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Long term international collaboration: from teaching to research

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Abstract. The text reports the experience of international collaboration between the universities of Burgos (Spain) and the School of Health Sciences Polytechnic Institute of Leiria (Portugal), during 6 academic years till now. What began as a teaching experience has led to joint research and has yielded results that make worth continuing the collaboration.

Throughout these six years, 3 final degree projects have been carried out, 12 students have been involved through these projects, 2 research and teaching exchanges between the teachers involved, 4 presentations at conferences and the creation of a common line of research, which we hope will give more results.

We would also like to highlight how enriching the experience has been and how, thanks to it, lectures involved have learned, not only on a professional level, but also on a personal dimension, acquiring new skills and making real the concept of lifelong learning.

Keywords: International teaching/research experiences, Interchange mobility programs, Inter-disciplinary lectures, final project degree.

1 Introduction.

The concept of lifelong learning emerged in the 1970s at the hands of UNESCO, but it is in the 1990s that it gained importance on our continent thanks to the declaration of the "European Year of Lifelong Learning". In this framework, lifelong learning is defined as: "All learning activity undertaken throughout life, which results in improving knowledge, know-how, skills, competences and/or qualifications for personal, social and/or professional reasons " (CEDEFOP, 2014, p.77).

This lifelong learning can take place in formal and informal contexts, as the concept itself includes a perspective related to the acquisition of skills and competences, not only professional, but also personal (Dávila Heitmann, 2013). As university lecturers, we exercise our profession within the context of regulated and therefore formal education, and we are presented with opportunities to teach adults, through the different educational programmes that universities offer to society. However, despite the offers of continuous training that we receive from our universities, we are reluctant to participate in that kind of training that aims to improve our skills in order to better adapt to the new demands of teaching and research. But what about our lifelong learning related to personal skills?

On the other hand, the university has not been oblivious to the processes of globalisation, the advance of technology and the increase in interconnection between people and countries and has made internationalisation one of the cornerstones of its

policies. According to Delgado-Márquez et al. (Delgado-Márquez et al., 2011), the concept of internationalisation includes several perspectives, among which are the activity-centred perspective (focused on participation in activities that promote student and teacher exchange), the competition-centred perspective (focused on acquiring important values to be competent in the global market), the ethos perspective (creation of intercultural culture) and the process perspective, which tries to integrate the international dimension in both teaching and research. According to this perspective, the emphasis is not on mobility, but rather on the development of international and intercultural competences. Especially important after the process of Pandemic period by Covid-19.

Considering both the perspective of lifelong learning, focused on the skills of university professors, and the perspective of internationalization as a process, the aim of this contribution is to present an experience of collaboration between the School of Health Sciences of Polytechnic Institute of Leiria (Portugal) and the Burgos University (Spain), based on the implementation of a project between the two institutions, and articulated through students as part of the completion of the final degree project from Bachelor's Degree in Occupational Therapy.

2 Development.

The methodology chapter was divided into four different work packages, developed over the years.

2.1 Work Package 1. Starting collaboration.

The present experience started in course 2016-2017. From this moment till now, several groups of students from the Occupational Therapy Course of Health Science Schools of Leiria (ILP) and students from Burgos University (UBU) have worked together, but also teachers from both institutions.

In the aforementioned course, students from both universities showed interest in research related to Breast Cancer, more specifically on what role can Occupational Therapy play with women diagnosed with Breast Cancer, especially those survivors of this diagnosis.

It is still an unknown topic throughout the intervention process, especially with emphasis on a correct assessment that certainly impacts the intervention that is carried out. Of the various studies carried out, the intervention of Occupational Therapy with women survivors of Breast Cancer, highlighting the adequacy of the assessment, has not been the object of much scientific investigation, especially in countries such as Portugal and Spain, often leaving a void in the monitoring, a professional area that is still very much at the mercy of assessment instruments, many of them outdated and poorly adjusted to the current reality, for the respective national realities.

This is the starting point of this experience. The activities carried out are shown below in a timeline (figure 1).

The research work was carried out over 2 academic years (2016-2017 and 2017-2018). During the first year, students from IPL designed the research protocol centered

in the Assessment and Intervention in Occupational Performance Deficit in Women with Breast Cancer; while students from Burgos, collected data from Spanish Population. The second year the same students continued the process, and IPL students ended the final project degree with a presentation that is made annually in the form of Internal Occupational Therapy Meeting in Leiria.

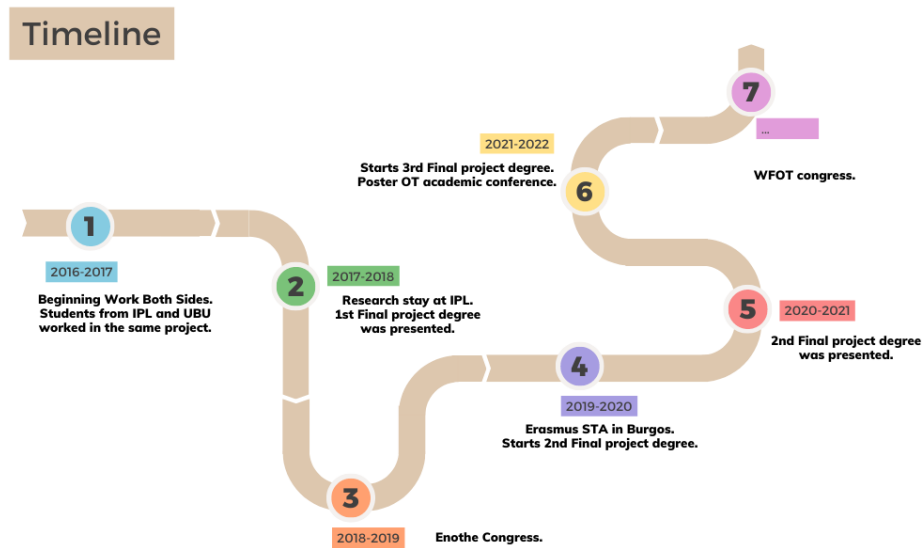


Fig. 1. Timeline of the collaboration.

2.2 Work Package 2. Erasmus experiences (from side to side)

After initiating this first collaboration between students from both universities, the following academic years (2017-2018 and 2018-2019) the professors involved carried out exchange activities.

From February 2018 to June 2018, a research stay was carried out at the ILP, with the aim of advancing the research initiated with students from both institutions in the previous academic year. This stay helped to establish the collaboration and create a longer-term collaborative project.

In the 2018-2019 academic year, the exchange went in the other direction, and through a teaching mobility in the Erasmus framework, it was possible to transfer to the Spanish students a new experience of internationalisation, since classes and seminars were given showing the reality of the work of the occupational therapist in Portugal.

2.3 WorkPackage 3- Final projects degree and stabilization of the collaboration

The next academic years, students continued being involved in different works and final project degree. During 2019-2020, a second group or three students from IPL, designed the project: Identification of Deficits in Occupational Performance in Women After Breast Cancer: Development of an instrument to assess the implications for occupational performance in women with breast cancer; this same group in 2020-2021 collected data from the Portuguese sample and analysed the respective analysis,

preparing an article for publication and presentation at conferences. They obtained the collaboration of Portuguese women from all over the mainland and islands.

The third group of students were involved in the process, in present academic year and in the next, 2022-2023. They submitted a final proposal they want to carry on under the name: The Impact on Occupational Performance of Women Breast Cancer Survivors. They will collaborate with the main group of Investigation.

2.4 WorkPackage 4- Concerning dissemination

This experience would not be the same, without having considered the diffusion.

Result of the first final project degree in course 2017-2018, the ILP students also made one submission at the 24th European Network of Occupational Therapy Education (ENOTHE) Annual Meeting, held from the 4th to the 6th of October of 2018, in Cascais, Portugal under the theme: *Students perspective of an international research cooperation*. This presentation is especially important because, highlights the fact that the students were very involved throughout the process, and that they themselves mentioned that this intercultural experience and with both countries collaborating was very important for their learning, and future competencies.

On the other hand, the lectures involved also presented one oral communication at the same congress, with the title *"International collaboration: What teachers can learn"*. The presentation highlights the very relevant aspects from our joint perspective. Continuous learning as key point, not only for students and practitioners, but also for teachers (lecturers). These learnings cannot be unaware of the fact of belonging to an increasingly globalized world, and the importance of researching within universities.

The data from the second final project degree has been presented at the academic conference of occupational therapy in June 2022 and also has been accepted at the World Federation of Occupational Therapy (WFOT) Congress which takes place in August 2022.

Nowadays, lectures are working in the analysis of all the data collected during these years, and are preparing several papers.

3 Results

It is difficult to quantify the results of this experience, but mainly because the most valuable results are those based on the personal experiences of the students and lecturers.

In an attempt to point out some quantitative data, we summarize the number of academic courses, six at this time; the number of final project degree carried out, three; the number of students involved, ten for Leiria and two from Burgos; two stays, one in each country; four approved submissions with presentation in international congress (figure 2).



Fig. 2. Quantitative results.

About qualitative results, they are presented from the perspective of students and lecturers.

Students from IPL, gave their opinion about the experience: *"This Work allowed us to explore new ways of acting in the European space, reporting the valuable addition of being arranged in an Iberian level, to develop scientific knowledge in an area that it lacks: Intervention of OT in women with Breast Cancer and helped us being agents that cross barriers representing where the OT past meets the OT future. As future occupational therapists, we want to inspire the concomitant research with the outside world, prospecting the future. This oral communication reports the typology of working together, as a team, deliberating our partnership as an example of cooperation. The partnership is a commitment procedure to achieve a common objective, as such, all partners conjointly decide the planning and execution of the project: each part of the partnership has autonomy and due responsibility. To increase the development and*

research in OT, it is very important to improve the professional relations and partnerships”.

According to teacher’s perspective, we described the experience as enriching and challenging. Obviously, it requires greater involvement, but the results are worthwhile.

Related to academic stays we can highlight the opportunity of sharing different topics related to occupational therapist performance, as Palliative Care, Health Management and Economics, Support Products and Intervention of Occupational Therapy in the Community from the respective of how it works in Portugal and establishing consonances and dissonances between the two countries. Know how it develops in the other country contributes to a better comprehension of Occupational Therapy. These exchanges, also allow to visit different kind of facilities and learn about other institutions work.

4 Final reflections and future ideas

Thinking retrospectively, this collaboration was decisive for the understanding of the path taken as well of what we lived, which is very good for individual and collective knowledge.

This sharing helps to synthesize what was and what could be a successful partnership of Erasmus over the years, an experience that has been going on for a long time, from 2016 until now and who knows for how long.

This was a process that started, but it seems that it never ended, and the fact that we are doing this joint writing is proof of that, that the process continues and seems to keep growing. This joint exercise with a colleague from a different university, from a different country, where we have to incorporate different concepts and knowledge, is extremely valuable to us. It has been decisive to improve our qualifications, skills, training, in line with what is internationally recommended (OECD, 2020).

Our CV has become richer, more comprehensive, and has brought us a collaborative vision and practical experimentation that, until then, we did not have, both from the perspective of a teacher and from the perspective of the student who, and since 2016, have been involved in the work developed in partnership. Reflective practice on international peer collaboration issues, involving students in the activities done, has become a valuable learning experience (OECD, 2020).

As future ideas, it would be interesting to create mixed groups of students from both universities in order to enhance the international experience among them. It would be also worthy establish a formal Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) program.

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