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## EXCHANGE OF STUDENT EXPERIENCE IN EDUCATION THROUGH PARTICIPATION IN INTERNATIONAL PROJECT

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***Abstract:** The paper describes the importance of international projects as a means of exchanging professional experience in the education of the occupational therapy students. Through comparison analysis the ways of conducting of ICC@Home (2019) and OT professional identity (2020) modules are presented. An overview of the experience and knowledge gained by the students during the two projects is shared. Particular attention is paid to the competences required by the students in order to participate in international modules. At the same time, the skills and knowledge that participants have acquired are presented. In addition how they devolved their competences at the end of the projects is described.*

***Keywords:** OT education, international modules, online education*

## INTRODUCTION

Participation in international online modules provides a variety of opportunities for students to achieve personal and professional development. On the one hand, interacting with their colleagues, the participants create a basis for comparing their level of education to that in other countries. Through group activities they develop their personal competences for teamwork and undoubtedly make new valuable friendships. In addition, students maintain the level of their language skills and at the same time get to know the traditions, culture and understandings of other nations in an enjoyable way.

On the other hand, interacting with professionals, participants have great examples to follow. In this way, students create their own professional identity. Furthermore, participation in international modules leaves students with lasting positive emotions, knowledge and lifelong partnerships. The reason for this is that students learn in a fascinating way in a different environment, where they accumulate knowledge without being burdened. Through the modules, students have the opportunity to explore and introduce others to what they are interested in. At the end of the module, as a reward for their work, participants receive additional diploma credits which give them an advantage in finding a job.

## EXPOSITION

### Online modules by the **COPILOT project**

The discussed online modules are a product of the COPILOT project, funded by the Erasmus + program. The aim of the modules is to facilitate international learning and skills building in the various professional fields of Occupational Therapy. The goal is achieved by providing training opportunities for all students from the participating universities, especially for those who are not able to go abroad. The main elements of the module are designed to be transferred to other programs as well as to healthcare research.

The project partners are from 6 countries: FH JOANNEUM University of Applied Sciences (Austria), HOWEST University of Applied Sciences (Belgium), "Angel Kanchev" University of Ruse (Bulgaria), Luleå University of Technology (Sweden) and ZUYD University of Applied Sciences (Netherlands). Associated partners also include the Hochschule für angewandte Wissenschaften (ZHAW) (Switzerland) and the European Network of Occupational Therapy in Higher Education (ENOTHE).

The aim of COPILOT is to create a sustainable model for the implementation of international learning and appropriate training modules for each international group or network of occupational therapy programs. The goals are based on three main principles. The first is for students to be able to participate in e-learning modules as part of their regular curricula and to receive the usual number of ECTS. Secondly, students should study together in internationally mixed groups and be trained by teachers again from different countries. The third principle is that the training takes place in a "digital classroom". This is done through e-learning tools and multimedia such as e-learning platforms, e-lectures, social media or video recording.

### **How the modules work**

Initially, participants individually receive from the coordinator study guide with instructions that facilitate the work process. After getting acquainted with the module activities, the students get acquainted with the participants in their group. The groups are distributed preliminary by the coordinator so that there are representatives from different countries. Initially, participants in each group have time to get to know each other by sharing information about their lifestyle, interests or goals for the future. The participants then move on to the tasks. During the tasks, the participants in the group are free to choose by consensus a topic to work on, as well as the way to gather and present information. While performing the tasks of the module, students are guided by experienced tutors – well-trained occupational therapy teachers. The group communicates with experienced occupational therapy practitioners to collect information.

In ICC@Home participants communicate individually with occupational therapists in their own country to explore OT approaches and strategies of working in the selected area. Afterwards the collected information is shared with the group and compared between different countries. Finally the group develops a report with similarities, differences and things that need improvement.

In OT Identity across Europe, participants again identify together a topic and develop a research questions, after which they conduct a group interview with an occupational therapist from a country, other than those of the participants. Then they summarize the interview and compare it with the interviews of the other groups.

In both modules the participants gather information about professional issues that concern them in a creative way, and at the end get acquainted with the work of the other groups. In this way, the modules present different views on the most appropriate ways of working with different conditions, create a connection and exchange information between the participants, as well as increase the overall development and quality of occupational therapy services.

### **Media for exchanging of experiences**

In order to communicate and share their research, all participants use a common e-learning platform. All materials giving instructions and guidelines for the work of the participants are published on it. The participants and the tutors create profiles with a photo and a brief personal information. Each group has a separate space in the platform to store and update their files and communicate with the tutor. The platform facilitates monitoring the work of the group, the results achieved, and the tutors can give their comments and recommendations. At the same time, participants choose applications such as Skype, Zoom, Whatsapp and others to work on the tasks. They also organize and conduct weekly online meetings to complete the set weekly tasks.

### **What experience do the participants exchange?**

First of all, the participants exchange knowledge about the development of occupational therapy in other countries, about the training and the role of the occupational therapist in the team, the available jobs. In addition, they discuss the practices, approaches, models and assessments that apply to different kinds of disability. Students look for the skills and competencies that the occupational therapist needs most in order to be able to manage his/her professional responsibilities. In the *OT professional identity* module, participants explore their favorite traditional foods and look at their workplaces by using pictures and discussion.

### **How participants exchange experiences**

Participants exchange experiences through a combination of traditional methods such as research and writing, and creative approaches such as essays, questionnaires and choosing topics. Both approaches are applied simultaneously, with students working in groups or individually.

In the modules, the participants express their individual creativity in the group by choosing topics and creating questions for an interview or research. By conducting group or individual interviews, students gain experience directly from practicing occupational therapists. Knowledge and skills for conducting interviews, collecting and summarizing information are important so that students can create good reports on selected topics. At the end of the project, through reading the group reports individually, students exchange the gained experience.

In the ICC @ Home module there is also a creative moment, where each participant writes an essay on a certain topic. Each participant can read and comment on what others have written. In this way, participants are informed about the state of the problem in other countries and how occupational therapists help. In addition, by expressing their opinion, students not only exchange experiences, but also build interpersonal friendships outside the group.

### **Description of the experience**

In general, historically, occupational therapy as a profession in Europe has existed for about 50 years. Initially, the work of occupational therapists was focused on the participation of clients in activities, but this concept has evolved over the years. Today, the success of occupational therapy is due to the careful study of the client's interests and the selection of meaningful activities for him.

The countries with traditions and good level of development of occupational therapy are England, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Belgium and France. They serve as a model and example of good practice. However, there are regions in these countries where there are not enough occupational therapists. In addition, many people are still unfamiliar with the essence of occupational therapy as a profession and can not refer to specialists on their own. However, this problem is solved with the help of doctors. They identify the need for occupational therapy and issue a referral to the client. The costs for the client are minimal, as they are covered by the state. In countries such as Austria and Germany it is difficult to visit an occupational therapist without a referral. There is no possibility for clients' self-referral. In order to keep up-to-date after graduation, occupational therapists prove their knowledge every two years.

Participants are also informed about the role of the occupational therapist in the multidisciplinary team, his workplace and target groups. The findings point out that occupational therapists most often work with children and adults. With adults, the therapists support them to cope on their own at their homes in order to avoid institutionalization. Occupational therapists work with children with the same goal for self-management at home and in the community. Occupational therapists rarely work with middle-aged people, aiming for independent living and finding work.

Optimal results are achieved when the work area is the client's home, as this is their natural environment. Therefore, occupational therapists often work at the client's home. In addition, occupational therapists in Europe work in hospitals, nursing homes, schools, psychiatric and rehabilitation centers. There they work in multidisciplinary teams with doctors, nurses, speech therapists, psychologists and physiotherapists. Sometimes it is difficult for occupational therapists as there is no clear distinction between the professional activities of the occupational therapist,

physiotherapist and even speech therapist. In some regions of France there is still a belief that the occupational therapist works for the functionality of the upper limbs and the physiotherapist for the lower. Nevertheless, it is widely accepted that the occupational therapist uses meaningful activities for his client as a means. The interaction between occupational therapy and physiotherapy specialists turns out to be a good way to exchange experience and knowledge and work in a team. The number of occupational therapists in the teams is significantly smaller, as one occupational therapist works with about 4-5 physiotherapists.

One of the problems identified by the participants is that Occupational Therapy is still a young profession and not everyone is familiar with it. This requires professionals to explain to their clients what they are doing. In the multidisciplinary team it turns out that some of the other health professionals also do not fully understand the work of the occupational therapist, which again requires further clarification.

The fact is, however, that occupational therapists are proving their effectiveness in all places. There is a steady increase in jobs in schools, day care centers, hospitals, home visits as a service are also increasing. At the same time, the number of universities training occupational therapists is also increasing.

The training lasts for 3 or 4 years, depending on the country. In France, for example, they study for a period of 4 years. In the first year, however, student study fundamental disciplines such as anatomy, physiology, pathoanatomy and others. For the next three years, students study only occupational therapy disciplines, while at the same time conducting practice in the currently studied field. Both newly opened and established programs are constantly updating the curriculum in order to offer better education every other year.

Occupational therapists rely deeply on good theoretical training. All therapists continue their professional development through self-study and training courses after graduating from university. Most applied theoretical models are MOHO (Model of Human Occupation) and CMOP (Canadian Model of Occupational Performance), and from the approaches – COOP (Cognitive Orientation to Occupational Performance). In addition to solid theoretical training everywhere there are over 1000 hours of practice in at least five practical placements. This, in addition to strengthening the knowledge, builds the professional identity of the occupational therapists and help them to get orientation which professional field they want to work at.

However, it turns out that most therapists experiment and change jobs at 7-8 years. After gaining experience, most therapists become teachers in the programme, which transfers experience and develops the value of the services offered.

### **What competencies do the participants need, how do they develop them and what new ones do they acquire**

To participate in the module participants need generic competencies. Following their order of importance, they start from the skills for analysis and synthesis of information. Students' ability to plan and organize personal time also plays an important role. They are also required to have a good theoretical background, which is supplemented by knowledge acquired during the practice.

In addition, participants must be fluent in spoken and written English at level C. They also need to be familiar with the translation of professional terminology. In this way, students can become part of the team, working not only with their group, but also with coaches and occupational therapists. Participants are also required to have good computer training, again in order to communicate with the team.

Of key importance for participating in a module are teamwork skills. They are most valued and include the ability to build good interpersonal relationships. This area also includes skills in assessing and recognizing the importance of cultural diversity. A mandatory skill for students is to be able to work in an international environment and, above all, to understand the traditions and customs of other countries.

As the project is based on Occupational Therapy, participants need subject specific competencies, which include knowledge of theoretical models, approaches and role of the

environment, as well as skills for building professional relationships and partnerships. Diversity, individual differences, cultural values, customs and their impact on activities and participation need to be valued and respected. Participants must present information, ideas, problems and solutions not only within the team, but also to non-experts or other occupational therapy students.

For their professional development occupational therapists need research competences, as well as competences for working with scientific information. In this way, he/she contributes to the overall development of the profession, which is why they are also included in the competencies needed to participate in modules. Research skills include individual study of information, critical search and synthesis of scientific literature and other information related to occupational therapy. In addition, the development of scientific information requires effective participation in research projects. Thus, students are encouraged not only in their own professional development, but also that of Occupational Therapy.

Last but not least are the competences of the occupational therapist in the field of professional autonomy and accountability. They are expressed in his ability to demonstrate a high degree of independence in identifying the needs and opportunities for lifelong learning and professional development.

All the listed competences are directly related to the project activities in the module. Therefore, the participants imperceptibly develop and upgrade them, performing the tasks. Students also acquire new skills such as a sense of group responsibility and belonging. Also, due to the format of the modules, as a result of their participation students acquire knowledge of how to communicate and meet online. On one hand, they are trained to create a structured interview based on research questions. They acquire skills on how to conduct an interview in an international environment. They also learn to analyze the information obtained from the interview. In a natural and enjoyable way, they learn to gain knowledge by analyzing information from other interviews and to make comparisons between them.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In summary, participation in occupational therapy projects and modules proves to be the most effective way for students' professional development. Through the exchanged experience, each participant builds a professional identity, develops competencies, gains experience and most of all has the opportunity to build professional relationships with colleagues. On the other hand, the participants in the international projects contribute to the development of Occupational Therapy as a profession. This is due to the fact that when they start working, students can transfer and apply in practice the acquired knowledge, experience and good practices from better developed countries.

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