

## Motivations and challenges of physiotherapy researchers abroad

### Motivações e desafios de pesquisadores fisioterapeutas no exterior

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Despite the successive budget cuts to the sector, the growth of Brazilian science in the last four decades is unquestionable. Such growth is mainly due to the role of postgraduate programs for the training of researchers<sup>1</sup>. According to a report from the Coordination for Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES in Portuguese), only in the last four years the National Graduate System has increased in a rate of 25%, with absolute data pointing to the creation of 838 new programs<sup>2</sup>. With the guidelines for the internationalization of postgraduate programs, the researchers have shown a great interest in training abroad. This interest is visible considering the growing number of scholarship applications abroad from CAPES and the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq in Portuguese), Brazilian's main research funding agencies. In 2017, more than 600 grants for doctorates and postdoctoral studies abroad were granted by the agencies<sup>3</sup>.

With 22 years of existence and 20 programs recognized by CAPES<sup>4</sup>, the Post-Graduation in Physiotherapy has also boosted the physiotherapist's interest in training abroad.

The desire to work in leading laboratories in another country, experiencing work dynamics in a renowned research group or just broadening horizons and experiences are some of the reasons that attract physiotherapist researchers abroad. Another great motivation of the professional is to advance in critical-scientific thinking and, in this way, to transpose theoretical knowledge into clinical practice. The motivations and expectations of international training are also stimulated by the difficulties found in the national job market.

Thus, the expectation of more and better job opportunities and consequently, higher salaries are also embedded in the motivations that lead the physiotherapist to leave his country and invest in international training. In fact, a recent opportunity for insertion of physiotherapists in the job market, although still incipient and timid, consists of the position of researcher and/or scientific consultant in research institutes, hospitals and multinational networks, which give great value to the professional with training and experience in the host country of such companies. In addition to the professional motivations, the expectation of personal growth through living

the long-awaited (and also unexpected) situations, of learning or improving another language, making new personal and professional networks, knowing other working and education methods, and of course, immersing in a new culture are very positive points for those who are not afraid to leave their comfort zone and have resilience to face all the faces of the new. However, the challenges are as numerous as the expectations and motivations with the international experience.

While experiencing new cultures, the physiotherapist who wants to broaden his academic, professional and personal skills is also faced with some obstacles, one of the main being the academic barrier. As a higher-level profession whose regulation occurred in Brazil just over 50 years ago<sup>5</sup>, the training of physiotherapists is still heterogeneous throughout the world. In Brazil, the National Curricular Guidelines of the graduation degree were only established in 2002 with the aim of equalizing and guaranteeing a global and quality vocational training<sup>6</sup>. Although this is a remarkable effort, this initiative only applies to equality at national level, which does not translate in the same way at the global level.

With a heterogeneous training throughout the world, it is not uncommon for the dream of international training to become a nightmare due to curricular incompatibilities and even the non-recognition of higher education. As an example, until a few years ago, the physiotherapy in Germany was not recognized as a higher education, only as a technical training. In this way, Brazilian physiotherapists who wanted to attend a masters or doctorate program in the country were required to take an equivalency examination of higher education and only after passing the exam, they had the right to join the German postgraduate programs. Such a framework shows that exercising the role of physiotherapist researcher abroad may lead to academic disparities.

Revalidating the diploma or conducting examinations so that specific knowledge is recognized depends on the regulations of each country and requires documentation that in many cases hinders professional exchange. Faced with disparities in professional training, a task force led by the European Respiratory Society has created

an initiative to develop a curriculum with basic content that every undergraduate student should have access to - in the specific area of respiratory physiotherapy, independent of the University or the country in which it is studied<sup>7</sup>. This is a remarkable initiative and is an example of how the exchange of knowledge among students and professionals around the world is important for equal and high-level training. Another initiative in this context, but not specific to physiotherapy, emerges from the European Union that has developed programs for the unification of university systems, such as "LMD" (License, Master, Doctorate) and ECTS (European Credits Transfer System) in order to facilitate the circulation of postgraduate students between European countries<sup>8</sup>. Thus, in addition to financial support, development agencies should also provide administrative support to help trainee researchers understand and transpose academic differences.

Some other experiences not included in the researcher's expectations are often present in the challenge of international training. These, of course, are not proper to physiotherapists but to a large extent those who seek training away from home. Distant from family and friends, anonymous in an unknown world, faced with the lack of preparation to deal with the new, ignorance of cultural, social and language codes, researchers often face great emotional and psychic ill-being that can be a source of mental disorders, such as anxiety and depression. The psychic resources of the individual to deal with the new makes him more reactive to the external environment, and all emotions are intensified. Thus, it is common to become confident of strangers. In order to attenuate the feeling of isolation and non-belonging to the environment, the search for other Brazilians or for other people facing the same challenges and difficulties, in a subjective belief of common origin that unites them as members of a community in the which symbols express values, fears and, aspirations. Aware of this, many foreign universities also offer free and monthly meetings with psychotherapists so that the student/researcher who feels intimidated by other colleagues, due to cultural differences or personal motivations, can find psychological support to face these and other situations.

Having overcome these difficulties, it is time to face the benefits of the training and academic learning abroad. According to a study from the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy<sup>9</sup>, the combination of clinical experience and evidence-based practice makes the physiotherapist a complete professional<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, having the opportunity to perform part of the academic training abroad adds solid advantages to the physiotherapist's curriculum as a researcher. Through the experience of international training it is possible to know other systems of education, learning and work, to deal with students, teachers and employees of innumerable origins, formations, experiences and habits. As well as the possibility of obtaining knowledge of different areas and themes of those researched in Brazil, either by geographic, cultural differences or approaches different from those studied in the country. Developing scientific research in centers of international excellence also provides contact with renowned researchers and creates opportunities for partnerships between Brazil and other countries.

Finally, after a great psychological, professional and personal investment, the return to Brazil brings great expectations and fears. The fears are closely related to the reinsertion of the professional in the job market. The expectation of finding such a limited space, where the scarcity of resource and incentive make the development of quality science almost an act of bravery. The training in excellent laboratories, the high level of knowledge acquired, and the numerous experiences in your area of training are not guarantees of professional success as a researcher in Brazil. The return means a new beginning full of uncertainties, full of tensions. The articulation between teaching and research conceptually defended in the national plans makes that when returning to Brazil, the researcher seeks to pursue the academic career in public or private universities, once the most widespread path for the physiotherapist to continue as a researcher is also to act as a teacher. However, in an increasingly competitive environment, the shortage of vacancies in universities and research institutions turns the scenario of researchers with international competence into something discouraging. Even when employed, most of the

time, being forced to divide the attention between research and teach, facing a strenuous knowledge production in an undeniable context of the scraping of Brazilians universities, in which scientists are often obligated to finance their own research. In other words, as a rule, the Brazilian researcher's motto is to produce a lot, in a short time facing precarious and hostile conditions. Faced with this scenario, many researchers with international training are attracted by the offer of work abroad and give up returning or staying in Brazil. A contradictory question is the fact that Brazilian development agencies invest hundreds of millions of national currency annually in the international formation of researchers and, in order to guarantee the scientific return of this investment, require the researcher to remain in Brazil for a period equivalent to that of the outside world. Without guaranteeing, however, the insertion of the professional in the local job market. It is praiseworthy to send abroad thousands of researchers, but without financial, human and structural resources in our universities, there is a great risk that both scientific and technological advances brought by these professionals will be lost due to lack of planning and public initiative.

To briefly summarize, the international training of the physiotherapist is the result of a lot of struggle, of many outdated barriers, challenges overcome, but with countless rewarding experiences and a vast acquisition of knowledge. It is striking the difference in the magnification of the worldviews after the experience. It should be kept in mind that the international competence acquired is not a guarantee of professional success at the national level, but this should not be a discouraging factor; rather, it should encourage society to rethink how Brazil is investing in young scientists and seek solutions to change this reality.

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