

NEW CHALLENGES IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION AREA: UNIVERSITY NETWORKS FOR INTERNATIONALIZATION AND GLOBALIZATION

Ferreira, M.A.*, Godinho, A., Amaral, M., Encarnação, R., Loureiro, E.

Faculdade de Medicina da Universidade do Porto (FMUP)

Porto, Portugal

gem@med.up.pt

Abstract

The “A *NAME* for Health” project, funded by the EDULINK program, is a project that establishes *A Network Approach in Medical Education* (NAME) for the Pursuit of Quality in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and Health Systems. It aims to improve Health Care through an ongoing intervention quality program on Medical Education, at 4 HEIs in Portugal, Angola and Mozambique: Faculty of Medicine of University of Porto (project coordinator), Portugal; Faculty of Medicine of Agostinho Neto University, Luanda, Angola; Faculty of Medicine of Eduardo Mondlane University, Maputo, Mozambique; and Faculty of Health Sciences of Lúrio University, Nampula, Mozambique. São João Hospital, E.P.E. and Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation are associated with this Project.

Specifically, this Higher Education project aims at reinforcing the partner institutions’ ability to improve academic skills and clinical specializations in three priority areas (Paediatrics, Gynaecology & Obstetrics and Infectious Diseases) related with the Millennium Development Goals. The presence of a qualified network for Medical Education helps to elevate the overall level of medical care available to the people of Angola and Mozambique, through academic stimulation. The network’s priority is to reinforce the capabilities and the existing strengths of the Higher Education Sector, through the creation of a more qualified staff and supporting an efficient development of these HEIs.

With these objectives in mind, three types of activities are being developed: structuring, academic and clinical activities. Structuring activities include the establishment of Centers for Medical Education, creation of a Network Technological Platform among the different HEI (e-learning and long-distance learning), and the establishment of Students Support Office; academic activities consist of an evaluation of the medical curriculum, its reform, implementation and monitoring, and IT Seminar/Conference; clinical activities comprise the establishment of a mobility program for clinical teachers and physicians.

The project’s strength and sustainability come from the belief that improvements in the whole Health System will be attained through the improvement of clinical and academic practice.

Increasing the Institutions’ scientific, pedagogical and clinical levels will enhance the network of Portuguese speaking countries, strengthening the link between Medical Education Healthcare in the African Higher Education Institutions. Sustainability will also be reinforced through the Technological Platform (which will be maintained among the Institutions) since it will enhance the investments that are being done in the partner Universities’ information and communication technologies. Curricular reforms and their adaptation to international standards, together with the expected multiplier effects obtained through the clinical mobility program, will also be a way of supporting academic and clinical sustainability after the conclusion of the project. The competence acquisitions in the three priority clinical areas will also have a multiplier effect at the level of knowledge transfer to the other health agents such as nurses and health community agents. Focusing on Medical Education by structuring its organization, will generate involvement of young medical students, which will be the future physicians and clinical teachers.

Keywords - Higher Education; Medical Education; Internationalization; Cooperation for Development; University Networks

CONTEXT OF HIGHER EDUCATION AS A FOUNDATION FOR DEVELOPMENT

Higher Education Area in Health Sciences is becoming a priority sector for developing countries as a means to raise the quality of Health Services, based in the improvement that Medical Education can provide to health care. This is becoming evident both at the under and postgraduate levels of health education, due to the existence of well defined standards of quality provided by medical education [1, 2]. However, this sector has to deal with the pressure to prioritize training for working life and a professional occupation. The tension between the short-term and the long-term forward-looking is not a new situation, but it is becoming stronger in critical areas where Health Education is a major example.

Higher Education is now becoming a priority sector in African Portuguese-speaking countries for creating a background of qualified human resources in strategic areas – mainly in sectors like Universities, Research Centers, Science and Technology, supporting the development of an efficient and creative network for global development. To the Portuguese cooperation, the relationship with the African Portuguese-speaking countries is one of the fundamental pillars of the foreign policy. The strategic objectives of cooperation are defined based on a combination of priorities established by the Governments for the development of the country, and the objectives and financial and human capacities of Portuguese Cooperation, including the existing strengths in defined sectors.

In this endeavour, and aiming to to improve the effectiveness and the impact of co-operation in the field of higher education, the **EDULINK** programme funded by the European Union created an approach to intervene in Higher Education in order to achieve the targets for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in the field of higher education. This way, the overall objective is to “foster capacity building and regional integration in the field of higher education through institutional networking, and to support a quality higher education system...”.

A NETWORK APPROACH IN MEDICAL EDUCATION (NAME)

In Health Sector, Medical Education and Clinical Practice are interconnected sectors, where institutional evaluation processes conducted in the last years allowed to the characterization of the situation and identified problems. In the context of recent developments in European Higher Education and the strategies adopted by the African Community in the policy of Higher Education, this Sector was set as a strategic point in the program raised between the Governments, at the National and Trans-National levels.

Taking this opportunity, within a strategic view of internationalization of the University of Porto and the globalization in medical education [3, 4], allied to on-going programs in cooperation within the area of higher education, a program was raised funded in a network of universities responsible for medical education in African Portuguese-speaking countries.

The Project “A NAME – Network Approach in Medical Education – for Health”, supported by EDULINK, is based in a network among medical schools of different Universities and aims to strength the capacity of partner institutions to improve academic competencies and clinical expertise in priority health areas, Maternal and Child Healthcare and Infectious Disease, related to the MDGs.

Relevance of the University network

Angola and Mozambique are developing countries sharing similar problems at the levels of Education and Health Care sectors. Despite differential strategies undertaken by both countries to overcome educational and health deficits in both fields, globalization in Medical Education issues constitute a common link to the intervention in both countries [3, 5]. Medical Education is based in a number of principles that are commonly accepted worldwide; this has been the foundation for the wide possibility of implementing mobility of clinical faculty/physicians making this an important issue for the development of a global view of the physicians/medical profession and of the health care systems.

Through a Network Approach in Medical Education - NAME - the project aims to improve health through Medical Education, linking and empowering partner High Education Institutions (HEIs) devoted to the education of medical professionals. The specific objective of the project is to strengthen the capacity of partner institutions to improve academic competencies and clinical expertise in priority health areas (maternal and child health care and infectious diseases), related to the MDGs.

This network will create better regional conditions towards the establishment of efficient connections in the partner institutions since it involves official/public HEIs responsible for Medical Education in Angola and Mozambique. Implementing this project this global view will be achieved not only across Portuguese speaking African countries, but also within the same country as is the case of Mozambique.

The overall objective of the program emerged from the analysis and joint discussion of problems concerning medical education and health care conditions in the partner countries (Angola and Mozambique), being reached through a coordinated action merging the fields of Medical Education and Clinical Practice, focusing in three priority intervention areas clearly identified in the MDGs to which the action aims to contribute towards is "to improve healthcare services in maternal and child health care and infectious diseases, to the populations of Angola and Mozambique".

Stating this objective, a NAME for Health constitutes a novel action among partner HEIs devoted to the education/training of medical professionals. In this context, there are two joint and coordinated intervention areas: Medical Education and Clinical Practice. The action will evolve from Medical Education to Clinical Practice displaying a structured organization where the intersection point between both fields is production and share of knowledge and knowledge transfer, aiming to achieve clinical competence. In this context, the project will evolve from Medical Education to Clinical Practice. This implies collaboration between the partners and associate institutions in the pursuit of knowledge and its application.

Identification of problems to be addressed by the network

The main/core problem is the deficit of basic health care to the populations, as identified and stated in different Health Indicators Reports, and is associated with two specific problems: (1) deficit in Medical Education and (2) deficit in Clinical Practice. Within the scope of Medical Education, the main concerns are: (a) deficit in faculty qualification, (b) inappropriate curricula organization, (c) insufficient educational resources and (d) low academic performance of medical students. Within the scope of Clinical Practice problems to be addressed, the focus is: (i) reduced number of physicians in these countries, (ii) deficit in the organization of the specialization and (iii) deficit in the definition of priorities for clinical specialization, namely in maternal and child healthcare and infectious diseases. In these terms, the specific objective of the trans-national action is defined: "Strengthen the capacity of partner institutions to improve academic/scientific competencies and clinical expertise in priority health areas (maternal and child health care and infectious diseases) related to the MDGs.

Who will benefit from the network

The target groups are constituted by the undergraduate medical students of the Medical Courses of the Medical Schools in Angola (University Agostinho Neto) and Mozambique (University Eduardo Mondlane and Lúrio) and the clinical faculty/physicians involved in the defined academic priority areas (Pediatrics, Gynaecology and Obstetrics and Infectious Diseases). Undergraduate medical students will turn physicians who will be responsible for the health care of populations, within these same fields of intervention. Therefore, intervening and following-up at the level of Medical Education the undergraduate students of the target group until they become physicians, will enable to extend the effects of the intervention to the final beneficiaries of this Trans-national Action, which are the populations covered by the Health Systems of Angola and Mozambique, in harmonization with the National Health priorities of these countries. This way, the network will be extended to a wide range of beneficiaries, allowing a multiplier effect of the action.

How to develop the network

The Backbone of the Project: Structuring Activities

The initial set of activities, which are transversal to the whole project, becomes a means towards its development, which enables the execution and sustainability of NAME.

The set of activities comprise

- Establishment of Centers for Medical Education, to serve continuous professional development dedicated to the improvement of health standards through better education, training, research and other related programmes for health professionals;
- Creating a Technological Platform Network in terms of communication between the different institutions (e-learning and long-distance learning);
- Establishment of Student Offices to provide support measures to students as coaching and counselling, welfare services, activities aiming at social integration and services to students with special needs and other support measures.

Enhancing Excellence and Quality in Medical Education: Academic Activities

The project will develop a common framework for quality assurance, based on internationally recognised principles of an initial self-assessment, a peer review and report, followed by actions aiming to ensure quality improvement. These are academic activities, to be undertaken according to the institutional status of educational paradigms and involve:

- Evaluation of the undergraduate medical curriculum;
- Curriculum reform and follow-up of the curriculum development process;
- IT seminar/conference

Improving educational/clinical skills: clinical faculty/physicians mobility programme

Mobility programmes for clinical faculty/physicians play an essential role in sharing experiences in the models of teaching and learning in medicine, and as a source of different experiences in University and Health Systems. These clinical activities are focused in three priority areas: Paediatrics, Gynecology & Obstetrics and Infectious Diseases, and will be developed through the establishment of a mobility programme for clinical faculty/physicians.

How to create sustainability of the network

The improvement of the clinical/educational competences in the fields of the MDGs in Angola and Mozambique will strengthen the African networks in Medical Education and will contribute to avoid “brain-drain” [6, 7]. Increasing the institutional competence at academic and clinical practice, will enhance the integration of this network in Portuguese speaking countries linking Medical Education with Health, in the other networks of African HEIs devoted to Medical Education. The academic environments are already mutually recognized. Since these activities are based in a previous knowledge of the subject, they will evolve mostly by knowledge/experience transfer and context adaptation.

Expected impact of the network

Ultimately, it is expected that a quality cycle of education/clinical practice will be created through “A NAME for Health” which, by transfer of specific knowledge and supported by information technologies, will improve the competencies of the target groups at the under- and postgraduate levels of medical education. This will create a dynamics of institutional “brain gain”, multiplied at the inter-institutional level, and provide academic/clinical quality. In the long term, the populations of Angola and Mozambique will therefore be the ultimate beneficiaries of the project.

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