



An international online collaborative learning project for occupational therapy students: a mixed-methods study

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Background: Origin and Development of i-DOT

- The concept for the project was conceived at the ENOTHE meeting in Portugal in 2018.
- Initially called the Artevelde Interviews project, Artevelde students interviewed international peers on topics such as ageing, free-time occupations, occupational justice, and environmental, social, and political influences.
- Year 1 recruitment took place through an informal call on social media (Facebook and Twitter), at a time when online learning was still in its infancy (pre-covid).
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, the project expanded significantly, involving nine international institutions.
- After two years, those nine institutions from eight countries became core partners in the project.
- Recognition of shared ownership, and a move away from interviews to two-way discussions, then led to a name change: International Discussions in Occupational Therapy (i-DOT).



Background: Structure and Operation of i-DOT

- The i-DOT project supports participating institutions in achieving their internationalisation-at-home goals.¹
- The project structure allows institutional autonomy, including decisions about compulsory or voluntary participation, assessment, and academic outputs.
- Students register via a Microsoft Form, providing consent to share contact details with a student from another country, including preferred communication platforms, email, and phone number.
- Information is provided through an explainer video and PowerPoint presentation, and individual information sessions in each university.
- One participating country uses a buddy system where students who have taken part the year before, mentor the students about to take part.
- Students are paired across countries, ensuring each student is matched with an international peer.
- Contact details are distributed via a mail-merge system, with initial contact made in the first week.
- Students typically meet two to three times, usually totaling two to three hours, though some engage for longer (and stay in contact).
- All discussions are in english and face to face.
- The project runs annually during the month of May.



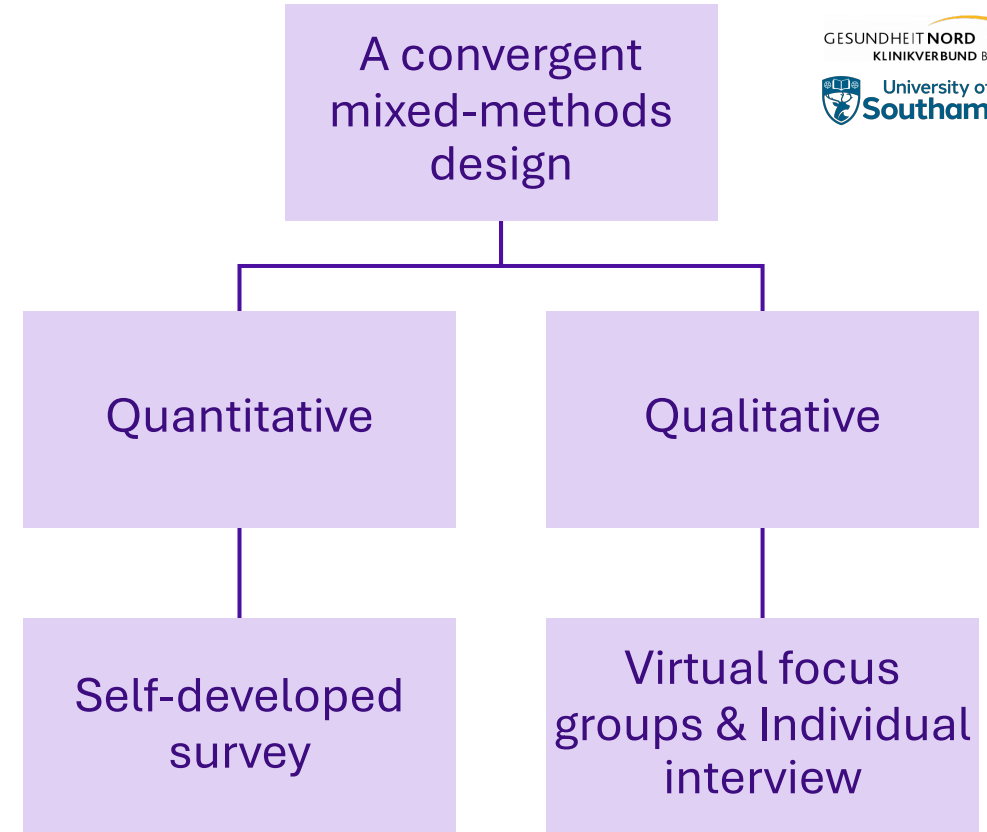
Aim

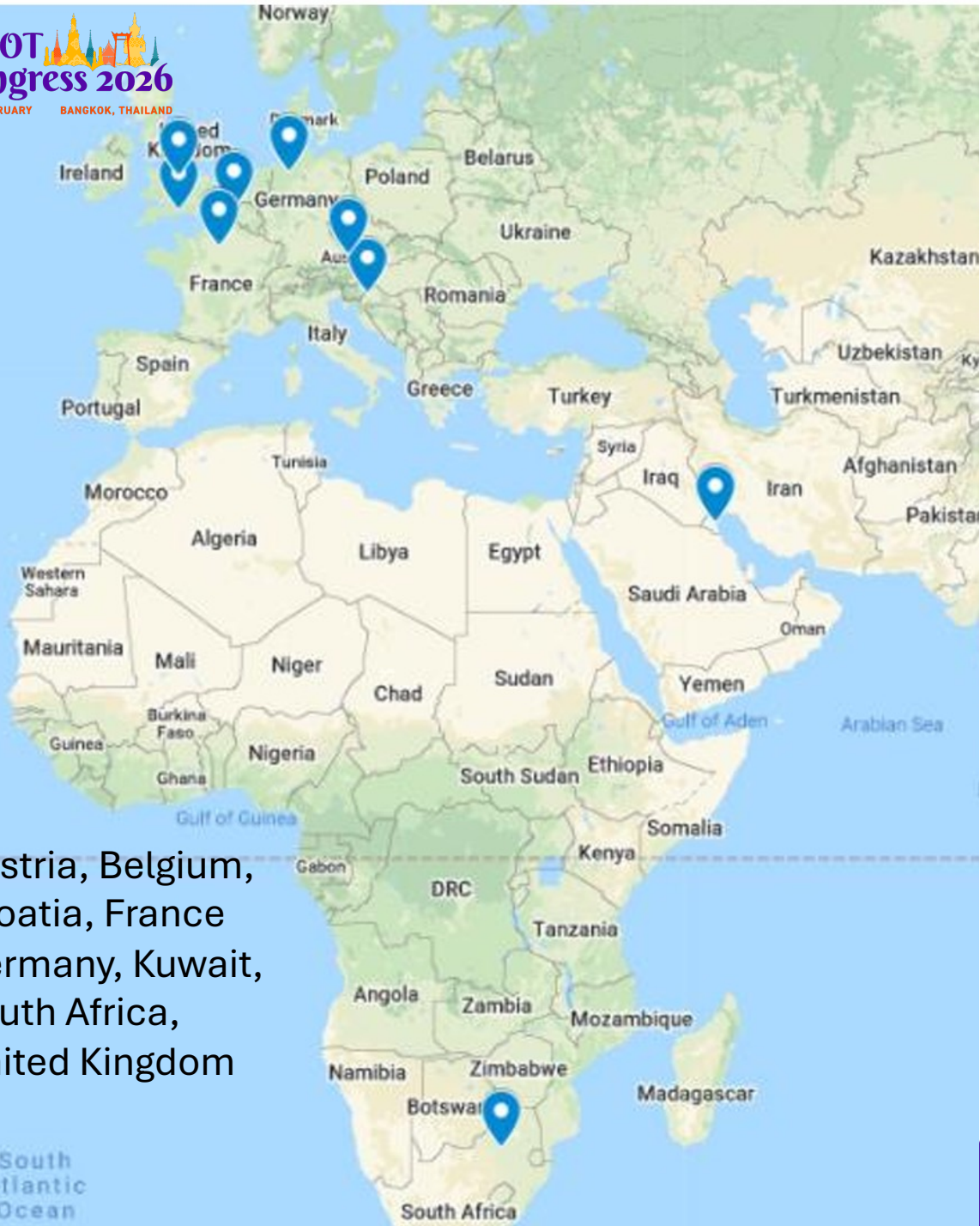
This study aimed to assess the benefits of the i-DOT project and identify factors influencing student participation by:

1. Identifying the benefits of participating in the i-DOT project
2. Exploring the challenges of participation
3. Exploring facilitators to participation

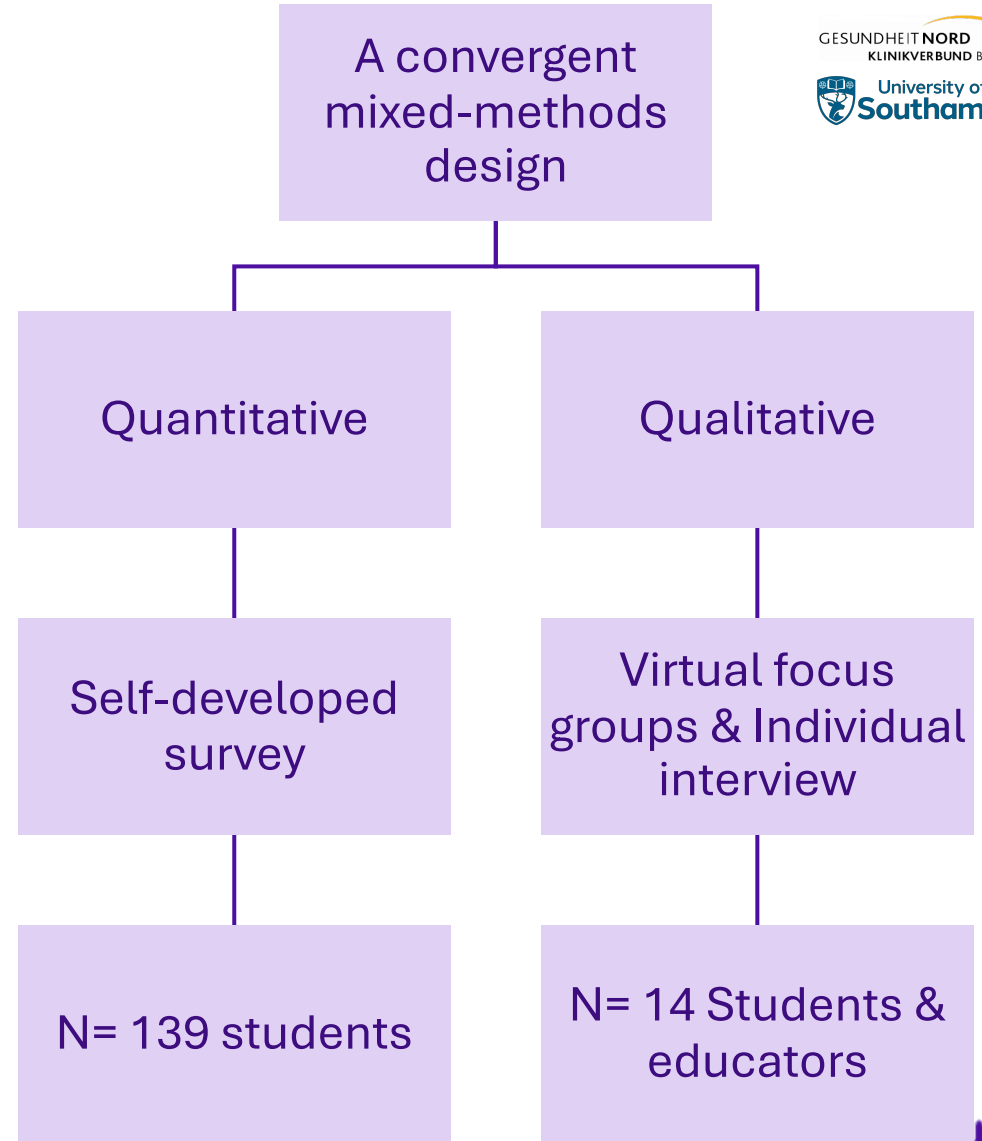


Methods





Austria, Belgium,
Croatia, France
Germany, Kuwait,
South Africa,
United Kingdom

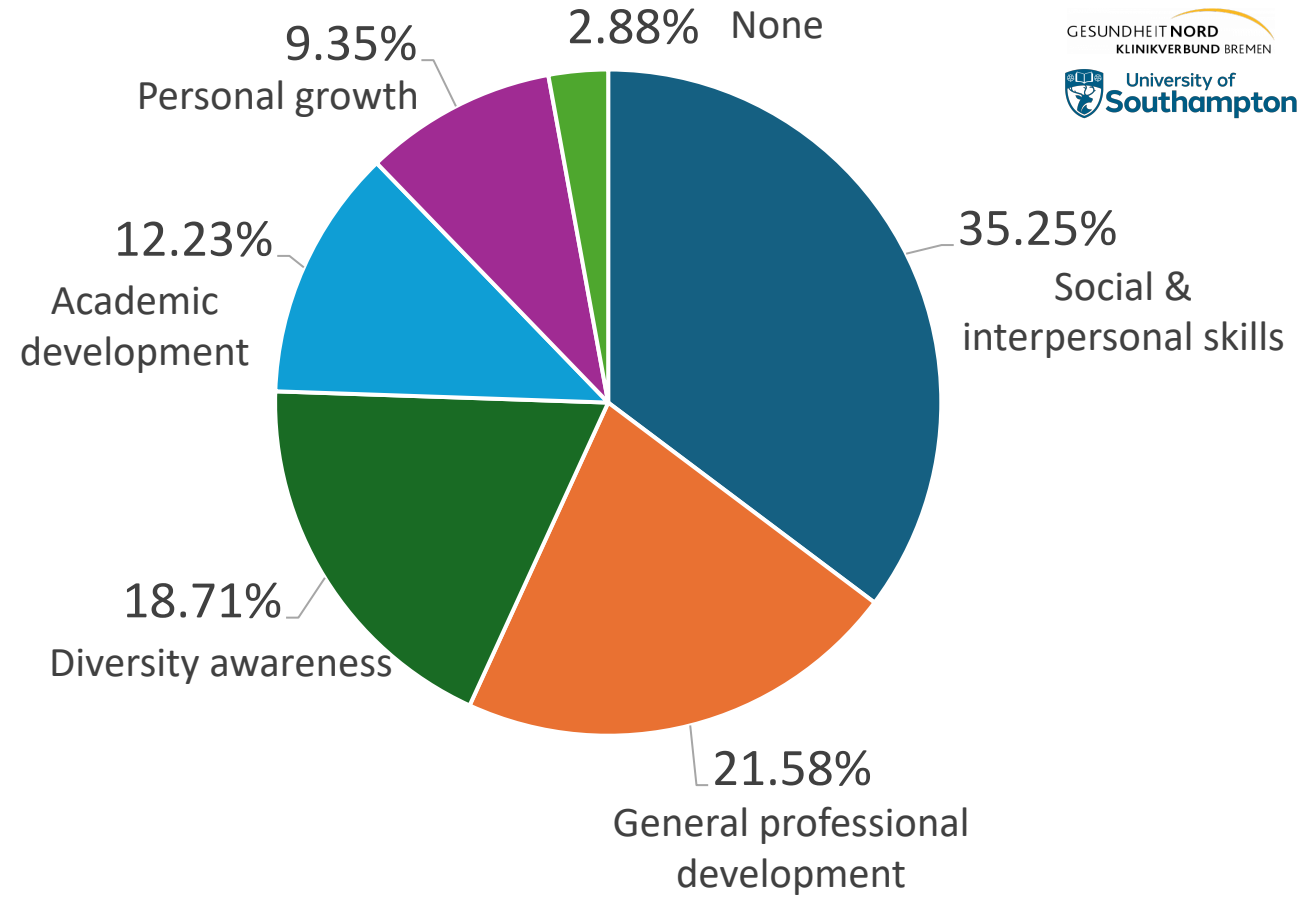


Results

Benefits of participating in i-DOT

Challenges to participation

Facilitators to participation



‘If anything, that i-DOT project... helped me a lot in having to interact and getting out of my little box of just only talking to people that I’m comfortable with’

‘For example in Croatia there is no occupational therapy in schools. We don’t have therapy in schools... just realising occupational therapy can be in schools was a whole new level of excitement’



Results

Benefits of participating in i-DOT

Challenges to participation

Facilitators to participation

Experienced challenge ^a	% of participants who experienced the challenge
Language barrier	43.88
Scheduling suitable times with my partner	43.17
Challenges with internet connectivity	39.57
Communication difficulties	30.22
Technological difficulties	25.18
Limited understanding of what was expected	20.14
Understanding or navigating time zones	13.67
Interpersonal skills	7.91
Loadshedding	7.19
Partner student dynamic	5.76
Miscellaneous	5.76
Busy academic schedule	4.32
Different HEIs requirements	1.44
None	2.16

^aParticipants could select more than one response.

'I think they feared the most the language barrier but... during the interviews (with their i-DOT partner) they realised it was not as much of a problem as they anticipated it to be' (participated educator)



Results

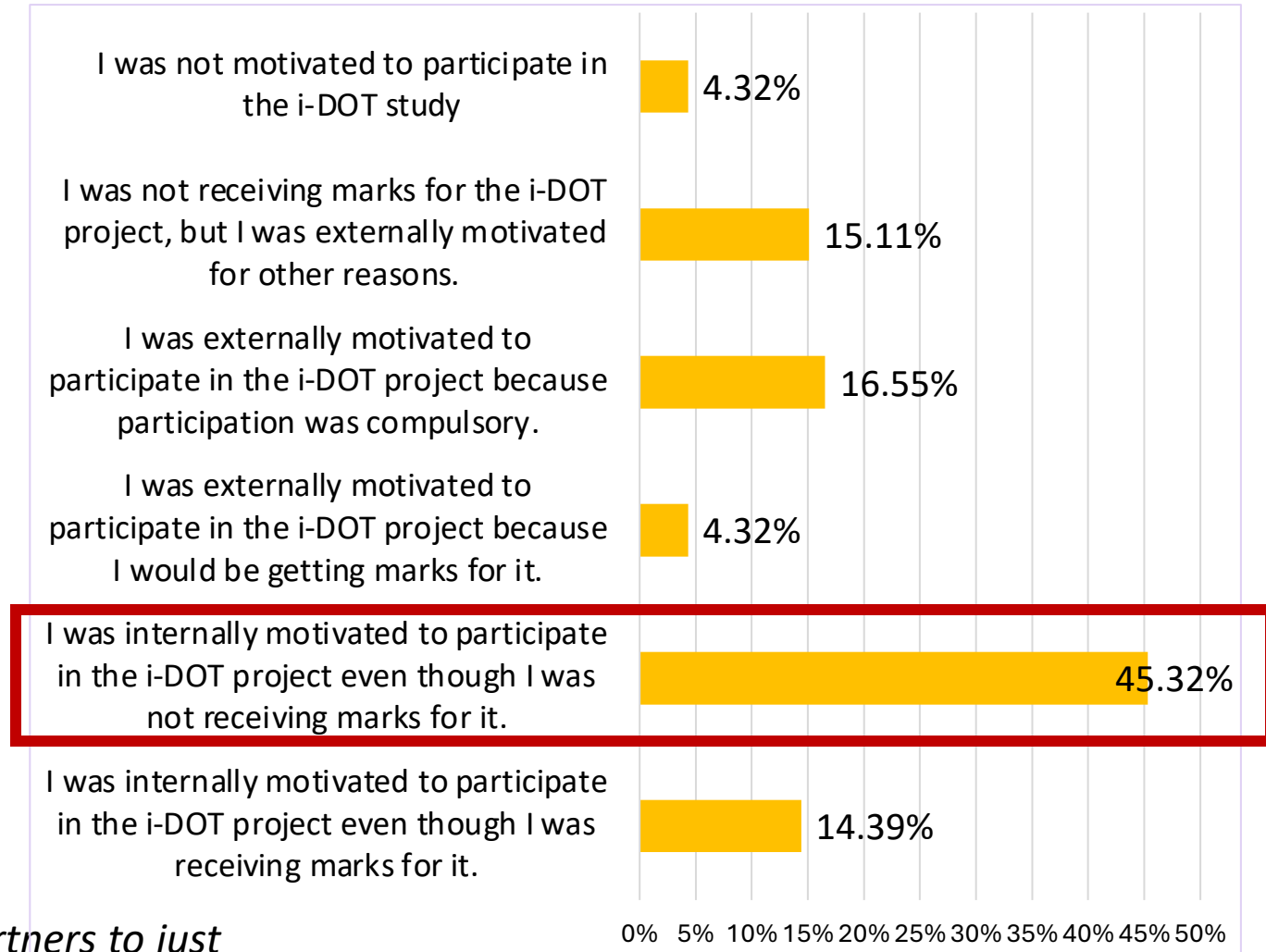
Benefits of participating in i-DOT

Challenges to participation

Facilitators to participation

'So it was very common for me and my partners to just pause the meeting for a minute and just go to Google Translate and translate what we're trying to deliver' (participated student)

Nature of participants' motivation during the project



Discussion

- i-DOT benefits extend beyond academic and intercultural learning
- Diversity was experienced through and via lifestyle, political, and religious factors.^{2,3}
- Contrary to previous research, being in a different year of academic study was seen as an enabler.⁴
- Limitations: the unequal representation across participating countries
- Future studies: A pretest–posttest design to provide quantifiable evidence of its benefits.



Conclusion

Short-term OCL projects (2–3 hrs) can yield substantial outcomes, making them feasible in existing curricula.

The i-DOT project exemplifies a flexible, collaborative model while preserving institutional autonomy.

As global crises increase the demand for resilient occupational therapists, fostering international collaboration and professional preparedness becomes increasingly critical.



What it means to be member of the i-DOT collaboration ?

"As an OT lecturer, I was inspired by the premise of the i-DOT online collaborative project and welcomed its focus on intercultural learning within occupational therapy education. In today's global context, it felt particularly meaningful to see internationalisation framed as the development of global citizenship rather than simply mobility.

Embedding the project within our communication module created valuable opportunities for students to engage with curiosity and openness, while practising online communication and collaboration skills. Students reported rich and positive discussions, learning not only about occupational therapy education in other countries, but also about culture, healthcare systems, history, and each other as people.

Post-module evaluation offered useful insights into how clear guidance can further support the i-DOT intercultural dialogue. This has prompted valuable reflection on how the project can be intentionally scaffolded within the module so that future students are well supported to make the most of this powerful learning opportunity. "

Fay Free, lecturer, University of Southampton



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ABSTRACT

Background: Internationalization-at-home facilitates intercultural learning and cultivates global citizenship opportunities for students in higher education while in their home environments. The International Discussions in Occupational Therapy (i-DOT) project is an annual, online collaborative learning initiative that supports occupational therapy education.

Aim: This study aims to assess the benefits of the i-DOT project and identify factors influencing student participation.

Material and methods: A convergent mixed methods design was used. Quantitative survey data and qualitative focus groups and interviews were gathered from occupational therapy students and educators involved in the project.

Results: Data were collected from 139 students who completed an online questionnaire and 14 students and educators who participated in the focus groups or interviews. Reported benefits included improved social and interpersonal skills, professional, and academic development, and increased diversity awareness. Most students indicated that these outcomes would not have been achieved through engagement with peers from their own country alone. Challenges to participation were attributed to logistical issues and participant-related difficulties.

Conclusion and significance: Participation in the i-DOT project enabled equitable international engagement for occupational therapy students. Despite participation barriers, occupational therapy students enhanced their learning and developed skills essential for independent professional practice.

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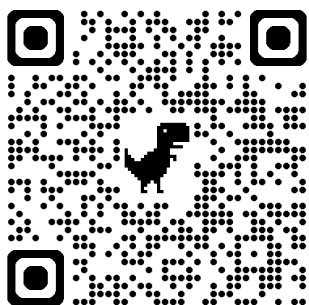
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Thank you..
Any questions?

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