

The Research Group
Rehabilitation Research

has the honor to invite you to the public defence of the PhD thesis of

Paula DiBiasio

to obtain the degree of Doctor in Rehabilitation Sciences and Physiotherapy

Title of the PhD thesis:

Understanding and Promoting the Development of Intercultural Competencies in Physiotherapy Students

Curriculum vitae

Supervisor:
Prof. dr. Nele Adriaenssens (VUB)

The defense will take place on
Tuesday, June 24, 2025 at 10.00
a.m.(GMT -4 -USA), 04:00 p.m (GMT
+2 - Belgium)

The defence can be followed
through a live stream: [link](#)

Members of the jury

Prof. dr. Bart Roelands (VUB) - chair
Prof. dr. Hakki Demirkapu (VUB)
Prof. dr. Dirk Geldof (VUB)
Dr. Ann Claeys
Dr. Cheryl Footer

Paula DiBiasio is a Doctor of Physical Therapy, an associate professor in the Department of Physical Therapy Education at Elon University (USA). Paula also serves as the Director of the Global Learning Opportunities Program at Elon. She collaborates with international partners to create sustainable and reciprocally beneficial student and faculty exchanges, including research and learning experiences. Her research focuses on enhancing intercultural skills in physiotherapy students, aiming to prepare graduates who are adept in delivering equitable, individualized, and person-centered healthcare across diverse populations and settings. Paula volunteers as a curriculum consultant for the development of physiotherapy academic programs globally, teaches internationally, and is dedicated to promoting access and equity in healthcare.

Abstract of the PhD research

With increasing internationalization, entry-level physiotherapists are working with patients and families from a wide variety of backgrounds, experiences, and places. Memorizing stereotypes is not what is needed to provide equitable healthcare in these situations. Educators are charged with providing opportunities for students to develop intercultural competencies (ICC), including cultural awareness, sensitivity, and humility. Learning the knowledge and skills related to ICC takes place within and beyond the walls of the classroom and has a profound and lasting impact on a healthcare provider's relationship with their patients. Physiotherapy (PT) curricula must teach students to expect, explore and embrace differences in caring behaviors among patients and families. ICC in healthcare providers supports the provision of individualized, high-quality care in any environment, and can reduce healthcare disparities and promote equitable and inclusive healthcare delivery.

The purpose of this research is to explore how students develop skills related to ICC and best practices for educators in promoting this development. The research included three published studies: one examining the concurrent validity of two measures of ICC, the second explored the development of ICC in 1038 doctor of physiotherapy (DPT) students in 8 programs in the United States of America (US), and the third explored the development of ICC in 182 students in one DPT program. Additionally, a manuscript presenting a narrative review of the literature for evidence-based educational strategies to promote the development of ICC in PT students was completed. A fifth study that explores the development of ICC in Belgian PT students is forthcoming and preliminary data was presented at the World Physiotherapy Congress, May 2025.

Results from the concurrent validity study included negligible to low statically significant positive relationships for scores on two measures of ICC, one intended to assess worldview and the other designed for a healthcare environment. This suggests that the measures are not interchangeable, and context specific measures may not be generalized to a world view, or vis versa. For this reason, the measure for healthcare was used in subsequent research. Findings from the two studies of ICC in DPT students demonstrated that curricula from the US DPT programs in these studies supported statistically significant increases in the level of skills related to ICC in students over time and that students who participated in intercultural learning experiences domestically and abroad demonstrated higher levels of ICC than those who did not. Furthermore, differences in ICC were found among age, gender identity, and ethnic/racial groups. Students who were in the DPT program during the COVID pandemic demonstrated lower levels of ICC than those prior to the pandemic. The narrative review revealed that there is an evidence-based process for promoting and developing ICC, in PT students, and it includes setting specific student learning outcomes, choosing evidence-based pedagogy, providing engaged intercultural experiences to all students, preparatory content and critical reflection, using an outcome measure that aligns with learning objectives and has strong psychometric properties in the desired context and adjusting based on outcomes.