COLLABORATIVE LEARNING IN THE OFFICE MANAGEMENT STUDIES FIELD: A COIL EXPERIENCE BETWEEN PORTUGAL AND CABO VERDE

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Abstract

The internationalisation of Higher Education Institutions (HEI) can occur across borders and at home. In recent years, the option for virtual mobility or collaborative online international learning (COIL) has been gaining special relevance. COIL "encompasses projects based on the involvement of teachers and students with different geographical, language and cultural backgrounds, for the development of collaborative teaching and learning processes using online communication tools" [1], thus facilitating not only the consolidation of technical skills, but also of transversal skills.

This article describes a COIL project that took place between March and June 2021, involving 26 students from the degree in Office Management and Business Communication (OMBC) of the University of Aveiro (Portugal) and the degree in Public Relations and Executive Secretariat (PRES) of the Public University of Cape Verde. The project, entitled "Communication tools in the context of job search in Portuguese-speaking markets: Portugal and Cape Verde", was streamlined in a context of competences aggregation between disciplines in the area of Portuguese and Computer Science, with the participation of 5 teachers. Each student selected a job offer in the partner country and produced a multiformat CV (digital support and video CV), adapting it to a situation of applying for real job opportunities. The project included familiarisation sessions, open classes regarding the labour market in both countries, extra-class meetings between students and moments (in class and extra-class) to follow up the work in progress.

After the end of the project, a questionnaire was applied to the students involved, and 24 answers were obtained: 13 from Portugal (all participants) and 11 from Cape Verde (out of 13 possible). The respondents indicated curiosity, the possibility of meeting new cultures/people and acquiring new knowledge as factors that motivated them to participate in this COIL project. Overall, participants were very satisfied with the development of this project. The answers obtained also made it possible to identify the most and least positive aspects in the implementation of the project, to find out the technical and transversal skills developed from this experience, and to list the communication tools/digital tools that the students used the most.

Keywords: Internationalisation at home, Virtual mobility, Collaborative Online International Learning, Portuguese Language, Digital Competences.

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, with the consolidation of the global knowledge economy, Higher Education and Research have become even more decisive factors in the economic field [2]. In this context, the internationalisation of Higher Education has gained renewed importance in the discourse and agendas of politicians and decision-makers [3]. Although universities have, quintessentially, always been strong international interaction environments, internationalisation is currently regarded as a priority and as a critical factor for the success and projection of the various Higher Education Institutions which hence commonly integrate it in their respective strategic plans [4].

Subject of several studies, internationalisation can be understood, in the light of what is proposed by Knight, as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education" [5]. The same author [6] argues that internationalisation can assume two complementary features: internationalisation across borders, and internationalisation at home.

International mobility, in the more traditional ways of physical mobility of students and other actors in the academic world, has been the target for much investment, at national and international levels, namely in the context of the Erasmus+ programme, and has also received much attention from

researchers in various areas. Conversely, internationalisation at home has a less visible and robust profile [7]. Conceived as "the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments" [8], internationalisation at home is currently associated with several advantages, namely with regard to the unlimited number of students it can reach [7]. Consequently, "compared to cross-border (i.e., the mobility of students and staff), this is a more versatile teaching-learning modality that can include all students, namely the ones that are not able to participate in mobility programs" [9].

In this context, the option for virtual mobility or Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) gains special relevance. COIL "encompasses projects based on the involvement of teachers and students with different geographical, language and cultural backgrounds, for the development of collaborative teaching and learning processes using online communication tools" [1], thus facilitating not only the consolidation of technical skills, but also of transversal skills. Understood as "a new teaching and learning paradigm that develops cross-cultural awareness across shared multicultural learning environments" [3], "COIL is based upon developing team-taught learning environments where teachers from two cultures work together to develop a shared syllabus, emphasising experiential and collaborative student learning" [4].

As they are based on online collaboration between geographically distant classes, COIL projects also allow the strengthening of cooperation between Portuguese-speaking countries, facilitating the articulation between students and teachers of the various countries of this extensive linguistic community. It is, therefore, an excellent opportunity to contribute to the achievement of the objectives of the CPLP (Community of Portuguese Language Countries), particularly with regard to multilateral cooperation in science, technology and higher education.

In parallel, COIL projects seem to be contexts that facilitate the strengthening of digital and multicultural skills, thus preparing those involved for professional practice in multinational and geographically distant teams [4]. In fact, these are opportunities for growth and enrichment, not only for the students involved, but also for the teachers, as pointed out by [10], when they state that COIL experiences also contribute to the transformation of teachers, enabling them to improve, in a more sustainable way, the multicultural skills of their students.

2 COLLABORATIVE LEARNING IN THE OFFICE MANAGEMENT STUDIES FIELD: DESCRIPTION OF A COIL EXPERIENCE BETWEEN PORTUGAL AND CAPE VERDE

At Águeda School of Technology and Management of the University of Aveiro (ESTGA-UA), specifically within the scope of the first cycle degree in Office Management and Business Communication (OMBC), several innovative pedagogical initiatives have been implemented over the years [11], making the preference for learner-centred activities even more noticeable. Concurrently, inter-institutional collaboration strategies have been reinforced, namely within the scope of Secretarial Studies, with the participation of the teachers and students of this course in national and international networks and associations in this field, whether in the pedagogical, professional or research scope.

One of the privileged guiding lines in the context of the internationalisation of the OMBC course focuses on bringing partners from Portuguese Language countries closer, in order to strengthen the plethora of academic, scientific, cultural, and economic opportunities associated to sharing a common work language, and belonging to the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP). In effect, the Agreement on Cooperation among Higher Education Institutions of the Member Countries of the Community of Portuguese Language Countries, signed in 1998, precisely states the aim of promoting "cooperation among higher education institutions through activities supporting education and culture, research, and scientific and technological development" [12]. As Leite [13] states, the strengthening of cooperation actions between CPLP countries may foster a scale effect, "increasing our competitiveness in the framework of world globalisation" [13] and contributing to the effective establishment of this language as an international work language [14], thus benefiting all its users.

Over the years, the friendship ties and affinity between Portugal and Cape Verde, based on a historical relationship, as well as the special ties that unite the two countries within the framework of the CPLP, have enabled the development of partnerships in various areas, including education, science and innovation.

In this context, during the academic year 2020/2021, contact was strengthened between the Degree in OMBC and the Degree in Public Relations and Executive Secretariat (PRES), taught at the Public University of Cape Verde. This approach involved the inclusion of Professors from this University in

scientific events and publications organised by ESTGA-UA during this academic year, and the implementation of a COIL project, developed between March and July 2021, as described below.

Project preparation started in January 2021, following the guidelines of the coordinating team for Pedagogical Innovation at Aveiro University, namely the recommendations on the COIL@UA webpage. The preparation and implementation cycle broadly followed the path indicated by the Aveiro University for this type of international collaboration initiatives (cf. Fig. 1).
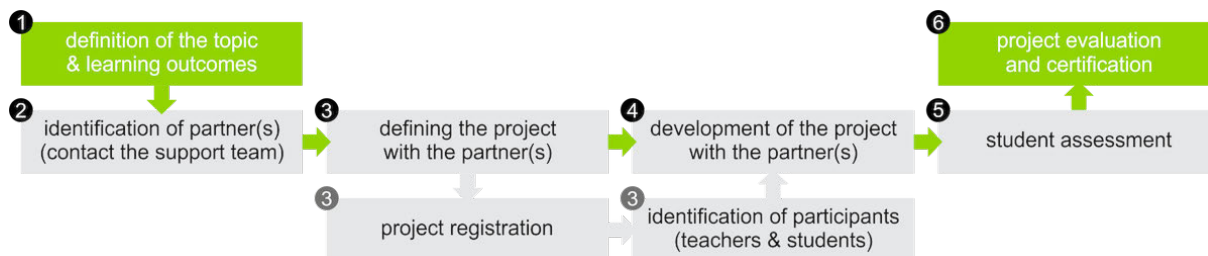

Figure 1. Cycle of preparation and implementation of COIL projects
(source: https://www.ua.pt/pt/inovacaopedagogica/coil).

Thus, and considering the importance the experiences of competences aggregation, already described in previous works, have in the Undergraduate Degree in OMBC, the focus was once again placed on a project of this type, which fostered the convergence of competences associated with two or more curricular units (CU) taking place simultaneously, assuming the completion of a single work, guided and assessed by the professors of the different CUs involved [15]. In this particular case, the collaborative project outlined aimed to develop competences in the understanding and production of multimodal texts in Portuguese and competences in the production, editing and dissemination of digital contents. In fact, and if we take into account the ideal competences for secretarial professionals referred to by Erviti, Fernández-Vallejo and Raskin [16], we find that several are anchored in the articulation of these two domains of knowing/doing, being unquestionable the need for graduates in this area to master the IT tools in use in the various organisations [11], [17] and be excellent users of their mother tongue [18].

Assuming the importance of crossing these two domains, the CUs of both degrees to be part of the COIL project were defined: Portuguese II and Electronic Office Applications II, for the degree in Portugal, and Textual Interpretation and Production and Applied Informatics, for the degree in Cape Verde. In both cases, these are first year courses (second semester) of the degrees in question. The project was named "Communication tools in the context of job search in Portuguese-speaking markets: Portugal and Cape Verde", and presupposed the creation of a multiformat CV by the students involved, adapting this communication product to a situation in which one applies for job opportunities in the partner country. In detail, the students involved should present the following final products:

- CV in printable format (on paper/digital media) for job application for a company/organisation in the partner country;

- Video CV for job application for a company/organisation in the partner country;

- Personal presentation, in *pitch* format, in the context of a joint synchronous session, with the participation of students and teachers.

Globally, the aim was to enable students to act more easily in the wide Portuguese-speaking market, which is increasingly more relevant in economic and cultural terms. More specifically, the project aimed to develop technical skills such as (i) selection and analysis of job opportunities in the countries involved, (ii) selection and presentation, with correct linguistic discourse, of the most relevant information to include in multimodal CVs; (iii) selection and use of the most appropriate IT tools to create and publish functional and appealing multiformat communication products; (iv) preparation of an incisive and persuasive personal presentation, adapted to the socio-cultural characteristics of the interlocutors. In parallel, the consolidation of transversal skills such as collaboration in international teams, critical thinking and argumentative capacity, intercultural communication, digital proficiency, time and conflict management, among others, was also foreseen. Table 1 shows the specific objectives associated with the CUs involved.

Table 1. Specific objectives of the project.

Portuguese II / Textual Interpretation and Production	Electronic Office Applications II / Applied Informatics
• To identify and systematise relevant information found in job advertisements/institutional websites; • Produce a multiformat CV, showing ability to select information, linguistic and discourse correctness, and intercultural sensitivity; • Present and substantiate their CV orally, interacting with the audience in an assertive and appealing way.	• Use a variety of resources and applications to produce a functional, appealing and modern multiformat CV, consistent with the context of the job application; • Use various resources and applications to share and communicate the multiformat CV produced; • Orally present and substantiate their CV, interacting with the audience in an assertive and appealing way, in articulation with the digital support used.

The adherence to the project from the students in both classes was optional, having calculated, in both HEIs, parallel assessment options that would guarantee the development of the same technical competences for all students enrolled in the CUs involved, regardless of whether or not they had joined the COIL project. The project, which involved 13 students from each partner HEI, effectively began at the end of March 2021, and took place, according to the stages indicated in Table 2, in the following two and a half months.

Table 2. Project stages.

Date(s)	Project stages – main moments
March 2021	Presentation of the two course degrees
12.04.2021	Familiarisation activity: personal presentations | Open class on the profile of the Office Management Professional in Portugal
19.04.2021	Familiarisation activity | Team building | Open class on the labour market in the Secretarial and Public Relations areas in Cape Verde
26.04.2021	Familiarisation Dynamics | Presentation of the project: objectives, activities, timetable
First week of May 2021	Meeting to define the advertisement/company (joint session with parallel rooms), with the support of the teachers involved
May 2021	Interaction within each team to prepare the communication products | Online monitoring sessions on work in progress
31.05. 2021	Finalisation of the provisional version of the documents produced and sharing it with the team
2.06.2021	Sharing the review of the previous version of the colleague's work
3.06.2021 – 4.06.2021	Update the documents according to the pair's suggestions/comments
11.06.2021	Submission of final products
16.06.2021 – 23.06.2021	Synchronous pitch presentation session
June and July 2021	Self and hetero-evaluation | Final assessment of the project

After the familiarisation activities indicated in Table 2, which allowed not only mutual institutional knowledge, but also some initial more informal and personal interactions, such as those associated with sharing photos selected by the multiple participants, mixed teams were randomly selected. From that moment on, students from both HEIs supported each other at several levels, including but not limited to, a) support when identifying a real job advertisement (in relevant areas for both courses) posted in each of the countries involved; b) collaboration in the preparation of CVs (taking into account the specificities of the business sector and culture of each country); c) review of the products prepared by the pair, providing suggestions for improvement that contribute to the adequacy of the documents to the business reality in question.

Throughout the preparation period of the requested products, students were able to share doubts and receive *feedback* from the Professors involved, both during the associated CU timetable and during additional office hours scheduled for this purpose (these took place via *Zoom*, to facilitate the participation of students from both countries). For the Cape Verdean students, a *Teams* group was created to ensure that they could meet outside of class and share relevant information about the project.

In the final stage of the project, the students exchanged their products (digital CV and video CV), to obtain suggestions for improvement from their colleagues. Finally, the final documents, already incorporating the changes suggested by their colleagues, were submitted through the *e-learning* platforms of the HEIs involved. The project ended with the presentation of the personal *pitch,* held in two online sessions via *Zoom*, on 16 and 23 June, 2021. In these sessions, from the selected real job advertisement, each student had the opportunity to present and substantiate their application, by sharing and commenting on the products being evaluated. As they presented, the students were questioned by the Professors involved and/or received comments from them. Colleagues were also able to comment on each other's work.

As this is the first COIL experience within the courses involved, it was considered fundamental to assess how the students involved perceived this experience of international collaborative work.

3 A COIL EXPERIENCE IN THE OFFICE MANAGEMENT STUDIES FIELD: STUDENTS PERCEPTIONS

The next paragraphs present the students' perceptions regarding various aspects of the project implementation and indicate the main competences developed by the participants.

3.1 Methodology

Twenty-six first-year students from the PRES degree courses in Cape Verde and the OMBC degree course in Portugal were involved in this experiment. In both cases, participation in the collaborative pedagogic experiment was voluntary. A questionnaire survey, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity, was set as the methodology for data collection.

The questionnaire was created in *Google Forms*, taking into account not only the objectives of the international collaborative project, but also a series of aspects related to its implementation. The questionnaire, with 15 questions, aimed at collecting the students' assessment of multiple aspects relevant to monitoring the project, such as the motivations for participating in the project, the degree of suitability of several aspects of implementation, the degree of difficulty of variables associated with group work, the technical and transversal skills developed, and the digital tools used. The questionnaire contained 6 open-ended questions and the remaining questions were closed-ended. For data collection, this questionnaire was made available by two means: the students' institutional email address*,* for both classes, and the *Teams* platform, in the case of the Cape Verde class. 24 responses were obtained, 11 from Cape Verde and 13 from Portugal.

3.2 Results

The participants in this international collaborative project indicated their curiosity and desire to have new experiences and to acquire/share new knowledge as the main reasons that led them to join this project. The possibility of interacting with people from other countries and contacting other cultures was also mentioned as a motivating factor. Two respondents also indicated that they joined the project because it allowed them to learn about the partner country's labour market and two others mentioned the possibility of obtaining a certificate of participation in an international project.

The student respondents showed great satisfaction with the collaborative project developed, as the registered average of 4.21 on a scale of 1 (totally unsatisfied) to 5 (totally satisfied) has shown. The answers from the students from Cape Verde indicated a higher degree of satisfaction than the Portuguese students, with an average of 4.55 and 3.92, respectively. None of the participants selected levels 1 or 2 of the scale and the mode is in the level 4 (see Fig. 2).
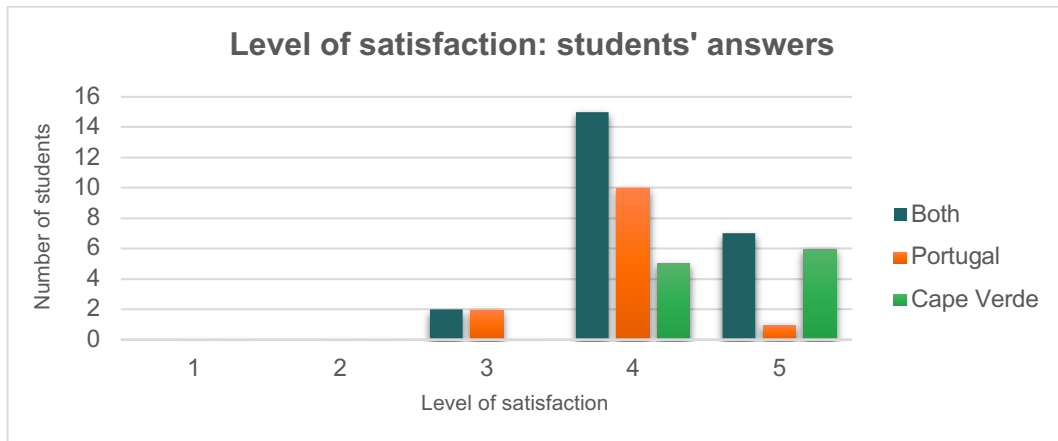
Figure 2. Level of satisfaction with the collaborative project.

In the reasons given by students for their degree of satisfaction with the project, two groups were identified: one group included the reasons for a more positive assessment of the project; the other group included the reasons that contributed to a lesser degree of satisfaction with this experiment. In the latter group, aspects such as the difference of class timetables, the difficulty of interaction with peers and the short period of time for the completion of the project are indicated. As reasons for satisfaction, students indicated that the project was well managed and that it was an enriching experience; there were also students who mentioned the ease of interaction with their peers and the greater knowledge of the partner country's labour market.

Students were also asked about the degree of adequacy of various items associated with the development of the project, which were rated on a scale of 1 "not at all adequate" to 5 "totally adequate". At this level, the trends shown by the global responses replicate those of each of the countries involved, with it being clear that, on average, the respondents considered the various aspects under analysis to be at least adequate. Even so, the average response values of Portuguese students are always higher than those of their colleagues from Cape Verde. The aspects identified as most adequate by the Portuguese respondents are "Project monitoring by teachers" and "contribution of the content taught in class". For Cape Verdean students, the most suitable aspects were "familiarisation activities/mutual acquaintance" and " Project monitoring by teachers", as shown in Figure 3.
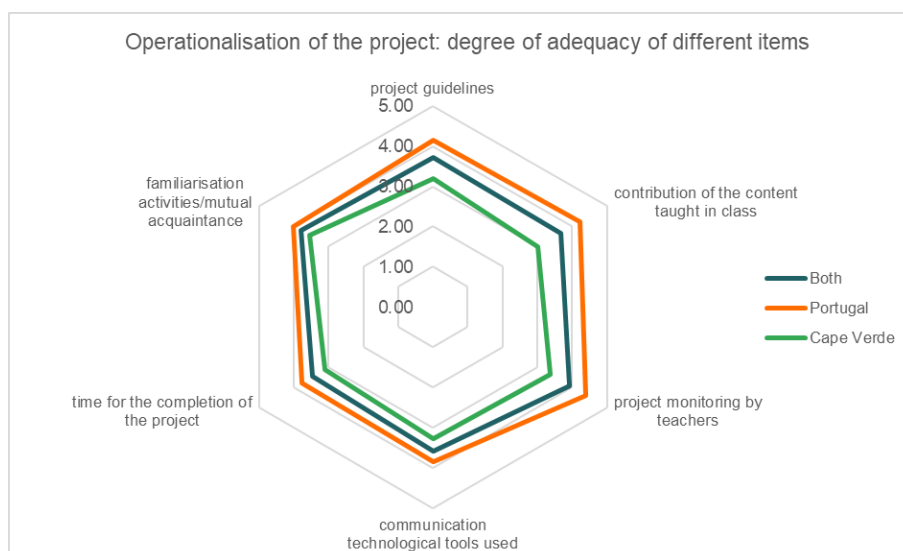

Figure 3. Degree of adequacy of different items related with the operationalisation of the project.

With regard to the development of the work, the respondents rated the degree of difficulty of a series of items, and the proximity of the average values of the answers of the students from the two countries was evident. Globally, the students indicated "conciliation of schedules between the elements of the group" as the least easy aspect. For the Portuguese respondents, "searching for a relevant/appropriate

job advertisement" also did not prove easy, which contrasts with the perception of the Cape Verdean students, who indicated this as the easiest aspect (cf. Fig. 4).
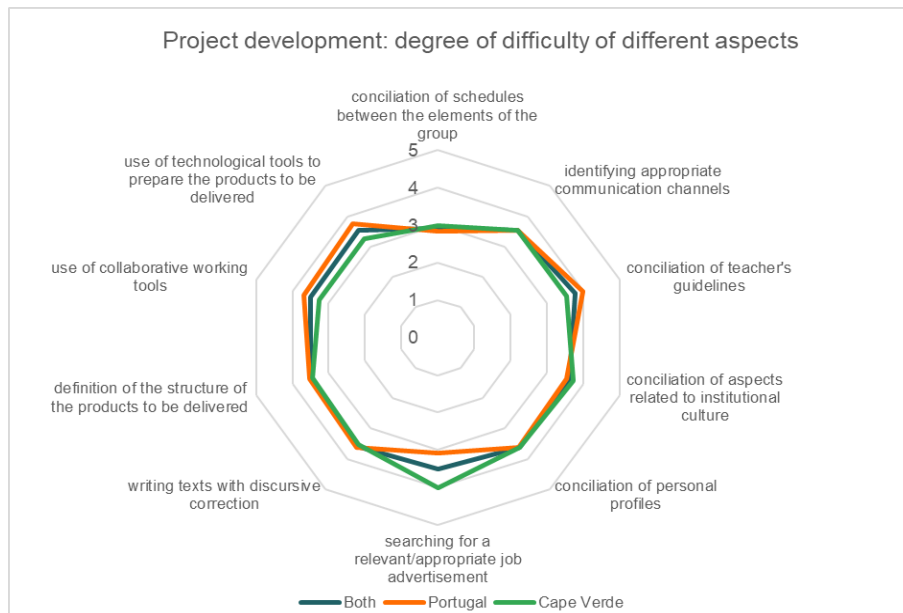

Figure 4. Degree of difficulty of different aspects related to the project development.

The students were also asked to identify the technical competences consolidated while carrying out this collaborative project. In this area, the coincidence of results between the two groups of students is even clearer. In general terms, the average responses are quite satisfactory, with the "preparation of a CV with structural and linguistic-discursive correctness" standing out in both groups of respondents, with an average of 4.0 out of 5 (which corresponds to "very developed"). For Cape Verdean students, "using electronic office applications to produce and share documents" was also indicated as very developed. In the case of the Portuguese students, "preparation of a video CV" stood out (3.77 out of 5), as shown in Figure 5.
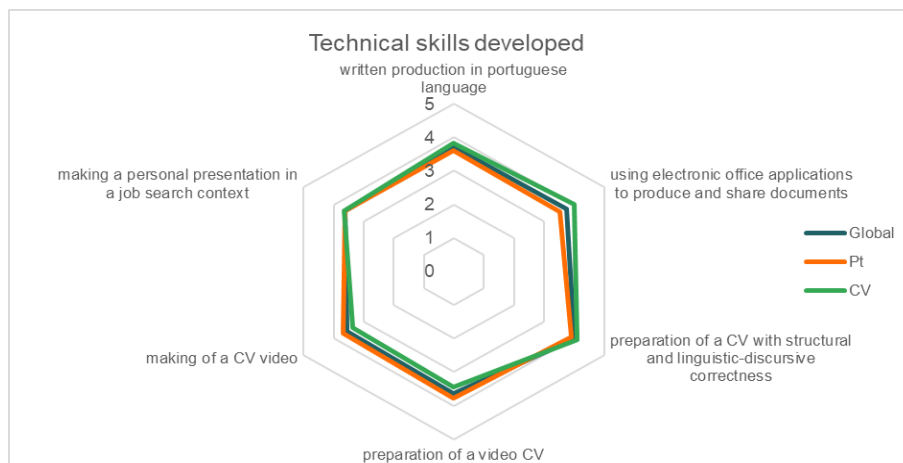

Figure 5. Technical skills developed by the students during the project.

Considering the relevance of collaborative projects, such as the one described here, for the development and consolidation of transversal competences, the participants were also questioned in this respect. For the Portuguese students, the most developed competences were creativity, tolerance, organisation and intercultural fluency. The students from Cape Verde indicated that they had developed resilience/persistence, tolerance, intercultural fluency and autonomy to a greater extent. Although there is some proximity in the results of both groups in general (cf. Figure 6), they differ mainly with regard to the consolidation of competences such as organisation (which shows a higher level in the Portuguese group), resilience, tolerance, intercultural fluency and teamwork (more valued by Cape Verdeans).
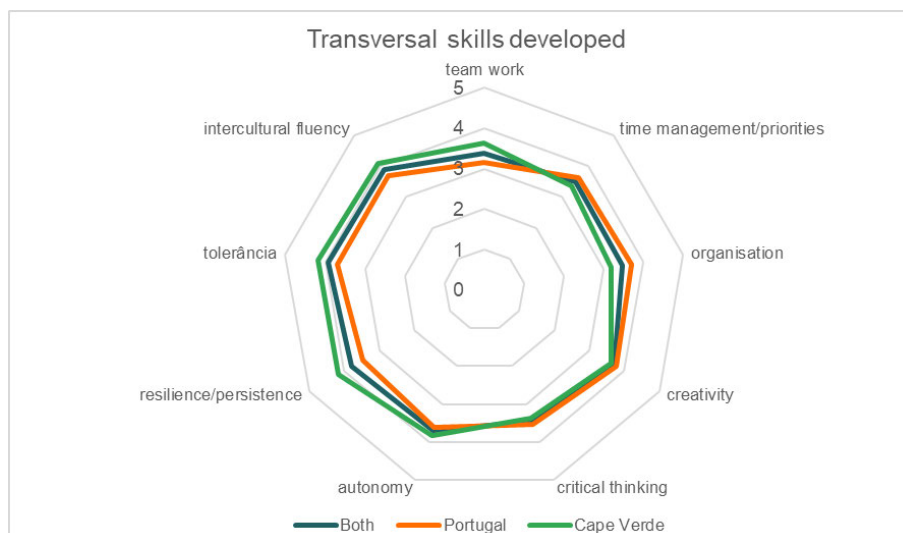
Figure 6. Soft skills developed by the students during the project.

With regard to communication between the elements of the various teams, on average, each respondent said they had used 2.3 communication tools, highlighting *Facebook chat, email*, *Whatsapp* and *Zoom* as the most used tools. The least used tools were *Instagram* and *Teams*.

With regard to the digital tools used by the students to develop the work, *Canva* was highlighted, especially used for the preparation of the digital CV. Some students also indicated that they had used *MsWord* for this purpose. The responses regarding the use of tools for preparing the video CV were less conclusive as students indicated not only the *software* used, but also some *hardware* (namely mobile phone and computer), a hypothesis that had not been predicted when the questionnaire was created. The answers concerning the *software* used were also very disparate: among other tools, students mentioned *Canva*, *Inshot* and *Filmora*.

4   CONCLUSIONS

This article describes an international collaboration project developed between two higher education Office Management/Secretarial Studies degree courses at Portuguese-speaking universities, the University of Aveiro, in Portugal, and the University of Cape Verde. In both degree courses, it was the first *Collaborative Online International Learning* experiment. The described project was not only based on this international collaboration, but also on the articulation between two scientific areas (Portuguese language and Computer Science), having involved, simultaneously, in each University, two CUs that were running in parallel. Therefore, it was a pedagogical practice that aimed to encourage not only the work with colleagues from another country, based on the capacity of teamwork and cultural adaptation, but also interdisciplinarity.

This collaborative project allowed the implementation of a very relevant and enriching socio-cultural interaction dynamic, bringing together two realities that, despite being geographically distant, converge in terms of language, of the challenges faced today and the desire for cooperation. It was also a project that allowed future professionals in the same area – Office Management and Communication - to work together, with the resulting asset in terms of sharing aspirations, expectations and experiences, and the creation of international networks.

The Portuguese professors' previous experience in similar projects allowed a more effective and more guiding dynamic, both at the level of interaction with students, and in the indication of the very contents worked in the classroom during the execution of the project.

Overall, the students, who took up this challenge for various reasons, such as the opportunity to get to know new cultures and to acquire or consolidate knowledge, were very satisfied with the experience, especially the Cape Verdean students. In fact, for these students, the project was very relevant as it allowed contact with a more developed world and with a more dynamic market in terms of job opportunities. The overall satisfaction of the participants results mainly from the fact that the project was well managed, providing an enriching experience and allowing contact with co-workers of other nationalities and cultures.

While evaluating various aspects related to the implementation of this project, the student respondents' overall assessment was quite positive, with two of the most successful aspects being "the contribution of the contents taught in class" and "Project monitoring by teachers". Regarding working in teams, the least successful aspect was "conciliation of schedules between the elements of the group".

In terms of the development and consolidation of competences, the project proved to have met its objectives, insofar as, in terms of technical competences, the respondents gave quite satisfactory answers. Thus, for both groups of respondents, the most developed competence was "preparing a CV with structural and linguistic-discursive correctness". For Cape Verdean students, "using electronic office applications to produce and share documents" was also indicated as being very developed. In the case of Portuguese students, who had already worked with collaborative tools in other previous CUs, "preparation of a video CV" was highlighted. The transversal competences, which are extremely important in the preparation and dynamisation of collaborative projects such as the one reported here, were also consolidated in this collaborative project, although there was some dissimilarity in the competences most developed by each of the groups of respondents: for the Portuguese, the most developed competence was creativity, while for the Cape Verdeans it was tolerance and resilience/persistence.

This project, only feasible due to the existence of communication tools and digital collaborative work tools, aimed precisely to create a work context in which participants could strengthen their knowledge of some tools and contact with others. At this level, and to ensure communication within each group, the students resorted to tools currently in common use, such as *Facebook* chat, *Whatsapp* or email, among others. For the Cape Verdean students, the great richness of this experience was, above all, the diversification of technological tools that were additionally explored in the Applied Computer Science course, allowing them to work on contents that went beyond the usual ones. The Portuguese students had the opportunity to explore several tools for creating and editing videos, a content not previously worked on during their academic life. Both groups were also able to benefit from the regular use of communication and collaborative work tools (*Zoom*, *Teams*, *GoogleDrive...*).

Despite the overall success of the project, there were some contextual variables that may have acted as constraints on its development, including but not limited to, the fact that this collaborative work was boosted during the COVID-19 pandemic period, which was reflected, for example, in the reduction of job offers available in Cape Verde during the period in question. Also, the difficulties in accessing internet, mainly experienced by Cape Verdean students, may have led to a less regular participation of some students in the project.

The analysis of how this collaborative project (the first of its kind, in which both classes participated) was prepared, implemented and evaluated also leads to some suggestions for future work. Therefore, in a potential next edition of this COIL project, it will be necessary to rethink the time distribution of the project, so as not to coincide with the concentration of assessments in other curricular units and to allow more time for the completion of the requested products. Thus, it will be important in the future to: a) allow for more familiarisation activities; b) allocate more time to exploring the different contents and working with different tools; c) give the members of each team the possibility to do a more regular work, enabling, for example, a greater exchange of impressions on the products developed, and obtaining more sustained feedback from teammates.

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