Horizontal Psychological Support in the Digital Network: *DigiPsyRes* Project Training Evaluation

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Abstract: *Despite extensive research on peer support, there remains a lack of initiatives specifically targeting psychological resilience and digital student networking. Addressing this gap, the training program "Step by Step from Trainees to Trainers and Peer-Supporters in the Student Peer-Support Network" (sub-program C) within the "DigiPsyRes" project aims to equip students to provide peer support. This paper describes the layout and implementation of Program C, which underwent an international pilot phase in January 2024, followed by refinements, and was finally delivered in April 2024 in Serbian in a hybrid format. The aim of the paper is to evaluate Program C and compare the outcomes of its international pilot phase and national training. The evaluation employed a blend of quantitative and qualitative methods, utilizing three distinct types of instruments: knowledge assessment, evaluation questionnaire, and qualitative feedback. The results showed high scores in knowledge assessment and evaluation questionnaires for both phases, with the national training phase receiving higher evaluations than the international pilot. Qualitative analysis confirmed the prevalence of positive feedback and provided insights for future adjustments, leading to improved scores for the national training. These findings underscore the importance of well-structured courses in fostering peer support networks that enhance resilience and highlight their role in achieving optimal learning outcomes.*

Keywords: *Horizontal/peer Support; digital network; psychological resilience; training; program evaluation.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary educational landscape, fostering resilience among youth, especially university students, has emerged as a critical objective [1]. Resilience, defined as positive psychological adaptation in the face of change, plays a pivotal role in the well-being and learning outcomes of students, enabling them to navigate and surmount adversity [2, 3]. Moreover, individual resilience is frequently augmented by community support, encompassing interactions with peers, family, teachers, and community leaders [4]. This social aspect of resilience highlights the significance of peer support, a form of social support where individuals with shared experiences offer mutual assistance. Research indicates that resilience helps students navigate difficulties, enhances their satisfaction with university life, and contributes to their academic success [3]. Additionally, high levels of resilience are associated with better psychological well-being, self-esteem, and physical health among university students [5].

Despite extensive research and numerous training programs focusing on peer support, there remains a paucity of initiatives specifically targeting psychological resilience and digital student networking. Addressing this gap, the training program "Step by Step from Trainees to Trainers and Peer-Supporters in the Student Peer-Support Network," developed within the "Enhancing Digital and Psychological Resilience through Peer Networking in the Online Environment in Times of Crisis – DigiPsyRes" project, aims to equip students to provide peer support. This training program seeks to enhance both psychological and digital resilience among peers, fostering a robust peer support network to fortify resilience in educational settings.

This paper describes the layout and implementation of Program C, the third and final part of the training program, with the aim of evaluating it and comparing the outcomes of its international pilot phase with the national training phase that followed after adjustments.

2. PSYCHOLOGICAL RESILIENCE AND PEER SUPPORT

Resilience is related to and overlaps with psychological support. Activities that promote psychological support can contribute to resilience

by promoting the core competencies that support well-being and learning outcomes (i.e. skills, behaviours, and relationships), and which in turn allow children and youth and the education systems they are part of to manage and overcome adversity. It is also important to note that individual resilience is often boosted by community support, including interactions with peers, family, teachers, community leaders, and so on [6].

Resilience is defined as positive psychological adaptation in the face of change. It is the focus of many educational skills training programs. It is nurtured, developed, and mobilized in times of stress [7]. Researchers have identified three related uses of the term resilience: recovery, resistance and reconfiguration [8].

Peer Support is a supportive relationship between people who have a lived experience in common in relation to either their own mental health challenge or illness or that of a loved one [9]. Peer support is distinct from other forms of social support in that the source of support is a peer, a person who is similar in fundamental ways to the recipient of the support; their relationship is one of equality. Peer support is used to refer to initiatives where colleagues, members of self-help organizations, and others meet, in person or online, as equals to give each other connection and support on a reciprocal basis. Trained peer support workers such as peer support specialists and peer counsellors receive special training, like clinical staff. The social peer support also offers an online system of distributed expertise, interactivity, social distance and control, which may promote disclosure of personal problems [10].

Peer social support increase the psychological well-being, self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-management of difficulties and social inclusion, engagement and social network, also indirectly influencing academic performance [11]. Peer support is based on the exchange of knowledge, experiences, emotional, social or practical support between persons who are in an equal position, with the aim of mutual assistance. Research on social support has consistently found that knowing about the available support from others is related to adaptive outcomes [12].

While numerous research studies and training programs focus on Horizontal/Peer Support, few delve into the intersection of psychological resilience and digital student networking. The training program "Step by Step: From Trainees to Trainers and Peer Supporters in the Student Peer-Support Network," stands as a pioneering initiative in this field.

This program is meticulously designed to empower students with the skills and knowledge necessary for providing peer support that enhances both psychological and digital resilience. By implementing a structured approach to peer support, the program aims to establish a sustainable network of student supporters capable of aiding their peers in navigating challenges within digital learning environments, especially during crises.

This innovative training model not only addresses immediate student needs but also lays the groundwork for fostering long-term resilience and well-being within educational communities. The program consists of the three sub-programs [13]: A (Psychological resilience, well-being, and support), B (Digital resilience and networking) and C (Horizontal psychological support in the digital network and ethical framework). This paper focuses on Program C, examining its structure and evaluation.

3. HORIZONTAL PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT IN THE DIGITAL NETWORK - TRAINING PROGRAM C

The training program C, titled "Horizontal psychological support in the digital network and ethical framework" was designed with the objective of enhancing communicative skills of students and staff across three partner universities to provide successful support within the DigiPsyRes network. It was developed based on the scientific and educational expertise of university teachers – professionals in the field of communication sciences and psychology of the three partner universities.

The program aims at introducing participants to the key features of peer support, peer networking, and the ethical framework of non-professional psychological peer support, with a focus on the communication skills needed to participate in the peer support network.

Program C consists of five thematic units [13]:

1. Introduction of student support network and network behaviour;

2. Peer communication and supportive communication;

3. Non-professional psycho-social support and non-professional educational support;

4. Ethics and rules of non-professional support;

5. Connections with the portal - DigiPsyRes Network.

In-depth scenarios for each thematic unit are given in detail in the manual titled "Step by Step: From Trainees to Trainers and Supporters in the Network" [14] and they comprise thorough instructions of the program delivery, enriched by various original visuals and numerous interactive activities.

The training model applied in program C delivery is sequential, and consists of phases of experience, reflection, conceptualization and implementation. The delivery format is hybrid, encompassing online-remote and in-person sessions, both

synchronous and asynchronous. The course is structured over a total duration of 14 hours, with 6 hours allocated to direct course instruction and 8 hours dedicated to preparatory activities and tasks conducted through the e-course platform. The program underwent an international pilot phase in January 2024, followed by refinements, culminating in its final delivery in national languages in April 2024 in a hybrid format. This international training initiative was concurrently conducted in three partner countries.

3.1. International piloting of the Program C

The international piloting (IP) of the training program C was implemented on January 12th, 2024 in four locations (Kragujevac, Čačak, Bydgoszcz, Foggia) across three countries, reflecting a collaborative effort of a team of DigiPsyRes expert team, with a goal to deliver a comprehensive training that addresses the diverse needs and perspectives of participants. The piloting was conducted in the English language, and all the learning/teaching materials were prepared in English. In the international piloting phase, a total of 81 trainees participated, including students and staff from the three partner universities collaborating within the DigiPsyRes project. Of these, a cohort of 42 participants successfully completed the international pilot program C [15]. The international piloting of all 3 programs, per rule, served as a rigorous control procedure aimed at providing formative assessment and fostering program improvement.

3.2. Implementation of the national program C at the University of Kragujevac

Simultaneously with other partner universities, the national program (NP) C was implemented at the University of Kragujevac in April 2024. The training was implemented in the Serbian language, at two locations: one in Kragujevac for local students and staff, and another in Čačak for participants from that area. The program involved students aiming to become peer supporters alongside their trainers, engaging in an intensive, interactive, cooperative, and collaborative workshop. A total of 37 participants enrolled in the e-courses for program C, with 31 taking part in the training sessions (14 in Čačak, and 17 in Kragujevac).

Phases of the training process included:

- Selection of trainees;
- Enrolment of participants into the Moodle e-learning system;
- Pre-training activities, including lessons, readings, and tasks to be completed within the e-course starting from March 25, 2024;
- Implementation of the training: April 2, 2024, at the Rectorate of the University of Kragujevac and April 4, 2024, at the Faculty of Technical Sciences in Čačak;

- Post-training activities focused on comprehension tasks, testing, and training evaluation, to be finalized by April 17, 2024.

The learning experience during the program C was enriched by pre-recorded lectures and a live presentation of the project portal, supported by appropriate PowerPoint presentations and videos created using the Veedio app. Participants in both IP and NP demonstrated high engagement and interaction, actively participating in discussions, role-playing exercises, and interactive demonstrations.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The evaluation and assessment of the Program C training within the framework of the DigiPsyRes project are pivotal to understanding its effectiveness in preparing participants as peer supporters. The evaluation was conducted using a blend of quantitative and qualitative methods. Three distinct types of evaluation instruments were employed during both the piloting phase and the final training phase:

1. Knowledge Assessment in Program C: After completing the initial activities in the e-course and the training implementation, a knowledge assessment was conducted among the trainees. The summative evaluation of participant achievement at the end of the training and e-courses includes three achievement e-tests (knowledge tests), one for each program separately. These tests are part of the post-training e-course at the Moodle Platform. "Test C" comprises 30 closed-answer items. Participants were allowed a maximum of 3 attempts, with a mandatory break period of 12 hours between the attempts (example Fig.1);

2. Evaluation questionnaire: This evaluation instrument for Program C was implemented after the entire Program C had been delivered, following the training and completion of activities in the e-courses. It was conducted through a questionnaire in the Post-training e-course on Moodle LMS (all items presented in Table 2);
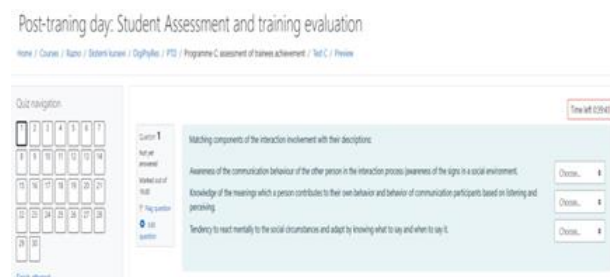
Figure 1. *Item from an online knowledge assessment, program C*

3. Qualitative Evaluation: Immediately following the training program C, participants engaged in an online evaluation using Mentimeter, an interactive online app. The trainees were prompted to summarize their impressions of the training in five key words, providing valuable feedback on their overall experience and personal benefits gained from the program (Figure 2).
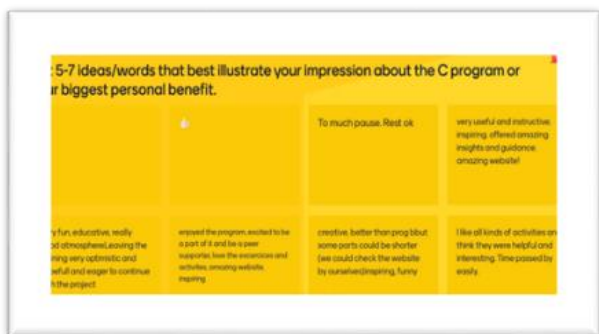

Figure 2. *Mentimeter evaluation example*

5.   RESULTS

5.1.   Knowledge Assessment in program C

After the international piloting was completed, a total of 42 participants accessed to the knowledge assessment "Test C" and all of them passed the test (Fig. 3). The score 50% and above was considered "pass" (the grade range was 5.00 - 10.00). Overall the participants achieved M=8.65 on the Test C. Based on the participants' achievements on the knowledge tests and high results, it can be concluded that the realized program (e-courses and training programs altogether) enabled learning of the basic and relevant knowledge about the topics of the program C.
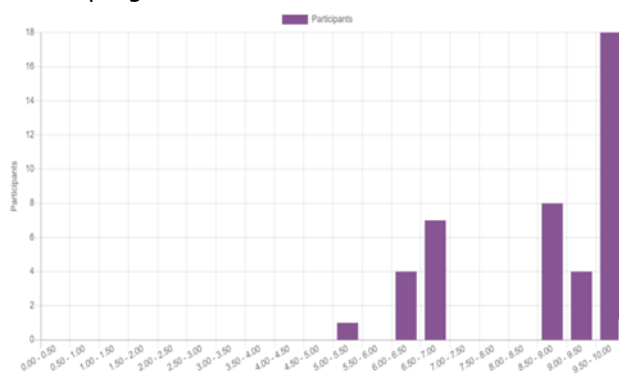

Figure 3. *Test C results at the International pilot*

The national implementation of Program C at the University of Kragujevac saw participation from 31 individuals. Similarly, every participant passed the test, achieving an average grade of M=8.66, with the lowest grade being 6.05 (Fig. 4). These results indicate that the participants' achievements were notably high, demonstrating a strong grasp of the fundamental concepts of Program C.
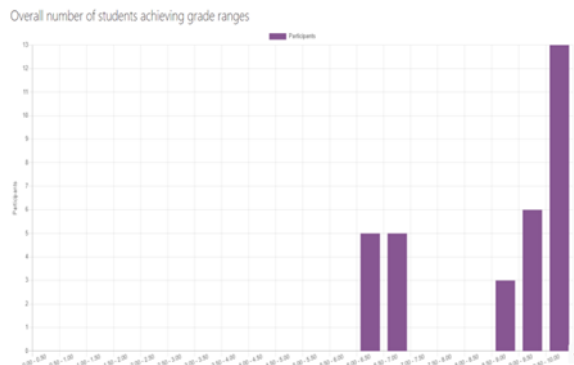

Figure 4. *Test C results at the national program implementation*

5.2.   Evaluation questionnaire

Following the international pilot and national implementation, the same evaluation questionnaire was administered to participants to assess the overall success of Program C. The results of the questionnaire are presented in Table 1. When it comes to the international pilot, the findings indicate that it was successful. Participants provided evaluations ranging from 1.23 to 5.00 for the entire program, with an average score of 4.29, indicating a very high level of satisfaction. The standard deviation of 0.95 suggests some variability among participants (some differences in individual assessment), implying a relatively high level of evaluation homogeneity. As for the national implementation of program C, the lowest grade was 3.15, and the mean value 4.75. Comparison of these values confirm that the assessment values were higher in the national implementation, with the standard deviation value significantly lower, which adds to the overall consistency of evaluation.

Table 1. *Participants overall evaluation of program C: international pilot (IP) and national implementation (NP)*

Graphics	Min	Max	Mean	St. Dev.
Evaluation of C program IP	1.23	5.00	4.29	.95
Evaluation of C program NP	3.15	5.00	4.75	.42

Min – the smallest average value (Participant score / N of items

Max – the highest average value (Participant score / N of items

Mean – average value (Sum of participants scores / N of items / N of participants

Table 2 provides a comparative evaluation of IP and NP. The evaluation covers various aspects of the program, highlighting the participants' perceptions and satisfaction levels across different dimensions.

The evaluation was conducted using a set of questions (Q01-Q13) focusing on content integration, usefulness of lessons, design and realism of tasks, dynamic nature of workshops, coordination and encouragement from trainers,

satisfaction with idea exchange, quality of lessons, understanding of the support network's significance, familiarization with key roles, improvement in expected behaviour and communication guidelines, skill development, active participation opportunities, and identification

of available resources. The overall evaluation shows that the national implementation consistently received higher mean scores compared to the international pilot across all items.

Table 1. *Comparison evaluation of the international pilot program C (IP) and national implementation of C program (NP)*

Items	IP Mean	NP Mean	F	sig.
Q01. The content and activities of the C e-course and C training are seamlessly integrated and harmonized.	4.40	4.84	5.843*	.018
Q02. Lessons in the C e-course are useful for the C program outcomes.	4.29	4.88	10.297**	.002
Q03. The tasks in e-course C were well-designed and realistic.	4.34	4.75	3.925	.052
Q04. The workshops in the C training were dynamic and well-designed.	4.34	4.75	3.761	.057
Q05. The leading trainer from C training and facilitator/trainer in my group coordinated activities and encouraged the work of the group.	4.54	4.78	1.920	.171
Q06. I am satisfied with the exchange of ideas in C training in remote online mode between six university groups.	4.11	4.78	8.786**	.004
Q07. Evaluate the quality of the lessons in e-course C with the grade (from 1 – very poor to 5 – excellent).	4.20	4.77	6.666**	.012
Q08. The C program contributed to my better understanding of the purpose and significance of the student support network within the three higher education institutions.	4.46	4.78	2.842	.097
Q09. The C program contributed to familiarizing myself with the key roles and responsibilities of individuals involved in the network.	4.26	4.75	5.207*	.026
QC10. The C program contributed to improving my insight into the expected behaviour and communication guidelines when interacting within the student network.	4.20	4.66	4.126*	.046
Q11. The C program contributed to developing the skills necessary to contribute positively to the network's collaborative and supportive environment.	4.29	4.66	2.849	.096
Q12. The C program contributed to exploring opportunities for active participation and engagement in the network's activities.	4.17	4.75	6.168*	.016
Q13. The C program contributed to identifying available resources and support systems within the network for addressing student needs and challenges effectively.	4.17	4.59	3.418	.069
Evaluation of program C	4.29	4.75		

Mean – average value (Sum of participants scores / N of items / N of participants)
F – Fisher coefficient. **$p<0.01$; *$p<0.05$

The integration and harmonization of content and activities were rated highly, both with means of 4.40 for IP and 4.84 for NP, showcasing a seamless integration in the national context. The usefulness of lessons for achieving program outcomes also saw significant improvement, with the national implementation scoring 4.88 compared to 4.29 in the international pilot, reflecting better alignment with program goals.

Tasks in NP were perceived as better designed and more realistic. Similarly, workshops were rated as more dynamic and better designed in NP.

Coordination by trainers and facilitators, while only slightly higher in the national program compared to the pilot program, still points to better perceived support and guidance in the national context. Participants in the national program also experienced more effective communication and clearer understanding of their roles and responsibilities within the student support network.

In terms of behavioural and communication guidelines, the NP program provided more comprehensive training, resulting in higher participant ratings. Skill development and engagement opportunities were also more favourably rated, indicating that the national implementation offers better strategies for building necessary skills and encouraging active participation.

Resource identification and overall program evaluation further underscore the advantages of the national program, with participants rating it higher than the piloting program. These findings highlight the importance of contextual and cultural factors in educational program design and implementation. They demonstrate that tailoring training to specific national contexts can significantly enhance the effectiveness of peer support networks, resulting in higher participant satisfaction and better learning outcomes.

5.3. Qualitative Evaluation

More specific evaluation of the pilot program, including participant feedback surveys, was done immediately at the end of training with the aim to provide inputs for improvements of the pilot program and help modify the areas in which weaknesses have been detected.

The evaluation was conducted using the Mentimeter online app. Participants were asked to list 5 to 7 ideas/words that best illustrated their impression about the program or personal benefits they experienced. Responses were collected by a pre-designed QR code generated to be scanned immediately after the training. This qualitative approach aimed to capture immediate feedback to provide insights into the program's strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement.

Key Findings of the Mentimeter evaluation yielded valuable insights into participants' perceptions of Training Program C. A total of 44 responses was collected. Two responses were brief, simply indicating "GOOD JOB," while 42 responses provided detailed explanations. Responses were analysed by the method of thematic analysis and then grouped into positive and negative impressions and additional remarks, which were all then further dissected (Table 3).

Table 3. *Thematic analysis results*

Positive impressions		Negative impressions	
No.	*comment*	*No.*	*comment*
14	fun/interesting	2	short breaks
10	learned a lot/ improved skills	1	website presentation unnecessary
7	great/amazing website/portal	1	long pauses
7	useful/instructive	1	too much information
6	inspiring/optimistic		
5	educative/ informative		
5	boundaries/ethics/listening/nonverbal topic		
5	engaging role-plays		
4	Interaction/connection with other groups/collaboration within the group		

The overwhelming majority of positive feedback reflects the effectiveness and success of training program C in meeting its objectives and providing a valuable learning experience for participants. The high number of responses in categories such as "Fun/Interesting," "Learned a Lot/Improved Skills," and "Great/Amazing Website/Portal" suggests that participants found the program engaging, informative, and user-friendly. The emphasis on practical relevance, inspirational content, and opportunities for interaction and collaboration

further underscores the program's positive impact on participants' learning and personal development. Overall, these positive comments highlight the strengths of the program in delivering engaging, informative, and impactful training experiences.

While the majority of feedback was positive, a few participants expressed dissatisfaction with the duration or frequency of breaks during the training sessions. Also, one participant noted that the website presentation was unnecessary, suggesting a potential mismatch between their preferred learning format and the program delivery method and another participant expressed feeling overwhelmed by the volume of information presented during the program.

The discussion that followed also provided some recommendations for future program delivery. Participants expressed a desire for more discussion time and suggested the inclusion of additional crisis scenarios beyond COVID-19 to diversify the content and maintain engagement. They also proposed that trainees should explore the portal independently, either in pairs or small groups, fostering a more hands-on and interactive learning experience. Important feedback highlighted the need to adjust break durations and frequency to better accommodate participant comfort and attention span. For the national training that followed, special attention was given to these aspects.

By incorporating participants' suggestions for improvement, the national training of Program C aimed to further enhance participant satisfaction, engagement, and learning outcomes. Following NP, Mentimeter feedback revealed an array of positive sentiments among participants, to mention just a few ("amazing", "stimulating discussions," "enriching learning experiences," "captivating role-plays," "user-friendly interface"). As shown above, improved results in the quantitative analysis highlighted increased participant satisfaction and perceived effectiveness of the program's content and delivery, attesting to the program's adaptability and its alignment with participants' language and cultural contexts.

6. CONCLUSION

The study focused on the implementation and evaluation of Program C, the third and final part of the training program "Step by Step from Trainees to Trainers and Peer-Supporters in the Student Peer-Support Network," developed within "Enhancing Digital and Psychological Resilience through Peer Networking in the Online Environment in Times of Crisis – DigiPsyRes" project. This program was initially conducted as an international pilot and subsequently implemented in national languages at the three partner universities.

Evaluation methods included qualitative feedback and quantitative analysis, both of which yielded very high overall ratings for both the International Pilot and National Program. National implementation of C program demonstrated superior results in participant satisfaction and program effectiveness.

The comparative evaluation reveals that the national context generally enhances program effectiveness and participant satisfaction. The national program consistently outperformed the international pilot program across several key areas, including integration, lesson usefulness, task realism, workshop dynamism, and online collaboration. This trend suggests that localized adaptations of educational programs are more successful in meeting specific needs and preferences of participants.

These findings underscore the critical role of localized adaptations tailored to the cultural and contextual specifics of participants in optimizing educational program outcomes. The success of the national program exemplifies how such adaptations can significantly enhance participant engagement and enrich learning experiences.

It is necessary to emphasize some of the basic limitations of this study that should be eliminated or reduced in some future research. Firstly, the sample size should be larger to allow for generalizations. Additionally, the language of the training is an important variable, as well as differences in cultural context, both of which could influence the implementation of such programs.

Looking forward, future studies could explore the longitudinal impacts of peer networking programs on student resilience and academic performance, offering deeper insights into their lasting effects. Additionally, investigating the scalability of localized educational programs across diverse cultural contexts would be invaluable for developing sustainable and adaptable educational interventions.

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