RISCOS & DESAFIOS: VALIDATION OF AN ADDITIVE BEHAVIOURS AND DEPENDENCIES PREVENTIVE PROGRAM AMONG STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Introduction

It is evident and scientifically proven the need to invest in prevention of addictions and addictive behaviors use in the context of higher education, particularly among students attending the first year. The purpose of this research was to assess the effectiveness of an original prevention program, the Risks & Challenges, in reducing psychoactive substance use and its negative consequences, as well as to assess its effectiveness in reducing the exposure to risk factors and enhancing the effect of protection factors related to addictive behaviors among university students.

Methodology

This is a community based open-label controlled trial. The sample consisted of first-year students from the University of Minho, in Portugal, who voluntarily enrolled in the Risks & Challenges Program. Data were collected at baseline, post-intervention and at a 6-months follow-up. Students were randomly assigned to intervention and control groups. In addition to collecting sociodemographic and psychoactive substance-use data, the following instruments were self-administered: AUDIT, Self-Control Scale, Sensation Seeking Scale Version V, Academic Experience Questionnaire, Rosenberg Global Self-esteem Scale and Beck Depression Inventory. THE RISCOS & DESAFIOS PROGRAM is a co-curricular, comprehensive and multi-component competence enhancement based preventive intervention. The Program is aimed at students attending the 1st year of higher education and was composed of a set of 8 two-hour weekly sessions to be implemented in group format.

Results

The sample consisted of 228 participants, of which 192 (85.7%) were female and 32 (14.3%) were male. Participants' ages ranged from 17 to 48 years (M = 19.43; DP = 3.75; Mdn = 18).

Comparison between groups
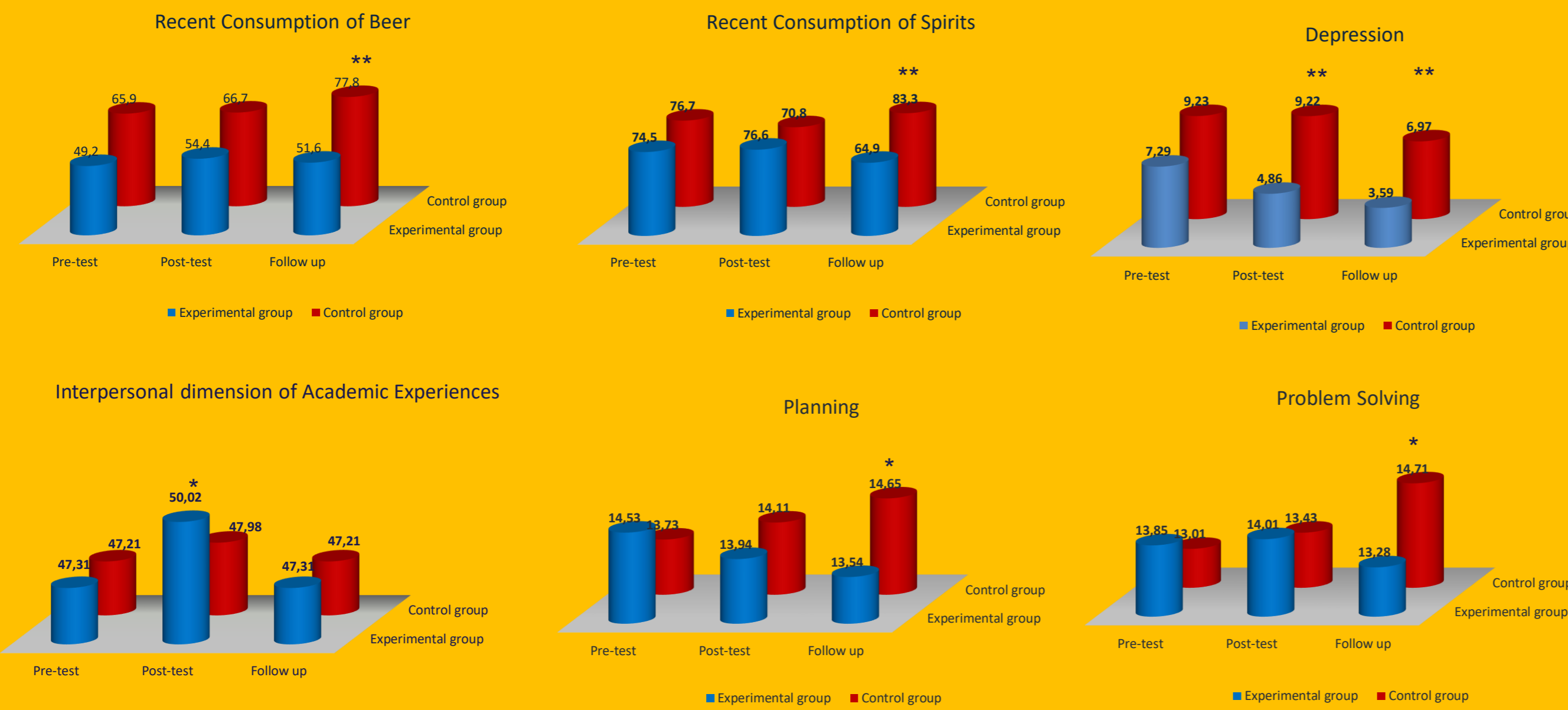
There were significant differences between the groups in students' self-reported alcohol consumption, in depression level and in personal and interpersonal dimensions of academic experiences. In addition, there were evident gains in the intervention group over time in: expectations/motivations for alcohol and cannabis consumption, tension and anger, personal and interpersonal dimensions of academic experiences, self-esteem and depression.

Intra-subject analysis for the intervention group

Intra-subject analysis for the control group
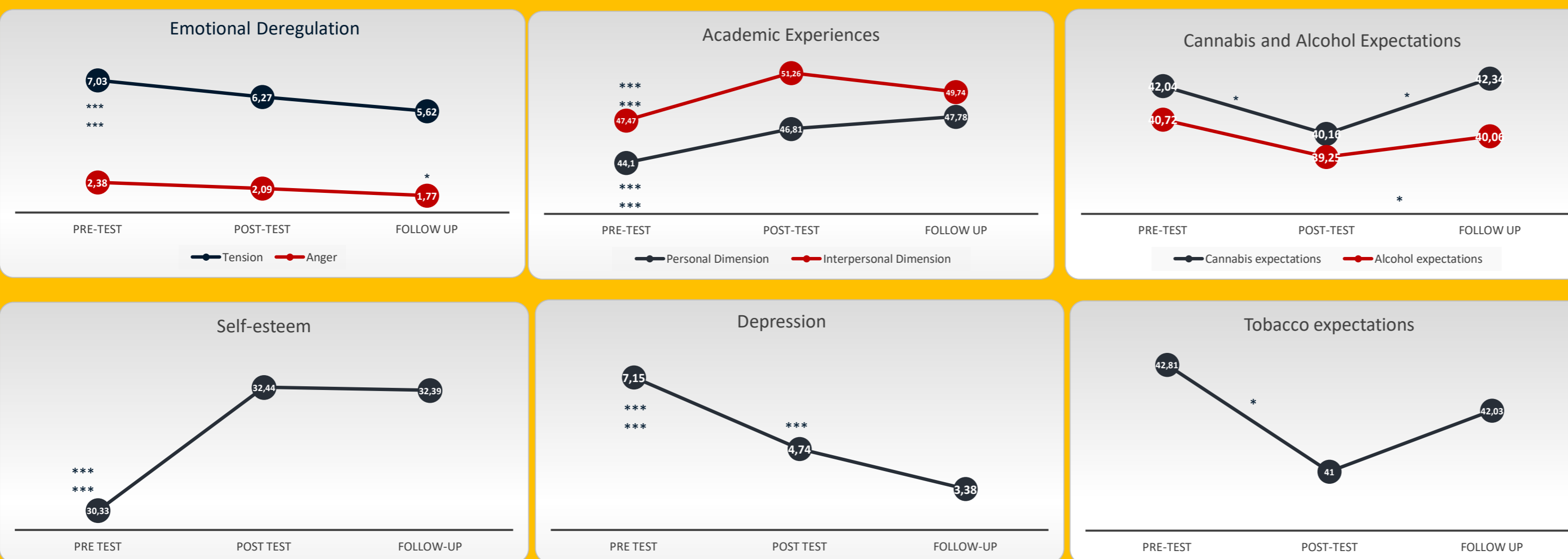
On the other hand, students in the control group showed an increased perception of availability of substances between baseline and follow-up evaluations, a situation that did not occur in the intervention group, suggesting that the experience of the program had a protective effect also at this level.
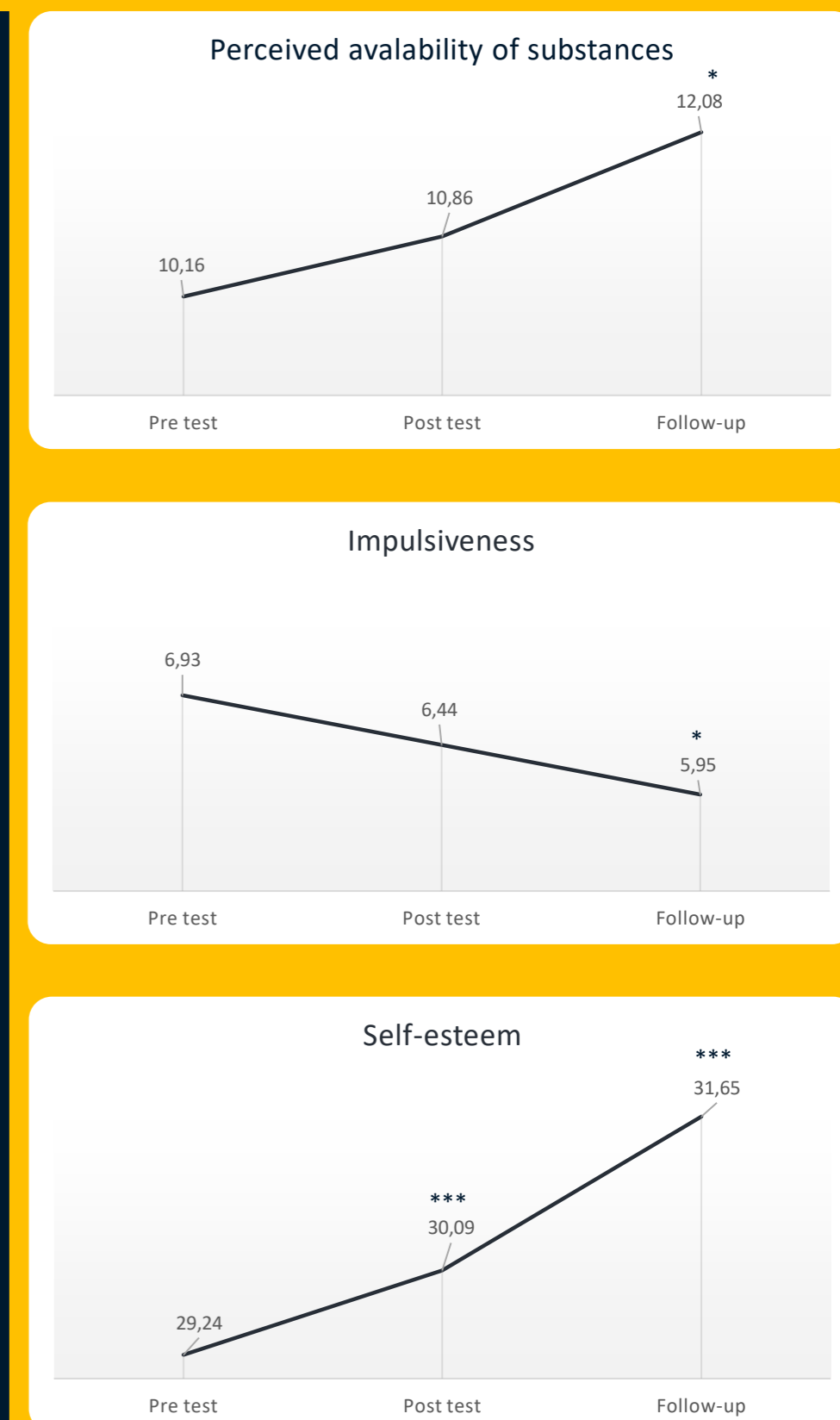
Conclusions

Our results validate the Program Risks & Challenges to the extent that it has been associated with the reduction of consumption of alcohol among university students, with reduced risk factors and improved protection factors for the consumption of psychoactive substances. This research is useful for young adults, particularly for university students, for health technicians, for the distinguished educators at this level of education, as well as for the managers of universities and policymakers.

Despite the clear recommendations for the use of comprehensive programs to reduce substance use amongst university students, no studies regarding implementation of multicomponent programs in this educational context have been found (Rodgers, 2012). This situation is difficult to understand and accept in view of the magnitude of the problem of substance use, particularly alcohol, in this target group and its implications on the social and academic life of students, their families and the university itself. In this scenario, the evidence found with the implementation of the Risks & Challenges Program is very important, both for its innovative character and for the challenge it poses to educators and decision makers in higher education institutions.

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