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Ignite IAstro: A touring show goes off the beaten track

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Most research institutions and science communication initiatives in Portugal are based in the main urban areas. Therefore, people in small cities and towns far away from the large cities have less opportunities to learn about current research in science and technology and to have direct contact with researchers.

However, they constitute a significant number of the country's population and may influence governance regarding the investment and education in science and technology.

In addition, teenagers and young people in these areas will pursue higher education and may choose careers in STEM.

The Instituto de Astrofísica e Ciências do Espaço designed a national tour in which, once a month, on a Saturday evening, a group of nine researchers visit a city or town distant from metropolitan areas.

Following the 'ignite' format and branded Ignite IAstro Tour, the researchers give quick and focused five-minute talks, presenting a wide range of research topics in simple language and in a lively and fast-paced show.

Working closely with the municipality, schools, teachers, libraries and cultural venues, the events are promoted within the local cultural scene. The venue is always a cultural setting, such as theatre or performance venues, and even historic buildings.

In 2016, nearly 2000 people attended the 11 Ignite IAstro events, in half the districts in continental Portugal. Other municipalities contacted us to be included in the 2017 tour, namely the Autonomous Region of Azores. We believe this awareness grew out of the impact on local media, prior and after the events, and the consistent brand and visual identity.

One same event can include topics like 'hunting' exoplanets, 'dust cleaning' in galaxies, the 'puberty' of stars, and telescopes' teamwork. These are also regular opportunities for researchers to practice focused and enlightening talks. Despite the effort required, 34 researchers (about 30% of the institute's), from a range of career stages, participated in the tour, with some becoming regular speakers.

Support is given by improving the slides and offering feedback on the video recordings of their performances. Researchers also enjoy the time spent with colleagues from other scientific fields.

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