

The COVID-19 Pandemic and its Effects on the Future of Study-Abroad Programmes at Selected Universities in South Africa

Elhaam Abrahams and Hilary Kennedy Nji Bama
Cape Peninsula University of Technology, South Africa
bamah@cput.ac.za

Abstract: This study seeks to explore the early considerations that COVID-19 induced mobility restrictions placed on study-abroad programmes at universities in South Africa. The study considers how, given the negative impacts that were felt with international travel being largely restricted, universities in the Western Cape province approached study-abroad programmes during the restrictions and post restriction considerations. Data for this pilot study were collected via a mixed-method approach targeting international students and key resource persons through the international offices at four universities in the Western Cape. Twenty-three international students and two key resource persons responded to the pilot. Key indications highlight a European dominance in the demographic distribution of participants while illustrating a steady interest in the study-abroad programmes irrespective of the challenges induced by the pandemic. While the anxieties and uncertainties induced by the evolving nature of the pandemic were noted, emerging trends from the data highlighted areas of focus for future resilience strategies to shore up the sector from future crises, the scale and nature of COVID-19. As a pilot to a broader empirical study, it is hoped that the outcomes will contribute towards the development of conceptual tenets for the sustainable development of the study-abroad programme segment within the international higher education nexus while providing context for proposing mitigating actions and strategies which would help higher education institutions move from a crisis management situation to more long-term resilience planning.

Keywords: study-abroad programmes, edu-tourism, South Africa, COVID-19, travel intentions

1. Introduction

Globally, the higher education system has experienced and dealt with various crises (Ramsahar, 2021; Roy, 2021). The advent and current evolution of the COVID-19 crisis have been of an unprecedented nature and extent, affecting all aspects of human life, with international student mobility being no exception (Thravalou, 2021). With limited medical interventions available at the outset, most countries responded with various non-pharmaceutical interventions including lockdowns, social distancing, closing higher education institutions (HEIs) and non-essential businesses, cancelling or postponing events, banning mass gatherings, international travel restrictions and shutting down of entire countries and economies (Bama & Nyikana, 2021; Gossling, Scott & Hall, 2020). Chang, McAleer and Ramos (2020) claim that although the long-term physical, psychological, socio-economic, and environmental impacts are still unclear, the short-term effects are not optimistic. Admittedly, Kanwar and Carr (2020:326), note that many international students decided to either cancel or defer plans to study abroad because of the effects of COVID-19. Additionally, Schleicher (2020), notes that even though HEIs were quick-thinking in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic by replacing face-to-face lectures with online learning, these closures affected learning, examinations, safety and legal status of international students in host countries. As such there emanated a growing need for new insights and perspectives towards responding to the growing need to improve higher education policy and practice in the era of COVID-19, specifically by understanding the views of international students and HEIs on study-abroad programmes. The changing roles and responsibilities of institutions and international education leaders post-COVID-19 are also noted and worthy of exploration in the current context. According to South Africa [The Good News] (2022), there are an estimated twenty thousand universities globally and South Africa has thirteen universities ranked in the top two thousand; three of which are in the Western Cape province. These are the University of Cape Town (UCT), ranked 269th, Stellenbosch University (SU) ranked 435th and the University of the Western Cape (UWC) ranked 1239th. Such recognition highlights the potential of these institutions as highly sought-after study-abroad programmes destinations, thereby necessitating this study's objective which seeks to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on study-abroad programmes at universities in the Western Cape province of South Africa.

2. Literature review

According to Loss (2019) travelling across the globe is increasingly common due to the forces of globalisation, internationalisation and diplomatic relations among countries thus, inspiring tourists to travel more. Likewise, Bodinger de Uriarte & Di Giovine (2021:326) assert that the expansion rate of study-abroad programmes mirror that of global tourism. Study-abroad programmes have been noted to be beneficial to students by allowing them to study in a foreign country and take in the appeal and culture of the new destination (Obadire, Mashau &

Misumi, 2020). Similarly, host destinations also benefit from study-abroad programmes as international students are important to the economy and contribute to the cultural and developmental aspects of HEIs (Aliyeva, 2015). Study-abroad programme students are regarded as a significant source of diversity and revenue, as they are mostly financially independent and an important part of the cultural mix of students at HEIs (Eder et al. 2010). According to Ramsahar (2021), the cost of study-abroad programmes sometimes cost up to USD7400 for one semester abroad, illustrating that international students do bring value to the host country.

COVID 19 demonstrably impacted the international higher education sector, and international student mobility was severely affected, particularly due to the closure of many university campuses and international travel restrictions (Kersher & Plasa, 2020). According to an Institute of International Education (IIE) COVID-19 survey, 285 higher education institutions reported a total of 22,041 students studying abroad at the start of the academic year in 2020. However, 253 of these institutions evacuated a total of 17,787 students due to COVID-19. Unsurprisingly, popular study-abroad programme destinations such as Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, France, China, Japan, and the United States of America were the most heavily affected countries during the height of the pandemic (UNWTO, 2020; Zaremba, 2021). Bodinger de Uriatre and Di Giovine (2021:328) contend that the most reforming and lasting changes to the university experience due to the COVID-19 pandemic can be linked to study-abroad programmes. In concurrence, Heleta (2020) notes that globally, study-abroad programmes have been heavily disrupted by the pandemic, with universities having to transform overnight, switching from in-person to online teaching and learning. Consequently, this led to major economic as well as psychological impacts on study-abroad programmes. Wood (2021) claims that because of the COVID-19 pandemic, fewer students were studying abroad due to ongoing mobility restrictions, visas delays, and the general unease about international travel. As a result, millions of students including those currently and aspiring to study abroad. Paterson (2021) argues that many of the less funded public universities, as well as a substantial amount of private higher education providers worldwide, struggled to adapt to the economic damage induced by COVID-19. Heleta (2020) notes that the ability of students who had intended to study abroad for a semester or for a full degree was curtailed, and this will linger for years, with such recovery likely to be linked to economic recovery globally.

The suspension and cancellation of study-abroad programmes created stress and psychological hardships for those working directly with students at HEIs such as workers at study-abroad programme operators, professors, guides and other on-site instructors (Bodinger de Uriatre & Di Giovine, 2021:331). Furthermore, the loss of income and feeling of abandonment from some HEIs were psychologically taxing as plans and expectations of students were being altered. Pang (2020) asserts that HEIs should alter their approach in delivering the study experience to adapt to the unpredictability of the COVID-19 pandemic. Roy (2021) concurs that apart from moving to online/virtual classes and abiding by government COVID-19 guidelines, HEIs globally should adopt measures to attract more international students and meet their evolving requirements such as changes to application processes and deadlines, reducing fee structures and offering virtual campus tours to students and parents.

South Africa has established itself as an international higher education hub and has been hosting increasing numbers of international study-abroad programmes students up until the recent COVID-19 pandemic (Jooste & Hagenmeier, 2020). According to the International Education Association of South Africa (IEASA), the mobility of international students to South African universities for face-to-face education and research was hit hard by regulations and restrictions contained in the five (5) level risk-adjusted strategy of the South African government (IEASA, 2020). To reduce the spread of the COVID-19 virus, The South African government implemented this strategy, whereby level 5 signified drastic measures to limit a high spread and level 1 meant low virus spread and returning to normal activity with precautions and health guidelines (Cape Town Travel, 2021; COVID-19 South African Online Portal, 2021). With the implementation of COVID-19 regulations, all four universities were closed. As such, the figures for study-abroad students were gravely affected with universities not being able to host study-abroad programme students (Lamson, 2021; Umwizerwa, 2021). Van der Westhuizen (2021) however notes that even though study-abroad programme student numbers declined in 2020, a resurgence was noted in 2021. Thus, although the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have proven to be more complex, the crisis paves the way for HEIs to become resilient and to seize the opportunity to reimagine the future of study-abroad programmes by being innovative to the changes engendered COVID-19 (Chasi, 2020:10).

3. Methodology

Based on the exploratory nature of this study, a mixed-methods focus was adopted. According to Fink (2014), a research design describes how the participants of a study are organised and how their behaviour is measured within the study. Purposive and simple random sampling approaches were implemented for the qualitative and quantitative data collections respectively. For the qualitative data, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with key informant personnel at international offices of the targeted HEIs in the Western Cape who were purposefully chosen based on their knowledge, experience, and involvement in study-abroad programmes, the higher education sector and the educational tourism industry. Of the four universities targeted, two successfully participated in the research study. After verbatim transcripts of the recorded interviews were generated, manual content analysis was used to code themes and sub-themes generated from the data, linked to the study's aim. The contents of these themes and sub-themes were synergised for succinct reporting.

Given the complexities of data collection and COVID-19 restrictions, the quantitative questionnaire survey was distributed via the international offices of all four universities targeted via Google Docs. The application enabled the capture and analysis of data in real-time. The main variables measured by the questionnaire included socio-demographic profiles, study-abroad programme students' behaviour, and motives for studying abroad, especially in the Western Cape. With the extended study targeted sample size of two hundred and sixty ($n=260$), this pilot study, due to the inaccessibility of international students based on COVID-19 restrictions collected a total of twenty-three (23) valid questionnaire surveys. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26 was then used to capture and analyse the data from the questionnaires. This software described and summarised the data using descriptive statistics, the details of which are discussed next.

4. Results and discussion

Following the quantitative data analysis and the content analysis of the qualitative data, the research findings are presented according to the order of themes guided by the predefined research objectives of the study.

4.1 Demographic profiles of respondents

From the demographic results displayed in Table 1 it is evident that in terms of age and gender, a homogenous pattern is identified, which concurs with current literature (Anderson & Bhati, 2012; Lam, et al., 2016; Harazneh, et al., 2018). 60.9% of the respondents were female while 39.1% were male. The data collected further reflects most participants (69.9%) were between the ages of eighteen (18) and twenty-four (24) years of age, while the remaining 30.1% were between the ages of twenty-five (25) and over thirty-four (34) years of age. In terms of the origin of the students, the feedback highlights a European dominance of the participants as reflected in Table 1. with Dutch (4.3%), Finnish (4.3%), French (13.1%), German (39.1) Hungarian (4.3%), Italian (4.3%), Norwegian (4.3%), Swiss (4.3%), and Ukrainian (4.3%). The remainder of the participants (17.4%) originated from the United States of America (USA). In terms of the institution at which they were enrolled, 39.1% were at CPU, 30.4% at UCT and 30.4% at SU. The majority (43.5%) were undertaking business studies, 30.4% enrolled on social sciences, 8.7% natural sciences, 4.3% in humanities and education respectively, and another 8.7% selected the 'other' category (automotive, business/economics, foreign trade). Regarding their source of funding for their study-abroad programme, most of the respondents (39.1%) noted that they were self-funded, 26.1% partially self-funded and partially on a scholarship, 21.07% on a full scholarship and 13.1% were on financial aid scheme from their country's government.

Finally, when the participants were asked to indicate their current form of accommodation the majority (43.5%) were renting with strangers followed by 34.8% who were renting by themselves. 13% were making use of the university's residences while 8.7% were renting with family members. These results concur with extant literature on the characteristics of study-abroad programmes (University of Hawaii, 2017). The participants in the qualitative interviews were mainly the international exchange coordinators and study-abroad programmes officers within their respective institutions who had spent between three and five years in that portfolio, thereby providing them with extensive knowledge to provide feedback on the current trends within the study-abroad programmes sector.

Table 1: Demographic profiles of respondents (n=23, in %)

Characteristics	Category	Total (in %)
Nationality	American	17.4
	Dutch	4.3
	Finnish	4.3
	French	13.0
	German	39.1
	Hungarian	4.3
	Italian	4.3
	Norwegian	4.3
	Swiss	4.3
	Ukraine	4.3
Gender	Female	60.9
	Male	39.1
Age (in years)	18-24	69.9
	25-34	30.4
Current university	CPUT	39.1
	SU	30.4
	UCT	30.4
Current place of residence	University residence	13.0
	Renting by myself	34.8
	Renting with family members	8.7
	Renting with strangers	43.5
Study major	Humanities	4.3
	Natural Sciences	8.7
	Social Sciences	30.4
	Business	43.5
	Education	4.3
	Other (Automotive Business/Economics, Foreign Trade)	8.7
Main source of funding	Self-funded	39.1
	Scholarship	21.7
	Both	26.1
	Other (Financial aid from US university, partial student funding)	13.1

4.2 Travel experience and behaviour in South Africa

Looking at their travel experiences, most of the respondents (73.9%) indicated that they were first-time travellers while 26.9% indicated having had prior travel experience to South Africa. For those who had prior travel experience to South Africa (26.9%), a majority (65%) stated they had visited South Africa once before and the remaining (35%) indicated they had been to South Africa twice. Asked about the tourism-related activities they engaged in during their time in South Africa (see Table 2 below), most of the respondents had participated in some or other tourism-related activity. It was interesting to note that watersports were not considered a very popular activity among them. All participants noted that they would recommend South Africa as a study-abroad programmes destination.

Table 2: Tourism-related activities

Tourism Activities	Yes	No
Visit key tourism attractions	95.7%	4.3%
Wine tasting	87.0%	13.0%
Shopping	82.6%	17.4%
Sun, sea, and sand	95.7%	4.3%
Partake in cultural and historical activities	73.9%	26.1%
Multi-day tours	69.6%	30.4%
Hiking	95.7%	4.3%
Nightlife and casinos	82.6%	17.4%
Watersports	39.1%	60.9%
Safaris	65.2%	34.8%
Festivals and concerts	47.8%	52.2%

4.3 Motivations for engaging in study-abroad programmes

Respondents were quizzed on factors that motivated them to study abroad. On a 5-point Likert scale ranging from not at all important, unimportant, neither important nor unimportant, important, and very important, statements regarding the motivational factors were posed to respondents. Responses were grouped in certain instances of the analysis to represent either Important (important + very important) or Unimportant (not at all important + unimportant) for ease of reporting. Table 3 provides a snapshot of the feedback provided by the respondents. Most respondents saw the lure of a different cultural experience (95.6%), international experience (95.6%) and living in another country (91.3%) as important factors for embarking on a study-abroad programme. Other important factors included international exposure to the specific field of study (65.2%) and the making of new friends (65.2%). Study abroad marketers could benefit from such feedback in the designing of programmes that consider these motivations in attracting more participants in future.

Table 3: Motivating factors for engaging in study-abroad programmes

Statement	Important	Neither important nor unimportant	Unimportant
Expected as part of your university programme	34.7%	13%	52.2%
University marketing activities influence	13%	17.4%	69.5%
University counsellor influence	13%	17.4%	69.6%
International experience	95.6%	4.3%	0%
Lack of available programme in the home country	13%	8.7%	78.3%
Quality of education	43.5%	43.5%	13%
International exposure in the field of study	65.2%	21.7%	13%
Different cultural experience	95.6%	4.3%	0%
Living in another country	91.3%	8.7%	0%
Sponsorship	13%	4.3%	82.6%
Cost of study	39.1%	17.4%	43.4%
To become independent	47.8%	26.1%	26.1%
To further career prospects	47.8%	21.7%	30.4%
Parental encouragement	21.7%	4.3%	73.9%
Where my friends are going	0%	13%	86.9%
To make new friends	65.2%	26.1%	8.6%
To be with my partner	8.6%	0%	91.3%

4.4 Motivations for engaging in study-abroad programmes in the Western Cape province

Respondents' motivations for selecting the Western Cape were considered. Respondents highlighted natural and environmental factors (91.3%), favourable climate and weather conditions (86.9%) common language (65.5%) and, utilisation of English as a teaching medium (65.2%) as primary motivating factors for selecting the Western Cape as the destination. Irrespective of the negative media that the province is sometimes exposed to, issues around safety and security did not feature in the list of important motivational factors suggesting that respondents viewed the Western Cape as a safe study-abroad programmes destination. Table 4 provides further elucidation of the respondents' responses about the selection motives of the Western Cape.

Table 4: Motivating factors for selecting the WC as a study-abroad programmes destination

Statement	Important	Neither important nor unimportant	Unimportant
Natural and environmental factors e.g., landscape and beach	91.3%	0%	8.7%
Favourable climate and weather condition	86.9%	4.3%	8.7%
Favourable government policies	8.7%	21.7%	69.6%
Easy to get visa/visa-free	8.6%	13%	78.3%
Political or historical ties with South Africa	26%	8.7%	65.2%
Low rate of discrimination	17.3%	26.1%	56.5%
Safety and security	21.7%	21.7%	56.5%
Common language	65.5%	21.7%	21.7%

Statement	Important	Neither important nor unimportant	Unimportant
Familiarity with own culture	21.7%	8.7%	69.6%
Closeness to the home country (proximity)	4.3%	0%	95.6%
Welcoming attitudes of the locals	47.8%	26.1%	26%
Lower cost of living in South Africa	39.1%	34.8%	26.1%
Accreditation and reputation of the country and its institutions	34.7%	34.8%	30.4%
Easy admission	26%	13%	60.8%
English as a teaching medium	65.2%	17.4%	17.3%
University ranking	34.7%	30.4%	34.7%
University services	17.4%	34.8%	47.8%
Qualified and friendly academic staff	43.5%	30.4%	26.1%
Availability of labs and research instruments	21.7%	8.7%	69.6%
Expertise and specialisation in the area of study interest	30.4%	34.8%	34.7%
Media advertising	4.3%	13%	82.6%
Overseas websites	8.6%	21.7%	69.5%
Domestic websites	4.3%	17.4%	78.3%
Referrals from friends, family members and social media	30.4%	26.1%	43.5%

5. Perceptions of COVID-19 impacts on study-abroad programmes in the Western Cape

The key resource persons noted that the educational tourism sector was negatively affected, with programme cancellations and suspensions, travel suspensions and bans which engendered negative socio-economic outcomes for the HEIs. According to one of the key informants:

The impact of COVID-19 in higher education has immensely affected the activities of study-abroad programmes and exchanges, the international travel bans at our university because of COVID-19 has stopped all physical exchange mobilities and E+ funded projects funds cannot be used up as some of the criteria for it, requires for student and staff to travel to another country.

This seemed to resonate with both key resource persons with another indicating that:

Student intake and recruitment of students were heavily affected due to the COVID-19 because of mobility and travel restrictions.

These findings highlighted the existence of an adverse relationship between study-abroad programmes and the COVID-19 pandemic induced restrictions, indicating the restrictions had engendered a major negative effect on study-abroad programmes and their ability to attract prospective students.

To understand the impact of pandemic induced challenges on the study-abroad programmes, pre-pandemic data was considered. Both key resource persons noted that the Western cape was a very notable study-abroad programmes destination, as reflected in the large number of study-abroad programme students HEIs often attracted each semester. In this light, one of the key informants indicated that:

Before COVID-19, our numbers were significantly higher because everyone wants to come to our university and everyone wants to come to Cape Town, because it is a very highly sought out tourism destination, so location is probably a very big deal. Students are coming for the experience, so it was a big thing when things went online, and the numbers of international students declined significantly.

In the same vein, another key informant supported this by highlighting one of the motives for choosing the Western Cape as a preferred study-abroad programmes destination, noting that:

The Western Cape is a popular study-abroad programmes destination for many exchange students, and it appeals to the students due to its many attractions and tourist activities available to students at a low cost. Also, the cost of living in a city like Cape Town is low compared to other European/American cities”.

Correspondingly, both key informants were quite positive in noting that the pandemic would not have a major long-term impact on study-abroad programmes because the situation would evolve, and with vaccination

rollouts and the destination image, the study-abroad programmes sector would not suffer. Furthermore, the respondents noted that though COVID-19 induced restrictions might have had a negative impact on the attitudes of international students regarding study-abroad programmes in the interim, long-term prospects were positive. One of the key resource persons noted that:

The attitude of students has not changed in the slightest. Students want to come to Cape Town; they want to come study at our university. Our numbers are currently increasing. It seems like they are just waiting for the pandemic to end or to get vaccinated. Despite being in the pandemic, we still had students travelling and still wanting to receive study-abroad programme experience in Cape Town. Even though the students were staying here and studying virtually in their accommodation, they still came, when they could have stayed at home and studied online.

Additionally, one of the key resource persons in agreement with the expression of the other as noted above highlighted that:

I don't think South Africa is worse off I feel [that] like every country, we are doing our best to recover from the pandemic, and we have the necessary precautions in place, and we are taking the necessary steps, by informing students of what they can do when they come to the country. We, as a university has taken so many steps to combat the COVID-19 situation and there are many procedures in place like any other university globally. Our guidelines are clear, we put the students' interests first and we protect them.

However, they were quick to caution that effective and efficient communication was indispensable to maintain such a positive outlook and consideration, especially in the light of contentious media rhetoric around the evolution and management of the pandemic and various viral mutations being reported, sometimes targeting South Africa as the origin (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2022). As such, credible information dissemination and communication sources regarding COVID-19 in South Africa, if encouraged and maintained could further promote the destination to international students and encourage travelling post-COVID-19 into the country for international students. Pang (2020) claims that studying abroad remains at the top of many students' bucket lists, but COVID-19 has complicated the question of when and how they'll make it happen.

6. Future considerations for study-abroad programmes post-pandemic

Regarding future considerations in connection with the recovery of the study-abroad programmes, which would directly benefit the educational tourism industry, the respondents identified the need for a heightened uptake in vaccination initiatives as critical to the reopening of international travel, thereby making it viable again for students to consider engaging in these programmes. From an institutional perspective, one of the key resource persons noted that:

University EM members need to be decisive and take measures to ensure that study-abroad programmes students are also included in the overall institutional planning considering that internationalisation is an institutional key objective.

In addition, and supporting the previous position, another key informant indicated that for universities in the Western Cape

I think communication is key, we [should] focus on that a lot, just informing them, keeping our programmes open and keeping them running, working on creative ways to offer our programmes and to keep our programmes going. As well as keeping our relationships with our international partners open and going and working on our internal processes to offer better and more appealing things to partners and working on our virtual offerings and orientations.

Both key informants again noted the need for communication and suggested that this can be achieved by redoubling marketing efforts of the Western Cape as a safe COVID-19 compliant student travel destination while also claiming that this engagement can be promoted through government communications and information and greater engagement and dissemination of COVID-19 related research. Furthermore, augmented reality (AR) was identified as a marketing tool to potentially influence students' decision making in selecting the Western Cape as a preferred study-abroad programme destination in a post-pandemic era.

Furthermore, the key resource persons conceded that the key elements of attraction as highlighted in the current study would need to be leveraged upon. Aspects such as the cultural experience of the students, the viability of the programmes and the allure of the Western Cape generally were some of the highlighted elements

that would have to be focussed on in marketing efforts. Along this line of thought, one of the key informants noted that:

Yes, it would just depend on the course offerings and what students mean to take and the credits that they need. The thing about study-abroad programmes is yes, it is an experience, yes, it is exciting you going to another country but then there is also the educational aspect in doing well in your courses and being able to graduate getting your credits. So, if you want to take courses that require a lot of social engagement, how can we then do that virtually? Presence would be required.

The responses above are considered quite important in highlighting the need for collaboration and the strengthening of partnerships between government and study-abroad programme stakeholders within universities and international partners. The effective kick-starting and relaunching of the study-abroad programme in the Western Cape hinges on such collaborations and involvement of all stakeholder groups in resolving the current issues that the pandemic has brought to the fore. As such the involvement of all stakeholders in proposing solutions and working in collaboration with the government and other international partners cannot be undervalued.

7. Conclusion and recommendations

With little available empirical inquiries into the impact of COVID-19 on the future of study-abroad programmes at universities in the Western Cape, the findings from the study may assist in understanding the attitudes and perceptions of the study-abroad programmes stakeholders going forward. This pilot makes a small but important contribution towards determining trends in the theoretical advancements relating to pandemics and their management and implications on the educational tourism and study-abroad programmes industry, especially from a South African point of view. This area of focus has largely been neglected in the past and as such findings in this study will add to the literature in this respect. In this study, for example, it was established that although the COVID-19 restrictions had a major impact on the viability of study-abroad programmes, the future of study-abroad programmes would not be eternally affected as the evolution of the pandemic provides an opportunity to design resilience strategies for the reboot and recovery of the sector more generally and the study-abroad programme subsector primarily. On a practical level, the outcomes of the broader study are expected to have implications on both the government and stakeholders of study-abroad programmes about fostering more effective communication and collaboration for better outcomes.

This study is not without its limitations, and thus should be read with these in mind. Firstly, owing to the lockdown restrictions and university COVID-19 policies, going directly to the universities was impossible, and as such, the researcher was limited to university call centres and switch offices to reach the intended offices. Additional stakeholders such as private study-abroad programmes were reached out to, but no response was received. Staff members at the various universities were sometimes unavailable leading to very limited audience response. Being a pilot study, it is hoped that this provides the trends that would be relied on in the context of the broader study to ensure the wider objectives are achieved.

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