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Motives for Participating in Study-Abroad Programmes and the Impact of the Pandemic on Selected Universities in South Africa

Abstract. The article explores the motivations of students participating in study-abroad programmes and the effects of pandemic-related travel restrictions and associated regulations at three universities in South Africa. The author analyses the policies of universities in the Western Cape province regarding study-abroad programmes when pandemic restrictions were in place and once they were lifted. The discussion is based on quantitative data collected during a survey involving 75 foreign students and qualitative data obtained during interviews with 5 programme coordinators at the international offices of the selected universities. The majority of foreign students surveyed were from Europe. While anxieties and uncertainties exist, university representatives were found to be hopeful about the future of study-abroad programmes.

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

1. Introduction

In recent years, the number of students selecting to study abroad globally has increased. According to UNESCO, internationally mobile students are those who cross international boundaries to participate in educational activities at receiving destinations (Tomasi, Paviotti & Cavicchi, 2020). Consequently, educational tourism (edu-tourism) has emerged as one of the fastest-growing sectors of the travel and tourism industry, since study-abroad programmes offer benefits not only to students but also to host destinations (Abrahams & Bama, 2022) in the form of additional revenue from international students' expenditures on accom-

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modation, food and beverages, entertainment, and leisure activities, and, in certain programmes, tuition fees and taxes (Tomasi, Paviotti & Cavicchi, 2021; Samah & Ahmadian, 2013). Benefits derived by international students are not limited to their educational activities, but also include interactions with local communities and experiences that foster their personal and professional growth. The whole study-abroad experience is also associated with numerous opportunities for experiential learning and tourism (Tomasi, Paviotti & Cavicchi, 2021).

There is no doubt that study-abroad programmes were seriously affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many students chose to either cancel or defer their plans to study in other countries. Although higher education institutions (HEIs) were quick to adapt to the situation by substituting in-person lectures with virtual options, pandemic restrictions ultimately impacted students' academic performance, exam results, the sense of safety and legal status in their host countries. In South Africa for instance, an Indonesian student on a brief visit to Cape Town during of the outbreak of the pandemic expressed his experience in the following words: "I was by myself, in a foreign country with no one I knew, in the middle of a pandemic" (Imanda, 2020).

International students are classified as educational tourists (Abdullateef & Biodun, 2014). Subcategories of edu-tourism include spring/winter break trips, study abroad trips, educational cruises, seminar vacations, school trips, and skill-enhancement retreats (Tourism & More, 2010). The current study focuses on the study-abroad segment, which can include "anything from six-week intensive study sessions to a full year of cultural and linguistic involvement" (Tourism & More, 2010).

Globally, there are an estimated twenty thousand universities, and twelve of them (three of which are in the Western Cape province of South Africa) are ranked in the top two thousand, (South Africa – The Good News, 2021; Center for World University Rankings, 2022). These are the University of Cape Town (UCT) ranked 270th, Stellenbosch University (SU), ranked 441st, and the University of the Western Cape (UWC), ranked 1186th. Though not ranked in the top 2000, another university situated in the Western Cape province of South Africa is the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT). These institutions are frequently selected by international students wishing to study in South Africa (Abrahams & Bama, 2022).

Before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, attempts were made to critically examine the future of international higher education and the pandemic emphasised the importance of these issues (Mok et al., 2021).

The following study focuses on the motivations of international students enrolled at three of the four universities in the Western Cape province. In addition to contributing to the literature on the motivations of international students in

general, the study addresses the question of motivations in the context of the pandemic in the hope that the results could inform strategies that could facilitate the recovery of the study-abroad sector in South Africa.

2. Motivations to Study Abroad

There are various reasons why students decide to study abroad and a number of factors need to be considered, such as which country and which university to choose (Eder, Smith & Pitts, 2010). While there is a wealth of literature on international students' motives (Casas Trujillo, Mohammed & Saleh, 2020; Harazneh et al., 2018; Ozoglu, Gur & Coskun, 2015; Anderson & Bhati, 2012; Ivy, 2010; Lu, Mavondo & Qiu, 2009), there are very few studies about reasons for studying in the Global South, particularly from the African perspective. By invoking four theories of motivation (Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory (1970), Dann's theory of push and pull motivations (1981), Crompton's socio-psychological motivations (1979) and Pearce and Lee's travel career patterns (TCP) (2005)), the authors propose a conceptual model describing students' reasons for studying abroad (Figure 1). The model illustrates how the different theories can be linked to explain students' reasons for studying, including the desire to develop academically, mentally, and physically. Compared to other travel decisions, Mazzarol and Soutar (2002, p. 84) argue that the decision to study abroad is influenced by push factors, which help students decide "whether to go," and pull factors that explain why they are attracted by a given

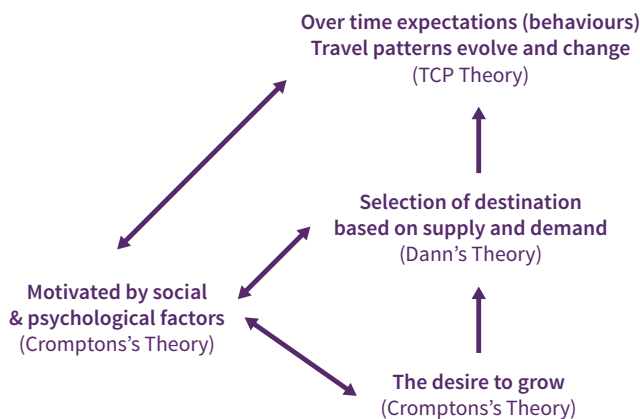


Figure 1: A conceptual model of students' motives for studying abroad

Source: Adapted from Maslow (1970); Crompton (1979); Dann (1981); Pearce and Lee (2005)

location, i.e., “where to go” (Baloglu & Uysal, 1996; Kim, Jogaratnam & Noh, 2006). The desire to study abroad is frequently sparked by social and psychological factors, as well as considerations regarding supply or demand. Because travel expectations and behaviours change over time, these theories can be used to explain constantly changing trends with respect to motivations associated with studying abroad.

3. COVID-19, International Higher Education, and Study Abroad Programmes

Loss (2019) notes that internationalisation and diplomatic ties between nations have made international travel more popular. The same trend can be observed with regard to educational tourism.

The educational tourism industry was obviously affected by the pandemic, especially in countries that are among the most popular destinations for foreign students, such as Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, France, China, Japan, and the United States of America (UNWTO, 2022). Even though the adverse effects on edu-tourism and student mobility have been well documented in the Global North, some scholars remain optimistic that international student mobility will remain strong after the COVID-19 pandemic if efforts on the part of educational institutions are combined with appropriate tourism policy measures (Johnston, 2021; Mok et al., 2021; Zubrytska, 2021). However, these negative impacts have not been adequately analysed in connection with study-abroad programmes at universities in the Western Cape province and are therefore discussed in the next section.

4. Impacts of COVID-19 on International Higher Education

4.1. Psychological Impacts

In a survey report looking at the psychological impact of COVID-19 on study-abroad programmes in 2020 (Educations.com, 2020; Pang, 2020), it was found that 78% of prospective students were planning to begin studying in the next two years. Only 3.9% of prospective students said they were planning to cancel their future study-abroad plans because of the pandemic. In a study conducted at the start of 2022 among Indian students (Roy, 2022) found that around 50% of study-abroad aspirants intended to postpone their plans until the next academic year, while oth-

ers explored study options in a different country in the hope of being able to travel overseas and continue their studies.

4.2. COVID-19 and Edu-tourism in South Africa

South Africa established itself as an international higher education hub and had been hosting increasing numbers of international students until the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (Jooste & Hagenmeier, 2020). In a report published by Wesgro (2020), the global student travel market was valued at \$33 billion, representing 23% of the global travel market in 2019. According to the International Education Association of South Africa (IEASA), mobility for international students to universities in South Africa was seriously affected by the pandemic restrictions imposed by the government (IEASA, 2020), with a 100% drop in the early stages of the pandemic (Abrahams & Bama, 2022). To curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus, the South African government implemented a 5-level alert lockdown regulation (Cape Town Travel, 2021; Nyikana & Bama, 2023). The five-stage risk-adjusted strategy was implemented at various times during the pandemic until they were discontinued in April 2022 (Table 1).

Table 1: South Africa’s Risk-Adjusted Strategy for Phasing out COVID-19 Lockdowns

Alert Level	Description	Implementation period	Measures
Level 5	High virus spread and/or low health system readiness.	27 March for three weeks but later extended to 30 April 2020	Full lockdown
Level 4	Moderate to high virus spread with low to moderate health system readiness	30 April – 30 May 2020	High restrictions
Level 3	Moderate virus spread, with moderate health system readiness	31 May – 16 August 2020	Moderate restrictions
Level 2	Moderate virus spread with high health system readiness	17 August 2020 – 31 January 2021	Moderate to low restrictions
Level 1	Low virus spread with high health system readiness.	28 February 2021 – 25 July 2021	Low restrictions
Level 3	Moderate virus spread, with moderate health system readiness	26 July 2021 – 12 September 2021	Moderate restrictions
Level 2	Moderate virus spread with high health system readiness	13 September 2021 – 30 September 2021	Moderate to low restrictions
Level 1	Low virus spread with high health system readiness	01 October 2021 – 4 April 2022	Low restrictions
National Health Act: Regulations: Surveillance and control of notifiable medical conditions: Amendment			
None	Low virus spread with high health system readiness	4 April 2022 – 22 June 2022	Low restrictions

Source: Adapted from Rogerson and Rogerson (2020)

5. Method and Data

The main purpose of the empirical study described in this section was to examine the motivations of foreign students at three universities in the Western Cape province: CPUT, SU and UCT. The study was conducted using a mixed-method approach. Quantitative data were collected between September 2020 and October 2021 using a questionnaire developed after an extensive literature review and other similar studies on study abroad motivations. The questionnaire was distributed to all foreign students via the international offices of each university using Google Docs. It contained questions about respondents' socio-demographic characteristics, their tourist activities during study-abroad programmes and reasons for choosing South Africa. Since the average population of foreign students at the universities in the Western Cape province between 2019–2021 was 726, the minimum sample size was 131. However, because the majority of international students were absent because of the pandemic, only 75 questionnaires were returned.

Qualitative data were obtained from 5 respondents employed at the international offices of three of the four universities during semi-structured in-depth interviews held between November 2020 and December 2021. Additionally, given that the biggest group of foreign students at the four universities was from Germany, interviews were also conducted with employees of international offices at two German universities in the state of Baden-Württemberg. After producing transcripts of the recorded interviews, content analysis was conducted to identify common themes and sub-themes associated with the study's aim.

6. Results and Discussion

Table 2: Demographic profiles of respondents ($n=75$)

Characteristics	Category	% of total
Nationality	German	36.0
	French	27.0
	American	13.0
	Dutch	7.0
	Italian	3.0
	Swiss	3.0
	Hungarian	1.0
	Norwegian	1.0
	Ukraine	1.0
	Finnish	1.0
	Belgian	1.0
	Austrian	1.0
	Slovenian	1.0
	Brazilian	1.0
Multi-national	1.0	
Sex	Female	56.0
	Male	42.7
	Non-conforming	1.3
Age	18–24	84.0
	25–34	16.0
Current university	CPUT	27.0
	SU	58.0
	UCT	15.0
Current place of residence	Renting with strangers	38.7
	University residence	25.3
	Renting by myself	24.0
	Renting with family members	9.3
Study major	Business	53.0
	Social Sciences	17.0
	Other (Automotive Business/Economics, Foreign Trade)	8.0
	Natural Sciences	7.0
	Communication, journalism, media studies	4.0
	Engineering	3.0
	Education	3.0
Main source of funding	Self-funded	60.0
	Scholarship	12.0
	Both	20.0
	Other (financial aid from a US university, partial student funding, parents)	8.0

Source: Survey data

6.1 Previous Visits and Tourist Activities in South Africa

Only 16.0% of respondents indicated that had previously visited South Africa. 75% of them had visited South Africa once while the rest — two or more times.

Table 3 shows tourism-related activities the respondents engaged in during their stay in South Africa.

Table 3: Tourist activities

Tourism Activities	Number of respondents $n=75$	%
Visiting key tourism attractions	64	85.3
Wine tasting	61	81.3
Shopping	66	88.0
Enjoying the sun, sea, and sand	44	58.7
Participation in cultural and historical activities	41	54.7
Multi-day tours	39	52.0
Hiking	62	82.0
Nightlife and casinos	48	64.0
Water sports	28	37.3
Safaris	44	58.7
Festivals and concerts	35	46.7

Source: Survey data

6.2. Respondents' Views about the Western Cape as a Study-Abroad Destination

Asked if they would recommend South Africa as a study-abroad destination, 90% of the respondents answered affirmatively, while the remaining answers were split between 'maybe' (9%) and 'no' (1%).

6.3. Reasons for Choosing Study Abroad Programmes In the Western Cape (Push Factors)

The next part of the questionnaire was designed to elicit respondents' reasons for choosing to study abroad. Respondents had to indicate how important a given reason was by choosing one option from a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'not at all important' (1), 'unimportant' (2), 'neither important nor unimportant' (3), 'important' (4), and 'very important' (5). In the analysis, pairs of similar responses were combined into "Important" (important + very important) and "Unimportant" (not at all important + unimportant).

The most frequently mentioned reasons for choosing to study abroad included the prospect of a different cultural experience (97.3%), living in another country (97.3%), international experience (96.0%) and a chance to make new friends (81.4%).

Reasons considered to be unimportant by the majority of respondents included being with one's partner" (89.3%), lack of available programmes in their home country (82.7%), funding received (78.7%) and "that's where my friends are going" (78.3).

Furthermore, factor analysis was performed on the raw data (using the Oblimin rotation with Kaiser normalisation). Five factors that push students to study abroad were identified (Table 4). The factors accounted for 64% of the total variance, with an acceptable to high level of reliability (RC ranging from 0.55 to 0.77) indicating that each of the factors was internally consistent. Lastly, correlations between the factors and their component items (AIC) were all above 0.3, so can be regarded as acceptable. To ensure that the factors could be interpreted in relation to the original 5-point Likert scale, factor scores were calculated as mean values (M) of all relevant items. Standard deviations calculated for these values ranged from 0.799 to 4.339.

Table 4: Push factors motivating students to study abroad

Motivational Factors and Items	FL	M	RC	AIC	SD
Factor 1: Quality and networking aspects		3.34	0.73	.471	4.133
To improve career prospects	0.79				
International exposure in the field of study	0.69				
To obtain quality education	0.69				
Parental encouragement	0.49				
To make new friends	0.47				
Factor 2: Marketing and financial considerations		2.39	0.77	.460	4.339
Cost of study	0.79				
Funding received	0.70				
University marketing activities	0.66				
University counsellor influence	0.61				
To become independent	0.47				
Factor 3: International exposure		4.82	0.64	.472	0.799
To experience life in another country	0.82				
To gain international experience	0.70				
Factor 4: Socio-cultural		2.47	0.56	.406	2.324
This is where my friends are going	0.76				
To be with my partner	0.54				
Factor 5: Regulatory		1.57	0.55	.383	1.768
Expected as part of university programme	0.84				
Lack of available programme in my home country	0.53				
Total variance explained:	64%				

Source: Survey data. KEY: FL= Factor loading; M = Mean; RC = Reliability coefficient, AIC = Average interitem correlation; SD = Standard deviation

6.4. Reasons for Choosing Study Abroad Programmes in the Western Cape (Pull Factors)

The most frequently indicated reasons for choosing South African universities included natural and environmental factors (93.3%), favourable climate and weather conditions (86.6%), use of English as the language of instruction (82.6%), common language (65.3%) and the lower cost of living in South Africa (56.0%). Results of factor analysis are shown in Table 5. As can be seen, the five factors identified in the analysis accounted for 66% of the total variance, with an acceptable to high level of reliability (RC ranging from 0.65 to 0.88), indicating that each of the factors was internally consistent. Correlations between the factors and their component items (AIC) were higher than in the case of the push factors and ranged from 0.449 to 0.798. Mean values of all relevant items were calculated for each factor (M) and their standard deviations ranged from 2.946 to 6.570.

Table 5: Pull factors motivating students to study in South Africa

Motivational Factors and Items	FL	M	RC	AIC	SD
Factor 1: Quality		2.77	0.88	.653	5.393
Qualified and friendly academic staff	0.80				
Expertise and specialisation in area of study interest	0.75				
Availability of labs and research instruments	0.67				
Accreditation and reputation of the country and its institutions	0.62				
University services	0.62				
Factor 2: Socio-Political		2.12	0.86	.688	6.570
Low rate of discrimination	0.84				
Safety and security	0.75				
Favourable government policies	0.67				
Familiarity with own culture	0.62				
Closeness to the home country (proximity)	0.49				
Political or historical ties with South Africa	0.48				
Easy to get visa/visa free	0.46				
Factor 3: Marketing		2.45	0.83	.516	5.604
Referrals from friends, family members and social media	0.76				
Domestic websites	0.69				
Media advertising	0.67				
Overseas websites	0.65				

Motivational Factors and Items	FL	M	RC	AIC	SD
Lower cost of living in South Africa	0.54				
Easy admission	0.51				
Factor 4: Environmental	4.13	0.74	.798	2.515	
Natural and environmental factors e.g., landscape and beach	0.89				
Favourable climate and weather condition	0.88				
Factor 5: Social		3.58	0.65	.449	2.946
English as the teaching medium	0.84				
Common language, and travel	0.69				
University ranking	0.50				
Total variance explained:	66%				

Source: Survey data. KEY: FL= Factor loading; Mean= M; RC = Reliability coefficient
AIC = Average interitem correlation ; SD = Standard deviation

6.5. Effects of Covid-19 on Study Abroad Programmes in South Africa

The second part of the study is based on data collected during in-depth interviews with 5 respondents employed at the international offices of the three universities (CPUT, SU and UCT). The purpose of these interviews was to get a better understanding of how the educational tourism sector in the Western Cape province was affected by the pandemic and the socio-economic impacts of programme cancellations and suspensions, travel restrictions and bans for universities.

Provided below are some of the responses given by the interviewees.

COVID-19 has immensely affected study-abroad programmes and exchanges; as a result of international travel bans at our university has stopped all physical exchange programmes and E+ funded projects. Funds cannot be used up because the requirement is for students and staff to travel to another country.

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

In 2019, South Africa was the world's 8th most popular foreign student-receiving destination, with 2.2% of the global share and 40,712 foreign students (Galal, 2022; Oyeleye, 2023). The majority of those students come from Sub-Saharan Africa (Oyeleye, 2023; South Africa, 2020). As regards universities in the Western Cape, 13,139 foreign students were enrolled in 2017 (South Africa, 2020). One of the interviewees noted:

Before COVID-19, our numbers were significantly higher ... 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 massive thing when things went online, and the numbers of international students declined significantly.

Nonetheless, the interviewees were quite optimistic about the future and thought that the pandemic would not have a significant long-term impact on study-abroad programmes because the situation would change thanks to vaccination rollouts and the destination's reputation.

From what I have seen, a lot of students still want to come Western Cape, Cape Town. I am not sure about the rest of South Africa though. We had students that wanted to come during the pandemic though not many. I have seen an increase in the numbers of students, they want to travel here they want to come, and I think it is because of the destination... Also, students have seen the advertising, they've seen the university and what it has to offer. I think the pandemic will pass and we will recover from it, our numbers will pick up. However, the pandemic has shown us that we do have a lot of work, such as the need to digitise these programmes and digitise education and programmes. Students took a bit more time to make their decision to travel to South Africa because of the pandemic. At the beginning, the restrictions were very strict. But South Africa is a good destination, foreign students still want to come here, and I am hoping they will keep wanting to come.

The interviewees pointed out that effective and efficient communication was necessary to maintain such a positive outlook and consideration, particularly in the face of controversial media discussions surrounding the course of the pandemic and the various viral mutations, which occasionally were thought to have originated in South Africa (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2022).

6.6. The Future of Study-Abroad Programmes after the Pandemic

The interviewees' suggestions and expectations concerning the future of study abroad programmes after the pandemic are summarised in Figure 2. All of them are intended to make it easier for foreign students to come to South Africa. All interviewees agreed that more attention should be paid to communication policies for example by intensifying marketing efforts to promote South Africa as a safe study-abroad travel destination.

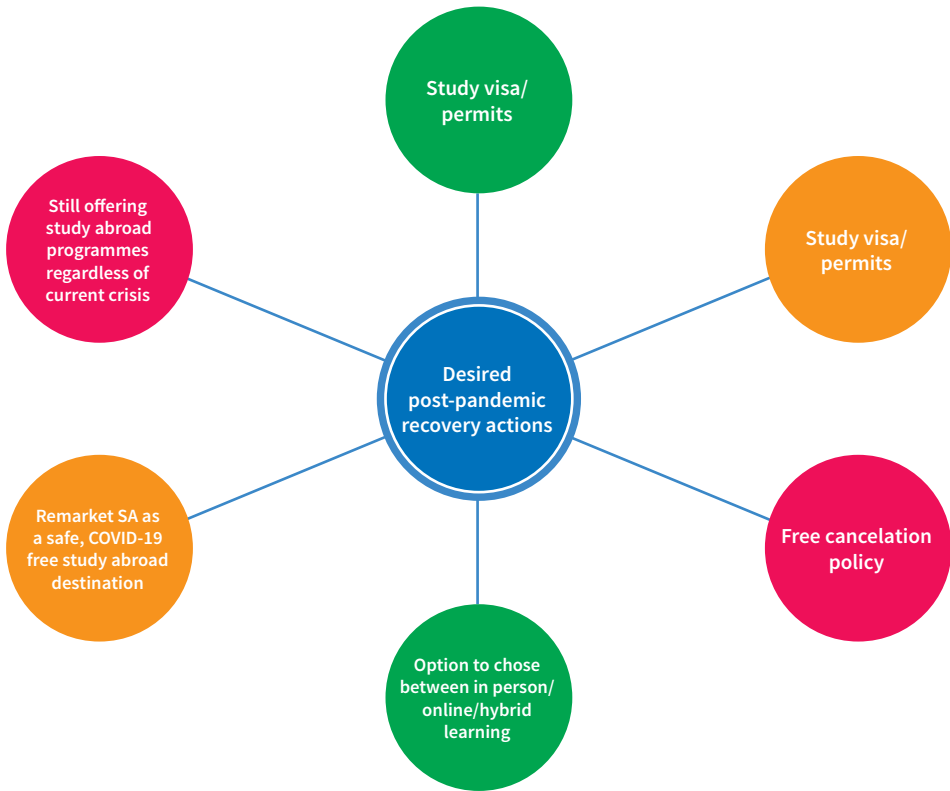


Figure 2: Post-pandemic recovery actions expected/proposed by the interviewees.

One interviewee suggested using augmented reality (AR) as a marketing tool to attract foreign students to come to the Western Cape.

I think augmented reality (AR) can be used as a tool to influence students' decisions. Especially now with COVID. I think it can make a difference. I was [actually] a part of this; I went to a tourism event in Cape Town, and they were exploring the possibilities of AR. So, I think it can make a difference.

In addition, and supporting the previous position, one of the coordinators from a German university indicated that:

VR/AR might not be the first motivating factor to select a destination, but it supports the decision to go somewhere (1 part of the decision).

Furthermore, another interviewee made the following suggestion:

If I saw an informative video about the campus and destination featuring the contact person speaking it would be very useful.

Marketing efforts associated with future study abroad programmes should highlight key attractions identified in the current study, such as cultural experiences, and the allure of the Western Cape in general.

Study-abroad programmes are about the experience of course, it is exciting to go to another country but there is also the educational aspect, the quality of the courses. So, in the case of courses that require a lot of social engagement, how can they be done virtually? Presence would be required.

Another interviewee from a German university that sends students to the universities in the Western Cape, said that students choose the destination because it is an English-speaking country, stating that:

Students want to go to a country where people speak English, which is an attractive destination because of its weather, climate, and seaside; students want to go somewhere they haven't been to before. Also, because South Africa is probably more developed than other African countries, students feel safer and that's why they keep wanting to go there.

The interviews confirm that foreign students are interested in countries that provide both good quality educational and tourist experiences.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The pandemic presented many challenges for study-abroad programmes and the wider educational tourism and tourism industries. Nonetheless, the universities in the Western Cape remain quite optimistic about the future of study-abroad programmes. However, their successful resumption will require cooperation between the government, universities and international partners.

The results of the study show that South Africa and the Western Cape in particular remain popular edu-tourism destinations despite the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The main push factors motivating foreign students to choose South Africa as a study-abroad destination include diverse cultural experiences, inter-

national experience and making new friends; among the key pull factors were environmental factors, the English language and the lower cost of living.

Interviewed respondents employed at the international offices remained optimistic that international student mobility would remain strong after the COVID-19 pandemic if efforts on the part of educational institutions were combined with appropriate tourism policy measures, such as positioning South Africa, and the Western Cape in particular, as a safe destination, greater transparency in the management of pandemic-related issues, simplifying visa procedures for international students and focused marketing campaigns (Johnston, 2021; Mok et al., 2021; Zubrytska, 2021). From the marketing perspective, effective and efficient communication is required to maintain such a positive outlook and consideration, particularly in light of controversial media discussions surrounding the management of the pandemic (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2022).

With current student mobility in Sub-Saharan Africa standing at 430,000 and predicted to double by 2050, South Africa's position as a popular destination for international students remains important for the country's economy (Kigotho, 2023; Oyeleye, 2023).

This study has obvious limitations. Firstly, due to lockdown restrictions and university anti-pandemic policies, the author had to use university call centres and switchboards to reach the desired offices because it was difficult to visit the universities in person. The result was an exceptionally low response: students who were not physically present in South Africa could not often be reached by email and asked to respond to the questionnaire. The second part of the study concerning the effects of COVID-19 on study abroad programmes was only based on the views of programme coordinators and did not account for the perspective of foreign students.

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Motywacje studentów zagranicznych oraz wpływ pandemii na wybrane uczelnie w RPA

Streszczenie: Tematem artykułu są motywacje studentów zagranicznych studiujących na trzech uczelniach w RPA w świetle ograniczeń spowodowanych pandemią. Autor analizuje politykę uczelni w prowincji Western Cape w odniesieniu do studentów zagranicznych w okresie obowiązywania restrykcji związanych z pandemią oraz po ich zniesieniu. Rozważania opierają się na danych ilościowych uzyskanych za pomocą ankiety z udziałem 75 studentów zagranicznych oraz danych jakościowych zebranych w czasie wywiadów z 5 koordynatorami studiów zagranicznych pracującymi na wybranych uczelniach. Większość ankietowanych studentów pochodziła z Europy. Pomimo obaw i niepewności przedstawiciele uniwersytetów wyrażali optymizm co do przyszłości programów dla studentów zagranicznych.

Słowa kluczowe: programy studiów za granicą, turystyka, RPA, COVID-19, motywacje do podróży



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