

Academic Tourism in Barcelona (Spain) in the COVID-19 Era

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Abstract. Academic stays at higher education institutions located outside students' usual environment for less than a year have become increasingly popular. The research reported in this article aimed to examine the current situation of international academic tourism in the region of Barcelona (Spain). The main objectives were to profile academic tourists, to analyse the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on inbound academic tourism flows, and to explore the outcomes of academic travel experiences. Following a mixed-methods approach, two focus groups and three in-depth interviews were conducted to collect data from both a supply and demand perspective, in addition to a survey designed for international students. A total of 132 questionnaires were analysed by means of descriptive statistics and through chi-square and ANOVA tests. Qualitative data was processed by means of categorisation and content analysis using QDA Miner. The main results indicate that academic tourism has positive sustainable impacts and is conducive to transformational experiences. Tourists' profile has been identified and the effects of the pandemic have been pinpointed. Due to COVID-19, academic tourism flows experienced a serious decline and the satisfaction degree with the academic travel experience was lower. Nonetheless, most of the respondents would recommend Barcelona as an academic destination.

1 Introduction

The number of overseas students in higher education has almost tripled in less than 20 years, growing from 1.9 million in 1999 to 5.3 million in 2017 (UNESCO 2020, as cited in [Martínez-Roget, Rodríguez 2021](#)). Academic stays abroad rely on a wide range of educational and touristic services and facilities that involve different stakeholders. They also impact the participants and the destinations where they take place. However, academic tourism has not received the attention it deserves from academia ([Cerdeira Bento 2021](#)), particularly from an anthropological perspective ([Di Giovine, Bodinger de Uriarte 2021](#)).

The need to explore academic tourism has had another turn of the screw with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic and its unexpected consequences for international mobility worldwide. Spain has seen a decrease in tourism flows because of the lower demand for tourist services as a result of uncertainty, preventive measures, and the mobility restrictions that most destinations are adopting ([Ministry of Industry, Trade and Tourism ny](#)).

This has been the main motive underpinning the research reported in this article. The general objective was to study the current situation of inbound academic tourism in the region of Barcelona (Spain), and it comprised three specific objectives. The first one aimed to identify the profile of tourists that come to Barcelona's region for academic purposes. The following research questions were formulated in this respect:

RQ1. Which is the demographic profile of academic tourists that come to Barcelona for academic purposes?

RQ2. Which are the main motivations of academic tourists coming to Barcelona?

The second specific objective sought to analyse the impact of COVID-19 on inbound academic tourism flows in the region of Barcelona, and was related to these questions:

RQ3. What was the influx of academic tourists in Barcelona before the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ4. What has been the influx of academic tourists in Barcelona during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ5. Has the COVID-19 pandemic influenced students' destination choice?

RQ6. What are the major challenges posed by COVID-19 for academic tourism in Barcelona?

Finally, the third specific objective focused on academic tourism stakeholders so as to explore the outcomes of academic travel experiences in the region of Barcelona in the COVID-19 era in reply to the last set of research questions:

RQ7. What are the impacts of academic tourism on Barcelona's academic tourism industry?

RQ8. What are the impacts of academic tourism on Barcelona's host community?

RQ9. Are academic tourists satisfied with their academic stays in Barcelona?

RQ10. What are the main impacts of the academic tourism experience on the academic tourists that stay in Barcelona?

Before providing an account of the methodology and the outcomes of this research, let us contextualise the current academic tourism scenario.

2 Literature review

According to the [World Tourism Organization \(2019\)](#), educational tourism is primarily motivated by the tourist's engagement in learning, self-improvement, intellectual growth, and skills development. It can be linked to study programs, language courses, skill acquisition, or career development sojourns. In simple terms, educational tourism is the combination of traveling and learning.

A micro-niche of educational tourism is academic tourism, which can be referred to as "a distinct type of tourism that would include any stays made in higher education institutions in places outside their usual environment for a period of less than one year" ([Rodríguez et al. 2012](#), p. 1583). Academic travel is closely related with other niches, such as scientific, cultural, or youth ([Iglesias 2022](#)). In fact, it can be complemented and even intertwined with several touristic activities, like voluntourism or language tourism, which is in turn another micro-niche of educational tourism ([Iglesias 2021](#)). Within academic tourism, two subtypes can be distinguished: domestic and international ([Rodríguez et al. 2012](#)).

Thanks to exchange mobility programs, thousands of students pursue their studies in a higher education institution outside their usual place of residence annually. Concerning domestic mobility agreements between Spanish universities, the Sistema de Intercambio

entre Centros Universitarios de España (SICUE) has been operating since 2000. Promoted by the associations Crue-Asuntos Estudiantiles and Crue-Internacionalización y Cooperación, students can go on an exchange program in a higher education institution located in a different geographical region within Spain, with guaranteed adaptation to their curricular profile and academic recognition. This enables students to take part in diverse teaching systems and socio-cultural contexts ([Crue Universidades Españolas ny](#)).

On the other hand, the Erasmus program has always been a very popular international mobility scheme in Spain. From its foundation in 1987 by the European Union until 2018, over 4 million higher education students had the opportunity to study, train, volunteer, or gain professional experience abroad. International flows rocketed from over 3,000 students in the academic year 1987-1988 to almost 350,000 students in 2018, and the number of participating countries during this period increased from 12 countries to 33 ([Martínez-Roget, Rodríguez 2021](#)). The Erasmus+ program for 2021-2027 aims at enabling the mobility of about 10 million learners and staff with a total budget of €26.2 billion, i.e., nearly twice the budget of the Erasmus+ program for 2014-2020 ([European Commission 2021](#)). The main purpose of the Erasmus+ program is to encourage Europe's 2020 strategy for prosperity, jobs, social equity, and inclusion, as well as spreading the concept of sustainability across higher education institutions. It also supports the objectives of the EU Youth Strategy, such as reducing the unemployment rate, promoting adult learning, and supporting innovation and collaboration. Another strand of Erasmus+ is Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters, especially targeted at master's students worldwide ([European Commission ny](#)).

The academic tourism micro-niche has some idiosyncratic characteristics which are related to the impacts it produces in terms of economic, socio-cultural, and environmental sustainability, as stated by [Rodríguez, Martínez-Roget \(2021\)](#). These authors maintain that, to begin with, this type of tourism is considered more economically sustainable than mainstream tourism, since students' stays are significantly longer than those of common tourists, so their average expenditure is more substantial. Additionally, students have similar spending patterns to local residents. Academic tourism also helps to counterbalance seasonality, compensating for the decrease of tourist flows in the low season ([Rodríguez, Martínez-Roget 2021](#)).

Secondly, when it comes to socio-cultural aspects, exchange students are generally more educated than other types of tourists, and many wish to integrate into the local culture, learn the local language, and build new relationships with residents and people from all around the world. Cultural exchange and open-mindedness are thus enhanced ([Rodríguez, Martínez-Roget 2021](#)). Study abroad can be considered an ethical type of tourism that can contribute to global citizenship ([Di Giovine, Bodinger de Uriarte 2021](#)).

Lastly, nowadays young people are environmentally concerned and universities are also committed to the conservation of the environment. Higher education institutions usually promote the use of recycled products and alternative energy resources, and they are involved in providing an ecologically oriented education. Innovation and the use of new technologies are frequent in academic tourism. Moreover, it does not require the building of new infrastructures, as is the case with mainstream tourism, since students stay in shared apartments, dorms, with host families, or housing provided by universities. Academic tourism is therefore positive for the destination and it even contributes to its conservation ([Rodríguez, Martínez-Roget 2021](#)). Academic tourism activities can also have the power to transform those participants that take part in them ([Cruz et al. 2021](#)). Study abroad has a transformational nature, since it offers opportunities for changing attitudes and behaviours ([Di Giovine, Bodinger de Uriarte 2021](#)). It is necessary to understand the transformative process of intercultural identities from an interdisciplinary approach that looks at mobile students' realities and listens to their own accounts ([Selby 2021](#)).

Transformational tourism experiences can be created anywhere at any time. Nevertheless, according to [Pritchard, Morgan \(2013\)](#) some specific types of travel tend to contribute to enhancing consciousness, like nature-based tourism, eco-travel, cultural and heritage travel, religious trips and pilgrimages, adventure and challenging activities, volunteer trips, or educational travel. The latter results in learning, gaining cultural and global

Table 1: Push factors in international academic tourism

PUSH FACTORS	
Professional development goals	Doyle et al. 2010 , Furukawa et al. 2013 , Lam et al. 2011 , Larbi, Fu 2017 , Lesjak et al. 2015 , Li, Bray 2007 , Li, Qi 2019
Linguistic and/or cultural development goals	Bodycott 2009 , Cao et al. 2016 , Counsell 2011 , Doyle et al. 2010 , Iglesias 2017, 2021 , Nilsson 2015
Personal growth	Cruz et al. 2021 , Doyle et al. 2010 , Lesjak et al. 2015 , Li, Bray 2007 , Nilsson 2015
International exposure	Bhati, Anderson 2012 , Bodycott 2009 , Larbi, Fu 2017
Experiencing novelty and excitement abroad	Jon et al. 2014 , Li, Qi 2019 , Llewellyn-Smith, McCabe 2008
Having fun and socializing	Cruz et al. 2021 , Lesjak et al. 2015 , Llewellyn-Smith, McCabe 2008
Low living standards and/or unavailable educational options in home country	Bodycott 2009 , Cao et al. 2016 , Larbi, Fu 2017 , Maringe, Carter 2007 , Mazzarol, Soutar 2002 , Naidoo 2007 , Rodriguez et al. 2012 , Rodríguez González et al. 2011
Adverse socio-political situation in home country	Maringe, Carter 2007 , Abubakar et al. 2014
Dissatisfaction with education system in home country	Ghazarian 2014 , Kim, Zhang 2021 , Park 2009

knowledge, intellectual growth, and personality development. Tourists have traditionally been driven by relaxation and leisure. New tourists seek educational and experiential components in their trips. They want to go beyond looking and seeing, they want to feel and sense, and undergo a personal transformation ([Reisinger 2015](#)).

Following [Martínez-Roget, Rodríguez \(2021\)](#), the push and pull model has been commonly used to analyse academic travel motivation. Push factors are usually regarded as intrinsic to travellers and related to their background, whereas pull factors are external and often linked to the perceived attributes of the academic destination ([Mazzarol, Soutar 2002](#)). Some of the push and pull factors identified by researchers in the last two decades are listed in Tables 1 and 2.

These are some of the aspects that underlie the noticeable growth experienced by academic tourism over the years ([Lesjak et al. 2015](#)). The implementation of student exchange programs coupled with the creation and promotion of infrastructures to support mobility have made this possible. International students now represent 2.4% of all higher education students in the world (UNESCO 2020, as cited in [Martínez-Roget, Rodríguez 2021](#)).

Regarding academic tourism in Europe, in 2019 a €3.37 billion budget was distributed by means of the Erasmus+ program among almost 940,000 students, around 25,000 projects, and 111,000 participating organisations ([European Commission 2020b](#)). As for academic tourism in the region of Barcelona, significant data is reported by two important universities, namely Universitat de Barcelona (UB) and Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB). In 2019-2020, UB received a total of 1,705 international students through mobility programs and sent 1,392 students abroad. This university had 3,754 agreements with foreign institutions and 68 active Erasmus+ programs ([Universitat de Barcelona 2021](#)). In turn, in 2019-2020 UAB welcomed 881 Erasmus+ foreign students, as well as 356 students through their UAB Exchange Programs and 2,179 students through their study abroad programs. As for outbound mobility, 660 students engaged in Erasmus+ studies and 116 in Erasmus+ placements, while 270 took part in UAB exchange programs and 136 in UAB exchange program placements ([Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona 2021](#)).

Table 2: Pull factors in international academic tourism

PULL FACTORS	
Destination's image or prestige	Ahmad et al. 2016 , Lesjak et al. 2015
Destination's culture and language	Abubakar et al. 2014 , Larbi, Fu 2017 , Rodríguez González et al. 2011
Destination's climate and weather	Cao et al. 2016 , Llewellyn-Smith, McCabe 2008 , Rodríguez González et al. 2011
Destination's tourist attractions	Cruz et al. 2021 , Llewellyn-Smith, McCabe 2008
Destination's natural environment	Abubakar et al. 2014 , Llewellyn-Smith, McCabe 2008
Destination's geographical proximity	Beine et al. 2014 , Cao et al. 2016 , Lee 2017 , Mazzarol, Soutar 2002 , Moreira, Gomes 2019 , Rodríguez González et al. 2011 , Shanka et al. 2005 , Soo, Elliott 2010
Destination's linguistic or cultural proximity	Ahmad, Buchanan 2016 , Beine et al. 2014 , Counsell 2011 , Jon et al. 2014 , Lee, Morrish 2012
Destination's perceived safety and/or security	Abubakar et al. 2014 , Bhati, Anderson 2012 , Caruso, De Wit 2015 , Chen 2008 , Lam et al. 2011 , Mazzarol, Soutar 2002 , Shanka et al. 2005
Destination's cultural diversity and integration opportunities	Abubakar et al. 2014 , Ahmad, Buchanan 2016 , Chen 2008 , Lam et al. 2011 , Mazzarol, Soutar 2002
Destination's professional opportunities	Abubakar et al. 2014 , Cao et al. 2016 , Counsell 2011 , Eder et al. 2010 , Ivy 2010 , Mazzarol, Soutar 2002
Destination's educational system and institutions	Abubakar et al. 2014 , Ahmad et al. 2016 , Ahmad, Buchanan 2016 , Beine et al. 2014 , Cao et al. 2016 , Furukawa et al. 2013 , Gong et al. 2020 , Kim, Zhang 2021 , Lam et al. 2011 , Larbi, Fu 2017 , Mazzarol, Soutar 2002 , Nilsson 2015 , Park 2009 , Petruzzellis, Romanazzi 2010 , Rodriguez et al. 2012 , Rodríguez González et al. 2011 , Shanka et al. 2005 , Van Bouwel, Veugelers 2013
Tuition in English in the destination	Baláz, Williams 2004 , Bodycott 2009 , Kim, Zhang 2021 , Nilsson 2015 , Park 2009
Scholarships and financial support	Abubakar et al. 2014 , Larbi, Fu 2017
Destination's education costs	Abubakar et al. 2014 , Ahmad, Buchanan 2016 , Bourke 2000 , Doyle et al. 2010 , Lam et al. 2016 , Mazzarol, Soutar 2002 , Naidoo 2007 , Shanka et al. 2005
Destination's living costs	Abubakar et al. 2014 , Ahmad, Buchanan 2016 , Beine et al. 2014 , Bourke 2000 , Cruz et al. 2021 , Lam et al. 2016 , Mazzarol, Soutar 2002 , Moreira, Gomes 2019 , Nilsson 2015 , Rodríguez González et al. 2011 , Shanka et al. 2005
Travel costs	Cao et al. 2016 , Cruz et al. 2021 , Mazzarol, Soutar 2002 , Moreira, Gomes 2019 , Rodriguez et al. 2012
Visa procedures	Abubakar et al. 2014 , Eder et al. 2010 , Urias, Camp Yeakey 2008
Recommendations and social influence of acquaintances	Ahmad et al. 2016 , Cao et al. 2016 , Cheung et al. 2011 , Cruz et al. 2021 , Ivy 2010 , Lee 2014 , Li, Qi 2019 , Mazzarol, Soutar 2002 , McCarthy et al. 2012 , Rodriguez et al. 2012 , Shanka et al. 2005

International mobility flows started to be dramatically affected worldwide in early 2020 when the COVID-19 virus started to spread, becoming an ongoing pandemic and a global health threat. National governments across the world restricted non-essential business and travel, which resulted in massive economic loss and jobless workers (Williams 2020). The tourism industry experienced a global decline of 60% in international tourism in 2020 (OECD 2020). The destination of Barcelona lost 75.8% of airport arrivals and 82.3% of international commercial flights (Observatori del Turisme a Barcelona 2021). The lockdown, quarantine, social distancing, and closure of universities caused an overall impact on international student mobility of nearly 90% (Marinoni et al. 2020). More specifically, as regards both inbound and outbound mobility programmes, UB reported that the pandemic affected nearly 100% of full-year and autumn semester stays. Whereas one-third of overseas students returned home, the rest stayed in their academic destinations, and most international students had to continue their studies online, regardless of whether they had stayed abroad or not (Universitat de Barcelona 2021).

The European Commission published in 2020 the results of the survey on the impact of COVID-19 on learning mobility activities sent to over 57,000 participants, 40% of which were doing an academic exchange during the outbreak of the pandemic. The study found that 75% of the respondents, i.e., more than 107,000 participants, were affected. Over 42% were able to continue with their academic mobility with some variations like online learning, 22% of the participants had their exchange temporarily suspended, and 36% of the students had it cancelled (European Commission 2020a).

In addition, a factsheet was published by the European Commission (2020c) to provide essential practical advice to participants in the Erasmus+ program during the COVID-19 outbreak and spread. The European Commission monitored the situation in order to implement the necessary measures and adapt the activities to the current context. The main measures were to invoke the force majeure clause in all cases, postpone the deadline of all the activities for 12 months, reschedule Erasmus+ partnerships that were not able to take place in spring 2020, and arrange peer-to-peer support for students abroad in Europe (European Commission (2020c)). At present, while domestic academic tourism and proximity trips seem to have better recovery prospects, the future of international academic travel is uncertain and will be probably dependent on ensuring travellers' safety (Iglesias 2022).

Pandemic-related research in the tourism and hospitality sector has globally focused on impacts on vulnerable stakeholders, destinations' promotion, tourists' choices, and the role of technology, as well as on resilience and recovery (Utkarsh, Sigala 2021). In view of the lack of studies comparing the specific situation of academic tourism before and after the COVID-19 crisis in the region of Barcelona, the research project presented in this paper aimed at putting this topic under the spotlight.

3 Data and Methodology

This exploratory investigation followed a mixed-methods approach with the purpose of reaching the research objectives mentioned in the Introduction after triangulating different perspectives and methods. Thus, the main primary data collection techniques were a survey to international academic students, interviews with experts from the academic tourism sector, and two focus groups: the first one gathered past and present foreign students and national students, and the second focus group aimed at obtaining information from industry stakeholders. A Google Forms questionnaire was designed for the survey and distributed through social media, while specific scripts were elaborated for the interviews and the focus groups. Virtual zoom meetings were video recorded in the case of the focus groups and one interview. The other interviews took place onsite or via email.

Both descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were conducted using GNU PSPP, a software for quantitative survey results (Free Software Foundation). This programme was considered a very convenient tool since it is a free easy-to-use replacement for SPSS, which is commonly used by researchers (cf. Lesjak et al. 2015, McCarthy et al. 2012, Nilsson 2015). Data was correlated through chi-square and analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests. The whole process is represented in Figure 1.

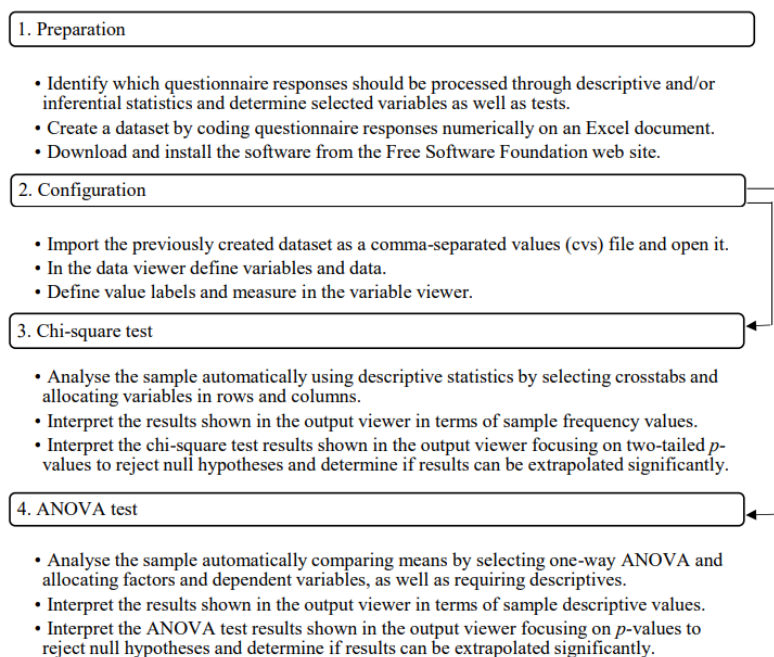


Figure 1: Process for PSPP analysis

On the other hand, qualitative data obtained by interacting with interviewees and focus group participants was processed by means of content analysis and categorisation following the model employed by Cruz et al. (2021). Table 3 shows the categorisation used in this study after reading the information provided by all the respondents.

Transcripts of the responses included in each dataset, i.e., in-depth interviews, students' focus group, and stakeholders' focus group, were analysed using QDA Miner Lite, the free popular version of the qualitative data analysis software QDA Miner (Provalis Research). This was also considered a very useful methodological option, as it enables researchers to code and analyse textual data from large collections of documents to find out co-occurrences reliably. Figure 2 illustrates this process.

Since the scope was the region of Barcelona, the universe consisted of the students that came to this region to take part in an academic exchange experience and the industry stakeholders from local academic tourism organisations. As mentioned in Section 2, an approximate number of exchange students in the academic period 2019-2020 has been publicly reported by UB and UAB. However, it was impossible to determine the exact volume of academic tourists that participate in international mobility programs in the rest of this region's higher education institutions every year.

Having opted for a non-probabilistic convenience sample, 136 responses to the questionnaire were collected, 4 of which were discarded because they were submitted by national students. The valid responses were sent by international students whose academic destination was or had been Barcelona. Moreover, 3 experts based in Barcelona were interviewed in depth, namely the CEO of an academic tourism provider for the Chinese outbound market, the Diversity and Inclusion Officer of another international study abroad provider, and the Co-founder and Head of Product and Marketing of an international student association. Furthermore, the first focus group was composed of a combination of international students from mobility programs in Barcelona before or during the COVID-19 pandemic and local students who participated in Buddy Programs to contribute to their foreign peers' integration. Last but not least, 5 industry stakeholders shared their views in the second focus group: the International Officer of a higher education institution in Barcelona, the Head of the Buddy Program of the same institution, the Sales Manager and Commercial Director of a student residence hall located in this city, and one of the Operations Managers of a local accommodation agency.

Table 3: Categorisation

Technique	Category	Subcategory
Interview (I)	I1. Impacts	I1.1. Economic I1.2. Socio-cultural I1.3. Environmental
	I2. Profile of students	
	I3. Challenges	
	I4. Future expectations	
Focus group students (FGS)	FGS1. Impacts	FGS1.1. Economic FGS1.2. Socio-cultural FGS1.3. Environmental
	FGS2. Profile of students	
	FGS3. Challenges	FGS3.1. Health FGS3.2. Mobility FGS3.3. Integration
	FGS4. Academic experience	FGS4.1. Positive outcomes FGS4.2. Negative outcomes
	FGS5. Barcelona as an academic tourism destination	FGS5.1. International students' perspective FGS5.2. Local students' perspective
Focus group industry (FGI)	FGI1. Impacts	FGI1.1. Economic FGI1.2. Socio-cultural FGI1.3. Environmental
	FGI2. Profile of students	
	FGI3. Challenges	FGI3.1. Academic FGI3.2. Accommodation
	FGI4. Academic tourism data	
	FGI5. Future expectations	

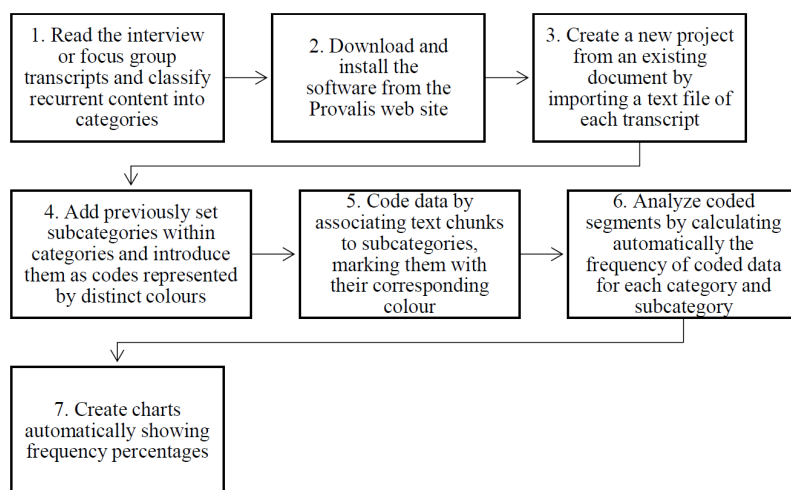


Figure 2: Process for QDA Miner analysis

4 Results

4.1 Survey analysis

The vast majority of the respondents were European students, mostly from France (19.5%), Italy (18.8%), and Germany (12.03%). They were mainly in their early twenties and 70.5% were women. Their main motivation to carry out an academic exchange was personal development (80.15%), as well as professional growth (61.76%), social life (54.4%), and leisure (26.47%). They chose Barcelona as their academic destination because of the climate (21.9%), the local language and culture (17.4%), the tourist attractions (16.62%), and the local cuisine and gastronomy (10.29%). Most of them stayed in this city in the second semester of 2020-2021 (54.5%) or in the first semester of 2019-2020 (23.5%), for a period of 6 months (55.3%) or 3 months (24.2%), and studied at UB (53.68%) and UAB (16.91%). The respondents pursued a Bachelor's degree (83.3%) or a Master's degree (14.4%), in social sciences (56.1%) or in the area of arts and humanities (16.7%), predominantly.

Regarding the touristic services they used in Barcelona, 75% rented an apartment and 19.12% stayed at a student residence hall, whereas the rest opted for other types of accommodation, including host families. Average monthly accommodation expenditures ranged between €301 and €500 for 52.2%, between €501 and €700 for 33.8%, between €701 and €900 for 7.4%, exceeded €900 for 4.4%, and did not reach €300 for 2.2%. Almost everybody (97.06%) travelled around the city by public transport, and 52.94% also did it on foot. The most frequent leisure activities were cultural (77.94%), nightlife (47.06%), gastronomic (42.65%), and sports (27.21%).

Even though most of the respondents interacted with local residents almost constantly (36.03%) or quite often (24.26%), constant interactions with other foreign people were more abundant for the majority (53.68%), and while 42.6% took a Spanish language course during their stay, 57.4% did not. Linguistic gains were actually some of the outcomes of their academic stays reported by the respondents, as well as other aspects related to their individual growth shown in Figure 3.

As for the consequences of COVID-19 on the respondents' academic tourism experience, 68.4% stated that the pandemic affected them, but they stayed in Barcelona and continued with their classes online, while 5.9% had to return to their countries. Conversely, for 25.7% their academic stay took place before the COVID-19 outbreak. All in all, a very significant percentage of the respondents seemed globally satisfied (50%) or even very satisfied (28.68%) with their academic experience, and they would recommend (27.2%) or highly recommend (67.6%) Barcelona as an academic tourism destination.

With respect to the chi-square tests for 132 valid cases, 2 null hypotheses (H_0) were rejected since the results were statistically significant ($p < .05$):

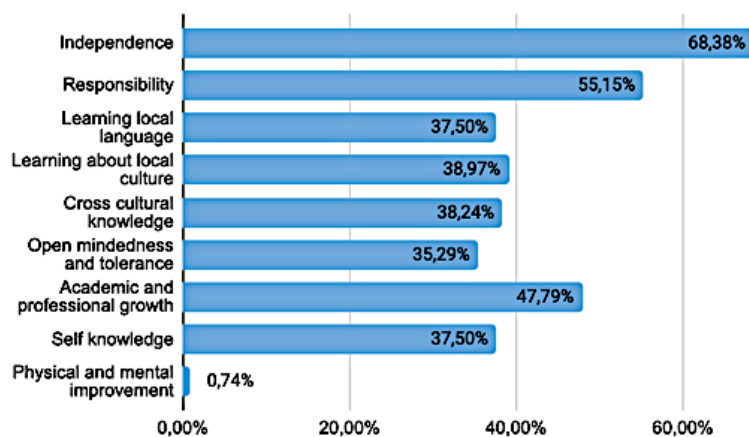


Figure 3: Outcomes of academic stays for international students in Barcelona

Table 4: Chi-square test results

Associations	H ₀	Statistic	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Period of stay & motivation for choosing Barcelona	Confirmed. Not related	Pearson Chi-square	1.79	4	.775
		Likelihood Ratio	2.12	4	.714
		Linear-by-Linear Association	.70	1	.401
Country of origin & accommodation expenditure	Rejected. Related	Pearson Chi-square	266.06	136	.000
		Likelihood Ratio	127.82	136	.679
		Linear-by-Linear Association	.59	1	.441
Length of stay & accommodation expenditure	Rejected. Related	Pearson Chi-square	54.04	16	.000
		Likelihood Ratio	42.77	16	.000
		Linear-by-Linear Association	4.83	1	.028
Length of stay & means of transport	Confirmed. Not related	Pearson Chi-square	5.31	8	.724
		Likelihood Ratio	5.34	8	.720
		Linear-by-Linear Association	.33	1	.566
Period of stay & outcomes	Confirmed. Not related	Pearson Chi-square	4.35	4	.361
		Likelihood Ratio	4.92	4	.295
		Linear-by-Linear Association	1.08	1	.298
Length of stay & outcomes	Confirmed. Not related	Pearson Chi-square	5.69	4	.224
		Likelihood Ratio	5.56	4	.235
		Linear-by-Linear Association	.18	1	.670

- For H₀ = There is no significant difference between the country of origin and the accommodation expenditure, the result was $\chi^2(136, n = 132) = 266.06, p < .001$. There was a correlation between non-European countries like Ukraine, South Korea, Jordan, or Australia and monthly accommodation expenditure above €900. The respondents who paid €300 a month for their accommodation were mainly from France, Portugal, Italy, and Greece.
- For H₀ = There is no significant difference between the length of stay and the accommodation expenditure, the result was $\chi^2(16, n = 132) = 54.04, p < .001$. There was a correlation between longer stays and higher accommodation expenses. The students who stayed between 3 and 6 months were the most likely to spend between €301 and €500 per month on lodging.

On the contrary, no significant correlations were found between other aspects. Full details of the findings are summarised in Table 4.

As regards ANOVA test results, 5 null hypotheses (H₀) were rejected since the results were statistically significant ($p < .05$):

- For H₀ = There is no significant difference between the country of origin and the

Table 5: ANOVA test result

Associations	H ₀	Groups	Sum of squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig
Country of origin & interaction with locals	Rejected.	Between gr.	69.00	34	2.03	1.69	.024
	Related	Within gr.	116.33	97	1.20		
Country of origin & interaction with internationals	Rejected.	Between gr.	53.15	34	1.56	2.50	.000
	Related	Within gr.	60.73	97	.63		
Period of stay & satisfaction	Confirmed.	Between gr.	5.72	4	1.43	2.06	.090
	Not related	Within gr.	88.28	127	.70		
Type of accommodation & interaction with internationals	Confirmed.	Between gr.	.16	2	.08	.09	.911
	Not related	Within gr.	113.71	129	.88		
Length of stay & interaction with locals	Rejected.	Between gr.	18.60	4	4.65	3.54	.009
	Related	Within gr.	166.74	127	1.31		
Length of stay & interaction with internationals	Rejected.	Between gr.	8.98	4	2.25	2.72	.033
	Related	Within gr.	104.89	127	.83		
Affected by COVID-19 & satisfaction	Rejected.	Between gr.	7.77	2	3.88	5.81	.004
	Related	Within gr.	86.23	129	.67		
Length of stay & satisfaction	Confirmed.	Between gr.	6.25	4	1.56	2.26	.066
	Not related	Within gr.	87.75	127	.69		

interaction with locals, the result was $F(34, 97) = 1.69, p < .024$. Non-European students seemed to interact more frequently with local residents than European students.

- For $H_0 =$ There is no significant difference between the country of origin and the interaction with internationals, the result was $F(34, 97) = 2.50, p < .001$. Non-European students also interacted more often with other internationals than European students. Yet, European students' interactions with other international peers were more frequent than with locals.
- For $H_0 =$ There is no significant difference between the length of stay and the interaction with locals, the result was $F(4, 127) = 3.54, p < .009$. The students who stayed in Barcelona for longer than 6 months had more interaction with locals than those who stayed for a shorter period.
- For $H_0 =$ There is no significant difference between the length of stay and the interaction with internationals, the result was $F(4, 127) = 2.72, p < .033$. Longer stays also correlated with more frequent interactions with other internationals.
- For $H_0 =$ There is no significant difference between the students affected by COVID-19 and the satisfaction with their academic experience, the result was $F(2, 129) = 5.81, p < .004$. Those international students who stayed in Barcelona before the COVID-19 outbreak were more satisfied with their academic experience than the ones who were affected by the pandemic.

Table 5 shows all the results in full detail.

4.2 Analysis of interviews

The three most recurrent categories mentioned by interviewees were future expectations (I4 = 25%), socio-cultural impacts (I1.2 = 23.1%), and challenges (I3 = 21.2%). When

	Count	% Codes	Cases	% Cases
IMPACTS				
ECONOMIC IMPACTS	3	5,8%	1	50,0%
SOCIO CULTURAL IMPACTS	12	23,1%	1	50,0%
ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS	5	9,6%	1	50,0%
STUDENTS				
PROFILE OF STUDENTS	8	15,3%	1	50,0%
CHALLENGES OF INDUSTRY				
CHALLENGES	11	21,2%	1	50,0%
EXPECTATIONS				
EXPECTATIONS FOR THE FUTURE	13	25,0%	1	50,0%

Figure 4: QDA Miner analysis of interviews

it comes to the impacts generated by academic tourism in the region of Barcelona (I1), international students' most substantial expenditure on rent, tuition, and leisure activities is always a direct economic benefit for the destination (I1.1). With regard to socio-cultural impacts (I1.2), bearing in mind the difficulties that some students face when they have to overcome the language barrier or interact outside of their comfort zone, the pandemic has been an added obstacle for the students to get to know new people and integrate themselves into the local culture. Lastly, concerning environmental impacts (I1.3), all interviewees agreed that academic tourism is more sustainable than other types of tourism, as international students stay longer, use public transport, and have similar consumption patterns to locals, even though the carbon footprint of their trips to neighbouring regions cannot be overlooked.

In relation to academic tourists' profile (I2), due to the strict travel restrictions caused by the pandemic, most students nowadays come from Europe, especially from France. Before the COVID-19 outbreak, a large percentage of American and Chinese students used to choose Barcelona as their academic destination.

One of the main challenges (I3) posed by the coronavirus was indeed the drastic reduction of academic tourists due to restricted mobility, as well as the need to adapt providers' products and services to the new situation, for instance through digitalisation and virtual environments. Promoting Spain as a safe destination was considered a must.

As regards future expectations (I4), there was consensus on the recovery of academic stays in the short term, as international students are eager to travel. More inclusive programs and local trips are forecast.

Figure 4 shows metrics for each one of the above-mentioned categories including number of co-occurrences (Count) and relative frequencies (% Codes).

4.3 Analysis of students' focus group

In relation to the impacts generated by academic tourism on the area (FGS1), students mentioned that they used to shop more in local establishments rather than in shops owned by bigger companies to help local businesses, particularly during the pandemic (FGS1.1). They were aware that living costs would have been higher before the COVID-19 outbreak. Paradoxically, for them it was easier to meet local students online or onsite in this new context, as there were fewer international students, and social interactions were highly appreciated (FGS1.2). They travelled around the city by public transport or on foot (FGS1.3).

As for international students' profile (FGS2), the focus group participants agreed that the majority were around 21 years old and came from European countries, especially France and Germany, since most American students were not traveling abroad during the pandemic. Generally speaking, Erasmus students were considered open-minded, adventurous, and keen to meet new people.

Regarding challenges (FGS3), the fear of being infected by the COVID-19 virus made students' experiences less enjoyable (FGS3.1). Mobility challenges caused by restrictive measures like COVID-19 test requirements to cross borders were perceived as obstacles,

	Count	% Codes	Cases	% Cases
IMPACTS				
ECONOMIC IMPACTS	2	4,9%	1	100,0%
SOCIO-CULTURAL IMPACTS	8	19,5%	1	100,0%
ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS	1	2,4%	1	100,0%
PROFILE				
PROFILE OF STUDENTS	5	12,2%	1	100,0%
CHALLENGES				
HEALTH ISSUES	2	4,9%	1	100,0%
MOBILITY CHALLENGES	3	7,3%	1	100,0%
INTEGRATION	5	12,2%	1	100,0%
ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE				
POSITIVE OUTCOMES	6	14,6%	1	100,0%
NEGATIVE OUTCOMES	4	9,8%	1	100,0%
BARCELONA AS ACADEMIC TOURISM DESTINATION				
EXCHANGE STUDENT VISION	3	7,3%	1	100,0%
LOCAL STUDENT PERSPECTIVE	2	4,9%	1	100,0%

Figure 5: QDA Miner analysis of students' focus group

but not as impediments that made academic travel impossible (FGS3.2). International students felt integrated into the host community all the same (FGS3.3). Even though sometimes they had to meet local students virtually through social media instead of face-to-face, they did not find it hard to get along with locals and adapt to the local culture despite the language barriers.

With respect to the academic experience (FGS4), in spite of the pandemic situation, students regarded it as very positive and felt satisfied with it (FGS4.1). However, the limitations in terms of mobility and entertainment opportunities due to the COVID-19 pandemic were seen as negative aspects, particularly for those students who did not speak Spanish (FGS4.2).

Concerning Barcelona as an academic tourism destination (FGS5), both international (FGS5.1) and local students (FGS5.2) agreed that the local people, culture, climate, gastronomy, and tourist attractions were the principal pull factors. Learning Spanish was a push factor for some international students. Moreover, local students believed that academic tourists were also looking to have fun.

To sum up, the most recurrent topics were socio-cultural impacts (FGS1.2 = 19.5%), positive outcomes of the academic experience (FGS4.1 = 14.6%), students' profile (FGS2 = 12.2%), and integration challenges (FGS3.3 = 12.2%), as shown in Figure 5.

4.4 Analysis of industry stakeholders' focus group

Referring to impacts (FGI1), all participants agreed that the economic benefits of academic tourism for the destination are usually very noticeable (FGI1.1), not only for educational institutions but also for the hospitality industry and for local businesses, even in neighbouring geographical areas. Therefore, the drop in inbound travellers due to the pandemic has badly affected the local economy. Socio-culturally speaking (FGI1.2), Barcelona as a diverse, cosmopolitan city with a wide cultural offering facilitates foreign students' cultural development and is in turn enriched by international student flows, so the balance tends to be very positive. In the current situation, restrictive safety policies coupled with some students' reluctance to meet face to face have limited social interactions. Nevertheless, the participation of local students in buddy program activities has increased, since this is nowadays a home-based opportunity for internationalisation. The special emotional bonds that this program creates contributes to all students' linguistic and cultural progress. As for environmental impacts (FGI1.3), there was consensus on considering that academic tourists are more environmentally friendly than mass tourists, since they stay longer, tend to use public transport, and are more akin to local residents' patterns of behaviour. In student residence halls, for instance, cleaning procedures lead to minimising water consumption in comparison to hotels. In addition, students' carbon footprint has been reduced since they cannot travel as much as in pre-pandemic times.

	Count	% Codes	Cases	% Cases
IMPACTS				
ECONOMIC IMPACTS	10	19,6%	1	100,0%
SOCIO-CULTURAL IMPACTS	6	11,8%	1	100,0%
ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS	5	9,8%	1	100,0%
PROFILE				
PROFILE OF STUDENTS	11	21,5%	1	100,0%
CHALLENGES				
ACADEMIC CHALLENGES	6	11,8%	1	100,0%
ACCOMMODATION CHALLENGES	3	5,9%	1	100,0%
DATA				
ACADEMIC TOURISM DATA	5	9,8%	1	100,0%
EXPECTATIONS				
FUTURE EXPECTATIONS	5	9,8%	1	100,0%

Figure 6: QDA Miner analysis of industry stakeholders' focus group

Moving on to the profile of international students (FGI2), before the COVID-19 outbreak the majority were non-European, they used to travel in groups, and preferred to live together in apartments. However, nowadays intercontinental travellers are discouraged by mobility restrictions or by the prospect of being locked down and having to take online classes at the host university. Students are mostly European, predominantly from nearby countries, and safety is a concern for them.

In relation to challenges (FGI3), both higher education institutions and students have had to face a number of academic challenges (FGI3.1). Even though digitalisation has been key, adapting to virtual environments or new safety protocols was not easy. Visa procedures have also been a drawback for students which should be addressed by public administrations. On the other hand, accommodation challenges (FGI3.2), like having extended apartment rentals or more limited capacities in common areas and restrictive buffet procedures in residence halls, were not perceived as particularly problematic.

According to the academic tourism data provided by the focus group participants (FGI4), inbound study abroad volumes dropped up to 90% and slumped down completely in the case of summer programs owing to the pandemic.

Lastly, the participants' future expectations (FGI5) were all optimistic and highly positive, forecasting even higher student flows once the pandemic has been stabilised, first from outbound proximity markets and later across continents. Although digitalisation is here to stay, international students are expected to be more motivated than ever to travel.

In conclusion, the most recurrent topics were students' profile (FGI2 = 21.5%), economic impacts (FGI1.1 = 19.6%), socio-cultural impacts (FGI1.2 = 11.8%), and academic challenges (FGI3.1 = 11.8%), as illustrated in Figure 6.

5 Discussion

This research stemmed from a number of research questions that were fundamentally grounded on three main concerns with respect to academic tourism in Barcelona amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, namely tourist profiles, impacts, and outcomes. The triangulation of the results has made it possible to obtain some answers.

Contrary to pre-pandemic tourism flows, the vast majority of international students were European in their early twenties coming from nearby countries due to restricted international mobility. This confirms that proximity travel is indeed a global trend in this new context (Iglesias 2022). In line with the previous research findings listed in the Literature review, the main push factors were personal development (Cruz et al. 2021, Doyle et al. 2010, Lesjak et al. 2015, Li, Bray 2007, Nilsson 2015), professional growth (Doyle et al. 2010, Furukawa et al. 2013, Lam et al. 2011, Larbi, Fu 2017, Lesjak et al. 2015, Li, Bray 2007, Li, Qi 2019), and social life and enjoyment (Cruz et al. 2021, Lesjak et al. 2015, Llewellyn-Smith, McCabe 2008). The major pull factors were the climate (Cao et al. 2016, Llewellyn-Smith, McCabe 2008, Rodríguez González et al. 2011), local

culture and language (Abubakar et al. 2014, Larbi, Fu 2017, Rodríguez González et al. 2011), and tourist attractions (Cruz et al. 2021, Llewellyn-Smith, McCabe 2008). In comparison with intercontinental students, Europeans tend to interact less with locals than with other international peers. However, longer academic stays have been correlated with higher interaction, which in the pandemic context has been facilitated by virtual platforms. Interactive opportunities and behaviour need therefore to be strengthened to enhance academic tourists' integration in the host community and local culture.

Barcelona used to be a consolidated academic tourism destination. Yet, like other studies have reported worldwide (European Commission 2020a, Marinoni et al. 2020), data suggests that the COVID-19 outbreak and spread have had a dramatic effect in this region, as tourism flows have decreased considerably and pre-pandemic international students seemed to be more satisfied with their academic tourism experience. Health concerns and restrictive protocols associated with COVID-19 have been very challenging and have interfered with academic tourists' full enjoyment and integration. In addition, lack of proficiency in Spanish has been a barrier sometimes. Since the majority of the respondents did not take a language course during their academic stay, fostering the acquisition of the local language could contribute to counterbalancing this deficiency. On the other hand, safety is a key aspect that must be taken care of without undermining academic tourists' memorable experiences, so global vaccination and hygiene measures need to be reinforced and promoted.

Admittedly, the traditional outcomes of academic tourism as described by other authors (Cruz et al. 2021, Rodríguez, Martínez-Roget 2021) have been minimised because of the pandemic. Before the COVID-19 outbreak and spread, which entailed a substantial loss in revenues, the economic impact on the destination used to be significant owing to direct and indirect expenditure beyond the educational and hospitality industries. As already mentioned, the interference in the socio-cultural benefits deriving from intercultural contact has also been noticeable. Nevertheless, other compensating alternatives have become more popular, either in virtual environments or through buddy programs, leading to enhanced emotional bonds and cultural development in both visitors and hosts.. The increased participation of local students has thus provided them with more internationalisation opportunities. Concerning environmental impacts, the perception that academic tourism is more sustainable than other types has been corroborated. The results indicate that international students used less-polluting means of transport within the destination and had more similar consumption patterns to those of local students, particularly in longer stays. Furthermore, the pandemic has reduced the carbon footprint produced by less frequent leisure trips to neighbouring regions.

Although satisfaction degrees were higher before the pandemic, more than 75% of the respondents were satisfied with their experience and would recommend Barcelona as an academic tourism destination. Most of them acknowledged some kind of personal growth, as they had become more independent and responsible thanks to their academic sojourns. For some, their academic stays were also conducive to self-discovery and cross-cultural awareness, and had transformed them into more tolerant, open-minded individuals. Moreover, some international students seized the opportunity to learn more about the local language and culture, whereas other reported gains were related to academic and professional development. These findings build on existing evidence of transformational benefits of educational tourism experiences (Di Giovine, Bodinger de Uriarte 2021, Reisinger 2015) and the outcomes seem consistent with the above-mentioned pushfactors.

Table 6 summarizes the reported pre-pandemic and pandemic features of academic tourism in Barcelona. They are related to their corresponding effects, so the table also indicates which traditional outcomes have been undermined and which new aspects have emerged. Therefore, the implications can be regarded as lessons that can be learned, mostly concerning positive and negative economic, socio-cultural, and environmental impacts.

Table 6: Effects of COVID-19 pandemic on academic tourism in Barcelona

Pre-COVID features	COVID features	Implications	Type of impact
Significant socio-economic benefits for Barcelona as a consolidated academic tourism destination and surrounding areas.	Dramatic slump of academic tourism flows.	Loss in revenues experienced by the tourism industry, educational institutions, and local businesses.	Economic (-)
		Fewer tourists and local community members can enjoy the socio-cultural development associated with intercultural contact.	Socio-cultural (-)
Large percentage of inbound transcontinental students.	Mainly inbound European students.	Shorter stays and lower monthly accommodation expenditure.	Economic (-)
		Less diversity and more narrow socio-cultural perspectives.	Socio-cultural (-)
		Less frequent social interaction with local and other international students.	Socio-cultural (-)
		Reduced carbon footprint produced by long-haul transport.	Environmental (+)
		Rebound of proximity travel and rediscovery of European academic destinations.	Global (+)
Weekend breaks and excursions to other regions arranged for academic tourists.	Travel restrictions for complementary trips and limited mobility.	Reduced carbon footprint produced by short-haul transport.	Environmental (+)
		Students stay in their academic destinations, generating more local revenues and the opportunity to socialise and know the host culture better.	Economic (+) and socio-cultural (+)
Significant economic investment made by students during their academic stays.	Lower living costs. Purchase in neighbourhood shops prioritised.	Increased affordability for tourists.	Economic (+)
		Reduced profit margins for local businesses, particularly large stores.	Economic (-)
		Higher revenues for corner shops.	Economic (+)
		More opportunities for immersion in the local community & culture.	Socio-cultural (+)
Some challenges posed by international students' reluctance to leave their comfort zone or by language barriers.	Social distance and increased social media exchanges.	More obstacles for onsite integration in the local community and culture.	Socio-cultural (-)

continued on next page ...

Table 6: Effects of COVID-19 pandemic on academic tourism in Barcelona (continued)

Pre-COVID features	COVID features	Implications	Type of impact
		Enhanced opportunities for virtual socialisation and online integration approaches.	Socio-cultural (+)
Partial involvement of local students in facilitating academic tourists' integration.	Social interactions highly valued due to lockdowns. More participation of local students in buddy programmes.	Strengthening of emotional bonds conducive to integrative activities as well as to boosted linguistic and cultural development for local and international students.	Socio-cultural (+)
Solid operating procedures aiming to provide immersive academic tourism experiences.	Need to adapt service provision and health protocols. Introduction of virtual operations and online tuition.	More limited face-to-face contact. Extra financial and emotional efforts made by supply and demand to meet digitalisation needs and to implement safety measures. New paths have been opened for future dynamics.	Socio-cultural (-) Economic (-) and socio-cultural (-) Global (+)
Higher satisfaction with academic tourism experience.	Health concerns and fear of infection. More limited entertainment options.	Less enjoyable stays and lower degrees of satisfaction.	Socio-cultural (-)

6 Conclusion

This research aimed at analysing the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on academic tourism in the region of Barcelona, as this was an unexplored field to date. The initial specific objectives were met, even though the generalisability of the results is limited by this study's sample size. Finding publicly available updated data on inbound academic tourism in the region of Barcelona was one of the main obstacles, and several higher education institutions were reluctant to cooperate. Similarly, it was difficult to obtain a higher response rate not only from industry stakeholders but also from international students. Nevertheless, in view of the multiple positive impacts of academic travel reported in this and previous investigations, the implications point to the convenience of sustaining this tourism niche in forthcoming post-pandemic scenarios. Public administrations, hand in hand with educational institutions and the hospitality industry, should therefore implement supportive policies, for example in terms of financial aids, promotional campaigns, and the regulation of international mobility.

To counterbalance the negative impacts of the pandemic as regards socio-cultural and economic loss, some compensatory measures have been pointed out in this article. Proximity tourism with longer academic stays ought to be further promoted. They could consist of combined experiences to make them more integrative and significant, for example including internships or volunteering projects. Additionally, to encourage a rebound of international academic tourism an image of a safe destination must be projected thanks to high vaccination rates and sound health procedures. The public and private sectors should undertake alliances across regions, and local authorities must endeavour to involve local stakeholders in academic tourism activities, particularly the host community. Virtual platforms and social media should be considered as engagement opportunities that can complement face-to-face interaction, also reinforced by educational institutions through mentoring and buddy programmes.

This study has established the foundations for further lines of investigation that ought to analyse in more depth expenditure and patterns of behaviour in relation to the consumption of touristic services, i.e., transport, accommodation, catering, and leisure. Cross-cultural development and adjustment experienced by both local community members and sojourners should also be investigated in specific contexts, and viable integration practices should be an object of analysis. There is a need to reflect on how meaningful immersion and authentic encounters can be facilitated for the benefit of all those who engage in them.

As the pandemic evolves, further research will be needed to continue identifying changes in inbound academic tourism flows, profiles, and impacts. Moreover, domestic academic tourism data should be examined, as well as outbound academic tourism indicators. Since new travel choices will be made, it is fundamental to know the effect of COVID-19 on destinations and tourist experiences, to redesign tourism supply accordingly, to take into account the factors that intervene in this changing landscape, and to foster innovation.

Finally, scholarly attention may also focus on academic tourism across different geographical regions through longitudinal contrastive projects. Despite local idiosyncrasies, some of the aspects that have been pinpointed in this study - such as the key role of digitalisation and technological innovation or the need to provide safe travel options to students who are eager to engage in study abroad experiences - will probably be global dynamics and trends. Likewise, the features that characterise the academic tourism micro-niche and its outcomes involve excellent prospects to diversify the socio-economic activities of academic destinations worldwide. How they can contribute to their post-pandemic sustainable development is another area that must be certainly researched.

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