



IS COVID-19 TRANSITIONING CASH COWS INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS INTO CATS?

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Abstract:

The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted every aspect of human life. It has disrupted people's lifestyles around the world and international students are no exception. Every industry has been affected, including higher education (HE); for the first time ever in the HE sector, learning and teaching adopted online platforms to deliver the curriculum. At the same time, there has been growing interest in the business of international students across the globe. More than five million international students are currently studying in higher education institutions (HEIs) outside their home countries. It is often assumed that HEIs consider international students a source of revenue and, therefore, seek to recruit as many as possible. The United Kingdom is the second largest and most popular global destination for international students after the United States. The primary purpose of this study is to assess the impact of COVID-19 on international student enrolment around the world in general and in the UK in particular. Our findings show that international students are cash cows, and COVID-19 had a significant impact on the recruitment of international students.

Keywords: COVID-19, international students, cash cows and cats

1. Introduction

An internationally mobile student is an individual who has physically crossed an international border and is now in a foreign country for education purpose (UNESCO, 2015). The OECD (2019) defines international students as those who have left their native country for the sole purpose of studying. More specifically, international students in

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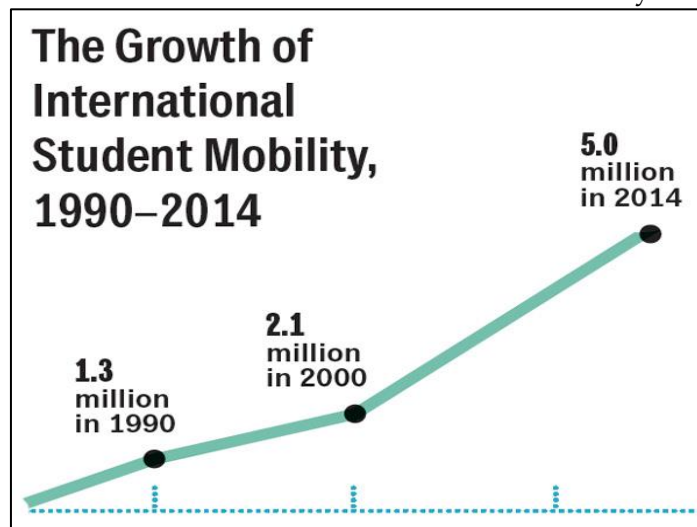
higher education are those who received their prior education in another country (usually in their country of origin) and are not residents of their current country of study.

Based on these definitions, an international student within the UK context is a person who is not a UK resident and comes from outside of the European Economic Area (EEA) to the UK for study purposes only. International students from outside the EEA require a Tier 4 visa (student visa), and the student must be sponsored by a Tier 4 licensed institution and meet the student visa requirements (MAC Report, September 2018). The UK officially left the European Union (EU) on 31st January 2020. Since Brexit, EU students require a student visa if they come to the UK to study for more than six months.

The number of international students has increased tremendously over the past four decades from 1.3 million in 1990 to 5.0 million in 2014 (see Figure 1).

According to ICEF Monitor (2015), nearly five million students were studying outside their countries of origin in 2014. This number had more than doubled since 2000 when 2.1 million people were classed as international students. In 2013, almost 4.5 million international students were studying at a higher education level outside of their country of citizenship (UNESCO, 2016).

Figure 1: The Growth of International Student Mobility 1999-2014

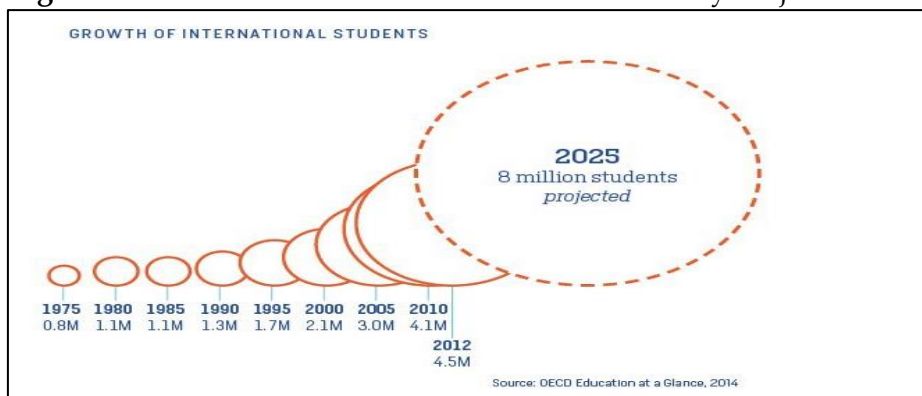


Source: ICEF Monitor (2015)

The OECD (2014) forecasts that the number of international students will rise to eight million by 2025 and Altbach and Bassett (2004) predict a similar trend. This indicates a very inspiring projected growth rate of sixty per cent in the overall global mobility of students over the subsequent decade.

The number of international students increased quite consistently in the 1980s. The number was just over one million, and by 2000 that number had increased to more than two million. The figure doubled between 2000 and 2017 to reach 5.3 million (UNESCO 2018) and rose again to 5.6 million in 2018 (OECD, 2020).

Figure 2: The Growth of International Student Mobility Projection 2025



Source: OECD Education at a Glance (2014), figure retrieved from Institute of International Education, Project Atlas, (2015)

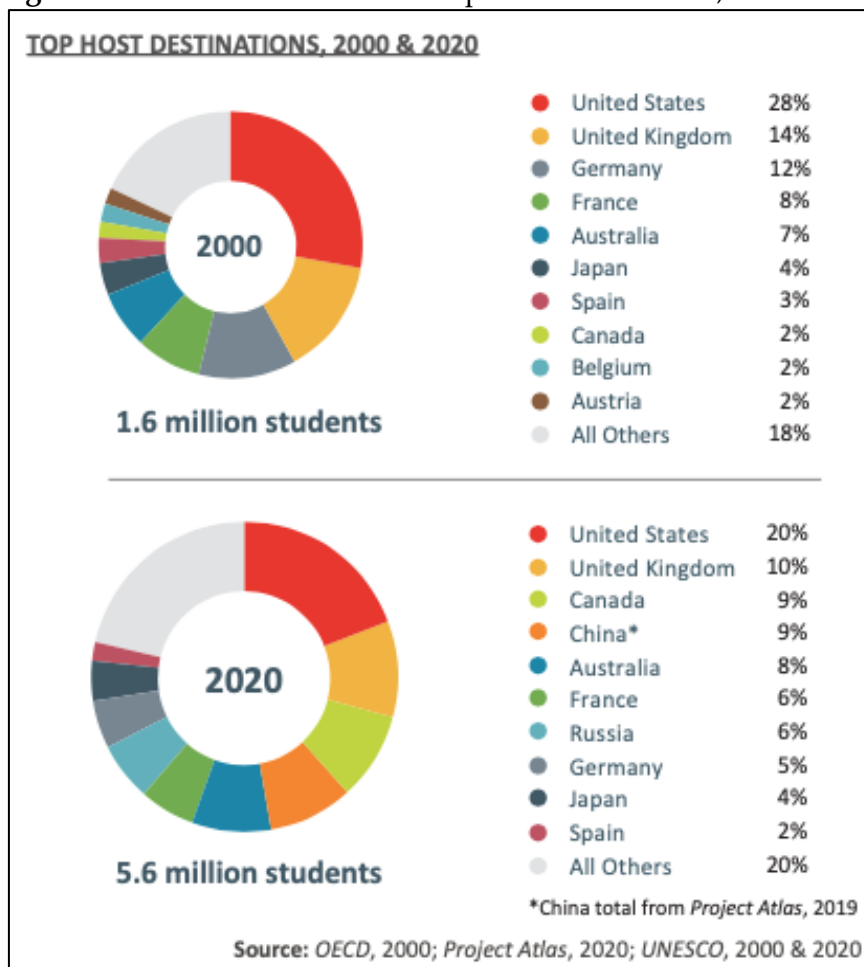
2. Global Competition

The percentage of international students in higher education has grown dramatically over the past century (OECD, 2017) and, between 1998 and 2018, increased on average by 4.8% and reached 5.6 million by 2018 (OECD, 2020). Global competition in international education markets is becoming intense. International students are attracted and recruited for economic reasons, although this is by no means the universal motivation (Lee, Maldonado-Maldonado, & Rhoades, 2006). Other reasons may include a skilled labour force, talent and cross-culture diversity (Bhandari, Robles and Farrugia, 2018).

As more countries recognise that international students represent an important source of revenue and human capital, and as more significant numbers of people worldwide can afford to study abroad, the sector has become increasingly competitive. The increasing global flows of international students are concentrated towards a handful of countries. Recently, however, a few more countries have also recognised the importance of international students as a key source of revenue and human capital. Consequently, new destinations have emerged, such as China, Russia and Malaysia, in addition to traditional destinations, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, France, Germany and New Zealand, making competition even fiercer.

In 2020, the US was the most crucial destination, receiving more than one million international students, 20% of the whole population. For many decades, the US has been the top choice for international students primarily because it is home to a large number of universities and colleges (5500) and US institutions dominate the world's highest ranked universities and colleges. Stanford University, Harvard University, California Institute of Technology, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, University of California, Berkeley, Yale University, Princeton University, and the University of Chicago all feature in the top ten global rankings (The Times Higher Education World University Rankings, 2021). These prestigious institutions attract international students from across the globe with an appetite for a first-class education and a bright future through academic excellence.

Figure 3: Global Market Share of Top Host destinations, 2000 to 2020



English is the lingua franca of the globalised world, with one in four people using it worldwide (Sharifian, 2013). Unsurprisingly, then, English-speaking countries are the most attractive student destinations overall, with four countries (the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia) receive 47% of all internationally mobile students in 2020. In 2000, these four countries alone received 51% of the entire population of international students. The United States lost its share by 8%, from 28% in 2000 to 20% in 2020. Similarly, the United Kingdom lost 4% of its share from 14% in 2000 to 10% in 2020.

The growth in international students is not just a US-centric phenomenon. Universities and colleges in the UK, Australia, Canada, Germany, France, and China also experienced a rapid increase in international enrolments.

The UK is the second-largest market after the US and the preferred choice for higher education by international students (OECD 2017). The UK has a world-class education system and globally-reputed universities with a strong presence in international markets. The universities of Cambridge and Oxford have always retained their positions in the top ten rankings; for example, in 2021, the University of Oxford topped the World University Rankings and the University of Cambridge was ranked sixth in the same year (The Times Higher Education World University Rankings, 2021).

In percentage terms, the US received 20%, the UK 10% and Canada 9% of the entire international student population in 2020. The top three countries, therefore, accounted for 39% of the whole population. By adding the fourth and fifth countries, China (9%) and Australia (8%), more than half of the international student population is represented (56%). France, which is roughly tied with Russia, another emerging destination in terms of market share of international students (around 6% as of 2020), has a new international recruitment programme designed to dramatically expand international students enrolments at its HEIs: 470,000 students by 2025. Adding an additional five countries (France, Russia, Germany, Japan, and Spain) gives a share of 80%. Therefore, the top ten countries account for 80% and the rest of the world 20%. Among the six most notable destinations, European countries represent 39% of all international students, North America 29%, Asia 13%, Australia 8% and the rest of the world, including Africa, 11%.

Elsewhere, the global education market is developing and changing rapidly. We can see in the table below the emergence of new markets, such as China and Russia, which did not feature among the top ten destinations for international students in 2000.

Table 1: The top ten destinations for international students, 2019 and 2020

Country of study	Number of International Students 2019	Number of International Students 2020	% Change
1. United States	1,095,299	1,075,496	- 1.8%
2. United Kingdom	542,250	551,495	+ 5.2%
3. Canada	435,415	503,270	+15.6%
4. China	492,352		
5. Australia	420,501	463,643	+ 10.3%
6. France	343,400	358,000	+4.3%
7. Russia	334,497	353,331	+ 5.6%
8. Germany	280,002	302,157	+ 7.1%
9. Japan	208,901	228,403	+9.3%
10. Spain	120,991	125,675	+3.9%

Source: Project Atlas, 2019 & 2020

Several governments from different countries have devised strategies to recruit international students and boost their HE balance sheets (Douglass & Edelstein, 2009; Slaughter & Cantwell, 2012). For example, Australia, Canada, Germany, France and the UK have already formulated strategies for internationalising their higher education sectors by sending strong, positive messages to the world that international students are welcome and needed. Australia launched a strategy in 2015 to increase the number of international student numbers to 720,000 by 2025 as well as improve the quality of education, enhance the student experience, improve complex visa application procedures, and develop and strengthen international partnerships. Canada's international education strategy was formulated in 2013 and clearly recognised the importance of international students by setting a target to attract 450,000 international students and researchers by 2022. Canada also formulated another international education strategy (2019-2024) entitled 'Building on Success' (Government of Canada,

2019) and the Canadian government has plans to welcome 1,233,000 international students (The Pie News, 2020).

Germany and France have similar strategies and targets, as shown in the table below.

Table 2: National Strategy for international students

Country	National Strategy	Recruitment Targets
Australia	National Strategy for international education 2025	Aims to forecast to grow from 650,000 enrolments to 940,000 by 2025
Canada	International education strategy	Aims to attract 450,000 international students and researchers by 2022
Germany	International cooperation action plan and strategy of the federal government for the internationalisation of education, science and research.	Aims to increase the proportion of international students and researchers at campuses to 15% by 2025. The country already achieved a target of 350,000 internationally mobile students before 2020.
France	Aim to increase the number of international students	Aims to increase the numbers of international students by 20% by 2025.
UK	The United Kingdom has a new International Education Strategy to attract international students and allowing them to work after graduating.	The UK government aims to attract 600,000 international students by 2030.

Source: Adopted and modified from: MAC report, (September 2018) and Daad Strategie 2025

In March 2019, the UK Education Secretary and the International Trade Secretary announced a new ambitious strategy to strengthen Britain's leading role in the global higher education market. The strategy aims to increase the number of international students studying in the country by more than 30 per cent – helping to boost income from educational exports to £35 billion by 2030 (UK Government, 2019).

The United Kingdom currently provides a world-class education with a positive global reputation and has a strong presence in the international market (HM Government, 2019). The number of international students in the UK reached 430,833 in 2017 (OECD 2017) and 458,520 in 2018, and it is also worth noting that there is no cap on the number of international students permitted to study within the country (MAC report, Sep 2018).

3. International Students as Cash Cows

The budget cuts faced by many American and British higher education institutions have compelled its policymakers to seek alternative sources of revenue to ensure the financial sustainability of their institutions. In search of solutions, many saw an opportunity to increase tuition fees, especially for international students, and recruit more as a new source of cash flow to fund operations and plug budget deficits (Choudaha, 2017). Thus, international student recruitment has become a vital revenue source for host HEIs and the growing export industry for host countries.

A decade ago, there were no tuition fees for home students in UK Higher Education. The UK government designed and increased the tuition fees in order to share the cost of providing Higher Education between the state and the students (and their families) who consume Education (Johnstone & Marcucci, 2010).

However, some tuition fee schemes have extended beyond cost-sharing for international students. The Anglo-Saxon countries have become increasingly entrepreneurial and seek revenue through market-like competition (Bok, 2003; Marginson & Considine, 2000; Mophew & Eckel, 2009; Slaughter & Cantwell, 2012). They charge up to four times the tuition fees for home students; for example, some undergraduate international students pay £35,000 a year compared to a maximum of £9,000 paid by the UK students (BBC, 2013). Attracting higher fee-paying international students is one prominent way in which HEIs compete for additional income (Brown, 2010; McBurnie & Ziguas, 2003; Marginson, 2007; Slaughter & Cantwell, 2012). International students pay full tuition fees and bear the associated costs of study. The UK's national policy of high-cost tuition fees for international students generates immediate income necessary for the financial health of HEIs and provides economic benefits for the country and the economy (Lomer, Papatsiba and Naidoo, 2018). The contribution from international students to the economy has been well documented (Hamzah and Abdullah, 2017). For example, the University of Luton (now University of Bedfordshire) earned 17.7 per cent of its total income from fees paid by international students, whilst the universities of Hertfordshire, Middlesex and Westminster all earned more than 20% of their total income from international students in the academic year 2003-04 (MacLeod, 2006).

International students provide invaluable economic, societal and cultural benefits (Foster, 2014) and can be a driver of campus internationalisation (Forbes-Mewett, 2016). According to ICEF Monitor (2019), international students generate an economic impact of US\$300 billion globally and the largest share is that of the US - US\$57.3 billion, followed by the UK, which had a share of US\$25.5 billion in 2016. According to Universities UK (2017), international students and their visitors generated £25.8 billion for the UK economy in the 2014-15 academic year. In 2019, international students contributed nearly \$44 billion to the US economy (Bureau of Economic Analysis 2020).

The Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC, 2021) report that international students contribute more than \$21.6 billion annually to the Canadian economy and support the vitality of communities. The enormous contributions international students make to the Canadian economy have resulted in the Canadian government developing policies to attract more international students.

In Australia, the estimated revenue from international student tuition fees exceeds one-quarter of the total expenditure on tertiary educational institutions (OECD, 2017).

Attracting prospective international students remains important for economic reasons as well as for the diversity of experience (Soo and Elliott, 2010). International students are also beneficial to higher education institutions as they pay higher tuition fees than home students, creating an important source of revenue in the face of budget cutbacks (Riaño, Mol & Raghuram 2018). For instance, in the 2014-15 academic year, it

was estimated that fourteen per cent of the total university revenue in the UK was generated by tuition fees paid by international students (Universities UK 2017).

For many UK universities, international students can finance their operations (Ziguras, 2011). Without revenue from international student tuition fees, many UK universities would experience a shortfall in financing and would struggle to grow and invest in the future. In this context, some experts argue that, without tuition fee income derived from international students, some UK universities might not survive (Wilkins & Huisman, 2011).

Many international students at the undergraduate level for three years in the UK and four years in the US have been attractive sources of revenue for HEIs. In addition, some countries with no tuition fee for home students also charge international students tuition fees, such as Sweden. Another example is Finland, which has a robust egalitarian tradition and expectations about the social provision of higher education, where HEIs can charge fees to non-European Union (EU) students in some programmes (Kauppinen & Kaidesoja, 2014).

In countries where home students share some of the costs but also enjoy a state subsidy, international students have often been charged fee premiums (Johnstone & Marcucci, 2010), such as the UK and Australia.

While cost-sharing has unquestionably been a consideration, the implementation of international tuition fees has also been part of a general policy shift in many Anglo-Saxon countries towards a more market-based and entrepreneurial higher education system (Slaughter & Cantwell, 2012).

As we previously mentioned, a number of countries, including Australia, Canada, France (Marshall, 2013), and the United Kingdom (Buchanan, 2013), have recently announced plans to attract more international students, especially at the undergraduate level. This categorically indicates that these countries consider international students to be cash cows, even in national strategies, and prioritise increasing international student enrolment. As discussed, some countries have been successfully achieved set targets ahead of time, such as Germany.

As cost-sharing schemes have extended to profit motives, HEIs have made more efforts to attract international students. Some countries have reformulated their strategies; for example, China (McCafferty, 2013) and Russia are rapidly attracting international students.

It is well known that exporting education services has become an important economic activity in some countries, including Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States. Fee-paying international students generate a considerable revenue stream for higher education institutions; they also consume other goods and services and thus contribute to the host country's economy.

However, many HEIs have realised that increasing international student enrolment is no easy task. Especially in the knowledge economy and era of globalisation, students are well informed and have a much wider choices; therefore, they prefer to study at a reputed institution or in their ideal location. In order to attract more international students, HEIs are establishing their campuses in large cities; for example, London is the

best capital city for international students in the world. The city attracts a large number of international students, and every year more than 100,000 international students come to study in London (Study London, 2019). International students prefer to study in the UK capital, and British universities also like to offer courses at their campuses in London. According to Study London (2019), there are nearly fifty universities in London with more than 10,000 courses on offer. This list also includes five of the twenty-four prestigious Russell Group universities. For example, Coventry University has had a London Campus since 2010 and the University of Sunderland established a London Campus in the late 2000s. Other universities with a presence in London include Cumbria, Glasgow Caledonia, Ulster and Liverpool. This trend started in the 2000s and has clear benefits in attracting potential international students. Obviously, International students are potentially more attracted to London. According to the Trade Union Congress (TUC 2017), the UK economy is disproportionately concentrated in London and the South-East. This prosperous region is projected to account for forty per cent of national output by the end of 2022. London's rapid growth has been particularly evident in the last two decades, during which period the city climbed from 18.7 per cent of GDP to 22.7 per cent of GDP, and this figure is expected to reach 24.8 per cent by the end of 2022.

It is a common presumption that international students prefer to study in big cities. Both home and international students are keen to study in London because of the availability of job opportunities and proximity to potential employers. It is a global business and financial hub, a centre for entertainment and nightlife; and home to a wealth of academic resources; for example, one of the largest libraries in the world is the British Library.

4. Impact of COVID-19 on International Students and HEIs

The global spread of the coronavirus pandemic has created significant challenges for industries around the world, including higher education (Qureshi et al., 2020). Many countries went into lockdown, borders were closed and face-to-face classes at Higher Education Institutions were cancelled. The crisis has not only affected home students, but international students as well.

In 2020, higher education institutions worldwide closed down to control the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, possibly affecting more than 3.9 million international students (UNESCO, 2020). International students were particularly badly hit at the start of the lockdown. They have had to deal with the implications of university closures and switch to online classes in their host country. Students have had to decide whether to return home with limited information about their return to the host country or continue online classes and remain in their host country with restricted employment or without employment and unable to resolve their student visa status. Obviously, due to their immigration status, international students have been more vulnerable during the pandemic. Some countries have offered leniency on student visas, such as the United Kingdom, which implemented temporary policy concessions for international students, introducing a number of measures, such as assuring no adverse immigration

consequences on overstays between 24 January 2020 and 31 August 2020 (UKCISA, 2020). Canada has offered similar leniency to international students (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2020). A fall in the number of international students during the academic years 2019/20 and 2020/21 may have severe consequences on the revenue of some HEIs, as international students often pay higher tuition fees than domestic ones. The Anglo-Saxon countries, such as Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States that rely heavily on international students with differentiated fees, will suffer huge losses. International students' investment in higher education abroad will still pay off over the course of their lifetime. However, students may begin to challenge the value of paying high fees to study online during the pandemic when they can no longer benefit from networking and access to foreign labour markets. International students are already demanding compensation from their universities as the pandemic has seriously affected their university experience. Tuition fees for undergraduate programmes in the UK are capped at £9,250 for home students for the 2021-22 academic year, but international students often pay double or more than this figure (Study International 2021). Several hundred international students at three major London universities refused to pay their tuition fees because they argued that learning primarily from their bedrooms did not justify prices of up to £29,000 a year. Hundreds of students at the Royal College of Art launched a tuition fee strike in January 2021, potentially withholding around £3.4m in tuition fee payments to force the University to issue refunds for the past academic year despite fearing their visas may be revoked (The Guardian March 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it more challenging for international students to complete the regulatory procedures essential to enroll in a Higher Education Institution (HEI) abroad and travel to that country to study. International students help colleges and universities, providing millions of pounds annually by paying premium tuition fees.

A recent study conducted by a London Economics consultant for the University and College Union (UCU) revealed a massive reduction in the number of international students in the UK. An estimated 47% drop in international student numbers will cost the HE sector £1.5 billion. This coupled with a fall in domestic intake, could jeopardise 60,000 jobs across the UK.

As the impact of the pandemic has been felt across the globe, similar situations have emerged in other countries. For example, Ireland's seven universities are currently facing a significant financial crisis, such as the collapse of international student tuition fee income, rental of on-campus accommodation, and associated sources of revenues, which will cost the universities €374 million in the academic year 2020-21 (Consultancy.UK, 2020). The Irish Universities Association predicts that the decline in fee income from international students alone will be €181 million in the academic year 2020-21 (The Times, November, 2020).

In a nutshell, cash flow challenges are a reality for many HEIs, especially those heavily dependent on international students as a genuine source of revenue at a time when public funding is insufficient to cover costs. It is unethical to consider international students as cash cows (Choudaha, 2017); rather, they should be considered pedagogic

partners (Lomer, Mittelmeier, Carmichael- Murphy, 2021) or customers (Guilbalt, 2018, Safdar et al., 2020) and HEIs must endeavor to go the extra mile not just to meet their expectations, but exceed them.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

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