SA Journal of Human Resource Management
ISSN: (Online) 2071-078X, (Print) 1683-7584

Enhancing emotional intelligence for well-being in higher education: Supporting SDG 3 amid adversity

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Dates:
Received: 12 June 2024
Accepted: 19 Sept. 2024
Published: 07 Nov. 2024

How to cite this article:
Maharaj, P., & Ramsaroop, A. (2024). Enhancing emotional intelligence for well-being in higher education: Supporting SDG 3 amid adversity. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management/SA Tydskrif vir Menslikehulpbronbestuur*, *22*(0), a2705. https://doi.org/10.4102/sajhrm.v22i0.2705

Orientation: The coronavirus disease 2019 necessitated tertiary institutions to reevaluate their educational paradigms, emphasising resilience and fostering creative mindsets to navigate unprecedented challenges. This disruption evoked distressing emotions, posing threats to academics' emotional well-being. Such challenges carry profound implications for the attainment of sustainable development goal 3 (SDG 3), aimed at ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all.

Research purpose: This study aimed to comprehend and harness the emotional intelligence of academics, with a view to understanding how adversity affects emotional intelligence and emotional well-being in academics.

Motivation for the study: The focus on enhancing the emotional well-being of academics directly contributes to the overall health and well-being goals outlined in SDG 3.

Research approach/design and method: A quantitative approach with a sample size of 360 academics was drawn from five campus sites from the University of KwaZulu-Natal using stratified random sampling.

Main findings: Respondents reported elevated levels of stress and anxiety and a lack of visibility regarding employee assistance programmes (EAPs). Respondents indicated a notable dissatisfaction with the lack of support from the human resource department.

Practical/managerial implications: Recommendations proposed in the higher education landscape for advancing SDG 3 consisted of EAP insights and awareness, needs analysis on well-being support and policy formulation.

Contribution/value-add: By focussing on emotional intelligence, the study aligned with SDG 3 and presented practical strategies embedded in a model designed to enhance the emotional well-being of academics.

Keywords: academics; adversity; COVID-19; emotional intelligence; emotional well-being; higher education; human resource management; SDGs.

Introduction

The global commitment to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which includes the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) ratified by the United Nations (UN), underscores the imperative to address social, economic and environmental challenges (Estrada et al., 2021). The advent of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic represents a novel, evolving and uncertain situation for all individuals (Collie & Martin, 2020). In addition to exacerbating pre-existing challenges, the pandemic has introduced new hurdles such as burnout, navigating work-life balance, heightened risk of ill-health, diminished morale, increased workloads, reshaping of work structures and adapting to the impacts of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and beyond. Research confirms that when coping mechanisms falter, individuals may experience heightened levels of stress, anxiety and various distressing emotions, significantly impacting their emotional well-being (MacIntyre et al., 2020). Emotional well-being, as defined by Gross and John (2019), encompasses the overall state of one's emotional well-being and resilience, including the ability to effectively manage and navigate a spectrum of emotions.

The study is underpinned by SDG 3, which aims to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages (Shulla et al., 2021). Aligned with SDG 3 objective, the research problem identified is a lack of effective strategies to harness emotional intelligence and emotional well-being in achieving SDG 3. In response, the study aims to evaluate how emotional intelligence contributes

to emotional well-being among academics, directly relating to SDG 3. Assessing the role of emotional intelligence during adversity will allow the study to understand the role of emotional intelligence on emotional well-being during adversity, thereby contributing to the SDG 3 objective.

Emotional intelligence emerges as a pivotal determinant in fostering emotional well-being and devising effective coping strategies to advance SDG 3. Individuals with high emotional intelligence possess the capability to 'monitor one's own feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one's thinking and action' (Mayer & Salovey, 1990 as cited in Drigas & Papoutsi, 2018, p. 14). Such individuals are better equipped to navigate adversity with a positive outlook. The COVID-19 pandemic serves as a test of society's vulnerability in relation to academics' emotional well-being and emotional intelligence. Coping mechanisms such as seeking support from loved ones, prioritising self-care and focussing on controllable aspects of the situation become imperative strategies (Maharaj & Ramsaroop, 2024). Conducting studies to assess emotional intelligence in academics amid adversity, like the pandemic, holds significant relevance for higher education institutions. Such endeavours aim to enhance emotional intelligence in academics, thereby addressing emotional well-being and contributing to the attainment of SDG 3.

Background of the study

Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak and subsequent campus closures, South Africa's higher education sector was already facing significant challenges, with reports characterising it as being in a state of crisis (Czerniewicz, 2020). In response to lockdown measures, South African tertiary institutions were compelled to rapidly reassess their teaching and learning approaches to adhere to social distancing guidelines. This led to the implementation of remote and online teaching methods in an urgent effort to complete various curricula and salvage the academic year (Adotey, 2020; Dipa, 2020).

University academics facilitate a crucial role in delivering quality education for sustainable development in Africa (Igbafe, 2020). The reliance on academics' creativity, empathy and judgement is particularly pronounced, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Academics find themselves grappling with personal stress, adapting to constant change and uncertainty and endeavouring to maintain equitable quality teaching while also supporting anxious students (Freshwater, 2020). Consequently, the challenges posed by COVID-19 not only exert significant strain on academics' professional lives but also affect their personal lives. Qiu et al. (2020) underscore the profound impact of COVID-19, which induced fear, insecurity, uncertainty and the loss of relationships and lifestyle changes on emotional well-being, further emphasising the need for targeted support mechanisms within higher education institutions.

According to Niekerk and Gent (2021), the emotional well-being of university employees is often overlooked and is exacerbated by the challenges brought about by the pandemic. Additionally, factors such as excessive workloads, job insecurity for those on employment contracts, rapid adaptation to virtual platforms, changes in teaching styles because of virtual platforms, blurred boundaries between work and home life, acceptance of the new work reality, social disconnection from students and increased administrative responsibilities have continued to burden academics (Kriel et al., 2020; Phakeng, 2020). Research indicates that reactions to COVID-19 have elicited a spectrum of distressing emotions, including fear, anxiety and sadness, all of which are associated with a heightened risk of ill-health and have a negative influence on emotional well-being (Niekerk & Gent, 2021; Qiu et al., 2020). Consequently, the core components of emotional intelligence become particularly crucial for individuals to navigate challenging situations, thereby underscoring the significance of emotional intelligence, especially during crises such as the COVID-19 outbreak (Drigas & Papoutsi, 2020).

Literature review

Sustainable development goals

The ramifications caused by COVID-19 are impacting commitment and undermining the overall strategy towards suitability by reducing progress towards reaching the 17 SDGs and modifying the development trajectory (Shulla et al., 2021). Walker and Salt (2012) contend that after the SDGs are accomplished, people and societies will be more resilient to crises when they occur. Heggen et al. (2020) echo that the worldwide recession triggered by the COVID-19 response is concerning, prompting researchers to debate whether the SDGs are appropriate for the post-pandemic era. As a result, there is a need for emotional intelligence awareness; hence, emotional intelligence must be incorporated into the SDG recovery plan for fostering emotional well-being to advance SDG 3.

The United Nations (2019) asserts that emotional intelligence will be instrumental in achieving the SDGs by 2030. Emotional intelligence will aid countries in preventing conflict and facilitating post-conflict healing, fostering closer community collaboration, enhancing interpersonal relationships, promoting environmental care and encouraging better global citizenship (United Nations, 2019). The reshaping of the SDGs by COVID-19 indicates that transforming a crisis into an opportunity to learn about emotional intelligence is vital for implementing the SDGs and promoting emotional well-being post-COVID-19 (Estrada et al., 2021). Research indicates that high emotional intelligence helps in the adaptive regulation of distressing emotions, which in turn supports the effective management of daily stressors and challenges (Drigas & Papoutsi, 2020). Additionally, the UN Academic Impact conference highlighted the importance of harnessing emotional intelligence to meet the SDGs, demonstrating how these skills can be used to achieve SDG goals, recover from trauma and incorporate the SDGs into daily life to enhance overall well-being (Banerjee, 2019).

Emotional intelligence

Research demonstrates a strong, positive correlation between emotional intelligence and various aspects of emotional well-being. These include reduced psychological symptoms, better physical health, lower levels of emotional distress, higher life satisfaction, increased self-esteem, stronger social support and enhanced creative thinking (Maharaj & Ramsaroop, 2022; Peláez-Fernández et al., 2021). Mayer and Salovey (1990), Daniel Goleman (1998) and Reuven Bar-On (2012) have all made notable contributions to the understanding of emotional intelligence.

Mayer and Salovey (1990) define emotional intelligence as the capacity to observe and understand one's own and other's emotions, to recognise and harness emotions to facilitate thinking, to comprehend emotions and to regulate emotions thoughtfully by fostering both emotional and intellectual developments. Goleman (1998) views emotional intelligence as the ability to recognise one's own emotions and those of others, to self-motivate and to manage emotions effectively to benefit personal well-being and relationships. In contrast, Bar-On (2012) conceptualises emotional intelligence as a set of non-cognitive skills, competencies and abilities that impact an individual's ability to successfully navigate environmental demands and pressures.

The appraisal, regulation and utilisation of emotions are fundamental components of emotional intelligence and play crucial roles in personal and social functioning (Mayer & Salovey, 1990). Appraisal involves the ability to accurately perceive and understand one's own emotions and those of others, as well as to recognise how emotions shape thoughts and behaviour (Mayer & Salovey, 1990). Effective regulation of emotions entails the ability to manage and control one's emotional responses, including coping with stress, regulating mood and adapting to various situations (Mayer & Salovey, 1990). Additionally, the utilisation of emotions involves harnessing emotional information to facilitate problem-solving, decision-making and interpersonal interactions (Mayer & Salovey, 1990). These three aspects of emotional intelligence are interrelated and essential for adaptive functioning in diverse contexts, from relationships to the workplace. Understanding and developing skills in appraisal, regulation and utilisation of emotions contribute to enhanced emotional well-being and success in various domains of life (Maharaj & Ramsaroop, 2022).

The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report (2020) places emotional intelligence among the top 15 skills expected to be in high demand from 2025 onwards. The study notes that the numerous challenges brought on by COVID-19 triggered distressing emotions like fear and anxiety, which negatively impacted academics' overall well-being. These challenges are attributed to a lack of resources to adapt to new circumstances, indicating generally low levels of emotional intelligence among academics (MacIntyre et al., 2020; Smit & Serfontein, 2020). In response to these challenges, academics are still in the process of developing their emotional intelligence, which is fortunately a teachable skill that can help academics manage stress and adversity more effectively. Academics with lower emotional intelligence may struggle to recognise and understand their emotions, making it difficult to identify their emotional state, which in turn impairs academics' ability to manage perceived stress (Sadovyy et al., 2021).

Emotional well-being

The ability to develop pleasant emotions, moods, thoughts and feelings, as well as adapt when faced with adversity and difficult conditions, is referred to as emotional well-being (Choi, 2020). Alqahtani et al. (2022) observed an increased rate of stress and anxiety as it was emphasised that the effect of COVID-19 harmed people's emotional well-being. The research argues that the emotional well-being of university staff members is often neglected and exacerbated by COVID-19. Niekerk and Gent (2021) echo these sentiments. Elevated anxiety was caused by emotions of susceptibility to the infection, interruptions in routines, uncertainty about job and income, and concerns about the safety and well-being of loved ones (Chew et al., 2020). Stress was increased by prolonged quarantine, fear of infection, frustration, boredom, inadequate information and supplies, financial loss and stigma (Visser & Van Wyk, 2021). Research indicates that COVID-19 elicited stress in academics because of deadlines, disruptions and higher workload, with concerns related to work, family and self (Idris et al., 2021).

Evidence of the influence on the emotional well-being of academics appeared to show a change from work-related stress to anxiety as the primary concern among staff members (Niekerk & Gent, 2021). This is because academics' competence and skills to deliver teaching in the contemporary setting (online) are a major contribution to their elevated anxiety levels (Alliance for African Partnership, 2020). Other challenges were a lack of visible feedback or interaction with students, Zoom fatigue and how to deal with blurred boundaries between their professional and domestic lives while teaching from home with personal health issues, as well as those with children or elderly care responsibilities (Gruber et al., 2021). In a positive light, studies demonstrate that academics reported decreased levels of anxiety, stress and loneliness because of their strong relationship with their family and enhanced spirituality, which aided in positive emotional well-being to cope with adversity (González et al., 2020; Idris et al., 2021). There has been growing concern about the adverse influence that the environment of higher education institutions has on the emotional well-being of academics, who have shown high levels of stress, burnout and low levels of well-being (Garcia, 2020).

Human resource management support for academics

Human resource management (HRM) is the strategic approach to managing an organisation's workforce, focussing

on optimising employee performance and well-being to achieve organisational objectives (Mathis & Jackson, 2019). The COVID-19 prompted human resources (HR) to rethink their roles in adapting their practices to the new normal (Lews, 2020). The key strategic directions for HR during the pandemic crisis were redesigning organisational policies, providing safety training and addressing workplace stress (Gigauri, 2020). Another important HR challenge would be 'What does the future of work look like?'. The necessity for the 4IR has been expedited by COVID-19, and this will transform how everyone works and interacts with one another in conjunction with technology, thus requiring everyone to reconnect with their emotional intelligence. Consequently, the need for remote working would raise the demand for automation and collaboration technologies, as well as accelerate the migration to cloud computing (Raj, 2020).

It is essential for HR to ensure that academics are satisfied with their jobs and that their home is a substitute for the workplace. In the context of COVID-19 and higher education, HR is responsible for motivating, inspiring, training and developing employees, as well as standardising the use of technology to enable efficient work and managing work relationships in response to changing circumstances (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020). The most cited HR challenges during COVID-19 were employee well-being, employee engagement, remote work and communication (Irshad et al., 2021; Zhong et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 findings in the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) context reveal that work-life integration is a significant challenge for academics because of inadequate organisational support (Pillay et al., 2021). Other UKZN academic challenges included a rise in emotional distress with neglect of internal wellness programmes tailor-made to academics' needs, no internal psychological support provided during the overnight switch to emergency remote teaching and no dissemination of a survey for staff in relation to their requirements. Many demands were made on staff with no acknowledgement of the variety of obstacles that staff encountered while working from home with the utilisation of their resources for completing the semester (Pillay et al., 2021).

The pandemic highlights the important role HR must perform to provide support to academics as a critical stakeholder in higher education. The study argues that the quality of HR practices was showcased during the pandemic revealing weaknesses. This is supported by Nutsubidze and Schmidt (2021) who argue that HR managers had to rethink their role as they adjusted to the new work environment. Evolved HR practices presently intend to produce responsibility, flexibility, creativity, autonomy and participation in production (Kutieshat & Farmanesh, 2022).

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of Kwazulu-Natal (reference no.: HSSREC//00004468/2022).

Research methodology

The overall aim of the study is to harness academics' emotional intelligence to enhance emotional well-being within academic settings, thereby contributing to the attainment of SDG 3.

Research questions

The study aims to address the following research questions:

- How do appraisal of emotions, regulation of emotions and the utilisation of emotions contribute to emotional intelligence in academics during adversity?
- How do anxiety and stress contribute to emotional well-being in academics during adversity?
- How did human resource management support academics during adversity?

Objectives

The study seeks to accomplish the following objectives:

- To ascertain academics' emotional intelligence through appraisal of emotions, regulation of emotions and the utilisation of emotions during adversity.
- To understand how anxiety and stress contribute to emotional well-being in academics during adversity.
- To evaluate human resource management support for academics during adversity.

Sampling and sampling design

A quantitative research approach was employed, focussing on university academics (junior lecturers, lecturers, senior lecturers, associate professors and professors) from five campus sites at the UKZN. Participants were selected through stratified random sampling. Out of the total population of 1226 university academics, a sample of 370 was drawn, as outlined in the sample table by Sekaran and Bougie (2016). The sample was predominantly female (62.5%) and largely Indian (33.9%). Most respondents were between the ages of 30 and 39 years, with 48.6% being married, 65% holding a doctoral degree and 51.4% having more than 10 years of service.

The power value was calculated using the sample size, effect size and significance level. Given the significant findings and the high explanatory power of the regression model, it is reasonable to infer that the power value is high, likely exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.80. This indicates a strong likelihood that the study effectively detected the true relationships among the variables. The power calculation (Equation 1) is as follows:

$$\text{Effect size } (f^2) = \frac{R^2}{1-R^2} = \frac{0.97231}{1-0.97231} = 35.05 \quad \text{[Eqn 1]}$$

where the number of predictors (k) is 2; the significance level (α) is 0.05 and the power ($1 - \beta$) is 0.9.

Data collection methods

The study employed both close-ended and open-ended online questionnaires. Participants' biographical data were collected using nominal and ordinal scales. Emotional intelligence was assessed using the Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test on a five-point Likert scale (Schutte et al., 2009). This test consists of 15 self-report items divided into three sub-scales: appraisal of emotions (five items – 'I know why my emotions change'), regulation of emotions (five items – 'I seek out activities that make me happy') and utilisation of emotions (five items – 'I am aware of the non-verbal messages other people send').

Emotional well-being was measured using Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scales-21 by Lovibond and Lovibond (1995), with self-developed questions on a five-point Likert Scale. There are 15 items measuring three sub-scales: stress (five items – 'The changes at work impact my work-life balance'), anxiety (five items – 'I experience the emotion of fear during COVID-19') and HR (five items – 'Initiatives from human resource management positively influence my emotional well-being').

Data analysis

The study applied both descriptive and inferential statistics. Frequencies and percentages were used to analyse biographical data. Measures of central tendency helped interpret the characteristics of the sample, while measures of dispersion assessed the spread of the data. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was above 0.500, and Bartlett's test of sphericity had a significance value below 0.05, confirming that all conditions for factor analysis were met. To analyse the data from open-ended questions on emotional intelligence and emotional well-being, thematic analysis was used to identify and develop key themes. Initially, the data were reviewed to familiarise with its content, followed by coding responses into relevant categories. The frequency of each theme was calculated to determine its prevalence or significance among the respondents.

Reliability

The two key components of precision are reliability and validity. Reliability is determined by taking multiple measurements from the same subjects. A reliability coefficient of 0.70 or above is regarded as 'acceptable' for a newly developed construct. Table 1 presents the Cronbach's coefficient alpha score for all the individual items that made up the questionnaire. Additionally, open-ended questions measured the role of HR and coping techniques which consisted of 'What supportive role did HR facilitate during COVID-19?' and 'Name one significant coping technique you utilised for helping you manage your distressing emotions'.

The reliability scores for all sections exceed the recommended Cronbach's alpha value. This indicates a degree of acceptable, consistent scoring for these sections of the research.

Presentation and discussion of results

The intended analytical tools employed to examine the associations among the data presented in Table 2–Table 5, corresponding to the three objectives of the research, include various statistical methods. Descriptive statistics were employed for Table 2 and Table 3, including counts, means, standard deviations, medians, percentiles and binomial p-values. These statistics summarise the emotional intelligence and emotional well-being scores across the sample. Additionally, section analysis was used to examine the scoring patterns for each sub-dimension related to emotional intelligence and emotional well-being. This technique involved analysing the mean scores and standard deviations for each variable per section. The results were then further analysed to assess the significance and importance of the statements, providing a detailed understanding of the respondents' emotional intelligence and emotional well-being scores. In Table 4 and Table 5, thematic analysis was first employed to identify and develop key themes from the qualitative data. Following this, frequency distribution was used to analyse and present the quantitative aspects of the responses. This approach provided a clear depiction of the proportion of respondents for each theme, including cumulative percentages to illustrate the accumulation of responses and highlight the distribution of preferences or practices. These statistical tools were chosen to provide a thorough analysis, aligning with the study's objectives and enhancing understanding of how emotional intelligence and emotional well-being are affected by different factors, especially during adversity such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

How do appraisal of emotions, regulation of emotions and the utilisation of emotions contribute to emotional intelligence in academics during adversity?

The COVID-19 presented significant emotional challenges for academics, underscoring the relevance of emotional intelligence in managing adversity. Mayer and Salovey's (1990) ability model of emotional intelligence, which includes appraisal, regulation and utilisation of emotions, offers a

TABLE 1: Cronbach's alpha score.

Section	Number of items	Cronbach's alpha
Emotional intelligence		
Appraisal of emotions	5	0.946
Regulation of emotions	-	0.946
Utilisation of emotions	5	0.929
Emotional well-being		
Stress	5	0.938
Anxiety	5	0.947
Human Resource Management	5	0.936

TABLE 2: Emotional intelligence scoring patterns.

Dimension	Item	Count	Mean	SD	Median	Percentile 25	Percentile 75	Maximum	Minimum	Binomial *p*-value
Appraisal of emotions										
I encounter obstacles that allow me to remember times I encountered similar obstacles and overcame them	BI.1	360	3.13	1.33	3.50	2.00	4.00	5.00	1.00	1.000
Solving problems is easy for me when I am in a positive mood	BI.2	360	3.72	0.86	4.00	4.00	4.00	5.00	1.00	< 0.001
I motivate myself by imagining a good outcome to tasks I take on	B1.3	360	3.44	1.02	4.00	3.00	4.00	5.00	1.00	0.155
I help other people feel better when they are impacted upon psychologically	BI.4	360	3.93	0.98	4.00	4.00	5.00	5.00	1.00	< 0.001
I use good moods to persist in the face of obstacles	BI.5	360	3.46	0.89	4.00	3.00	4.00	5.00	2.00	0.004
Regulation of emotions										
Empathy benefits my well-being	B2.1	360	3.74	0.93	4.00	4.00	4.00	5.00	1.00	< 0.001
I know how to make my positive emotions last	B2.2	360	3.08	1.00	3.00	2.00	4.00	4.00	1.00	0.031
I sought out activities that make me happy	B2.3	360	3.57	1.23	4.00	2.00	4.00	5.00	1.00	< 0.001
I know why my emotions change	B2.4	360	3.74	0.94	4.00	3.00	4.00	5.00	1.00	< 0.001
I have control over my emotions	B2.5	360	3.14	1.05	3.00	2.00	4.00	5.00	2.00	< 0.001
Utilisation of emotions										
Verbal cues of communication assist me in better understanding the emotional states of others	B3.1	360	3.56	0.70	4.00	3.00	4.00	5.00	2.00	< 0.001
Non-verbal cues of communication assist me in better understanding the emotional state of others	B3.2	360	3.43	0.80	3.00	3.00	4.00	5.00	2.00	0.958
I am aware of the non-verbal messages I send to others	B3.3	360	3.33	0.93	4.00	3.00	4.00	4.00	1.00	< 0.001
I can tell how people are feeling by listening to the tone of their voices	B3.4	360	4.04	0.56	4.00	4.00	4.00	5.00	3.00	< 0.001
It is difficult for me to understand why people feel the way they do	B3.5	360	2.45	1.02	2.00	2.00	4.00	4.00	1.00	< 0.001
It is difficult for me to understand why people feel the way they do	B3.5_R	360	3.55	1.02	4.00	2.00	4.00	5.00	2.00	< 0.001

Source: Maharaj, P., & Ramsaroop, A. (2023). *Assessing emotional intelligence for enhancing academic resilience during adversity: A study on the University of KwaZulu-Natal*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal

Note: B3.5_R is reverse coded.

SD, standard deviation.

TABLE 3: Emotional well-being scoring patterns.

Dimension	Item number	Count	Mean	SD	Median	Percentile 25	Percentile 75	Maximum	Minimum	Binomial *p*-value
Stress										
COVID-19 will have a long-term negative impact on my emotional well-being	D1.1	360	3.14	1.22	3.00	2.00	4.00	5.00	1.00	0.712
I feel an increase in stress as a result of recent changes that have occurred in my work	D1.2	360	3.81	1.11	4.00	3.00	5.00	5.00	2.00	< 0.001
The changes at work impact my work-life balance	D1.3	360	3.78	1.07	4.00	3.00	5.00	5.00	1.00	< 0.001
I fmd it difficult to unwind due to my high stress levels	D1.4	360	3.61	1.18	4.00	3.00	5.00	5.00	1.00	< 0.001
I feel that I am using a lot of nervous energy	D1.5	360	3.57	1.11	4.00	2.00	4.00	5.00	2.00	< 0.001
Anxiety										
I fmd it difficult to work up the initiative to do things during COVID-19	D2.1	360	3.38	1.18	4.00	2.00	4.00	5.00	1.00	0.031
I am not able to stop or control worrying	D2.2	360	3.39	1.10	4.00	2.00	4.00	5.00	2.00	0.126
I experience the emotion of fear during COVID-19	D2.3	360	3.70	1.07	4.00	3.00	4.00	5.00	1.00	< 0.001
I experience the emotion of sadness during COVID-19	D2.4	360	3.94	0.70	4.00	4.00	4.00	5.00	2.00	< 0.001
I experience the emotion of anger during COVID-19	D2.5	360	3.49	1.03	4.00	3.00	4.00	5.00	2.00	0.102
Human resource management										
Initiatives from human resource management positively influence my emotional well-being	D3.1	360	2.07	0.88	2.00	1.00	3.00	4.00	1.00	< 0.001
Human resource management must be instrumental in incorporating emotional health into well-being policies	D3.2	360	4.00	1.17	4.00	4.00	5.00	5.00	1.00	< 0.001
Human resource management is proactive during the transition to emergency remote learning	D3.3	360	2.21	1.15	2.00	1.00	3.00	4.00	1.00	< 0.001
Work-from-home human resource management strategies improve my employee performance	D3.4	360	2.88	1.47	3.00	1.00	4.00	5.00	1.00	< 0.001
During COVID-19, human resource management supports employee participation in decision making and idea sharing	D3.5	360	2.10	1.03	2.00	1.00	3.00	4.00	1.00	< 0.001

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SD, standard deviation; COVID-19, coronavirus disease 2019.

TABLE 4: Coping strategies employed by University of KwaZulu-Natal academics for managing distressing emotions.

Coping strategies	%	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Enjoying a hobby	10.6	10.6	20.3
Mindfulness	10.6	10.6	45.3
Spirituality	10.6	10.6	81.1
Staying connected through technology	10.6	10.6	91.7
Exercise	10.0	10.0	30.3
Spending less time on social media	10.0	10.0	70.6
Being in nature	9.7	9.7	9.7
Practicing gratitude	8.3	8.3	53.6
Work from home	8.3	8.3	100.0
Self-care diary	6.9	6.9	60.6
Introspection	4.2	4.2	34.4
Learning off YouTube	0.3	0.3	34.7
Total	**100.0**	**100.0**	

Source: Maharaj, P., & Ramsaroop, A. (2023). *Assessing emotional intelligence for enhancing academic resilience during adversity: A study on the University of KwaZulu-Natal*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal

TABLE 5: Perceptions of University of KwaZulu-Natal academics on the supportive role of University of KwaZulu-Natal human resources during COVID-19.

Supportive role of HRM	%	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
No support: Solutions were not supported by quality empirical evidence	19.7	19.7	59.2
Allowed employees to work from home	17.5	17.5	30.8
Workshops	16.1	16.1	100.0
Webinars	12.2	12.2	83.9
A lot of communication emailed on ICAS Wellness Centre	10.3	10.3	10.3
Appreciating and recognising employees who had to work long hours	8.6	8.6	39.4
Regular email communication on wellness benefits offered and tips	7.5	7.5	71.7
Psychologists were reserved	5.0	5.0	64.2
Adjustments were made to key performance indicators	3.1	3.1	13.3
Total	**100.0**	**100.0**	

Source: Maharaj, P., & Ramsaroop, A. (2023). *Assessing emotional intelligence for enhancing academic resilience during adversity: A study on the University of KwaZulu-Natal*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal

COVID-19, coronavirus disease 2019; ICAS, Independent Counselling and Advisory Service; HRM, Human resource management.

robust framework for understanding how these dimensions contribute to emotional well-being.

A binomial test with a cut-off of 3.0 was conducted to assess whether the scoring patterns for each statement differed significantly by option. The null hypothesis posited that the number of respondents who agreed was similar to those who disagreed. The ability to appraise emotions involves recognising and understanding one's own and others' emotional states. Table 2 displays a strong level of agreement among respondents regarding the appraisal of emotions, with a mean score of $m = 3.54$, indicating that academics are adept at identifying and predicting their emotional responses to various events. For instance:

- Problem-solving in positive moods: $m = 3.72$ suggests that academics find problem-solving easier when in a positive mood, demonstrating an ability to leverage positive emotions effectively (B1.2).
- Helping others: $m = 3.93$ indicates that academics help others feel better, reflecting an awareness of how their emotional states impact those around them (B1.4).

The results highlight the role of appraisal of emotion in fostering resilience and adaptability, which are crucial for managing the stressors associated with the pandemic. A study by Miao et al. (2020) highlights that emotional appraisal skills, such as recognising and accurately interpreting emotions, are foundational to effective emotion management and coping strategies. This capability enables individuals to foresee emotional responses and prepare mentally for stressors, thereby enhancing resilience. Additionally, Joseph and Newman (2020) found that individuals with high emotional appraisal abilities tend to exhibit better problem-solving skills and decision-making capabilities, especially in high-stress environments like the pandemic, as they can navigate complex emotional landscapes effectively.

Emotional regulation pertains to managing and responding to emotional experiences effectively. The mean score for emotional regulation is $m = 3.45$, indicating that academics generally feel competent in this area. Key findings include:

- Empathy and well-being: The strong agreement with $m = 3.74$ for the benefits of empathy for personal well-being suggests that academics use empathy to enhance their emotional stability (B2.1).
- Controlling emotions: Although academics report some control over their emotions with $m = 3.14$, there is a noticeable variation in how effectively they manage their emotional states (B2.5).

Effective emotional regulation is essential for mitigating the negative impacts of stress and enhancing overall well-being during adversity. Cabello et al. (2020) demonstrated that emotional regulation is critical in reducing burnout and enhancing emotional well-being among professionals, particularly during the pandemic. Empathy, specifically, has been linked to improved social connections and reduced feelings of isolation, further buffering against stress. A meta-analysis by Gross et al. (2020) confirmed that emotional regulation strategies, such as cognitive reappraisal and mindfulness, have a substantial impact on reducing anxiety and depression symptoms, reinforcing the value of emotional regulation in maintaining mental health during crises.

Utilisation of emotions involves harnessing emotional experiences to guide thoughts and actions. Academics showed a strong agreement with $m = 3.58$ in utilising emotions constructively:

- Understanding emotional states: Academics are generally effective in using verbal and non-verbal cues to understand others' emotional states, as indicated by high scores on these items (B3.1 and B3.4).
- Understanding others' emotions: The lower score on understanding why people feel the way they do with $m = 2.45$ suggests room for improvement in this area (B3.5).

The dimension of the utilisation of emotions under emotional intelligence helps academics apply their emotional insights to

improve interpersonal interactions and adapt their strategies for dealing with challenges. A study by Petrides et al. (2020) underscores the importance of emotional utilisation in academic settings, as it facilitates better teamwork and collaboration. The ability to use emotions constructively allows individuals to adapt their strategies and maintain motivation, even in uncertain and challenging situations. Furthermore, research by MacCann et al. (2020) found that those with higher emotional intelligence scores, particularly in utilising emotions, are more adept at recognising non-verbal cues and adjusting their communication styles, which is crucial for effective remote work and teaching.

The results reinforce the importance of emotional intelligence as outlined in Mayer and Salovey's ability model (1990). By effectively appraising, regulating and utilising emotions, academics can better navigate the emotional turbulence induced by the COVID-19 pandemic (Hölling, 2019). These abilities contribute to firstly enhanced decision-making whereby academics who are skilled in emotional intelligence can make more informed decisions, improving their effectiveness and job satisfaction (Sutte, 2019). According to Fernandez-Berrocal et al. (2020), individuals who can effectively regulate and utilise their emotions tend to make more balanced decisions, showing resilience in the face of ambiguity and change. This skill set is particularly beneficial in navigating the unpredictable circumstances brought on by the pandemic. Schutte et al. (2020) further argued that emotional intelligence serves as a protective factor against the psychological impacts of stress. It enhances one's ability to bounce back from setbacks, contributing to long-term well-being and job satisfaction among educators.

Secondly, resilience and well-being are enhanced by emotional intelligence, which serves as a protector against stress, promoting resilience and mitigating the physiological and psychological impacts of stress (Sadovyy et al., 2021). A study by Vink et al. (2020) highlights that organisations that promote emotional intelligence training and support systems, such as workshops and coaching, enhance employees' abilities to cope with stressors. This organisational approach fosters a culture of resilience, aiding in the overall mental health and well-being of employees during crises like COVID-19.

The appraisal, regulation and utilisation of emotions are pivotal components of emotional intelligence that significantly contribute to academics' emotional well-being during adversity. By fostering these abilities, educational institutions can help academics navigate challenges more effectively, ultimately enhancing their resilience and overall performance during difficult times.

How do anxiety and stress contribute to academics' emotional well-being during adversity?

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted the emotional well-being of academics, with heightened levels of stress and anxiety being prominent concerns. According to the National Institute of Health (2021), strong emotional well-being is often marked by fewer distressing emotions and greater resilience in facing challenges. However, life disruptions, such as those caused by the pandemic, can heighten stress and anxiety, leading to adverse effects on emotional well-being (Melkonian, 2021). Hamouche (2021) examined the psychological impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on employees in higher education, finding that uncertainties related to job security, workload and changes in work dynamics led to increased anxiety, stress and burnout. Browning et al. (2020) reported similar findings, showing that the pandemic significantly impacted the mental health of university staff and students, with increased reports of anxiety, depression and stress because of concerns about personal health, job security and well-being of family members.

Stress and anxiety among academics during the pandemic were exacerbated by several factors. Academics faced increased concerns about infection risk, disruptions to established routines, uncertainties regarding job security and income, and worries about the safety of loved ones (Chew et al., 2020). These factors have been associated with elevated stress levels, including prolonged quarantine, fear of infection, frustration and financial instability (Visser & Van Wyk, 2021). Mheidly et al. (2022) noted that academics continue to face increased stress because of the transition to online learning environments, coupled with the added burden of maintaining research productivity and managing personal life challenges. Padilla-Díaz et al. (2022) found that academic professionals reported high levels of anxiety because of job insecurity, uncertainty about career progression and challenges in maintaining work-life balance, especially among early-career researchers.

Table 3 highlights the intensity of these stressors. For instance, respondents reported significant increases in stress related to changes in their work environment, with high levels of agreement on statements regarding work-life balance disruptions and difficulties in unwinding because of stress. Chi-square tests indicate that these differences are statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), underscoring the impact of the pandemic on academics' stress levels.

Table 4 provides an overview of the coping strategies used by UKZN academics to manage distressing emotions. The most frequently used strategies included engaging in hobbies, mindfulness practices, spirituality and staying connected through technology. Each of these approaches has been shown to mitigate stress and anxiety:

- Mindfulness: Mindfulness practices, including meditation and deep breathing exercises, were widely utilised. These techniques have been effective in reducing stress and promoting overall well-being throughout the pandemic (Niu & Long, 2023). Adams et al. (2022) showed that mindfulness practices, such as meditation and deep breathing exercises, remained effective in reducing stress

and promoting emotional well-being during ongoing pandemic challenges.

- Exercise: Regular physical activity, such as home workouts and yoga, was recommended for managing stress and improving overall health (Ai et al., 2021). Liu et al. (2022) demonstrated that regular physical activity, including yoga and home-based workouts, significantly reduced anxiety and depressive symptoms among academics, supporting the role of exercise as a coping mechanism.
- Social connections: Maintaining social connections through technology provided essential support and a sense of community, which helped manage distressing emotions (Maharaj & Ramsaroop, 2022). González-Sanguino et al. (2022) emphasised the importance of maintaining social connections through virtual means as a protective factor against emotional distress during extended periods of social isolation.
- Spirituality: Spiritual practices, such as prayer and support from religious communities, were also significant for managing emotional stress during the crisis (Coppola et al., 2021; Le-Roux et al., 2022).

Interestingly, the absence of employee assistance programmes (EAPs) in the coping strategies noted by the respondents suggests a potential gap in available support services. Employee assistance programmes offer confidential counselling and resources that can play a crucial role in addressing occupational and personal challenges (Chen et al., 2021). Barton et al. (2022) identified a gap in available mental health services and EAPs for academics, stressing the need for universities to provide more comprehensive and accessible support mechanisms to address mental health challenges effectively. Peters et al. (2022) suggested that institutions should enhance the provision of EAPs and other mental health resources, including tailored interventions to support the specific needs of academic staff during and beyond the pandemic.

The COVID-19 has had a profound impact on academics' emotional well-being, with increased levels of stress and anxiety being prevalent. The coping strategies employed by academics, such as mindfulness and exercise, have been effective to varying degrees, but there is a need for more structured support systems, including EAPs. Future initiatives should focus on providing tailored support based on empirical evidence to enhance emotional well-being and resilience among academics.

How does human resource management support emotional well-being in academics during adversity?

Human resources played a crucial role in supporting emotional well-being in academics during the adversity of the COVID-19 pandemic. The primary support mechanisms included providing mental health resources, offering virtual counselling services and EAPs, implementing safety measures and developing remote work policies. Furthermore, HR organised wellness webinars and workshops to promote mental health (Bieńkowska et al., 2022; Hamouche, 2021). These efforts were complemented by initiatives aimed at bolstering employee engagement and morale, such as virtual team-building activities, recognising employee achievements and encouraging open communication channels (Bieńkowska et al., 2022; Hamouche, 2021). Gaskell et al. (2022) reported that HR's efforts to offer continuous virtual mental health support, such as access to therapists and online support groups, were beneficial in mitigating anxiety and depression among academic staff. Singh et al. (2023) highlighted the effectiveness of EAPs in providing timely support to academics, reducing stress levels and improving their ability to cope with the challenges posed by the pandemic.

The findings from Table 3 indicate that UKZN academics expressed a need for HR to be more effective in integrating emotional well-being into well-being policies. Key areas where HR support was perceived as lacking include 'inefficient work-from-home strategies to enhance employee performance', 'lack of proactiveness', 'limited decision-making' and 'ineffective emotional well-being initiatives'. These areas received low scores from UKZN academics, suggesting that the current HR strategies were insufficiently addressing these concerns.

In contrast, the open-ended responses in Table 5 reveal that while HR efforts were acknowledged, they were often viewed as lacking empirical support. Specifically, HR's initiatives, such as allowing remote work, providing workshops and webinars and increasing email communication on the Independent Counselling and Advisory Service (ICAS) wellness centre, were noted.

However, the perceived effectiveness of these initiatives varied, with 19.7% of academics expressing that the solutions provided were not supported by quality empirical evidence. Jones and Smith (2022) argued that HR departments need to adopt a more evidence-based approach to designing well-being initiatives. The study suggests that using data analytics to assess the impact of current programmes can help identify gaps and areas for improvement, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of these initiatives (Jones & Smith, 2022). Kumar and Patel (2023) highlighted the importance of leveraging data to customise wellness programmes that address specific challenges faced by academic staff, such as job stress, workload management and work-life balance. Kumar and Patel (2023) advocated for a continuous feedback loop between staff and HR to ensure that policies remain relevant and responsive to changing needs.

While HR provided various forms of support during the pandemic, the findings reveal a critical need for HR to utilise data-driven approaches to refine and enhance their strategies. The integration of empirical research and best practices into HR policies will be essential for addressing the emotional

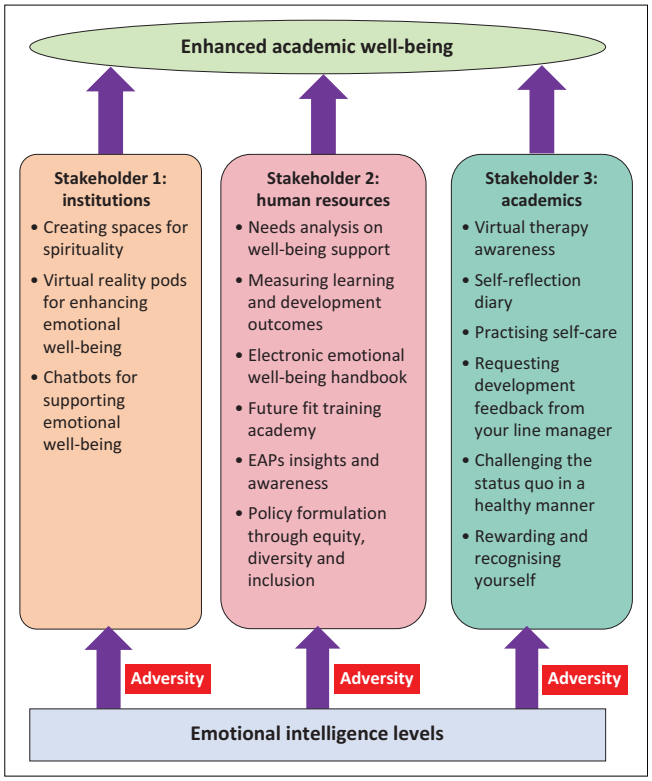
well-being of academics more effectively. This approach will not only support academics during adversity but also contribute to the overall quality of education and institutional performance in the long term.

Potential recommendations

The study proposes a model for higher education aimed at harnessing emotional intelligence to enhance academics' well-being during adversity. Figure 1 illustrates how the variable of emotional intelligence, along with its key strategies, shows a significant relationship with academic well-being during adversity. Consequently, when these strategies are effectively implemented by the relevant stakeholders, academics will be able to thrive in adversity, thereby contributing to the SDG 3 objective.

Employee assistance programmes insights and awareness

Interestingly, the results indicate that EAPs are not actively visible. Employee assistance programmes are voluntary programmes offering employees free and confidential services to address various occupational and personal issues (Chen et al., 2021). The goal of an EAP is to enhance employees' quality of life by helping resolve or manage issues that could affect their job performance (Veldsman & Aardde, 2021). The pandemic has introduced new considerations for these programmes, particularly given the evolving challenges encountered by academics and their changing roles in the post-COVID-19 era.



Source: Maharaj, P., & Ramsaroop, A. (2023). *Assessing emotional intelligence for enhancing academic resilience during adversity: A study on the University of KwaZulu-Natal*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal

EAPs, employee assistance programmes.

FIGURE 1: Effective emotional intelligence strategies to enhance academic well-being during adversity.

The trends that the UKZN EAP assisted with were coping with stress, relationship and family challenges, substance abuse and work-related challenges. An important question to address is 'What is UKZN HR doing with academic EAP information?' The EAP provides useful insights that can assist UKZN HR in formulating their wellness initiatives and engagement in relation to the well-being challenges encountered by academics. To address these challenges and improve the understanding and utilisation of EAPs, HR departments must implement comprehensive communication and awareness strategies. These strategies must emphasise the benefits of EAPs, ensure confidentiality and provide clear instructions on how to access services. Moreover, fostering a culture that supports employees' emotional well-being is essential in reducing the stigma associated with seeking help and increasing the utilisation of EAPs.

Human resources must therefore, firstly, have leaders be trained to identify signs of employee distress and guide academics to the EAP when necessary. Additionally, organising lunch-and-learn sessions or webinars can educate academics about the EAP offerings and how to access them. Conducting anonymous surveys among academics can gauge awareness and understanding of the EAP, enabling tailored awareness campaigns. To foster peer support, EAP ambassadors or peer champions can share their positive experiences with the programme, enhancing its relatability. Sharing anonymised case studies or success stories can further illustrate the positive impact of the EAP on academics' lives. Finally, obtaining leadership endorsement and support for the EAP can underscore its significance within the organisation (Corrigan et al., 2014; Durand-Bush et al., 2019; Jain & Choudhury, 2021).

Needs analysis for well-being support

Human resources can conduct well-being support needs analysis for university academics through a systematic and empathetic approach that considers the specific needs and challenges encountered by academics instead of generalising academics' needs. As shown in the results, generalising academics' needs during COVID-19, instead of establishing data-driven strategies and ground-level engagement with academics, conveyed a lack of support from the UKZN HR department. A needs analysis is a structured assessment that aims to identify existing problems, determine the underlying cause, define the goals that need to be achieved and recommend strategies to address the identified needs (Hou et al., 2019). The study advocates that HR engage academics and stakeholders; define clear objectives; analyse the collected data to identify common themes, patterns and priorities for academics' needs; prioritise needs; customise support; establish a feedback mechanism to maintain ongoing communication; evaluate and adapt; continuously assess the effectiveness of HR initiatives in meeting academics' needs; and ensure that the needs analysis process adheres to ethical standards (Cohen et al., 2020; Jones, 2016; Stake, 2019).

Policy formulation

The HRM department facilitates a crucial role in formulating policies that prioritise employee well-being within organisations. Human resources can implement several strategies to develop effective well-being policies. Firstly, HR can conduct comprehensive needs assessments and surveys to understand employees' well-being challenges and preferences (Jones & Brown, 2019). This data-driven approach ensures that policies are tailored to address specific needs. Secondly, HR can design and implement flexible work arrangements such as telecommuting, flexible hours or compressed workweeks, allowing employees to achieve better work-life balance (Smith & Johnson, 2019). Additionally, HR can provide training and development opportunities related to stress management, resilience building and emotional intelligence, equipping employees with the skills to cope with challenges and enhance their well-being (Robinson & Garcia, 2019). By incorporating these strategies into policy formulation, HR can create a supportive work environment that prioritises employee well-being and contributes to organisational success.

Limitations

One of the primary challenges encountered by the researcher was soliciting cooperation from participants to complete the online questionnaire. Additionally, there were instances of blank responses for the open-ended questions, further complicating data collection efforts. As a result of these challenges, the study was unable to achieve a 100% response rate.

Recommendations for future research

The study provides the following recommendations:

- Focus on the value and influence of UKZN's EAP on emotional well-being during adversity.
- Attention should be given to assessing the value of HRM initiatives on UKZN's emotional well-being and emotional intelligence.

Conclusion

The research shows that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected the emotional responses and coping strategies of academics. The findings in relation to objective 1 reveal a strong level of agreement among respondents regarding the importance of appraisal, regulation and utilisation of emotions in managing distressing emotions during adversity. This underscores the relevance of emotional intelligence for coping with distressing emotions, ultimately influencing emotional well-being. In light of objective 2, respondents displayed heightened levels of stress and anxiety being prevalent. Insights into the coping strategies employed by academics revealed how they managed their distressing emotions, with no visibility of the EAP. Objective 3 highlighted the importance of aligning HR practices with empirical research and emerging trends that can further enhance the effectiveness of well-being initiatives, ultimately benefiting both employees and organisational outcomes.

Nevertheless, the research argues that there is a need to reassess the quality of HR practices, as a significant proportion of academics at UKZN expressed dissatisfaction with the support provided by the university's HR department. The disruption caused by COVID-19 highlighted the need for adopting innovative coping strategies to support academic well-being and develop new approaches to work. In response, HR departments were compelled to adopt more creative and mindful approaches to meet the evolving needs of academics. Human resources must prioritise the cultivation of emotional intelligence skills, including the ability to appraise, regulate and utilise emotions effectively, to bolster emotional well-being. This approach aligns with the objectives of SDG 3, which seeks to empower individuals to lead healthier and more fulfilling lives. Recommendations proposed for enhancing emotional intelligence and emotional well-being for advancing SDG 3 comprised of EAP insights and awareness, needs analysis on well-being support and policy formulation.

Acknowledgements

This article is partially based on the author, P.M.'s PhD thesis entitled 'Assessing emotional intelligence for enhancing academic resilience during adversity: A study on the University of KwaZulu-Natal', towards the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Law and Management Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, with supervisor A.R., received on 18 September 2024.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

P.M. contributed to the design and implementation of the research, the analysis of the results and the writing of the manuscript, under the direct supervision of A.R., who was the sole supervisor of the PhD research on which this article is partially based.

Funding information

P.M. received an internal Doctoral Research Grant from the College of Law and Management Studies to cover her editing costs.

Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, A.R., upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this study's results, findings and content.

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