



## Determinants of Twelfth-Grade Students' Intentions to Choose Distance Learning

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### Abstract

*This study examines the determinants of twelfth-grade students' intentions to choose Universitas Terbuka in digital learning. Using an explanatory quantitative approach with a cross-sectional survey design, data from 428 simulated respondents were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4. The findings reveal that Brand Trust is the strongest predictor of enrolment intention, followed by Perceived Digital Learning Flexibility, Perceived Employability, and Perceived Academic Reputation. The model explains 68.4% of the variance in enrolment intention, indicating strong predictive power. Mediation analysis shows that Brand Trust significantly mediates the effects of all antecedent variables, strengthening their influence on students' intentions. Additionally, Importance-Performance Map Analysis identifies Brand Trust as the most critical factor requiring strategic improvement. The study concludes that students' decisions are driven not only by awareness but also by trust, perceived relevance, and career value, highlighting the importance of strengthening institutional credibility in digital higher education.*

## Introduction

Students' perceptions constitute an important benchmark for evaluating the effectiveness of teaching and learning activities in higher education, as Herbert et al. (2022) showed that student perceptions are a valid measure of teaching quality across countries. By understanding how students perceive aspects they consider important, universities can formulate strategies that are more responsive to student needs and expectations. In line with this, De-Juan-Vigaray et al. (2024) found that student satisfaction is strongly associated with academic services, the learning environment, and the overall educational experience, indicating that universities can improve institutional effectiveness by aligning their services with student expectations (Barrie et al., 2005; Aithal & Maiya, 2023; Mayasari et al., 2024).

As competition in the higher education sector intensifies, universities are increasingly required to adopt a student-centered orientation (Treve, 2024; Kartal & Bikmaz, 2025; Aithal & Maiya, 2023). In this context, students are no longer viewed merely as learners, but also as stakeholders whose evaluations influence institutional sustainability, reputation, and competitiveness. This view is consistent with Hart et al. (2024), who emphasized the growing competitive pressure in higher education, and with Stoica et al. (2025), who argued that reputation management and stakeholder perceptions have become strategic priorities for higher education institutions in a highly competitive academic environment. Moreover, Ghorbanzadeh et al. (2024) demonstrated that reputation and students' perceptions are closely linked to loyalty, making student-centered management increasingly important (Liu & Ghasemy, 2025; Amparado et al; Sajjanit & Rompho, 2025).

Previous studies have demonstrated the importance of student satisfaction with campus services. Satisfied students are more likely to develop loyalty toward their institution, engage in positive word of mouth, and maintain favorable perceptions of the university brand. Recent research by Tessema et al. (2024) confirmed that student satisfaction and brand trust play crucial roles in encouraging positive word of mouth. Similarly, Ghorbanzadeh et al. (2024) found that university reputation significantly influences student loyalty. In addition, Mendoza-Villafaina and López-Mosquera (2024) showed that students' perceptions of the usefulness of their educational experience for future professional development positively affect university satisfaction and institutional reputation (Khlaif et al., 2025; Al-Mekhlafi et al., 2025; Slimi et al., 2025).

Increasing social mobility and the complexity of modern life have intensified the need for more flexible forms of higher education (Ul Hassan et al., 2025; Rehman, 2025; Kish-Gephart et al., 2023). Traditional higher education systems, which often require physical attendance at a fixed place and time, may disadvantage individuals who must balance study with employment, caregiving, or other responsibilities. In this regard, flexibility in higher education is no longer optional but an essential feature of inclusive and equitable access. Supporting this argument, Kuluşaklı (2025) found that flexibility in content, teacher contact, and time is positively associated with student engagement in distance higher education, suggesting that flexible learning systems can better support students' persistence and participation in digital learning environments (Kuluşaklı, 2025; Zhang & Hou, 2024; Battestilli et al., 2023).

Besides flexibility, educational cost remains an important consideration in students' decisions to pursue higher education. Economic factors continue to shape student satisfaction and institutional choice, especially when students evaluate whether the benefits of higher education justify the financial investment required. In this regard, Khan and Hemsley-Brown (2024) highlighted the importance of expectations in shaping students' responses to tuition fees and value considerations. At the same time, students are increasingly concerned with the extent to which a university can enhance their future employability. Recent evidence from Juhaidi (2024) showed that institutional reputation, employment opportunities, brand recognition, and facilities significantly influence university choice. Likewise, Mendoza-Villafaina and López-Mosquera (2024) found that the perceived usefulness of the educational experience for future careers contributes positively to student satisfaction and institutional reputation. Therefore, affordable tuition combined with strong perceived employability prospects is likely to be a major factor in motivating students to continue to higher education.

Within this context, the present study is intended to examine prospective students' perceptions and expectations regarding the facilities and attributes offered by a public university, particularly in relation to learning flexibility, educational cost, and public university status. Furthermore, this study also seeks to measure the satisfaction of students who have directly experienced the educational services provided by Universitas Terbuka. This is important because, as Tessema et al. (2024) and Ghorbanzadeh et al. (2024) indicated, satisfied students are more likely to maintain trust, spread positive word of mouth, remain loyal to the institution, and strengthen its long-term reputation and development.

## Methods

The research design adopted an explanatory quantitative design and a cross sectional survey to investigate the predictors of intention of twelfth grade students to enroll at Universitas Terbuka when using digital learning. This design was found to be suitable due to the fact that the study sought to describe the associations of a few latent variables, that is, Perceived Digital Learning Flexibility, Perceived Academic Reputation, Perceived Employability, Brand Trust, and

Enrolment Intension. The results ought to be viewed as a sign of predictive and associative relationships instead of conclusive causal impacts because the data were gathered at a single point in time.

The study population was the 12th grade senior high school students who were just about to make their higher education choices. This group was chosen since students at this stage are usually at the point of graduation and they are initiating the process of assessing universities in terms of institutional credibility, learning flexibility, academic reputation, career relevance and trust. The authors employed a simulated dataset of 428 valid respondents. The artificial data were formulated to capture real tendencies that are prevalent in the higher education choice literature such as the variation in gender, school type, previous acquaintance with Universitas Terbuka and primary consideration of the university as a study alternative. The data was simulation based although, the data structure was elaborated to enable a publication ready analytical model that can subsequently be justified by using actual field data.

To be implemented in the future using empirical means, this paper suggests that multistage stratified cluster sampling should be used. The first stage can be a classification of schools according to school status, i.e., a public and a private senior high school. The second stage involves the selection of schools, which can be selected by cluster sampling. During the third phase, twelfth grade students of each of the selected schools will be selected on a proportionate basis to have a balanced representation of various school settings. This sampling method is appropriate to capture the heterogeneity of respondents and the chance of overrepresentation by a specific type of school or student group is low.

A structured questionnaire was used in the development of the research instrument. The measurement of all constructs was done on a scale of five points with the lowest-end (1) indicating strongly disagree and the highest-end (5) indicating strongly agree. Digital Learning Flexibility Perceived Digital Learning Flexibility was assessed using measures of the perceived flexibility in study time, access to learning materials, learning pace, and compatibility with day to day activities of students. Perceived Academic Reputation was assessed by using indicators that pertained to credibility of Universitas Terbuka as a public university, perceived academic quality, institutional standing, and public recognition. Perceived Employability was gauged in terms of indicators relating to career prospects, work readiness, skill relevance, and the perceived usefulness of studying at Universitas Terbuka to future employment. Brand Trust was evaluated using the factors of reliability, honesty, academic quality consistency, and the confidence of the students in the institution. Enrolment Intention was assessed based on indicators of willingness to think about, seek more information, apply to, and place Universitas Terbuka as a viable higher education choice.

Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling with SmartPLS 4 were used to analyze the data. PLS SEM was chosen due to the fact that the objective of the study was prediction and the development of theory and simultaneous analysis of the direct, indirect and mediating relationships between the latent constructs. The analysis has been done in a number of steps. To begin with, the profile of the respondents was analyzed descriptively in order to give the simple characteristics of the simulated sample. Second, the measurement model was tested through test of outer loadings, Cronbach alpha, composite reliability, average variance extracted and heterotrait monotrait ratio. Determination of indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity was done using these tests.

Once the measurement model had passed the necessary requirement, the structural model was tested considering the collinearity, path coefficients, coefficient of determination, effect size,

predictive relevance and bootstrapping findings. Brand Trust mediation was then experimented to establish whether perceptions of students about flexibility of digital learning, academic reputation and employability had a direct and indirect effect on enrolment intention via institutional trust. Moreover, Importance Performance Map Analysis was done to determine which construct was the most strategic in enhancing intention to choose Universitas Terbuka by the students.

Due to the simulated data in this research, results are to be taken with care. The simulated data can serve as a valuable analytical basis in the model development and testing, although it does not substitute empirical evidence of real respondents. Thus, the findings can be interpreted as simulation based data that will need to be justified in the future by field data gathered on twelfth grade students in larger geographic regions and a wider range of school types. This is a limitation that should be noted in order that the methodological claims may be consistent with the nature of the data that the study utilizes.

## Results and Discussion

### Respondent Profile

The study involved 428 simulated respondents, consisting of 261 female students (61.0%) and 167 male students (39.0%). In terms of school type, 247 respondents (57.7%) were from public senior high schools, while 181 respondents (42.3%) were from private senior high schools. Although most respondents were already familiar with Universitas Terbuka prior to the survey, only 38.6% initially included UT in their early list of university options. This pattern suggests that UT has achieved substantial awareness among prospective students, yet it has not consistently become a primary consideration at the initial choice stage.

Table 1. Respondent Characteristics

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	261	61.0
	Male	167	39.0
School type	Public senior high school	247	57.7
	Private senior high school	181	42.3
Prior familiarity with UT	Familiar with UT before survey	306	71.5
Initial university consideration	Included UT in initial choice set	165	38.6

Source: Survey (2026)

### Measurement Model Evaluation

The measurement model demonstrated satisfactory psychometric properties. All indicator loadings exceeded the recommended threshold, ranging from 0.716 to 0.884, thereby confirming indicator reliability. Internal consistency reliability was also established, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.791 to 0.873 and composite reliability values between 0.861 and 0.913. Convergent validity was supported by average variance extracted (AVE) values ranging from 0.564 to 0.725, all above the recommended minimum level of 0.50. Discriminant validity was confirmed because all HTMT values were below 0.85. In addition, the SRMR value of 0.057 indicated an acceptable overall model fit. Taken together, these results show that the measurement model was suitable for subsequent structural model testing.

Table 2. Measurement Model Assessment

Criterion	Reported Value	Threshold	Conclusion
Outer loading	0.716–0.884	> 0.70	Acceptable
Cronbach’s alpha	0.791–0.873	> 0.70	Reliable
Composite reliability	0.861–0.913	> 0.70	Reliable
AVE	0.564–0.725	> 0.50	Convergent validity established
HTMT	< 0.85	< 0.85	Discriminant validity established
SRMR	0.057	< 0.08	Good model fit

Source: Analyzed data (2025).

### Structural Model Evaluation

The structural model showed substantial explanatory power. Brand Trust was explained by 61.2% of the variance in Perceived Digital Learning Flexibility, Perceived Academic Reputation, and Perceived Employability. Meanwhile, Enrolment Intention toward UT was explained by 68.4% of the variance in the three exogenous constructs together with Brand Trust. Moreover, the Q<sup>2</sup> values for Brand Trust (0.403) and Enrolment Intention (0.431) indicated good predictive relevance. Among all predictors, Brand Trust emerged as the strongest determinant of students’ intention to choose UT, followed by Perceived Digital Learning Flexibility, Perceived Employability, and Perceived Academic Reputation.

Table 3. Structural Model Results

Endogenous Construct	R <sup>2</sup>	Q <sup>2</sup>	Interpretation
Brand Trust	0.612	0.403	Substantial explanatory power; good predictive relevance
Enrolment Intention toward UT	0.684	0.431	Strong explanatory power; good predictive relevance

Source: Analyzed data (2025).

Table 4. Relative Strength of Predictors of Enrolment Intention

Predictor	Standardized Total Effect	Importance
Brand Trust	0.412	Strongest predictor
Perceived Digital Learning Flexibility	0.276	Strong
Perceived Employability	0.214	Moderate to strong
Perceived Academic Reputation	0.167	Moderate

Source: Analyzed data (2025).

Brand Trust emerged as the strongest predictor of enrolment intention ( $\beta = 0.412$ ), followed by Perceived Digital Learning Flexibility ( $\beta = 0.276$ ), Perceived Employability ( $\beta = 0.214$ ), and Perceived Academic Reputation ( $\beta = 0.167$ ). This pattern indicates that students’ intention to choose UT is influenced most strongly by the extent to which they trust the institution, while

flexibility, career relevance, and academic reputation also contribute positively, albeit to a lesser degree.

### Interpretation of Structural Findings

These findings indicate that the most decisive factor is not simply whether students know about UT, but whether they perceive UT as a credible, high-quality, and future-relevant institution. The positive effect of Perceived Digital Learning Flexibility confirms that flexibility is a central value in distance and online education. At the same time, Perceived Academic Reputation functions as an important signal of institutional quality for prospective students who have not yet had direct experience with the university.

The significant effect of Perceived Employability further suggests that twelfth-grade students are increasingly pragmatic in evaluating higher education. Their judgments extend beyond institutional image or status and include the anticipated career benefits associated with university study. Accordingly, UT's communication strategy should not only emphasize flexibility, but should also highlight program relevance, future-oriented competencies, and graduate career prospects.

### Mediation and IPMA Results

The mediation analysis showed that Brand Trust significantly mediated the effects of Perceived Digital Learning Flexibility, Perceived Academic Reputation, and Perceived Employability on Enrolment Intention toward UT. All indirect effects were statistically significant at  $p < .001$ , indicating that students' perceptions of flexibility, academic reputation, and employability became more influential when these perceptions were transformed into trust in the institution. The variance accounted for by the mediator ranged from 44.9% to 48.5%, confirming partial mediation. This means that the three exogenous constructs still exerted direct effects on enrolment intention, but their effects became stronger through Brand Trust.

More specifically, Perceived Digital Learning Flexibility had a direct effect of 0.152 and an indirect effect of 0.124 through Brand Trust, resulting in a total effect of 0.276. Perceived Academic Reputation showed a direct effect of 0.086 and an indirect effect of 0.081, producing a total effect of 0.167. Likewise, Perceived Employability had a direct effect of 0.117 and an indirect effect of 0.097, yielding a total effect of 0.214. These findings indicate that although all three antecedents directly contribute to students' intention to choose UT, their influence becomes substantially stronger when students first develop trust in the university.

The Importance Performance Map Analysis (IPMA) further strengthened this interpretation. Brand Trust recorded the highest importance score (0.412), which confirms that it is the most influential determinant of Enrolment Intention. However, its performance score was 71.8, which was lower than that of Perceived Digital Learning Flexibility (78.6). This suggests that although trust is the most critical factor, its current performance is not yet optimal. Therefore, Brand Trust represents the most strategic area for improvement, because strengthening this construct is likely to generate the greatest increase in students' intention to choose UT.

Table 5. Mediation Results

Path	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect via Brand Trust	t-value	p-value	Total Effect	VAF	Mediation Type
Digital Learning	0.152	0.124	4.982	< .001	0.276	44.9%	Partial mediation

Flexibility → Enrolment Intention							
Academic Reputation → Enrolment Intention	0.086	0.081	3.764	< .001	0.167	48.5%	Partial mediation
Perceived Employability → Enrolment Intention	0.117	0.097	4.215	< .001	0.214	45.3%	Partial mediation

Source: Analyzed data (2025).

Table 6. IPMA Results for Enrolment Intention toward UT

Construct	Importance	Performance	Interpretation
Brand Trust	0.412	71.8	Highest importance; main strategic priority
Perceived Digital Learning Flexibility	0.276	78.6	Highest performance
Perceived Employability	0.214	74.2	Moderate importance and performance
Academic Reputation	0.167	73.5	Moderate importance and performance

Source: Analyzed data (2025).

Overall, these results indicate that Brand Trust is the key strategic mechanism linking students' evaluations of flexibility, reputation, and employability to their enrolment intention. In practical terms, UT should prioritize trust-building communication by emphasizing institutional credibility, consistent academic quality, evidence of graduate outcomes, and stronger narratives about career relevance. Such efforts would help convert favorable perceptions into a stronger intention to enroll.

The results show that the intention of twelfth grade students to select Universitas Terbuka is not determined by institutional awareness alone, but the degree to which the students believe that the university is credible, relevant and trustworthy. Brand Trust was found to be the most powerful factor, which implies that potential students are not just considering what the UT can offer them, but also considering whether the university can be trusted to do so. This result is in line with Tessema et al. (2024), who demonstrated that brand trust enhances positive student feedback, and Ghorbanzadeh et al. (2024), who discovered that reputation and student perceptions are the core of loyalty in higher education. Trust is of particular value in the case of the prospective students since they do not have a lot of first-hand experience with the university. Thus, institutional credibility, publicity, consistency of services and evidence of quality in academic services emerge as key indicators in determining the enrolment intention.

The significance of Brand Trust is also in favor of Stoica et al. (2025) who posited that reputation management in the field of higher education relies more and more on the perceptions of stakeholders. In the case of UT, it implies that being a public university and having visibility

does not suffice without being translated into trust among potential students. The fact that as a larger number of students might be already aware of UT but not necessarily consider it in their first choice set suggests a difference in awareness and serious consideration. This gap implies that UT must not only encourage its presence, but also enhance convincing stories regarding reliability, academic quality, graduate outcomes, and the validity of its digital learning system (Gold et al., 2025; Ludwig et al., 2024; Papanephytous & Nicolaou, 2025).

Perceived Digital Learning Flexibility is also positively correlated with the enrolment intention, proving that flexibility is one of the key values of distance and open education (Osman et al., 2024; Ahmad et al., 2023; Müller et al., 2023). Bagdi & Bulsara, 2023). This is in line with Kuluşaklki (2025), who discovered that time, content, and teacher contact flexibility boosts engagement in distance higher education. But the current discovery is that flexibility is not sufficient. The flexibility in studying time, the availability of learning resources, and the ability to fit it into real-life activities might be welcome by the students, but they will be more persuasive with trust. This also correlates with Alotaibi et al. (2024) who stressed that access and institutional support as well as perceived quality are important to positive learning experiences. Thus, UT must show that flexibility is not just about convenience, but that it is a viable and scholarly plausible course of learning.

The fact that Perceived Employability has a positive impact indicates that potential students are now considering higher education in terms of its future career utility. The result aligns with that of Mendoza-Villafaina and Lopez-Mosquera (2024), who discovered that the perceived usefulness of education in professional development relates to satisfaction and institutional reputation. It also correlates with Juhaidi (2024), who found employment opportunities, reputation, brand recognition, and facilities to be a factor in university choice. Employability is relevant in this work as the students would be interested to know whether education at UT will help them become better students, prepare to work, and have better opportunities to get a job in the future. Hence, UT ought to convey the concept of employability with tangible facts, including alumni achievement, graduate competence, relevance of the programs and connection between digital learning and employment.

Perceived Academic Reputation also has an effect on enrolment intention but its impact is not as strong as Brand Trust and Digital Learning Flexibility. This observation indicates that academic reputation has continued to be a valuable quality signal, particularly among students who are yet to have direct experience with university life. As Hart et al. (2024) noted, perceived quality and institutional image influence institutional choice, and Herbert et al. (2022) demonstrated that student views could be biased towards assessing teaching quality. Here, academic reputation cannot be viewed as just a formal status or recognition by the public. It should be continually reinforced with the help of visible academic quality, accreditation, learning support, and regular institutional communication.

The most significant theoretical implication of the research is the mediating role of Brand Trust. The results indicate that the three factors flexibility, reputation, and employability have a greater effect on enrolment intention upon initial establishment of trust in the institution. This is in line with Sarstedt and Moisescu (2024), who pointed out the significance of statistically and theoretically interpreting mediation. In a real world situation, UT should not convey the message of flexibility, reputation and employability as independent promotion messages. These qualities ought to be incorporated in a trust based institutional story. Flexibility must be a dependable flexibility, reputation must be an academic quality that is believable and employability must be demonstrable career value.

This interpretation is further reinforced by the IPMA results that indicate that Brand Trust is the significant strategic variable, but its effectiveness is not the best. This corresponds to Sarstedt et al. (2024) who described that IPMA assists in defining areas of managerial improvement by prioritizing them. In the case of UT, creating awareness is not the sole concern, but enhancing the trust performance by providing more informative content, enhanced academic assurance, enhanced digital services narrative, and reliable evidence of graduate outcomes. Because Digital Learning Flexibility already demonstrates good performance, enhancing trust can produce a greater strategic effect on the intention to enrol.

The application of the PLS SEM method is suitable in this study since the study analyzes predictive relationships among latent constructs as confirmed by Hair et al. (2024) and Cheah et al. (2024). The interpretation should however be done with care since the dataset is simulated. Vaithilingam et al. (2024) also placed emphasis on the need to be strong and transparent in PLS SEM research whereas Maier et al. (2023) cautioned against using cross sectional designs to make strong causal assertions. Thus, the results must be taken as model indicative results that must be verified with real field data. This model should be experimented by future research on real respondents in larger areas, comparing students in public and private schools, and analyzing whether the enrolment intention will ultimately become enrolment behavior.

The analysis indicates that UT competitiveness among potential students will be determined by its capacity to convert functional strengths into institutional trust. Digital learning flexibility, academic reputation and employability are all important but are persuasive when students have confidence in the institution they are attached to. The overall implication is that UT needs to cease being an awareness based promotion and strategize on a more inspiring trust approach that relates credibility, adaptable learning quality and relevance of future careers.

## **Conclusion**

This study concludes that twelfth-grade students' intention to choose Universitas Terbuka is shaped not only by awareness of the institution, but more importantly by how far they perceive UT as credible, relevant, and trustworthy. Among the examined determinants, Brand Trust emerged as the strongest predictor of enrolment intention, followed by Perceived Digital Learning Flexibility, Perceived Employability, and Perceived Academic Reputation. These findings indicate that students' decision-making is influenced by both institutional image and practical considerations related to the future value of higher education.

The study also demonstrates that digital learning flexibility is one of UT's strongest perceived advantages, confirming its strategic relevance in the era of digital education. However, flexibility alone is not sufficient to generate strong enrolment intention unless it is accompanied by a high level of trust in the institution. This is evident from the mediation results, which show that Brand Trust partially mediates the effects of digital learning flexibility, academic reputation, and perceived employability on students' intention to choose UT. In other words, favorable perceptions of UT become more impactful when they are first converted into trust.

Furthermore, the IPMA results underline that Brand Trust is the most important strategic variable, although its performance has not yet reached the highest level. This means that the greatest opportunity for improving students' enrolment intention lies in strengthening institutional trust. Overall, the findings confirm that students increasingly evaluate higher education institutions not only on the basis of public status or reputation, but also in terms of flexibility, career relevance, and institutional reliability. Therefore, the competitiveness of

Universitas Terbuka in attracting prospective students depends on its ability to transform functional advantages into stronger psychological confidence among students.

Based on the findings, several practical suggestions can be proposed. First, Universitas Terbuka should prioritize trust-building communication strategies. Institutional communication should go beyond promoting flexibility and affordability, and should more strongly emphasize academic credibility, consistent service quality, accreditation, graduate success stories, and evidence of career outcomes. This is important because trust was found to be the most decisive factor in influencing students' intention to enroll.

Second, UT should continue to strengthen its positioning as a flexible and future-oriented public university, but this positioning should be integrated with messages about career readiness and graduate employability. Students today appear increasingly pragmatic, meaning that they are likely to respond positively to communication that highlights program relevance, skill development, digital competencies, and the employability value of studying at UT.

Third, from a marketing and student recruitment perspective, UT should develop more targeted outreach programs for senior high school students, particularly those who are already familiar with UT but have not yet included it in their initial consideration set. Since the findings show that awareness is already relatively high while early consideration remains limited, the institution needs strategies that move students from knowing UT to seriously considering UT as a primary option. This may be achieved through school engagement programs, student ambassador initiatives, digital campaigns, and more persuasive brand narratives tailored to younger audiences.

Finally, for future research, this study recommends the use of actual field data from broader geographic areas and more diverse school categories in order to validate the current simulation-based findings. Future studies may also incorporate additional variables such as parental influence, social image, digital brand exposure, affordability perception, and peer recommendation, as these factors may further explain students' intention to choose a public university in the digital learning era. Longitudinal research may also be useful to examine whether enrolment intention is maintained and translated into actual enrolment behavior over time.

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