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Navigating Change

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Internationalization Strategies of Business Schools

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EMBRACING GLOBAL CONNECTEDNESS IN THE ERA OF COVID-19

In recent decades, business schools worldwide have sought to provide a truly global education, preparing students to lead in an increasingly interconnected world. For many schools, this international focus potentially opens doors to prestigious rankings and accreditations, attracts diverse faculty and students, enhances cross-cultural understanding, and fosters innovative research collaborations. However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 brought international activities to a sudden standstill. Borders closed rapidly as governments sought to contain the virus, leaving countless international students and staff scrambling to return home or be stranded abroad for months (Matthews, 2020). For business schools, this period was marked by uncertainty and tough choices; for instance, how to safeguard students while keeping operations running. This unprecedented challenge forced business schools to find new ways to maintain global partnerships, engage students through distance learning, and adapt to the realities of remote work. Were these challenges and changes a turning point for the internationalization strategies of business schools?

Despite the significance of these challenges, there remains a gap in research regarding how schools have navigated these complex changes. One international study investigated the pandemic's impact on the internationalization of higher education institutions, and provided broad insights drawn from large-scale survey responses (Marinoni et al., 2024). Other

works have focused on specific aspects of this impact, such as work by Osbaldeston and Kudrnova Lovera (2023), which examines the challenges faced by schools during the pandemic and discusses potential shifts in the practice and assessment of internationalization. Our study delves into the specific strategies and innovations employed by international business schools. Understanding these responses is crucial, as it can provide insights for business schools worldwide to build more resilient and adaptable internationalization strategies. By examining what was done and why, we can better grasp the extent to which schools can rethink and reshape their global education offerings in response to unprecedented disruptions.

This chapter presents a study that employs qualitative research methods to examine changes in internationalization strategies of business schools resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. We selected a sample of diverse schools in different countries with mature levels of internationalization to examine the topic. First, we contextualize the concept of internationalization through a review of the literature, and then present the methodological framework and research approach are presented. Empirical findings are showcased next, followed by our comprehensive analysis and interpretative insights. We then present our thinking about the future of internationalization. Ultimately, we aimed to uncover how strategies continue to evolve, offering deeper insight into the way schools are adapting to the current global landscape. By doing so we fill part of the existing research gap, providing new insights into the unique approaches and innovations adopted by international business schools during this period of rapid change.

UNDERSTANDING THE BIG PICTURE—INTERNATIONALIZATION: WHAT DOES IT REALLY MEAN?

A review of the literature reveals that while internationalization is considered an important dimension of many schools, there are differences in how it is defined and analysed. Confusion about the meaning of the term led Knight from the University of Toronto to examine the evolution of the concept and develop one of the most widely cited definitions, 'the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education' (Knight, 2003, 2). Knight's definition underscores that internationalization is a process and has a multifaceted nature.

In parallel, the term 'comprehensive internationalization' emerged in the mid-2000s and was popularized by the American Council on Education (ACE) through its various publications (ACE, 2002; 2005; 2006). ACE defines comprehensive internationalization as 'a strategic, coordinated

process that seeks to align and integrate policies, programmes, and initiatives to position colleges and universities as more globally oriented and internationally connected institutions'.[1]

Building upon Knight's foundational work (Knight, 2004), a study commissioned by the European Parliament in 2015 on the state of internationalization in higher education led to the reconsideration of the concept and expansion of Knight's definition, adding 'in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff and to make a meaningful contribution to society' (de Wit et al., 2015, 29). De Wit et al. add a purpose of internationalization in a definition still often cited today.

These widely used definitions acknowledge that internationalization is an ongoing process rather than a static goal. They include a normative element about the impact of the process on society. The European Parliament's definition focuses on the enhancement of education and research quality together with providing a meaningful contribution to society. Meanwhile, the ACE definition focuses on developing institutions that are resilient, inclusive, and just.

However, some scholars argue that these definitions are limited. Hawawini (2016) considers the standard definitions frequently cited in higher education, such as those by Knight, the European Parliament, and ACE, and argues that these are too focused on inward-looking criteria, which does not allow for a comprehensive consideration of the connections between an institution and partners in the global knowledge economy, lacking the dynamic process of reciprocal enrichment. In the case of business schools, Hawawini (2016) considers the criteria used by the *Financial Times* ranking of the top 100 global MBA programmes and observes that geographic location and market characteristics explain the prevalence of inward internationalization (and higher internationalization scores) in Europe.

Further extending the discourse, Mittelmeier et al. (2021) argue that past definitions of internationalization have led to a categorization of activities in binary terms, internationalization at home versus internationalization abroad, and that a third category of internationalization at a distance should be considered, given the rise in technology-supported opportunities. More recently, Marginson (2023) critiques Knight's definition of internationalization by arguing that it is too broad and lacks specificity, failing to account for the complexities and power dynamics inherent in the global landscape of higher education.

Different definitions provide complementary perspectives on the internationalization of higher education institutions. No single definition is sufficient to fully explain and support a comprehensive analysis of the process. Some authors explore the internationalization of schools through

specific models and formats adopted by institutions, while others consider multidimensional frameworks to support its analysis.

Evolving Strategies and Models of Internationalization in Business Schools

While business schools have faced challenges in defining effective internationalization strategies, numerous authors have explored the various formats and business models of internationalization in higher education. Ricart captured this uncertainty in 2011, noting then that 'we are still struggling to define the right business model in this important dimension. Twenty-five years of internationalization and the process is more open than ever' (Ricart, 2011, 552). This reflects a broader sentiment about the complexity of navigating internationalization.

Soliman et al. (2019) found that in the case of English business schools, internationalization strategies develop in various phases: an initial period in which initiatives are controlled by operational managers and are not featured in a university's strategy, a second period in which practices are managed by middle managers and mentioned in the strategy but not foregrounded, and a third stage in which it becomes a core strategic priority managed by senior managers. They also found that 'international strategy was deliberate in each strategic period, whereas it was emergent over a longer time frame of several strategic periods' (Soliman et al., 2019, 1421).

Hawawini (2016) describes five forms of international reach:

1. The import model: schools that bring the world to their campus
2. The export model: schools that send students and faculty abroad; online courses
3. Academic joint ventures: institutions located in different countries design and deliver programmes jointly
4. Academic partnerships, alliances and consortia: institutions that collaborate on various initiatives such as exchanges, joint programmes, research
5. Campuses abroad: establishing a physical presence abroad, temporarily or permanently

Osbaldeston and Kudrnova Lovera (2023) discussed the various models of internationalization among EQUIS-accredited schools and the structure behind the model:

- Full internationalization at home: single school
- 'Sister' schools: dual schools

- 'Founding' or 'fledgling' schools: new school in a developing country/region
- Joint venture: new school formed by two or more partners
- Multi-campus/global network: multiple/interlinked schools
- Selected partnerships/global alliance: multiple/network of schools

Frameworks for Evaluating Internationalization in Higher Education

Various frameworks for internationalization analysis and support exist. The ACE Model for Comprehensive Internationalization (ACE, n.d.) is structured around six target areas to advance the Teaching-Research-Service missions of institutions:

1. Institutional commitment and policy
2. Leadership and structure
3. Curriculum and co-curriculum
4. Faculty and staff support
5. Mobility
6. Partnerships

Another framework is provided by EFMD's Quality Improvement System for international business schools, EQUIS. To help assess the degrees of internationalization, EQUIS developed a multidimensional model with 12 areas grouped into four broad categories: policy, content, context, and network (EFMD Global website, accessed July 2024).[2]

Policy

1. Strategy
2. Recognition/reputation
3. Governance/advisory board

Content

4. Curriculum/learning resources
5. Research and development
6. Competencies

Context

7. Faculty/visiting professors
8. Students/exchanges/alumni
9. Professional staff

Network

10. Executive education/clients/recruiters
11. Alliances/partners
12. Activities abroad

The EQUIS model offers a structured and comprehensive approach to analyse internationalization in business schools. Each of the 12 areas can be assessed on a low-medium-high scale and mapped in a spider diagram in order to provide schools with a concrete tool to assess their current state or progress over time. These models and frameworks demonstrate the complexity and diversity of internationalization efforts in business schools, providing a rich foundation for analysis.

This section has presented definitions of internationalization, various formats, and frameworks for analysis. It acknowledges the multidimensionality of internationalization and the diverse perspectives through which it can be analysed. By capturing these essential elements, we proceed with the study of the changes observed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

BEHIND THE SCENES OF OUR STUDY

As we saw in the last section, there is no universally accepted definition of internationalization among business schools. However, based on existing definitions and contributions, we distilled the essential elements to guide our analysis. Our aim was to identify and understand the changes in policies, processes, and initiatives within the functional areas of business schools: teaching and development, research and innovation, and various services and activities.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented a unique opportunity to observe how business schools responded to a crisis, particularly in areas directly impacted by lockdowns and travel restrictions. To explore the shifts in internationalization strategies of business schools in this period, we adopted a qualitative approach, which allowed us to understand how the schools' decisions were shaped by the specificities of their context. Our research unfolded in three phases, each designed to gather detailed insights into these changes.

Phase 1: Identifying Initial Changes

In the first phase, we aimed to capture a broad view of the landscape by conducting a literature review alongside qualitative interviews with deans

and associate deans from a diverse range of business schools. The review of existing literature allowed us to understand the existing body of research on internationalization in higher education. It helped identify commonly used definitions and approaches by universities and business schools, as well as the main topics addressed.

Building on this foundation, our interviews focused on identifying shifts in internationalization processes and initiatives in response to the COVID-19 lockdowns. This phase helped us understand the initial challenges and responses, focusing on government regulations and school policies, as well as changes concerning students, staff, programmes, alliances, and other activities during the pandemic. We gathered insights into the challenges schools face, such as navigating government regulations and adapting to new operational realities and explored how schools initially adjusted their policies and priorities. This provided a foundational understanding of the immediate impacts of the pandemic on internationalization efforts and set the stage for further exploration in subsequent phases.

Phase 2: Tracking Strategy Evolution Over Time

In the second phase, we conducted follow-up interviews three years later with some of the participants. These interviews allowed us to track the evolution of their internationalization strategies over time and identify any shifts in priorities or new challenges that emerged. By engaging with the schools throughout this extended period, we captured a wide range of responses and adaptations, providing a rich understanding of how diverse factors such as geographic location, institutional size and structure, and governance influenced their actions and initiatives. This inclusive and longitudinal approach ensured that we gathered a complete picture of the ways business schools responded to the pandemic. It also allowed some reflection from school leaders on the decisions made during the peak of the crisis, as well as an assessment of the long-term effects of some changes.

Phase 3: Analysis and Synthesis of Internationalization Strategies

The third phase involved a comprehensive analysis and synthesis of the data collected in the previous phases. We aimed to identify new or different initiatives that sustained internationalization at each school. This phase allowed us to identify common themes and patterns, as well as unique approaches that could serve as inspiration for other institutions. This analysis provides valuable insights into the evolving nature of internationalization

strategies in business schools and highlights the factors contributing to their resilience and adaptability during the pandemic.

Given the annual and multi-annual nature of higher education cycles, this project spanned several years, starting in 2021 and concluding in 2024. The study employed a qualitative research method, collecting data from semi-structured interviews with top business schools around the globe during the post-COVID period (starting in 2021 with a follow-up in 2024). Each business school agreed to participate in the longitudinal study, allowing us to track changes over time and understand how business schools adapted their strategies and structures throughout different stages of the pandemic.

The Schools in the Spotlight

Several characteristics were considered when selecting the schools for the study. We sought to look at institutions where internationalization is a central element of their activities and strategic vision. Thus, we considered the purpose of internationalization at each institution (e.g. fostering global connections among institutions, elevating colleges and universities to a global level, enhancing the quality of higher education, and impacting society). Furthermore, all selected schools are five-year EQUIS accredited institutions, the highest possible accreditation in a system that uniquely requires schools to meet a standard on internationalization. Although this focus on accredited institutions might introduce some bias, it ensures that the schools under analysis are actively and intentionally engaged in international activities at a high level. Indeed, all the schools studied have a clear international strategy.

Furthermore, we sought to capture the experiences of a wide range of schools across various contexts. Diversity within the sample was intended to explore the unique challenges faced by schools and how various school characteristics may influence decisions during the pandemic and its aftermath. Therefore, to understand the context of the changes and initiatives observed, we outlined several key characteristics of the schools and their potential implications:

- **Geographic location**: The campus location can affect access to international networks and partnerships.
- **Institutional structure**: Whether a school is stand-alone or part of a larger university can influence its governance, autonomy, resources, and strategic priorities.

- **Campus configuration**: The existence of single or multiple campuses, along with their locations, can impact a school's global reach and operational complexity.
- **Ownership type**: Public versus private ownership can affect funding, autonomy, and international collaborations.
- **Size**: The number of core faculty and students offers insight into the scale of operations and capacity for undertaking international initiatives.

Keeping these characteristics in mind allowed us to better understand how internationalization manifests across different business schools and the factors that may influence its implementation.

A brief description of each school will follow to provide context and support the understanding of our findings.

Skema Business School (France)

A private higher education and research institution under the status of a non-profit association, SKEMA was born in 2009 from the merger between Ecole Supérieure de Commerce de Lille (ESC Lille) and CERAM Business School, Sophia Antipolis. The importance of internationalization is clear in its mission of being a 'global school that prepares the business talents of the 21st century—responsible, mobile, multicultural, entrepreneurs with abilities to manage information, data and knowledge'. It has nine campuses spread along five continents (one in Brazil, one in the United States, one in South Africa, two in China, one in Dubai, and three in France), and an innovation centre in Canada. As of December 2022, SKEMA had nearly 11,000 students and 200 faculty. The school offers programmes at all education levels. SKEMA campuses pursue the same objective: to offer students a multicultural experience combining academic and international professional experiences. The school has a long-lasting international approach, evidenced by its initial accreditation by EQUIS in 2006 as ESC Lille.

School of Business, American University Cairo (Egypt)

This is a private business school and is one of five schools housed by the American University in Cairo, an independent not-for-profit higher education institution accredited in both the United States and Egypt. The university was established in 1919, and the roots of the School of Business date

Table 6.1. CHARACTERISTICS OF SCHOOLS IN THE STUDY

School	Geographic Location	Institutional Structure	Campus Configuration	Ownership Type	Size (faculty and student numbers as of 2022)
SKEMA	France	Stand-alone	Multi-campus (9) - several countries	Private	F-200 S-11,000
School of Business, American University Cairo_AUC	Egypt	Stand-alone	One campus	Private	F-100 S-1200
Peter B. Gustavson SoB, University of Victoria	Canada	University-based	One campus	Public	F-60 S-1500
Imperial College	UK	University-based	Multi-campus (2) - same city	Public	F-95 S-2500
QUT Faculty of Business and Law, Queensland University of Technology	Australia	University-based	One campus	Public	F-1000 S-11,500
Escola de Administração de Empresas de São Paulo da Fundação Getúlio Vargas-EAESP	Brazil	Stand-alone	One campus	Private	F-240 S-3600

back to 1947. AUC School of Business was accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business in 2006, becoming triple-accredited in 2014 following its accreditations from EQUIS and AMBA (Association of MBAs). The school offers undergraduate and graduate degrees as well as executive education programmes. In December 2022, the school had 1,236 students, including 1,052 undergraduate students and 184 graduate students, in addition to 114 faculty members, including 61 full-time and 53 part-time. AUC School of Business was recently renamed AUC Onsi Sawiris School of Business.

AUC is committed to internationalization. The school states on its website, 'The internationalization strategy of the school is built on the principles of a Connect, Diversify, Glocalize (CDG) strategy whereby we connect the Middle East Africa region and the world, foster an intercultural learning experience, as well as produce and disseminate international knowledge for the benefit of the region'.

Peter B. Gustavson School of Business, University of Victoria (Canada)

A public, not-for-profit business school belonging to the University of Victoria, the school was first awarded EQUIS accreditation in February 2007 and has since maintained the quality label. The school offers programmes at all education levels and views internationalization as one of its strategic pillars. The Gustavson School of Business is intentionally small in numbers, and in 2022 had nearly 1,500 students and 60 regular faculty members.

Imperial College Business School (UK)

Part of Imperial College London, a public research university dedicated to science and technology, the school has two campuses in London and offers undergraduate and postgraduate education including an MBA, master's degrees in specific subjects, a PhD, and executive education. In 2022, Imperial College Business School had approximately 2,510 students and 95 full time faculty members.

The school has long held an international approach, having been internationally triple-accredited since 2012. In its strategic 2018–2028 document, the school reveals its strategic vision to 'be a world-leading business school with a diverse, engaged and supportive research and learning environment that leverages technology and entrepreneurship to benefit businesses and improve society'.

QUT Faculty of Business and Law, Queensland University of Technology (Australia) is

One of five faculties of the Queensland University of Technology, QUT is a public research university located in the coastal city of Brisbane. The QUT business schools include the QUT Graduate School of Business, as well as four discipline-focused schools: the School of Accountancy, the School of Advertising, Marketing and Public Relations, the School of Economics and Finance, and the School of Management. As of December 2022, QUT Faculty of Business and Law enrolled a total of 11,500 students and employed more than 1,000 faculty. It was the first Australian business school to earn triple-crown accreditation.

Escola de Administração de Empresas de São Paulo da Fundação Getulio Vargas (EAESP FGV) (Brazil)

EAESP FGV is a private higher education institution. It offers programmes from undergraduate, and master's to doctorate, offering courses in business administration and public administration. The school belongs to the Getulio Vargas Foundation (FGV), with its main office in Rio de Janeiro and a presence in São Paulo and Brasília. EAESP FGV offers educational programmes in over 100 cities in Brazil through a network of affiliate partner institutions, with executive education and MBA programmes in several areas of knowledge. FGV has 11 schools and 2 institutes dedicated to education. The EAESP is one of these schools and in 2022, registered approximately 3,600 students and 240 faculty members. Internationalization has long been part of EAESP's strategy. The school was triple-crown accredited in 2004.

STRATEGIES IN A SHIFTING LANDSCAPE

This section presents schools' key initiatives to navigate the evolving educational landscape. These include embracing digital transformation, forging new partnerships, and expanding the internationalization of their curricula. Additionally, schools placed a strong emphasis on student and faculty satisfaction and well-being, supporting these groups through a variety of programmes and policies. Management approaches were also adjusted to enhance decision-making processes and leverage lessons learned from past experiences. These findings illustrate the diverse ways in which schools responded to the pandemic, highlighting their efforts to sustain internationalization goals.

Digital Transformation

All schools reported a significant boost in digital adoption and transformation. This included substantial investments in technology and accompanying support for faculty and students. Beyond facilitating remote teaching and learning, several insights can be gleaned from the digital transformation that occurred during and after the pandemic. The digital shift enabled schools to pursue key internationalization objectives in novel ways.

Accessing New Markets

The adoption of technology for distance learning and the digitization of processes that were traditionally conducted in person and on paper have opened up opportunities to recruit students from regions that were previously inaccessible. For instance, AUC transitioned its executive education to a hybrid model, enabling entry into new markets across Africa, and reported planning to create more hybrid courses to support entry into those markets. Similarly, EAESP introduced hybrid formats at the start of programmes to support the transition of students from new regions and countries. Integrating a hybrid portion into its programmes was accompanied by additional support from the school to help students find housing and ease the transition to an eventual in-person format. The school also changed its mode of delivery for the school entrance exam, which unexpectedly increased participation and broadened the geographic diversity of applicants. The online exam format will be retained to maintain the benefits of a wider, more diverse applicant pool, provided it aligns with government regulations.

Accessing New Partnerships

The increased regularity of online activities reduced the resources needed to engage with partners in other parts of the world, enabling schools to establish connections with a wider range of institutions. AUC, for example, strengthened ties with universities across Africa, which in the past could not engage due to the resources required from those institutions for travel. While travel remains an option, the initial establishment of partnerships online has allowed for a broader focus, considering new partners within the same continent for schools in Africa and Latin America.

Distant and Hybrid Modes

Initially, all schools moved to online programme delivery. Some, like Imperial College, invested heavily in technology and were convinced that they would never go back fully to face-to-face. Meanwhile, QUT, with a decade of experience in postgraduate online education, saw no major disruptions to existing online programmes but had to expand its operations to cover all undergraduate and postgraduate programme offerings, which required a significant investment. SKEMA, for instance, eventually abandoned the hybrid format for most degree programmes but retained some online options, such as for executive training. Gustavson, traditionally a face-to-face provider, successfully launched an online programme in partnership with a Polish university (COIL) during the pandemic, and subsequent offerings followed.

Student and Faculty Satisfaction and Well-Being

Schools implemented various strategies to enhance student and faculty satisfaction and well-being, particularly during challenging periods of government-imposed campus closures. Initiatives included open campuses, enhanced support systems, and new learning opportunities to attract and retain international students and faculty, ensuring their needs were met both during and beyond the pandemic.

Attracting and Retaining International Students

Government policies on campus closures posed challenges for schools in attracting international students. SKEMA successfully retained international students due to a government policy that allowed them to keep the campus open. Imperial College introduced a student enhancement package, allowing students whose international experiences were disrupted to join a later cohort on an international experience within the next three years. The school has also created new online experiences that students can join even after graduation. EAESP faced student anxiety about returning to class and even saw demonstrations from students. Competitor decisions about opening up their campuses earlier affected these expectations of their students. In Australia, QUT faced a closed border policy and recognized the lack of government support for international students and filled the gap by providing additional support, including emergency bursaries and meals. Gustavson managed to retain some international students through

its Co-op internship programme, with a dedicated staff that placed more students in internships during COVID than before, thanks to increased market demand.

Student Well-Being

SKEMA launched the SKEMA Care initiative, which considers the learner's satisfaction and experience. This has allowed them to better understand the learning needs, as well as the physical and social needs of students. International students were provided with hot meals and protected from isolation. SKEMA Care was developed with specific KPIs to assess performance on the learning experience of their students at all campuses. QUT moved all student support systems online, allowing for better monitoring and expansion of in-demand services. Creating welcoming environments for international students remained a priority for the school. Imperial College engaged closely with the Student Advisory Council to ensure student perspectives were considered during the implementation of changes.

At SKEMA, the focus on student well-being remained beyond the pandemic. Student support played a critical role that has led to the redesign of the Students Affairs Office into a new Student Experience Office, ensuring the same student experience across borders.

Attracting International Faculty

Attracting international faculty was already challenging for EAESP due to Brazil's economic and political situation. The crisis exacerbated this challenge, with some faculty leaving. However, the shift to online teaching created new opportunities for the school to recruit international faculty, as remote lecturing became an attractive option.

Supporting Faculty

Schools provided various forms of support to help faculty adapt to new teaching platforms and methodologies. Imperial College offered training to help faculty become comfortable with new online platforms and garnered their support for the shift to digital during the lockdowns. EAESP addressed the impact of the pedagogical changes by reducing teaching loads to allow time for adaptation and providing counsel and support. Gustavson introduced moderators to support online teaching and student experience.

Moderators ensured that the technology was working properly and interacted with students if any tech problems emerged. In addition, after the first lockdown, there was different anxiety from faculty and students about returning to the classroom. This prompted the introduction of additional mental health support for all. QUT had a design studio that created individual modules that anyone could use to learn, and design teams were available to provide direct support. In the first month, they had significant demand for their services, but this lessened as people acquired the necessary skills to use the new technologies on their own. AUC introduced the Happy School Initiative, focused on three elements: 'the Soul' to inspire and motivate for collaboration, innovation, and productivity; 'the Body', emphasizing people's health; and 'the Mind', promoting mental well-being.

Changes in Management Approach

In response to the pandemic, schools adapted their management approaches by prioritizing short-term decision-making and establishing crisis committees to handle rapidly changing situations. Institutions leveraged lessons from past crises to enhance their ability to quickly implement effective strategies, ensuring smooth operations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Evolving Decision-Making Processes

Initially, schools reported the need for short-term decision-making. Schools were uncertain about the length of the crisis and were apprehensive about making long-term decisions, thus they opted for adaptation decisions on a daily basis. Schools were cautious about setting expectations and emphasized the importance of clarity and communication. Crisis committees, like those at Imperial College and SKEMA, met frequently to make daily decisions. Schools within larger universities also found that central leadership took more control, with committees set at the university level. Gustavson faced challenges when the University of Victoria suspended all international activities, leading to dissatisfaction among business school students who lost their international experiences. In addition, as the students changed their preferences over destinations, the school maintained its criteria for selecting international partners but expanded its network, including more partners from Europe and Latin America. QUT also saw some of its decision-making move to the university level, as the university sought to protect resources and ensure compliance with regulations.

Leveraging Lessons from Past Crises

The speed at which schools were able to adapt differed. Prior experience in managing crises helped some schools adapt more quickly to the challenges posed by the pandemic. AUC, for instance, leveraged lessons from nine years before, when Egypt went through a period of social, economic and political turmoil. The university was shut down and had to rapidly move classes online. Following that experience, the school prepared the necessary infrastructure for a future crisis, which eased its transition to online during the COVID crisis. Faculty and support services were prepared. QUT also relied on its experience managing a previous flooding crisis to guide its response to the pandemic; however, the COVID crisis added a layer of uncertainty in terms of its duration and a new health dimension. The school used its experience to guide its response particularly in terms of technology, people, teams and process management.

UNPACKING THE INSIGHTS

This section presents the insights derived from the analysis of the schools' strategies. One key finding was the significant influence of the national and institutional contexts, which often constrained or shaped what the schools could or could not do. These contexts forced schools to navigate the repercussions of their decisions while continuing to deliver their programmes. The shift to online learning across all the daily activities required extra investments in technology and support systems. In addition to this increased investment, the well-being of students, faculty, and staff emerged as a critical dimension to consider. The experiences during lockdowns and the subsequent return to campus provided valuable lessons about building resilient and supportive communities.

The Context: Navigating Constraints During the Pandemic

During the pandemic, schools operated within the constraints imposed by their respective universities and national contexts. The strategic decisions regarding campus access for international students—such as allowing them a place to stay during the day or providing a warm meal—were primarily determined by governments, followed by universities, with schools being the last to implement these regulations. This top-down decision-making process left many schools with little autonomy, severely restricting their ability to make independent decisions.

Notably, even though business schools are among the most internationally diverse, they were excluded from the decision-making process concerning restrictions on access for faculty and students. Consequently, schools were left to manage the repercussions of these strict access controls without having been part of the initial decision-making process.

The pandemic also highlighted the broader economic and social impact of internationalization within higher education. The national context exposed how deeply intertwined international students are with local economies. For instance, at QUT, the departure of international students significantly reduced the local workforce, demonstrating the critical role these students play not only in the education system but also in the community's economic well-being. This example highlights the significant ways in which internationalization impacts communities, beyond the academic realm.

The constraints imposed by national and university contexts were far more limiting than what the individual schools would have chosen if they had been given the freedom to decide or if they had been involved in making the decision. National policies had a greater impact on schools' operations than whether a school was independent or privately owned. It is particularly noteworthy how schools were constrained by school infrastructure limitations and daily operational decisions in responding to the new challenges posed by the pandemic. This underscores the importance of context in shaping the strategic responses of educational institutions.

These findings illustrate that institutional responses vary significantly based on their unique national and local contexts. Schools in less restricted countries may exhibit different initiatives compared to those in more constrained environments. Similarly, institutions in easily accessible regions versus those in distant or isolated locations, or those in large countries with extensive internal markers versus smaller nations, will face and respond to challenges in varied ways. Understanding these contextual differences is necessary to understand the diverse strategies adopted by schools and for anticipating how future crises might be managed. This perspective helps us appreciate the importance of context in shaping the strategic responses of business schools.

Accelerated Investment and Sense of Need

An unsurprising yet noteworthy outcome of this study was the rapid pace of investment and digital transformation across all schools. While some schools scaled their existing offerings, others undertook significant transformations of their infrastructure. We observed a substantial investment

of resources—both financial and human—towards digital transformation, and these efforts proved highly effective. Schools moved quickly because of the urgent demands of the situation; however, without this pressing need, such changes might not have been initiated or even anticipated.

Schools adapted to online teaching with remarkable speed. Faculty members quickly adjusted to delivering courses online, and students swiftly adapted to distance learning. The transition, though fast, was generally smooth. Many schools implemented support mechanisms to facilitate this shift, assisting faculty in adopting new technologies, designing and producing teaching materials, and effectively conducting online sessions. These efforts helped ensure a mostly seamless experience for both faculty and students.

International faculty found new ways to engage, with increased opportunities for participation in mixed forums and invitations to various events. However, these changes did not significantly change the fundamental modes of course delivery.

Prioritizing Well-Being During Uncertain Times

During the pandemic, schools universally emphasized the well-being of students, faculty, and staff as a central concern. Signs of fear, isolation, panic, depression, and loneliness were monitored, with many schools implementing initiatives specifically designed to support the mental health of their students. These initiatives went beyond traditional counselling, as schools became aware of the vulnerability and mental strain on students and created new supports. Schools adopted a more attentive approach to student interactions, both during online classes and on campus, to ensure that any signs of distress were promptly addressed. In some cases, this was also made available to faculty and staff.

The pandemic underscored the vital role of universities as centres of social interaction, holding significant responsibility for the well-being of not only their students, faculty, and staff, but also their broader community—including partners, the local community, and families. This responsibility became even more pronounced in the face of international uncertainties and challenging environments.

Reflecting on their actions during this period, school leaders acknowledged that in hindsight, they should have prioritized the human aspect of their community more. Many expressed the belief that they could have done more to support the well-being of students, faculty, and staff, rather than focusing primarily on infrastructure and pedagogical concerns.

The social role of schools, particularly in the context of international experiences, became even more significant during this time, highlighting the importance of fostering a supportive and connected community.

Strengthening Community Connections

The pandemic offered lessons in three dimensions of community. First, it underscored the critical importance of placing students at the centre of international strategy. This involves prioritizing students' experiences, well-being, and exposure to different cultures, and recognizing how being far from their home can amplify these experiences. The focus on students became even more essential as they navigated the challenges of distance and isolation.

Second, the crisis highlighted the importance of communicating clearly with the internal community, comprising students, faculty and staff. Schools often took certain needs for granted, such as assuming that it was sufficient that everyone had a computer, when in reality, a good internet connection was the essential requirement for participating in a class or meeting. Or, when resuming after the lockdown, many schools did not adequately address the fear and anxiety of returning to campus. This reluctance to re-engage with normalcy became a crisis in itself, catching some schools off guard. This lack of communication left parts of the community feeling unsupported and unprepared for the transition back to in-person activities.

Third, the shift to distant interactions with both existing and new school partners revealed the potential for nurturing remote communities. Schools discovered that effective research, teaching and collaboration could extend beyond geographic boundaries, opening up new opportunities that had not been previously considered. The ability to form and sustain these distant connections demonstrated how technology could facilitate global collaboration, despite a physical separation. And although the technology for remote collaboration existed before, it was only during the pandemic that people became truly comfortable using it. This shift has had a lasting impact on how schools and their local communities interact, further emphasizing the evolving nature of community in a post-pandemic world.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Our study provided insights into the various decisions and initiatives taken by business schools at different moments of the COVID-19 pandemic. It highlighted the short-term limitations faced by institutions and how they

navigated these challenges through adaptation and change. Additionally, we were able to gather post-crisis reflections from some of the interviewees, offering a deeper understanding of how past actions are shaping current decisions and the potential shifts in the internationalization landscape.

While internationalization may not have changed dramatically, the recent crisis has offered valuable lessons. This section explores key themes of geopolitics, ecology and the future of teaching and learning. We conclude the section with a diagram (Figure 6.1) that summarizes the dimensions already discussed.

The Significance of Internationalization

Despite the global shock of COVID-19 on schools worldwide, one thing remains clear: the fundamental purpose of internationalization in business education has not changed. Strong institutions continue to view internationalization as a core element of their strategy, and this perspective was not altered by the pandemic. The commitment to fostering global connections and enhancing the quality of education and research remains as strong as ever.

With international networks expanding to include new and diverse partners, internationalization now carries even greater significance. This expansion promotes more inclusive international communities, enriching the overall impact of internationalization efforts. Engaging with diverse cultures and perspectives allows people to develop global competencies and intercultural skills, enlarging their potential contribution to society. The pandemic has brought to light the importance of placing people at the centre of internationalization efforts to help ensure that academic and cultural experiences remain meaningful but also supportive of individuals' well-being. This focus may also foster more resilient strategies that are better equipped to withstand and adapt to future crises.

Geopolitics: Strategic Choices for Global Partnerships

The lockdowns demonstrated the potential for forming partnerships in different regions, as the need for constant travel and face-to-face meetings diminished. As an example, business schools in Africa and Latin America considered new partners in their same regions rather than seeking them in other continents. The pandemic fostered a more inclusive approach to collaboration, emphasizing openness to diverse partners, regardless of their geographic location or financial standing.

After the pandemic, geopolitical events continue to influence internationalization choices. Geopolitics will remain a crucial factor in decisions regarding faculty and student mobility, as well as in the choice of campus locations. These decisions may originate from the schools themselves or be shaped by government policies and international relations constraints.

Just as lockdowns did not stop internationalization efforts, neither will geopolitical events. Schools, faculty, students and entire communities will continue to adapt to these evolving conditions.

Ecological Considerations in International Strategy

Geographic destinations for internationalization are increasingly influenced by international relations, but also by ecological concerns related to long-distance travel. While ecological considerations are beginning to shape internationalization patterns, their influence is still in its early stages. Students and faculty look for the positive value of mobility. Ultimately, international mobility needs a balance of resources used and the value created by bringing together people with different cultures and perspectives. Although recognized as important, ecological factors have not yet significantly impacted the actual decisions of students or schools regarding internationalization. Currently only a few are weighing the environmental versus the social impact. We expect to see more schools do so in the future.

The Pandemic and the Future of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

As we have seen in other industries, the digital transformation was boosted by the pandemic. The same is true in higher education. Just as business practices have evolved, so too has the landscape of teaching and learning. There is now a natural acceptance of online meetings among researchers, faculty, staff and students. However, the pandemic also underscored the importance of physical presence on campus, which remains essential for the academic community. Social interaction is crucial for both learning and well-being. This dual approach—embracing both digital and physical environments—will likely continue to shape the future of education and of internationalization.

The pandemic prompted significant changes in programme delivery methods, increasing accessibility through online platforms while highlighting the differentiation and value creation of face-to-face formats.

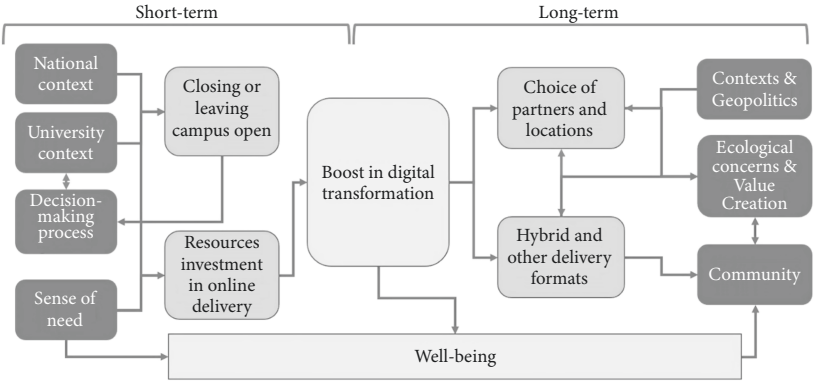

Figure 6.1: The short- and long-term impact of the pandemic on the internationalization of business schools

The outreach of executive education also expanded, with a shift to hybrid formats, increased collaboration with partners and companies, and greater accessibility for students from diverse geographies. This broader reach enabled distance learning to flourish at an unprecedented pace.

But what have institutions learned on top of enlarging the executive and post-grad market through good and well-designed online programmes? What changes are booming in the more demanding face-to-face courses? New generations of students are expecting more dynamic and innovative approaches. Artificial Intelligence will certainly have a role in the new developments of both digital and in-person learning formats.

Internationalization decisions are increasingly shaped by the context in which they are made, with geopolitics and national contexts playing a significant role. However, in the realm of higher education—and business schools in particular—preparing professionals for an increasingly uncertain and volatile environment requires the development of different skill sets. Internationalization provides a fertile ground for such a development and holds the potential to create impact in the communities involved. In this study, we have observed schools at mature levels of internationalization, and we anticipate the same to be true even in the early stages of a business school's internationalization journey.

The pandemic revealed that even the most traditional and change-resistant institutions, such as universities, can adapt when driven by a compelling need for change and a commitment of resources. Despite the widespread adoption of digital tools, there were no significant breakthroughs in innovative instructional technologies. But the current world

situation requires more change in higher education. Internationalization can play a role in driving this change.

At the heart of internationalization should be a focus on people—understanding the skills societies will need and how those needs are evolving. Designing international strategies around these insights will not only impact the school's community and its partners but also contribute to long-term sustainability.

NOTES

1. ACE website, https://www.acenet.edu/Pages/default.aspx, accessed April 2022.
2. https://www.efmdglobal.org/wpcontent/uploads/EQUIS_Standards_and_Criteria.pdf

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