



Silver linings

Internationalisation, accreditation and the pandemic - Michael Osbaldeston and Adriana Kudrnová Lovera look at the potential benefits that may emerge from the current challenges

The internationalisation of higher education has been on the agendas of national governments and university leaders around the world for decades, but the topic has achieved greater prominence in recent years due to the increasing realisation that universities have a responsibility to prepare students for leadership roles in a global world.

There are different reasons for this: the issues faced by employers are increasingly global; companies and NGOs are increasingly organised internationally with a global focus; and students have increasingly been taking an international perspective when choosing where to study, often deliberately choosing to go abroad.

Greater international awareness of issues such as climate change, geopolitics, poverty, inequality and radicalisation has enhanced the international debate within the academy and led us to re-examine the ways in which internationalisation is conceptualised, systematised and operationalised within the strategic development of most universities.

While the current coronavirus pandemic has been a profound shock to many of these strategies, traditional approaches to international education already faced challenges due to concerns about sustainability, environmental impact, elitism and other ethical considerations.

What is internationalisation?

Knight's 2003 definition of internationalisation as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education" has been widely applied.

More recently, Knight acknowledged that her original definition has the weakness that *"traditional values associated with internationalisation such as partnerships, collaboration, mutual benefit and exchange are not articulated – only assumed."*

The description was thus expanded, with the addition of *“in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff and to make a meaningful contribution to society”* (by De Wit).

There is an increasing focus on how internationalisation contributes to outreach, social responsibility and engagement, but a recent European report (TEFCE) notes that *“in the absence of prioritising engagement over research excellence ..., some universities have failed to develop the appropriate infrastructures to translate the knowledge they produce into the range of contexts ...”*

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Assessments of internationalisation have generally focused on structural issues such as relevant research and publications, student and faculty diversity, international partners and networks, and international corporate connections. Yet there is an argument for rebalancing attention towards processes that are more outcome-related, with more focus on the development of international relevance and outreach.

Internationalisation of management education

Although there have been university-based business schools for over a century, it is only in the last fifty years that they have become one of the major success stories in higher education, both from an academic perspective – faculty, research and publications – and a business one – customers, revenue and profitability.

In recent decades, business schools have spread rapidly from North America through Europe to Asia and beyond, currently numbering over 15,000 worldwide with new additions being launched almost daily, particularly in emerging economies.

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Yet despite this success, there has also been increasing criticism in recent years, fuelled in part by the frustrations of the global economic recession. Business schools have been charged with being too analytical, insular and theoretical; insufficiently global, integrative and collaborative; and lacking in values, ethics and social responsibility.

It is hardly surprising, then, that many leading schools have increasingly turned their attention to internationalisation to expand their reach and demonstrate their worth. In addition to the global issues that affect higher education generally, faculty and students in management education tend to be more mobile internationally,

and while they accept higher costs they also expect higher benefits (for example, some MBAs are the highest-priced but also the most sought-after Master's degrees in the world).

As management education has become increasingly competitive, it has become crucial to use internationalisation to enhance the differentiation, with an array of different international strategies being employed. At the same time, management research disseminated through journal publications, books, case and learning materials, has become increasingly cross-cultural.

Internationalisation and accreditation

The accreditation of management education started over a century ago with a focus on North American schools, later followed by other programme accreditation systems limited to specific countries.

It was not until the 1990s that the growing demand for a European approach to accreditation led the European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD, originally founded in 1971) to seize the initiative and work towards the launch of the [European Quality Improvement System \(EQUIS\)](#) in 1997.

EQUIS was designed to provide business schools in Europe – and later worldwide – with a rigorous tool to assess and improve quality in all aspects of their operations. Over a relatively short period of time, EQUIS has enabled an elite group of institutions (currently 191 schools in 45 countries) to state with confidence that they are part of the *“1% of leading business schools.”*

It was not long before EFMD also launched the European Programme Accreditation System (EPAS) in 2005 – recently rebranded as [EFMD Programme Accreditation](#) – with 120 programmes currently accredited at 89 institutions across 35 countries.

After more than twenty years of continuous development, the *Financial Times* stated that five-year accreditation from EQUIS is now regarded as “*the gold standard*” for international business school accreditation.

EQUIS aims to recognise quality and promote quality assessment in the world’s best business schools – through the award of a quality label that is valued worldwide by students, faculty, employers and the media (having now become a prerequisite for entry into some prestigious rankings) – and also recognise improvement through the need to meet and continue to achieve internationally agreed quality standards.

From the start, EQUIS was conceived as an accreditation system rooted in respect for diversity of institutional and cultural contexts. It does not promote any ‘one best model’ of a business school, but rather embraces higher education at all levels without imposing standardisation of programme design, course content or delivery mode.

However, it is also firmly grounded on several transversal issues, one of which is looking for an international dimension throughout a school’s activities.

Although EQUIS was originally designed within a European context, it has also recognised the dilemmas that result from applying universal standards in widely differing international contexts and the system has thus evolved to ensure that it can be applied in all regions of the world, especially in rapidly emerging economies.

The criterion of ‘respect for diversity’ is a particular case in point. While EQUIS is designed to promote diversity of all types, it also inevitably reflects the nature of diversity encountered within its originating geographical region. Assessment of quality begins with an understanding of the particularities of the local context before progressing to assess international application across all dimensions and thus ensuring it is possible to recognise top-level business schools in Europe, Asia and the Americas.

However, this inherent flexibility does not imply any lowering of expectations regarding quality standards because of local constraints. Rather it is a feature of an assessment process capable of accepting wide differences in the organisation and delivery of management education across the world.

At the heart of EQUIS accreditation is an issue which has engendered continuous debate since its foundation: exactly what is meant by the term 'internationalisation' and how best do we assess it?

Internationalisation has often been perceived as being reflected in the mix of nationalities amongst students and faculty, together with advisory board members, partner schools and recruiting organisations.

While a school's cultural diversity, measured by nationality, is, of course, important, a much deeper understanding of internationalisation results from an assessment of how a school has adapted its education and research to an increasingly global managerial world (and, an issue which we will return to later, how a school responds to unexpected international shocks such as the current global pandemic).

Further, deeper evidence of the degree of internationalisation can be reflected, for instance, by research that explores international challenges, education that incorporates an international curriculum and is accessible across the world, and exposure that encourages international mobility and employment.

In the same broader context, other more recent developments such as the growth of joint programmes in business schools, the dissemination of online learning methodologies, the establishment of satellite campuses, increasing institutional collaboration and partnerships, and the emergence of mergers and other forms of restructuring (many of which have taken place across international boundaries) all need to be considered if we wish to understand and assess this complex and multi-faceted concept.

A broader interpretation of internationalisation

In order to assist academic leaders and accreditation reviewers alike in assessing the degree of internationalisation of a business school, EQUIS developed a model (first launched in 2018) which encourages us to think beyond nationality mix and incorporate a wider range of international measures, grouped into four broad categories:

- **Policy** issues influencing the whole school
- **Content** aspects of the learning and development process
- **Context** issues resulting from the experience of the various stakeholders, and
- Elements of the wider **network** to which the school belongs

Each category encompasses three further dimensions (all included within the EQUIS Quality Profile). When assessed on a simple low/medium/high scale, these produce an overall profile of the extent of a school's internationalisation, together with its relative strengths and areas for further improvement.

This model (which has become colloquially known as the 'Spider Diagram') also enables a school to demonstrate its international quality improvement journey over time with past vs present profiles, or to illustrate its future international strategic objectives with present vs planned future profiles.

Policy

1. **Strategy** – does the school have a well-defined strategy for internationalisation together with plans and resources for its implementation?
2. **Recognition/reputation** – what is the competitiveness, recognition and ranking of the school in international markets?

3. Governance/advisory board – is there an international dimension in the school's governance and advisory system?

Content

4. Curriculum/learning resources – what are the international perspectives, content and resources of the school's qualification and executive education programmes and how is the learning made accessible/disseminated internationally?

5. Research and development – what are the international scope, dissemination and recognition of the school's R&D?

6. Competencies – are global-mindedness and cultural sensitivity developed, is language learning provided and is English widely used for learning materials, teaching and publication?

Context

7. Faculty/visiting professors – what is the intercultural and experience mix of core, adjunct and visiting faculty?

8. Students/exchanges/alumni – what is the intercultural mix of degree-seeking and exchange students and the international spread of alumni?

9. Professional staff – is there an international/partnerships/exchanges office with an intercultural mix of professional staff?

Network

10. Executive education/clients/recruiters – does the school have international corporate links with clients/employers, including international companies with domestic offices?

11. Alliances/partners – what is the quality of the school’s international academic partners, strategic alliances and professional networks?

12. Activities abroad – what is the school’s level and quality of internationalisation outside its home country, such as satellite campuses, joint programmes and franchised provisioning (where applicable)?

Although participating schools have generally welcomed this broader interpretation of internationalisation within the EQUIS (and EPAS) accreditation system, there continue to be ongoing pressures to redefine standards, introduce new areas of assessment and continuously evolve processes to reflect and even anticipate developments in management education; none more so than in the context of the current coronavirus pandemic.

As was announced at the [EFMD 2020 Deans’ Conference](#), the Quality Services team is currently using external sources and EQUIS data to further research and publicise the benefits and challenges of internationalisation.

These relate to schools becoming more international, the intersection of internationalisation and the ethics, responsibility and sustainability transversal standards, and the diverse strategies which schools adopt to increase their internationalisation in widely different national contexts and regions.

The research findings will be used to identify new opportunities and strengthen current dimensions of internationalisation, to raise awareness of the challenges and potential pitfalls of becoming more international, to highlight successful strategies to internationalise despite local limitations and to disseminate illustrative case studies drawn from schools around the world.

In addition, a Digitalisation Task Force has been established, with the support of an Internationalisation Working Party, to draw on the experiences of EQUIS Deans from across the world in relation to the benefits of digitalisation for international management research and education and the consequences of online learning for students and faculty.

This project may also lead to an evolution in the language of internationalisation towards 'participation and experience' and away from ideas of 'enrolment and exchange'. The current and rapid transition seen in many business schools from a classroom to a virtual learning environment necessitated by the pandemic will also have major consequences for how we understand internationalisation.

Internationalisation strategies

More than twenty years of accreditation experience drawn from across the world has clearly demonstrated that there is no 'one best model' for internationalising a business school. Rather there are a variety of successful strategies, depending upon the scope, size, resources and location of a school (as illustrated by the briefcase examples 'boxed' throughout this text).

However, some of these approaches may be more affected than others by the constraints imposed by the current pandemic, especially approaches that rely heavily on international recruitment and exchange of students and faculty across borders.

While it is too early to assess whether these will become permanent barriers, some schools are responding to the current context by re-evaluating the long-term viability of their internationalisation strategies and searching for new opportunities.

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These schools have developed a truly international community where no single nationality predominates. Others, perhaps originally based in a single European location, chose a different path, establishing a subsequent 'sister' school in a different geographical region.

Here, students and faculty can be recruited initially to either site and then move seamlessly between the dual locations to experience the contrasting cultural settings. Another option is schools which have invested in supporting fledgeling institutions, often located in developing countries, with financial, human and managerial resources, then withdrawing at a later stage once the new school has gained sufficient strength and independence.

A variation on this latter model is an international joint venture where an established school or foundation in one region of the world initiates a joint project with one or more other partners, working together to build a new institution from scratch in another region in order to enhance management education provision globally.

A more complex multi-campus strategy involves establishing a global network of interlinked campuses, either on a stand-alone basis or in partnership with other schools in each region, where students can be globally

mobile, transferring from one location to another to complete their studies on the basis of international credit accumulation.

Faculty may contribute to research and teaching in any or all of the locations or choose to develop their careers by periodically moving between locations.

A somewhat less complex model involves selected partnerships where an independent school chooses to work with a variety of international partners (often using their accreditation status for selection) to develop different activities such as research networks, joint programmes or student exchange facilities.

Some of these partnership programmes are now so well established that they are assessed as delivering a higher quality of education than any one of the partner schools could provide alone.

Yet another option is independent schools which may choose to be nationally based but internationally open, by encouraging an influx of international exchange students and visiting faculty and promoting overseas faculty secondments to build an ever-changing international community.

The demand from Chinese and Indian students, in particular, to study abroad, especially at postgraduate level, has encouraged many schools in Europe and Australasia to expand internationally on this basis.

Internationalisation: current and anticipated effects of the pandemic

The onset of the coronavirus pandemic raised new questions about current approaches to internationalisation. Efforts to contain the spread of infection, including domestic lockdowns, international travel restrictions and

campus closures, have left many international students in limbo, while many institutions have adapted quickly to continue their activities online.

This rapid transition to virtual learning which can then be disseminated worldwide, accompanied by pedagogical training for faculty to support the revision of their teaching methodologies, are to be applauded. Yet at the same time, many international and exchange students have sought greater safety and security by returning to their home countries.

In tandem, accreditation bodies, ranking agencies and business school associations have been sharing experience and best practices in response to this educational disruption in order to provide a 'collaborative platform of knowledge and solidarity'.

Beyond these short-term impacts, institutions are now grappling with the implications for some internationalisation strategies, in particular those which focus on the international mobility of students and faculty.

Prior to the pandemic, many universities, particularly those in Australia, the UK and the USA, were becoming increasingly dependent on income from international students, who in some cases pay higher fees than their local counterparts. Figures published in January 2020 show that in 2017-2018, Chinese student fees provided £1.7 billion GBP to UK higher education institutions, comprising around five percent of all income.

Institutions with a large percentage of international students risk a major loss of tuition fee income due to the pandemic, with a decrease in international student enrolment.

For example, the world-renowned London School of Economics, like many schools, has invested heavily in international recruitment, has a student body of more than two thirds international students and could stand to lose a substantial proportion of its fee income if enrolments were to drop significantly.

A March 2020 survey from Studyportals found that a majority of prospective students (73 percent) who had planned to enrol in courses abroad in the following six months were continuing with the same study plans; the remaining students (27 percent) were considering postponing their studies or enrolling in online courses.

A more recent survey in October 2020 by *Times Higher Education* found that over 50 percent of prospective international students are considering changing their plans and now wish to postpone their studies or study in a different country. More than half of the students surveyed were not interested in studying online, and 53 percent still hoped to travel abroad for their studies in the near future.

Whether prospective international students will choose to study locally in the future remains uncertain. However, it is possible that the pandemic, together with other factors, may indeed change the flows of students to different countries.

In August 2020, a survey by IIE found that more than half of 520 US institutions have seen a decline in international student applications in 2020 compared to the previous year, and some experts are warning that higher education institutions in the US may see a minimum 30 percent decline in international student enrolment in the coming academic year.

In addition to the restrictions of movement across borders imposed by the pandemic, students intending to study abroad could be put off by ever tighter visa requirements, a backlog of visas to be processed, and 'unwelcoming' or

even discriminatory experiences reported over recent months by foreign students in some countries. Furthermore, the perception that some countries have better managed the pandemic may also sway student plans.

Countries such as New Zealand and Australia may increase their share of international students globally as a result of their relatively successful containment of the virus. Other anglophone countries such as Canada may also benefit from their more liberal immigration and post-study regulations.

Whatever the short-term problems, some commentators have suggested that a 'silver lining' may emerge for business schools from the current challenges. The business education ecosystem may develop its own immune system, with more flexible, innovative and collaborative international strategies.

Schools may become more resilient, more relevant and better prepared for future disruption, while students may be more open, more selective and increasingly flexible in how they plan their international management education. ■

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