

**THE CHALLENGE OF GLOBALISING HIGHER EDUCATION:  
A LATIN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE**

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*During the last decades, the term internationalisation has become a concern in all higher education institutions around the world. This paper explores the key issues regarding the importance and implications for such institutions to effectively become international from a Latin American viewpoint. By scrutinizing aspects like information vs. formation, conception of knowledge, development of innovative programmes, cultural awareness, quality of instruction, the role of instructors and the mobility of both students and professors; this document also aims to bring answers that may help faculty members face the imminent change towards an accurate global performance of business higher education institutions.*

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*En las últimas décadas el término internacionalización se ha convertido en un tema preocupante para todas las instituciones de educación superior alrededor del mundo. El presente documento analiza, desde la perspectiva latinoamericana, los elementos claves en relación a la importancia e implicaciones para tales instituciones con miras a ser internacionalmente efectivas. A través del escrutinio de aspectos como información vs. formación, concepción del conocimiento, desarrollo de programas innovadores, competencia cultural, calidad de la enseñanza, el rol de los maestros y la movilidad tanto de alumnos como de profesores; este escrito intenta también dar respuestas que ayuden a los académicos a enfrentar el inminente cambio hacia un verdadero desempeño global de las instituciones de educación superior.*

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**Key words:** *international education; formation; cultural awareness; students mobility; business program; globalization; instruction*

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## BEYOND NATIONAL BOUNDARIES

Globalisation, as the process of liberalisation of markets, intrinsically and necessarily implies mobility and deployment of people across borders. This *process* is imminent and unavoidable; therefore becoming international is to a certain extent inevitable. The level of connectivity among nations is stronger than ever and both individuals and societies need to communicate with the rest of the world in a more assertive way. As a result of this progression institutions are rapidly learning and implementing strategies to survive. But this fear to succeed though is probably what makes the internationalisation process even more predictable.

Business programmes are no longer concentrated in local economies and communities. Business courses obviously deal with market liberalisation practices; and consequently such programmes play a key role if we compare with other disciplines. Likewise, undergraduate and graduate business schools face the same predicament. But what does it really mean to become international? What do new generations of students request from their universities and the programmes they offer? What do higher education institutions need to do in order to satisfy the demands? What is the future of business education?

## INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS PROGRAMMES: INFORMATION VERSUS FORMATION

We live in an era of excessively abundant *information* but surprisingly, every so often insufficient *formation*. The dilemma is how to select and classify such information, transfer it into knowledge and pass it on. Data are endless and new professionals need to have the capability of bringing all received information into context in order to acquire the knowledge. Both students and scholars have to be able to apply such knowledge and re-transmit it as new information to others. The key element here is communication. How we transmit this information and how it is perceived by the receiver is crucial for the conception of new knowledge. This becomes more relevant for business students when communicating with people of other nationalities.

Leadership plays an important role in this process of internationalisation of business education, and teachers must, at this point, prove their ability to help, assist, facilitate and guide. An international study programme is a way of communication because teachers and students exchange, share, discuss and generate knowledge that will later on be transmitted to other business communities. Alumni will go out and make decisions based on what they have learned and experienced; decisions that will change things somewhere

else, decisions that will modify practices and situations; and by simply doing this they are already shaping the future.

A high-quality and prominent business programme, an influential programme that may help outline the future has to provide a sound and stable source of information for the students. Attendees provided with such frame are more likely to get through the cognitive process of reasoning and reflecting, which is the base for their future decisions. Once the students are able to obtain knowledge they should be able to apply it, innovate and finally decide. Before that, we cannot properly talk about *formation*. We can summarise this with the following equality statement:

INFORMATION + REASONING + APPLICATION = FORMATION

### **WIDE-REACHING EDUCATION: THE PARADIGM OF INTERNATIONALISATION**

The notion of international higher business education suggests that global institutions must concern themselves with the economic, commercial, trade, business-related and social outcomes of their decision-making. The development of new technologies has allowed counterparts to share points of view. Social polarisations, segregation and the non-stopping growing population are becoming a concern that makes us reflect about the idea of not being able to fit in our own planet.

International Politics is driven by individuals who change state foreign policies as they change their mood. Religions still struggle to understand and tolerate each other. Corporations face the pressure of being socially responsible. Well, higher business education institutions have enormous impact on societies. Hence having such institutions address the subject of internationalisation as the challenge to create “true” business leaders for the future is so important. Proficient, talented and competent managers are urgently needed since internationalisation comes along with enormous doses of vulnerability and exposure, perhaps even defencelessness for many nations.

J. Stewart Black says that the development of globally capable leaders should be a top priority in all companies.<sup>1</sup>

*“To formulate or implement strategic plans for the 21st century effectively, managers and executives must be able*

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<sup>1</sup> J. Stewart Black (1999). *Globalizing People through International Assignments*. Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc.

*to focus on the unique needs of local foreign customers, suppliers, labour pools, government policies, and technology, and at the same time, on general trends in the world marketplace”<sup>2</sup>*

Although the author refers the real business world as a top priority for all companies, the formation of new business leaders must be a priority in all higher education institutions as well. And such purpose should be reflected in every single business programme offered. The enhanced linkage between business schools and companies can help students from the earliest stages of their careers to become familiar with the expectations of corporations. Internship programmes integrated with international business courses will represent a precious dividend for students who really wish to learn from foreign experiences and take advantage of studying abroad.

Universities should be driven by intellectuals who are capable of anticipating the future and properly adapt according to the fast-changing circumstances. The educational world gets connected mainly through institutions. Business schools communicate with each other and make agreements, collaboration accords and strategic alliances.

Business programmes have proliferated with an extensive variety of subjects to choose from. Summer schools are emerging every year as part of academic plans in many universities to attract good students from remote places who can add value to the course. New consortiums are being created and they offer international instruction for students coming from everywhere.

With the enrolment in education abroad programmes at record numbers, colleges and universities continue to add new programmes to meet the demands of students, faculty and institutional administrators. At the same time, they face a delicate balance between filling the programmes with enough students to sustain them while maintaining or even trying to improve programme quality.<sup>3</sup>

## **UNIVERSITY AND BUSINESS INSTRUCTION**

Higher education institutions are demanding more innovative and creative ways of teaching, conducting and helping young people to acquire business knowledge —solid and reflective understanding— the application

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<sup>2</sup> J. Stewart Black (1999). *Globalizing People through International Assignments*. Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc.

<sup>3</sup> NAFSA. Association of International Educators. *International Educator. Quality and cost in education / JUL-AUG (2006) p.24*

of which will produce measurable results in terms of improvement and progress for the economic society. Universities have to ensure and guarantee well-conducted business teaching practices and innovative methodologies, supported and validated by competent authorities from both, educational institutions and corporations.

In the era of globalisation, society, as a complex system composed of smaller systems, where many of them act as autonomous organisms that constantly modify the outline, require from universities a structural reform towards internationalisation. In Germany, for example, as well as in other European countries, some universities are facing the decline of students' matriculation and are forced to receive students coming from other parts of the world in order to uphold the number of places and thus, in addition retain their budgets. Also in Japan, universities in rural areas have been facing serious problems because of the decline of enrolments, threatening thus many small institutions.<sup>4</sup> Some scholars attribute this also to the low quality of instruction.

*“Enrolment quotas are one of the most conflicting and problematic concepts in the Japanese higher education system, especially for private institutions. Quotas exist for all types of institutions and seem not strictly enforced by the government. However, the amount of subsidy to private institutions depends explicitly on whether the programme complies with the approved educational conditions, including enrolment. Institutions with a 50 percent lower enrolment rate than the approved quota are likely to face the suspension of government subsidy for not fulfilling the initial promise”.*<sup>5</sup>

Latin America, on the contrary, has a deficient public higher educational offer to satisfy the demand of all business oriented students. Only in Guadalajara —Mexico's second biggest city— about 60% of the state university applicants are rejected because of insufficient places.<sup>6</sup> Mexico is the most populated Spanish speaking country in the world, and the formation of new professionals in this field is a real concern for the authorities. Jocelyne Gacel-Ávila, in her book “La Internacionalización de la Educación Superior” (The Internationalisation of Higher Education), addresses the issue of educating new and competent professionals in countries where systems and technological levels considerably differ from

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<sup>4</sup> NAFSA Association of International Educators / International Educator / JUL 2006 p.16

<sup>5</sup> NAFSA Association of International Educators / International Educator / JUL 2006 p.17

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.comsoc.udg.mx/gaceta/paginas/355/355-4.pdf>

those in developed countries. Gacel-Ávila proposes the internationalisation as a strategy of specific qualities to respond to the educational needs.

*“The internationalisation of education, from its fundamentals, philosophy, pedagogy, and objectives, is presented as a reachable educational alternative for educational institutions to adapt to the new global context. The internationalisation of education will allow the transmission, spreading and production of knowledge according to our times and with the needs of the universal society, preparing graduate students capable to perform professionally and socially within the global system framework, characterized by globalisation, interdependence, competitiveness and multiculturalism”.*<sup>7</sup>

Business education and all what it implies in terms of administration, operation and bureaucracy up to the commencement of new graduate students, as well as the creation and spreading of knowledge through research publications, must get through a thorny transition process. Today’s business world requires more qualified managers than what the institutions are able to produce.

## **INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION AND CULTURAL AWARENESS**

We cannot talk about becoming international without referring to cultural differences and how to deal with them. Learning how to understand other cultures is learning how to understand ourselves. The four basic elements of culture: language, religion, time perception and use of space, may radically differ from one country to another and both teachers and students should be aware of this. A solid knowledge of another culture is quite valuable in a world that becomes more and more multicultural. Tolerance —the respect we have for other’s points of view— is a key word in the route of internationalisation.

It is undeniable that culture influences the way people make business. It is in our mind-sets the way we communicate, the way we inform, the way we perceive information, in summary, the way we negotiate. It is our mental programming that dictates how we express things and the manner in which we express those things determines, in most cases, the outcome of the negotiation. Because of that, international business programmes should necessarily include courses on cross-cultural management and intercultural

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<sup>7</sup> Gacel-Ávila, Jocelyne (2003). *La Internacionalización de la Educación Superior. Paradigma para la Ciudadanía Global*. Universidad de Guadalajara. p.58

communication in their study plans. A firm knowledge of business management without a proper cultural awareness base might have overwhelming and even demoralising results. Hence being culturally intelligent is very important.

*“Successful interaction with people from other cultures is the heart of cultural intelligence. Knowing facts about another culture is helpful, but your approach cannot be only academic or intellectual; you need to know how to interact successfully with people”<sup>8</sup>.*

International executives should be determined to work on their cross-cultural communication skills and be able to transmit information to both supervisors and subordinates. Developing mutual trust and using effective listening and understanding is essential when negotiating with foreign customers or counterparts.

#### **INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

At a workshop conducted by the Asia-Pacific Programme of Educational Innovation for Development, the UN officially recognised the importance of education for sustainable development, being one of the main goals to facilitate interaction among institutions (faculty and students) as well as support to improve the quality of teaching around the world.<sup>9</sup> This is, perhaps, the clearest example of the strapping and unavoidable link between educational institutions and governments. Educated societies, therefore educated nations, are stronger legal entities that can positively influence and carry out the necessary steps towards a more stable and prosperous life for the community members.

Institutions of higher education are, to a certain extent obliged to be socially responsible, as well as any other corporation that owes its communities its own existence. It is more a question of value than a norm since education implies rather a way of being than a simple technique to provide information and transfer knowledge. Business education is a question of values since personal criteria are involved as individuals who teach are involved. Special emphasis is placed on business ethics. Only when we consider universities as entities that norm business instruction based on the same values that the society and professional world demand, then we can talk about a steady business educational system.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.hurights.or.jp/asia-pacific/044/05.html>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.hurights.or.jp/asia-pacific/044/05.html>

## **THE INTERNATIONALISATION OF BUSINESS STUDY PROGRAMMES**

Universities in Latin America are taking a serious look at their curricula and implementing the necessary changes to respond to worldwide demands, but there is still a long way to go. Institutions around the globe ought to offer more business courses which are adapted to satisfy the needs of international students who attend their campus on an exchange basis. For instance, the establishment of regional consortiums is a growing tendency among the NAFTA members and such associations effectively fulfill the very nature of mobility and internationalisation of programmes. The mobility of students and teachers across nations as well as the implementation of up-to-date course contents provides priceless experiences for future management professionals. Internships in foreign companies/countries, as well as overseas research assignments, contribute enormously to the objective of internationalisation.

As long as faculty individuals are alert to the importance of internationalisation, they will feel responsible for planning and implementing international executive programmes in their institutions, in order to increase business management educational proposals. Academic people must be in charge of deciding what to teach, how and who. There is neither room nor time for subversive interests or bureaucratic practices that slow the process anymore. Many universities in Mexico and Latin America, especially private universities, are aware of this and are rapidly becoming proactive, more receptive, and more responsive to this matter.

Universities in Latin America are developing strategies to extend and build new partnerships with foreign overseas universities in order to offer their students and teachers wider possibilities of exchange. This is particularly noticeable among business faculties due to the fast-growing economies in the area. The two biggest and most important emerging economies in the region, Brazil and Mexico, embrace alone a population of almost 300 million.

However, given the circumstances of our current world in terms of international politics, national security and immigration, education in general becomes also an issue of foreign policy for many countries, which can sometimes become an obstacle. The attitude of a country towards the acceptance or rejection of international students has a direct impact in the perception of both teachers and students prepared to go abroad. For example, during the last couple of years, the number of Mexican students who want to do an exchange semester in the United States has considerably decreased due to the difficulties of obtaining a visa. This has resulted in an increased interest in going European universities instead, even when the



costs of living may be higher. But the issue here is the cost of the decreased interaction between US and Mexican universities.

### **THE ROLE OF PROFESSORS IN THE TRANSITION TO INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION**

Parallel to students exchange and mobility, there must be a dynamic network of international educators who are competent, talented and skilled, but above all, who are willing to teach abroad and who are able to use other languages for instruction. Teaching overseas not only brings benefits for the attending students at the foreign university, but also to the local students who profit from the experiences acquired by the professor during an academic assignment as visiting lecturer. In the same way, teachers benefit from such experiences to enhance their competitiveness and deepen their knowledge by learning from foreign colleagues and counterparts, and taking advantage of new research resources.

International educators, by simply teaching a lecture in a foreign country, involuntarily help the system and process of harmonising global higher education. Indirectly, international professors contribute to the cultural awareness and ease the process of becoming more sensitive to other cultures. Students who learn from a foreign professor will bring their new and likely innovative knowledge home and influence other members of their own community.

International lecturers must be equipped with all kinds of tools and didactic methods in order to be able to compete and succeed outside their own institution and, above all, with a proactive and open attitude for dealing with new environments.

### **THE ROLE OF STUDENTS WITHIN THE PROCESS OF INTERNATIONALISATION**

A group of foreign students —from diverse cultural backgrounds— attending private universities in Guadalajara, Mexico were interviewed and asked their opinion about the impact of international business programmes according to their own experiences abroad. The result of the survey was quite homogeneous in terms of perception and expectations as future professionals. They all consider that higher education institutions should keep on enhancing academic exchange projects between business faculties in order to ensure survival. A Dutch student from the University of Groningen refers to the future of business programmes and their impact with two keywords: increased *competition* and *internationalisation*. He suggests

that the student population in Europe is decreasing and therefore universities will have to compete more internationally in order to attract international applicants to guarantee enough number of students. He believes that the labour market will become increasingly competitive because companies will tend to recruit more in the whole market which makes it harder to obtain a good job for students. Therefore students will try to look for the best education in order to survive in this market. This will lead to more quality competition between universities and the need for better quality rankings as well. Besides this, he assumes that companies will be interested in students with more international experience which obviously obliges universities and students to become more international.

Another student from the same university perceives his current study exchange as a great experience of life, for several reasons: at first it gives students the opportunity to learn something about a totally different culture. In addition only learning from a book or from being on a holiday in a country, foreign students have to adapt to the new culture and deal with a different language, different customs, etc. in a daily life basis. It also requires to leave behind ones own life he or she is used to for a longer period, with respect to family and friends, house, etc. These characteristics of a study abroad experience will definitely have a positive influence. One learns how to look at things from different perspectives and to perform in an international world among other things. He believes these abilities can be of value for the rest of his life.

Students find also interesting to be taught business courses from a different perspective than the one they are used to at their home universities and to meet people from a wide range of countries who all have their different thoughts about common subjects. For example, certain business subjects might be viewed upon totally different by a European, an American, a Mexican or a Chinese person. This is what adds the value. International students accept as true that in a globalising world, it is becoming crucial to have an international study experience, especially as a student in the field of international economics/ business. This often will also be appreciated by companies who are looking for new employees and with a study abroad experience.

## **POLICIES AND STRATEGIES OF INTERNATIONALISATION**

The Centre for International Research and Innovation (CERI) along with the Mexican Ministry of Education has conducted remarkable studies about the internationalisation process, emphasising quality through strategic alliances. The primary goals of this centre are literally: (1) to promote and support the development of research activities in education and carry them

out in suitable cases, (2) to promote and support pilot projects aimed to introduce and test innovations in the education system and, (3) to promote cooperation between member nations in the field of research and innovation.<sup>10</sup>

Thanks to organizations like CERI and the Institute for Management in Higher Education from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), higher education institutions in Mexico and Latin America have already started the process of internationalisation with first-class norms.

### **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

Higher education plays then a fundamental role in shaping the future of business. Innovative, diversified and broadening management programmes contribute positively to the bottom-line, bringing benefits to the society in terms of growth and development expectancy.

Beyond the endorsement of dialogue among institutions out of their own country, the transition process to become international necessarily implies: an educational system restructure, the internationalisation of the curriculum, the exchange of students, teachers' mobility and cultural awareness programmes.

Higher business education institutions must work on the design of international teacher profiles. Institutions should also implement training programmes and incentive professors to have ambitions for broader stages. Temporary assignments in other distant universities bring valuable outcomes in terms of diversification and improvement of domestic practices.

Internationalisation clearly presents new opportunities but also confrontations and risks. Some universities have already experimented important changes in this regard, more specifically in the way they conduct their strategies regarding internationalisation. This is not about offering more courses but harmonising quality standards of education and offering innovative curriculum in order to be internationally competitive.

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<sup>10</sup> [http://www.sep.gob.mx/wb2/sep/sep\\_4980\\_centro\\_para\\_la\\_inves](http://www.sep.gob.mx/wb2/sep/sep_4980_centro_para_la_inves)