

Internationalisation is a high-priority issue for business schools but **Anna Blombäck, Yvonne Carlisle, Andrew Gaudes** and **Ulrich Hommel** ask if they are reacting in the right way

## **Business education:**

# International Learning '4.0'



**I**nternationalisation is a high-priority issue for business schools as they seek international applicants for their degree programmes, source faculty talent globally, interact with non-academic stakeholders abroad and establish campuses overseas.

In this article we challenge whether business schools undertake such activities for reasons and in ways that are conducive to international learning for students. Based on the notion that an international dimension is essential for management education and student learning, we elaborate why current practices are not fully capturing the potential benefits.

We then turn to the organisation of international learning, initially in a more traditional context and subsequently by exploring how current sector dynamics can act as an accelerator for further innovation and development. The underpinning conjecture is that international learning would benefit from an "Industry 4.0"-type transformation.

Internationalisation involves a process of integrating an international perspective into the purpose and legitimacy of management education. More concretely, international learning intends to develop competencies in students that enable them to manage in culturally diverse environments. They are acquiring the ability to perceive, analyse and utilise cultural differences in pursuit of well-defined business objectives.

By extending the boundaries of personal comfort zones beyond cultural divides, students are transformed into international citizens. As such, they become sought-after graduates due to their ability to reflect and articulate the competencies required to help organisations succeed in the international arena.

International learning is conventionally described and managed in structural terms such as geographical diversity in the classroom (with regards to origin of both students and faculty), international curriculum and case study work, and student mobility.

In addition, proxies such as international partnership portfolios – including reputable

business schools and multinational organisations – are used to verify the international standard of management education.

But what often appears missing is a more explicit understanding of what internationalisation means in the context of learning; that is, moving beyond coverage of different geographies in the facilitation and management of learning outcomes, which all too often suffers from institutional decoupling.

Intercultural mix in the classroom will not automatically lead to an adequate amalgam in terms of learning; a good track record of graduates entering international management careers could also be related to personal attributes rather than the learning experience provided by the school. The ultimate litmus test is whether students are acquiring the ability to manage effectively in diverse cultural contexts.

How, then, can business schools successfully transform their approach and secure an influence on this particular aspect of students' learning?

We are proposing to turn the described practice on its head and apply a framework that borrows from the well-known structure-conduct-performance paradigm.

At its core is "conduct", which represents the design of the learning activity (the "doing"); this needs to be supported by "structure", implying the supply and diversity of learning resources ("inputs"); and should lead to some form of measurable "performance" ("outputs").

Assurance of learning serves as a glue between these components, ensuring systematic reinforcement and also supporting the interlinkage between programme objectives and institutional strategy.

Ultimately, the three elements of content, pedagogy and assessment must be aligned as interrelated components. Curriculum design must allow for the cultural contextualisation of academic methodologies and practical narratives, which needs to be facilitated with targeted learning activities, for example involving cultural immersion (such as study tours, group activities, mentoring and internships).

Activities that are typically deemed extracurricular and all too often off the radar screen of programme management, can equally assume central importance (foreign language training, exploration of social and business contexts overseas, as well as foreign art, music and folklore).

Faculty, staff and other stakeholders involved in degree provision need to embrace an intellectual immersion experience that offers and affords the same learning path as their students. Often, though, these stakeholders are caught in a complexity where management on the basis of crude proxies is considered state-of-the-art.

Organisational inertia and limited rewards (financial or otherwise) have prevented a stronger focus in the proposed direction. This is likely to change as "Industry 4.0" principles put pressure on business schools to transform management education and to accept the role of prospectors who disrupt – through the embracing of new advanced technologies with increased focus on the facilitation of students' skills and competencies - rather than that of reactors who wait to be disrupted.

As we are moving to what we refer to as "International Learning 4.0 business school" physical space and geography are becoming marginalised in importance. Taking the "Wow Room" at IE (a Spanish business school) as an example, virtual classrooms can create an in-class experience comparable to face-to-face instruction.

Virtual work spaces coupled with modern communications media that our students have been born into can facilitate project work carried out by geographically dispersed students (this article, has for example been written using Google Docs, which allowed all co-authors to work on the same document simultaneously).

Technology-induced shrinkage of distance promises to increase cultural diversity in business schools and the workplace, thereby making competencies of dealing with cultural differences even more important. It is not only the competencies of the student that is a consideration here. It is also those of faculty who teach. Training and development in new technologies and awareness of new teaching environments will be critical to success.



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Current trends such as the spread of "flipped classroom" pedagogy and the more widespread use of real-life ("dirty") cases will act as propellers of this development. Structural diversity, which has largely been at the centre of the international learning agenda for the wrong reasons, is becoming a *conditio sine qua non* for realising the full potential of 4.0 within our proposed framework.

There is now a need for a business school to consider the strategic fit between its international relations policy, its structural diversity and networks, and its intended learning outcomes.

Globally top-ranked business schools are often found in the vicinity of large business centres, suggesting that students in more remote locations struggle to gain the same access to practitioner knowledge and who may also need to undertake extra efforts to gain the attention of future employers. Virtual learning spaces across curriculum specialisms will help to overcome such locational disadvantages.

In turn, businesses will increasingly use virtual learning spaces to support global talent recruitment (and universities would be well served to do the same). The benefits will however not be spread in a Pareto fashion. The value derived from business degrees will shrink for some, as the competitive intensity for relevant business





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education increases; at the same time, the access to that education (whether it be in an academic or non-academic environment) will become more ubiquitous.

More fundamentally, our proposition for a more activity-focused experiential approach to managing international learning is also a response to a potentially radical shift in future global education requirements.

Jack Ma, founder of the Alibaba Group, for example, framed this challenge at the 2018 World Economic Forum, arguing that education needs to shift away from communicating knowledge, towards developing skill sets and abilities that foster and complement new technologies and expanding global processes.

This revised focus of management education demands new thought, not only with regard to curriculum design but also with a focus on faculty training and composition. The translation of theoretical knowledge to learning in practice is not intuitive. Likewise, specialised professors with strong academic records but limited practical experience are not necessarily the best facilitators of cross-cultural learning.

The virtual bridging of geographical distance will play an important role in encompassing ethics, responsibility and sustainability more broadly into a student’s learning experience. Student cohorts are now encouraged to practise managerial decision-making in physically distant and geographically dispersed project management activities.

As a result, virtual mobility will allow students to engage in a different form of discourse, enabling the development of a global perspective that credibly extends beyond mature markets. It will also foster the students’ reflective ability to understand how society is impacted by business decisions.

The Industry 4.0 transformation delivers challenges as well as opportunities for business schools operating in a global context. With regard to international learning, business schools will need to ensure an international exposure for all their students.

The virtualisation of learning with emerging technologies will help to break down the economic, intellectual and emotional barriers that have so far prevented students from acquiring immersive experiences.

It will be an exciting experience for everybody involved in management education.

*The authors have benefitted from discussions with participants of the Executive Academy of EFMD Global Network, Miami 2017*



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