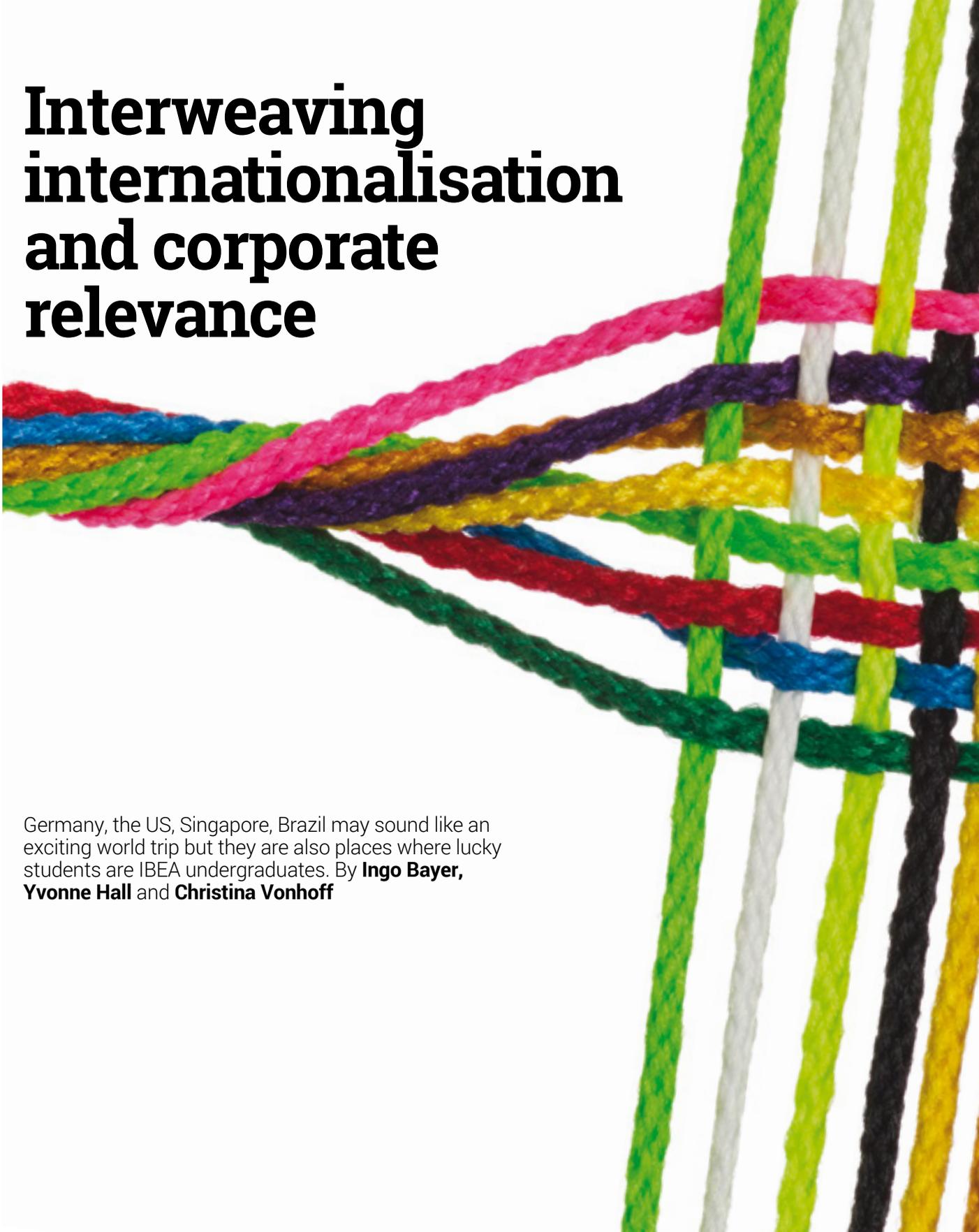


Interweaving internationalisation and corporate relevance



Germany, the US, Singapore, Brazil may sound like an exciting world trip but they are also places where lucky students are IBEA undergraduates. By **Ingo Bayer**, **Yvonne Hall** and **Christina Vonhoff**



The International Business Education Alliance (IBEA) allows students to obtain a bachelors degree studying in Asia, Europe, and North and South America. Intercultural understanding and hands-on management experience play an important role in this innovative programme offered by Darla Moore School of Business at the University of South Carolina, ESSEC Business School, the School of Public and Business Administration (FGV-EBAPE) and the Business School of the University of Mannheim. With ESSEC's newly inaugurated campus in Singapore, the IBEA programme spans campuses in Asia, Europe, and North and South America.

Most of today's problem solving in business is only successful if it incorporates the multinational dimension of international markets, laws, customers, logistics and other factors, all of which are closely intertwined.

Moreover, business is more and more driven by data rather than physical assets. A company's competitor can spring up from a garage anywhere and anytime around the globe before it is even identified as a potential opponent.

Organisations must therefore be prepared for an environment that changes overnight. And this will only happen if an organisation is the promoter of constant change and embraces it based on a thorough understanding for the new demands of business and a solid trust in its own abilities.

Business schools cannot ignore this development. They must re-think how they educate students for the challenges of a fast-changing, complex and globally connected business environment.

For the University of Mannheim Business School in Germany, one way to inculcate the skills and competences students need to meet this kind of business environment is to offer students the possibility of participating in the International Business Education Alliance.

This innovative international student exchange adds a new dimension to regular exchange programmes through the

incorporation of real-life company projects aligned with a curriculum taught in four different international settings.

The underlying idea of IBEA, which started in 2015, is to give students the chance to study at four top business schools where they develop academic and professional skills in different global settings and enhance their interpersonal and intercultural skills as well as their language competence. IBEA students study four semesters as one cohort and stay one semester at each of the four participating institutions. Three elements are crucial for student learning during the IBEA program:

- provide students with the opportunity to experience different academic, cultural and social environments in four international contexts
- boost student learning through studying in an internationally diverse student cohort
- challenge students by exposing them to different business worlds and corporate settings

IBEA students study on four different continents at four different business schools and, compared to regular student exchange programmes that last for one or two semesters at one institution, IBEA students' experiences and learning are intensified as they have to adapt quickly to new cultural environments that differ enormously.

Intercultural classes help students to process and reflect on their experiences: At each of the four schools, the cohort has to attend a cultural class on the hosting country's culture and economy. As a result, intercultural understanding becomes part of students' conversations in and out of the classroom, which intensifies their learning.

Compared to regular exchange programmes, where intercultural learning is often delayed, IBEA students are "forced" to respond to their experiences at the time when they are actually exposed to them. This can avoid the emergence of cultural misconceptions and accelerates the acceptance process.

Students complete the IBEA programme in an internationally diverse cohort, which consists of eight to 10 students from each participating school. This second important element of the IBEA programme, the cohort structure, has the goal of facilitating the academic and social integration of students and to intensify student learning inside and outside of the classroom.

The cohort structure provides many academic and extracurricular occasions for participants to bond and trigger intercultural learning and understanding. For example, the class “Globalisation in business” benefits from the fact that the IBEA students, representing six or seven nationalities, bring their perspectives and discuss them openly.

In addition, through group work in diverse teams, students are forced to deal with the challenges and experience the benefits of diversity within teams.

Lena Rudat, a Mannheim student of the first IBEA cohort, says: “Diversity is not a buzz word. It is hard work and you do not necessarily overcome these challenges within one day”.

Outside the classroom, IBEA students also experience different business worlds and corporate settings in each country, which is the third important element of IBEA. Besides a strong local and regional exposure, the students gain hands-on global management experience by working closely with a corporate partner from each school in a company project, which is aligned with the respective IBEA courses of each school.

In Mannheim, for example, IBEA students attend a class in international taxation and tax-planning. Based on this class, a corporate project with PricewaterhouseCoopers or Ernst & Young gives students the opportunity to acquire practical skills first hand from a leading globally active firm.

A company project is considered an outstanding feature of the programme and offers great value for both students and companies. Ernst & Young GmbH confirms: “The IBEA company project represents an extraordinary way to co-operate with higher-education institutions. It gives us the possibility

to interact with students and get to know them in a real-life business situation. During our first company project with IBEA, students we were deeply impressed by the students, their engagement and eagerness to learn”.

Designing an “integrated” and cohort-based programme across four schools located in three continents and offering classes on four continents is a complex endeavour.

As a result, IBEA does not only enhance student learning but also organisational learning. A multilateral co-operation and co-ordinators with different institutional backgrounds are a tremendous challenge for even experienced international relations managers. Because of their different missions and ethnographical settings, each school has a different perspective on things as well as different decision processes.

It starts with the motivation (marketing, recruitment, philosophy/strategy) to be part of the programme and ends by divergent opinions about how to react to student complaints or parents who want to be involved and informed about their children’s life abroad. Situations occur, which are for one school “normal business” but for partners very uncommon. Thus, the problem-solving approach of each school differs and staff have to learn about these differences and – even more importantly – to understand them.

At Mannheim, we learned that in a multilateral project effective communication is essential. Furthermore, workflows and hierarchies have to be considered. In fact, each institution has its own approach and its own philosophy and other partners have to understand and accept that.

It is helpful to have at least one person at each partnering institution who has worked in international relations for a couple of years and who has the necessary experience to enhance intercultural understanding among other staff involved and to guide younger professionals through the project.

There is a big need for coherency as well as mutual trust on personal level in order to succeed and to keep the whole project on the right track. Partners must learn that there is more than one approach to lead a project to success, which is exactly what IBEA students learn.



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2015

IBEA started in 2015, to give students the chance to study at four top business schools



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About the Authors

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More information on IBEA can be found on the following websites:

- <http://www.ibea-bachelor.org/>
- <https://www.bwl.uni-mannheim.de/en/international/ibea/>