by Wolfram Berger | Ulrich Hommel
Martin Meyer

Rewired for the World: Why Internationalisation Demands a New Operating Model

It has become routine to describe university internationalisation as a strategic priority. Mission statements affirm it. Accreditation bodies (including EQUIS, whose standards explicitly require evidence that the international dimension is reflected in governance, culture, and strategy) demand it. Senior leaders champion it in speeches and annual reports. Yet despite this declared commitment, the organisational reality in most universities tells a different story. Internationalisation remains structurally peripheral: managed by a dedicated office, championed by a small number of enthusiasts, and bolted onto an institutional architecture designed for an entirely different era. The gap between internationalisation ambition and capacity has never been wider, and the consequences are increasingly visible.

The argument we want to make here is straightforward, if uncomfortable: universities cannot achieve comprehensive internationalisation without restructuring the organisations through which they pursue it. Cultural aspiration, however sincere, is insufficient. This demands deliberate investment in new organisational capabilities and a fundamental shift in the logic that guides how internationalisation is conceived, governed, and measured. That shift must also include a harder conversation about what responsible internationalisation actually means in a world of geopolitical volatility, financial concentration risk, and growing scrutiny of the values that underpin global academic engagement

The Structural Problem

Most universities still organise internationalisation as an additive function. An international office handles mobility and partnerships. A vice president for international affairs or global engagement provides strategic oversight. Individual academics pursue international research collaborations largely independently. These activities coexist, but they rarely cohere. The result is what might be called additive internationalisation: globally active on the surface but structurally fragmented beneath.

This fragmentation is not incidental; it is architectural. As Hommel and Peters (in Kaplan, A. (ed) (2022) Digital Transformation and Disruption in Higher Education, Cambridge University Press) have argued, higher education is undergoing deinstitutionalisation, characterised by the unbundling and rebundling of educational services into new ecosystem-based configurations. Traditional learning structures are being broken down and rebuilt, with micro-credentialing, stackable qualifications, and hybrid delivery models creating an increasingly interconnected but also more complex operating environment. Internationalisation strategies designed for integrated, stable institutional structures are

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poorly equipped to navigate this terrain. When the institution itself is being unbundled, a standalone international office cannot provide the connective tissue required for comprehensive global engagement.

The costs of this model are significant. When internationalisation is concentrated in a single function, it is vulnerable to leadership changes, budget cycles, and shifting institutional priorities. When partnership development is driven by individual academics without institutional coordination, portfolio quality is inconsistent and sustainability is uncertain. And when governance is fragmented, with decisions about international student recruitment, digital programme delivery, international partnerships, and curriculum design made by separate committees and without a shared architecture, institutions discover, often at the worst possible moment, that their internationalisation machinery cannot respond with the speed or coherence that disruption demands. Berger and Hommel (2026, MBA International Business, No. 89) have identified precisely this governance crisis in the context of digital internationalisation: as business schools race to expand globally online, most lack the organisational capabilities to do so well. Decisions that should be made once across the entire institution are instead made independently by separate units, generating cumulative coordination costs, internal conflicts, and accountability gaps that only become visible late in the process, when they are costly to resolve. The same structural failure applies to internationalisation strategy more broadly.

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Rewiring the Institution

Addressing this necessitates more than process improvement. It requires what we have described elsewhere as institutional neuroplasticity: the capacity to continuously adapt structures, policies, and programmes in response to changing internal and external realities. Just as the human brain forms and reorganises synaptic connections throughout life and loses this capacity when caught in administrative rituals that matured in more stable times, universities must develop the capability to reconfigure the organisational networks through which internationalisation actually happens. A school’s ability to change and reinvent itself assumes key importance in a regime where the parameters of operation are becoming increasingly unsettled and unstable. Internationalisation is no longer an activity that can be planned once and implemented steadily; it is a continuous process of adaptation that requires the organisational equivalent of neural rewiring built into institutional DNA.

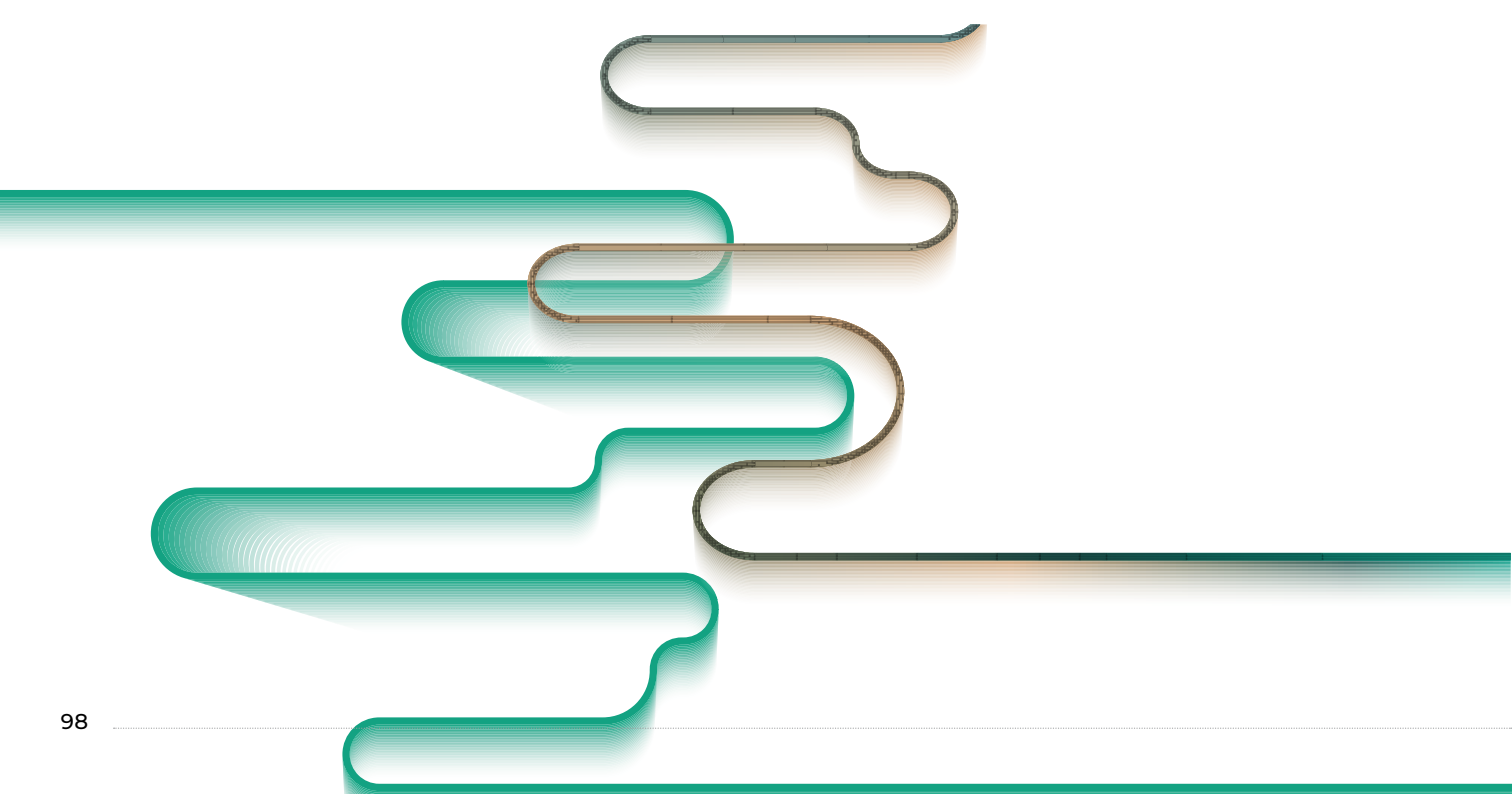
This has concrete structural implications. As Hommel and Meyer (2023, Global Focus 17(1)) argue, institutional neuroplasticity operates across three interlocking dimensions: structural flexibility, which allows universities

to reconfigure organisational arrangements and reporting lines as new needs arise; policy adaptability, which enables rapid adjustments to institutional frameworks in response to emerging realities; and programmatic agility, which facilitates the swift development and modification of academic offerings. Applied to internationalisation, these dimensions translate into specific organisational choices. Do faculties and schools have both the mandate and the resources to pursue internationalisation as a core academic function? Are governance structures designed to enable coordinated responses to disruption? Is the institution capable of adjusting its international partnerships, recruitment strategy, or programme portfolio when conditions change, or does it require years of committee deliberation to make adjustments that the environment demands in months?

The University of Vaasa's recent restructuring illustrates what building internationalisation capacity into institutional architecture can look like in practice. By organising around four multidisciplinary schools complemented by three boundary-spanning research platforms, including VEBIC, which operates as a living lab integrating local and international stakeholders across industry, government, and civil society, the university has created multiple entry points for international engagement rather than routing everything through a central function. Faculty members are expected to engage both within their school and within an adopted platform, generating the cross-domain connectivity that genuine internationalisation requires. The structure does not merely permit boundary spanning; it institutionalises it.

Boundary Spanning as Organisational Infrastructure

This brings us to what we regard as the single most underinvested dimension of internationalisation strategy: boundary-spanning capacity. Boundary-spanning leaders operate effectively across academic, administrative, and cultural domains: bridging gaps within the institution and between the institution and its wider ecosystem, facilitating communication across cultural and organisational divides, navigating complex regulatory



environments, and translating among the priorities of the multiple stakeholders on whom internationalisation depends. As Hudzik and Stohl have observed (2012, Deardorff et al., Sage Handbook of International Higher Education), they are indispensable to comprehensive internationalisation because university internationalisation frameworks require internal collaboration across functional units, faculty departments, academic disciplines, and levels of decentralised bureaucracy. Boundary-spanning leaders are the linchpins that make integrated global engagement operationally possible.

The problem is that most universities claim to value boundary spanning while structurally marginalising the people who perform it. Career pathways reward disciplinary depth and administrative compliance. Formal decision-making structures (academic boards, programme committees, and faculty councils) tend to exclude the hybrid professionals who increasingly carry the operational weight of internationalisation. Berger and Hommel make this point with particular force in the context of digital internationalisation: learning designers, platform managers, data governance leads, and programme architects hold considerable influence over how international programmes are organised and delivered, yet their roles are rarely included in formal academic decision-making. This exclusion is not merely inefficient; it is strategically dangerous, creating a growing gap between where international strategy is made and where it is actually implemented.

Restructuring for internationalisation means treating boundary-spanning capacity as a core institutional investment. It requires formal mandates, protected time, inclusion in governance forums, and career frameworks that make these roles genuinely attractive. It also requires creating what we call consensus spaces: ongoing forums, both physical and virtual, where diverse stakeholders, including academic staff, administrators, students, and external partners, engage in continuous dialogue about internationalisation strategy, test institutional direction against emerging global realities, and develop adaptive responses. The experience of Ontario universities, whose International Student Offices have functioned as effective consensus spaces by convening diverse stakeholder groups in fluid, continuous dialogue rather than formal periodic meetings, demonstrates that this model can generate the cross-functional collaboration that additive structures cannot. These are not additional committees. They represent a fundamentally different mode of institutional intelligence, one that keeps internationalisation truly responsive rather than nominally flexible and pairs change agents with institutional enablers in the way that innovation in complex organisations requires.

The Responsibility Imperative

Organisational restructuring is necessary but not sufficient. Universities must also confront a more fundamental question about the purposes that internationalisation is meant to serve and whether current practice aligns with those purposes.

The motivations that have driven internationalisation (academic ambition, cultural exchange, economic incentives, and political engagement) are legitimate, but they have also created a distinct set of vulnerabilities. Revenue models built on concentrating recruitment of international students from a narrow range of source countries create structural dependencies that leave institutions acutely exposed to geopolitical disruption and policy change. Partnership portfolios assembled for prestige rather than genuine intellectual complementarity produce impressive counts of memoranda of understanding and very little sustained collaboration. Mobility programmes serving a relatively privileged minority of students are presented as evidence of comprehensive internationalisation, leaving the majority of the student body, particularly those from less advantaged

backgrounds, for whom mobility is financially or practically inaccessible, untouched by its benefits. As the field has increasingly recognised, internationalisation can no longer be treated as an unqualified good; its effects are shaped by the values and structures through which it is pursued.

Responsible internationalisation demands a different orientation. It means honestly asking who benefits from current practice and who does not, and designing student support, curriculum, and community building accordingly. It means taking seriously the environmental costs of international travel, and asking whether virtual and hybrid modalities, whose educational potential the pandemic significantly accelerated, can deliver comparable outcomes with substantially lower environmental impact. And it means pursuing genuine reciprocity in international partnerships: moving beyond relationships in which one institution effectively exports its models and standards to another, toward collaborations built on mutual learning, shared intellectual contributions, and honest acknowledgment of power asymmetries. At a time when international academic exchange remains one of the few genuine arenas for open dialogue across borders, the values universities bring to that exchange matter enormously.

Design Principles for Institutional Leaders

For institutional leaders, four principles offer a practical orientation.

Audit for structural fragility before investing in further expansion: Before adding partnerships, programmes, or recruitment channels, institutions should conduct an honest assessment of where their internationalisation model is exposed. Where is decision-making fragmented? Which partnerships are substantively active? Where does the institution depend on a small number of individuals whose departure would leave significant gaps? Resilience begins with an accurate map of vulnerability, and adaptive KPIs that measure portfolio diversity, curriculum integration, and organisational recovery capacity, alongside traditional activity metrics, are essential tools for that mapping.

Restructure governance before it becomes a crisis: The governance failures that undermine internationalisation do not resolve themselves incrementally. They require explicit structural choices by senior leaders - where authority sits, how cross-functional coordination is enabled, and which institutional voices are included in internationalisation strategy. Governance by design, not by default, is the distinguishing characteristic of institutions that manage digital and physical internationalisation effectively, and the same principle applies at the level of overall international strategy.

Invest in boundary-spanning infrastructure as a strategic priority. Identify the individuals already functioning as boundary spanners within your institution and ask honestly whether the current structure supports or hinders their work. Build formal recognition, career pathways, and governance inclusion for these roles. The return on this investment, in partnership quality, strategic adaptability, and institutional resilience, is substantial and demonstrably undervalued in how most universities allocate resources.

Embed responsible internationalisation as an institutional design principle, not a compliance exercise. Values alignment, reciprocity, equitable access, and environmental sustainability should be built into the criteria for selecting partnerships, designing programmes, and resourcing student support. Peer benchmarking and shared

learning play an important role in calibrating these choices, but the trap of standardisation for its own sake must be avoided. Universities must understand their own contexts and develop internationalisation strategies that reflect their specific strengths, values, and stakeholder obligations.

Conclusion

The case for internationalisation remains compelling. The academic, cultural, economic, and political arguments for globally engaged universities are, if anything, stronger in a fractured world than in a more stable one. International academic exchange remains one of the most powerful tools for developing the cross-cultural competence that contemporary challenges demand, and one of the few institutional settings where genuine dialogue across geopolitical divides is still possible.

But the organisational model through which most universities pursue internationalisation is no longer fit for purpose. Additive structures, fragmented governance, marginalised boundary spanners, and activity-focused metrics designed for a different era are producing internationalisation that is ambitious in aspiration, but brittle in practice. The institutions that will lead in global higher education over the next decade are not those with the longest list of international partnerships or the highest mobility numbers. They are those that have done the harder work of continuous rewiring: restructuring their governance, investing in boundary-spanning capacity, building genuine consensus spaces for adaptive strategy, and grounding their global engagement in a clear and honest account of the values they are meant to serve.

That work is demanding. It is also unavoidable.

> “Ambitious in aspiration, but brittle in practice.”

About the authors

Wolfram Berger is a Professor of Economics and Vice President of Internationalization at Brandenburg University of Technology in Germany, and an Executive Consultant at XOLAS Advisors GmbH, a Germany-based higher education consultancy.

Ulrich Hommel is Vice Dean of Education and Professor of Finance at EBS University of Business & Law in Germany and Managing Director of XOLAS Advisors GmbH.

Martin Meyer is Professor of Industrial Management and Vice Rector of International Affairs at the University of Vaasa in Finland. He is also an Executive Consultant at XOLAS Advisors GmbH.

Next to their work for XOLAS Advisors, all three authors share a passion for the German soccer club Borussia Dortmund.