

COVID-19 and higher education: responding to local demands and the consolidation of e-internationalization in Latin American universities

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COVID-19 y educación superior: respondiendo a demandas locales y la consolidación de la e-internacionalización en universidades Latinoamericanas

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to provide insights into the internationalization strategic responses to the COVID-19 pandemic by higher education institutions (HEIs) in Latin America.

Design/methodology/approach – This study is based on information from eight leading Latin American private universities. The data were obtained from official sources such as institutional communications and university administrators.

Findings – The authors identify two main issues that HEIs should consider while responding to the pandemic. First, greater attention and resource allocation to the universities' main local stakeholders can affect traditional internationalization activities. Second, a focus on revitalizing foreign partnerships and strengthening "virtual internationalization" can help maintain and eventually increase international presence.

Research limitations/implications – While this study analyses how these Latin American HEIs responded during the initial stages of the COVID-19 outbreak, it is important to conduct follow-up studies to shed light on how HEIs are adapting to the COVID-19 crisis as it continues to unfold.

Originality/value – This study is based on unique information gathered from leading private, not-for-profit HEIs in Latin America, which, contrary to state-owned HEIs or other private institutions in developed economies, have exhibited different means and conditions to respond to the coronavirus outbreak. Finally, the authors contribute to the literature on the internationalization of HEIs by discussing the role of a significant disruptive event on the internationalization of higher education and, particularly, business schools.

Keywords Higher education institutions, Latin America, COVID-19, Global crisis, online learning, e-internationalization

Paper type Conceptual paper

Resumen

Propósito – Este artículo discute las respuestas estratégicas de internacionalización frente a la pandemia del COVID-19 implementadas por Instituciones de Educación Superior (IES) en América Latina.

Diseño/metodología/aproximación – Este estudio se basa en información de ocho universidades privadas líderes en América Latina. La información fue obtenida de fuentes oficiales tales como comunicados institucionales y autoridades.

Hallazgos – Identificamos dos temas principales que las IES deben considerar mientras responden al COVID-19. Primero, una mayor atención y reubicación de recursos hacia los principales grupos de interés local puede afectar las actividades tradicionales de internacionalización. Segundo, revitalizar las alianzas extranjeras y fortalecer la "internacionalización virtual" puede ayudar a mantener y eventualmente incrementar la presencia internacional.

Limitaciones de investigación/implicaciones – Si bien este estudio analiza cómo un grupo de IES latinoamericanas respondieron durante las etapas iniciales del COVID-19, es importante continuar analizando cómo las IES se siguen adaptando a medida que la crisis COVID-19 avanza.

Originalidad/valor – Este estudio se basa en datos únicos obtenidos de IES privadas, sin fines de lucro, y líderes en América Latina que, al contrario de las universidades públicas u otras IES en economías desarrolladas, exhiben medios y condiciones diferentes para responder a la expansión del coronavirus. Finalmente, este trabajo contribuye a la literatura sobre internacionalización de IES mediante la discusión del rol de un evento disruptivo de escala mundial en la internacionalización de universidades y, particularmente, escuelas de negocios.

Palabras clave Instituciones de educación superior, América Latina, COVID-19, Crisis global, Aprendizaje en línea, e-internacionalización

Tipo de papel Trabajo de investigación

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic represents a significant crisis that has disrupted higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide. Amid the pandemic, understanding the situation of HEIs in

different regions becomes particularly relevant. The purpose of this study is to learn from the strategic responses to the COVID-19 crisis implemented by a group of leading private universities in Latin America. We analyze how the internationalization and relationships with their primary stakeholders have changed due to the coronavirus outbreak. This analysis offers different insights that can be helpful to HEIs around the world.

During the last few decades, HEIs have been under increased scrutiny from various social actors regarding their responses to social challenges and crises (Datar *et al.*, 2010, 2011; Fragueiro and Thomas, 2011). Implementing comprehensive responses to social challenges can often clash with HEIs' loosely coupled nature (Foss and Møllgaard, 2020). HEIs are complex organizations characterized by heterogeneity in their activities, significant goal ambiguity and vague connections between inputs and outputs (Weick, 1976). Recent research has focused on identifying the characteristics of efficient and inefficient responses to different challenges. A line of inquiry tries to understand HEIs in a developed-market context. This line focuses on analyzing the gap between HEIs' teaching vs market needs (Datar *et al.*, 2010, 2011), the steps adopted by schools to improve professional and ethical standards (Hawawini, 2005; Mintzberg, 2004) and the challenges of strategic execution in these loosely coupled systems (Fragueiro and Thomas, 2011; Foss and Møllgaard, 2020). On the emerging markets front, research has been scarce – analyses have mainly centered around the challenges of operating with limited resources while balancing the adaptation of developed-country practices to local needs (Ilie *et al.*, 2020; Alon and McIntyre, 2004).

One of the most relevant challenges for HEIs is adding a global perspective to their teaching, research and service activities (Datar *et al.*, 2010, 2011; Hawawini, 2016, Teichler, 2004). Globalization has led to expectations that HEIs should enhance their international dimension (e.g. AACSB, 2018; EFMD, 2018) and help students develop a global mindset. Pressure has come from sources as different as global rankings (Wedlin, 2011), demand for global talent (Guillotin and Mangematin, 2015) and academics themselves (Doh, 2010). School responses have ranged from adopting international quality standards to the opening of campuses in foreign locations. Latin American HEIs are not an exception – in the last decades, several universities have developed new international programs and opened campuses abroad.

The internationalization of HEIs has been explored under process lenses in the academic literature, mainly using the Uppsala tradition (Johanson and Vahlne, 1977, 2009). Engwall and Kipping (2013) identify internationalization as a progression in a two-dimension space: the location of delivery and the students' origin. This model suggests that HEIs can combine four different mechanisms to internationalize: import of ideas, outsourcing, insourcing and foreign direct investment (FDI). The *import of ideas* refers to internationalization without physical mobility delivered in the home country, especially knowledge imported from foreign sources. *Outsourcing* is associated with internationalization through physical mobility to another country (e.g. student participation in exchange programs abroad or faculty travel to international conferences). *Insourcing* refers to internationalization related to bringing international students or faculty from abroad to the home country. Finally, *FDI* refers to internationalization through investments outside the home country, representing the highest financial commitment (e.g. opening a new campus abroad).

Another relevant model has been developed by De Meyer *et al.* (2004). This model divides HEIs into importers (i.e. bringing faculty, students or ideas from abroad into the home base), exporters (i.e. offering programs and exposing faculty to new international environments) and hybrid combinations that include partnering with foreign institutions and building networks through FDI (Hawawini, 2016). Finally, scholars acknowledge that the internationalization process can involve deliberate and emergent strategies (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985). Schools can change internationalization strategies due to pressures from their local environments, triggering modifications in their deliberate internal decisions (e.g. Amdam and Benito, 2021; Juusola and Alajoutsijärvi, 2019).

The different studies mentioned above show the diverse perspectives and the complexities involved in the internationalization of higher education and business schools. In this brief article, we aim to contribute to this literature by improving our understanding of the effects of major global crises on this process. In our case, we ground our work on the COVID-19 crisis and Latin America. We are not aware of any studies addressing the effects of disrupting worldwide events on the internationalization of higher education.

The COVID-19 crisis has affected HEIs' operations worldwide, particularly international operations. The pandemic has led many leading Latin American HEIs to strengthen their local engagement at the expense of internationalization. By strengthening the connections with the local community (El-Kassar *et al.*, 2019) and taking on domestic leadership roles (Atanga, 2019), many leading Latin American universities are performing functions beyond their usual scope of activities (Cordova *et al.*, 2021; Gonzalez-Perez *et al.*, 2021a). In doing so, they have increased the attention paid to their most important local stakeholders (Uitdewilligen and Waller, 2018) while postponing and even reversing their internationalization plans. Two international dimensions that have been significantly disrupted during the pandemic relate to the access to international students and the ability to run educational programs abroad (Engwall and Kipping, 2013).

Studies on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education have adopted different lenses and levels of analysis. One set of studies has explored the quality of students' learning during the pandemic, which is mostly happening in online settings. Scholars have discussed the challenges associated with redesigning learning activities, adapting to new interactions and assessing student progress (Rapanta *et al.*, 2020). Other studies have explored the opportunities (i.e. access to broader audiences, location flexibility and time flexibility) and challenges (i.e. Internet availability, robustness of information technology (IT) infrastructure and distant learning technologies) behind the use of online modes of instruction (Dhawan, 2020; Mihhailova, 2006). At the individual level of analysis, recent studies have focused on the psychological reactions from students, such as anxiety (Wang and Zhao, 2020), depression (Marelli *et al.*, 2021) and stress (Odriozola-González *et al.*, 2020).

To study university responses to the pandemic outbreak and improve our understanding of its effects on internationalization, we analyze eight leading private universities based in eight different Latin American countries [1]. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), Latin America has been one of the emerging-market regions most affected by the pandemic outbreak in number of deaths per 1 million. The situation and responses of our eight schools can provide valuable lessons not only to other universities in the region but also to those located in other emerging-market regions. Our study's HEIs show substantial diversity in their student body, faculty, size, educational programs and international accreditations (Table 1). Most importantly, each of them has faced significant challenges while handling their internationalization plans amid increasing demands from local stakeholders due to the pandemic.

2. Responses to COVID-19 local demands and the new normal of internationalization

Management research has characterized firm responses to crises in four categories: *status quo*, *exit*, *retrenchment* and *strategic renewal* (Wenzel *et al.*, 2021). As Latin American private universities depend mainly on student fees and enrollment, a status quo response to the pandemic is not an option. Economic vulnerability explains the earliest interest in implementing cost and budget restrictions. However, none of the study's HEIs has adopted an "exit" response to the crises. What we have identified are responses in a continuum between retrenchment strategies and strategic renewal. Naturally, these strategic responses are affecting the approach of these institutions to internationalization. Moreover, in this pandemic outbreak, HEIs' strategic responses must deal with situations that are not

HEIs	EAFIT	PUCP	UDEM	UDD	U Austral	UNIVALI	INCAE	UPB
Foundation year	1960	1917	1969	1990	1991	1989	1964	1992
Home country	Colombia	Peru	Mexico	Chile	Argentina	Brazil	Costa Rica/ Nicaragua	Bolivia
Number of campuses	4	2	1	7	3	7	2	3
Students enrolled	13,500	29,873	9,930	16,100	6,193	20,000	350	5,374
Undergrad. Students	10,500	23,488	9,202	13,700	4,092	17,000	-	3,774
Graduate students	3,000	6,385	728	2,400	2,101	3,000	350	1,600
Full-time employees	705	5,300	1,372	1,500	2,905	1,207	400	285
Full-time faculty	353	933	522	500	268	370	44	409
Undergrad. Programs	21	63	46	24	22	100	-	17
Master programs	33	147	16	24	50	72	6	45
Doctoral programs	6	23	1	4	4	6	-	1
International accreditations	BGA/AMBA/ PRME/CACSLA/ AACSB in progress	Equis/ AACSB/ AMBA	SACSCOC/ AACSB/ AMBA	AMBA	Business school: Equis/AACSB/ AMBA/PRME	AACSB in progress	Equis/ AACSB/ AMBA/SACS	ISO 9001:2015, Mercosur:Electronic and Telecom Eng. And Arch
Approximate revenue from student fees (%)	60	46	90	55	23	75	95	94

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Table 1.
Profile of the eight
Latin American
universities (as of June
1, 2020)

under their control, such as income reductions and travel bans. Therefore, the spectrum of potential responses is sometimes limited.

Due to the late arrival of the pandemic to Latin America, the eight private universities analyzed in this study showed a rapid adaptation to the COVID-19 outbreak (Gonzalez-Perez *et al.*, 2021b). Even though the first COVID-19 case in the region was confirmed on February 26, 2020, online instruction protocols were in place before the end of March. A contributing factor to this relatively fast adaptation was that most of the eight universities had previously developed the technological capabilities and organizational flexibility to adjust to a new remote learning situation. Also, previous crises of different kinds have provided Latin American universities with invaluable capabilities and experience that have helped them deal with the pandemic outbreak. For example, Universidad del Desarrollo (UDD) and Universidad Privada Boliviana (UPB) had already prepared online teaching platforms in response to social unrest in Chile and Bolivia in 2019. Another fascinating example is INCAE's ability to quarantine students and quickly resume face-to-face teaching based on experience acquired during Nicaragua's political unrest in 2018.

Retrenchment responses in the eight universities increased the focus on their main domestic stakeholders while decreasing resource allocation to nonessential activities. As in most Latin American HEIs, domestic students and faculty are the main stakeholders in the eight universities under analysis. Physical and mental health responses have targeted both groups due to the pandemic. Even though faculty played a decisive role supporting HEIs initiatives toward local communities, high uncertainty levels forced them to make difficult budget decisions, being Universidad de Monterrey (UEM) and UPB the only two HEIs in our group that were able to secure faculty salaries in advance (see Table 2). It is important to note that students in Latin American universities are mainly domestic and, especially in private schools, most of the revenues come from student tuition and fees (see Table 1). For example, INCAE obtains nearly 95% of its revenues from student fees (graduate students and executive education). An exception is Universidad Austral (only 23% of its revenues come from student fees) due to its additional focus on other sources of income. Most of the universities have increased their financial support to domestic students through additional scholarships and fee reductions. The exception is INCAE, which is fully oriented to graduate students and executive education (see Table 2). Student representatives have participated in the development of contingency plans and financial support policies. Also, the universities implemented various responses and activities to address the local business community: webinars, workshops, joint ventures to develop COVID-19-related medical innovations, free consulting services and publications such as the two numbers of INCAE Business Review that focus on pandemic issues. While it is difficult to assess the impact of these activities, schools refer to informal accounts, including excerpts from decision-makers' comments on the relevance of specific contributions or statistics about webinar attendance. Table 2 shows how some of the HEIs – EAFIT, UDEM and INCAE – have supported small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and other firms, while other universities – Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú (PUCP) and UDD – have focused on assisting other educational institutions. This suggests that HEIs have played an essential role in providing domestic support during the crisis. It is crucial to emphasize that these responses – summarized here as students, faculty and civic engagement – were mostly aimed at local stakeholders (see Table 2).

Interestingly, some of the eight universities' *strategic renewal responses* have been related to internationalization (Table 3). The studied HEIs had gone through different stages of internationalization before the pandemic. They had implemented exchange programs and signed double-degree agreements with universities abroad, developed networks with foreign HEIs, consolidated international research collaborations and established international alliances. Despite the travel restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, these HEIs preserved their commitment to develop cross-cultural competences in their students

HEIs responses	EAFIT	PUCP	UDEM	UDD	U Austral	UNIVALI	INCAE	UPB
Students	100% of courses went online in a week Psychological support and health insurance Solidarity funds, financial support and scholarships	100% of courses went online in two weeks Psychological, health and nutritional support Financial support and scholarships. Fees reimbursement	100% of courses went online in 4 days Psychological and spiritual support. Priority access to medical centers Financial support and scholarship programs	100% of courses went online on lockdown first day Psychological support. Priority access to medical centers Solidarity funds and scholarships	Shift to online classes in less than a week. Specific programs were postponed Psychological support. Priority access to medical centers Financial support	100% of courses went online in the first week Psychological support Financial support and benefits	Full time MBA with online classes from March to mid-May 2020. On-campus classes resumed in May 2020, following social distancing protocols. Executive masters 100% online Psychological and health support	100% online teaching Psychological and nutritional support. Health insurance Financial support

(continued)

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Table 2. Noteworthy initiatives implemented by the eight universities to support their key stakeholders during the COVID-19 pandemic (as of June 1, 2020)

Table 2.

HEIs responses	EAFIT	PUCP	UDEM	UDD	U Austral	UNIVALI	INCAE	UPB
Faculty	Promotion of knowledge co-creation. R&D on COVID-19 and health support	Special funds for COVID-19 research projects	Promotion of knowledge co-creation (interdisciplinary) Health support Training and support for online teaching	Promotion of collaborative research: 26 COVID-19 projects were presented to the Government Health advice Training and support for online teaching	Promotion of cross-disciplinary research focused on COVID-19 Health insurance Training and support for online teaching	Promotion of research projects to face COVID-19 Health insurance and psychological support Training and support for online teaching	Promotion of practical implications to business and society in the region (two Health insurance entire issues of <i>INCAE Business Review</i> on the topic of Covid-19)	Interdisciplinary research toward SDGs. Free access to EBSCO COVID-19 database Health insurance Training and support for online teaching Salaries were secured
Civic engagement and service to the community	Hot line for entrepreneurs and SMEs Participation in national media Manufacturing of respirators and face masks	New patents for pulmonary breathing for manufacturing respirators Sharing online teaching experience with education institutions	Mind initiative & ecosystem I4.0 for SMEs (Triple helix model) Diagnostic tests were designed as well as respirators and face masks	Support of online teaching for elementary and high schools Epidemiology experts participate in the President's advisory committee	A separate unit on-campus of Austral Hospital for diagnosis, treatment and recovery of COVID-19	Labs to do tests for the community Equipment and technical training for health professionals Donation of 3D-printed facial protectors	INCAE provided 30,000 h of professional counseling about the COVID-19 crises. Content reached 150,000 views online. This includes advice to governments in 9 countries (local and country level)	Raising funds for the food bank Webinars to adapt technology on business Member of Employment Commission in Cochabamba

Internationalization brief	EAFIT	PUCP	UDEM	UDD	U Austral	UNIVALI	INCAE	UPB
Impact of the COVID-19 outbreak	Negative: Inward –90% and outward –86% student mobility from 2019 to 2020 (2nd semester)	Negative: Inward –73% and outward –59% student mobility from 2019 to 2020 (2nd semester). Infrastructure for international events was delayed	Negative: Inward –28% and outward –84% student mobility from 2019 to 2020 (2nd semester)	Negative: Inward –45% and outward –90% student mobility from 2019 to 2020 (2nd semester)	Negative: Inward –55% and outward –48% student mobility from 2019 to 2020	Negative: Inward –100% and outward –91% student mobility from 2019 to 2020 (2nd semester). Lack of institutional support toward student mobility	Negative: Inward –82% and outward –77% student mobility from 2019 to 2020 (2nd semester)	Negative: Inward –75% and outward –88% student mobility from 2019 to 2020 (2nd semester)
	Positive: Bigger audiences and inclusive mobility. Legal and psychological support to students abroad: “Operation Return home”	Positive: More students and faculty in online events. More regional virtual mobility	Positive: Virtual exchange and study abroad programs. COIL (collaborative online international learning) +20% from 2019 to 2020	Positive: Virtual exchange and study abroad programs	Positive: Bigger audiences and develop inclusive mobility. More virtual mobility within Latin America. New partners difficult to reach before	Positive: New blended agreements, learning, technology and virtual exchange programs	Positive: New blended programs. Consolidation as a regional leader of socio-economic development	Positive: More students and faculty in online events

(continued)

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Table 3. Information on internationalization for the eight universities amid the COVID-19 pandemic

Table 3.

Internationalization brief	EAFIT	PUCP	UDEM	UDD	U Austral	UNIV ALI	INCAE	UPB
Strategic actions due to the COVID-19 crisis: new programs, alliances, consultancy services and other opportunities	Every department has added new virtual programs and took the opportunity to internationalize current curricula	Launching of specific student online exchange programs within Latin America, mainly with Pacific alliance partners	Leading COIL initiatives in the region. Virtual mobility call was launched. Business school launched 3 online business certificates	International collaboration with regional partners for online joint-courses development. 22 new courses in English, and Coursera modules can be taken for credit	Developing programs such as COIL. Building on pre-existing alliances with platform providers (e.g. Coursera) and developing capabilities in-house	Developing new programs for 2020 and 2021 in online format and blended format. New international agreements with regional HEIs	5 executive programs are redesigned to virtual and 3 online are blended. 11 certificates have been created. Partnering with EMERITUS to launch "INCAE online" .online programs for Spanish speakers	5 programs and 20 online courses. Reinforcing students' exchange program in Latin America, Europe and the USA. Partnering with HEIs and businesses to develop research projects and funding

Note(s): The table shows how the COVID-19 has affected the ongoing internationalization performance of the eight Latin American universities during the first semester of 2020, highlighting positive impacts as well as negative ones and what new implications the coronavirus outbreak brought for the international strategy of these HEIs

and faculty, to advance the portfolio of international options for their students and to consolidate the networks and alliances that were previously established. Aiming to overcome the mobility restrictions in the brick-and-mortar world, these HEIs strengthened e-internationalization, i.e. bringing internationalization into the digital world. Therefore, there has been an increased interest in taking advantage of existing foreign partnerships to maintain a certain level of (virtual) international student activities. Some institutions are also actively extending global networks through new partnerships. Private universities are fostering alliances with foreign universities to promote virtual student exchanges (as seen in EAFIT, PUCP, UDEM, UDD and UNIVALI). Nevertheless, according to [Table 3](#), there are some differences about which programs they have chosen to emphasize. UDEM and Austral decided to aggressively increase their collaborative online international learning (COIL) activities; EAFIT and University of Vale do Itajaí (UNIVALI) have focused on developing new virtual programs; PUCP, UDD and UPB have reinforced their online exchange programs with regional partners. Other universities have announced partnerships with non-academic institutions (e.g. INCAE with Emeritus and UDD and Austral with Coursera) to develop new programs and skills to increase students' international opportunities. HEIs such as UDD, Austral and INCAE, which have established these particular alliances, would be opening a new front by developing joint programs to strengthen the internationalization of their curricula. Also, UDD and INCAE have developed courses in a different language to prepare themselves to offer educational services to a broader audience (see [Table 3](#)). Hence, these findings show HEIs' new partnership-oriented strategies, including additional factors such as the partner's trajectory, technological experience and potential markets.

In terms of the internationalization of faculty research activities, the pandemic has generated both opportunities and challenges. Some of the adverse side effects of the health crisis have been the increased difficulties to perform field research and collect primary data that requires physical presence. Also, the effort that is necessary to adapt to new teaching formats and methodologies has decreased the time allocated to research by some academics. On the other hand, one of the positive side effects of the pandemic has been the increase in international virtual seminars and local virtual events with international speakers, who were more willing to participate due to convenience in terms of schedule and no travel-time commitments. In addition, all of these HEIs have promoted academic research focused on COVID-19. UPB also provided free access to information databases related to the pandemic (see [Table 3](#)). Different from the case of non-virtual research activities, those performed online are typically free or low cost and, most importantly, they do not require the amount of time and funding associated with traveling. Additionally, HEIs have provided more affordable alternatives for students to participate in those international online activities. However, it is unclear how the benefits and drawbacks for faculty and students from "virtual internationalization" compare to face-to-face activities or how the weaker social experience would impact research in the future. Are we in the presence of a shallow form of internationalization? Is e-internationalization a good substitute for brick-and-mortar internationalization?

Unfortunately, the situation of MBA students in a pandemic context can be particularly problematic. Networking activities are an essential part of MBA programs. MBA students focus not only on acquiring new knowledge but also on establishing different types of relationships that can significantly impact their future careers. Even in programs that have managed to resume on-campus instruction (e.g. INCAE), social distancing protocols translate into limited informal interactions with guest speakers, faculty and even other students. Unlike the mere transmission of knowledge, the negative effect of online instruction on the ability to network can be dramatic. Hybrid education may help to lessen some of the disadvantages of virtual learning. However, networking usually takes place out of the classroom and off-campus. It is unclear how this MBA networking issue can be resolved unless the pandemic outbreak significantly recedes.

Interestingly, educational programs usually associated with continuing education are probably less affected by the pandemic. Typically, continuing education encompasses non-degree programs such as certificates, individual courses or specific training. The focus is mainly on knowledge transmission rather than networking or non-academic on-campus activities. Therefore, online instruction may not be as damaging as in other degree programs. Online instruction's sophistication due to the pandemic can strengthen continuing education and increase coverage. In the schools under analysis, anecdotal information has emerged about specific population groups, such as working-from-home professionals, whose new schedules (i.e. fewer business trips or reductions in commute trips) have increased their availability to participate in virtual non-degree programs. Naturally, there is a tradeoff between on-site experiences and the intense use of digital environments. However, continuing education programs seem to be less affected than other types of programs.

While the transition to virtual and hybrid learning models can open opportunities for HEIs to access new international markets (Mihhailova, 2006), there is a perception that most international students enrolling in the eight universities will continue to come from their traditional markets. Interestingly, online learning could allow the HEIs to reach students in countries where other barriers (e.g. language) prevent global players' entrance. However, following Wenzel *et al.* (2021), even though these HEIs are not implementing exit or status quo responses, they could also be exiting from some specific traditional internationalization initiatives. Meanwhile, universities have been forced to cut back some programs due to the constraints caused by the COVID-19, speeding up their strategic renewal of internationalization programs. Despite these interesting insights, more time is needed to understand the effects of these strategic changes and the virtual access to a broader international audience. It is still not clear how the development of virtual teaching capabilities may impact the future internationalization of emerging market HEIs.

3. Conclusions

The COVID-19 crisis is generating multiple opportunities and challenges within Latin America, giving rise to new trends that will impact the future of companies and organizations in the region (Hernandez-Poza *et al.*, 2021). This brief article discusses how eight leading private Latin American universities had handled their local stakeholders and their internationalization plans amid the COVID-19 outbreak. Our study's contribution revolves around improving our understanding of the impact of major disruptive events on the internationalization of higher education and, particularly, business schools. Even though there are multiple studies related to the internationalization and globalization of HEIs, the effect of major worldwide crises has been overlooked.

As we have discussed, private universities in Latin American and other emerging-market regions are particularly vulnerable to any crisis, because they depend heavily on their ability to generate economic inflows from their own operations. This is different from other private universities in developed markets, where donations and additional non-operating revenues are more common. For example, universities can rely on existing endowments that facilitate crisis management. On the other hand, public HEIs can benefit from government support that is typically unavailable to private institutions.

In part motivated by the late arrival of the pandemic outbreak to Latin America and the experience gained on managing previous crises, we observed a rapid response to the COVID-19 emergency by the eight universities analyzed in this article. Even though each HEI has adopted specific actions, we argue that these responses have followed two patterns: *retrenchment* and *strategic renewal*. Retrenchment has led to a stronger focus on local stakeholders' needs – particularly domestic students and faculty – and a reduced emphasis on internationalization programs. Strategic renewal has taken place as universities try to revitalize foreign

partnerships and develop “virtual internationalization.” Although other HEIs could develop similar responses to crises, adapting traditional internationalization into a virtual world could depend on how the new digital ecosystem helps to manage the HEI’s different requirements. Hence, before deciding on a strategic response to a crisis, HEIs administrators should analyze their course portfolio and the characteristics of their student population.

The change from brick-and-mortar to e-internationalization in higher education opens different areas for future research. First, the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to be followed by a relatively long period of recovery. Financial problems may reduce traditional internationalization activities, such as reduced physical mobility of students and faculty. More generally, the capabilities to handle traditional internationalization will be negatively affected. Second, the rapid transition to online technologies does not necessarily mean that international students’ virtual experience will be equivalent to a face-to-face experience. According to [Galloway \(2020, p. 134\)](#), the value proposition delivered by HEIs “offers three components of value: a credential, an education, and an experience.” The long-term effects of a lack of on-campus experiences could be addressed in future longitudinal studies.

Faculties have transitioned to online teaching using practices and content that may not leverage virtual platforms’ characteristics. In the case of Latin America, as HEIs start developing new programs and learn to take advantage of e-platforms, we may see them expanding their presence throughout the region, primarily because of their language advantage and low psychic distance. Scholars from emerging markets are now significantly more capable of integrating into global networks, develop new digital content and open cross-border virtual collaborations.

Based on the eight Latin American private HEIs, we observe a tradeoff between local stakeholders’ demand for attention and resources and traditional internationalization. University officers in charge of internationalization plans should be aware of this tradeoff and develop strategies to address it proactively. Adapting internationalization plans to the new situation is of uttermost importance. HEIs should also develop a global strategy that considers different scenarios regarding the pandemic severity and length. Additionally, university officers must think not only about handling the pandemic today but also about how to transition into a post-pandemic world. Thinking about post-COVID-19 internationalization plans could be even more important than short-term responses.

We must be aware that the virtual internationalization ignited by the pandemic may not be as fantastic as it looks. For instance, Latin American students may be more willing to consider online or hybrid programs in top foreign institutions than those offered by lower-ranked local HEIs. Hence, it will be relevant to develop further research on how these HEIs would react and respond to this new competition in the online territory to achieve its financial survival. It is also unclear how research output and quality may be affected by a more permanent emphasis on online research activities and virtual events at the expense of face-to-face participation in international activities. Another future research avenue could focus on the new distribution of learning interests due to COVID-19, especially in new e-internationalization methods and the location of educational programs. Available data and trends until 2019 could be compared to data from 2020 onwards, identifying how students are allocating their resources between online and face-to-face learning, as well as among regional or global locations.

Future studies should identify and explore the medium- and long-term effects of this virtual internationalization or e-internationalization caused by the pandemic. We believe this is a new mechanism of internationalization that should be added to existing frameworks on the internationalization of management education, such as the one proposed by [Engwall and Kipping \(2013\)](#). We would also like to remind the reader that the schools analyzed in this paper are leading Latin American private institutions. Hence, some non-leading private HEIs in emerging markets could be forced into an exit strategy, going

out of business; other private institutions already supported by external funds may decide on a status quo strategy, using their current reputation to move forward. In any case, this limitation of the sample should be addressed in future research. Thus, future studies should consider a broader set of universities – weaker or externally funded HEIs may have to implement very different strategic responses to deal with the pandemic disruptions. A micro-level analysis could uncover specific decisions toward abandoning or reinforcing some internationalization programs. Future research could go deeper into analyzing how some specific programs would continue or not under crisis situations. This will be instrumental in improving our understanding of the impacts of severe disruptions like COVID-19. Even though we offer interesting insights based on the experience of leading private HEIs, these insights do not necessarily generalize to other contexts. To conclude, we hope that this article will be insightful for HEIs worldwide and inspire new provocative questions on how the COVID-19 pandemic affected internationalization and global strategy in tertiary education.

Note

1. Most of the universities included in our study were founded by business leaders to contribute to the social and economic development of their countries through high-quality tertiary education based on civic values and an open-market orientation (Giacomin *et al.*, 2019; Gonzalez-Perez, 2011). Co-evolving with the increased integration of Latin American countries into the global economy, and the growing number of internationally operating Latin American firms (Aguilera *et al.*, 2017), these HEIs initiated their own internationalization processes.

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