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INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS EDUCATION: A CORPORATE VIEW

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Abstract. As a preliminary step in the internationalization of business school curricula, 122 major Canadian corporations were surveyed for their views on the importance of various management skills and international courses, as well as their opinion on the mechanisms (institutions and academics) for delivering them. This article reports on the responses obtained and suggests methods for improving the overall effectiveness of international business education.

A major challenge facing North American educational institutions is the internationalization of their business curricula. This challenge has been recognized by both the private and public sectors. They have tasked the educational system with preparing students for the complexity of international business [Costanzo 1974; Nehrt 1977; Joyal 1982; Stein 1984; Vice 1987; Bergman 1988]. However, while the issue of internationalization of the business school curriculum is important, how this internationalization is to occur has received little empirical attention [Farahbakhsh 1984].

The objective of this paper is to examine the business and management skills, qualities and knowledge that senior managers from 122 Canadian organizations felt were necessary to maintain their global competitiveness. In particular, executives' attitudes towards the importance of various management skills and specific international courses were examined. Since a significant factor in the quality and success of international business programs is the quality of academe, executive attitudes towards the competence and relevance of academe were also examined. Some suggested methods for improving the overall effectiveness of graduate and undergraduate international business education in Canadian institutions are also provided.

Many studies have pointed to the importance of an international educational system for the growth and well being of a country. In November 1979, the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International

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Studies found that one of the leading reasons behind a declining U. S. international competitive edge was American business's lack of foreign language and area expertise. The Commission suggested that "Colleges and Universities must extend and improve their curricula in meeting the growing needs of foreign language and international business." They concluded that the educational system was an integral component for improving U. S. international competitiveness. A similar conclusion was reached in Canada by the Canadian Manufacturers Association. As a result, they established a task force to explore how post-secondary institutions could be strengthened so that Canadian industry could become more internationally competitive [Vice 1987]. Porter and McKibbin [1988] had slightly different results. While they felt that more attention should be paid to international education, and found that international business education was one of the most important issues among academics, they reported that both in interviews with corporate executives and in corporate surveys, international business education was not highly ranked.¹

Both in Canada and the United States, business, government and academe have recognized the importance of improving international business education as a means of enhancing the country's international competitiveness. From a microeconomic perspective, studies have found a correlation between international business education and firm performance. Beamish [1986, 1988] examined the exporting performance of small- and medium-sized Canadian export firms and found a correlation between export performance and the extent of international education. Similarly, Reynolds [1986] and Koh [1986] found positive correlations between international business performance and formal training in international business within American firms.

Unfortunately, none of these studies clearly identified whether the international education had occurred as part of a formal graduate/undergraduate education, through management programs or as part of a continuing education program. Therefore, although the preceding studies have identified micro and macro economic benefits from international business education, the role to be played at the graduate/undergraduate level is uncertain. However, executives have indicated the undergraduate/graduate level as being the front line training ground for international business education. Mr. Costanzo (Vice President of Citibank), in a symposium on "Preparing Tomorrow's Business Leaders Today," stated that "multinational business is becoming so important that the business school had better prepare all its students for it." Similar conclusions were reached by Nehrt [1977], Joyal [1982], Stein [1984] and Rush and Evans [1985]. These studies found that many North American companies felt that students at the undergraduate and graduate level should receive a grounding in international business. As well, the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business thought the issue of international business education to be of sufficient importance that in 1980, they amended the business course section of curriculum

standards to include “every student should be exposed to the international dimension through one or more elements of the curriculum.”

STUDY DESIGN

While business leaders recognized the importance of international education programs, they were concerned that the courses and material encompassing these programs were not reflecting the needs of industry [Kaminarides and Latanich 1984; Farahbakhsh 1984; Vice 1987; Porter and McKibbin 1988]. The recognition of the importance of an international business education system which was targeted to corporate needs in Canada led to the establishment of the Corporate-Higher Education Forum’s Task Force on International Business Education in 1987. The Task Force’s terms of reference were:

1. To identify the expectations and needs of business and government for well educated and trained Canadians to work in the fields of international business;
2. To assess the effectiveness of university programs and research in the field of international business, and make recommendations for improvements to these programs; and,
3. To survey the nature and extent of short-term education and training for Canadians engaged in international activities within Canadian universities, business and government, and recommend ways in which these programs can be made more effective, particularly through university, business and government cooperation.

To accomplish these objectives, the Task Force² developed and administered different questionnaires to corporations, academic institutions and public sector organizations, eliciting their opinions on the three issues.

Of the 500 largest Canadian firms identified as being involved in international transactions, 284 were mailed the corporate questionnaire. A subsequent telephone follow-up resulted in 122 completed questionnaires for a response rate of 43%. These responses formed the basis for this paper.

The questionnaire items used for this analysis consisted of 73 opinion-related questions gathered by four-point anchored Likert scales. There were some study design problems. For example, some questions were ambiguous while others were double-barrelled: “MBA’s are too theoretical, too mobile and too highly-priced.”

Another methods problem could have arisen due to a size bias as the questionnaire was only sent to the largest companies in Canada. Additionally, a position-based bias could have arisen due to heterogeneity in the position of respondents. The questionnaire was completed by only one individual within each organization. The respondent was either the chief executive officer/president, senior human resource executive or some other executive. Although the questionnaire asked for organization needs and opinions, it is possible that the respondents may have answered within the context

of their position. For this study, our concern was that human resource executives might, for example, have viewed organizational behaviour courses and "people" skills as being of greater importance, while CEOs might have placed a greater emphasis on policy and general management courses.

To assess whether respondent and organizational characteristics influenced replies, several discriminant analyses were conducted. Discriminating factors examined included the position of the respondent, sales level, percent of sales that arose from international sales activity, nationality of ownership, and whether the respondent firm had ever directly benefitted from international education. As well, stepwise regression analysis was used on sales level and percent of sales arising from international activities since these were interval variables. While all final equations were statistically significant, the number of significant predictor variables was low. Further, at the .05 level, the predictive ability of the equations was, with the exception of position, only marginally better than that obtained by chance. In addition, for the discriminant analysis, few of the significant variables had mean differences between the groups of greater than .50. Since so few questions were statistically significant it was concluded that bias from position, nationality, sales level, international sales level or past benefit was negligible. Therefore, further analysis proceeded using the complete corporate data set. Where a discriminating variable had a group mean difference greater than .50, or where a regression coefficient was statistically significant (at .05), the effect and its direction are noted within the appropriate table.³

As our intended purpose was to use the Task Force data to recommend appropriate directions for action based on respondent rankings of courses, skills and desired employee attributes, a paired *T*-test using a .05 significance level was used in order to ensure that the rankings of responses were statistically different.

Finally, in order to increase the generalizability of the study beyond its Canadian context, where possible, results from American studies were contrasted with those obtained in this study.

RESULTS

Respondent Characteristics

Of the 122 respondents, the dominant position of the respondent was human resource executive (43%), followed by other executive (33%) and CEO (23%). Total firm sales were over \$1 billion (Cdn) for 17.4% of respondents, \$500-\$1,000 million (32.1%) and \$100-\$500 million (30.3%). International sales accounted for 10%-25% of all sales in 42% of firms and over 25% of sales in 45.7% of firms. The majority of respondents were from independent Canadian-owned firms (64.2%), Canadian-owned subsidiaries (11.7%) and U.S.-owned subsidiaries (9.2%). With only a few exceptions—even among the foreign-owned subsidiaries—the respondents were Canadian nationals.

Half of the respondents were located within Ontario, which corresponds closely with that province's share of Canadian trade. There were also a sufficient number of respondents from two other provinces (Quebec and British Columbia) to permit regional analyses. Details are provided in the tables when differences existed.

Recruitment Activities

The first set of questions explored the hiring and selection criteria of the corporations (Table 1). Some of the responses provided an indication of when in the education process international business skill training should be offered. Respondents indicated that international business skills were of greater relevance after some work experience had been obtained. For example, respondents indicated that recruitment for international positions was more likely to have occurred post-experience and that few international positions were filled using on-campus recruitment. As well, respondents strongly agreed that "international business education/training is more effective after experience" and that they "preferred to hire international business expertise combined with functional or technical skills at the post-experience level." However, there was a strong indication by respondents that some aspects of an international education were important for entry-level applicants. Respondents moderately agreed that international awareness among recruits was important. Further, as firm size increased, the importance of the language and international business combination increased such that its mean approached that of the highest ranked responses.

The results of this section indicate that while business experience and functional skills were considered more important than international business skills for entry-level international positions, an awareness of international issues as well as some foreign language training were important and would provide the applicant with a competitive advantage in the hiring process. The fact that executives viewed international education as being of greater value after some experience had been gained might argue for incorporating a greater range of international course offerings at the graduate level, where more students have had some work experience. As well, the need to combine international business skills with work experience could suggest support for cooperative international educational programs.

Academic Disciplines, Preferred Courses and Skills

While international skills have been identified in the previous section as being of some importance in the hiring process, the issue of which courses, which skills and within which academic discipline will be addressed in this section.

Respondents ranked business degrees (business/commerce, accounting/finance) and engineering highest (2.05, 3.03 and 3.04, respectively, on a 1 = highest and 7 = lowest scale) for students preparing for an international

TABLE 1
Corporate Recruiting Preferences for Positions
of International Responsibility

How do you go about recruiting for positions of international responsibility within your organization? (1=Yes, 2=No)

Recruit post-experience for international positions	1.27*
Recruit on campus	1.35
Recruit on campus for international positions	1.84

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements relating to your hiring criteria and selection process (1=Do not agree, 4=Strongly agree):

IB education is more effective after experience	3.29
Primarily seek functional/technical expertise, not IB	3.26
Executive skills needs include expertise in IB	3.24
The number of entry level applicants exceeds demand	3.22****
Prefer to hire IB expertise combined with functional or technical skills at post-experience level	3.21*
International awareness among recruits is important	3.03
Criteria favors applicants with business education	2.97***
Combination of IB studies and language is attractive	2.90**
Growing need for Canadians to manage our international operations	2.89****
Value of IB education is not tested at entry level	2.89
Calibre of entry level applicants is improving	2.87
Cooperative classroom/workplace applicants favoured	2.61*
Foreign language ability is important hiring criteria	2.54
Most IB skills needs met from host country hiring	2.47
Favor MBA over Bachelor/diploma-level applicants	2.43
Prefer applicants with postgraduate degrees	2.18
You increasingly hire generalists at entry level	2.15
MBA's are too theoretical, mobile and high priced	2.15
International exchanges rate highly in selection process	1.94
Prefer a foreign MBA over a Canadian MBA	1.26

*Negative correlation between level of sales and the statement

**Positive correlation between level of sales and the statement

***Negative correlation between international sales level and the statement

****Regional differences within Canada were observed. The supply of applicants was lowest in Quebec (2.8) and highest in British Columbia (3.6). Similarly, the strongest need was observed in Quebec (3.2)—the lowest in British Columbia (2.7)

career. This was followed by economics (3.91), law (4.89), science (5.02) and general arts (5.69). The low ranking assigned to general arts was corroborated by a low level of agreement with the statement "Generalists are increasingly hired," while "Our criteria favours applicants with business degrees," was ranked higher (Table 1).

Respondents were also asked to rate the importance of fifteen international courses as they related to career progress within the organization. Most of the courses were deemed to be of some importance. The means ranged from 2.16 for international production and operations management to 3.32 for international marketing and sales (Table 2). Only four statistically significant means emerged, with the highest attributable to international marketing and sales, international finance/capital markets and international trade/export management. Regional studies and languages were ranked among the lowest desired courses; however, their importance increased with the

seniority of the respondent. Since it is the CEO who is supposed to set long-term firm direction, the more positive support they provided might indicate that language and regional study courses will become more important in future years.

The course rankings in Table 2 can be clustered into ranked area groups. The first two recommended courses fell into marketing and finance area groups. The next three courses (trade, policy, business policy) fell into general management/policy area group. Ignoring legal and language courses as they are usually nonbusiness courses, the next four courses (cross-cultural communications, global change management, organizational behavior in global settings and managing the multinational enterprise) fell largely into the organizational behavior/organizational psychology area group. The last courses were representative of course offerings in the information systems and production area groups.

The area and course rankings indicated one approach for internationalizing business programs. Instead of adding all courses at the same time, the institution could consider a phased approach either by offering the top-ranked courses first (marketing, finance and trade) or by starting an internationalization program within the area groups. Under this approach either international modules could be put into existing courses within the area groups, or specific international courses could be offered. In either case, the internationalization would start in the marketing area group followed by finance, policy/general management, organizational behavior, information systems and then production-area groups.

The course rankings in this study are supported by rankings within the American studies of Farahbakhsh [1984] and Nehrt [1977] and are close to those obtained by Patrick [1978]—Table 3.

Apart from looking towards academe to provide business studies to students, academe is also expected to endow students with business skills. Corporations were asked to rate the importance of twelve skills and abilities as they applied to selection for positions of international responsibility. Similar to the course rankings, most skills were rated as either moderately important or very important. The means ranged from 2.78 for foreign language proficiency to 3.69 for communications skills (Table 4). The most important skills were communications,⁴ leadership, interpersonal, adaptability/flexibility, ethical and moral standards and management skills. These results were somewhat consistent with those found in other non-international studies. For example, Porter and McKibbin [1988] found that executives ranked leadership/interpersonal business and written and oral communications skills highest.

Corporate Attitude towards Academe

The next set of questions addressed the corporation's relationship with academe, with particular emphasis on their perception of academe's strengths and weaknesses.

TABLE 2
Courses Preferred by Corporate Employers

How important to career progress within your organization are the following business school studies?
(1=Not important, 4=Very important)

International Marketing and Sales	3.32
International Finance/Capital Markets	3.04*
International Trade/Export Management	2.90
International Policy & International Competitiveness	2.71
International Business Policy/Strategic Managements	2.68
Cross-Cultural Communications/Negotiations/Bargaining	2.61
Legal Aspects of International Business Transactions	2.50
Global Change Management	2.50
International Transfer of Technology	2.45**
Regional Studies/Languages	2.40***
Organizational Behavior in Global Setting	2.38*
Managing Global Information Technology	2.27
International Service Operations Management	2.19
International Production and Operations Management	2.16

*Positive correlation between level of sales and the statement

**Positive correlation between international sales level and the statement

***Positive correlation between level of respondent and the statement

TABLE 3
Ranking of Most Important International Courses
(1=Highest, 5=Lowest)

Beamish and Calof [1988]	Farahbakhsh [1984]	Patrick [1976]	Nehrt [1977]
1 Marketing	Marketing	Finance	Marketing*
2 Finance/Cap. Mkts	Intro to IB	Economics	Finance*
3 Trade/Export Management	Policy/Strategy	Accounting	Accounting*
4 Policy/Competition	Management	Marketing	Labor*
5 Policy/Strategic Management	Export/Import Marketing	Management	Business law*

*Importance of international skills in

While no question resulted in a strong response (strongly agree or strongly disagree), the statement that received the greatest degree of agreement was "Academe's competence in international business needs outside evaluation" (Table 5), while the third- and fourth-ranked responses were "Canadian business schools need redesigning to be consumer oriented," and, "Management education is too academic and remote." One of the most negative responses was for the statement "Business schools have evaluated your international business/management skill needs." Thus, respondents indicated a slightly negative opinion of academe's international business competence. This slightly negative view has been echoed in other studies: Ricks and Czinkota [1979] noted that executives in their survey found international business research to be not particularly helpful; Stein [1984] found that some corporations felt that higher education may not have enough of a

TABLE 4
Importance of Skills and Abilities

Please rate the importance of the following skills and abilities to selection for positions of international responsibility with your organization. (1=Not important, 4=Very important)

Communications skills	3.69
Leadership skills	3.68
Interpersonal skills	3.67
Adaptability/Flexibility	3.66*
Ethical and moral standards	3.61
Management skills (organize/plan, direct)	3.60
Multi-dimensional capability	3.53
Functional/Technical strengths (specific skills)	3.47
Emotional/Physical fitness	3.21
Global orientation	3.14
Technological literacy	2.80
Foreign Language proficiency/Aptitude	2.78**

*Positive correlation between level of sales and the statement

**Ratings ranged from 3.2 in Quebec, which has the highest proportion of Canadians who speak both English and French, to 2.5 in British Columbia.

TABLE 5
Corporate Opinion of Academe

Please indicate the level of your agreement with the following statements. (1=Do not agree, 4=Strongly agree)

Academe's competence in IB needs outside evaluation	2.69*
Canada's business schools are responding to our corporate needs	2.57**
Canadian business schools need redesigning to be relevant and consumer oriented	2.45***
Management education is too academic and remote	2.41
Academic research has been useful for decision making	2.06
Business school staff are sufficiently exposed to business experience	1.97
Risk taking can be successfully taught in a risk-averse environment	1.86
Business schools do a good job marketing their international expertise	1.83
Business schools have evaluated your IB skills need	1.23

*Positive correlation between level of sales and the statement

**Positive correlation between international sales level and the statement

***Positive correlation between level of respondent and the statement

grasp of the issues involved in international business and prepare students to become U.S.-based or international-based trainers; Stein also reported on prominent gaps in business and management education; and in Porter and McKibbin's study [1988] executives rated overall teaching ability as being slightly above average, but the executives were unfamiliar with academic research and that research had not provided any known benefits. Thus, the perceived quality of research is either negative or nil.

Respondents who viewed the state of management education and business schools in general to be remote and not consumer oriented also tended to not give financial support to business schools. While this does not necessarily prove causation, the association between the variables cannot be ignored.

CONCLUSIONS

The need to develop business academic programs which are responsive to corporate needs can hardly be argued. The data from this study indicated that corporations did not feel that academe was adequately responding to their international needs. Thus, institutions should not adopt a "do nothing attitude," rather steps should be taken to internationalize business programs.

As institutions increase their level of international commitment, more faculty trained in international business will be required. However, the decision to internationalize must be mediated by faculty availability, which has been identified as a current problem [Nehrt 1987].

In the context of strategic positioning of business programs, the results of this survey should be interpreted with caution. While international programs should respond to the corporate needs identified within this study, the fact that an individual course or program was ranked low (e.g., exchange programs) should not be interpreted to mean that the program or course need not be offered. Similarly, although executives indicated that international skills were of greater value after experience, this does not mean that international courses should, for the most part, be limited to the graduate level. Teaching courses and skills beyond those currently required by corporations and/or extending the international program at the undergraduate level, should also be based on a philosophical determination of whether the institution is preparing students for the first job after graduation or for a longer-term career; and what the institution perceives to be the longer-term knowledge needs of business.

Content of international courses should be set in consultation with industry in order that its relevance be assured. The involvement of industry can also assist in improving the image of academe, as closer ties can help remove some of the prejudices. Without close cooperation between corporations and academe, the probability of an applicable, properly targeted international education system decreases. Close ties have been advocated by many academics and business leaders [Lynton 1983; Rush and Evers 1985; Vice 1987; Porter and McKibbin 1988]. Further, the danger in not bringing business leaders into the course design process is that the appropriate course title might be created (e.g., international marketing) but the course content itself might be inappropriate from a real world business perspective [Kaminarides and Latanich 1984]. Survey respondents indicated that they were "somewhat willing" to get involved in curriculum development and program redesign, thus closer ties are viable (Table 6).

In order to better target academic programs for the business environment, the interchange of ideas between academe and business is essential. The responsibility lies with all academic institutions to carry the process forward into course design. From an altruistic perspective, the structuring of courses to meet the needs of business leaders could improve the overall effectiveness of global competition while at the same time increasing the employability of students trained within the international education system. From

TABLE 6
Corporations Willingness to “Get Involved” with Academe

Please indicate the level of your agreement with the following statements. (1=Do not agree, 4=Strongly agree)

The onus is on business to initiate IB/M skills needs discussions with academe	2.75
Corporate donors should be involved in IB/M restructuring	2.68
Executive secondments to academe have been a success	2.61
Suitable mechanisms for corporate-academic dialogue are available	2.49
Communications and contact with business schools is O.K.	2.44
Prepared to be involved in IB/M curriculum development	2.36
Prepared to provide executives for part-time teaching	2.11

an economic perspective, improving the effectiveness of programs should enhance the business community’s perceptions of academe’s competence.

NOTES

1. Unfortunately, Porter and McKibbin did not clearly indicate how the issue of international business education was raised in either the interviews or the questionnaire, if at all. Secondly, unlike the previous studies, international business education was only an ancillary part of their study. Thus, any conclusions on the importance of international business education as a result of their study are speculative.
2. The project director was F. Ian Wood, now the Consul-General of Canada in Seattle, Washington. The authors are grateful to all of the project team members and forum staff for their assistance and cooperation.
3. All results in tables are presented in ranked mean order and not in the order in which the question was asked. This was done in order to complement our analysis and help the reader interpret the data.
4. This emphasis on the importance of communications was previously identified by the executives in Ricks and Czinkota’s 1979 survey as the single most important problem area in their international operations.

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