



Reimagining Internationalization in Higher Education: Leveraging Crisis-Driven Strategic Opportunities

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Purpose: The present research examines to what extent crises, such as the recent pandemic, have opened new possibilities for higher education institutions—especially in developing countries—to attract international students. The study is intended to analyse how internationalisation strategies have been readjusted under recent sectoral changes.

Study design/methodology/approach: Through a literary review and an investigation into current patterns of higher education, this study will construct a conceptual framework for universities to achieve sustainable revenues through internationalisation, including major educational changes triggered by the pandemic.

Findings: The research shows that while the recent challenges have been significant, they also concurrently created opportunities for institutions which were previously less appealing to international students. The way online and hybrid learning modes have shifted has thus helped the universities to rebalance their strategic focus in ways compatible with the proposed framework.

Originality/value: This study provides a strategic framework for university administrators desiring to achieve financial sustainability via internationalization. The paper sets the stage for future empirical research and makes an important contribution to the use of online and hybrid learning modes to attract a larger international student body.

Introduction

Internationalisation of higher education is no longer considered a ‘good to have’ activity of a university as it has become an essential function for most universities and other higher education institutions worldwide. The period between the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first was characterised as a time activating the internationalisation efforts of the universities. By that time, well-established Western universities already had experience in internationalisation, while newly emerging economies such as *those* in Eastern Europe were just moving from planned to market economies. This paradigm shift triggered a rethinking of university's strategies as they became market players, and many of them, primarily private universities, were supposed to find their own funding. Thus, on top of the other objectives, Internationalization became necessary to generate additional income for higher education in emerging countries.

On the other hand, as soon as universities started drafting and implementing internationalisation strategies, they became international market players with all the necessary business functions. These universities experienced various challenges: lack of prior experience in internationalisationInternationalization, as well as the need to assign teams responsible for internationalisationInternationalization, modify curriculums to align with Western standards, offer degree programs in foreign languages, and promote their countries and universities as attractive destinations for potential international students, and many more. Hence, an increased rivalry has not changed the internationalisation scene significantly. Up to now, North American

and Western European countries are considered education destinations by most international degree-seeking students.

At the end of 2019, the world entered the unprecedented crisis era in modern history. The virus called COVID-19 rapidly spread into all countries, infecting hundreds of millions of people and causing millions of deaths worldwide. Most companies in almost all industries needed to adapt to the new reality and reshape their strategies and operations. The same applies to higher education. As the movement between the countries and sometimes within the countries was restricted, internationalisationInternationalization experienced a rapid slowdown. At the same time, education institutions needed to adapt to the new reality: many introduced an entirely online or hybrid education style during different phases of the pandemic. Such changes triggered modernising technologies universities were using, adopting online and hybrid delivery curricula, training professors and administrative staff, and reshaping campus operations to meet health and safety requirements.

While many industries, including higher education, experienced unforeseen challenges and losses, the crisis triggered innovative approaches to continue business operations. The current research aims to determine whether the recent paradigm shift and adaptation to new realities can be used as a window of opportunity to boost internationalisation in higher education in emerging markets. It also provides a comprehensive framework for internationalisationInternationalization to generate additional income.

The research aims to study whether the recent pandemic crisis can provide opportunities for internationalising higher education, especially in emerging markets. This paper will contribute to the existing literature on internationalisationInternationalization, exploring and conceptualising options in the new reality.

To meet the research goals and design a comprehensive conceptual framework, the following research questions were derived:

- In what ways does the COVID-19 pandemic present higher education institutions, especially those in developing countries, with new opportunities for attracting international students?
- In what ways have the internationalisation strategies in higher education been adjusted amidst sectoral changes triggered by the pandemic?
- What is the contribution of online and hybrid modes of learning in redeveloping internationalisation strategies towards financial sustainability?
- What are the factors that help online and hybrid learning be effective in attracting international students to institutions in emerging markets?
- How does a conceptual framework support universities in achieving sustainable revenues through internationalisationInternationalization in the post-pandemic context?

Methodology

The present study takes an exploratory approach to assessing whether the recent pandemic has opened new opportunities for higher education institutions, particularly those of emerging countries, to attract more international students. The methodology adopted involves an in-depth literature review combined with observation of continued developments in the higher education sector, which allows nuanced analysis of recent shifts in strategies for internationalisation and their potential to support sustainable revenue generation.

A robust conceptual framework was developed by conducting a comprehensive analysis of 37 scholarly articles on the internationalisationInternationalization of higher education. These studies have examined the impact of the recent pandemic on internationalisation trends through

a critical review of related themes and strategies. This study further analysed statistical data from prominent global organisations such as UNESCO, the OECD, and the Institute of International Education (IIE) to provide empirical support and depth of context. This will not only shed light on the challenges and opportunities presented by the pandemic but also infuse global perspectives into the ongoing changes in the landscape of higher education internationalisation.

The study reviews literature from the last two decades, ensuring coverage of both foundational studies and the most recent developments related to higher education internationalisation, including those addressing the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The academic papers were sourced from reputable academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Grey literature, institutional reports, and policy documents were also reviewed to add practical insights and comprehensiveness to the analysis.

The review encompasses studies representing a wide variety of geographic regions, with a particular focus on emerging markets. This ensures a balanced understanding of internationalisation strategies across various contexts.

Articles were selected based on clear inclusion and exclusion criteria, such as relevance to internationalisationInternationalization in higher education, peer-reviewed status, and alignment with the study's thematic focus on online learning, hybrid education, and financial sustainability.

Research specifically targeted literature that addressed the role of online and hybrid learning, cost-saving measures, and strategic shifts in internationalisation post-pandemic. This narrow focus strengthens the applicability of the findings to the study's objectives.

The framework seeks to guide universities in formulating internationalisation strategies that would result in financial sustainability despite global challenges. It focuses on synthesising existing research with real-time sector observations to form the basis of a conceptual framework, which reflects current and emerging dynamics in higher education internationalisation.

Literature Review

This part of this paper explores existing literature on higher education internationalisation and its challenges in emerging markets.

Financial Objectives and Strategies for the Internationalisation of Higher Education

Since the 1990s, higher education institutions have significantly enhanced their international activities involving students' mobility, academic and administrative staff exchanges, and academic curriculum changes (Ayoubi & Al-Habaibeh, 2006). These processes coincide with globalisation. There is a mutual influence between globalisation and teaching and research practices that makes Internationalisation one of the aspects of globalisation and vice versa: Internationalisation induces rapid growth of globalisation (Manning, 1999). According to Ellingboe (1998), the internationalisation process involves various stakeholders modifying the internal dynamics of higher education institutions in the frequently changing external environment. Moreover, Qiang (2003) sees InternationalisationInternationalization as a response of higher education to globalisation. According to the author, influential factors of InternationalisationInternationalization vary from country to country and comprises history, culture, resources, and diverse concepts.

While influential factors of higher education institutions vary, the same applies to Internationalization's goals and motivational factors. These factors may include economic

growth, labour market requirements, foreign policy, Financial expectations, national educational demand, cultural function, personal growth, involving international destinations in research and teaching, and institutional growth (Knight & de Wit, 1995). According to Altbach and Knight (2007), profit is considered one of the main motivational factors for InternationalisationInternationalization. Universities seek additional income. Some universities are directly acquired from private companies to generate revenue. The authors state that many countries reduce subsidising traditional universities. These higher education institutions intend to have InternationalisationInternationalization as an additional funding source. Many of these universities establish their branches in middle-income countries with joint programs with the local universities.

Implementing such activities and maximising profit from internationalisation requires a strategic approach; thus, various scholars consider the internationalisation of higher education *to be* a strategic process. According to Schoorman (1999), internationalisation can be achieved through strategic planning that considers short-term and long-term objectives. University strategic planning is a long-term process that includes planning for Internationalization as well (Taylor, 2004). The author suggests that while planning Internationalization strategically, higher education institutions need to consider the external environment, internal arrangements, and capabilities. Planning and implementing Internationalization is an ongoing process that requires solid internal orientation from managers (Taylor, 2004).

Rudzky (1995) puts together strategic management and the internationalisation process. The author provides details of the higher education internationalisation process that starts with strategic analysis, which implies external and internal environment analysis. At this stage, universities evaluate their mission and vision, the current scope of activities, academic and administrative staff capabilities, tangible and intangible assets, opportunities provided by the external environment, the nature of stakeholders and competitors, and the goals of Internationalization. The next stage consists of deriving strategic options for InternationalisationInternationalization. These options need to be evaluated, and their feasibility must be considered, considering internal and external factors. Once the best strategic options are selected, universities start their implementation process, which implies allocating resources, adjusting organisational structure if needed, and putting plans into action (Rudzky, 1995).

Having studied the existing literature on various models of Internationalization, Alpenidze (2015) provided a synthesised framework of higher education internationalisation that links together strategic processes, internationalisation areas, and internal and external influential factors. The model shows that at specific points, universities evaluate their strategic moves and adjust their strategic planning and implementation process considering dynamic changes in the external environment and internal resources. According to the model, which is based on various scholars' findings and suggestions, one of the significant components of internationalisation strategies is having international students. As the latter provides additional income for universities, it is essential to attract more international students. The following section examines global student mobility trends and factors influencing destination choice.

International students' mobility trends and factors affecting destination choice

Student mobility is an essential aspect of internationalisation in higher education. Economic and cultural factors, national political climates, global geopolitical realities, and environmental changes have altered the global student mobility landscape in recent decades (Kirloskar & Inamdar, 2021; Alpenidze et al., 2022).

Since 1960, there has been an incredible increase in international student mobility worldwide (Chen & Barnett, 2000). From roughly 1.3 million in 1990 to about 5.3 million in 2017, the number of mobile students has increased dramatically (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2019). According to the Institute of International Education Global Atlas, The United States, the United Kingdom, and China are the most popular destinations for international students (Institute of International Education, 2018a), whilst China is the top source country among the sending countries, with 8,69,387 students on overseas campuses, followed by India (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2018). By 2025, the number of internationally mobile students is expected to reach 8 million (Bohm et al., 2002). OECD data support the same trend. According to the OECD, 4.6 million students crossed a border in 2015 to pursue an international education experience, significantly rising from the 2.1 million students who travelled abroad in 2001 (OECD, 2017). Table 1 provides international students' host country distribution worldwide, highlighting eight top destinations in 2001, 2017, and 2023.

Table 1: Host Destination for International Students

| 2001 | | 2017 | | 2023 | |
|-----------|-----|-----------|-----|-----------|-----|
| USA | 28% | USA | 24% | USA | 17% |
| UK | 11% | UK | 11% | UK | 11% |
| Germany | 9% | China | 10% | Canada | 10% |
| France | 7% | Australia | 7% | France | 6% |
| Australia | 4% | France | 7% | Australia | 6% |
| Japan | 3% | Canada | 7% | Germany | 6% |
| Spain | 2% | Russia | 6% | Russia | 4% |
| Belgium | 2% | Germany | 6% | China | 3% |
| Others | 34% | Others | 22% | Others | 37% |

Source: Institute of International Education (2018b, 2023)

Wilkins et al. (2012) have comprehensively summarised various empirical research on factors influencing international students' destination choices. It provides multiple influential factors for students from different source and destination countries. The main factors identified were:

- Economic and cultural ties between source and host nations; scholarship opportunities; additional support (McMahon, 1992, as cited in Wilkins et al.,2012);
- Course and career information; required tools on hand; learning-friendly environment degree program with a good reputation; a clean and safe atmosphere; reasonable expenses (Joseph & Joseph, 2000);
- Personal recommendations; knowledge of the host nation; safety; cost difficulties; social reasons; reputation; institution quality (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002, as cited in Wilkins et al.,2012);
- Quality of education; recognised qualifications; ease of enrollment; work during and after studies; cost considerations; housing; safety; culture (Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003, as cited in Wilkins et al.,2012);
- University repute; course diversity; teaching quality; employment after graduation; good university facilities for international students (Pimpa, 2005, as cited in Wilkins et al.,2012);
- Proximity to home; educational quality and variety; cost of living; where friends go to school; family recommendation; safety (Shanka et al., 2005, as cited in Wilkins et al.,2012);

- Employment possibilities; quality and reputation of universities; tuition fees and living expenses; and suggestions from families, friends, and agents. (Gatfield & Chen, 2006, as cited in Wilkins et al.,2012);
- Academic capacity; sociocultural experience; economic income; job market aptitude; educational quality; internationalisation aspects (Li & Bray, 2007, as cited in Wilkins et al.,2012);
- Recognition of earned credentials; ease of entrance; high-quality teaching and learning environments; and employment while studying (Maringe & Carter, 2007, as cited in Wilkins et al.,2012);
- Safe setting; studious atmosphere; multicultural environment; quality of life; future work prospects; degree valued in home country; visa procedure easy; institution/program quality and reputation (Chen, 2008, as cited in Wilkins et al.,2012);
- Employment following graduation; social and academic support; program availability; on-site lodging; relatives/friends in the area; English-speaking environment (Bodycott, 2009, as cited in Wilkins et al.,2012);
- Course quality; lecturer quality; course cost; safety; library facilities; a range of courses; opportunity to interact with other students; recommendations; cost of living; proximity to home (Abubakar et al., 2010, as cited in Wilkins et al.,2012);
- Quality learning environment; use of the English language; staff quality; university reputation; family, friends, and media influences; funding; costs; institution facilities (Padlee, Kamaruddin, and Baharun, 2010, as cited in Wilkins et al.,2012);
- Improved job chances, learning about different cultures, improved English, quality of education, university reputation, **and** quality and quantity of education (Wilkins & Huisman, 2011, as cited in Wilkins et al.,2012).

These factors need to be studied by universities to come up with strategies to attract international students.

Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Higher Education

Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 outbreak has disrupted normalcy worldwide and changed how businesses typically conduct their operations (Bocanet et al., 2021). Of course, such a change affected the higher education industry, too. As the objective of this research was to find out whether the COVID-19 pandemic could open a window of opportunity to enhance InternationalisationInternationalization by higher education institutions, it was essential to look at the recent research on the general impact of the pandemic on higher education.

Due to the recent pandemic, most countries have implemented lockdown and social distancing measures, which have resulted in the shutdown of schools, training and higher education institutions. Educators were required to deliver quality education through numerous online channels, a paradigm change. Despite the problems educators and learners face, online learning, distance learning, and continuing education have proven to be a remedy for this unprecedented worldwide pandemic (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). With the surge of the pandemic, all instructors were forced to adjust to an even more ambiguous and unprecedented environment based on the idea that "education must go on." Most educational institutions had to adapt their teaching methods, necessitating a review of existing strategies and the implementation of new ones (Fenech et al., 2020). In one of the recent studies, scholars provided empirically proven models depicting the adoption of new teaching strategies in the current rapidly changing environment. Those strategies were evolving through dynamic capabilities such as agility, sensing, shaping, seizing and reconfiguring opportunities. In a setting of organisational support, learning, reflection, experience, and student feedback, dynamic capacities shape new teaching tactics (Fenech et al., 2021). Many of those strategies were implemented through online platforms.

The method of educating students via the Internet using various online-based media, such as video calls, webinars, online learning platforms, and social media, is known as online teaching in higher education institutions (Mishra et al., 2020). Online teaching was used by the majority of universities worldwide to adapt their course delivery strategies to adapt to the new reality. However, such a rapid change in teaching required a high level of agility in educators and learners' acquisition of new skills.

According to Menon and Suresh (2020), changing environmental dynamics in higher education necessitate changes in the skill sets of the workforce, and thus, processes and practices that enhance and develop new knowledge and capabilities in the workforce have become critical for HEIs to achieve their goals. The researchers looked into the primary characteristics that aid agility in higher education and the interrelationships between them. The authors identified eight enablers to endorse agility in higher education based on existing literature and expert opinion: Organisational structure, ICT adoption, organisational learning, human resource strategies, leadership, change readiness, and engagement with stakeholders are all factors to consider. The researchers discovered that leadership is the most important facilitator, followed by human resource strategies and organisational structure. (Menon & Suresh, 2020). In the surge of COVID-19, these facilitators were modified to support online and hybrid teaching in many higher education institutions. This process was quite challenging; however, despite the sudden shift of instructional delivery to online platforms by higher education institutions and other establishments of learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is clear that online learning will be sustained if the obstacles faced by faculty and students are adequately understood and transformed into opportunities (Adedoyin, Soykan, 2020).

Discussion and Conceptual Framework

A few important contributions to the internationalisationInternationalization in higher education literature are outlined here. Altbach and Knight (2007) addressed the motivations and realities of internationalisation, economic drivers, and global competition in higher education institutions. The work of Rudzki (1995) represented a strategic management approach. The author explained how universities should combine internal and external factors in order to enhance their activities related to internationalisation. Alpenidze (2015) synthesised different models into a single comprehensive framework that focuses on strategic processes, areas of focus, and influencing factors. Wilkins et al. (2012) investigated factors affecting international students' choices of destinations and highlighted the role of reputation, cost, and quality. Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021) analysed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on teaching and learning in light of the shift to online and hybrid education as an important adaptation. The present research extends these foundational studies by specifically addressing the opportunities created by the pandemic for emerging markets.

Whereas earlier studies have focused broadly on internationalisation or emphasised internationalisation of traditional destination countries, the current research focuses on how cost-efficient online and hybrid delivery strategies can help institutions in developing countries attract international students and achieve financial sustainability. In incorporating a conceptual framework harnessed from the post-pandemic realities, this study fills the literature gap with pragmatic guidelines tailored for changed dynamics in the internationalisationInternationalization of higher education.

Table 1 clearly **shows the** trendy destinations for most international students, mainly **in** Western countries and China. There has been no significant change in these figures for the last two decades. However, the trend has changed by 2023: The trend in top destinations for international students between 2001 and 2023 shows some shifts:

- USA: While still the first choice, the USA went down significantly from 28% in 2001 to 17% in 2023, a sure sign of increasing competition.
- UK: The UK was relatively stable, hovering around 11% over the years, thus remaining consistent as the second choice.
- Germany and Canada: Whereas in 2001, Germany was very strong, it then lost its position to China in 2017; its share finally stabilised in 2023 at 6%. Canada also, in 2023, rose as a desired destination, accounting for 10%, overtaking the positions of both Germany and China.
- China and Australia: China appeared for the first time in 2017, reaching briefly 10%, but after that dropped to 3% in 2023. Australia reached 7% in 2017 and then slightly decreased to 6% in 2023.
- Others: The category "Others" has fluctuated but generally remained high, reaching 37% in 2023, indicative of the fact that other smaller or non-traditional destinations are turning out to be increasingly attractive options. This shift indicates that diversification in study destinations is continuous as more countries invest in becoming attractive to international students.

The competitiveness of the universities in emerging markets was still weak; hence, a change-triggering event on the scene was needed to avail *of* growth opportunities. A negative event of the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a paradigm shift in many industries, including higher education. Paradoxically this change could be positive by providing a window of opportunity to increase the competitiveness of the universities in emerging markets.

A significant change in higher education is being observed in teaching and learning strategies. Due to strict regulations and safety protocols, most universities and colleges were forced to adopt online learning practices. Universities needed to switch sharply to the new learning platforms. As a result, after two years of living in a new reality, universities acquired enormous experience in teaching online. At the same time, international students physical mobility experienced additional barriers due to travel restrictions imposed amid the pandemic regulations. The latter triggered challenges as well as opportunities for the universities. Most of them already have experience in online teaching and hybrid education, so they are more likely to attract international students. Such development will positively affect the internationalisation process of higher education in emerging markets that were not traditional destinations for international students.

Cost consideration is one of the major factors affecting international students' destination choices. Hence, designing online and hybrid delivery strategies that would reduce the costs for universities and prospective international students seems to be an effective way to attract more students to universities in emerging markets; this could significantly save travel, accommodation, and living costs as students could gain knowledge fully or partially online remaining at home at the same time. Universities in emerging markets are competitive in terms of tuition fees. If we remove the destination component as the main attraction for international education, universities in developing countries will be highly competitive, providing quality, flexible, and affordable education.

For successful implementation of InternationalisationInternationalization at home and attracting international students, a contemporary curriculum adapted to online teaching will be necessary, as well as professors capable of delivering such a curriculum mainly in English. Many universities already have experienced English-speaking academic staff; however, those universities that experience a lack of English-speaking faculty can hire them from abroad. Curriculum development and hiring English-speaking professors for online delivery are cost-effective activities as they are manageable without much investment.

Considering the current paradigm shift in the university education process, existing research on these topics and close observation of this process, a conceptual framework was designed to help universities gain sustainable income and thus improve sustainability (Figure 1).

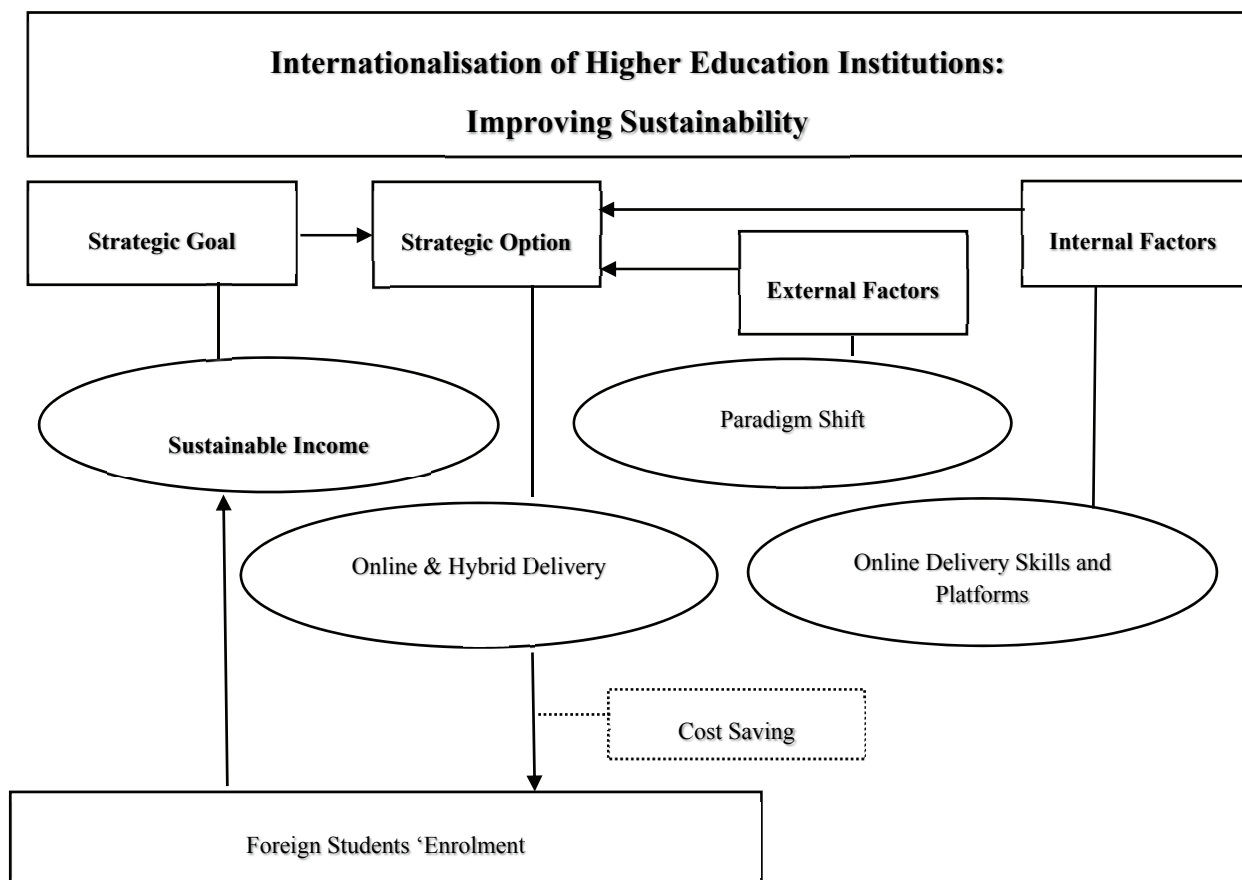


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

The current conceptual framework represents a model for further empirical research and a roadmap for university administrators to design strategies to increase their sustainability. Generating income is one of the major desires in higher education to pursue Internationalization. The framework proposes a strategic option to secure additional revenue through adapting to the recent paradigm shift in higher education. To achieve the strategic goal of having a sustainable income, among other options, universities can use online and hybrid course delivery platforms to attract international students and increase their enrolments online or partially online. That approach would settle concerns about costs that drive many international students' destination choice decision-making process. The recent paradigm shift as an external factor is still present; therefore, universities must adapt to new realities. This process, of course, would be affected by handling internal challenges such as providing sufficient training to existing faculty and admin staff that could deliver classes online and designing and improving technological platforms for such online activities. As a result, foreign students' enrolment will increase and generate additional income for universities aligned with their strategic goals.

Conclusion and Limitation of the Study

This study aimed to assess whether the recent pandemic crisis would provide higher education institutions with an opportunity to recruit more international students, particularly by

universities in developing nations, and to provide a conceptual framework that would enable researchers to further empirically explore the topic and direct university administrators in the internationalisation process in COVID-19 triggered context. The body of research and data demonstrates that, despite many challenges for institutions, the pandemic also opened up opportunities for higher education institutions that were previously not considered by most international students as their study destination preferences. With the strategic option of online and hybrid learning, universities now have a unique opportunity to revise their strategic goals as outlined in the conceptual framework developed in this study.

Despite many challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic has created a special window of opportunity for higher education institutions in developing countries to position themselves as competitive players in internationalisation. Cost savings and enhanced online learning capabilities have increased their appeal to international students.

The internationalization of institutions has been adapted, with the use of online and hybrid modes of learning that reduce travel barriers and costs for students. Such adaptations chime with broader trends within the higher education sector and address concerns around financial sustainability.

Online and hybrid learning have emerged as key enablers, with flexible and more economical options that will also serve a wider population. Investing in robust digital infrastructure with concomitant curriculum redesign will make institutions better able to exploit these modes of delivery.

Success in online and hybrid learning in internationalisationInternationalization is dependent on faculty training, technological platforms, and the quality of English language curriculum delivery. These are the areas where emerging markets shall have to give priority if they are to be competitive.

The proposed framework has also shown the way universities can achieve sustainable revenues through internationalisationInternationalization by cost savings, strategic shifts, and effective utilisation of online and hybrid delivery platforms. It offers insights with actionable items for university administrators in treading the shifting landscape in higher education.

The study has certain limitations as it relies on previously published literature and the researcher's observations rather than fully empirically supported scientific research data to support the notions and suggestions made in this paper. Other motivators other than cost savings are excluded from the framework, which is another area of constraint. Even though the cost is a key consideration when choosing a study location, other aspects could still influence potential students' decisions, such as the acceptance of the school, work prospects, immigrating overseas, experiencing a different culture, etc. However, it is anticipated that some potential overseas students may choose to remain at home and receive a high-quality education at a far reduced cost, which allows higher education institutions to market themselves and recruit prospective students. Further research could depict a clearer picture of the significance of each of these factors.

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