

Internationalization meets digitalization: entrepreneurial responses in higher education to the COVID-19 pandemic

**Erik E. Lehmann, Jonah M. Otto, Laurenz Weiße, Katharine
Wirsching**

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Internationalization Meets Digitalization: Entrepreneurial Responses in Higher Education to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Lehmann, E. E., Otto, J. M., Weiße, L. & Wirsching, K.*

**Corresponding Author*

Abstract

The COVID-19 Pandemic disrupted and altered nearly every facet of higher education, with the programmatic aspects of international education being one of the components most adversely affected. With mobility being strictly limited due to health and safety concerns, academics and program administrators needed to think on their feet and act quickly in order to salvage international student programming and its benefits. This chapter presents a case study of an intricate, trilateral, short-term study abroad program where the academic leaders and program administration collectively adopted an entrepreneurial and innovative mindset in order to move the program into an online, digital environment as a response to the conditions of the pandemic. In doing so, the key actors in this case study provide an successful example of a collaborative online international learning (COIL) program to maximize student and stakeholder outcomes in a turbulent situation. Further, this case study evidences the benefits of international higher education partnerships that are built on a foundation of trust and a commitment to innovation and resilience.

Author Affiliations

All authors are affiliated at the Chair of Management and Organization within in the University of Augsburg's Faculty of Business and Economics.

Erik E. Lehmann: erik.lehmann@wiwi.uni-augsburg.de

Jonah M. Otto: jonah.otto@wiwi.uni-augsburg.de

Laurenz Weiße: laurenz.weisse@wiwi.uni-augsburg.de

Katharine Wirsching: katharine.wirsching@wiwi.uni-augsburg.de

1. Introduction

With the discovery of the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2, more commonly known as COVID-19, and with the subsequent and ongoing pandemic, society and economies worldwide have experienced, and are still experiencing, an unprecedented exogenous shock (McKibbin & Roshen, 2020). The infection control measures, such as social distancing, which are taken to slow the spread of COVID-19, exert tremendous pressure not only on large parts of a nation's economy, but also on the world's education systems, which have historically relied on in-person classes, events, meetings and contacts (Marinoni et al. 2020). In particular, several aspects of higher education internationalization are severely affected by these pandemic control measures due to the closure of many university campuses and the implementation of international travel restrictions (Altbach & de Wit, 2020). Restricted student mobility has drastic consequences for international students who are then unable to begin or continue their degrees abroad, and for domestic students who are currently facing myriad challenges in implementing their exchange semesters or short-term study abroad programs, in particular, when such programs are mandatory graduation requirements (Kercher & Plasa, 2020). These impacts are being felt at the individual, institutional, network, national and international levels of analysis. About 82% of respondents in a survey conducted in June 2020 indicated that their study plans are affected by Covid 19.¹ In Europe, the flagship program Erasmus+ might encounter serious cuts instead of an anticipated increase in funding, and in the United States, one of the larger providers of study abroad programs, the Council on International Educational Exchange, has also announced serious cuts (Altbach & de Wit, 2020).

Lockdown and social confinement measures have therefore had an enormous impact on higher education. Higher education has been disrupted as never before, but the fact that campuses are physically closed does not mean that higher education institutions have stopped

¹ <https://www.fintiba.com/blog/corona-survey-results/>

functioning (Marinoni & van't Land, 2020). On the contrary, faced with multiple challenges, some universities have responded quickly and found new solutions to previously unknown problems and have discovered new ways in which to continue teaching and conducting research, even in an international and interdisciplinary context. Particularly, many universities have been able to shift international programming online, leveraging the strength of their institutional partnerships, international portfolios and technological capability/adaptability to implement collaborative online international learning (COIL) programs which are able to help provide some of the benefits of international education while mitigating the health risks introduced by the pandemic (Rubin & Guth, 2015; de Wit & Altbach, 2021).

Indiana University (USA), the University of Augsburg (Germany) and the University of Bergamo (Italy) provide an excellent case study of how to successfully cope with the pandemic in order to continue producing positive outcomes for students and stakeholders through COIL programs. Since 2013, these universities have annually offered a short-term summer study abroad program for groups of students comprised of all three institutions. The program, affectionately known as 'the Summer School', normally takes place in Augsburg (first 1.5 weeks) and in Bergamo (second 1.5 weeks) every summer. Based on an intense international exchange between the students and the lecturers, and amongst the students themselves in order to organize their required team projects, in-person contact was assumed to be a necessary condition and success factor of a program designed to enhance intercultural competence and international project management skills. Can such a program add some value to the students under the conditions of social distancing? How can such a program be organized just through online components?

By diving deeper into this specific case, this chapter exemplifies the ways in which universities have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic with innovative and entrepreneurial solutions, particularly in the area of internationalization. Given the importance of

internationalization to the successful attainment of the traditional mission goals of the university (teaching, research and service to society) (Otto et al., 2021), the universities in this case study quickly answered the challenge of the pandemic in order to provide their students with opportunities for meaningful international experiences despite the inherent obstacles introduced by the pandemic. The rest of the chapter is organized as follows: section two introduces the concept of the Summer School and how it normally functions (prior to the pandemic) and offers facts and statistics, section three then describes how the Summer School was shifted in 2020 into a COIL format and section four concludes.

2. The Summer School²

The leadership of the program, three professors which have known each other personally and professionally for years, nurtured a formal partnership in 2013 between the University of Augsburg, the University of Bergamo and Indiana University that has resulted in an intensive, three-week study abroad course that brings together graduate and undergraduate students from all three institutions to work on group projects that address regional economic development and public policy. This Summer School is co-hosted by the University of Bergamo and the University of Augsburg, splitting the program duration between the two locations. The program is designed so that the students not only benefit from hands-on academic training, but they also are able to build invaluable skills in international project management and cross-cultural competence by working in intercultural teams on rigorous research projects. This is ensured by requiring that every group has no more than 50% of its members from just one university.

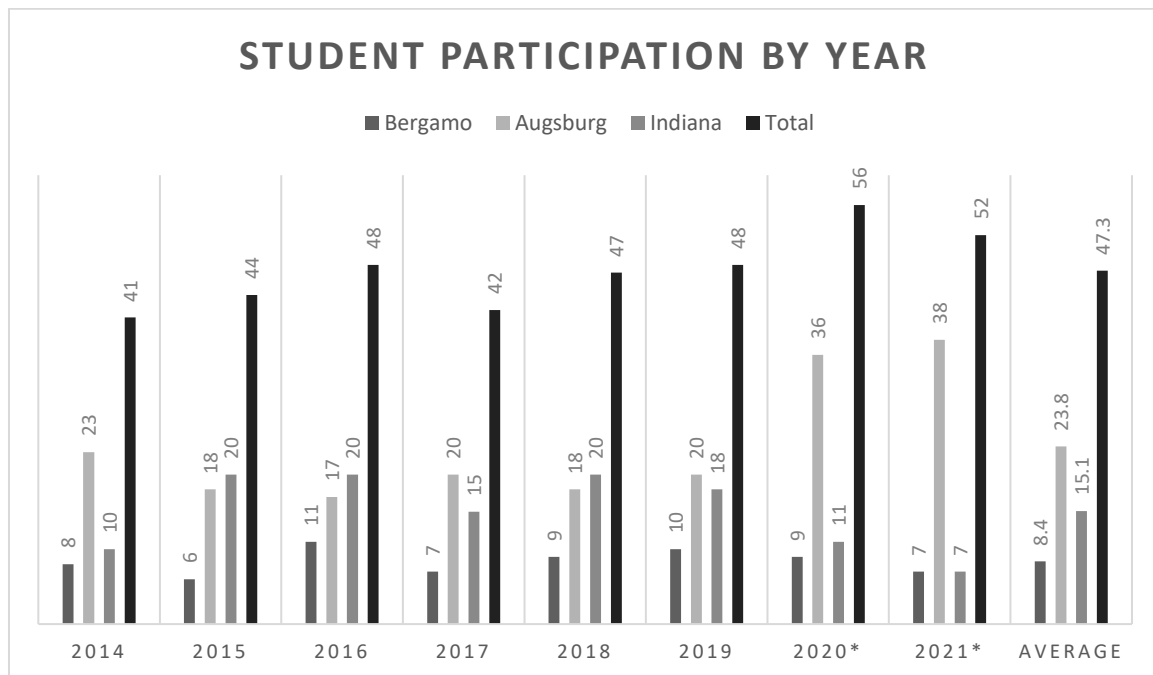
As noted by Vismara et al. (2019), “the content of the seminar is comprised of lectures, guest speakers, site visits and cultural excursions so as to maximize the breadth and depth of experience for the students that attend. Through lectures and talks from various voices and areas

² This section is largely adapted from the work of Vismara et al. (2019).

of expertise, the students are exposed to the expansive and interdisciplinary nature of the academic discipline of the course and are provided with a theoretical foundation and examples of practical application. By making site visits to smaller, family-run firms as well as large, multinational corporations in the local community, the students learn about the important role of private enterprise in economic development, as well as the benefits of nurturing a diversified regional economy. The cultural excursions teach the valuable, yet often ignored, lesson of context; that the historical and cultural context of a place bears significant implications for regional economies and the public policies that are intended to shape them. At the conclusion of the program, the students formally present their findings to demonstrate what they have learned and show the progress that they have made towards their group papers. They then use the feedback from the presentations to finalize their work.”

While the Summer School been able to serve a large number of students in total (378), the program has also been popular from the beginning and has maintained a consistently high level of student interest each year, never having less than 41 students in a given year (see figure 1). These consistently strong numbers for a program of this scale and complexity is no small feat, particularly when accounting for the COVID-19 pandemic which has significantly impacted international programs since early 2020. This will be discussed in detail later in the chapter.

Figure 1: Student participation in the Summer School program by university and year



**Numbers include expansion to 2 Summer School programs per year*

Source: Authors' own independent data collection

The number of students from each university is significant, but what is not shown is that there are far more nationalities and cultures represented in the data than just Italian, American and German. Owing to the internationalized student bodies at each of these universities, every iteration of the Summer School has had a very diverse population. Not only are the students culturally diverse, but they are academically diverse as well. The Indiana University students come from a public affairs background, the University of Bergamo students study management engineering and the University of Augsburg students are trained in various disciplines within business and economics.

Vismara et al. (2019) describe the content of the program as such: “The student academic work of the Summer School revolves around group projects, which are consulting-style reports where the students outline an economic development problem within a place (municipality, city, region, etc.) and propose public policy recommendations within the context of strategic management. At the beginning of the course, students arrange themselves into groups of four or five, with the caveat that no more than two group members can come from

the same university. This not only ensures that each group has multiple cultural perspectives, but that each group will also have different academic nuances. With the groups being comprised as such, they are instructed to take a multicultural and interdisciplinary approach to their work. Each group selects a place and an issue that is hindering economic development within that place, then they are tasked with combining their own independent research with the lessons learned from the readings, lectures, site visits and cultural excursions to formulate strategic recommendations that policy-makers from that place can use to appropriately manage and improve local economic development (Audretsch 2015). In the first year of the Summer School, the resulting papers were published within a book edited by the leadership of the program: *Globalization and Public Policy: A European Perspective* (Audretsch et al. 2015).” See figure 2 for a selection of topics and places chosen over the years.

Figure 2: Student Group Research Project Topics and Places

<i>Topic</i>	<i>Place(s)</i>
Income Inequality	United States, Germany, Norway
Gender Pay Gap	Iceland, Finland, Norway, Sweden, United States
Recession and Unemployment	Germany, United States
Crime and Security	Germany, Italy, United States
Healthcare Systems and Policies	Germany, Italy, United States
CO2 Emissions and Regulations	Germany, United States
Aging Population	Germany
Education	Munich
Youth Unemployment	Andalucia
Tech Industry Regulation	Ireland
Discrimination	Indiana
Poverty	East Germany
Pollution	India
Minimum Wage	California
Water Resource Management	Sicily
Immigration	United States
Tea Industry Ethics	Kenya
Entrepreneurship	Munich
Water Resource Management	Flint, Michigan
Dependence on the Oil Industry	Kuwait
Unemployment	Donegal County, Ireland
Healthcare System	United States
Youth Unemployment	Italy

Natural Resource Management	Namibia
Hyperinflation	Venezuela
Poverty	Mongolia
Agriculture and Energy Dependence	Moldova
Water Resource Management	Sub-Saharan Africa
Poverty and Regional Inequality	Brazil
Gender Pay Gap	Estonia
Economic Decline	Wieda, Germany
Fashion Industry Ethics	Bangladesh
Chinese Investment	East Africa
Youth Unemployment and Brain Drain	Southern Italy
Dependence on the Tech Industry	Silicon Valley
Gender Pay Gap	France
Debt Crisis	Greece
Opioid Crisis	West Virginia
Corporate Taxation	Ireland
Public Transit	Indiana
Green Spaces	Shanghai, China
Start-up Culture	Southern Italy
Regional Inequality	Germany
Labor Regulations	Bangladesh

Source: Authors' own independent data collection

Vismara et al. (2019) go into further detail that, “while typical lectures and assigned readings are essential to providing the students with a theoretical foundation in economic development and the strategic management of places, these methods alone do not sufficiently equip the students to understand best practices, and worst mistakes, that policy makers and economic actors make in regional ecosystems. The best way to be exposed to this type of practical application, under normal circumstances, is to meet local decision makers and see the outcomes of their strategies and policies first-hand. Leveraging the geographic locations of the Summer School and the relationships that have been forged and nurtured by the co-directing professors, the students are not only given the opportunity to hear from economic development experts, government officials, corporate executives, socially-minded entrepreneurs and non-governmental organization leaders, but they are often able to visit their work places too. Throughout the years the Summer School has been fortunate to welcome high profile guest

speakers (such as the U.S. Consul General of Munich and a former Senior Vice President of American Express Bank) and gain rare access to public sites and private firms (such as KUKA Robotics Corporation, MAN Group, the Bavarian Center for Transatlantic Relations, Roschmann IDL and Weisser Spulenkörper). This wide array of guest speakers and site visits has given the Summer School students an invaluable look at economic development and the strategic management of places in action; living case studies displaying how public-private partnerships and governmental policy and support can lead to economic prosperity (Audretsch & Lehmann, 2016). In this manner, the hands-on nature of the Summer School has been a crucial component of the student learning process and greatly informs the final products of the student groups.”

Vismara et al. concluded by elaborating that, “The final, yet vitally important, components of the Summer School, under normal operation, are the cultural excursions. One of the key lessons to be learned in the strategic management of the economic performance of a place is that culture and context matter (Audretsch 2015). It is often the case that a policy solution that works in one place cannot simply be implemented elsewhere without at least some modification, and this is owed to the unique cultural and historical considerations of each place (Audretsch & Lehmann 2016). Cultural excursions are built into the program of the Summer School for this reason; so that students can understand the specific nuances of where they are studying and be able to compare and contrast with the context of their home cultures. This enables the students to dig into the background of a place, identifying root causes of economic and social issues so that they may tailor their policy recommendations in a way that addresses these causes, and doesn’t merely put a bandage on the symptoms. The cultural excursions also provide an insight into the preservation, operation, marketing and management of historical and cultural sites, showing how these resources can be included in a local portfolio for economic development.”

As one can see, the typical operation of the Summer School has traditionally relied upon educational components tied to the ability to travel and meet in-person. The pandemic, especially in its opening stages, completely upended this model. The following section details the extenuating circumstances of the partner universities and how they answered the challenge of the pandemic in order to continue providing the value of internationalization to their students.

3. The Pandemic and the Entrepreneurial Response

One by one, in early 2020 the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic began to sweep through the three countries of the Summer School partner institutions. Unfortunately, the University of Bergamo is very near one of the early pandemic epicenters in the northern Italian province of Lombardy, with the local community severely impacted (Odone et al. 2020). The government and university system responded quickly by implementing strict measures to limit contacts and ensure social distancing to mitigate the rampant increase in positive cases. By mid-March, the federal states in Germany, in consultation with the national government and constituent universities, similarly imposed and recommended numerous requirements and regulations aimed at preventing the further spread of COVID-19, namely a lockdown which restricted contact and movement.³ The United States, whose response was largely fragmented along state lines, was not far behind Europe in instituting international travel restrictions as well as lockdown recommendations, which also implicated Indiana and its universities.⁴

The first reaction of the organizers of the Summer School was to express deep condolences and unwavering support for their colleagues and their families and friends in Bergamo, an area which was hard hit by the initial force of the pandemic during a time when little was known about the disease – including how it spread and how to treat it (Odone et al. 2020). After everyone was able to take initial stock of the situation and provide for the safety

³ <https://www.hrk.de/activities/the-covid-19-pandemic-and-the-german-universities/>

⁴ <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/presidential-actions/proclamation-suspension-entry-immigrants-nonimmigrants-certain-additional-persons-pose-risk-transmitting-2019-novel-coronavirus/>

and stability of themselves and their loved ones, the focus quickly turned to how the best could be made of a difficult situation. The brutal nature of the pandemic was demoralizing in itself, and the leaders of the Summer School wanted to do their part to contribute to as much good as they could, to as many as they could. However, as co-organizer Silvio Vismara of Bergamo pointed out, “With the traditional start of the Summer School in May quickly approaching, we knew that we would need to be swift, innovative and flexible in order to deal with the chaotic environment that the pandemic had created.”

In the face of the pandemic’s disruptive force, the three institutions of the Summer School, unilaterally agreed that the program would take place, but not in its traditional form. Questions about the educational consequences and possible ways to implement the program arose. The inability to attend the lectures, site visits, group work meetings and excursions in person not only turned the regular Summer School routine on its head, but it also posed challenges to the program’s educational, professional and cultural focuses. The organizers resolved to address these concerns with solutions that would a) responsibly address the context of the pandemic and b) not sacrifice the Summer School’s distinctive ability to leverage internationalization for positive student outcomes.

In the ensuing planning discussions, it became clear that the Summer School could defy COVID-19’s detrimental effects by playing to the program’s true, underlying strengths. Year after year, the program had shown what can be achieved when universities commit to working together, being innovative and staying as flexible as possible, and the program leaders decided that 2020 would be no different. The consensus was that for the Summer School to take place during the pandemic, it must be delivered exclusively in a digital format so as to place public health as the top priority. However, in attempting to achieve the main goals of the program in a digital environment, the Summer School team encountered numerous obstacles. Available digital technologies have enormous potential in their applicability, as they offer direct,

synchronous, and asynchronous exchanges between supervisors and students; however, if not implemented correctly, these tools also risk forfeiting the core characteristics of the Summer School program, that is, the personal connections built between people when meeting in person and the intercultural understanding that comes from conducting such programs abroad.

In facing these challenges head on, the leadership team developed its own approach for the realization of the inaugural digital version of the Summer School. The first task relied upon the flexibility and adaptability of all partners in working with their respective central administrative units to handle the cancelation/rebooking/refunding process for all of the intertwined finances involved in setting up the traditional Summer School format, while also receiving necessary contracts for digital tools and checks for compliance with data privacy regulations. Given the shortened time frame and the complexities of three different university financial/regulatory systems in three different institutional and country contexts, this was no small task but was necessary in order to clear the path for the digital version of the program.

With the administrative aspects sorted out, deciding upon the technical components of such an online program became the next item on the agenda. While basic video conferencing software would be used for lectures and formal talks/presentations/interviews/etc., the students needed a place to work and collaborate – a digital version of the campus library. As there was no institutional student portal that students from all three universities had legal access to, it was imperative to obtain a license for software which would provide the students with online collaborative space for their group work. The organizers wanted a system that was already in use in one of the institutions in order to avoid any system-inherent problems during installation and adaptation difficulties, as that partner would then be able to assist with implementation questions and troubleshooting. Thus, the team decided to rely on a free version of the 3rd party communication and collaboration platform being utilized by the University of Bergamo which provided a hub for online meetings, chats, file sharing and real-time collaboration on documents

for students. In addition, for supervisors, the platform enabled sharing of classroom resources, curriculum management and increased student engagement by posting updates, tasks and discussion boards. This platform then satisfied all of the base technical needs of the Summer School which were required for the students to be able to complete the academic group work of the course, but as stated by the Summer School leader from Indiana University, David Audretsch stated, “Finding a technical solution to provide students with access to communal resources was one thing, but finding a way in an online format to recapture some of the interpersonal, cultural and experiential value created in a typical Summer School was something else entirely.”

So far, it has always been an essential component of the Summer School to promote intercultural exchange amongst all of the students and stakeholders involved in the program. For this reason, the internationally diverse and inclusive work groups with students from all involved universities were assigned again. Since in the past Summer Schools the personal interaction in the student groups often took place outside the lectures, a private area for each group in the online platform was made available for the students to meet informally with their groups, enabling them to get to know each other, discuss aspects of the course or simply decompress after the lectures. Small intercultural virtual workshops were another way to promote exchange. Whether it was cooking events in their own kitchens or game nights conducted by student teaching assistants, students had the opportunity to get to know their fellow students privately through functions and events designed by the Summer School organizers. In order not to neglect the cultural focus of the program; the digital Summer School placed additional emphasis on speakers in non-management-related topics. Thus, online cultural lectures/events were offered by various partners of the three universities on the topics of "Brexit - Background, Current Situation and Implications", "Comparing & Contrasting US

& European Cultures", a virtual tour of the Documentation Centre for the History of National Socialism and a tour and introduction to the Bavarian American Academy, among others.

Despite the abrupt change to a digital format, the Summer School was a resounding success. Not only was the program very popular, seeing only a slight reduction in attendance when compared to a normal year, it also received high marks in the student evaluations, highlighting the academic value of the course and the efforts of the program organizers to actively foster connections within and across the student groups. Furthermore, the efforts in both the cultural and educational aspects also resulted in value for the students, or as program co-director Erik Lehmann recalled, "Our Summer Schools thrive on personal interaction and cultural experiences, but this year has truly proved how much interest students from different countries have in our Summer Schools. It was a unique highlight in what has been a difficult period for students, particularly given the large amount of extracurricular student activities that have been canceled. You could really tell that the students appreciated that we simply found a way to make it work."

Of particular interest is that the quality of the student projects did not suffer when compared to a typical year. As Vismara noted, "We initially expected that the distance education component of the program would result in papers and presentations of lower academic rigor, but rather, the groups thrived. We were thrilled with this outcome, as the academic merit of the program is of the utmost importance." These benefits became important pillars of success, as the pandemic continued throughout the summer and the next year, pushing new Summer School programs also into the online space, as well as the 2021 programs needing to be digital yet again. However, the Summer School partners were well equipped and prepared, resulting in another round of successful Summer School programming.

4. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has served as a singularly disruptive force in almost every, if not every, aspect of modern life, and higher education is no exception. In order to provide for the safety and security of students and staff, universities have largely shifted to the world of online or hybrid education, deviating from the traditional university model of in-person education and learning. As discussed in this chapter, international programs quickly came under intense focus as mobility was restricted and higher education institutions asked themselves, ‘How can we still reap the benefits of internationalization without physically sending students and faculty abroad?’ One of these answers is COIL programs, as evidenced in the case study focal point of this chapter, in addition to the expansive literature on this particular program architecture (de Wit & Altbach 2021; Rubin & Guth 2015).

By utilizing the mutual understanding and commitment within their trilateral partnership, in addition to their combined strengths in innovation and adaptability, the institutions of the Summer School were able to successfully create a COIL program capable of imparting invaluable international experiences for their students. The intentional planning that went into adapting and caring for each individual component of the program made the difference. The leaders consciously paused frequently in the planning process to ensure that each decision made would result in outcomes that aligned with the mission and values of the program as it was originally constituted in its traditional, in-person form. Although the digital version of the Summer School was a spontaneous response to difficulties introduced by a once in a century viral pandemic, the experiences gathered by the students and faculty involved will leave a lasting trace. While those involved with the program certainly still miss the full experience provided by the original format, it is comforting to know that a commitment to partnership and innovation can find solutions to any ongoing that still exist, as well as to future challenges that may arise.

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