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*Reinventing the Internationalization  
of Business Schools in the  
Post-COVID-19 Era*

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The dramatic spread of COVID-19 has disrupted lives, livelihoods, communities, and businesses worldwide. The collapse in global economic activity has ruptured the traditional arteries for school operations and international study, travel, and exchange. Yet, the need for international and interdisciplinary contact has never been greater. In this sense, the internationalization of business schools in the post-COVID-19 era will have two layers of new meanings.

First, international experience goes beyond constant overseas travel or exchange. Having recognized the COVID-19 crisis as a defining moment for transformation, business schools have now been called on to reset and rejuvenate their approach, explore the use of new resources to design rewarding and well-rounded curricula, and offer students ample exposure to international resources. They must establish a clear positioning and prepare hedging strategies to emerge stronger out of the wreckage of COVID-19.

Second, as corporate geopolitics becomes even more strategic, the international education agenda should encompass all the elements that equip students with the skills needed to navigate global companies and the world. Business educators must have a deeper understanding of how the world will be reshaped. Training must include solid geopolitical and economic elements for business leaders to engage in and support the transition to a fairer, more sustainable post-COVID-19 world. Both content creation and delivery are equally important: business schools must be quick to respond to the current context with agility and foresight.

As a result, the internationalization of business schools in the post-COVID-19 era is now being reinvented. New meaningful international opportunities exist, and as business educators, we all have to keep step with the accelerated pace of change.

The lessons learned by the China Europe International Business School (CEIBS), a business school in China, in the first 10 months of

2020 have given us a rare but real opportunity to reflect on risk mitigation in the event of lockdowns and travel bans. The experience of 2020 has been a chance to think about how we should equip ourselves today and tomorrow with streamlined learning approaches designed to engage, educate, ensure student program completion, and even enhance content creation and delivery.

This chapter therefore aims, first, to illustrate how external situations may affect business schools, and second, to share the initiatives explored by CEIBS to maintain its international education agenda.

Despite a general sense of uncertainty, one thing is for sure: we are not returning to an “old” or even a “new” normal. We believe business schools are going to be even more critical in reshaping the world’s recovery in the aftermath of COVID-19. As such, the purpose of this chapter is to share our school’s reflections and practices, with the hope that they may be relevant and, where relevant, transferable to others. Together, our efforts will add up to reset our world for a better future.

## **1. External and Internal Factors That Have Affected the Basic Operations of Business Schools amid the Pandemic**

Geographic location has long been an important strategic factor for business schools. Schools based in countries with large populations can usually depend on a steady pool of domestic students. However, building a brand that is recognized beyond domestic borders and operating abroad are never easy, especially for schools based in developing countries. Therefore, to maintain a diversified student base and to give students the opportunity for greater cross-cultural exposure, schools must work hard to attract foreign students and provide international study and career opportunities.

COVID-19 confinement measures have largely turned this situation upside down. Fortunately, a large home base has offered a buffer to some schools suffering from a drop in enrollment during the pandemic. China was, of course, the first country to suffer from the virus. Today, however, it is also the first country to have succeeded in resuming normal life, and the impact of the pandemic on business schools has therefore been limited. A healthy supply of domestic candidates has also helped offset the slump in international applications (Moules, 2020).

In any crisis, it is often the large, successful companies, organizations, or institutions that survive and recover the fastest. Because the

pandemic is fundamentally a crisis that has had an immediate and direct impact on workforces and workplaces, it is leading business schools that are more likely to successfully navigate the crisis and succeed in shifting to remote or hybrid learning.

CEIBS is fortunate to be in a strong position. It has access to a large supply of domestic students, is located in a country that has successfully controlled the outbreak, and is in a leading position in the business education industry. Incoming applications remain steady for the school, and CEIBS has even seen an increase in applications for degree programs, confirming the conventional belief that people turn to education to gain fresh knowledge to prepare for a new start amid economic downturns. In addition, offline campus life has returned to normal, at least for those students who live in China.

Yet, although external factors are critical for a business school to emerge stronger in the postpandemic era, they alone do not determine everything. The key factors lie in a school's resilience, which is comprised of its operations model, global resources, and hedging strategies. Another prerequisite, regardless of whether a school is for-profit or not-for-profit, is a healthy and diversified financial structure. Schools depending solely on government subsidies, donations, or high tuition fees from international students will suffer more than others.

That said, the driving forces behind CEIBS's successful turnaround amid the pandemic have always been its capabilities to evolve constantly and its continuous efforts to build and upgrade infrastructure. "Never sleep on the assets or wealth that founders or predecessors have created" is more than a guiding principle at CEIBS. It is a faith.

Since its establishment, CEIBS has sought to expand its influence and forge ties between the East and the West by building a global network of campuses, as well as through its teaching, research, and business practices. The past few decades have seen growing numbers of overseas universities partnering with local Chinese universities to provide executive education in China (Hodge et al., 2019). In most cases, however, the teaching is delivered in one way, with professors from around the world teaching Chinese students in China. As a result, there are still only very few truly global programs catering to both local and international students in China. CEIBS is the only business school based in mainland China with a student base composed of, according to CEIBS admissions data, approximately 40 percent international students studying business in China in English.

Before 2015, CEIBS had already realized that simple management knowledge dissemination and general business skills training were not enough for business leaders to deal with the complexity and changes occurring at the global level, especially as China began taking on a more important role in the global economy. CEIBS was aware that it was essential to build a platform for students from the East and the West to further engage in effective communication in order to foster mutual understanding and build synergy between global and local perspectives to find common ground for business practices.

Based on this premise, CEIBS extended its operations to Zurich, Switzerland, and integrated its campus in Accra, Ghana, into its global campus network in 2015. These initiatives were guided by five imperatives: **cultivate a global mindset, embrace inclusiveness, increase multicultural awareness, connect China and the world, and exchange excellence.**

Although neither overseas campus offers full-time degree programs, they are hubs of international exchange that are able to host short-term programs and modules. European and African students are able to complete their global executive MBA (EMBA) degree modules in Zurich and Accra, in addition to learning together with their Chinese peers in Shanghai and many other global centers around the world. Meanwhile, study trips, exchange programs, alumni events, forums, and local company visits hosted in Zurich and Accra are in high demand. Such two-way communication has been truly appreciated by students and the entire CEIBS community. In order to accommodate the influx of students, CEIBS doubled the size of the Zurich campus in October 2019.

It turns out that understanding the type of infrastructure required to build and update will not only support the school's growth but also help it mitigate the risk of uncertainties such as the COVID-19 pandemic. CEIBS must connect China and the world by building an integrated global campus network. The links the school has established through its campuses have made it possible for it to continue operating despite travel restrictions. The next section highlights how CEIBS has reconnected students in China and overseas, both online and offline.

## **2. From “Managing the Shift to Online” to “Restarting Life on Campus”**

Although once considered a short-term aberration, the pandemic has now forced nearly everyone to adapt. The long-lasting effects of the

pandemic on education remain unclear, but what is certain is that it has accelerated the development of online learning. Almost every school in the world has experienced a sudden shutdown and has had to adapt to remote or hybrid learning.

Online learning is an appealing educational option because it offers flexibility and convenience and eliminates the limitations associated with face-to-face teaching. Students and professors may enjoy a borderless campus and its convenience, as well as easy access to school resources that were previously constrained by physical distance. Some short-time-frame, led-by-speech, or presentation-dominant activities and events can be easily replicated online. The CEIBS Executive Forum series, for example, has been reorganized as a hybrid online/offline event, increasing its potential audience to include students and alumni around the world, offering them the hitherto nonexistent opportunity to interact with renowned business leaders. As for continuing business education, online learning can increase its impact and enlarge its circle of influence (Gallagher and Palmer, 2020).

For executive education, however, online learning can be viewed as a supplementary option rather than as a complete substitute. Online instruction can go smoothly as long as the teaching content is well designed and the instructor is well prepared. However, the learning result of business education is a total package of personal transformation. Moreover, the development of soft skills, such as leadership, communication, and strategic thinking, requires a lot of human contact, interaction, and on-site instruction and coaching. This cannot be completely replicated online.

In my opinion, the biggest difference between online and offline formats is not the channel or teaching method but the learning mood and motivation. A leading concern among scholars is how to keep students motivated and engaged in online settings. Human beings are social by nature, and engagement during class time can vary significantly depending on whether it is a highly interactive, responsive, and peer-bonded environment or a mute, hidden, easy-to-escape room with a screen. Moreover, according to an education researcher in the UK, the longer a higher education institution can retain a student on campus and in an academic environment, the greater the student's chance for academic growth and success (Tight, 2019).

While some schools are trying a variety of education technology platforms, some are pushing back start dates, some are testing various

return-to-school efforts (such as partial re-openings) or limiting the number of students allowed back on campus, some are accepting credits taken in other schools in other countries that offer offline courses, and some are collaborating with third-party vendors that provide offline studying facilities (such as WeWork) in order to provide as much offline campus life as possible in the face of subsequent COVID-19 waves.

However, in terms of business school internationalization, aggravating an already difficult situation are the drastic differences in the border-control policies of different countries.

Although business schools in China have had the advantage of being allowed to resume normal campus life since September 2020, they have still been forced to bear the consequences of draconian entry restrictions and border controls. As a result, even students with valid visas have not been able to enter the country. For CEIBS, these restrictions have compounded the effects of the pandemic because almost 40 percent of the participants in its MBA program are international students. The decision for CEIBS to shift teaching and learning, and even some student activities and forums, online was relatively easy. The toughest problem for the school was how to maintain its diversified student body and retain students who remained overseas and were unable to enter China.

When CEIBS reopened and resumed normal offline MBA teaching in Shanghai in May 2020, many students and professors who were able to return to campus stated that face-to-face teaching, learning, and socializing was the most valuable part of school life. For those who had experienced both formats, the biggest difference between online and classroom learning was the level of peer-to-peer interaction. After all, schools are not just a collection of buildings, tables, and technology. At their most fundamental level, schools are about relationships. Educational research has also shown that students are more likely to excel academically and socially if their school fosters positive relationships and makes each class an enjoyable place to learn (Roffey, 2012). Consequently, CEIBS has done (and will do) everything it can to resume face-to-face communication and life on campus as soon as possible. Travel restrictions, however, still leave the problem of foreign students unable to enter China unanswered. This has served as a catalyst for CEIBS to begin exploring the possibility of reopening its Zurich campus to cater to students stranded outside China.

Although this step was a first for CEIBS, the school decided that it was necessary to explore these uncharted waters. After all, MBAs are all about breaking through new frontiers, challenging existing boundaries, and exceeding personal ambition.

The next section describes how CEIBS has mobilized resources to leverage the potential of its global campus network to overcome the risks and limitations brought about by the pandemic.

### **3. The “Twin-City” Model**

Between May and July 2020, CEIBS internally discussed the possibility of enrolling new MBA students at both its Shanghai and Zurich campuses. For the program to be delivered in tandem on both campuses safely and equitably, the school would need to (1) implement the same curriculum, (2) open simultaneously, and (3) maximize opportunities for students to interact and create bonds between them.

Delivering such an ambitious twin-city program spanning two continents posed significant challenges in terms of leadership and governance – and in terms of risk management, funding, human resources, and communications. Tremendous efforts were made in order to cope with the administrative and logistical obstacles. The CEIBS Zurich team, first, had to overcome the hurdle of travel permits for students coming to Switzerland, then enable student visa holders to study on campus, live in student residence, and have access to quarantine facilities where needed. Furthermore, staff members at the Zurich campus were accustomed to organizing short modules and therefore had to be trained to transit effectively to supporting degree programs. The Shanghai campus, on the other hand, faced the challenge of designing a curriculum that could accommodate different time zones and balance teaching and student activities while ensuring continuity. The list of challenges was almost endless.

Despite the huge difficulties, CEIBS believed that organizing the program across two campuses was feasible and worth the investment in time and effort. Following this twin-city principle, Shanghai and Zurich therefore simultaneously launched the 2020 MBA program for new students on October 12, 2020. To ensure that the 10 core modules of the first semester (which include Financial Accounting, Data Analytics, Organizational Behaviour, Microeconomics, and Marketing Management) contained the same content and were taught

in the same way, a hybrid curriculum was designed, and five professors were flown to Zurich to teach. In this way, although it created a busy faculty schedule and called for some modules to be taught twice (i.e., once online for Zurich and again offline in Shanghai), student interactions and academic quality could be ensured. As a result, students not only had the chance to learn and interact with each other in their groups but also had the chance to complete collaborative projects across campuses. Moreover, 2 hours each day were devoted to extra-curricular activities for students to participate in simultaneously in both Shanghai and Zurich.

As a result, 41 out of 156 students were able to study in Zurich, attend face-to-face classes, interact with their peers offline, participate in student clubs, and even visit Chinese companies in Zurich to learn more about China and Chinese business culture. School leadership was therefore confidently able to declare, “We firmly believe that in-person classroom discussions with diverse peers and world-class faculty represent one of the true cornerstones of a leading MBA experience” (CEIBS, 2021, p. 49). This statement was affirmed by Sourav Panda, a member of the CEIBS MBA 2022 cohort: “During the Leadership Module kick-off, we looked sideways by knowing more about the team, we looked outside when we looked for inspiration, and we looked within when we looked for self-awareness. In a short span, CEIBS taught us the 360-degree view of leadership” (CEIBS, n.d., Part III, para. 2).

Even though fresh obstacles appear as policies continue to shift, CEIBS has guaranteed a degree of continuity in its training by developing its twin-city model. It has been a tough but worthwhile mission, especially because there are no clear signs to indicate when travel restrictions will be lifted. CEIBS Zurich campus CEO Dr. Robert Straw aptly pointed out during the opening ceremony that the campus hosting MBAs for the first time was a good practical example of the concept of VUCA – volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity – a new norm in the post-COVID-19 environment.

Although this project presented many hurdles, it also generated valuable new experiences and revealed some of the schools’ hidden strengths. First, inclusiveness: this has always been nurtured as a core value at CEIBS, and it proved to be a vital ingredient in ensuring that all those working for CEIBS felt empowered to do their jobs in challenging conditions, instilling a deep sense of pride with every



achievement. Second, CEIBS's alumni and partner network: many of CEIBS's plans would have been impossible without the generous financial support of CEIBS EMBA alumnus and Tencent cofounder Jason Zeng and the support of the Swiss authorities. Finally, the sense of belonging that faculty and staff feel toward CEIBS: the twin-city plan would not have been possible without the willingness of faculty members to spend 2 long months away from home, the proactive work of faculty members to explore innovative online teaching and collaboration tools and approaches, and the dedication of staff working overtime to support both online and offline courses.

In terms of business school internationalization, the twin-city model has created new possibilities in the field of international education: classes included students from 20 different nationalities, who were able to interact with each other and with faculty in a truly diverse and multicultural environment. Within the framework of the twin-city program, students were able to explore their potential and reach out to business communities around them to gain on-site experience with local business practices. Meanwhile, in accommodating each other across time zones, students were trained to be open-minded and became skilled in building inclusive and cohesive virtual teams. In sum, students in the twin-city program have been able to practice firsthand the new skills that companies in the postpandemic era will require to rebuild themselves, on the basis of a new corporate social contract founded on care, trust, solidarity, and fairness between colleagues. These new skills are no longer just important; they are game-changers, given the new challenges that still lie ahead in the post-COVID-19 era.

Although the twin-city model has offered a convenient solution in the face of travel restrictions and constitutes a useful compromise between balancing online teaching and some degree of real campus life, it is still a suboptimal solution. As vaccines are rolled out, travel bans will be lifted, allowing international travel and exchange to resume, and mobility will remain a key part of business education. This could spell the end of the twin-city model. In reality, however, this model exposes students to a unique form of international exchange that amplifies classroom learning through one-of-a-kind experiences and cultivates students' skills in global networking. As such, the twin-city model is likely to be developed on another level to leverage a broader academic and professional network, creating more hybrid

opportunities for academic engagement; encouraging students to discuss, collaborate, compete, and celebrate with one another; and fostering more common values in a shared community.

Another key ingredient behind the success of the twin-city model is student enthusiasm. Indeed, why did these 156 applicants decide to sign up for a full-time MBA at CEIBS amid all the uncertainty? Many will talk about the influence of location, alumni networks, and students already enrolled in the program (Jack, 2020). Of course, each of these factors plays a role, but the *strategic priorities of the school make a bigger difference*. CEIBS's leitmotif, "China Depth, Global Breadth," holds the foresight that drives the establishment of a global campus network and underpins its capacity to deliver a twin-city model. So, the answer to the previous question, in short, is CEIBS's uniqueness in providing students with both a China focus and a global reach, as well as the most up-to-date business knowledge about China and the world.

In the wake of the pandemic, business schools will play an ever more critical role as a platform not only for fostering international exchange but also for global experts to identify, better understand, and tackle the challenges emerging from the crisis. The internationalization of business schools, therefore, also means that knowledge creation in a global context has to be aimed at educating and engaging students in an effective approach to navigating the crisis and emerging stronger.

The next section outlines how the international education agenda has been redefined and what business schools need to do to prepare for this new frontier in teaching and learning.

#### 4. Knowledge Creation in a Global Context

Over the past several decades, leading business schools have developed certain immutable assets, including a **solid knowledge base** with consistent intellectual output, a **transnational perspective** to cultivating students into business leaders committed to improving the state of the world, and a **boundary-free community** with a secure and trusted environment for all stakeholders to interact and connect.

The year 2020 saw the emergence of a global pandemic against a backdrop of world instability. Geopolitical tensions have persisted as the COVID-19 virus continues to spread, laying bare relations between countries and altering people's perceptions about each other in a way

that is likely to continue in the wake of the crisis. This context has given rise to two new challenges for business schools.

First and foremost, business schools need to have the capacity to ensure nondisrupted knowledge creation to pool professional recommendations on the COVID-19 response and offer a clearer picture of the risks and solutions. Second, as educators, business schools need to understand the consequences of the growing sophistication and complexity of the global economy and adjust their international education curriculums accordingly.

Knowledge creation depends on faculty productivity. Maintaining continuity in productivity during the pandemic has required greater use of technology to efficiently deploy faculty resources. It has also required motivation, a sense of urgency, and dedication to being an engaged partner in the business community. The success of any community or region in the postpandemic world will hinge on whether higher education institutions, the business community, and civic partners can join forces to address corporate/workforce needs and societal needs.

At CEIBS, numerous webinars, online forums, cloud sharings, and live broadcasting lectures were organized immediately after face-to-face teaching was suspended. A series of surveys and reports was conducted to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on business operations in China. Meanwhile, faculty members immediately joined ongoing efforts to explore possible solutions for restarting disrupted supply chains and to identify trends in digital transformation, new retail and leadership, workforce management, and more. A new emphasis on technology has generated the unexpected positive consequence of helping the school reach more people. For example, an online lecture series featuring CEIBS professors in the fields of macroeconomics, mergers and acquisitions, corporate governance, and digital marketing was live-streamed by multiple mainstream media in China and received up to 2 million page views per session.

CEIBS faculty also led the way for the business community in connecting the dots on best practices related to reopening businesses and fostering economic recovery. As the first country to be affected by the pandemic, China was on the front line in terms of the actual outbreak and again for the post-COVID-19 economic recovery and related societal changes brought about by the crisis. CEIBS professors cooperated closely with industry leaders in retail, e-commerce,

logistics, remote medical care, and telemedicine, among others, to conduct extensive research to examine responses to the crisis and to show how the pandemic accelerated several preexisting trends (notably, digitization and the increasing caution and health consciousness of Chinese consumers). The proprietary insights generated will not only explain how China fared compared to other markets but also generate findings that may be transferable to companies elsewhere in the world, sharing insight and strategies learned for thriving in such a challenging environment.

CEIBS professor of strategy Chen Weiru has researched how digitization combined with a value for satisfying people's pursuit of truth, kindness, beauty, and love can help corporations achieve sustainable development, as reported in his talk at the CEIBS Insights 2020 Europe Forum on November 26, 2020. A new series of business cases is also being compiled. For example, AstraZeneca's patient-centric innovation solutions piloted in China have made medical consultation, treatment, and recovery more available in third- and fourth-tier cities (China Daily News, 2020). At the same time, Ping An, a Shenzhen-based insurance company, launched its COVID-19 smart image-reading system in early 2020 to assist doctors with fast and accurate diagnoses to help control the epidemic. Ping An's system can generate smart analysis results in about 15 seconds, with an accuracy rate above 90 percent. It was used 22.04 million times by approximately 413,000 doctors in the first half of 2020 (Ping An Group, 2020).

CEIBS is working hard to share these lessons and practices from China with other parts of the world through its global platform. Students, alumni, and others have been able to learn about these developments through the school's Service Excellence Forum (hosted by CEIBS in collaboration with École hôtelière de Lausanne [EHL]) or from the CEIBS Insights Europe Forum series, which made virtual "stops" in Switzerland, Germany, the UK, and France in 2020 and featured insights from both academics and business leaders.

The more complex the emerging trend, the more it can drive innovation. A new initiative has been explored to establish multi-/cross-disciplinary research areas at CEIBS. This initiative will allow faculty members from different disciplines to create more synergy with other fields and introduce step-change solutions by combining developments in business administration with input from other disciplines and stakeholders. We believe that agility and flexibility in multi-/cross-disciplinary

research will play an important role in promoting a different international education curriculum for future business leaders.

The pandemic has thrown into question conventional beliefs about the traditional global order and undermined trust in multilateral organizations, as well as how we conduct international trade and investment and forge partnerships. Although the United Nations (UN), World Trade Organization (WTO), World Economic Forum (WEF), Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and other international organizations have tried to showcase the power of cooperation, the world still faces the four “huge challenges” described by UN secretary-general António Guterres – namely, “climate change, the mistrust of leaders, increased geopolitical tension and the dark side of the technological revolution” (Guterres, 2020, para. 1). Furthermore, the WTO has remained stuck in a stalemate. First, inclusive multilateralism is an urgent need. Second, vision and practices for responsible and adaptive corporate governance are needed in a more volatile, multiconceptual, and post-COVID-19 context. This means that universal management frameworks are neither adequate nor effective enough to ensure business continuity in the face of surging national and regional interests. The corporate world needs to adapt to nonuniversal, culturally different, geographically segmented, and demographically diverse national and regional markets.

Against this background, it is incumbent on business schools to ground their teaching in a solid and inclusive understanding and awareness of current geopolitical tensions. *Inclusive* in this context refers to respecting diversity and exercising impartiality, where diversity is embraced along with strong accountability, and fair competition is assured along with transparency. To be able to manage across countries in a post-COVID-19 global context, managers and executives should become experts in one or two specific business environments or at least understand the specificities of one or two markets. Only when the specificities are understood and acknowledged can value be created through inclusive collaboration and cooperation.

As such, business schools need to be clear about their focus and how they want to position themselves. To become an enabler of global economic recovery, business schools should create and deliver content with regional depth and a global perspective in order to equip business

leaders with the necessary knowledge and skills to understand changing dynamics, navigate through crises, and emerge stronger.

In the case of CEIBS, its unique strategic positioning of China depth and global breadth has made it the top expert on China with a global perspective. In the past few years, CEIBS has established itself as a knowledge hub and attracted many Chinese and non-Chinese professors to deep dive in China. As academic professionals, they received extensive and rigorous research training from top universities before joining CEIBS. What they are contributing to the overall business management field includes not only their in-depth explanation of China's economic transition and Chinese business models and practices but also their insights on how the corporate world can better engage with China and how experiences and innovations from emerging markets like China can also be drawn upon for growth and sustainability elsewhere.

As mentioned earlier, because the pandemic began in China, it was the first to face the crisis, but it has also played a leading role in the post-COVID-19 economic recovery due to its resilience and economic growth. As CEIBS leadership has put it: “[T]he demand from multinationals to come to China has dramatically increased as China has changed from being perceived as merely a manufacturing base to a driver of profit” (Yuan Ding, as quoted in Murray, 2019, para. 6). As such, CEIBS is the window for the world on China: demystifying perceptions, offering an interpretation of the country's unique cultural fabric across its different regions, and revealing the patterns and drivers behind its economic success.

## **5. The Cornerstone of Internationalization**

In the postpandemic era, international cooperation, rather than unilateralism, will be the only sure way to avoid the risk of an increase in retaliation and reprisals between countries. It is therefore incumbent on business school students and alumni who go on to become important members of the business community to enhance international cooperation. We need more business schools to act as a bridge between China, Europe, the United States, and the rest of the world, one that provides practical experience and raises awareness among students of

the diversity among geographical regions and fosters people-to-people dialogue, school-to-school exchange and communication, and greater mutual understanding between corporations. We believe global trust will be built by those who reach out to form partnerships. This is the type of international ambition that business schools should aim to instill in their students, and it is also the cornerstone of internationalization as a foundation for a better future.

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