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To cite this article: Roberto Rivas Hermann & Eivind Arne Fauskanger (27 Jun 2024): Institutionalizing international internships in business education: an action research approach to overcoming barriers and driving systemic change in Norwegian business schools, Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research, DOI: [10.1080/00313831.2024.2369882](https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2024.2369882)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2024.2369882>



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Published online: 27 Jun 2024.



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Institutionalizing international internships in business education: an action research approach to overcoming barriers and driving systemic change in Norwegian business schools

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the institutionalization of international internships in business education through action research (AR), addressing the scarcity of research on overcoming institutional barriers and driving systemic change. Using AR at the meso-level in two Norwegian business schools, we investigate challenges and processes involved in incorporating international internships into curricula. Our multiple-case study explores contrasting experiences, organizational structures, and institutional practices within Norway's context. We reveal the interconnectedness of regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive institutional pillars in institutionalizing international internships through meso-level AR, proposing a theoretical model emphasizing internationalization strategy drivers, practices of education and engagement, and organizational dynamics. Practical implications include fostering a culture of global competence development, promoting active learning and innovative pedagogy, and encouraging shared responsibility for internationalization among academic and administrative staff. We emphasize the need for continuous reassessment and adaptation of institutional processes and strategies to align with evolving demands and best practices.

ARTICLE HISTORY



Received 15 May 2023
Accepted 5 June 2024

KEYWORDS

Institutions; action research; internationalization; internships; higher education; business schools

1. Introduction

Internationalization of higher education has emerged as a significant trend worldwide, driven by factors including government policies, institutional strategies, and global economic shifts. Consequently, universities are increasingly adopting internationalization initiatives to achieve educational goals, meet staffing requirements, and position themselves as educational hubs (Daquila, 2013; Humfrey, 2011; Lee, 2014; O'Connor, 2018; Tham, 2013). These efforts, however, face challenges, including implementing policies, integrating international students, and aligning internationalization with institutions' core missions. The extant literature overwhelmingly centers on policies and cases of attracting international students to the focal university or country rather than on research about improving practices for creating efficient mobilities abroad. The COVID-19 pandemic has had profound immediate and long-term impacts on student mobility in higher education. Immediately, there was a notable shift from traditional physical student mobility to virtual alternatives. This

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immediate disruption catalyzed a change towards virtual mobility and online learning as substitutes for traditional physical exchanges (Koris et al., 2021). In the short term, these virtual programs have proven invaluable, enabling students to persist in their international educational pursuits. Enkhtur et al.'s (2023) study underscores this, noting students' appreciation for the diverse academic content, flexible course structures, and opportunities to interact with international peers and faculty. However, this transition has not been without its challenges. If not tailored for the virtual environment, course delivery can wane in effectiveness, risking diminished student engagement (Enkhtur et al., 2023).

Beyond the immediate responses, the pandemic has instigated a broader rethinking of internationalization strategies in higher education. The merits of virtual student mobility programs, as highlighted by Enkhtur et al. (2023), suggest they could play a key role in future internationalization efforts. Nevertheless, the potential of online learning as a complete replacement for physical mobility remains contested, with concerns about the loss of cultural immersion and direct interpersonal interactions (Koris et al., 2021).

Indeed, the post-pandemic scenarios for higher education focus on counterweighting the benefits of "traditional" international mobility forms and online learning opportunities. A sub-area within the internationalization of higher education is management education, specifically organizing experiential learning mobilities abroad. The internationalization of university education, action research (A.R.), and problem-based learning have been highlighted as important aspects of enhancing students' global mindset through experiential learning (Hermann et al., 2021). This is the context of international internships in business education, where there has been limited focus on institutionalizing these experiential learning approaches and how they fit within school routines (Ding et al., 2019; Conroy & McCarthy, 2021; Johnson & Jordan, 2019; Mello, 2006).

AR's role in education has gained increasing attention in recent years, particularly regarding systemic change (Calhoun, 2019). Implementing AR for systemic change in a learning organization can be complex as various factors can influence the success of the process, such as the orientation and beliefs of the AR leaders and the context in which the research is conducted (Calhoun, 2019). A key aspect of AR for systemic change is understanding the factors and constructs that influence individual and collective motivation to act and persist in the face of challenges. Constructs such as locus of control, sense of agency at the workplace, and perceived self-efficacy play vital roles in shaping educators' beliefs in their abilities to be agents of change (Calhoun, 2019). Moreover, understanding schools' micropolitics is essential, as these institutions are arenas of struggle characterized by power, control, conflict, cooperation, and collegiality (Eilertsen et al., 2008). Indeed, there is little research about how internationalization dynamics influence higher-education institutions (HEIs) and how institutions can adapt to the requirements of internationalization. O'Connor (2018) presents a case study of an Irish university that increased international student diversity through concerted efforts but struggled with communication, coordination, and student integration. Meanwhile, Daquila (2013) presents a case study of the National University of Singapore, which implemented various international programs, fostering cross-institutional collaboration and promoting a global experience for students, though some initiatives encountered debates over academic freedom. A knowledge gap is evident regarding what happens inside HEIs when internationalization demands emerge—especially regarding student and staff mobility abroad and the implementation of novel pedagogical practices, such as international internships.

Consequently, this paper seeks to address the question: How can action researchers address institutional barriers when leading curricular and pedagogical systemic changes to institutionalize international internships in business education? Additionally, given the extensive literature on internationalization and globalization, this paper also explores the secondary question: Is international student mobility still an under-researched field within the broader context of internationalization and globalization? If so, why?

In this study, we employed action research at the meso level in two Norwegian business schools to introduce active learning education, requiring organizational change. Utilizing a multiple-case

study design with embedded units of analysis, we focused on contrasting experiences in internship integration, organizational structures, and institutional practices. Our research was contextualized in the Norwegian higher-education setting, characterized by a relatively democratic and consensus-oriented approach conducive to facilitating change and integrating new approaches into curricula.

This paper's findings are used to build a grounded-theory model of institutionalizing international business internships in young university contexts and to offer theoretical and practical implications. The theoretical contributions target the AR domain by providing a systematic overview of AR at the meso level and of institutional change, in keeping with the intent to fill the gap in attention to institutional development and AR projects. Specifically, the paper contributes to the internationalization literature's understanding of the key mechanisms that allow institutionalizing internationalization projects amid external drivers. It expands knowledge about how internationalization is adapted to particular contexts in times when internationalization policies are subject to constant criticism as a result of geopolitical conflicts and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The practical implications target teaching and administrative staff who engage in internationalization projects and require templates to sustain the projects over time.

2. Analytical framework

Understanding the driving forces and the context of internationalization sets the stage for debating how HEIs evolve in accordance with the need to increase student and staff mobility and attract more international students. Professionals in higher educational settings, either in the administration or in academic positions, initiate institutional-level change processes to introduce curricular improvements or modify existing organizational practices, such as those demanding internationalization.

2.1. Drivers for internationalization and international internships in business education

Higher-education institutions face internationalization as a contextual phenomenon deeply rooted in current geopolitical developments. Research on internationalization includes multiple country-specific case studies of driving and contextual factors explaining these investments. Previous research addresses internationalization from the point of view of attracting international students and creating educational hubs through world-leading academic institutions. The drivers for internationalization among Asian, European, and North American HEIs exhibit both similarities and contrasts. Asian experiences of HEI internationalization seem dominated by economic growth trends in the second half of the twentieth century, which paved the way for a globalized economy that helped to connect the local workforce with the needs of international markets. As Tham (2013) explained regarding Malaysia, the quest for internationalization in government policies is primarily motivated by economic considerations, such as export revenues and human capital needs. While student numbers are emphasized, other types of internationalization activities, such as staff exchanges and research collaboration, are also included. However, these policies remain instrumental and ad hoc rather than embedding internationalization into the university's core functions. Further examples illustrate this trend. South Korea emphasizes systematic collaboration between East Asian countries, while Korean higher-education internationalization faces new challenges, necessitating a shift toward contributing to academic and cultural diversity and fostering regional cooperation (Byun & Kim, 2011). Malaysia, Hong Kong, and Singapore have differing approaches to attracting foreign talent and repatriating diasporic talent among education hub policymakers. Malaysia's political climate does not support the recruitment of foreign talent due to affirmative action and graduate unemployment concerns. Meanwhile, Hong Kong and Singapore have long relied on foreign talent for their development as world cities, and education hubs serve as platforms for attracting students and researchers (Lee, 2014).

However, internationalization efforts are also tamed by political changes regarding how publicly funded education is perceived as a welfare benefit. In Norway, the government introduced a tuition fee for international students during the fall semester of 2023. The reasoning behind this implementation was to make clear distinctions in the state budget for 2023 and prioritize domestic and European students (Norwegian Ministry of Education, 2023). The significant opinion of teachers in higher education was noticeable in a wave of debate notes and chronicles. The effects of this fee implementation in 2023 have been significant. There has been a noticeable decrease in international students studying in Norway. This decline has raised concerns about the potential loss of diversity and perspectives in classrooms and the impact on research and development studies. The decrease in international student enrollment has also sparked debates about the potential erosion of the principle of free education in Norway (Jessen & Skjulhaug, 2023). Furthermore, some concerns introducing the tuition fee will cause the entire academic community to lose knowledge, perspectives, and the opportunity to think from a diverse perspective (Sveen, 2023).

In the peer-reviewed literature there are a number of studies focalizing in a Scandinavian / North European context and the hindrances behind the implementation of student fees and their effects on internationalization. Cai and Kivistö (2013) present a detailed assessment of how Finnish HEIs considered various education export models, such as charging fees for pilot master's programs and offering customized degree programs, in response to the global shift toward alternative international education models. Humfrey (2011) highlights the history and evolution of international student recruitment in the UK, including government initiatives and the potential growth of transnational education (TNE) due to stricter regulations. O'Connor (2018) discusses how internationalization is used as a marketing tool in Ireland to create diverse, globally connected campuses. Meanwhile, Viczko (2013) examines Canada's response to the Bologna Process, with the university and colleges association (AUCC) addressing issues including international student recruitment, graduate admissions, and student mobility, viewing the process as both a challenge and an opportunity.

While much of the existing literature has focused on the country level, two studies mentioned above focus on HEI-level internationalization strategies, one at an Irish university and one at the National University of Singapore (NUS). Both institutions face challenges in implementing internationalization plans, such as communication and coordination issues, support-framework insufficiencies, and debates on academic freedom. They have nonetheless made strides in promoting international student diversity, engaging in international alliances, and offering various international programs such as student exchanges, internships, and joint/double-degree programs. These institutional responses demonstrate the importance of a holistic approach that acknowledges the complexities of student identities and the need for specific inclusion measures while fostering global connections and collaboration (Daquila, 2013; O'Connor, 2018).

The vast majority of the reviewed literature focuses on inbound student exchange. Indeed, international internships are experiential learning opportunities where students engage in professional work settings abroad, typically for several weeks to six months. These internships can enhance students' global knowledge, cultural awareness, and intercultural communication skills, allowing them to better understand and respond to social, cultural, economic, and political differences in the global business environment. Integrated into degree programs or structured as multi-stage processes, international internships provide valuable hands-on experience for students to develop their global competence, adapt to diverse business environments, and improve their self-efficacy (Conroy & McCarthy, 2021; Ding et al., 2019; Johnson, 2003). As a result, international internships require resources and a certain level of administrative involvement to provide an effective experience for participating students (Hermann et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic led to strict health measures worldwide between early 2020 and mid-2022, which undoubtedly also affected the international mobility of students; in a study from 2021, 89% of surveyed institutions indicated any disruption in the international mobilities plans of their students. Post-COVID-19, the definitions and expectations of an 'international experience' in

higher education have evolved significantly. Traditional physical mobility, where students travel to study abroad, is becoming less attractive due to institutional strategies that emphasize cross-border education and the recognition of credits by the students' home institutions. The rise of virtual mobility models, as seen in Europe, exemplifies this shift. The pandemic has accelerated the adoption of virtual mobility and collaborative online learning as primary alternatives to physical student mobility. Many universities have transitioned to online courses, ensuring that international students can continue their studies even during lockdowns. The general satisfaction of students with their academic performance in online learning environments further underscores the potential of virtual mobility programs as a mainstay in the future of international higher education experiences (Chang & Chou, 2021).

Virtual mobility in higher education has emerged as a significant trend, offering both advantages and challenges for students. On the positive side, virtual mobility provides unparalleled flexibility, allowing students to access international educational opportunities without the constraints of location. This model not only enhances students' digital literacy and technological skills but also reduces costs and logistical challenges associated with traditional study abroad programs (Cheah & Shimul, 2023; Enkhtur et al., 2023; Oanda et al., 2022). Furthermore, it fosters cross-cultural understanding, as students can connect with peers and experts globally, enhancing their global awareness and cross-cultural communication skills (Whatley et al., 2022).

However, the shift to virtual mobility is not without its challenges. A significant concern is the potential lack of face-to-face interaction, which can limit networking opportunities and the depth of cultural immersion (Cheah & Shimul, 2023; Oanda et al., 2022). Technological barriers, such as the need for reliable internet connectivity and the unequal distribution of high-speed internet, can hinder participation (Cheah & Shimul, 2023; Oanda et al., 2022). Additionally, challenges like time zone differences, language barriers, and unequal linguistic power dynamics can impact the effectiveness and inclusivity of virtual mobility programs (Whatley et al., 2022).

2.2. Action research and institutional change in higher-education institutions

Higher-education institutions can be understood through the institutional theory lens, with institutions defined as social structures that over time have attained high degrees of resilience. The major role of institutions is to bring order through a systematic regime of rules, actions, and events. Nevertheless, actions are often repealed or limited by actors in the organizational field, whose influence in turn is manifest in institutions. Such "inhabitants" of institutional fields may be influential actors, common channels of dialogue and discussion, or communities or organizations with shared meaning or thinking or systems of mutual interaction (Scott, 2001). Institutions may be expressed in regular social, economic, or political patterns and/or defined sets of interactions. They may comprise cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative elements (pillars) associated with activities and resources that serve to provide organization, functions, and meaning to social life. Institutions operate at multiple levels, from the world system to localized interpersonal relationships, and are subject to continuous and discontinuous change processes (Scott, 2001).

At the meso level, AR experiences implement any of several institutional changes: democratizing organizational practice, institutionalizing sustainability education across faculties in core curriculum, transitioning toward a research orientation, digitalizing social networking in the workplace, or institutionalizing non-discriminatory practices. The University of Southampton illustrates the institutionalization of education for sustainability across faculties, integrating sustainability education into core courses and programs (Cebrián, 2018). AR is also applied in the pathway from "education-oriented" toward "research-oriented" institutions, as at Tshwane University of Technology in Pretoria, South Africa—where, however, the staff lacks research training skills (Zuber-Skerritt & Louw, 2014).

The regulative pillar (how we must behave) expresses how institutions constrain and regulate social interactions. It is reflected in laws, regulations, and informal rules (Scott, 2001). The

regulative pillar of institutional change through AR is the least highlighted in the literature. Change through rules is usually seen as radical and implying the involvement of several people throughout an organization, together with relatively complex processes. The clearest example in our review concerns participatory action research used to change institutions' rules about transgender discrimination, in particular with the use of inclusive language. The goals of the project were to involve student activists and teachers and to align the institution with nondiscrimination policies at the U.S. federal level. From a methodological standpoint, the project entailed collecting mostly qualitative empirical materials with the purpose of understanding the evolution of student activism, through the prism of creating nondiscrimination policies on campus (Case et al., 2012).

The normative pillar (how we should behave) includes preferred or desirable values, together with norms (e.g., what should be done in cultural and other contexts). Normative systems can either repress social behavior or empower it (Scott, 2001). In the normative pillar, AR has also been subject to multiple experiences, including normative aspects of organizational communication and decision-making processes and normative changes to incorporate sustainability across faculties, teacher roles, and learning practices in the health system to care for patients with dignity. King and Land (2018) apply participatory action research (PAR) to support a small non-profit community education organization in tracing its gradual transformation from its initial form as a radical locus for education guided by principles of anarchism and self-organization into a formalized non-profit with external funding, run with modern management principles (service provision) and budgeting. While there was interest in returning to the roots, employees showed little interest in taking on greater responsibility in running the organization (King & Land, 2018).

The cultural-cognitive pillar (how we usually behave) is the "nature of social reality and the frames through which meaning is made" (Scott, 2001). The literature contains reports of several relevant AR initiatives across different contexts: building a culture of democracy at the workplace, research-oriented culture, and digitalization of the workplace. In Norway, one AR initiative developed a framework focused on organizational learning, aiming to explain how to increase work satisfaction and democracy in an organizational culture. The framework combines ideas of staging and back-staging, indicating that organizations should implement less mechanistic approaches to work. Here, staging is akin to the organizational structure (what is seen), while back-staging is an organization's instances of reflection as it addresses potential conflicts or challenges connected to itself or its activities. All employees are to participate in both staging and back-staging activities, and back-staging implies a meta-cognitive aspect of the organizational learning culture (Eikeland, 2012).

Other research tackles the lack of "research" culture in an organization. Fowler Davis (2009) presents participatory action research wherein the researcher is part of the human resource management team, which is actively involved in organizational change as the university evolves into a research-oriented organization. The participatory action research process is expected to be democratic, requiring all parties to take active part in the change process (Fowler Davis, 2009).

3. Materials and methods

We apply action research at the meso level in two Norwegian business schools, using a multiple-case study design. The research aims to introduce active learning education, requiring organizational change, and is thus a multiple-case study with embedded units of analysis (Yin, 2014).

3.1. Contextualizing the case study into the Norwegian context of AR

The Norwegian work culture is characterized by an approach of dialogue and negotiation between actors, such as unions, employers, or the government (Eikeland, 2012). Norwegian organizations, particularly in academia, have been described as democratic and consensus-oriented, with less emphasis on management and more on autonomy (King & Land, 2018). They tend to be horizontal in structure, creating a suitable environment for AR as a methodology to facilitate change and

integration of new approaches and theories into curricula, such as sustainability or internship integration as a pedagogical approach (Cebrián, 2018). These practices, implemented largely during the 1970s and 1980s, were considered experimental spaces (Eikeland, 2012). However, more recent developments have seen a shift toward the adoption of Anglo-American managerial approaches, with a focus on the quantification of tasks and mechanistic methodologies, leading to challenges for the traditional AR practices in Norway (Eikeland, 2012). The Norwegian higher-education sector has witnessed a recent shift, with teaching-oriented organizations required to upgrade their mission to increasingly integrate externally funded projects and research into teaching activities (Fowler Davis, 2009). This has necessitated learning at all levels and examining the small changes needed within organizations to achieve these objectives.

In the Norwegian context of AR, the researcher's role is not that of an external observer but rather an active participant embedded within the problem space. This intrinsic involvement raises important considerations about potential biases and ethical standards. Researchers are accountable for their methodological choices and must be prepared to invest the requisite intellectual and temporal resources to ensure the credibility of their findings (Rowell et al., 2015). Cain et al. (Cain, 2008) highlight that AR can produce various types of knowledge, such as factual, skill-based, and attitudinal, and focusing too much on one type can introduce bias. They also emphasize the importance of rigorous data analysis to prevent the selective presentation of data that solely supports the research objectives. To mitigate these biases, it is crucial to maintain a balanced approach, incorporating a diverse range of sources and obtaining feedback from other experts in the field. This is particularly relevant in the Norwegian higher-education sector, where there is an increasing emphasis on integrating externally funded projects and research into teaching activities. Therefore, careful planning, ethical considerations, and a balanced approach to data collection and analysis are essential for minimizing bias and enhancing the validity of AR projects in Norway.

3.2. The meso-level action research design

The paper's authors are action researchers driving internationalization projects at their home institutions. Some of these experiences seek to integrate novel pedagogical practices (Hermann et al., 2021). Both AR experiences discussed here were carried out in HEIs more focused on education than on research and characterized by varying degrees of integrating collaboration with industry into teaching, along with a relatively new focus on internationalization and developing English-language programs. While both cases represent new universities (founded after 2010), they offer contrasting experiences in the integration of internships, organizational structures, and institutional practices following the analytical framework (Figure 1).

Following the typology of Flyvbjerg (2006), both cases were selected following the "extreme case" definition: these are cases where a phenomenon under study is likely to emerge with extreme

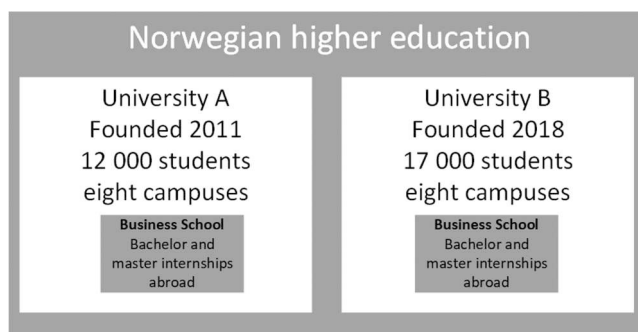


Figure 1. Multiple-case study design.

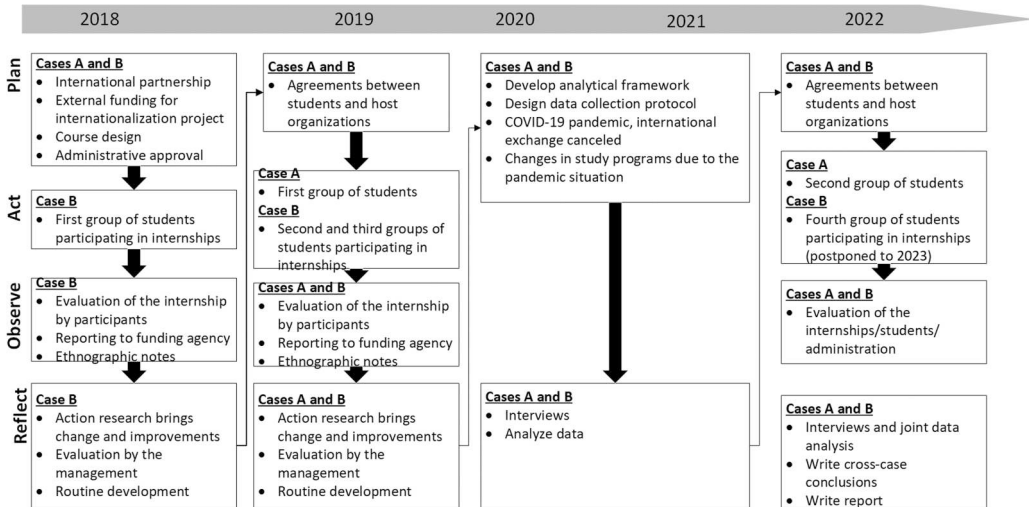


Figure 2. Action research implemented with two case studies.

characteristics and thus to either falsify existing theoretical propositions or generate new perspectives. The case studies adapt Norton's action-research methodology (2019), which implies the broad categories of planning, action, observation, and reflection as sketched in Figure 2 and echoing previous studies in Norwegian contexts (Hermann et al., 2021; Hermann et al., 2022). These approaches are intertwined with the data collection, analysis, and synthesis usually applied in multiple-case studies (Yin, 2014). In contrast to classroom action research (Calhoun, 2019), the AR interventions here implied activities beyond teaching and mentoring, such as networking with international partners, the university administration system, and funding agencies, as in reviewed meso-AR literature (Cebrián, 2018; Crow et al., 2006; Delgaty, 2015). In line with Yin's recommendations for multiple-case studies (Yin, 2014), we focus on cross-case analysis as the core of our main report, which is particularly well-suited for a journal article format. This approach allows us to combine insights from both cases into a cohesive narrative, while still taking into account the unique characteristics of each case, such as their location in Norway, international collaborations, and organizational contexts. This methodology ensures a rigorous yet nuanced understanding, consistent with Yin's guidelines.

The case of University A comprises two international internship projects, one with Brazil and one with South Africa, externally financed by the Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills (HK-Dir) program InternAbroad. Since 2019, around 12 bachelor's and master's students have participated. The internships yield credits and last two months. In parallel, the business school initiated a 4–5-month national internship program, with more participants. Case B represents a pair of InternAbroad projects, also with a focus on international internships in Brazil. It has run since 2018 and is funded by the same HK-Dir program. In 2020, the project expanded to include collaboration with Romanian companies with funding from Erasmus. Each academic year entailed new students and subsequent evaluation of the internship, project reporting to the funder, and exchange of experiences between researchers about their progress in their respective institutions. Considering the break during 2020 and 2021 due to the pandemic, the project comprises three cycles of AR per institution in the period 2018–2022.

3.3. Data collection

Data collection methods and information sources were triangulated to increase the study's internal validity (Patton, 2002). Using multiple qualitative data collection methods (see Table 1) served to

Table 1. Triangulation of data collection methods.

| Theme/Institutional pillar | Type of information sought | Methods of data collection |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| Regulative | Laws and rules | Documents review (emails, procedures, meeting minutes) |
| Normative | Values, norms, roles | Interviews (administration staff, academic staff involved in the administration of study programs) |
| Cultural-cognitive | Shared concepts and beliefs | Ethnographic inquiry (journal, participant observer) |

uncover all possible aspects of the institutions studied in connection with the implementation of new pedagogical approaches and international internships. Private documents reviewed included minutes from the internationalization committees and project applications to internationalization grants. Public documents included those directly related to the internship projects, including procedures to register for courses, handbooks developed as part of each course, course descriptions, assignment guidelines, minutes, and the whitepaper on internationalization from the Ministry of Education (Norwegian Government, 2020).

Ethnographic inquiry was necessary as both co-authors were participant observers and facilitators of the action-research initiatives as teachers in the management program. Both co-authors lead the implementation of international internships following external grants at their respective business schools. Through participant observation (Bartunek, 2007), it was possible to reflect in action on the cultural/cognitive aspects of working in an organization with shared concepts and beliefs that are not easy for an outsider to spot. Such reflections were recorded in a researcher journal and integrated into the interpretative sections of this paper.

To complement the document review and ethnographic inquiry, the researchers completed nine semi-structured interviews with key informants from the two institutions. Purposive sampling was used to select key informants directly linked to internationalization projects in higher education. In line with the recommendations of Eisenhardt & Graebner (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007), a diverse range of informants was chosen to mitigate interview data bias. These informants included organizational actors from various hierarchical levels, functional areas, and roles such as those responsible for education programs, deans or vice-deans, faculty directors, internationalization advisors, and department leaders. Ethical approval was requested from the Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD; notification form 437206). Given the small number of interviews and the potential ease of identifying individual participants, the position connected to each interview and institution is not given. The interview guide served to identify underlying normative aspects of the institutionalization of internships at each university, especially when internships were not a current educational practice format.

The first section investigated the background of each interviewee by highlighting the interviewee's role in relation to the institutionalization of internships. The second section, "Call for new projects," focused on the institution's reaction (in terms of resources and decision-making processes) regarding externally financed projects focused on improving education quality. The third section, on decision-making, zooms in on project development and the institutionalization of internships. The fourth section seeks to unfold hidden or potential contingencies in the implementation of internship projects, e.g., overlaps with courses implementing similar active-learning pedagogy. The final section provides an opportunity to the interviewee to recommend improvements to the current projects.

3.4. Data analysis

This study applied an inductive approach based on the Gioia methodology for qualitative data analysis (Gioia et al., 2013). In the practice the grounded data analysis approach combining multiple case study follows the procedure of Campos Retana and Rodriguez-Lluesma (2022). This

methodology offers a robust application of grounded theoretical approaches and is widely used in management studies, strengthening the possibilities to replicate qualitative results (Gioia et al., 2022). Initially, first order concepts were generated with the purpose to give informants a voice, as result the researchers analyzed the interview transcripts to grasp the main ideas through the verbatim transcription of the interview. Here striking ideas were summarized with the freedom of being detached from predefined theoretical constructs. Both researchers worked independently at this stage and the initial analysis of transcripts generated 249 different codes. Such large numbers are not uncommon when carrying out inductive analysis following Gioia's methodology (Gioia et al., 2013). However to reduce to a manageable amount of first order terms (30–40), the initial codes are reviewed by researchers to identify redundancies, merging similar terms and reduce the length of the codes. 30 first order concepts were therefore generated at this stage.

At a second stage, first order codes, were merged into second order themes. These themes take inspiration from theory and therefore is a first attempt to drive the analysis from the empirics into the constructs that emerge from the literature review. These includes aspects of for example reflections of the regulations in place for internationalization at the higher education, educational programs, student exchange, but also normative issues like teaching management, approval of new courses didactical approaches or resistance to change. The third stage implied regrouping the second order themes into overarching theoretical dimensions. As result, the theoretical dimensions grouped together second order themes that relate to aspects connected to regulative, normative, cultural pillars of the institutions, or either process of institutionalization. Following Gioia's procedure, a data structure organizes the inductive process from empirical to abstract and is shown in Appendix 2 and the result section is structured according to the subsections according to the theoretical dimensions.

The next step in the process of data analysis is developed in the discussion section and presents a dynamic abstract model where a dynamic relationship is presented among the second order themes. This model aims to explicitly indicate a process of institutionalization of international internships into the context of young universities taking Norway as context, but aimed to be generalized to other countries. As result, the model is discussed vis-à-vis the analytical framework to justify the links among the second order themes. A positioning of the framework is also discussed in relation to extant research and its implications for theory and practice.

4. Results

In 2018, Case A University inaugurated its "Internships Abroad" program, a groundbreaking initiative generously funded by HK-Dir. The program marked an initial effort to integrate international internships into the university's academic framework, assessed as a pilot program in the business management program. Elective courses were developed for both bachelor's and master's programs to include these internships. This decision, approved by program coordinators at both academic levels, reflects the university's aim to enhance the international aspects of student education.

By 2019, the program had generated its inaugural cohort of students who had completed their international internships. Based on the initial outcomes and feedback, a new master's program was developed and as part of the design, international internships was offered as part of the international mobility options. By 2021, a second master's program had also integrated a similar option within the pedagogical design, further aligning with the institution's focus on practical and international aspects of education.

Significantly, the post-COVID-19 landscape of 2021 also saw the university forming a Working Group on Internationalization. This strategic development aimed to align the university's internationalization objectives with governmental policy, as laid out in the respective white paper. Notably, the international internship program had by then expanded its scope to include other faculties beyond the Business School. Through collaborative discussions within this working group,

experiences and best practices from the Business School were disseminated, thereby offering a robust framework for the institutionalization of international internships across the institution.

University B proactively sought project funding in 2017 and 2019, successfully securing grants in both instances. The institution's leadership, particularly within the Business School, encouraged academic staff to apply for such funding, and committed to developing a program that would award academic credits for international internships. The resultant model offered students a semester of enrollment at a foreign university, coupled with a 240-hour internship experience. Student evaluations and reports generated from this initiative were positive, leading to the integration of internships into the Business School's formal internationalization strategy.

In October 2020, the Norwegian government issued a white paper, "A World of Opportunities," (Norwegian Government, 2020) that underscored the national policy goals for international student mobility. This directive reaffirmed the aspirational targets set in earlier strategies and emphasized the need for a cultural shift within higher education to make international experiences a staple in all academic programs.

In April 2021, the national Panorama Strategy was introduced, targeting research and educational collaborations with nine countries beyond Europe. Financial incentives were modified to increase student mobility to these countries, exemplified by additional monthly stipends for Norwegian students studying in locations like Brazil. Furthermore, existing programs like UTFORSK and INPART continued to strengthen academic partnerships, notably incorporating the "InternAbroad" program as part of UTFORSK's offerings.

The remaining of this result section summarizes the findings according to the three themes identified through the analysis of interviews and triangulated through researchers' journal notes. The purpose of this section is to establish an empirical basis for the proposed framework for the institutionalization of international internships.

4.1. Drivers for internationalization strategy

According to the interviews, public HEIs consider three drivers for internationalization strategy: government policy, the HEI's international reputation, and internationalization as a long-term "transformative" investment.

Regarding government policy, the case HEIs are directly affected by three factors when determining internationalization activities: compliance with internationalization targets set by the Ministry of Education, translating government priorities in external cooperation into HEI strategies, and the potential to increase externally financed projects. Interviews indicate that their institutions work toward the Ministry of Education's goals on internationalization and toward increasing student participation every year. As one interviewee said:

[University] currently sends 10% of students on exchange programs worldwide, but to increase that number to 20, 30, or even 50% as the government suggests, we may need to consider that some students prefer closer destinations like Denmark, France, or Italy. (Interview 8)

Government priorities in external cooperation have a significant impact on HEIs' international collaboration strategies, potentially shifting HEIs' focus toward working with countries the government prioritizes more highly:

Now, there's finally some focus. It's been decided that only about 30–40 countries will be aid partners. Fortunately, there is also a growing focus on BRICS countries. (Interview 1)

Interviewees also mentioned that internationalization can bring numerous benefits to an institution, including increased resources:

The four internationalization projects funded by HK-Dir together emphasize [University's] work-life profile internationally and complement each other, despite some unfortunate overlap in attracting the same students. (Interview 7)

Gaining national and international reputation is seen as a second driver. Both cases represent young universities that went from an education-based focus to including more research and now aim to increase their international reputation by focusing on high-quality research output. The organizational structure of young universities spread across diverse campuses presents both advantages and disadvantages as these institutions must navigate competing study locations to attract students and develop strategies to couple internationalization with the unique characteristics of each campus:

We deliberately focused on the international aspect at the [XX] campus, with an English-taught master's program to attract skilled students and build international networks. (Interview 9)

High-quality research output is critical for enhancing a university's international reputation. Business schools, in particular, must be mindful of the impact international accreditation has on their reputation:

In terms of business schools, there are accreditations like AACSB and EQUIS. In fact, some other universities almost blindly rely on these accreditations; if you don't have them, you are not very relevant. (Interview 3)

Interviewees underscored the transformative role of internationalization, highlighting its potential to drive strategic investments and organizational change. These projects often involve cultural changes anchored in university fusion processes, administrative challenges, and cross-project learning that informs improvements in subsequent initiatives.

Cultural change in the merged organization is evident since becoming a university; it's compared to institutions with better mobility numbers, unlikely to change in 10 years. (Interview 5)

A successful implementation of internationalization projects, such as the "InternAbroad" initiative, necessitates a strategic vision incorporating key elements such as applying for internationalization funds, building networks, and investing in physical presence in collaboration areas (Interview 9). Working toward business school accreditation and crafting compelling applications are vital aspects of this strategic approach (Interview 3). International internship projects align with two strategic aspects: the work relevance of education and sustainability. Investments at the faculty level are deemed strategic but necessitate counterparts to ensure that projects are complementary but not overlapping:

These projects benefit our organization by driving change and providing new impulses for our activities. Without internationalization funding, we wouldn't have made much effort, but now we've applied for 4.5 million for internships. (Interview 1)

4.2. International education and engagement

The second theme emerging from the interviews connects the external drivers of internationalization with educational traditions at the home institution. Four connective mechanisms seem to be in place.

The first mechanism, *cultural and global competence development*, comprises expanding students' horizons in international business and imprinting global mindsets into business studies. Expanding students' horizons in international business is crucial for fostering global competencies, particularly related to Norway's emerging trade partners:

As a small open economy, Norway depends on other countries, and with only 5.4 million Norwegian speakers, we must acquire skills in major international languages. (Interview 9)

The second mechanism follows *innovative pedagogical developments and engagement* within the HEI. Higher-education institutions must keep pace with pedagogical developments. Educators are key in adopting new pedagogical approaches and methods, contributing to improved student learning experiences, and preparing them for an interconnected and dynamic global workforce:

The project you initiated is innovative and entrepreneurial, promoting a unique form of student mobility and collaboration with businesses. It helps adapt to the expectations of the working world and provides valuable internship experiences for students. (Interview 7)

The third mechanism, *internationalization of curricular transformation*, is key for HEIs seeking to prepare students for global business environments. Crucial to this is ensuring quality assurance for new pedagogical approaches, which involves addressing challenges in creating and integrating new subjects, finding connections with relevant management theories, and establishing procedures for integrating new courses into the curriculum (Interviews 2 and 4). Windows must also be created in the study plan for exchanges, which can be achieved through implementing an international internship model at the institution:

In terms of internships, one of the challenges is defining good learning objectives for students. It is difficult to establish an academic background for internships. In our project funded by the DA[...] internships should be linked to specific fields. For instance, if a student goes to Brazil for an internship, it should be related to supply chain and shipping so that they can receive curriculum and theoretical knowledge related to it. (Interview 4)

Interviews indicated that to achieve *resilient internationalization*, institutions should prioritize long-term relationships with external partners, foster institutional relations, and collaborate with administrative staff. Mutual gains are crucial, and internationalization efforts should consider the educational context of the countries involved and the establishment of large, reciprocal projects. Issues such as project reach, financing, and mobility reciprocity should be addressed. Trustworthiness should be emphasized in the application process, and partnerships with reputable universities should be pursued. Countries' synergies should be reflected upon and projects initiated based on partner input.

4.3. Internationalization organizational dynamics

The third theme sheds light on organizational dynamics connected with internationalization projects such as internships abroad, including academics' leadership fluctuations, resources, responsibilities shared between the administration and academics, and organizational culture.

Recently, the role of academics has expanded beyond traditional teaching and research responsibilities, requiring them to assume leadership roles in complex project management tasks. As administrative processes become more complex, the need for dedicated support to manage tasks such as coordinating internships becomes increasingly apparent (something also experienced in other faculties and business schools), as described below:

There are many things, ranging from registering vacation, sick leave, projects[...] And then you have to deal with Canvas, Inpera, and, right, so the information is there online, but it may not be easy to find. (Interview 2)

An essential factor driving academia's internationalization is the personal interest of individual staff members in establishing and fostering international collaborations:

The travel expenses are covered externally, but if I hadn't put a lot of volunteer work into this thing, we would never have been able to do it. If I didn't have an interest in supporting it, I wouldn't have the resources to do this job in relation to the time I spend on it. (Interview 8)

The involvement of action researchers within the academic system is critical for the success and continuity of internationalization efforts, which present various challenges and resource-related concerns, requiring careful planning and allocation of resources. Hurdles include implementing structured internship programs, scaling up initiatives to reach more students, and coordinating projects with multiple partners:

It's important to promote and market the project and to get buy-in from both academic and research communities. It's a significant job to get a project off the ground, and it can be difficult to market it to students. It takes a team effort to make it successful, such as creating promotional videos. You can have a great project, but if nobody uses it, then it's not a success. (Interview 6)

Resource allocation and management play a vital role in the success of internationalization projects. This includes accounting for time invested in previous projects, streamlining internal organization at the faculty level, and implementing proper financial control mechanisms (Interview 2).

Shared responsibility for internationalization calls for close collaboration between the international office, faculties, and management, requiring joint efforts in organizing mobilities, providing clear information about opportunities, preparing grant applications, and supporting incoming students:

The projects are initiated and owned by the faculty, and all activities are owned by them. We (international office) are a support service, with no income, purely operational. We take on more of an advisory role because we see that different types of mobility models are being used. It is very demanding and innovative in how we can exchange students, taking into account all external factors that can hinder exchange. (Interview 5)

Upgrading the organizational culture in HEIs necessitates reducing the distance between academics and administration, fostering a cultural shift among academic staff to expand internationalization projects, and incorporating leadership practices that have a positive influence on these projects. Thus, a strategic focus on internationalization aims to foster collaboration between academic staff and administration through personal relations and institutionalized channels (Interviews 8 and 9). This includes building competencies over time through strategic planning, reciprocal partnerships, and support for researchers in writing grant applications. Institutions should also prioritize international cooperation at the faculty level and facilitate the creation and maintenance of international alliances. Furthermore, faculty leadership is essential in prioritizing and supporting international cooperation, ensuring that projects align with institutional goals and provide mutual benefits (Interview 8).

5. Discussion

How can action researchers overcome institutional barriers when leading curricular and pedagogical systemic changes for the institutionalization of international internships in business education? We seek to provide insights into the strategies and mechanisms that can be employed to address the challenges and capitalize on the opportunities in institutionalizing international internships. Based on the empirical findings and following a grounded theoretical approach (Gioia et al., 2013), this section presents the theoretical model that explains the process of institutionalization of international internships. The section then introduces theoretical and implications to practitioners.

The theoretical model is based on the emerging second-order themes grouped within the three identified aggregate dimensions: drivers of internationalization strategy, internationalization of education/engagement, and organizational dynamics. The model identifies three categories of push drivers for internationalization strategy in HEIs: government policy, internationalization as a transformative investment, and increasing international reputation. Throughout the findings, it emerges that the first driver, government policies, has effects within the regulative institutional pillar as both HEIs are public and must comply with the government's internationalization targets. These findings expand previous research about government-induced policies and their effects on HEIs (Daquila, 2013; O'Connor, 2018). In addition, as discussed in the literature review, extant research has analyzed the government-driven internationalization initiatives in European, Asian, and North American countries considering workforce competitiveness and cultural factors such as the need to increase English language programs (Humfrey, 2011; Lee, 2014; Viczko, 2013). Going beyond previous research, the present findings provide evidence about how government policies and other drivers influence initiatives aimed to increase outward, as opposed to inward, mobility.

There is another important caveat that the current AR Norwegian experience highlights regarding government-driven internationalization policies. Some previous research indicates potential pitfalls for HEIs regarding compliance with government key performance indicators (KPIs) for internationalization (Tham, 2013). However, sudden government priorities for HEIs can also have effects on internationalization. Two contextual elements profoundly transformed this action-research project during the four year period covered: the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 and the introduction of tuition-fees for international students by late 2023 (Norwegian

Government, 2020). While the COVID-19 pandemic affected equally outbound and inbound student exchanges; the tuition fees issue is more connected to the inbound student influx to domestic universities. Indeed, both factors drove important debates about the priorities of internationalization of higher education in Norway and also put in question the study abroad methodologies such as international internships with new forms of study abroad -such as online or blending programs (Enkhtur et al., 2023). While the focus of this research was not to analyze the effect of both issues within the institutionalization of international internships, our participant-observer role bring us some takeouts as warrants for contextualizing the results. First, the authors carried out the observations and collected the empirical data amid the pandemic, but with an overwhelming positive political climate towards inbound and outbound internationalization in Norwegian universities. Notwithstanding the introduction of tuition fees partly affects this positivist climate, but in connection with inbound international students. This happened out of the period of the data collection and in later stages of data analysis and writing the manuscript. In our teaching practice involved in internationalization of education projects, we see that business school perceived as even more strategic the inclusion of added value factors for international mobilities as strategic to attract students from those countries out of the European space which could be affected by the introduction of tuition-fees.

Second, higher-education institutions in Norway, despite the tradition of highly subsidized public education, now face developments analogous to those in other highly developed countries. A risk of too much reliance on market-based approaches or compliance with government agendas leads to competition for resources, students, and prestige (Croucher & Lacy, 2022).

The normative aspects of internationalization, however, revolve around the values, beliefs, and expectations held by the stakeholders within the business-school setting. These aspects can significantly impact the perception and implementation of internationalization and can be influenced by the changing landscape of higher education as institutions continuously adapt to the evolving demands and expectations of students, employers, and society at large. In contrast to previous studies (Cai & Kivistö, 2013), what is interesting to highlight in these drivers is the way they intertwine and influence each other in shaping the internationalization strategy of HEIs. Government policies, as part of the regulative pillar, can create a supportive environment for internationalization by providing guidelines, incentives, and resources to universities. This in turn encourages institutions to consider internationalization as a transformative investment, recognizing its potential benefits in terms of enhancing the quality of education, fostering global competencies, and expanding research and collaboration opportunities. Increasing international reputation is another driver that often coincides with the two previously mentioned drivers. Higher-education institutions, particularly business schools, are increasingly aware of the role that internationalization plays in boosting their rankings and visibility in the global education landscape. Consequently, they strive to incorporate global engagement activities into their educational offerings, and the cultural-cognitive institutional pillar proves its importance in internationalization projects. These findings complement and expand previous research on international practicums in business school settings, which has focused overwhelmingly on their pedagogical and bureaucratic aspects along with students' experiences while disregarding their institutionalization aspects (Johnson & Jordan, 2019; Perusso & Baaken, 2020; Rogers et al., 2009).

The second element of the proposed institutionalization framework concerns internationalization practices of education and engagement. The highlighted external drivers motivate curricular transformations in the most relevant study programs in two ways: by requesting windows of opportunities for exchange programs and by ensuring the quality of new programs. The findings highlight institutions' upgrading the normative aspects of relational systems and routines to be able to respond to this growing interest in study programs. The first normative upgrade that emerges is cultural and global competence development as part of business programs' curricular developments. As this implies imprinting global mindsets into business studies, international internships or exchanges are a key to this process (Le et al., 2018). The second normative upgrade is the design

of resilient internationalization projects along bidimensional feedback loops with curricular transformation. Mutual gain for partners abroad and in Norway was identified as critical here. Nonetheless, this area is under-researched and will require further study to understand how HEIs assess mutual gains in practice. Third, innovative pedagogy and engagement is closely connected to the design of internationalization projects and affects how cultural and global competences are developed in practice. As results show, the increased integration of active learning into study programs is seen as a driving force in educational curriculums to address issues such as student dropout (Perusso & Baaken, 2020).

Following the internationalization of education and engagement, organizational dynamics emerged as a third element. This is the process component in the framework that more closely relates to the cultural-cognitive institutional pillar (Scott, 2001), because the components of this third mechanism are “shared responsibility for internationalization,” “academic leadership,” and “resources.” Even though teaching and administrative staff have clearly defined routines and their activities are regulated by norms, participation in internationalization projects is not usually among the achievements evaluated in their performance indicators—which positions the reward systems within the normative basis of order (Scott, 2001). Instead, as noted in the findings, academics’ interest in managing complex internationalization projects is a main driver, which also requires close collaboration with the administration and the ability to obtain resources internally and externally. These self-efficacy characteristics of the teachers must be positioned within a basis of compliance leaning toward taken-for-grantedness and shared understanding. In the cases studied, this cultural acquaintance with international internships increasingly connected to grant applications for internationalization projects.

Besides theorizing about institutionalizing internationalization practices, the present paper expands previous studies in the field of educational AR by showing how the regulative, normative, and cognitive-cultural pillars are intertwined when meso-level AR projects are undertaken in complex internationalization projects. A proposed framework indicates that carriers such as symbolic systems (Scott, 2001) are more likely to emerge throughout the process. Contrary to previous research on meso-level action research (Calhoun, 2019), this study demonstrates that boundaries between the three levels require a thoughtful reassessment given that, e.g., micro-level considerations (such as study programs) are also part of the process leading to institutional change. The findings can be generalized following some conventions in case study research and action research traditions. Thick descriptions and contextual information were provided to facilitate applying this conceptual framework to HEIs organizationally similar to Norway’s. Other models, such as Educational Management Action Research (EMAR), also have applicability beyond their countries of origin; the idea is that continuous improvement of educational programs and their outcomes can be applied in these contexts through ongoing AR cycles (McPherson & Nunes, 2002).

Despite the proliferation of studies on internationalization and globalization, our research suggests that international student mobility remains an under-researched area, particularly within the context of business education. While substantial literature exists on the policies and strategies for attracting international students to universities, there is a lack of studies that explore the systemic changes required to institutionalize international internships and other forms of experiential learning abroad. The focus has predominantly been on inward mobility, with limited attention to outward mobility and its institutionalization. This gap is especially stark given the evolving landscape of higher education, where the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent shifts in government policies are compelling institutions to reassess and adapt their internationalization strategies. The lack of comprehensive research on this facet can hinder educational institutions from effectively steering the complexities involved in establishing and sustaining international mobility programs, thereby limiting the potential benefits these programs can offer to both students and institutions.

In practical terms, the proposed framework provides guidelines for teachers and managers of internationalization programs. Upgrading the organizational culture within HEIs is crucial for overcoming institutional barriers to international business practicums. Some practical strategies

and mechanisms include evaluating how open calls for funding internationalization projects can align with transformative investments (e.g., business school certifications) and identifying opportunities for increasing the reputation of the HEI. Amid changing government priorities for internationalization, participation in international networks and collaborations seems to have positive impact. Within this framework, managers should foster a culture of global competence development and resilience within the institution. With the advent of digitalization and artificial intelligence tools, teaching staff should more than ever invest time in pedagogical practices to facilitate active learning, enhance student retention, and support the integration of international experiences into the curriculum. Results show that managers can encourage shared responsibility for internationalization, fostering collaboration and resource allocation to support internationalization projects effectively. HEI leadership should provide the necessary support and resources for the successful implementation of internationalization initiatives. Finally, it is critical to continuously reassess and adapt institutional processes and strategies in response to the evolving demands of internationalization, ensuring ongoing improvement and alignment with best practices.

6. Conclusion

This paper presents a comprehensive theoretical model that explains the process of institutionalizing international internships in higher-education institutions, taking into account the complex interplay of the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive institutional pillars. The study expands on previous research in the field of educational AR, offering valuable insights into how action researchers can navigate institutional barriers and capitalize on opportunities when leading curricular and pedagogical systemic changes. The proposed framework both contributes to the theoretical understanding of internationalization processes in higher education and provides practical implications for managers, teachers, and higher-education institutions' leadership. By fostering a culture of global competence development, resilience, shared responsibility, and innovative pedagogy, higher-education institutions can effectively adapt to the evolving demands of internationalization and continuously improve their educational programs and outcomes.

A limitation is the study's methodological design, which is based on two case studies situated in Norway. While this focus allows for an in-depth exploration of the local context, it may constrain the generalizability of the findings to other educational systems and cultural settings. Additionally, the study was conducted during a period marked by significant global events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which could influence the applicability of the results over time. As researchers based in Norway and involved in the local educational landscape, we acknowledge the potential for inherent biases in action research. We have sought to mitigate these biases through rigorous reflexivity and data triangulation, but they remain a consideration. Ethical complexities, especially those arising from our dual roles as participant-observers, have been carefully navigated but still present a limitation. Resource constraints, including time and available funding, have also impacted the depth and breadth of this research. Despite these limitations, we believe that the epistemological underpinnings of educational AR allow for the development of grounded theories with practical applications that extend beyond the Norwegian context. We have taken steps to ensure both internal and external validity to offset these limitations. Future research can expand some of the elements in this model and some of the hypothesized claims. First, it can investigate mutual gains in internationalization projects. This study identified mutual gains for partners abroad and in the home country as a key characteristic of resilient internationalization projects. Further research could explore how higher-education institutions assess and optimize mutual gains in practice, leading to more sustainable and fruitful international partnerships. Second, follow-up research can explore the dynamics of shared responsibility for internationalization. Further research could delve deeper into the factors that promote or hinder collaboration, resource allocation, and support for internationalization initiatives within higher education institutions, providing better understanding of how to foster an organizational culture that embraces internationalization.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank Professor Antonio Luis Lopes (University of South Eastern Norway) for his support in early phases of this study. This manuscript received the valuable comments of two anonymous peer reviewers, who we thank for their time reading our paper.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

Both authors received financial support from the Norwegian Directorate for Internationalization and Quality in Higher Education (HK-Dir) through the following grants: R.R. Hermann [grant number INA-2018/10058 and INA-2019/10021], E. Fauskanger Direktoratet for internasjonalsisering og kvalitetsutvikling i høgare utdanning [grant number INA-2017/10035 and INA-2019/10061].

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Support data

Access to the anonymous data repository is available through: <https://doi.org/10.18710/VZBZEO>

Appendix 2. Data structure

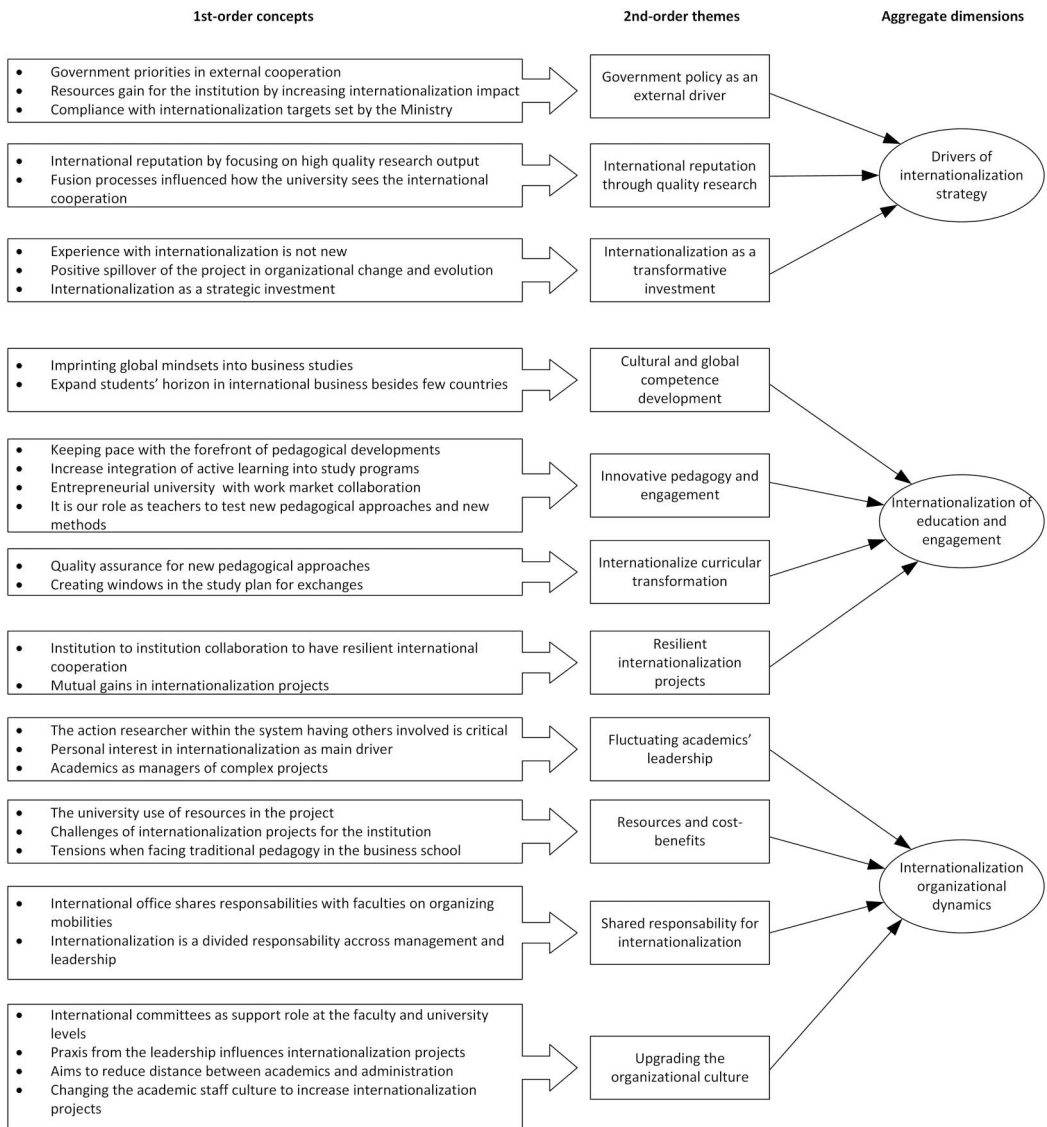


Figure A1. Grounded data structure following Gioia (2012).