

# A Critical Review of Theoretical Models on Institutional Internationalization of Higher Education

Yiwei Qiu<sup>1</sup>, Ella Ruth Anaya<sup>1</sup> & Sergio Cepero Espinosa<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Trinity Western University, Langley, Canada

Correspondence: Yiwei Qiu, Trinity Western University, Langley, BC, Canada. Tel: 1-778-554-1837. E-mail: yiwei.qiu@twu.ca

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## Abstract

This paper presents a critical review of theoretical models on institutional internationalization in higher education. Over the past three decades, scholars have proposed numerous frameworks to understand internationalization processes, yet gaps persist in their practical application and integration. Through a systematic and evaluative examination of the literature, this study identifies two main categories of models: *content-based models*, which focus on institutional strategies and policies, and *process-oriented models*, which emphasize internationalization as a dynamic, cyclical progression. The critical review highlights the strengths, limitations, and developmental trends of major existing frameworks, underscoring the need for a more integrated and actionable approach. To address these gaps, we propose *Qiu's blended evidence-based theoretical model*, which combines Van Dijk and Meijer's internationalization cube with Rogers' diffusion of innovation theory. This integrative framework provides a structured yet adaptable pathway for institutions, aligned policy, support systems, and implementation strategies to facilitate purposeful and measurable internationalization efforts. By bridging theoretical insights with practical applications, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of internationalization as a process offering valuable guidance for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners.

**Keywords:** critical review, higher education, internationalization, theoretical model

## 1. Introduction

Over the past three decades, internationalization has shifted from a peripheral concern to a central priority within higher education (Brandenburg & De Wit, 2010). Despite the growing interest, much of the literature has focused on the conceptualization of internationalization and its isolated activities (Altbach, 2008; De Wit, 2002; Francis, 1993; Knight, 2004; Mestenhauser, 2002). There remains a gap in understanding the practical application of established theoretical frameworks that guide institutional internationalization processes (O'Malley, 2015). While many higher education institutions (HEIs) have made commitments to internationalization, the extent to which these frameworks are applied in a cohesive manner is often unclear (Taylor, 2004). Comprehensive case studies providing evidence-based models remain sparse, leading to a lack of unified approaches (Johnsen-Smith, 2014). Policymakers require more comprehensive data and efficient strategies to better predict, plan, and support institutional internationalization with increased confidence, helping to prevent ineffective efforts (Burriss, 2006). As such, this paper aims to critically review the major existing theoretical models that have been postulated for institutional internationalization of higher education, which contributes to systematic knowledge about the international dimensions of higher education. We begin with an outline of the methodology followed by definitions of the internationalization of higher education institutions. Subsequently, we engage in critical analysis of existing theoretical models related to institutional internationalization in higher education. Lastly, this paper identifies key challenges within these models and proposes refinements, with a particular focus on Qiu's evidence-based blended model.

## 2. Methodology

This study adopts a systematic approach to critically reviewing theoretical models on institutional internationalization in higher education. The process involved two primary stages: selection of models and synthesis of insights, ensuring both breadth and depth of analysis.

### 2.1 Criteria for Selecting Models

The selection of theoretical models was guided by the following criteria:

- a) **Relevance to Institutional Internationalization:** Models were included if they explicitly addressed the strategies, processes, or frameworks applicable to higher education institutions' internationalization efforts.
- b) **Scholarly Recognition:** Models cited frequently in peer-reviewed journals or foundational texts were prioritized.
- c) **Temporal Range:** The review focused on models developed and applied over the past three decades to capture both historical evolution and contemporary perspectives.
- d) **Empirical and Theoretical Foundations:** Preference was given to models grounded in empirical research or those offering robust theoretical contributions.

### 2.2 Scope of Literature Search

The search spanned academic databases (e.g., ERIC, Sage Journals, Taylor & Francis Online, Web of Science, and Google Scholar) using keywords such as “institutional internationalization,” “higher education,” and “theoretical/conceptual models/frameworks.” Relevant models were reviewed to ensure they met the above criteria and aligned with the study's objectives. It should be noted that although the scope of the sources included in this review are highly representative of this research domain in the past three decades, it is not an exhaustive review of all potential sources.

### 2.3 Research Procedure

The study involved a comparative thematic analysis to identify patterns, divergences, and complementarities among the models and proceeded according to the following steps:

- a) **Categorization:** Grouping models into content-based and process-based frameworks.
- b) **Comparative Analysis:** Models were compared based on their conceptual underpinnings, practical applications, and limitations. This step illuminated gaps and overlaps, enabling a comprehensive understanding of their utility.
- c) **Integrative Framework Development:** Insights from the comparative analysis informed the development of Qiu's blended evidence-based theoretical model, aimed at addressing identified limitations and advancing the discourse on institutional internationalization.

This iterative approach ensures a robust synthesis of theoretical models, offering a comprehensive foundation for the proposed blended evidence-based model.

## 3. Definitions of the Internationalization of Higher Education Institutions

The concept of internationalization in higher education, though widely recognized, lacks a unified definition. Scholars have highlighted that internationalization is not a uniform construct (Hudzik, 2015), and its meaning has been characterized by ambiguity (Yelland, 2000), excessive use due to growing interest, and misuse from its varied interpretations (Knight, 1999). Some definitions are strategically focused, emphasizing which aspects of higher education should be internationalized, while others stress the process-oriented nature of internationalization, portraying it as a continuous organizational transformation. This shift in focus from specific programs and activities in the 1980s to a process in the 1990s is indicative of the evolving understanding of the term (Knight, 2004).

The notion of *internationalization* has progressed significantly over recent decades. Initially, during the late 1980s and early 1990s, definitions of internationalization were activity-based and linked to institutional-level international programs. An example of this is Arum and Van de Water's (1992) definition, which described internationalization as “the multiple activities, programs, and services that fall within international studies, international educational exchange, and technical cooperation” (Arum & Van de Water, 1992, p. 202). This approach emphasized programmatic initiatives without addressing broader institutional strategies. By the mid to late 1990s, a shift towards a process-oriented approach emerged (Ellingboe, 1998; Knight, 1994, 2006; Knight & De Wit, 1995). Knight (1994) argued that internationalization should be an integrated and sustained process within institutions, defining it as the “process of integrating an international and intercultural dimension into the teaching, research, and service functions of the institution” (Knight, 1994, p. 7). This redefinition marked a transition from isolated programs to an integrated institutional approach. However, critics, including Van der Wende (1997), argued that such definitions were overly narrow, neglecting the interplay between national policies and institutional strategies (Van der Wende, 1997). Researchers increasingly contended that internationalization

should be viewed as a means to improve educational quality and research, rather than as an end in itself (De Wit, 2011; Hudzik, 2015; O'Malley, 2015; Van der Wende, 1997). To address these critiques, Van der Wende's (1997) more expansive definition framed internationalization as "any systematic effort to make higher education adaptable to the demands and challenges of globalization in society, the economy, and labor markets" (pp. 18-19), highlighting the need for adaptability in a global context.

Considering the diverse interpretations, a structured framework is necessary to advance internationalization efforts. The challenge lies in crafting a definition that is both sufficiently broad to be applicable across various countries, cultures, and educational systems, while also acknowledging the influence of the international dimension on every aspect of education and its societal functions. Knight (2004) updated her definition of internationalization to "the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education" (p. 11). This definition emphasizes two key elements: first, internationalization should permeate all educational functions, including teaching, research, and service; second, it should be integrated within existing institutional operations, rather than being treated as a separate or supplementary initiative (Hudzik, 2015). These features laid the foundation for contemporary understandings of internationalization, particularly the concept of "comprehensive internationalization" (CI), which reflects the growing complexity of internationalization in the 21st century. CI represents a "commitment confirmed through action to infuse international and comparative perspectives throughout the teaching, research, and service missions of higher education" (Hudzik, 2011, p. 6).

#### **4. Critical Analysis of Theoretical Models of Institutional Internationalization of Higher Education**

A review of the literature identifies the following seven theoretical models as typical and widely applied in higher education institutions (HEIs) research and its practical domain. These models offer both a descriptive and prescriptive framework that serves as a methodological and analytical tool for evaluating and advancing internationalization efforts within higher education institutions. These theoretical models are constructed and represented differently at different times and in different cultural contexts; therefore, similar to the definition of internationalization, these theoretical models have evolved over the past decades and are presented and critiqued in two categories based on their respective attributes and emphases. A summary of each of the models follows.

##### *4.1 Content Models*

###### **4.1.1 Neave's (1992) Model**

Neave's (1992) model, developed through case studies commissioned by UNESCO, provides a paradigmatic framework for managing international cooperation. This model delineates two distinct approaches: one driven by leadership and the other by base units (Neave, 1992). A key characteristic of Neave's framework is the absence of formal connections below the central administration level, whereas the second model views central administrative units to be primarily service-driven, responding to initiatives from lower organizational levels (De Wit, 2002, p. 126). This distinction underscores the contrast between centralized and decentralized approaches to internationalization (Iuspa, 2010). Moreover, Neave categorizes these models as "managerial rational" versus "academic consensual," incorporating the dimension of change into his analysis (Burnett, 2008). Neave (1992) further conceptualizes these two models as representing opposite poles on a continuum, positing that administrative structures supporting international cooperation can shift between these paradigms under certain conditions (p. 166). He emphasizes that such structures should remain "continually provisional" (Neave, 1992, p. 168). To enhance analytical clarity, Neave integrates the leadership-driven and base-unit-driven models into a matrix, which includes the definitional and detailed aspects of institutional strategy (Neave, 1992). However, Rudzki later critiqued Neave's model, arguing that it lacked practical applicability in real-world contexts (Rudzki, 1998).

###### **4.1.2 Davies' (1992) Model**

Building upon Keller's (1983) foundational work, *Academic Strategy*, Davies (1992) developed a two-dimensional theoretical framework that emphasizes the need for universities to establish an internal strategic framework in response to external environmental changes (De Wit, 2002, p. 129). As articulated by Knight and De Wit (1995), this model carries a prescriptive tone, advocating for institutions to clearly articulate their stance on internationalization. They assert that universities should provide clear statements to serve both as an internal rallying point and to communicate a consistent set of beliefs and values to external stakeholders (Knight & De Wit, 1995, p. 178). Davies' model facilitates the analysis of institutional internationalization along two dimensions: organizational policies, which reflect the institution's commitment to internationalization goals, and organizational design, which encompasses the systematic procedures for managing international activities.

In his 1992 work, Davies presents a matrix (Table 1) that positions universities within one of four quadrants based on these two dimensions: organizational design (ranging from ad-hoc to systematic) and policy (ranging from marginal to central). The matrix identifies the following quadrants: (a) Quadrant A – *Ad-hoc-Marginal*: Internationalization endeavors are minimal, sporadic, and peripheral to the institution’s core policies. (b) Quadrant B – *Systematic-Marginal*: Although internationalization activities are organized and supported by some level of strategic planning, they remain marginal to institutional priorities. (c) Quadrant C – *Ad-hoc-Central*: Despite a significant level of internationalization throughout the institution, activities lack clear direction and are characterized by an ad-hoc approach. Projects are often accepted reactively, without long-term planning, and support services are inadequately aligned with internationalization efforts (Davies, 1992, p. 188). (d) Quadrant D – *Central-Systematic*: Universities in this quadrant demonstrate a high volume of coherent international activities, supported by explicit policies, procedures, and a clear international mission.

Table 1. Davies’ (1992) matrix model

Matrix	Ad hoc	Systematic
	A	B
Marginal	The university’s international initiatives are minimal, sporadic, and largely peripheral to its overall policies	International efforts are still limited but well organized and supported by a certain degree of strategic planning, but still marginal to the university policies.
	C	D
Central	A high level of international efforts may take place throughout the institution, but it is not based on clear concepts and has an ad hoc character	Universities demonstrate a substantial range of international initiatives that complement one another and are intellectually aligned. The international mission is clearly defined and supported by specific policies and procedures to ensure its implementation.

While Davies’ model has served as a foundational structure for understanding the organizational strategies of internationalization in higher education institutions (Knight & De Wit, 1995), it primarily focuses on whether organizational designs are ad-hoc or systematic. The model does not account for how international efforts are managed at various levels, such as the central administration, faculty, or interactive units.

#### 4.1.3 Van Dijk and Meijer’s (1997) Model

In their 1997 study, Van Dijk and Meijer expanded upon the concept of internationalization within higher education institutions (HEIs), building on their research conducted in the Netherlands. They enhanced Davies’ (1992) model by introducing the internationalization cube model, which encompasses eight cells across three dimensions, as depicted in Table 2.

Within this framework, policies can be classified as either priorities or marginal concerns. Support mechanisms may be categorized as either interactive—facilitating collaboration among central, faculty, and departmental levels—or unilateral/one-sided, where support is offered either at a central or peripheral level. Moreover, implementation strategies can vary between structural/systematic and ad hoc approaches.

Table 2. Van Dijk and Meijer’s (1997) internationalization cube

Position	Policy	Support	Implementation
1	Marginal	One-sided	Ad hoc
2	Marginal	One-sided	Systematic
3	Marginal	Interactive	Ad hoc
4	Marginal	Interactive	Systematic
5	Priority	One-sided	Ad hoc
6	Priority	One-sided	Systematic
7	Priority	Interactive	Ad hoc
8	Priority	Interactive	Systematic

The internationalization cube model was designed to facilitate the analysis of internal decision-making processes, organizational structures, and the implementation of internationalization strategies in HEIs, while also examining how these processes correlate with the outcomes of internationalization efforts. Importantly, Van Dijk and Meijer

(1997) assert that the model is not prescriptive; institutions are not required to progress sequentially from cell 1 to cell 8. Instead, it serves as a tool for assessing the current state of institutional internationalization and elucidating its development, particularly where there is a proactive international strategy in place.

Knight and De Wit (1995) highlight that this developmental model allows for the identification of distinct developmental processes within an institution. Specifically, they delineate three pathways for achieving internationalization, as analyzed through the framework of the internationalization cube:

- a) Route 1-2-6-8: This pathway represents a deliberate and methodical approach characterized by a structured institutional culture, labeled as “slow starters,” where interactions evolve through a gradual increase in activities.
- b) Route 1-5-6-8: This route signifies a robust commitment to internationalization coupled with a well-structured institutional culture, referred to as “organized leaders.”
- c) Route 1-5-7-8: This pathway reflects a rapid reaction to external changes, showcasing a diverse range of activities across various levels and a significant commitment that is organized systematically only at a later stage, termed “entrepreneurial institutions.” Notably, in this trajectory, support services might fall behind the newly launched initiatives.

According to Van Dijk and Meijer (1997), the progression toward a greater level of internationalization is not necessarily a linear process; institutions may experience stagnation or even regression. They may opt to sustain their internationalization efforts at a particular level or completely withdraw from non-essential activities.

The strength of the Van Dijk and Meijer model resides in its empirical basis and its capacity to forecast key input factors affecting internationalization outcomes. By adding a third dimension to Davies’ model, it enriches the understanding of the internationalization process and illustrates how various determinants, such as resource availability, influence outcomes (Rudzki, 1998). Nonetheless, challenges in this theoretical model may stem from the ambiguity surrounding how internationalization—conceptualized as an abstract vision, an organizing paradigm, and a value system for higher education institutions—manifests and operates within these institutions (Qiu, 2018).

#### 4.1.4 Rudzki (1998) Model

Rudzki’s model, developed in 1998, is grounded in empirical research derived from a national survey of business schools in the United Kingdom. He critiques Neave’s “top-down versus bottom-up” framework for its limited practical application and lack of inherent clarity. Rudzki observes that the expansion of international activities within higher education institutions (HEIs) manifests through various approaches, ranging from ad hoc (reactive) to strategic (proactive) models. Table 3 delineates the fundamental differences between these models across four primary dimensions of internationalization: organizational change, curriculum innovation, staff development, and student mobility, which are further illustrated in Figure 1. This analysis identifies the institutional activities essential for internationalization, highlighting the need for a coherent and comprehensive approach to be adopted (Rudzki, 1998).

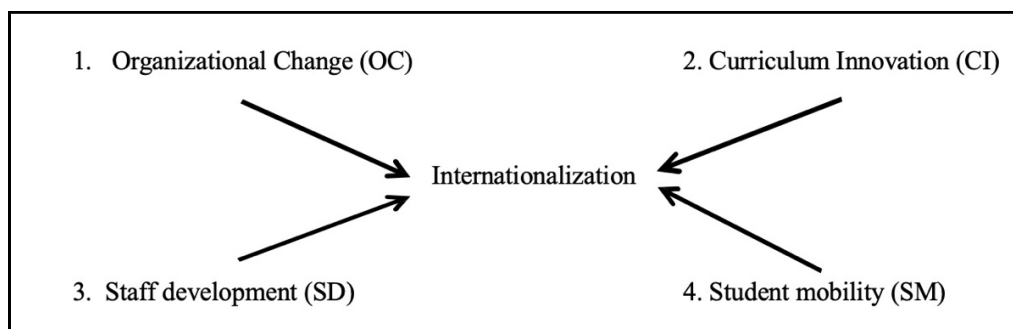


Figure 1. The four dimensions of internationalization

Table 3. The comparison of proactive and reactive models of internationalization (Rudzki, 1998)

	Reactive Model	Proactive Model
Stage 1	CONTACT: Academic staff engages in making contacts with colleagues in other countries, curriculum development, limited mobility, links lack clear formulation of purpose and duration.	ANALYSIS: Understanding what 'internationalization' means and involves is essential. This includes a strategic analysis of organizational objectives in the short, medium, and long term, addressing questions such as 'Should we pursue internationalization?' and 'What are the benefits?' Additionally, staff training and discussions are important for exploring available options and the types of international activities that can be undertaken. Conducting an international audit of existing activities and a staff audit, along with a SWOT analysis and a cost-benefit analysis, is also crucial.
Stage 2	FORMALIZATION: Some links are formalized with institutional agreements being made. Resources may or may not be made available.	CHOICE: A strategic plan and policy are collaboratively created with staff, aligning their mutual interests with those of the organization. Performance measures are defined, resources allocated, and networking with internal and external units is prioritized.
Stage 3	CENTRAL CONTROL: Growth in activity and response by management who seek to gain control of activities.	IMPLEMENTATION: Measure performance.
Stage 4	CONFLICT: Conflict between staff and management can result in a loss of goodwill from staff, potentially leading to decreased activity and growing disenchantment.	REVIEW: Assessment of performance against policy and plan.
Stage 5	MATURITY OR DECLINE A potential shift toward a more cohesive and proactive approach.	REDEFINITION OF OBJECTIVES /PLAN/POLICY: A process of continuous improvement, addressing related quality issues, may necessitate a return to Stage 1 in the cycle of growth and development.

Rudzki (1998) concludes that a broad spectrum of internationalization activities exists, ranging from those that are strategically positioned on a global scale to those that have consciously opted not to engage in international initiatives. Consequently, he reframes these approaches into a six-stage process, referred to as the fractal process model of internationalization, as depicted in Figure 2. Rudzki (2000) asserts that "this six-stage process model enables both individuals and institutions to analyze the actions and issues that need to be addressed and to conduct that analysis in the appropriate order" (p. 81).

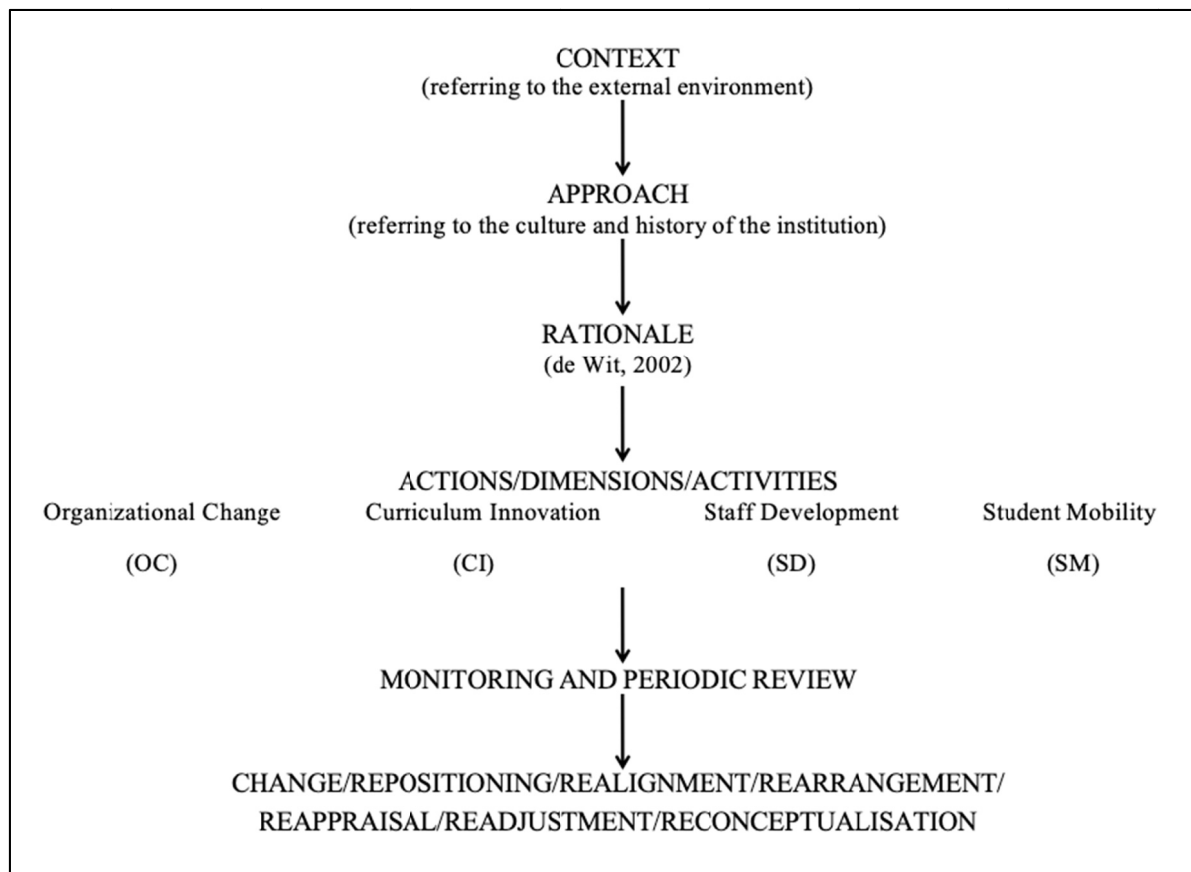


Figure 2. The fractal process model of internationalization (Rudzki, 1998, 2020)

Despite its contributions, Rudzki's model has faced criticism. One critique involves the difference between approach and context. The internal features defining the approach could be integrated into the contextual framework, resulting delineation between external and internal contexts (De Wit, 2002). Furthermore, the model's hierarchical structure suggests that the approach—encompassing organizational history and culture, is subordinate to the external context in shaping strategic decisions (Iuspa, 2010).

Additionally, De Wit (2002) questions the choice of the four dimensions of internationalization, noting that “the model employs a generic variable like organizational change alongside three more specific activities.” He argues that “his subjective selection of the three activities— staff development, curriculum development, and student mobility—omits other strategic program initiatives or relegates them to the category of organizational change” (p. 128). De Wit further emphasizes that while these models serve as useful tools, caution must be exercised to avoid an overly enthusiastic pursuit of a singular model for internationalization in HEIs, as these models do not represent a new paradigm for internationalization strategies (De Wit, 1995).

#### 4.2 Process Models

Content models serve as a framework for evaluating an institution's formal commitments to internationalization, effectively illustrating how institutional strategies can be either implicit or explicit (De Wit, 2002). A critical distinction among the models proposed by Neave (1992), Rudzki (1998), Davies (1992), and Van Dijk and Meijer (1997) lies in their linear and static characteristics (De Wit, 2002). Unlike the linearity inherent in content models, an alternative perspective on developing an organizational model involves viewing the internationalization process as an ongoing cycle (Iuspa, 2010). This viewpoint emphasizes the entirety of the internationalization strategy process rather than the institutional organization itself as content (De Wit, 2002).

##### 4.2.1 Knight's (1994) Internationalization Cycle

Knight's (1994) internationalization cycle, illustrated in Figure 3, conceptualizes internationalization as a result of six sequential, two-way-flow steps enveloped by a supportive culture that facilitates the integration of internationalization. The cycle seeks “to outline the steps or phases involved in incorporating an international dimension into the culture and systems of the university or college” (Knight & De Wit, 1995, p. 25). The six phases

identified in this model are (a) awareness, (b) commitment, (c) planning, (d) operationalization, (e) review, and (f) reinforcement, through which colleges and universities progress at their own pace (Knight, 1994). In this cyclical framework, reinforcement and rewards lead to heightened awareness and commitment, creating a foundation for further planning processes. This often catalyzes changes in existing programs or policies, along with the development and implementation of new activities and services. Continuous support, monitoring, and review mechanisms aim to enhance quality and involve incentives, recognition, and rewards (Knight, 1994).



Figure 3. Internationalization cycle (Knight, 1994)

Knight's (1994) model represents as a foundational framework in the realm of international higher education, proving to be especially useful for scholars studying institutional internationalization (O'Malley, 2015) and for elucidating conceptual perspectives on internationalization strategies in higher education, thereby helping to clarify how universities formulate their internationalization strategies (Burnett, 2008). However, Knight's model is not without its criticisms. Firstly, it inadequately accounts for the impact of external factors on institutional internationalization. Secondly, the focus on the six steps fails to consider the interconnections and power dynamics among various units within an institution. Thirdly, the model presupposes a sequential progression through the six phases, a notion contested by Childress (2009), who suggests that institutions may not necessarily follow this linear path. For instance, some institutions might begin at the review phase to assess their resources and their contributions to internationalization, leading them to subsequently develop an internationalization plan.

#### 4.2.2 Rumbley's (2007) Delta Cycle for Internationalization

While Knight's (1994) model has played a pivotal role in the domain of international higher education by offering a clear and process-oriented conceptual framework, Rumbley's (2007) Delta cycle for internationalization, as illustrated in Figure 4, provides an improved framework for comprehensively understanding and analysis of internationalization at four Spanish universities. Rumbley (2010) observed that although Knight's model is applicable to the Spanish context in numerous respects, it lacks critical elements that adequately represent the internationalization efforts of Spanish universities. Consequently, Rumbley (2007) revised and expanded the graphical representation of internationalization to address these deficiencies in Knight's framework.

Rumbley's (2010) model retains Knight's six phases—(a) awareness, (b) commitment, (c) planning, (d) operationalization, (e) review, and (f) reinforcement—while urging institutions to move beyond isolated categories of interest. It encourages a deeper exploration of the motivations driving universities to pursue internationalization; the methods and approaches they adopt to address these interests; the outcomes of their initiatives; and the overall impact on the institution and its international objectives (O'Malley, 2015). Moreover, Rumbley (2007) identifies four essential contextual and environmental factors—opportunities, obstacles, imperatives, and resources—as crucial determinants influencing the international engagements of Spanish institutions, significantly affecting both the practice and study of university internationalization (Rumbley, 2010).



Furthermore, Rumbley (2007) emphasizes that the idea of change is a fundamental component underlying all aspects of internationalization. To elaborate on this critical notion, the Delta cycle highlights the necessity for institutional decision-makers to stay attuned to the mutable nature of the external context and how internationalization has already transformed, or could transform in the future, the institution itself (Rumbley, 2010).

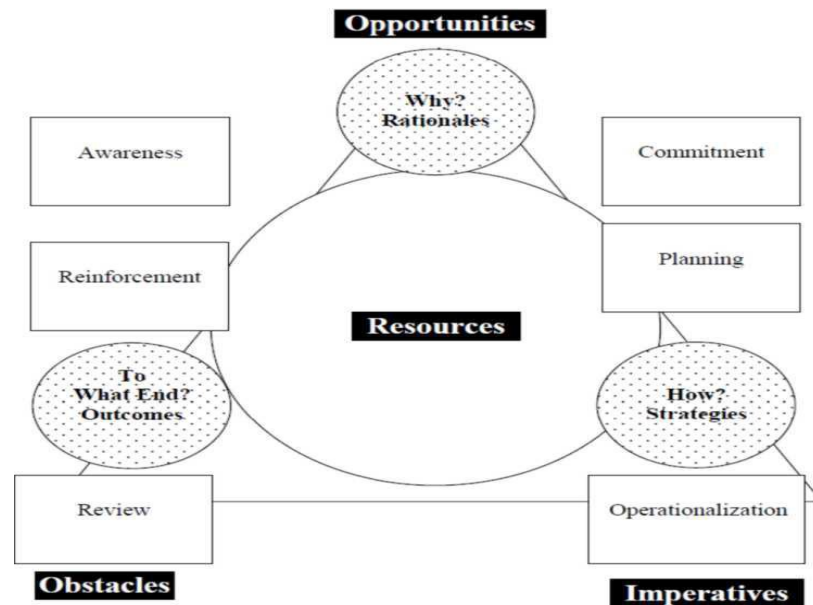


Figure 4. Delta cycle for internationalization (Rumbley, 2010)

The Delta cycle for internationalization (Rumbley, 2010) effectively encapsulates a wide array of intricate and evolving issues into a clear format by presenting internationalization as a dynamic, cyclical process through a visual framework. Central to this model is the essential idea of internationalization as an aspect of institutional change within a changing global landscape. As a result, the Delta cycle serves as a framework for analyzing and critiquing the key question of what drives universities to pursue internationalization, the various strategies they adopt to achieve these goals, and the evaluation of institutional logics, outcomes, and impacts (Rumbley, 2010; Szyszlo, 2016).

#### 4.2.3 De Wit's (2002) Internationalization Circle, Modified Version

De Wit's (2002) modified version of the internationalization circle represents one of the most inclusive and comprehensive conceptual frameworks available. This proposed cycle is illustrated in Figure 5 and combines elements from both Van der Wende and Knight's internationalization cycles, framing the internationalization process as a continuous cycle rather than a linear progression. Van der Wende (1999) emphasizes the significance of internal and external factors affecting the environment, focusing on context analysis, implementation, and long-term effects. In contrast, Knight's (1994) cycle is more oriented towards awareness, commitment, planning, organization, and review.

De Wit's (2002) revised model synthesizes the six elements from Knight's (1994) cycle with three additional components from Van der Wende (1997), resulting in a sequence of nine phases that operate uniquely among the different steps. This model also incorporates both institutional and specific departmental aspects. De Wit (2002) underscores the necessity of addressing the distinct internationalization needs of each academic discipline rather than imposing a generalized framework upon them (p. 137). The internal circle introduced by De Wit (2002) signifies the supportive culture that delineates each step in the process of integrating all dimensions of internationalization into institutional systems, guiding the transition from innovation to institutionalization (LeBeau, 2018). The model implicitly conveys that internationalization is not a goal in itself; instead, it serves as a means to improve the quality of education, research, and service functions at universities.

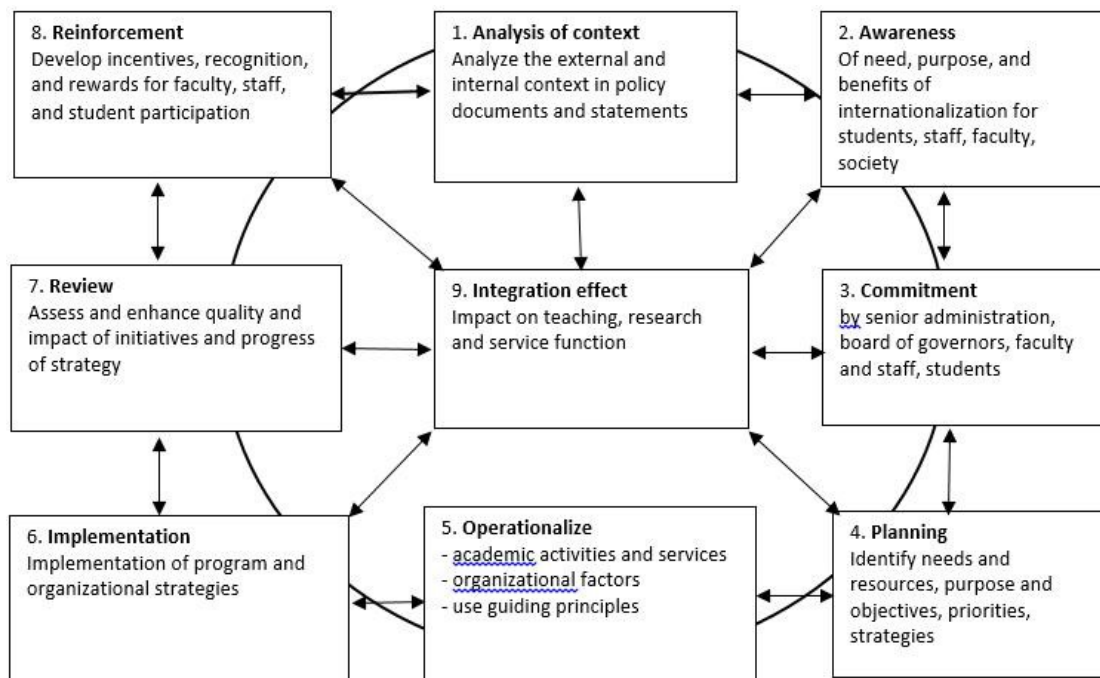


Figure 5. De Wit's (2002) internationalization circle (Modified version)

Source: Adapted from "Internationalization of Higher Education in the United States of America and Europe: A Historical, Comparative, and Conceptual Analysis," by H. De Wit, 2002. Boston College, Center for International Higher Education and the Program in Higher Education.

Moreover, De Wit's (2002) modified version of the internationalization circle offers a theoretical foundation for measuring and assessing internationalization efforts (LeBeau, 2018). However, critiques suggest that an essential element may be absent from the internationalization cycle—the explicit inclusion of all stakeholders in the decision-making process, which is fundamental to cultivating a supportive institutional culture (Perez-Encinas, 2018). Internationalization can be viewed as a strategy in itself (De Wit, 2009) that should be integrated across all aspects and functions of higher education institutions, fostering collaboration with various networks and stakeholders. Consequently, internationalization, as an approach, should inherently embody a collaborative spirit.

### 5. Proposal of the Blended Theoretical Model: Internationalization Cube and Diffusion of Innovation

The blended theoretical model proposed by Qiu (2018) integrates a modified version of the dimensional internationalization cube model (Van Dijk & Meijer, 1997) with Rogers' (2003) diffusion of innovation theory. The distinct characteristics of the internationalization cube model, illustrated in Figure 6, highlight a comprehensive approach to the internationalization process by incorporating multiple dimensions. Meanwhile, the diffusion of innovation theory acts as a complementary framework that facilitates a focused and systematic analysis of essential indicators in international programs.

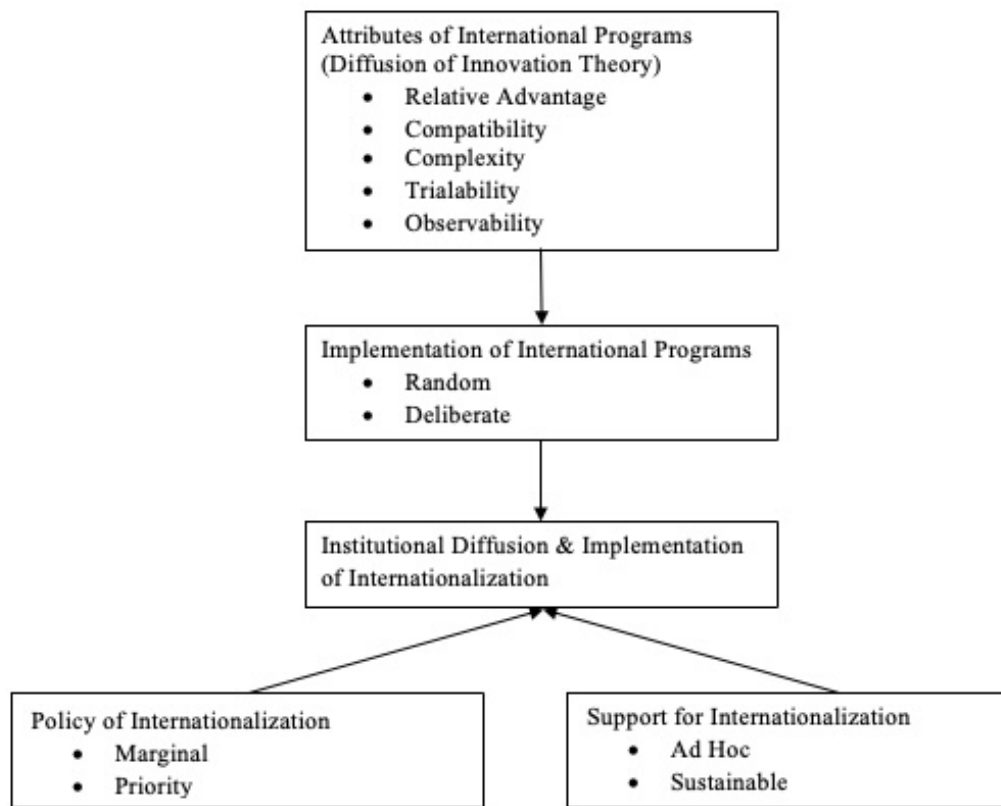


Figure 6. Qiu's (2018) blended theoretical model: Internationalization cube and diffusion of innovation

Qiu's (2018) blended theoretical model represents not merely a superficial modification of Van Dijk and Meijer's (1997) conceptual framework, but rather a substantive shift from an organizational theory perspective to an implementable strategy. The internationalization cube (1997) proposes a strategic re-positioning of higher education institutions (HEIs) within a matrix of actionable concepts aimed at fostering internationalization; however, it lacks a clear programmatic pathway to achieve the desired outcomes. The cube acts as an initial evaluation tool to gauge the current standing of HEIs while also facilitating the development of a cohesive and interactive strategy for the intentional and effective diffusion and implementation of internationalization initiatives.

Rogers' (2003) process-driven model delineates the mechanisms for the gradual diffusion of innovations within an organization, offering valuable insights into the characteristics of innovations amenable to diffusion. However, it does not specifically address internationalization or propose concrete programs that could advance internationalization efforts within an organization. Nevertheless, overlaying Rogers' model onto the internationalization cube allows for the identification of characteristics that impact the diffusion and implementation of international programs, enabling the establishment of priorities for implementing initiatives that deliberately and efficiently advance internationalization.

This revised and enhanced model empowers HEIs to establish a programmatic trajectory for the progressive, step-by-step implementation of an internationalization strategy. By utilizing the combined Cube-Rogers model, institutions can pinpoint the programs that can be most readily and effectively implemented. This approach facilitates a critical examination of appropriate policies, the adequacy of support systems, and specific implementation strategies. It also provides a rationale for the organization, diffusion, implementation, and assessment of the effectiveness of international programs. Research indicates a connection among three key dimensions: policy, support, and implementation of international programs (Burries, 2006; Iuspa, 2010; Van Dijk & Meijer, 1997). Thus, this blended model aims to emphasize both the features of innovations associated with international programs and the external factors—such as policy, leadership, and available resources—that can impact their adoption, diffusion, and implementation.

The interactions among various institutional factors significantly impact whether international programs experience growth, decline, or stability, thereby influencing the overall institutional diffusion and implementation of internationalization. Under similar external conditions concerning institutional policy and support, it becomes crucial to identify the characteristics that affect the diffusion and implementation of diverse international programs. Therefore, by merging the internationalization cube model (Van Dijk & Meijer, 1997) with diffusion of innovation theory (Rogers, 2003), this blended theoretical model clarifies the systematic arrangement and implementation of specific international programs. It elucidates how the interplay of policy, support, and implementation collectively affects the overall internationalization process within institutions, thus contributing meaningfully to the existing literature.

In summary, the blended theoretical model provides a framework for comprehending, analyzing, and facilitating the diffusion and implementation of internationalization within institutions. It is applicable across various educational settings, serving not only as a tool for reviewing resources and their contributions to internationalization but also as a lens for developing a focused internationalization plan deliberately that integrates both process and content. Consequently, this framework has the capacity to direct institutions toward a collaborative approach that ultimately enhances the institutional diffusion and implementation of internationalization initiatives.

## 6. Discussion of Findings

This paper represents a significant step in comparing, evaluating, and synthesizing theoretical models of institutional internationalization in higher education. By providing an aggregated body of knowledge, it addresses critical gaps in understanding the development and dynamics of this field.

### 6.1 Key Findings

#### 6.1.1 Diversity of Theoretical Models

The review identified seven prominent models, categorized into content-based and process-oriented frameworks. These models collectively offer heuristic value by addressing different dimensions of institutional internationalization.

#### 6.1.2 Strengths and Limitations

While individual models provide valuable frameworks for understanding specific dimensions of internationalization, they often exhibit limitations in scope, applicability, or integration across institutional levels.

#### 6.1.3 Advancements through the Blended Model

The proposed Qiu's blended evidence-based theoretical model overcomes many of these limitations by integrating the internationalization cube (Van Dijk & Meijer, 1997) with Rogers' diffusion of innovation theory (2003). This synthesis offers a comprehensive framework that is both strategic and actionable.

### 6.2 Advantages of the Blended Model

#### 6.2.1 The Blended Model's Key Strengths

- **Holistic Perspective:** It combines structural analysis with programmatic pathways, enabling institutions to align policy, support, and implementation systematically.
- **Practical Guidance:** By overlaying diffusion of innovation principles, the model offers actionable insights into how internationalization efforts can be effectively diffused and implemented.
- **Flexibility and Adaptability:** Its multidimensional structure accommodates varying institutional contexts, allowing higher education institutions (HEIs) to tailor strategies to their unique needs.

#### 6.2.2 Applications for Practitioners and Researchers

##### 1) For Practitioners:

- The blended model provides a clear roadmap for designing and executing internationalization strategies, enabling higher education institutions to align their efforts with organizational goals.
- It serves as a diagnostic tool to evaluate the current state of internationalization, identify gaps, and prioritize actionable initiatives.
- By integrating the diffusion of innovation theory, the model helps institutions anticipate challenges and adapt their strategies to changing global contexts.

## 2) For Researchers:

- The blended model offers a framework for empirical studies exploring the diffusion and implementation of internationalization initiatives.
- Future research can test the model's applicability in varied institutional and cultural settings, contributing to its refinement and broader relevance.
- Comparative studies can utilize the model to analyze the impact of specific policies and resources on internationalization outcomes.

## 7. Conclusion

To most accurately evaluate internationalization outcomes and effectively assess and monitor performance, there is a need for an improved theoretical framework for institutional internationalization in higher education. This paper attempts to do that by consolidating existing knowledge and introducing a novel, integrative framework that addresses the conceptual and practical challenges of institutional internationalization. By bridging theory and practice, the blended model holds promise for advancing the discourse on internationalization in higher education, supporting both strategic decision-making and scholarly exploration.

While a review of the available literature does not immediately suggest a future research agenda in this domain, we can expect that adaptation in higher education will continue to be the major drivers of change in the research agenda. We hope that advancement will be manifested in three respects. First, those universities adopt more sophisticated methods for developing global engagement strategies and integrating various institutional responses that strengthen their internationalization efforts. Secondly, that by enhancing their understanding of the impact of globalization and policy outcomes, university administrators, researchers, and practitioners will be equipped to offer intellectual oversight of internationalization efforts through a more nuanced analysis of the internationalization process. Thirdly, leveraging the existing international business literature could provide a valuable foundation for analyzing strategic internationalization management. To better evaluate internationalization outcomes and monitor their performance more effectively, it is essential to develop an enhanced theoretical framework for institutional internationalization in higher education. Finally, it should be noted that although the scope of the sources included in this review are highly representative of this research domain in the past three decades, it is not an exhaustive review of all potential sources.

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**Authors contributions**

Dr. Yiwei Qiu was the primary author, responsible for study design, manuscript drafting, and revisions. Dr. Ella Ruth Anaya contributed as the secondary author, while Dr. Sergio Cepero Espinosa served as the third author and assisted with revisions. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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