

**Leading the many, Considering the few - University Presidents'  
Perspectives on International Students During COVID-19**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Globalization has changed the landscape of higher education. The purpose of this study is to enhance understanding of how higher education leaders are engaging emerging questions about successful leadership, particularly when it comes to international student populations in times of crisis. Guided by the Intercultural Leadership framework, this comparative case study illuminates how university presidents from eight different countries were informed in their perceptions of international students and how they acted*

*to support this vulnerable population. The results of this analysis highlight practical implications for higher education leaders to utilize when navigating global crises while protecting international student populations.*

**Keywords:** *COVID-19, crisis leadership, international students, presidential perspectives, university leadership,*

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## INTRODUCTION

Successful leadership in higher education is much discussed, yet hard to achieve. The challenges and difficulties presented to educational leaders are only amplified in situations of crisis (Kuknor & Bhattacharya, 2021; McNaughtan & McNaughtan, 2019). Many studies have attempted to capture those hardships of leading a higher education institution (HEI) through difficult times and crises of various sorts and identified best practices for leaders to employ (Gigliotti, 2019; Fortunato et al., 2018; Smith & Hughey, 2006). For example, Brennan and Stern (2017) point out that “crisis leadership requires not only making decisions but also communicating them in ways that help to maintain a leader’s (and organizations) legitimacy and credibility” (p. 121). Similarly, McNaughtan and colleagues (2019) argue that leaders should be guided by their institutional mission statements and values when facing challenges to maintain integrity.

Despite the growing body of research focused on educational leadership in HEIs in times of crisis, few focus on the role of top leaders in supporting students and even fewer discuss how presidents engage their most vulnerable student populations (Hotchkins et al., 2021). Utilizing the COVID-19 global pandemic as a common experience to reflect on, the purpose of this study was to enhance understanding of how presidents across the world garner information about, and support one of the more vulnerable populations in HEIs: international students. Results from this study provide insights to presidents on how to best guide their institution through difficult times while considering the needs of students.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

To situate the study within the existing research literature corpus, the following section will introduce several topic areas relevant to the analysis on how university presidents worldwide lead their institutions and more specifically their international student communities during crises. The overarching areas discussed are campus internationalization and the role university presidents play in developing it, as well as international students' roles and challenges on U.S. campuses.

### **Campus Internationalization - Different Approaches, One Goal?**

Internationalization is not a concern only for U.S. universities, but for HEIs around the globe (García & Villarreal, 2014). While there is a substantial research corpus exploring the internationalization efforts of U.S. institutions (Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007; Teichler, 2017), an equally robust scholarly base is wanting for a more international scope. As early as in 2003, the UNESCO Global Education Digest mentioned internationalization as an integral focus of universities worldwide. The guidelines presented in this report were intentionally formulated to be applicable to a wide range of HEIs worldwide, making internationalization a global educational goal. Knight (2007) emphasized that in order to ensure progress and prosperity in the 21st century, adding an international dimension to higher education needs to be a priority for HEIs in all countries. A globalized world with equally globalized labor markets sets new expectations and demands for HEIs to equip their students with the necessary skills and knowledge to survive and thrive under these conditions (Yeaton et al., 2017). Excelling globally and successfully participating in the global market has become a crucial aspiration and goal of higher education institutions (Rumbley et al., 2012).

In Europe, as early as in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, students took it upon themselves to travel and live-in different countries to study at prestigious institutions (Haskins & Lewis, 1957). The first medieval universities in Europe that emerged in the late 11<sup>th</sup> and early 12<sup>th</sup> century had travel and mobility inscribed in their cores, since it was not only the students but in fact, the universities themselves that traveled from location to location, keeping education quite literally dynamic (Thelin, 2019). Europe in general and Germany in particular developed into the center of academic rigor and scientific achievements and attracted scholars from all over the

world (Willets, 2017). Though geographically bound to certain campus locations, modern universities have always been international institutions with a constant influx of international students crossing state borders in pursuit of extraordinary and high-quality education (Garcia & Villarreal, 2014).

While internationalization seems to be an essential aspect of global higher education, the individual national contexts in which those efforts to internationalize are being made differ significantly. In both Europe (e.g., Great Britain), and North America, for example, “there are increasingly powerful political, economic, and academic challenges to the internationalization process” (Altbach & DeWit, 2018, p. 4) and non-Western countries have shown an increased interest in internationalizing their HEIs. The so-called ‘Trump Effect’ on U.S. international higher education (Altbach & de Wit, 2017) and Brexit (Marginson, 2017) severely impacted internationalization efforts, particularly in Western higher education. In addition, the COVID-19 global pandemic “involved worldwide lockdowns, cessation of normal activities and massive state sponsored and state-controlled mitigation” (Woods et. al, 2020, p. 5) made a globalized world that used to feel so open and intertwined all of a sudden, very isolated and distant. In summary, the combination of increased nationalism and global challenges has hindered internationalization in yet to be fully comprehended ways.

### **The President’s Role in Campus Internationalization**

The 2017 American Council on Education (ACE) report on college presidents in the United States mentions campus diversity and inclusion as one of the top priorities of HEI presidents, stating that more “than half of the presidents in the sample reported that racial climate on campus was more of a priority than it had been three years ago” (p. 46). Despite the increasing importance of improving the campus climate, few presidents focus on supporting international students and there is a dearth of research on presidential responsibilities towards the international community or the internationalization of the campus in general (Sullivan, 2011). With the presidents’ role as the moral leaders of their institutions (Brown, 2006), their perceptions of all campus groups carry significant weight for all HEI practices, routines, and strategies. A global crisis like COVID-19 disproportionately affects international students due to travel restrictions,

visa issues, and other amplified challenges. Especially in situations like this, the spotlight on educational leadership is rightly criticized, and focus is given on how to best support students.

### **Considering the Few - International Students**

Logistically, international students face regulatory barriers to studying in foreign countries and significant emotional and social challenges (Baklashova & Kazakov, 2016; Tas, 2013; Wu et al., 2015). Hurdles exist for all international student destinations, however, countries considered ‘top hosts’ like the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom share some characteristics of driving a harder course on student visas, while international students in countries that are typically ‘senders’ tend to go easier on the regulations for the few international students they host (Sin et al., 2021). For example, the U.S. visa system confronts international students with many hurdles, including an abundance of fees, complicated rules, and strict rules and consequences regulating the international students’ stay in the United States (Urias & Camp Yeakey, 2009). This reflects the apprehensive stance on bringing in an international student population and redirecting international students to other nations for tertiary education (García & Villarreal, 2014). While restrictions to certain areas like for example work permits for international students exist in non-top host countries like Germany as well, the overall visa system tends to be less restrictive and alienating than in the United States (Woodfield, 2009).

However, international students, in general, are often under-supported (Lee & Rice, 2007) and a crisis like the COVID-19 global pandemic amplifies already existing organizational support deficiencies (Tozini & Castiello-Gutiérrez, in press). International students represent a “vulnerable student population” (Sherry et al., 2010, p. 33), amplified in crisis situations. With international students as part of the campus community facing a unique set of challenges (Andrade, 2017; Baklashova & Kazakov, 2016; Heck & Mu, 2016; Pottie-Sherman, 2018; Wu et al., 2015), a global crisis brings about a whole new additional set of difficulties (Chen et al., 2020; Demuyakor, 2020; Dennis, 2020; Hope, 2020; Jang & Choi, 2020; King et al., 2020; Zhai & Du, 2020).

While much research focusing on educational leadership during crisis exists (Fortunato et al., 2018; Gigliotti, 2019; Smith & Hughey, 2006),

there is a dearth of studies looking specifically at how university leaders in different national contexts perceive vulnerable populations and even less on how leaders engage their international campus communities in crisis situations. Therefore, this study aims to illuminate how university presidents from eight different countries are informed in their perceptions of the international students on their campuses during the COVID-19 crisis. Two research questions guide this study:

RQ1: How do university presidents in different contexts perceive their role in supporting international students during a crisis?

RQ2: What are presidents' perceptions on how to best gather information when making decisions about supporting international students during crises in their respective national contexts?

### **THEORETICAL CONSTRUCT**

The theoretical framework guiding this study is Intercultural Leadership Competency (Seiler, 2007). Intercultural competence is a highly contested and equally faceted term with a plethora of definitions. “Conceptualizations of intercultural communication competence are highly diverse in their disciplines, terminologies, and scholarly and practical objectives” (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009, p. 5), which is why fields like higher education need to closely consider and specify their understanding of what it means to possess intercultural competencies, for example in areas of higher educational leadership. Generally, intercultural leadership competency has been linked to an awareness of the leader (Goleman et al., 2002), an ability to deal with complexity (McCall & Hollenbeck, 2002), a proclivity to take on inspirational, motivational and empowering roles while displaying an open mind and respect for all stakeholders (Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Moro Bueno & Tubbs, 2004). Seiler’s (2007) framework was selected because it allows us to compare and contrast the different leadership experiences of the presidents included in the study, and because it provides insight into the diverse student populations served by these presidents. In short, we posit that successful leadership has to respond to the increased globalization and subsequent interculturalization (Irving, 2010). As early as 2004, sources like the Research and Development (RAND) report stated that increasing globalization will lead to increased intercultural complexities within

organizations. Organizational leadership in their position on the forefront of representation and guidance becomes a focal point for intercultural competencies (McNaughtan et al, 2019).

This framework is also best suited for this study because it focuses on intercultural leadership competency as a complex construct rather than merely considering an intercultural environment as a determining factor (Bolten, 2005), Seiler (2007) provides “a holistic description of the influencing variables on leadership behavior” (p. 3), combining five influential factors to intercultural leadership behavior: a) individual competence, b) team, c) organization, d) general context and e) specific situation. Individual competence is defined by Seiler (2007) as “a certain level of meta-cognitive, cognitive, motivational and behavioral intercultural competence” (p. 5). In this study, we use this factor to describe the presidents’ individual characteristics, experiences and perspectives that contribute to their intercultural leadership. The team (or group) factor “focuses on the importance of the team that a leader is integrated in” (p. 6), which translates in this study to any references of collaborative efforts to successfully lead international students. Organization is defined by Seiler (2007) as “internalization strategy, the infrastructure and the selection and development of employees” (p. 6), allowing for an integration of the individual universities and their strategic planning of internationalization into the framework. The general context as “the historical and current context in which the mission is embedded” is higher education for this study, whereas the specific situation consists of anything relating to the COVID-19 pandemic and the institutional response. In order to operationalize Seiler’s (2007) framework for intercultural leadership, this study identifies the five factors a) individual competence, b) team, c) organization, d) general context and e) specific situation within the international presidents’ narratives in order to better understand how university leaders lead their international campus communities in times of crisis.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

The global nature of the COVID-19 pandemic created opportunities for international comparative studies on many fronts. In order to successfully employ the theoretical framework for intercultural leadership to answer this study’s research questions, a qualitative multiple case study

design (Yin, 2014) with university presidents from multiple countries and continents was chosen.

## **Participants**

The study participants were selected through purposeful sampling (Patton, 2014) with the broader goal of dissecting global HEI leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. The sampling process consisted of several steps that lead to the ultimate final sample of 14 university presidents. The first step in sampling was to identify and select nationally known and top ranked HEIs from around the world. Second, the diversity of the sample in terms of countries and potential gender imbalances within higher education leadership (Timmons, 2020) was a key concern as we reviewed all potential institutions for selection. As a third step, we identified the highest ranking individual within the HEI with the assumption that the highest authority level grants the highest level of impact on decision making processes during a crisis. While both job titles and leadership responsibilities vary among higher education leaders, we use the term ‘university presidents’ as a universal replacement for different titles such as Chancellor or Rector.

This initial sampling process produced a list of 85 universities located in 15 different countries. With the internationally comparative intention of this study in mind, email invitations were initially sent out to 50 HEIs and their respective leaders from each of the 15 countries in order to achieve greater international variance of the sample. Those 50 email invitations included the approximate duration of the online interview which was set between 30-45 minutes as well as a list with research questions guiding the interview. We received 14 declines, 19 failed responses and 17 responses agreeing to participate in the study. However, three of those 17 HEIs indicated that the interview partner would be a senior leadership member but not the university president. Since this study focuses specifically on university presidents and not higher education leaders in other ranks, we dropped those three HEIs from the sample. Table 1 presents the main characteristics of the final sample consisting of 14 university presidents from 8 different countries.

### **Table 1: Participants**

#	Pseudonym	Sex	Country	Institution Type
1	President G	Male	Taiwan	Public
2	President J	Female	Taiwan	Public
3	President K	Male	Germany	Public
4	President L	Male	Germany	Public
5	President M	Female	Germany	Public
6	President N	Male	Austria	Public
7	President O	Female	Austria	Public
8	President E	Male	Chile	Public
9	President F	Male	Brazil	Public
10	President H	Male	Mexico	Private
11	President A	Male	US	Public
12	President B	Male	US	Public
13	President C	Female	US	Private
14	President D	Female	Canada	Public

Given the potential for significant variance across the context of the countries' governance structures and COVID response, we do not seek to provide blanket comparative statements, but we will acknowledge the different context to provide insight into how decisions were made. The research team for this project had the capability to interview presidents in English, German, Mandarin Chinese and Spanish. Following guidance provided to reduce barriers to interviewing elites in higher education by McClure and McNaughtan (2021) interviews were conducted on Zoom or

Microsoft Teams, questions were provided well in advance, and each interview was conducted in a semi-structured approach to allow the president to guide the discussion more freely.

### **Data Analysis**

The methodological approach for this study was a comparative case study to allow for “flexibility to incorporate multiple perspectives, data collection tools, and interpretive strategies” (Blanco Ramirez, 2016, p. 19). Through the comparative aspect of the case study employed, it is possible to develop “an in-depth analysis of a case” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 14) on multiple national levels. This allows for comparative conclusions that would not be possible by looking at merely one single case (Liebersohn, 2000). A content analysis of the themes brought up by the presidents during the interviews focused on who and what informed the university leaders’ perceptions of their international students’ wants and needs during a global crisis like COVID-19. The theoretical framework of Intercultural Leadership (Seiler, 2007) provided the guiding base for the analysis and helped structure the codes and themes. The five themes 1) individual competence, 2) team, 3) organization, 4) general context, and 5) specific situation identified in the framework were used to answer the research questions and guided the coding process. Since the study is specifically looking at leadership during crisis, theme 4) general context and theme 5) specific situation were combined into one theme context/situation.

## **RESULTS**

Throughout the collected data, four main themes crystallized around the core theme of presidential crisis leadership relating to international students as a minoritized campus group: Individual Competency, Team Focus, Organizational Support, and Context and Situation. To achieve “a holistic description of the influencing variables on leadership behavior” (Seiler, 2007, p. 3), those four themes must be considered in answering this study’s research questions.

**RQ1: How do university presidents in different contexts perceive their role in supporting international students during crisis?**

### ***Individual Competence***

When asked about their role in leading their institutions through crisis while at the same time considering the needs of minoritized campus populations like international students, the university presidents often referred to their individual and personal experiences with international education, studying abroad and the idea of an internationalized campus. This aligns with the presidents' role as the moral leaders of their institutions (Brown, 2006), which includes leveraging their own experiences. European President N mentioned his own involvement with the internationalization of higher education through work experience as he "did have an offer to work as a dean at an American university". President L, also the leader of a European university, vividly remembers the experience of being a student and emphasizes his empathy for the challenges international students are facing during COVID-19. He also mentioned that it was this experience that inspired his involvement in internationalization:

We have increasingly more programs that can be taken in English which is quite popular for international students. A few years ago, I myself have created an English molecular biology program which has increased by 80% over the past few years. I can say, we are proud to be an international university with about 25% international students.

President M shared that her leadership was informed from being an international student and therefore personally engages in the support and care for international students. She stated:

I have some of my own sources. I used to be an international student and see myself as an international person so I can use those resources. My son is an international student right now. At the moment he is in Sweden. In the spring he was still in Boston. So personal and professional is mixing here a little bit (...). I personally started a project to collect money to be able to help international students so they can bridge this difficult time where they cannot make any money (President M).

Personal and professional life mixing, especially during situations of crises, turned out to be an important aspect of the individual intercultural leadership competency university presidents employed.

### ***Organization***

The university as an inherently international organization (Knight, 2007; Thelin, 2019) played an important part in the presidents' intercultural leadership. Many presidents mentioned the overall global and diverse perspective of their institutions as a defining characteristic that became particularly important during crises. President H for example stated:

We try to develop a global and diverse perspective. And as part of that, of course, we promote student mobility abroad. Because of the pandemic, all of a sudden, the multiple ways in which we were sending students was affected. And not only that, we have as one of our goals or metrics that graduating classes need to develop that global and diverse perspective, if they can, through face-to-face experiences. If not, then through alternative means (President H).

This international perspective extends throughout all parts of the university, including students, faculty and staff. President N stated that “Our institution is very involved in internationalization and we see ourselves as very international” and that “the internationalization on the level of the employees has increased significantly” while the university takes “in professors and research personnel from all over the world, but we also want our students to go out into the world” (President N). Within this international scope of the university as a global actor, university presidents presented themselves as global actors representing their institutions, drawing on institutional values when faced with a crisis.

### ***Context/Situation***

As expected, the specific context and situation of the global COVID-19 pandemic had a great impact on the ways in which the university presidents perceived their role when it comes to considering and leading the few. With the impact of the pandemic transcending national borders (Woods et al., 2020), the particular challenges and emerging wants and needs of the international student population were not only recognized by

the presidents, but specifically addressed. President E mentioned his concern for a lack of connectedness of the international students with their university and expresses his wish for more opportunities for direct lines of communication and contact:

Also, being able to give students the attention they require. By attention I mean a concern for them, what they need, if they need to talk. That is a subject that has been much more difficult because there are students who simply do not connect with the university, or hide the camera at a certain moment, or do not have a camera...you don't even know if they are there or if they are not there. And that has been strange for the academic activities, and it has been strange, too, to not have a more direct contact with the students. I think that we could improve that even more (President E).

Even with the number of obligations and responsibilities during crisis exponentially increasing, university presidents remained aware of the struggles particularly vulnerable student populations like the international student community are facing. Establishing an institutional culture of care during challenging times was pointed out as a leadership priority by president C who stated that “we knew it was going to be very challenging for them to come, but we wanted them to be able to continue their education. And so the biggest role was making sure we support and nurture that community. Your voice is being heard. We care about you”. Especially during an extreme situation like during COVID-19, knowing that your organization, your leadership, cares about you is an important factor for campus populations. This is particularly crucial for international students as “vulnerable student population” (Sherry et al., 2010).

**RQ2: What are the perceptions of presidents on how to best gather information when making decisions about supporting international students during crises with their geopolitical context?**

### ***Individual Competence***

While the presidents mentioned the role they saw themselves play when it came to leading and supporting international students through a crisis, they also pointed out that their involvement and sources of

information were often not of the direct kind, but rather lay in the structural framing of the institution. President N for example stated, “when it comes to individual students, I am not very involved but when it comes to framing the conditions that is my job (President N)”. They do feel personally involved and responsible, but also acknowledge that sometimes they may not be doing enough to engage with the concerns of the international student populations, which aligns with the existent literature on a lack of direct presidential involvement in matters of internationalization (Sullivan, 2011). President B talked about the difficulties that come with a general leadership position of the university president.

I don't do enough in that regard, I would say. I do get a lot of emails from international students. The international students, in my opinion, many times, come from a culture in which they're very differential to leadership. And so, sometimes, I do get a lot of direct requests from them because they think the president can do anything (President B).

With only so many hours in a day and the presidential responsibilities piling up during crises, the importance of a functioning, well-collaborating team increases significantly, which was another theme in this study.

### ***Team***

The director's office was mentioned as an important team resource university presidents employed in order to manage the many leadership tasks. President N points out that issues of international student mobility are particularly complex, as they are tied to various legal and political considerations. He states that “In the director's office we have to think closely about what steps to take concerning the regulations put forward by the government. We have to think about immediate measures how we can manage all that but also what the future will look like” (President N). The deans make up another important team resource employed by university presidents. Communication and collaboration with the deans are crucial as they often represent links to political, economic or other entities outside the university. President B highlighted his relationship with the dean of the graduate school as an example of how he leverages those teams available to him to both get information and use it:

I get a lot of input from (...), the dean of the graduate school. We communicate a lot. And then I get correspondence from (...). But I probably communicate with (...) when I want advice on issues that relate to policies. And sometimes, we would reach out to our congressional leadership in DC to help us or communicate to APLU or NASA. I would get advice from (...) to be better informed before I would speak to them (President B).

Knowing what is going on in their institutions and having a general overview of the wants and needs of specific student populations was identified as dependent on efficient and effective teamwork. President F pointed out that staying up to date with information and internal processes during crises is an important part of successful crisis leadership: “And this kind of information quickly that comes to my office with the velocity of light. Any problem, I immediately already know. So nowadays, with the social media, especially with the social media, I immediately I'm aware of what's going on” (President F). Similar to the importance of leadership teams were the role of the organizational structures within the universities that facilitate the flow of information on international students.

### ***Organization***

An important source employed by the university presidents to obtain information on the international student populations are the various offices within the university structure, particularly the international offices. President L states that

We have an office that deals with our international affairs and they work on many different sectors. They also run a welcome center for incoming international students and also for international faculty. So, we have a good oversight over all of our international community and all the exchange programs we run and participate in (President L).

Having oversight of the exchange programs and foreign affairs appeared to be a concern for the presidents, which is why they relied on their international offices to provide them with information on various aspects of the international student life. While usually not directly involved in

international student affairs, the presidents showed awareness of those complexities and the organizational structures supporting them. President E talks about those complexities and states:

And foreign students were given all the training that was necessary to complete semester. And from there...things went down, obviously, in importance and actually... And I think it's going to be difficult to recover, because it isn't just the pandemic, but it also has to do with other things, visas, travel restrictions, travel availability... But hopefully we will be able to return soon to these programs, foreign students are very important, and so are our students who go abroad (President E).

Finally, the unavoidable context of the global COVID-19 pandemic played an overarching role in the presidents' intercultural leadership.

### *Context/Situation*

Permeating all areas of presidential leadership, the context of and specific situation caused by the COVID-19 outbreak heavily influenced the ways in which university presidents obtained and employed information on their international student populations. It is in this factor of the intercultural competency that all others come together and show how intertwined the aspects of successfully leading HEIs and marginalized student populations like the international student community through crisis truly are. President D makes sure to state that the information he and his administration use comes directly from the students and flows into the institutional practices: "So I think in the surveys we did, we really listened for our international students and paid attention to them and tried to make sure they had a voice" (President D).

The comparative lens of this study allowed for an in-depth analysis of the ways in which university presidents in various different national and cultural contexts showed intercultural leadership competency when leading their international student populations during crises. The findings reflect this comparative scope and aim and show that the university presidents, while faced with different challenges in their respective national and institutional contexts, showed intercultural leadership competency in the ways they led and continue to lead. Rather than one specific factor, it is the

combination of multiple factors that result in successful intercultural leadership. University presidents relied on their individual competence, built through experiences and their personal norms and values. While the presidents' intercultural leadership included this individual component, it also showed a strong emphasis on teamwork and collaboration for dealing with issues that pertain to the international campus communities. Assigning tasks to a competent administrative team and collaborating on crisis interventions emerged as an essential aspect of intercultural leadership during a crisis. Besides the support from leadership teams, presidents also considered their respective organizations in their intercultural leadership. Offices within the organizational structure like international offices and the overall mission of their organizations factors into the way presidents lead their international student populations during crisis. The context and situation of the pandemic appeared to be spanning over the presidential intercultural leadership, permeating all aspects of the perceived presidential roles and information-seeking actions.

## **DISCUSSION**

As the literature shows, in our modern times of globalization and global mobility, postsecondary institutions need to both add and emphasize this international organizational component (Knight, 2007). The ways in which the university presidents interviewed in this study displayed intercultural leadership competency (Seiler, 2007) highlighted that the HEI leaders were cognizant of the fact that in order to excel globally, their institutions including all stakeholders need to embrace the internationality of their efforts (Rumbley et al., 2012).

Given that the COVID-19 pandemic “involved worldwide lockdowns, cessation of normal activities and massive state sponsored and state-controlled mitigation” (Woods et. al, 2020, p. 5), the presidents' intercultural leadership competency became even more crucial in leading their respective HEIs throughout this crisis. The presidents, as leaders concerned with diversity and inclusion (ACE report, 2017), while simultaneously being moral leaders of their institutions (Brown, 2006), appeared to experience a particular need to employ the factors of Individual Competence, Team, Organization and Situation/Context in their ability to consider international campus populations as a “vulnerable student population” (Sherry et al., 2010) in their crisis leadership.

Overall, intercultural leadership competency as defined by Seiler (2007) emerged as of the university presidents as leaders (Individual Competence), the leadership teams around them (Teams), the respective universities' stance on internationalization, the institutional framework and mission (Organization) and finally COVID-19 as a global pandemic impacting HEIs and their place as leaders in their local communities (Context and Situation). The presidents who participated in this study all operated in different national and cultural contexts, yet their intercultural leadership competency transcended those contexts and showed consistency in the presidential efforts to successfully lead their institutions and campus populations through crisis. This study highlighted that during times of crises, successful leadership employs the tenants of intercultural leadership. With the dynamic character of crises, leaders need to incorporate the same dynamic processes in the ways they lead their multicultural organizations. "Therefore, the variables that define successful leadership are not only in the individual itself but also in its environment" (Seiler, 2007, p. 4). While other leadership competencies or measurements fail to address the intercultural component organizations in a globalized world possess, "an intercultural environment adds an additional level of complexity that requires additional competencies and a different approach to certain aspects of leadership than a mono-cultural environment" (p. 5).

## **IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

The study's results produce policy implications informing how higher education leaders can navigate global crises while best serving their international student populations. Having identified the factors of intercultural competency, those factors need to be specifically emphasized in leadership training and ongoing professional development for university presidents. The factor Individual Competence can be used as selection criteria for future higher education leadership while factors like Team and Context/Situation make useful points of reference in leadership training.

Knowing where university presidents turn to obtain information about a specific group of the campus population and how that information influences their perceptions of the needs that this particular group has, can help optimize future practices not only in situations of crisis but within the operational context of higher education institutions in general. Seeing how the world is increasingly becoming more globalized, insights into how

educational leaders handle global challenges in different socio-cultural and socio-economic environments make a significant contribution to the field of comparative and international higher education. Employing the framework of Intercultural Leadership (Seiler, 2007) helps frame those recommendations in a way that can be applied to university leadership across the globe and provides a guidance for university presidents on how to take advantage of aspects reflected in the themes of individual competence, team, organization, and general context/specific situation. President H summed up the ways in which higher educational leadership needs to show intercultural competency and also the ways in which higher education as a whole needs to constantly change and adapt to the challenges ahead:

Higher education is not going to be the same. Not entirely the same. No, we're going to have to change. So I think that the mindset, looking for future development, looking for changes and innovation across higher education institutions is essential, okay? (...) because of the pandemic, we all need to be more mindful and more strategic about partnerships. That's the way to go. Number two, we need to make sure we broaden our understanding and the portfolio of internationalization from student mobility that is face-to-face to one that involves virtual mobility. Three, we also need to be more inclusive and accordingly, do something for all of those who typically can't leave the campus for health, economic or other reasons, and we should explore and exploit the notion of internationalization at home (President H).

Empirically tracing university presidents' intercultural competency in times of crisis is a salient starting point for more extended research on presidential practice and communication. For example, future studies should look at students' perceptions of presidential communication and leadership supporting them. Limiting insights only on the presidents' perspective creates an imbalance of power and information, which can be leveled out by including student voices and opinions. Additionally, a larger and even more nationally diverse sample could significantly increase the rigor of future studies. Another area for research to fill existent gaps is the

examination and analysis of presidential training and an aim to understand who and what prepares university presidents to lead and how this preparation can be optimized and tailored specifically to the needs of minoritized campus populations.

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