



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Business Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ibusrev

The development of IB as a scientific field

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

IB development

AIB

EIBA

IB journals

ABSTRACT

International business (IB) is today an established field in business studies with two professional associations and numerous academic publications. However, it is much younger than many other fields in the management area. Although economists were focusing on international issues even before, it was not until after the Second World War that IB started to emerge as a scientific field. The purpose of this paper is to analyse this development from the early days up to the present time. In so doing, using a theoretical framework, it focuses on the organizing of the field, i.e. how early informal contacts eventually led to the formation of formal organizations, the launching of journals, and with the passage of time the publishing of handbooks. The paper provides empirical evidence of all these steps. In this way it presents data on significant contributions to the field.

1. Introduction

After the Second World War international trade and foreign investments increased rapidly due to the removal of barriers related to the flow of goods and capital between countries. This increased internationalization is also reflected in a research community where the Academy of International Business (AIB) will celebrate its sixtieth anniversary in 2019 and its younger sister, the European International Business Academy (EIBA), turned forty in 2014. Hence, the age of both organizations clearly shows that the field of international business (IB) is a post-war phenomenon. Most descriptions of the development of the field state that it emerged in the 1950s, mostly as a result of the increasing internationalization of firms (Hambrick & Chen, 2008). Early inspiration was also given by Penrose (1959) and Hymer (1960). As noted by Shenkar (2004), other business disciplines, however, lacked interest in international issues, and the opportunities to publish were rare. Consequently, “IB was forced to develop a secluded and protected market by launching its own outlets and institutions” (Shenkar, 2004, p. 161). Interest from students also grew, and in higher education the field was introduced in the mid-1950s, when Columbia University presented the first master’s programme in IB. Other prominent universities soon followed.

However, it took some time to delineate the field. According to Niamat Elahee (2007), the first study to identify the boundaries of IB was done by Nehrt, Truitt, and Wright (1969), who categorized the research until then into five areas: (1) International business strategy and structure, (2) Functional aspects of international business, (3) International business and national environments, (4) Cultural factors,

and (5) Others. They also set criteria for what type of investigation should fall within the IB boundaries. Other ways of categorizing IB research followed. Vernon (1994) proposed three areas: (1) International trade, (2) MNEs and (3) Comparative national business systems. Buckley (2002), for his part, described an evolution in research from a focus on explaining flows of FDI (Post-WWII to 1970) to strategy and organization of MNEs (1970s–1990s) and globalization and new forms of IB (mid 1980s–2000). While Buckley was worried that IB research might be “running out of steam” and need to identify a new important research question, Peng (2004) argued that there is one question that has always been and will continue to be the most relevant and fundamental: “What determines the international success and failure of firms?” Referring to Buckley (2002, p. 370) he argued that “the way forward is, paradoxically, to look back” (Peng, 2004, p. 106).

Some researchers express concerns that the IB field is waning in importance. For instance, Hambrick and Chen (2008) noted that IB departments at several business schools have been absorbed into other units. They also point to the fact that business schools nowadays often have interdisciplinary units for international issues instead of specific IB departments. According to Shenkar (2004) the strategy field could be considered a main competitor, although he argued that “strategy is ill equipped to handle the challenges of a global economy” (Shenkar, 2004, p. 167). Instead he put forward the importance of developing the competitive edge of IB by combining knowledge and creating a unified knowledge platform. A recent review of research in international strategic management (see White, Guldiken, Hemphill, He, & Khoobdeh, 2016) illustrates a substantial increase in articles within this fairly new field of research that combines insights from strategic management and

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international business.

The above demonstrates that IB, since its early days has been, and still is, a continuously developing field, for which it is of great importance to trace its roots in order to fully understand its scope. This paper therefore aims at providing an analysis of two aspects of the development of the IB field. First, the organizing of the field, and second the production of the field. The first aim implies a focus on how the field has developed from a fairly loose structure towards a rather strong academic community with professional meetings, journals, and extensive publishing of articles and books. This is a development that IB shares with many other scientific fields. A recent study of corpus linguistics (Engwall & Hedmo, 2016) demonstrated how that particular field started through academic entrepreneurship and has become successively more organized.

The second aim implies an extensive analysis of publications in the IB field. For this purpose we have undertaken a bibliometric analysis of publications before 2015, focusing on selected keywords associated with the IB field. In this way we will show how the organizing has resulted in a considerable growth of publications, as well as how different approaches in the field are associated with each other.

For our analysis we have taken advantage of earlier overviews such as Toyne and Nigh (1998), Toyne and Nigh (1999), Buckley (2002), Shenkar (2004), Buckley and Lessard (2005), Griffith, Cavusgil, and Xu (2008), Roberts and Fuller (2010), Seno-Alday (2010), Zettinig and Vincze (2011), Oesterle and Wolf (2011), and Michailova and Tienari (2014) as well as autobiographical descriptions from pioneers in the field, such as Fayerweather (1994) and Dunning (2002), which have provided valuable insights.

2. A model of the organizing of scientific fields

The literature on scientific innovation has long stood on Thomas S. Kuhn's classical work *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Kuhn 1962), and its presentation of the way in which new ideas replace old views. As the title of the book indicates, it presents a view that scientific innovations occur through revolutions, and these are often associated with one person. This image of the individual revolutionary that breaks away from the establishment is also reinforced by various prestigious prizes such as the Nobel Prize. However, empirical evidence seems to indicate that new ideas seldom appear in isolation but instead simultaneously in several places. An eminent example from Kuhn's own book (1962, Chapter VI) is the discovery of oxygen, where at least three persons were simultaneously working on the problem in the eighteenth century: the Swede Carl Wilhelm Scheele, the Englishman Joseph Priestly, and the Frenchman Antoine Lavoisier.

A significant change since the time of the discovery of oxygen is the expansion of the scientific community worldwide. This means, according to a general model presented in Engwall and Hedmo (2016), increased opportunities for innovators to find colleagues abroad working along similar lines and to overcome resistance from their close peers by establishing *informal networks* internationally (Fig. 1). As new approaches gain ground, these informal networks are likely to become *formal organizations* with statutes for governance, elections, boards, presidents, and fees. This bottom-up process may result in a number of organizations supporting and communicating new approaches as well as competing for academic prestige. A major means for these organizations consists of the organizing of various kinds of academic

meetings. For most professional academic organizations, with the passage of time these meetings become more and more regular and advanced. In this way they turn into significant places for the meeting of colleagues, for the presentation of papers, and for interviewing job candidates.

A further significant step in the development is constituted by the publication of *journals*. One reason for this is of course that a journal is a very concrete sign of the establishment of a new field. However, another very significant reason for the establishment of new journals appears to be that scholars in the new field feel that they are rejected by the established journals. The model is based mainly on empirical observations. Theoretically it is associated with the literature on institutional entrepreneurship within institutionalism (cf. e.g. Battilana et al., 2009; David, Wesley, & Haveman, 2013; Garud, Jain, & Kumaraswamy, 2002; Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006; Maguire, Hardy, & Lawrence, 2004; Tracey, Phillips, & Jarvis, 2011).

As a field develops, journals and textbooks are followed by other means of communication. In the present day, electronic discussion forums have thus become increasingly important. Among printed publications there has been a strong trend for some time among publishing houses to ask a few experts in a field to edit *handbooks* with chapters on various aspects of the field. In this way the establishment of the field is manifested in a way that is profitable for the publishing houses.

In the following we will use the described model for our analysis. In so doing, we will first focus on the various steps of organizing the field (professional associations, journals, and handbooks). Then in a subsequent section we will analyse production of the field before presenting conclusions.

3. Organizing the field

3.1. Professional associations

In accordance with our expectations the IB field has become organized through professional associations. As is well-known to all IB scholars, the two most significant ones are the Academy of International Business (AIB) and the European International Business Academy (EIBA). However, there are also a number of other such organizations, among which Australia and New Zealand International Business Academy (ANZIBA, founded in 1997) is the most prominent (see www.anziba.org). Here we will limit the discussion to AIB and EIBA, however.

3.1.1. Academy of International Business

Founded in 1959 AIB was the first professional organization gathering scholars of international business (For an account of the first 25 years of AIB, see Fayerweather, 1986). In early 2017 it had 3517 members from 86 different countries. A bit more than one third (35%) were working in North America, about 25% each in Europe and in Asia, and 15% on other continents (<https://aib.msu.edu/statistics.asp>). In view of its geographically diverse membership, AIB rotates its conferences among continents. In addition, in early 2017 AIB had eighteen chapters, fourteen of them outside the United States.

Among its members, AIB has since 1977 elected AIB Fellows, who are "distinguished AIB members recognized for their contributions to the scholarly development of the field of international business". By

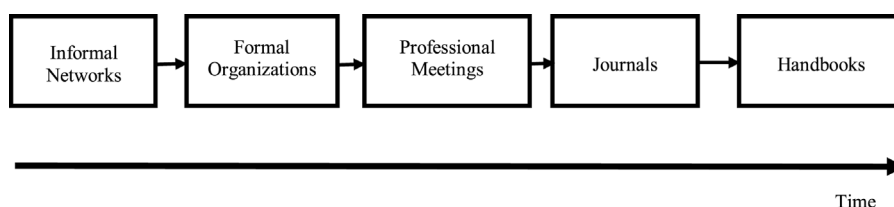


Fig. 1. A model for the organizing of scientific fields.

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