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Reimagining Institutional Reputation: Crisis-Ready Internationalization Strategies for Post-COVID Higher Education

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ABSTRACT: *The COVID-19 pandemic exposed significant vulnerabilities in higher education internationalization, thereby highlighting the need for more resilient, equitable and crisis-responsive approaches to global engagement. This study examines how higher education institutions (HEIs) can strengthen institutional reputation and internationalization strategies in the post-pandemic era through the concept of institutional waypower. Adopting a constructivist grounded theory approach, the study employed qualitative documentary analysis for peer-reviewed literature, institutional reports, policy documents and international briefs published between 2020 and 2024. The analysis identified eight interrelated structural adjustment constructs that underpin crisis-resilient internationalization: crisis-prepared learning management systems (LMSs), technology investment and digital infrastructure, student support and well-being services, internationalization strategy and intercultural competence, institutional stability and agile governance, ethical stewardship and community engagement, curriculum innovation and responsiveness, and resource development and diversification. The findings indicate that these constructs collectively enhance institutional agility, equity, service delivery, and global reputation while supporting sustainable internationalization. The study contributes a novel framework of institutional waypower that extends resilience, complexity and institutional theories by integrating crisis preparedness, ethical governance and Global South perspectives. The framework provides practical guidance for institutional leaders and policymakers seeking to strengthen internationalization,*

student success and institutional resilience in an increasingly uncertain global environment.

Keywords: crisis management, higher education internationalization, institutional reputation, service delivery, waypower

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly disrupted higher education systems worldwide, compelling institutions to rapidly adapt their operations, pedagogies, and service delivery models. Lockdowns, travel restrictions, and the urgent need for social distancing forced higher education institutions (HEIs) to transition almost overnight to remote and hybrid learning environments (Camilleri, 2021; Leal-Filho et al., 2022). While necessary for the continuity of teaching, learning and broader institutional operations, this rapid shift exposed significant gaps in digital infrastructure, pedagogical preparedness, and institutional resilience. It also highlighted the critical need for sustainable, inclusive, and crisis-ready frameworks in higher education (Crawford & Cifuentes-Faura, 2022). These disruptions intersected with broader global challenges, including climate change, rising geopolitical tensions, migration pressures, and the accelerating impact of artificial intelligence and digitalization (De Wit & Jones, 2022; Ferreira Santos, 2024). Together, these dynamics place unprecedented demands on HEIs, which demonstrate the need for governance structures that are academically competitive, socially responsive, and ethically grounded (De Wit, 2020; De Wit & Jones, 2022). In response to these challenges, this study introduces institutional waypower, defined as the capacity of institutions to devise alternative pathways, implement contingency plans, and align strategies with pressing global challenges while prioritizing equity, inclusivity, and social responsibility.

Despite a growing body of literature on internationalization, relatively few studies have developed frameworks that are explicitly crisis-resilient, equity-driven, and informed by Global South perspectives (De Wit & Jones, 2022; Finardi & Guimarães, 2020; Heleta & Chasi, 2022; Huang et al., 2022; Jones et al., 2021). Existing models often prioritize mobility, prestige and global branding while overlooking systemic inequities, cultural marginalization and vulnerabilities revealed during the pandemic. The predominance of mobility-, ranking-, and prestige-driven approaches to internationalization can perpetuate inequities by privileging institutional competitiveness over inclusion, belonging, and the broader needs of students, staff, and communities (Altbach & De Wit,

2020; Ziguras & Tran, 2020). While resilience theory, complexity theory and institutional theory have each provided useful insights into institutional adaptation, none of these frameworks fully integrate crisis-resilience, equity and ethical governance into a coherent model of internationalization. This represents a critical research gap that this article seeks to address. Against this backdrop, there is an urgent imperative to reimagine internationalization as a transformative force for equity, belonging, sustainability and global engagement (Finardi & Guimarães, 2020; Heleta & Chasi, 2022; Jones et al., 2021).

Building on this definition, institutional waypower is proposed as a novel conceptual framework that enables HEIs to navigate uncertainty with integrity, adaptability and ethical intentionality. Drawing on principles from resilience theory, complexity theory and institutional theory, the framework extends the existing understanding of institutional adaptation by emphasizing equity, social responsibility and context-sensitive responses to crises. Conventional internationalization approaches have generally privileged indicators such as international student mobility, international recruitment, institutional prestige and global rankings, often positioning internationalization as a mechanism for enhancing competitiveness, reputation and market advantage (Altbach & De Wit, 2020; De Wit, 2020; Huang et al., 2022). While these approaches have contributed significantly to global engagement, they have often proved vulnerable to disruptions that constrain mobility and expose underlying inequities in access and participation. In contrast, institutional waypower emphasizes resilience, ethical governance, inclusivity and sustainable global engagement as central principles for internationalization in times of uncertainty. The framework is operationalized through eight interrelated structural adjustment constructs: crisis-prepared learning management systems (LMSs), technology investment and digital infrastructure, student support and well-being, internationalization strategy and intercultural competence, institutional stability and agile governance, ethical stewardship and community engagement, curriculum innovation, and resource development and diversification (Steynberg et al., 2023). Together, these constructs provide actionable guidance for HEIs seeking to sustain high-quality service delivery and enhance institutional reputation during periods of uncertainty.

These constructs are not only theoretical propositions, but also practical levers that allow institutions to respond effectively to crises, maintain inclusivity, and advance global engagement (Camilleri, 2021; Huang et al., 2022; Steynberg et al., 2023). For example, crisis-prepared LMSs ensure continuity of learning, technology investments strengthen hybrid and digital learning capabilities, and student support services promote mental health, well-being and intercultural competence (Benito et al., 2021; Redvers et al., 2023). Ethical stewardship and community engagement extend institutional responsibility beyond campus boundaries, while curriculum innovation and resource development foster flexibility, sustainability and responsiveness in pedagogy and partnerships (Jones et al., 2021; Tamoliune et al., 2023). By centring equity-driven, crisis-resilient internationalization, this study introduces a framework that is theoretically novel, practically actionable, and globally relevant. In doing so, it contributes to

scholarship by extending resilience, complexity and institutional theories, and it contributes to practice by offering HEIs a roadmap for navigating uncertainty and fostering inclusive, sustainable global engagement (Heleta & Chasi, 2022; Young et al., 2024).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly disrupted the global higher education landscape, compelling institutions to reassess their internationalization strategies and service delivery models (Park et al., 2025). Traditionally, internationalization has been dominated by models centered on academic mobility, institutional prestige and global rankings. Within these approaches, international student mobility is frequently regarded as a key indicator of institutional success and global engagement. Accordingly, this study adopts the UNESCO-OECD-Eurostat definition of an international student as an individual enrolled in a HEI outside the country of their prior education or citizenship, typically on a temporary basis. This population has expanded significantly over the past two decades, with global academic mobility reaching approximately 6.3–6.9 million students in 2023–2024, representing a threefold increase since 2000 (OECD, 2025; UNESCO, 2025). OECD countries hosted approximately five million of these students, with nearly half concentrated in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia (OECD, 2025). The United States alone enrolled around 1.18 million international students in 2024–2025, representing roughly 6% of its total post-secondary population (Institute of International Education, 2025). While traditional destination countries continue to dominate global student flows, emerging hubs in Europe and Asia are gaining prominence through policy diversification and digital learning innovations (ICEF Monitor, 2025; Migration Policy Institute, 2025). These developments underscore the strategic importance of resilient, equitable and future-orientated internationalization frameworks for HEIs navigating post-pandemic uncertainties.

While traditional internationalization approaches based on international student mobility, global rankings and institutional prestige enhanced competitiveness and global visibility, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed their fragility (Buckner et al., 2022). Their strong reliance on physical mobility, limited digital preparedness, and lack of crisis-responsive mechanisms constrained institutions' ability to respond effectively to unprecedented disruptions (Altbach & de Wit, 2020; Huang et al., 2022). Scholars increasingly argue that internationalization must be reimaged as a transformative process that centers equity, belonging and resilience, rather than merely facilitating cross-border flows of students and knowledge (Finardi & Guimarães, 2020; Jones et al., 2021). This shift aligns with the broader imperative for HEIs to contribute meaningfully to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education (De Wit & Jones, 2022; Jones et al., 2021). It also emphasizes Global South perspectives that have been historically marginalized in mainstream internationalization literature, positioning them as active contributors to theory and practice rather than passive recipients of Northern models. Despite

the existence of resilience, complexity and institutional frameworks, none explicitly integrate crisis-resilience, Global South perspectives, and ethical governance into a single cohesive approach. This study addresses that gap through the articulation of institutional waypower.

A key conceptual contribution to this evolving discourse is the notion of institutional waypower which refers to the strategic capacity of HEIs to devise alternative pathways, contingency plans, and adaptive strategies in response to crises (Ferreira Santos, 2024; Snyder, 1995). Building on resilience theory (Young et al., 2024), complexity theory (Mason, 2008, 2022), and institutional theory (Furusten, 2023), waypower extends these frameworks in important ways. Resilience theory emphasizes adaptive capacity, but institutional waypower embeds ethical intentionality into resilience, ensuring that survival strategies also advance inclusivity and justice (Van Breda, 2018). Complexity theory highlights non-linear dynamics and interdependence, which institutional waypower translates into governance practice by promoting agility without sacrificing institutional stability (Rosenhead et al., 2019). Institutional theory traditionally focuses on legitimacy and conformity, whereas institutional waypower reimagines legitimacy as rooted in social responsiveness and equity-driven governance (Cai & Mehari, 2015). In this way, institutional waypower not only builds on resilience, complexity and institutional theory, but also challenges their Eurocentric biases by positioning Global South experiences as generative sites of theory-building and innovation (Heleta & Chasi, 2022).

Empirical research grounded in qualitative documentary analysis and constructivist grounded theory has operationalized institutional waypower through a set of structural adjustment constructs that provide both measurable and actionable pathways for HEIs to maintain quality service delivery, equity and reputation in times of crisis (Steynberg et al., 2023). Earlier research identified four interrelated constructs: international student volatility, institutional stability and agility, stewardship, and resource formation and development (Steynberg & Grundling, 2023).

International student volatility underscores the economic and reputational risks of over-reliance on tuition fees from international students (Altbach & De Wit, 2020; Leung & Sharma, 2020). Existing internationalization models often privilege recruitment targets, enrolment growth and mobility outcomes while paying insufficient attention to the lived experiences, inclusion and sense of belonging of students during periods of disruption (De Wit, 2020; De Wit & Jones, 2022). The pandemic exposed this gap as mobility restrictions disproportionately affected students from Asia and Africa, many of whom faced isolation, xenophobia and digital exclusion (Altbach & De Wit, 2020; Ziguras & Tran, 2020). This highlights the need for equity-focused strategies that embed belonging and intercultural sensitivity in internationalization policy.

Institutional stability and agility are equally critical. Resilience theory and complexity-informed approaches to institutional adaptation have traditionally emphasized flexibility, responsiveness and adaptive capacity as essential organizational capabilities (Mason, 2008, 2022; Young et al., 2024). However, the pandemic demonstrated that rapid organizational change, if not accompanied

by institutional stability and inclusive governance, can erode institutional identity and exacerbate existing inequalities (Sabzalieva, 2022). HEIs therefore require not only adaptive capacity, but also stability to safeguard educational quality, institutional coherence, and inclusivity. Achieving this balance demands foresight, inclusive governance, and sustained investment in crisis-prepared digital infrastructure, particularly resilient learning management systems (LMSs) that guarantee secure, accessible and equitable hybrid learning environments (Camilleri, 2021; Steynberg & Grundling, 2023).

While institutional stability and agility enable HEIs to respond effectively to crises, stewardship provides the ethical foundation that guides such responses. Stewardship refers to the ethical responsibility of HEIs to serve students, staff and broader communities. Conventional models restricted stewardship to academic performance, while neglecting well-being and community engagement (Callejo Perez & Ode, 2013). The pandemic underscored the need for stewardship that embraces digital inclusion, mental health support and societal resilience (McCann & Cole, 2025; Wang et al., 2020). A post-pandemic vision of stewardship also extends to planetary health and sustainability, thereby encouraging civic responsibility and systems thinking in higher education (Redvers et al., 2023).

Resource formation and development remain an underexplored dimension of internationalization. Earlier models focused narrowly on mobility funding or bilateral partnerships, but resilience requires broader investment in intellectual and technological capital to support digitally enabled and sustainable forms of internationalization (De Wit & Jones, 2022; Ferreira Santos, 2024). Strategies such as establishing pandemic response committees, diversifying recruitment pipelines, and forging symbiotic partnerships with local communities strengthen both institutional resilience and societal impact (Jones et al., 2021; Leung & Sharma, 2020; Ndaipa et al., 2022).

Recent research has expanded these constructs into a more comprehensive framework consisting of eight interrelated dimensions (Steynberg & Grundling, 2023). These dimensions are crisis-prepared LMSs, technology investment and digital infrastructure, student support and well-being services, internationalization strategy and intercultural competence, institutional stability and agile governance, ethical stewardship and community engagement, curriculum innovation and responsiveness, and resource development and diversification. Together, these constructs provide a coherent framework for translating conceptual insights into actionable strategies, linking the theoretical foundations discussed above with practical implications for HEIs navigating crises. For example, technology investment supports the development of robust digital systems that strengthen teaching, administration and global engagement, while curriculum innovation promotes flexible, inclusive and skills-orientated learning opportunities (Camilleri, 2021; Zhao & Watterston, 2021). Student support and well-being services prioritize mental health and intercultural competence, complementing internationalization strategies that foster culturally responsive curricula and balanced global partnerships (Jones et al., 2021; Redvers et al., 2023). Ethical stewardship promotes civic responsibility and planetary health, whereas resource development and diversification strengthen financial, intellectual and social

capital, thereby enhancing institutional resilience and long-term sustainability (Ndaipa et al., 2022) (Table 1).

Table 1: Structural adjustment constructs of institutional way power for crisis-resilient internationalization in higher education

Structural adjustment construct	Operational focus	Key outcomes	Contribution to equity, resilience and reputation
Crisis-prepared LMSs	Ensuring continuity of learning in hybrid and remote environments	Sustained academic delivery, student engagement, uninterrupted assessment	Promotes equitable access to education, enhances institutional resilience, and maintains academic credibility
Technology investment & digital infrastructure	Building robust IT systems, digital platforms, and cybersecurity	Reliable online teaching, administrative efficiency, data security	Reduces digital divide, strengthens crisis adaptability, reinforces institutional prestige
Student support & well-being services	Mental health support, intercultural competence programmes, mentoring	Improved student retention, engagement and satisfaction	Advances inclusivity and belonging, supports resilience during crises, enhances institutional reputation for student care
Internationalization strategy & intercultural competence	Culturally responsive curricula, global partnerships, mobility programmes	Balanced international engagement, intercultural skills development	Fosters equitable participation, strengthens global reputation, builds adaptive capacity
Institutional stability & agile governance	Decision-making structures, contingency planning, adaptive leadership	Maintained institutional identity, responsive operations	Balances adaptability with stability, supports equitable resource allocation, enhances

Structural adjustment construct	Operational focus	Key outcomes	Contribution to equity, resilience and reputation
Ethical stewardship & community engagement	Civic responsibility, sustainability initiatives, stakeholder engagement	Social impact, community partnerships, ethical leadership	institutional trustworthiness Promotes justice and societal responsibility, strengthens resilience through stakeholder support, enhances institutional legitimacy
Curriculum innovation & responsiveness	Flexible programmes, skills-orientated learning, micro- credentials	Relevant and future-ready graduates, adaptable teaching	Supports inclusive learning pathways, enhances resilience in academic delivery, boosts employability reputation
Resource development & diversification	Financial, intellectual, and social capital, partnership networks	Sustainable institutional growth, diversified funding, research capacity	Ensures equitable opportunities, strengthens capacity to respond to crises, enhances global competitiveness and reputation

The pandemic has also accelerated digital transformation, normalizing hybrid and multimodal learning environments. Advocates call for “global campuses” that transcend geography and time zones (Buckner et al., 2022). Yet such initiatives risk reproducing inequalities if digital equity and social learning are not prioritized. Previous models emphasized technological adoption but overlooked ethical dimensions such as equitable access, training and culturally responsive pedagogy (Benito et al., 2021; De Castro & De Castro, 2023). Recent strategies, including the integration of micro-credentials and performance-based education, underscore the shift toward employability and lifelong learning, but require careful alignment with inclusivity and cultural responsiveness (Tamoliune et al., 2023; Zhao & Watterston, 2021). These developments reinforce the need for a framework like institutional waypower that integrates digital transformation with ethical governance and inclusive pedagogy.

The literature demonstrates that while existing models of internationalization have provided valuable insights, they remain constrained by three limitations: an overemphasis on mobility and prestige at the expense of equity and belonging, insufficient integration of digital transformation with ethical and cultural sensitivity, and a lack of frameworks that center Global South perspectives as sites of theoretical and practical innovation (Heleta & Chasi, 2022). Institutional waypower addresses these gaps by offering a crisis-resilient, equity-focused, and globally relevant framework that equips HEIs to build digitally resilient, ethically grounded, and socially responsive approaches to internationalization (De Wit & Jones, 2022; Jones et al., 2021). This article contributes by introducing a theoretically novel, equity-driven, and globally relevant framework of institutional power that extends resilience, complexity and institutional theories while operationalizing eight structural adjustment dimensions for practice. This framework not only advances theoretical understanding but also provides a practical roadmap for institutions seeking to navigate uncertainty and to foster inclusive, sustainable global engagement.

The following section outlines the methodology employed to develop and refine this framework.

DEMARCATON OF THE STUDY

This study is situated within the field of higher education internationalization, focusing specifically on how institutions navigate crises while advancing equity, resilience, and ethical global engagement. While existing studies on internationalization under crisis conditions have highlighted mobility disruptions, financial volatility and digital transitions, they rarely integrate these dynamics with Global South perspectives, ethical governance and long-term resilience strategies. This study addresses that omission by introducing the concept of institutional waypower as a novel framework for rethinking internationalization in times of uncertainty.

The research employed a qualitative documentary synthesis of secondary data published between 2020 and 2024, including peer-reviewed scholarship, institutional policy documents, sector reports, and international briefs. This approach captured how higher education systems adapted during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, and was deliberately positioned not as a methodological limitation, but as a strength. By adopting a constructivist grounded theory design (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2017), the analysis identified recurring patterns across diverse contexts and translated them into a conceptual framework, enabling a comparative and integrative perspective that would be difficult to achieve through single-case studies. To ensure analytic rigor, only documents that directly address internationalization, crisis preparedness, equity, or resilience were included, thereby anchoring the synthesis in the central concerns of this research.

The scope of the study is framed by institutional waypower, which extends resilience, complexity, and institutional theories while embedding Global South perspectives as generative sites of theory-building and practice. The findings do not seek empirical generalization across all higher education systems. Instead,

they advance theoretical generalization by offering a transferable framework that highlights the structural adjustments necessary for inclusive and sustainable internationalization (Charmaz, 2014; Mouton, 2011). Eight structural adjustment constructs operationalize institutional waypower, providing HEIs with a crisis-resilient, equity-orientated framework for rethinking internationalization beyond its traditional dependence on mobility and prestige. In doing so, the study contributes to contemporary scholarship by introducing institutional waypower as a novel and equity-driven extension of resilience, complexity, and institutional theories. At the same time, it offers HEIs a practical roadmap for building digitally resilient, ethically grounded, and socially responsive internationalization strategies. This dual contribution positions the study at the intersection of theory and practice, thereby extending contemporary debates in internationalization scholarship and offering globally relevant insights for institutions navigating uncertainty in a post-pandemic world.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design underpinned by the constructivist paradigm, selected for its emphasis on meaning-making, interpretive depth, and theory generation (Mertens, 2020). The methodological aim was to examine how HEIs navigated crises during and after the COVID-19 pandemic and to develop a conceptual framework, termed institutional waypower, which integrates resilience, equity and ethical global engagement. Similar qualitative documentary approaches have been employed in higher education research to examine internationalization and institutional responses to change (Ferreira Santos, 2024; Steynberg & Grundling, 2023). Given the need to synthesize dispersed yet comparable evidence across multiple contexts, a qualitative documentary analysis was employed, supported by constructivist grounded theory to generate categories and refine them into higher-order constructs (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2017).

Documentary analysis was chosen for both pragmatic and epistemological reasons (Bowen, 2009). Pragmatically, the pandemic produced an unprecedented volume of institutional reports, sectoral briefs, and international policy documents that captured in real time how universities adapted under conditions of uncertainty (Buckner et al., 2022; Leal-Filho et al., 2022). Epistemologically, documents are not neutral artefacts but cultural products that both reflect and shape institutional behavior (Bowen, 2009; Kousa et al., 2022). They provide critical insights into organizational priorities, values and responses, which makes them an appropriate site for interrogating internationalization practices (Godin, 2021). Grounded theory, while traditionally associated with interviews or ethnography, has been increasingly applied to documentary data in higher education studies (Ferreira Santos, 2024). In this study, it enabled the inductive identification of recurrent categories and their development into constructs that operationalize institutional waypower.

To ensure methodological transparency and rigor, the study followed the PRISMA (preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses) framework to guide the identification, screening, eligibility and inclusion of

documentary sources (Page et al., 2021). Boolean search strategies were applied across multiple academic databases (Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and Mendeley) as well as grey literature repositories from international organizations, higher education associations and university consortia. Search terms included “higher education internationalization,” “COVID-19,” “crisis,” “waypower” and “institutional resilience.” Initial searches yielded 156 documents. After removing duplicates and non-relevant sources, 97 documents were screened at the abstract and full-text stages, and a final set of 31 documents was retained for synthesis. The document selection process is summarized in Figure 1, which presents a PRISMA flow diagram illustrating the identification, screening, eligibility and inclusion stages of source selection.

The final dataset comprised a balanced mix of 19 peer-reviewed journal articles and 12 grey literature documents, including institutional policy frameworks, regional and global reports, and international briefs. This breadth captured both Global North and Global South perspectives, providing diversity in scope and depth of insight. While journal articles offered conceptual rigor and theoretical grounding, particularly in ongoing debates about internationalization and digital transformation (Ferreira Santos, 2024), grey literature enriched the analysis by illustrating how HEIs and governing bodies responded in practice to crises during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Grey literature has been shown to hold significant scholarly value, especially in periods of rapid change when formal peer-review processes may lag behind practice (Kousha et al., 2022). This dual-layered dataset ensured that the study was firmly rooted in both scholarly debates and applied contexts, and that it offered a comprehensive foundation for developing the conceptual framework of institutional waypower.

Triangulation was explicitly applied by comparing findings across peer-reviewed research, institutional reports, and international policy briefs (Mertens, 2020). Contradictory or complementary insights were systematically evaluated to validate emerging categories and enhance the credibility of identified patterns (Palinkas et al., 2015). For example, scholarly articles emphasized conceptual models of resilience and internationalization, while institutional policy documents highlighted applied measures such as pandemic response committees, technology investment, student well-being initiatives, and community engagement programmes (Camilleri, 2021; Jones et al., 2021; Redvers et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2020). This iterative comparison across different document types strengthened the robustness of the structural adjustment constructs.

Sampling followed a purposive strategy to ensure relevance, credibility and representation across diverse institutional contexts (Palinkas et al., 2015). Inclusion criteria required English-language sources published between 2020 and 2024 that explicitly addressed internationalization in relation to the COVID-19

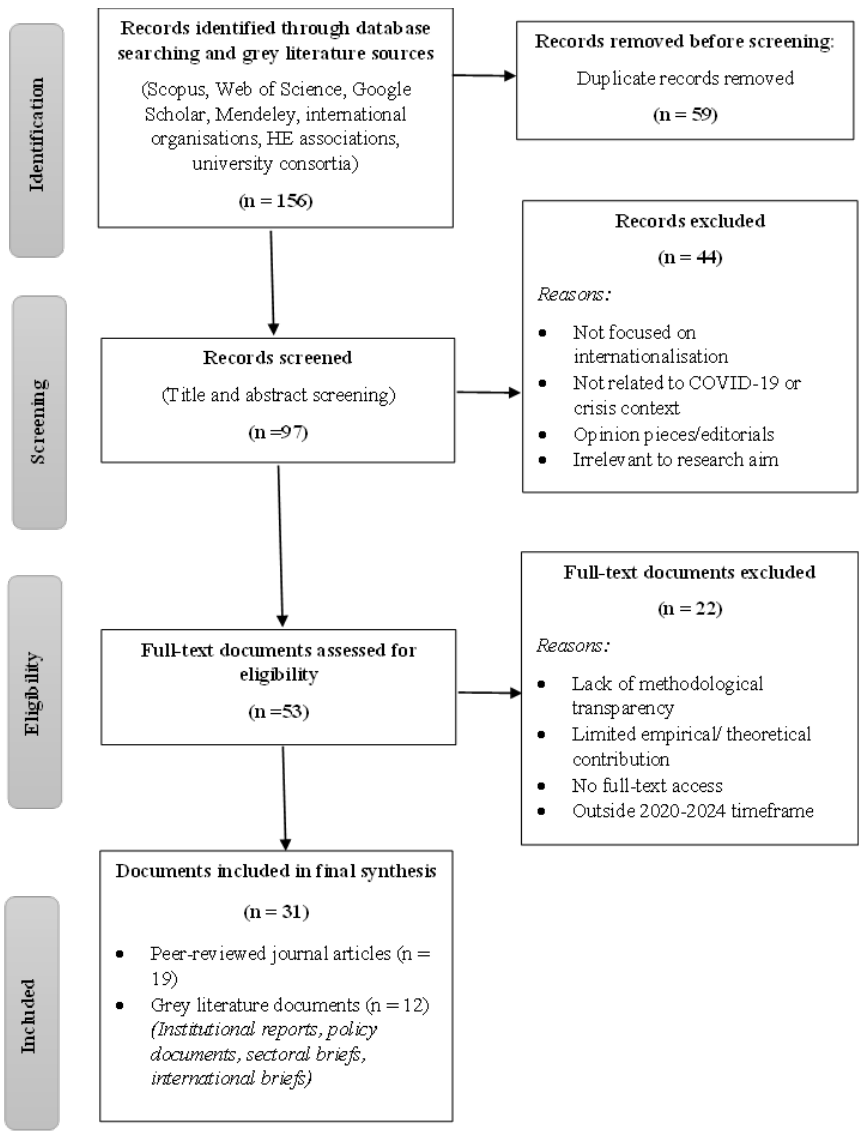


Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram of Documentary Source Selection Process

Note. Adapted from the PRISMA 2020 framework (Page et al., 2021). The diagram illustrates the identification, screening, eligibility and inclusion of documentary sources used in this study.

pandemic and engaged with crisis response, institutional adaptation, or systemic transformation (Ferreira Santos, 2024). While peer-reviewed scholarship

provided theoretical depth and methodological rigor (Steynberg & Grundling, 2023), grey literature was also considered a valuable source of timely evidence, given its recognized scholarly contribution during periods of rapid transformation such as the pandemic (Godin, 2021; Kousha et al., 2022). Exclusion criteria eliminated opinion pieces, editorials, dissertations, and articles lacking full-text access or methodological transparency (Bowen, 2009; Steynberg & Grundling, 2023). This approach ensured that both conceptual innovation and applied institutional responses were captured, thus reflecting the dual realities of higher education's engagement with crises and transformation (Camilleri, 2021; De Wit & Altbach, 2021).

Data analysis proceeded through three iterative stages of grounded theory coding. First, open coding identified initial concepts such as "digital preparedness", "student belonging", and "financial vulnerability" (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Second, axial coding grouped these concepts into relational categories, revealing linkages such as the relationship between governance agility and institutional stability (Rieger, 2019). Finally, selective coding integrated these categories into a coherent set of higher-order structural adjustment constructs: crisis-prepared LMSs, technology investment and digital infrastructure, student support and well-being services, internationalization strategy and intercultural competence, institutional stability and agile governance, ethical stewardship and community engagement, curriculum innovation and responsiveness, and resource development and diversification (Steynberg & Grundling, 2023). Coding continued until theoretical saturation was reached, defined as the point when additional documents yielded no substantively new categories (Charmaz, 2014).

To ensure consistency and transparency, NVivo 12 software was used to manage the coding process, facilitate constant comparison, and organize categories into themes. A shared thematic codebook, guided by 39 a priori keywords, such as "adaptation," "resilience", "equity", "digitalization" and "waypower", supported the systematic coding of documents (Steynberg & Grundling, 2023). The coding process was further framed by a bounded crisis lens, which conceptualized COVID-19 as a global emergency with regionally specific manifestations (Zuo, 2022). This framing facilitated the identification of generic, transferable pathways of institutional waypower while recognizing contextual variations.

Reflexivity and positionality were maintained throughout (Berger, 2015). As researchers situated in the Global South, we critically engaged with Eurocentric internationalization models and recognized Global South institutions not merely as recipients of global policy trends, but also as innovators contributing to theory-building. Reflexive practices included revisiting coding decisions, questioning underlying assumptions, and ensuring that interpretive depth was balanced with contextual sensitivity. This reflexive stance enhanced the credibility and confirmability of findings (Mertens, 2020).

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research process (Mertens, 2020). All documents analyzed were publicly available and open-access, and no human participants were involved. As such, the study did not

require formal ethical clearance. Nevertheless, care was taken to ensure accurate representation of source material and to avoid misinterpretation or decontextualization of findings, consistent with accepted principles of qualitative documentary analysis and research design integrity (Bowen, 2009).

Limitations were explicitly acknowledged and addressed. Reliance on secondary data precluded capturing real-time experiences or decision-making processes within institutions, while the absence of primary data such as interviews restricted insights into lived experiences. These limitations were mitigated through the breadth and diversity of the dataset, triangulation of multiple document types, rigorous coding, and reflexive interpretation. The use of PRISMA ensured methodological transparency in source selection, while grounded theory coding allowed for the generation of theory-driven constructs. As such, the findings are not intended for statistical generalization, but for theoretical generalization, offering a transferable framework for diverse institutional contexts (Mouton, 2011).

This methodology integrates systematic PRISMA-guided documentary analysis with constructivist grounded theory, producing a conceptually robust and practically relevant framework (Charmaz, 2014; Page et al., 2021). Institutional waypower thus emerges not from abstract theorization alone, but also from an iterative synthesis of scholarly, policy and institutional evidence (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2017). By incorporating triangulation, reflexivity, and rigorous coding procedures, this study contributes both methodological innovation and practical relevance, positioning its findings as transferable insights for HEIs seeking to advance equity, resilience and ethical global engagement in times of crisis.

FINDINGS

The analysis identified eight interrelated structural adjustment constructs that collectively operationalize institutional waypower in higher education. These constructs are crisis-prepared LMSs, technology investment, student support services, internationalization, institutional stability and agility, stewardship, curriculum development, and resource formation and development. Together, they provide a framework for understanding how HEIs can strengthen resilience, sustain service delivery, and maintain institutional reputation during periods of crisis.

The findings show that HEIs with robust, scalable, and mobile-accessible LMSs were significantly better positioned to maintain academic continuity during the pandemic. These systems evolved into adaptive ecosystems that supported hybrid learning, peer collaboration, and real-time analytics (Camilleri, 2021; Steynberg & Grundling, 2023). However, the effectiveness of LMSs was contingent on their integration with institutional contingency planning and their ability to accommodate diverse learning needs. Institutions in the Global North, particularly private HEIs, often had pre-existing digital infrastructure and financial reserves to support rapid LMS deployment. In contrast, public HEIs in the Global South demonstrated innovation through mobile-first, low-bandwidth

solutions and community-based learning hubs, highlighting the importance of context-sensitive digital strategies (Chyrva et al., 2023).

Technology investment emerged as a critical enabler of institutional agility. Institutions that aligned their digital transformation with pedagogical intent and strategic mission through the integration of AR/VR, AI-driven learning analytics, and cloud-based platforms demonstrated greater adaptability and innovation (Rasli et al., 2022; Zhao & Watterston, 2021). However, the findings caution that digital equity remains a persistent challenge, particularly in under-resourced regions. HEIs must therefore adopt inclusive digital strategies that address infrastructure gaps, cybersecurity, and faculty digital literacy (Benito et al., 2021; Mygovych, 2021). Moreover, the pandemic underscored the need for HEIs to invest in digital health platforms and mental health services. Institutions that embedded support services such as virtual counselling, peer mentorship and wellness dashboards into their digital ecosystems were more effective in addressing the psychosocial impacts of the pandemic and maintaining student engagement (McCann & Cole, 2025; Redvers, Faerron Guzmán & Parkes, 2023).

Internationalization emerged as a key structural adjustment construct within the institutional waypower framework. The analysis revealed a shift from mobility-dependent approaches towards more flexible and inclusive forms of global engagement. HEIs that adopted collaborative online international learning (COIL), virtual exchange initiatives and global classrooms were better able to sustain international engagement and diversify their student base during periods of disruption (Higgins, 2024). The findings further indicated important contextual differences: while private institutions in the Global North expanded their reach through digital platforms, public HEIs in the Global South relied more heavily on regional partnerships, local knowledge systems and community networks to sustain service delivery (Steynberg & Grundling, 2023; Tran et al., 2023). These findings highlight the importance of context-sensitive internationalization strategies that balance global connectivity with local relevance and resilience.

Institutional stability and agility were found to be defining traits of resilient HEIs. Institutions that demonstrated reflexive governance, decentralized decision-making, and scenario planning were more effective in navigating uncertainty and maintaining service quality (Mitroff, 2005; Sabzalieva, 2022). However, agility must be balanced with stability to preserve institutional identity, mission, and quality assurance. The findings advocate for adaptive institutional architectures that integrate foresight, risk management, and stakeholder participation into strategic planning (Palmer, 2025). Stewardship, both as a moral imperative and a strategic necessity, was also central to institutional resilience. HEIs that prioritized transparent communication, stakeholder trust, and social responsibility were perceived as more credible and responsive (Redvers et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2020). This stewardship extended beyond academic functions to include planetary health, civic engagement, and sustainability education, positioning HEIs as agents of global transformation (Crawford & Cifuentes-Faura, 2022; Zuo, 2022).

Curriculum development was another area of significant transformation. The pandemic catalyzed a shift toward performance-based education (PBE),

interdisciplinary learning, and digital literacy integration (Rasli et al., 2022; Zhao & Watterston, 2021). Institutions that embedded critical thinking, creativity, and global competence into their curricula were better positioned to prepare students for an uncertain and rapidly evolving job market (Jones et al., 2021). The rise of micro-credentials and modular learning pathways supports lifelong learning, employability, and institutional diversification (Tamoliune et al., 2023). These innovations were particularly impactful in institutions that embraced flexible learning models and prioritized student agency.

Resource development and diversification emerged as important contributors to sustainable service delivery and institutional resilience. The findings indicate that HEIs that established permanent risk and pandemic response committees, diversified funding streams, and invested in staff development were generally better positioned to respond to disruption and sustain innovation (Leung & Sharma, 2020; Steynberg & Grundling, 2023). These institutional capacities were further strengthened through collaborative partnerships with industry, government and civil society, which facilitated knowledge sharing, resource mobilization and the co-creation of sustainable solutions (Jones et al., 2021; Ndaipa et al., 2022). As a result, institutions that adopted diversified resource strategies and cultivated strong external partnerships were better able to address financial challenges, maintain operational continuity, and strengthen their institutional standing.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study have far-reaching implications for HEIs, policymakers and global education stakeholders seeking to enhance institutional resilience, service delivery and international reputation in a post-pandemic world. By extending the concept of institutional waypower into a crisis-informed internationalization framework, this research offers a transformative lens through which HEIs can reimagine their strategic positioning, operational agility and societal relevance.

At the institutional level, the study underscores the urgent need for HEIs to embed crisis-readiness and adaptability into their core governance and service delivery systems. The eight structural adjustment constructs, ranging from crisis-prepared LMSs to curriculum innovation and resource development, highlight the multidimensional nature of institutional transformation. Institutions must move beyond reactive responses and adopt proactive, systems-based approaches that integrate digital infrastructure, inclusive pedagogy and strategic foresight. For example, the development of resilient LMSs and hybrid learning ecosystems must be accompanied by investments in faculty digital literacy, cybersecurity and pedagogical innovation (Camilleri, 2021; Rasli et al., 2022). These systems should not only support continuity during crises but should also enhance long-term educational quality and accessibility.

The implications for policy and leadership are equally significant. The study revealed that institutional agility, defined by decentralized decision-making, scenario planning and reflexive governance, is a key determinant of successful

crisis navigation. Policymakers must therefore support HEIs in developing adaptive governance models that balance stability with flexibility, particularly in contexts marked by inequality, resource constraints, or geopolitical volatility. This includes enabling differentiated internationalization strategies that reflect the unique challenges and capacities of institutions in the Global South versus the Global North (Chyrva et al., 2023; Steynberg & Grundling, 2023). Moreover, national and regional policy frameworks must incentivize innovation in digital education, support services, and cross-border collaboration, while ensuring that quality assurance mechanisms evolve in tandem with new delivery models.

From a global engagement perspective, the study reinforces the importance of reconceptualizing internationalization as a human-centered, digitally enabled, and socially responsive process. HEIs must shift from mobility-centric models to more inclusive forms of global engagement, such as collaborative online international learning (COIL), virtual exchange, and transnational curriculum co-design. These approaches would not only expand access to international learning, but also promote intercultural competence, language diversity and global citizenship; key attributes of institutional reputation in the 21st century (Finardi & Guimarães, 2020; Jones et al., 2021). Furthermore, the volatility of international student flows during COVID-19 has exposed the risks of over-reliance on tuition-based revenue models. Institutions must therefore diversify their internationalization portfolios and develop symbiotic partnerships that prioritize mutual benefit, knowledge exchange and sustainable development (Altbach & De Wit, 2020; Ndaipa et al., 2022).

The implications for curriculum and pedagogy are equally transformative. The shift toward performance-based education (PBE), micro-credentials and interdisciplinary learning reflects a broader reorientation of higher education toward employability, lifelong learning and societal impact (Tamoliune et al., 2023; Zhao & Watterston, 2021). HEIs must redesign curricula to integrate digital fluency, sustainability and civic responsibility while ensuring that learning remains inclusive, flexible and contextually relevant. This requires not only pedagogical innovation, but also institutional commitment to equity in access, assessment and support, particularly for students from marginalized or under-resourced backgrounds.

Finally, the study highlights the strategic importance of resource formation and stewardship. HEIs must develop sustainable funding models, invest in human capital, and establish permanent risk and pandemic response mechanisms. This includes creating institutional cultures that value continuous learning, stakeholder engagement, and ethical leadership. Stewardship, in this context, extends beyond financial accountability to encompass environmental sustainability, mental health, and social cohesion (Redvers et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2020). Institutions that embrace this broader vision of stewardship are more likely to build trust, foster innovation, and enhance their global standing.

This study offers a comprehensive, evidence-based framework for reimagining higher education in a post-COVID-19 world. The crisis-ready model of institutional waypower provides both a diagnostic tool and a strategic roadmap for HEIs seeking to lead with integrity, adapt with agility, and engage with

purpose. While the study draws strength from its systematic documentary analysis and grounded theory approach, it also acknowledges the limitation of relying solely on secondary data, which may not fully capture the lived experiences of institutional actors. Future research should therefore explore the operationalization of this model across diverse institutional contexts, using mixed-method approaches, including interviews and case studies, to assess its impact on institutional performance, student outcomes and global engagement.

CONCLUSION

This study advances a novel conceptual framework, institutional waypower, as a strategic lens for reimagining internationalization in higher education in the post-COVID-19 era. Institutional waypower, defined as the capacity to devise alternative pathways and contingency plans in response to crises (Finardi & Guimarães, 2020; Snyder, 1995), offers a transformative approach to navigating global disruptions while fostering ethical leadership, digital innovation and inclusive service delivery.

By synthesizing insights from grounded theory, documentary analysis and comparative perspectives, this research fills a critical gap in the literature: the absence of a crisis-ready, ethically grounded model for sustainable internationalization that integrates digital equity, intercultural competence and resilient governance. Existing models often focus on mobility and branding (Marginson, 2016), whereas this study proposes a human-centered, values-driven paradigm aligned with global citizenship and social justice (Jones et al., 2021).

The eight structural adjustment constructs, ranging from crisis-prepared LMS and technology investment to curriculum innovation, resource development and stewardship, form a comprehensive roadmap for HEIs seeking to enhance their international reputation while advancing equity, sustainability and institutional agility (Camilleri, 2021; Rasli et al., 2022).

The originality of this contribution lies in its integration of crisis management frameworks (Boin & Hart, 2022; Mitroff, 2005) with institutional transformation theory, offering a scalable and adaptable model for HEIs across diverse geopolitical contexts. It moves beyond reactive crisis response to propose a strategic, future-orientated model that embeds internationalization in institutional values, governance and pedagogy.

The study advances institutional waypower as a crisis-resilient framework for reimagining internationalization in higher education. Drawing on documentary analysis and constructivist grounded theory, the study identified eight interrelated structural adjustment constructs that support institutional resilience, ethical governance, inclusive service delivery and sustainable global engagement. The findings demonstrate that effective internationalization in the post-pandemic era requires more than mobility and reputation building; it requires digitally resilient systems, student-centered support structures, adaptive governance, curriculum innovation, and sustained stakeholder partnerships. By integrating insights from resilience, complexity and institutional theories, the study contributes a novel framework that is both theoretically grounded and

practically relevant. Future research should empirically test and refine institutional waypower across diverse higher education contexts to further examine its applicability and impact on equity, belonging, resilience and global engagement.

As HEIs face increasing pressure to respond to ecological disruption, technological acceleration and socio-political fragmentation, this study offers a timely and actionable framework for building inclusive, agile and globally connected institutions. It contributes to the broader discourse on rethinking international education by positioning institutional waypower as a catalyst for ethical leadership, digital transformation and global citizenship.

Future research should explore the operationalization of institutional waypower across varied institutional types and regions, with particular attention to underrepresented and transnational contexts. Comparative studies and empirical validation will deepen understanding of how this model can support equity, belonging, and global engagement in a changing world.

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