

Enhancing international business competence: how cognitive and exposure training approaches matter

Christopher Boafo ^{a,b}, Utz Dornberger ^a and Nathaniel Boso ^{c,d}

^aSEPT Competence Center, Faculty of Economics and Management Science, Leipzig University, Leipzig, Germany; ^bFaculty of Management, The University of British Columbia, Kelowna BC, Canada; ^cGordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria, South Africa; ^dKNUST School of Business, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana

ABSTRACT

This study draws insights from knowledge acquisition theory to examine how cognitive and exposure training approaches explain differences in international business competence (IBC). Following an interpretive phenomenological approach and in-depth interviews with 23 business school professors and 32 business executives on in-service training programs, the study finds that six major learning processes, which consolidate into cognitive-driven and exposure-driven training approaches, contribute to differences in IBC. The cognitive-driven training approach emphasizes the use of explicit knowledge activities, depth of interaction with internationally sourced academics and professionals, and breadth of international research and study contents to enhance IBC. Exposure-driven training focuses on fostering tacit knowledge activities, diversity of cultural experiences and skills, and participation in international affairs to build IBC. The implications of these findings for knowledge acquisition theory, practice, and policy are discussed.

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Introduction

International business competence (IBC) is an intangible resource essential for the effective international engagement of business executives and their firms. The literature on international business and entrepreneurship recognizes this competence as including orientations (e.g., global mindset, international orientation, international entrepreneurial orientation, and learning orientation), networking and relationship competencies, and marketing and sales skills (Birru et al., 2018; Knight & Kim, 2009). This competence may operate at the organizational and individual levels of an international business enterprise (Cortellazzo et al., 2020; De Vasconcellos et al., 2019; Felício et al., 2016). In particular, IBC may manifest in a firm's owners, workforce, structure, processes, and interpersonal and

CONTACT Christopher Boafo  christopher.boafo@studserv.uni-leipzig.de; christopherboafo2019@gmail.com © 2025 The Authors

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intergroup relationships (Knight & Kim, 2009). At the individual level, IBC constitutes the human capital of the firm and may be manifested in the behavioral skills of entrepreneurs, managers, and top management teams deployed in a firm's international operations (Cortellazzo et al., 2020; Covin et al., 2020; Mathew, 2019).

Previous research has largely centered on how top managers acquire knowledge and develop individual-level competences during a firm's internationalization process (Ciszewska-Mlinarič et al., 2020; de Clercq et al., 2012; Pellegrino & McNaughton, 2017; Stoian et al., 2018). However, international competence for business executives may have been cultivated before employment (Bolton & Lane, 2012; Retana & Rodriguez-Lluesma, 2022; Soria & Troisi, 2014). Notably, emerging findings suggest that international business and educational experience can foster individual-level competence development (Andresen & Bergdolt, 2021; Cortellazzo et al., 2020; Mathew, 2019).

Given its role in driving international competence development, international educational experience has become an important aspect of training offered by higher education institutions globally (Clegg & Sarker, 2024; Knight, 2004, 2012). Higher education institutions (HEIs), particularly business schools, in sub-Saharan Africa have also embraced the international educational experience as a tool to build the international competence of their students (Nsanzumuhire et al., 2021; Outamha & Belhacen, 2020; Sa, 2015; Zavale & Langa, 2018). This interest is driven by the region's integration into the global higher education system, its growing youth population, and the rise of youth-led businesses. Notably, a significant portion of sub-Saharan Africa's population consists of individuals under 30 years of age (World Economic Forum, 2022), many of whom own and manage micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) that need internationalization for growth (International Council for Small Business [ICSB], 2023).

A major concern is that business decision-makers in the region often lack exposure to global business knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Boso et al., 2019; INSEAD, 2022; Nachum et al., 2023; Zahoor et al., 2023). This issue has fueled a growing demand for continuous, career-long executive training programs across the continent (America, 2013; Financial Times, 2023), highlighting an increasing interest in developing international competence. Nonetheless, how various training approaches help to build students' international competence remains under-researched (Bolton & Lane, 2012; Soria & Troisi, 2014; Zhuang et al., 2024).

Individuals on in-service training programs often work full-time for their firms while studying for academic and professional qualifications (Prince et al., 2015; Raza et al., 2018; Tho, 2017; Tho & Trang, 2015). This phenomenon is common among entrepreneurs, managers, and supervisors in companies pursuing Master of Business Administration (MBA) and Executive MBA programs (America, 2013; Ibeh et al., 2008; Ibeh & Debrah, 2011). These qualifications are highly valued for acquiring managerial competence, career advancement, and personal development (Herrington, 2010; Ibeh et al., 2008; Ibeh & Debrah, 2011). While knowledge remains patchy on the relationship between training and international competence development, prior research suggests additional scholarly works on "whether a linkage between management education and behaviors can be empirically demonstrated and cross-culturally throughout the African context" (Honig & Hjortsø, 2018, pp. 4–5). In a direct response to these calls, this study explores the research question: *how does training contribute to the development of IBC of executives enrolled on in-service training programs?*

To address this question, we followed an interpretative phenomenological approach (Lamb et al., 2011; Smith et al., 1999; Stoian et al., 2018) to study the training approaches

used in four leading business schools in Ghana. Using business schools in Ghana provides a useful context for several reasons. First, Ghana has several public and private universities offering various tertiary-level business education programs that are available to workers. The availability of such programs to students who are also full-time business executives provides a useful avenue for training in business schools to flourish. Second, three of the top 50 business schools in Africa are in Ghana (EduRank.org, 2024), suggesting that knowledge of training programs for business executives in Ghana can help to broaden scholarly insight into the management education system in sub-Saharan Africa.

This study contributes to the management education literature in two ways. First, it draws insights from different modes of knowledge acquisition theory (Huber, 1991) to identify cognitive-driven and exposure-driven training approaches as major contributors to the development of IBC at the individual level. We draw on Huber (1991) to illustrate how the macro elements of these training approaches can promote learning through strategies such as grafting, vicarious, searching, and noticing, which are essential for developing international competence (de Clercq et al., 2012; Fletcher & Harris, 2012). We propose that business executives participating in in-service training programs for their international competence development can learn from international mobility programs and their peers' experiences by observing and imitating them within their networks. These training elements include interactions with diverse international students and guest faculty, such as foreign academics and industry professionals. Furthermore, the internationalization of study content and research, as experienced by these executives, can enhance their ability to search for and notice new information, opportunities, markets, and methods for developing international competence.

Second, contextually, this study's focus on business schools in Ghana helps broaden knowledge on the nature and outcomes of training approaches in a challenging, ignored, and under-researched context, thus helping to broaden the diversity of empirical evidence and extend the utility of management education research. Additionally, the focus on this context helps address a major challenge facing university administrators and faculty regarding the growing need for universities in low-resource settings to realign internal resources to develop relevant educational programs that address the skills needs of industry while at the same time exposing graduates to global competences to enhance employability outcomes.

Theory Development

Learning, Knowledge Acquisition, and International Business Competence

Learning and knowledge acquisition unfolds across the organizational, group, and individual levels (Cortellazzo et al., 2020; Mathew, 2019). The most effective learning practices happen at the individual level (Crossan et al., 1999; Tam & Gray, 2016), highlighting that a firm's behavior is intrinsically linked to its workforce. The interactions between learning processes, their sources, and their focus areas are essential for cultivating individual-level competences (de Clercq et al., 2012; Fletcher & Harris, 2012; Pellegrino & McNaughton, 2017). In exploring the processes and sources of learning, de Clercq et al. (2012) applied Huber's (1991) classification, which organizes knowledge acquisition approaches into six types: experiential learning, searching, noticing, vicarious learning, grafting, and congenial learning. The knowledge that individuals accumulate across these six knowledge

acquisition approaches may culminate in building broader organizational knowledge stock that may subsequently contribute to the quality of decisions, behaviors and actions of managers (Andresen & Bergdolt, 2021; Ciszewska-Mlinarič et al., 2020; Felício et al., 2016).

How Training Approaches Contribute to International Business Competence Development

Higher education institutions and their business schools continue to internationalize their operations for growth and sustainability. University internationalization is categorized as “at-home” or “cross-border education” (Knight, 2012). Cross-border education refers to educational exchanges across national borders. In contrast, at-home internationalization involves integrating a global perspective into the campus-based teaching-learning processes (Knight, 2004, 2012). These efforts also extend to various international activities such as partnerships, projects, academic mobility for students and researchers, developing new international academic programs and research initiatives, and delivering education in other countries through satellite offices abroad (Knight, 2004).

Technological advancements have led to new pedagogical methods, improved learning experiences, and increased accessibility to education. Key trends include the delivery of educational content through digital tools and the internet via e-learning and online education, as well as blended learning, which combines traditional classroom teaching with online materials (Garrison, 2008; Littlejohn & Pegler, 2007). Additionally, there is a rise in gamification, incorporating game-design elements into learning environments to boost student motivation and engagement (Kapp, 2012), alongside mobile learning (Ally, 2009), massive open online courses (Zhang et al., 2019), and collaborative learning enhanced by social media and cloud-based tools (Joosten, 2012). Recent advancements have seen artificial intelligence being used to improve management education and overall educational experiences by offering customized learning paths for students (Clegg & Sarker, 2024). These advancements have introduced intercultural and global dimensions to training offered by higher education institutions.

Training approaches encompass joint curriculum development and delivery, student mobility programs, lifelong learning, industrial training, coaching, and mentoring (Galan-Muros & Davey, 2019; Ishengoma & Vaaland, 2016; Kram, 1985; Zhuang et al., 2024). Cooperative education, industrial training (continuing education), mentorship, coaching, and guest lectures are more visible and accessible to students (Walter et al., 2013). In sub-Saharan Africa, common approaches include conferences, student internships, and recruitment (Zavale, 2018). In Rwanda, informal methods like incorporating research findings into teaching materials, informal knowledge exchanges with professionals during internships, encouraging entrepreneurship among students, and participation in professional conferences are prevalent (Nsanzumuhire et al., 2021). South Africa sees a mix of teaching and outreach activities, such as voluntary student outreach, service learning, community-based research, and work-integrated learning, along with additional teaching methods like customized training, continuing education, and collaborative curriculum design (Kruss & Visser, 2017). These training approaches collectively focus on traditional and service-oriented modes (Zavale, 2018).

Student mobility programs include in-service training, which allows working professionals to return to the university for new knowledge, skills, experiences, and networks for their career growth (Prince et al., 2015; Raza et al., 2018; Tho, 2017; Tho & Trang, 2015).

Graduate business education is widely recognized as an effective way for working professionals to gain managerial skills and improve career opportunities (America, 2013; Financial Times, 2023; Retana & Rodriguez-Lluesma, 2022). Individuals pursuing MBA and Executive MBA programs are mainly entrepreneurs, managers, and supervisors in companies (America, 2013; Financial Times, 2023; Ibeh et al., 2008; Ibeh & Debrah, 2011). These individuals often work in small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) with six to 250 employees (Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2022), where decision-making is concentrated in the hands of one or a few people. Their personal characteristics significantly influence their business decisions, greatly affecting how their companies approach internationalization (Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2022; Boafo et al., 2022).

Universities aim to prepare diverse individuals, including entrepreneurs, managers, professionals, and graduates, to operate effectively in the global business environment. Their objective is to cultivate a global perspective, encouraging individuals to think globally and act locally or globally, which can enhance international business initiatives within their respective firms. Universities with strong business connections expose students to market-oriented thinking, making them more receptive to business opportunities (Walter et al., 2013). Previous studies have recommended collaborative efforts between businesses and students to develop skills and prepare individuals for effective participation in international networks (Elenurm & Moisola, 2008) and business marketing (Cheng et al., 2016).

In today's business world, there is a pressing need for individuals who possess international business skills to effectively navigate foreign markets and engage with multicultural partners, including customers, suppliers, and distributors. As globalization shapes the business landscape, local companies compete with domestic firms and international players in physical and online markets. This competition underscores the critical importance of understanding global business dynamics for business decision-makers. Local businesses must adopt an international approach to stay competitive, and their personnel working in foreign subsidiaries must operate effectively within global systems. Research highlights the significance of enhancing the skills of African business professionals to enable them to participate in cross-border business activities and collaborate with foreign firms seeking local partners in Africa (Nachum et al., 2023).

Developing international business competence is crucial for business executives undergoing in-service training in sub-Saharan Africa. The experience gained from training approaches plays a vital role in shaping the background characteristics of in-service trained business executives. These characteristics influence how such executives interpret international strategic situations within their firms. Accordingly, business executives undergoing in-service training can significantly enhance their IBC through diverse training experiences, positively impacting their ability to manage their firms' international business strategies.

Methodology

Research Approach

This study explores the experiences of faculty and in-service trained business executives, focusing on how diverse training approaches contribute to executives' IBC development. We address a gap in the management education literature, particularly concerning in-service trained business executives (Prince et al., 2015; Raza et al., 2018; Tho, 2017; Tho

& Trang, 2015). Exploratory research in this field is valuable for discovering new phenomena (Nielsen et al., 2020, p. 1490) and understanding individuals' subjective experiences and interpretations (Graebner et al., 2012, p. 278).

We adopted an interpretative phenomenological approach (Lamb et al., 2011; Smith et al., 1999; Stoian et al., 2018), ideal for examining commonalities in individuals' experiences of a phenomenon. We relied on evidence of multiple realities (Doz, 2011, p. 584) to grasp the meanings and essences of these experiences (Moustakas, 1994, p. 75). Phenomenological research deepens theoretical concepts by illustrating how they manifest in people's lived experiences, enriching their meaning (Berglund, 2007, p. 89).

Context and Participant Selection

Business schools, as defined by the Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS, 2021), specialize in business and management science. This study spanned 102 days, from March to June 2022, focusing on Ghana's top four business schools. These schools are part of three prominent public universities and one specialized/professional tertiary education institution, as detailed in Table 1. They are in Ghana's three largest regional capitals: Accra, Kumasi, and Cape Coast. Each city offers varying infrastructure and business sizes, with Accra as the national capital and a hub for many firms. Kumasi and Cape Coast rank second and third in importance for higher education in Ghana.

In 2019, these institutions hosted approximately 68.1% (36,148 students) of the total enrollment in business programs across Ghana's specialized/professional tertiary education institutions (2,964 students) and public universities (50,126 students), as reported by the Tertiary Education Statistics Report for Ghana. This report also noted that enrollment numbers for undergraduate and postgraduate business programs were 50,126 (males = 29,703; females = 20,423) and 2,964 (males = 1,600; females = 1,364) respectively (National Accreditation Board, 2020).

Our research participants were selected through a purposive sampling method, suitable for phenomenological studies (Lamb et al., 2011). We engaged with a diverse group of highly knowledgeable academics and in-service trained business executives, who shared their experiences and perspectives on how diverse training approaches contribute to international competences of executives (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007, p. 29). These participants were key decision-makers, possessing exclusive information and the ability to influence outcomes in business schools or firms (Aguinis & Solarino, 2019).

Among the academics interviewed were vice-chancellors, deans, professors, and department heads, all of whom had a minimum of five years of industry engagement beneficial to their students. Similarly, the in-service individuals held management positions. This variety of data sources helped validate the data and broaden the scope of inquiry (Nielsen et al., 2020), thus mitigating interview data bias.

We applied two main criteria to select the 55 participants (Tables 2 and 3). Academics had to be associate or full professors, a rank achieved through scientific publications, excellent teaching performance, and extensive industry collaborations locally and globally. In-service participants needed to be enrolled as weekend or evening students for at least two semesters and hold full-time positions as business owners or managers responsible for international teams and activities. Leaving their jobs to pursue further studies without active involvement in their companies could lead to lost time, career

Table 1. An overview of the studied business schools.

Established in a	Year of establishment	Number (of Departments)	Student enrollment (in 2019)	Member	Africa Business Schools ranking *
Public university (A)	1960	Six (Accounting, Finance, Marketing and Entrepreneurship, Operations and Management Information Systems, Organization and Human Resource Management, and Public Administration and Health Services Management)	10,085	AABS, AACSB, GNAM	10
Public university (B)	2005	Four (Human Relations and Organizational Development, Accounting and Finance, Marketing and Corporate Strategy, and Supply Chain and Information Systems)	6,872	AABS	25
Public university (C)	1975	Six (Entrepreneurship and Small Enterprise Development, Finance, Accounting, Human Resource Management, Management, and Marketing and Supply Chain Management)	16,915	AABS, AACSB	44
Specialized/ Professional tertiary education institution (D)	2003	Three (Management Science, Business Management, and Accounting and Finance)	2,276	AABS, GBSN	102

Notes:

- The Business School (A), formerly known as the School of Administration (1962) and the College of Administration (1960), was rebranded as a school in 2004.
- The Business School (C), which started as the Department of Business Studies in 1975, was rebranded as a school in 2004.
- Association of African Business Schools (AABS), Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), Global Network for Advanced Management (GNAM), Global Business School Network (GBSN).
- Student enrollment is based on the latest tertiary education statistics (National Accreditation Board, 2020, <https://gtec.edu.gh/publications>).

* = <https://edurank.org/business/gh/> (as of October 14, 2024): Best universities in Africa ranked based on their research performance in business. Notably, a graph of 519 K citations received by 52.5 K academic papers made by 23 universities in Ghana was used to calculate publications' ratings.

advancement opportunities, and financial resources. They differ from traditional students; the latter group seeks university knowledge for future careers and aspires to become top executives in organizations one day (Flanagan & Palmer, 2021).

Our selection strategies were personalized to establish a closer relationship with the participants (Evered & Louis, 1981). Before conducting field research, we networked with our target population, sending personalized introduction letters via email to professors two months in advance. We sent follow-up emails after two weeks to those who had not responded, and we visited unresponsive faculty members in person. These efforts and acceptance from senior academics such as rectors, deans, and department heads lent our study legitimacy and facilitated further acceptance among academics.

For in-service trained business executives, we gained approval and support from the dean's office of the business schools, which allowed us to join the students' social media platforms (e.g., WhatsApp) before starting our field research. By contributing to

Table 2. Overview of research participants (business schools' faculty).

Assigned number of elite informants	Qualification and recent position	Department	Year range of engaging the industry through knowledge transfer	Time and duration of the interview
El_01	Full Professor and Dean, School of Business	Public administration and health services management	11–15 years	21/3/2022; 86:55 min
El_02	Associate Professor and Head of Department	Operations and Management Information Systems	1–5 years	31/3/2022; 53:32 min
El_03	Full Professor and Head of Department	Marketing and entrepreneurship	11–15 years	22/3/2022; 44:16 min
El_04	Associate Professor	Public administration and health services management	16–20 years	31/3/2022; 58:23 min
El_05	Associate Professor	Public administration and health services management	1–5 years	25/5/2022; 43:32 min
El_06	Associate Professor	Marketing and entrepreneurship	11–15 years	22/3/2022; 33:05 min
El_07	Associate Professor	Organization and Human Resource Management	6–10 years	3/5/2022; 47:45 min
El_08	Full Professor and Rector	Business management	16–20 years	27/4/2022; 72:47 min
El_09	Full Professor and Head of Department	Business management	6–10 years	29/3/2022; 35:28 min
El_10	Associate Professor and Director of the Academy of Leadership and Executive Training	Management Science	11–15 years	8/4/2022; 51:59 min
El_11	Associate Professor and Head of Department	Management Science	6–10 years	6/4/2022; 49:19 min
El_12	Full Professor and (former) Rector	Business management	Over 20 years	29/3/2022; 49:32 min
El_13	Full Professor and Dean, School of Business	Management Science	11–15 years	6/4/2022; 59:53 min
El_14	Full Professor and Pro-Vice-Chancellor	Entrepreneurship and Small Enterprise Development	Over 20 years	14/4/2022; 61:01 min
El_15	Full Professor and Dean, School of Business	Finance	11–15 years	12/4/2022; 60:03 min
El_16	Associate Professor and Head of Department	Finance	11–15 years	24/5/2022; 40:56 min
El_17	Associate Professor	Marketing and corporate strategy	6–10 years	9/3/2022; 46:10 min
El_18	Associate Professor	Human Resources and Organizational Development	6–10 years	9/3/2022; 40:32 min
El_19	Associate Professor	Accounting and Finance	16–20 years	9/5/2022; 48:46 min
El_20	Associate Professor and Head of Department	Accounting and Finance	6–10 years	14/3/2022; 51:04 min
El_21	Associate Professor and Head of Department	Human Resources and Organizational Development	6–10 years	10/3/2022; 37:36 min
El_22	Full Professor and Dean, School of Business	Marketing and corporate strategy	11–15 years	11/3/2022; 57:06 min
El_23	Associate Professor and Provost	Marketing and corporate strategy	Over 20 years	11/5/2022; 43:08 min

Source: Field research (2022).

Table 3. Overview of research participants (in-service training students).

Assigned number of elite informants (<i>continuation</i>)	Professional qualification	Study program (and semester)	Year range of professional experience	Type of organization	Time and duration of the interview
El_24	Managing director	MBA in Supply Chain Management in semester four	16–20 years	A local private company that imports beverages from Thailand.	19/5/2022; 58:65 min
El_25	Owner-manager	MBA in Supply Chain Management in semester four	6–10 years	A local cosmetic retail company (sole proprietorship) that sells hair and skin organic products	15/5/2022; 103:57 min
El_26	Head of accounts and finance	MBA in Accounting and Taxation in semester two	6–10 years	A local private company in the oil and gas industry.	17/5/2022; 66:08 min
El_27	Business development manager	MBA in Supply Chain Management in semester two	11–15 years	A local subsidiary firm in the aviation industry with a parent company headquartered in France.	30/4/2022; 101:41 min
El_28	Branch manager	MBA in Finance in semester two	11–15 years	A local public bank.	15/3/2022; 54:18 min
El_29	Owner-manager	MBA in Strategic Management and Consulting in semester two	6–10 years	A local private company (sole proprietorship) in the fashion industry.	11/3/2022; 61:40 min
El_30	Chief executive officer	MBA in Strategic Management and Consulting in semester two	6–10 years	A local travel consultancy firm helping clients study, work, or settle abroad.	10/5/2022; 86:54 min
El_31	Manager of medical radiation physics center	Master of Public Administration in semester two	11–15 years	A local energy organization	8/5/2022; 60:09 min
El_32	Sales manager	MSc Marketing in semester four	11–15 years	A local expatriate family firm that produces beverages	20/4/2022; 57:49 min
El_33	Director of commercialization and communication directorate	MBA in Marketing in semester four	16–20 years	A local energy organization	22/3/2022; 59:67 min
El_34	Sales executive	MBA in Human Resource Management in semester two	6–10 years	A foreign freight company headquartered in Switzerland	19/05/2022; 140:46 min
El_35	Project manager	MBA in project management in semester two	1–5 years	A local private company that does production abroad	4/5/2022; 34:58 min
El_36	Project manager (general office management)	MBA in Finance in semester two	11–15 years	A local private real estate company	21/5/2022 72:45 min
El_37	Merchandise manager	MBA in Marketing in semester two	11–15 years	An oil local private company	4/5/2022; 89:65 min
El_38	Sales manager	MBA in Project Management in semester two	6–10 years	A foreign private bank headquartered in South Africa	6/5/2022; 52:35 min
El_39	Operations manager	MBA in Finance in semester two	11–15 years	A local public bank.	14/3/2022; 52:24 min
El_40	Assistant estate manager	MBA in Project Management in semester two	1–5 years	A local real estate company	5/5/2022; 79:37 min
El_41	Administrative manager	MBA in Human Resource	1–5 years		22/5/2022; 76:43 min

(Continued)

Table 3. Continued.

Assigned number of elite informants (<i>continuation</i>)	Professional qualification	Study program (and semester)	Year range of professional experience	Type of organization	Time and duration of the interview
		Management in semester two.		A startup construction company into block production	
El_42	Operations manager	MBA in Accounting and Taxation in semester two.	6–10 years	A savings and loan local private company	24/5/2022; 52:30 min
El_43	Human resource team assistant	MBA in Human Resource Management in semester two	1–5 years	A foreign private food manufacturing company	21/5/2022; 56:28 min
El_44	Assistant clients' relationship manager	MBA in Finance in semester two	6–10 years	A local private pensions corporate trustee	22/5/2022; 43:27 min
El_45	Lower-middle manager	MBA in Logistics and Supply Chain Management in semester two	11–15 years	A local real estate company	15/3/2022; 61:27 min
El_46	Assistant administrator	Master of Public Administration in semester two.	1–5 years	A local gas company	3/5/2022; 75:14 min
El_47	Senior marketing officer	MBA in Marketing in semester four	11–15 years	A local IT Consortium with offices in Kenya and Zambia	11/5/2022; 48:42 min
El_48	Hospital manager	MBA in Marketing in semester four	1–5 years	A local private health company	23/3/2022; 40:02 min
El_49	Team leader	MBA in Finance in semester two	11–15 years	A foreign telecom management service headquartered in Nigeria	17/5/2022; 61:33 min
El_50	Entrepreneur	MBA in Marketing in semester four	11–15 years	A local private consultancy enterprise	20/4/2022; 48:58 min
El_51	Digital entrepreneur	MCom Entrepreneurship and Small Business Development in semester four	1–5 years	A start-up firm in nutrition and cooking events	13/4/2022; 58:48 min
El_52	Administrative supervisor	Master of Public Administration in semester two.	6–10 years	A local private information and communication company	22/4/2022; 51:29 min
El_53	Finance administrator	MBA in Finance in semester two	1–5 years	A local private fintech company	16/5/2022; 56:35 min
El_54	School improvement support manager	MSc Management and Human Resource Strategy	16–20 years	A local private delivery company	10/5/2022; 60:32 min
El_55	Technical Director	MBA in Project Management	6–10 years	A foreign telecommunication equipment company headquartered in China	6/5/2022; 61:26 min

Source: Field research (2022).

academic discussions on these platforms, we engaged with the students and gained their acceptance. We selected potential in-service trained business executives with experience in our explored phenomena, with the process supported by class representatives. In both scenarios, we informed our study participants about the benefits they would receive from this study, such as access to the research findings.

Data Collection

We utilized a variety of data sources, including in-depth semi-structured interviews with individuals involved in in-service training and faculty members from the university's business schools. A semi-structured interview is a valuable method for phenomenological investigations (Berglund, 2007; Lamb et al., 2011). Following the approach of Graebner et al., we integrated "certain theoretical frames from the existing [management education, knowledge acquisition, and international business competence] literature before gathering data, building these ideas into the data collection efforts" (Graebner et al., 2012, p. 281). The study's questions were derived from conceptual themes grounded in the literature (see the supplemental data), aiming to elicit comprehensive accounts of the individual's experiences of the phenomena (Moustakas, 1994). The semi-structured allowed us to uncover new information.

Additionally, we conducted observations by participating in lectures and university academic programs with the faculty's approval. Examining online documents, including study programs, faculty profiles, and news stories on business schools' websites, complemented these observations. Employing multiple data collection methods, including data triangulation, enriched our understanding of the participants and enhanced the interpretation of the findings (Nielsen et al., 2020).

We concentrated on the 55 participants to retain more richness regarding description (Boddy, 2016). The semi-structured interviews lasted a total of 54 h and 15 min and were conducted in person at the business and university offices of the participants. We observed that additional participants, beyond the 20th academic and the 27th in-service individual, did not provide significantly new information (Guest et al., 2006, p. 65). These additional interviewees often reiterated strategies used by the business schools in cultivating individual-level competences, which was already known to us, rather than sharing their personal strategies related to teaching, research, and industry engagements.

Moreover, our discriminant sampling (Creswell, 2007) yielded no new insights from other professors in the business schools beyond those initially interviewed. The additional professors contacted often referred us to colleagues they believed would have a deep understanding of our researched phenomenon; however, we had already interviewed those faculty members.

Data Analysis

The interviews were conducted in English, and we sought the participants' permission to record them digitally. Subsequently, we adopted the "24-hour rule" proposed by Eisenhardt (1989) to transcribe the interview data using Microsoft Office (online version). We carefully listened to the interviews again for corrections due to voice variances and transcription software defects. The participants who requested their transcripts received them for data verification, reflection, and confirmation. From this point, we anonymized the participants (see Tables 2 and 3).

We transcribed 48,918 words, forming 129 single-spaced pages segmented into 698 quotes (see codebook in the supplemental data). Figure 1 illustrates our data structure. We adapted the principles of interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith et al., 1999) employed in international business research (Lamb et al., 2011). Our data analysis procedures involved five stages.

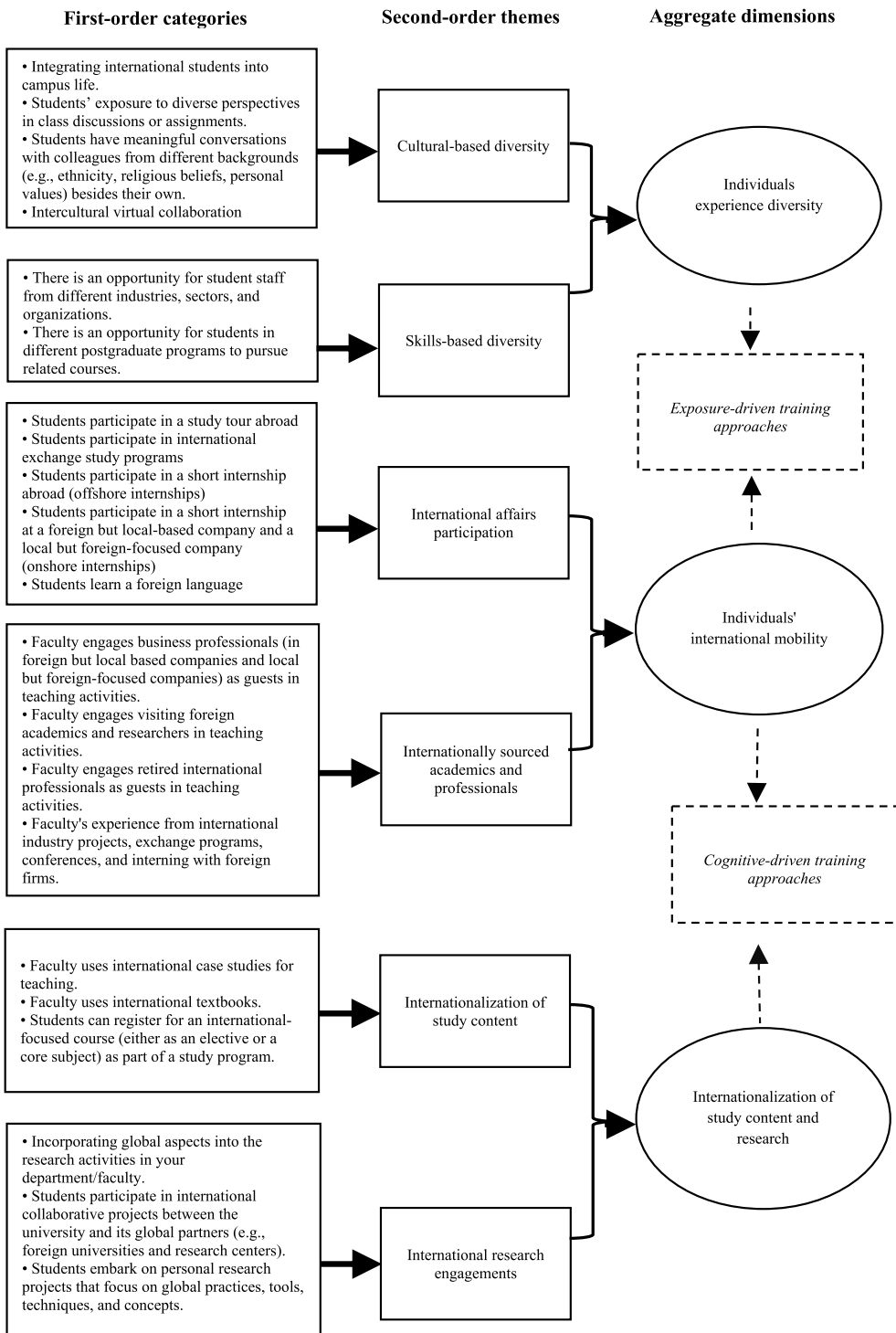


Figure 1. Data structure. Source: Authors' own.

First, we read each participant's transcribed interview data for familiarization. Second, we sought immersion and sense-making by diagnosing the cases. We tried to distance our prior knowledge by allowing the data to reveal its original meanings. To achieve this, we overlapped data analysis with data collection for the first 10 interviewed academics and in-service trained business executives. This approach allowed us to use flexible data collection and probe emerging findings in our subsequent interviews.

Third, we embarked on categorization and association recognition by developing intra-case and inter-case themes (Stoian et al., 2018). Through this process, we identified 21 1st-order categories directly from the interviews and then consolidated these categories into six 2nd-order themes and overarching three dimensions. We thoroughly reviewed the transcripts and consulted with colleagues in the African Center for Career Enhancement and Skills Support (ACCESS) research group to validate the identified categories (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Notably, dimensions could either originate from themes derived from existing literature or emerge from the interviewees' narratives (Creswell, 2007).

Fourth, we embarked on writing up (representation). In approaching this, we actively sought within-group similarities and intergroup differences (Creswell, 2007). We analyzed the interviews of business school academics and in-service-trained business executives separately. Subsequently, we compared their shared understanding and sought a collective interpretation. In this paper, we provide diverse direct quotes from participants, presenting a range of perspectives.

The last stage involved enfolding literature (explanation and abstraction). Here, we linked the findings to the literature for more substantial internal validity, broader analytical generalizability, and a higher conceptual level (Eisenhardt, 1989; Nielsen et al., 2020). This includes publications featuring international collaborations indexed in the Web of Science and data on international mobile tertiary students detailing their countries of origin and destination within sub-Saharan Africa (Cerdeira et al., 2023; The UNESCO Institute for Statistics database, 2022).

Collectively, we combined multiple data management approaches, enabling different analytical triangulation techniques (Nielsen et al., 2020). We managed the data using MAXQDA (version 2022), facilitating the organization of evidence from various sources and samples. Additionally, manual techniques, such as tables, were employed to identify patterns and themes in the data, guiding the analysis process.

Findings and Analysis

The aggregate dimensions demonstrate cognitive-driven and exposure-driven training approaches essential to individual-level international business competence. On the one hand, cognitive-driven activities represent internationally sourced academics and professionals, the internationalization of study content, and international research engagements. As often narrated,

"There are courses you study, and you realize what you practice at your workplace, it is what you are learning," said a Chief Executive Officer. (In-service Person > EI_30 > MBA in Strategic Management and Consulting)

According to a sales manager, cognitive-driven activities enhance confidence knowledge application at the workplace:

Previously, I was just trying things internationally. Now that I am learning and know the reasons behind it when I am carrying out that assignment, I am more confident that [I am doing] the right thing. (In-service Person > EI_38 > MBA in Project Management)

On the other hand, exposure-driven activities describe international affairs participation, cultural-based diversity, and skills-based diversity. Some interviewees indicated that in-service individuals' internationalization competence could be gained less in the classroom and more through experiences. As often reported,

"There is nothing better than getting exposure where you experience it yourself. When you are in it, you learn many things that no textbook will ever tell you," said a rector. (Prof > EI_08)

A suitable way of building individual-level international business competence is by creating an environment for people to experience. In what follows, we shed more light on these training approaches.

Cognitive-Driven Training Approaches

Internationally Sourced Academics and Professionals

This activity illustrates the internationalization of faculty and guest faculty (Table 4). It involves faculty engaging foreign industry practitioners and visiting foreign academics and researchers as guests in teaching and presentation activities. Additionally, it describes the faculty's experience from international industry projects, exchange programs, conferences, and interning with foreign firms.

We found different programs (e.g., Practitioner Forum, Chief Executive Officers' Engagement, and Passing Through series) initiated by the business schools to engage industry practitioners from international firms/multinational enterprises (MNEs). Primarily, industry practitioners were sourced through the university's international office, international professional bodies, and academic international networks. Whether foreigners or locals working for international firms/MNEs, they came with global perspectives, presenting useful global topics to in-service individuals. According to a business school dean,

A global supply chain manager was here to present to our students. He used case examples from different parts of the world because he worked in the company branches in South Africa, the UK, and the US. (Prof > EI_22)

This way, in-service individuals could understand the mindset of international professionals. To illustrate this, a student who doubles as a managing director with 16–20 years of experience in a local private beverage company shared,

I come from a different cultural background. After listening to the experiences shared by invited international professionals [about] their companies, I will compare them with what I am doing and try to introduce them in my business. (In-service Person > EI_24 > MBA in Supply Chain Management)

Additionally, business schools adopted different strategies to engage foreign academics in teaching activities. Often, local academics relied on their international personal networks established through research collaborations. At the organizational level, the schools relied on the foreign supervisors of local doctorate students and the influential members of the Africa Academy of Management. Foreign academics were often immigrant Africans working in foreign universities. They possessed knowledge of African

Table 4. Inference from raw data to second-order theme: internationally sourced academics and professionals.

First-order code	Representative raw data excerpts
Faculty engages business professionals (from foreign but local-based companies and local but foreign-focused companies) as guests in teaching activities.	<p>“Amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, we instituted the <i>COVID, Business, and Society Seminar series</i>. We had twelve weekly sessions where we invited people across the globe, including the president of the American Society of Public Administration and the Country Manager of OXFAM. We also had the <i>Corporate Executives in Residence</i>, where we have people who can walk in anytime to deliver an industry lecture to the students”. (Interviewee EI_01)</p> <p>“We constantly try to leverage international staff working in Ghana. We bring them on board as practitioners. We called it the <i>Practitioner Forum</i>. We try to get them here to present useful global topics to the students. That interaction allows the students to understand the mindsets of this international personnel”. (Interviewee EI_03, echoing interviewees 02, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 22)</p>
Faculty engages visiting foreign academics and researchers in teaching activities.	<p>“The most effective is exposing students to foreign academics, researchers, and students. What I normally do here as a Dean is to use my international networks to bring foreign academics and researchers for a week or two”. (Interviewee 22, echoing Interviewees 21, 23)</p> <p>“Before COVID-19, we brought many foreign academics into our teaching (especially from the US, UK, and Canada). We have a modular system. We had about 10 or 12 foreign academics engage in various modules for each modular. They teach together with the local staff. This approach makes the students feel international without traveling abroad”. (Interviewee EI_10, echoing interviewees 06, 08, 09, 12, 13, 14, 17, 18, 20)</p>
Faculty engages retired international professionals as guests in teaching activities.	<p>“Some retirees from international firms/MNEs have returned home after retirement. They have all the international knowledge needed for local organizations. We are trying to engage them now. That is one of the ways of improving the international exposure our students can get”. (Interviewee EI_08)</p>
Faculty’s experience from international industry projects, exchange programs, conferences, and interning with foreign firms.	<p>“When faculty are exposed internationally, they can quickly drive the international behavioral competencies of their students. Ideally, it is suitable for business schools to have faculty who first worked abroad and decided to do a Ph.D.; we have some of these people here. Our business school often participates in two programs that help our faculty develop their competencies internationally. You know ISA (in Spain) has an <i>International Faculty Development Program</i>. Every year, we send our faculty (3 or 4 people) to participate in this program – learning to consult, research, and learning to teach. They build international contacts. That thing is replicated in Africa through the Association of African Business Schools”. (Interviewee EI_12 echoing 01, 09, 10, 20, 22).</p> <p>“Most lecturers may, one way or the other, have an experience outside Ghana before and during lectures. They try to introduce their international experience to the class as much as possible, which has helped in my international decisions”. (Interviewee EI_24 echoing 25, 29)</p>

Source: Field research (2022).

industries as their research is typically on African settings. In-service individuals were exposed to different teaching frameworks and introduced to new ideas and insights, building their international mindset.

Moreover, the faculty's international experience directly influenced in-service trained business executives' international knowledge. Faculty had international consciousness and approached their teaching with a global mindset. Faculty, through the support of their employers, often participated in international exchange programs, international faculty development programs, international conferences, and international industry projects to gain experience globally. Again, the faculty interned with international firms/MNEs. As emphasized by a business school dean,

When I go to class, because of my global expertise and experiences, students will get a lot more [from listening] to me with [my] international perspectives than [to] someone else. Because of my international experience through international engaged projects, I relate to what I teach in the classroom. (Prof > EI_01)

In effect, global aspects were often inculcated in classroom discussions and assignments.

Internationalization of Study Content

The findings describe international case studies and teaching textbooks. An additional aspect is that business executives in in-service training registered for an international-focused course (either an elective or a core subject) as part of their study programs (Table 5).

Often, case studies probe international standards. The teaching content can be global while positioned locally. Some schools collaborated with international professional bodies to incorporate global aspects into teaching activities. The international professional

Table 5. Inference from raw data to second-order theme: internationalization of study content.

First-order code	Representative raw data excerpts
Faculty uses international case studies for teaching.	<p>"Our challenge is bringing much local content into the training, especially case studies. We just established a <i>Case Teaching and Learning Center</i>, where we want to train staff in writing local case studies". (Interviewee EI_010)</p> <p>"We share case studies with international dimensions through our lectures. Our students should look at the world as a global village so that they do not think Ghana and act Ghana, but think global and act globally. They begin to notice what is happening within the international space". (Interviewee EI_19, echoing 03, 17, 18, 21, 25).</p>
The faculty uses international textbooks.	<p>"Before my current position as a Pro-Vice-Chancellor, I was fortunate to be part of a committee mandated to review our curriculum. One of our tasks was to incorporate twenty-first-century skills into our undergraduate and postgraduate curricula" (Interviewee EI_14, echoing 13 and 15)</p> <p>"We have collaborations with several institutions, including universities and professional bodies. Our collaboration with ACCA has established a resource center where our students and all ACCA students from Ghana write their exams". (Interviewee EI_16)</p>
Students can register for an international-focused course (either as an elective or a core subject) as part of a study program.	<p>"We have core courses in international management, business, and human resource management. For instance, international management becomes a core subject if you are studying human resources. Moreover, we also allow other students pursuing other programs (e.g., accounting and finance) to take this as an elective". (Interviewee EI_07, echoing 25, 26, 32)</p>

Source: Field research (2022).

bodies have onsite offices to facilitate interactions with the business schools. Additionally, departments were revising curricula to incorporate twenty-first-century skills such as critical thinking, creativity, communication, global mindset, social networking, teamwork, and collaboration. There were established Case Teaching and Learning Centers training faculty to write local case studies. As shared by a student who doubles as a chief executive officer of a travel consultancy firm with six to 10 years of professional experience:

(...) the international nature of [the] study content has helped me position my company in our sub-region. For example, the businesses doing well now are global in my industry. I can now understand better how they run their businesses and have branches worldwide. (In-service Person > EI_30 > MBA in Strategic Management and Consulting)

Relatedly, an owner-manager of a cosmetic retail company with six to 10 years of work experience recounted that:

Now I look at things in local and international business more critically than just looking at things from the surface (...). I am better informed about how to make international business decisions. Strategically, it has given me headway in analyzing things critically. (In-service Person > EI_25 > MBA in Supply Chain Management)

International Research Engagements

Departments, faculty, and students spearhead the business school's research activities. Accordingly, this finding describes internationalization regarding the research activities of the business school, departments, and faculty. International research engagements represent the participation of in-service training business executives in international collaborative projects between the business school and its global partners. These individuals embark on personal research projects that focus on global practices, tools, techniques, and concepts. Another point is how business schools or faculty members incorporate global aspects into their research activities. The latter is academic-driven, while the first and second points are student management processes (Table 6).

Research informs teaching content; therefore, faculty members' works guided their lessons, eventually influencing students' international competence. Global research activities reflect the faculty members' adoption of international research standards and engagement in cross-national studies. They also include using data from global or regional agencies (e.g., the World Bank, United Nations, and African Development Bank) and engaging with international researchers. In addition, faculty members are involved in knowledge transfer with international firms/MNEs through consultancy, contract research, and collaborative research. As recounted by Interviewee 3,

The reporting standards are almost always the same when development agencies engage in international projects. I was involved in a project by a Danish development agency. I learned about their reporting system and standards, which I use to offer consultancies for Danish companies. (Prof > EI_03)

This way, faculty learned from the best international research practices to inform their teaching content.

Moreover, the international collaborative project served as a platform for in-service-trained business executives to gain international competence. Collaborative projects often involve faculty and students of partner universities. They follow acceptable

Table 6. Inference from raw data to second-order theme: international research engagements.

First-order code	Representative raw data excerpts
Incorporating global aspects into the research activities in your department/faculty.	<p>“We are talking about research informing our teaching activities. So, for our teachings to be rich in international perspectives, we will have to embark on collaborative research that is international in scope. We have done this over the period and are still doing it. I just contributed to purchasing a database of SMEs in Ghana, Canada, the UK, and the US. The plan is to conduct various studies that seek comparative analysis. So inculcating these international research activities is internationalizing your teaching strategies”. (Interviewee EI_18)</p> <p>“We want to do research that has global impacts. It is important to use global data from international agencies’ databases, which allows you to analyze the data from many perspectives. Incorporating global aspects into the research activities also includes local academics collaborating with foreign academics in their research activities”. (Interviewee EI_20, echoing 09, 15, and 22)</p>
Students participate in international collaborative projects between the university and its global partners (e.g., foreign universities and research centers).	<p>“A couple of centers are established through international collaborative projects that have worked well to expose our students to international standards. Several students have opportunities to engage with international academics through these centers”. (Interviewee EI_02)</p> <p>“We run a couple of projects here. We provide some exposure to our students. They are part of these projects. We have two students who are part of our international projects to develop the capacities of researchers in West Africa. In this project, there are international exchanges among the partners’ students. We always encourage partners to encourage students in funded projects”. (Interviewee EI_10, echoing 01, 3, 13, 14, 15, 17, and 18)</p>
Students embark on personal research projects that focus on global practices, tools, techniques, and concepts.	<p>“The highlighted points are critical. At the undergraduate level, I am teaching international marketing this semester, and the class semester project is to do an international marketing plan for the Ghana Tourism Authority – how will you market Ghana to the world? Even if the students have not traveled, they must go to the internet to learn about other things. We have a few foreign academics serving on committees. That gives students international exposure”. (Interviewee EI_13, echoing 03, 08, 15, 16, and 19)</p>

Source: Field research (2022).

principles to avoid knowledge misappropriation. Partners have joint projects based on both local and foreign contexts. They offer international exposure to local students, providing opportunities for team building and meeting scholars abroad. Students exchange to share and build ideas on projects.

Consequently, local students learned international standards and built confidence and consensus to excel globally. However, some interviewees bemoaned that faculty often benefitted more from international exposure in collaborative projects. The cost demand on funded projects restrained students’ participation.

Last, in-service training built executives’ international competence by engaging in personal research projects focusing on global practices, tools, techniques, and concepts. This aspect involves individuals approaching research topics from an international perspective while not overlooking the local context. Often, in-service trained business executives did case studies or action research focusing on their work organizations. The onus was on the faculty to engage their students in international research discourse and encourage them

to initiate topics with international theoretical and practical implications. Students funded through global collaborative projects developed research topics based on project goals. Project financiers directed the knowledge gaps that needed further research. In addition, business schools involved foreign academics in supervising students' work – the physical interaction with foreign supervisors beyond supervision nurtured business executives in in-service training` international competence. As a student entrepreneur with 11–15 years of professional experience in a local private consultancy enterprise remarked:

(...) my curiosity has peaked. The underpinning theories that guide the way I think, the way I frame, the way I write, and how to read research papers and industry reports that I did not have before. (In service Person > EL_50 > MBA in Marketing)

Exposure-Driven Training Approaches

International Affairs Participation

This activity describes in-service trained business executives learning a foreign language and participating in study tours abroad, international exchange study programs, fellowship programs, offshore internships, and internships at foreign but local-based companies (Table 7). The foreign exchange programs were tailored to give individuals direct exposure beyond the classroom.

We found international firms/MNEs collaborated with business schools, offering opportunities for fellowships and internships. Their operations conform to global standards.

Table 7. Inference from raw data to second-order theme: international affairs participation.

First-order code	Representative raw data excerpts
Students participate in a study tour abroad.	"Every year, we send about 70 students on two weeks of study tour abroad, visiting leading universities and international corporations, mainly to Denmark and the US. Unfortunately, this opportunity is limited to our students". (Interviewee EL_01, echoing 06, 08, 12, 29)
Students participate in international exchange study programs.	"Another strategy is exchange programs whereby our students go abroad, and other international students also visit here for a semester program. We have the two plus one plus one, where our students do three years of education in Ghana. They complete their remaining one year in a US university and further to a one-year master's program". (Interviewee EL_19, echoing 08, 10, 11, 14, 15, 16, 18, 20, 22)
Students learn a foreign language.	"Also, business schools should have opportunities for their students to learn more than one foreign language. Language is one part of building the international behavioral competencies of our students". (Interviewee EL_04)
Students participate in a short internship abroad (offshore internships)	"We pioneered a program about two years ago for our full-time students where there is an internship scheme, so they work in foreign but local based companies and local but foreign focused companies. Our students studying Hospitality, if can afford it they, travel to Mauritius". (Interviewee EL_12, echoing Interviewee 29)
Students participate in a short internship at a foreign but local-based company and a local but foreign-focused company (onshore internships)	"Sometimes, we put our students on internships in international firms/MNEs to develop a global culture. These are avenues I can think of for now to drive students' international behavioral competencies". (Interviewee EL_11, echoing 08, 15)

Source: Field research (2022).

Through attachments, individuals undergoing in-service training could observe, practice, and understand things done internationally. However, in-service trained individuals benefitting from global exposure came with substantial financial costs. Only some individuals could benefit from scholarships and subsidies from foreign partners, which is the challenge of physical mobility across borders.

Individuals Experience Diversity

We found two dimensions of diversity concerning educational collaborative activities: cultural-based diversity and skills-based diversity (Table 8).

The cultural-based diversity describes diversity in the cultural composition and learning experiences of business executives in in-service training. It covers how business schools integrated individuals with foreign exposure (e.g., international students) into campus life, organized intercultural virtual collaboration, and engaged individuals from different perspectives and disparate ethnicities and religions.

Generally, business schools in Ghana have few full-time students from Western countries (specifically, Australia, New Zealand, North America, and Europe including the United Kingdom). Students from Western countries were often on funded exchange programs through university-level collaborations; therefore, they had short stay periods. However, business schools in Ghana are increasingly attracting full-time international students from sub-Saharan Africa. In line with the UNESCO Institute for Statistics database, the largest numbers of international students in Ghana originate from Nigeria (2,530), Cameroon (291), Cote d'Ivoire (264), Gabon (257), and Benin (189) (see details in the supplemental data). According to a student who doubles as a sole proprietor of a local private fashion firm, with six to 10 years of professional experience:

(...) We met international students (...) in my interaction with them [I made] them understand that I have a business and look forward to scaling up internationally. One of the students returned to Kenya, and, since then, he has been managing affairs there on my behalf. The university business school experience taught me how to seize international business opportunities. (In-service Person > EI_29 > MBA in Strategic Management and Consulting)

In this light, we found interesting ways in which the studied business schools integrated international students. First, the university administrative office furnished faculty with information on international students in schools and departments at the beginning of every semester. Such information enabled faculty to devise strategies to integrate international students into their teaching and project activities. Faculty arranged study groups irrespective of in-service individuals' backgrounds to develop the individuals' tolerance levels and team building. In addition, the studied business schools have intensified accreditation applications for more international credit transfers.

Furthermore, we found skills-based diversity, illustrating diversity regarding the in-service individuals' professional experiences and academic backgrounds. The in-service students were from different industries, sectors, and organizations. As one affirmed,

We are lucky to have a postgraduate class with students [who have diverse] skills. Suppose you are lucky to be in class with colleagues engaged in international business and [who] deal with companies or markets abroad daily; you learn a lot from them through their contributions in the classroom. (Prof > EI_03)

Table 8. Inference from raw data to second-order theme: individuals experience diversity (cultural – and skills-based).

First-order code	Representative raw data excerpts
Integrating students with foreign exposure (e.g., international students) into campus life.	<p>“Integrating international students into campus life is done at the university level. Those managing the international students are from the university administration, so they know the number of international students and give them all orientations. However, international students eventually find themselves in the faculties. That is where I find the linkage very weak here. It is mainly happening at the university level but not at the faculties”. (Interviewee EL_15, echoing 01, 02, and 17)</p> <p>“We had one colleague from Germany. On most occasions, the lecturer asked him to give a perspective of what happened in Germany. This person also asked many questions. They seem to be a bit different from the questions we asked, meaning what this person tends to pick from their class may differ from what some of us also wanted”. (Interviewee EL_30, echoing 25)</p>
Students’ exposure to diverse perspectives in class discussions or assignments.	<p>“We have quite a few foreign students from the sub-region, especially people from Francophone countries, who first studied the English language. I met somebody from Mali in my class. I think this person feels new experiences in this new environment. We must do more by understanding how local students benefit from foreign students”. (Interviewee EL_10, echoing 09, 12, 16, 18, 19, 21, 25)</p> <p>“We are fast-growing in our intake of international students. I was even surprised today when somebody from Malawi was a student in my class. Ghanaian universities are doing well in Africa. We have a large number of students from Nigeria. They help the cultural integration of our local students”. (Interviewee EL_20)</p>
Students have meaningful conversations with colleagues from different backgrounds (e.g., ethnicity, religious beliefs, personal values) besides their own.	<p>“Students have diverse conversations with colleagues; lecturers cannot monitor this because it is a natural flow of engagement. You choose who becomes your friend and your discussions. In the classroom, the lecturer is to lecture and initiates students’ discussions. When sharing different perspectives, you consciously allow foreigners and local students to bring their perspectives. Additionally, you try to synthesize if the different perspectives have some congruency. And then you can highlight those things that are useful”. (Interviewee EL_15, echoing 27)</p> <p>“Firsthand experience with people from other backgrounds helps and positions you to understand people. It does not surprise you when you enter a different environment where people behave differently. Because you already know that people behave differently at certain things. An experience with the local diversity prepares one for international experiences but not as a shock”. (Interviewee EL_29)</p>
Intercultural virtual collaboration	<p>“This May, I submitted a list of about 20 students from our business to my colleague at Yale. [...] We have about 700 students from 35 of the world’s best business schools. These students work together in different teams doing online negotiations and team-building assignments. In the end, my students said that this activity had been their best experience in our business school”. (Interviewee EL_05, echoing 04, 06, 17, 18, 19, 29, 33, 46, and 55)</p>
There is an opportunity for student workers from different industries, sectors, and organizations.	<p>“Our students come from different sectors, industries, and organizations. This skills diversity enriches the class discussion. I find this very interesting, especially when students are making presentations. You will find students</p>

(Continued)

Table 8. Continued.

First-order code	Representative raw data excerpts
There is an opportunity for students in different programs to pursue related courses.	<p> talking about their industry and how things are done. So it is essential to have a diversified class; it makes discussing very rich". (Interviewee EI_16, echoing 03, 24, 25, 26, 27, 30, 34, 36, 39, 43, 44, and 47)</p> <p> "I don't know whether that is why [our business school] put all of us together. Because in our class, we have a supply chain, project management, and marketing students". (Interviewee EI_27)</p>

Source: Field research (2022).

Discussion and Contributions

Figure 2 illustrates the macro elements of training approaches in business schools, essential for developing individual-level international business competence. This framework is discussed in the context of knowledge acquisition theory, and we consider its implications for theory, management practices, and policy.

Theoretical Implications

Cognitive and Exposure-Driven Training Approaches

Cognitive-driven aspects involve the international nature of study content, engagement in international research, and internationally sourced academics and professionals. Our studied business schools engaged international industry professionals, alumni, academics, and researchers as guest lecturers. On a personal level, local academics use their international networks, formed through research partnerships, to bring in guest lecturers from abroad. For instance, Ghana registered 9,803 publications in the Web of Science (WoS) from 2000 to 2017 that included at least one international scientist, amounting to 2.8% of all African publications with international collaboration (Cerdeira et al., 2023).

Additionally, business schools found industry experts through their universities' international offices and professional organizations. This approach of bringing in industry-relevant knowledge met the needs of the business sector (Klarin et al., 2021). These schools also benefitted from foreign academics supervising local doctoral students and from members of the Africa Academy of Management, many of whom are part of the African diaspora working at universities abroad. Ibrahim et al. (2021) highlighted that the African diaspora significantly contributes to advancing African business management education. They offer valuable perspectives on African markets, often focusing their research on African contexts.

For instance, the study of international entrepreneurial activities of African SMEs between 1995 and 2021 saw significant contributions from authors in the UK (30), the USA (eight), and Australia (four), mostly African academics abroad (Zahoor et al., 2023). Many were African academics who immigrated for postgraduate and doctoral studies. This scenario underscores the importance of academic knowledge transfer by the diaspora. Collaborations between foreign and local academics were crucial in educating business executives through in-service training and facilitating reciprocal knowledge exchange.

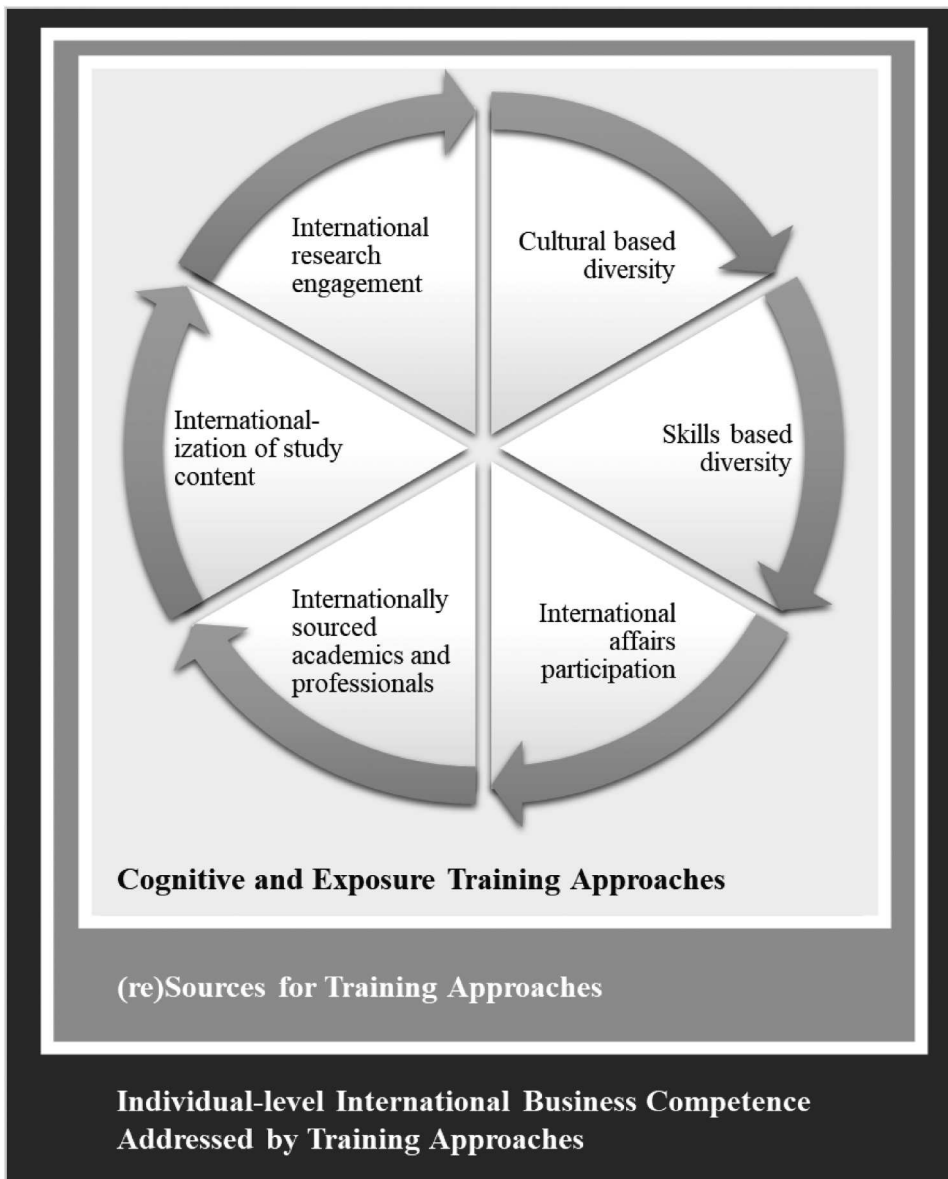


Figure 2. Macro elements of training approaches in business schools, essential for developing individual-level international business competence. Source: Authors' own.

A further aspect of cognitive-driven is the internationalization of study content. This includes providing in-service individuals with the opportunity to enroll in courses with a global perspective. International-focused courses, such as international business education, have grown into distinct sub-disciplines within various fields, like management, marketing, economics, and finance, in business schools (Klarin et al., 2021). The international study content integrates international case studies and textbooks into its teaching methodology. Honig and Hjørtsø (2018) stressed the importance of developing

African-generated content in management education, encompassing case studies and comparative research by African business schools. The research findings point toward a “glocalization” of study content that balances the local relevance of African management education and global awareness and relevance (Honig & Hjortsø, 2018; Lee et al., 2018).

Additionally, international research engagement pertains to the international dimensions of research activities within business schools, departments, and faculty. This aspect also provides in-service-trained business executives opportunities to engage in international (personal or collaborative) projects. Faculty members encouraged in-service individuals to craft research projects utilizing global practices, tools, and concepts. In-service individuals then analyzed empirical findings from studies conducted in various international contexts.

Furthermore, the business schools under review have formed international partnerships that offer individuals undergoing in-service training access to knowledge and skills from global networks, including international firms/MNEs and development agencies. Lately, there has been an increase in international or transnational network-based collaborative efforts between local universities and international partners (Youtie et al., 2017). The dynamic global economic and technological landscape has driven business schools to partner with subsidiaries of MNEs operating in Africa (Zavale, 2018). These extensive collaborations introduce individuals to global business environments, enriching in-service-trained business executives with valuable resources through close contact with diverse partners and access to various resources. As a result, these international collaborative efforts expose in-service-trained business executives to numerous international projects.

On the other hand, exposure-driven aspects include cultural diversity, international affairs participation, and skills diversity. Cultural-based diversity refers to the experiences of in-service trained business executives, particularly how business schools in our study have integrated individuals with international exposure into campus activities. This integration not only includes bringing together people from various ethnic and religious backgrounds but also organizing intercultural virtual collaborations. Such cultural diversity enriches the educational journey of in-service individuals, preparing them for a multi-cultural workforce and society.

Sub-Saharan Africa has rich multicultural, multiethnic, multilingual, and multi-historical dimensions (Nachum et al., 2023; Osabutey et al., 2015). Within individual countries, different geographic regions often have unique cultures, languages, and socioeconomic statuses (Ibrahim et al., 2021), leading to a broad cultural diversity within higher education institutions in these areas. Additionally, our findings indicate that international-intercultural activities involving international students from outside Africa were often conducted virtually. Such intercultural virtual collaborations facilitate interactions with foreign cultures without traveling (Ferreira-Lopes et al., 2021).

Furthermore, business executives with in-service training reap significant benefits from skills-based diversity. This diversity enriches their practical learning far beyond the traditional classroom teachings. These individuals participate actively in the exchange of organizational practices. For example, students enrolled in an Executive MBA in Marketing at “Business School A” were from diverse sectors, including pharmaceuticals, banking, real estate, and horticulture. Consequently, in-service individuals foster a dynamic environment by sharing innovative marketing techniques and perspectives from their respective business sectors. This exchange promotes adaptability and learning among peers.

However, the degree to which in-service individuals can capitalize on skills-based diversity largely hinges on the pedagogical approaches adopted by academics. When academics encouraged business simulations, in-service individuals effectively shared and leveraged their industry insights. On the flip side, more individualized teaching methods limited the opportunities for these individuals to share their industry experiences.

A further aspect of exposure-driven is international affairs participation. This dimension saw individuals in in-service training participate in international academic activities, including industrial study tours, internships, and study exchange programs abroad. These activities generally lasted from one day to one month (Gil & Reyes, 2020; Luo, 2023). The UNESCO Institute for Statistics database (2022) reveals that 449,188 sub-Saharan students are pursuing their studies abroad at the tertiary level, in contrast to a worldwide total of 6,387,488. Specifically, Ghana has 20,318 tertiary students studying overseas, with the United States (4,004), the United Kingdom (2,787), Germany (1,656), Canada (1,527), and Senegal (1,235) being the top five destinations. Zimbabwe counts 19,808 tertiary students studying abroad, mainly in South Africa (9,839), the United Kingdom (1,532), the United States (1,293), Poland (1,093), and India (1,057).

A few sub-Saharan African countries are preferred destinations for students from the region. For example, Ghana welcomes 2,530 tertiary students from Nigeria. South Africa hosts students from Zimbabwe (9,839), Zambia (920), Kenya (869), and Botswana (751). Kenya, in turn, accommodates tertiary students from Tanzania (774) and Uganda (702), while Congo DR receives 832 tertiary students from Rwanda (UNESCO Institute for Statistics database, 2022).

Destinations for tertiary-level students from sub-Saharan Africa are predominantly in countries outside Africa. African countries are net “exporters” of tertiary students to nations outside the continent. More students travel outside Africa for educational purposes (such as industrial study tours, internships, and study exchange programs) than come to Africa for their studies (CampusFrance.Org, 2023; OECD, 2023).

Collectively, these training approaches extend knowledge acquisition theory for fostering international business competence at the individual level (Ciszewska-Mlinarič et al., 2020; de Clercq et al., 2012; Huber, 1991). One aspect focuses on vicarious learning gained through cultural diversity, skill diversity, and engaging with internationally sourced academics and professionals. This kind of learning requires business executives undergoing in-service training to learn from the experiences of international industry professionals and visiting scholars. These experts are typically connected through the university’s international office, global professional associations, and academic networks.

Another valuable source of vicarious learning includes interactions with students from various industries and international backgrounds, facilitated by cooperative efforts between the university international offices and the business school faculty to integrate international students into teaching and research projects.

Furthermore, grafting highlights knowledge acquisition through active participation in international affairs. Business schools enhance their executive MBA programs with optional international academic events, such as study tours, internships, and exchange programs, allowing in-service trained business executives to gain international experience independently from their companies. The opportunities for grafting-based learning stem from the broader strategy of “cross-border education” and internationalization efforts of universities (Knight, 2012), alongside agreements with global organizations. University international

offices organize these efforts to foster various international partnerships, projects, and academic programs, encouraging academic mobility among students and researchers.

Moreover, the internationalization of study content and involvement in international research initiatives facilitate a learning approach through searching and noticing. The learning sources involve collaboration with international professional organizations, participation in international projects, the involvement of foreign academics in student supervision, and the utilization of case teaching and learning centers.

Areas of Training Focused on by Cognitive and Exposure-Driven Approaches

We concentrate on fostering international business competence through cognitive-driven and exposure-driven training approaches. Individuals with higher intrinsic motivation were more inclined to participate in exposure-driven training approaches. The intrinsic motivations of business executives participating in in-service training played a crucial role in acquiring competence through diversity and engagement in international affairs.

Regarding diversity, in-service individuals trained within a more international cultural setting gained resources, know-how, and improved insights into markets and cultures. Additionally, they experienced faster learning and developed projects with a reduced risk of expropriation (Minola et al., 2016). Those participating in intercultural group learning activities benefited from these interactions, especially when they had a positive outlook on their experiences. Such encounters enhanced their intercultural competence (de Hei et al., 2020).

Moreover, intercultural virtual collaboration has emerged as a promising tool for developing in-service individuals' intercultural competence (Ferreira-Lopes et al., 2021). This supports the idea that well-structured international-intercultural classroom activities can advance discipline-related knowledge and global competence development without the necessity for student mobility (Corrales et al., 2021). Students' encounters with diversity positively impact their ability to work with others, solve problems, and foster an appreciation and respect for diversity (Denson & Zhang, 2010). Diversity also enhances the cultural dimension of a global mindset (Levy et al., 2007), highlighting the influence of students' experience with language diversity on management decisions within their firms (Tenzer et al., 2017).

Furthermore, engagement in international affairs enhances individual-level international business competence. The decision-making process in designing international business study missions, including the choice of destination, organizations visited, duration of visits, variety of teaching methods, intensity of preparation, and quality of management, significantly boosts students' global competence acquisition (Chong et al., 2022; Luo, 2023). These short-term international visits also cultivate students' professional aspirations, networking abilities, and global mindset (Gil & Reyes, 2020).

Regarding the cognitive training approach, international industry professionals and academics from abroad introduce global ideas, business values, and concepts to in-service individuals. In turn, these in-service individuals gain exposure to diverse teaching methodologies and international perspectives, enriching their understanding of technical and cultural aspects in global markets. Additionally, the international nature of study content and research reflects the internationalization of the curriculum (Schworm et al., 2017), preparing business executives undergoing in-service training for global citizenship (Klarin et al., 2021). They develop a global mindset from a strategic (cognitive) perspective (Levy et al., 2007), enabling in-service trained business executives to analyze concepts from a broader viewpoint.

The international aspect of study content and research is a key component of international business education, leading to a “transformative learning process resulting in international awareness, competence, and expertise among students [who are already managers or are] likely to become managers” (Schworm et al., 2017, p. 495). As faculty members introduce international study content and research through varied teaching methods, they convey international tacit and explicit knowledge to in-service-trained business executives, allowing them to integrate new knowledge with their existing expertise.

According to Peng et al. (2021), explicit knowledge can significantly enhance general and professional working abilities. In this context, faculty members’ transfer of tacit and explicit knowledge crucially affects in-service individuals’ ability to absorb and learn (Peng et al., 2021). Those with superior absorptive capacity (Tho, 2017) benefit greatly from cognitive-driven activities, as they recognize the value of new knowledge and apply it to improve their international business competence. The degree to which teaching activities are internationalized has a strong and positive direct impact on students’ entrepreneurship (Minola et al., 2016). Likewise, international research inspires individuals to develop their entrepreneurial skills, adapting and implementing business concepts at the local level based on research conducted in other contexts (Minola et al., 2016). In-service individuals drew on the practical implications of research findings, applying this knowledge in their daily professional tasks.

Ultimately, international business competence from cognitive and exposure-driven training approaches enabled in-service-trained business executives to transfer global knowledge through firm-specific knowledge applications. This knowledge is transferred directly via job-related activities and indirectly through internal organizational methods, such as on-the-job training, people management, meetings, and training sessions. Knowledge developed by individuals through in-service training leads to organizational learning (Tam & Gray, 2016), impacting internationally oriented decisions and actions at the corporate level (Ciszewska-Mlinarič et al., 2020; Felício et al., 2016).

Managerial and Policy Implications

Prior research highlights the importance of improving the behavioral competence of business owners, managers, and employees to support company internationalization through education in sub-Saharan Africa (Boso et al., 2019; Misati et al., 2017). However, knowledge of effective training approaches to enhance executives’ IBC is limited. This study provides preliminary insights for university management, academics, and business executives and owners on two training approaches that may be used to enhance executives’ IBC.

For business executives and owners, this study’s findings regarding cognitive and exposure-driven training approaches offer a cost-effective alternative to more expensive strategies, such as expatriation or hiring foreign professionals. Accordingly, business owners should provide flexible options for their executives participating in in-service training programs, such as promoting work-study-life balance. They should also consider tuition sponsorship and recognize the degrees earned by their executives to facilitate promotions after they complete their training programs.

Furthermore, business owners should create policies that enable executives undergoing in-service training to transfer international knowledge gained from cognitive and exposure training approaches back to their companies. This knowledge transfer should go beyond applying what executives learn directly to their job responsibilities. Executives

in management positions can effectively share knowledge with the staff they supervise. They should leverage people management and intra-organizational presentations (at meetings, seminars, and retreats) to ensure their team and the organization benefit.

Knowledge transfer tends to be more effective in smaller groups. Companies that implement policies supporting external knowledge transfer can help in-service participants share their learnings more rapidly. However, the effectiveness of people management and intra-organizational knowledge sharing often depends on the executive's leadership skills – people-oriented managers typically relate to their staff more comfortably than task-oriented managers.

For university management, this study's findings regarding the exposure-driven training approach call for promoting collaborations among business schools in different African sub-regions to enhance intra-African student mobility and international knowledge exchange activities. The current higher education landscape suggests that collaboration between African and overseas business schools is greater than that among African business schools (Ibrahim et al., 2021). This is concerning as students from developing African economies struggle with high financial and visa requirements for travel to countries outside Africa, particularly to destinations in Australia, New Zealand, North America, and Europe, including the United Kingdom.

By fostering intra-Africa student mobility, institutions will reduce the costs associated with international participation and promote African integration. Students will also gain first-hand experience in the intra-Africa labor market, providing them access to opportunities beyond their home countries. Ultimately, companies stand to benefit from multicultural human resources, contributing to sustainable international growth.

Furthermore, university management should facilitate collaborations between business schools and technology and knowledge transfer structures. Findings from this study indicate a significant lack of engagement with these structures in enhancing the international business competence of graduates within Ghanaian business schools. Such structures include consultancy centers (project structures), lifelong learning and training centers, community services, and career, internships, and skills centers (human resource structures), as well as enterprise development centers (start-up development structures) and technology parks and transfer offices (intellectual property structures). These are crucial learning resources but remain underutilized, likely due to their absence or management overlooking the needed collaborations with these technology and knowledge transfer structures (Boafo & Dornberger, 2024).

Moreover, the findings on the cognitive training approach encourage business school academics to actively participate in international conferences and events, which are instrumental in building global connections. Strong global ties and networks are vital for developing training approaches that leverage diversity, engage international experts, and incorporate globally focused study materials and research. Academics often utilize their international networks, formed through research partnerships, to invite guest lecturers abroad. Additionally, they identify industry professionals through their universities' international offices and global professional associations.

Furthermore, in line with the previous point, university management should leverage the African diaspora working abroad at universities and multinational enterprises. The diaspora presents promising avenues for international knowledge transfer through collaborative educational activities.

Finally, the findings highlight the importance of integrating international students and professionals from diverse industry sectors to develop executives' international competence. We recommend that university administration and international program offices provide faculty information on international students enrolled in schools and departments. This information would enable faculty to devise strategies to integrate international students into their teaching and project activities. Faculty could arrange study groups that ensure local students are paired with at least one international student, including those from other African countries. This approach would facilitate introducing local students to foreign projects from their peers' home countries.

Additionally, executives undergoing in-service training come from various sectors and companies. Academics should initiate knowledge exchange activities by utilizing these executives' industry experiences to improve and develop new teaching content for undergraduate programs.

Limitations and Avenues for Further Research

This study's limitations are noteworthy and highlight areas for further research. First, this study relied on data from 55 participants in Ghana's top four university business schools, focusing exclusively on academics and executives undergoing in-service training. It omitted other key stakeholders like industry partners, policymakers, non-business students, and non-business academics from different academic levels or disciplines. The country and participant restrictions may affect the wider applicability of our qualitative findings, given the variance in universities across different national and local contexts (Nsanzumuhire & Groot, 2020). Other universities exist within the same country, such as research, comprehensive, and technological universities (Kruss & Visser, 2017).

Given these, we advise that future research extend to other countries in sub-Saharan Africa and regions sharing similar socio-economic features. Specifically, we advocate for cross-cultural studies that involve more stakeholders, which are crucial for confirming the validity and universality of theories and concepts (Luo, 2023). Such research would broaden our understanding of cognitive-driven and exposure-driven training approaches, which are crucial for international competence development in other African countries and developing economies. We also suggest conducting robustness checks of our findings through a quantitative survey-based study for statistical generalizability.

Second, this study focused only on business executives currently enrolled on in-service training programs, which means future research should consider those who are now alumni of such programs. This approach could enrich our findings, as these individuals would have more time to apply their IBCs. Including non-business academics and students from various academic levels or disciplines could provide additional insights.

Third, future research should employ a longitudinal approach to capture the evolving nature of cognitive and exposure-driven training approaches and their long-term impact on IBCs.

Conclusion

This study explored how cognitive-driven and exposure-driven training approaches contribute to developing executives' IBC. The study uses the experiences of business

executives who had enrolled on in-service training programs at university business schools in Ghana. The cognitive-driven training approach involves participation in international research, interactions with internationally sourced academics and professionals, and integrating global perspectives into the study content. The exposure-driven encapsulates diversity based on differences in culture, skills, and engagement in international affairs.

Within knowledge acquisition theory, these findings identify cultural diversity, skills diversity, and engagement with faculty and guest faculty with international backgrounds as key elements that support vicarious learning. Additionally, involvement in international affairs is described as learning through grafting. Moreover, incorporating global perspectives into the study content and actively participating in international research are highlighted as methods that encourage learning through searching and noticing.

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Notes on contributors

Christopher Boafa is a Research Fellow at Leipzig University's SEPT Competence Center and a Post-doctoral Research Fellow at the University of British Columbia's Faculty of Management. His research focuses on Indigenous institutions, international entrepreneurship, the internationalization of informal small businesses, and international knowledge transfer through university-business collaborations in emerging markets. He holds a PhD in Management Science (focusing on Business Administration) with Summa Cum Laude from Leipzig University in Germany. His work has been published in the *International Small Business Journal*, *Thunderbird International Business Review*, *International Journal of Management Education*, and the *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*.

Utz Dornberger is the Director of the Small Enterprise Promotion and Training Competence Center (SEPT) at Leipzig University and a professor of development economics specializing in promoting small and medium-sized enterprises. He also leads the Entrepreneurship Initiative at Leipzig University. During his career, he has been the project leader for over 50 international projects supported

by organizations such as the European Union, World Bank, German Corporation for International Cooperation, German Academic Exchange Service, and the Federal Ministry of Research and Education in Germany. Additionally, he directs the SEPT MBA program in Germany and Vietnam and is the Director of the African Center for Career Enhancement and Skills Support.

Nathaniel Boso is a Professor and Director of Research at University of Pretoria's Gordon Institute of Business Science (South Africa) and O.R. Tambo Africa Research Chair of Entrepreneurship and Employability at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (Ghana). He was previously Dean at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology School of Business, and an Associate Professor at University of Leeds in the UK. Prof. Boso is a consulting editor at *Journal of International Business Studies*, a senior editor at *International Business Review*, and an associate editor at *International Marketing Review* and *Africa Journal of Management*. His research has published in the *Journal of International Business Studies*, *Journal of World Business*, *Journal of Business Venturing*, *Journal of Product Innovation Management*, *Journal of International Marketing*, and *International Journal of Production Economics*. He received his Ph.D. in Entrepreneurship and Industrial Marketing from Loughborough University in the UK.

Supplemental data

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ORCID iDs

Christopher Bofo  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1727-2515>

Utz Dornberger  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0267-0310>

Nathaniel Boso  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7043-4793>

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