



The emergence, advance and future of international entrepreneurship research – An introduction to the special forum

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ABSTRACT

Since its genesis over twenty years ago, research in International Entrepreneurship has emerged as a field of study, and moved through the process of differentiation, mobilization and legitimacy building. Generally referred to as IE, research in this area is conducted by scholars worldwide and supported by various community structures, conferences and journals. In recognition of IE, this Special Forum was initiated to help clarify its parameters and history of development, the areas of research pertinent to it and critically, directions for future research.

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1. Executive summary

New fields of scholarly enquiry are often marked by calls from researchers that an observed phenomenon is inadequately explained by existing disciplines or falls outside their scope (Merton, 1973). If the new field is sufficiently distinctive, researchers are likely to try to position it at the intersection between two or more existing fields (Hagstrom, 1965), with Hambrick and Chen (2008) proposing that new academic fields are advanced through the process of differentiation, mobilization and legitimacy building. They suggest the signals used to establish a field include the adoption of a 'name' for the field, reference by scholars to it as such, and efforts to develop community structures such as associations, journals and conferences.

International Entrepreneurship has followed just such a pattern of development. Its genesis was marked with McDougall's (1989) comparison of domestic versus international new ventures and her explicitly naming and providing an early definition of the term 'international entrepreneurship' (IE) which focused on new ventures that engaged in international business. This was closely followed by scholars writing about new patterns and about the timing of internationalization (e.g. Coviello and Munro, 1992; Jolly et al., 1992; Litvak, 1990; Ray, 1989; Rennie, 1993). These emergent phenomena then provoked examination of, and challenges to, extant theory (see McDougall et al., 1994; Oviatt and McDougall, 1994) and, as explained by Kuhn (1996), activities like these signal a new line of scholarly inquiry. Also appearing about that time were assessments of how entrepreneurs compared across cultures (e.g. McGrath et al., 1992a,b; McGrath and MacMillan, 1992). Such studies reflected a growing awareness of the diversity of entrepreneurial activity across an increasingly globally integrated economy.

Following from the above, research in IE began to gain momentum. Zahra (1993) expanded the definition of IE to include corporate entrepreneurship and conceptualized a process of IE, thus laying a fertile foundation for future studies. In 1996, *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* published a special issue on IE and the McGill International Entrepreneurship Conference

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Series was launched by Richard Wright and Hamid Etemad in 1998. The first of these conferences led to two special issues in the *Journal of International Marketing* (1999). In 2000, the *Academy of Management Journal* published a special research forum on IE. While the academic community had informally referred to the new field as International Entrepreneurship for some time, McDougall and Oviatt's (2000) introduction to the special research forum formally positioned IE at the interface of research in international business and entrepreneurship. They also broadened McDougall's previously narrow definition of IE, defining it as: "...a combination of innovative, proactive and risk-seeking behaviour that crosses national borders and is intended to create value in organizations" (McDougall and Oviatt, 2000: 903).

It is noteworthy that the Zahra et al. (2000) article published in the special research forum received the Best Paper of the Year award from AMJ, thus highlighting the impact that IE research was beginning to have on the mainstream management literature. Further special issues devoted to IE soon followed. These were published in the *Journal of International Management* (2001), *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* (2002), *Small Business Economics* (2003), and *Canadian Journal of Administrative Studies* (2005). In addition, the *Journal of International Entrepreneurship* was launched in 2003, a journal devoted to IE as a developing field (rather than being an 'international journal' of entrepreneurship). During this time, Zahra and George (2002: 262) developed another definition of IE, considering it to be "...the process of creatively discovering and exploiting opportunities that lie outside a firm's domestic markets in the pursuit of competitive advantage." Notable with this definition however is that rather than encompass international comparisons of entrepreneurial behaviour (as per McDougall and Oviatt, 2000), the scope of IE defined by Zahra and George (2002) focused on entrepreneurial internationalization alone.

In 2005, the *Journal of International Business Studies* awarded Ben Oviatt and Patricia McDougall the JIBS Decade Award for their 1994 contribution, simultaneously publishing commentaries on the field by Autio (2005) and Zahra (2005). That same year, Oviatt and McDougall (2005: 540) offered a refined definition of IE, one that like Zahra and George (2002) incorporated the concept of opportunity: "International entrepreneurship is the discovery, enactment, evaluation, and exploitation of opportunities – across national borders – to create future goods and services." Again however, Oviatt and McDougall (2005) explained that IE research included studies of: 1) entrepreneurship crossing borders, i.e. entrepreneurial internationalization, and 2) comparative studies of entrepreneurship across borders.

In the period 2005–2009, special issues or forums on IE were published by a range of leading journals across the fields of international business, entrepreneurship, small business and marketing. These include *Journal of International Business Studies*, 2005; *Management International Review*, 2005; *International Business Review*, 2005; *Small Business Economics*, 2005; 2008; *International Marketing Review*, 2006; *Journal of World Business*, 2007; *Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal*, 2009. The year 2009 also saw the launch of ie-scholars.net, a virtual community built to support IE research on a global basis. This initiative was championed by Rod McNaughton and Hamid Etemad. Indicative of the importance of IE, ie-scholars.net (and related activities) is supported by a grant of \$1.95 million from Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

In addition to the AMJ Best Paper Award in 2000, IE publications have garnered other recognition. For example, the *Journal of International Marketing* annually presents the Hans B Thorelli Award to the most significant and long-term contribution to international marketing theory or practice. A number of the Thorelli Award winners are studies in IE: Jones (1999), Knight (2000), Burgel and Murray (2000), Chetty and Campbell-Hunt (2004). In addition, IE is regularly found in the 'top 10 cited' article lists. As we go to press, a citation search using the Publish or Perish software (Harzing, 2007) shows that IE research holds down five of the top 10 positions at *Journal of International Marketing*, three of the top 10 positions at *International Business Review* (#1 Madsen and Servais, 1997; #2 Coviello and Munro, 1997; #7 Rialp et al., 2005) and two of the top positions at *Management International Review* (#2 Coviello and McAuley, 1999 and #3 Oviatt and McDougall, 1997). Also, important early research is in the top 10 at *Journal of International Business Studies* (Oviatt and McDougall, 1994), *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* (Bloodgood et al., 1996) and *Journal of Business Venturing* (McDougall et al., 1994). As a result, returning to Hambrick and Chen (2008), we see that research in IE now has a name, an increasingly established position in relation to entrepreneurship and international business, recognition in relevant journals and scholars who identify with each other. It also has a number of community structures (e.g. the annual McGill Conference on IE, the *Journal of International Entrepreneurship*, ie-scholars.net), and a growing body of literature. After twenty-two years, the field of IE has managed to differentiate itself, mobilize, and gain some legitimacy.

As part of IE's development, we can identify a number of reviews of the field, each offering summaries on the state of IE (or issues related to it). One group of reviews are the early publications that helped signal IE as a potential field of study (Giamartino et al., 1993; Wright and Ricks, 1994), and these are reinforced by Coviello and McAuley's (1999) review of the empirical evidence on small and new firms pursuing non-traditional internationalization paths. A second group of reviews focuses on IE sub-fields. For example, Rialp et al. (2005) conducted a systematic review of research on early internationalizing firms, while others assessed the literature on the founding, internationalization processes, marketing strategies and performance of firms considered to be either International New Ventures or Born Globals (Aspelund et al., 2007). Hayton et al. (2002) organized the comparative entrepreneurship literature on national culture into three strands focussing on individual, institutional and national level characteristics, while Engelen et al. (2009) reviewed cross-cultural entrepreneurship studies, identifying content gaps, research purposes and analytical approaches. A third group of reviews assess the potential for IE research in specific disciplines such as marketing (Styles and Seymour, 2006) or management and policy (Cumming et al., 2009). A fourth group of reviews are more focused, assessing IE through a specific theoretical lens such as opportunity (Di Gregorio et al., 2008), cultural values (Tieszen, 1997) and transaction costs (Zacharakis, 1997).

Of particular interest to us is a fifth group of reviews: recent publications that present strong criticisms of the studies that have emerged in IE and IE research as whole. Gamboa and Brouthers (2008: 555) questioned how international the entrepreneurship literature is, and they express concern that IE research may simply replicate international business studies "...by substituting

smaller/newer firms for larger ones". Then, in a review intended to identify the deficiencies of IE research, [Keupp and Gassmann \(2009\)](#) criticized the phenomenological basis of IE research and argued that while efforts to achieve a theoretical understanding of IE have shifted focus away from the phenomenon of small and new ventures that triggered its inception, there remains a dominant empirical focus on small firms. They believe that this precludes efforts to advance generalizable IE theory. They also observe that many IE studies fail to use theoretical frameworks from either international business or entrepreneurship. In their discussion, [Keupp and Gassmann \(2009\)](#) called for more theoretical integration and consistency in IE research. Similar arguments were made in another review ([Coombs et al., 2009](#)), and those authors concluded that the field is at a rudimentary stage of development (albeit with promise for the future).

We find this last group of reviews helpful for a number of reasons, one of which is that they introduce perspectives from other disciplines and their criticisms cause us to pause and reconsider our field. For example, much of the previous research conducted by Gamboa and Brouthers, Keupp and Gassmann, or Coombs et al. appears to be in classic international business, innovation management, finance or strategy. Thus, the lens they apply to IE may help them to see things that we do not. At the same time, we suggest that to fully assess and evaluate IE, it is also helpful to have some understanding of the history of the field. For example, although IE research has emerged, in part, from studies of small firm internationalization, this type of research does not necessarily incorporate theoretical frameworks or insights specific to entrepreneurship. Thus, comparisons of small firm and large firm behaviour (as discussed by [Gamboa and Brouthers, 2008](#)) are not the same as research on entrepreneurial activity during internationalization, or research on entrepreneurship across international contexts. We also believe that to review the field, it is important to assess it in a manner that is first, focused on research at the intersection of international business and entrepreneurship and second, as comprehensive and rigorous as possible. Thus, if the articles selected in the review are not screened to identify those integrating international business and entrepreneurship elements, the dataset may well include, for example, traditional SME export studies that often incorporate no concepts, arguments or theory from entrepreneurship. Such a review might even include teaching cases, and it is often unclear whether the reviews discussed above assess studies comparing entrepreneurship across countries or cultures – a major and growing area of IE research. Reviews based on articles selected from a pre-determined set of journals are also of some concern. This is because the list of selected journals may or may not publish IE studies and it may exclude journals that have published special issues devoted to IE.

To be sure, critiques of IE are important to the field in that they provoke discussion, stimulate research and drive us to question our work. We also find much in the reviews discussed above with which we might agree. At the same time, we believe that focusing on the inadequacies of IE has perhaps eclipsed the developments and achievements of the field. Consequently, as long-time researchers in IE, we believe it is time for general reviews that clarify IE's parameters and its path of development through a comprehensive assessment of the history of IE. Such reviews might provide structure to the domain and a broad-based research agenda for existing IE scholars and for those new to the field. Given the value of looking at a field through a specific theoretical lens or mind-set, we also believe some reviews should do just that.

2. Submission and evaluation procedures for the special forum on IE

Our initiation of this Special Forum in JBV was distinctive in its call for five-to-seven page proposals rather than fully developed manuscripts. The call invited proposals of two types: (1) broad evaluations of the IE field and (2) critically evaluative discussions of theoretical developments in a specific area relevant to IE (social capital theory, emerging or transitional economies, finance, institutional theory, etc.); these are more focused reviews that also generate directions for future research. Each proposal included the intent, scope and theoretical positioning of the full review paper as well as anticipated contributions to the IE field.

Our call for the Special Forum generated 51 proposals. These involved 114 authors from 22 countries. Each proposal was reviewed by the guest editors of the Special Forum. From the initial pool of 51 submissions, we identified 10 for full development. Our decisions were guided by not only the focus and rigour of the proposal, but also by the proposal's distinctive potential to advance a research agenda for IE. We also wanted to develop articles that could benefit both current and new IE scholars. Finally, we chose proposals that seemed to reflect important themes in IE research, some of which were identified based on the topics submitted to us for consideration.

As Special Forum guest editors, we recused ourselves from decisions about the proposal and paper from a group of authors that included Nicole Coviello, one of the Special Forum editors. Instead, Dean Shepherd, Editor of JBV, managed these. When a proposal and manuscript came from an author employed by a guest editor's home institution, that editor also recused him or herself. Ultimately, 8 full papers were submitted and entered the normal double-blind review process for JBV. As we go to press, two articles have been accepted, three declined and three more remain in review. If accepted, these will appear in forthcoming issues of JBV, through 2012.

The first article ([Jones et al., 2011-this issue](#)) offers a thematic analysis of IE research and builds a domain ontology that covers 323 articles published in 1989–2009 (excluding review papers). This appears to be the most comprehensive review of IE research to date, providing a history and categorical structure for those studying IE. It also includes a map of the field, thus providing a graphic overview of IE as a domain. In their article, Jones et al. identify three major areas of IE research (entrepreneurial internationalization; international comparisons of entrepreneurship; international comparisons of entrepreneurial internationalization) and then multiple thematic areas within each. They develop research agendas for each area of study and also highlight important operational issues for research in IE.

The second article in this issue is positioned in the contemporary context of online IE. In an effort to develop a research agenda pertaining to internet-enabled entrepreneurship and internationalization, [Reuber and Fischer \(2011-this issue\)](#) review past research across IE and the broader fields of entrepreneurship, international business, marketing, management and management

information systems. They identify three firm-level resources that are associated with the successful pursuit of international opportunities in internet-enabled markets: 1) online reputation, 2) online technological capabilities and, 3) online brand communities. Drawing on their cross-disciplinary review, Reuber and Fischer then develop a propositional inventory and model of the expected relationships between these resources and international opportunity in the online context. They link the core constructs of their argument with a variety of measures expected to be useful to studies in this area, and they develop a rich research agenda for scholars interested in internet-enabled IE. Given that much of the extant IE literature is embedded in an 'offline' context, Reuber and Fischer's work is an important foundation for new avenues of study.

3. Editorial comments on terminology in IE

Jones et al. (2011-this issue) suggest that the labels attached to venture types in IE are often applied loosely. For example, when they discuss research on entrepreneurial internationalization, they are concerned that the term 'International New Venture' (INV) is regularly used interchangeably with 'Born Global' (BG). We would like to comment further on the interchangeable use of terms to describe organizations in IE, but first we provide some historical perspective on this issue. We believe Rennie (1993) introduced the term 'Born Global' in print and this is the term that appears to be most commonly used in today's literature. Over the years, various efforts to operationalize this concept have emerged (see Rialp et al. (2005) for a review of research on early internationalizing firms). Also popular is the term INV, and this was introduced by Oviatt and McDougall in their 1994 *JIBS* article. In that article, Oviatt and McDougall included the term 'global start-up' as one of four types of INV (with a global start-up described as a new venture that was active in many countries and coordinated many value chain activities across countries). Since the mid-1990s, they have consistently used the term INV, but have recognized in their publications that the terms INV and BG are used interchangeably within the broader literature. Importantly, their specific choice of the term INV is reflective of the conversation by IB scholars who often distinguish the term 'international' from 'global', with 'international' referring to crossing a single or a few country borders while 'global' is reserved for involvement in many countries or continents. With this in mind, Oviatt and McDougall chose to use the term INV in recognition of that fact that many of the ventures they were examining competed primarily in their regional markets or in a relatively limited number of countries, rather than necessarily having a truly global focus. This is reflected for example, in their conceptual distinction between the geographically-focused start-up and the global start-up, an argument supported empirically by (e.g.) the 'early internationals' that are distinguished from BGs by Aspelund and Moen (2005) or the 'born regionals' identified by Lopez et al. (2009).

The distinction between global and international may be useful at times, as is an appreciation that there is more than one type of INV and even BG. However, we have come to the conclusion that there is a more critical point. What is most distinctive about the terms INV and BG is the commonality between the terms 'new' and 'born.' Thus, studies of INVs or BGs should be studies of new and young firms. The implication is that researchers must clarify the stage of the firms' life-cycle they are studying. If one is studying INVs or BGs, it is firm age that is their defining characteristic, not firm size or even scope of foreign operations. While size and scope are often of great interest to researchers, they may be greatly influenced by how early and quickly a firm grows and internationalizes from its foundation. In a similar vein, although the internationalization of small firms or SMEs is of interest in IE, we argue that care should be taken not to identify such firms in the same way one does a start-up or a young venture. This is because a small firm may be well-established in terms of its organizational experience and other characteristics. Furthermore, if the unit of analysis is an SME, care should be taken to articulate the entrepreneurial aspects of the study since IE, by definition, draws on the entrepreneurship literature and is now distinct from SME internationalization research.

The entrepreneurial behaviour of larger firms is another important but under-developed aspect of IE research, in terms of both internationalization and cross-national studies. Research in this area offers a rich opportunity for comparisons with INVs or BGs, or investigations of the influence of various organizational characteristics on entrepreneurial behaviour. It is, however, potentially confusing if the firms in question are well into their life-cycle but yet, referred to as BGs or INVs simply because they happened to internationalize early and quickly at some point in the distant past. Again, we encourage scholars to clearly define the nature of the firms under investigation and label them accordingly.

We also want to draw attention to the fact that since IE research can benefit from multiple levels of analysis (Keupp and Gassmann, 2009), it is important to better understand whether international entrepreneurial behaviours are impacted more by (e.g.) the intent of the firm leader, by his or her team, by the nature of the firm, by the networks involved, or by the context in which all these are placed. For example, are differences in entrepreneurial behaviour, including internationalization, a function of firm age or whether the founders are novices or habitual entrepreneurs? Research concerning these issues will be especially complex because which level has the most impact may well vary depending on circumstances and time. In the same way we encourage clear use of terminology for the firms being studied, we recommend that more attention be paid to exploring the amount and type of entrepreneurial experience that founders have and how those experiences relate to other variables and affect the research findings. This recommendation is made for IE research in general, be it focused on entrepreneurial internationalization or comparisons of entrepreneurship across contexts.

4. Final observations

In positioning IE at the interface of international business and entrepreneurship, McDougall and Oviatt (2000) noted that both antecedent disciplines are becoming less distinct as fields of study. A question worth considering is how might a new field that sits at the intersection of two already hybrid and evolving fields claim to be distinctive? If integration is considered to be the new

field's distinctiveness, the papers published in this Special Forum show that IE is both integrated and increasingly distinctive. As noted earlier, we see IE being informed by (and informing) theories and perspectives from other domains such as strategic management, economics, knowledge management and economic geography.

We also recall that early arguments in IE called for multi-theoretical perspectives. Giamartino et al. (1993) advocated broadening the scope of the field rather than encapsulating it with tight definitions, while Coviello and McAuley (1999) concluded that to understand what we might now describe as entrepreneurial internationalization, scholars require a multi-theoretical perspective. Wright and Ricks (1994) called for researchers to examine international business issues in an integrated multidisciplinary way while Young et al. (2003) called for more focus on the environmental and institutional approaches as well as innovation and resource-based perspectives. They also expressed concerns, similar to Gamboa and Brouthers (2008) that the international aspect of IE may become taken for granted. Etemad (2004) described IE as a complex adaptive system incorporating multiple levels of interaction between the entrepreneur, firm, market and environment, to which various theories apply. Autio (2005) called for a new and fuller theory of firm internationalization and its outcomes. Of note, these were not invitations to approach theory and model-building in a 'pick-and-mix' fashion. Rather, they were calls for careful consideration of first, what theories might help explain various aspects of IE phenomena, and, second, how such theories might be usefully integrated to arrive at better and more comprehensive explanations or new insights. We see this in the extant literature that explicitly integrates entrepreneurship and international business theory (e.g. Di Gregorio, 2005; Jones and Coviello, 2005; Mathews and Zander, 2007) or entrepreneurship with institutional theory (e.g. Bruton et al., 2009; Busenitz et al., 2000), as well as new arguments that suggest, for example, IE might involve consumers rather than firms as international entrepreneurs (see Chandra and Coviello, 2010). To some extent, therefore, we already see evidence that IE research is informed with perspectives from other disciplines. We hope it will continue.

Other areas that seem to offer rich potential for study in IE are derived from the range of proposal topics that we reviewed for this Special Forum. For example, given the explicit inclusion of 'opportunity' in the definition of IE, we need an improved understanding of how this concept is or might be defined and operationalized in our research. Also, although we have seen the emergence of IE research on emerging and transition economies, we need a greater understanding of IE phenomena – in terms of both entrepreneurial internationalization and international comparison – in these contexts. Ideally, these would involve comparisons with developed economies. Such research fits within the area of IE that compares entrepreneurship across cultural and institutional contexts. Although Jones et al. (2011-this issue) review this area of study additional insight is needed regarding the theories, methods and findings generated by it. We also observe that IE interest in institutional theory and economic geography is growing, and suggest that this offers a bridge between IE and the area of research focused on transnational, ethnic and immigrant entrepreneurship, a rich area of study in its own right. Going a step further, IE research may be informed by research on economic development, sustainability and social entrepreneurship.

Additional examples include research that better links IE with the literatures in marketing and branding, knowledge management, learning, finance and venture capital. We also see an ongoing interest in methodology issues, and, since the field has grown quickly in recent years, we suggest that a review of methodological fit would be appropriate (as per Edmondson and McManus, 2007). Alternatively, earlier methods reviews (e.g. Coviello and Jones, 2004) should be updated and extended. Particularly helpful would be in-depth reviews on specific methodological issues, such as construct measurement. Also, while developing fields often learn from meta-analyses, IE has strong and informative qualitative studies that cannot be assessed this way. Thus, we refer to Walsh and Downe (2005) for guidance on how to conduct a meta-summary of qualitative findings.

In conclusion, fields of study like IE that sit at the intersection of parent disciplines reside there because the phenomena under study defy explanation by any single theory. Those working in the area develop ways to compare explanations and look for areas of agreement or convergence. They also learn the orientation and structures of each discipline and learn to converse in the language of either. Opportunities for the development of new approaches emerge from researchers' experiential knowledge when coupled with different or new insights from other fields. Thus while authors make an appeal for unifying frameworks and consistent methodological directions in IE (e.g. Keupp and Gassmann, 2009, as well as us: Coviello and Jones, 2004; McDougall and Oviatt, 2000), a perhaps complementary argument is to call also for new insights and new entrants to the field from other disciplines to enrich our understanding of the complex phenomenon that is now known as IE. Following Schumpeterian reasoning, diversity fuels innovation, opportunity and sustainable development. It is as important in securing IE's survival and rightful position as a domain as is the rigorous development of its theories and methods.

5. Reviewers

We would like to acknowledge the many scholars from around the world who contributed to this Special Forum on International Entrepreneurship. First, we thank the authors who submitted their work for review. This was a truly global pool of scholars, indicative of the nature of IE. Second, we thank Dean Shepherd, JBV Editor, for his support throughout this project, including his advice on difficult decisions and his management of the review process for any research that involved the guest editors. Third, the initial idea for this Special Forum came from Marian Jones, and we are grateful for her passion in developing IE as a field. Finally, we thank the reviewers for their thoughtful comments and insights. Without them, this Special Forum would not be possible. Our reviewers are listed below in alphabetical order.

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- Wade Danis, Georgia State University
- Dirk De Clercq, Brock University
- Dante Di Gregorio, University of New Mexico
- Paul Ellis, Hong Kong Polytechnic University
- Gerard George, Imperial College London
- Denis Grégoire, Georgia State University
- Jolanda Hessels, Erasmus University Rotterdam
- Sharon Loane, University of Ulster
- Tatiana Manolova, Bentley University
- Steven Michael, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
- Arto Ojala, University of Jyväskylä
- Maija Renko, University of Illinois at Chicago
- Rebecca Reuber, University of Toronto
- Àlex Rialp Criado, Autonomous University of Barcelona
- María Ripollés Meliá, Universitat Jaume I
- Dean Shepherd, Indiana University
- Chris Styles, The University of Sydney Business School
- Patricia Thornton, Duke University
- Friederike Welter, Jönköping International Business School

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