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INTERNATIONALIZATION STRATEGY IS THE KEY FOR FUTURE SUCCESS OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract. Internationalization is seen as a crucial tactic for countries transitioning from central planning to market-driven economies. Both national and institutional efforts are underway to internationalize universities. However, there's a lack of research on how individual institutions undertake internationalization and the benefits they derive. This study explores how Uzbek universities utilize internationalization to improve the knowledge and skills of their teachers and students. The findings indicate that the current methods of internationalization in Uzbek universities are characterized by an ad hoc approach, with constraints such as *limited resources* and *language proficiency* among staff and students. Consistent with prior research, inadequate resources and insufficient English proficiency among educators and learners are identified as significant barriers to internationalization efforts. Additionally, a novel concern highlighted in this study, not previously addressed in relevant literature, pertains to the sustainability of knowledge generation through research and publications.

Keywords: Internationalization; Universities; Higher education; Strategies

СТРАТЕГИЯ ИНТЕРНАЦИОНАЛИЗАЦИИ – ЗАЛОГ БУДУЩЕГО УСПЕХА ВУЗОВ

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и конкретные науки»

Аннотация. Интернационализация рассматривается как важнейшая тактика для стран, переходящих от централизованного планирования к рыночной экономике. Как на национальном, так и на институциональном уровне предпринимаются усилия по интернационализации университетов. Однако недостаточно исследований того, как отдельные учреждения осуществляют интернационализацию и какие выгоды она извлекает. В этом исследовании рассматривается, как узбекские университеты используют интернационализацию для улучшения знаний и навыков своих преподавателей и студентов. Результаты показывают, что нынешние методы интернационализации в узбекских университетах характеризуются специальным подходом с такими ограничениями, как ограниченность ресурсов и знание языка среди сотрудников и студентов. В соответствии с предыдущими исследованиями, нехватка ресурсов и недостаточное знание английского языка среди преподавателей и учащихся определены как серьезные препятствия на пути усилий по интернационализации. Кроме того, новая проблема, подчеркнутая в этом исследовании и ранее не обсуждавшаяся в

соответствующей литературе, касается устойчивости получения знаний посредством исследований и публикаций.

Ключевые слова: Интернационализация; Университеты; Высшее образование; Стратегии

Introduction

The rise of economic globalization has significantly impacted the movement of goods, services, capital, as well as the mobility of human resources and knowledge across borders. This phenomenon has sparked intense competition among nations to expand their markets. With the transition of a country's wealth sources from natural resources to knowledge-based assets, the concept of a knowledge-based economy has gained prominence as a model for economic development, aiming to bolster national competitiveness and growth. Consequently, within this framework, internationalization within universities has become an essential strategy to supply highly skilled labor and enhance institutional competitiveness. Internationalization in higher education is not simply seen as an international activity but rather as a process that integrates an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the objectives, functions, or delivery of tertiary education. Over recent decades, the internationalization of higher education has undergone significant development in response to the escalating forces of globalization.

This paper aims to explore how internationalization is helping teachers and students improve their knowledge and skills in Uzbek universities.

Internationalization in universities

Universities have a long history of engaging in international activities, but the push for internationalization in higher education gained momentum a few decades back, aligning with the perception of education as a strategic policy response to a more globalized economy. According to De Wit (2002), there are four main reasons why higher education institutions are interested in internationalization: political, economic, social/cultural, and academic factors. Various attempts have been made to define internationalization in higher education, evolving from an institutional focus to a broader national and global perspective. Knight's (2007) definition is particularly concise and widely applicable. They emphasize that internationalization isn't solely the responsibility of individual universities but requires coordinated efforts between universities and governments at a national level to integrate international dimensions into higher education systems, reflecting a shift from cooperation to competition in the global context.

Universities and their stakeholders reap multiple benefits from internationalization, operating on various levels. Many countries, particularly those outside the Western sphere, prioritize internationalizing higher education due to its promising outcomes. These benefits encompass the development of domestic human resources and the enhancement of the

country's economic, geopolitical, and educational standing. Universities can leverage financial support and favorable policies to implement international activities, aiding faculty and students in aligning their knowledge and skills with international standards. Academic exchanges with scholars from around the world expand international networks, which can bolster local institutions. Through international exchange programs, students gain exposure to multicultural environments, fostering the enhancement of their psychological and sociocultural adaptation skills. Increased scholarly journal publications not only advance knowledge production but also enhance the academic reputation of institutions and staff. Implementing internationalization strategies often entails changes in a university's organizational culture and structure, aiming to evolve into better-functioning learning organizations. Many universities target this transition to effectively address external challenges, gain a competitive edge, and improve organizational performance, as evidenced by empirical studies highlighting a positive correlation between learning organizations and performance.

Methodology

We conducted qualitative, semi-structured interviews with leaders from 12 universities to delve into their perspectives, strategies, and perceived outcomes regarding the internationalization process of their institutions. These interview formats are well-suited for exploring individual beliefs and identifying patterns of similarity and difference among respondents. We selected participants based on their knowledge and experience of the phenomenon, with university leaders or department heads responsible for shaping institutional internationalization strategies considered as the most suitable candidates, given their role as knowledgeable informants on the topic.

The sample comprised universities catering to varied demographics, selected deliberately to encompass diversity in terms of size, geographical distribution, establishment time, and orientation. Each criterion is detailed as follows:

- Size: The study examines universities with both above and below-average total student enrollments, with the national average being approximately 7,523 students per institution (General Statistics Office, 2017).
- Geographical location: The chosen universities represent the North, Central, and Southern regions of the country.

To fulfill the research objective, discussions with interviewees revolved around the following inquiries: What is their perspective on the role of internationalization concerning their institutions? What are the key components of their university's internationalization strategies? How do they describe the approach to implementing these strategies? What are the potential benefits of internationalization within the unique context of their institution? These questions were prepared in both Uzbek and English and shared with leaders of the sampled universities one month prior to the

interviews. Additionally, the leader of our research group personally contacted leaders of the sampled universities via phone to explain the interview process. Providing the questions in advance allowed the participating universities ample time to prepare and select appropriate interviewees.

To facilitate discussion, face-to-face interviews were conducted in Uzbek. A total of 21 individuals from 12 universities participated in the interviews, with each interview lasting an average of two hours, totaling 24 hours of interview time. All interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants and subsequently transcribed. The transcripts underwent thorough scrutiny and coding into main themes, utilizing a combination of emerging and predetermined codes. This entire process, including coding and transcript analysis, was carried out in Uzbek with the technical support of MAXQDA version 18, a software designed for qualitative and mixed methods research. Data analysis involved categorizing interview transcripts into themes, with the coding framework developed through both inductive and deductive approaches. Special attention was given to identifying commonalities across respondents' accounts. Finally, the findings were translated into English.

Results and Discussion

In this section, we outline and deliberate upon the key thematic issues that surfaced from the interviews with university leaders. Through the analysis of these results, we address the research questions posed in our study. Additionally, we identify emerging challenges that need to be tackled as the internationalization process evolves within both global and domestic contexts.

Goals and activities in relation to internationalization

In our study, universities' stated objectives for pursuing internationalization largely aligned with three main categories: academic goals aimed at enhancing the knowledge and skills of both staff and students, bolstering the university's reputation and ranking, and fostering knowledge production and dissemination (refer to Table 2).

Table 2

Leaders' perspectives on the goals of internationalization

University	Knowledge and skills of staff and student	Reputation and ranking position	Knowledge production and dissemination	Students' cultural integration
A	✓	✓	✓	✓
B	✓	✓	✓	
C	✓	✓	✓	
D	✓	✓	✓	
E	✓	✓	✓	
F	✓	✓	✓	
G	✓	✓	✓	
H	✓	✓	✓	

Notably, only two university leaders cited students' cultural integration as a goal alongside these academic objectives. These findings are consistent with previous research by De Wit (2013) and Knight (2008). While none of the respondents explicitly mentioned economic considerations as a driving factor for internationalization, the implicit pursuit of financial benefits has become a significant goal of internationalization efforts across institutional contexts. For Uzbek universities, domestic student enrollment holds particular importance, especially considering the significant increase in the number of new academic institutions over the past decade and the aspirations of public universities towards financial autonomy. Given the current peripheral status of Uzbek higher education in global university rankings, domestic universities face challenges in attracting desired levels of international student enrollment.

The primary focus of internationalized activities is the enhancement of educators' and students' knowledge and skills, as highlighted in Table 3. However, at present, these activities are predominantly limited to educators. Internationalizing the curriculum stands as a central component of the country's agenda for internationalization in education (Ministry of Education and Training, 2012). The following two activities—staff mobility and collaborative research and publications—were identified as means to enhance staff competency, thereby enabling educators to more effectively impart their acquired knowledge and skills to students.

Table 3

Reported internationalized activities

University	Internationalizing curriculum	Staff mobility	Collaborative research and publications	International degree programs	English-speaking environment
A	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
B	✓	✓	✓		
C	✓	✓	✓		
D	✓	✓	✓		
E	✓	✓	✓		
F	✓	✓	✓		
G	✓	✓	✓		
H	✓	✓	✓		✓
K	✓	✓	✓		
L	✓	✓	✓		
M	✓	✓	✓		✓
N	✓	✓	✓		
Frequency	12	12	12	12	3

The method for developing institutional-level internationalization strategies

All university leaders regarded partnerships with highly-ranked foreign universities as crucial for internationalizing and enhancing the reputation of domestic universities. As explained by the leader of university B, the strategy

is akin to "standing on a giant's shoulders." The president of university H further emphasized the benefits of this approach, stating that by establishing partnerships with larger foreign universities, smaller ones would also be inclined to collaborate with their university. This indicates that if a domestic university successfully partners with one of the top universities globally, it can garner trust from lower-ranked foreign universities, making it easier to establish collaborative programs with them as well.

The method for developing institutional-level internationalization strategies

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Only three of the universities surveyed demonstrated explicit strategies for selecting international partners, enhancing staff competencies to meet global standards, and monitoring international activities for resource allocation and anticipated outcomes (see table 4). Conversely, the remaining ten universities described their approaches to internationalization as largely unplanned or opportunistic. Their methods for choosing foreign partner institutions were often ad hoc, relying on personal networks or chance encounters. This ad hoc approach extended to research, publications, and international degree programs, where limited staff capabilities led universities to depend heavily on foreign partners for expertise, curriculum development, and sometimes funding. While international programs typically involved a mix of domestic and foreign faculty, there was a gradual transition to employing suitably qualified domestic staff, often with degrees earned abroad. Financial constraints frequently impeded university leaders' efforts to foster research collaborations, with some projects only made possible through the generosity of foreign sponsors and scholars. Financial limitations also restricted universities' control over research project directions, as funding sources often dictated project themes, which may or may not align with the universities' priorities. As exemplified by the leader of University M, reliance on voluntary contributions from foreign scholars was common, highlighting the challenge of managing international activities amidst financial constraints.

Table 4

Reported approach to internationalization strategies

University	Internationalization was designed as		Approach to internationalization	
	a separate plan with measurable outcomes	components of the university's general strategy	Systematic/ Planned	Unplanned/ Opportunistic
A		✓		✓
B	✓			✓
C		✓		✓
D		✓		✓
E		✓		✓
F		✓		✓
G		✓		✓
H	✓		✓	
K		✓		✓
L		✓		✓
M	✓		✓	
N		✓		✓
Frequency	3	9	2	10

All the universities surveyed said that they face challenges due to not having enough money and because educators and students don't speak English well. These problems make it hard for them to do international activities. This matches what other studies have found. When international activities mostly involve local students and not many foreign students, it's tough for universities to blend cultures because local students don't get many chances to interact with foreign students.

The interviews showed that universities really want their staff to publish internationally, so they use different methods to encourage them. One common way is by giving them money when they publish a paper in an international journal. The amount of money varies depending on how well-known the journal is. But even though international publications can boost a university's reputation, they're expensive to pursue. This is a big deal because most of a university's money comes from student fees. And according to all the university leaders interviewed, research activities that lead to international publications usually don't make enough money to cover their costs. Some universities are even cutting back on spending to deal with these financial challenges. This suggests that the universities we looked at struggle to get funding for research and publications from sources other than student fees. This creates problems for keeping up with research and publications because the money they get can change depending on how many students enroll. This is different from what's seen in Western Europe, Eastern, and some Southeastern Asian countries, where governments and industries often fund research (Kwiek, 2004; Howe, 2009; Beerkens, 2010). None of the university leaders we talked to mentioned getting funding for research from industries. Instead, collaborations between universities and companies mostly

focus on providing internships and job opportunities for students. This lack of collaboration for research between universities and businesses matches what other studies have found.

Conclusion

The outcomes of our investigation into the perspectives of leaders in Uzbek universities regarding internationalization offer valuable insights into the central inquiries of this study. It appears that economic motives primarily drive the internationalization efforts of these universities. However, their strategies in this regard seem to lack coherence, leading to ambiguity in their overall direction, which could impede their global competitiveness. Additionally, our research sheds light on the obstacles confronting these universities, such as inadequate human and financial resources and a limited proficiency in English among staff. Moreover, there is a notable absence of opportunities for domestic students to engage with their international peers. By highlighting these issues, we contribute to the academic discourse by drawing attention to the potential impediments to sustained knowledge generation through research and scholarly publications, particularly within the context of universities in developing nations where resources are constrained.

To attract more foreign students, government support could be directed towards domestic universities to establish programs akin to Erasmus, especially with nations like ASEAN members, as part of a regionalization strategy. Additionally, universities could tap into the economic potential of academic tourism in Uzbekistan's most picturesque regions. To ensure the sustainability of research and publication endeavors, fostering partnerships with businesses in research and development endeavors should be encouraged, allowing for the application of knowledge and skills acquired through international initiatives for the country's benefit.

While it's beneficial to draw insights from successful models in other educational systems, Uzbek universities should adapt these practices to fit the local context. Looking ahead, it's crucial for domestic universities to collaborate in identifying priority areas for internationalization efforts, necessitating coordinated action among institutions to optimize the use of limited resources. Initiatives such as interconnected library networks, expertise sharing networks, and freely accessible online learning materials represent avenues for collaboration to leverage academic resources. With the rise of online learning platforms due to the pandemic, enhancing virtual mobility activities with foreign universities becomes imperative. This would enable cultural exchange opportunities for all students, regardless of their backgrounds.

Subsequent research should investigate the effects of internationalization strategies implemented by Uzbek universities on both the institutions themselves and various stakeholders, an aspect not addressed in our study. Analyzing these impacts would provide university leaders with valuable

insights into the efficacy and efficiency of their international initiatives, enabling them to adapt policies as necessary. Such insights could prove beneficial for universities operating in resource-constrained environments within the country.

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