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Abstract

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This article presents a comparative analysis of internationalization strategies at two leading higher education institutions (HEIs) in Central and Eastern Europe: Universitatea Babeş-Bolyai (UBB) in Romania and the University of Warsaw (UW) in Poland. Drawing on formal policy documents from the two institutions, the study employs content and discourse analysis to examine how institutional visions, goals, and actions articulate internationalization as a strategic imperative. Findings reveal both convergence and divergence in approach. UBB adopts a pragmatic, five-year operational strategy oriented toward measurable growth in international student recruitment, expansion of foreign-language programs, mobility diversification, and comprehensive student services. Its initiatives, such as the Françubb francophone project and alumni ambassador networks, underscore a market-driven, niche-focused model shaped by national legal constraints on joint degrees. By contrast, UW embeds internationalization structurally within its broader institutional strategy, envisioning joint and multiple-degree programs, multilingual curriculum expansion, and mobility as a permanent feature of study. Anchored in the 4EU+ European University Alliance, UW positions itself as a European trend-setter, aiming to integrate internationalization into its institutional culture through systemic reforms and cultural transformation. The comparison highlights shared emphases on alliances, mobility, curricular internationalization, and student integration, while also underscoring distinctive pathways shaped by national contexts and institutional ambitions. UBB exemplifies operational pragmatism within constraints, while UW embodies aspirational integration aligned with European higher education reforms. Together, the cases demonstrate the diversity of internationalization models in newer EU member states, illustrating how HEIs translate global imperatives into locally responsive strategies.

1. Introduction

Internationalization has become an imperative for higher education institutions (HEIs) across the world. Under pressure from the ever-increasing and intensifying global race to attract academic talent, generate cutting-edge research, secure top placements in world university rankings, boost their prestige and credentials, and expand their worldwide collaboration networks, HEIs have made internationalization a strategic and instrumental priority in their efforts to boost their competitiveness on the world stage.

Driven by the global economic competition that oblige HEIs to define their relevance for their national economies as laboratories preparing their graduates for the local labor markets, universities are compelled to draft internationalization plans aiming to instrumentalize, through multiple interrelated actions and objectives, their aspirations for excellence, innovation, reputation and attraction among their peers in the global higher education landscape (Buckner, 2019).

This study focuses on the internationalization aspirations, actions and goals expressed in strategic plans implemented at Universitatea Babeş-Bolyai (UBB) in Cluj-Napoca, Romania and Uniwersytet Warszawski (UW) in Warsaw, Poland. It seeks to answer the following research questions:

- 1) How do internationalization strategies compare across two specific institutional settings in the newer EU member states?
- 2) In what ways do institutional strategies mirror each other in interpreting internationalization as a strategic objective?

This research brings attention to geographic and institutional contexts that remain under-researched, using content analysis of formal internationalization strategies at HEIs in two newer EU member states. As noted by de Wit et al. (2017) and Mammadova et al. (2025), research on internationalization has primarily centered on the English-speaking world and Western Europe, with limited focus on “peripheral” regions,



areas that, according to the authors, are expected to play an increasingly influential role in shaping the future of higher education internationalization. Examining how institutional strategies are formulated and articulated at these two institutions, offers valuable insight into the institutional cultures, professional practices, and mindsets that shape internationalization efforts in Romanian and Polish higher education. It also offers contrasting models of internationalization in higher education locales that have adopted and implemented this global imperative relatively recently, given their transition from their common (post)communist trajectories that had restricted their participation in the global higher education landscape until the 1990s.

2. Internationalization in Higher Education

Over the past three to four decades, scholarly engagement with the internationalization of higher education has produced an extensive body of literature (Fumasoli, 2021). This surge in interest coincides with the globalizing forces that gained momentum following the end of the Cold War, fostering an increasingly interconnected knowledge economy that has encouraged educational institutions worldwide to pursue international linkages and collaboration (de Wit & Deca, 2020). Nevertheless, some scholars argue that internationalization, in various forms, has existed since the earliest days of medieval universities. During that era, both students and scholars traveled throughout European Christendom to pursue their studies, a movement facilitated by Latin as the common language of instruction and by a shared curriculum and examination structure (Knight & de Wit, 1995). While assessing the extent of such early forms of internationalization through contemporary definitions remains challenging, modern forms of international academic engagement and exchanges, vastly more complex in scope, continues to serve as foundational elements of comprehensive internationalization strategies in higher education (de Wit & Deca, 2020).

Accordingly, this research is situated in the broader scholarly discourse on internationalization, recognizing that, although a range of definitions for the term exist, they are more productively viewed as complementary rather than conflicting (Lee & Stensaker, 2021). One of the earliest and most widely cited definitions described internationalization as “the process of integrating an international/intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service functions of the institution” (Knight, 1993, p. 21; see

also Knight, 2004). Building on this, van der Wende (1997) proposed a broader, systemic perspective, defining internationalization as “any systematic effort aimed at making higher education responsive to the requirements and challenges related to the globalization of societies, economy and labour markets” (p. 18). Later, Knight (2008) revised her earlier position, offering a more inclusive definition: “internationalization at the national/sector/institutional levels is the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of higher education at the institutional and national levels” (p. 21). A more comprehensive formulation was offered by de Wit et al. (2015), who defined internationalization as “the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society” (p. 29). This article adopts the latter, more expansive conceptualization to guide its analysis of internationalization strategies.

While this article’s primary focus is on how institutions articulate internationalization strategies, it is important to acknowledge that scholarly literature on higher education internationalization has significantly expanded since early research, which largely concentrated on mobility in the context of globalization. Over time, research has evolved to encompass comparative perspectives, such as the tension between competition and cooperation (van der Wende, 2001), and has explored themes including internationalization at home (Alexiadou et al., 2023), curriculum internationalization (Shahjahan et al., 2024; Stein, 2017), the role of internationalization in global university rankings (Buckner, 2022; Hauptman Komotar, 2019), and its influence on institutional transformation and governance structures (Kovačević & Dagen, 2022; Wright, 2022). Other studies have examined how internationalization can foster more inclusive and holistic approaches (Rajkhowa, 2024).

Still, academic mobility has remained a central and consistent theme within this evolving literature. Part of the reason for this ongoing focus is the visibility of physical mobility, that is, students studying abroad for a time at host institutions, and faculty and staff traveling for teaching, research, or conferences, which Teichler (2015) describes as “the most visible international activity and it is in the forefront of programmes aiming to promote internationalisation”

(p. S8). In the European context, academic mobility has also been reinforced at the policy level through the European Commission's active efforts to increase mobility rates, with the goal of having 23% of European students participate in mobility experiences by 2030 (Mitchell, 2024a). These efforts are further supported by the Erasmus+ Programme and the establishment of the European Universities alliance (Mitchell, 2024b).

Therefore, it is no coincidence that institutional internationalization strategies place particular emphasis on academic mobility as a core driver of global engagement, although this is certainly not the only factor or dimension of a modern internationalization strategy that takes into consideration the complexity of an array of interrelated connections, frameworks, partnerships and collaborations necessary to sustain long-term internationalization in higher education. Against this background, this study examines UBB and UW to reveal the multidimensionality of internationalization strategies in two distinct national settings that form part of a broader higher education nexus, as both institutions are members of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

3. Institutional Settings

The two universities included in this study, UBB and UW, were selected for their importance in the higher education landscape of their respective countries, Romania and Poland. Their comparability in size, research status and reputation make them ideal sites for the examination of internationalization strategies, as illustrative cases for the higher education context of both countries.

3.1. Universitatea Babeş-Bolyai

Tracing its origins to a Jesuit college founded in 1581 under the name *Academia Claudiopolitana Societatis Jesu*, UBB holds the distinction of being both the oldest and largest higher education institution in Romania (Universitatea Babeş-Bolyai, n.d.). However, in its modern form as part of the modern state of Romania, UBB was founded in 1919 (Petrescu et al., 2018). Today, the university comprises 22 academic divisions and offers around 528 degree programs in the three main languages of Transylvania—Romanian, Hungarian, and German—alongside programs in English and French, underscoring its tradition and ongoing commitment to multiculturalism. UBB currently enrolls more than 50,000 students (UBB, 2024a).

Given its size, UBB operates through a broad and complex administrative framework. Central to this structure is the priority placed on internationalization, coordinated by the *Centrul de Cooperări Internaționale* (CCI; the Center for International Cooperation). CCI consists of 24 staff members distributed across four sub-units, each addressing different aspects of international cooperation. Within this framework, the office staff play a pivotal role in formulating, implementing and managing the university's internationalization strategy. This office also works closely with mobility coordinators designated by each academic unit (colleges and departments), who oversee tasks such as candidate selection for mobility placements (CCI, n.d.).

Aligned with UBB's administrative capacity and CCI's internationalization mandate, the university maintains 217 active agreements with partner institutions in 53 countries. Erasmus+ mobilities account for a significant portion of internationalization efforts and activities at UBB. In 2023, for instance, the university facilitated 2,005 student mobilities, of which 830 were outgoing and 581 incoming under Erasmus+. That same year, UBB recorded 1,728 faculty mobilities, with 868 supported through Erasmus+ funding (UBB, 2024a).

Although UBB is the largest higher education institution in Romania, its internationalization activities also reflect a broader, gradual shift across Romanian higher education over the past two decades toward greater internationalization through Erasmus+ and other integrated educational programs (Becker & Salajan, 2024; Salajan & Chiper, 2012).

3.2. Uniwersytet Warszawski

Founded in 1816 through an imperial decree by Russian Tsar and Polish monarch Alexander I, the University of Warsaw (UW) is the Poland's largest research university, enrolling over 38,000 undergraduate and graduate students during the 2023-2024 academic year, approximately 3,700 of whom were international students (UW, 2024a). UW's academic infrastructure is comprised of 25 faculties, 30 academic and research units and 4 doctoral schools, with 8,000 employees, 4,500 of which as academic staff (UW, 2024d).

In 2024, the university reported 400 active international partnerships agreements with institutions located in 77 countries, resulting in 1,991 exchanges through the Erasmus+ Programme (UW, 2024b). Partly in response to these partnerships, UW offers 44 English-language programs and 22 double or multiple

joint degree programs with institutional partners from across the world (UW, 2024d).

Another signature initiative highlighting UW's internationalization efforts consists in its participation as a partner institution in the +4EU Alliance along six other universities from Czechia, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy and Switzerland. Through this alliance, which conferred the European University status by the European Commission, UW and its partner institutions seek to: a) enhance faculty, student, researcher and administrative staff mobilities; b) collaborate on a common educational framework, and; c) contribute to the further integration and sustainability of European higher education (UW, 2024c).

4. Methodology

The overarching methodological approach for this research study adopts elements of a comparative vertical case study design (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2014), adapted to examine formal policy documents on internationalization enacted at UBB and UW. To answer the study's research questions, this approach is instrumentalized through a content and discourse analysis of policy narratives, texts, and/or legislation. Consequently, the primary sources selected for analysis, serving as the empirical evidence for this study, had to meet a fundamental criterion: they had to consist of formal policy instruments with the power to direct and implement internationalization strategies at higher education institutions in the two national settings. As such, UBB's five-year internationalization strategic plan for 2025-2029 and UW's ten-year overall institutional strategic plan for 2023-2032, with an embedded internationalization dimension, were selected as the primary sources for this comparative analysis.

Each primary source was subjected to content and discourse analysis to tease out the policy-maker's 'utterances' (Gee, 2014) and to overcome the 'information barriers' (Krippendorff, 2018) that the enacted policy may pose to the researcher. In taking this approach to examining the primary sources, we focused on the rhetorical devices (Salajan, 2018) that, in context, elicited notions of an explicit and implicit intent to formulate and articulate internationalization goal, objectives and actions by the policy framers. While the UBB document was available in the English language, the UW document was translated from the original Polish language to English via the DeepL translation software, considered a reliable and accurate digital translator (Polakova & Klimova, 2023).

5. Findings

5.1. UBB: Internationalization Strategy 2025-2029

UBB's internationalization strategy is framed as a five-year operational plan that builds on the university's strong reputation as Romania's largest and most internationalized university. The strategy is explicitly tied to UBB's CCI, described as "a veritable foreign ministry of the university" (UBB, 2024b, p. 4), which coordinates all aspects of international cooperation and partnerships. The plan sets clear objectives to increase international student enrollment, both for full degrees and for mobility programs. Erasmus+ plays a central role, with UBB committing not only to expand numbers but also to embrace innovative forms such as blended, short-term, virtual, inclusive and green mobility. There is a strong emphasis on the digitalization of mobility processes to simplify administration and enhance inclusivity.

Another pillar is the expansion of teaching in foreign languages. UBB already offers programs in English, French, German, and Hungarian, but the strategy underscores the need for growth in English and French in particular, supported by international accreditation. The development of new language-based programs is explicitly linked to international recruitment and global visibility.

The university places significant emphasis on recruitment and marketing efforts, detailing practical tools, such as participation in international education fairs, online webinars, recruitment agency networks, and partnerships with high schools abroad. The strategy also calls for an international alumni ambassador network, enabling graduates to promote UBB globally. Within this context, the *Françubb* initiative is highlighted as a flagship project to strengthen UBB's francophone identity and ties with the Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie (AUF). German-speaking countries are also identified as priority recruitment markets.

UBB's strategy pays careful attention to student services and integration, presenting a long list of support measures, such as visa and residence assistance, tutoring and mentoring schemes, academic counseling, housing services, and access to career centers. This service orientation reflects the university's aim to improve not only recruitment but also retention and satisfaction of international students.

Finally, UBB identifies challenges such as national-level legal barriers that prevent joint or

double degree programs. While this limits some structural forms of internationalization, the strategy compensates by focusing on program expansion, marketing, mobility, and alliances. In terms of alliances, UBB emphasizes active participation in EUTOPIA, EUA, AUF, SGroup, and The Guild, not only as memberships but as platforms for raising visibility and co-developing projects. In short, UBB's plan is pragmatic and operational, balancing ambition with awareness of external constraints. It aims to achieve measurable growth in international enrollment, strengthen linguistic and cultural niches, and provide robust support services for students, while leveraging alliances for visibility and collaboration.

5.2. UW: Strategy for 2023-2032 (Internationalization Dimensions)

UW embeds internationalization as a core dimension of its 10-year institutional strategy, making it a fundamental condition for academic excellence. Its strategy integrates internationalization across education, research, and community-building, presenting it both as a goal and as a structural feature of the university's future.

A central priority is the development of joint, double, and multiple-degree programs with strategic partners. The strategy envisions curricula that transcend institutional boundaries, deepening academic integration across borders. In this regard, UW places special emphasis on its leadership role within the 4EU+ European University Alliance, which it describes as its "flagship" for internationalization. The alliance is not just a network but a framework for creating shared modules, joint research teams, and long-term institutional cooperation.

The strategy also calls for significant growth in English-medium and other foreign-language offerings, especially at the master's and doctoral levels. By diversifying its multilingual curriculum, UW aims to attract and integrate a more global student body, while simultaneously enhancing the intercultural competences of its Polish students.

Mobility is framed as a structural expectation, as the university commits to making international exchange "a permanent feature of university education" (UW, 2023, p. 30). This includes not only physical exchanges but also the institutionalization of digital mobility to broaden participation. Staff mobility is emphasized alongside student mobility, with the strategy viewing it as essential for professional development and for embedding international practices into the university's culture.

Integration into the community is another key pillar of UW's internationalization strategy, highlighting the importance of building a multicultural and multilingual environment, aiming to ensure that foreign students and staff are not seen as outsiders, but as full members of the university community. Internationalization is thus framed not only as a recruitment tool, but also as a transformational vector of institutional culture. The strategy also highlights institutional enablers, namely, simplifying procedures, diversifying funding sources, and ensuring that documentation and communications are available in English. This signals UW's recognition that bureaucratic and linguistic barriers can undermine internationalization efforts if not addressed systematically.

Finally, UW is explicit about its ambition, describing internationalization in aspirational terms as a prerequisite for achieving the highest academic standards and positioning UW as a leader and trend-setter in European higher education. In summary, UW's strategy is structural, long-term, and integration-focused, prioritizing joint degrees, alliance-driven collaboration, and embedding mobility and multilingualism as permanent features of education and research. As such, internationalization is conceived of as an intrinsic element of excellence, not just as a tool for growth.

6. Discussion and Implications

In light of the above findings, this section offers a comparison of the internationalization strategies at UBB and UW. While both institutions place internationalization at the core of their missions, their approaches differ in scope, emphasis, and response to contextual factors. Below is a structured comparative analysis highlighting similarities, differences, and emerging themes from the two institutions' strategic internationalization plans. In addition, Table 1 presents in a side-by-side comparison the core elements of the two institutions' internationalization strategies.

6.1. Similarities in Internationalization Strategies

Both UBB and the UW articulate internationalization as a central driver of institutional development rather than a peripheral activity. Each frames mobility, partnerships, and the expansion of foreign-language provision as essential to building visibility and reputation.

Partnerships and alliances occupy a particularly prominent role in both strategies. Thus, UBB highlights its involvement in European and global

associations such as EUTOPIA, EUA, AUF, the SGroup, and The Guild, presenting these memberships as multipliers for influence, visibility, and capacity building. UW, similarly, positions its role within the 4EU+ European University Alliance as a vehicle for systemic integration, stressing joint educational modules, research cooperation, and student/staff exchange as ways to establish itself as a trend-setter among European research universities. Both institutions, then, are leveraging transnational networks to enhance not only their international reputation but also to secure practical benefits for their communities.

Mobility is another converging theme, as both universities recognize mobility as more than just an add-on, describing it as a defining feature of contemporary higher education. UBB sets clear operational targets for Erasmus+ exchanges, calls for diversification of mobility opportunities, and emphasizes digitalization, inclusivity, and “green” mobility as ways to widen participation. UW goes further in framing mobility as a permanent component of its educational offerings, embedding it structurally into curricula, and explicitly promoting digital/virtual forms of exchange. Staff mobility is also underscored by both institutions, tied to building institutional capacity and exposure.

A further shared strand is the expansion of teaching in foreign languages. UBB stresses the need to expand English- and French-language offerings, explicitly tying this to recruitment goals and international accreditation. UW prioritizes growth in English-medium courses, especially at the master’s level, and emphasizes the development of programs taught in other foreign languages, integrating them into a multicultural, multilingual educational environment.

Finally, both strategies are attentive to the student experience and community integration. UBB lays out comprehensive service infrastructures for incoming students, including visa assistance, tutoring, and access to career services. UW also focuses on integration but stresses the creation of a truly multicultural academic community in which international students and staff feel fully part of campus life. Both view student support as an avenue to ensure not only attraction but also retention and positive reputation-building.

6.2. Differences in Internationalization Strategies

Notwithstanding these similarities, the two strategies diverge in scope, emphasis, and structural orientation. Thus, UW takes a long-term, structural approach, embedding internationalization into its

overarching institutional strategy for 2023-2032. It treats internationalization as a fundamental condition for achieving academic excellence and explicitly sets the goal of becoming a European trend-setter. A central component of this ambition is the creation of joint, double, and multiple degree programs with key partners. In contrast, UBB’s five-year plan is more operationally oriented and acknowledges external constraints. The university openly notes the legal barriers in Romania that complicate the establishment of joint or double degrees. As a result, UBB places more immediate emphasis on recruitment, the expansion of international-language programs, and maximizing existing frameworks such as Erasmus+.

Another distinction lies in the marketing and recruitment dimension. UBB devotes significant attention to international student recruitment strategies, such as attending education fairs, building agency networks, running targeted webinars, and developing an international alumni-ambassador network. Moreover, it defines language-market priorities through its *Françubb* francophone initiative and its outreach to German-speaking countries. UW’s strategy is less focused on external marketing tactics, focusing instead on structural integration into European initiatives, curricular redesign, and systemic alignment with partners. Its path to internationalization is less about recruitment pipelines and more about programmatic innovation and collaborative capacity.

The depth and breadth of student services also reflect this divergence. Thus, UBB sets out a highly detailed roadmap for international student support, including orientation programs, mentoring schemes, housing services, and psychological counseling. This service orientation aligns with its more immediate enrollment growth targets. In contrast, UW emphasizes integration into a multicultural community but focuses less on the granular service infrastructure, and more on institutional reforms that create a welcoming, sustainable environment.

Finally, the institutions’ signature initiatives differ to a considerable degree. UBB explicitly promotes *Françubb*, a flagship initiative that aligns with its membership in the Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie, signaling a linguistic and cultural niche strategy. Instead, UW focuses on integration into the 4EU+ Alliance, presenting it as a structural vehicle for research and teaching collaboration at the European level. These initiatives reflect differing approaches, with UBB targeting specific linguistic/geographic

niches, while UW is signaling an intent for broader European structural integration.

Table 1

Visual Comparison of Internationalization Themes at UBB and UW

Theme	UBB	UW
<i>Strategic Scope</i>	Five-year internationalization-specific plan with operational targets and recruitment tactics.	Ten-year university-wide strategy; positions itself as a European trend-setter.
<i>Partnerships & Alliances</i>	Active in EUTOPIA, EUA, AUF, SGroup, The Guild.	Anchors internationalization in 4EU+ Alliance.
<i>Mobility</i>	Erasmus+ targets; inclusive, digital, and green mobility.	Mobility as a permanent feature of study; physical + virtual exchanges.
<i>Foreign-Language Provision</i>	Expansion of English- and French-language programs; accreditation goals.	Growth of English-medium (esp. master's) and other foreign-language offerings.
<i>Joint/Dual Degrees</i>	Legal constraints hinder development of joint degrees.	Actively pursues joint, double, and multiple degrees with partners.
<i>Recruitment & Marketing</i>	Strong focus: fairs, agency networks, alumni ambassadors, <i>Françubb</i> strategy.	Less emphasis on marketing; focus on alliances and program innovation.
<i>Student Services</i>	Comprehensive infrastructure: visa support, orientation, mentoring, housing, counseling.	Emphasis on integration into multicultural community; less detail on services.
<i>Signature Initiatives</i>	<i>Françubb</i> francophone initiative; German-speaking pipelines.	4EU+ Alliance as flagship initiative for integration and visibility.
<i>Institutional Enablers</i>	CCI as central hub for funding and coordination.	Calls for sustainable funding, streamlined processes, and internal capacity building.

Formulated succinctly, several common themes clearly emerge from the two documents:

- *Alliance-driven visibility and capacity:* Both universities see international networks and alliances as core engines of internationalization.
- *Mobility as a defining feature:* Student and staff mobility, in both physical and digital forms, is

central to international engagement and intercultural competence.

- *Curricular internationalization:* Expanding programs in English and other foreign languages is viewed as a necessary precondition for attracting and retaining international talent.
- *Building inclusive, multicultural campuses:* Internationalization is not only about recruitment but also about integration and intercultural exchange, ensuring that internationalization is a community-wide process.
- *Internal capacity and enablers:* Streamlining administrative processes, ensuring sustainable funding, and building strong institutional structures are seen as prerequisites for successful internationalization.
- At the same time, divergent themes highlight the different institutional and national contexts:
- *Structural vs. operational focus:* UW pursues systemic, long-term internationalization embedded in its institutional DNA, while UBB focuses on practical, short-term levers and acknowledges contextual constraints.
- *Recruitment vs. partnership emphasis:* UBB invests heavily in marketing and recruitment pipelines, while UW emphasizes structural partnerships and joint degrees as its pathway to visibility.
- *Policy environment sensitivity:* UBB explicitly negotiates legal and national constraints, while UW positions itself aspirationally as a trend-setter.
- *Geolinguistic niches vs. pan-European integration:* UBB elevates French- and German-language initiatives; UW emphasizes its European alliance integration without singling out linguistic markets.

As these contrasting themes suggest, the two institutions' strategies, taken as illustrative case studies for their respective national higher education contexts, highlight the diversity of pathways through which European universities navigate global engagement. Thus, they show that internationalization is not a uniform template, but a dynamic process shaped by institutional vision, national policy environments, and the balance between immediate opportunities and long-term aspirations.

6.3. Implementation Challenges and Critical Reflections

While the strategies of UBB and UW provide compelling and, in many ways, complementary visions

of internationalization, a closer look reveals several challenges and contradictions that complicate their realization. Strategic plans often operate at the level of aspiration, but implementation is shaped by uneven capacities, contested priorities, and structural constraints.

A first set of challenges relates to resources and institutional capacity. Expanding foreign-language programs requires not only curriculum redesign but also sustained investment in staff development, recruitment, and accreditation processes. Mobility targets similarly depend on financial support, administrative efficiency, and student readiness, which may not be evenly available across all faculties. Bureaucratic inertia and fragmented internal structures can slow the translation of ambitious goals into operational realities. Moreover, the volatility of national higher education policy, whether through shifting regulations, fluctuating funding, or changing political priorities, further complicates long-term planning.

Second, there is the risk that internationalization becomes more rhetorical than practical. Scholars have warned that internationalization is at times deployed as a symbolic marker of prestige rather than as a fully integrated institutional process (Knight, 2011). Strategy documents may celebrate mobility, alliances, or multilingualism, yet implementation can be fragmented, uneven, or limited to specific niches. The gap between rhetoric and practice raises questions about how deeply internationalization penetrates the everyday academic life of students and staff, beyond high-profile initiatives and policy statements.

Third, the pursuit of global visibility and competitiveness can obscure issues of equity and inclusion. Heavy emphasis on rankings, partnerships with elite universities, and recruitment from targeted linguistic or regional markets risks reproducing existing hierarchies rather than broadening access. Similarly, prioritizing certain languages or programs may marginalize disciplines or groups less aligned with international benchmarks. Framing internationalization primarily as a market-driven strategy can conflict with universities' social and civic missions, especially in contexts where promoting access and supporting local communities remain pressing priorities.

Finally, the University of Warsaw's case illustrates a revealing paradox. While UW presents a highly sophisticated internationalization strategy that positions the university as a European trend-setter, the

strategy itself is published only in Polish. This reflects a strong orientation toward domestic stakeholders and reinforces the institution's embeddedness in its national context. Yet it simultaneously limits the strategy's accessibility to international audiences, including potential partners and students. Far from being a trivial issue of translation, this choice highlights how the discursive framing of internationalization can contradict its stated aspirations. It underscores the tension between national accountability and global visibility, and illustrates how internationalization is always embedded in specific cultural and linguistic contexts.

Taken together, these challenges highlight that internationalization strategies must be read critically, not only as policy aspirations but also as situated practices subject to negotiation and compromise. They demonstrate that internationalization is not a uniform template, but a contested and uneven process shaped by institutional capacity, national policy environments, and the interplay between global ambitions and local realities. This underscores that internationalization cannot be understood as a single, uniform process, but must be seen as a set of differentiated institutional responses to evolving opportunities and constraints.

7. Conclusion

The internationalization strategies UBB and UW demonstrate two distinct yet complementary approaches to positioning European universities in a rapidly globalizing higher education landscape.

UBB's five-year plan is pragmatic, operational, and growth-oriented, reflecting both the university's ambition to expand its international profile and its recognition of external constraints, particularly Romania's restrictive legal framework for joint degrees. By focusing on expanding foreign-language programs, recruiting through targeted linguistic and geographic markets, and developing a robust infrastructure of student services, UBB positions itself as an institution committed to immediate and tangible results. Its use of tools like *Françubb* and alumni ambassador networks illustrates an entrepreneurial and market-driven approach to internationalization, while participation in networks like The Guild and EUTOPIA signals an awareness of the reputational and collaborative benefits of alliances. This resonates with Knight's (2004) characterization of internationalization as both a process and a set of activities tailored to institutional contexts.

In contrast, UW's ten-year strategy situates internationalization as a structural condition for

academic excellence. It aspires to move beyond recruitment and services to embed internationalization into the very architecture of the university. By foregrounding joint and multiple-degree programs, staff and student mobility as permanent features of study, and the central role of the 4EU+ Alliance, UW positions itself not simply as a participant in internationalization but as a European “trend-setter.” Its strategy is characterized by long-term systemic integration, cultural transformation into a multilingual and multicultural community, and a strong emphasis on institutional reform to remove barriers to engagement. This aligns with the ‘comprehensive internationalization’ framework articulated by Hudzik (2011), which emphasizes integration across teaching, research, and service functions.

The comparison reveals a spectrum of internationalization strategies within Europe. On the one hand, UBB exemplifies operational pragmatism, focusing on marketing, recruitment, and service provision as levers of growth. On the other hand, UW represents aspirational integration, embedding internationalization into its institutional culture through alliances, joint curricula, and structural reforms. Both strategies are context-driven, UBB adapting to legal and policy limitations, UW leveraging its freedom to align with European integration agendas. This reflects de Wit et al.’s (2015) argument that internationalization is not monolithic but must be understood as differentiated responses to institutional and national conditions.

The picture that emerges from this analysis does not point to a dichotomy, but to a complementarity of internationalization strategy models. UBB’s focus on targeted recruitment and student support responds to immediate market pressures and positions it competitively within specific linguistic and regional niches. UW’s alliance-based structural reforms seek to redefine what it means to be an internationalized university in Europe, emphasizing leadership, sustainability, and integration. Together, they illustrate how universities in different national contexts can pursue internationalization not as a one-size-fits-all model, but as a tailored response to their opportunities, constraints, and ambitions, echoing Altbach and Knight’s (2007) call to understand internationalization in diverse global and regional contexts.

Ultimately, both institutions affirm that internationalization is not optional but a strategic imperative, whether pursued through growth-driven

pragmatism or integration-driven aspiration. Their approaches highlight the evolving diversity of European higher education, where universities balance external constraints, internal capacities, and global ambitions to craft strategies that serve their unique identities and trajectories. Their strategies enrich the diversity of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), demonstrating that internationalization is not a uniform project but a dynamic process shaped by vision, context, and opportunity.

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