

## UNWE INTERNATIONALISATION: SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

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### Abstract

*The article presents a project on the internationalisation of a Bulgarian economic university within the context of the pandemic, educational trends and policies, as well as a strive for global recognition in the spheres of academic and research activity. It makes an overview of the concept of internationalisation in higher education and the approaches and strategies to internationalisation developed and implemented by higher education institutions and educational experts. The in-depth research is expected to provide the basis for the updating and optimisation of the internationalisation strategy of the University of National and World Economy for the period 2020 – 2025.*

**Keywords:** higher education, internationalisation, internationalisation of higher education

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### Global context

Due to social, political and economic reasons, nowadays the internationalisation of higher education institutions (HEIs) has an increasingly significant role for their successful existence and development. Internationalisation processes, in which some universities have a centuries-old practice, encompass almost all higher education institutions, both in academic and research work, due to the drive to attract international students, strengthen the exchange of students and university faculty and administration, intensification of scientific cooperation, improvement of relations with the business, dissemination and popularisation of achievements and good practices additionally leading to enhanced authority and greater recognition in the educational sphere and a more substantial contribution to the knowledge-based economy.

In its hundred-year history, the University of National and World Economy has implemented various internationalisation policies influenced by national traditions, political context, socio-economic features of a given period, as well

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as world trends. At the moment, a detailed strategy for internationalisation has been developed aiming at the optimisation of the academic activity and the establishment of the institutional authority in the EU and worldwide. In the context of the pandemic of the last two years, however, circumstances arose which, along with natural social processes, led to the implementation of different approaches to dealing with the emerging crisis and revealed new opportunities to increase the potential of internationalisation and, accordingly, to expand its scope as well as diversifying strategies and tactics for organisational development and recognition.

How has our university internationalised in the last half century? How has it historically responded to change and innovation, what competitive advantages has it used and how successful have its specific policies been? On the other hand, how do they fit into global educational trends? How has UNWE been performing against other universities and in what way does it stand out could be revealed by the in-depth analysis of its practice, as well as of the practices of the higher education institutions (HEIs) from all continents. In addition, the findings would provide a useful corrective to optimise internationalisation and outline its contributions in comparison with other national and international HEIs. These are some of the questions at the core of the present scientific research placed in the context of the current global circumstances.

## **Research on the internationalisation of higher education institutions**

### ***Overview of the concept development and objectives***

In the collection “Bridges to the Future: Strategies for Internationalizing Higher Education”, Klasek and his colleagues along with the Association of International Educational Administrators (Klasek et al. and the Association of International Educational Administrators, 1992) sets to facilitate the implementation of the framework for higher education internationalisation developed by Jack Van den Water and Burkhart Holzner (1990a, 1990b). What is more, Klasek suggests doing it by preparing implementation strategies. He refers to Wesley Posvar, president emeritus of the University of Pittsburgh. As early as 1978, Posvar (as cited by Posvar 2012) said that there are excellent universities without faculties of law and medicine, or without football teams, but there are no excellent universities without an international dimension. The author collective emphasises the fact that the foundation of the Association of International Educational Administrators in 1981 was due to the perceived need for internationalisation in higher education. It notes that a decade later, the transformation of internationalisation from a peripheral activity into an integral part of education was observed, as well as the

scientific activity and mission of higher education institutions in the United States in the context of a world society based on scientific progress, modern technology and civic engagement.

In 1999, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) published its Programme on Institutional Governance in Higher Education “Quality and Internationalisation in Higher Education”, aimed to promote policies intended to maximise sustainable economic development and employment, and a rising standard of life in the member countries while maintaining financial stability and thus contributing to the development of the world economy; stimulating stable economic expansion in both member and non-OECD countries; contributing to the expansion of world trade on the basis of multilateral cooperation and non-discrimination, as well as in accordance with international commitments. The specific tasks of the programme include the promotion of exceptional professionalism in the management of higher education institutions by stimulating exchanges in research, training and information, as well as facilitating the dissemination of practical methods and approaches in management.

In 2012, Hudzik and McCarthy publish “Leading Comprehensive Internationalization: Strategy and Tactics for Action” as representatives of NAFSA: Association of International Educators. They define comprehensive internationalisation (CIZN) as:

“a commitment, confirmed through action, to integrate international, global, and comparative perspectives throughout the teaching, research, and service missions of higher education. It is a means to advance the core learning, discovery, and engagement objectives of higher education in a twenty-first century context... CIZN defines institutional missions and values in global terms as well as in local and national terms. It recognizes the interconnection of local and global issues and how higher education institutions play a pivotal role in mediating between global forces and local impact and how an institution of higher education becomes broader and more inclusive... The commitment to engage in comprehensive internationalisation is significant because it is likely to alter existing institutional frames of reference, prompting faculty, staff, and students to think and behave differently. Institutional practices and relationships that are traditionally defined in local or domestic terms will expand to include a global frame of reference... Internationalising an institution of higher education is an ongoing commitment since it represents continual adjustment to new challenges and opportunities within an evolving global landscape” (Hudzik and McCarthy, 2012, p. 2).

Cripps (2017) examines the French approach to the internationalisation of higher education and presents the ten key steps to achieve it by involving all stakeholders in the educational process and the importance of good standing among the global academic community.

In 2020, Varghese, vice-chairman of India's National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration, assisted by the Association of Indian Universities (Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, 2020), examines the global trends in internationalisation and presents the initiatives of Indian universities by making an overview of the context in developed and developing countries historically from the emergence of the first universities in the post-war and post-colonial period to the present day.

The results of the cited studies unequivocally show, on the one hand, the significance and importance of the internationalisation of institutions in the field of higher education and, on the other hand, the challenges faced by educational experts in the development and implementation of strategies for academic internationalisation in practice. These findings make the multifaceted study of UNWE internationalisation in the context of contemporary global social and economic processes particularly significant.

### ***Research on the internationalisation of HEIs***

Strenuous research has been conducted on the issue of internationalisation of higher education with various strategies and steps developed, which provides for making comparisons and better educational decisions.

Bartell (2003) uses the typology of organisational structure proposed by Sporn (1996) to develop a framework facilitating the understanding of the process of university internationalisation. He considers internationalisation against the backdrop of a complex and dynamic external environment and links it to strategic planning and increased effectiveness of expected outcomes. What is more, it is seen as a necessary adaptation in response to external challenges – a rapidly changing world environment involving “unprecedented growth, complexity and competitiveness of the economy” (Bartell, 2003, p. 43) that necessitate changes in the labour market and, respectively, in personnel training.

Altbach and Knight (2007) study the motives and realities related to internationalisation and point to globalisation as the context for the economic and academic trends that are part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century reality. Therefore, internationalisation encompasses policies and practice in academic systems and institutions, and the motives for internationalisation include commercial advantage, acquisition of knowledge and languages, optimisation of curricula with international content, etc. As more specific measures, they indicate university

affiliates, cross-border cooperation arrangements, programmes for foreign students and English-taught programmes, development of more international initiatives and making them an integral part of the international environment of higher education.

De Wit (2001) makes a comparative analysis of internationalisation in the USA and Europe by analysing historically its development in both places and tries to explain the differences in its course. In addition, the motivations for the internationalisation of higher education are explored by examining the importance of this process in both regions, as well as the applied approaches, strategies and organisational models. The most important manifestations of internationalisation at the beginning of the new century are examined as well.

Cantu (2013) examines three effective educational strategies for internationalisation of American universities in the context of globalisation. After a thorough review of the research on the issue, she found the importance of three themes: study abroad, attracting foreign students and internationalisation of academic staff. The three topics are analysed in detail along with the possible obstacles to their implementation as strategies and the possible solutions for their removal.

Jibeen and Khan (2015) focus their research interest on the potential benefits and cost of internationalisation. For them, it is no longer an end in itself, but a means to achieve quality education. Among the benefits it brings are “the knowledge translation and acquisition, mobilization of talent in support of global research and enchantment of the curriculum with international content” (Jibeen and Khan, 2015, p. 196). They note that the risks of internationalisation include commercialisation, academic colonisation and the problems with ensuring quality education.

In its strategic plan for the period 2008-2012, The University of Edinburgh outlines its goals for expanding its international popularity by building on its established authority and using the opportunities provided by globalisation. What is more, it reacts quickly and flexibly to the changing international environment and overcomes the barriers to its internationalisation.

Most foreign universities such as those in Kent, Bath, Sarajevo, Amsterdam, Manitoba, Dailjan, Zurich or those in the country - the technical universities in Gabrovo and Varna, South-West University, Sofia University, Shumen University, Academy of Economics - Svishtov have prepared their strategies for internationalisation with different measures, emphases and policies, but with similar goals - greater international authority, more opportunities for international cooperation, more international students, increased scientific and teaching capacity.

The review of the scientific studies on academic internationalisation shows that depending on the time, region and specific higher education institution, there are differences that deserve to be investigated in order to optimise the internationalisation process of a university. Unfortunately, there are no publications in Bulgarian literature which are based on empirical research focused on academic internationalisation and the strategies for its implementation. The lack of such research makes it difficult for Bulgarian educational experts and is an obstacle to the deployment of the academic potential of the university teams in our country in the implementation of research and teaching activities in accordance with the current global trends in the field.

### ***UNWE internationalisation***

The author, in a creative collective with three other members of the academic community of UNWE and within the framework of a university research project, has been conducting a study aiming to explore the context, necessity and approaches to internationalisation, by implementing a multifaceted approach and building a credible picture of the possibilities and challenges to the process of university internationalisation and UNWE in particular, taking into account the pandemic situation in the period 2020-2022, which strongly affected academic work, as well as all other global social and economic processes affecting higher education and, accordingly on the issue under examination.

The object of research is the overall process of the strategic management of the University of National and World Economy. The subject of research in the current project is the targeted actions in the field of internationalisation. In UNWE, they are systematized in its Internationalisation Strategy 2020-2025. The aim of the project is to prepare recommendations and propose approaches for optimisation of the university's international activities after an analysis of the key factors of the environment and a study of the internationalisation experience of other universities in the country and abroad.

The tasks of the research project are determined by its objective and are as follows:

- To trace the historical logic of the implementation of strategic planning in the field of higher education (for universities and specialised HEIs) and of UNWE in particular.
- To establish how the significance, place and role of internationalisation rank among the priorities of universities.
- To look for possible tools for the implementation of the strategic plans in their part for the internationalisation of universities.

- To analyse the university strengths and weaknesses along with its work environment threats and opportunities.
- To analyse university actions in the context of the dynamics of the environment factors.
- To prepare recommendations for the improvement of the UNWE internationalisation strategy.

Project goal and tasks determine its stages, which is why it consists of four stages: the first one is focused on a comprehensive study of the research on the development and implementation of internationalisation strategies in the tertiary sector; the second stage examines the overview and analysis of the internationalisation strategies of Bulgarian and foreign universities, as well as of the UNWE strategy; stage three is devoted to the analysis and interpretation of the research carried out in the first two stages; and, finally, during the fourth stage, the scientific team will outline recommendations for updating and optimising the UNWE internationalisation strategy in the context of global experience, regional specificity and the COVID-19 pandemic.

The working hypotheses established at the initial stage, before the research is carried out, are as follows:

H1: The successful internationalisation of the activity of a university or HEI is the result of a successful application of the theory of strategic management of organisations in the tertiary sector taking into account sector specifics and peculiarities.

H2: For the successful internationalisation of the activity of a university or HEI, its positioning in the minds of the conditional users of the service is of key importance.

The methods applied in the research include:

- Critical analysis for analysis of existing theoretical concepts - historical review and theoretical analysis of literary sources on the subject;
- Needs analysis, as well as the method of conceptual analysis, which also includes particular procedures, such as contextual analysis, comparative analysis, etc.;
- Strategic analysis at different organisational levels;
- Specific methods for operations examination applicable in the research context (optimisation methods such as different types of programming, DEA (Data envelopment analysis), etc.; graph theory models, etc.);
- Statistical methods for the analysis of dependencies - parametric and non-parametric;
- Methods for analysis of user perceptions such as factor analysis, multidimensional scanning, etc.



The research outcomes include an exhaustive in-depth analysis of internationalisation in the tertiary sector and the ways for its implementation – strategy, tactics, measures, policies, good practices, as well as the preparation of detailed recommendations for the updating and optimisation of the UNWE internationalisation strategy in the context of world experience, regional specifics and the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Conclusion**

Internationalisation in the tertiary sector is a multi-faceted process of far-reaching impact. It involves a number of factors and stakeholders and has its variations due to cultural differences, national stereotypes, policies, demographic parameters, local and global circumstances. The research team has been investigating internationalisation applying a variety of methods. With regard to UNWE, it has been studying a fifty-year period involving numerous changes and developments leading to different outcomes such as a flood of foreign students and interest in English medium instruction (EMI), orientation towards joint programmes with foreign universities aimed at enhancing UNWE's competitive advantages or active participation in EU initiatives under educational programmes stimulating academic and research exchange. Examining the issue comprehensively brings insights into the potential and consequences of internationalisation and provide an ample opportunity for improvements and adjustments of UNWE's internationalisation strategy along with the raised global awareness of its practice and achievements. In addition, the work on the project contributes to a unique and exhaustive study of a long-standing experience which combined with the comparative analysis of other local and international HEIs can help stakeholders benefit from the optimised processes of going international.

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