



# Strategic management of internationalization in higher education institutions: the lens of international office professionals

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## Abstract

The need for strategic planning of the internationalization process in universities is inevitable. The key stakeholders in higher education institutions (HEIs) are expected to be involved in the strategy-making process. It is argued that international office professionals (IPs) are one of these key stakeholders and need to be part of strategy development. The study aims to explore IPs' conceptualization of internationalization, their needs, and roles in the universities, as well as their perceptions of strategic planning, management, and institutionalization of internationalization in European and Turkish universities. In this qualitative research, 23 semi-structured interviews with IPs showed that they are not sufficiently involved in the strategy-making process and could not contribute to this with their expertise as expected. This non-involvement observed in both settings has led them to imitate quantitative global strategies similar to that of universities, like increasing the number of international students. Moreover, the comparative analysis showed that European universities utilize more democratic and participatory decision-making than Turkish universities, which have little or no participation of IPs in decision-making in internationalization.

**Keywords** Internationalization · Strategic management · Institutionalization · International office professionals

## Introduction

Internationalization is one of the activities that universities engage in with an institutional approach to address larger external forces—globalization, the knowledge economy, or massification—impacting higher education systems around the world. In this context, internationalization has become a key mechanism as an integral part of university strategy (de Wit & Hunter, 2014). Although it is sometimes considered an add-on activity, higher education institutions (HEIs) are obliged to develop a strategic response (Middlehurst & Woodfield, 2007). There may be a level of isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), yet universities

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still have scope for strategic action representing system diversity (Fumasoli & Huisman, 2013). While this action has been driven by political, cultural, and academic rationales over the last decades, currently, economic rationales increasingly play a role (Jiang, 2008; Van der Wende, 2001), leading to a more superficial implementation of internationalization.

In this study, internationalization is considered beyond economic rationales; it focuses on the level of awareness and application of intra-cultural and intercultural interactions through education, research, and community service functions with, as the main objective, to develop mutual understanding beyond cultural boundaries (Yang, 2002). It is a concept from which HEIs and stakeholders benefit in accordance with the mission and vision of the institution. Although a wide variety of definitions have been given in the field for the internationalization of universities, the broadest one covering all aspects of internationalization, often used in the literature, and considered suitable for this study, was coined by De Wit et al. (2015). They defined it 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).

A commitment to internationalization requires a carefully thought-out strategic process for the development of the whole institution (Hunter, 2018) with a collaborative strategy in which both formal and informal services and all university constituents (Perez-Encinas, 2018) are included. Hudzik (2011) envisaged this process as comprehensive internationalization embraced by the institutional leadership, governance, faculty, students, and all academic service and support units. Similarly, De Wit and Jones (2018) explain that inclusive internationalization necessitates the involvement of the entire institution. Rumbley (2015) utilized the concept of intelligent internationalization in a similar fashion, requiring a thoughtful alliance between researchers, practitioners, and leaders to have mutual learning across relevant stakeholder groups. She also added that cooperation is needed between all internal stakeholders so that the policy-making of institutional leaders, research of scholars, and implementation of practitioners can provide shared input. Lastly, Perez-Encinas (2018) states that a collaborative approach among support services at HEIs can strengthen the internationalization strategy of universities.

As internationalization one of the most important strategies in universities' agendas during the past three decades and, having been transformed from a marginal activity to an institutional imperative (de Wit & Hunter, 2014) to which all stakeholders should contribute, the roles and responsibilities of international office professionals (IPs) have become more significant, but there is very limited research about them. It is crucial to analyze the experiences of professionals working in international offices to empower them with the necessary qualifications and to define the necessary structures in universities to realize more inclusive or comprehensive internationalization. Therefore, the study aims to explore IPs' conceptualization of internationalization and their needs and roles in the universities, together with their perceptions of how internationalization is strategically planned, institutionalized and managed. Specifically, this paper aims to gain an understanding of internationalization strategy development by identifying similarities and differences in European and Turkish universities regarding IPs' participation in decision-making and strategy development in internationalization.

## Strategic Management of internationalization in Higher Education

*Strategy of internationalization:* Strategy is the process of designing long-term goals (Mintzberg, 1990); institutions engage in intentional behaviors, analytical practices, and action plans to accomplish these predetermined long-term goals. Soliman, Anchor, and Taylor (2019) called such a strategy an action for deliberateness—institutions examine their own strengths and areas to self-improve and develop their unique strategy. Such deliberate strategy work naturally needs to be inclusive of all related university members. In this research, the goal is to elaborate on the strategic management of internationalization by examining one key stakeholder—the IPs’—roles and views on strategic planning and institutionalization in higher education.

Based on the understanding of strategy derived from literature as highlighted above, the strategy on internationalization can only be successful if it is comprehensively embraced by the whole institution. A collaborative approach to enhancing and strengthening the internationalization strategy of HEIs is possible through integrating the views of all stakeholders in all actions, such as identifying needs, incorporating them into activities, and assessing the results for promoting a more inclusive environment (Perez-Encinas, 2018). Although there is a vast amount of research on strategy development in HEIs, there is less focus on internationalization from a strategic organization perspective (Soliman, Anchor, & Taylor, 2018). For example, the multi-level strategies suggested by Stensaker and Fumasoli (2017) are beneficial for strategizing internationalization to be expanded to faculties, schools, departments, and so on. In addition, interlinked strategies such as curriculum, research, mobility programs, campus environment, and student activities contribute to more holistic strategy development in HEIs.

*Management of internationalization:* In the context of higher education, the emergence of internationalization as a management function is associated with new forms of professionalism, and new approaches to administration since internationalization has encouraged new forms of centralized control and oversight (Taylor, 2010). Forms of international delivery have increased and diversified through joint and dual degrees, online courses, and international education; the responsibilities of higher education international offices have also expanded (Deschamps & Lee, 2015). Therefore, the management of internationalization requires intended effort and dedication from university leaders and academic and administrative staff, with a special emphasis on IPs. For example, Kristensen and Karlsen’s (2018) research on universities in Nordic countries showed that the emphasis on internationalization in academic functions was higher than on the managerial or administrative sides of institutions. This clearly calls for attention in terms of a holistic approach to internationalization, where HEIs integrate the strategies into the main functions of academia via strategic management of internationalization (Soderqvist, 2002).

*Strategic management of internationalization:* Strategic management of internationalization is mainly the responsibility of all personnel; “top-down” planning leads to a larger “implementation gap” between intended objectives or international policy plans and actual outcomes following implementation (de Haan, 2014). Foskett (2012) argues that there is an inevitable gap between published strategic documents and the immediate strategic emphasis of operational practices. In other words, there may be a difference between the written strategic targets and their application. Schriewer (2009) also noted a significant difference between policy-making and policy implementation. Furthermore, de Wit et al. (2015) sug-

gest that while comprehensive and strategic policies are being rhetorically developed for internationalization, there is a long way to go in many cases in the future. To create such inclusive internationalization, developing an institutional approach—the way universities organize and realize themselves—is crucial. Institutional theory fundamentally explains the “actions of both individuals and collective actors” (Cai & Mehari, 2015, p. 3), which can be interpreted for this research as the ways IPs are engaged in internationalization activities within their organizations. In other words, the strategic management of internationalization in HEIs was used as a lens to interpret the IPs’ work practices, beliefs, and work environments that are international offices.

## International Office Professionals

*IPs’ Work Practices:* Many studies have been conducted on Senior International Officers (SIOs) (AIEA, 2017; O’Reilly, Hickey & Ryan, 2013; Cruz, 2019; Tran, LaCost & Grady, 2020; Heyl & Tullbane, 2012). The Association of International Education Administrators (AIEA) (2017) defines SIOs as individuals within an institution of higher education charged with leading and facilitating its internationalization efforts. Heyl and Tullbane (2012) refer to SIOs as an institution’s lead international administrator. Tran, LaCost, and Grady (2020) state that SIOs are unique leaders leading internationalization efforts on campuses. On the other hand, IPs differ from SIOs since the term SIO is mostly used in Anglo-Saxon countries to refer to leaders or administrators of internationalization who directly report to the top administration. In other words, IPs, mostly ignored in the research, are field workers of internationalization with direct experiences, observations, and deeper insights regarding institutional practices.

IPs have been involved in many aspects of internationalization, ranging from the management of mobility to the development of international policies, the management of international projects, and everything else considered “international.” (Beelen, 2017). They oftentimes do not have a clear job description and, as Beelen (2017) states, “every envelope with a foreign stamp on it ends up on their desk.” (para. 2). From this perspective, it is possible to argue that IPs are seen as practitioners of internationalization possessing a variety of roles in universities such as bureaucrats, moderators, mentors, brokers, entrepreneurs, or innovators. The duties involved in these roles of IPs are summarized based on the experiences of the first author in Table 1:

IPs are not independent actors since they work in a context-bounded environment where the institutional structure and culture develop accordingly. Thus, their perceptions, work practices, and decisions are impacted by their work environment: international offices.

*IPs’ work environments:* The foundation and development of international offices is an important step toward the institutionalization and the development of organizational culture of internationalization. In Europe, various paths of internationalization have emerged, such as student recruitment-based models (UK) or cooperation and exchange of faculty and staff stimulated by Erasmus (continental Europe) (Heyl & Tullbane, 2012). On the other hand, the global knowledge economy and regional development (e.g., European Higher Education Area) have accelerated the convergence among different systems. In terms of international offices, they have been a common feature for more than 25 years, but the 1990s were critical in Europe since the role, size, and influence of international offices have increased and become more decentralized (Heyl & Tullbane, 2012). This decentralized model of inter-

**Table 1** The Different Roles and Duties of the IPs

The roles	The duties
Bureaucrat	Receiving applications, selecting student/ staff, project management, budgeting, reporting
Moderator	Resolving conflicts between different participant groups or departments either within a university or with partner universities
Mentor	Advising participants related to a large range of subjects such as selecting a host university, conducting a visa application procedure or psychological counselling for adaptation. This role is especially important for inclusiveness since it helps the adaptation of international students to the non-formal curriculum
Broker	To meet the expectations of university administrators on economic rationales such as increasing student recruitment or climbing up in global university rankings
Entrepreneur	Finding new endeavours to better benefit from internationalization via expanding the university's international network, concluding new partnership agreements or joining international projects
Innovator	Creating innovative practices for the sake of internationalization of the university.

nationalization structure based on partnerships and exchange of students/ faculty is also extended to the countries that are not European Union (EU) members yet participated in the Erasmus program. One such country is Turkey, where the internationalization process has only recently gained importance, and international offices were initially established after the launch of the Erasmus program in 2004. Turkish universities established their international offices mainly to conduct student and staff exchange programs, but their responsibility has extended to a wide variety of international activities since then. Therefore, the EU education and training programs led to the emergence of an internationalization policy with similar structures and processes of international offices for all the participating countries. Hence, it is possible to consider a shared professional culture resulting in similar work experiences for IPs as the primary implementers of internationalization policies in HEIs, regardless of the culture-specific context. This consideration allowed the researchers to conduct this study of IPs in different contexts.

Although the supranational programs like the Erasmus created a shared professional culture for IPs which allows analyzing their professional perceptions independent of their cultural context, Turkey is different from other European countries in terms of the central governance structure and the historical development of higher education. Compared to well-established universities in Europe, Turkey has a more recent history starting from the 18th century affecting HEIs' organizational structure and culture. Besides, higher education in Turkey has a centralized system mainly coordinated by the Council of Higher Education (CoHE), and Turkey has a large higher education sector with approximately eight million students in 207 universities (CoHE, 2022). This central governance structure also affects strategic planning and decision-making processes in universities; therefore, in this paper, European IPs' perceptions of these administration mechanisms are compared to Turkish ones.

## Methodology

This exploratory comparative research focuses on the experiences and strategic roles of IPs in European and Turkish universities on internationalization to generate generic categories based on structural criteria (Hantrais, 2009). The rationale for comparison is to identify a certain degree of commonality (and differences) by grouping relatively based on geography and historical development, as Hantrais (2009) mentioned. Besides, comparative research “can lead to fresh, exciting insights and a deeper understanding of issues that are of central concern in different countries. They lead to the identification of gaps in knowledge and may point possible directions...” (Hantrais, 1995, parag.18). The research has utilized semi-structured interviews to reach similarities and differences in European and Turkish universities regarding the IPs’ participation in decision-making and strategy development to provide new directions for higher education management.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 23 IPs working in different HEIs to answer the following research question: “*In what ways do international office professionals conceptualize internationalization, understand their needs and roles, and perceive strategic planning, institutionalization and management of internationalization in Turkish and European HEIs?*” The purposeful sampling strategy was used to select the participants as choosing professionals working in international offices. Sixty-two e-mails were sent to IPs in different European and Turkish universities. 12 European participants were from nine countries: Belgium (1), France (2), Finland (1), Italy (1), Ireland (1), Poland (1), Portugal (1), Spain (1), and the Netherlands (3) and 11 participants were from Turkey. Having one or two participants from each European university can be considered a limitation in this study. Yet, the goal of this research is not to generalize the results but to examine the differences and similarities of the practices regarding strategic decision-making.

Interviews were conducted through the Zoom platform between June and July 2021 in English and Turkish, each lasting between 25 and 45 min. With permission from the interviewees, interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed. Each interview was named according to their group – TP for Turkish participants and EUP for European participants – and a number showing their rank of participation.

Thematic analysis was used in accordance with Creswell’s (1998) guidelines to identify the generic categories of strategic decision-making and IPs’ work experience in this regard. In this qualitative data analysis process, steps concerning organizing, reading, describing, classifying, coding, and interpreting the data were followed (Creswell, 1998; Stake, 2006). Two authors of this paper conducted the thematic analysis to ensure the validity of the results. After carefully reading the transcripts, coding, and grouping the codes, we created the main themes related to the research question.

European IPs’ years of experience were between two to 20 years in international offices, and they work in public institutions except for two. In addition, only four of them had a graduate degree. Of the Turkish participants, while six work in public institutions, five are from private institutions. Their years of experience spanned from 1 to 19 years, and, in contrast to their European counterparts, all have graduate degrees.

## Results

This study investigated the strategic management of internationalization in HEIs from the lenses and needs of IPs. The research comparatively examined the issues and needs of IPs with a holistic perspective in higher education management in European and Turkish contexts. In other words, we explore the commonalities as well as differences in the features of European and Turkish HEIs regarding the strategic and institutional approaches to internationalization. While reporting the comparison, the data results are presented the differences between these two systems only wherever they exist under each sub-theme due to space limitations. In doing this, the main focus will be on the IPs and strategic management of internationalization in both contexts. The overall findings also showed more similarities regarding how IPs conceptualize internationalization, the organizational structure, decision-making, and the way internationalization was operationalized in both contexts.

The overall data analysis revealed four generic categories: *the intricacy of the conceptualization of internationalization*; *strategies, management, and decision-making on internationalization*; *the role and needs of IPs*; and *institutionalization of internationalization in HEIs*.

**Theme 1: The intricacy of the conceptualization of internationalization: “It is very much embedded in our lives and familiar, yet difficult, to define” (TP10).**

It is crucial to explore the understanding of IPs about what internationalization means. The results clearly showed that the concept of internationalization is difficult to characterize, even for people who have worked in the field for years. The intricacy of the conceptualization revealed itself in three sub-categories: *internationalization as part of the marketization of HEIs*, *internationalization as a comprehensive framework*, and *internationalization as having global/multicultural values*.

First, most of the participants in both contexts talked about internationalization regarding the number of international students at the institution, international networks, protocols, or double-degree programs. The most frequently quoted definition of internationalization was “*university with international students*.” For these IPs, being international simply means their institution has a large number of international events / occurrences / people / protocols / collaborations / projects / programs.

“The foundation of internationalization is to have a university with international students while organizing the exchange programs properly is the way to ensure this. Like in most universities, it happens through exchange programs.” (TP1).

Some participants in European universities mentioned the significant income generation for the institution from their international students. In some cases, IPs provided their perspective in terms of receiving more and more students, while a few people said that they do not agree with this strategy. Some participants described their work more in the line of marketing and sales terminology.

“There are a number of different ways how many international students come to study with us. There are two sides to this: exposing the local students to a better international environment and also balancing this significant income generation. I person-

ally believe this as it is very good to get that income as it allows us to invest more.” (EUP5).

The second most common definition of internationalization is that it is a comprehensive framework embedded in all dimensions of an organization. Specifically, internationalizing the curriculum, exchanging the practices and knowledge of faculty members, and adjusting the campus services and facilities accordingly. Internationalization in the form of student learning outcomes and development was also highlighted, mostly by the European counterparts. Some European universities adopt a very specific and comprehensive approach to student learning so that students can develop the necessary skills and attitudes for international work while there were no IPs mentioning this particular aspect from Turkish universities.

“Embedding international dimensions to academic discipline skill training of students...everything runs in the campus with the goal of creating an international campus. Also, in our university, international organizations and companies that are external stakeholders can be involved.” (EUP6).

Third, there were very few statements including “intercultural, multicultural, or diversity” to describe internationalization; or, there was very little emphasis on internationalizing the campus and education in those schools. This mostly came from participants in European universities. There was also very little emphasis on being global, bridging between local and international communities, or having a visionary approach so that an institution could compete at the international level.

“We are high in the ranking because of this. We have international staff. It can be shown in daily life. It is a multicultural campus.” (EUP10).

“In my opinion, internationalization is, more than everything, an internal process helping a HE establishment to adhere to the globalization movement and, thus, ensuring its international visibility, contributing to the attractiveness for international studies, and the global influence of a country.” (EUP7).

***Theme 2: Strategies, Management, and Decision-Making of Internationalization: “It is not a particular person’s plan. It is the university’s plan.” (EUP5).***

Under this theme, strategies, management, and decision-making in regard to internationalization are reported. The universities generally follow the traditional process of top-down strategic planning, while there are few examples of strategic thinking embedded in processes in collaboration with IPs in both contexts. The following sub-categories were identified as a result of data analysis: *organizational structure and communication, specific strategies for internationalization, strategic management, and decision-making processes.*

Most participants in the European and Turkish universities explicitly stated that the *organizational structure* in their organizations can be ineffective, creating complications for IPs. In some cases, there are academic boards, a commission of professors, or executive boards involved in the internationalization work of the institution. Beyond the managerial



structure, international offices have recruitment/marketing officers and academic advisors for incoming/outgoing students, while most universities have school or department-level coordinators for internationalization.

“My team is in the marketing department, not a very accurate place for us. We have been trying to understand why this is the case... there was a new organizational structure called the International External Affairs team.” (EUP5).

One significant difference in terms of the structure is that in most Turkish universities, there are two positions to report to: Vice Provost (VP) for Internationalization and General Secretary. The distinction can be thought of as dealing with academic versus administrative processes and decisions, although it was reported that it causes a lot of confusion in decision-making. Also, in Turkish universities, the international offices are not legally formed in the organizational structure but work in coordinatorship with an academic title.

“Even though we work with academics and we need to interpret some implementations, we were located under the General Secretary, and the person appointed there would change very often. We had to explain the processes and our office every single time, and we struggled a lot.” (TP2).

Within the scope of such complicated organizational structures, communication is rather clear between the offices and IPs. Generally, communication between IPs and the university management follows the line of authority from the Rector-VP to the International Office to the Director, which moves forward with the IPs. It was often stated that the upper management supports the international offices' work in European universities, while the Turkish counterparts stated that it depended on the person. There is no direct communication between the top management and IPs unless the size of the institution is small. There are also some other institutions in which the IPs have direct communication with the university administration due to the existing organizational culture. The distinction is that in Turkish universities, communication can depend on the person in charge of internationalization and thus was expressed as not being institutionalized.

“We don't know where we are located. We are everywhere and nowhere at the same time. We are not invited to the meetings. There are the names of the committees and councils, but we don't know how often they meet.” (TP1).

Almost every participant stated that *the specific strategies for internationalization* resembled each other, while very few institutions had unconventional strategies. The most-reported strategy is to be the best university and the most international university by reaching the highest number of international students / faculty / mobility / projects / protocols / grants / joint degrees/ publication; yet, few mentioned the integration of international dimensions into academic disciplines helping students learn the necessary skills for the workforce or on campus.

“The strategies are very narrow—mostly exchange students, and the number of master and doctoral students.” (TP9).

“Embedding international dimensions to academic discipline skill training of students. Everything runs on the campus, creating an international campus. Also, in the university, international organizations and companies that are external stakeholders can be involved.” (EUP6).

Student satisfaction with academic and administrative aspects is also used as a strategy by IPs to ensure quality services to students. Internationalizing the curriculum and campus and having more programs taught in English are also given as efficient strategies for the HEIs; these can be classified under the student satisfaction aspect and were mostly provided by participants from European universities.

“The international office is one of the most important ones in the institution. Our performance affects everything like student satisfaction because this is a private university.” (EUP1).

The *strategic management of the internationalization* sub-category includes components like the strategic planning process and documents, strategic partnerships, and aligning with other networks to increase the likelihood of internationalization. Most universities have separate *strategic planning documents* developed by upper management. There are very few universities that embed internationalization into all functions of the organization. Within this strategic management, they emphasized the importance of *strategic partnership* with particular universities (e.g., Stockholm University, University of Edinburgh, Northwestern U., Beijing University); specific regions (e.g., Africa, Asia, Latin America), or particular countries (e.g., China, Brazil, Singapore) to increase the prestige of their own institution. In a similar vein, they chose to attract students for academic disciplines that they feel the strongest about or which have relevance, such as hospitality management or the health sector.

Lastly, under this theme, *strategic decision-making* for internationalization was reported. In identifying the decision-making category, the role of IPs was particularly sought out, and it was found that, except for directors in the office, IPs are not directly involved in decision-making. There are very few European universities where there is collaborative decision-making for strategies on internationalization that involve the staff, managers, or even students. IPs play a predominantly advisory role and provide the facts and figures, as well as their feedback from the field to the university leadership.

“I have no right to make these kinds of decisions. They are not very participatory in decision-making. The International Office works closely with the Director and Vice-Chancellor. Decisions are made by these two positions. And we try to follow the instructions to achieve the goal.” (EUP3).

“Yes, it is a pity that you don’t participate in writing strategies, but the people are still experts. They know better, for example, how much the budget requires for certain actions, where to move, or how to move, and which personnel to involve.” (EUP2).

From the Turkish participants' perspectives, universities show a lower or non-existent involvement of IPs in the process of strategic decision-making. It is either an executive board or the university management making the strategy identification. Another distinction was made in terms of being academic versus administrative staff, which also impacts academic decisions in regard to internationalization.

“Strategic planning is a separate group of people, and we are nowhere in the group. One day we find that there are strategies decided by that group, and we are not informed about it. We are the practitioners, but we have no idea of the strategies.” (TP8).

***Theme 3: The Perceived Role of International Office Professionals: An international office is not a travel agency or a bank counter for scholarships! (EUP7)***

The roles and responsibilities of IPs are more operational and entail managing exchange programs, recruitment, financial aid, agreements, educational projects, student experience, and student satisfaction. Few participants in managerial roles stated that their role is to motivate people toward more internationalization, strategic cooperation, and to assist faculty members in internationalizing the curriculum. Interestingly, when they were asked about the perception of others in the institution, they revealed some of the miscomprehensions and unwritten roles expected of them in both contexts.

“Most people think that we are working as a travel agency. There are sometimes requests, and they think we can get them to travel. The awareness regarding internationalization is below 50%, I think.” (TP3).

Another important distinction, one mentioned by the Turkish IPs only, is that their work conditions heavily depend on the university administrators' and coordinators' perspectives on internationalization. They are sometimes not seen as university personnel or trustworthy enough to do the job, even though IPs are competent individuals most of the time. Some university managers have a very supportive attitude and have direct interaction with them, while some do not respect or trust them. They expect the IPs to engage in tasks that are not in their job description.

“From the eyes of our managers, we should be doing everything. There are expectations not clearly written in the job description. There are too many expectations from us. Sometimes, we do the translation of documents.” (TP11).

***Theme 4: Institutionalization of internationalization in HEIs: “It needs to go on the DNA of academics, not an add-on.” (EUP6).***

Institutionalization of the internationalization theme revealed that there is a strong demand for restructuring of the organizational chart, regulations, and approaches both in European and Turkish universities. This will be reported as suggestions provided by the IPs in both contexts for there were mostly commonalities in this category.

- *More and better human resources:* The participants clearly voiced an urgent need for more human resources in their offices. While there are teams of IPs, there are also a number of offices with one member only. They stated that they need more people as they

are overloaded with the amount of office work. There was also a need for more financial resources and for a better physical environment, but human resources were the most emergent and common one across the participants. Besides, they suggested having a more professional approach to hiring policies since being an IP requires particular skills, knowledge, and attitude. This hiring policy should also be followed by specific training to learn more about internationalization and work with a diverse body of students.

- *Clear organizational structure & Leadership*: All participants criticized the current organizational structure as being too complicated, disorganized, or not coordinated well, while almost all IPs in Turkey strongly advocated for the legal status of the offices in the HEIs. There should also be more supportive leadership for internationalization and recognition of the IPs to increase their motivation and ownership of the process. In Turkish HEIs, the lack of legal status affects not only the management of these offices but also the leadership and the perception of others in regard to internationalization.
- *A holistic framework for an internationalization strategy*: Participants mentioned that there is no holistic approach to internationalization to integrate it into the daily practices of university members and leadership. There should be embedded processes and aspects in the structure, education, research, leadership, and also physical space complementing each other for the purpose of internationalization.
- *Quality evaluation and monitoring*: The IPs mentioned that monitoring the work of the offices, evaluating student satisfaction, and analyzing the data would allow them to improve services. HEIs should develop their own internal evaluation processes, and external agencies should also provide monitoring mechanisms to develop more professional and consistent internationalization strategies.
- *Authentic and more focused strategies for internationalization*: IPs mentioned an important principle on how to identify strategies for HEIs. They said that there are sometimes very similar internationalization strategies that do not necessarily work for the organizational context. Thus, it would be wise to better examine institutional characteristics and identify better-focused and more authentic strategies based on these characteristics.

## Discussion

IPs are the key stakeholders in the formulation and implementation of internationalization strategies. Therefore, their conceptualization will impact their work behaviours and preferences and the direction of internationalization in a given institution. This study defines IPs as “highly-skilled academic support staff” as most of them either graduated or pursued a graduate education—having 11 years of work experience on average. They are knowledgeable and experienced about the necessary skills/knowledge to effectively execute their work by having intercultural skills, appreciating other cultures, or exhibiting high proficiency in a second language in both contexts.

Based on the interviews with IPs, the first discussion point would be the need to construct institution-specific perspectives on internationalization before strategy development. The confusion around what internationalization is generated by isomorphic strategies rather than meaningful and authentic ones. The similarity of misconceptualization of internationalization in both contexts can be seen as evidence. Although a diverse understanding of

internationalization was reported, there is a strong tendency toward both in Turkish and European contexts to see it as marketization and competition, with a weak focus on global and multicultural values. Some of the misconceptions listed by de Wit (2015) are reported heavily in this research, with a focus on internationalization being about studying abroad, more partnerships, or more international students. There were very few remarks on the intercultural/intercultural competencies of some European universities, yet, the intent of internationalization is to become a world-class university (Knight, 2015) or to have the highest number of international students. As provided in the introduction, internationalization needs to be deliberately integrated into the particular settings of HEIs in relation to their provision of purpose, function, and service (de Wit et al., 2015). The internationalization strategies have a strong similarity in defining measurable outcomes such as the number of international students, research networks, joint degrees, etc. However, internationalization is “more complex and multifaceted.” (Hénard et al., 2012; p. 7).

Secondly, the importance of defining clear roles and responsibilities for IPs, as well as a clear line of organizational structure in HEIs, is clearly observable from the data results. Generally, the IPs of mostly Turkish universities seemed to struggle with their ambiguous roles and responsibilities, while most of them stated a lack of organizational structure even though there is leadership appointed for internationalization. In terms of strategic management of internationalization, allocating senior leadership positions seems to be a common practice and proper approach in both contexts. However, it is also imperative to clarify the position of international offices and the roles of IPs. This would also allow organizations to have better management of human resources and professional development activities for international offices. Hunter, Jones, and de Wit (2019) pointed out the exclusion of administrative staff and highlighted the fundamental role of international offices in the strategic process for institutional leaders. They further stated the necessity of appropriate human resources development for long-term changes in the HEIs.

Thirdly, the IPs in this study tended to be bureaucrats, brokers, and mentors rather than moderators, entrepreneurs, or innovators, as defined earlier. Besides, as mentioned by the participants quite explicitly, they are the executors of the strategies identified by the university leadership but not active participants in the strategy development of their institutions. *“However, all too often, decisions around internationalization are taken by a select group of senior leaders with academics and administrators simply expected to implement those decisions and students expected to accept internationalization in whatever form it is offered”* (Hunter et al., 2018; para. 4). In developing a strategic approach and achieving comprehensive internationalization, involvement of the key stakeholders—IPs in this case—is crucial because of the benefit of their invaluable insights from the field and to increase ownership of and engagement in internationalization across campuses (Hénard et al., 2012). It is also important to note that IPs are not the only groups responsible for internationalization on campuses; however, they are underutilized professionals, and they can be resourceful in different roles, as previously mentioned.

The need for a better organizational structure for international offices and more involvement of IPs in decision-making and strategy development can be argued with the traditional vs. modern university models (Rybnicek et al., 2016). As a result of high competition, external pressures, limited resources, and societal expectations, HEIs have to deal with many challenges (Biedermann & Strehl, 2004). The traditional university model, defined by the ideas of Humboldt, functions with more bureaucratic management structures and a highly

intense hierarchical mindset (Rybnicek et al., 2016) while responding to these challenges. On the other hand, the modern university model is run by the new public management perspective started in the Anglo-Saxon area that could be more effective in responding to the fast-changing and competitive environments. Thus, universities in both contexts are challenged by the very nature of the Humboldtian model. While this is the case, it is also observed that European universities utilize more democratic and participatory decision-making compared to Turkish universities that have little or no participation of IPs in decision-making. As mentioned above, this difference can stem from the centralized system and more hierarchical organizational culture in Turkish higher education. The level of university autonomy is under pressure in Turkish higher education (Fındıklı, 2020) compared to the European counterparts reported in the University Autonomy in Europe Index (European University Association, 2022), where Turkey is not listed anymore due to a lack of data. The highly centralized system, more bureaucratic management, and university autonomy issues in Turkish higher education cause confusion about IPs, their existence in the organizations, and the management of the offices.

In conclusion, there is a common language and understanding among IPs regarding the work of internationalization. There are similar practices and goals in institutions, yet, the level of organizational structure, governance, and leadership for internationalization vary due to the organizational culture and contextual factors in European and Turkish universities. It is fair to say that the internationalization processes of universities require more work on adapting better institutional approaches and university-specific strategies depending on their characteristics and contexts. At this point, the priorities of universities should be determined at the institutional level, while multi-level strategies (Stensaker & Fumasoli, 2017) in the various parts need to be developed for comprehensive internationalization (Hudzik, 2011). Universities inevitably adopt similar practices in order to maintain their legitimacy in the globally competitive world; better-planned and more local-oriented approaches are required. It will be important to set transnational, regional, and national priorities and make more strategic moves, rather than every university following the same route.

Another significant insight is related to collaborative decision-making for strategy development. The interviews revealed the gap between internationalization strategies and implementation discussed by Foskett (2012) also that there is an inevitable gap between the published strategic documents and the immediate strategic emphasis of operational practices. Similarly, Schriewer (2009) noted that there is a significant gap between policy-makers and practitioners concerning internationalization in universities. The bureaucratic management by the traditional university model might also interfere with this gap, where the decision-making is done more at the hierarchical level. While Turkish higher education should focus more on this collaborative decision-making aspect, in both contexts, the roles of IPs and their involvement must be defined with an institutional approach. There needs to be more active participation in strategy development at every opportunity regarding internationalization.

There is also an emergent need in higher education systems for better management of international offices, the recruitment of IPs, and professional development because an IP is a specialization and profession that requires specific qualifications. However, there is no pre-determined career path for this profession not specific to these two contexts in the research but all around the world. By providing more structured training to these professionals, a career path can be defined to pave the way for them to become office managers. Besides the

IPs, higher education leaders should also better understand the IPs in the institutions and engage them in decision-making and strategic planning processes. It is obvious that with their participation, strategic goals will be planned and implemented more efficiently and successfully.

The international offices, the profession, and the internationalization strategies in universities exist in most universities today, yet they are still evolving. According to de Wit et al. (2015), there is still a long way to go and this study contributes to the drawing of a road map for this long journey. From the observation here of both higher education systems, it is clear that HEIs should initiate more structures and processes for strategy development with a constructive dialogue by including key stakeholders—IPs, particularly—and local, national, regional, and international participants for a shared understanding of internationalization. Through this common understanding, organizations can integrate it into the essence of their organization and culture through multi-level and interlinked strategies. For better institutionalization of internationalization, deliberate strategies should include curriculum, research, and campus services and facilities, along with student, academic, and administrative affairs. These strategies should go beyond quantitative measures and embrace the value of internationalization, which will contribute to society in a meaningful way.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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