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Research Article

Institutional Commitment vs. Capacity: Comprehensive Internationalisation Practices at Istanbul Medeniyet University

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Abstract: This study investigates how a newly established Turkish public university, İstanbul Medeniyet University (IMU), interprets and implements internationalisation strategies in alignment with national policy and global trends. Anchored in the framework of comprehensive internationalisation (CI) and informed by internationalisation at home (IaH), the study employs a qualitative case study design. Data were collected through institutional self-assessment documents, a validated comprehensive internationalisation rubric, and semi-structured interviews with 14 senior academic leaders. Findings reveal a strong strategic commitment at the institutional level but limited operational coherence, particularly in curriculum integration, faculty engagement, and support systems for student mobility. The study contributes a context-sensitive model of phased internationalisation for emerging higher education institutions. It offers insights for both policymakers and university leaders navigating the complexities of aligning ambition with institutional capacity in the Global South.

Keywords: Comprehensive internationalisation, higher education, Türkiye, institutional capacity, academic leadership, İstanbul Medeniyet University

1. Introduction

The internationalisation of higher education has emerged as a core strategic objective for universities worldwide, aiming to enhance academic quality, foster intercultural competencies, and increase global competitiveness (Knight, 2004; de Wit & Deca, 2020). While global trends have broadly institutionalised internationalisation as a normative practice, its conceptualisation and implementation remain context-dependent —shaped by national policy priorities, institutional capacities, and regional dynamics (IAU, 2019; Altbach & Knight, 2007).

In the Global North, models of internationalisation often emphasise revenue generation through international student recruitment and global branding (Marinoni & Bartolomé Pina Cardona, 2024). In contrast, many countries in the Global South pursue hybrid approaches, using internationalisation to support national development agendas, improve academic capacity, and promote soft power diplomacy (Kapfudzaruwa, 2024; Eriçok & Arastaman, 2022). These emerging models are especially prominent in regions such as Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, where higher education systems are rapidly expanding and diversifying.

Türkiye represents a compelling case of a non-Western country actively shaping its internationalisation agenda. Over the past two decades, its higher education system has undergone significant expansion, with over 200 new universities established and international student numbers increasing sixfold—from 50,000 in 2013 to over 300,000 in 2023 (CoHE, 2024; Lewis & Lüküslü, 2024). National policies such as the *Higher Education Internationalisation Strategy Document 2018–2022* have positioned Türkiye as a regional education hub, emphasizing institutional visibility, student mobility, and global partnerships (CoHE, 2017). However, despite this policy momentum, there is growing concern that institutional practices have not kept pace with national ambitions (Şenay et al., 2020; Bulut-Şahin, 2023).

Existing literature on Türkiye's higher education internationalisation has predominantly focused on macro-level policies or elite institutions (e.g., METU, Boğaziçi), overlooking how newly established public universities interpret and operationalise internationalisation (Arastaman, 2022; Tasci et al., 2022). These institutions—often younger, less resourced, and more dependent on state support—face unique challenges and opportunities. Understanding how they navigate the gap between national strategies and local capacities remains an underexplored area of research, particularly given the country's highly centralised higher education governance (Kondakçı, 2010).

This study addresses that gap by examining the internationalisation strategies of Istanbul Medeniyet University (IMU), a public institution founded in 2010 in Türkiye's largest and most cosmopolitan city. IMU is strategically located in Istanbul, employs a globally trained faculty, and has embedded internationalisation into its institutional vision. As such, it offers a relevant case

to explore how a mid-sized, state-funded university in an emerging system attempts to translate policy-level directives into actionable institutional practice.

Drawing on a mixed-methods case study design—including document analysis, semi-structured interviews with senior academic leaders, and a validated rubric-based self-assessment—this research provides a multidimensional analysis of IMU's internationalisation trajectory. The study is guided by three interrelated research questions:

1. What are the main internationalisation strategies implemented at IMU?
2. How are internationalisation efforts operationalised across academic, administrative, and policy domains?
3. To what extent are IMU's strategies aligned with Türkiye's national vision and global higher education trends?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to the growing body of research on internationalisation in non-Western and emerging higher education systems. It offers empirical insights into how institutional actors in newly established universities conceptualise and enact internationalisation, and what tensions arise between ambition and capacity. The findings aim to inform both institutional strategy and national policy refinement, particularly for countries navigating the complexities of aligning global competitiveness with regional priorities and resource constraints.

1.1. Conceptualising the Internationalisation of Higher Education

Internationalisation of higher education is broadly defined as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of higher education" (Knight, 2004, p. 11). It is no longer limited to cross-border mobility or global rankings; rather, it has evolved into a comprehensive, strategic imperative integrated across teaching, research, governance, and community engagement (Hudzik, 2011; Marinoni & Bartolomé Pina Cardona, 2024).

Key rationales for internationalisation vary by region and institution, including academic quality enhancement, institutional prestige, revenue generation, graduate employability, and geopolitical diplomacy (Altbach & Knight, 2007; de Wit, 2002). In high-income countries, economic rationales—especially international student recruitment—are often dominant (Brandenburg et al., 2019). In contrast, developing systems tend to frame internationalisation as a means of capacity building, academic reform, and international visibility (Kapfudzaruwa, 2024; Gazzoni et al., 2025).

Over time, several operational models have emerged. These include mobility-driven approaches (e.g., student and staff exchange), curriculum internationalisation, transnational education, joint degrees, international research networks, and increasingly, virtual internationalisation through collaborative online learning (Beelen & Jones, 2015; O'Dowd, 2021).

Among the most influential frameworks is CI, which advocates an institution-wide strategy rather than fragmented initiatives. As Hudzik (2011) argues, CI requires leadership commitment, strategic planning, resource allocation, and engagement across all university functions. Another widely adopted concept is Internationalisation at Home (IaH), which emphasises that all students—regardless of mobility opportunities—should gain intercultural and global competencies within the domestic learning environment (Beelen & Jones, 2015). These models are complementary and increasingly integrated into global benchmarks for institutional quality and relevance (Knight, 2016; Leask, 2015).

1.2. Global Trends and Shifts in Internationalisation Practice

Several global shifts have reshaped IHE. The rapid growth of international student numbers—from 2 million in 2000 to over 6.4 million in 2020—demonstrates increasing global demand (UNESCO, 2025). However, student mobility alone now constitutes only one pillar of IHE strategies. Post-pandemic conditions have reinforced the relevance of digital tools, such as Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), virtual exchanges, and internationalisation at a distance (Huang et al., 2022; Lim, 2024).

Additionally, transnational education (TNE) has matured beyond offshore campuses to include joint universities, dual-degree programs, and franchised curricula (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2006; Knight, 2016). These models allow universities to extend global reach without physical relocation, although issues of quality assurance, regulatory compliance, and equitable access persist.

Critiques of internationalisation have also become more pronounced. Scholars have cautioned against market-driven, neoliberal forms of internationalisation that commodify education and reinforce global inequalities (Stein, 2021; de Wit & Jones, 2022). In response, the literature increasingly calls for ethical, inclusive, and decolonial approaches to IHE—emphasising cultural plurality, reciprocity, and social justice (Stein & de Andreotti, 2016; Cassol-Silva et al., 2023). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have also been positioned as a guiding framework for socially responsible internationalisation (Lim, 2024).

In summary, the global discourse has moved from transactional and prestige-driven models toward inclusive, digitally mediated, and socially accountable approaches—though implementation remains uneven.

1.3. Türkiye's Strategic Position in the Global Internationalisation Landscape

Türkiye has rapidly transformed from a sending to a receiving country in global student mobility. With over 300,000 international students as of 2023, it ranks among the top 10 host countries globally (CoHE, 2024). This growth has been driven by national policy initiatives, notably the *Higher Education Internationalisation Strategy Document 2018–2022* (CoHE, 2017), Türkiye Scholarships, and Study in Türkiye campaigns. Key objectives include increasing

international student diversity, fostering academic collaboration, and enhancing the global standing of Turkish higher education (Eriçok & Arastaman, 2022).

Turkish internationalisation strategies combine elements of European alignment (via Erasmus+, Bologna Process), political soft power in the Muslim world, and developmental diplomacy through scholarships and bilateral agreements (Öz, 2021; Lewis & Lüküslü, 2024). These efforts position Türkiye within a hybrid model—neither purely market-driven nor purely humanitarian, but balancing cultural outreach, regional leadership, and academic advancement.

Nonetheless, structural challenges persist. Turkish-medium instruction dominates in most public universities, limiting appeal for non-Turkish-speaking students. Bureaucratic complexity, uneven digital readiness, and reliance on individual initiative often hinder institutional follow-through (Kondakçı, 2010; Bulut-Şahin, 2023). Moreover, literature points to a gap between national-level policy intentions and institutional-level implementation, especially outside elite institutions (Şenay et al., 2020; Arastaman, 2022). Despite Türkiye's robust strategic framework, the diffusion of internationalisation practices remains uneven, raising questions about institutional capacity, leadership, and cultural readiness.

1.4. Internationalisation in Young vs. Established Turkish Universities

Türkiye's higher education landscape is diverse, comprising legacy institutions like Istanbul University and newly established universities created after 2000. Research reveals that established universities benefit from historical prestige, strong international alumni networks, and longstanding Erasmus+ participation (Tasci et al., 2022). Institutions such as METU, Boğaziçi, and Bilkent have long offered English-medium instruction, global research collaborations, and competitive international branding.

In contrast, younger public universities, especially those established in the 2010 expansion wave, often approach internationalisation as a means to gain legitimacy, attract recognition, and accelerate institutional development. These institutions may be more flexible, entrepreneurial, and willing to innovate—e.g., launching English-language programs or seeking bilateral agreements. However, they also face significant barriers: limited financial and human resources, underdeveloped international offices, fewer global connections, and high dependence on state policy and funding mechanisms (Eriçok & Arastaman, 2022; Bulut-Şahin, 2023).

Studies suggest that while many young universities adopt ambitious internationalisation strategies in their vision statements, actual implementation often relies on individual champions and lacks coordinated policy execution (Gazzoni et al., 2025). This misalignment between institutional rhetoric and operational reality points to a critical bottleneck in Türkiye's broader internationalisation agenda. Yet, these universities also present untapped potential. Located in dynamic urban regions or strategically important border

zones, they may serve as key nodes in Türkiye's higher education diplomacy—if adequately supported with strategic investments, leadership development, and flexible policy frameworks (Lewis & Lüküslü, 2024; Öz, 2021).

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative case study design to investigate how internationalisation strategies are conceptualised and operationalised at a young public university in Türkiye. A case study approach is particularly suitable for examining complex, institution-specific processes such as internationalisation, where context, policy, and stakeholder dynamics intersect (Yin, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The exploratory orientation reflects the need to generate grounded insights in an under-researched area: the practices of mid-sized, recently established Turkish universities in aligning with national and global internationalisation agendas. By integrating document analysis, a validated institutional assessment rubric, and semi-structured interviews, the study triangulates multiple data sources to enhance analytical depth and reliability. This multi-method design enables both descriptive mapping and interpretive understanding of institutional strategies and challenges.

2.2. Case Selection

IMU was purposefully selected as a representative case of a young, public, research-oriented university. Founded in 2010, IMU is located in Istanbul—a key academic, cultural, and geopolitical hub—and has explicitly positioned internationalisation as a pillar of its institutional strategy. With a growing cohort of international students, an internationally trained faculty, and involvement in national and European mobility programs, IMU offers an illustrative case for examining how emerging institutions navigate internationalisation in practice. The selection was guided by theoretical and practical relevance rather than generalisability. As Stake (1995) notes, the goal of case studies in education is to provide rich, context-sensitive understanding that informs broader conceptual and policy debates.

2.3. Study Group

The study involved 14 senior academic leaders at IMU, including six deans, three department heads, three academic division chairs, and two senior faculty members. All participants held professorial rank and were selected through purposive sampling based on their active involvement in internationalisation-related roles or decision-making. Participants represented nine faculties, offering diverse institutional perspectives. Demographically, the sample included 9 males and 5 females, ranging in age from early 40s to mid-60s. Their tenure at IMU varied from 2 to over 11 years, ensuring a mix of founding-era and more recent academic leaders. Pseudonyms (P1–P14) were assigned to protect confidentiality.

Table 1. Demographic and Professional Profiles of Rubric Respondents and Interview Participants

Faculty	Gender	Age	Academic Title	Institutional Role	Years of Service at IMU	Code of the Participants
Law	Male	55	Professor	Dean	3 years	P1
Engineering and Natural Sciences	Female	43	Professor	Dean	3 years	P2
Dentistry	Female	42	Professor	Dean	3 years	P3
Educational Sciences	Male	41	Professor	Dean	4 years	P4
Dentistry	Female	42	Professor	Dean	3 years	P5
Health Sciences	Female	54	Professor	Dean	3 years	P6
Tourism	Male	58	Professor	Department Chair	Over 11 years	P7
Islamic Studies	Male	55	Professor	Department Chair	2 years	P8
Health Sciences	Female	50	Professor	Department Chair	6–10 years	P9
Dentistry	Male	42	Professor	Head of Division	4 years	P10
Engineering and Natural Sciences	Male	47	Professor	Academic Staff	Over 11 years	P11
Art, Design and Architecture	Male	54	Professor	Academic Staff	Over 11 years	P12
Medicine	Male	65	Professor	Head of Division	6–10 years	P13
Faculty of Political Science	Male	44	Professor	Head of Division	6–10 years	P14

2.4. Data Collection Tools and Procedure

Three primary data sources were employed. The ***Comprehensive Internationalisation Rubric*** (Mace & Pearl, 2019) assesses institutional maturity across six core domains: (1) *institutional commitment,* (2) *administrative leadership,* (3) *curriculum and learning outcomes, (4) faculty policies,* (5) *student mobility and (6) partnerships and collaboration.* Each domain contains multiple indicators rated on a three-level developmental scale (L1: Emerging, L2: Capacity-Building, L3: Sustained Practice). The rubric served both as a structured self-assessment and as a data collection tool enabling cross-case comparison of perceptions and institutional progress. Following rubric completion, participants were invited to engage in 30–45 minute ***interviews*** conducted in Turkish. Interviews were guided by a protocol exploring: (1) perceptions of imu's internationalisation strategies, (2) key achievements and persistent challenges, (3) institutional culture, leadership, and coordination, (4) faculty readiness, capacity, and support structures. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated into English for analysis. Member checking was used with a subset of participants to ensure accuracy of interpretation. Lastly, ***document analysis*** was employed to enrich the data and to support triangulation in the overall analysis. Institutional self-evaluation reports (2020–2024), strategic plans, Erasmus+ participation statistics, and faculty-level performance reports were reviewed to contextualise and triangulate findings. Particular attention was given to sections related to mobility, curriculum design, faculty recruitment, and international cooperation.

2.5. Data Analysis

Rubric data were compiled and analysed descriptively (means, standard deviations) to map institutional self-assessment across domains. Comparative tables were created to highlight discrepancies between formal documents and stakeholder perceptions. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), supported by both deductive codes (drawn from the rubric domains) and inductive themes (emerging from interview narratives). The document analysis informed interpretation by illustrating strategic alignment, performance trends, and gaps in implementation.

2.6. Research Credibility and Trustworthiness

Multiple strategies were employed to enhance the study's trustworthiness. *Triangulation* is the most valuable one. Combining rubric data, interviews, and institutional documents allowed cross-validation of findings and reduced reliance on any single data source. While findings are context-specific, the methodology enables conceptual generalisability and transferability to similar institutions in Türkiye or comparable higher education systems.

2.7. Ethical Considerations

The study received ethical approval from the IMU Social and Humanities Ethics Board. All participants provided informed consent and were assured of

anonymity and voluntary participation. Data were securely stored and pseudonymised in reporting.

3. Findings

This section presents an integrated analysis of IMU internationalisation practices, based on the triangulated data from institutional self-assessment reports (2020–2024), Mace and Pearl's (2019) comprehensive internationalizaiton rubric, and in-depth interviews with 14 senior academic leaders. Rather than reporting rubric dimensions in isolation, the findings are organised into four thematic categories that best capture institutional strengths, constraints, and perceived priorities: (1) *strategic commitment vs. operational gaps,* (2) *curriculum and language policy as partial drivers,* (3) *faculty engagement and disconnected incentives and* (4) *student mobility and fragile support ecosystems.* The aggregated results of the rubric self-assessment, presented in Table 1, show that while IMU scores relatively high in vision alignment and strategic planning, it remains underdeveloped in areas such as funding, operational leadership, and faculty development.

3.1. Theme 1: Strategic Commitment vs. Operational Gaps

IMU demonstrates a high-level commitment to internationalisation through its vision statements, strategic documents, and structural investments. The university's strategic plan identifies internationalisation as a core goal, reinforced by the creation of coordination offices (e.g., the International Office and the International Performance Development Coordination Unit) and the adoption of institutional policies aligned with the Bologna Process and Erasmus+ principles. In the rubric assessment, "Vision and Mission Alignment" received the highest average score (M = 3.14), followed by the "Strategic Plan" component (M = 2.71). However, participants expressed significant concerns about the gap between formal articulation and institutional readiness. The lowest scores were given to "Funding Allocation" (M = 1.29) and the existence of a dedicated "Internationalisation Task Force" (M = 1.43), suggesting that while the rhetoric is strong, enabling structures are fragile. Multiple interviewees reported the absence of horizontal coordination across faculties. P6 states: *"Our university has vision documents about internationalisation, but what's lacking is a culture of action. There's an overreliance on individuals rather than system-wide planning."* Internationalisation initiatives were often described as fragmented, depending on unit-level leadership rather than being centrally directed and monitored. Annual self-evaluation reports consistently set targets (e.g., 20% mobility growth per year) but lacked documented follow-through or systematised progress reviews.

Moreover, strategic targets often focused on quantitative metrics (e.g., number of bilateral agreements, Erasmus+ participation) rather than qualitative outcomes, such as integration of international students or learning outcome alignment. P12 highlights the position: *"Yes, there are many signed protocols. But many of them remain dormant. They look good in reports, but they are not generating actual academic*

exchange." This reveals a disconnect between policy ambition and implementation capacity, which echoes broader critiques of "symbolic internationalisation" in resource-constrained HEIs (Bulut-Şahin, 2023).

Table 1. Assessment Scores of Respondents Across Six Domains of Comprehensive Internationalisation

Pillars and Dimensions	N	Mean	SD	Rank
Pillar 1: Articulated Institutional Commitment	14	2,11	1,26	3
TM01: Vision/Mission Statement	14	3,14	1,23	1
TM02: Institution Strategic Plan	14	2,71	1,33	2
TM03: Internationalization Committee or Task Force	14	1,43	0,85	9
TM04: Funding Allocation	14	1,29	0,73	10
TM05: Formal Assessment Mechanisms	14	2,00	1,04	5
Pillar 2: Administrative Leadership Structure and Staffing	14	1,90	1,01	5
TM06: Institutional Leadership	14	2,00	1,04	5
TM07: Reporting Structures	14	1,71	0,99	7
TM08: Staff and Office Configurations	14	2,00	1,04	5
Pillar 3: Curriculum, Co-curriculum, and Learning Outcomes	14	2,71	1,11	1
TM09: General Education and Language Requirements	14	3,14	0,95	1
TM10: Co-curricular Activities and Programs	14	2,29	1,27	4
TM11: Specific Student Learning Outcomes	14	2,71	1,07	2
Pillar 4: Faculty Policies and Practices	14	2,24	1,08	2
TM12: Hiring Guidelines	14	2,43	0,94	3
TM13: Tenure and Promotion Policies	14	2,43	1,22	3
TM14: Faculty Development Opportunities	14	1,86	1,03	6
Pillar 5: Student Mobility	14	2,10	1,08	4
TM15: Education (Study) Abroad Programs	14	2,71	1,27	2
TM16: International Student Recruitment	14	2,00	1,04	5
TM17: International Student Support	14	1,57	0,94	8
Pillar 6: Collaboration and Partnerships	14	1,43	0,83	6
TM18: Institutional Partnerships	14	1,57	0,94	8
TM19: Joint Degree and Dual/Double Degree Programs	14	1,43	0,85	9

TM20: Institutional Presence Abroad	14	1,29	0,73	10
Overall	14	2,04	1,15	

3.2. Theme 2: Curriculum and Language Policy as Partial Drivers

Curriculum internationalisation emerged as the strongest-performing rubric pillar overall (M = 2.71), particularly regarding language requirements and general education standards (M = 3.14). IMU currently offers 10 undergraduate programs in English or Spanish, and faculty members have initiated curriculum revisions to include global competencies and SDG-aligned outcomes. The presence of a TÖMER language centre supports Turkish language instruction for international students. However, the qualitative data reveal a nuanced picture. While English-medium instruction (EMI) was praised as a strategic tool for visibility and mobility, multiple participants described inconsistencies in implementation, staff capacity, and student preparedness.

Moreover, curriculum-level internationalisation was often interpreted narrowly—as the language of instruction, rather than pedagogical design, international readings, or intercultural learning outcomes (Leask, 2015). Faculty members noted that few programs include internationally benchmarked syllabi or globally relevant course content. *"There is enthusiasm for English programs, but we struggle with sustainability. Some departments don't have enough instructors fluent in English. Others find it hard to recruit students"* (P9). *"Internationalisation of the curriculum is not just about offering courses in English. We need more interdisciplinary, comparative, and critical perspectives"* (P2).

Co-curricular programming (e.g., international weeks, guest lectures) was described as occasional rather than systematic. Although rubric scores for co-curricular activities were moderate (M = 2.29), most activities appeared to be event-based rather than integrated into broader educational strategies. A dean explains: *"There is no mechanism to track or evaluate how students gain global competencies unless they study abroad. We are missing the 'at-home' side"* (P5). This indicates partial adoption of Internationalisation at Home (IaH), with language reform leading, but curriculum reform lagging.

3.3. Theme 3: Faculty Engagement and Disconnected Incentives

Faculty-related internationalisation policies were rated as moderately developed in the rubric (M = 2.24). Hiring and promotion practices (M = 2.43) showed some sensitivity to international publication and mobility experience. However, opportunities for faculty development, such as training, exchange, or collaborative research, received weaker evaluations (M = 1.86). The interviews suggest a disconnect between institutional goals and faculty incentives. Several academic leaders reported that while international output is encouraged rhetorically, it is not adequately rewarded or supported in performance

appraisals: *"We are told to internationalise, but the workload policies, travel approvals, or publication incentives don't really align with that objective"* (P7).

Moreover, the institutional capacity to support visiting scholars, sabbaticals, or externally funded research is limited. Faculty who engage in international activities often do so through personal networks or individual initiative, not institutional facilitation.According to a faculty member, *"Faculty mobility depends on who you know, or if you studied abroad. There's no structured roadmap or mentorship"* (P11). Notably, some participants voiced frustration about a lack of alignment between hiring policies and program needs—particularly in English-medium departments. While young faculty with international degrees bring valuable networks and ideas, they often lack administrative support and clarity about how to advance internationalisation goals. This reflects a common challenge in emerging HEIs. The tension between decentralised academic innovation and centralised bureaucratic inertia (Hudzik, 2011; Arastaman, 2022).

3.4. Theme 4: Student Mobility and Fragile Support Ecosystems

Student mobility was the most publicly promoted aspect of internationalisation at IMU, and the area most visible in institutional documents. Erasmus+ participation increased from 13 agreements in 2020 to over 60 by 2024. The university reported a consistent rise in both outbound and inbound mobility, with international students comprising approximately 3% of the student body. Rubric scores for outbound mobility (M = 2.71) were higher than for inbound recruitment (M = 2.00) and international student support (M = 1.57). Interviews confirmed these disparities: *"We are good at sending students abroad through Erasmus. But supporting incoming students is much harder. There are issues with dormitories, course registration, and integration"* (P8). Participants described a fragile support ecosystem, where much of the responsibility for international students falls on overburdened academic advisors or office staff. There is no centralised induction program, intercultural mentoring, or sustained language support beyond TÖMER.

Additionally, the administrative infrastructure—such as credit transfer systems, bilingual websites, and course mapping—was often cited as a barrier to effective mobility: *"When students return from mobility, their transcripts sometimes don't match our systems. This creates friction and discourages others from applying"* (P10). This gap reflects broader patterns identified in the literature: that many HEIs in emerging systems excel at mobility as quantity, but lack systems for quality, inclusion, and sustainability (Beelen & Jones, 2015; Stein, 2021).

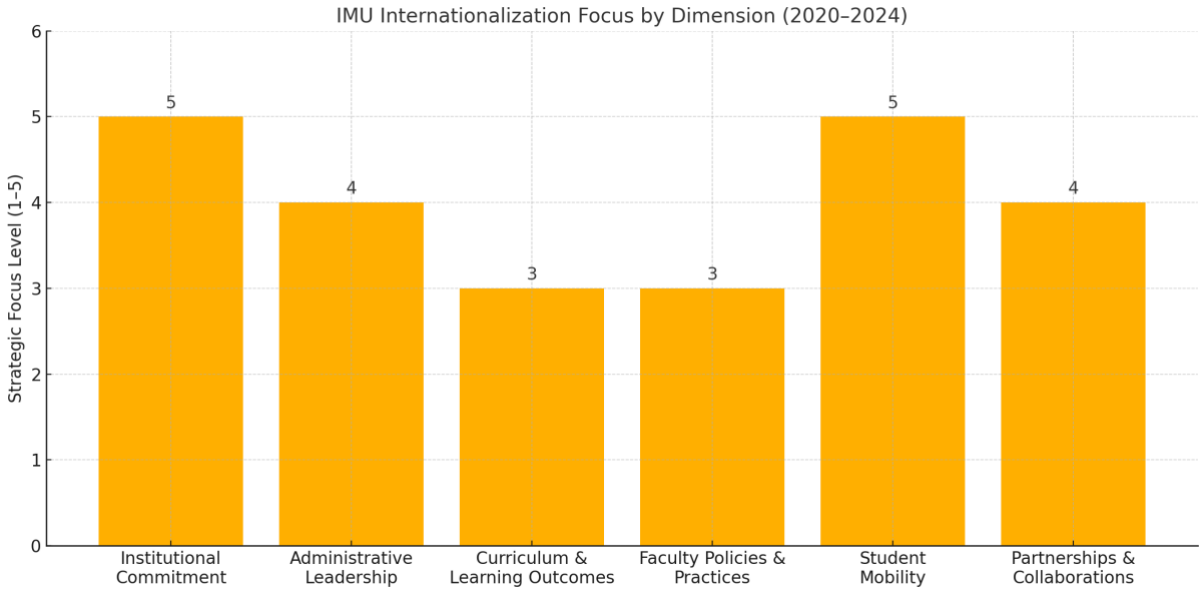

Figure 1. IMU Internationalization Focus by Dimension in terms of IMU Institutional Self-Evaluation Reports (2020–2024).

As visualised in Figure 1, participant perspectives clustered into three distinct groups—those expressing high institutional readiness, those indicating moderate progress, and those highlighting persistent structural constraints. IMU's internationalisation journey can be characterised as strategically committed but operationally uneven. High-level vision and structural investments (e.g., EMI programs, Erasmus+ expansion) have created a promising foundation. However, challenges remain in cross-unit coordination, faculty engagement, curriculum integration, and student support. The four emergent themes underscore the misalignment between policy intent and institutional capacity, echoing critiques of top-down internationalisation in comparable systems (Bulut-Şahin, 2023; Gazzoni et al., 2025). Nonetheless, the study also reveals pockets of innovation and high readiness, particularly in units led by internationally trained faculty or proactive deans.

4. Discussion

This study set out to examine how a newly established public university in Türkiye—IMU—conceptualises and operationalises internationalisation in light of national policy expectations and global higher education trends. Through a triangulated qualitative approach involving self-assessment rubrics, document analysis, and interviews with senior academic leaders, the study revealed important insights about institutional capacity, leadership, and cultural dynamics in emerging higher education systems. This discussion interprets the findings through a theoretical lens, compares IMU with international literature, and identifies implications for both policy and institutional strategy.

4.1. Rhetorical commitment vs. organisational alignment

A central theme emerging from the study is the disconnect between strategic intent and institutional readiness, a gap frequently reported in non-Western and Global South institutions (Bulut-Şahin, 2023; Arastaman, 2022). While IMU has embedded internationalisation in its mission and policy frameworks—reflected in its strategic plan, the establishment of international offices, and the introduction of EMI programs—this rhetorical commitment is not fully matched by internal governance, resourcing, or faculty incentives. In Mace and Pearl's (2019) rubric, indicators such as "vision/mission" and "strategic plan" scored relatively high, but others tied to implementation—like "funding allocation," "partnership management," and "faculty development"—remained underdeveloped. This reinforces a broader critique of "surface-level" or "symbolic" internationalisation (Knight, 2011), in which institutions conform to external policy pressures or global visibility expectations without transformative engagement. True CI demands integration across academic functions, coordinated leadership, and cultural shift (Hudzik, 2011)—conditions that are difficult to achieve in resource-constrained, bureaucratically rigid institutions like IMU. The IMU case thus affirms that CI cannot be achieved merely through structural reforms or document-based compliance. Rather, it must be approached as a long-term process of internal alignment, guided by inclusive leadership and faculty buy-in.

4.2. IMU and the hybrid model of internationalisation in the global south:

IMU's trajectory mirrors a hybrid model of internationalisation common in the Global South, blending global aspirations with domestic constraints (Kapfudzaruwa, 2024; Stein, 2021). Its strategies combine compliance with European frameworks (e.g., Erasmus+, Bologna Process), regional soft power outreach through Türkiye Scholarships, and institutional aspirations for global recognition through rankings and EMI offerings. This mirrors similar dynamics in emerging systems such as Malaysia, Colombia, or Uganda, where internationalisation serves multiple, sometimes competing purposes—quality improvement, national diplomacy, economic development—but is constrained by limited autonomy and resources (Gazzoni et al., 2025; de Wit et al., 2015). What distinguishes IMU is that, as a young university, it lacks the legacy, prestige, and global networks enjoyed by more established institutions. While this limits its attractiveness to global partners, it also enables greater flexibility in design and reform. For example, its EMI programs were introduced within a decade of its founding—a timeline faster than most older Turkish public universities. However, this flexibility is undermined by inadequate support structures, faculty overload, and a lack of strategic alignment across units. IMU, therefore, embodies what might be called "emergent internationalisation"—where vision exceeds capacity, and progress is piecemeal, dependent on entrepreneurial faculty or isolated champions rather than institutional coherence.

4.3. Reframing CI for emerging institutions:

The findings suggest a need to rethink how CI is conceptualised in young, public universities. The standard Western model of CI—holistic, fully integrated, resource-rich—may be unrealistic or even inappropriate in contexts like IMU. Instead, a developmental or phased approach may better reflect the pathways of emerging HEIs. Such a framework might include four phases *foundational structuring* (establishing international offices, embedding CI in strategy, joining Erasmus+), *programmatic expansion* (launching emi programs, increasing mobility, piloting partnerships), *institutional integration* (aligning curriculum, faculty incentives, governance reforms), *cultural embedding* (developing global citizenship outcomes, inclusive policies, and academic identity rooted in international engagement). IMU currently sits between Phases 1 and 2. It has developed policy architecture and initiated programs, but has not yet achieved deep curricular, cultural, or governance-level integration. Recognising CI as an institutional learning journey rather than a fixed model may help avoid the pitfalls of compliance-driven implementation.

4.4. Faculty and curriculum as underutilised drivers of deep internationalisation:

Another major insight concerns the underutilised potential of faculty and curriculum. While faculty hiring policies now consider international research outputs, and EMI has gained traction, there remains limited support for faculty development, exchange, or incentive alignment. Most international activities are driven by individual motivation, with little institutional scaffolding. This reflects a broader issue in the CI literature. Faculty are often seen as implementers of internationalisation, rather than co-designers of strategy (Leask, 2015). Without clear performance incentives, workload protection, and support for research collaboration, faculty engagement remains peripheral. The curriculum, too, remains a missed opportunity for meaningful change. Though English-medium programs exist, few departments have embedded global or intercultural outcomes into their learning design. Internationalisation at Home (IaH)—designed to democratise global learning for non-mobile students—is mentioned but not meaningfully enacted. This reinforces critiques that mobility remains the dominant paradigm, even in institutions that claim to value inclusivity (Beelen & Jones, 2015). To deepen CI, institutions like IMU must move beyond language-based reform toward curricular and pedagogical internationalisation, including intercultural learning objectives, globally contextualised course content, Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) initiatives, cross-border research integration into teaching.

The IMU case also raises important questions about national policy approaches to internationalisation. Türkiye's higher education governance is highly centralised, with national bodies setting quotas, approving EMI programs, and coordinating scholarship schemes (CoHE, 2017). While this provides consistency and visibility, it also creates rigidity and limits institutional autonomy. For younger or mid-tier public universities, this creates a dependency on top-down initiatives—e.g., Erasmus+ agreements facilitated centrally—but

leaves a gap in bottom-up capacity-building. Policies that focus on counting agreements or increasing inbound student numbers miss the need for qualitative improvements, such as academic integration, research collaboration, and governance reform.

To address this, national actors (e.g., CoHE, Ministry of National Education) should support differentiated internationalisation strategies based on institutional type and maturity, provide dedicated funding for internationalisation of curriculum and faculty development, encourage regional clusters or consortia for joint international initiatives, create mechanisms for evaluating the *impact*, not just the *volume*, of internationalisation. These lessons apply not only to Türkiye but to many systems in transition across the Global South.

This study makes two primary contributions to the literature. First, while much research focuses on elite or legacy institutions, this study provides rare insight into how a mid-tier, recently founded public university in an emerging system interprets and enacts internationalisation. Second, the findings support a developmental and contextualised model of CI, highlighting the need for phased implementation, flexible adaptation, and embedded cultural change—particularly in systems where formal structure outpaces institutional capacity. By centering the voices of institutional actors and triangulating rubric, interview, and documentary data, this study offers a grounded, realist perspective that complements more normative or prescriptive models of internationalisation.

5. Conclusion

Present study examined how a young public university in Türkiye -IMU- interprets and implements internationalisation strategies in line with national ambitions and global frameworks. Using a qualitative case study approach that combined a validated institutional rubric, document analysis, and interviews with academic leaders, the research provided a nuanced understanding of the opportunities and limitations of internationalisation in emerging higher education institutions.

Findings reveal a significant gap between IMU's strategic commitments and its operational realities. While the university has clearly articulated internationalisation in its vision and policy frameworks—demonstrated by its EMI programs, participation in Erasmus+, and institutional support offices—implementation remains fragmented and highly dependent on individual initiative rather than coordinated, system-wide strategy. Institutional documents often emphasise quantity-focused targets such as mobility numbers or bilateral agreements, while deeper forms of integration, particularly in curriculum development, faculty incentives, and intercultural learning, remain underdeveloped. This reflects a broader trend in resource-constrained contexts, where internationalisation is pursued as policy compliance rather than transformative practice.

The study contributes to the literature by offering a grounded, institutional perspective on how comprehensive internationalisation (CI) unfolds in non-elite, recently established universities. Unlike established institutions with longstanding global partnerships and reputational capital, IMU represents a category of institutions that must build international capacity while simultaneously navigating centralised policy mandates and limited resources. The findings suggest that existing models of CI—often rooted in Global North contexts—may require recalibration when applied to emerging systems. A phased or developmental approach to internationalisation, aligned with institutional maturity and local constraints, may be more appropriate and sustainable.

In addition to its empirical findings, this study offers methodological value by integrating a validated rubric with qualitative interviews to assess internationalisation practices in a Global South context—an approach that remains underutilised in the literature. By foregrounding the institutional narratives of academic leaders, the research also brings attention to the strategic tensions and cultural nuances often overlooked in policy-level analyses. While the study is context-specific, the conceptual and diagnostic framework developed here may be transferable to other emerging universities navigating similar challenges in Türkiye and beyond.

While the study is limited by its single-institution focus and insider perspective, its methodological triangulation enhances its credibility and transferability. Future research could explore comparative cases across institutional types or investigate how students and staff experience internationalisation in practice. There is also scope to explore how ethical, decolonial, or sustainability-oriented frameworks are—or are not—being integrated into the internationalisation agendas of universities like IMU.

In sum, this study underscores that effective internationalisation requires more than strategic documents or external partnerships; it demands deep institutional alignment, inclusive leadership, and cultural change. For young universities in transitional systems, internationalisation must be context-sensitive, realistically phased, and meaningfully integrated into the core academic mission.

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Ethical Considerations

This research adhered to ethical standards, including respect for participants' rights and confidentiality. The study was ethically approved by the IMU Social and Humanities Ethics Board.

AI Use Disclaimer

The author discloses the use of AI in the research process, manuscript preparation, and data analysis. Specifically, ChatGPT 4.5 was used as a tool to assist with proof reading of the research. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and ethical considerations of any AI-generated content included in the manuscript.

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Appendix 1: Comprehensive Internationalization Rubric

L1: Emerging

L2: Capacity Building

L3: Sustained International

Pillar 1: Articulated Institutional Commitment.

TM1: Vision/Mission Statement

TM2: Institution Strategic Plan

TM3: Internationalization Committee or Task Force

TM4: Funding Allocation

TM5: Formal Assessment Mechanisms

Pillar 2: Administrative Leadership Structure and Staffing.

TM6: Institutional Leadership

TM7: Reporting Structures

TM8: Staff and Office Configurations

Pillar 3: Curriculum, Co-curriculum, and Learning Outcomes.

TM9: General Education and Language Requirements

TM10: Co-curricular Activities and Programs

TM11: Specific Student Learning Outcomes

Pillar 4: Faculty Policies and Practices.

TM12: Hiring Guidelines

TM13: Tenure and Promotion Policies

TM14: Faculty Development Opportunities

Pillar V: Student Mobility.

TM15: Education (Study) Abroad Programs

TM16: International Student Recruitment

TM17: International Student Support

Pillar 6: Collaboration and Partnerships.

TM18: Institutional Partnerships

TM19: Joint Degree and Dual/Double Degree Programs

TM20: Institutional Presence Abroad

Appendix 2: Kapsamlı Uluslararasılaşma Rubriği

L1: Başlangıç aşamasında
L2: Kapasite oluşturma aşamasında
L3: Sürdürülebilir uluslararasılaşma aşamasında

1. Alan: Belirlenmiş Kurumsal Taahhüt
TM1: Vizyon/Misyon Bildirimi
TM2: Kurum Stratejik Planı
TM3: Uluslararasılaştırma Komitesi veya Ekibi
TM4: Fon Tahsisi
TM5: Kurumsal Değerlendirme Mekanizmaları
2. Alan: İdari Liderlik Yapısı ve Personel
TM6: Kurumsal Liderlik
TM7: Raporlama Yapıları
TM8: Personel ve Birim Yapılandırmaları
3. Alan: Müfredat, Ortak Müfredat ve Öğrenme Çıktıları
TM9: Genel Eğitim ve Dil Gereklilikleri
TM10: Müfredat Dışı Etkinlikler ve Programlar
TM11: Spesifik Öğrenci Öğrenme Çıktıları
4. Alan: Fakülte Politikaları ve Uygulamaları
TM12: İşe Alma Yönergeleri
TM13: Görev Süresi ve Terfi Politikaları
TM14: Fakülte Gelişim Fırsatları
5. Alan: Öğrenci Hareketliliği
TM15: Yurtdışı Eğitim Programları
TM16: Uluslararası Öğrenci Alımı
TM17: Uluslararası Öğrenci Desteği
6. Alan: İşbirliği ve Ortaklıklar

TM18: Kurumsal Ortaklıklar

TM19: Ortak Derece ve Çift/Yandal Diploma Programları

TM20: Yurtdışında Kurumsal Varlık