Internationalization Strategy as Sustainable Governance: Navigating ESG and AI Transformation

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Internationalization in higher education is increasingly becoming a component of sustainable university governance in a period of rapid technological, societal, and geopolitical transformation. Rather than being understood primarily through mobility and partnership expansion, it needs to be approached as a strategic and value-based domain of institutional management. Internationalization is shaped not only by new globalization pressures, but also by European Union priorities, transnational project cooperation, sustainability expectations, and AI-driven digital transformation. These developments point to a broader shift from activity-based understandings of internationalization to governance-based approaches. Particular attention is given to more inclusive, equitable, environmentally responsible, and strategically coordinated forms of international engagement through alliances, as well as to the opportunities and governance risks associated with digitalization and artificial intelligence. The changing role of international offices is examined in this context through a brief practice-based reflection, highlighting their repositioning from administrative support units to strategic actors contributing to sustainable institutional development.

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1 Introduction

Internationalization in higher education can no longer be understood primarily through mobility, recruitment, and partnership expansion. These dimensions remain important, but they are no longer sufficient for capturing the full meaning of international engagement in a rapidly changing institutional environment. Universities now operate under the combined pressures of intensified global competition, geopolitical uncertainty, sustainability expectations, digital transformation, demographic change, and growing demands for inclusion and accountability. In this setting, internationalization is no longer simply an outward-facing set of activities; it increasingly becomes a question of how institutions define priorities, allocate resources, manage risk, and align international engagement with their academic mission and public role. This fundamental shift necessitates a re-evaluation of traditional approaches, moving towards a more strategic and integrated understanding of internationalization within the broader framework of university governance, where international engagement is not an "add-on" but a core institutional function.

This shift is reinforced by contemporary European policy. The European Strategy for Universities (European Commission, 2022) explicitly positions universities as key actors in building sustainable and resilient societies and economies, emphasizing their crucial role in addressing global challenges and fostering European values. Concurrently, the Erasmus+ programme (2026) no longer frames international engagement only through mobility, but links it intrinsically to inclusion and diversity, digital transformation, and environmental responsibility, reflecting a holistic approach to European higher education development. The Council of the European Union (2024) has simultaneously reaffirmed the continuing importance of mobility by setting a target that at least 23% of higher education graduates should have a learning mobility experience by 2030, while also aiming for at least 20% of learning mobility participants across the EU to be people with fewer opportunities by 2027. This dual focus underscores that mobility remains central, but it is increasingly embedded in a broader governance framework concerned with quality, fairness, and long-term value, moving beyond mere quantitative metrics to encompass qualitative impact and equitable access.

A similar development is visible in OECD (2025) thinking on transnational collaboration, which emphasizes that international cooperation increasingly depends on institutional capacity, regulatory compatibility, funding incentives, and cross-government coordination rather than on academic goodwill alone. This perspective highlights the complex interplay of national policies and institutional frameworks that shape effective international partnerships, where success is predicated on "policy coherence" and "regulatory interoperability." At the same time, UNESCO's (2023) guidance on generative artificial intelligence in education and research makes clear that digital transformation is not simply a matter of adopting tools. It requires policy capacity, human-centred governance, and deliberate institutional judgment to navigate the ethical and pedagogical implications of AI. Taken together, these developments suggest that the most important contemporary question is no longer how international a university appears, but how intelligently and responsibly it governs internationalization, ensuring that global engagement serves institutional mission and societal good in a sustainable manner.

This paper therefore makes a conceptual and practice-based contribution. It does not claim empirical validation in a statistical sense. Rather it develops a policy-informed conceptual synthesis and uses structured profession reflection from institutional practice to illustrate how the governance turn materializes in university management. Its original contribution is to connect three debates that are often treated separately: quality-oriented internationalization, ESG-oriented sustainable governance and AI-enabled institutional transformation. The discussion proceeds in seven steps. It first traces the move from internationalization as activity to internationalization as governance. It then shows that this shift is visible not only in mobility policies but also in European Universities alliances and project-based forms of cooperation. It next examines internationalization through an ESG lens, discusses the opportunities and risks associated with AI and digital transformation, and considers the changing role of international offices. Building on these strands, it proposes a framework for sustainable internationalization governance and concludes with a short reflection informed by institutional practice.

2 From Internationalization as Mobility to Internationalization as Governance

For a long time, the dominant grammar of internationalization was activity-based. Universities often evaluated success through visible and countable indicators: the number of incoming and outgoing students, the volume of agreements signed, the growth of English-taught programmes, the expansion of international recruitment, or the number of visiting professors and international events. This model had obvious advantages. It made internationalization measurable, communicable, and politically attractive. It also corresponded to a period in which internationalization was closely associated with openness, competitiveness, prestige, and institutional visibility, as evidenced by the IAU (2024) 6th Global Survey. However, this quantitative focus often overlooked the deeper strategic implications and qualitative outcomes of international engagement, leading to what some critics call "symbolic internationalization."

Yet this activity-based model is increasingly inadequate. It does not tell us whether international engagement is strategically aligned with the university's academic profile, whether it benefits the wider community of students and staff, whether partnerships are reciprocal and meaningful, or whether the institution is building long-term capacity through its international choices. A university may be highly active internationally and still be strategically fragmented, socially selective, environmentally inconsistent, or overly reliant on symbolic cooperation. In that sense, counting internationalization is not the same as governing it well. Hans de Wit's (2020) call for a more ethical and qualitative approach is particularly relevant here, because it challenges the long-standing tendency to equate internationalization with volume, visibility, and market-oriented expansion, advocating instead for a focus on genuine impact and responsible engagement.

A broader and more purposive understanding of internationalization is already embedded in the influential definition adopted by the International Association of Universities (IAU, accessed 2026), which describes internationalization as the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, and delivery of post-secondary education in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff and to make a meaningful contribution to society. This definition matters because it shifts the

discussion from activity to intentionality, from expansion to purpose, and from external visibility to institutional quality and societal value. It is therefore fundamentally governance-oriented, even if it is not always used that way in practice, emphasizing the strategic integration of international dimensions rather than their superficial addition.

The same direction can be seen in the idea of comprehensive internationalization associated with Hudzik (2015), which emphasizes that internationalization should not be confined to a specialist office or a limited set of mobility activities, but should be integrated across teaching, research, service, and leadership. Once internationalization is understood in this way, it becomes inseparable from institutional strategy and organizational design. The issue is no longer whether a university has international activity, but whether internationalization is embedded in decision-making, connected to core academic priorities, and supported by institutional capacities that make it sustainable rather than episodic, ensuring a coherent and impactful approach that permeates the entire institutional culture.

Recent OECD (2025) analysis deepens this governance perspective still further. It stresses that transnational collaboration depends on interacting policy fields such as migration, quality assurance, funding, research policy, and institutional incentives, and recommends stronger institutional capacity, support for diverse forms of engagement, and greater policy coherence. This is a crucial insight. It means that internationalization is not simply an arena in which universities act; it is also an arena in which universities are shaped by external frameworks and must respond through internal coordination and strategic choice. The central shift, then, is from seeing internationalization as institutional expansion to seeing it as institutional steering, where strategic foresight and adaptive governance are paramount in navigating a complex and often contradictory global policy landscape.

3 Beyond Mobility: European Universities and Project-Based Cooperation

The governance turn becomes even clearer when one looks beyond mobility itself. Contemporary internationalization increasingly takes place through deeper, longer-term, and more structurally demanding forms of transnational cooperation. The European Universities initiative is perhaps the clearest expression of this shift.

According to the European Education Area (accessed 2026), the initiative now encompasses 73 alliances with almost 650 higher education institutions across Europe. These alliances are presented not as simple exchange networks, but as strategic frameworks for deeper and more sustainable cooperation, fostering integrated curricula, joint degrees, and shared research agendas that challenge traditional institutional boundaries.

This is an important qualitative change. In a classic bilateral model, internationalization often revolved around relatively discrete activities: exchanges, visits, memoranda, occasional joint events. By contrast, alliance-based cooperation presupposes shared planning, joint agendas, stronger organizational interoperability, and the gradual building of trust and capacity across institutions. It requires coordination not only between international offices, but also across faculties, research units, support services, and leadership structures. Internationalization here is no longer a peripheral activity. It becomes part of how a university organizes itself in relation to others, demanding a fundamental rethinking of institutional structures, legal frameworks, and administrative processes to enable "seamless" transnational cooperation.

A similar logic applies to project-based cooperation. Much contemporary internationalization unfolds through grant consortia, thematic partnerships, research collaborations, innovation ecosystems, and capacity-building projects. These activities are not secondary to mobility; in many institutions they increasingly define the most strategically consequential forms of international engagement. Project cooperation is governance-intensive because it requires partner selection, internal coordination, compliance capacity, timeline discipline, reporting quality, and continuity beyond one-off contacts. It also often generates spillovers into curriculum development, research networks, staff development, and institutional positioning. For that reason, project cooperation should not be viewed as an add-on to internationalization, but as one of its most significant contemporary manifestations, requiring sophisticated management and strategic oversight to ensure that project outputs are integrated into long-term institutional development.

OECD's (2025) emphasis on supporting diverse forms of transnational engagement is particularly useful here, because it highlights that internationalization can no longer be captured adequately by mobility indicators alone. If universities define

their international success too narrowly through mobility numbers, they risk overlooking where the most demanding governance challenges and the most valuable long-term opportunities actually lie. Building a strong consortium, aligning project pipelines with institutional priorities, or participating meaningfully in a transnational alliance often requires more strategic judgment than processing individual mobility flows. That does not reduce the importance of mobility; rather, it situates mobility within a much wider ecosystem of international cooperation, where its value is amplified through strategic integration and multi-level partnership development.

4 Internationalization through an ESG Lens

If internationalization is increasingly a matter of governance, the next question is according to what principles it should be governed. One useful answer is provided by an ESG lens. In the higher education context, ESG should not be treated as a simplistic import from corporate reporting. Rather, it can serve as a practical framework for examining whether internationalization is environmentally responsible, socially inclusive, and institutionally well governed. Used in this way, ESG is less a branding exercise than a way of asking whether international engagement supports the wider public mission of the university and whether it does so responsibly, ensuring accountability and ethical practice in a globalized world.

The environmental dimension is no longer marginal. Traditional internationalization often normalized travel-intensive models in which physical mobility was treated as an unquestioned indicator of success. Today, universities operate in a context where climate responsibility has become unavoidable. Erasmus+ (2026) explicitly identifies environment and the fight against climate change as a programme priority and encourages forms of learning and cooperation that support greener futures. This does not require abandoning mobility. It requires a more reflective approach to mobility design: asking what purposes mobility serves, when it creates real value, how it can be combined with digital or blended formats, and how institutions can balance educational gains with environmental costs. Sustainable internationalization is therefore not anti-mobility; it is mobility governed more deliberately, integrating ecological considerations into every stage of planning and implementation, from travel choices to digital infrastructure.

The social dimension concerns inclusion, access, and fairness. Here the policy environment is again instructive. Erasmus+ (2026) foregrounds inclusion and diversity, while the Council of the European Union (2024) mobility recommendation explicitly links expansion with the participation of those who have traditionally faced barriers. These priorities are highly significant because they challenge a model in which internationalization often disproportionately served already advantaged students and internationally connected academic groups. A more sustainable approach requires attention to "internationalization for all," including curriculum internationalization, internationalization at home, accessible support structures, and more intentional outreach to those who may not otherwise participate. The social legitimacy of internationalization increasingly depends on whether it broadens opportunity rather than reproducing inequality, fostering equitable access and participation for all members of the academic community regardless of their socio-economic background.

The governance dimension ties these issues together. Universities must decide which partners they work with, what forms of cooperation they prioritize, how they allocate scarce resources, how they balance prestige with reciprocity, and how they respond to ethical, reputational, and geopolitical risks. Governance in this sense is not merely procedural. It is about judgment. It concerns whether institutional structures are capable of linking international ambition to academic mission, whether data and decision-making processes are transparent, and whether internationalization is treated as part of long-term institutional development rather than a collection of disconnected initiatives. OECD's (2025) focus on institutional capacity is therefore especially important, because it suggests that governance quality is not an optional extra; it is a condition for sustainable internationalization, ensuring robust decision-making, ethical oversight, and strategic coherence.

Looked at through this lens, internationalization can no longer be evaluated merely by the quantity of mobility or the number of agreements signed. The more meaningful questions are whether cooperation is strategic, whether participation is equitable, whether mobility is purposeful, whether partnerships are reciprocal, and whether international engagement contributes to institutional resilience, public responsibility, and academic quality. ESG is useful precisely because it helps make these questions visible, providing a comprehensive framework for assessing the true

impact and value of internationalization efforts in a society demanding greater accountability.

5 AI and Digital Transformation in Internationalization Governance

Digitalization has already reshaped internationalization in practical ways, but the spread of generative artificial intelligence adds a new layer of strategic complexity. International engagement increasingly depends on digital infrastructures for recruitment, multilingual communication, student support, virtual collaboration, translation, administration, and data analysis. AI tools can improve responsiveness, lower linguistic barriers, streamline repetitive tasks, and help institutions manage growing expectations with limited staff resources. In principle, this makes internationalization not only more efficient but also potentially more accessible, opening new avenues for global connectivity and service delivery.

Yet the governance implications are substantial. UNESCO's (2023) guidance stresses the need for a human-centred vision, regulatory planning, and human capacity development in relation to generative AI. That warning is especially relevant in international higher education, where communication is often cross-linguistic, cross-cultural, and institutionally sensitive. Internationalization is not only about transaction; it is about interpretation, trust, and relationship-building. When AI enters these processes, universities must ask not only about efficiency but also about the ethical implications, potential biases, and the preservation of human agency and intercultural understanding. This also changes what counts as institutional capacity. It is no longer enough to have internationally active staff and a functioning mobility infrastructure. Universities increasingly need digital literacy, data governance competence, procurement awareness, and the ability to evaluate how new technologies reshape the quality and ethics of international services. In other words, digital transformation reinforces the argument that internationalization is fundamentally a governance issue, requiring proactive policy development, robust data protection, and continuous ethical oversight to prevent the "dehumanization" of international engagement.

6 Repositioning the International Office as a Strategic Actor

Once internationalization is understood as a field shaped by sustainability, alliances, project cooperation, inclusion, and digital transformation, the role of the international office must also be reconsidered. Traditionally, international offices were often perceived primarily as service units responsible for mobility administration, agreements, visits, and operational communication. Those functions remain essential. But they no longer capture the full institutional significance of the office, which is evolving to meet the demands of a more complex and strategically sensitive international landscape.

In many universities, the international office increasingly operates at the intersection of strategy, administration, policy translation, and institutional coordination. It connects leadership, academic departments, students, external partners, and funding schemes. It helps interpret policy agendas, identify viable cooperation formats, support project development, coordinate implementation, and ensure that international engagement does not become fragmented across institutional silos. In this sense, the international office becomes not just a provider of services, but a broker of coherence and a translator between different institutional logics. That role is strategic precisely because internationalization today is not self-organizing; it must be curated, aligned, and continuously evaluated to ensure its effectiveness and sustainability.

This repositioning also has an important symbolic dimension. If international offices are viewed only as administrative units, universities risk underestimating the governance work required to turn international activity into institutional value. Someone must distinguish between symbolic and substantive partnerships, between opportunistic expansion and sustainable engagement, between short-term visibility and long-term capacity building.

International offices are often well placed to make these distinctions because they sit close enough to operations to understand what is feasible, but also close enough to strategy to see how internationalization can serve broader institutional goals, thereby acting as critical strategic enablers and "gatekeepers" of institutional quality in the global arena. Without institutional steering, international activity can easily become dispersed, reactive, or symbolic. Universities may accumulate agreements

without meaningful cooperation, increase mobility without widening access, join projects without building long-term capacity, or adopt digital tools without sufficient attention to ethics, quality, and human oversight. The international office is therefore increasingly involved in transforming international activity into institutional value. It helps distinguish between symbolic and substantive partnerships, between opportunistic expansion and sustainable engagement, and between short-term visibility and long-term capacity building.

A deeper governance approach to internationalization can therefore be organized around four interrelated pillars below, (Chytilová, 2026). These pillars should not be understood as a checklist of desirable values, but as a decision-making framework that helps universities evaluate whether internationalization is strategically meaningful, socially legitimate, environmentally responsible, and institutionally sustainable.

First, strategic alignment concerns the relationship between international engagement and the university's academic mission, institutional profile, and long-term development priorities. The central issue is not whether a university is internationally active, but whether its international activities strengthen what the institution wants to become. This pillar therefore requires universities to ask which partnerships, projects, mobility schemes, and alliances genuinely support their educational, research, and societal objectives. Strategic alignment also implies selectivity. Not every international opportunity creates institutional value, and not every partnership should be pursued simply because it increases visibility. A governance-based approach requires the capacity to prioritize, to discontinue low-value activities, and to concentrate institutional energy on forms of cooperation that generate cumulative benefits over time. In this sense, strategic alignment protects internationalization from becoming a collection of disconnected initiatives and turns it into a mechanism of institutional development.

Second, inclusive and responsible engagement addresses the social legitimacy of internationalization. Internationalization has often been associated with opportunity, openness, and mobility, but in practice these opportunities may be unevenly distributed. Students and staff with stronger financial, linguistic, social, or professional resources are often better positioned to benefit from international engagement. A sustainable model must therefore move beyond the assumption that

internationalization is automatically inclusive. It must examine who participates, who remains excluded, and what institutional barriers shape access. This pillar includes mobility support, internationalization at home, curriculum internationalization, transparent selection procedures, targeted communication, and support for participants with fewer opportunities. It also includes reciprocity in partnerships. Responsible internationalization cannot be based only on institutional prestige or one-sided extraction of benefits; it should create meaningful value for all partners involved. The governance question is therefore not simply how to expand participation, but how to ensure that internationalization does not reproduce existing inequalities under the language of global opportunity.

Third, sustainable mobility and cooperation design concerns the quality, purpose, and long-term value of international activities. Mobility remains a central element of internationalization, but it should no longer be treated as an unquestioned good measured mainly by volume. The relevant question is what kind of mobility produces meaningful educational, academic, or institutional outcomes. A short-term visit may be valuable if it leads to curriculum innovation, research cooperation, student engagement, or future project development; conversely, a formally successful mobility may have limited value if it remains isolated and unconnected to broader institutional goals. This pillar also requires attention to environmental responsibility. The issue is not to replace physical mobility with digital formats, but to design mobility more intelligently: combining physical, blended, and virtual formats according to purpose, expected impact, accessibility, and ecological cost.

The same logic applies to project and alliance cooperation. A sustainable internationalization strategy should not aim to participate in as many projects as possible, but to develop a selective and cumulative project portfolio. Project cooperation should be evaluated according to what it brings to the institution across several dimensions: research capacity, educational innovation, curriculum development, staff development, student opportunities, international visibility, knowledge transfer, links with practice, and future funding potential. In this sense, the value of a project cannot be reduced to whether funding was obtained or whether formal outputs were delivered. Its deeper institutional relevance depends on whether it creates spillovers into teaching, research, partnerships, reputation, and organizational learning. Selective project cooperation also requires universities to distinguish between projects that merely consume administrative capacity and

projects that build institutional capacity. Especially in smaller or more specialized institutions, project participation can become fragmented if it is driven mainly by short-term availability of calls, personal contacts, or opportunistic consortium invitations. A governance-based approach therefore requires asking whether a project fits the institution's strategic profile, whether there is sufficient internal ownership, whether the expected outputs can be used beyond the project lifetime, and whether the cooperation strengthens areas in which the institution wants to develop. Sustainable cooperation requires continuity, implementation capacity, internal ownership, and mechanisms for transferring benefits back into the institution. It is therefore not enough to join networks or projects; universities must be able to absorb, use, and institutionalize what such cooperation produces.

Fourth, AI-enabled but human-centred governance responds to the growing role of digitalization and artificial intelligence in international higher education. AI can support internationalization by improving communication, translation, student services, data analysis, document processing, and administrative efficiency. It can help international offices manage growing expectations under conditions of limited staff capacity. However, AI also introduces new governance risks. Internationalization involves culturally sensitive communication, trust-building, interpretation of individual circumstances, and decisions that may affect access to opportunities. These processes cannot be reduced to automation without careful human oversight. A human-centred approach requires transparency about where AI is used, protection of personal data, awareness of bias, and clear responsibility for decisions. AI should therefore be understood as an enabling infrastructure, not as a substitute for institutional judgment. Its value lies not in replacing the relational dimension of internationalization, but in freeing human capacity for tasks that require interpretation, empathy, negotiation, and strategic reasoning.

These four pillars are mutually reinforcing. Strategic alignment without inclusion may produce prestigious but socially narrow internationalization. Inclusion without strategic alignment may broaden access but remain institutionally fragmented. Sustainable mobility without digital capacity may become administratively inefficient, while digital transformation without human-centred governance may undermine trust and quality. The strength of the framework therefore lies in the interaction among the pillars. It shifts the evaluation of internationalization from isolated indicators toward the quality of institutional steering.

Under such a model, the international office is repositioned from a primarily administrative support structure to a strategic actor contributing to sustainable institutional development. This includes supporting strategic partner selection, improving the quality of implementation, strengthening inclusion and transparency, identifying synergies between mobility, projects and research cooperation, and ensuring that internationalization contributes to long-term institutional resilience.

7 Reflections from Practice

At Skoda Auto Vysoka skola, this perspective is closely linked to the ongoing shaping of Strategy 2035. In that context, addressing internationalization through a governance lens is not optional but increasingly necessary. The aim is not only to increase international activity, but to improve how internationalization functions: how mobility is organized, how outcomes are assessed, how services are delivered, how equal access and transparency are ensured, and how international engagement contributes to wider institutional quality. From this point of view, governance begins not in abstraction but in the continuous improvement of concrete processes that shape the everyday experience of students and staff (Chytilová, 2026).

This perspective is closely connected to the ongoing shaping of Strategy 2035. For a smaller and professionally oriented institution, internationalization cannot be based on unlimited expansion. The principle of quality over quantity is therefore essential. Partnerships are increasingly meaningful when they support more than one institutional objective: student opportunities, curriculum development, research cooperation, staff development, project capacity, links with practice, knowledge transfer, and reputation. A partnership that exists only formally has limited value. By contrast, a smaller number of well-developed partnerships can generate repeated mobility flows, teaching cooperation, research contacts, joint project ideas, and stronger institutional visibility. In this sense, internationalization becomes a matter of strategic portfolio development rather than simple partner accumulation.

One important step has been to treat mobility itself as an area of quality enhancement rather than mere administration. This includes a stronger focus on the effectiveness of student and staff mobility, with explicit attention to equality, inclusion, transparency, and service quality. Such principles should be self-evident, but in practice they require systems, routines, and institutional attention. Practical

measures have therefore included the strengthening of advisory and support formats.

Student mobility at Skoda Auto Vysoka skola is not treated only as an administrative output, but as a supported experience that must be monitored before, during, and after the stay. Formal feedback through university system is useful, but it is not sufficient on its own. For outgoing students, ongoing consultations during the mobility make it possible to understand how the stay is developing, whether the student feels academically and practically supported, and whether any difficulty should be addressed while there is still time to intervene. For Erasmus incoming students, a similar logic applies through consultations during the semester, informal meetings, shared dinners, and community-building activities. These concrete formats matter because they turn mobility from a one-off transaction into a relationship-based process of support, feedback, and institutional learning. Activities such as Erasmus Days, dialogue-oriented events, and more visible communication about mobility opportunities also play an important governance role. They are not merely promotional events. They lower information barriers, make internationalization more visible inside the institution, and help students and staff understand mobility as a realistic and supported opportunity rather than as an abstract programme. In this way, inclusion is created not only through formal eligibility rules, but through repeated communication, trust-building, peer examples, and spaces where participants can ask questions and share experience. This is particularly important where participation may be limited by uncertainty, lack of confidence, insufficient information, or the perception that international mobility is only for a narrow group of already motivated students and staff. Even seemingly modest innovations matter because they improve not only service provision but also participation quality and institutional responsiveness (Chytilová, 2026).

Staff mobility requires a different but equally deliberate approach. Here the issue is not only whether staff are formally eligible to participate, but whether they are motivated, prepared, and able to connect mobility with their academic or professional development. Ex ante support, for example through informal formats such as "coffee with the Vice-Rector", can help academic and administrative staff discuss possible mobility plans, clarify expectations, identify suitable partners, and overcome uncertainty. This type of support is important because staff mobility often

depends not only on administrative information, but also on confidence, time constraints, workload, and the perceived usefulness of the experience.

The value of staff mobility should also be judged by what happens after the visit ends. A teaching or training mobility has greater institutional relevance when it produces a follow-up: renewed partner communication, joint teaching ideas, comparison of curricula, research contacts, project discussions, or internal sharing of good practice. Ex post services and visibility are therefore important. Mobility stories, short profiles, website news, internal communication, and staff medallions can make individual experience visible to the wider academic community and motivate others to participate. In this sense, staff mobility becomes not only an individual professional activity, but also a tool for internationalization culture-building, peer inspiration, and institutional learning.

The same selective logic applies to project cooperation. International projects should not be pursued only because a call is available or because the university is invited into a consortium. Their value depends on whether they fit the institution's profile and whether their outcomes can be used beyond formal reporting. A well-selected project can simultaneously strengthen research capacity, curricula, staff expertise, student opportunities, applied cooperation, international visibility, and future funding potential. By contrast, a poorly aligned project may consume administrative and academic capacity without creating lasting value.

Based on personal experience, a particularly important element is the multiplication effect of project cooperation. Once the institution develops competence in a specific project area, it should not treat the project as an isolated episode, but as a platform for further development. A successful project can create methodological know-how, administrative routines, partner trust, better future applications, and stronger academic specialization. The aim is therefore to build on areas where the university is already developing strength, deepen expertise over time, and use one project as a stepping stone toward more ambitious cooperation. This cumulative logic is especially important for smaller institutions because it allows them to concentrate limited resources and gradually become more competitive in selected international project ecosystems.

Alliance-oriented cooperation can support this cumulative approach. Skoda Auto Vysoka skola's relationship with the Ulysseus European University Alliance as an associate partner illustrates a move from isolated bilateral contacts toward a more structured collaborative environment (Skoda Auto Vysoka skola, 2025). The value of such cooperation does not lie only in symbolic affiliation or external visibility. It lies in access to economies of scale: shared know-how, joint project preparation, thematic working groups, distributed expertise, mutual learning, and cooperation formats that would be difficult for one institution to generate alone. For a smaller university, alliance cooperation can therefore help connect mobility, projects, innovation, knowledge transfer, and institutional learning in a more systematic way.

Digitalization of international office processes follows the same governance logic. Its value is not primarily technological, but organizational and analytical. Better digital processes can make mobility pathways more transparent, identify bottlenecks, improve monitoring, reduce dependence on informal memory, and support more consistent service quality. At the same time, digitalization has practical limits. Some Erasmus+ and related European administrative processes may still require specific documents, signatures, or paper-based evidence. A realistic digitalization strategy therefore cannot be based on the illusion of complete digital replacement. It must distinguish between processes that can be simplified internally and those that remain constrained by external compliance requirements. The same caution applies to AI-supported tools. They can help with communication, translation, documentation, and routine administration, but they cannot replace human judgment. Internationalization involves trust, cultural interpretation, negotiation, individual circumstances, and sensitive communication with partners, students, and staff. Digital and AI tools are most valuable when they release human capacity from repetitive work and redirect it toward higher-value tasks: advising students, supporting staff, developing partnerships, identifying project opportunities, and connecting international activities with institutional priorities.

Taken together, these experiences show that the four pillars of sustainable internationalization governance are not abstract categories, but practical leadership questions. Strategic alignment is visible in the move toward quality over quantity in partnerships. Inclusive and responsible engagement is visible in consultations, Erasmus Days, shared dinners, dialogue-oriented formats, and more accessible support for outgoing and incoming students. Sustainable cooperation design is

visible in the expectation that staff mobility, projects, and alliances should generate follow-up value rather than remain isolated activities. Human-centred digital governance is visible in the effort to digitalize what improves transparency and monitoring, while preserving human judgment where standardization would reduce quality.

A further lesson from practice is that sustainable internationalization depends on academic ownership across departments, rather than on coordination by the international office alone. At Skoda Auto Vysoka skola, this has involved mapping existing internationalization activities at the departmental level by International Office, including current international contacts, teaching-related cooperation, research links, mobility experience, and areas with further cooperation potential. The purpose of this activity is not merely descriptive. It creates a more nuanced understanding of the institution's internal internationalization capacity and makes it possible to connect external opportunities more precisely with academic expertise. This is particularly important when engaging with foreign partners, incoming delegations, visiting academics, or potential project consortia. In this role, the international office acts less as a separate administrative unit and more as a strategic intermediary, helping to translate dispersed departmental experience into more coherent and development-oriented international cooperation. Without such academic ownership, internationalization may remain administratively functional but academically thin; with it, it becomes embedded in the intellectual and strategic life of the institution.

Finally, practice also highlights the growing importance of risk awareness and institutional resilience. Contemporary internationalization takes place in an environment shaped by geopolitical uncertainty, changing programme rules, reputational sensitivities, digital risks, uneven partner capacities, and dependence on a limited number of key staff members. Sustainable internationalization therefore also requires the ability to anticipate vulnerabilities: which partnerships are strategically promising but administratively demanding, which projects create long-term dependence, which mobility flows may be exposed to external shocks, and which processes rely too heavily on informal knowledge or individual experience. From this perspective, governance is not only about expanding opportunities, but also about making internationalization more resilient, transparent, and institutionally embedded.

The contribution of the Skoda Auto Vysoka skola experience is not a universal model, but a practice-based demonstration of how internationalization can be governed more selectively, concretely, and deliberately in line with institutional strategy.

7 Conclusion

Internationalization in higher education has entered a phase in which activity growth alone no longer captures institutional reality. This necessitates a paradigm shift from a purely activity-based understanding to a governance-centric approach that prioritizes institutional steering over expansion.

The contribution of this paper was to conceptualize internationalization as a component of sustainable university governance. It argues for a shift from activity to alignment, from expansion to steering, and from symbolic visibility to responsible and value-based engagement. The proposed four-pillar framework highlights that sustainable internationalization depends on strategic alignment, inclusive and responsible engagement, sustainable mobility and cooperation design, and AI-enabled but human-centred governance. These dimensions are mutually reinforcing: internationalization becomes institutionally meaningful only when opportunities are selected strategically, implemented inclusively, connected to academic and project development, and supported by governance mechanisms that preserve human judgment, transparency, and trust.

The practice-based reflection from Skoda Auto Vysoka skola further suggests that sustainable internationalization is not created by formal strategies alone, but through concrete managerial decisions and institutional routines. These include the principle of quality over quantity in partnerships, stronger feedback and support mechanisms in student mobility, ex ante and ex post support for staff mobility, selective and cumulative project cooperation, the multiplication effect of building on existing strengths, the use of alliances to generate economies of scale, and realistic digitalization that respects both institutional needs and external compliance requirements. The practical value of governance therefore lies in the ability to transform individual activities into institutional capacity.

As a conceptual and reflective article, the paper does not provide empirical validation of the proposed framework. Its value lies instead in clarifying an analytical perspective and translating it into practical governance questions that can guide institutional strategy.

Future research could build on this conceptual framework by applying it to selected institutional cases or by using expert interviews to assess its practical relevance. Rather than relying on extensive cross-institutional datasets, future studies may explore how international offices perceive their strategic role, organizational constraints, and the potential use of AI-supported tools in managing internationalization.

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Summary

This study examines internationalization in higher education at a moment when its traditional language of mobility, agreements, and external visibility is becoming insufficient. Against the background of European policy integration, sustainability pressures, geopolitical uncertainty, and the rise of generative artificial intelligence, internationalization is presented not as a separate institutional agenda, but as a test of how universities govern complexity. The paper develops a four-pillar framework of sustainable internationalization governance, built around strategic alignment, inclusive and responsible engagement, sustainable mobility and cooperation design, and AI-enabled but human-centred governance. These pillars are not treated as abstract principles, but as a governance architecture through which universities can evaluate whether international engagement creates academic value, social legitimacy, institutional capacity, and long-term resilience. Particular attention is paid to the changing role of international offices, which increasingly act as organizational interfaces where policy priorities, academic ambitions, operational constraints, and partnership opportunities are translated into practice. The reflection on Skoda Auto Vysoka skola and Strategy 2035 illustrates how this framework can inform concrete institutional choices: building quality rather than quantity in partnerships, supporting mobility as a lived experience, using projects cumulatively rather than episodically, strengthening departmental ownership, digitalizing realistically, and anticipating risks. The study concludes that sustainable internationalization is ultimately less about how far a university reaches outward than about how intelligently it converts international exposure into academic depth, organizational learning, and resilient governance.

About the author

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