

# Recruiting International Students and Internationalization Policies of Bulgarian Universities

## ブルガリアの大学での留学生のリクルートと国際化政策

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要旨：ブルガリアの高等教育は、EU への統合と教育サービスの世界市場に関連するいくつかの大きな課題に直面している。本稿は、ブルガリアの高等教育機関（大学）の国際化の戦略的計画から見た、留学生を引き付ける問題を探求することを目的としている。ブルガリアでの国際化政策の文献レビューを行った。ブルガリアの大学にとって留学生リクルートは重要であると考えられているようですが、この問題に十分に対処するための明確な具体的な対策は国レベルではない。機関レベルでは、留学生のリクルートの目標と目標は、各教育機関の計画では十分に具体的ではないようです。多くの大学にとって、留学生のリクルートは戦略的手段と見なすことができますが、優先度の低いにする大学もある。ブルガリアの高等教育機関のほとんどはすでに国際化の戦略的計画を策定しているが、これらの計画の実現可能性は疑問視されているようです。

キーワード：ブルガリア、高等教育機関、国際化、留学生リクルート、戦略計画

**Abstract.** Bulgarian higher education today is facing some major challenges related to the integration to EU and global market for educational services. This paper is aiming to explore the issue of attracting international students in the context of internationalization of higher education in Bulgaria as seen from strategic plans for internationalization of Bulgarian HEIs. We conducted a literature review of strategic planning documents for internationalization of selected HEIs in Bulgaria. We found that recruiting international students seems to be considered an important for Bulgarian HEIs, however, there is no clear specific measures at national level to sufficiently address this issue. At institutional level, the goals and target of recruiting international students seem not specific enough in the plan of each institution. For many HEIs, recruiting international students could be considered as a strategic measure, while for other HEIs it could be a low priority issue. Although most of the HEIs in Bulgaria already develop strategic plan for internationalization, the feasibility of these plans seems to be questioning.

### Introduction

Bulgaria locates in the Balkan Peninsula with about 7 million population with various ethnic groups and diverse cultures. Bulgaria was a socialist country during the cold war. After 1989, Bulgaria transitioned into a democracy with market economy and became a full EU member in 2007. Although enjoying EU integration, the country suffers from severe demographic crisis, massive emigration, and low birth rate, which may hamper the country's prospective economic development (Manolov, 2021). In fact, Bulgaria has one of the lowest GDP per capita among EU members nowadays. Bulgarian higher education today is facing some major challenges related to the integration to EU and global market for educational services (Andonova, 2008). The Bulgarian higher education institutions (HEIs) have to face challenging factors such as reduced number of future students, disbalanced labor market, underfunding of higher

education and science, decreased interest in the Bulgarian higher education, lack of well-trained specialists in priority areas, deficit of academic staff, and lack of interest among young people to pursue academic careers (MES, 2014).

Tokushima University (TU) has academic exchange agreement with 98 universities worldwide, including 16 universities in Europe (figure of May 2021). Expanding and strengthening academic cooperation with universities in Europe could be a potential direction for academic internationalization of TU. After the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic, in an effort to set up new possibilities for international exchange, some initial online interactions between staff and students of TU and Veliko Tarnovo University (VTU) have been successfully carried out, opening a potential academic exchange and cooperation. As a result, both universities signed an agreement for academic exchange and cooperation in December 2021 (Tran & Marinova, 2021). This cooperation is expected to be implemented

as a university-wide level, including exchange of students and scholars, short-term study visits, joint research, and education collaboration. As internationalization of higher education is one of the most important modern trends in economic development and academic transformation, we consider working on joint research about internationalization process of HEIs across different countries including Bulgaria and Japan, which could be a starting point for implementing the academic cooperation agreement between two universities.

This paper is aiming to explore the issue of attracting international students in the context of internationalization of higher education in Bulgaria as seen from development plans of Bulgarian HEIs in Bulgaria and implications for internationalization possibilities in the future.

## Method

By collecting related literature, mainly from Bulgarian sources, we conducted a literature review of data from research papers, reports, publications, and internet articles related to internationalization of higher education in Bulgaria, plans and reports of activities from the home page of Bulgarian HEIs were being reviewed. Table 1 lists the Strategic documents and plans for internationalization of selected HEIs that we had a look at.

Table 1. List of strategic documents on for internationalization reviewed by the authors

Title	Period	Institution
Strategy for development of higher education in the Republic of Bulgaria	2014-2020	Ministry of Education and Science
Strategy for development of higher education in the Republic of Bulgaria	2021–2030	Ministry of Education and Science
Strategy for Internationalization	2020-2023	Veliko Tarnovo University
Strategy for Internationalization	2020-2030	Sofia University "Kliment Ohridski"
Strategy for internationalization	2021-2027	Technical University - Varna
Strategy for internationalization	2015-2020	College for management - Varna
Strategy for internationalization	2019-2024	Medical University "Dr Paraskev Stoyanov" - Varna
Strategy for internationalization	2020-2030	Technical University - Gabrovo
Strategy for internationalization		Transport University "Todor

		Kableshekov" - Sofia
Strategy for internationalization	2021-2027	Economic Academy DA Tzenov - Svishtov
Strategy for internationalization	2021-2025	Higher Airforce School "Georgi Benkovski" - Dolna Mitropoliya

## Results

### Situation of Bulgarian Higher Education

Higher education system in Bulgaria includes 51 HEIs, including 37 public and 14 private HEIs. The total capacity of Bulgarian HEIs is relatively high per population compared to other EU countries (Figure 1). This high capacity may influence the recruitment process and affects quality of education. In 1989, the admission capacity was less than 30,000 in all universities in Bulgaria, but in 2017, this capacity was increased to more than 74,000. While in the 1990s there were 3.5 candidate students competing for 1 admission slot, today there are 2 admission slots for 1 high school graduate. For compensating the capacity of admission, the HEIs should consider recruiting more international students, or to lower examination threshold of local students, which may downgrade the quality of education (Zhelev & Peneva, 2018).

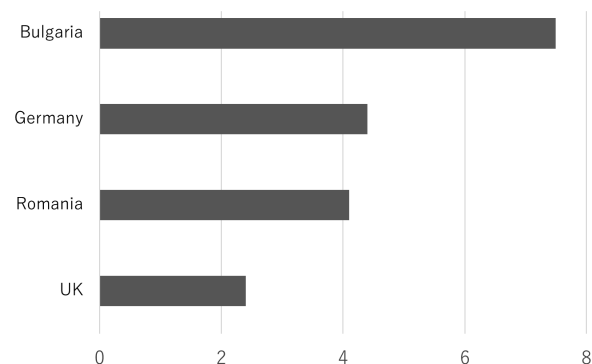


Figure 1. Number of HEIs per 10,000 population, based on data from (MES, 2021)

Bulgarian HEIs have problems such as low quality of the education and discrepancy in the training and the needs of the labor market, growing trend of study abroad and competition in the Europe, poor recognition of universities as a means of career development, lack of promotion of research, inadequate internal and external academic mobility, worsening infrastructure. To overcome these obstacles, amendments to the Higher Education Act (*Higher Education Act, 1995*), Strategies for Development of Higher Education 2014-2020 (MES, 2014) and 2021-2031 (MES, 2021) aims to optimize the HEIs network and achieve institutional accountability (Petrov, 2021). The Higher Education Act (*Higher Education Act, 1995*) requires adoption of

European Credit Transfer System by HEIs for better academic harmonization and student mobility (Zhelev & Peneva, 2018). The introduced Rating System of HEIs in Bulgaria (RSVU) in 2021 notices an increase in the number of students, including international students, as well as a continuing trend for increasing the number of publications. Although spread of COVID-19, a significant increase in the income of graduates in vocational training, health, and education sectors. The number of students in higher education in 2021 has increased by more than 4,000 compared to the previous year. In 2021, Sofia University has the highest student number at 22,250, while 12 universities has less than 1000 students each (Osis, 2021). The three most popular professional fields in 2021 are economics with 29,321 active students, pedagogy (16,719) and medicine (13,186).

### Situation of international students in Bulgaria

In the 2020/2021 academic year, 211,800 students are enrolled in bachelor's and master's degrees in higher education in Bulgaria, including 12.3% are enrolled in private HEIs, and 16,700 (7.9%) are international students (Radio Bulgaria, 2021), which is 2.4% more than the previous academic year and 29.1% more than the academic year 2016/2017. The largest number of international students is from Greece (24.5%), followed by from UK (16.1%), Germany (9.2%), Ukraine (7%), and Macedonia (6.1%). The most preferred specialties for them are the fields of healthcare, as 62.1% of them preferred such (Radio Bulgaria, 2021).

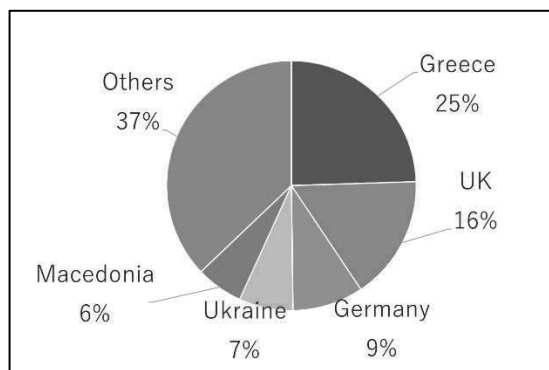


Figure 2. International students by country in 2020/2021 academic year

The share of international students in Bulgaria is increasing from about 4% of the number of current students in 2013 to over 8% in 2021. Most international students' study in the fields of Medicine (58%), Dentistry (43%) and Veterinary Medicine (31%). International students exceed 10% in the fields of Pharmacy (12%), Transport, Shipping and Aviation (12%) and Music and Dance (12%) (Osis, 2021).

Table 2 shows the transition of number of international students enrolled in Bulgarian HEIs. Notably, number

of international students from Asian countries such as Japan and China are almost in an insignificant number, although this number somehow is gradually increasing.

Table 2. Transition of number of international students enrolled 2015~2020 (Source: VTU)

Year / Degree	All countries	Japanese	Chinese	
2015/16	BS*	4,489	5	10
	MS*	7,288	14	9
2016/17	BS	4,477	9	33
	MS	8,824	12	18
2017/18	BS	4,675	5	57
	MS	9,993	13	20
2018/19	BS	5,074	4	81
	MS	10,943	18	38
2019/20	BS	5,416	3	131
	MS	11,608	37	27
2020/21	BS	5,488	3	114
	MS	12,025	36	51

\*BS: Bachelor degree, MS: Master degree

The impact of COVID-19 and online transformation was shown by the results of a survey among nearly 25,000 students, conducted for the purposes of the Rating System of HEIs in Bulgaria in period April-June 2020. During the COVID-19 pandemic, in the spring of 2020, 95% of the students in Bulgarian HEIs studied in specialties that switched to online education, and over two thirds of them remained satisfied with the successful completion of the school year. Dissatisfaction with various aspects of online learning is expressed between 14 ~21% of students participating in this form of learning. The most significant challenge in online training is the creation of appropriate conditions for teamwork. (Osis, 2020b)

### Internationalization of Bulgarian HE

Internationalization of higher education is one of the most important modern trends in economic development. Cooperation between universities is related to the organization of exchange of programs for students and teachers, special programs for international students, development of research projects. One of the most common forms of internationalization of higher education is student mobility. Mobility itself is stimulated through various programs (international, national, and regional). This leads to the need to conclude bilateral and multilateral agreements in the field of education with different countries. One of the most widely used European academic exchange programs is Erasmus, which has now grown into the Erasmus + program. It was launched in 1987, with the main aim of helping to create a common European market. The program already allows for the expansion of exchanges with countries outside the European Union.

The 1999 Bologna Declaration (Bologna, 1999) was the starting point of the EU internationalization of

higher education, the process aiming at comparability of higher education systems. This declaration set out the principles of a three-level structure of higher education. A European system for the portability of educational credits has been introduced and funds have been invested to promote student and teacher mobility. Measures have been taken to improve internal systems for the recognition of academic degrees and qualifications and to strengthen cooperation in the field of quality assessment. One of the basic principles adopted by the European Parliament is the establishment of the right to equal education and training throughout the EU. Joint programs with foreign universities in Bulgaria seem to gain popularity. A HE degree from a foreign HEI can be obtained in Bulgaria in 88 joint programs, as 23 Bulgarian universities offer joint programs in 25 professional fields. Nearly 3,400 students and 28 Ph.D. students are studying in joint programs with a foreign university in the spring of 2020. (Osis, 2020a)

Bulgarian higher education today is facing some major challenges related to integrating to the EU and global market for higher education. Regarding university ranking, Bulgarian HEIs are still left behind in the international higher education arena. There are no Bulgarian universities present in the top 500 most prestigious universities. Although there is a tendency of increasing the number of visiting students under the Erasmus program, the presence of Bulgarian universities in the European network of universities is insignificant. Except the five Bulgarian universities participate in one of the consortiums of "European universities", the low participation of other universities shows that Bulgarian higher education is still absent from European trends (Petrov, 2021).

In the Strategy for development of higher education in the Republic of Bulgaria for the periods 2014–2020 (MES, 2014), there was no clear goal set out for internationalization of HE. However, in the Strategy for development of higher education in the Republic of Bulgaria and 2021–2030 (MES, 2021), internationalization of HE was set up among priority areas and goals for HE. In the Goal 4. Internationalization of HE and inclusion in international educational and scientific networks, specific targets and outcome indicators were set out as below: (1) At least 50% of the Bulgarian HEIs included in networks of European universities; (2) Increased share of students studying in joint educational programs between Bulgarian and foreign universities, as well as in specialties and programs in a foreign language; (3) Increased number of international students, including from Bulgarian communities abroad, and teachers in Bulgarian universities; (4) Increased number of mobilities by Bulgarian students and lecturers in foreign universities and colleges; (5) Increased number of textbooks, teaching aids and monographs in foreign languages.

### *Strategy for Internationalization of HEIs*

Most of the Bulgarian HEIs have already developed its own strategic plan for internationalization. In Table 1 we showed some the plans collected. Most of the HEIs' strategic internationalization plan have prepared in a format similar to the national strategy, which consist of background, situation, SWOT analysis, priority areas, goals, targets and indicators. Here we will look at some of the strategies for making sure the goals and specific activities related to international students are in place. As a common feature, all of these HEIs have already joined Erasmus + programs, which allows for student mobility in academic institutions-partners of the Universities within EU. Partnership with universities provides an opportunity to implement a number of activities such as: sharing experience for curricula, programs for different disciplines; development of joint research projects, educational and scientific literature; participation in the scientific conferences; giving lectures and training; participation of lecturers, doctoral students and students in international forums; annual exchange of students, doctoral students and lecturers in international practices etc.

#### *Technical University Varna*

Technical University Varna (TU-Varna) is a major center for science and technology education. In its strategy for internationalization 2021-2017 (TU Varna, 2021), the Goal 2 for Internationalization of the academic community and curricula set up the targets related to accepting international students. Target 1 was to increase the number of foreign students at TU-Varna to 10% of the total number students by optimizing the marketing strategy and online presence of TUV; and Target 3 is to increase the number of countries from which foreign students come to TU-Varna to a minimum of 10 by improving the quality of teaching, developing new educational markets and the creation of new academic partnerships. In its SWOT analysis, it also specified several weaknesses related to accepting international students: limited region of origin of available international students, lack of scholarships, unbuilt culture of communication in a multilingual and multicultural environment, and limited use of new technologies in attracting international students. It identified the following as threats to the internationalization process: Increase investment in attracting students nationally and internationally competitors, new emerging competitors in the market of international students, other competitors to improve their positions on the national and international market, complex procedure and high costs of issuing a type D visa for training in Bulgaria, a lack of a unified national advertising strategy for the promotion of higher education in Bulgaria abroad, unrecognizability of Bulgaria as an educational destination abroad, lack of international traditions of Bulgarian higher education, relatively difficult procedure for admission of

international students in Bulgaria. Moreover, this strategic plan also assigned responsibilities to TU-Varna's departments as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Plan of activities related to international students (Source: TUV, 2021)

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Department in charge</i>
<i>Internationalization of the student community</i>	
Increasing the number of international students enrolled for full course of study at TU-Varna	Department of International Education program
Increasing the number of exchange students from partner universities at TU-Varna	International Cooperation Department
Creating a network of students and alumni as recruiting ambassadors' international students.	Department of International Education program
Activating the representation of the university in social networks to attract the interest of international students and their parents.	Department of International Education program
Activities related to the adaptation and integration of international students at TU-Varna	International Affairs and International Students Directorate
<i>Institutional commitment to internationalization</i>	
Create a program for relatively modest scholarships for international students.	Business Council

#### *Higher Airforce School "Georgi Benkovski"*

Higher Airforce School "Georgi Benkovski" (HAS) is a specialized state higher military school, providing training for the acquisition of various degrees of higher education in accredited military and civilian specialties for the needs of the Airforce, Navy etc. The main goal of internationalization for the period 2021 - 2025 is "to turn it into an attractive educational and research center for international students, teachers and researchers, which develops professional competencies and personal qualities and develops research and innovation" (HAS, 2021). When the SWOT analysis and plan of activities looks similar to the plan of TU-Varna, this plan did not specify specific indicators for numbers of international or scholars to be admitted or exchanged.

#### *Todor Kableshkov Transport University*

Todor Kableshkov Transport University (TKTU) is a state university with 96 years of tradition in transport education, the largest educational and research transport center in the country (Todorova et al., 2018). TKTU is a partner of over 55 foreign universities, with

which we have agreements for cooperation in education and research, exchange of teachers and students, for student internships, for various scientific events and more. However, the plan for internationalization of TKTU does not specify specific goals and target indicators regarding international and researchers.

#### *Economic Academy DA Tzenov*

Economic Academy DA Tzenov has a strategy that clearly specify the current problems such as having small number of foreign students and doctoral students with full and partial term of study, low mobility of students and staff and lack of scholarship for full term international students, low interest of undergraduate and graduate students in the fields of economics and business, weak interest of agents and intermediaries to attract international student to Bulgaria, due to relatively low annual tuition fees, lack of job positions for foreigners in Svishtov, lack of active national policy and strategy for attracting foreign students to Bulgaria etc.

#### *Medical University Varna*

Medical University Varna is a major institution for medical education in eastern Bulgaria. The strategic plan for internationalization 2019-2024 (MU Varna, 2019) has specified goals and specific activities for achieving the goals. Although this plan has emphasized strengthening collaboration with foreign institutions and increasing mobility, it has not mentioned about attracting international students as a measure or objective for internationalization.

#### *Technical University Gabrovo*

At Technical University Gabrovo (TU-Gabrovo), the strategy for internationalization 2020-2030 put international student issues into the Goal 2.4. Attracting more foreign students at TUG-Gabrovo for training and internships; and 3.2. Attracting foreign researchers to work in scientific infrastructure of TU-Gabrovo (TU Gabrovo, 2020).

#### *Sofia University "Kliment Ohridski"*

Sofia University "Kliment Ohridski" (SU) is the top and biggest HEI in Bulgaria, having 10% national share of students and over 30% of doctoral students. Strategy for Internationalization 2020-2030 said "The strategic goal is the development of SU as an internationally recognized and recognized research university with a prestigious place in international rankings, an attractive place for foreign professors, researchers and students". Some of the specific goals are directly addressing international students and researchers, such as "3.3. Attracting more international students for full or part-time study", "2.4 Attracting more foreign researchers and lecturers to work at SU and for short-term visits", the plan seems lack of specific activities, responsibility and targets for implementation. Nevertheless, taking the huge scale and complicatedness of SU, it may need

an independent analysis outside the scope of this paper (SU, 2021).

### Strategy for Internationalization of VTU

Similar to the other HEIs, the VTU also approved its Internationalization Strategic Plan for the period 2020-2023 (VTU, 2020). According to this document, one of the visions of the VTU is to achieve a “high degree of internationalization of the academic community and the educational content”. In the Strategic Objective 1: International mobility of students, academic and non-academic staff, the 4<sup>th</sup> task is clearly mentioned about the importance of attracting foreign students, as it said “Attracting students from foreign countries to complete a full course of study is an important aspect of the internationalization of higher education. Foreign students in the respective countries should be attracted by authorized representatives of VTU, who provide extensive information about the offered educational programs”. In the Strategic Objective 4: Campus Internationalization and institutional capacity, several tasks to serve foreign students were specified such as the 3<sup>rd</sup> task “Improving and increasing the number of specialties in which foreign students’ study”, and the 9<sup>th</sup> task “Providing opportunities for internships for foreign students in the Erasmus office, as well as in other units of VTU”.



Figure 3. Japan's Culture Festival 2019 at VTU

For international student exchange, the VTU is heavily put emphasis on the collaboration within the Erasmus framework for integrating into the European Higher Education Area. Table 4 shows specific activities specified in the Internationalization Strategic Plan for the period 2020-2023 of VTU, which mainly aims to receive short-term exchange students from Erasmus program.

Table 4. Activities of VTU for promoting short-term inbound student mobility

#	Tasks
1	Increasing the number of foreign students under the Erasmus program
2	Validation and promotion of the mentor system at the VTU for foreign students
3	Providing more opportunities for incoming

	students to conduct internships at VTU, such as: Foreign Language Centers, Department of Foreign Language Learning, Erasmus Office, Distance Learning Center, etc.
4	Creating social networks of the foreign students of Erasmus at VTU.
5	Provide better conditions for accommodation and training of Erasmus foreign students and increase the number of students in bilateral exchange cooperation.
6	Organizing short-term art workshops for foreign students. Inviting of foreign lecturers in order to conduct such at VTU

Although VTU has experienced collaboration with countries outside Europe, including Japan, China, Korea and so forth, the actual number of students from these countries are still insignificant (Table 2). In case of collaboration with Japan, the Center for Japanese Language and Culture has been active since 1993 and contributes to promoting exchange activities with Japan (Tran & Marinova, 2021). Figure 3 shows a scene of the Japan's Culture Festival organized in 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, which is a regular event. However, the VTU's Strategic Plan is not specified any specific actions for increasing inbound student mobility or collaboration with HEIs from outside Europe.

### Conclusion

From the strategic plans for internationalizations of various Bulgarian HEIs as shown above, it seems that some of the HEIs such as the TU-Varna has developed very specific implementation plan with clear objectives and target indicators with regards to the issue of attracting international students and researchers. The plan of VTU set up some specific tasks to promote internationalization, however it lacked specific contents to address collaboration with countries outside Europe. The plans of other HEIs seems comprehensive and broad but may not specific enough for implementation.

With the rapid development of technology and increasing demand for more qualified staff in the labor market, the last decades, there was a trend of massification of higher education, which in many countries, including Bulgaria, has led to an increase in the number of students. (MES, 2014). In future, decreasing population pose the need to admit more international students to compensate for high capacity of Bulgarian HEIs. Looking for effective strategies to attract students from Asian countries and other parts of the world could be an alternative but challenge for Bulgarian HEIs in the future.

The internationalization of universities must address the quality, visibility, and mobility. The establishment of the European educational space, which will enable

more students to come to Bulgaria, is of key importance for Bulgarian foreign policy. In practice, international students come to Bulgaria are mostly from EU or other European countries, and mostly under short-term exchange scheme. From our review, it could be concluded that although attracting and accepting international students seems to be an important for Bulgarian HEIs, however, there is no clear strategy and specific measures at national level to sufficiently address this issue. At institutional level, the goals and target of recruiting international students seem not specific enough in the plan of each institution. For many HEIs, recruiting international students could be considered as a strategic measure, for other HEIs it could be a low priority issue. Although most of the HEIs in Bulgaria already develop strategic plan for internationalization, feasibility of these plans seems to be questioning. It may need further research to look at the implementation of internationalization plans of HEIs.

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