

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES IN THE REGIONS OF LATVIA

ĀRVALSTU STUDENTU PIESAISTES STRATĒGIJAS LATVIJAS REGIONOS

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Abstract

In the context of declining local student enrolment, higher education institutions are developing and implementing internationalisation measures and attracting international students to regional universities. This study analyses the processes of internationalisation in higher education in Latvia's regional universities and the experience of integrating international students. This research employs a methodology consisting of quantitative statistical analysis and qualitative methods, including document analysis, interviews with staff from International Affairs departments, and semi-structured interviews with international students studying in Latvia. The findings demonstrate that regional universities maintain their competitive edge through personalised educational approaches, and affordable tuition and living costs, while simultaneously highlighting the substantial difficulties international students encounter when integrating socially into their new environment. The research also highlights the need to expand employment prospects for international students in the regions of Latvia, and to promote these students settling long-term in these regions following the completion of their studies.

Keywords: *Latvian regions, international students, higher education, internationalisation, student mobility.*

Introduction

The internationalisation of higher education is one of the main processes shaping modern higher education, and has a substantial impact on regional development (de Wit & Altbach, 2020). There is a close relationship between international student migration and regional development levels (Weber & Van Mol, 2023). A 2023 study examines the concept of student migration transition, showing how a country's economic development influences its role in international student mobility. As countries develop, they gradually transition from being "exporters" of students to "importers." This model is particularly relevant in Latvia, where

regional universities, facing a decline in local student numbers, are increasingly positioning themselves as study destinations for international students (Weber & Van Mol, 2023). The development of higher education institutions, together with regional socio-economic growth, largely depends on international students as an important resource (Chankseliani et al., 2021). Research on the internationalisation of higher education has become an important field that examines both university-level developments and local geographical aspects (Sharipov, 2020). Student mobility patterns and flows are constantly evolving, reflecting both global trends and regional characteristics. Decisions to study abroad are based on a complex set of factors, including personal and professional goals, as well as structural aspects (Van Mol & Timmerman, 2014). Non-traditional destinations, including Central and Eastern European countries, are becoming increasingly active in attracting international students by developing their own specific advantages and niche study programmes (Apsite-Berina et al., 2023). This trend creates new opportunities for regional universities, which can leverage their advantages in particular fields of study (Restaino et al., 2020).

Latvia's higher education system has undergone significant changes over the past few decades. The decline in the number of local young people, combined with intense emigration, has created a need for a new approach to maintaining the sustainability of the higher education system (Chankseliani et al., 2021). In the face of these challenges, universities' ability to attract international students while also integrating them into the relevant regions is becoming crucial (Karlsen et al., 2017). Latvia has successfully strengthened its position in the global higher education market. This positive trend is becoming crucial for regional development within the country, as universities serve as important cultural and economic centres in the regions where they are based (Apsite-Berina et al., 2023). Regional universities are becoming increasingly important in international higher education. International students, through their expenditures on tuition, accommodation and daily living costs, contribute directly to local economies by supporting businesses and generating employment. This economic stimulus is especially significant in peripheral regions, where higher education institutions serve as anchors of stability and help boost otherwise limited economic activity (Chankseliani et al., 2021; Weber & Van Mol, 2023). Research shows that regional universities have the potential to act as important centres of development, promoting both economic growth and community cohesion (Kempton et al., 2021).

Data and methods

The use of mixed methods is significant in studies of international student mobility, as it allows a combination of quantitative data analysis with qualitative experience research, thereby providing both a broad context and a detailed understanding of the problem under study (Weber & Van Mol, 2023; Apsite-Berina et al., 2023). This study aims to investigate how regional universities in Latvia are responding to declining local student numbers through internationalisation, while examining both the advantages these institutions offer and the integration challenges faced by international students. Two main research questions guide this research. First, what strategies do higher education institutions in the regions of Latvia use to attract international students? Second, what determines international students' decisions to choose universities in the regions of Latvia? The research involved conducting a systematic analysis of scientific literature on international student migration, higher education internationalisation processes, and their impact on regional development.

The study analysed international student trends in Latvian higher education, using the Ministry of Education and Science report on higher education for the 2023/2024 academic year, Central Statistical Bureau data on student dynamics (1995–2023), unpublished CSB data on international students (2021–2023), and data on international student enrolment provided by higher education institutions. The internationalisation strategies of regional universities were examined, with key priorities and objectives identified. The study utilised data from semi-structured interviews with international students at Latvian regional universities and expert interviews with representatives of university international offices.

Results

Common priorities are evident in the internationalisation strategies of Latvia's regional universities. Firstly, all institutions aim to recruit international students by offering competitive, internationally accredited study programmes (Table 1). Daugavpils University (DU) aims to increase the proportion of international students to 5% by 2028; Riga Technical University Liepāja (RTU) plans to reach 15% by 2027; Ventspils University of Applied Sciences (VeA) aims to reach 10%. Secondly, the strategies emphasise the international mobility of academic staff, including participation in Erasmus+ and other programmes, as well as involvement in international research projects. Thirdly, universities are systematically developing international cooperation networks, establishing partnerships with universities, research institutions and businesses. The strategies also emphasise the creation of a multicultural study environment and

the strengthening of global visibility, which align with contemporary trends related to the globalisation of higher education.

Table 1. **Internationalisation Strategies** (based on DU 2023; LBTU 2023; RTA 2023, RTU 2023)

<i>University</i>	<i>Internationalisation strategy</i>
Daugavpils University (DU)	<p>Attracting international students to study programmes at all levels</p> <p>Strengthening international cooperation with partners and creating new partnerships</p> <p>Strengthening involvement in scientific networks</p> <p>Expanding staff participation in outgoing mobility activities</p> <p>Organising international doctoral training programmes as part of all doctoral study programmes</p> <p>The goal for 2028 is to achieve 5% of international academic staff (3% in 2022) and 5% of international students (1.8% in 2022)</p>
Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies (LBTU)	<p>Strengthen LBTU's international recognition in the education and research space</p> <p>Promote student and staff mobility by participating in Erasmus+ and other programmes</p> <p>Develop partnerships with foreign universities, companies, and scientific institutions</p> <p>Attract international students by offering competitive programmes</p> <p>Support the involvement of academic staff in international projects and networks</p>
RTU Rēzekne	<p>Establish RTU Rēzekne as an internationally recognised higher education and science institution</p> <p>Promote the recruitment of international students and the improvement of study programmes</p> <p>Promote international mobility of students, academic, scientific and general staff</p> <p>Develop a multicultural environment</p>
RTU Liepāja	<p>Increase the number of international students, especially in STEM fields</p> <p>Promote international mobility and recruitment of academic staff to strengthen research and teaching quality</p> <p>Develop strategic partnerships with leading universities and research institutions worldwide</p> <p>Promote international recognition for RTU by participating in global initiatives and projects</p> <p>Reach 15% of the total student number being international students</p> <p>Increase the number of international research projects by 20%</p> <p>Ensure that at least 25% of academic staff participate in international mobility programmes</p>

Despite these commonalities, university strategies differ in their level of detail and focus. DU and RTU Liepāja set clear, quantitative targets, such as increasing the proportion of international students and academic staff, and growth in the number of research projects (RTU Liepāja: +20%; VeA: +25%). The LBTU and RTU Rēzekne strategies are more general, focusing on promoting visibility and cooperation without having specific numerical indicators. RTU Liepāja stands out for its focus on STEM fields, while DU emphasises the development of international doctoral training programmes.

Two significant trends can currently be observed in Latvia's regional higher education institutions: a general decline in student enrolment in the 2023/2024 academic year compared to previous periods; an increasing proportion of international students at the majority of Latvian universities analysed, indicating the implementation of Latvia's higher education internationalisation strategy in an effort to compensate for the decrease in domestic student numbers.

The percentage of international students has increased at many universities (Fig. 1). A particularly notable rise can be observed at RTU Rēzekne, where the proportion of international students grew from approximately 9% in 2019/2020 to nearly 12% in 2023/2024. LBTU, which is the largest of the analysed institutions, shows a relatively low proportion of international students in 2023/2024 (approximately 8%), although in previous years it was even lower.

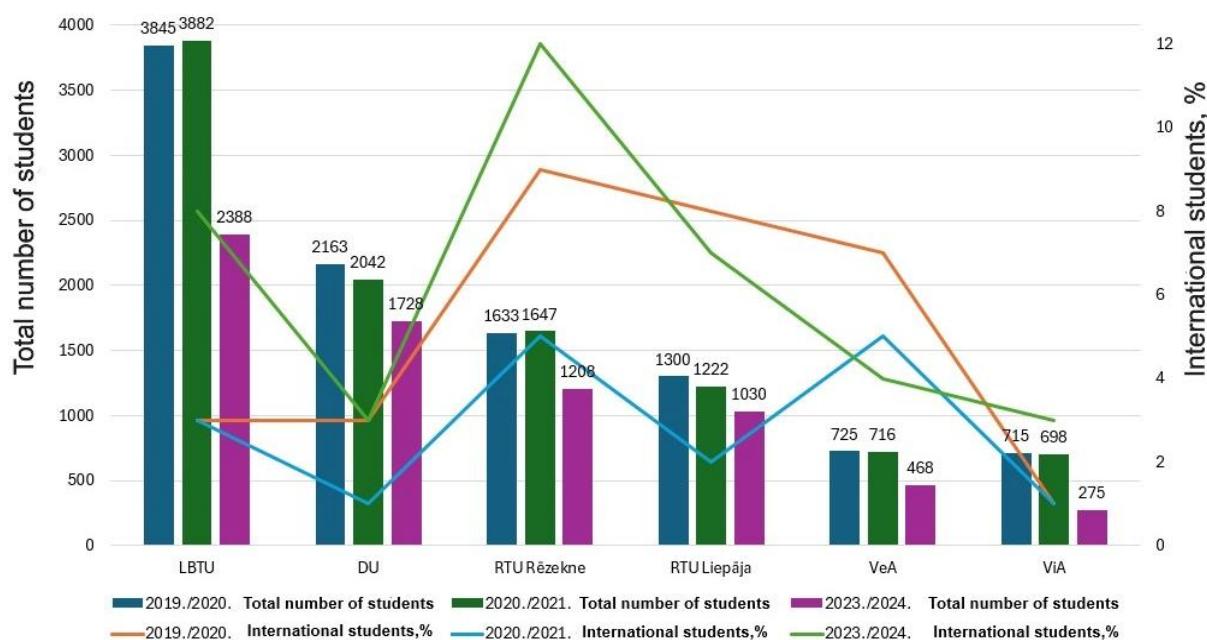


Figure 1. International students at regional universities in Latvia (authors' figure based on Ministry of Education and Science, 2019; Ministry of Education and Science, 2020; State Education Information System, 2025)

International students at regional universities are primarily attracted by specific study programmes that are often unique, recognised among international students, and in demand in the labour market. LBTU is most widely recognised for veterinary medicine (particularly among EU students), business administration, food science, sociology, and IT studies. RTU Liepāja attracts the most international students to its IT bachelor's and master's programmes. At RTU Rēzekne, international students overwhelmingly study on the master's programmes in business administration and management science. In contrast, at Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences, the most popular programmes are the IT bachelor's programme and the Virtual Reality master's programme.

Currently, full-time students at higher education institutions in the regions of Latvia are predominantly third-country nationals from Uzbekistan, India, Belarus, Russia, Sri Lanka, Cameroon or Pakistan. One exception is the Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies (LBTU), where students from Europe study veterinary medicine. The Erasmus+ programme is also often the only means by which students from EU countries reach regional universities.

The main advantages of regional universities include a more individualised approach to students; compact, easily accessible spaces for daily activities; guaranteed accommodation in dormitories; lower living costs; and lower tuition fees than in Riga. Additionally, they provide students with greater opportunities to participate in the Erasmus+ exchange programme due to less competition and a safer, more peaceful environment.

A significant challenge in attracting and integrating international students into Latvia's education system is the varying approaches to study organisation, assessment, and overall educational quality across students' countries of origin. Consequently, the knowledge and preparedness of students entering Latvia's education system do not always align with the expectations of instructors and the host institution as a whole.

The integration of international students into local society varies. Universities offer Latvian language courses to first-year students to facilitate successful integration into the local community. However, the language barrier often remains a significant obstacle to full participation in local society. For some students arriving from certain countries – for example, Uzbekistan – their knowledge of Russian serves as an important communication tool, particularly in everyday situations such as shopping or using public transport. However, for students arriving from other countries, integration into society is hindered, as English language proficiency among Latvian residents varies. Unfortunately, cases occur in Latvia where international students are subjected to racism and xenophobia due to their physical appearance.

A lack of proficiency in the state language and limited employment opportunities in the regions characterise the complexity of international students' integration into the local labour market. On one hand, labour market accessibility is an essential part of the student experience and sense of belonging; on the other hand, its absence creates unequal access to resources and professional development opportunities. Concurrently, differing experiences are observed among students from various fields (e.g., IT professionals), indicating specific demands and competency alignment with the labour market, which can serve as a significant resource for integration. Thus, students' labour-market experiences can vary, suggesting diverse integration experiences.

Students utilise opportunities to work for food delivery companies such as Bolt and Wolt, where available. Meanwhile, IT students most frequently find employment in their field of specialisation either in Latvia or abroad through Erasmus+ internship exchanges, thereby working internationally while continuing their studies in Latvia. Bachelor-level students in Latvia are limited to 20 hours of paid work a week, while master's students are not.

Conclusion

Four of the six regional universities in Latvia have developed structured internationalisation strategy documents with specific quantitative targets. Their strategies focus on increasing the number of international students, promoting academic staff mobility, and developing international cooperation networks. Analysis of the internationalisation strategies reveals that existing strategies pay insufficient attention to qualitative aspects – integration quality, retention of graduates within the regions in question, and long-term socio-economic impact. The total number of students is declining, both nationally and specifically at higher education institutions in the regions of Latvia, while the proportion of international students is increasing. Among the institutions examined, the highest proportion of international students is at the RTU Rēzekne branch, while the lowest is at the Latvia University of Life Sciences and Technologies.

A combination of economic and qualitative factors determines international students' choice of higher education institutions in the regions of Latvia. The most significant motivating factor is economic accessibility, as Latvia is considered a low-cost option that offers high-quality education within the European Union. Universities' specific advantages include an individualised approach (smaller study groups and closer contact with academic staff) and

lower daily expenses than, for example, in Riga, as well as guaranteed dormitory accommodation and a safe environment.

The increasing reliance on international students as a stabilising force in regional higher education reflects broader global and regional trends described in the literature on internationalisation (de Wit & Altbach, 2020; Weber & Van Mol, 2023). As Latvia transitions toward becoming a destination country for international students – a process consistent with the student migration transition model – the role of regional universities becomes especially significant. Their ability to attract and retain international students directly influences regional economic resilience, demographic renewal, and labour market vitality (Chankseliani et al., 2021; Benneworth & Dahl, 2019). However, the analysis suggests that current internationalisation strategies do not sufficiently address these wider developmental linkages.

The lack of emphasis on integration quality and graduate retention points to a strategic gap that could undermine the long-term potential of internationalisation as a regional development tool. Research shows that successful integration depends not only on educational factors but also on students' everyday experiences – including language learning, social belonging, and access to employment – none of which are uniform across the regions of Latvia (Karlsen et al., 2017; Apsite-Berina et al., 2023). The challenges that international students report, such as language barriers, limited labour-market opportunities, and occasional experiences of discrimination, indicate that attracting students is only the first step. Without more comprehensive support systems and clearer pathways to employment and settlement, universities risk losing highly skilled and motivated graduates who could otherwise contribute to regional societies and economies.

At the same time, the competitive advantages of regional universities – individualised teaching, compact and safe environments, lower living costs, and niche academic programmes – align with emerging trends in student mobility toward non-traditional destinations (Restaino et al., 2020). These strengths should be leveraged more explicitly in strategic planning. Integrating internationalisation efforts with regional development priorities, strengthening cooperation with local employers, and improving language and integration support could enhance long-term outcomes for both students and the regions in which they study.

Overall, the study demonstrates that while regional universities in Latvia are actively pursuing internationalisation and attracting an increasing share of international students, the next step requires a more balanced approach – one that combines quantitative growth with qualitative development, labour-market alignment, and strategies to retain graduates in the

regions. Such an approach would allow internationalisation to fulfil its potential as a driver of sustainable regional development.

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Kopsavilkums

Pētījumā analizēti internacionalizācijas procesi Latvijas reģionālajās augstskolās un ārvalstu studentu iekļaušanās pieredze, izmantojot pieeju, kas apvienoja statistisko analīzi ar padziļinātām intervijām ar studentiem un augstskolu darbiniekiem. Rezultāti rāda, ka četras no sešām reģionālajām augstskolām ir izstrādājušas internacionalizācijas stratēģijas ar konkrētiem mērķiem, tomēr tajās galvenā uzmanība tiek pievērsta ārvalstu studentu piesaistei un akadēmiskā personāla mobilitātei. Mazāk uzmanības veltīts iekļaušanās kvalitātei, studentu labbūtībai un absolventu ilgtermiņa noturēšanai reģionos.

Lai gan kopējais studentu skaits reģionos turpina samazināties, ārvalstu studentu īpatsvars pieaug; pārsvarā tie ir jaunieši no Uzbekistānas, Indijas, Baltkrievijas, Krievijas, Šrilankas, Kamerūnas un Pakistānas. Viņus piesaista specifiskas studiju programmas, salīdzinoši zemās izmaksas, individualizēta pieeja, garantēta dzīvesvieta un droša vide. Tomēr studenti saskaras ar būtiskiem iekļaušanās šķēršļiem – valodas barjeru, atšķirīgu izglītības pieredzi, ierobežotām nodarbinātības iespējām un atsevišķiem rasisma un ksenofobijas gadījumiem. Pētījuma secinājumi uzsver nepieciešamību stiprināt sociālās integrācijas pasākumus, veidot ciešāku sadarbību ar vietējiem darba devējiem un attīstīt absolventu piesaistes stratēģijas, lai veicinātu ārvalstu studentu ilgtermiņa palikšanu un ieguldījumu Latvijas reģionu attīstībā.

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