

Article

International Office Professionals: An Example of Street-Level Bureaucrats in Higher Education

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Abstract: Internationalization has become an indispensable part of universities worldwide. Since the 1990s, various research has been conducted with those often seen as the main stakeholders of universities, namely administrators, academics, and students. However, the leading implementors of internationalization and especially mobility programs, international office professionals (IPs), are rarely considered by research. In this study, qualitative research was conducted through 36 semi-structured interviews with IPs in Poland and Turkey. The results revealed that IPs have several professional and institutional challenges. While the professional challenges include diversified responsibilities, incoming students' problems, and communication difficulties with the young generation; institutional challenges are mainly associated with administrative issues like lack of participation in decision-making, temporarily appointed leaders, and lack of academic support. Additionally, in this study, IPs were referred to as street-level bureaucrats as the main contact with the beneficiaries of internationalization. The research revealed that IPs use a high level of discretion in practice. This paper presents examples of how to structure internationalization policies so that the IPs use their power of discretion in a positive way, contributing to policy implementation. Therefore, this paper aims to provide a roadmap for the practical implementation of internationalization and mobility programs in universities.

Keywords: internationalization of higher education; international office professionals; street-level bureaucracy; discretion



Citation: Bulut-Sahin, B.

International Office Professionals: An Example of Street-Level Bureaucrats in Higher Education. *Educ. Sci.* **2023**, *13*, 890. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13090890>

Academic Editors: Cosmin Ionut Nada and Thais França

Received: 26 July 2023

Revised: 29 August 2023

Accepted: 30 August 2023

Published: 2 September 2023



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1. Introduction

The internationalization of higher education (IHE) has gained tremendous importance and has become an indispensable part of higher education (HE). Despite the fact that the idea of internationalization has always been a fundamental and defining aspect of the concept of “university” throughout history [1], it has only recently been advanced by states and supranational formations in a radically new way. This new strategy calls for creating international and supranational norms, networks, and HE systems. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are also driven to standardize their approach towards internationalization. Rapid advancements in information and communication technologies have further emerged with this transition. In other words, having access to knowledge more than ever diminished national boundaries' significance.

With this increase in the IHE, economic rationales are becoming increasingly prominent [2], and universities are increasingly engaged in internationalization activities that bring financial returns. The increase in marketization and competition causes progressive values of internationalization, such as cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, diversity, and social justice, to be left behind [3]. These changes led to the emergence of internationalization as an ambiguous concept constantly redefined by the efforts of people, governments, and communities.

A diverse range of university stakeholders, such as leaders, faculty members, administrative personnel, and students, are involved in the internationalization process. Although

the institutional policies of internationalization are developed mainly by the leaders and faculty members, the practitioners working in international offices are the primary implementers of these policies. In this study, international office professionals (IPs) are the main research participants. IHE discourse is overly dominated by HE leaders, governments, and foreign organizations [4], while the voices of the professional field are absent. On the other hand, these professionals are often highly skilled academic support staff, knowledgeable and experienced in performing their work effectively [5], and aware of their critical position in promoting IHE.

Not only the concept of internationalization, but also HEIs transform continuously. Recently, there is a “third space” in HEIs that blurs the lines between academic and administrative staff [6], i.e., practitioners are gaining more academic credentials while academics are working more on a project-oriented basis. Therefore, IPs can be called “blended professionals” [7] who are appointed based on experience in a third space, somewhere between professional and academic domains, and characterized by an ability to build common ground with a range of colleagues, internal and external to the university, and to develop new forms of professional space and knowledge. In other words, because they specialize in internationalization and tend to have related academic degrees, IPs in universities vary from other administrative staff members (such as clerks and secretaries). These blended professionals suffer from not being institutionally recognized and having to explain and justify their activity and relevance in their institutions [8]. Therefore, for effective internationalization, more research should be conducted with the IPs as the main catalyzers of internationalization.

In this study, the street-level bureaucracy theory [9,10] was used to analyze IPs in universities. The street-level bureaucrats (SLB) are practitioners who interact directly with individual citizens/customers/students and use a great deal of discretion when allocating resources or enforcing rules. They must constantly make major and minor decisions on how the rules should be interpreted in a particular situation. The street-level bureaucracy theory emphasizes how SLB use discretion, the routines they create, the tools and techniques they employ to deal with the pressures and uncertainties of their jobs, and the decisions they ultimately make on the public policies to implement them in practice. A systematic review conducted on street-level bureaucracy [11] showed that the theory was primarily applied to the analysis of social welfare (26%) and education policy (14%). The majority of education policy studies involve teachers. However, this study applied the theory to the practitioners working in international offices.

This study has two core objectives. The first goal is to identify IPs’ problems and obstacles when serving as SLB for internationalization initiatives. The second one is to ascertain how IPs exercise their discretion and whether doing so has beneficial or harmful repercussions. The article first presents the literature on street-level bureaucracy, managing internationalization, and IPs. Then, the methodological part includes the research design and data collection process, and the article ends with the findings and a discussion of the results.

2. Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory and IPs as Street-Level Bureaucrats

In this study, IPs are considered street-level bureaucrats (SLB) regarding internationalization since they are the first contacts of incoming and outgoing students and staff. SLB are public service workers who interact directly with citizens in the course of their jobs and have substantial discretion in the execution of their work [10]. Teachers, police officers, or social workers are typical examples of SLB. The sociological theory around street-level bureaucracy aims to describe the attitudes and working methods of front-line employees in the public sector as well as the ways in which they implement public policy on a daily basis.

The paradox of these practitioners’ roles is at the root of street-level bureaucracy theory [10]. “Street-level” denotes a location away from the center, where authority is thought to dwell; on the other hand, “bureaucracy” denotes a system of regulations and

institutions of authority. The following paragraph discusses how this theory puts the street-level implementors of the policies into the center:

“In a top-down view, implementation is treated as something that comes next, while blaming the street-level in the case of a perceived implementation failure is a standard reaction. When the policy goals have not been achieved, that is because something in their implementation went wrong. In street-level bureaucracy research, however, a mirror view can be observed: the public official working there while often fulfilling difficult tasks is put centrally.” [12] (p. 27)

The decisions, established routines, and inventions of tools to deal with uncertainty and job pressure of SLB become the actual public policies [10]. In other words, although policymakers develop the rules and objectives, organizational behavior occasionally deviates from these guidelines and objectives. As a result, we need to understand how SLB apply the rules and implement the policies.

The concept of SLB is also well-applicable to educational contexts, and it is not surprising that education is the second subject area for researchers focusing on SLB [11]. The study [13] also argues that teachers are SLB, which supports Lipsky’s viewpoint. Teachers have their self-policing procedures and are subject to relatively minimal managerial authority, just like other SLB. Similarly, another research study [14] analyzed the school principals as the implementers of the national education policy and revealed the challenges teachers face during the implementation.

Research was also conducted on HE level using the concept of SLB. One of the research studies [15] used the concept of street-level bureaucracy to investigate faculty and academic advisors. The authors state that although SLB in universities may not have been involved in creating the related policies, these stakeholders must assist in implementing these policies and interact with the students affected by them. Their research results revealed that faculty and academic advisors are exercising a source of power by acting with discretion as they operate as intermediaries between university policymakers and students. Moreover, another research paper [16] studied the role of student support staff members as SLB in HE. They have discovered that these experts exercise discretion to help students get through administrative burdens.

Even though they are typically thought of as low-level employees in the organizational hierarchy, most public servants supply government services through their activities. In other words, SLB are responsible for directly carrying out national authorities’ policies. This is also true for IPs, who typically assist international students according to choices made by national governments or regulations set forth by supranational agencies (such as the European Commission, which designs exchange programs). This paper defines the IPs as SLB since they are much more different than the lower-level workers. The research study [10] argued that two interrelated aspects of SLB make them different from lower-level workers: relatively high levels of discretion and relative autonomy from organizational authority. Similarly, IPs are experts and professionals in the field of internationalization and make numerous decisions that will affect their institutions.

The street-level bureaucracy hypothesis is most commonly used in the public or semipublic sector [17]. However, in this study, practitioners working in both public and private universities were included and considered SLB. First of all, there is convergence in the laws that both national and supranational bodies in both nations use to oversee the IHE. Second, because institutional decisions are made according to the same global and national policies, the work that practitioners do daily is similar in both public and private institutions.

The Concept of Discretion

Discretion characterizes the decisions made by SLB for various reasons [9]. First of all, SLB need to use their professional expertise to address the needs of their clients (students). Secondly, there is some ambiguity in some international student mobility policies that allow for interpretation, and they have to use their professional expertise to interpret. Thirdly,

the direct involvement or control of the management is impossible in most cases, and they have to make decisions on their own. The tension between broad, abstract norms and the flexibility against uniformity is what discretion is all about [17].

For this study, the concept of discretion has particular importance. The street-level bureaucracy research outlines both the potential drawbacks of bureaucratic discretion and these practitioners' potential influence and impact on policy outcomes [11]. The research [18] revealed that front-line practitioners should be given a broad range of decision-making authority since they have the necessary expertise and professional knowledge to use discretion. SLB have considerable technical discretion [19] in determining the most efficient ways to achieve the goals they are mandated to pursue based on their factual understanding of what works. Technical discretion refers to the interpretation of rules and policies with an expert's judgment assessing the actions or methods most likely to achieve the desired results.

The literature review [20] showed that the discretion exercised by the SLB could have positive or negative impacts. The positive impact of the use of discretion arises from implementation willingness because SLB can better tailor their decisions and procedures to the specific situations and needs of their clients. These examples of positive discretion might lead to policy innovations and improvements in implementation processes. On the other hand, negative use of discretion might have detrimental effects and hidden costs, making the process complicated, confusing, or time-consuming.

3. The Management of Internationalization and International Office Professionals

Since internationalization has fostered new kinds of centralized control and monitoring, the growth of internationalization as a management function is also related to new forms of professionalism and new HE administration methods [21]. Joint and dual degrees, branch campuses, and other methods of worldwide delivery have enlarged and diversified them, and the duties of international offices in HE have also increased [22]. As a result, leaders, academics, and administrative staff must put concerted effort and attention into managing internationalization. According to the research [23], academics focus more on internationalization than management or administrative activities. Even though rhetorically comprehensive strategies are being made for internationalization, much work still needs to be performed [24]. These broad strategies should include the engagement of international offices in the management of internationalization.

International education has emerged in recent years as a distinct profession with its own standards of professional practice and code of ethics [25]. International office professionals (IPs) are professionals and practitioners of internationalization efforts in HEIs. Most are working in short-term mobility offices (e.g., the Erasmus program) or interacting with degree-seeking overseas students. Although they play a significant role in the implementation of internationalization, there is not much research about these professionals. Some research [26,27] was conducted on "senior international officers" (SIO) as professionals who are in charge of directing and facilitating HEIs' internationalization efforts. Recent research [5] argues that IPs are different from the SIOs in the sense that the term IPs refers to all practitioners in the international students and/or exchange offices who play six prominent roles in their jobs: bureaucrat (managing, budgeting, reporting), moderator (resolving conflicts), mentor (advising, counseling), broker (increasing student recruitment), entrepreneur (growing university networks and global university rankings), or innovator (creating innovative practices).

4. Methodology

This study was conducted with IPs in Poland and Turkey. These countries were selected since they are non-English-speaking, peripheral European countries and have similar emerging internationalization practices. Both countries' national internationalization policies mainly focus on attracting more international students [28,29]. According to UNESCO [30] statistics, both countries have more incoming students than outgoing ones.

Moreover, both countries receive most of their incoming students from their neighboring countries, Ukraine and Belarus for Poland and Syria and Azerbaijan for Turkey. Although Poland is a member of the European Union, Turkey is a candidate country; both have been involved in the Erasmus mobility program since 2004. Both countries are not in the Eurozone and use their own currency. Therefore, with these similar characteristics, this study involved a sample of IPs in these two countries.

This study applied a qualitative research method, and 36 semi-structured interviews were conducted. The research questions of the study are:

- What difficulties and challenges do IPs face as the SLB of internationalization policies?
- How do IPs use their right of discretion? What are the conditions that lead IPs to use their discretion in line with the internationalization policy of the university?

Interviews with IPs working in different international offices in Poland and Turkey universities were conducted. The Middle East Technical University provided the ethical approval of the protocol, and one pilot interview was conducted with an IP from Turkey. The questions included demographic characteristics, local and national-level challenges and difficulties, and barriers to inclusive internationalization. This paper presents an analysis of the interviews related to institutional-level challenges. The results of the national-level challenges were presented elsewhere [31].

The interviews were conducted by the researcher through online meetings and recorded with the participant's consent. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed by the researcher. The interviews with Turkish IPs were conducted in Turkish and translated into English. The interviews with Polish IPs were conducted in English.

The participants are 18 international office professionals from each country. The diversity of the participants is considered in terms of university type (public/private), geographical location (center/periphery), medium of instruction, etc.

4.1. Demographics on IPs from Turkish Universities

All of the participants have Turkish nationality. Fourteen participants work in public universities and four in foundation universities. They are working in fourteen different cities in Turkey: Afyon, Aksaray, Ankara (2), Aydın, Bartın, Denizli, Gaziantep, İstanbul (3), İzmir, Karabük, Konya, Manisa, Nevşehir, Samsun (2). Eight participants are in management positions as directors or coordinators of international offices. The average working year experience in an international office is eight years ranging from two to seventeen years. Fifteen participants have master's degrees, two have bachelor's degrees, and one has a Ph.D. degree. Their fields of study are educational sciences (5), business administration (4), English language teaching (3), international relations (3), European studies (1), entrepreneurship (1), and finance (1).

4.2. Demographics on IPs from Polish Universities

One participant is Turkish and seventeen are Polish. Thirteen participants work in public universities and five in private universities. They are working in nine different cities in Poland: Gdansk (2), Krakow (2), Kwidzyn (1), Lodz (2), Lublin (1), Poznan (1), Rzeszów (1), Warsaw (6), Wrocław (2). Twelve participants work in management positions; one participant works as the departmental Erasmus coordinator and five as international office professionals. The average working year experience in an international office is nine years ranging from one to twenty-four years. Fourteen participants have master's degrees, one bachelor's, and three have Ph.D. degrees. Their fields of study are business administration (4), international relations (2), law (2), sociology (2), journalism (1), humanities (1), political science (1), geography (1), psychology (1), economics (1), linguistics (1), educational administration (1).

Although some of the participants in this study hold managerial positions, almost all of them do not represent high leadership posts and work in a coordinator role in their offices. In other words, the participants who are managers are responsible for coordinating

the implementation rather than being a part of the decision-making process. Therefore, no distinction was made between managers and other experts when analyzing the results.

5. Findings

The findings were presented as professional challenges, institutional challenges, and the use of discretion as SLB. The first research question focuses on the challenges that IPs express regarding internationalization processes in HE. The findings revealed that IPs in both countries face two kinds of challenges while conducting internationalization activities. The first category of challenges is professional, and the second category is institutional. However, in some cases, the institutional and professional challenges are intertwined, and the categorization was made based on the source of the challenge. The institutional challenges mainly originate from the institutional and policy-making decisions of university leaders and the attitude of other stakeholders towards internationalization. On the other hand, professional challenges are mostly derived from the nature of the work itself.

The second research question is on IPs' use of discretion in internationalization processes as SLB.

5.1. Professional Challenges

IPs perceive that they experience several professional challenges as internationalization practitioners. The main professional challenges are diversified roles and responsibilities, problems related to incoming students, and communication difficulties with the young generation.

The participants were asked about their primary responsibilities during the interviews. The results revealed that, although their main task seems to be the coordination of student and staff mobility, IPs are expected to conduct many other tasks. The jobs mentioned during the interviews are listed below:

- Signing new partnership agreements and following up on the existing ones;
- Outgoing and incoming student and staff exchange (including internships);
- Organizing international summer school/international staff week;
- Administration of the mobility programs (application to EU, budgeting, reporting, etc.);
- Information dissemination (website, information sessions, posters, social media, etc.);
- Dealing with international visitors/researchers;
- Integration of international students/staff (e.g., orientation programs, welcome center);
- Supporting academic personnel for their international projects;
- University promotion in international fairs;
- Double-degree diploma programs;
- Integration to Erasmus Without Paper (EWP) digital system;
- Integration to "Blended Intended mobility" and virtual mobility programs;
- Reporting to institutional and national authorities.

Moreover, some Polish IPs were also dealing with the business travels of all university employees and the workload from being a member of the European Universities Initiative. However, in the Turkish case, some IPs mentioned that international ranking applications of their institutions are part of their job. In Turkey, the average number of personnel in the international office is six, ranging from one to fifteen personnel. In Poland, the average number of personnel in the international office is twelve, ranging from one to thirty personnel.

As a professional challenge, although they deal with all these multiple tasks, IPs consider that the complexity of their profession is not appreciated and their job is reduced to student mobility. An IP expressed this perception as follows:

"The first problem is that our work is poorly understood inside or outside the organization. We do this profession under an enormous workload with a lot of effort. But unfortunately, all the work we do is seen as "student came/student left."

The most challenging thing for me is seeing the work we do become worthless day by day. Our effort and motivation are negatively affected.” (Turkish-IP-18)

In the following questions, when IPs were asked about the challenges of their profession, they mentioned this variety of tasks as a disadvantage. In addition to that, they have also emphasized that the administration sometimes assigns ad-hoc tasks unrelated to their main roles, which causes a decrease in their motivation. One of the IPs exemplified such an irrelevant task as:

“There are many things we do, for example, translating the university regulations into English. The new rector requested translations of all university regulations; hundreds of regulations, of pages.” (Turkish-IP-7)

The second challenge under this category is related to student mobility and incoming students, where delinquency problems are mentioned. IPs mentioned that they have to accompany more incoming students than outgoing students. Most IPs see incoming students as guests in their countries and feel they have to support them in their adaptation process. IPs highly criticize that the other stakeholders in the university see international students as the students of international offices and ask every question about them directly to IPs.

One of the IPs explained how she is involved with all problems of incoming students as “We even know when international students lost their socks” (Turkish-IP-16). On the other hand, dealing with incoming students from different cultures causes professional challenges for IPs. An IP from Poland and an IP from Turkey mentioned how they had difficulties with some incoming students in their adaptation to school rules:

“For example, we have some international students right now. Even though the deadline for coming was October 15th, we prolonged it for two weeks, so they got here. Yesterday they came, it was November 4th. There are many things like that; they are taking our energy; I got upset for a couple of days; I really don’t know how to talk with these students, to send them back. If we accept them, we will have some other students coming in November next year. It is not possible.” (Poland-IP-14)

“For example, some students are a little more relaxed; they may not be very attached to the rules and are usually late. They can arrive at around eleven, half-past eleven, where they should arrive at 10 am. To solve this problem, we adapt to them. In other words, if the meeting is at 10, we say at 9, for example.” (Turkish-IP-16)

Another problem related to incoming students is the expected over-responsibility of IPs. Especially the incoming students below 18 became a big issue in international offices. An IP from Poland expressed her experience with different age groups in the following way:

“So as the IP, we have to deal with all types of personalities, the students, their parents, because very often we have students starting university while being 16, these from Ukraine. They finished high school very early, so we had to deal with the parents of very young candidates. So, the age range of our students is between 16 and sometimes 30.” (Poland-IP-16)

This over-responsibility arises due to the young ages of the students and the lack of experience living in another culture. IPs mentioned that especially the bachelor’s degree-seeking students are experiencing their first study abroad program, so they need more guidance. They also expressed that most of these students did not receive any intercultural communication or socio-cultural adaptation training before studying abroad, which makes the situation harder for the IPs. An IP from Poland expressed his experience as follows:

“Most of them are going abroad for the first time. Especially in the first year, it is necessary to take care of them closely. Visa procedures, finding an internship or

job, accommodation, career services, orientation, etc. Hundreds of e-mails are replied to organize everything.” (Poland-IP-1)

The other professional challenge mentioned by IPs is related to communication problems with the young generation. IPs in Turkey and Poland experienced similar communication problems with outgoing and incoming students. First of all, they mentioned a generational gap between IPs and students, which is a source of communication problems. IPs from both countries often emphasized that the students do not read the announcements or e-mails properly, which in turn causes challenges to them. Two examples from Poland and Turkey are:

“On the students’ level, I would say the problem would be across probably every university, and it’s connected with the generation and the student’s attitude . . . in our case, students do not read e-mails, and the communication issue is big. And it’s incredible, and the communication issue is very crucial. So, how can we post announcements in a very short sentence?” (Poland-IP-11)

“These international students are not following anything. For example, they give the wrong e-mail address. We cannot contact the student. He has an exam; I send the exam to the student by e-mail. The student did not check his e-mail. We are experiencing such problems, and these are irreversible problems. We are experiencing problems due to these young students.” (Turkish-IP-11)

5.2. Institutional Challenges

Institutional challenges include the general management of internationalization, the temporary status of academic leaders, the lack of support from faculty members, and lack of participation in decision-making.

The first one is the administration of internationalization in HEIs. IPs consider that internationalization should not be seen as the task of the international office but of the whole organization, and all stakeholders should embrace it. Interviewees felt that sometimes they were the only ones working on internationalization, while the rest of the organization did not get involved. An IP from Poland explains that:

“There is a lack of understanding that internationalization should be a process for the whole university, not only for the international office or not only the authorities but everyone, and every department should be involved.” (Poland-IP-13)

This argument becomes more robust when IPs feel that everybody in the university sends all documents in English or any international student to their office. Some IPs gave examples of how they dealt with a misunderstanding in the dormitory since the Director of Dormitories thought it was a “foreigner” problem. They are overwhelmed with receiving many kinds of tasks either because they are in English or because international students are involved. They think this is a challenge that should be solved at the institutional level. Two examples of such situation are:

“Every time something is international or in English, it’s immediately sent to my office, even though we are not connected to it. She is international, or it’s your student. It’s this way of thinking. An international student is not a student of the faculty; it’s a student of the international relations office.” (Poland- IP-16)

“And we have a problem. When something is wrong with international students, everyone asks us, even if it is outside of our authority. Once, an international student’s diploma was lost. The vice-rector called me. He wanted me to find the diploma in half an hour. That half-hour, I guess I had a heart attack. Maybe he didn’t give his high school diploma. So maybe there is no diploma around. Is it our responsibility?” (Turkish-IP-6)

The second dimension is related to the temporary status of the academic leaders, which leads to decreased support for internationalization and the lack of sustainable policies.

IPs would like to feel the support of the university leaders, but, in some cases, they think the opposite. The main problem of support is visible in the temporary position of the rectors. IPs in both countries mentioned that the leaders are changed every four years in the university, so they could not have a chance to be adequately involved in internationalization policies or closely work with the international office. Since the IPs do not have a clear job description, they are highly affected by these changes. An IP from Turkey and an IP from Poland noted:

“Offices are mostly affected by the rector changes in universities. For example, there is a circulation in the employees; some are dismissed or reappointed. Different assignments. This leaves us behind, leaving no time and opportunity for the offices to deliver their vision.” (Turkish-IP-7)

“We have elections for years, every four years, I mean, for the professors for rectors. But still, you know, someone can become a president or vice president or vice-rector and has had no idea how to manage people or the administration. They have no competencies as far as the area they are going to administer. So, every four or eight years, we have a period of teaching our job, teaching the professors how to do something,... Our position is lower than theirs, so we must adjust to how they work.... Sometimes it’s just hard.” (Poland-IP-14)

The third dimension is the lack of support from academics. The support of all stakeholders is necessary, but especially the support of academics is indispensable. IPs highly criticize that international students are seen as the students of the office but not the students of the faculties. They assume that especially academic processes should be managed by faculty members. However, the experiences of IPs show that they have to deal with these academic processes, and sometimes faculty members do not even want international students in their classes. In the following quotations, IPs gave examples of the difficulties they have in the EWP project and internationalization of curriculum:

“EWP is a huge project and the most demanding. Thousands of universities are trying to use the same software, trials, and tests, but it is not working properly. In every department, there is a faculty member responsible for Erasmus agreements. There is a decentralized policy, but academics are not happy to work like administrative personnel to deal with Erasmus agreements through the EWP system. I am dealing with them by myself.” (Poland-IP-2)

“I mean, we did this as an international office. I started the internationalization of the curriculum in many places. Then, believe me, I got tired of talking to these people and gave up. Because this job is beyond the international office, I don’t know, but it can be realized in the classroom by the teacher and the department faculty. Yes. I mean, even if I pushed it, the realization area was not under my control in the end, so it could not be implemented. I am responsible for the exchange program. However, teaching takes place in the classroom, and we cannot do it because it will be done with the active contribution of the teacher. It is tough.” (Turkish-IP-1)

This category’s last dimension is the lack of participation in decision-making and defining internationalization strategies. Nearly all IPs who participated in the study criticized their lack of involvement in developing internationalization strategies. They see this as a mistake of their institution since they think this causes a significant gap between strategy development and strategy implementation. They assume that they are the leading implementors of these policies and should also have a decision-making role. They expressed this experience as follows:

“I’m afraid I’m not in the group who is developing the strategy, the international strategies, which I think it’s a big mistake, because as an international office, the officer who is dealing with all the things that are within the internationalization

(policy), I think we should be a part of the group who is developing the strategies.” (Poland-IP-15)

“Think of it this way, such a strategy is being made, and the international office is not included. In other words, it has been done by people without expertise in this field. Unfortunately, I do not think that our university is taking us very seriously as an international office.” (Turkish-IP-10)

5.3. *The Use of Discretion as SLB*

The challenges above show how IPs work as SLB in universities as the primary contact points for incoming and outgoing students and as the main implementers of internationalization policy. During the interviews, IPs gave several examples of their use of discretion, such as accepting students' applications with lacking documents, extending the application deadline in exceptional cases, helping the students with their papers, etc. Some IPs explained that they are always looking for new types of partnership agreements and new opportunities for international projects, although their managers do not ask for that. Moreover, some of the IPs mentioned how they work hard for the adaptation of incoming students, even outside of work hours, to help them on different matters. One of the IPs said that she had to go to Italy to help her outgoing student in an emergency in the hospital. One of the IPs mentioned their support for international students during the COVID-19 pandemic:

“My administrative role is to deal with all red-type processes of exchange students, but on the higher level, we also provide adaptation assistance. We also assist students whenever there is an emergency, pandemic, or epidemiological situation in the country, all the restrictions, and vaccination roll-outs. Although I work fixed hours, I am flexible for the urgent calls of the students. I have helped with their vaccination process during the pandemic” (Poland-IP-4)

These examples above show how IPs use their power of discretion to help students with bureaucratic issues, adaptation problems, or emergencies. On the other hand, sometimes, IPs excessively use their discretion. As the example below states, some IPs extend their work to their private life. A striking example from one of the participants is the following:

“Somehow, some things are not under our obligation or responsibility, but because of these cultural codes in Turkey, we try to solve some things ourselves, to help, in the spirit of hosting. And this brings us extra workload, emotional, moral, and sometimes financial burdens. I can give many examples if you want me to give an example. A student came with his child and his wife. We searched for a place to stay for a week until 10 p.m. Another student came on Friday evening, his scholarship had not been paid, and he had no money; I took him home. Or a few years ago, my family lived in Izmir. Incoming students wanted to visit Izmir. It would be difficult for them to go back, so I took nine female students, we stayed at my parent's house, and they went to the sea. I can give countless more examples.” (Turkish-IP-15)

This example clearly shows how she excessively used her discretion. This is mainly because of the flexible structure of IPs' jobs. Primarily, helping the adaptation process of international students is not defined for the IPs, and they cannot limit their involvement in the adaptation process. Another example from the interviews shows that IPs might use their discretion in a negative way, not in line with internationalization policy. A striking example that is given below shows that the IP13 from Turkey is not applying to new international projects since he could not get support from the leaders:

“Deadline is December 31st. I know that by December 31st, accreditation applications for institutions will end. If I apply and get accredited, I must write a project. If I write a project, I can send students and receive students. I know there

is this opportunity, but I don't apply because I know that no one can take it all on my own. No one in the administration knows about it anyway. Why should I apply? I'm not applying! I know there is such a possibility, but that requires human resources. I've said many times that we need staff, they don't hire them, so I don't apply for projects" (Turkish-IP-13)

Similarly, some IPs expressed that they do not use their discretion power positively since they lost their belief in the support of their colleagues, faculty, administrator, or organization. Another IP explained that she would use less positive discretion compared to her previous years of experience since she was tired of not being supported by the other units of the university:

"When I took charge of the office, I tried to bring some fresh air and make some changes to become more student-friendly and staff-friendly. So, at the moment, for myself, as an international officer or manager, it's quite difficult and demanding to go through all these old-fashioned procedures at the university and to deal with the administrative staff, non-English speaking administrative staff to change the way of thinking and working of all types of professionals at the university. That's why I abandoned all efforts; if I am the only one who cares about international students at the university, what is the need for change? Now, I just do my job, and I do not start any new initiative" (Poland- IP-16)

6. Conclusions and Discussion

Supranational and national organizations mostly develop internationalization policies. However, as the street-level bureaucracy literature shows, the positions of those who implement these policies are as important as those who make them. This research revealed that the role of IPs in universities as policy implementors makes them close to being street-level bureaucrats. Therefore, while addressing internationalization in universities, an approach that ignores the IPs, the actual implementers of internationalization, will cause severe issues in the execution of that policy. The research [15] explains this "street-level divergence" in universities where advisors are forced to apply the policies differently than they were intended due to conflicting policies, causing a policy's change from its original design as it is put into practice. In other words, a policy document on education, which was designed from a top-down perspective, could not be understood appropriately or implemented on the local level [14]. Therefore, for proper policy implementation in internationalization, more inclusive administrative methods are needed from a bottom-up perspective, and IPs have a major role in implementing internationalization policies.

This study indicates that IPs face considerable institutional and professional constraints as the primary agents responsible for implementing the IHE. The first professional challenge is related to the diversified roles and responsibilities that lead IPs to embrace multiple tasks. The university leaders frequently delegate new responsibilities to IPs because these do not often have well-defined job descriptions. Another professional challenge identified in this research is related to communication problems with the young generation, which is valid for both incoming and outgoing students and leads to over-working conditions for the IPs. Lastly, the excessive duty of IPs to deal with international students presents another professional difficulty. This over-responsibility comes from very young students being abroad for the first time and requiring much support or the cultural codes of IPs who wish to show a high level of hospitality. As stated in the literature [32], socio-cultural preparation before mobility would help reduce this issue. However, with the lack of this preparation, the host universities' IPs face difficulties adapting to incoming students. Especially the degree-seeking international students who arrange their study abroad by themselves have less support for socio-cultural preparation compared to the Erasmus/exchange students studying abroad from a home university to the host one.

Moreover, this research found that IPs face several institutional challenges while implementing internationalization policies. IPs criticize the continuously changing internationalization policies due to the cyclical nature of university administrators, namely rectors.

Moreover, IPs noted that they were not included in the strategy-making, policy-making, or decision-making process of internationalization, and they feel undervalued as being excluded from these processes. Lastly, IPs do not feel the support of academics. They sometimes have conflicts with the faculty members for either the course selection of incoming students and course recognition of outgoing students or for any other internationalization-related task. Lastly, IPs highly criticize that internationalization and international students are left to the international offices to deal with, while the whole organization does not embrace it. This lived experience of IPs is contrary to the concept of comprehensive internationalization [33], where all HE stakeholders encompass the same internationalization ideals.

This study revealed that most of the challenges apply to the IPs from Poland and Turkey. However, the overall analysis shows slight changes in the findings for the two countries. First of all, the higher education structure is more centralized in Turkey, and therefore, universities mainly apply the centralized decisions, causing more institutional challenges in Turkey. While Turkish IPs are more concerned with the problems of outgoing students, Polish IPs spend most of their time on incoming students. According to the interview analyses, Turkish students have a high demand to go abroad, whereas Polish students are not so keen. Second, Polish IPs are more concerned with quality, whereas Turkish IPs are more concerned with expanding the number of incoming students. For instance, the majority of Polish IPs criticize incoming students' inadequate language skills. Lastly, Polish IPs are more concerned with incoming student visa problems, while Turkish IPs are more concerned with outgoing student visa problems. Since Poland is a member of the European Union, the incoming students have difficulty obtaining a visa even if the university accepts the student. This causes several challenges for Polish IPs. On the other hand, Turkish IPs deal with rejected visas for outgoing students and sometimes cannot send the selected students to Europe.

In addition to the professional implications of IPs, this article provides crucial insights for better implementation of internationalization in universities. For instance, the findings on discretion from street-level bureaucracy theory are significant for the practical implementation of internationalization in HEIs. The debate has progressed far beyond discussing discretion as an all-or-nothing issue by highlighting its positive and negative elements and creating comprehensive frameworks to explain discretion [20]. The paper presents several examples of the use of discretion. Some examples contribute to the university's internationalization policy, such as relaxing bureaucratic rules to facilitate the processing of international students. In other words, IPs often have to use their discretion when faced with an implementation challenge. These results align with previous research [11], revealing that SLBs use their professional expertise to re-formulate and implement the policy and resolve policy failures and other shortcomings.

On the other hand, some other examples showed that IPs can have a negative impact by exercising discretion. An IP working alone, for instance, claimed that he purposefully did not apply for a new project since the university did not offer him staff support, and if he embarked on this project, the entire weight would be on his shoulders. This is a significant example of how IPs exercise their discretion as SLBs. Therefore, eliminating the professional challenges mentioned above and improving the conditions for job satisfaction of these employees should be among the priorities of universities. The findings of this study showed that IPs use their discretion negatively when they feel overwhelmed, undervalued, or excluded in decision-making. According to a study [34] on the motivation of SLBs to provide public services, this gap between ideal notions and actual job requirements can cause SLBs to become more burned out. They also argue that the problem of work overload and role conflict could be minimized by reassigning work responsibilities according to workload analyses for given jobs.

Therefore, the university administrations should not ignore the difficulties experienced by these professionals and the institutional problems addressed in this paper. The data also indicates that, in many universities, there is a perception that internationalization would

happen by itself. On the other hand, the findings show that IPs play a significant role in the effectiveness of IHE implementation and are often overburdened by this role. The difficulties discussed in this paper are expressed through Turkish and Polish IPs' experiences. As a result, many of these difficulties do not appear to be country-specific; instead, they are common issues that IPs in HEIs may frequently encounter. Therefore, despite contextual changes, IPs deserve more attention for a successful policy implementation process regarding the internationalization of higher education.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The ethical approval of this research was taken from the Ethical Review Committee of Middle East Technical University on 26 July 2021.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data are unavailable due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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