

Exploring International Strategies: A Comparative Analysis of Global Best Practice Guides and the Need for a Unified Conceptual Framework

Ioana Alexandra DINU*

National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA Bucharest, Bucharest, Romania
*Corresponding author, dinuioanaalexandra99@gmail.com

Sorin Cristian IONESCU

National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA Bucharest, Bucharest, Romania
sc.ionescu@gmail.com

Iuliana GRECU

National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA Bucharest, Bucharest, Romania
iuliana.grecu@upb.ro

Abstract. *The Internationalization of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises is a widespread process in the current economic context and with growing importance, being strongly linked to the extension to foreign markets, but also with rising levels of competitiveness. In this context, companies are increasingly required to take more complex strategic decisions. Recent research has shown that internationalization has surpassed direct export and it now includes concepts such as sustainability, digitalization, and supply chain resilience. However, the main problem identified is that the current good-practice guides for internationalization which should help these companies in their journey, have the information extensively fragmented and are not organized in a clear and coherent structure, making it difficult for managers to understand how recommended steps relate to one another in practice.*

Through a qualitative comparative analysis, we compared eight internationalization guides, gathered from Romania, European Union and United States institutional, academic and entrepreneurial sources, to observe the differences in perspectives and where they align. From this study, two problems arise: first, fragmented practices can complicate managerial decision making for smaller enterprises and second, cultural and digital dimensions receive less attention than financial ones. Based on the gaps that we identified, we propose a four-pillar framework that comprise internal readiness, cultural and digital awareness, administrative compliance and long-term monitoring post-entry into a single structure.

Keywords: Small and Medium-sized Enterprises Internationalization, Unified framework, Digital Readiness, Good-Practice Guides, Supply Chain Resilience.

Introduction

In the economic context of 2025, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) represent a significant share of firms engaged in international business (Knight et al., 2025). Internationalization has progressively shifted from being focused on exports, increasingly incorporating aspects related to supply chain resilience, digital tools and sustainability. Based on the literature, global disruptions have driven enterprises to rank resilient networks above the typical export practices for cost reduction (Ivanov, 2020). Other researchers have shown in their studies that integration of digital innovation and sustainable practices in an economy overpowered by the

intrusion of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is not any longer a secondary objective, but a main necessity for SMEs to stay competitive in global value chains (Denicolai et al., 2021).

Unlike multinational enterprises (MNEs), these companies face several disadvantages: limited experience, small size, constrained resources and difficulty navigating through foreign cultures, politics, and institutions. Most of the time, these companies choose to operate internationally alongside MNEs, even if that implies power and control. Alternatively, this tends to reduce their ability to access the real advantages brought by internationalization (Knight et al. 2025).

While there is a variety of internationalization guides available to SMEs, these guidelines are associated with different conceptual frameworks, depending on whether they are developed for public institutions, academic bodies or private consultants. Consequently, entrepreneurs are often exposed to recommendations with similar elements, which are not always easy to connect into a systematic internationalization path.

The main objective of this study is to address the limitations identified in current good-practice guides for internationalization. To do this, we compared eight good practice guides and organized their common elements into a unified framework that covers internal readiness, cultural and digital awareness, administrative compliance and long-term monitoring. As for SMEs, this framework offers a practical reference that can be used for international expansion.

Literature review

The process of internationalization has evolved, moving beyond the notions described by earlier scholars, and now has gained the ability to adapt to the needs and demands of businesses in the markets where they wish to extend their operations.

Defining the Modern SME Internationalization

Given the current economic landscape, understanding the difficulties faced by SMEs requires a clear definition of internationalization, not as the volume of sales made abroad, but as a strategic reorganization of value creation. According to existing literature, internationalization represents a process of increasing involvement in international operations, where attention moves from short-term financial outcomes towards adjusting internal resources (Knight & Liesch, 2016). Considering the current global disruptions, this definition should also include stability, since global supply chains increasingly value operational resilience and the ability to recover from shocks rather than just cost efficiency (Ivanov, 2020).

Even the way companies interact worldwide has changed; For example, digital technology now helps them overcome the difficulties of being a small company by providing access to foreign markets without requiring large physical investments. These tools help SMEs to adopt new technologies and engage with greater effectiveness within international networks, lowering the typical expenses of expanding globally (Hervé et al., 2020). Therefore, based on the context in which we approach internationalization, the concept can be defined as a dynamic and adaptive process, based on collaboration, which involves the internal development of the companies, but also their integration in the foreign economic environment.

Theoretical Shifts, operational drivers and the practical limitation

Based on this definition, theoretical knowledge of how firms grow has experienced significant changes. Whilst traditional models, such as the Uppsala Model, argue that companies must expand successively, accumulate physical assets to manage risks and increase their level of international involvement, modern literature states that speed and knowledge are now more valuable than

dimension of the company. Other comparative studies show that in today's economy, SMEs tend to avoid the sequential stages of entrance by taking advantage of entrepreneurial agility. This shift suggests that a company's success is no longer determined by its years of expertise, but by its ability to substitute large capital investments with fast, innovation-based efforts (Paul & Rosado-Serrano, 2019).

In practical terms, the digital revolution has provided much of this freedom. Digital technologies now serve as the main tool for small businesses to navigate the challenges that are associated with their size, allowing them to find partners and manage global partnerships without the high costs of transactions that previously held them back (Hervé et al., 2020). Yet, technology alone is no longer enough, as the current economic marketplace requires responsible conduct. Regarding sustainability, the concept has developed from an optional corporate decision to a strategic need for participation in global value chains. Recent findings indicate that relevant international partners increasingly focus on environmental criteria when selecting partnerships, demonstrating the relationship between an organization's eco-innovation efforts and its international success (Denicolai et al, 2021).

While previous research has discussed key dimensions of SME Internationalization such as finance, culture and digitalization, the current study concentrates on how these dimensions are addressed together in operational internationalization guides and converted into practical recommendations for managers.

Methodology

In this study, we analyze the internationalization process from a new perspective, through a qualitative comparative analysis of eight best-practice guides and strategic reports, with the aim of developing a unified conceptual framework based on them. This study considers that the existing data fragmentation limits the external expansion of SMEs.

We have developed the premises of this study in order to address the difficulties of SMEs in the current global economic environment. Starting with the first premise, small and medium enterprises experience obstacles throughout the internationalization process caused by a lack of standardized practices and a unified conceptual framework to assist managers step by step.

Internationalization has been increasingly important in recent decades, as the growing research on this topic shows (Knight et al., 2025). Despite this rising amount of knowledge developed on this subject, existing good practice guides still fail to effectively support firms' internationalization processes.

Continuing with the second premise, we suggest that integrating cultural and digital adaptation represents a key differentiator in internationalization assistance, beyond a sole focus on financial support.

Nowadays, the success of a firm's internationalization is measured by achieving strict financial targets or acquiring tangible assets. Still, the reality of modern-day enterprise has shown that the availability of finance does not guarantee access to a foreign market if the business model is not culturally and digitally adaptive.

To test these assumptions, data was gathered from eight internationalization guides chosen to represent the various methods in which the internationalization process is structured and supported by companies. The sample includes institutional, academic and entrepreneurial sources from the Romanian, European and United States contexts, to represent various approaches to international expansion. Guides were chosen based on the focus they place on internationalization and the availability of structured, actionable steps; purely conceptual documents were excluded.

The analysis employs a qualitative comparison approach, building on a broader analytical process created as part of one of the authors' doctoral research (Dinu & Ionescu, 2026).

The general information over the eight guides are summarized in table 1 below.

Table 1. Comparative Overview of Internationalization Guides and Strategic Frameworks

No.	Document name	Issuing entity	Target audience	Category/ Perspective	Primary focus	Key differentiator	Source
1	Applicant's Guide 131 F	North-West Regional Program (Romania)	SMEs (Romania)	Public funding instrument	Grant funding	Eligibility-based compliance	North-West Regional Development Agency, 2025
2	Support for SMEs Internationalization	European Court of Auditors	Policy makers	Policy audit report	Policy coherence	Critique of Institutional Fragmentation	European Court of Auditors, 2022
3	US Market Penetration Measures	K-OS Innovation (USA)	Entrepreneurs	Operational Consulting	Market Entry	Business model adaptation	Sierra Murillo, 2025
4	Guidelines for European Entrepreneurs	ESE+/Erasmus+	Start-ups/SMEs	Educational and cross-cultural	Legal and Cultural adaptation	Intercultural and legal localization	European School of Entrepreneurship, 2020
5	Good Practices Guide on Research and Innovation	Ulysseus Alliance	Universities	Academic Research and Innovation (R&I)	Research excellence	Open science and digital hubs	Gardiner, 2024
6	Approaches to Internationalization	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)	Governments	Governmental strategy	Institutional governance	Ethics and intellectual property protection	Hénard, Diamond & Roseveare, 2012
7	German SME Internationalization Guide	Empirical Research (German SMEs)	Micro-SMEs	Scientific methodology	Resource constraints	Hofstede-based niche analysis	Pollinger, 2013
8	Guide for Assisting Companies (Ready2Go)	European Commission	BSOs	Methodological Business Success Optimization (BSO) Support	Export procedures	Seven-phase methodology	Centinaro et al., 2019

Source: Authors' own research.

The investigation process was divided into four main stages. First, we selected and assessed guidelines that provide sequential internationalization procedures; Second, we identified and coded repeating strategic concepts; Third, we compared these elements across sources. Finally, we developed a unified conceptual framework. We selected this qualitative technique to illustrate the discrepancy between institutional theory and practical reality, emphasizing the need for a hybrid system that incorporates cultural and digital aspects rather than a simple investment of capital.

The findings were examined using a cross-case synthesis approach. We compared similarities in the initial assessment phases with the differences in how guides approach the execution of niche strategies. Then, we observed that guides place greater emphasis on business model adaptation and managing cultural risk rather than simple administrative compliance.

In the analysis phase, each of the eight guides was reviewed in order to identify the main elements that shape the internationalization process. The emphasis was on repeating themes and clearly defined strategic stages. The comparison of guides allowed us to distinguish between

aspects that arise repeatedly and those that are addressed only selectively. This assessment resulted in the identification of a narrow set of strategic elements, which served as the foundation for the comparative matrix shown in table 2. Cultural aspects were reviewed only when explicitly discussed in accordance with local norms or behavioral differences, and digitalization was included only when it was treated as a strategic component of internationalization rather than a general background condition.

Results and discussions

By applying this comparison technique, we identified seven strategic elements that commonly appear in the analyzed good practice guides for internationalization. These factors constitute the foundation for analyzing how different methods define the internationalization process and how they are managed in practice. Although the importance of cultural adaptation, digital readiness, and financial resources is well-known in the internationalization literature, our analysis contributes by showing how these dimensions are unevenly integrated and prioritized across different types of internationalization guides.

The Comparative Analysis

The table below shows the results of comparative coding using the operational definitions and coding process protocol in the methodology section. The matrix indicates the presence (Yes) or absence (No) of key strategic elements across the sources, hence reinforcing the fragmentation noted in the first premise.

Table 2. Comparative Matrix of Internationalization Pillars

Strategic Element	Guide 1	Guide 2	Guide 3	Guide 4	Guide 5	Guide 6	Guide 7	Guide 8
Internal Readiness Audit	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Market and Competitor Analysis	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cultural Distance	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Legal and Administrative Setup	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Digital Readiness	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Access to Funding	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Post – entry monitoring	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Source: Authors' own research.

Through this matrix, we were able to identify certain significant discrepancies as follows:

Firstly, the cultural dimension is treated only briefly by institutional guides that are finance-oriented (G1, G2, G8), giving limited or no attention to cultural distance. In contrast, entrepreneurial and educational sources (G4 and G7) place much greater importance on local values and cultural adaptation in the internationalization process. This implies that managers who depend mainly on funding-oriented guides (G1), which place significant emphasis on compliance and eligibility, risk being culturally blind to market risks despite being administratively prepared. Based on this finding, rather than redefining the role of culture in internationalization, the analysis shows that cultural considerations are unevenly reflected in the guidance offered to SMEs, depending on the type of source.

Secondly, a clear contrast emerges between funding-oriented and entrepreneurial methods. Guide 1 presents the internationalization process mostly around access to grant funding and

compliance requirements, while guide 7 highlights that many small and medium-sized companies depend on internal equity to preserve strategic adaptability. This finding suggests that some guides' focus on finance might change managerial attention from business model adaptation, which is frequently mentioned with respect to sustainable international expansion. Therefore, the analysis shows that when guides focus strongly on funding, the strategic perspective they promote becomes narrower.

The investigation reveals that, in the examined documents, the subject of digitalization is addressed inconsistently. In this sense, we observed variations in the presence, level of detail, and strategic placement of digital readiness. In some guides, digitalization is portrayed as a critical component of international expansion, whereas in others, it is either secondary or implicit. This suggests that the lack of coherence and adaptability to market demands may hinder the development of a well-planned digital strategy.

To overcome these difficulties, all established best practices were combined into a new model, a unified conceptual framework. Three main objectives guided the development of the model: eliminating redundancies, addressing identified strategic gaps and ensuring practical applicability across internationalization phases. The framework is based directly on the cross-guide comparison in table two, which means that each pillar represents common patterns identified throughout the investigated sources. This model has four interrelated pillars that combine institutional standardization with the flexibility that modern SMEs need, as presented in table three below.

Table 3. Conceptual Pillars of the Proposed Internationalization Model

Pillar	Focus and Objective	Source alignment	Strategic Contribution
Readiness Audit	Evaluation of internal resources, capabilities and managerial readiness before market entry	G8, G3, G1	Makes sure the company is prepared for internationalization before investing capital
Cultural and Digital Awareness	Combination of cultural assessment with analysis of digital trends in the target market	G4, G5, G7	Addresses the lack of cultural focus in administrative-oriented guides
Legal and Administrative Setup	Choosing legal entities and setting up administrative structures	G4, G5, G6	Provides legal stability through formal setup procedures
Operational Scaling	Setting long-term objectives and monitoring performance after market entry	G2, G3, G8	Ensures sustainability after the initial market entry

Source: Authors' own research.

The model presented above does not intend to replace the existing perspectives on internationalization discussed in the literature, for example gradual expansion or accelerated internationalization approaches. Rather, this framework brings all these perspectives into a practical structure. It is derived from the comparative analysis of selected guides, illustrating how different sources prioritize different stages and strategic dimensions.

Pillar 1: Readiness Audit, this pillar emerges from the finding that the diagnostic phase is the only element in common across all eight examined guides. To ensure a precise evaluation of internal organizational capabilities, the pillar integrated instruments found in guides 8 and 3.

Pillar 2: Cultural and Digital Awareness, this pillar tackles the cultural void found in funding-oriented guides such as guide 1. By drawing on factors identified in guides 4 and 7, traditional market analysis is transformed into a comprehensive evaluation of cultural distance.

Pillar 3: Legal and Administrative Setup is initiated by the need for legal and administrative protection of the enterprise. This pillar provides a stable operational foundation by combining the administrative rigor of guide 4 with strategic partnership models, such as the Memorandums of Understanding (MoU) from guide 5 (Gardiner, 2024).

Pillar 4: Operational Scaling, this stage was structured as a direct consequence of concerns raised by the Europe Court of Auditors (guide 2) concerning the lack of impact monitoring. Internationalization is defined as a long-term growth strategy instead of a one-time process, by using key performance indicators (KPIs) from guide 8 and feedback loops from guide 3.

The proposed model shows how these dimensions, such as cultural adaptation, digital readiness and financing, are distributed across internationalization guides, providing a structured synthesis of elements that are otherwise handled separately. Therefore, the contribution of this study is conceptual, as it consolidates existing internationalization insights into a structured framework derived from comparative guidance analysis.

Conclusion

In the context of 2026, internationalization is an increasingly diverse process that extends beyond export volumes towards broader concerns associated with resilience and digital integration. Through this study we compared eight internationalization guides in order to identify the main strategic elements they promote, the limitations of these guides, and the differences in how these elements are structured and prioritized. Through a unified conceptual framework, we integrated all these recurring elements of the analyzed guides. The main contribution of this study is the framework itself, which addresses the coherence gaps observed across different types of guidance.

From a theoretical point of view, the study links ideas from the literature on supply chain resilience and digital entrepreneurship, by assessing how they are portrayed in practical guidance for companies. In this regard, the analysis shows how compliance and innovation-oriented perspectives focus on different stages and priorities within the internationalization process. When investigated across diverse internationalization approaches, digitalization and sustainability emerge as elements whose strategic role becomes clearer.

From a practical perspective, digital readiness is not uniformly integrated across these guides. This concept appears to differentiate the approaches promoted by existing internationalization guidelines, influencing how companies are advised to prepare for foreign market entry. In this sense, the addition of contextual intelligence in the framework demonstrates the need to bring together cultural considerations that are unevenly addressed across existing internationalization guides. Sustainability is increasingly viewed as essential and SMEs that do not meet environmental expectations may face exclusion from high-value global supply chains, regardless of their production capabilities.

This study's limitations are mainly related to its qualitative design. Since the analysis relies on a selected group of best practice guides available at the time of the research, that may not fully reflect regional differences or specific regulations. Although the proposed framework addresses the fragmentation identified in the analyzed guides, further empirical validation is necessary to assess its relevance across different industries and contexts.

To conclude, internationalization of small and medium enterprises in the current economic context is no longer defined by physical expansion of a firm, but it represents the ability to maintain

continuous connectivity with partners, distributors, customers and the entire foreign market which they interact with. The framework proposed in this research offers a structured reference to support this foreign integration, giving SMEs a clear path to evolve from local entities into active participants within the global market. Future operational roadmaps dedicated to Romanian SMEs may build on this conceptual basis to provide the strategic competencies required for successful global integration.

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