



Analysis of the Eloy Alfaro Lay University of Manabí Internationalization process from 2015 – 2019

Maria Emilia Furlan & Estefania Sanchez

Mondo Internazionale, Ecuador

Corresponding Author Email: mfurlan1212@gmail.com / estefania.sanchez199422@gmail.com

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Abstract: This study analyses the internationalization process of the Eloy Alfaro Lay University of Manabí (ULEAM) during the 2015–2019 period, identifying the core structural barriers that hinder its integration into global academic and research networks. Historically, Ecuadorian higher education institutions focused heavily on teaching, leaving scientific research and community engagement sidelined due to a lack of structural public policies. Following the implementation of the Organic Law of Higher Education (LOES) and quality evaluations by CEAACES, universities were pushed to restructure; however, peripheral universities still face deep asymmetric challenges compared to central, highly prestigious institutions when adopting global dimensions. Framed within the sector of service exportation and higher education policies, this research evaluates ULEAM's institutional performance across the dimensions established by the Indicators for Mapping and Profiling Internationalization (IMPI), utilizing data from institutional accountability reports, operational budgets, and strategic development plans (PEDI). The analysis reveals that ULEAM's progress is fundamentally restricted by three systemic conflicts: its current regulatory classification as a "teaching-oriented university" (driven by having only 6% of its faculty holding a Ph.D. in 2017 and a lack of doctoral programs), a constrained institutional budget where funding is heavily centralized in administrative personnel rather than research development, and an institutional strategic plan lacking explicit, actionable metrics for international mobility. Consequently, these factors lead to uncompleted internationalization processes, scarce academic mobility, and low participation in international networks, positioning Ecuador 102nd globally in knowledge exportation. To overcome these barriers, ULEAM must foster an institutional research culture, optimize resource allocation for doctoral training to avoid brain drain, and improve English language proficiency. Ultimately, the successful internationalization of ULEAM extends beyond the immediate academic community of students, faculty, and researchers; it carries vital socio-economic significance for the region as a catalyst for territorial transformation, directly benefiting local business sectors, industries, banking, tourism, and cultural preservation by bridging global knowledge with local market demands.

Keywords: *Higher Education Internationalization, Academic Mobility, Teaching-oriented University, Knowledge Transfer, Regional Development, Ecuador.*

1. Introduction: Latin America's Public Higher Education in the Pursuit of Internationalization

The process of internationalization is a complex, long-term phenomenon that requires a deep understanding of diverse cultural, legal, and operational realities. Historically, the conceptual roots of internationalization trace back to classical international trade theories. Adam Smith (1776) laid the groundwork by linking economic growth to market expansion and absolute advantage through the division of labor. David Ricardo (1817) advanced this by introducing comparative advantage, urging nations to specialize to optimize national efficiency. This framework evolved further with the Heckscher-Ohlin factor endowment theory, which emphasized how nations utilize their specific production factors to export goods. By 1980, Paul Krugman modernized these perspectives through the new trade theory, demonstrating how economies of scale reduce production costs through volume and product diversification, balancing trade relations between nations. While these economists initially framed internationalization within commercial, business, and economic sectors, the core tenets of these theories are increasingly vital when applied to the academic field, specifically regarding the internationalization of higher education institutions (HEIs).

In the academic sector, internationalization seeks integration for mutual benefit, a process highly illuminated by Network Theory. Originally defined in business by Johanson and Mattson (1988), Network Theory highlights the interaction between local entities and international networks. This approach seamlessly transfers to HEIs, which connect globally through international agreements to benefit students, faculty, and researchers. Mirroring the business phases outlined by Rialp and Rialp (2001)—moving from establishing partner relationships to market penetration and, ultimately, structural integration—universities utilize academic networks to build institutional capacity. However, a critical distinction remains: unlike the commercial sector, higher education must be treated as a public common good rather than a commodity (Ramírez, 2010). As reinforced by the Regional Conference on Higher Education (CRES, 2018), states must resist incorporating education into bilateral or multilateral free trade treaties that promote commercialization. Instead, governments are called to increase funding for education, science, and technology to reduce inequality gaps and ensure equitable access to quality education.

From a Latin American perspective, the landscape of university internationalization has evolved unevenly. Prior to 2002, scientific literature rarely included data regarding Ecuadorian higher education, largely due to a historical lack of documented comparative metrics or systemic research tracking. Studies by the World Bank (2005) and Carmen Guadilla (2007) historically highlighted Argentina's leadership in international cooperation within Mercosur, Brazil's robust scientific research networks, and the balanced institutional programs in Chile, Colombia, and Mexico. It was not until after 2010 that encouraging data from Ecuador began appearing on international and Latin American regional platforms. This shift highlights a growing recognition of academic internationalization as defined by Jane Knight (2014), who emphasizes how these processes strengthen relationships between different nations, cultures, and institutions. While Europe pioneered structured institutional mobility through the landmark Erasmus program established in 1987, Latin America's internationalization identity is anchored in a deep sociopolitical history.

The foundation of the Latin American university model stems from the historic June 1918 student reform movement at the University of Córdoba in Argentina. The resulting "Declaration of Córdoba" democratized university governance, established institutional autonomy, and secured free public higher education for all social strata, breaking the historical monopoly of elite societies. This secular, free, co-governed, and autonomous educational model (Rama, 2015) created the foundational framework for cross-border cooperation and internationalization across the Southern Cone. Today, nations like Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Venezuela, and Mexico serve as critical operational reference models for the Ecuadorian educational system. Recognizing this historical

and theoretical backdrop is essential for analyzing how peripheral institutions, such as the Eloy Alfaro Lay University of Manabí (ULEAM), navigate contemporary mandates of quality, research production, and global academic integration.

2. Ecuadorian Public Higher Education in the Pursuit of Internationalization the Push for Structural Transformation

The structural evolution of public higher education in Ecuador underwent a significant paradigm shift in 2010 with the enactment of the new Organic Law of Higher Education (LOES). Introduced under the political framework of President Rafael Correa Delgado's "Citizens' Revolution," this law repositioned higher education as a non-profit system of public interest, granting the State exclusive control over regulation and quality assurance. Aligned with the National Plan for Good Living, this framework treated academic transformation as an engine for national development and social equity. Under the coordination of the National Secretariat of Higher Education, Science, and Technology (SENECYT), alongside regulatory bodies like the Council of Higher Education (CES) and the Council for Quality Assurance (CEAACES), several ambitious state projects were deployed. These initiatives included strict institutional recategorization to elevate academic excellence, the standardized National Exam for Higher Education (SNNA) for university admissions, the Prometeo Program to recruit international Ph.D. researchers, and robust merit-based scholarship programs enabling domestic faculty and students to pursue advanced degrees abroad. While these macro-level policies effectively initiated bilateral flows of international mobility, their operational impact has been asymmetric; the formal internationalization process remains in its early stages for peripheral public institutions located in smaller cities, such as the Eloy Alfaro Lay University of Manabí (ULEAM) in Manta, which stands as the nation's third-largest university by student enrollment and primarily serves lower-income populations from the Manabí province.

On a broader scale, Ecuador's quest for academic quality has led to its integration into regional educational networks dedicated to global academic standards. A key milestone occurred during the third Regional Conference on Higher Education (CRES 2018), which commemorated the centenary of the 1918 Declaration of Córdoba. The conference positioned internationalization and regional integration at the core of Latin American educational policy, emphasizing the development of global competencies designed to navigate complex, knowledge-based economies. Crucially, CRES 2018 established that academic internationalization must reject commercialization, advocating instead for South-South cooperation, solidarity among institutional equals, intercultural dialogue, and the formation of inter-university networks that respect local identity while building regional capacities. Locally, this vision was mirrored by the Assembly of the Higher Education System of Ecuador (ASESEC) through its Agenda 2035, which aimed to establish public policies guaranteeing international quality and inclusion, though its development stalled in 2019. Additionally, Ecuador's alignment with international bodies was highlighted when it hosted the fourth Congress of the Americas on International Education (CAEI 2015). This Canadian-led initiative brought together eighteen nations to discuss international education, serving as a timely platform to showcase

Ecuador's systemic transformation and underscore the role of higher education as a vital catalyst for modifying the country's productive matrix.

3. Regulatory Typologies and Institutional Constraints in Ecuadorian Higher Education

Under the evaluation framework established by the Council for Evaluation, Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Higher Education (CEAACES, 2012), Ecuadorian universities are classified into three strict regulatory typologies based on their research output and faculty profiles:

- **Universities of Teaching with Research:** Mandated to possess a minimum of 70% of full-time academic faculty holding a Ph.D. degree, alongside robust, self-sustaining lines of investigation aimed at nationwide knowledge generation.
- **Universities Oriented to Teaching:** Focused on providing technical, scientific, and humanistic professional training to drive national economic development; these institutions must maintain a 40% Ph.D. faculty threshold and direct their limited research capacities toward addressing immediate national needs.
- **Universities of Continuing Education:** Prioritize professional, technical, and scientific updates not critically tied to human life, requiring that 60% of their staff operate as active professors or internal researchers.

An analysis of this regulatory framework reveals that the Eloy Alfaro Lay University of Manabí (ULEAM) falls strictly within the teaching-oriented typology. Consequently, ULEAM's institutional model historically focuses on its humanist, secular educational philosophy and the defense of teaching freedom (Vicerrectorado Académico, 2016). However, this classification represents a critical structural bottleneck because establishing a solid, continuous line of research is an indispensable pillar for any comprehensive internationalization process. This operational challenge is further complicated by severe financial constraints: according to institutional statutes, ULEAM allocates only 6% of its baseline institutional budget toward postgraduate scholarships, research project funding, and active faculty publications in indexed journals (Órgano Colegiado Superior, 2019). This restricted allocation inherently limits the available resources necessary to finance robust international student mobility, global research collaborations, and cross-border academic exchanges.

The internationalization process at the Eloy Alfaro Lay University of Manabí (ULEAM) faces critical systemic restrictions rooted in its institutional typology, historical evaluation outcomes, and strategic funding limitations. According to Article 117 of the Organic Law of Higher Education (LOES), Ecuadorian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are classified by the Council for Evaluation, Accreditation and Quality Assurance of Higher Education (CEAACES) into three categories: teaching-with-research, teaching-oriented, and continuing education (CEAACES, 2012). Entering the global academic dialogue and ascending international rankings requires a "teaching-with-research" profile, as high-impact scientific production allows an institution to engage with the state-of-the-art in different disciplines and secure a competitive global position (Macías et al., 2015).

However, ULEAM is legally classified as a teaching-oriented university, lagging far behind the parameters required to transition into a research institution due to two structural deficits:

- **Faculty Qualification Gap:** While Article 147 of the LOES establishes that 70% of an institution's academic staff must hold a Ph.D. or its equivalent to qualify for the research typology, ULEAM's 2017

Human Resources Accountability Report revealed that 83% of its professors held only a Master's degree, while a mere 6% possessed a Ph.D. (Informe de Rendición de Cuentas, 2018).

- **Absence of Doctoral Programs:** Research-driven universities must offer internal doctoral programs tied to established research lines that address national development objectives. ULEAM's postgraduate offerings are restricted exclusively to specialized Master's degrees (e.g., Industrial Engineering, Urbanism, Housing Planning, and Agribusiness), creating a void in high-level doctoral research infrastructure (Dirección de Posgrado, 2019).

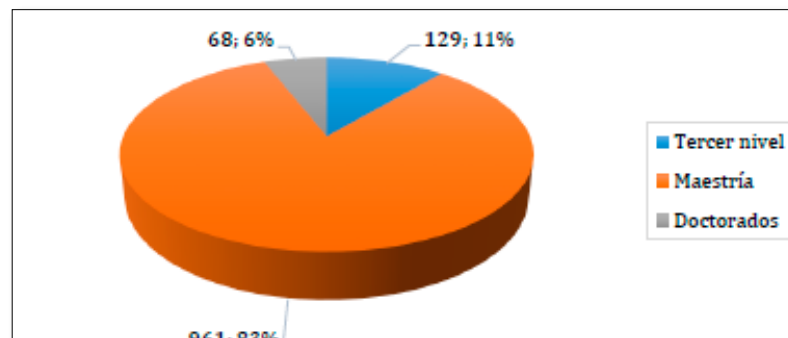


Figure 1: Number of teachers by academic training during 2017

The problem of internationalization at the Eloy Alfaro Lay University of Manabí begins with the classification of the type of HEIs, because it is focused on teaching (CEAACES, 2012) and its main objectives therefore is not the internationalization of Uleam.

Another problem that is analyzed is the limited budget of the Uleam destined to finance research projects and cover the expenses to finance the mobility of teachers and students at the time of carrying out an exchange.

Finally, we find that the Eloy Alfaro Lay University of Manabí, presents a Strategic Plan for Institutional Development 2016-2020 but it is observed that it lacks a solid and clear strategic plan, which causes that a correct process and follow-up is not carried out to execute an adequate internationalization process. (Piguave, Pantaleon, & Castillo, PEDI 2016-2020)

During the Investigation of the project, a collection of information was carried out through surveys of 16, 15, 12, and 17 questions, respectively in the order mentioned below, to four groups of different subjects: students, former students, teachers, and administrative staff, oriented to the internationalization of the Eloy Alfaro Lay University of Manabí.

3.1. Stakeholder Survey Analysis

The student body exhibits a clear cognitive dissonance regarding the university's institutional identity and operational capabilities. While students demonstrate a high baseline understanding of the conceptual definition of "internationalization" and express a strong interest in academic exchanges, they are profoundly misinformed about ULEAM's structural reality. A significant majority (63.2%) erroneously believe ULEAM is a "teaching-with-research" institution, whereas its official regulatory typology is strictly "teaching-oriented."

This misperception is compounded by severe institutional communication failures: 42.7% are entirely unaware of the existence of the Department of International Relations and Cooperation, 43.3% lack knowledge

regarding active inter-institutional agreements, and 40.4% are unaware of mobility scholarship opportunities. Consequently, an overwhelming 94.7% of students have never applied for an exchange or research grant, citing a pervasive lack of institutional dissemination as the primary barrier. Furthermore, 46.8% are completely unaware of any joint national or international projects, indicating that student interest in "internationalization at home" remains unrealized due to underfunded structures and a lack of explicit student-centered strategies within the Institutional Development Plan (PEDI).

The data from alumni mirrors the systemic informational deficit observed in the active student population, confirming that these communication barriers have persisted over time. Representing 12 of ULEAM's 19 faculties, 50.6% of alumni also misidentify the university's typology as teaching-with-research. Institutional invisibility is even higher in this group, with 49.4% unaware of the international relations department during their tenure.

The primary inhibitor of alumni mobility during their studies was a lack of information or the absence of a dedicated strategic plan (66.3%). This directly correlates with high ignorance rates regarding scholarships (68.5%), international projects (66.3%), and institutional agreements (53.9%). As a structural consequence, 95.5% never applied for an exchange grant, and 92.1% never received financial aid from the institution. Furthermore, 93.3% were oblivious to international extracurricular activities. Despite these failures, 70.8% recognize the value of an internationalized curriculum at home for global competence, while identifying bureaucratic/administrative hurdles (59.6%) as the university's primary operational obstacle.

In contrast to the student and alumni cohorts, ULEAM professors demonstrate a much higher level of institutional awareness. A strong majority (76.1%) acknowledge that internationalization is formally embedded within the university's mission, vision, and strategic planning, and 73.9% believe university leadership prioritizes these processes. Additionally, 56.5% of faculty members are actively aware of available teaching and research mobility programs, viewing them as vital mechanisms to counter globalization pressures and improve teaching quality.

However, a steep disconnect exists between faculty awareness and active engagement. Nearly 70% (69.6%) of professors report never having experienced international mobility, compared to only 30.4% who have. This low participation rate directly undermines ULEAM's scientific production; 26.1% rate ULEAM's international research participation as "very low," noting that existing projects are sparse, highly decentralized, and driven primarily by isolated researchers rather than cohesive departmental networks. Faculty identify insufficient funding, internal administrative delays, and a lack of foreign language proficiency as the primary inhibitors to structural progress.

Surveys targeting internationalization managers and administrative staff across peer universities provide an external benchmark, revealing that structural vulnerabilities are widespread throughout the regional higher education ecosystem. While administrators confirm that internationalization is explicitly stated in their institutional missions, they report that university leaders view it with only "medium importance." This moderate prioritization

restricts aggressive funding strategies, leaving institutions heavily reliant on fluctuating external public funds and international grants.

Administrative tracking is characterized by significant internal communication gaps and operational paradoxes. Budget allocations over the past three years have experienced severe volatility ("ups and downs"), directly destabilizing academic mobility and event participation. Crucially, a structural paradox was identified regarding transnational education: 75% of administrators initially stated their institution was not involved in transnational education yet immediately contradicted themselves in the follow-up question by selecting active structural involvements in joint degree programs, franchises, or foreign campuses. This confirms a lack of clear operational definitions and metrics among the personnel managing internationalization policies.

3. Proposal of ULEAM's Internationalization process

To overcome the identified structural limitations and actively transition from a "teaching-oriented" typology toward a "teaching-with-research" paradigm, the Eloy Alfaro Lay University of Manabí (ULEAM) must optimize its existing international infrastructure while aggressively executing its unfulfilled cross-border agreements. Currently, ULEAM possesses a foundational network consisting of 53 active international agreements across America, Europe, and Asia. This network has historically supported critical postgraduate faculty development, including doctoral training programs with the University of Rosario (32 professors), the University of Zulia (80 professors), the University of Cádiz (10 professors), and the University of Córdoba (30 professors). Additionally, the institution maintains annual undergraduate exchanges through the Paila Freile academic mobility projects and participates in prominent regional networks such as the La Rábida Group, the Association of Ibero-American Postgraduate Universities (AUIP), and the Global University Network for Innovation (GUNI).

Building upon this baseline, the university's future internationalization agenda requires the immediate activation of stalled cooperative lines. These unexecuted agreements hold strategic value for regional and field-specific integration:

- The Framework Agreement with the University of Valle del Cauca (UCEVA, Colombia): Designed to facilitate bidirectional mobility for 40 students and professors through pre-professional internships and specialized seminars in Port Logistics alternating between Manta and Tuluá.
- Development Cooperation with the University of Pando (Cobija, Bolivia): A targeted research exchange focusing on sustainable architecture and best construction practices using bamboo cane.
- Subregional Network Expansion: Formalizing the PONCHO International Network and finalizing ULEAM's incorporation into the Council of Rectors for the Integration of the Central-West Subregion of South America (CRISCO) to catalyze undergraduate mobility.

To ensure these initiatives achieve systemic impact, this proposal synthesizes the Indicators for Mapping and Profiling Internationalization (IMPI) framework with the multi-level strategic approach recommended by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). While the IMPI model spans five core dimensions—ranging from improving international training and institutional reputation to serving the broader community—this proposal explicitly isolates Dimension B: Improving the Quality of International Research. This dimension is cross-referenced with the OECD's tri-level intervention matrix: the Macro level (institutional policies

and strategies), the Medium level (the structural study plan and curriculum), and the Micro level (the classroom teaching-learning process).

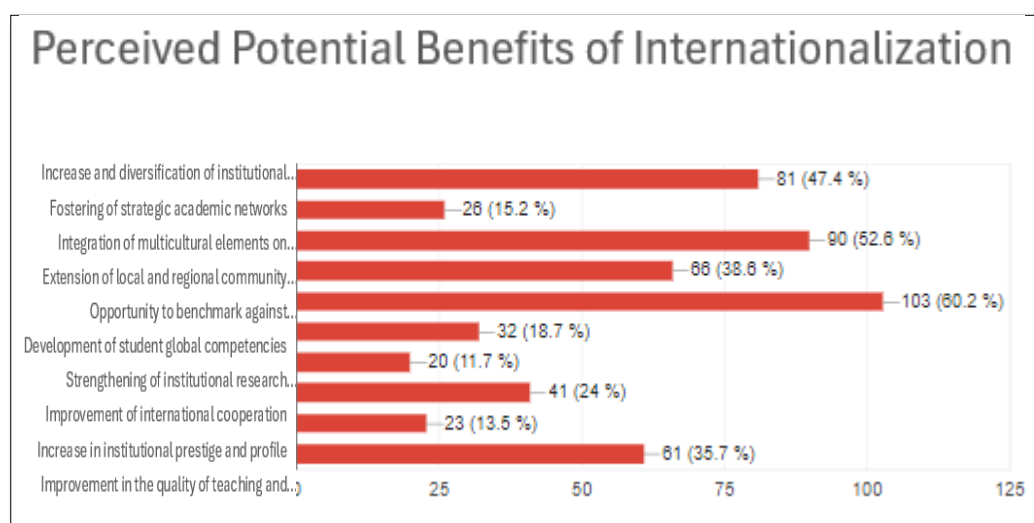


Figure 2: Stakeholder Perceptions on the Potential Benefits of Internationalization.

4. Conclusion: Systemic Barriers Inhibit the Consolidation of the Internationalization Process at ULEAM

Internationalization has gone from being a voluntary activity to an essential activity for the training of student citizens of the world. Ecuador has been creating appropriate conditions to make the internationalization of public universities a reality throughout the country; from the first-class schooling of teachers to the favorable levels of research and scientific publications that are felt from the classrooms, when our teachers share scientific contributions of their authorship or of researchers from sister countries. We must think about student mobility to the world and from it, to Uleam, from undergraduate courses, whether in semester format, specific subjects, seminars, congresses, meetings or cooperation projects.

The analysis of the internationalization of the Eloy Alfaro Lay University of Manabí, allows us to know its current situation, and will be able to structure institutional policies that will give access to each national and international community, generating internationalization activities for its students, teachers and administrators, this initiative must be consolidated in a project sustained over time.

The results of the diagnosis of the internationalization processes of Uleam 2015 – 2019, resulted in there being no adequate management of the departments in charge of the internationalization process, due to the fact that there is no concrete strategic plan that helps to have a correct internationalization process of Uleam. We also consider that there is not much communication and necessary advice from Uleam to students regarding academic mobility and scholarship programs or projects to which they could apply, without forgetting that there is also a lack of knowledge on the part of students of departments that administer the International Relations and Cooperation of the University and in turn the little interest in carrying out student exchanges due to lack of information offered. A very relevant fact is the number of students who have not applied for exchange scholarships is very high (94.7%), a result that could be considered critical and is due to the lack of communication and other internal barriers that occur at Uleam.

By analyzing the current situation of the internationalization of the Eloy Alfaro Lay University of Manabí, this research allows us to know that there are internal and external problems or barriers of the Uleam to be able to consolidate the internationalization process, in addition to those mentioned above; among these internal problems we have the bureaucratic and administrative barriers at the time of carrying out a mobility, the lack of an organizational structure that monitors the internationalization process, but the obstacle that has been highlighted the most is the insufficient funding that Uleam has and that unfortunately limits both teachers and students to be able to apply for a scholarship, receive financial aid to carry out a study, project or research abroad. This insufficient funding also limits the University itself from being able to carry out the entire internationalization process with its respective follow-ups, to carry out a concrete strategic plan together with the different departments and qualified administrative personnel and to put it into practice to obtain successful results; but thanks to this research we have observed that the expected results of the internationalization process of Uleam have not been obtained.

The proposals for the internationalization of Uleam, which is proposed in this research is to implement the IMPI, these indicators are the best way in which Uleam will be able to enter into internationalization processes through the development of these indicators of internationalization of the Mapping, which is based on looking for the Universities of the networks to which you belong in which there is the possibility of making student exchanges, teachers and administrative staff and the elaboration of profiles (IMPI) the latter is a system that allows establishing the profile of the university, students, teachers, administrative staff and the projects to be executed. By developing these indicators, it will be possible to obtain better quality of training in international terms, improve the quality of international research, train students for a globalized world and increase international reputation and visibility.

Understanding that the internationalization of universities must be a process that is improved and strengthened over time, it is necessary that activities of an 'internationalizing' nature are not a requirement that sanctions those students, teachers and administrators who have not been able to do so, but rather, that it constitutes a motivating activity.

It is from these lines that the following initiatives are suggested to Uleam in order to initiate and solidify a program of internationalization and student mobility.

First: Launch a pilot institutional project and carry out the respective follow-ups, where each Faculty unify its curriculum, identifying several subjects that can be taken in other universities in the country and that are recognized and accredited in a harmonious way, removing bureaucratic and administrative barriers that could slow down attempts at internal mobility. This homologation of both theoretical content and academic weight could be achieved thanks to the cooperation relationships that Uleam has with Ecuadorian universities.

Second: Continue the subsequent phases; once the characteristics and results of the pilot project have been analyzed and documented, network projects should be initiated and extended to universities in Latin America and then expanded to countries on other continents, with whom we have already developed important interactions such as Spain, Portugal, and the United States.

Third: Create/strengthen the Uleam Language Center, for the teaching of Spanish as a second language (L2) for foreign students or teachers, combining classes of Spanish learning and classes of subjects of their preference within Uleam as a free student. This strategy is perhaps one of the fastest ways to internationalize to Uleam and taking advantage of the conditions that Manta offers as a beach city, the creation of the tourism-academy formula would constitute an attractive project for foreign students to Uleam.

By strengthening the teaching of English as a second language (L2) for Uleam students and teachers, it strengthens the academic level in that language to make it easier to apply for scholarships in English-speaking countries and to have greater ease of communication.

Fourth: Schedule master classes shared through digital platforms with university students from other cities in Ecuador and other Spanish-speaking countries. This strategy could be generated at no cost; the involvement of teachers who have studied abroad would be necessary and required.

Fifth: Standardize theoretical content and academic weight of a list of subjects taught at Uleam at the introductory level (first semesters) at a national and international level and identify the universities that are willing to create cooperation projects in order to allow the mobility of students from Uleam to the world and vice versa.

Sixth: Strengthen the budget for the implementation of mobility activities. This fund could be managed by each Faculty, through direct donations from former students, private companies, NGOs and friendly governments that are already working with Ecuador.

Seventh: Maintain a constant presence of Uleam in different activities that generate student mobility, research and training initiatives. It is imperative that students attend, not only teachers and administrators, and that these fruits are shared with the university community in a transparent manner.

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