

Export Promotion Programmes In Developed Countries:
A NON-SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW
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Abstract

This literature review critically examines international scientific literature on the effectiveness of ‘*Export Promotion Programmes*’ (EPPs) in developed countries, establishing a comprehensive theoretical background by introducing the legal and economic environment of ‘*export promotion*’. Central to the research is the empirical research question how EPPs can contribute to reducing transaction costs related to the internationalisation of ‘*small and medium-sized enterprises*’ (SMEs). The paper follows a non-systematic review of the recent academic literature following the 2008-2009 economic crisis, exploring various dimensions of trade promotion as well characteristics of ‘*trade promotion agencies*’ (TPAs) and its services. Key findings reveal that EPP’s in developed economies can significantly enhance export capabilities of SMEs through tailor-made promotion services, their impact remain often uneven due to challenges in effective programme design, implementation, and measurement of impacts. The review also identifies gaps in applied methodologies of current research, particularly regarding the number of involved SME’s and factors used to measuring program impact. These gaps underscore the need for further research especially examining the impact of EPPs in Hungary with the further aim of elaborating guidelines and recommendations to effective EPP design in Hungary.

Keywords: SME internationalisation, export promotion, trade promotion

JEL classification: F13, F14, M16, L26

Introduction

This non-systematic literature review firstly provides a framework how researchers define ‘trade facilitation’ and evaluate the role of facilitating and promoting tools in internationalisation of SMEs. Export orientation and export-led growth are considered as key factors of competitiveness in the globalised world, though several researchers also emphasise the negative effects of trade openness such as increased carbon emission rates through forced industrialisation or vulnerable local communities in terms of cultural or economic diversity (Wang et al., 2023). Secondly, the review intends to provide an overview of research focusing on microeconomic viewpoint in internationalisation of SME’s. EPPs play an important role in preparing companies for successful internationalisation, especially the small and medium-sized companies. Besides a competitive product range, available production and logistic capacities, organisational, human resources, and several other competencies are also required for successful export performance by firms. (Leonidou et al., 2007) The importance of services provided by state actors lies in facilitating these competencies.

In terms of the macroeconomic significance of EPPs, academic literature reveals (Wang et al., 2017) that – in the current world of global supply chains and intense competition – export

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development agencies or ‘trade promotion organisations’ (TPOs) or other government agencies offer their services in almost every country. However, their effectiveness varies (Wang et al., 2023). For EPPs, a distinction shall be made between developed countries and developing countries according to the definition of the ‘Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’ (OECD). This distinction is necessary because developing countries may have access to a broader range of export support, including export subsidies that developed countries do not utilize.² The significance of export promotion services and incentive programs lies in their contribution to mitigating the risks of international economic activities, and thus contributing to the reduction of transaction costs related to the internationalisation process and facilitating the participation of firms in international trade (Suematsu, 2021). Such support is particularly crucial for the SME sector, even in developed countries, given that the SME sector's share in international trade is significantly lower than that of large corporations (WTO, 2023).

Giovanucci confirms that enhancing the utilisation of export promotion tools in the SME sector is essential for improving these indicators (Giovannucci, 2004). Furthermore, TPOs can benefit from extensive collection of international best practices and technical assistance services that ‘World Trade Organisation’ (WTO), OECD and other international organisations provide. Increasing the proportion of SMEs engaged in exports is also a strategic objective of the Hungarian Export Strategy (NEXT)³. At the same time, the individual export promotion agencies must operate in a highly competitive environment to gain business positions and market share for their clients. Therefore, export promotion agencies may even be in competition with each other (Antalóczy & Éltető, 2017). Even if SMEs are utilising the available EPPs, several other key factors must be met for successful foreign market activity.

A long-term, strategic development process must be implemented within the company to create and maintain international competitiveness. Dealing with export promotion, the development of basic management competencies is essential, as well as activities such as, – but not limited to – ensuring adequate financial background, continuous product development, innovation management and intellectual property protection, human resource development, and the continuous development of a marketing and sales strategy (Giovannucci, 2004.; Mota et al., 2021).

The first part of this article summarises the results of a non-systematic academic literature review, followed by a short introduction of theoretical and legal background. The third part deals with challenges of impact measurement in EPPs, followed by drawing up the design of a future research on Hungarian EPP impact measurement. Conclusions and suggestions for further research are made upon findings of the non-systematic literature review.

Non-systematic literature review

To obtain a holistic overview of macroeconomic viewpoints of researchers and recent scientific studies the literature review firstly implemented a non-systematic literature overview based on Scopus database. Based on the results, refining and targeted rankings and selections to the search results have been applied. This non-systematic type of literature analysis with a microeconomic viewpoint has been repeated, selecting keywords related to internationalisation of the SME sector. Based on the research question, to create a deep overview of academic literature, the following list of keywords has been established to search Scopus database with a macroeconomic focus on ‘trade facilitation’: 1) ‘Trade facilitation’, 2) ‘Direct export/indirect export’ 3) ‘Inward and outward FDI’ 4) ‘Export promotion’. Regarding the microeconomic focus of the research topic, the following keywords have been defined to assess the importance

² Agreement on Establishing World Trade Organisation,
https://www.wto.org/english/docs_e/legal_e/ursum_e.htm#Agreement

³ National Export Strategy of the Hungarian Government,
<https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/download/e/ca/91000/Nemzeti%20Export%20Strat%C3%A9gia%202019-2030.pdf>

of the research topic in international scientific literature: 5) ‘*SME and internationalisation*’, 6) ‘*Export subsidies*’, 7) ‘*Export promotion programmes*’. This selection of keywords without any limitations led to several thousands of search results in Scopus database, which shows the importance of the topic in international research society but would not serve to find the relevant academic literature to build up the academic literature review of the special research questions. The following limitations and search refining have been implemented at each above-mentioned keyword.

Keyword	Number of search results in Scopus
Trade facilitation	877
Direct export/indirect export	1054
Inward FDI and outward FDI	336
Export promotion	2921
SME and internationalisation	846
Export subsidies	2150
Export promotion programmes	439

Limitations to non-systematic literature review

Time frame: The above searches have been limited to the period of 2008-2023, to the last 15 years, from the economic and financial crisis of 2008 to the after-Covid-19 pandemic period. This 15 years-period is characterised by the era of digitalisation which has significantly changed the range of export promotion services, introducing a high number of new, digitalised solutions in services related to export promotion, e.g., fairs and exhibitions, conferences, showrooms, or even digitalised forms of learning. Besides, search results of the keywords show a significant increase of publications related to the macro- and microeconomic viewpoints of these specific research areas.

Geographical limitation: Further refinement of searches for academic literature has been made with geographical focus, where the country or territory defined are EU member countries, Switzerland, United States, Canada, and United Kingdom. Reasoning for the geographic limitation lies in the fact that developing and least developed countries have a wide range of other facilitation programmes than developed countries, which would lead to misleading consequences from search results.

Further limitations: Language limitation of the research is English, with some exemptions for Hungarian language publication. Subject area limitation includes business, management, and accounting. Basically, social sciences, economics, econometrics and finance and environmental science and agricultural and biological sciences have been excluded as these subject areas are out of the research focus. Pre-prints have also been excluded.

After applying the defined filters, search results could have been reduced to an average 40 to 50 academic publications. Most of the studies have been published in high-ranking business journals, e.g., *World Economy*, *Global Trade and Customs Journal*, *International Business Review* and *European Journal of International Management*. Regarding scientometrics of the dataset, the average number of citations is 5-6, in several cases exceeding 15-20.

Keyword	Number of search results in Scopus with limitations
Trade facilitation	40
Direct export/indirect export	32
Inward FDI and outward FDI	50
Export promotion	40
SME and internationalisation	52
Export subsidies	13
Export promotion programmes	29

Perényi and Losoncz provided an excellent comparative dataset (Perényi & Losoncz, 2018) with the systematic review of twenty-one systematic and six non-systematic review articles and 126 special issue articles provided validation to the key areas and fields of development of international entrepreneurship related research.

Based on the above-mentioned non-systematic review, research gaps have been identified in adopting longitudinal perspective in the internationalisation process of enterprises, in validation of existing theories and in focusing market penetration in developed and emerging countries, as well as in comparative international entrepreneurship research. Internationalisation of SME's provide the conceptual framework to research related to impact measurement of export promotion programmes.

Theoretical and legal background

The institutional framework of '*trade facilitation*' and liberalisation has been set up by '*General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs*' (GATT) and '*World Trade Organisation*' (WTO). The international organisations along with national government bodies and trade actors have built out cooperations improving the regulatory framework of international trade and intensifying bilateral trade relations (Grainger, 2007, p. 16.). It is defined by the WTO as '*The simplification and harmonisation of international trade procedures*' (Grainger, 2007, p.4.) Zaki provides another definition as the set of tools and actions aiming 'Making international trade easier' (Zaki, 2015, p. 157.) which is the most straightforward definition. This includes simplifying trade procedures, harmonizing trade rules, increasing transparency, and adopting technologies to improve security, reliability, and speed in trade operations.

Over the past seven and half decades, WTO has significantly contributed with its wide range of tools to economic growth and reducing poverty through involving developing countries into the flow of international trade. Global WTO initiatives have contributed to a 75% reduction in extreme poverty since its foundation in the mid 90'. Despite disruptions caused by the Covid-19 demand crisis, the share of exports of goods and services in global trade shows an increasing tendency by reaching nearly 30% (WTO, 2023). The World Trade Report 2023 of WTO challenges the recent criticism of globalisation, that international trade hinders sustainability and inclusivity, emphasising instead the positive impacts of interconnectedness. (WTO, 2023).

The legal framework and international regulatory environment of 'trade facilitation' and 'export promotion' are worth examining in the context of the 'Marrakesh Agreement'⁴ establishing WTO and its supplementary agreements. Legal background for trade facilitation is provided by the 'Trade Facilitation Agreement' (TFA) of WTO, concluded at the 2013 Bali Ministerial Conference⁵. Full implementation of TFA can result in reduction of trade related

⁴ World Trade Organisation, Uruguay Round Agreement, Agreement on Subsidies and Countervailing Measures, https://www.wto.org/english/docs_e/legal_e/24-scm_01_e.htm

⁵ Agreement on Trade Facilitation Annex 1A of the WTO Agreement (the 'Protocol', 2014b)

transaction costs by an average 14.3% particularly benefiting African and least developed countries. Upon evaluating the results of TFA, a wide range of technical assistance services has been established to assist beneficiaries in acquiring ‘Trade Facilitation Agreement Facility’⁶. Another supplementary agreement of the Marrakesh Agreement is the ‘Agreement on Subsidies and Countervailing Measures’ (ASCM), and its Annex I regulate the subsidies provided by the state. It categorises subsidies into three groups: ‘prohibited, actionable and non-actionable subsidies’. ‘Non-actionable subsidies’ include research and development, regional development, compliance with environmental regulations, and other support provided for development purposes⁷. Based on the practices of the OECD and WTO, EPPs fall into the latter category as indirect support provided by national TPOs increasing the competitiveness of local enterprises on international level. The principles and obligations of the ASCM are reflected in EU law through various regulations and legal instruments that govern trade remedies and competition policy⁸. The agreement was proclaimed in Hungary in 1998⁹. Trade promotion as an instrument for strengthening international market position of domestic enterprises cannot be analysed without having a deeper view on the recent international economic environment. As Losoncz (2023) argues, in an era of deglobalization, effective trade policy increasingly depends on leveraging trade facilitation measures to reduce transaction costs by eliminating regulatory barriers. This shift highlights the evolving role of trade promotion as a tool for strengthening the international market position of domestic enterprises in a complex global economic environment. (Losoncz, 2023).

Impact measurement of export promotion services and agencies

Research on measuring EPPs impact is generally based on quantitative analysis of published government data and information obtained from the responses of the firms concerned to questionnaires (Hajiagha et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2017; Martincus & Carballo, 2008). The economic indicators of firms' export performance include measures of sales (the share of exports, its growth and the profit from export activity and its growth), the volume of products exported, the number of markets reached and the market penetration rate, and the number of years of successful export activity. In addition, there are also measures of satisfaction with export activity and its outcomes (Mota et al., 2021). A review of relevant academic publications shows that research on firms' export performance and EPP participation is mixed: there are research results on the positive impact of financial programmes, but both positive and negative conclusions on the impact of information programmes (Hajiagha et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2017). EPPs help to create a positive attitude among SME managers towards going abroad, reducing concerns about the risks, costs, and complexity of exporting. It is particularly important for SMEs to receive assistance commensurate with their level of knowledge and experience in relation to their export activities, both in terms of information and financial support for EPPs. However, there is no consensus among researchers on how to measure their impact (Martincus & Carballo, 2008; Tesfom & Lutz, 2008; Mota et al., 2021).

Related research focuses partly on knowledge of these EPPs, partly on their use, partly on their usefulness, or even some combination of these. The conclusions are mostly that when designing EPPs, governmental or other organisations providing them should consider the

⁶ <https://www.tfafacility.org/facility>

⁷ World Trade Organisation, Uruguay Round Agreement, Agreement on Subsidies and Countervailing Measures, https://www.wto.org/english/docs_e/legal_e/24-scm_01_e.htm

⁸ Council Regulation (EC) No 597/2009 of 11 June 2009 on protection against subsidised imports from countries not members of the European Community <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A02009R0597-20140220>

⁹ Act IX of 1998 on the promulgation of the Marrakesh Agreement establishing the WTO within the framework of the GATT. The Annex 1.A

specific characteristics of the participating firms (e.g. the distribution method, the 'age' of the firm, or the volume of exported product, or share of export-related income in their total revenues) (Coudounaris, 2012; Kanda et al., 2015).

In the context of national export promotion agencies, Giovanucci (2004) delineates the following guidelines to the establishment and successful operation of these agencies: meeting real market demands of exporter companies, operational independence in terms of financing and decision making of the agency, expert staff employed by the EPA, providing the adequate financial backing by the state, avoiding focus dilution in services and activities, and playing an advocacy and policy shaping role towards the national government and decisionmakers (Giovanucci, 2004).

Research method and data collection

The theoretical background of this research is rooted in transaction cost theories. The primary empirical research question has been formulated as 'How can EPPs contribute to reducing the transaction costs of internationalisation?' The research model is to be established based on a pragmatist philosophical approach and applies an inductive theory development method, following a mixed-method research model, using the triangulation method, incorporating both quantitative data collection and analysis to enhance reliability and objectivity of research findings (Saunders et al., 2016). This approach aims to verify the hypothesis that Companies participating in export promotion programs experience faster and more successful market entry compared to non-participants, owing to reduced transaction costs. The quantitative aspect allows for the measurement of various direct and indirect costs associated with international market entry and the assessment of the impact of EPPs on mitigating these costs. In parallel, the research is planned also to employ qualitative methods to explore, in greater depth, the motivations behind the use of export promotion services, as well as their long-term effects on corporate culture and export market development—particularly within the Hungarian context. Data collection methodology is based on triangulation model as well, addressing SME's participating in EPPs, non-participants as a control group and export promotion agencies, as well. Throughout the study the research methodology and data collection process are planned to be refined iteratively to ensure they accurately capture the complexities of transaction costs and the role of EPPs in reducing these costs.

Conclusions and further research

This non-systematic review of recent academic literature revealed a significant academic interest in trade facilitation, export promotion, and SME internationalisation highlighting the evolving landscape of global trade (Chen et al., 2022).

Based on recent academic papers, an important conclusion is the need for more resilience in international trade, and the necessity of building a green, digitalised, and sustainable and safe global network for value chains. In terms of legal background, it could be explored that the 'Marrakesh Agreement' and WTO's 'Trade Facilitation Agreement' established a stable international legal environment for further development of trade, and significantly contributed to the use of advantages of these programmes, particularly in the developing countries. We need to emphasize their role in shaping the legal and regulatory environment of trade facilitation and export promotion and to draw attention on challenges of recent geopolitical conflicts, which have a strong negative impact¹⁰.

Recent academic and political discussions put the dilemma of de-globalisation versus re-globalisation in focus, whereas some international institutions still emphasize the positive impacts of globalised trade on the development of societies and economies. In that

¹⁰ <https://www.maersk.com/news/articles/2023/12/15/maersk-operations-through-red-sea-gulf-of-aden>

macroeconomic context, further research challenge is in the indirect and direct impact of trade promotion actions and programmes on macroeconomic level, where among others, the policy shaping of export-oriented countries regarding export promotion services, or the efficiency of state budget spendings for EPAs and EPPs can be drawn under investigations. Several best practices and research examples have been published by researchers and consultancy agencies of the United Kingdom and the export promotion advocacy institutions or WTO's International Trade Centre (ITC), as well¹¹. A further research challenge is the self-positioning of EPAs, as in our globalised world, as agencies can gain significant market positions when cooperating on regional level, and at the same time they are in a competitive situation when selling their own clients on third country markets.

The review also highlighted the mixed research findings on the relationship between EPPs and firms' export performance, emphasizing the need for a tailored approach to different SMEs. The theoretical background to investigate the process of internationalisation SME's is broad which is a further research challenge for literature review. Based on the different approaches in internationalisation, several EPAs apply measurement systems to determine the export-readiness of their clients, which can be the subject of further analysis. The level of export maturity or readiness can be involved as a factor of a methodological and data triangulation model. As for the limitations and challenges of studies in impact assessment of EPP's, the low proportion of respondents in case of qualitative queries is regarded as a common challenge by researchers. Several studies also mention the limits of quantitative research in comparison to quantitative data analysis and the need for longitudinal research, as impacts of trade promotion actions and subsidies basically can be better measured on the long term. Sectoral focus is regularly applied in impact measurement studies. The review tried to identify a critical research gap in the regular impact assessment of EPPs, suggesting the need for potential longitudinal studies to track the long-term effectiveness of these programs.

The future of EPPs in enhancing SME internationalization appears promising, demanding a more agile, responsive, and innovative approach to export promotion. As a conclusion, there has been identified further room for research both in the field of theoretical background, deepening the research focus on impacts of globalisation on trade promotion and assessing impact of trade promotion actions on successful internationalisation of SMEs and in tracking and evaluating the impact of Hungarian trade promotion actions, with a regional comparison of Central Europe, with the ambition to elaborate applied-research based recommendations to decision-makers and incorporating the created knowledge into curriculum of higher education.

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