

INTERNATIONALIZATION IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

Critical Challenges to Albanian Higher Education and Its Internationalization

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This article describes and analyzes the development and internationalization of higher education in Albania since 1991, when a 45-year long dictatorial period ended. It considers the major developments and challenges in the context of Albania's efforts toward European integration and internationalization.

Little has been written about the state of higher education in Albania, its role in the country's economic, social, and political development, or its efforts to achieve European and international integration. From 1946 to 1991, Albania was ruled by an extreme, ruthless, and isolated communist dictatorship. When the regime ended in 1991, what followed was an unstable period of six years of political tensions, instability and corruption. This period was one of the toughest in the country's history, including the failure of several financial pyramid schemes, which triggered a massive rebellion bringing the state institutions to collapse. Only in 1998 did the country see the return of some stability and the prospect of economic recovery.

Historical Context

During the dictatorship, higher education was public and state-controlled. The University of Tirana, founded in 1957, acted as the lead institution, with several other higher education institutions serving specific needs of the communist government. Once the regime fell, the country immediately entered a period of massification. As, during the communist period, only the children of the elite—i.e., of loyal communist party members—were allowed to attend university, the end of the regime marked a new era of opportunity for all Albanians. In response to this increased demand, after 1991, more public universities were opened by the elected socialist government, in particular outside of the capital, albeit with very limited funding, human resources, and academic capacities.

When the conservative Democratic Party took over in 2005, the government allowed the creation of private universities in order to provide more supply. Over 50 private universities were established in the post-2005 period. In 2014, the country had the highest number of higher education institutions per inhabitant in Europe, with a population of just around 3 million. However, the quality of both public and private universities was very poor due to underfunding, lack of qualified teachers, and high numbers of students. Corruption and fraud were common, with

private universities practically selling their degrees, including to foreigners.

In 2015, under the new government of the Socialist Party of Albania, a new law on higher education and scientific research entered into force, establishing a higher education system that consisted of public and not-for-profit private institutions. Seventeen private and eight public universities were closed, and a review by the British Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education helped the Albanian Public Accreditation Agency for Higher Education develop standards for quality assurance and accreditation. Currently, there are between 30 and 40 universities in the country, 13 of them public and the rest private ones; 33 of these are accredited.

In itself, this reform was a good step forward. However, a number of major challenges remain that prevent Albania from upgrading its higher education system to match European and international standards. The challenges include a continuous lack of funding, corruption, a rigid bureaucratic system left over from the communist era, brain drain, and lack of adequate quality assurance mechanisms. Brain drain, in particular, is a major concern. Efforts to stimulate the return of skilled members of the diaspora are challenged by bureaucratic procedures, as recognition of foreign diplomas takes up to two years, even for PhD degrees from top universities. The autonomy of Albania's higher education institutions also exists primarily on paper, as governance is highly centralized and subject to detailed regulation and funding by the ministry of education and other government agencies.

Internationalization Efforts

As mentioned in the preceding section, brain drain is quite high, with neighboring Italy, in particular, attracting a large number of Albanian students. Incoming students and staff numbers, meanwhile, are almost insignificant. Existing dual-degree programs between Albanian and foreign universities are in reality one-way outgoing programs and only add to the brain

drain. Students that come to study in the country are mostly Albanian speakers from neighboring Kosovo and North Macedonia. Recently, there have been recruitment efforts targeting potential students from Asia and the Middle East, through a recruitment agency based in Dubai. Some students from Italy have also started coming to Albania to study medical sciences through a private Catholic university in Tirana. However, language remains a huge barrier, and, while teaching in English is offered by some private universities, its quality is often questionable. Recently, public universities have started launching English-language programs, but their success remains to be seen.

Academic services and the quality of teaching are other obstacles in recruiting international students. It is difficult to find information on university websites, especially for international students, about enrollment procedures and admission requirements, available programs, teaching staff, academic services, tuition fees, and other aspects of campus life.

Europeanization Efforts

Albania is aspiring to become a member of the European Union. In 2003, it joined the Bologna Process and also became an associate member of the Horizon Europe research and innovation program. It additionally has access to some elements of the Erasmus+ program and is aiming for full membership at a later stage. However, there are major challenges with the implementation of these plans. Even though Albanian universities mention long lists of partnerships with foreign—mostly European—universities on their websites and are active in Erasmus+ and involved in dual-degree programs with primarily European universities, the reality is less positive. Other countries in the Western Balkan region that share some common legacies from the past, such as North Macedonia and Serbia, have already become program countries in the Erasmus+, while Albania remains just a partner country.

There is slightly more foreign presence in the private higher education sector. In 2023, the College of Europe in Bruges, Belgium, opened the first international branch campus in

Tirana, sponsored by the European Commission. Epitech Balkans is part of the French IONIS group, and there is also Turkish influence in private universities such as the University of New York Tirana, which is managed by the Turkish state-run Maarif Foundation. There are also other higher education institutions with international-sounding names, such as the Canadian Institute of Technology or the European University of Tirana. However, these names seem to be given purely for marketing reasons, as there is no clear indication of involvement from Canada or Europe in their accreditation or management.

Major Challenges

The rigidity of the system, underfunding, lack of professional development, and brain drain are the main problems obstructing Albanian higher education's path toward European integration and internationalization. While universities boast a large number of bilateral agreements, they fail to show any analytical data on the results of such agreements. Even more concerning, although the government imposes fines or even up to two years imprisonment for plagiarism, in the last five years there have been [reports of senior public officials and university leaders guilty of plagiarism](#).

Urgent Needs

What the country needs urgently is further training for university administrators and academics on understanding and implementing internationalization, including internationalization of the curriculum at home. Albania also needs a national strategy on internationalization and more attention paid to accreditation and quality assurance processes. It is important to address the main obstacles and weaknesses impeding internationalization, in particular issues around recognition of foreign degrees and transfer of credits. Finally, accumulating more reliable data is essential.

For Albanian higher education to become seriously integrated in the European Higher Education Area and to internationalize, there is still a long way to go.

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