



## **INNOVATION MANAGEMENT IN ALBANIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES**

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### **Abstract**

*This study explores innovation management practices and challenges in five Albanian public universities, focusing on the relationship between specific initiatives and their strategic and organisational support. It adopts an exploratory comparative approach, drawing on the processed findings of nine questionnaires completed by academic, managerial and administrative staff across five public universities between March and June 2026, together with institutional documentary material. The analysis is organised around five dimensions: strategic orientation and governance, organisational capacity and culture, pedagogical and digital innovation, research and knowledge exchange, and coordination and institutionalisation. The findings identify practices particularly in active teaching methods and the use of digital*

*platforms. Research structures and strategic orientations are present, whereas knowledge transfer outcomes and implementation and monitoring mechanisms are less extensively documented. The identified barriers concern funding, infrastructure, training and administrative procedures. The study suggests a need to align existing policies, clarify responsibilities and assess the outcomes of initiatives. Its contribution lies in comparing reported practices with formal institutional support. The conclusions are restricted to the cases studied and are not statistically generalisable to the Albanian higher education system.*

*Keywords: Innovation management; higher education; university governance; digital transformation; knowledge transfer*

## INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions face demands to improve teaching, develop research and respond to technological change and societal needs. University innovation encompasses pedagogical, digital and organisational changes, as well as collaboration with external stakeholders. The OECD's (2022) analysis of 13 HEInnovate country reviews highlights the importance of connecting these functions with institutional support. The central question is whether innovative practices are coordinated through strategies, responsibilities and sustainable resources. In Albania, recent studies have examined culture, leadership and support for university intrapreneurship (Prendi et al., 2026; Myftaraj et al., 2026). This paper complements these perspectives by comparing reported practices and documented strategic orientations in five public universities. The analytical gap concerns the relationship between specific initiatives and the mechanisms supporting institutional integration. This research aims to identify forms of innovation, examine strategic and organisational support, and compare barriers across institutions. It addresses three research questions:

RQ1: Which innovative practices are reported, and in which areas are they concentrated?

RQ2: How do these practices relate to strategic documents and responsible institutional structures?

RQ3: Which barriers and priorities for improvement are identified?

Its importance lies in examining how universities connect innovation initiatives with the institutional support needed to sustain them.

By comparing five Albanian public universities, it identifies practices, organisational challenges and areas where clearer evidence of implementation is needed. The findings can inform university leaders and units responsible for curricula, quality assurance, research and digitalisation when reviewing priorities, coordinating responsibilities and planning staff

development. Higher education policymakers may also use the findings to identify issues requiring further investigation or targeted support, while researchers can build on the comparative framework to examine innovation management across a wider range of institutions.

## **LITERATURE AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Governance and Organisational Capacity**

HEInnovate approaches the innovative university through interconnected dimensions of governance, organisational capacity, teaching, digital transformation, knowledge exchange and impact assessment (OECD, 2022). This perspective connects initiatives with the conditions supporting their continuity. Lašáková et al. (2017) examined barriers to and drivers of innovation in ten European universities, focusing on governance structures and processes. In Albania, Prendi et al. (2026) reported associations between supportive culture, leadership, policies and intrapreneurship. Myftaraj et al. (2026), analysing 624 valid questionnaires in the Western Balkan context, linked institutional support and strategic orientation with external collaboration. These studies support examining innovation in relation to institutional organisation, although intrapreneurship does not encompass all forms of university innovation.

### **Digital Transformation and Regional Evidence**

Castro Benavides et al. (2020) identify the reach of digital transformation across teaching, administration, research and governance. Fernández et al. (2023) distinguish technology use from strategic transformation: among the institutions identified in their review, only one in four had a digital strategy, and 56% had initiatives that were not integrated into a plan. The findings cover material from 2015–2020 and do not represent the current state of universities in general. In Kosovo, Qorraj and Kačaniku (2023) analysed the digital transformation of teacher education through interviews with managers, teacher educators and students. They identified issues concerning policy coordination, organisational culture and change management. Alfirević et al. (2025), drawing on 137 responses from three institutions in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, identified infrastructure and teaching as important dimensions of perceived transformation success; technology transfer and societal impact received lower ratings. Students predominated in the sample, so the findings particularly reflect their perspective.

The literature suggests that practices may develop at different rates and that technology should be examined alongside competencies and coordination. External collaboration also

requires assessing activities and outcomes alongside formal agreements (OECD/European Union, 2018).

### **Knowledge Exchange and External Collaboration**

Knowledge exchange provides a link between university activities and their wider societal and economic relevance. Within HEInnovate, collaboration with external stakeholders is connected to institutional priorities and the university's innovation agenda (OECD/European Union, 2018). This perspective encourages an assessment of partnerships through their activities and outcomes, alongside their formal establishment. Different forms of collaboration serve different purposes. Student placements support professional preparation, consultancy applies academic expertise to external needs, and joint research can support the development of new knowledge and solutions. Consequently, the presence of agreements alone offers limited evidence of the depth or continuity of collaboration. Myftaraj et al. (2026) associate institutional support and strategic orientation with external cooperation, reinforcing the importance of examining partnerships alongside internal organisational conditions.

For this research, the literature provides a basis for distinguishing reported forms of collaboration from evidence of knowledge transfer outcomes. It also highlights the need to examine whether external relationships are connected to teaching and research priorities. Where outcome data are unavailable, conclusions should concern the documented forms of engagement rather than their effectiveness or impact.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework draws on HEInnovate to organise the analysis into five dimensions corresponding to the topics covered by the study questionnaire: strategic orientation and governance; organisational capacity and culture; pedagogical and digital innovation; research and knowledge exchange; and coordination and institutionalisation. These dimensions provide a structure for examining how reported innovation practices relate to institutional policies, resources and responsibilities (OECD, 2022). HEInnovate is used as a conceptual reference rather than as a standardised measurement instrument. The study questionnaire is therefore not treated as a validated HEInnovate tool, and the analysis does not generate a standard innovation score. Instead, the framework supports descriptive comparisons across the five universities, distinguishing participants' perceptions, documented institutional commitments and evidence of implementation.

Table 1: Study Dimensions

| Dimension                             | Elements Examined                                                       |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Strategic orientation and governance  | Strategies, policies and responsibilities for innovation.               |
| Organisational capacity and culture   | Funding, infrastructure, training and barriers.                         |
| Pedagogical and digital innovation    | Teaching methods, platforms and electronic services.                    |
| Research and knowledge exchange       | Research support and forms of external collaboration.                   |
| Coordination and institutionalisation | Connections between practices, policies and evidence of implementation. |

*Source: Authors' elaboration based on the study data*

The main relationship examined is that between practices and strategic and organisational support. The analysis distinguishes participants' perceptions, documented commitments and evidence of implementation. The framework is interpretive and is not used for causal testing or numerical rankings.

## METHODOLOGY

The study adopts an exploratory comparative approach at “Luigj Gurakuqi” University in Shkodër, “Aleksandër Xhuvani” University in Elbasan, “Aleksandër Moisiu” University in Durrës, “Ismail Qemali” University in Vlorë and “Eqrem Çabej” University in Gjirokastrë. The universities constitute the institutional cases for analysis. The empirical component of the study is based on nine completed questionnaires obtained from academic, managerial and administrative staff across the five participating public universities. Data were collected between March and June 2026. A non-probability purposive sampling approach was used to identify respondents with relevant knowledge of institutional innovation practices. Participants were selected through the units responsible for curriculum development or innovation at the participating universities, based on their roles and involvement in the activities addressed by the questionnaire. The purpose was to obtain informed accounts of innovation practices, strategic support and implementation barriers rather than a statistically representative sample of university staff. Nine completed questionnaires were included in the analysis across the five universities. Consequently, the responses provide exploratory insights into the selected institutional cases and should not be interpreted as representing the views of all staff within each university. The questionnaire contained both open-ended and closed-ended questions on innovation practices, policies, barriers and priorities. It also included an overall assessment on a scale of 1–5 and the identification of relevant institutional documents. Given the exploratory nature of the study and the limited number of respondents, the questionnaire findings are interpreted descriptively and

are not intended to provide statistically representative estimates for the participating universities. This article uses the processed questionnaire findings and documentary summaries.

The questionnaire covers both university activities and the institutional conditions supporting innovation. Teaching, digitalisation, research and external collaboration capture areas in which innovative practices may emerge, while questions on policies, responsibilities, resources and barriers examine the conditions for their implementation. This coverage allows innovation to be explored across academic and administrative functions rather than through technology adoption alone. For the present analysis, these topics were grouped into five conceptual dimensions informed by HEInnovate. This grouping provides an analytical structure and does not imply that the original questionnaire was developed from, or validated against, HEInnovate.

The findings are organised according to the five conceptual dimensions, first within each university and then comparatively. The documentary analysis covers the development, research, internationalisation, digitalisation and teaching strategies included in the study material. It examines convergence and differences with reported practices. The existence of a document is not treated as evidence of implementation, while failure to report an activity is not equated with its absence. No statistical tests or recoding of original responses are undertaken.

## RESULTS

### Strategic Orientation and Governance

The summarised assessments of innovation levels are concentrated mainly at levels 3 and 4 on the 1–5 scale. They express perceptions and do not constitute calculated means for each university. The documentary analysis identifies strategic support for innovation in all five institutions. In Shkodër, this includes sectoral strategies for teaching, research, internationalisation and the labour market; digitalisation strategies and organisational responsibilities for innovation are also identified. In Durrës, strategic orientations extend across development, institutional profiling, research and interactive teaching documents, but are distributed among them. In Gjirokastër, the strategic foundation is organised around development, research and internationalisation. In Elbasan, innovation is addressed mainly through development, research and quality documents. For Vlorë, the 2025–2030 Strategic Plan and the 2026–2030 Research and Innovation Strategy are identified, although participants had not listed them in detail. This difference reveals discrepancies in the information covered by the responses and documentary material.

## Capacity and Pedagogical and Digital Practices

Research structures, laboratories, project offices and funding for projects, publications and conferences constitute identified forms of support. Barriers include inadequate funding and infrastructure, administrative procedures and a lack of partners. Pedagogical training is described as sporadic in some cases and absent in others. Frequencies that would permit ranking the barriers are unavailable. The most commonly identified methods are student-centred learning, project-based learning and case studies. Their use is described as more widespread in Shkodër, Vlorë and Durrës and more limited in Elbasan. Guidelines for innovative methods and interactive teaching are identified at UAMD. Blended learning and advanced technologies appear less widespread. These differences are descriptive and are not supported by standardised frequencies. Digital platforms are used in all five universities; the tools mentioned include Moodle, Microsoft Teams and Google Classroom. Services include electronic assessment and digital libraries, while digital archives, Pitagora and UCRIS are identified at UAMD. Administrative digitalisation remains partial in some institutions. The effects of these practices on learning quality or service efficiency have not been measured.

## Research and External Collaboration

Research support is documented more clearly than knowledge transfer outcomes. Detailed data on patents, commercialised products, university enterprises or technology transfer revenues are unavailable. Collaboration takes place mainly through student placements, consultancy and training. It is described as more developed and formalised in Shkodër and Durrës and more limited in Elbasan. For the other institutions, the information focuses mainly on student placements. Joint research projects are documented in insufficient detail to assess their extent or outcomes.

## Institutional Profiles and Coordination

Table 2 summarises the main differences without ranking universities by performance.

Table 2: University main differences

| University | Identified Profile                                                       | More Limited Evidence                       |
|------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| Shkodër    | Sectoral strategies, digitalisation and formalised collaboration.        | Implementation and monitoring.              |
| Durrës     | Broad documentary framework, pedagogical guidelines and digital systems. | Coordination across strategic orientations. |

| University  | Identified Profile                                           | More Limited Evidence                                       |
|-------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| Elbasan     | Documentary support for development, research and quality.   | Extent of practices and a dedicated innovation orientation. |
| Gjirokastrë | Development, research and internationalisation strategies.   | Links to specific practices and outcomes.                   |
| Vlorë       | Pedagogical practices and research and innovation documents. | Extent of implementation of objectives.                     |

*Source: Authors' elaboration based on the study data*

No consistent body of information on implementation plans, indicators and monitoring is identified. The degree of institutionalisation is therefore less well documented than the presence of practices and policies.

## DISCUSSION

### Practices and Institutional Support

The findings suggest that pedagogical, digital and research initiatives coexist with differing levels of documentation of coordination. This relates to the perspective of Lašáková et al. (2017), who examined innovation through governance processes, and to the OECD's (2022) integrated approach. The present study complements this debate by comparing reported activities with formal orientations in five Albanian institutions. Prendi et al. (2026) report associations between supportive culture, leadership and intrapreneurship. These factors are relevant to interpreting institutional support, but are not measured directly here. Moreover, the distribution of innovation across several documents may reflect integration across different functions; it does not inherently constitute a weakness. The question is whether these orientations are connected through responsibilities and implementation plans.

### Digitalisation and staff development

The presence of digital platforms with partially digitalised administrative processes is consistent with Fernández et al.'s (2023) distinction between initiatives and strategic transformation. However, the study does not measure digital maturity or determine the institutions' stage of development. Similarities in the evidence profile emerge with Alfirević et al. (2025): teaching and infrastructure are more visible than technology transfer. The comparison remains conceptual because the instruments and samples differ. In particular, the predominance of students in the regional study may influence the visibility of teaching services. Sporadic training suggests a need to connect tools with staff competencies. Qorraj and

Kaçaniku (2023) highlighted the importance of culture and change management in Kosovo. This helps interpret human capacity, but the Albanian data do not establish resistance to change or the effects of training on practice.

### **Partnerships and Knowledge Transfer**

The predominance of placements, consultancy and training in the available information indicates operational links with external stakeholders. The more limited evidence on joint research calls for analysing activities and outcomes beyond agreements. Myftaraj et al. (2026) link strategic orientation and institutional support with external collaboration. The present study complements this perspective by distinguishing forms of partnership, but does not determine the strength of this relationship. Alfirević et al.'s (2025) findings also identify technology transfer as an area requiring attention. Lack of documentation here does not establish an absence of activity; it identifies a need for more detailed evidence. The contribution of the comparison lies in highlighting the relationship between practices and the capacity for coordination. Methodological differences from other studies prevent numerical comparisons of performance but allow the identification of shared organisational issues.

### **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

This study examined innovation management in five Albanian public universities, focusing on reported practices and their strategic and organisational support. The findings identify innovation particularly in teaching methods and the use of digital platforms. Research support structures and strategic documents are also present, whereas knowledge transfer outcomes and mechanisms for coordinated implementation and monitoring are less extensively documented. Reported barriers concern funding, infrastructure, staff training and administrative procedures. The main conclusion is that sustaining innovation requires connecting existing initiatives and strategic commitments with clear responsibilities, adequate resources and regular assessment.

The findings suggest several practical recommendations for university leaders and relevant institutional units. First, existing strategic commitments should be translated into implementation plans specifying responsible units, timelines and resources. Where innovation priorities are distributed across several documents, universities should clarify how these priorities and responsibilities are coordinated. Second, the sporadic provision of pedagogical training supports establishing regular staff development in active teaching methods and the effective use of digital platforms. Third, reported funding and infrastructure constraints suggest prioritising investments according to identified teaching, research and administrative needs.

Reviewing administrative procedures could also help identify opportunities to simplify support for innovation initiatives.

Fourth, research and partnership offices should document the activities and outcomes of external collaboration, including student placements, consultancy, training and joint research. This would complement information on formal agreements and provide a clearer basis for assessing the contribution of partnerships to institutional objectives. Universities could introduce a limited set of indicators, reviewed periodically, to track staff participation in training, the use of digital services, the implementation of planned initiatives and the outputs of collaborative projects. These recommendations should be adapted to each institution's mission and capacity. Their effectiveness was not tested in this study.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The analysis draws on a small, purposively selected and non-representative sample of nine respondents across five universities and uses summarised questionnaire findings. The limited number of respondents does not permit institution-level statistical comparisons, analysis of individual differences or testing of relationships between variables. Self-reported information reflects participants' knowledge and perceptions, while institutional documents represent formal commitments and cover different periods. Limited documentation of an activity should therefore not be interpreted as evidence of its absence. The findings remain exploratory and case-specific and are not statistically generalisable to the Albanian higher education system.

Future research could include a wider range of institutions both public and private and also a wider range of respondents, incorporating the perspectives of students, academic and administrative staff, and external partners. Interviews and more detailed implementation data could clarify how strategic commitments are translated into practice. Longitudinal studies would also help assess whether initiatives are sustained over time and how they contribute to teaching, research, administrative services and external collaboration.

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