



## Business and Academia Collaboration: Empowering Internationalization in Albania

Olta Qejvani<sup>1</sup>

Dorina Gjipali<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>PhD, Lecturer of EU law, Department of Law,  
Faculty of Political and Legal Sciences,  
University 'Aleksandër Moisiu' Durrës, Durrës, Albania

<sup>2</sup>Dr., Lecturer, Department of Law,  
Faculty of Political and Legal Sciences,  
'Aleksandër Moisiu' University, Durrës, Albania

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### Abstract

Global and European challenges have shift dynamic expectations from universities, going beyond 'centers of knowledge', towards the urge of producing sustainable research and innovation that impact communities. Despite of taking care of 'producing' professionalism, there is a strong need inside academia to ask business collaboration in order to catch up the new developments and be competitive in the trade market. Positioning the field of research into the session of Educational Globalization 'Higher Education Internalization, curricula and methodologies' is a possibility to find out current and updated resources or even new policy strategies on how to adapt synergies into the terms of globalization and European challenges ahead for academia. This research aims to explore and analyze the current European practice of collaboration between business sector and universities and offer proper alternatives to be embraced from Albanian universities activity. Based on the findings of European Commission, there are less universities (more than half) rather than business organizations that demonstrate cooperation (72 %).<sup>1</sup> Does this mean that business sector is more willing to get closer with academia? It is courageous that both universities and business sector demonstrate more than average the will to smartly collaborate within this dimension. It is interesting that among all the high number of legal acts and policy level documents of EU, there is none that explicitly treats UBC (University Business Cooperation) as a specific policy or issue. Having a specific policy document into EU level that can envisage this pattern, will strongly put this issue into the proper spotlight of the understanding and potentially could encourage both of the structures to raise proper attention to UBC. Also, having a separate document on UBC can produce sustainable impact, bringing this not as a sporadic solution, but prompting sustainable results for business, academia and the community. The vague position of UBC into European policy making is not in the same line with successful histories of European universities that have established on their own initiative different level of collaboration. High-ranking universities in Europe have a lot to learn from good models and practices in this area. There is no need to wait for the national, regional or European document that can treat collaboration between university and academia. Universities can be the first initiators of getting closer to business sector in order to strengthen capacity building, research and innovation. Despite of this context, there are a lot of good examples that European universities have established by their own being empowered through business sector connection.

**Keywords:** business sector, university, EU practice, internationalization, raise of funds, UBC

<sup>1</sup>The state of university-business cooperation in Europe, final report, PDF ISBN 978-92-79-80971-2 DOI 10.2766/676478 NC-02-18-373-EN-N, [https://publications.europa.eu/resource/cellar/1b03ec59-67a4-11e8-ab9c-01aa75ed71a1.0001.01/DOC\\_1](https://publications.europa.eu/resource/cellar/1b03ec59-67a4-11e8-ab9c-01aa75ed71a1.0001.01/DOC_1), last seen in January 2024

## 1. Introductory Context and Methodological Aspects

The research road path brings the collaboration between academia and business sector, not as a random implementation of current strategies or laws in force, but as smart solutions that both sectors must establish in order to 'play the ground from both sides', such as strengthening the university activity through business sector; offering a social behavior to business sector with a proper impact into the community.

Identification of the practices developed so far in European universities and EU institutions/agencies will be the main gate of resource connecting this area with the relevant context of Albanian universities, concluding which are some of the possibilities that can be highly taken into account.

The paper will address the following issues:

- Importance of strengthening business and academia collaboration as useful instrument to develop universities and playing a significant role into the community.
- Identification of good EU practice into this new perspective.
- Offering to the Albanian HEIs some models or examples by describing potential environment on how they can be applied, especially focusing on how universities can raise funds from business sector.

The article tries to raise up attention in regard to this topic as a possibility to pass through difficulties and challenges that Albanian universities face into the terms of internationalization; offering concrete examples and practice that would serve as instruments, easily to be approached and implemented further in academia; offering a new innovative approach outside of the box to the internationalization as a part of a new strategic vision of our universities.

Universities can be more persistent to business sector, by not staying limited in the internships and bringing students to their trade, but also to establish new partnerships using *win to win* situation, for example: applying as strong partners in EU calls. Among all the potential sources that can help universities to raise funds, strengthening their role into the community and society, there are a lot of new methods on how universities can raise funds from business sector, changing the approach and *modus operandi*. There is an urge need to understand that universities (especially referring to Albanian case) must properly develop to have their own strategy to raise funds and orientating the mainstream to business sector. Even though there is no current law requiring the application of this instrument, the policy must be designed as a wise strategy within their walls to deliver long-term benefits in research and innovation.

This paper will examine some of the most important documents as part of the theoretical framework of European Union and Albania going through the following resources:

- a. EU strategies and policies on developing academia through business sector.
- b. Some universities, in specific: Charles University in Czech Republic, SNSPA (National University of Political Sciences and Public Administration) in Bucharest, German universities (in specific the model of applied sciences). The Ministry of Education website and the website of each of these universities will be analyzed to reach out results.
- c. National Strategy of Higher Education in Albania and relevant policy documents.
- d. INSTAT and EUROSTAT as main Albanian and European institutes of Statistics to connect qualitative and quantitative methods.
- e. Updated booklets and manuals of EU agencies that have treated business sector into the function of university development.<sup>2</sup>

The collaboration between businesses and academia will be seen through the literature review as crucial for fostering innovation, driving economic development and enhancing higher education internationalization.<sup>3</sup>

In the context of Albania, implementing a new approach to empower higher education internationalization through business-academia collaboration can bring about several benefits. Here are some key strategies and considerations:

- A. *Establishing Partnerships*: Encourage universities in Albania to actively seek partnerships with local and international businesses. Facilitate the creation of joint ventures, research collaborations, and internship

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<sup>2</sup> See the perspective envisaged according to Rossoni, A.L., de Vasconcellos, E.P.G. & de Castilho Rossoni, R.L. Barriers and facilitators of university-industry collaboration for research, development and innovation: a systematic review. *Manag Rev Q* (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11301-023-00349-1> , published 26 April 2023, last seen in February 2024

<sup>3</sup> See the perspective envisaged according to Rossoni, A.L., de Vasconcellos, E.P.G. & de Castilho Rossoni, R.L. Barriers and facilitators of university-industry collaboration for research, development and innovation: a systematic review. *Manag Rev Q* (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11301-023-00349-1> , published 26 April 2023, last seen in February 2024

- programs between businesses and academic institutions.<sup>4</sup>
- B. *Curriculum Development*: Involve industry experts in curriculum creation to ensure that academic programs meet the needs of the business community. Incorporate practical, hands-on experiences, case studies, and real-world projects into the curriculum to provide students with applicable skills and knowledge. <sup>5</sup>
  - C. *Internship and Work Placement Programs*: Create structured internship and job placement programs that allow students to obtain real experience in businesses. Encourage firms to provide mentorship programs to help students with their professional growth.
  - D. *Research and Development (R&D) Collaboration*: Facilitate joint research projects between academic institutions and businesses to address industry challenges and contribute to technological advancements. Create incentives for businesses to invest in R&D initiatives conducted by universities.<sup>6</sup>
  - E. *Dual Degree Programs*: Implement dual degree programs that allow students to earn degrees from both academic institutions and industry-recognized bodies, enhancing their employability. Ensure that these programs incorporate international perspectives and experiences. To improve students' employability, dual degree programs should be put in place that enable them to obtain degrees from both academic institutions and organizations recognized by business. Make sure that these courses include viewpoints and experiences from around the world.
  - F. *Language and Cultural Training*: Collaborate with businesses to provide language and cultural training to students, preparing them for the global job market. Explore language exchange programs and cultural immersion experiences for both students and business professionals.<sup>7</sup>
  - G. *Entrepreneurship and Innovation Hubs*: Establish entrepreneurship and innovation hubs where students, faculty, and business professionals can collaborate on innovative projects. Provide funding and resources to support entrepreneurial initiatives and start-ups emerging from academic institutions. Create hubs for entrepreneurship and innovation where academics, experts in business, and students may work together on creative ideas. Financing and resources should be made available to assist academic institutions' entrepreneurial endeavors and start-ups.
  - H. *Government Support*: Seek government support for initiatives promoting business-academia collaboration, including funding, tax incentives, and policy frameworks that facilitate partnerships. Encourage the government to actively engage in promoting the internationalization of higher education through collaboration with businesses.<sup>8</sup>
  - I. *Quality Assurance and Evaluation*: Implement mechanisms for quality assurance and continuous evaluation of collaborative programs to ensure they meet both academic and industry standards. Seek feedback from businesses, students, and academic stakeholders to refine and improve collaborative initiatives. Start systems for regular assessment and quality assurance of cooperative programs to make sure they adhere to industry and scholastic standards. To hone and enhance cooperative projects, get input from companies, learners, and academic stakeholders.<sup>9</sup>
  - J. *Promotion of Cultural Exchange*: Encourage cultural exchange programs between academic institutions and businesses to foster a deeper understanding of different working environments and practices.<sup>10</sup> Organize

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<sup>4</sup> See this perspective connected with EU level according to Rossoni, A.L., de Vasconcellos, E.P.G. & de Castilho Rossoni, R.L. *Barriers and facilitators of university-industry collaboration for research, development and innovation: a systematic review. Manag Rev Q* (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11301-023-00349-1>, published 26 April 2023, last seen in February 2024

<sup>5</sup> Curricula is put into the spotlight of EU regulations and press release of Educational Activities at the European Commission: Camille Kandiko Howson & Martyn Kingsbury (2023) *Curriculum change as transformational learning. Teaching in Higher Education*, 28:8, 1847-1866, DOI: 10.1080/13562517.2021.1940923, last seen in February 2024

<sup>6</sup> Eduardo B. Pinto, Gabriela Fernandes, *Collaborative R&D the Key Cooperation Domain for University-Industry Partnerships Sustainability – Position Paper, Procedia Computer Science, Volume 181, 2021, Pages 102-109, ISSN 1877-0509,*

<sup>7</sup> Karlık, Meryem, (2023), *Exploring the impact of culture on language learning: how understanding cultural context and values can deepen language acquisition. International journal of language, linguistics, literature and culture.* 2. 5-11. 10.59009/ijllc.2023.0035, last seen in February 2024

<sup>8</sup> *Internationalization of higher education in Italy 'Supporting Entrepreneurship and Innovation in Higher Education in Italy' | OECD ILibrary, oecd-ilibrary.org*

<sup>9</sup> *How to set up and manage quality control and quality assurance - Visschedijk - 2005 - The Quality Assurance Journal - Wiley Online Library*

<sup>10</sup> Tarchi, C., Surian, A. *Promoting intercultural competence in study abroad students. Eur J Psychol Educ* 37, 123–140 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10212-021-00554-0>, last seen in February 2024

events, workshops, and conferences that bring together academia and industry professionals to share knowledge and insights.

By adopting these strategies, Albania can create a dynamic ecosystem that not only enhances the internationalization of higher education but also contributes to the overall economic and social development of the country.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. Recent Developments and Importance of UBC in Europe

Government or different international, European projects are considered as the crucial sources from where universities can raise funds. In this regard, there are a lot of good examples on how universities have improved their profile, investing in different laboratories, research, innovation etc.<sup>12</sup>

European universities have a very well consolidated practice on raising funds from different sources compared with Western Balkans University, including Albania. The above alternatives can truly speak up for a 'win to win' situation for both universities and business sector, because<sup>13</sup>:

- It opens up new ways of providing support
- It guides the development of new technologies and innovations
- It aids in the recruitment of new hires from academia
- It merges theory with evidence
- It creates a steady talent pipeline
- It mentors young data storytellers.

Universities impact are a crucial demonstration of European integration, so raising proper funds to empower their function and results remain a spotlight in the framework of this process and beyond of it for strengthening knowledge and practice skills. Among all the potential sources that can help universities to raise funds, strengthening their role into the community and society, there are a lot of new methods on how universities can raise funds from business sector. First, I would like to invite the readers that there is an urge need to understand that universities (especially referring to Albanian case) must develop harder to have their own strategy to raise funds and orientating the mainstream to business sector. Even though, there is not any law enforcing the implementation of this instrument, the policy must be developed as a smart strategy inside their walls in order to provide sustainable results in research and innovation. The collaboration between universities and the business sector in Europe has a rich history that has evolved over time. Here is an overview of key developments and trends:

1. Post-World War II Reconstruction (1945-1950s): In the aftermath of World War II, European countries focused on rebuilding their economies. Collaborations between universities and industries became crucial for technological advancements and economic development. This period saw the emergence of research centers and partnerships aimed at addressing pressing societal challenges.
2. Research and Innovation Policies (1960s-1970s): During the 1960s and 1970s, European governments started implementing policies to promote research and innovation. Universities began to receive increased funding for scientific research, and partnerships with the private sector became more formalized. This era witnessed the establishment of technology transfer offices and research parks.
3. Technology Transfer and Spin-offs (1980s-1990s): In the 1980s and 1990s, the emphasis shifted toward commercializing academic research. Universities in Europe actively participated in technology transfer, facilitating the transfer of scientific knowledge and innovations to the business sector. Spin-off companies, often founded by academic researchers, became more prevalent.
4. Formation of Innovation Ecosystems (2000s): The 2000s saw the development of innovation ecosystems where universities, businesses, and government agencies collaborated closely. Clusters, science parks, and incubators emerged to foster collaboration, with a focus on regional economic development and entrepreneurship.

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<sup>11</sup> Smart Specialisation in Albania, <https://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/albania>

<sup>12</sup> European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Burquel, N., Percival, C., Calabuig, P., Potential EU funding opportunities for university-business cooperation (UBC) under the 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework of the European Union – Thematic overview – Updated, Publications Office of the European Union, 2023, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/354182>, last seen in February 2024

<sup>13</sup> See Forbes perspective on this background: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesbusinessdevelopmentcouncil/2022/01/05/six-reasons-why-business-university-collaboration-is-a-win-for-leaders/?sh=66b0a7b44517>

5. EU Initiatives and Framework Programs (2000s-present): The European Union has played a significant role in promoting collaboration between universities and the business sector. Framework programs, such as Horizon 2020 (2014-2020) and Horizon Europe (2021-2027), allocate substantial funding to support research and innovation initiatives that involve partnerships between academia and industry.
6. Focus on Entrepreneurship and Start-ups (2010s-present): In recent years, there has been an increased emphasis on fostering entrepreneurship and supporting start-ups. Many European universities have established entrepreneurship programs, incubators, and accelerators to facilitate the transition of research findings into viable businesses. The ongoing digital transformation has further intensified collaboration between universities and the business sector. Partnerships focus on areas such as artificial intelligence, data analytics, and Industry 4.0 technologies, reflecting the need to stay competitive in a rapidly evolving technological landscape. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of collaboration between universities and businesses for addressing global challenges. Initiatives related to healthcare, digitalization, and sustainable development gained prominence in the collaborative efforts to build resilience.

Overall, the history of collaboration between universities and the business sector in Europe reflects a trajectory of increasing integration, with a growing recognition of the mutual benefits that result from combining academic research with practical applications in the business world. In general, the history of university-business collaboration in Europe shows a trend toward greater integration and a growing understanding of the reciprocal advantages that arise from fusing academic research with real-world corporate applications.

### 3. Albania Towards Quadruple Helix

The central objective of the European and National Policy makers has been to strengthen cooperation among higher education institutions and the broader economy during the last decades. There are a number of possible benefits to this cooperation and it can be exploited in different sectors. Universities are at the heart of the 'knowledge triangle' of research, innovation and education, and business as well as universities can mutually benefit from cooperation in each of these areas.<sup>14</sup>

Nowadays collaborating with societal actors rises as a must to do of every actor in an innovation ecosystem in the context of Quadruple Helix Model highlighting the necessity of society participating actively in research and innovation.<sup>15</sup> The model can be perceived as an organization of connections, where public and private associations connect in esteem making cycles to exchange different contributions to important results for them and society.<sup>16</sup>

In Albania the National Education Strategy 2021-2026 is set as a specific objective the creation of joint cooperation projects between business associations and universities, with the assistance of international partners, through forms of change the transfer of technology that affects both the improvement of curricula and a better preparation of graduates<sup>17</sup>.

A research report produced in the framework of the Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education Project: "University-to-Society Innomediaries in Albania: Co-Production of Knowledge and Research that Matters" / U-SIA, funded by the European Union<sup>18</sup> has done an assessment of the university to society collaboration and interesting findings came out about UBC in Albania. Based on a combined methodology approach of mixed methods with surveys and document analysis, 48,9 % of surveyed researchers confirm that their institutions collaborate with businesses and 51.1% who do not collaborate with the business sector specify the lack of opportunity, the low interest of business to fund research, and incompatible Research Aims as main contributing factors.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Stieger, A., Unterweger, D., *University-business cooperation – EU-level initiatives and on-the-ground implementation*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2023, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/341837>, last seen in February 2024

<sup>15</sup> Florian Schütz, Marie Lena Heidingsfelder, Martina Schraudner, *Co-shaping the Future in Quadruple Helix Innovation Systems: Uncovering Public Preferences toward Participatory Research and Innovation*, *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation*, Volume 5, Issue 2, 2019, Pages 128-146,

<sup>16</sup> See [https://usia.al/wpcontent/uploads/wrkspc/USIA/WP1Preparation/Publication/SCIDEV\\_USIA\\_Uni\\_Society\\_Collaborations\\_FINAL.pdf](https://usia.al/wpcontent/uploads/wrkspc/USIA/WP1Preparation/Publication/SCIDEV_USIA_Uni_Society_Collaborations_FINAL.pdf), p. 24, last seen in February 2024

<sup>17</sup> National Strategy for Higher Education 2021 – 2026  
<https://arsimi.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Draft-Strategjia-per-Arsimin-2021-2026.pdf>, last seen in February 2024

<sup>18</sup> See <https://usia.al/>, where University "Aleksander Moisiu" Durrës was also a partner and contributed to this report.

<sup>19</sup> [https://usia.al/wpcontent/uploads/wrkspc/USIA/WP1Preparation/Publication/SCIDEV\\_USIA\\_Uni\\_Society\\_Collaborations\\_FINAL.pdf](https://usia.al/wpcontent/uploads/wrkspc/USIA/WP1Preparation/Publication/SCIDEV_USIA_Uni_Society_Collaborations_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> [https://usia.al/wpcontent/uploads/wrkspc/USIA/WP1Preparation/Publication/SCIDEV\\_USIA\\_Uni\\_Society\\_Collaborations\\_FINAL.pdf](https://usia.al/wpcontent/uploads/wrkspc/USIA/WP1Preparation/Publication/SCIDEV_USIA_Uni_Society_Collaborations_FINAL.pdf), p. 43

The survey, interviews, and focus groups all agree on the importance of university-to-business collaboration. Successful collaboration requires sustainable, professional cooperation, clear objectives, regular communication, high ethical standards, diverse funding sources, quality research participation, initial assessment of needs and expectations, and a review of the state of cooperation to identify lessons, success stories, challenges, and future directions.

UBC should take advantage of the EU integration process and its implications for another approach about research demand, involve universities in their continuous, thematic advocacy efforts. The universities can collaborate in terms of offering sustainable research regarding accurate definition of the sector and insufficient prioritization of sub-sectors of economy, also offering expertise in statistics and administrative data. Specialized outsourcing services have a main client in the public sector, while the private sector lacks a vision to align with specialized outsourcing companies for some processes and prefers in-house operations.<sup>20</sup>

Students of Bachelor, Master, and PhD will have more opportunities to collaborate on projects, interact with Business representatives, and have an easier time finding employment if they are active part of the UBC. Students will be able to build relationships with business leaders and enhance their knowledge and abilities through University-Business collaboration.<sup>21</sup>

The strategic need for research through the establishment and strengthening of the UBC will guarantee the improvement of the universities research capacities. The Universities research capacities should be positively used in strengthening also collaboration with other actors in society. Additionally, the establishment of research excellence will offer better possibilities for sharing information and data and will also allow the creation of interdisciplinary research groups that have better possibilities in conducting high level research.<sup>22</sup> UBC should be a valorized priority in Universities Strategic planning. Through educational public institutions research funds, collaborative project development, support for EU fundraising and networking this collaboration can produce improved research results that impact universities and businesses.

#### 4. EU Practice and their Adaption in Albanian Universities: Towards Possible Solutions

This section deprives the schemes and mechanisms that EU has explored and implemented so far to properly reach out business sector with academia:

*Business sector (sporadically) set up calls to support communities and social activity:* According to European practice there are a lot of companies that consult stakeholders on how to deal with EU acquis.<sup>23</sup> Among the dynamic issues tackling with, the companies orientate businesses and universities on how they can create bridges of collaboration. Universities can use these structures to get an inside approach and get proper solutions. In order to plan their own initiatives, Albanian universities should begin to comprehend the goals and objectives of these organizations. Also, there is still the possibility that Albanian universities can encourage the Ministry of Education to empower business and bring them closer to university activity. Universities must develop their own means to connect with the business sector because they are autonomous institutions; the Ministry of Education should not devote adequate resources to this endeavor. Also, in Albanian reality, business sector does not provide clearly specific calls on their websites or even general information to approach social impact related to university. When finding the common perspectives of collaboration, both universities and business sector can add a specific agenda on establishing and developing the relations between them. This process can be also managed from the Ministry of Education, by involving the scheme into the national strategies or relevant documents in this regard.

*University can bring into the right spot business investments by their own initiative:* The information in this frame is sporadic and not sustainable refreshed, on connecting business sector with university development: some partial employment with students, which most of the time remains without any detailed description. By attempting to involve the business sector more in the implementation of the projects and other pertinent scientific research, universities can serve as the primary intermediary in inviting and leading this process. In general, when universities write projects, business sector is not even foreseen as a target group. Over the past decade, Albanian universities have strategically aligned themselves with the European Union (EU) funding schemes as a primary avenue for financing research and

<sup>20</sup> Smart Specialization in Albania, <https://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/albania>

<sup>21</sup> Prendi LL., Kraja, G., Nexhipi O., (2021), UNIVERSITY-BUSINESS COOPERATION: THE CASE OF ALBANIA, *International Journal of Economics, Commerce & Management*, Vol IX, Issue 11, 2021, p. 134 <https://ijecm.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/9118.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> See <https://usia.al/>

<sup>23</sup> See some of the practice and the way how this is implemented in the websites of dr2consultants, spark etc being the most famous companies that successfully exercise this practice.

innovation.<sup>24</sup>

Other opportunities have spot out in the second place of attention. Being orientated in this area, has made possible that Albanian universities have not yet opened the possibility to work with business stakeholders or make them part of the process in one way or another. Popular grant opportunities that run out in Albanian universities are: CBHE – Capacity Building in Higher Education<sup>25</sup>, Jean Monnet Chair<sup>26</sup>, Modules<sup>27</sup>, COST<sup>28</sup> etc. The business sector is not viewed as a desirable stakeholder to participate in the project's writing and implementation by these funding schemes. In a general perspective, the EU granting schemes promote the collaboration between academia, community and governmental structure. We should also take into consideration that these EU opportunities create small spaces for the business sector to be involved, but this means that during application, universities must take some higher risks for successful evaluation. *Approach of international and European calls for grants/tenders/projects:* while several EU funding greatly facilitate the emergence of entrepreneurship, they do not specifically provide for the integration of the business sector into university research. Taking into consideration the nature of grant tenders of Horizon Europe, EU for Europe, Marie Skłodowska Curie, it is highly recommended that these programmes should add into their list of eligibility the involvement of business sector.<sup>29</sup>

Why is it that the business sector is not able to submit an application for a project concept that advances higher education? Also, there is another alternative that universities can 'use' in order to get closer to business sector. The format of SPARK and Dr2 Consultants, which are companies that do offer consultancies in the frame of EU law implementation in business stakeholders, can be highly recommended to be as a main cornerstone of universities. Albanian universities can start by establishing a memo of collaboration/agreement in order to get updated their insights in this frame. The Albanian National Institution for Research and Innovation (AKKSHII) can provide a list of EU Programmes that involve/promote the role of business into academia and university development in general, by highlighting separately those that are orientated towards entrepreneurship.

Albania is currently undergoing the process of EU integration. Not only is it necessary to approach the business sector more intelligently and closely, but it is also being incorporated into the main EU policy strategies. The European Commission has been discussing UBC (University Business Cooperation) in greater detail lately. The results of the project "The Status of University-Business Cooperation in Europe" are presented in this paper. A group coordinated by the Science-to-Business Marketing Research Centre, Germany, carried out the project between 2016 and 2017 for the European Commission's DG Education and Culture.<sup>30</sup> UBC is still only a hazy component of policy and execution at the national level in European nations. The research has identified 14 successful practices, but still it needs a lot to spread up correctly and efficiently the level of cooperation in EU.

It is interesting that among all the high number of legal acts and policy level documents of EU, there is none that explicitly treats UBC as a specific policy or issue. I do not see this as a vacuum, and it has not prevented academic institutions and the corporate sector from establishing their own degree of cooperation. On the other hand, having a concrete policy statement at the EU level that may anticipate this pattern will forcefully bring this issue into the right frame of reference and may even inspire both structures to give UBC the due attention it deserves. Also, having a separate document on UBC can produce sustainable impact, bringing this not as a sporadic solution, but prompting sustainable results for business, academia and the community in general.

The vague position of UBC into European policy making is not in line with successful histories of European universities that have established on their own initiative different level of collaboration. Going into different websites of the

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<sup>24</sup> See *Facts and Figures* and *press release from European Union regarding to this topic on International cooperation with Albania in research and innovation* [www.europa.eu](http://www.europa.eu), last seen in February 2024

<sup>25</sup> This program aims to enhance the quality and relevance of higher education in Albania. It focuses on capacity building, curriculum development, and institutional cooperation. Students can benefit from research projects, training, and mobility opportunities.

<sup>26</sup> Named after the French scholar Jean Monnet, this grant supports teaching, research, and activities related to European integration. It encourages academic excellence in European studies and fosters a deeper understanding of EU policies.

<sup>27</sup> These are short-term courses or workshops within the framework of Erasmus+ programs. They cover various topics and provide specialized knowledge to students and academics

<sup>28</sup> COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology): COST actions promote collaboration among researchers across Europe. They fund networking activities, conferences, and research projects in various fields

<sup>29</sup> [https://commission.europa.eu/funding-tenders/find-funding/eu-funding-programmes/horizon-europe\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/funding-tenders/find-funding/eu-funding-programmes/horizon-europe_en) last seen in February 2024

<sup>30</sup> See *resources developed on the EU websites The state of UBC in Europe, final report*, PDF ISBN 978-92-79-80971-2 DOI 10.2766/676478 NC-02-18-373-EN-N, © European Union, 2018, Reproduction is authorized provided the source is acknowledged, Image(s) © Science-to-Business Marketing Research Centre, 2018, © Leorato de Araujo, 2018, Printed in Germany [http://publications.europa.eu/resource/cellar/1b03ee59-67a4-11e8-ab9c-01aa75ed71a1.0001.01/DOC\\_1](http://publications.europa.eu/resource/cellar/1b03ee59-67a4-11e8-ab9c-01aa75ed71a1.0001.01/DOC_1), last seen in February 2024

high reputational universities in Europe, there is a lot to find out of good examples and practice in this regard. There is no need to wait for the national, regional or European document that can treat collaboration between university and academia. Universities can be the first initiators of getting closer to business sector in order to strengthen capacity building, research and innovation.

## 5. Albanian HEI-s Internationalization and European Practice to be Followed

Albanian universities having more than 30 years functioning under democratic principles, still face the challenge on strengthening their capacities by raising funds and in specific from business sector. In terms of funding and collaboration, academia and the business sector have often been perceived as distinct islands, each with its own unique characteristics and priorities. However, in recent years, efforts have been made to bridge this gap and foster meaningful connections between these two domains. Probably, this refers to the previous tradition on how universities have operated: having their own funds or administering governmental funds to fulfill the basic needs such as: salaries, laboratories, students' fee etc.

When it comes to Albania, being still in the road path of EU integration, there are some hint and tips that are worthy to be promoted and putting them into the right spotlight:

*There is somehow an indirect indicator coming from Annual Progress Report of Integration:* Progress on improving legal certainty for businesses has been mixed, while concerns about the effective consultation and implementation of legislation and strategies persist. Ongoing reforms of the vocational education and training (VET) system have still to show results. In 2021, Albania updated the professional and qualification standards and the respective curricula for three of the eight of its National Catalogue of the professional qualifications, in cooperation with vocational training facilities and business representatives, to better reflect market needs and to encourage a diversified offer of qualifications. Albania also progressed in aligning the Albanian qualification framework with the European Qualification Framework (EQF) and receive the approval of the EQF Advisory.<sup>31</sup>

It is somehow courageous that the Report highlights the connection of development of business sector in line with public policy and in specific with the research terms and innovation. There is a very good start to be based on and to proceed further within the needed documents.

*Business sector is also one of the very important indicators that INSTAT (Institute of Statistics) analyzes and provides for the whole country (but not with the correlation of business development and academia). It is strongly recommended that INSTAT should provide matching results on business sector and academia (for example how many graduates do work in business sector, how many business organizations have agreement with universities, etc.).*<sup>32</sup>

*UBC in Albania finds place even in the National Strategy of Education: Creation of joint cooperation projects between business associations and universities, with the assistance of international partners, through forms of change the transfer of technology that affects both the improvement of curricula and a more preparation good of graduates for the labor market.*<sup>33</sup> Despite of not being detailed in specific indicators or having a wider space, the strategy bring into the tables of opportunities the need of collaboration between universities and business sector.

*The National Plan of EU Integration (2022-2024)*<sup>34</sup> treats a lot of business development area, but does not connect the business impact with university activity. Even though it is not a necessary element to be included formally in this document, relevant indicators that can orientate public administration to implement UBC modality, would have been useful in this regard. We do remember the fact that the Plan of Integration is in the center of attention of policy makers and executive power.

*A very positive new approach of announcing the winning project on UBC modality:* Recently, National Agency of Research and Innovation (responsible for development of project, research and innovation in higher educational

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<sup>31</sup> Albania 2022 Report of EU in the frame of enlargement process

<https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-10/Albania%20Report%202022.pdf>, last seen in February 2024

<sup>32</sup> This is how indicators for business sector are presented from INSTAT, <https://www.instat.gov.al/al/temat/shkenc%C3%AB-teknologji-dhe-inovacion/inovacion/>

<https://www.instat.gov.al/al/statistikat-n%C3%AB-shkolla/arsimi-n%C3%AB-shqip%C3%ABri/>, last seen in February 2024

<sup>33</sup> National Strategy for Higher Education 2021 – 2026 <https://arsimi.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Draft-Strategjia-per-Arsimin-2021-2026.pdf>, last seen in February 2024

<sup>34</sup> National Plan for European Integration in Albania

[https://integrimi-ne-be.punetesjastme.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/PLANI-KOMB%C3%8BTAR-P%C3%8BR-INTEGRIMIN-EVROPIAN\\_Final.pdf](https://integrimi-ne-be.punetesjastme.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/PLANI-KOMB%C3%8BTAR-P%C3%8BR-INTEGRIMIN-EVROPIAN_Final.pdf), last seen in February 2024



institutions in the country) have recently announced details of the winning projects that do support the connection between university and business sector.<sup>35</sup>

In 2023, there are currently 10 UBC projects running on implementation. The nature of these projects seems to be reflected on the impact of business sector on the community development (SME, environmental issues, support on technology research etc).

*There is still a way from going national to regional:* Staying focused only into the national efforts in this regard is not enough for the universities to get closer to business sector. There are a lot of opportunities to join to regional, European or international partners in order to spread up the isolation of higher education institutions. One of these successful examples is the Stars EU Alliance. <sup>36</sup> We envision universities as regional development accelerators, which create new knowledge that society, industries, and sectors need to innovate. They educate citizens and empower students and lifelong learners to fully contribute to the social, economic, and cultural betterment of society. They have the theoretical insights that underpin and challenge daily routines.

We believe that the European University *modus operandi* is particularly well-suited to serve our goal, as it allows partners to collaborate on common tasks, under one identity, whilst maintaining their freedom to act and interact with others. In our vision, universities will join forces, and competencies, utilize synergies and complementarities, and will team up with regional actors, collaborating in the cooperation structures (co-creation environments) – real and virtual – where all can meet, spar, discover and create. This Alliance has also a new Albanian University University “Aleksander Moisiu” Durres that have recently joined this structure. Each partner university established contacts with regional and local governments as well as with other regional ecosystem actors: industry; business; knowledge institutions; public entities and NGOs to involve them into the STARS EU Network.

Going from national perspectives into this European structure and *vice versa* is a very good way to understand and implement better the UBC modality. These examples must be promoted and inviting more partners to be part of.

## 6. Conclusions and Recommendations

As a reflection on this article, we may bring into light some conclusions:

*University Initiative on UBC as a smart solution:* While national policies may not explicitly mandate UBC, universities themselves should take the lead in fostering collaboration with the business sector. Their proactive engagement can drive meaningful partnerships.

*Government Support top – bottom up:* Albanian universities should advocate for improved and diversified instruments to empower UBC. By pushing the government to create an enabling environment, universities can enhance their impact.

*Strategic Approaches:* To successfully implement UBC, Albanian universities can adopt several strategies:

- National Resources: Leveraging national resources is essential. Universities can tap into existing infrastructure and funding mechanisms.
- EU and Regional Structures: Active participation in EU programs and regional networks provides valuable opportunities for collaboration.
- Negotiation and Diplomacy: Engaging in dialogue with businesses, policymakers, and other stakeholders through negotiation and diplomacy can yield fruitful outcomes.

*EU Programs:* Focusing on EU programs that promote UBC beyond entrepreneurship is crucial, considering these two successful strategies:

- Top-Down Calls: EU Commission-prescribed calls with specific content.
- Bottom-Up Calls: Companies suggest content for UBC programs twice a year.

Fostering strong relationships between academia and business enriches both sectors and adds to societal progress because when academia and business work together, everyone gains!

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<sup>35</sup> See the perspective followed by NASRI within the decision no.11, date 21.07. 2023 ‘On funding scheme for business and industry cooperation projects with universities for 2023 annual year’

<https://nasri.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/VENDIM-NR.-11-DAT%c3%8b-21.07.2023-MIRATIMIN-E-FINANCIMIT-T%c3%8b-PROJEKTEVE-FITUESE-T%c3%8b-TEKNOLOGJIS%c3%8b-DHE-INOVACIONIT-Q%c3%8b-VIJN%c3%8b-SI-BASHK%c3%8bPUNIM-I-UNIVERSITETEVE-ME-BIZNESININDUSTRIN%c3%8b-P%c3%8bR-VITIN-2023.pdf> , last seen in February 2024

<sup>36</sup> See <https://uamd.edu.al/stars-eu/>

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