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(ICSNS XXXXII-2025)

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Enhancing quality through staff and student engagement

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Abstract

This article explores the continuous development and challenges of quality assurance in higher education institutions in Albania, emphasizing the involvement of academic staff and students, and the critical role of human resources to ensure high academic standards.

The analysis is grounded in current practices and accumulated experiences. The Albanian legal framework mandates internal quality assurance systems within universities, requiring working groups that include student representatives and external experts to monitor academic, research, and administrative activities. Numerous reforms have been undertaken, the most significant of which relate to institutional autonomy, increased transparency, the implementation of the credit system (ECTS), and integration into the Bologna Process.

Case studies like Aldent University demonstrate successful initiatives such as student evaluations, workshops, and transparent communication strategies aimed at improving teaching quality. The professional development of academic staff through training and international collaboration is essential to advancing educational standards. However, challenges like subjective student evaluations, limited financial and human resources, insufficient engagement of key stakeholders in decision-making process and lack of independence in quality control processes.

The article argues for strengthening institutional capacities, fostering collaborative governance, and better measurable indicators to ensure meaningful participation of staff and students in quality assurance. Ultimately, aligning Albanian higher education with European standards and labor market needs requires a student-centered approach, robust internal quality control, and enhanced research-teaching integration to achieve sustainable improvements.

Keywords: Quality, Law, Staff, Students, Control.

1. Introduction

One of the main and necessary objectives that are set out in the framework of education reforms in general in Albania, and higher education in particular, is the continuous improvement and assurance of quality in the educational and academic process, in accordance with the most positive international practices and the standards of the Bologna System. A decisive role in this context, in addition to the provided legal framework and closely related to it - are the human resources in higher education institutions, which are considered not only as transmitters and implementers of educational and scientific policies and practices but also as key actors and partners in suggesting, developing, and drafting these practices as well as in exercising internal self-control during their implementation to achieve and ensure quality (UNESCO, 1995).

Human resources in higher education institutions, specifically the academic staff organized in the elected university structures at the academic and administrative level, and students with their respective organizations and representatives, are two

key actors who, with their mutual involvement and interaction, and consequently, with their direct or indirect shared responsibility, directly condition the achievement and assurance of quality in educational-scientific processes and programs. Inclusion in education is a complex process that primarily needs to be recognized and then implemented.

2. Legal Framework

According to a more moderate understanding, inclusion differs from integration. Inclusion requires fundamental changes to be made. Usually, these changes start with the legal framework for education and are followed by the joint commitment of educational authorities and the universities themselves, to improve the quality of educational programs, to ensure sufficient support services, qualified personnel, and above all, to create a welcoming and high-quality university atmosphere. Let us take a closer look at each of these issues, starting first with the competencies and regulations stipulated by the law on higher education in Albania regarding the role that higher education institutions themselves should play in ensuring educational-teaching quality.

Regarding internal quality assurance, the law on higher education stipulates that higher education institutions are responsible for internal quality assurance in accordance with the standards and guidelines set by the Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ASCAL). For this purpose, these institutions establish relevant working groups in which a representative from the student organizations of the institution, as well as an external expert representative, always participates. These working groups periodically assess the effectiveness of the educational, research, or artistic activities, as well as the administrative and financial activities of the institution. The groups have operational autonomy and access to all data of the institution [Article 59, point 1; 2].

In article 54/1, point ç, it is stated that students should express their opinion on the quality of teaching and the work of the academic staff of the institution. Students can express their opinions and evaluations in various ways. This can be achieved by completing several evaluation forms for each semester of an academic year. These evaluation forms are collected and reviewed by the Dean's Office, and based on the evaluations given by students, each lecturer is called by the respective dean, who communicates the results and what the lecturer needs to improve in the future.

Student councils also express opinions and proposals on all matters of general interest to higher education institutions, such as, for example, study plans and programs, regulations for educational activities, the right to study, the quality of services, the determination of tuition fees and other financial contributions for students, preliminary annual balances of expenditures or the allocation of financial resources, the development of various cultural, artistic, and sports activities, etc. [Article 57/2, subpoint c].

Regarding the involvement of academic staff in ensuring the quality of programs and curricula, the law provides for the representation of academic staff in decision-making and controlling bodies over academic quality. Study programs are developed by the

institutions themselves and approved by their academic senates. In this moment, academic staff is represented in the Academic Senate, in the Faculty Council, in the Council of Scientific Research Institutes, as well as in the Council of the Professional College. Participation of staff in these key bodies directly impacts the improvement of educational policies, relevant programs, and curricula, and consequently ensures the quality of programs in higher education institutions [Article 21].

With the perspective of liberalization and free movement in the European Education Area, some improvement in the interaction between educational assessment systems is required as a necessity (Vaniscotte. F, 1986).

Regarding the accreditation of study programs, the law stipulates that higher education institutions offer accredited study programs, organized in modules and assessed in credits, according to the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) [Article 70/1].

3. Analysis of the experience so far

Higher education in Albania has undergone a continuous transformation since the '90s, aiming to align with European standards and create a more open, qualitative, and accountable system. Numerous reforms have been undertaken, the most significant of which relate to institutional autonomy, increased transparency, the implementation of the credit system (ECTS), and integration into the Bologna Process.

Key achievements include an increase in access to higher education, the creation of a network of public and private institutions, as well as the development of the legal framework, including Law no. 80/2015 "On Higher Education and Scientific Research". Internal structures for quality assurance in higher education institutions have also been established, and the Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ASCAL) has been made operational.

However, challenges remain numerous, such as the lack of financial and human resources, problems with the quality of teaching and scientific research, the complete dysfunction of internal quality assurance structures, as well as a still limited involvement of students and staff in decision-making processes. The implementation of legislation has often turned out to be formal and not always effective in practice.

The experience so far indicates a clear need for strengthening institutional capacities, professionalizing academic management, increasing transparency and accountability, as well as creating a genuine culture of quality. Furthermore, it is essential to enhance the partnership between higher education institutions, the state, and the labor market, so that education truly serves the purpose of social and economic development.

One of the fundamental principles in this regard has been and remains the placement of the student at the center of the university's activities. For this purpose, the aim has been to verify the efficiency and results of the educational process offered to students. These internal checks are carried out periodically through questionnaires, feedback forms, or evaluation forms.

There is no golden key for solving every problem, but this does not mean we should not seek ways to solve the issues faced (Santelli. L, 2001). Aldent University, which is one of the well-established universities in Albania, has been implemented the

evaluation of the teaching process and quality through the completion of “Evaluation Forms” by students, the organization of various interactive workshops for staff and students, as well as other forms within the framework of transparency, improvement, and accountability.

The focus has been on internal formation as it highlights the ability to have a self-reflective behavior (Cambi.F, 2004).

According to Comenius on reflecting on the entire educational, scientific, and formative process, in school one must understand before learning.

Understanding does not only mean to expand and clarify knowledge in a specific field of science, but also to reflect on certain areas of knowledge, on intellectual curiosity, passion, quality, and the interest these pieces of knowledge evoke in you. To realize this idea, students have been encouraged and invited to be interactive actors by participating in decision-making at the university, in research activities, as well as in the social life of the university.

Based on the analysis of the experiences so far, the creation of a system of services for students is presented as a necessary requirement, as well as providing every student with the opportunity to graduate in the best possible way.

Regarding the engagement of academic staff in improving and ensuring quality, the emphasis has been placed on organizing work in groups of teaching staff, also involving student representation, based on transparency and mutual cooperation. The determination and systematic control of each lecturer’s tasks is based on the spirit of cooperation and respect for the academic freedom of the lecturers.

4. Challenges for the involvement of staff and students in quality assurance

The results so far have shown that evaluations made by students are not always objective. Some students judge or interpret aspects related to the educational process by viewing them in a personal context rather than in an academic, professional, or ethical context, meanwhile the establishment of working groups in universities and the review and improvement of curricula has yielded good results in enhancing quality. The working groups, composed mainly of lecturers and experts in the respective disciplines, present their suggestions for the improvement of curricula to the Dean’s Office and further to the Academic Senate. A major challenge has been and continues to be in this context, the independence of the process of internal quality control, self-assessment, and accreditation in higher education institutions.

For the continuous quality improvement, which is an ongoing challenge, qualifications and exchange of academic experiences among educators has been carried out.

This is especially true for the academic staff of institutions/universities recently opened in Albania. Organizing continuous staff qualifications, such as seminars and scientific conferences both domestically and abroad, is one of the fundamental practices for enhancing academic quality. Increasing collaboration opportunities and exchanging academic and professional experiences with many universities around the world is another strong point in improving the quality of the staff. Establishing professional and research laboratories in modern technologies has a significant and very facilitating impact both for academic staff and for students. The opportunity

for student exchange through various projects with multiple universities has been a good opportunity to see not only the academic side but also the professional and cultural evaluation of students. The use of the latest technologies in the theoretical and practical assessment of students has made meritocracy not just a motivation but a primary quality in their evaluation. As always there will be place for improvement, this also highlights the practical difficulties and obstacles that occur during the implementation of quality assurance policies, such as the lack of appropriate training, insufficient communication, and resistance to change. Through the examination of current experiences and recommendations, the aim is to provide a clear framework for enhancing the active and effective participation of staff and students in ensuring and developing quality in higher education in Albania.

5. Conclusions

The changes that are happening today within the framework of development - in the fields of education, science, technology, and society - clearly define the new missions of educational systems and formats, including not only schools and universities but also all the interactive, permanent components of society, which are increasingly connected to individuals' work experiences (G. Bocchi, M. Ceruti, 2004). To further improve the quality of processes and academic programs in higher education institutions in Albania, based on the most advanced Western European experiences, it would be advisable:

- The organization and implementation of the 'Internal Quality Control' by these institutions themselves. This control, which should be carried out periodically, concludes with the preparation of a comprehensive report on the overall status of academic internal quality in the institution.
- Creating regular mechanisms for bilateral communication between academic staff, administrative staff, and students (periodic meetings, forums, online surveys).
- Implementing continuous student surveys on teaching and support services, with publication of analyses and measures taken. This process should be carried out with greater objectivity and efficiency in the future.
- Using interactive workshops with students to discuss quality issues and improve the student experience.
- The inclusion of students in the evaluation of teaching, as well as in the processes of program assessment and the overall academic experience, along with the creation of measurable indicators for the engagement of staff and students in the development of quality.
- Increasing the independent research activities of academic staff, linking research results with the teaching process and putting them in service of this process. This will directly enhance the quality of university degrees.
- The essential post-university qualification of academic staff, both domestically and abroad, to acquire and implement Western academic methodologies and standards, which require the application of the Bologna System.
- One task that arises for the academic staff, in collaboration with the governing bodies of the University, is to increase the organization of student exchanges

(e.g., the current Western programs “TEMPUS”, “Erasmus”, “Leonardo”, etc.) that have been a reality in European universities for many years.

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Osteoporotic vs Non-osteoporotic patients comparison surgery with Hallux Valgus- Case Study Research

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Abstract

Introduction: Hallux Valgus (HV) is a prevalent deformity of the foot, often resulting in pain, functional limitation, and a decreased quality of life. Surgical intervention, including techniques such as osteotomy, is commonly employed to correct the deformity and restore normal function. However, the presence of osteoporosis, a condition characterized by reduced bone density and increased fragility, may complicate surgical outcomes. The aim of this study is to evaluate the outcomes of the surgical treatment in patients with osteoporosis with moderate or severe hallux valgus regarding the correction of Hallux Valgus angle (HVa) and intermetatarsal angle (iMa) compared to non-osteoporotic patients.

Materials and Methods: the timeline of the study was from 2015 to 2022 with 26 patients with the mean age of 62.7 ± 4.2 within the osteoporotic group and 61.5 ± 5.0 within the non-osteoporotic group. 15 osteotomies in osteoporotic patients and 11 osteotomies in non-osteoporotic patients were seen at follow-up after 2 years after surgery. Preoperative bone density of t-score 2.5 sD or more below is named osteoporosis and IMA and was used to define patient groups; mild hallux valgus was defined with IMA of 11-16 degrees, moderate hallux valgus was defined with IMA from 16 to twenty degrees, and severe hallux valgus was defined with IMA from 20 degrees or more.

Results: no statistical differences were found in HVa, IMA and between the osteoporotic patients and non-osteoporotic patients preoperatively, postoperatively, and therefore the final follow-up in mild to moderate hallux valgus. No evidence of complications and every one of the patients resulted with complete union of the osteotomy.

Conclusion: We believed that the surgical treatment is a safe, effective procedure for the correction of elderly patients with osteoporosis. In patients with moderate and severe hallux valgus the results of osteotomy have not any specific difference between the osteoporotic and non-osteoporotic groups.

Introduction

Over 130 metatarsal osteotomies are described in the world literature for the surgical management of hallux valgus. [1] the scarf osteotomy was described as a technique for primary correction of a metatarsus primus varus. The technique consists of a diaphyseal Z-shaped osteotomy of the primary metatarsal (Mt1), during which the distal plantar part of the Mt1 is moved laterally to correct the increased IMA.[2] Mild deformities might influence our results; therefore, we did need a much bigger group in order to test differences between osteoporotic and non-osteoporotic in other subgroups. Radiological parameters are utilized in our study to evaluate whether in patients with moderate or severe hallux valgus the scarf osteotomy in osteoporotic

patients results in a better correction of HVa and IMA, as compared to non-osteoporotic patients. the results are going to be compared according to preoperative IMA and HVa.[3]

Materials and Methods

The period of the survey was conducted from the patients treated within the Trauma University Hospital of Tirana from 2015 to 2022 with 26 patients, included within the study. 15 osteoporotic patients and 11 non-osteoporotic patients were seen at follow-up after 2 years after surgery. Preoperative IMA and HVA was utilized to define patient groups; mild hallux valgus was defined with IMA of 11 to 16 degrees, moderate hallux valgus was defined with IMA from 16 to 20 degrees, and severe hallux valgus was defined with IMA from 20 degrees or more. age, BMi, HVa, IMA and Bone density were a number of the data used in this study. Operative procedures and post-operative treatment are described in details as follows. radiological evaluation was performed consistent with standardized procedures, with standard dorsoplantar and lateral foot x-ray with weight bearing. the angle between the primary and second metatarsals is between 8 to 9 degrees, usually considered to be the upper limits of normal. the valgus angle of the primary metatarsophalangeal joint also is more than 15 to 20 degrees, considered to be the upper limits of normal weight bearing. HVa was measured as the angle between the line connecting the center of the base to the center of the head of Mt1 and the line connecting the midpoints of the proximal and distal articular surfaces of the proximal phalanx. The IMA is defined as the angle between the longitudinal axis of Mt1 and the line bisecting the distal and proximal diaphyseal portions of Mt. The distal metatarsal articular angle (DMAa) was measured consistent with standard guidelines. Markers were placed at the foremost medial and most lateral extent of the metatarsal articular surface. A line was drawn connecting the 2 markers. another line was drawn perpendicular to the present line, consistent with the literature. [4-8] Bone density values in individuals are often expressed in relation to a reference population in standard deviation (SD); when compared to the young healthy population, this measurement is mentioned as the t-score.[5] t-score 2.5 sD or more below is named osteoporosis. severe osteoporosis: t-score 2.5 sD or more below within the presence of one or more fragility fractures (t-score \geq 2.5 PLUS fracture). Osteopenia: T-score but \geq -1 but above 2.5; Normal: T-score $>$ -1. 5.[6]

Results

No statistical differences were found in HVa, iMa between the osteoporotic patients and non-osteoporotic patients preoperatively, postoperatively, and therefore the final follow-up in mild to moderate hallux valgus. within the osteoporosis group, the mean HVa resulted from 35.7° to 10.3° at the time of ultimate follow-up in the osteoporotic group and from 32.6 to 9.4, and also the mean iMa resulted from 12.1° to 6.0° within the osteoporotic group and from 12.4 to 6.2 within the non-osteoporotic group. regarding satisfaction, approximately 83% of patients were very satisfied or satisfied. No evidence of complications and every one of the patients resulted with complete union of the osteotomy.

Conclusion

We believed that the surgical treatment is a safe, effective procedure for the correction of elderly patients with osteoporosis. In patients with moderate and severe hallux valgus the results of osteotomy have not any specific difference between the osteoporotic and non-osteoporotic groups.

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Circular Economy in Tourism: Implementation, Barriers and Opportunities in Shkodra Region

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Abstract

Circular economy (CE) is gaining particular importance in the tourism sector as an approach that aims to reduce the use of natural resources, minimize waste and improve the sustainability of destinations. However, the existing literature focuses mainly on urban destinations or developed countries, leaving significant gaps in peripheral regions. This study explores the level of understanding, adoption and effectiveness of CE practices in the tourism sector in the Shkodra region, a destination with great natural and cultural potential, but with fragmented development of green policies and practices.

Research Question

The main research question of the paper is: To what extent are circular economy principles understood, adopted and effectively implemented in the tourism sector of the Shkodra region?

Methodology

The methodology is based on a mixed-methods approach with explanatory sequence, combining a structured questionnaire (50 tourism enterprises) with semi-structured interviews. Quantitative analysis will use descriptive statistics to answer the research questions on awareness, implementation and barriers to EQ, while qualitative analysis will follow thematic coding to deepen the reasons and perceptions of stakeholders.

Results and Discussion

The results are expected to show a gap between knowledge and implementation, limited implementation of basic EQ practices, as well as barriers related to costs and lack of institutional support. However, community-based tourism, international projects and local initiatives offer the potential for transformation. The study contributes to the literature by filling the gap on peripheral destinations and provides practical and policy recommendations for a sustainable transition towards circular tourism in Albania.

Keywords: Circular Economy, Sustainable Tourism, Resource Management, Energy Efficiency,

JEL classification: Q01, Q20.

Introduction

The concept of circular economy (CE) has gained attention as a new way of thinking about how we use resources. Instead of the traditional take-use-dispose model, it offers a practical approach to tackling today's big challenges – like running out of resources, harming the environment, and dealing with growing amount of waste. In recent years, the tourism sector has recognized the importance of adopting circular economy principles as a means to enhance environmental stewardship, mitigate the depletion of natural resources, and foster sustainable development in destinations.

During 2024 Albania was visited by 18.5% more foreign tourist and their main focus was in cultural and natural tourism (Ministry of Tourism, 2024 December). The tourism industry characterized by its heavy reliance on natural and cultural resources, faces significant challenges related to overconsumption, waste generation, and environmental degradation. As a result, the integration of CE practices within tourism operations is increasingly viewed as a critical pathway to achieving sustainable tourism, which not only benefits the environment but also enhances the socio-economic resilience of destinations.

Despite the growing interest in circular economy principles within the tourism sector, existing literature predominantly focuses on urban destinations in developed countries, leaving a notable gap in understanding how these principles are perceived and implemented in peripheral regions. This oversight is particularly evident in areas like Shkodra region of Albania, which boasts significant natural and cultural potential but has experienced fragmented development in terms of green policies and practices. Shkodra region is characterized by a diverse array of natural landscapes, including lakes, rivers, and mountains, as well as a rich cultural heritage, and emerging tourism opportunities, presents a unique case study for exploring the understanding the adoption of circular economy principles in a context that is often overlooked in the broader discourse on sustainable tourism.

However, the tourism sector in this region is still in its formative stages, facing challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, limited investment in sustainable practices, and a lack of awareness regarding the benefits of circular economy principles. As the region seeks to position itself as a competitive tourist destination, there is an urgent need to explore the extent to which stakeholders in the tourism sector understand, adopt, and effectively implement circular economy practices.

The research question guiding this study is:

To what extent are circular economy principles understood, adopted, and effectively implemented in the tourism sector of the Shkodra region?

The research sub-questions answered in this paper are:

- To what extent does awareness of the Circular Economy concept influence tourism businesses' future plans to adopt CE practices?
- Does receiving government support (eg, subsidies, loans, external expertise) increase the likelihood of CE adoption among tourism businesses?
- How do perceived benefits influence tourism businesses to adopt CE practices?
- To what extent does tourist demand for sustainable services influences the adoption of CE practices?

The significance of this study lies in its potential to provide valuable insights into the barriers and opportunities associated with the implementation of circular economy principles in the tourism sector of the Shkodra region. Understanding the level of awareness and adoption of CE practices among tourism stakeholders can inform policy development, promote best practices, and facilitate the transition towards more sustainable tourism models. Additionally, by focusing on a peripheral region, this research aims to address the existing literature gap and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how circular economy principles can be applied in diverse contexts.

Literature Review

CE emphasizes the importance of closing the loop of product lifecycles through greater resource efficiency, sustainable consumption, and waste reduction (Geissdoerfer et al., 2018). In the context of the tourism sector, the adoption of CE principles is particularly significant, as tourism is a resource-intensive industry that has substantial impacts on natural ecosystems and local communities (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). This literature review aims to explore the current state of research on CE in tourism, highlighting the gaps in knowledge, particularly in peripheral regions such as the Shkodra region of Albania.

The theoretical underpinnings of CE are rooted in systems thinking and sustainability principles. According to Kirchgeorg et al. (2018), CE is characterized by its focus on the lifecycle of products and services, advocating for a shift from linear consumption models to regenerative systems that prioritize resource recovery and waste minimization. This paradigm shift necessitates a holistic approach that integrates economic, environmental, and social dimensions of sustainability (Murray et al., 2017). In the tourism context, CE practices can manifest in various forms, including waste management, energy efficiency, sustainable sourcing, and community engagement (Lehmann et al., 2020).

The literature on CE in tourism has primarily focused on urban destinations and developed countries, where there is a greater emphasis on sustainability initiatives and regulatory frameworks (Baker et al., 2019). Studies have shown that urban tourism destinations are increasingly adopting CE principles to enhance their sustainability profiles, reduce operational costs, and improve the visitor experience (Patterson et al., 2019). For instance, cities like Amsterdam and Copenhagen have implemented comprehensive CE strategies that encompass waste reduction, renewable energy integration, and sustainable mobility solutions (Haas et al., 2019).

However, there is a notable lack of empirical research addressing the adoption and effectiveness of CE practices in peripheral regions and developing countries, where tourism often plays a critical role in local economies but is characterized by fragmented policies and limited resources (Bramwell et al., 2017). This gap in the literature is significant, as peripheral regions may face unique challenges and opportunities in transitioning towards a circular tourism model (López et al., 2020).

Understanding and awareness of CE principles among tourism stakeholders is a crucial factor influencing the adoption of sustainable practices (Rogers et al., 2012). Research indicates that while there is a growing recognition of the importance of sustainability in tourism, many stakeholders lack a comprehensive understanding of CE concepts and their practical applications (Pérez et al., 2020). This knowledge gap can hinder the effective implementation of CE strategies, particularly in regions where educational and institutional support is limited (Dahl et al., 2020).

Despite the potential benefits of adopting CE practices, numerous barriers can impede their effective implementation in the tourism sector. Common challenges identified in the literature include high costs associated with transitioning to sustainable practices, lack of institutional support, and insufficient infrastructure (García et al., 2021). In

peripheral regions, these barriers may be exacerbated by limited access to financial resources, technical expertise, and market opportunities (González et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the perception of high initial costs associated with implementing sustainable practices can deter businesses from pursuing CE strategies, particularly in a context where profit margins are often tight (Kumar et al., 2021).

While barriers to the implementation of CE practices exist, there are also significant opportunities for transformation, particularly through community-based tourism (CBT) initiatives. CBT emphasizes the involvement of local communities in tourism development, promoting sustainable practices that benefit both the environment and local economies (Bramwell et al., 2019). Research has shown that CBT can facilitate the adoption of CE principles by fostering collaboration among stakeholders, enhancing local capacity, and promoting awareness of sustainability issues (Baker et al., 2019).

Initiatives that focus on local food sourcing, waste reduction, and cultural preservation can enhance the visitor experience while contributing to the sustainability of the destination (Pérez et al., 2020).

International projects and collaborations can also serve as catalysts for promoting CE practices in peripheral regions. Research indicates that partnerships between local stakeholders and international organizations can facilitate knowledge transfer, capacity building, and access to financial resources (Dahl et al., 2020). For instance, projects aimed at promoting sustainable tourism development in Albania can provide valuable insights and best practices for implementing CE principles in the Shkodra region.

In Albania, the circular economy in tourism is still in its initial phases, but some initiatives show great potential to integrate international practices with local specificities. Some of the examples that worthy to mention, are as follows:

- Circular Economy Park, opened in march 2025 and is an education and recycling center that combines a repair café, a second-hand goods market, and a recycling hall that promotes zero waste and arise the awareness in CE concept. (Recycling Albania, 2025).
- Erasmus Project and Circular Tourism Albania (2025-2027), aim to support touristic SME, and educational institutions with training and teaching the CE practices with EU examples.
- Circular City Labs – Shkodra project, that support startups and SME enterprises in finding innovative solutions for waste management, HORECA (Hotel, restaurant and Bar/Catering industries) and tourism, offering grants and financial support.
- Ecotourism in the Albanian Alps: family-run guesthouses (for example, in Theth and Valbona) and community-based initiatives make use of renewable energy, recycling, and locally sourced food, thereby integrating the principles of the circular economy into practice.
- Macro-infrastructure including projects financed by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, the German Development Bank KfW, focusing in waste management and waste water treatment, thereby indirectly improving the tourism environment.

From the perspective of a comparative analysis between international literature and Albanian cases we notice these differences:

Dimension	International cases	Albanian cases
Approach	Systematic development, Hotel models and Life Cycle assessment	Projects implemented
Extend	Global companies, and EU politics	Micro in SME, city projects and in infrastructure.
Strength	Standardization, politic integration and financial support	Local authenticity, community engagement, interplay between tradition and innovation.
Weaknesses	Focus on partial measures, and passive tourist	Fragmentation and lack of coordination.
Importance for tourism	Transforms the value chain	Direct experience at the destination, with a tangible impact on communities

Source: Authors elaboration

Local initiatives that align with CE principles can further enhance the sustainability of tourism in the region. By fostering innovation and collaboration among local enterprises, stakeholders can develop tailored solutions that address the unique challenges and opportunities in peripheral regions (González et al., 2019). These initiatives can range from waste reduction campaigns to sustainable transportation solutions, ultimately contributing to a more circular tourism model.

This literature review highlights the importance of assessing stakeholder awareness, understanding barriers to implementation, and exploring opportunities for transformation. By addressing these gaps, future research can contribute to the development of practical and policy recommendations that support a sustainable transition towards circular tourism in Albania and similar contexts.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach with an explanatory sequence to explore the awareness, implementation, and barriers to Circular Economy (CE) practices among tourism enterprises. The methodology integrates quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis, for a robust examination of the research questions. The main objective is to study the concept of circular economy in the tourism sector, the awareness level and the challenges and benefits of CE implementation. The questionnaire was created through google forms, and was send electronically to the participants. A link and a QR Code was created to access the questionnaire. The link was open from March 2025 to September 2025, and 50 questionnaires were answered. The businesses that participated were from different touristic areas of Shkodra region, as Shkodra city, Theth, Velipoje etc. The selection of participants was guided by purposive sampling, targeting organizations that are actively engaged in the tourism sector, including hotels, bar-restaurants, travel agencies, tour operators,

and other related businesses.

The questionnaire comprises 27 questions spread across several sections: 1) General information, 2) Knowledge and CE implementation, 3) Implemented CE practices, 4) Willingness to implement CE practices, 5) Customer demand for sustainable practices, 6) Rules and political framework, 7) Future plans to adopt CE principles and recommendations.

Following the quantitative phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subset of participants who completed the questionnaire. A total of 5 participants were selected based on their willingness to engage further and their responses in the questionnaire that indicated a nuanced understanding of CE practices. The selection aimed to ensure a diverse representation of perspectives, encompassing different types of enterprises, geographical locations, and levels of engagement with environmental initiatives.

The semi-structured format of the interviews allowed for flexibility in exploring topics of interest while ensuring that key themes related to the research questions were addressed. Interview participants included owners and managers, providing a comprehensive view of the operational and strategic considerations surrounding CE in tourism enterprises. The qualitative data obtained from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic coding.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the study. Participants were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing responses and securely storing data.

Results and Discussion

This session presents the main results and a deeper analysis of the data collected, according to the methodology and the research questions in which this study is focused.

Although the number of participants was not high and generally represented by small businesses, due to the limited number of large touristic businesses operating in Shkodra region, the exploratory study gives additional evidence to existing literature on CE implementation and tourism industry for the interested stakeholders.

The majority of the respondents operated in the accommodation and bar-restaurant (some in both businesses, 10% were operating in Travel agencies and 10% in souvenir shops. 38% of the respondent were working in the tourism sector for more than 10 years, 22% between 6-10 years, 22% between 2-5 years and 18% less than 2 years. The businesses with less experience are the new accommodation structures created in Theth, during the last two years that the tourism sector had a higher increase in numbers. About 56% of the businesses size is medium and 44% are small ones. This fact demonstrates the community engagement in the tourism sector, as an opportunity to make a profit from this emerging sector in Albania during the last years. According to the ministry of Tourism there is an increase of 15.2% of foreign tourist for the year 2024.

About 50% of the responses was given from the owner of the business and 32% from the managers, reinforcing the quality of the data collected. About 54% of the respondents have a University Degree, 18% have a Master Degree and 28% have a High School degree.

In terms of CE awareness, the findings reveal a knowledge gap: while 22% of respondents claimed to know the CE concept, many were unable to articulate it clearly, and almost half admitted not knowing it at all. This disconnection between limited conceptual knowledge and relatively higher familiarity with CE practices suggests that awareness campaigns have emphasized practical measures but have not effectively communicated the holistic vision of CE. Employee motivation to adopt sustainability practices was reported as moderate to high, which could serve as an enabling factor if businesses are provided with the right knowledge and tools.

Regarding implementation, CE practices are primarily centered on resource efficiency, such as reducing energy and water consumption and using local products. However, the low prevalence of eco-certification (only 16% certified) and the overwhelming reliance on landfill disposal (73%) indicate that systemic adoption of CE remains limited. Similarly, while over half reported moderate to high commitment to sustainability, this has not yet translated into comprehensive CE practices such as waste recycling or certification schemes.

The willingness to implement CE is constrained by structural challenges. Businesses identified high costs (74%), inadequate infrastructure (86%), lack of support (72%), and limited knowledge (44%) as the main barriers. These constraints echo findings in the literature, which emphasize financial capacity and supportive ecosystems as key determinants of CE adoption among SMEs. Moreover, the low financial capacity of firms is evident in their willingness to invest: 72% are only able to invest up to €1,000, while only 2% can invest more than €10,000. This highlights the urgent need for financial mechanisms —such as subsidies, low-interest loans, or tax reliefs— to make CE investments feasible for smaller firms.

Despite these constraints, the perceived benefits of CE are widely acknowledged, with environmental protection (92%), cost reduction (76%), and reputational gains (74%) emerging as the most valued outcomes. Interestingly, compliance with legislation was rarely cited (16%), reflecting the absence of mandatory CE regulations in Albania. This suggests that regulatory enforcement and mandatory standards could play a stronger role in mainstreaming CE practices.

Customer demand is emerging as an important factor: 76% of respondents noticed increased demand for sustainable services, and 72% actively promote their businesses as sustainable, mainly through social media and websites. This demonstrates that market-driven incentives are beginning to shape business behavior, although the lack of systematic infrastructure and support limits the extent to which businesses can respond to these demands.

Finally, the findings point to a strong will among businesses to support CE regulation, with 92% expressing support for government rules and acknowledging CE's importance for future success. About half of the businesses reported plans to adopt CE in the future, with a focus on renewable energy and smart technologies for efficiency. This underlines the potential for policy-business alignment, provided

that the necessary enabling conditions are created through targeted government interventions and infrastructure development.

The results of the research indicated the participants were not aware of the CE concept although they understood a lot of CE practices. This disconnection between knowledge and practice highlights the importance of targeted educational initiatives and capacity-building efforts to enhance stakeholder understanding and engagement. The most common practices include basic waste recycling, the use of local products, and the conservation of energy and water, which are consistent with international findings (Renfors, 2023).

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study highlights both opportunities and barriers to the adoption of Circular Economy practices in Albania's tourism sector. The findings show that while awareness of the CE concept remains limited, many businesses are already familiar with and implement certain sustainable practices. Perceived benefits—particularly environmental protection and cost savings—are widely recognized, and customer demand for sustainable services is increasing. Furthermore, businesses express strong support for future CE-related regulations, indicating readiness for a more formalized policy framework.

However, the results also reveal significant structural and financial barriers. Most businesses lack eco-certification, proper waste management systems, and the financial capacity to invest in CE practices. The predominance of small and medium-sized firms amplifies these constraints, as they are less equipped to bear the high upfront costs associated with CE transitions.

The study concludes that business size and financial support mechanisms are decisive for CE adoption, while awareness and demand, although important, are insufficient drivers on their own. To accelerate the transition, policymakers should prioritize: Establishing financial support schemes (subsidies, tax incentives, accessible loans) tailored to SMEs.

Developing infrastructure for waste recycling and eco-certification.

Launching awareness and capacity-building programs to bridge the knowledge gap between CE practices and the CE concept.

Encouraging customer engagement campaigns to strengthen demand-driven incentives and raise the awareness regarding international projects in CE.

In sum, the tourism sector in Albania demonstrates both willingness and potential to transition towards CE, but the pathway requires coordinated support from policymakers, businesses, and consumers. By addressing barriers and reinforcing enablers, CE adoption can become a cornerstone of sustainable tourism development in Albania.

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Teaching ESP through flipped approach: The case of food technology students at Agricultural University of Tirana

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Abstract

Despite not being a completely innovative teaching approach, the latest pandemics and the development of learning platforms and educational technology have encouraged English for Specific Purposes (ESP) researchers, academics, and course instructors to focus more on studying and implementing the flipped classroom approach. The goal of teaching ESP in higher education has been specifically to help students develop the communicative skills they may need in their future jobs by incorporating more computer-mediated communication into the curriculum. This study aims to compare the efficacy of implementing a traditional approach versus a flipped approach while teaching ESP to students of Food Technology who take a foreign language course during their first year of Bachelor's degree at the Agricultural University of Tirana, Albania.

By means of both quantitative and qualitative data analyses, gathered by using questionnaires as an instrument, the study attempts at answering the following questions: (i) What are the students' perceptions about the two approaches, flipped classroom approach and traditional learning approach?, (ii) What is the impact of these two approaches on three instructional goals, i.e. interaction, production and reflection?, and (iii) Which of the two approaches improves students skills more, especially in computer-mediated communication in the workplace?

The results of the study show that the flipped classroom approach has a greater impact on students' experience, as it motivates them more and consequently encourages them to take initiative in the learning process. The flipped approach also provided more time to study independently, thus catering to personal needs

Keywords: Flipped classes, English for Food Technology, ESP.

1. Introduction

The position of English as a Foreign Language in higher education has transcended the general language proficiency to include discipline-specific communication skills (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has emerged within this framework as an essential component of university curricula, particularly in technical and scientific fields.

In traditional ESP instruction, the method has been teacher-centered, and classroom time is predominantly spent in input delivery (content presentation, grammar explanations, vocabulary introduction). It has been assessed that such models may limit interaction and communicative language use (Hyland, 2019). On the other hand, the flipped classroom approach encourages learning by handing over activity from teachers to students (video lectures, readings, online quizzes and games, etc) outside of class therefore, reserving in-class time for interactive and communicative tasks (Bishop & Verleger, 2013).

The role of the teacher in a flipped classroom approach shifts from a presenter of the

knowledge and the centre of the activities to a more assistive role. They encourage students to be more active while taking on the role of the facilitator. Bergmann and Sam (2012) state that in the flipped model, the time is completely restructured, students ask questions about the content that has been delivered via video before the lesson, and the remainder of the time is used for more extensive hands-on activities and/or directed problem-solving time.

Due to the increasing digitalization of higher education, accelerated partly by the COVID-19 pandemic as well, there is growing interest in evaluating the pedagogical impact of flipped classrooms in ESP instruction. This study seeks to assess whether flipping the classroom can enhance communicative skills and learner autonomy for Food Technology students at AUT.

Through qualitative and quantitative data gathered, this study answers the following three research questions:

- a) What are the students' perceptions about the two approaches, the flipped classroom approach and the traditional learning approach?
- b) What is the impact of these two approaches on three instructional goals, i.e., interaction, production, and reflection?
- c) Which of the two approaches improves students' skills more, especially in computer-mediated communication in the workplace?

2. Literature Review

Over the past decade, due also to the emergence of technology, many new teaching methods have been developed, including the flipped classroom (FC) in ELT/language education, in English for Specific Purposes (ESP), (Acarol.2019). The fundamental idea of the relatively novel method is the inversion of the traditional pattern by introducing the learners to the didactic material outside the classroom, while class time is devoted to active tasks, collaborative work, practice, and interaction. The course instructor uses videotapes, online material, and different articles to encourage the learners to take a more active role in the process. (Bishop & Verleger, 2013).

Another study performed by Vitta & Al-Hoorie (2023), which analyzed 56 studies and 4,220 participants, found a large effect size ($g = 0.99$) in favor of the flipped classroom over traditional approaches in second-language learning, concluding that the flipped approach tends to outperform traditional methods in relation to student attitude, achievement, and engagement.

Another review by Heredia Ponce, Romero Oliva, and Claudio (2022) found steady evidence that FC contributes considerably to enhancing motivation, communicative competence, and self-oriented learning. The review points out some limitations as well, regarding student preparation and technological issues, among others.

Jiang, Lau, Cha, et al. (2020) synthesized studies carried out up to the year 2018 on language flipped education, finding that most studies focus on student outcomes with quantitative methods, rather than process-oriented or qualitative aspects.

Even though the majority of FC studies deal with general English, there is a growing interest in ESP, especially in technical, medical, engineering, and university discipline-specific contexts, as follows:

- *ESP for Automation / Computer-Integrated Technologies*: research by Konoplianyk,

Melnykova & Pryshupa (2021) reports that 46 undergraduate students majoring in automation and computer-integrated technologies at National Aviation University showed improvements in independence, time management, creativity, and communicative skills when a flipped ESP course using digital tools and learning platforms was applied.

- *ESP and reading comprehension in medical fields: A study in Iran* by Hosseini & Amirkhani, *Transforming Medical Education* (Hosseini & Amirkhani) explored how flipped classroom methods boost reading comprehension among medical/health students in ESP. It specifically studied how flipped classes compared to traditional lectures in reading comprehension among first-year medical graduates. The study highlighted statistically significant gains for the flipped group, especially for learners at intermediate levels.
- *Hybrid / blended ESP courses*: Montalbán (2021) integrated FC with other active methodologies in their courses, such as Project-Based Learning (PBL) and blended learning, thus developing a hybrid didactic ESP course combining these methods. As a result, the study emphasized student contentment and a positive correlation between well-chosen materials, appropriate course design, and learning achievement.
- *COVID-19 and ESP*: Pandemic and post-pandemic shifts have encouraged many ESP course instructors to experiment with flipped and hybrid formats. The study “Relevance of Flipped Classrooms for ESP Courses in the Post COVID-19 Scenario” (Baby, Yasser Sabtan, 2022) explored ESP for business administration students. They posted summary lessons online and used class time for discussion and problem-solving rather than lecturing. The study concluded that FC can help bridge knowledge gaps exposed when moving back to face-to-face instruction.

2.1 Motivational, Engagement, and Skill-Related Outcomes

- There are several studies in the literature that show that flipped classrooms are designed to boost *student motivation, engagement, and active participation* more than traditional classes.
- In 2023, Liu Dan & Hasnah Binti Mohamed (2023) looked at about 26 studies from 2019-2023 studying the relation between motivation and FC. They found that flipped classroom models improve learners’ intrinsic motivation, satisfaction, and attitudes toward language acquisition.
- In their paper “Does flipped learning affect language skills and learning styles differently?” (Tadayonifar & Entezari, 2020), the authors concluded that flipped methods were more effective across numerous skills—speaking, listening, writing—especially for students whose styles match interactive, learner-centered formats. The study also indicated that some students prefer more teacher-oriented classes and may struggle with self-paced pre-class tasks.

2.2 Challenges, Constraints, and Considerations

Despite advantages, many potential challenges and limitations have been highlighted by multiple studies.

- *Student preparation / out-of-class work*: Without preparation, the in-class active component becomes inefficient; therefore, making sure that students engage with pre-class materials is a recurring drawback in the studies.

- *Access to technology and digital literacy*: The issue that students lack reliable internet access, devices, or even skills to use learning platforms and video materials has been addressed in many studies. The flipped approach thus has the potential to aggravate inequalities. (Konoplianyk et al., 2021; Guilan University, Iran)
- *Cognitive load*: It may be challenging for students with lower proficiency to manage self-study plus classroom tasks.
- *Teacher workload*: Several studies state that constructing effective out-of-class materials (videos, reading materials), designing interactive in-class tasks, and providing feedback all require more upfront investment, and as a result are seen more as a constraint for implementation.

2.3 Gaps in Local and Regional Contexts

While global studies, including USA, China, Iran, U.K, etc., are abundant, there are fewer studies originating from the Balkan region, Albania specifically. The number of studies, especially in highly technical fields like Food Technology, is even less. Key gaps include:

- Local empirical studies of FC in ESP with **Food Technology** or **Agricultural Sciences** in Albanian universities.
- Panel data: many studies focus on a short-term period (one semester or part of it).
- Proficiency stratification: FC works differently for low vs. high proficiency students in the ESP technical field, sometimes making the gap bigger
- Focus on **professional / workplace communication skills**, especially digital communication, which may differ from general language skills.

3. Methodology

The research method employed is both quantitative and qualitative. The study was carried out among the first-year Bachelor students majoring in Agrifood Technology, enrolled in the compulsory ESP course, at the Faculty of Food Technology, Agricultural University of Tirana, Albania, during the academic year 2024-2025.

3.1 Participants

The sample of participants in the study consisted of approximately **N = 60** students, divided into two groups: one following a traditional approach and the other using a flipped classroom model.

During the first semester, the traditional approach of teaching ESP for Food Technology was employed; the content was presented in class by the course instructor, and homework was assigned at the end of the class based on the activities carried out within the teaching session. The class routine involved mainly warm-up activity, going over homework, introduction of the new content, and guided and independent practice

3.2 Research Design

During the second semester, the class was inverted, thus using the flipped approach, implementing the following stages: warm-up activity, Q&A time on video, optional tailor-made activity based on video: short quiz, recognition exercise, guided and independent practice: role-play, discussion, case study, giving a presentation.

A comparative design was used in the study.

- Classroom sessions in the traditional group consisted of lectures, vocabulary exercises, and grammar explanations, while the student-student interaction was limited.
- Classroom sessions in the flipped group initiated with students accessing online lectures, digital reading materials, and pre-class quizzes, then devoted time to problem-based tasks, role plays, and group discussions using Food Technology terminology.

3.3 Instruments

The study used a semi-structured questionnaire to collect quantitative and qualitative data, including both Likert-scale items in order to measure perceptions of motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes, and open-ended questions aiming at capturing qualitative insights. Then, the questionnaire on Google form was delivered in the form of a link to the participants of the study. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, percentages), while qualitative responses underwent thematic coding, focusing on categories such as “motivation,” “interaction,” “autonomy,” and “digital readiness.”

4. Results

Data revealed the following results:

- 82 percent of the participants in the study stated that taking homework before class was helpful, as it introduced them to what was coming and made it easier to follow the class activities.
- 79 percent of the students declared that they preferred the inverted, flipped method to the traditional way of doing homework.
- The respondents replied positively to the question “Does the flipped classroom approach help you understand the content easily?” 85 % of the students stated that they were able to understand the content better.
- Answering the question of whether they found that the flipped classroom allowed them to control their pace of learning, 83 percent of the students replied positively.
- The study also tried to identify students’ preferences for a particular form of prior-to-class preparation. They were asked to put the following forms in order according to their preferences.

Watching a video, listening to an audio, podcast, reading a text, looking up new words, summarizing the video, and doing grammar exercises

The students preferred to watch a video as the main activity of preparation before class, with 85 % of answers in favour of it, while doing a grammar exercise resulted in being the least preferred activity when preparing for class, with 27 % of students.

- Then, students were asked to identify several ways in which the prior-to-class homework helped them during the class activities.
 - The majority of the respondents, 89% felt more motivated and were more actively participating in class activities.
 - 88 % declared that they were more confident and at ease when they entered the class

- 52 % of the participants replied that they were able to memorize more content
- A small number of respondents, 6 %, emphasised that they were not able to catch up, since they couldn't access material every time due to a lack of internet or a smartphone.
- When asked whether they preferred the flipped classroom approach to be used all the time during their studies at the university, 86 % of the respondents replied in favour, 9 % of the respondents preferred it to be used sometimes, while the remaining 5 % preferred not to use it anymore.

From the above data, collected from the students' answers, it can be concluded that flipped classroom approach provides several benefits in ESP language instruction. The students' responses to the questionnaire were positive, and they prefer the flipped classroom to the traditional way of language learning.

5. Discussion

The FC model is an innovative teaching method used in higher education because it meets the demands of students for language competency. The data showed that the students' perception of flipped classrooms was positive. The results of the study confirm earlier studies that identify increased motivation and engagement as key benefits of flipped learning (Lo & Hew, 2017). It provided greater opportunities for Food Technology students to practice technical vocabulary and engage in professional discourse simulations—skills that are directly transferable to the workplace.

In addition, the FC model agrees with learner-centered pedagogy, in which the responsibility for initial knowledge acquisition is given to students while classroom time is maximized for applied learning. As a result, the development of computer-mediated communication (CMC) skills, a crucial competence in international food industry collaboration, is encouraged.

Nonetheless, as with every other approach, there are also drawbacks such as infrastructure, internet connection, and digital devices where students reported struggling with time management and reliance on digital platforms. These findings suggest that while flipped learning is beneficial, it must be carefully scaffolded, with explicit training in autonomous study strategies.

6. Conclusion

The study points out the potential benefits of the flipped classroom model in ESP instruction for Food Technology students at AUT. Compared to traditional methods, the flipped model resulted in encouraging greater learner autonomy, (learners engaged more actively in peer-to-peer communication and collaborative activities), , enhanced interaction and production of subject-specific language (students produced more oral and written language relevant to their field, especially during role plays and case-based task), supported reflection and professional communication skills (students more conscious of their learning process, which they described as “more independent” and “practical).

Future research should try to adopt a panel approach, tracking learning outcomes over multiple semesters, and explore the integration of emerging educational technologies (e.g., AI-driven learning platforms, virtual simulations).

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Neck Lift, A Complex “Common Surgery”

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of neck lift surgery in facial rejuvenation, emphasizing the anatomical and aesthetic challenges of the cervicomenal region. While standard facelift and neck lift procedures often improve the contour of the submental and jawline area, persistent problems in the lower neck such as platysmal banding and horizontal pleating require more individualized approaches. This study presents the outcomes of 10 patients undergoing neck lift, analyzing aesthetic results, patient satisfaction, and potential complications. Findings confirm that successful rejuvenation depends not only on surgical technique but also on personalized evaluation of pathology, skin quality, and patient goals.

Keywords: Neck lift, cervicomenal angle, platysmaplasty, facial rejuvenation, aesthetic surgery, submental liposuction, submandibular gland repositioning.

Introduction

Facial rejuvenation surgery has significantly evolved, with techniques addressing the midface, jawline, and periorbital region. However, the neck remains a distinct challenge due to its anatomical complexity and high visibility in daily interactions.

Signs of aging such as loss of cervicomenal angle definition, platysmal laxity, and jowl formation are particularly resistant to correction through facelift alone.

As the neck plays a central role in overall facial harmony, its treatment has become a cornerstone in aesthetic surgery. This section reviews the historical evolution of neck lift techniques, from early skin-only approaches to modern platysmaplasty and adjunctive procedures like liposuction, submandibular gland repositioning, and fat grafting.

The neck presents unique rejuvenation challenges; treatment of platysmal laxity, adiposity, and skin redundancy is central to facial harmony.

Background / Theoretical Framework

The youthful neck has been described with several anatomical hallmarks: a distinct inferior mandibular border, visible thyroid cartilage bulge, subhyoid depression, and a cervicomenal angle of 105–120 degrees. With aging, these structures are obscured by skin laxity, fat accumulation, and platysmal banding. Current classification

systems, while useful, may not fully capture the individualized nature of pathology. Therefore, a tailored approach is required. In the literature, multiple techniques have been introduced, including open and closed submentoplasty, corset platysmaplasty, and direct excision methods. Each carries advantages and limitations, particularly regarding scarring, recovery, and complication risks.

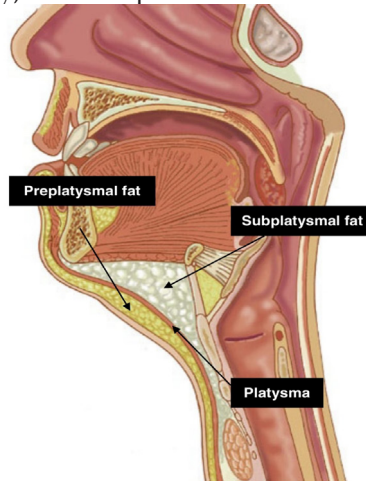


Figure 1 : Anatomy of Fat Distribution in the Neck

Materials and Methods

This study was conducted at three specialized centers — the University of Medicine of Tirana, the Burn and Plastic Surgery Unit at “Mother Teresa” University Hospital, and the International German Hospital in Tirana — between January 2021 and December 2023. The study design was a retrospective-prospective clinical analysis of patients undergoing neck lift surgery, either as an isolated procedure or in combination with a facelift. We have compared our results with visual criteria described for youthful neck which include :

- Distinct inferior mandibular border from mentum to angle without jowl overhang;
- Subhyoid depression;
- Visible thyroid cartilage bulge;
- Visible anterior border of the sternocleidomastoid muscle distinct in its entire course from the mastoid to sternum;
- Cervicomental angle between 105° and 120°;

Patient Selection and Inclusion Criteria: Ten patients (6 female, 4 male) aged 42–67 years were included. Eligible candidates presented with moderate-to-severe cervical skin laxity, prominent platysmal banding, and a clear desire for surgical rejuvenation after thorough consultation.

Exclusion criteria included prior neck surgery, history of keloid formation, severe comorbidities that contraindicated anesthesia, and unrealistic patient expectations.

Preoperative Assessment: All patients underwent a standardized evaluation protocol that included: detailed medical history and physical examination with focus on neck anatomy, platysmal bands, subcutaneous and subplatysmal fat distribution, and submandibular gland prominence; high-resolution photographic documentation from multiple angles (frontal, lateral, and oblique views); and skin quality grading

with cervicomental angle measurement.

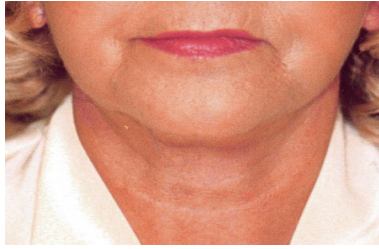


Figure 2 : Platysmal Bands Exposure

Surgical Technique: Procedures were performed under general anesthesia by experienced plastic surgeons. The standard approach involved a facelift-type incision extending into the retroauricular region, combined with a submental incision for direct access to the platysma. Depending on individual anatomy, the following adjunctive maneuvers were incorporated: platysmaplasty (midline corset or lateral tightening) to address vertical banding and horizontal laxity; submental liposuction for reduction of subcutaneous fat and enhancement of cervicomental contour; submandibular gland management (repositioning or partial excision) when gland prominence impaired the aesthetic line; and skin redraping with careful tension distribution to minimize scar visibility.



Figure 3 : Submandibular Glands Exposure Before Neck Lift

Postoperative Care and Follow-Up: Patients were monitored overnight in a surgical ward, with drains typically removed within 24–48 hours. Compression dressings were applied for one week, and sutures were removed on day 7–10 post-surgery. Follow-up visits occurred at 1, 3, 6, and 12 months, evaluating wound healing, scar maturation, cervicomental angle restoration, and patient satisfaction via a standardized questionnaire (5-point Likert scale). Any complications — hematoma, infection, nerve injury, or contour irregularities — were documented and managed according to best practice protocols.

Results

All patients demonstrated significant improvement in cervicomental contour and overall facial harmony. Satisfaction rates were high, with 9 of 10 patients reporting

marked improvement. Complications included one case of transient marginal mandibular weakness and one case of minor wound infection, both of which resolved with conservative management. Compared with existing literature, our results align with studies reporting enhanced outcomes through combined facelift and submentoplasty techniques. However, analysis confirms that results vary depending on skin quality, degree of platysmal laxity, and patient compliance with postoperative care. Aesthetic complications, such as asymmetry or visible scarring, remain important concerns that influence psychological well-being.

Discussion

The results of this study reinforce the role of neck lift surgery as a pivotal component of facial rejuvenation, particularly in patients with advanced cervical aging. The combination of facelift incisions with direct submentoplasty allowed comprehensive access to the platysma and surrounding structures, yielding consistent improvements in cervicomental definition and overall facial harmony.

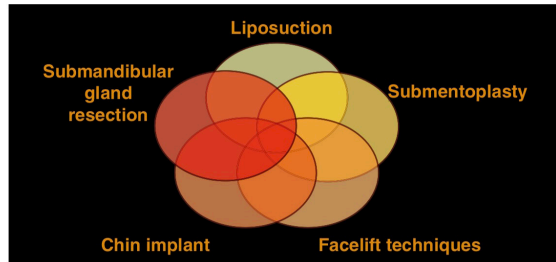


Figure 4 : Different techniques in Facial and Neck Rejuvenation

Preoperative skin quality correlated with the longevity of surgical results. Patients with robust dermal elasticity achieved more sustained neck contour improvements, whereas those with severe photodamage or intrinsic laxity experienced earlier recurrence of mild skin redundancy despite an initially satisfactory outcome. These observations highlight the importance of preoperative counseling and, where appropriate, adjunctive skin resurfacing or regenerative therapies.



Figure 5: Irregularities After Neck Liposuction in a Neck Lift candidate

The complication profile was comparable to published series: a single transient case of marginal mandibular nerve weakness and one minor wound infection, both resolving without sequelae. No hypertrophic or keloid scarring was observed, likely reflecting meticulous technique and careful patient selection.

Comparisons with the literature indicate that combining platysmaplasty with submental liposuction produces more pronounced cervicomental angles than skin-only lifts, especially in patients with concurrent subcutaneous fat excess. However, this approach requires precise intraoperative judgment to avoid over-resection, which can create unnatural concavities or compromise neck mobility.

Patient-reported outcomes were favorable: at 12 months, 90% reported 'marked improvement' while 10% reported 'moderate improvement'; the latter group tended to have poorer baseline skin quality or suboptimal adherence to postoperative recommendations (e.g., compression garments, activity restrictions). Overall, these findings support a customized, anatomy-driven strategy in which the interplay of skin quality, platysmal laxity, fat distribution, and patient expectations guides technique selection to optimize aesthetic and psychological outcomes. Future work with larger cohorts and extended follow-up is warranted to refine indications and minimize recurrence.

Conclusion

Neck lift surgery remains a central component of facial rejuvenation, particularly for patients with pronounced cervical aging. Successful outcomes depend on careful preoperative assessment, selection of the appropriate surgical technique, and individualized planning. Future studies with larger patient samples and longer follow-up are necessary to refine classification systems and identify optimal strategies for minimizing complications while maximizing aesthetic satisfaction.

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Higher education reform in Albania: Between university autonomy and public accountability

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Abstract

The reform of higher education in Albania has been one of the most debated issues in the past two decades, due to its direct impact on knowledge quality, the labor market, and social development. A major challenge remains the balance between university autonomy – as a fundamental principle guaranteed to higher education institutions – and public accountability, closely related to transparency, academic quality, and the efficient use of financial resources. This paper aims to analyze how these two concepts are often placed in contradiction within the Albanian context, highlighting legal limitations, institutional challenges, and the influence of political factors. Furthermore, the study will address the European model of higher education governance and the possibilities of adapting its best practices to the Albanian reality. Finally, it provides recommendations on building a balanced system, where autonomy does not translate into a lack of oversight, and public accountability does not become a limitation of academic freedom.

Keywords: higher education; reform; university autonomy; public accountability; transparency.

Introduction

Higher education reform has been one of the central debates in Albania over the last two decades, shaped both by internal socio-political dynamics and the external pressures of European integration. The transformation of the sector has been guided by the dual necessity of aligning with the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and responding to the specific challenges of a post-communist society marked by weak institutions and limited resources. At the heart of this debate lies a persistent dilemma: how to balance university autonomy with public accountability.

University autonomy is considered a cornerstone of academic freedom and institutional development. It allows higher education institutions to define their own academic programs, manage internal governance, and pursue independent research. Without autonomy, universities risk becoming extensions of political or bureaucratic structures, undermining their capacity for innovation and critical thinking.¹

On the other hand, higher education is financed to a significant extent by public resources and carries a direct responsibility to society. Public accountability ensures that universities remain transparent, efficient, and oriented toward quality education and research. It also safeguards the public interest by setting standards for accreditation, financial management, and institutional performance.²

¹ Magna Charta Universitatum, Bologna, 1988.

² European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) (Brussels: ENQA,

In Albania, this balance has proven particularly fragile. The adoption of Law No. 80/2015 “On Higher Education and Scientific Research” was intended to modernize the system by strengthening both autonomy and accountability.³ Yet, in practice, universities often face political interference, excessive bureaucratic requirements, and an unstable funding environment. At the same time, accountability mechanisms remain underdeveloped, frequently reduced to formal reporting without genuine oversight or impact on institutional quality.

This paper argues that the future of higher education reform in Albania depends on finding a sustainable balance between autonomy and accountability. Drawing on European models, it explores how Albania can develop a governance system that promotes both academic freedom and societal responsibility.

University Autonomy as a Fundamental Principle

University autonomy is internationally regarded as a cornerstone of higher education governance. The Magna Charta Universitatum (1988), signed in Bologna by rectors of leading European universities, declares that the university must be both intellectually and institutionally independent in order to fulfill its mission of producing and disseminating knowledge.⁴ Autonomy enables universities to determine curricula, set research priorities, and manage their internal affairs without undue interference from political authorities or market pressures.

In the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), autonomy is understood across four dimensions: academic, organizational, financial, and staffing.⁵ Academic autonomy allows institutions to design study programs and research agendas; organizational autonomy refers to internal governance structures; financial autonomy includes the capacity to manage budgets and generate revenues; and staffing autonomy ensures independence in hiring and promoting faculty. Together, these dimensions provide the framework within which universities can respond flexibly to societal needs while preserving academic freedom.

In Albania, autonomy has been formally enshrined in legislation, most notably through Law No. 80/2015 “On Higher Education and Scientific Research.”⁶ The law grants universities the right to elect their governing bodies, establish academic programs, and manage their financial resources. On paper, this represents a significant step toward alignment with European standards. However, in practice, autonomy remains fragile. Political interference in the appointment of rectors, centralized control over funding allocations, and rigid bureaucratic oversight undermine genuine independence.⁷

2015).

³ Law No. 80/2015, On Higher Education and Scientific Research in Higher Education Institutions in the Republic of Albania

⁴ Magna Charta Universitatum, Bologna, 1988.

⁵ European University Association (EUA), University Autonomy in Europe III: The Scorecard 2017 (Brussels: EUA, 2017).

⁶ Law No. 80/2015, On Higher Education and Scientific Research in Higher Education Institutions in the Republic of Albania.

⁷ Eurydice, National Reforms in Higher Education: Albania (European Commission, 2020).

Moreover, financial dependence on the state budget creates structural vulnerabilities. Since public universities in Albania rely heavily on government funding, their autonomy is limited by resource scarcity and unstable financing policies.⁸ This situation often forces universities into a paradox: formally autonomous, yet practically dependent. As a result, autonomy risks becoming more a legal abstraction than a lived institutional reality.

Thus, while Albania has adopted the language and formal structures of university autonomy, its implementation remains inconsistent. Strengthening autonomy requires not only legal guarantees but also cultural and institutional practices that promote transparency, meritocracy, and resistance to political influence.

Public Accountability and the Need for Transparency

While autonomy safeguards academic freedom, public accountability ensures that higher education institutions serve the broader interests of society. Accountability refers to the obligation of universities to demonstrate that they are using public resources effectively, maintaining academic standards, and delivering outcomes aligned with societal needs.⁹ It is not only a financial or administrative requirement, but also a social contract between universities, the state, and citizens.

In the European context, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015) stress that accountability must complement autonomy, ensuring that institutions are both self-governing and socially responsible.¹⁰ Accountability mechanisms typically include external quality assurance, accreditation, transparent reporting on finances and outcomes, and stakeholder engagement (including students, employers, and civil society).¹¹

In Albania, public accountability has been one of the weakest pillars of higher education reform. The establishment of the Quality Assurance Agency in Higher Education (ASCAL) was intended to improve external evaluation and accreditation processes.¹² However, in practice, accreditation has often been criticized as formalistic, driven by compliance with bureaucratic requirements rather than substantive improvement in teaching or research quality. Reports are frequently produced to satisfy legal obligations, without real impact on institutional performance or responsiveness to student needs.

Furthermore, financial accountability remains underdeveloped. Universities are required to submit annual reports to the Ministry of Education, but these documents

⁸ UNESCO, *Trends in Higher Education Governance* (Paris: UNESCO, 2017).

⁹ Guy Neave and Frans van Vught, *Government and Higher Education Relationships Across Three Continents* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1994).

¹⁰ European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)* (Brussels: ENQA, 2015).

¹¹ Ellen Hazelkorn, *Rankings and the Reshaping of Higher Education: The Battle for World-Class Excellence* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

¹² ASCAL (Agjencia e Sigurimit të Cilësisë në Arsimin e Lartë), *Annual Report 2022* (Tirana: ASCAL, 2023).

are rarely made public in accessible formats.¹³ The lack of transparency not only undermines public trust but also perpetuates perceptions of political favoritism and mismanagement.

Accountability also extends to academic integrity. Issues such as plagiarism, low research standards, and inadequate peer review continue to affect Albanian universities. Without credible mechanisms for addressing misconduct, public accountability risks being reduced to a procedural formality rather than a substantive guarantee of quality.

Ultimately, accountability should not be understood as a restriction of autonomy, but as its necessary counterpart. A higher education system that is autonomous but not accountable risks isolation and inefficiency, while one that is accountable but not autonomous risks bureaucratization and stagnation. Only through a meaningful integration of both principles can Albanian universities gain public trust and meet international standards.

The Tension Between Autonomy and State Oversight

The relationship between university autonomy and state oversight is inherently complex. On one side, the state holds a legitimate responsibility to regulate higher education, ensure quality, and protect the public interest, particularly when public funds are at stake. On the other side, excessive intervention risks undermining academic freedom and institutional independence, transforming universities into extensions of political or bureaucratic power.¹⁴

In Albania, this tension is especially pronounced. The Ministry of Education plays a decisive role in accreditation, funding allocation, and the appointment of key university bodies.¹⁵ Although Law No. 80/2015 formally grants autonomy, in practice, universities remain dependent on state authorities for essential functions. The frequent interference in rectoral elections and the politicization of funding decisions illustrate how fragile autonomy is in the Albanian context.¹⁶

Accreditation provides a clear example of this tension. While external quality assurance should be conducted by independent agencies, in Albania, accreditation procedures have often been influenced by political agendas.¹⁷ Reports by the European Commission have highlighted that the independence of the national accreditation agency (ASCAL) must be strengthened to align with European standards.¹⁸ Until then, accountability risks being reduced to a top-down exercise of control rather than a genuine mechanism of quality assurance.

¹³ European Commission, Education and Training Monitor: Albania 2020 (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the EU, 2020).

¹⁴ Guy Neave, *The Universities' Responsibilities to Society: International Perspectives* (Oxford: Pergamon, 2000).

¹⁵ Law No. 80/2015, *On Higher Education and Scientific Research in Higher Education Institutions in the Republic of Albania*.

¹⁶ Eurydice, *National Reforms in Higher Education: Albania* (European Commission, 2020).

¹⁷ Ellen Hazelkorn and Andrew Gibson, *Global Rankings and the Geopolitics of Higher Education* (London: Routledge, 2021).

¹⁸ European Commission, *Albania 2022 Progress Report* (Brussels: European Commission, 2022).

Financial oversight is another area where autonomy and state control collide. Universities are formally allowed to generate their own revenues through tuition fees, research grants, and partnerships, but the centralization of budget approval and auditing limits their capacity to act independently.¹⁹This dependency creates a paradox: universities are legally autonomous but remain practically subordinated to state decision-making.

Ultimately, the Albanian case reflects a broader dilemma faced by many post-transition societies: while laws may embrace European principles of autonomy, political culture and institutional weakness prevent their full realization. Resolving this tension requires building a governance framework in which state oversight guarantees accountability without infringing upon academic self-governance.

European Models and Lessons for Albania

European higher education governance provides valuable lessons for countries like Albania seeking to balance autonomy and accountability. Within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), countries have developed models that allow universities to exercise significant self-governance while remaining subject to rigorous quality assurance and financial oversight.²⁰

For example, in Finland, universities enjoy full academic and organizational autonomy, including independent decision-making regarding curricula, research priorities, and staffing.²¹At the same time, performance-based funding mechanisms, transparent financial reporting, and external evaluation ensure that universities remain accountable to both the government and society. Similarly, in the Netherlands, the governance system combines strong institutional autonomy with a robust accreditation system and external audit procedures, providing a framework that promotes innovation while safeguarding public interest.²²

These European models demonstrate several key principles relevant to Albania:

1. Separation of governance and political influence – decision-making bodies must be independent from direct political control.
2. Transparent financial and performance reporting – accountability mechanisms should be public, verifiable, and linked to measurable outcomes.
3. Independent quality assurance – accreditation and evaluation agencies must operate autonomously, free from governmental or institutional pressure.
4. Stakeholder engagement – students, faculty, and civil society should participate actively in governance and oversight processes.²³

¹⁹ UNESCO, *Trends in Higher Education Governance* (Paris: UNESCO, 2017).

²⁰ European University Association (EUA), *University Autonomy in Europe III: The Scorecard 2017* (Brussels: EUA, 2017).

²¹ Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland, *Higher Education Governance in Finland* (Helsinki: Ministry of Education, 2020).

²² Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, *Governance of Universities in the Netherlands* (The Hague: Ministry of OCW, 2019).

²³ Ellen Hazelkorn, *Global Rankings and the Reshaping of Higher Education* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

Albania has begun adopting elements of these models. The establishment of ASCAL as an independent accreditation body, the introduction of performance indicators, and efforts to diversify university funding are positive steps.²⁴ However, political interference, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and limited financial autonomy continue to constrain the practical implementation of these principles. Aligning with European standards will require not only legal reform but also cultural and institutional changes that strengthen transparency, meritocracy, and participatory governance.

In conclusion, European experience illustrates that autonomy and accountability are not mutually exclusive; rather, they are mutually reinforcing. By learning from successful models, Albania can develop a higher education system that is both free and socially responsible.

Current Challenges of Higher Education Reform in Albania

Despite legislative reforms and efforts to align with European standards, Albanian higher education continues to face significant challenges that hinder the realization of both autonomy and accountability. These challenges are structural, financial, and cultural, reflecting broader issues in post-transition societies.²⁵

One of the main obstacles is underfunding. Public universities in Albania rely heavily on state budgets, which are often insufficient to cover operational costs, invest in research infrastructure, or attract and retain high-quality faculty.²⁶ This financial dependence undermines institutional autonomy and limits universities' ability to innovate or expand programs in response to societal needs.

A second challenge is brain drain. Highly qualified academics and students frequently leave Albania in search of better opportunities abroad, weakening the domestic academic workforce and reducing research output.²⁷ The limited number of research grants, inadequate laboratory facilities, and low salaries exacerbate this phenomenon. Limited linkage with the labor market is another critical issue. Academic programs often fail to respond to evolving labor market needs, resulting in graduates who are inadequately prepared for employment.²⁸ This gap highlights a deficiency in both accountability and strategic planning within universities.

Political influence and clientelism remain pervasive. University management is often affected by political appointments, affecting the credibility of decision-making processes and the fairness of recruitment, promotions, and resource allocation.²⁹ This interference compromises both autonomy and accountability, creating a perception that university policies are driven more by political considerations than academic merit.

Finally, quality assurance mechanisms remain underdeveloped. Although the estab-

²⁴ ASCAL (Agjencia e Sigurimit të Cilësisë në Arsimin e Lartë), Annual Report 2022 (Tirana: ASCAL, 2023).

²⁵ European Commission, Education and Training Monitor: Albania 2020 (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the EU, 2020).

²⁶ UNESCO, Trends in Higher Education Governance (Paris: UNESCO, 2017).

²⁷ OECD, Education at a Glance 2021: Albania (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2021).

²⁸ World Bank, Albania Higher Education Policy Review (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2019).

²⁹ Eurydice, National Reforms in Higher Education: Albania (European Commission, 2020).

ishment of ASCAL and accreditation procedures represents progress, external evaluations are sometimes perceived as formalistic and lack real impact on institutional improvement.³⁰

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive reform strategy that strengthens financial independence, improves research capacity, fosters academic meritocracy, aligns curricula with labor market needs, and ensures that accountability mechanisms are meaningful and transparent. Only by tackling these systemic problems can Albania develop a higher education system that meets international standards and serves societal needs effectively.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Building a sustainable higher education system in Albania requires a careful balance between university autonomy and public accountability. Drawing on the challenges outlined above and lessons from European models, several recommendations can guide reform efforts.

First, universities should be granted genuine autonomy in academic, organizational, and financial matters. This includes the freedom to define curricula, manage budgets, hire and promote faculty based on merit, and conduct research without undue political interference.³¹ Strong institutional governance, supported by transparent election procedures for leadership positions, is crucial to protect autonomy in practice.³²

Second, accountability mechanisms must be strengthened to ensure that autonomy serves societal interests. This entails implementing evidence-based performance evaluations, transparent reporting on financial and academic outcomes, and stakeholder engagement, including students, faculty, employers, and civil society.³³ Accreditation and quality assurance agencies should operate independently, providing meaningful oversight without reducing autonomy to a formality.³⁴

Third, Albania should diversify university funding beyond state allocations. Public-private partnerships, research grants, and international cooperation can enhance financial sustainability and reduce dependence on the government.³⁵ Performance-based funding, aligned with measurable academic and research outcomes, can further incentivize institutional excellence.

Finally, the development of a culture of meritocracy and transparency is essential. Universities must foster ethical practices, academic integrity, and accountability at all levels of governance. Faculty development, research support, and international

³⁰ ASCAL (Agjencia e Sigurimit të Cilësisë në Arsimin e Lartë), Annual Report 2022 (Tirana: ASCAL, 2023).

³¹ Magna Charta Universitatum, Bologna, 1988.

³² European University Association (EUA), University Autonomy in Europe III: The Scorecard 2017 (Brussels: EUA, 2017).

³³ European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) (Brussels: ENQA, 2015).

³⁴ ASCAL (Agjencia e Sigurimit të Cilësisë në Arsimin e Lartë), Annual Report 2022 (Tirana: ASCAL, 2023).

³⁵ World Bank, Albania Higher Education Policy Review (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2019).

collaboration are vital for raising institutional quality and aligning Albanian higher education with European and global standards.³⁶

In conclusion, Albania has made substantial progress in reforming higher education, enshrining autonomy and accountability in law. However, the practical realization of these principles remains uneven. By strengthening institutional governance, implementing meaningful accountability, and learning from European best practices, Albania can develop a higher education system that is both academically free and socially responsible, capable of producing high-quality graduates and contributing to national development.

³⁶ Ellen Hazelkorn, *Global Rankings and the Reshaping of Higher Education* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

Financial services innovation, trends, challenges and opportunities

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Abstract

Finance is defined as any activity that involves the provision of financial services such as microcredit, microsavings and microinsurance to low-income individuals with the aim of creating social value for them. Creating social value involves reducing poverty and having a broad impact on improving living conditions by providing capital for microenterprises and insurance and savings to reduce risk and promote future consumption. Although access to microcredit is seen as a right to credit, it rather represents a right to development and economic initiatives that can change the borrower's way of life. However, credit alone is not enough to achieve the success of economic initiatives; a great deal of work and responsibility is required on the part of the borrower, in order to make the necessary profitable investments in productive activities and to encourage continuous savings. Microfinance actors around the world promote access to basic services by developing new tools, diverse products and adopting an integrated approach. The study first explains the concepts related to the lack of access to traditional banking services of marginalized groups, to financial and social exclusion, the developments of microfinance in poor and developed countries of Europe, and provides a general framework for the development of this sector in Albania. Microfinance institutions are analyzed in terms of profitability, efficiency, productivity, client portfolio and risk. The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of finance credit on improving the livelihoods of borrowers at the individual, household and business levels, as well as the impact that credit has on promoting savings. This study is based on an empirical investigation of 20 structured questionnaires addressed to individual borrowers and questionnaires addressed to microfinance and financial institutions operating in the Vlora and Fier regions regarding microfinance products.

Keywords: access, financial services, credit, impact, finance institutions.

Introduction

Access to financial services is considered a very important aspect of development. In recent years, mainly through awareness-raising and coordinated actions by national governments, non-governmental organizations and many donors, the expansion of financial services and their provision to individuals excluded from formal credit, and in particular, to low-income individuals through microfinance and its instruments such as microcredit, is being achieved. Inadequate access to financial services is more widespread in poor countries and developing countries (Dupas, 2013).

In many of these countries, the poor mainly have access only through informal financial services, such as money lenders at high rates (moneylenders), friends and family. The inability to access financial services prevents personal consumption and makes the poor more vulnerable and their incomes very unstable.

Lack of access to these services also hinders investment in health, education and income-generating activities, limiting development opportunities for the poor (D'Espallier, 2011).

Therefore, ensuring access to financial services has significant potential to help reduce and eliminate poverty. In practice, this has led to the spread and creation of programs and policies aimed at increasing the poor's access to financial services. But there is also a part of the population that is considered excluded from financial services even in developed countries. Microcredit, defined as a financial instrument in support of the poor classes, was born in the nineteenth century in the first wave of industrialization that hit the European continent. The industrial revolution, in addition to greatly stimulating the development of new technologies and innovative processes at work, caused the growth of social issues related to the change in the living conditions of the population. This tool was developed due to the need of some people to have access to credit, despite extreme poverty or destitution, who were unable to use traditional credit methods. In the fifteenth century, small informal credit and savings groups were created. In Italy, during this period, the Catholic Church, specifically the Franciscans – as an alternative to loan sharks – founded the Banca Monti di Pietà, which spread rapidly in various European urban areas (Fracasso 2013). This bank was a strategic and revolutionary innovation since it managed to overcome the link between benefits and solidarity. It is possible to do banking and at the same time achieve the provision of solidarity to the needy, not by giving them alms, but by introducing them to the functions and role that credit can play. (Littlefield, 2004) Other examples are found in England with the birth at the end of the eighteenth century of the so-called charitable lending, followed later by the credit fund institutions in Ireland and the first rural banks in Italy. These operations make it possible to identify, for the first time in history, the spread of institutional forms built on the basis of cooperative and cooperative models, which are characterized by the high participation of individuals in the territory where they were created, as well as by the special attention paid to the social context of reference (Zeller, 2002). A similar development to the rural and artisan banks was developed by Raiffeisen, although these forms were based on a slightly different operational mechanism compared to the Schulze-Delitzsch People's Bank. The initiative began with the creation of a credit association, but it did not require the creation of initial capital, but the use of certain loans collected through the joint responsibility of all partners (Ledgerwood, 1999). The funds collected in this way were mainly for the benefit of the members themselves, but with the possibility of allocating part of the money in loans to persons considered in need and deserving of trust. Raiffeisen rural banks were developed mainly in agricultural areas with the aim of expanding credit to the rural population, and ensuring sustainable growth, ultimately eliminating negative social phenomena such as poverty and interest (Armendariz, 2005). The growth of this type of lending slowed down significantly in the period between the two world wars, but immediately after the end of the conflict there was a rapid growth for them. These years, characterized by profound social changes, changed the object and mission of rural banks. Initially, the People's Banks and the Rural and Artisan Banks provided loans mainly in areas such as trade, crafts and agriculture, favoring productive activities. After the end of World War II, the focus shifted significantly towards the middle classes of the population, moving most of the resources in their favor.

Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the level of access to financial services for individuals in Albania and specifically in the Vlora and Fier regions?
2. What is the nature, functioning and process of microfinance in Albania?
3. What is the impact of microcredit on the living conditions of borrowers?
4. What are the factors that determine the supply and demand for microfinance products?
5. How does microcredit affect individual or business borrowers, in terms of promoting savings?
6. What is the role of the inclusion of non-financial services of microfinance banks in increasing the performance of small businesses in Albania?
7. What is the role of microcredit in empowering women borrowers?

• Participants

The population for this study includes individuals who are engaged in financial activities and live in the Vlora and Fier regions. The population of this study refers to individuals over 18 years of age, the age at which an individual can apply for a loan at MFIs or banks in the region studied. The size of this population is based on data published by INSTAT for 2015, on the number of individuals with the right to vote. A population with experience in microfinance activities was selected because they are better informed and know more about the pros and cons of it, so that they can better reflect the questionnaire, but individuals who are in the first cycle of microcredit, but have not yet received the benefits from it, were also surveyed. Structured questionnaires were used to collect empirical and primary data for this study by interviewing current clients at MFIs or banks that provide loans. Individuals for the interview were selected randomly.

• Applied scientific methods

The research of the chosen issue for study will be carried out through the construction and development of an appropriate research model, which is also supported by careful empirical research, as well as by the examination of data processing and appropriate statistical analyses, in order to test the main hypotheses of the study and generate reliable and valid conclusions. The analysis of the structure and its segmentation into different research areas in terms of the object but not the final goal requires the use of integrated qualitative and quantitative methodologies, which are preceded by an analysis of the literature and national and international studies in this field.

The part dedicated to empirical research will include statistical sampling methodologies and will mainly use questionnaires as instruments for data collection. A database will be designed and created with questionnaire data to provide original elements for research in this field. Generally, there are two types of research methods, qualitative and quantitative methods. Both methods have differences in terms of

numerical (numbers) or non-numerical (words) data.

The quantitative method is used as a synonym for data collection techniques, or data analysis procedures such as graphs or tables and statistics that are generated by using numerical data. The qualitative method is mainly used as a synonym for data collection techniques (such as through the inductive method, researchers begin work based on empirical observations). Based on them, researchers make hypotheses that they use to create new theories which, in the future upon completion of the study, will be attached to existing theories. The inductive model focuses on induction and stays very close to empirical data. The purpose of this research is not to build a new theory, but to investigate research questions based on empirical research and primary data. The review, processing and analysis of the research data will be carried out with the help of the statistical program SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences), starting from data control and variable reduction, to performing various analyses such as descriptive, confirmatory and predictive in function of the purpose and method of the research.

After collecting the data through the structured research questionnaire, their control will be carried out, the reduction of variables (to achieve the validity of the structure through factor analysis), the reliability of the research structures, with the calculation of indicators such as the range of measurements, standard deviation and mean of the final variables, ending with the testing of the correlation and their hypotheses as well as with the regression analysis between the independent and dependent variables of the study. In addition, other data, which are qualitative in nature, will also be analyzed and interpreted using statistical tools such as data mining, frequency distribution, calculation of percentages, graphs, and tables.

Data analysis

One of the methods of analysis used in this study is descriptive statistics. It includes comparing income, asset ownership, investments, nutrition, health, education, decision-making (empowerment), business growth, and the number of employees in borrowers' businesses before and after using microcredit. In this way, it can be seen whether or not there is an improvement in their standard of living after using microcredit.

The questionnaires had questions of a cognitive nature, which included general information such as: gender, age, education, number of family members, marital status, as well as questions of a specific nature, which are related to the level of income, employment, savings, capital, access to financial services, business investments, and the way in which credit is used. The questions that were used to collect information from the respondents were structured and some dichotomous questions with two answers: yes or no. The same question context was given to all respondents so that the stimulus received by them from the questionnaire was the same. The structured questionnaire also had multiple choice questions in which respondents selected one or more of the alternatives. The questionnaire also used the "Likert scale" (considered a rating scale with points from 1-5) to measure the perceptions of the respondents based on their statements about how microfinance affects their overall living standards.

The Likert scale rating indicates the degree of satisfaction of individuals regarding several indicators after they have received microfinance from an MFI or bank. The number '1' represents the lowest level of satisfaction, while the number '5' represents the highest level of satisfaction regarding the questions addressed to clients.

Results

Variable	Group	Frequency	Percentage
Age (years)	18-25	1	5%
	26-30	3	15%
	31-40	6	30%
	41-50	7	35%
	51-60	2	10%
	>60	1	5%
	TOTAL		20
Gender	Female	11	55%
	Male	9	45%
	TOTAL	20	100%
Education	Low	3	15%
	Professional secondary	3	15%
	General secondary	7	35%
	Higher education	6	30%
	Postgraduate	1	5%
	TOTAL	20	100%
Marital Status	Single	3	15%
	Married	15	75%
	Cohabiting	1	5%
	Divorced	1	5%
	Widowed	0	0%
	TOTAL	20	100%
Residence	City	11	55%
	Village	9	45%
	TOTAL	20	100%

Table no.1: Demographic Information

The table provides information about the distribution of respondents according to several characteristics. Regarding the age distribution of microcredit borrowers, 35% of respondents belong to the age group of 41-50 years. After that, 30% were aged 31-40 years, while 25% were aged 18-30 years. Only 10% of respondents were over 50 years.

Regarding education, the majority of respondents, around 50%, had secondary, vocational or general education. 15% of respondents had primary education, while 30% had higher education and 5% had postgraduate education.

Regarding the gender distribution of respondents, 55% were female and 45% were male. Globally, women are often the largest beneficiaries of microfinance programs, but in this study, respondents were selected randomly and without any gender bias.

Moment	Frequence	Percentage
Many documents required	8	40%
Long and complicated process	6	30%
Insufficient income	4	20%
Bad borrowing conditions	2	10%

Table no.2: The most difficult moments in getting a loan

In the first table, respondents were asked about the most difficult moments during the loan application process. The results show that 40% of respondents considered the request for many documents as the most difficult. This suggests that the administrative process is a major barrier for many borrowers. After that, 30% of them considered the long and complicated process as the biggest obstacle, while 20% mentioned insufficient income as a challenge. Fewer (10%) mentioned poor loan conditions as the most difficult moment. This shows that documentation and complex procedures are the main factors that negatively affect loan application.

Graph. No.1: Interest paid on the loan (Likert scale: 1 = very dissatisfied, 5 = very satisfied)

The second table presents the satisfaction of respondents with the interest they paid on the loan. The results show that 25% of respondents are very dissatisfied with the interest rate, while 20% are dissatisfied. 30% of respondents expressed an average satisfaction (through the value of 3), indicating that the interest rates may have been acceptable to them, but were not ideal. 15% of respondents are satisfied and only 10% are very satisfied. This distribution suggests that the majority of respondents are dissatisfied with the interest rates they pay on the loan, and this may be one of the reasons that influence their negative perception of the borrowing conditions.

Graph. No.2: How many times have you taken out a loan?

When asked how many times they have taken out a loan, the majority of respondents (50%) have taken out only one loan, while 30% have taken out two loans. 15% of respondents have taken out three loans, and only 5% have taken out four or more loans. This information indicates that a large proportion of respondents are occasional users of microcredit, suggesting that they may need loans only for specific situations. The smaller proportion of borrowers who have taken out more than three loans may indicate that they are repeat users of microcredit.

Graph. No.3: Purpose of loan application

Regarding the purpose of applying for a loan, 40% of respondents said that they applied for a loan to improve their living conditions, indicating that the need to improve their standard of living is a main justification for borrowers. 25% of them applied to invest in a business, which indicates that a good part of the borrowers are oriented towards business development and entrepreneurship. 20% applied to repay other debts, which may indicate a need to manage existing debts. While 15% of respondents used loans for emergency expenses. This suggests that the loan is mainly used for immediate needs and for long-term improvements in living and business.

Findings

The findings of this study reveal that microcredit borrowers face various challenges during the loan application process. A large proportion of respondents (40%) consider the requirement for multiple documents as the biggest obstacle, while 30% of them cite the long and complicated process as another important factor. This information shows that administrative barriers are one of the main issues affecting the possibility of obtaining a loan. On the other hand, high interest rates are another concern, as 25% of respondents are very dissatisfied with the level of interest they pay, suggesting a negative perception of the borrowing conditions. Another important aspect of the findings is the purpose of the loan application. More than 40% of respondents applied for loans to improve their living conditions, while a significant proportion (25%) requested loans to invest in business. This shows that microcredits are used not only for emergency needs, but also for long-term improvements and business development. Also, the majority of borrowers (50%) have received one loan, while a small portion (5%) have received four or more loans, suggesting that a large portion of respondents are occasional users of microcredit.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of this study suggest that the biggest barriers for loan borrowers are administrative requirements and high interest rates. However, borrowers use microcredit for a variety of purposes, with improving living conditions and business investments being the main reasons for applying. This study also shows that most borrowers are occasional users of credit, using it for both short-term and

long-term needs. In order to improve financial services, it is necessary to address these barriers and offer more favorable terms to borrowers.

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The Impact of Open vs. Closed Electoral Lists on Political Representation: A legal and practical perspective

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Abstract

This paper aims to conduct a legal and practical analysis of the impact that electoral list systems whether open or closed have on the quality of political representation in Albania. The focus of the study is the 2020 constitutional and legal amendments, which introduced a partial opening of candidate lists in parliamentary elections, thereby granting voters limited influence over the ranking of candidates within a party list.

The paper examines the effects of these reforms on the empowerment of citizens' votes, the autonomy of individual candidates, and the transparency of the electoral process. It further includes a review of the jurisprudence of the Central Election Commission (CEC) and the Electoral College, assessing how the law has been interpreted and implemented in practice.

Through a comparative analysis with international electoral practices, the study seeks to draw conclusions on the effectiveness of the current system and to provide recommendations for its improvement, aiming to promote more democratic and equitable political representation.

Keywords: Electoral list, 2020 electoral reform, political representation, preferential vote, electoral system, Albania, CEC, Electoral College.

Introduction

Electoral systems play a crucial role in shaping the democratic life of a state, as they determine how citizens' votes are converted into political representation. Their significance goes beyond the technical organization of elections; they deeply influence the distribution of power, the quality of representation, the stability of governments, and the legitimacy of democratic institutions. The type of electoral system in place can affect how majorities are formed, how political coalitions emerge, and whether voter participation is encouraged or discouraged. It also plays a key role in ensuring equality of the vote and in enabling the representation of diverse social groups. For these reasons, understanding electoral systems is essential not only for analyzing election outcomes, but for grasping the very nature of how democracy functions in practice.

The democratization of an electoral system is reflected in its various components, such as ensuring the active right to vote for as many citizens as possible; the radical elimination of barriers to the passive right to vote (the right to be elected); the guarantee of vote secrecy; the predominance of direct elections over indirect ones; the implementation of an electoral system that is as fair as possible; the protection of voting freedom by eliminating all forms of pressure, ranging from physical violence and threats to vote-buying; and the creation of conditions to prevent electoral fraud, among others (Omari & Anastasi, 2017, P.243)¹.

One often overlooked yet essential component of this system is the electoral list—the

¹ Omari, L., & Anastasi, A. (2017). *E drejta kushtetuese*. Tirana: Dajt 2000. ISBN: 978-99956-01-41-6

mechanism through which candidates are presented to the electorate. Far from being a purely administrative detail, the structure and nature of electoral lists have a direct impact on the transparency, inclusiveness, and accountability of the electoral process. Whether open or closed, inclusive or exclusive, electoral lists influence not only how citizens interact with political parties, but also who gets elected, how diverse that representation is, and how responsive elected officials are to the people they serve. Therefore, understanding the function and importance of electoral lists is key to analyzing the quality and depth of democracy itself.

Electoral lists represent a fundamental element in the structure of an electoral system, as they are directly linked to how political representation is formed in a democracy. They are not merely a technical compilation of candidates' names, but a mechanism that influences the balance between political parties, voters, and elected representatives.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, relying primarily on deductive and comparative methods. The deductive approach is used to analyze theoretical concepts and institutional practices, drawing from existing international reports, academic literature, and case studies from various European countries. By examining these external models and experiences, the study seeks to identify the most applicable and effective practices that could inform electoral reforms in Albania. Additionally, the comparative method plays a central role, as it allows for the evaluation of similarities and differences between Albania and other democratic systems, particularly in the design and implementation of electoral lists. Given the nature of the topic, the research is qualitative in character, as it requires a detailed examination of legal documents, policy reports, and observational data, with an emphasis on in-depth interpretation rather than statistical generalization. The process demands considerable time for data collection, review, and critical analysis in order to draw meaningful conclusions and recommendations.

Literature review

This study is grounded in a broad review of both national and international literature. Foundational concepts have been explored through the work of well-known Albanian scholars, as well as foreign authors who have extensively contributed to the field of electoral systems and democratic representation. In addition to academic sources, the analysis incorporates legal and institutional documents, including decisions and reports from Albania's Central Election Commission (KQZ), as well as monitoring and evaluation reports from international organizations such as OSCE/ODIHR. Furthermore, the research draws on best international practices related to electoral lists and voting systems, with the aim of identifying applicable models and standards that could inform future improvements to the Albanian electoral framework.

1. Introduction to electoral systems.

If we want to put it very briefly, according to Norris (2004)², an electoral system is defined as “the set of rules that translate votes into seats in a legislature” (p. 22).

According to Professor Erlir Puto, the electoral system comprises the totality of principles, rights, guarantees, formal and legal rules, and procedural norms established in the Constitution, in the Electoral Code, and in other legal acts, based on which the method of elections and the formation of the representative bodies of the people is determined (Puto, 2021, p. 95)³.

In the broader sense of the term, the electoral system also encompasses other aspects of the electoral process that have a more pronounced administrative character, such as the delimitation of electoral districts, the distribution of polling stations, the nomination of candidates, the registration of voters, the appointment of electoral commissions, and their composition.

(Omari & Anastasi, 2017, p. 246)⁴.

In practice however, there is much more to an election than just the electoral system, and these other issues are equally (if not more) important as the choice of the electoral system in ensuring fair and free elections and establishing public trust (Shahandashti, 2016, p.2)⁵.

Electoral systems vary significantly in how they enable voters to express their preferences. In some systems, a voter may be limited to selecting just one candidate, while in others, they may choose several candidates, vote for a party list, or rank their preferences among individuals or lists. As a result, vote counting procedures differ in complexity from simple vote totals for each candidate or list, to more elaborate processes involving multiple rounds of redistribution or reallocation of votes. Ultimately, these methods lead to the allocation of seats and determine which candidates are elected to represent the voters.

In practical terms, electoral systems are generally divided into three main types: majoritarian, proportional, and mixed systems.

Electoral systems inherently encompass both benefits and limitations, which vary depending on their structural and contextual implementation.

The selection of an electoral system represents a fundamental institutional decision for any democratic state. This choice significantly influences the country’s political development, as electoral systems tend to shape and reinforce political behavior and party dynamics over time. Once implemented, these systems are often maintained, as political actors adapt to and benefit from the specific incentives they create. Although the intentional design of electoral systems has become increasingly common in recent decades, historically, such decisions were seldom made through deliberate and systematic processes.

It is essential to recognize that the functioning of an electoral system can vary significantly across different national contexts. While certain patterns can be observed globally, the impact of any given electoral system is largely shaped by the specific socio-political environment in which it operates. The design and impact of electoral

² Norris, P. (2004). *Electoral engineering: Voting rules and political behavior*. Cambridge University Press.

³ Puto, E. (2021). *Leksione të së drejtës parlamentare* (p. 95). Tirana.

⁴ Omari, L., & Anastasi, A. (2017). *E drejta kushtetuese*. Tirana: Dajt 2000.

⁵ Shahandashti, S. F. (2016, May). *Electoral systems used around the world*. arXiv. <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.1605.01343>.

systems are highly dependent on broader institutional and constitutional frameworks. Effective electoral system design requires a holistic approach considering the entire architecture of political institutions since modifying one element of this framework often prompts shifts in the functioning of other institutional components.

The majoritarian electoral system is one of the most widely used voting methods globally, particularly in countries with long-standing democratic traditions such as the United Kingdom. This system operates on the principle that the candidate who receives the highest number of votes in an electoral district secures representation, regardless of whether they obtain an absolute majority. Among its key advantages are the direct link it fosters between voters and their representatives, as well as the governmental stability it tends to produce by favoring larger political parties. However, it has been criticized for its lack of proportionality and the underrepresentation of smaller political groups.

The proportional representation (PR) electoral system is designed to allocate seats in a legislature in proportion to the number of votes each party receives. Unlike majoritarian systems, PR aims to ensure a closer match between the percentage of votes and the percentage of seats won, thereby enhancing the fairness and inclusivity of political representation. This system tends to promote multiparty competition, coalition governments, and greater representation of minority groups, including women and ethnic minorities. Its primary strength lies in its ability to reflect a diverse range of political preferences within a society.

However, PR can sometimes lead to fragmented legislatures and less stable governments, particularly when no party secures a clear majority and coalition-building becomes complex (Lijphart, 2012 p. 150–170; Norris, 2004, p. 185–210)⁶⁷.

One of the primary issues is that a certain number of votes with relatively little weight may not be represented at all in the parliament and in such cases, the remaining votes are redistributed, which in most instances tends to favor the stronger political parties (Anastasi & Omari, 2017, p. 249)⁸.

Another issue with this system is that the candidate's campaign and personal connection with voters carry less significance, whereas the relationships with the party and its leader hold greater importance, which tends to advantage the party leadership (Anastasi & Omari, 2017, p. 250)⁹.

A mixed electoral system combines elements of both majoritarian and proportional representation systems in order to balance the benefits of direct constituency representation with the fairness of proportional seat allocation. Typically, a portion of the legislature is elected through single-member districts, while the remaining seats are distributed according to party lists based on the overall vote share. This approach aims to provide both local accountability and a more accurate reflection of the electorate's diverse preferences. However, the complexity of mixed systems can sometimes create challenges in terms of voter understanding and the potential for disproportionality depending on the specific design (Shugart & Wattenberg, 2001;

⁶ Lijphart, A. (2012). *Patterns of democracy: Government forms and performance in thirty-six countries* (2nd ed.). Yale University Press.

⁷ Norris, P. (2004). *Electoral engineering: Voting rules and political behavior*. Cambridge University Press.

⁸ Omari, L., & Anastasi, A. (2017). *E drejta kushtetuese*. Tirana: Dajt 2000. ISBN: 978-99956-01-41-6.

⁹ Ibid.

Katz, 2005)^{10, 11}.

2. A brief explanation of the concepts “closed lists” and “open lists” and their significance

The electoral list plays a crucial role in the selection of representatives and in the power exercised by voters within the electoral process. In closed-list systems, political parties maintain complete control over the ranking of candidates, determining which individuals will represent the party in representative bodies. This enables party structures to select candidates according to strategic interests and organizational needs, thereby ensuring representation that aligns with the party’s political line and internal stability. However, this arrangement limits voter power, as voters are unable to choose individual candidates and can only select the party as a whole, thus reducing their direct influence over the composition of representatives. In contrast, in open-list systems, voters have the opportunity to express preferences for specific candidates within the party list, thereby increasing the individual impact of their vote and making the selection process more transparent and responsive to voters’ will. Nonetheless, this can lead to internal competition within parties and potentially compromise party cohesion. Thus, the use of electoral lists constitutes a balance between party control over candidate selection and the voters’ ability to influence the composition of representative institutions, reflecting a complex equilibrium between political stability and participatory democracy.

In proportional representation systems, candidate selection and voter influence are largely determined by whether the party lists are open or closed. In a closed-list system, political parties pre-determine the order of candidates on the list, and voters can only vote for the party as a whole, without affecting which individual candidates are elected. Mandates are assigned to candidates in the order set by the party leadership. This system strengthens internal party discipline and facilitates centralized control over the composition of the legislature but limits voter influence over individual representatives (Gallagher & Mitchell, 2005, pp. 597–598)¹².

By contrast, an open-list system allows voters not only to choose a party but also to express preference for specific candidates within that party list. This means that the final order of candidates and ultimately who is elected can be influenced or even determined by the number of personal votes a candidate receives. Open lists enhance voter empowerment and candidate accountability, but they may also weaken party cohesion and encourage intra-party competition (Farrell, 2011, pp. 87–90)¹³. The candidate who receives the highest number of preference votes may move above the “red line” and enter parliament, thereby disqualifying the last-ranked candidate on the closed list.

¹⁰ Katz, R. S. (2005). *Electoral systems and electoral engineering*. In R. J. Dalton & H.-D. Klingemann (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Behavior* (pp. 246–268). Oxford University Press.

¹¹ Shugart, M. S., & Wattenberg, M. P. (Eds.). (2001). *Mixed-member electoral systems: The best of both worlds?* Oxford University Press.

¹² Gallagher, M., & Mitchell, P. (Eds.). (2005). *The politics of electoral systems*. Oxford University Press.

¹³ Farrell, D. M. (2011). *Electoral systems: A comparative introduction* (2nd ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.

3. Legal analysis of the 2020-2025 Constitutional and Electoral code changes

Parliamentary elections in Albania are primarily governed by the Constitution and the Electoral Code. The legal framework is further supported by secondary legislation, including the Law on Political Parties, the Law on Public Assemblies, the Law on Gender Equality, and the Law on Ensuring the Integrity of Elected, Appointed, or Public Office Holders (commonly known as the Law on Decriminalization), along with regulations issued by the Central Election Commission (CEC). Albania is a party to key international instruments related to democratic elections and human rights, including the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) etc. On July 30, 2020, constitutional amendments introduced preferential voting. Following subsequent changes on October 5, the Electoral Code replaced the regional threshold for electoral subjects to secure mandates with a national threshold of 1 percent. It also established a minimum number of candidates required on party lists and permitted political party leaders to run in up to four electoral districts simultaneously.

The Venice Commission of the Council of Europe and ODIHR expressed regret that the procedure for adopting these constitutional amendments and the subsequent changes to the Electoral Code was “exceptionally rushed” and lacked a proper consultation process and they also highlighted that the new minimum candidate requirements disproportionately disadvantaged smaller parties and raised concerns regarding the possibility of party leaders running in multiple electoral constituencies at the same time (Venice Commission & ODIHR, 2020)¹⁴.

The 2020 reforms, ratified as part of the June 5 Agreement, marked a turning point by introducing partially-open party lists, enabling voters to express preferences for individual candidates rather than solely for parties.

Following the significant electoral reforms introduced in 2020, Albania has undertaken further amendments to its Electoral Code during the 2021–2025 period, aiming to enhance electoral administration, increase voter participation, and modernize the voting process.

Subsequently, in early 2025, the Albanian Parliament enacted additional changes, which included tightening candidate registration deadlines to better accommodate ballot printing and distribution logistics, particularly for voters abroad. Moreover, the amendments involved integrating political party representatives into the vote-counting process for the diaspora and liberalizing voting rules by allowing emigrants to vote with expired identification documents, thereby broadening electoral participation.

Revisions to the legal framework in July 2024 and February 2025 brought modifications to the electoral system and introduced mechanisms for voting from abroad. However, a thorough and holistic evaluation of the overall legal structure has yet to be conducted.

Under the updated electoral model, political entities are required to submit both closed lists and preferential candidate lists. Parliamentary seats secured by a party or coalition within an electoral district are initially allocated to individuals listed on

¹⁴ Venice Commission & ODIHR. (2020, December 11). *Joint opinion on the amendments to the constitution of 30 July 2020 and to the electoral code of 5 October 2020* (Opinion No. 1006 / 2020; ODIHR Opinion Nr ELE-ALB/396/2020). Council of Europe. [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD\(2020\)025-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD(2020)025-e)

the closed lists.

Although certain ODIHR recommendations have been implemented such as the adjustment of the national electoral threshold for independent candidates and the elimination of the provision allowing party leaders to stand in multiple constituencies, numerous earlier recommendations from ODIHR remain outstanding and have not yet been acted upon. These include, inter alia, recommendations related to the composition of lower-level election commissions, suffrage rights of persons with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities, removal of criminal liability for defamation, independent media coverage during electoral campaigns, interim reporting on campaign finance and the extension of campaign finance regulations to third parties¹⁵. The Venice Commission and ODIHR expressed regret that the procedure for adopting the constitutional amendments and Law No. 118 was carried out in a very rushed manner. Before making changes to such fundamental texts, a broad and inclusive consultation process with political stakeholders and non-governmental organizations should have been conducted, allowing sufficient time for discussion and review¹⁶(Venice Commission & ODIHR, 2020,p.3).

The recently adopted legal amendments aimed to fulfill the Albanian Parliament's responsibility to implement three key rulings of the Constitutional Court concerning electoral matters: (1) amending the Electoral Code to enable voting for Albanian citizens residing abroad; (2) revising the electoral threshold formula to allow preferential votes to influence the ranking of candidates within party lists; and (3) adjusting the legal threshold applicable to independent candidates. However, these legislative changes were adopted without undergoing the formal process of public consultation, and no transparency was ensured regarding the preliminary draft proposals. The amendments were discussed solely within the Parliamentary Committee on Legal Affairs on 24 July and were approved just two days later, on 26 July, during the final session of the parliamentary term. During this session, representatives from all political parties acknowledged the failure of the broader electoral reform process.

Certain aspects of the July 2024 amendments have been positively received, particularly the removal of the national electoral threshold for independent candidates, the prohibition of party leaders from running in multiple constituencies, and the clarification of provisions enabling voting from abroad. These developments represent a step toward the practical implementation of a right formally recognized since 2020, though previously unenforceable in practice. However, the introduction of a dual-list system has drawn criticism for appearing inconsistent with the constitutional spirit. Specifically, it is seen as disproportionately favoring candidates on the closed lists while disadvantaging those on the open lists. This system may result in the artificial inflation of the number of closed-list candidates and an uneven distribution of party support votes, ultimately skewing the representation of electoral contenders.

Out of a total of 194 complaints submitted to the Central Election Commission (CEC)

¹⁵ OSCE/ODIHR. (2025, April 28). *Republic of Albania, Parliamentary Elections, 11 May 2025: Interim Report (28 April 2025)* (Interim Report No. 1, p. 4). Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

¹⁶ Venice Commission & ODIHR. (2020, December 11). *Joint opinion on the amendments to the constitution of 30 July 2020 and to the electoral code of 5 October 2020* (Opinion No. 1006 / 2020; ODIHR Opinion Nr ELE-ALB/396/2020). Council of Europe. [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD\(2020\)025-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD(2020)025-e)

regarding alleged violations of electoral law approximately 55 originating from civil society organizations, 125 from the Democratic Party, and the remainder from individuals or whistleblowers the State Election Commissioner (SEC) recommended sanctions to the Complaints and Sanctions Commission (CSC) in only four cases and administrative penalties were imposed in just two instances, both related to failures in reporting institutional activities (KRIIK, 2025)¹⁷. In 107 cases, the SEC either decided not to initiate an administrative review or chose to suspend proceedings after they had already begun (KRIIK, 2025)¹⁸.

4. A Practical Analysis of the 2021 and 2025 Parliamentary Elections

“Although voters could cast a preferential vote, the impact of such votes on the final allocation of seats was minimal.” (OSCE/ODIHR, 2021)¹⁹.

The electoral reform of 2020, which introduced a partially open-list system in Albania, was presented as a step toward enhancing the role of citizens in selecting their representatives, aiming to reduce the absolute control that political parties had in determining parliamentary mandates. However, the practical implementation during the 2021 and 2025 elections showed that this system operated in a way that did not produce any meaningful change in the ranking of candidates. This is largely due to the fact that the system imposes a high threshold for altering the party-determined order, requiring a candidate to obtain a significant number of preferential votes in order to surpass those placed higher on the list.

This means that, in practice, the system created an illusion of direct choice, while the actual power to determine elected representatives remained largely in the hands of political parties. Moreover, it was not accompanied by broad voter education, leaving many citizens unclear about how the preferential voting mechanism functioned.

This model also carries the risk that, if not further reformed such as by lowering the preference threshold or simplifying the voting system, it may undermine public trust in the value of the vote and lead to political disillusionment. In this regard, the partially open list system in Albania has faced criticism from both domestic and international observers as a hybrid solution that fails to meet the standards of genuine democratic representation.

The Constitutional Court in 2024 rejected the appeal submitted by several newly established political parties challenging the recent amendments to the Electoral Code. These parties had requested that the changes, particularly the agreement between the Democratic Party (PD) and the Socialist Party (PS) introducing closed lists and other related adjustments, be declared unconstitutional.

In its ruling, the Court found the applicants' claims to be unfounded, reasoning that the objections primarily concerned the outcomes of the vote, namely the distribution of parliamentary mandates. According to Article 64 of the Constitution, the regulation

¹⁷ Koalicioni për Reforma, Integrim dhe Institucione të Konsoliduara (KRIIK). (2025, May 12). *Zgjedhjet për Kuvendin e Shqipërisë, 11 Maj 2025: Deklarata e gjetjeve dhe konkluzioneve para-prake*. <https://kriik.al/>

¹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹ OSCE/ODIHR. (2021). *Republic of Albania Parliamentary Elections 25 April 2021: Final Report*. Retrieved from <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/0/e/493356.pdf>.

of mandate allocation and the scope of preferential voting falls within the competence of the legislature. The constitutional guarantee of preferential voting, as outlined in Article 64, paragraph 3, pertains specifically to the voting process itself, not to the results.

Furthermore, the Court found no violation of the principle of equality before the law, either for political parties or for organizations and individual voters. Upon examining both the applicants' arguments and the legal provisions in question, the Court concluded that the legislation applies uniformly to all electoral subjects and voters. As such, it does not create discriminatory distinctions in the exercise of the rights to vote or to stand for election.

While the OSCE/ODIHR considers the existing legal framework adequate for conducting democratic elections, it highlights the absence of a thorough and coherent electoral reform.

According to their findings, the current proportional representation system based on both closed and preferential lists across 12 constituencies largely benefits the two dominant political parties. Despite the inclusion of preference voting, most parliamentary seats continue to be distributed through closed lists, thereby reinforcing the significant control that party leaderships exert over candidate selection and final representation.

5. Do these changes strengthen voters' rights?

The system of partially open lists in Albania represents a step toward deeper democratization of elections by granting voter's greater influence. However, its benefits remain limited due to mechanisms that continue to concentrate power in the hands of political parties and their leaders. To achieve more equitable representation and more sustainable institutional stability, further reforms may be necessary to enhance the real impact of voters in the selection of candidates.

In the context of Albania's political system, the implementation of a genuinely open-list proportional electoral system would significantly enhance democratic representation and voter empowerment. Although Albania formally adopted open lists in its 2020 electoral reform, in practice the system remains predominantly closed, as party leaders retain substantial control over candidate ranking and mandate allocation (OSCE/ODIHR, 2021)²⁰. A truly open-list system, where voters can directly influence the order of candidates within party lists, would increase voter agency by allowing individuals to shape the composition of parliament based on merit and personal appeal rather than party loyalty alone. Such a system strengthens the accountability of elected officials, as candidates would rely more on public support than on internal party structures for electoral success (Carey & Shugart, 1995)²¹.

Moreover, open lists help to mitigate the concentration of power in party leadership, a particularly relevant issue in Albania where centralized authority has led to weak intra-party democracy and a pattern of patronage-based candidate selection (Biberaj,

²⁰ OSCE/ODIHR. (2021). *Republic of Albania Parliamentary Elections 25 April 2021: ODIHR Limited Election Observation Mission Final Report*. <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/albania/493356>.

²¹ Carey, J. M., & Shugart, M. S. (1995). Incentives to cultivate a personal vote: A rank ordering of electoral formulas. *Electoral Studies*, 14(4), 417–439. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0261-3794\(94\)00038-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/0261-3794(94)00038-7).

2020)²². By reducing clientelism and enhancing transparency, open lists promote a more competitive and responsive political environment. Empirical studies in post-communist and European countries, such as Slovenia and Croatia, have shown that open-list systems contribute to greater voter engagement and legitimacy of elected institutions (Birch, 2001; Kostadinova, 2002)^{23, 24}. Therefore, for Albania, a shift toward a well-regulated, truly open-list proportional system represents a meaningful step toward strengthening both democratic accountability and the representativeness of its parliamentary institutions.

In comparative perspective, while Albania recently adopted a hybrid list system in the 2024 reforms combining closed and preferential (open) lists with the former holding significant weight the experience of other Western Balkan countries reveals a variety of approaches to list-based electoral systems. Serbia and Montenegro continue to apply rigid closed-list proportional representation, typically in a single national district, where party leadership retains full control over the assignment of mandates (Bursać, 2022)²⁵. In contrast, Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as Kosovo use open or semi-open lists, allowing voters to express preference for individual candidates within a party list. However, even in these systems, thresholds and technical rules often limit the extent to which voter preference can alter party-determined candidate rankings (International IDEA, 2020)²⁶. While Albania's partial introduction of open lists represents progress toward greater voter influence, its preservation of a fixed one-third closed list places it closer to the Serbian and Montenegrin models than to the more open systems found elsewhere in the region (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, 2016)²⁷.

6. Should the Albanian electoral system move towards fully open lists? (Comparison with Netherlands and Finland)

The Netherlands uses an open-list proportional representation system for elections to the House of Representatives, characterized by a single national constituency rather than multiple electoral districts. Instead of choosing an individual representative for a specific geographic district, voters participate in selecting a group of members of parliament. Parliamentary seats are then distributed among parties in proportion to the share of the national vote each receives. In the Dutch electoral system, all votes cast for individual candidates are also counted toward the total vote share of their political party. Unlike other European systems, which divide the country into multiple constituencies where voters elect local representatives and functions as a single nationwide electoral district. Parliamentary seats are allocated to parties in

²² Biberaj, E. (2020). *Albania in Transition: The Rocky Road to Democracy*. Routledge.

²³ Birch, S. (2001). Electoral systems and political transformation in post-communist Europe. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 53(4), 595–615. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668130120051902>.

²⁴ Kostadinova, T. (2002). Do mixed electoral systems matter? A cross-national analysis of their effects in Eastern Europe. *Electoral Studies*, 21(1), 23–34. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-3794\(00\)00044-1/](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-3794(00)00044-1/)

²⁵ Bursać, D. (Ed.). (2022). *Electoral Systems in the Western Balkans: More democracy, more accountability?* ResearchGate. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/357837073/>

²⁶ International IDEA. (2020). *The Global State of Democracy: Electoral Systems and Representation*. <https://www.idea.int/gsod/>

²⁷ ACE Electoral Knowledge Network. (2016). *Unexpected implications of the open lists and the electoral system in Kosovo*. <https://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/es/annex/esy/unexpected-implications-of-the-open-lists-and-the/>

proportion to their total share of votes at the national level, ensuring a high degree of proportionality in representation. The Dutch electoral system also does not impose a formal electoral threshold for parties to gain representation in parliament. Due to the open-list system and the lack of a significant electoral threshold, the Netherlands experiences a high degree of party system fragmentation, with a large number of political parties able to compete and gain parliamentary representation.

Voting in Finland is quite distinctive. Unlike many countries where voters select from pre-printed lists of candidates or parties, the Finnish ballot is simply a blank folded card featuring an empty circle inside. Voters write the unique number of their chosen candidate in this circle. Each polling station provides lists of candidates organized by party, with parties typically presenting multiple candidates. Personal votes carry significant weight in Finland's truly open list electoral system. When a party secures seats in a constituency, those seats go to the candidates who received the highest number of personal votes. This system is complemented by party membership primaries, which determine the candidates included on the list initially. As a result, central party leaders have considerably less control over candidate selection compared to many other countries. This open list approach is often credited with contributing to Finland's notably high demographic representation in parliament. The results show an increase in the representation of women and a rise in the number of local councillors entering parliament.

Since the fall of communism, Estonia has emerged as a leading example of success in Eastern Europe. The country's economy has expanded rapidly. Additionally, Estonia performs strongly on democratic measures also. The Estonian parliament, known as the Riigikogu, is composed of 101 seats filled through a proportional representation system utilizing party lists across twelve constituencies, each electing multiple members. Voters select individual candidates from party lists, with each vote contributing both to the candidate's tally and to the overall party vote. A quota, determined by dividing the total number of votes by available seats in a constituency, sets the threshold for direct candidate election. Parties are awarded seats based on the cumulative votes their candidates receive, contingent on surpassing a 5% national vote threshold.

Subsequent seat allocations occur at the national level through a modified D'Hondt method, reinforcing the importance of the 5% threshold and essentially functioning as a national list system that shapes the final parliamentary composition. Estonia is notable for its early adoption of electronic voting, introduced in 2005, which has seen significant uptake, with nearly half of voters participating online in 2019, enabled by the widespread use of smart ID cards.

In order to enhance democratic accountability, improve voter representation, and reduce elite dominance, Albania would benefit from adopting a well-regulated open-list proportional electoral system, either at the national level or through balanced multi-member regional districts. A national proportional system, or one with carefully calibrated regional constituencies, would help reduce the disproportionality between votes cast and seats allocated, ensuring that smaller parties and diverse political voices are better represented (Reynolds et al., 2005)²⁸. Crucially, the effectiveness of

²⁸ Reynolds, A., Reilly, B., & Ellis, A. (2005). *Electoral system design: The new International IDEA handbook*. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.

such a system depends on the implementation of genuinely open lists, where voters can meaningfully influence candidate ranking through preferential voting. Albania's current system, while nominally open, continues to function in practice as a closed list due to party control over candidate positioning and a lack of transparency in vote aggregation (OSCE/ODIHR, 2021)²⁹. Ensuring transparent calculation of mandates based on voter preferences is therefore essential.

This would require robust electoral infrastructure, including clear legal guidelines, unbiased oversight bodies, and real-time publication of individual vote counts per candidate. Moreover, to safeguard the integrity of the system, mechanisms to prevent electoral corruption and intra-party clientelism are vital. These may include strict campaign finance regulations, monitoring of vote buying practices, and the enforcement of internal party democracy standards (Birch, 2011)³⁰. Without such safeguards, open-list systems risk reinforcing personalist or oligarchic politics, rather than empowering the electorate.

In Albania's political context, marked by centralized party leadership, weak institutions, and a history of electoral manipulation, these structural reforms are not merely technical adjustments but foundational steps toward consolidating a more inclusive and accountable democratic system. Empirical evidence from other post-communist countries, such as Slovenia, Poland, and Croatia, indicates that open-list proportional systems, when well designed, can increase voter turnout, foster stronger links between representatives and constituents, and reduce alienation from political processes (Kostadinova, 2002; Birch, 2001)^{31, 32}. Therefore, a national or balanced regional open-list PR system, paired with mechanisms for transparency and anti-corruption, represents not only a normative ideal but also a realistic and context-sensitive path forward for electoral reform in Albania.

Main Findings

1. Many previous ODIHR recommendations remain unaddressed, including those related to depoliticisation of lower-level election commissions, suffrage rights of persons with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities, criminal liability for defamation, and equal rights of party and citizen election observers.
2. Firstly, the way electoral lists are drafted and used affects the degree of influence that citizens have over the selection of their representatives. In systems with closed lists, the voter casts a ballot for a party but has no say in the order of the candidates this power belongs to the party leadership. Such an approach can limit the connection between citizens and their representatives, creating distance and reducing accountability. By contrast, open lists give voters the opportunity to express a preference for specific candidates, thereby increasing transparency and political responsibility.

²⁹ OSCE/ODIHR. (2021). *Republic of Albania Parliamentary Elections 25 April 2021: Final Report*. <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/albania/493356>

³⁰ Birch, S. (2001). Electoral systems and political transformation in post-communist Europe. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 53(4), 595–615. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668130120051902>

³¹ Kostadinova, T. (2002). Do mixed electoral systems matter? A cross-national analysis of their effects in Eastern Europe. *Electoral Studies*, 21(1), 23–34. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-3794\(00\)00044-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0261-3794(00)00044-1)

³² Birch, S. (2011). *Electoral malpractice*. Oxford University Press.

3. Secondly, electoral lists play an important role in the inclusion of under-represented groups. Through the arrangement of candidates, political parties can promote the representation of women, youth, minorities, and other groups that are often excluded from decision-making. Therefore, the way lists are constructed can serve as a reflection of a party's commitment to democratic values and social inclusion.
4. Thirdly, electoral lists are closely linked to the internal functioning of political parties. A transparent and competitive process for selecting candidates increases public trust and strengthens internal party democracy. On the other hand, when lists are compiled arbitrarily or based on clientelism, citizen's trust in elections and the institutions that emerge from them is seriously undermined.
5. The constitutional and legal amendments adopted in Albania in 2020-2025 aimed to enhance citizen participation and political accountability by introducing a partially open-list proportional representation system. In theory, these changes were designed to empower voters by allowing them to influence the selection of their representatives within party lists. However, an analysis of the system's implementation reveals that the actual power of the individual vote remains limited, raising concerns about the effectiveness of the reform and its alignment with international standards for free and fair elections.
6. While the Albanian system formally allows preferential voting for approximately two-thirds of the candidate list, the applied methodology tends to disproportionately benefit those placed in the fixed one-third segment. As a result, despite appearing open, the lists functionally resemble closed lists when considering the distribution of mandates within each electoral district.

Recommendations

1. To genuinely enhance the power of the vote, it would be necessary to either lower the preferential vote threshold or revise the mandate allocation formula to more accurately reflect voter's individual preferences. Without such accompanying measures, the system remains a hybrid model in which citizen influence is constrained, and party dominance continues to prevail.
2. The legal framework requires a comprehensive review to address outstanding recommendations from ODIHR and the Venice Commission, as well as to resolve existing ambiguities and inconsistencies. Any legislative amendments should be preceded by a transparent and inclusive consultation process, which must be completed and approved prior to the upcoming elections.
3. To ensure effective and informed citizen participation, it is necessary to develop educational campaigns on how open-list and closed-list electoral systems work, their benefits and challenges, in order to avoid confusion with the ballot papers and the high number of invalid votes caused by citizens not understanding the voting system.
4. Increasing the independence of electoral administration members, ensuring online and archival transparency of informational sources, and expanding the capacities of the Central Election Commission and other monitoring institutions

can contribute to the fair and effective implementation of electoral rules and the addressing of practical challenges.

5. The active engagement of civil society organizations, academics, interest groups, and the media in monitoring electoral processes and promoting public debate on electoral reform can strengthen transparency and democratic legitimacy. It will also have a significant impact on the adoption of new reforms, unlike previous ones, since, as we know, public consultation is one of the key principles of the rule of law when it comes to elections.

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Long – Term Clinical Outcomes of Scarf osteotomy vs alternative Hallux Valgus Surgical Techniques - A 10-year retrospective study

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Abstract

Introduction: The scarf osteotomy is an effective technique for hallux valgus deformity providing tremendous inherent stability, thus retaining the benefit of early mobilization. We report our experience of treating severe cases of Hallux Valgus deformity with a SCARF osteotomy with regular follow-up (1-2 years), at patients diagnosed and operated in the University Hospital of Trauma, from January 2014 – January 2024. The technique we are presenting, provides the correction of moderate to severe hallux valgus deformities.

Material and Methods: Correction of hallux valgus deformities was achieved using a Z step osteotomy cut to realign the first metatarsal bone. A retrospective analysis was undertaken in 45 consecutive patients (63 feet). All results were analyzed by clinical examination, a questionnaire including the AOFAS forefoot score, modified, and plain roentgenograms.

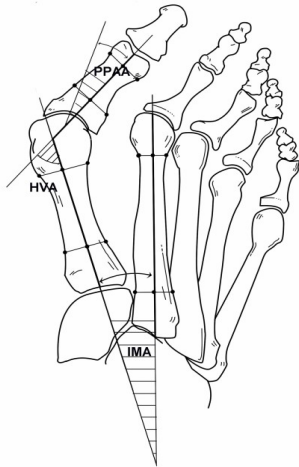
Results: Hallux valgus and intermetatarsal angle improved at mean 19.4° and 6.7°, respectively. Mean forefoot score improved from 50.1 to 91 points out of 100 possible points. Satisfactory healing time was expressed by an average return back to their attitude of 6-12 weeks, without including physiotherapy. Persistence or recurrence of hallux valgus was seen in 5 patients (11%). The complication rate was 5.6% including superficial wound infection, atrophy of the muscles, traumatic dislocation of the distal fragment.

Conclusion: Scarf osteotomy is a powerful and versatile procedure to correct hallux valgus deformity, and provides a predictable and satisfying result. Scarfs are not considered as a single osteotomy but as a combination of several procedures and displacement in several planes are possible.

Introduction

Numerous osteotomies have been described for surgical treatment of the primary varus metatarsus component of the hallux valgus deformity. over 130 metatarsal osteotomy techniques have been described in the world literature for surgical treatment of hallux valgus. In clinical practice, most orthopedists limit these to a few procedures that invariably involve soft tissue release, medial exostostomy combined with proximal or distal osteotomy of the first metatarsal. Any surgical procedure should result in a congruent metatarsal-phalangeal joint first, painless movement, improved makeup, and the ability to wear the desired shoes. The procedure should also result in as few complications as possible. The first osteotomy of the metatarsal scarf has significantly improved correction in hallux valgus and has recently gained popularity among European surgeons.[4]

The angle between the first and second metatarsals is between 8 to 9 degrees, usually considered to be the upper limits of normal. The valgus angle of the first metatarsophalangeal joint also is more than 15 to 20 degrees considered to be the upper limits of normal. If the valgus angle of the first metatarsophalangeal joint exceeds 30 to



35 degrees, pronation of the great toe usually results. This abnormal rotation, leads the abductor hallucis, which is normally plantar to the flexion-extension axis of the first metatarsophalangeal joint, to move further plantar ward. The only restraining medial structure is the medial capsular ligament with its capsule-sesamoid portion (inserting into the base of the proximal phalanx) -and capsule-phalangeal portion (inserting into the plantar plate). The adductor hallucis, which is unopposed by the abductor hallucis, pulls the great toe further into valgus, stretching the medial capsular ligament and allowing the metatarsal head to drift medially from the sesamoids.

In addition, the flexor hallucis brevis, flexor hallucis longus, adductor hallucis, and extensor hallucis longus increase the valgus moment at the metatarsophalangeal

joint, further deforming the first ray. The sesamoid ridge on the plantar surface of the first metatarsal head flattens because of pressure from the tibial sesamoid.

With this point of view, the normal or increased distal metatarsal articulation angle, bone stock, and symptomatic hallux valgus (HV) deformity have been established as major indications for the Scarf osteotomy. The osteotomy for the correction of the first metatarsal bone to reduce an increased intermetatarsal angle was performed using a Z step cut. Scarf is the term used for this Z step osteotomy and osteosyntheses technique [1, 2]. Micro oscillating saws allowed angulated osteotomy cuts in bone. early weight bearing



due to great stability and rare postoperative complications have contributed to its frequent application. sagittal-plane instability frequently leads to prolonged osseous healing and first metatarsal dorsiflexion malposition [2]. Therefore, midshaft osteotomies may fill the gap between the limitation of distal osteotomies and the

instability of proximal osteotomies to date only a few reports exist in the literature describing midterm results of Scarf osteotomy in larger populations. The literature concerning the Scarf osteotomy includes technical notes, but indications and contraindications have not been well defined. The current authors report their experience with a modified SCARF procedure in a three-year follow-up and indicate the use of this procedure in compare to other corrective procedures.

Clinical and Radiological Assessment

Clinical preoperative and follow-up evaluation was obtained by using the 100-point AOFAS forefoot score, modified. Follow-up examination and rating was done by the same team involved in performing the surgical procedure. Most of patients seen in clinic were photographed and overall radiographic assessment was done on weight-bearing x-rays obtained pre- and postoperatively in standardized dorsoplantar and lateral views.



Pre and post operative X-Ray

Surgical Technique

Operations were performed using spinal locoregional anesthesia or nerve block anesthesia also a tourniquet just above the knee joint was used. the standard approach was via a medial incision, at the junction of the plantar and the dorsal skin, with its proximal part below the surface projection of the metatarsi. the joint capsule and the medial collateral ligament of the MtpJ1 were incised horizontally, at the line of the first incision. The medial aspect of the metatarsal head was exposed. the medial eminence of the metatarsal head was partially resected. From an additional small dorsal interdigital approach, the lateral capsule was released longitudinally above the lateral sesamoid, leaving the plantar plate and the adductor tendon intact. the sesamoids were then mobilized trying to turn them back to the anatomic position.



In preparation for the three osteotomy cuts, two guiding 1.2-mm K wires were inserted at the corner points of the planned sCaRF cut as entry point of the proximal pin averaged 1 cm distal to the first metatarsal medial cuneiform joint line, over the concavity of the inferior aspect of the metatarsal at the junction of the plantar inferior to the medial aspect. The entrance point of the distal pin crossed the metatarsal head 5 mm proximal to the dorsal cartilage surface in the dorsal to the medial aspect.

iform joint line, over the concavity of the inferior aspect of the metatarsal at the junction of the plantar inferior to the medial aspect. The entrance point of the distal pin crossed the metatarsal head 5 mm proximal to the dorsal cartilage surface in the dorsal to the medial aspect. Both K wires were oriented parallel to each other. The horizontal osteotomies were performed using an oscillating saw. The angle of each cut was at 45° to 60° to the longitudinal metatarsal axis. The authors' modification of the SCARF osteotomy described by Barouk includes the angulation of the distal osteotomy cut and the placement of the distal pin on the dorsal-medial aspect of the first metatarsal [3]. After completing the osteotomy, the distal fragment was displaced laterally to reduce the intermetatarsal angle. Lateral displacement was achieved by pushing the distal fragment laterally while holding the proximal fragment of the first metatarsal in place. The translation is greater for larger IM angles. For maximal stability of the osteotomy after translation, it is necessary to orient the proximal and distal osteotomy cut strictly parallel to each other. Translation and lowering were indicated for hallux valgus with intermittent metatarsalgia or a deficit of the first metatarsal head in weight-bearing. This is best diagnosed clinically.

The osteotomy was modified by directing the orientation of the K wires. translation and shortening of the first metatarsal could be performed. Shortening was obtained by increasing the obliquity of the anterior and posterior cuts to the longitudinal axis of the second metatarsal. additional shortening was indicated in severe forefoot deformity with luxation of the lesser toes at the metatarsal-phalangeal joints. translation and lengthening were indicated in cases with short first metatarsal combined with metatarsalgia. Fixation of the osteotomy was achieved using a small cannulated bi-cortical compressive screw of steel or titanium material.

Results

In our study were 30(78.9%) female and 8 (21.1%) male patients. the average age at the time of surgery was 50 years. the range, 35 to 65 years. 2 (5.2%) of the patients had systemic disorders which caused neuropathy and/or angiopathy of the lower extremity. there were 2 (5.2%) of the patients with diabetes mellitus, 5(13.1%) of the patients with rheumatologic symptoms. patients were informed about a higher risk for possible wound healing complications. If they still wanted the operative treatment, surgery was planned. patients were also informed to stop smoking, but none did. 5(13.1%) of the patients had previous hallux valgus operations of different types. akin osteotomy was performed in 7(18.4%) of cases. akin osteotomy normally is added to sCaRF osteotomy in those cases where hallux valgus inter phalanges angle is greater than 15°, or after completing the scarf osteotomy and the soft-tissue reconstruction, the hallux was still in more than 10°of valgus position, as studied in the literature. In 6 (16.7%) of cases for treatment of metatarsalgia, was performed nerve removal. 20 (52.6%) of the patients underwent surgery on both feet. all of them in two sessions with an average interval of six months. at mean of 12 to 24 months a retrospective analysis including clinical examination and radiographic evaluation was undertaken. Regarding to postoperative pain, 27 (71%) of operated feet reported to be completely pain-free, and 5(13.1%) of operated feet reported to have only occasional or slight discomfort. the remaining 6 (16.7%) of cases had mild to moderate discomfort. The length of the first metatarsal was reduced by an average of 2.5 mm (+/- 2.7 mm). Healing was expressed by the ability of full weight bearing gait pattern and the time from surgery to return back to work. Bone healing was documented on plain radiographs six weeks after surgery. At the time of final follow-up, no loss of correction of the intermetatarsal angle was noted. However, 4 (10.5%) patients showed a recurrent or persistent hallux valgus. Complications were rare and comprised superficial wound infections necessitating antibiotic medication and traumatic dislocation of the osteosyntheses.



Pre and post operative status

Discussion

More than 130 procedures are described for the surgical treatment of hallux valgus. these include distal osteotomies (Chevron, Mitchell, Wilson osteotomies) or proximal metatarsal osteotomies. [4, 9] the procedure is already known by orthopedists especially in europe is the Z diaphyseal step incision osteotomy called as scarf osteotomy. the scarf is the english translation of the phrase "le trait de Jupiter des Charpentiers" - a technique used by carpenters to increase the size of an entrance by cutting two corresponding beams. [4, 10, 11] In 1973 Burutaran described a similar incision in the first metatarsal for the extension of the first ray. [4] Zygmunt in 1983 began performing Z incisions with lateral displacement of the first metatarsal head. [10] the technique was further developed by Borrelli and Weil in 1984, they gave the name "scarf" to this technique, [4] in europe Barouk has done more than 2300 scarf osteotomies. scarring is a combined procedure which involves resection of the median eminence and medial capsular fold, metatarsal osteotomy, lateral soft tissue release, and if required proximal phalanx osteotomy (akin). [1] procedures are performed in combination. the sCaRF osteotomy has become a widely used procedure in middle europe since the introduction and the development of specially designed osteosyntheses material. In our study were 30(78.9%) female and 8 (21.1%) male patients. the average age at the time of surgery was 50 years. the range, 35 to 65 years. Nix et al. [13] pooled prevalence estimates for HV were 23% in adults aged 18-65 years and 35.7% in elderly people aged over 65 years, and prevalence increased with age and was higher in females (30%) compared to males (13%) have comparable results to those of our study. akin osteotomy was performed in 7(18.4%) of cases. akin osteotomy normally is added to sCaRF osteotomy in those cases where hallux valgus inter phalanges angle is greater than 15°, or after completing the scarf osteotomy and the soft-tissue reconstruction, the hallux was still in more than 10° of valgus position, as studied in the literature. In 6 (16.7%) of cases for treatment of metatarsalgia, was performed nerve removal. 20 (52.6%) of the patients underwent surgery on both feet. All of them in two sessions with an average interval of six months. at mean of 12 to 24 months a retrospective analysis including clinical examination and radiographic evaluation was undertaken. Regarding to postoperative pain, 27 (71%) of operated feet reported to be completely pain-free, and 5(13.1%) of operated feet reported to have only occasional or slight discomfort. the remaining 6 (16.7%) of cases had mild to moderate discomfort. The length of the first metatarsal was reduced by an average of 2.5 mm (+/- 2.7 mm). Healing was expressed by the ability of full weight bearing gait pattern and the time from surgery to return back to work. Bone healing was documented on plain radiographs six weeks after surgery. At the time of final follow-up, no loss of correction of the intermetatarsal angle was noted. However, 4 (10.5%) patients showed a recurrent or persistent hallux valgus. this paper, introducing the sCaRF osteotomy, describes the operative procedure and the possibilities of the sCaRF in combination with other osteotomies in lesser metatarsals. Complications included two metatarsal fractures, failure to consolidation, also, neuropathy and angiopathy.

Conclusion: scarf osteotomy is a powerful and versatile procedure to correct hallux valgus deformity, and provides a predictable and satisfying result. scarfs are not considered as a single osteotomy but as a combination of several procedures and displacement in several planes are possible

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Transition in the Healthcare System and Burnout among Medical Professionals: A Qualitative Study in Albania

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between Albania's prolonged healthcare system transition and the emergence of professional burnout among medical staff. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 30 healthcare professionals—15 doctors and 15 nurses—from the University Hospital Center "Mother Teresa" in Tirana, it explores how decades of fragmented reforms, resource constraints, and unstable governance structures have shaped workplace stress and job satisfaction. Findings reveal that high workloads, inadequate institutional support, and uncertainty regarding ongoing reforms have intensified emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced professional fulfillment. Nurses particularly reported a lack of recognition and career development opportunities, while doctors emphasized the psychological toll of persistent systemic instability. The analysis situates these experiences within Albania's broader political and health policy evolution, highlighting the need for a stable institutional framework that actively involves healthcare workers in decision-making. Strengthening resource allocation, ensuring consistent policy direction, and fostering a supportive professional environment are essential for mitigating burnout and improving both staff well-being and patient care outcomes.

Keywords: Healthcare system transition, professional burnout, qualitative research, Albania, public hospitals, healthcare reforms, nurses, doctors, occupational stress, policy implementation.

Introduction

The fall of the communist regime in the early 1990s initiated a comprehensive transformation of the Albanian healthcare system. Initial reforms were guided by the aspiration to establish a sustainable health insurance model, inspired by the Bismarck system, yet the lack of institutional capacity and technical expertise hindered success. Over the next three decades, Albania witnessed fragmented and often unsupported reforms that undermined service delivery and contributed to professional dissatisfaction. This introduction situates the current challenges faced by healthcare professionals within the historical trajectory of systemic reforms, providing a foundation for understanding the roots and manifestations of burnout in hospital settings.

The fall of the dictatorship in the early 1990s marked a turning point for the Albanian healthcare system. The existing healthcare structures were dismantled, signaling the beginning of a prolonged transition period. In an effort to build a new health insurance

system based on the social health insurance model, Albania adopted elements of the Bismarck model; however, the lack of experience and technical capacity led to its failure. Between 1992 and 2021, the system underwent frequent, fragmented, and often unsupported reforms, until the adoption of the National Health Strategy in 2021. Although in 2019 the government formally adopted the UN initiative for Universal Health Coverage, today the Albanian healthcare system remains far from achieving its set goals. This prolonged transition has resulted in increasing pressure on public healthcare workers and has favored the emergence of professional burnout, directly affecting their well-being and the quality of care provided. The aim of this study is to explore how political transitions and successive healthcare reforms in Albania have influenced the experience of burnout among doctors and nurses working in hospital settings. Drawing on the experiences of frontline healthcare providers, this research investigates the interplay between prolonged systemic transition and the incidence of burnout, highlighting how structural instability exacerbates occupational stress and affects patient care quality. By examining reforms from the early 1990s to the present, the study contextualizes individual experiences within broader health policy changes.

Healthcare System Transition in Albania

The collapse of Albania's centralized governance system in the early 1990s marked the beginning of a complex and often turbulent transformation in the nation's healthcare sector. Under the socialist model, the state exerted complete control over health service organization, financing, and delivery, ensuring universal access in principle, but with significant limitations in quality, innovation, and responsiveness to patient needs. The dismantling of these rigid structures created both unprecedented opportunities and daunting challenges. Successive governments sought to decentralize decision-making, modernize infrastructure, and improve service accessibility. Reforms aimed at shifting administrative authority to regional and municipal levels, strengthening primary care, and introducing market-oriented principles. Policy milestones, such as the National Health Strategy adopted in 2021, articulated ambitious visions for universal access to safe, efficient, and patient-centered care. Nevertheless, persistent implementation gaps have undermined these objectives. Weak and unstable governance frameworks, coupled with chronic underfunding, continue to generate uncertainty for healthcare professionals and patients. The resulting environment is characterized by excessive workloads, inadequate managerial and professional support, and inconsistent administrative directives—conditions that collectively create fertile ground for the development of professional burnout.

Historical Context and Policy Evolution

The roots of these challenges lie in the profound socio-political and economic upheaval that followed the fall of the dictatorship. Determined to replace the outdated socialist health model, Albania experimented with elements of the Bismarck social health insurance framework, which emphasized contributions from employers and

employees to fund healthcare services. However, the lack of technical expertise, insufficient administrative capacity, and the absence of robust regulatory mechanisms hindered effective implementation. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, reforms were frequent but fragmented, often reflecting short-term political priorities rather than coherent long-term strategies. Changes in leadership brought shifts in direction, disrupting continuity and eroding trust within the system. The adoption of the United Nations initiative for Universal Health Coverage in 2019 represented a formal commitment to expanding access and reducing inequities, yet its impact remains limited by resource constraints and systemic inefficiencies. The protracted nature of this transition—now spanning over three decades—has intensified strain on the health workforce, exacerbating the risk of burnout and compromising the quality of patient care.

Methodology

To investigate these dynamics, this study employed a qualitative research design grounded in the principles of exploratory inquiry. Thirty healthcare professionals—fifteen doctors and fifteen nurses—employed at the University Hospital Center “Mother Teresa” in Tirana were recruited using purposive sampling to capture a diverse range of perspectives across different specialties and seniority levels. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in a confidential setting, enabling participants to speak openly about their experiences with systemic reforms, day-to-day operational challenges, and personal coping strategies. The interview guide included prompts on perceptions of policy changes, institutional support, workload management, and emotional well-being. Ethical considerations were prioritized: participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and anonymity was assured. Thematic analysis was carried out using an inductive approach inspired by grounded theory, allowing for the identification of patterns and themes directly from the data rather than imposing predefined categories. This approach ensured that the lived experiences of frontline staff were central to the study’s findings.

Results and Discussion

The data reveal a health system caught between aspirational reform goals and the practical realities of limited capacity. Participants consistently described working in conditions marked by excessive patient loads, insufficient staffing, and shortages of essential supplies and equipment. Doctors reported chronic emotional exhaustion and a sense of depersonalization when interacting with patients, often feeling that systemic shortcomings limited their ability to provide high-quality care. Nurses highlighted the absence of structured professional development, inadequate recognition of their contributions, and a lack of involvement in decision-making processes that directly affected their work. Many participants noted that policy changes were often introduced without adequate consultation or explanation, leading to confusion and uncertainty about roles and expectations. These findings resonate with international literature on transitional healthcare systems, which links prolonged policy instability

and resource scarcity to heightened burnout risk. In Albania's case, the combination of historical legacies, political volatility, and insufficient institutional coordination has created an enduring environment of occupational stress.

Conclusion

This study sheds light on the intricate relationship between systemic healthcare reforms and the well-being of medical professionals in a country undergoing prolonged political and institutional transition. The evidence suggests that without a stable governance framework, adequate resource allocation, and active engagement of healthcare workers in the reform process, the risk of burnout will remain high. Recommendations include strengthening institutional stability through consistent policy implementation, increasing investment in infrastructure and human resources, and establishing formal channels for frontline professionals to contribute to decision-making. Addressing these issues is critical not only for safeguarding the health and morale of the workforce but also for ensuring that Albania moves closer to achieving the universal health coverage and service quality standards outlined in its strategic plans.

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Hypercalcemia, renal dysfunction, and outcomes after severe burns

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Introduction

In an initial analysis involving 217 burn patients in intensive care unit, we identified 61 patients who met the criteria we desired: more than 10 days of hospital stay and over 20% body surface area burned. We analyzed the ions calcium, sodium, potassium, and chloride using their laboratory data. We identified periods of increase for these ions and determined which ion showed the most significant fluctuations in terms of increase and decrease. For each patient, we collected three values for each ion from the first day of hospitalization until the day of discharge and did the analysis.

Burn injuries, particularly those covering significant body surface areas such as: face, arms or legs lead to profound physiological changes, among which electrolyte imbalances are prominent. These imbalances arise due to the extensive damage to the skin and underlying tissues, resulting in a complex interplay of fluid shifts, metabolic demands, and systemic inflammatory responses and even sometimes in bad prognosis. What happens with electrolytes after burning?

1. Initial Phase (Acute Phase):

a. Sodium: In the immediate aftermath of a burn injury, there is a massive loss of fluids from the vascular compartment to the interstitial spaces, known as burn shock. This fluid shift causes hyponatremia (low sodium levels) as sodium follows water into the extracellular space. Additionally, aldosterone secretion increases, leading to sodium retention, but this is often insufficient to counteract the initial losses. Additionally, hyperkalemia is characteristic during this phase due to extensive tissue necrosis. The development of hyponatremia (Na) (< 135 mEq/L) is attributed to the depletion of extracellular sodium caused by changes in cellular permeability.

b. Potassium: Hyperkalemia (elevated potassium levels) occurs early due to the destruction of cells and the release of intracellular potassium into the extracellular space. However, as the initial shock phase resolves and fluids are resuscitated, hypokalemia (low potassium levels) may ensue due to increased renal excretion, inadequate intake, and ongoing losses from the burn wounds. Hyperkalemia (K⁺) (> 5.5 mEq/L) is mainly caused tissue necrosis. Manifestations of hyperkalemia are more pronounced in acute hyperkalemia, and in particular affect the cardiovascular system.

2. Intermediate Phase (Fluid Remobilization Phase):

a. Sodium: As fluid therapy continues, there is a risk of hypernatremia (high sodium levels) due to saline solutions. The use of hypertonic solutions can also contribute to this imbalance. Hypernatremia (Na⁺) (> 115 mEq/L) in burn patients is caused by several mechanisms: intracellular sodium mobilization, reabsorption of

cellular edema, urinary retention of sodium (due to increased renin, angiotensin, and ADH levels), and the administration of iso-/hypertonic fluids during the resuscitation phase. Hyponatremia manifests in various forms depending on the degree of water retention. This can include peripheral edema, ascites, pleural effusion, and interstitial/alveolar edema, which may impair ventilation. Alternatively, symptoms of dehydration may also be prominent.

b. Potassium: Hypokalemia becomes more pronounced due to continued renal losses, shifts back into cells, and dilutional effects from fluid therapy. Supplementation is often necessary to maintain normal potassium levels and prevent complications such as arrhythmias.

3. Late Phase (Recovery Phase):

a. Calcium and Magnesium: Burn patients may experience hypocalcemia (low calcium levels) and hypomagnesemia (low magnesium levels) due to factors like hypoalbuminemia (since calcium is protein-bound), sequestration in damaged tissues, and inadequate dietary intake. Although in some patients we have seen not such rare conditions such as hypercalcemia.

b. Mechanisms: Cellular Destruction: Burn injuries cause direct cellular damage, leading to the release of intracellular contents, including electrolytes like potassium. Inflammatory Response: The systemic inflammatory response syndrome (SIRS) triggered by burns alters vascular permeability, causing fluid and electrolyte shifts.

c. Renal Function: Burns can impair renal function either directly or through secondary complications such as sepsis, influencing electrolyte excretion and retention.

d. Fluid Resuscitation: Aggressive fluid therapy, while necessary to prevent shock, can dilute or concentrate electrolytes, necessitating careful monitoring and adjustments.

e. Hormonal Changes: Burns induce stress responses that activate the renin-angiotensin-aldosterone system (RAAS) and antidiuretic hormone (ADH), affecting sodium and water balance.

Burn injuries, particularly those covering significant body surface areas, lead to profound physiological changes, among which electrolyte imbalances are prominent. These imbalances arise due to the extensive damage to the skin and underlying tissues, resulting in a complex interplay of fluid shifts, metabolic demands, and systemic inflammatory responses.

Materials and methods

Design and setting: Retrospective cohort at a tertiary burn center (January 2023–April 2024). Screening frame: 217 admissions; analytic inclusion: TBSA >20% or hospital stay >10 days. Sixty-one patients met criteria (age 1–95 years; injuries 20–85% TBSA). Ionized hypercalcemia was defined as $\text{Ca}^{2+} > 1.22$ mmol/L. Serial values of calcium, sodium, potassium, and chloride were abstracted from admission to discharge. Outcomes included acute renal dysfunction (reduced urine output and rising creatinine), length of stay, and all-cause in-hospital mortality. Analyses used

descriptive statistics and exploratory associations with adjustments for age and TBSA where feasible.

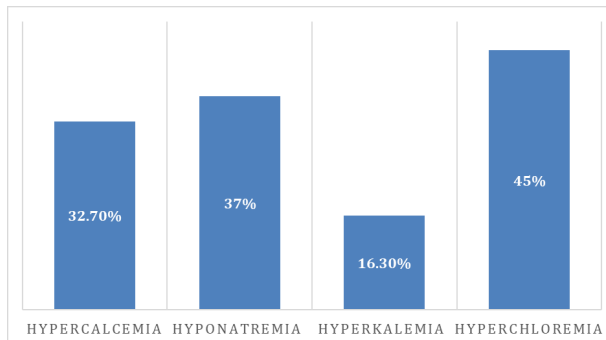
Results

Incidence and timing: Hypercalcemia occurred in roughly one-third of the cohort, with first detection near day 12. Electrolyte trajectories showed early hyponatremia, hyperkalemia, and constant hyperchloremia. Chloride showed the largest average rise across windows, aligning with chloride-rich fluids. Renal function and outcomes: Hypercalcemia co-occurred with more frequent low urine output and rising creatinine, longer length of stay, and higher mortality.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for key variables.

Variable	N	Mean	SD	SE
Age (years)	62	44.785	28.996	3.683
Ionized Calcium (mmol/L)*	62	—	—	—
Length of stay (days)	62	23.08	13.843	1.758

**Hypercalcemia threshold defined as Ca²⁺ > 1.22 mmol/L.*



Source: Authors' research

Discussion

Bone loss from immobilization, hormonal changes, and the systemic inflammatory response create a plausible basis for subacute hypercalcemia in burn patients. When kidney filtration declines, calcium levels can rise further, fueling a self-perpetuating cycle of risk. The frequent occurrence of hyperchloremia also highlights the need to consider the acid–base effects of fluid selection. While the associations we observed remained even after adjusting for basic variables, some residual confounding is still possible.

Clinical implications

For patients at higher risk, we recommend twice-weekly ionized calcium measurements between day 7 and week 4 post-injury. Regular assessment of volume status is essential, and for persistent elevations, loop diuretics or bisphosphonates should be considered.

Early mobilization and adequate protein–calorie nutrition are equally important, as is incorporating electrolyte trend reviews into daily rounds so that potential problems can be identified and addressed before they escalate.

Analysis of variables

In looking at the patients who developed high calcium levels, a few patterns stood out. Twenty people in total showed elevated calcium, a signal we always take seriously in a burn unit because it can point to deeper systemic problems, not just the obvious injury. Out of this group, nine did not survive, a sobering reminder that such imbalances can be more than just numbers on a chart; they can be a sign that the body is losing its fight to stabilize.

Some patients were managed with low-diuretic diets (10) in all. A choice made to help keep fluid levels steady and avoid making calcium problems worse. It's not a magic fix, but in critical care, even small adjustments can matter. The length of stay varied widely, from just under three weeks to a month and a half, and as is often the case, the longer admissions tended to be the ones with the heaviest complications or the most extensive burns.

Those burns ranged from a quarter of the body's surface to well over two-thirds.

Anyone who has treated such patients knows that the size of the burn changes everything from infection, risk to fluid needs and it often shapes the entire course of care.

One other thing caught our eye: chloride levels climbed higher than any other electrolyte, averaging a 45% increase.

In our setting, that's usually linked to the sheer volume of chloride-rich fluids patients receive in the first days after injury, compounded by bicarbonate losses through damaged skin. If kidney function is already compromised, the body can't clear chloride efficiently, and the imbalance only deepens.

Chloride levels showed the largest overall increase, with a mean rise of 45%. In burn patients, hyperchloremia is most often driven by fluid resuscitation, particularly with chloride-rich crystalloids such as normal saline. Large-volume administration can cause chloride levels to rise, leading in some cases to hyperchloremic acidosis.

Additional contributing factors include bicarbonate loss through damaged skin and impaired kidney clearance due to hypovolemia, shock, or direct injury, all of which can disrupt acid–base balance and exacerbate chloride retention.

Conclusion

We can conclude that calcium regulation in burn patients is not just a side issue. It is a moving target with serious consequences. The mix of bone changes from

immobilization, hormonal shifts, fluid choices, and organ strain creates a delicate balance that can tip quickly in the wrong direction. When it does, complications like kidney dysfunction can come very fast, and reversing them is not always an easy task.

The takeaway is simple but urgent: we need to watch these electrolytes closely, especially calcium, from the second week and on.

We need to use every tool we have at our disposal, such as better nutrition, early movement, careful fluid management, and timely medication in order to keep patients stable.

The numbers on a lab report sheet can change overnight and catching those shifts early can make the difference between recovery and decline. For those of us working on the floor, that vigilance is what gives patients their best shot at healing.

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Legal framework and financial challenges of the organized crime

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Abstract

Legal framework and financial challenges of Organized crime knows no borders and has taken on new forms in an international dimension. Globalization and information and technological changes have made it possible for criminal organizations to expand their activities and exert even greater influence on an international scale.

For this reason, international cooperation on their financial control is essential to combat this phenomenon effectively by confronting these organizations with aspects of law violations. To combat organized crime, it is necessary to provide technical assistance to countries that do not have the necessary capacity and training in building legal frameworks and increasing national capacity to implement financial control in the most orderly manner. A criminal organization is considered a group of individuals with a visible hierarchical structure, engaged in significant criminal activities.

These organizations often engage in multiple criminal activities and have extensive support networks for money laundering and their finances are always healthy and they have no fear for the continuation of these organizations. and so Transnational Organized Crime manifests itself in many forms, including trafficking in drugs, firearms and even people as well as what is most important for an organization the movement of money in a regular manner. At the same time, organized crime groups exploit human mobility to smuggle migrants and undermine financial systems through money laundering.

Keywords: Legal framework, Money laundering, Organized Crime, Criminal Activities, Financial Control.

1. Introduction and theoretical basis

This paper aims to provide a descriptive and comparative analysis of the legal and financial analysis of the forms of organized crime. Where the criminal activity of organized crime appears to us differently, especially during the commission of the most serious crimes in the field of general crime, political crime and environmental crime, this type of financial activity is mainly present in this organization, sometimes with established links with the state, its bodies and other relevant entities.

Organized crime does not recognize regions, borders, continents, it extends wherever it can be gained. It is an illegal criminal activity by structured groups for a long period of time by committing serious criminal offenses using threats, violence, corruption and other means in order to gain the greatest financial or material benefit. At the state level, new forms of organized crime are emerging where the bearers are senior state officials who use their institutional positions to acquire large material assets. These are professional perpetrators who are organized into various groups and other forms of association, with the aim of committing crimes.

They are strongly organized, with a hierarchical relationship and high speed, care and skill in the execution of criminal offenses. Relations in these organizations consist of strict discipline, personal obedience and loyalty, great operability and the ability to quickly maneuver and shift their activities over large spaces.

The characteristics of organized crime force all countries in the world to focus on building a strategy to combat organized crime and institutional crime and corruption. Almost all countries have joined the fight against organized crime systematically¹, building a system for the prevention and eradication of institutional organized crime, drug crime, illegal trade in weapons, oil, human trafficking, smuggling of excise goods, especially cigarettes and more². In building a concept of criminal law protection from organized crime, one starts from its basic characteristics: criminal profitability, violence and intimidation, corruption, sophistication, organization, synchronization, coordination, internationalization, technical personnel, multi-specialization. The last characteristic of this crime is the close connection with terrorism, money laundering, corruption, illegal trade, drug production and distribution, cybercrime, espionage (from all fields) and scientific and technical development.³

2. Research methods and methodology

In the preparation of this paper, several scientific methods were used, which have as their object the study of the phenomenon of the legal and financial analysis of the forms of organized crime different dimensions of its evolution and appearance in the international and regional arena. This paper is mainly based on the analysis of international instruments of legal and financial aspects and the issues addressed by doctrine and jurisprudence on the organized crime, based not only on the content methodology, but also on the analytical and comparative one.

Using this method Content analysis -, will give the provisions of the Law on Police, the Law on Courts, the Law on Public Prosecution, the Customs Law, the Law on Customs Administration, the Law on Internal Affairs, the Law on Financial Police, which regulate institutional protection are analyzed. from organized crime;

The comparative method (comparative), with the application of this comparative perception of the experiences, methodology and differences of institutional protection from organized crime in several countries; by using this method synthesis, the data obtained using the previous methods are combined.

3. Legal framework of the organized crime and its development

In the legal aspect, we see Organized Crime as a topic that not only determines the order of work of the judiciary and other law enforcement bodies (at national and international level). Organized crime is becoming a main target for those who, in one way or another, want to use it for their political gains. Various "specialists"

¹ Criminal organizations and Judiciary Power - SciELO, (2021), (пристапено на 19.10.2021), достапно на: <https://www.scielo.br> ›, стр. 1 - 3.

² Also known as the Convention on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

³ Organized Crime Defined, (2021), (пристапено на 19.10.2021), достапно на: <http://www.organized-crime.de> › OCDEF1, стр.3.

appear in public security in general and in the fight against organized crime who describe different solutions to combat the feeling of insecurity and fear that attacks the population and makes them hide from the great force of violence exercised by criminal organizations⁴.

To finance their projects, criminal organizations with their ideologies often intertwine in their increasingly “globalized” approach to organized crime, precisely at this moment they cooperate with each other to increase territories and finance their criminal projects, and it is ideological criminal organizations that seek to conquer territories, divide them or take political power, they need to raise funds for them. Corporate criminal organizations are those that have increased vigilance and intelligence to evade law enforcement and work like normal companies to maximize profits⁵.

The difference is that while legitimate companies achieve this goal through legitimate activities, criminal organizations seek their profits through illegal criminal means by involving them in normal activity and laundering their criminal products in secure finances. Organized crime has developed a formalized organizational structure with clear leadership roles among them, the main purpose of which is to secure finances through illegal activities and formalize them through legal activities. Criminal organizations maintain their position through the use of real violence, corrupt public officials or extortion.

In today's high-tech and global society, organized crime successfully adapts, effectively and illegally owns and manages significant financial and material resources, corrupting many government and municipal officials. An important motivation for participating in organized crime groups is the dependence of an influential person on the group related to the sense of duty, fear of retaliation, desire to gain criminal authority, friendly relations, striving to support a certain group member, spending time together, having fun together, increased risk sensitivity and adrenaline rush.

Some of the members of organized crime groups are motivated by seeking self-affirmation, gaining autonomy, proving that they are not worse than others, a strong desire for revenge, previous promises, specific responsibilities of the individual from other influential participants in the group. Individual psychological and behavioral characteristics typical of traditional crime have more intense and hypertrophied manifestations of perpetrators of organized crime:⁶

The differentiation of personal roles in organized crime groups leads to the emphasis on the personal characteristics of their bearers. Despite the peculiarities of their group position, functional roles and responsibilities, the participants in organized criminal groups have common universal personal characteristics, qualities and characteristics that to some extent are typical for all of them.

Psychological protection of individuals from organized crime reflects their philosophy of their prestigious business activities, their significant public role and their presence

⁴ Criminal organizations and Judiciary Power - SciELO, (2021), (пристапено на 19.10.2021), достапно на: <https://www.scielo.br> , стр. 1 – 3.

⁵ Sociology Essays - Causes of Organized Crime, (2015), , (посетено на 26.09.2021), распложиво на: <https://www.ukessays.com> , стр. 7.

⁶ Madzharov, E. A., (2021), An attempt to summarize the psychological portrait of perpetrators of organized crime, Academy of the Ministry of the Interior, Sofia, Republic of Bulgaria, (пристапено на 23.10.2021), достапно на: <https://stumejournals.com> > confsec > 158.full.pdf.

in the community as respectable citizens. Representatives of organized crime during their criminal activities develop effective strategies for dealing with, transforming their negative emotional and experiences into positive, feelings. Thus, they contribute to the stabilization of self-confidence and the successful unraveling of crime and the motivation of criminal representatives.

4. The globalization and organized crime

The most important form of international crime today is organized crime, ie. crime committed by groups of people equipped with a stable, generally hierarchical organization who carry out illegal acts, usually by force, in order to enrich themselves without regard to international borders. Important groups of international organized crime are the mafias (Sicilian, American and Russian), the Japanese yakuza, the Colombian drug cartels Medellin and Cali, the Chinese triad. However, the criminal group is not a unitary organization of strictly subordinate groups. Instead, it is a network of homogeneous groups linked together by various forms of solidarity, complicity and a false hierarchical order:⁷

Rivalry and conflict between criminal organizations are resolved according to rules and mechanisms only partially known from the outside and usually without giving way to a comprehensive confrontation. Global organized crime is helping to draw attention to the growing links between transnational criminal organizations, making them an even more daunting challenge. The increase in the formation of cooperative links between transnational criminals with the formation of the so-called “Strategic alliances” are based on economic considerations. (such as risk reduction, the need for specialized services, and the desire to enter new markets. The common goal of criminal alliances is to bypass law enforcement agencies and provide a basic incentive for sustainable cooperation.

International crime is constantly changing. It is becoming more diversified every day, from traditional fields such as gambling, lending and prostitution, to international car smuggling, art and archeological theft, arms trade, illegal wildlife trade, credit card fraud and other transnational enterprises. A criminal organization may prefer one sector of crime over another, but most organizations operate in drug trafficking, arms trafficking, prostitution, and international recycling of dirty money. Modern technology in the banking, communications and electronics sectors provides criminals with new tools that allow them to steal millions of dollars and launder their vast illicit profits across borders and continents.

The crime business in all its forms (such as drug trafficking, illegal arms deals, stolen cars, child pornography, prostitution and migrant smuggling) was worth \$ 95 billion ten years ago. Today it is more than five times. About \$ 500 billion change hands in the global criminal business each year - more than the combined value of international trade in oil, steel, pharmaceuticals, meat, fruit, wheat and sugar.

International criminal organizations are often involved in privatization programs held by many governments today to rebuild national economies after years of

⁷ Attina, F., (2021), Globalization and crime - The emerging role of international institutions, Department of Political Studies - University of Catania, (пристапено на 24.10.2021), достапно на <http://aei.pitt.edu › jmwp07>., стр. 3.

crisis. They buy previously state-owned banks and financial, telecommunications and service institutions cover for their covert activities. The huge sums driven by organized crime are often higher than the total budgets of most developing countries. Inflation and currency fluctuations can arise from such business, throwing domestic financial institutions in disarray with a huge violation of the conditions that enable the realization of basic social and economic rights.

Transnational criminal organizations are most concerned with profit, not politics, and are unlikely to want to undermine a system they can exploit and misuse for their own ends. But organized crime is always a form of lawlessness that cynically exploits citizens' rights and jeopardizes the most basic elements of democracy. Corruption is one of the most pervasive phenomena. Corruption of public servants is often the preferred way of doing business, as violence is likely to attract unwanted public attention. The resulting public reaction to the revelations of corruption of officials is one of deep distrust, fear and unwillingness to cooperate with the authorities.

Globalization, generally described as the removal of barriers to the international movement of goods and assets, is beneficial to international organized crime networks. The global forces of supply and demand have created new markets for illicit trade in goods and services provided by criminal activities. There is a high demand for things like drugs (especially in Europe and North America), weapons (in Africa and the Middle East), exotic parts of wildlife and animals (Asia) and exploitative people (practically everywhere). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) recently estimated that international trade in counterfeit and stolen goods was as high as half a trillion dollars. Criminal networks also have new opportunities to set up facilities in different countries from which they can produce and distribute illegal goods, reducing costs and maximizing profits.⁸

5. International framework and the financial aspects

Globalization is beneficial to transnational organized crime. Globalization facilitates international trade and the exchange of goods, as well as increasing the difficulty of regulating other activities such as the trade in illegal goods and the enforcement of laws intended to prevent them. Financial deregulation benefits criminal actors because it allows them to launder money through placement, stratification, and ultimately integration into a legitimate financial system.⁹

The process of globalization has brought the need to reform the way institutions are structured and how they function in different contexts. International cooperation between domestic institutions is no longer sufficient to meet international challenges such as global crime. There is a need for domestic institutions to become "more global".

The country faces enormous challenges due to global crime, and current institutions and legal systems are sometimes isolated or operate only on a national scale. These imperfections are used by organized crime groups to extend their reach. The processes

⁸ Globalization and Transnational Crime - E-International, (2021), (пристапено на 27.09.2021), расположиво на: <https://www.e-ir.info> › 2020/09/16 › globalization-and-tra, стр. 1.

⁹ Globalization and Organized Crime: Challenges for International Cooperation, (2016), (пристапено на 24.10.2021), достапно на: <https://www.bakerinstitute.org> › files.

of globalization have provided opportunities for global expansion of legal businesses, but also illegal businesses. Traditional mechanisms for controlling organized crime globally are insufficient. Nation states must now look for new and improved ways to combat illegal businesses, just as they are looking for new and innovative ways to regulate global corporations.

One of the biggest challenges of international cooperation is the different national penal laws. The calls of globalization for nations are to establish the principles of common law in order to fight crime. Just as transnational organized crime groups use a horizontal hierarchical system to do business, nations need to establish similar systems to combat them. States are called upon to develop, to look beyond their borders, and to act against the great, negative impact of organized crime through mutual cooperation.

Alignment of national legislations is one of the main challenges in the fight against transnational organized crime in the context of globalization. The effect of globalization on social phenomena has led to this process being considered as a huge social change in societies. Today, many socio-economic issues, such as peace, crime, immigration, manufacturing, employment, technology development, environmental threats, income distribution, prosperity, social cohesion, and identity, are described as phenomena affected by globalization. International law, trade law, international trade law, criminal law and other branches of law are also affected by globalization.¹⁰ Globalization affects everything, such as crime, crime and victim, the process of committing a crime, the method of trial, the reasons for proving the claim, criminalization and decriminalization, and criminal policy. Globalization has created new challenges and sometimes helped to address them. For example, crime is historically local. Most of the victims of the murders are known, and most of the victims of child abuse knew their perpetrators, and the victims of theft did not need to go far from their neighborhood to find the burglar.

The invention of computers and access to cyberspace, which are factors that contribute to globalization, are the cause of cybercrime and criminals who find it difficult, and sometimes impossible, to detect their crimes in cyberspace.

The internationalization of the world and the removal of borders have created new opportunities for criminals in lucrative areas, such as economic crime in organized crime. The evolution of communication networks has also facilitated the transfer of vast resources at the moment. This frees offenders from police and justice investigations.

Conclusion

The international community today has a clear global approach to effectively combating transnational organized crime in the area of prevention and taking effective measures against transnational organized crime and strengthening cross-border cooperation to prosecute and combat organized crime. The cornerstone in the reorganization of national efforts to create the institutional basis for the effective suppression of organized crime is the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized

¹⁰ The effect of globalization on the national criminal law systems, (2018), (пристапено на 24.10.2021), достапно на: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent>.

Crime.

Today, organized crime comes from all over the world. Organized crime is a very lucrative activity for organizations engaged in this type of activity because the realized criminal activities generate income whose value is estimated to be in the hundreds of billions of dollars.

Organized crime organizations are flexible, innovative, and resilient. They operate as networks of organizations that are profitably oriented, constantly looking for new opportunities and working across countries and beyond. Organized crime networks are sensitive to the tactics implemented by the competent institutions, have a high level of knowledge and experience of business practices and demonstrate a high level of resilience to traditional interventions and reactions of bodies and institutions to organized crime.

In order to be able to successfully respond to the challenges of organized crime, it is necessary to have a complete picture of how organized crime operates, what are the areas and means it uses and what tactical means to use in intelligence and conducting investigative procedures. It is also necessary to provide strong legal and legislative support and to create conditions for full implementation of the laws, to set targeted priorities in the fight against organized crime and to include more legal competencies in the fight against organized crime. Mixed multi-agency or institutional teams need to be built and action frameworks and strategies defined.

International cooperation is the only possible response to the fact that crime knows no national borders and that, on the other hand, the universal understanding of human rights and freedoms is necessarily a unique and effective response to any form of threat or violation. The cooperation is realized through the application of international instruments such as extradition, international mutual legal assistance and other forms.

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