

Research Article

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The Internationalization of HEIs in Albania. Internationalized Joint Programs: Joint and Double Degrees

Marsida Ismaili

Abstract

Background/purpose. The internationalization process of Higher Education constitutes a recent trend in Albania. As a country that from the 1990s is in transition towards democracy, Albania aspires to be part of the EU and is undertaking reforms in every sector, including education. This study is related to the HEIs' internationalization process, in offering International Joint Programs, IJPs, with Joint Degrees and Double Degrees. Whether these IJPs result from universities, a supportive governmental policy, or global initiatives, the aim is to understand the IJPs' nature, progress, and growth, and if so, if they will be relevant in terms of quality, international mobility, IoC, and other aspects, for all the actors, especially universities and students.

Materials/methods. The study research methods include literature review, the analysis of documents and reports, searching the official websites of Albanian and WBs' HEIs for IJPs, a case study of one of the country's leading public universities in offering IJPs, and a questionnaire for the IJPs enrolled students, as the basis for descriptive statistics.

Results. The internationalization of HEIs in Albania, offering JDs or DDs, is in its initial stages and will be a central focus of educational policy in the near future. These initiatives entail both benefits and challenges, and are based on different rationales for the government, the HEIs that offer IJPs, and students' decisions to pursue these study programs.

Conclusion. The internationalization of HEIs with IJPs in Albania and the region reveals that these initiatives are recent, but will generate substantial benefits for all involved actors.

1. Introduction

The aim of this study is to explore the recent process of higher education internationalization, which is gaining increased attention and support in the country, and more specifically, the aspect of internationalization related to International Joint Programs, including Joint or Double Degrees. The rationale is to better understand the HEIs' internationalization process resulting in IJPs, affected by political, institutional, social, cultural, educational, technological, and other important factors, in the context of Europeanization, globalization, international development, and international relations. The focus in this paper is on the future of creating European and international universities, with International Joint Programs (IJPs, with JDs, and/or DDs, with the internationalization of Albanian HEIs, public and private universities, and the road ahead in offering joint, double, or multiple degrees with other international HEIs. This study includes a case study of one of the leading public HEIs in this regard (UAMD case), an experiential perspective of the students enrolled in these IJPs using a questionnaire, and a short comparative perspective of HEIs in the Western Balkans (WBs) that offer IJPs. In total, there are 24 universities in Albania, comprising 12 public and 12 privately operated higher education institutions.

The internationalization process of HEIs is a broad concept. It encompasses several aspects, that are not covered by this article, like the membership in alliances of universities and respective agreements and/or projects in several fields for a period of time, bilateral or multilateral partnerships, exchanges of academic and administrative staff, and students' mobility to other HEIs with Erasmus + program or other EU financed programs, transfers between HEIs, etc. Also, the internationalization of HEIs includes the concept of "internationalization at home", which is a very important aspect, but it will not be considered extensively in this study.

The objective of this article is to fill the existing gap in research in this area, due to the lack of prior studies that address the issue of internationalization of higher education, specifically that of the IJPs offered by two or more partner universities. The universities' internationalization process is multidimensional, and the article's objective is to explore the individual level of students pursuing these programs, the organizational level of the HEIs, and the national level of policies in this direction related to the international level of the partner HEIs in other countries that cooperate to offer internationalized programs.

The main research question is: Does internationalization of study programs of Albanian HEIs constitute an important step for the future, to increase performance and quality in higher education, that serves all the interested actors, especially students, to achieve their maximum potential and to contribute to society? The other questions deriving from the main research question are: if there are real advantages resulting from this process and if the internationalization of the study programs in the first, second and third cycles will be dominant in the near future? If they continue and their number increases, what does it mean for Albania and the other countries in the region? And, on what basis do students choose or decide to follow these internationalized joint programs? Thus, another important issue is the measurement of perceptions of the already enrolled students in different internationalized IJPs in the Bachelor, Master and Doctorate study programs, their views and preferences, and the resulting decision to register and follow these programs (to gain better understanding, even if the research was carried out on the IJPs offered by one university (University "Aleksandër Moisiu" of Durrës, UAMD) which was one of the first and leading public universities in the country that offered several initiatives for joint international collaborations, or joint programs for students, as opportunities for future education and job market.

1.1. Higher Education Legislation in Albania in relation to IJPs

Beginning with the Law "On Higher Education and Scientific Research in Higher Education Institutions in the Republic of Albania" (Law No. 80, 2015), several aspects of higher education policy

are defined. Thus, the article no.6, point 22 defines a “study program”, as a set of academic and /or scientific research activities, after the successful completion of which, gives the student the right to obtain or to be awarded a certificate, a diploma or a scientific grade, from the Higher Education Institution which offers it, depending on the study program.

In this regard, Article 6 (Definitions), point 4, states that: "A double or a multiple degree" is a degree issued separately by two or more Higher Education Institutions, with an agreement that certifies the successful completion of a joint study program. Meanwhile, point 5 of article 6 defines a "joint degree" as a degree jointly issued, with an agreement that certifies the successful completion of a joint study program. (Law no.80, 2015).

Further, in the article no.80 of the Law no.80/2015 “Joint study programs” is specified that: 1. Joint study programs are offered or implemented from a HEI or its units (faculties), in collaboration with one or several HEIs, public or not, inside or outside the country. 2. The process can be done in one or all of the participating institutions, in accordance with the cooperation agreement. 3. With the successful completion of the study program, a joint diploma, or double or multiple diplomas, is issued from the participating institutions. 4. When joint study programs are offered with foreign HEIs, it is possible to implement different standards than the state’s standards. 5. Opening joint study programs is done with the approval of the ministry responsible for education. (Law no.80, 2015)

In relation to the accreditation of the programs offered by HEIs in Article 106, point 7, of the Law no.80/2015 (Law no.80, 2015) specifies that HEIs that offer joint study programs with foreign HEIs, and for the affiliates or the branches of HEIs that operate in the Republic of Albania, the analysis and accreditation are done by taking into consideration the same processes in the country of origin.

1.2. Governmental Policy on the Internationalization of Albanian Universities

The governmental policy of higher education, regarding the internationalization of Albanian HEIs, encourages and supports different initiatives taken by universities, especially those of public universities, for offering IJPs with DDs, which are funded by the public budget, through the Ministry of Education (MES).

The internationalization of higher education in Albania is one of the priorities of the Albanian Government for the period 2021-2025, focusing on the establishment of affiliates or branches of top international universities and collaboration on joint and double-degree programs. The Ministry of Education, Sports, and Youth, MASR, will support the opening of these programs in the English language at all Albanian universities (Governing Program 2021-2025). Especially in the third mandate of the socialist government led by the Prime Minister Edi Rama, every internationalized joint program, created and offered by public HEIs, was promised and supported by a budget funding of approximately 300.000 €.

In fact, in the article of the Albanian Telegraphic Agency, in relation with internationalization (Saracini, 2023) is underlined that the Ministry of Education and Sports (MES) with Minister Kushi, has made a call for public universities’ projects, qualifying for a 300 million ALL, that have in focus the development, improvement or the increase of the academic, didactic and research infrastructure, based on the agreements for Joint or Double Degree’ programs with foreign universities. The call was valid for the academic year 2023-2024, and the package of application included the request for funding, the project proposal, accompanied by clear objectives, activities, costs and the ratio of co-financing. The proposals that were considered successful were related to universities that had already signed joint agreements with other foreign institutions and declared a higher percentage of co-financing from their funds (ATA, 2023; ART, 2023).

Given the fact that political power is exercised for the fourth mandate, by the leftist government led by Prime Minister Rama (the Socialist Party won the May 11th 2025 general elections) the

internationalization of HEIs will continue to be a priority, and chances are that the governmental support, for the creation of international universities will increase. In this line is the approved Document of Higher Education Policies, 2030 (MES, 2025), where it is specifically given the strategic objective (1 of 3 major objectives) of implementing the reforms and policies of the European Higher Education Area, EHEA and Scientific Research, ERA, through the consolidation of the financial instruments, quality assurance and promoting internationalization and regional specialization in accordance with sustainable development policies (The Document of Higher Education Policies, 2030, 2025, 46). Securing partnerships with international institutions is vital for higher education development...except for EU programs for mobility of students, academic staff and researchers, with "Erasmus +", "Marie Curie", CEEPUS, etc., Albania would benefit by creating joint programs of Albanian universities with EU universities, that will lead to quality improvement of the education offer in the country, and also if these programs are taught in English, could be attractive for foreign students, as an added value for higher education. This, in turn, can contribute to the inhibition of students leaving the country (The Document of Higher Education Policies, 2030, 2025).

The goals of the internationalization of HEIs are to improve the quality of education, stimulate competitiveness, and promote academic and cultural exchanges between Albania and other countries. This process includes the elements of international cooperation, joint programs for internationally known diplomas, the accreditation of joint or double degree programs (with high financial and human resources costs) for EU projects applications, the promotion of foreign languages and international scientific conferences and workshops (The Document of Higher Education Policies, 2030, 2025, 51-54).

2. Literature Review

The literature review on the internationalization of higher education and its components reveals that even if it began in the 1980s, the process gained importance later on, in the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, especially in developed countries and the EU member countries, in relation with mobilities of academic staff and students, etc. Later, the internationalization of HEIs began to take center stage in educational policies, even in developing countries, driven by different rationales and the benefits it produces.

Based on Teichler (2023), the 'internationalization of higher education' gained importance since about the 1980s, because of the border-crossing of knowledge and persons in higher education. Although there is an extensive literature on the internationalization of higher education, a universally accepted definition does not exist. One of the most widely accepted definitions is that of Knight (2003), which states: 'the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education' (Knight, 2003). Later, it was completed by de Wit as: 'the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society'. (de Wit & Hunter, 2015)

According to Brandenburg and de Wit (2011), universities core role is to help understand the world and to improve our dealing with it, a reason to call for a common commitment at the institutional and personal levels, to being prepared to live and work in a global community, surpassing the old concepts of internationalization and of globalization and moving to a fresh and unbiased paradigm (Brandenburg, de Wit. 2011).

Another author, Yemini (2015, 15), gives a definition of internationalization as 'the process of encouraging multicultural, multilingual, and global dimensions within the education system, to instill in learners a sense of global citizenship'.

The authors Knight and de Wit (2018) in an article about the past and the future of the internationalization of higher education, underline that it has become a broad and varied concept, with new rationales, approaches and strategies in different and changing contexts, that includes developments such as branding, international programs and provider mobility, global citizenship, MOOCs, internationalization at home, global rankings, knowledge diplomacy, world class universities, cultural homogenization, franchising, and joint and double degree programs. The authors suggest that the economic and political rationales are far more important as the key drivers of internationalization, compared to the academic and social/cultural ones (Knight & de Wit, 2018).

The authors Lundgren, Castro, and Woodin (2020) provide an educational approach to the internationalization of higher education, employing terms such as 'interculturalisation' (Deardoff and Woodin, 2020) or 'internationalism' (Byram, 2020).

Based on de Wit, H. (2021) the internationalization in higher education, should not be a goal in itself, but a means to the end of enhancing the quality of education and research, of service to society, and more strategic, comprehensive and central in policies, as a priority of national governments, for global and intercultural outcomes for all, and to move away from massification, global knowledge economy, and reputation and rankings.

According to de Wit, Gacel-Avila & Jones (2017), recently, the internationalization of higher education in the emerging and developing countries implies that: 'regions, countries and institutions have to make choices that find the right balance between their local, national, regional and global roles...Internationalization strategies can take either a competitive direction or a more socially responsible approach. Both approaches are challenging and require substantial public and private resources; however, the latter will ultimately result in a higher-quality sector in the long run.

In recent years, several studies on internationalization of higher education underline also the attractiveness of non-anglophone countries (despite their challenges and obstacles) in increased recruitment and mobility of international students and imply that the guiding rationales should not be related primarily with revenue generation, soft power, and rising in the rankings (de Wit, Minaeva & Wang, 2022). According to de Wit et al. (2022), a systematic and comprehensive approach to the recruitment of international students, based on strategic and operational initiatives, and not primarily driven by economic and political rationales (that would be unrealistic for non-Anglophone countries, and will contribute to increasing global inequality and exclusions of systems, institutions, and individuals.

According to Bamford (2020), International Joint Double Degrees are the most significant aspect of the internationalization of higher education, due to the international transitions situated within a context of cultural interactions. The author focuses on international students who are part of the IJPs with DDs and employs an experiential approach, an aspect of learning in higher education that informs the direction and flow of internationalization, as well as the roles of teaching staff, institutions, and the governmental level (Bamford, 2020). The author employs a combination of research methods to gain insights into International Joint Double Degrees and their significance at the individual, institutional, and international levels.

For Bamford (2020), the term IJDD is an international program of study offering an integrated curriculum, it is delivered jointly in more than one institution and across national borders, awarding a single diploma or multiple diplomas.' In line with the requirements of EHEA and of the Bologna Process, the IJDDs offer a basis to create a "culture of mobility" and the forthcoming cultural interactions of the involved actors, especially students that are part of these programs (mostly in the second cycle or Master's programs) which can also benefit regarding graduate employability and skills development.

Whereas de Wit and Coelen regard the internationalization of higher education as an elite activity, as globally, only a small number of students participate in internationalization activities (Engwall, 2023). Nevertheless, Engwall (2023) suggests that 'it is likely that there will be increased organizing between institutions in different countries.'

Higher education internationalization, the importance and the multidimensionality of the process, serves as the basis for the elements to consider in the study, including concepts as joint programs, IoC, internationalization at home, quality assurance, international students and staff, mobility opportunities for both students and staff, benefits for the HEIs involved, and the direction of higher education's internationalization.

The literature review highlights the necessity of this study due to the lack of prior research in this field within the country, even though the offered IJPs result from university initiatives, supportive governmental policies, or other factors.

3. Methodology

The methodology employed in this article combines both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Qualitative methods used are the review of literature, the analysis of reports and documents from national and international governmental and nongovernmental sources, reviewing the formal websites of each HEI part of the study, and a case study. The study is based on available data and information on Albania and also about higher education's internationalization initiatives in WBs, collected on different higher institutions' official websites (HEIs in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia, and Serbia) in relation to the joint and double degrees they offer. The research was based only on universities (HEIs that comprise at least three units or faculties in their structure) leaving out of consideration institutions such as Academia and Colleges, and focused on 12 Albanian public universities and 12 private ones,

Furthermore, the study is based on continuous monitoring and communications(interviews) with students of one IJP, in an academic year, and includes a questionnaire as part of the quantitative methods that targets the students enrolled in these international programs, or IJPs that offer double degrees, DDs. The data and information gathered through the questionnaire provided descriptive statistics regarding the students' decision to pursue internationalized joint programs and to construct a framework based on the reasons, factors, and opportunities that direct them to these programs. The study utilizes findings from the questionnaire as a means of measuring students' perceptions in Albania (at UAMD) and is organized into three sections. The first section gathers general information regarding the enrolled students in the chosen IJPs, the second is focused on the information sources, reasons for choosing the IJPs with DD, and the students' evaluations of these programs of study, and the third part is about their views about future opportunities, advantages and also the perceived disadvantages of these programs. The questionnaires were filled by 76 students in total (the sample size), enrolled and pursuing five different programs, in all the cycles of study, in the BA, MA and PhD programs of one Faculty (the Faculty of Political Science and Law, FPSL, that offers 5 of 7 available IJPs in UAMD all of which are DDs), as the leading HEI in internationalized joint programs in the country.

In this article, a SWOT analysis of the HEIs offering internationalized programs of study and the road ahead in this direction will be presented, with several strategies for the future that lie ahead for different universities. The SWOT analysis is the result of the author's own research, which involves analyzing the higher education context, specifically the internationalization process, as an active participant in it, and drawing on the available data and information gathered for this analysis.

This study aim is to contribute modestly to the higher education internationalization process and policy in Albania and the WBs region, because there is a lack of studies in this field of research, and it

has several advantages, for being the first study about HEIs internationalization with IJPs, in the country, in terms of originality and of the issue importance.

Some of the issues, challenges, and limitations of this study, which other studies in the field can consider, relate to the future progress of internationalization and the study of other aspects of higher education internationalization. Amongst the limitations of the study can be noted the transparency issues regarding the way in which these IJPs are undertaken, especially when existing programs are changed to adapt to the curricula of the partner universities, those in relation to the students' possibilities to get the Double Degree in partner universities, and the financial issues that accompany their mobility abroad. Another issue is related to teaching and learning standards and the quality assurance in each partner university. Another point that can be regarded as a limitation is that the researcher (the author of the article) is part of the academic staff at the university studied in the case study. However, this does not invalidate the findings and results of the work. Furthermore, another limitation is the limited number of students actually pursuing these programs and the impossibility to interview the students (3 of them) who are doing the mobility semester abroad, which can give us a more detailed picture of the opportunities and the challenges that they encountered by learning in a different context, in partner universities.

The research design aimed to encompass as many elements as possible regarding the HEIs' internationalization process, specifically the IJPs, by employing both qualitative and quantitative methods, in order to gain a deeper understanding of this issue. The research design began with qualitative methods, for analyzing the institutional, national and international levels, and then was followed by the quantitative method of survey, for gathering data and information and for analyzing the perceptions and attitudes of the most important actors in the process, the students pursuing the IJPs, for the reasons and factors that affected their decision to enroll in these study programs. The research design employs an Exploratory Sequential Mixed Methods approach (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018), utilizing two distinct datasets related to each method, along with their respective data analyses, to gain a deeper understanding of the IJPs. The first qualitative phase (interviews with students during the first semester and the qualitative case study) evidenced the themes and variables for research in a following questionnaire, to measure the perceptions and attitudes of the enrolled students in the IJPs, in the third phase.

Data collection procedures involved gathering data and information from various sources regarding the IJPs, as well as reviewing all available documents and reports. The first step was to gather information about public and private universities that had international cooperation partnerships for offering IJPs. That was achieved by accessing ASCAL databases of the accredited HEIs in Albania and by searching information on the official websites for each of the 24 universities.

The second step was gathering official data and information about all of the IJPs of the case study university, to better analyze them, the number of enrolled students, for each academic year (some programs were new and three were adapted), and the number of actual or proposed mobilities abroad, were gathered to better understand the process and the number of engaged students. The reason for choosing one of three faculties that offer IJPs is that, from the total number of the offered university's IJPs (6 DDs and 1 JD), five international study programs in each cycle of study are offered by that faculty (1 PhD program, 2 Master's, and 2 Bachelor's programs).

Lastly, the survey was conducted to measure the perceptions of students pursuing these IJPs with DDs, gathering insights into the factors affecting their enrollment in these programs. The sample size adequately represents the students' population (76 students from each of the abovementioned IJPs) from a total number of 241 students actually registered and part of these programs. The questionnaire included 16 questions in the Albanian language, allowing students to better understand and express themselves on various topics (as their native language). The variables were

coded in relation to the questions to arrive at results and conclusions about the IJPs. The analytical techniques used to analyze and interpret the collected data from the questionnaire included the use of a statistical program (IBM SPSS Statistics 27) for descriptive statistics and crosstabulation of variables.

The methodology used is the basis for achieving the necessary validity and reliability of this study, as it involves carefully planning and executing each step of the research design.

4. Results

4.1. IJPs in Public and Private Universities in Albania

This study is based on data and information from 24 universities that are actually functioning and accredited in Albania, comprising 12 public and 12 private institutions. The following list of universities is based on data from the Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education's official website (ASCAL, 2025). At the same time, the data and information of the HEIs in Albania that offer IJPs and their respective attributes were gathered by reviewing each university's official website.

Table 1 summarizes the list of public and private universities actually operating in Albania.

Table 1. The list of public and private universities in Albania: IJPs with JDs and /or DDs

No.	HEI: Universities	Public or Private	IJPs	JDs	DDs
1	Polytechnic University of Tirana	Public	7	-	7 (2 MA+5 BA)
2	Agricultural University of Tirana	Public	-		
3	University "Aleksandër Xhuvani" of Elbasan	Public	-		
4	University "Luigj Gurakuqi" of Shkodër	Public	-		
5	University "Eqrem Çabej" of Gjirokastrë	Public	5	2 (1 PhD+1 Executive MA)	3 (1 MA+2BA)
6	University "Fan S. Noli", Korça	Public	-		
7	University "Ismail Qemali", Vlora	Public	6	2 (1 MA+1BA)	4 (1MA+3BA)
8	University of Tirana	Public	3	-	3 (1Executive MA+2BA)
9	University "Aleksandër Moisiu" of Durrës	Public	7	1 (MA)	6 (2PhD+2MA+2BA)
10	University of Arts	Public	-		
11	University of Sports of Tirana	Public	-		
12	University of Medicine, Tirana	Public	5	-	5 (3 PhD+2MA)

No.	HEI: Universities	Public or Private	IJPs	JDs	DDs
13	University "Luarasi"	Private	3		3(BA)
14	University "Albanian University"	Private	-		
15	Catholic University of Tirana "Zoja e Këshillit të Mirë"	Private	4	2 (1Exec. MA + 1 integrated program 3+2)	2 (MA)
16	New York University of Tirana	Private	-		
17	University "Barleti"	Private	-		
18	University "Western Balkans"	Private	-		
19	University "Metropolitan Tirana"	Private	-		
20	European University Tirana	Private	2	1 (MA)	1 (MA)
21	Mediterranean University of Albania	Private	1	-	1 (MA)
22	University "Aldent"	Private	-		
23	University "EPOKA"	Private	-		
24	University Polis	Private	-		

4.2. The academic offer of IJPs with JDs and DDs in Albanian HEIs

IJPs have started in Albania in the last few years (approximately 4 years), starting from the academic year 2022-2023, as a result of several factors at the institutional, national, and international levels. By reviewing all of the official websites of the public and private universities in Albania, part of the study, it can be summed up that 6 of the 12 public universities (listed in the same order as ASCAL, not by years of applying international joint programs are: Polytechnic University of Tirana, PUT; University "Eqrem Çabej" of Gjirokastra, UECGJ; University "Ismail Qemali" of Vlora, UIQV; University of Tirana, UT; University "Aleksandër Moisiu" of Durrës, UAMD; and University of Medicine, Tirana, UMT, that offer several joint and/or double degrees. Respectively, these public universities offer the following IJPs:

- PUT offers seven Internationalized Joint Programs, IJPs, with Double Degrees, for two Master's and five Bachelor's programs.
- UECGJ offers a total of five programs: two JDs in the third cycle: one Doctorate, PhD, and one Executive Master's, and three Double Degrees with one Master of Science and two Bachelor programs;
- UIQV offers six IJPs, with two JDs: one for a Master's and one for a Bachelor's; and four DDs for one Master's and three Bachelor's programs.

- UT offers three IJPs with DDs, from which one Executive Master's program, in the third cycle, and two Bachelor's programs.
- UAMD offers seven internationalized joint programs: one JD for a Master's program and six DDs for two Doctorates, two Master's, and two Bachelor's programs;
- Lastly, UMT offers five IJPs, DDs, for three Doctorate programs and two Master's programs.

In relation to the internationalized programs of study offered by 12 private universities, only four of them offer IJPs with Joint and Double Degrees: "Luarasi" University, Catholic University of Tirana, "ZKM", and European University of Tirana.

- LU offers three Bachelor programs, in collaboration with LSE in the UK, that will operate only in Albania, as a case of 'internationalization at home'.
- CUT "ZKM" offers four internationalized joint programs, with two JDs: one is an Executive Master's, and one for a five-year integrated program, and two DDs for two Master's programs.
- EUT offers one JD (PoSIG, part of a Consortia) and one DD, both for Master's programs.
- MUA offers only one DD for a Master's program.

In total, there are 21 (twenty-one) internationalized joint programs, IJPs, offered by public universities in Albania, in collaboration with Italian universities, three with French Universities, one with a Greek university, and one with a Montenegrin university. The other IJPs in the privately-operated universities function in partnership with several countries: three with a UK university, one as part of a consortium (PoSIG Master of Science), two with Swiss universities, and one with an Italian HEI.

As can be concluded, Italian universities are the primary partners for most internationalized joint programs, followed by France and Switzerland. Albania does not yet offer multiple degrees that refer to more than two, or multiple diplomas, certificates, or academic titles, gained after the successful completion of studies in more than two HEIs.

4.3. SWOT Analysis of HEIs' Internationalization Study Programs in Albania

When thinking about international universities and internationalized joint programs, IJPs, a SWOT analysis (Kume, 2005) can help to better understand the context where universities and other HEIs operate, for planning suitable strategies, for being proactive, or to adapt or survive in a fast-changing, dynamic environment. Universities should undertake a SWOT analysis regarding the IJPs (even if some universities have an internationalization strategy that may include elements of a strategic planning process and a corresponding SWOT analysis) to inform decisions on the necessary strategies that will be successful in the future. Each HEI should have a clear vision, mission, and objectives, and then consider the environment, including opportunities and the challenges or risks it poses. At the same time, it is necessary to analyze the institutions internally to gain a clear view of their strengths and take steps to improve any possible weaknesses. Considering all these aspects is crucial in developing effective strategies to achieve the stated objectives. In the strategic planning process for the future, attention should be given to the values and aspirations of the institution's leaders, enabling the creation of future scenarios based on different optimistic, neutral, and pessimistic environmental conditions.

In Albania, the array of internal factors that should be considered by HEIs, as their elements of strength and weaknesses, and of external factors to be considered in relation with the internationalization of the programs of study (a list that covers a set of factors but that is not exhausting) are summarized in the Figure 1.

Figure 1 shows the author's SWOT analysis of the internationalization of Albanian HEIs

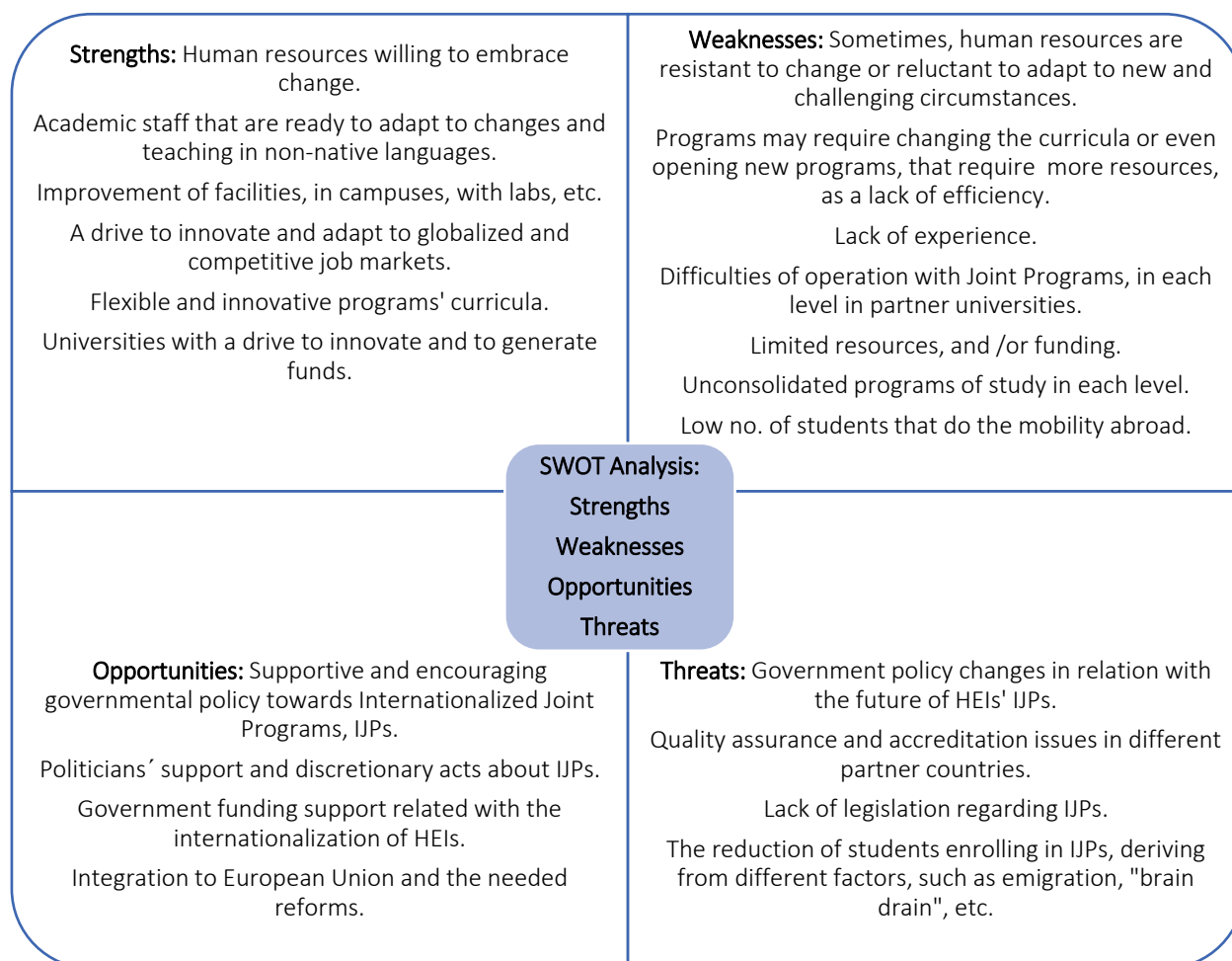


Figure 1. Author's own research for a SWOT analysis regarding the Albanian HEIs' Internationalized Joint Programs, IJPs

In the light of these supposed internal factors (strengths and weaknesses) and of the external factors, with opportunities and threats in the environment, some of the possible strategies may be:

- o Creating partnerships for IJPs with other foreign HEIs and working towards being an international university. This implies opening new programs of study in each of the study cycles, or changing the existing curricula of the programs to adapt to the requirements of the partner HEIs, or to be competitive in the job market. This could be seen as a proactive approach towards international universities and the internationalization of higher education, assuming that government support will continue and even increase for the involved Albanian universities.

- o Strategies chosen by universities that follow an active approach to the internationalization of their study programs, that are ready to undertake steps in relation to higher education internationalization, include activities such as signing agreements and establishing collaborations with other foreign HEIs.

- o If a pessimistic scenario is considered the base for future decision-making, possible strategies might include the avoidance of partnerships with other HEIs, because of several risks they might face, like: a governmental changed policy, by stopping universities' support, financially unstable institutions, a reduced number of students, difficulties to secure the accreditation process and the quality assurance of the internationalized programs, for the involved HEIs.

4.4. Students' Enrollment in Internationalized Joint Programs: Case Study of a Public University

It is important to analyze the case of UAMD as a university that has undertaken the internationalization process with a proactive approach, with ease and speed, by being amongst the first public universities that has signed collaboration agreements with foreign HEIs of the EHEA, and actually offers seven IJPs, six of which are DDs and, five of these DDs are offered by one faculty. Furthermore, the number of IJPs is expected to increase through other collaborations for the upcoming academic year of 2025-2026, offering internationalized programs with partner HEIs in Italy and Portugal. Additionally, the university has the first graduate 'international' student in a second-level or doctoral program, having obtained a degree from two partner institutions after completing a semester of mobility abroad.

In line with the UAMD internationalization strategy for 2025-2027, that states the objectives, the strategies, the instruments and the indicators to measure the achievement of objectives, is underlined the priority of increasing the higher education' offer with other partnerships (based on bilateral or multilateral agreements or as part of important academic alliances) for other IJPs, with JDs or DDs. The internationalization process, as a strategic priority, can enhance the quality of education, improve capacities for scientific research and innovation, and stimulate creativity and cultural interaction. UAMD views this process as beneficial for all the stakeholders (UAMD internationalization Strategy 2025-2027, 2025).

The six DDs are offered in different cycles or levels of study. Four IJPs are new programs, and from them, two are Doctorate programs, that have students registered only for the academic year 2023-2024, respectively 29 and 10 students, and no quotas yet for the 2024-2025 academic year (as shown in the table no. 2). Three IJPs represent changed programs, with adapted curricula, that fit with those of the partner HEIs. It is worth noting that the number of students enrolled in the study programs before the programs' internationalization and the subsequent changes in curricula (after 2022) are necessary for a better understanding of whether there are differences related to the number of students enrolled in these HEIs' partnerships.

Based on the UAMD Internationalization Strategy for the period 2025-2027, there is a need for HEIs to adapt their structures, programs, and policies to make possible the integration of the experiences and international knowledge, which means changing and adapting the curricula. According to the strategy, the internationalization process involves creating an open and respectful culture that values diversity, establishing an internationally recognized reputation, and enhancing the quality of institutional services by preparing students and professionals for the dynamic job market (UAMD Internationalization Strategy 2025-2027, 2025). In this respect, in the strategy it is stated that: 'Some activities linked directly with the internationalization process are developing 14 new joint or double degree programs, with EU universities, in the fields of law, business administration and digital technologies (UAMD internationalization Strategy 2025-2027, 2025). In this line, the newly added IJPs with DDs, that will start in the academic year 2025-2026, in the Faculty of Education, in collaboration with "Constantine the Philosopher" University in Nitra (Slovakia), are one Bachelor program on "German and English languages", one Master of Science in "Pedagogy, Foreign Language, German language" and one Doctorate in "Foreign Languages Didactics" (UAMD, 2025). Another IJP with a DD is the one offered in the upcoming academic year in the Faculty of Business, for a Bachelor's program in "International Business Management" in collaboration with the Instituto Politécnico de Bragança in Portugal. With the newly added programs, the total number of IJPs is eleven internationalized programs.

The necessary procedure to participate in these internationalized programs is the same as for other study programs nationwide in Albania. However, the new IJPs and the revised programs will require time to show results and to analyze their efficiency and effectiveness.

Table 2 summarizes the IJPs with JDs and DDs offered by a public university, based on data officially obtained from the Teaching Secretariat of the FPSL, FE, and FPS in UAMD (FPSL, FE, & FPS, 2025).

Table 2. Author's research about IJPs, with JDs and DDs

University		IJPs: JDs and /or DDs level & name	New/ Changed	Stud. mobility	No. of Enrolled students (AYs)				
					24-25	23-24	22-23	21-22	20-21
"Aleksandër Moisiu" of Durrës									
Faculty of Political Science and Law	Law Dep	II, MA, "European & Comparative Law", a DD with University "Sapienza", Italy.	New	Three students gained the mobility in Rome.	16	15			
		III, PHD "Public Law", a DD with University "Tor Vergata", Rome, Italy.	New	Three students are expected to do the mobility in Rome.	-	29			
	Public Adm. Dep	I, BA "Cooperation and Economic Development", a DD with the University of Sapienza, Italy.	Changed from "Economic Policy"	Two Italian students are undertaking a mobility program in Durrës, and two students are expected to go to Italy.	8	11	9	10	17
		II, MA "Public Administration", DD with University "Cote D'Azur", France	Changed, Adapted.	No students have gained the mobility so far, due to the language criteria.	48	31	55		
Faculty of Education	Political Science Dep	I, BA "International & Diplomatic Sciences", a DD with University of Genova, Italy	Changed from "Political Science"	Four students are expected to do their mobility in Italy.	22	13	9	31	26
		III, PHD "Education Sciences", a DD with the Pedagogic	New		-	10			

University	IJPs: JDs and /or DDs level & name	New/ Changed	Stud. mobility	24-25	23-24	22-23	21-22	20-21
"Aleksandër Moisiu" of Durrës	University of Cracow, Poland.							
Faculty of Professional Studies	II, MA, "Marine Environmental Management & Protection", a JD with the UIQV, Univ. of Montenegro & universities in Spain, Slovenia, France.	New	-	29				

It can be noted that of the three changed programs and those that have been internationalized, two show an increase in the number of enrolled students, while one shows a decline. Also, from the collected data and information results, it is clear that only two to four students manage to become part of the necessary mobility in the partner universities (after meeting the criteria) in order to gain the double degree.

Based on Monne and Morel (2013), joint degrees are important for promoting international cooperation and international mobility, and Kuder et al. (2013) acknowledge the growth of international joint and double degree programs, within EHEA and more widely (Bamford, 2020).

The question here, which can be further explored in other articles, is whether the number of students undertaking the mobility semester abroad, and thereby obtaining the Double Degree, is sufficient to claim the internationalization of higher education resulting from the offering of IJPs with JDs and/or DDs.

5. Discussion

5.1. Students' Perceptions of Internationalized Joint Programs, IJPs (DDs)

The questionnaire about the students' choice of the internationalized programs was filled out by 76 students who were actually enrolled in international joint programs, IJPs, specifically International Double Degree Programs. They have chosen to pursue internationalized programs, at the Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctorate levels, respectively, in the First, Second, and Third cycles. The questionnaire is important and reflects the students' perspectives or views about IJPs with DDs in different fields. Gathering the perceptions and views of students is one of the important directions for learning more and better analyzing the efficiency, effectiveness, advantages, and challenges they encounter as part of these international joint programs.

Figure 2 illustrates a framework for understanding the variables that influence students' decisions to enroll in IJPs.

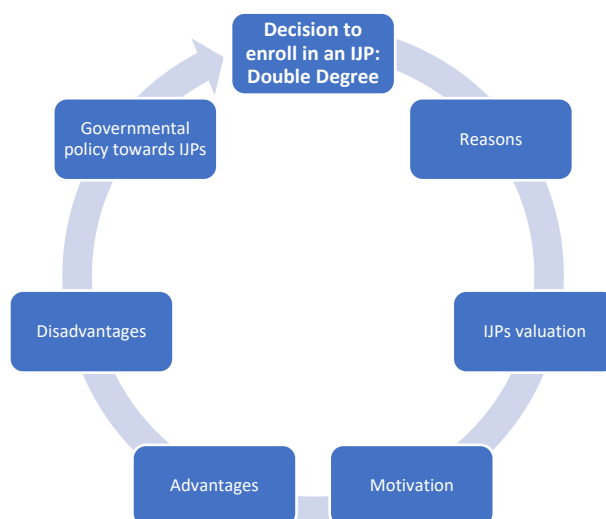


Figure 2. Author's framework in relation with the students' decision to pursue International Joint Programs

The data and the information gathered are used to construct a framework on the students' decision to enroll in an internationalized study program, and the effects of age, gender, reasons, program evaluation, motivation, advantages, and disadvantages of different internationalized programs, and the perceived governmental policy for the internationalization of HEIs. Descriptive statistics based on the questionnaire data, show the relevance of the variables on the students' decision to enroll and pursue an IJP, with a Double Degree.

Table 3 summarizes some of the variables used in this study to better understand their effects on the students' decision to pursue their studies in internationalized joint programs with DDs.

Table 3. List of the study variables

Variables	Specifications	Frequency	Percent%	Missing	Total
Age	18-28	52	68.4	1	75
	29-39	18	23.7		
	40-50	5	6.6		
Gender	Male	14	18.4		76
	Female	62	81.6		
Study Program	BA	29	38.2		76
	MA	37	48.7		
	PhD	10	13.2		
Year of Study	First year	52	68.4	2	74
	Second year	21	27.6		
	Third Year	1	1.3		
Information possession	Yes, I know the program very well.	40	52.6		76
	Fairly.	35	46.1		
	No, I do not have enough information.	1	1.3		

Variables	Specifications	Frequency	Percent%	Missing	Total
Program valuation	A study program, BA, MA, PhD.	24	31.6	1	75
	Double Degree Program.	23	30.3		
	Program that awards two diplomas.	26	34.2		
	Program that awards a joint diploma.	1	1.3		
	Other.	1	1.3		
Rationale	Studying in a program, in collaboration with a European university.	19	25		76
	Acquiring diplomas from each partner university.	24	31.6		
	Benefiting from a multicultural perspective in education & work for the future.	32	42.1		
	Other.	1	1.3		

The majority of students in the International Joint Programs, IJPs, part of the study belongs to the group age 18-28 years old (52 or about 68% of the respondents) and, about 82% or 62 of the respondents are females and 14 or 18% are males. The students who filled out the questionnaire are studying in different cycles or study levels, pursuing Bachelor's studies, Master's programs, or Doctorates. Most of the respondents are Master level students. About 38% or 29 students are following the first cycle of studies, 37 or about 49 % are in the second cycle, and 10 students or about 13% are in the third cycle. The majority of respondents are in their first year of study (52, or approximately 68%), followed by 21 (approximately 28%) in the second year, and one student (approximately 1.3%) in the third year. Furthermore, in relation to the information about their IJP, 40 students, or approximately 53%, indicate that they have all the necessary information. In contrast, 35 students, or about 46%, have limited information about the program, and only one student claims that they do not have enough information.

In relation with the evaluation and analysis of the IJPs that they are pursuing in different levels of study or cycles, 26 of the respondents or 34% believe that their program of study, awards two diplomas, 24 or about 32% have a generalized view of the program as a common Bachelor, Master or Doctorate program, 21 students or 30% state that their program is a double degree program. This variable reveals the students' perception and their beliefs about the IJP they are pursuing.

Table 4 summarizes the students' responses in relation with their sources of information of IJPs.

Table 4. Students' sources of information for IJPs, DDs

Cycle of studies	No. of Responses	Students' sources of information
Bachelor programs	6	UAMD website and faculty page.
	5	By searching the Internet/ web.
	5	By accessing social medias.
	4	Suggestions of friends, relatives and family members.

Cycle of studies	No. of Responses	Students' sources of information
Master programs	4	Internally in the institution, when visited the university.
	3	By UAMD promotion activities, and teachers in high school.
	5	UAMD website.
	5	Suggestions of friends, relatives and alumni.
	3	By accessing social medias.
	2	Internally, by the staff of the institution.
Doctorates	2	By searching the internet/ web.
	4	Internally by UAMD staff or because they are part of the institution.
	3	Through the UAMD website, social media, and promotional activities.
	2	Suggestions of colleagues and from participating in conferences.
	1	Searching the internet/ web.

Further, the rationale or the students' motivations for choosing and enrolling in these IJPs is mostly related with several benefits resulting from a multicultural perspective in education and work for the future (32 respondents or 42%), followed by the idea of acquiring two diplomas from each partner university (24 students or about 32%) and the remaining 19 students or 25% underline the programs' collaboration with European universities. Thus, the majority of students underline a cultural perspective regarding their IJPs, followed by a practical motive of getting two diplomas, for adapting to the competitive job market.

If we do the crosstabulation of the variables "Age" and "Reasons" for pursuing the IJPs with DD, it results that the decision to follow these programs is well-thought after scrutinizing all options for 36 students, aged 18-28 years, for 12 students in 29-39 age group and 4 students aged 40-50 years, that demonstrate a responsible approach regarding their choice. 11 students of the 18-28 group and one of the 29-39 category, have chosen the programs after taking in consideration the suggestions of family members and acquaintances; and lastly 3 students aged 18-28 years, responded that are following these programs by chance.

Table 5. Crosstabulation of the variable "Age" with the variable: "Reasons"

Variables	18-28	29-39	40-50	Total
By chance	3	0	0	3
Well thought out, after scrutinizing all options.	36	12	4	52
Reasons Suggestions by family & acquaintances	11	1	0	12
Other	2	5	1	8
Total	52	18	5	75

Two respondents in the Bachelor level (BA in International and Diplomatic Sciences, IDS) have responded "Other", because "it is necessary to get a job, and I like diplomacy", when asked about the

reasons for selecting their program of study. From the Master level, students specify: the attraction by different curricula; professors' suggestions; it is the second Master program for career advancement; for job related issues; and for future employment in public administration. The crosstabulation of the variables "age" and "program valuation" shows that students aged 18-28 years tend to think about their program as one that awards two diplomas (24 of 52), respondents aged 29-39 years mostly tend to refer to their IJP as an usual program of study (9 of 17) and the students aged 40-50 years old are equally divided in their beliefs of an usual program, (2 of 5) and as a DD (2 of 5).

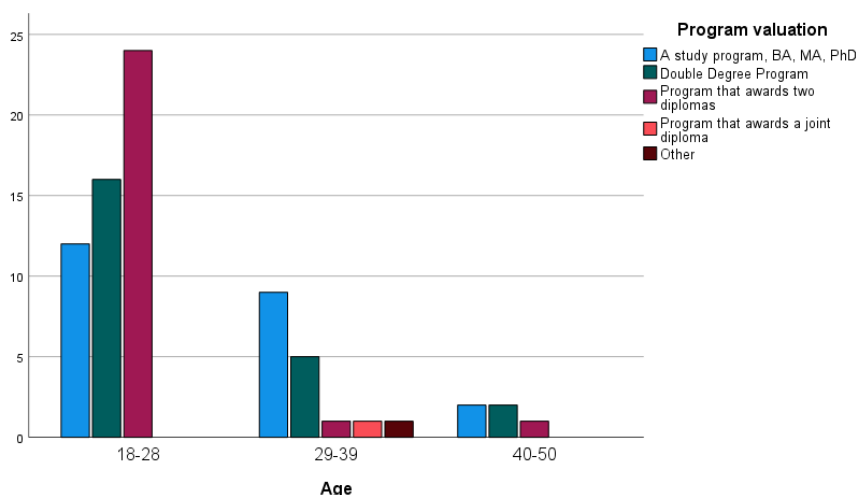


Figure 3. The results of the crosstabulation of the variables "age" and "program valuation"

The students between 18 and 28 years old underline that the most important reason for choosing these IJPs is acquiring diplomas from each partner university, while the others in the age groups 29-39 and 40-50 underline their desire to study and work in a multicultural environment. Both female and male students share the same opinions and reasons about pursuing the IJPs, from benefiting from a multicultural perspective in education and then job opportunities, to gaining two diplomas from partner universities, and lastly that of studying in a program offered in partnership with a European university. One student at the Bachelor's level underlined the response "other", related to the desire to gain a degree and enter the profession (IDS).

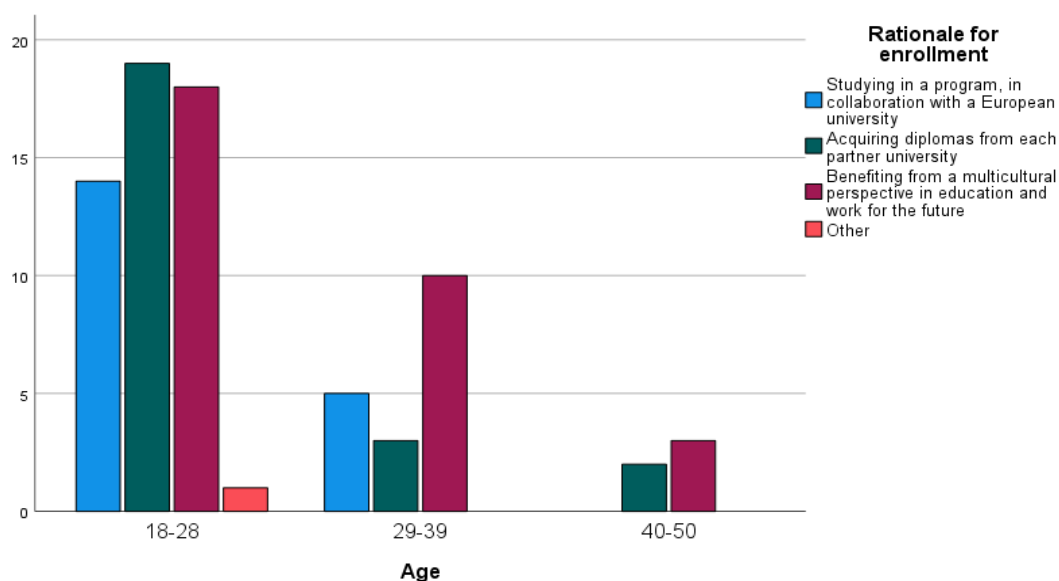


Figure 4. The results of the crosstabulation of the variables "age" and "rationale for enrollment"

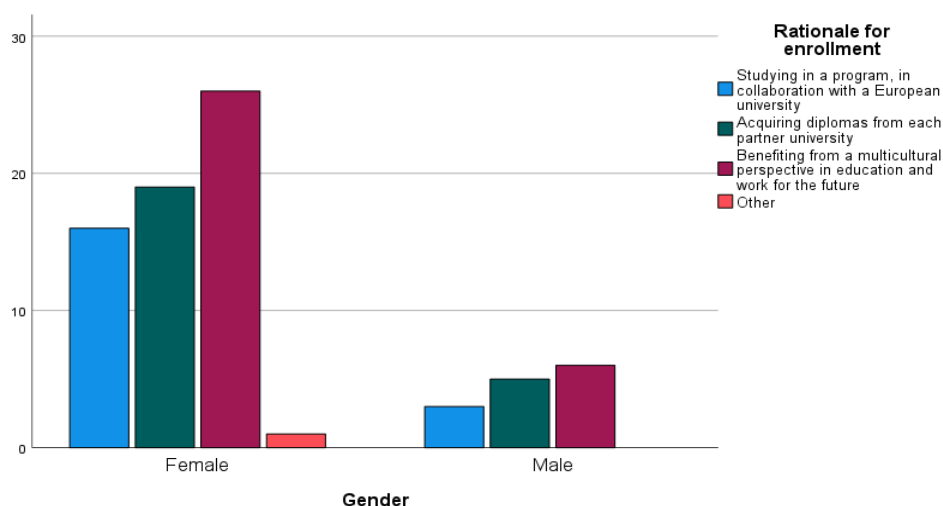


Figure 5. The results of the crosstabulation of the variables “gender” and “rationale for enrollment”

When specified by the student’s level of study, Bachelor level students’ decision to select a specific IJP is made mostly by scrutinizing all options (20), by suggestions of family and friends (5), and only two claim it was by chance. In the Master level, 23 students claim that their selection of the IJP was well-thought-out, seven students made their decision based on family and acquaintances’ suggestions, and one student by chance. Lastly, all PhD students (10) claim that their selection was well thought out.

Students’ evaluations of the IJPs in different study cycles indicate that: Bachelor-level students claim that their study programs award two diplomas (17 out of 29), and the remaining 12 refer to them as DDs. At the Master’s level, the majority of students (20 of 36) claim that it is a typical program of study, similar to all the other programs. Additionally, 9 students claim that it awards two diplomas, and only 6 specify that their study programs are IJPS with DDs. In the PhD level, 5 students view their program as a DD and 4 as a common PhD program, with only one implying that their program of study awards a joint diploma.

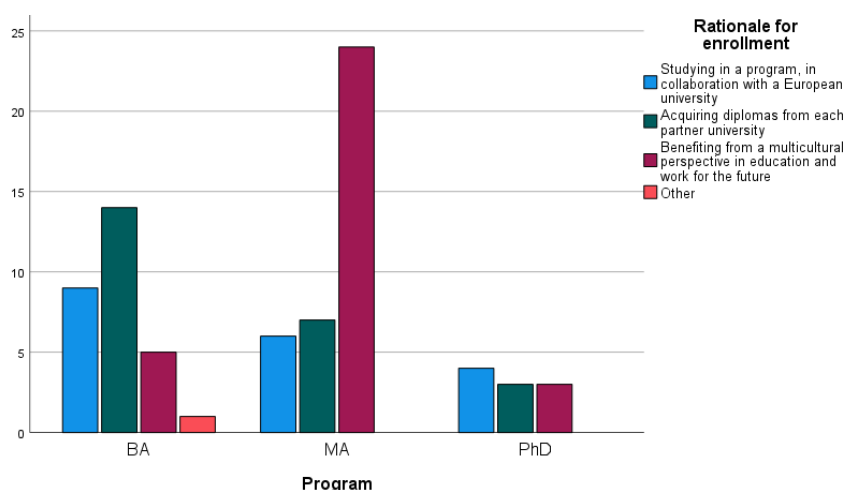
Table 6. Crosstabulation of the variable “program of study” with the variables: “reasons” and “valuation”

Variables		BA	MA	PhD	Total
Reasons	By chance	2	1	0	3
	Well-thought, after scrutinizing all options.	20	23	10	53
	Suggestions by family & acquaintances	5	7	0	12
	Other	2	6	0	8
	Total	29	37	10	76
Program valuation	A study program, BA, MA, PhD.	0	20	4	24
	Double Degree Program	12	6	5	23
	Program that awards two diplomas	17	9	0	26
	Program that awards a joint diploma	0	0	1	1
	Other	0	1	0	1
Total		52	18	5	75

Table 7. Crosstabulation of the variable “year of study” with the variables: “program valuation”

Variables		Year of study			Total
		First Year	Second Year	Third Year	
Program valuation	A study program, BA, MA, PhD.	17	6	0	23
	Double Degree Program	13	8	1	22
	Program that awards two diplomas	20	6	0	26
	Program that awards a joint diploma	0	1	0	1
	Other	1	0	0	1
	Total	51	21	1	73
	Studying in a program, in collaboration with a European university.	12	6	1	19

When thinking about the rationale for enrollment in the IJPs, the following different perspectives, can be evidenced from students in different levels of study, as shown in the chart below:

**Figure 6.** The results of the crosstabulation of the variables “program” and “rationale for enrollment”

The students’ motivations for choosing IJPs, for the majority of Bachelor students is acquiring two diplomas from the partner HEIs, Master students noted the possibility to study and work in a multicultural environment, when Doctorate students underline the importance of partnerships with European universities.

5.2. Advantages and Disadvantages of IJPs

Students’ views and perspectives, pursuing internationalized joint programs, IJPs, with DDs, are that these programs have major benefits and opportunities for the future. Most of them do not express the disadvantages or shortcomings of DDs. The responses of 66 students, or approximately 87%, in each level of study refer to several advantages. The respondents are equally divided in relation to the existence of disadvantages or challenges (31 out of 62).

Table 8. Supposed advantages and disadvantages

		Program of study			
		BA	MA	PhD	Total
Advantages	Yes	29	28	9	66
	No	0	1	1	2
	Total	29	29	10	68
Disadvantages	Yes	16	13	2	31
	No	11	12	8	31
	Total	27	25	10	75

When thinking about the advantages of IJPs which offer Double Degrees, the enrolled students' responses can be summarized as follows in table 9:

Table 9. Perceived Advantages of IJPs

Cycle of studies	No. of Responses	Perceived Advantages of IJPs
Bachelor programs	22	The advantage of gaining a DD, in partnership with a European university; a multicultural perspective in study and work; acquiring different skills, abilities and competences; the opportunities abroad and knowing other cultures and countries; the possibility to study for a semester abroad.
	6	Better future job opportunities.
Master programs	14	Better future job opportunities in all sectors.
	7	Understanding the public sector better and possibly working in public administration.
	3	The possibility to gain specialized knowledge.
	2	Better research methods and increased collaboration with lecturers.
	2	The chance to gain a Double Degree, that is known internationally.
Doctorate program	1	Obtaining the Master of Science degree.
	6	Obtaining the Double Degree and also an international experience.
	2	Better job opportunities.
	1	Benefits related to the intellectual and academic level, as well as added contacts.
	1	The possibility of staying in your country and the continuation of studies.

Respondents cite several challenges as disadvantages or challenges of IJPs:

Table 10. Perceived Disadvantages of IJPs: DDs

Cycle of studies	No. of Responses	Perceived Disadvantages of IJPs
Bachelor programs	8	The difficulty of fulfilling the foreign language criteria.
	3	The disadvantage of a new program of study that leads to a low number of students.
	2	A multidisciplinary program, with complex courses, that are too demanding.
	2	The challenges of gaining the DDs, as a result of adapting to a new and foreign culture, university, etc.
	1	The challenges that come from a competitive job market.
Master programs	7	The difficulties related to a competitive job market, including problems such as clientelism, militantism, and limited career opportunities.
	2	The challenges when studying in programs with a high number of students.
	2	The challenges of a new and not well-known program of study.
	1	The challenge of not getting the DD, due to the impossibility of doing the mobility abroad.
	1	The challenges that arise from not being a multidisciplinary program of study.
Doctorate program	1	The disadvantages that arise from using foreign literature, such as the use of a foreign logo/foreign diploma.

The challenges of offering IJDDs, according to Bamford (2020), are "the policy context, quality assurance, the international competitive environment for higher education, the development of a relationship between staff, international branding, and the motivations for engaging in these collaboration programs" (Bamford, 2020, 47). According to Palermo et al. (2018), the challenges associated with such programs of study result in the most capable individuals undertaking IJ programs. Despite the growth of these programs, they remain marginal in terms of student numbers and income generated (Bamford, 2020).

5.3. Information about other IJPs and Higher Education Policy Countrywide

Regarding the information about other IJPs in the country, among the 62 respondents, only 18 (or 29.0%) of the students are aware of other internationalized joint programs, while 44 (or about 71.0%) of the respondents lack information about other programs in HEIs in Albania.

Table 11. Information and knowledge about other Internationalized Joint Programs

Information on other IJPs in the country	Frequency	Percent%	BA	MA	PhD
Yes	18	23.7	4-Information only about UAMD IJPs, DDs. 2-Limited information CUT “ZKM” & Agricultural University.	4- Information only for UAMD several collaborations. 3-Limited information on the University of Tirana & the University “Luarasi”.	4- Information only for UAMD. 1- Information about the University of Tirana.
No	44	57.9			
Total	62	81.6			

Furthermore, the students’ information and views about governmental policy on IJPs with Joint or Double Degrees, reveals that only 28 or about 37 % of the respondents believe that the policy is supportive, 41 or about 54 % sustain that they do not have information on this topic, and about 7 % argue about non-supportive governmental policy:

Table 11. Students’ perceptions and information about governmental policy on IJPs.

Governmental policy on IJPs.	Frequency	Percent%	Program of study	
			BA	MA
Supportive.	28	36.8		
No idea.	41	53.9		
Not supportive.	5	6.6		
Other	2	2.6	1-There is no governmental information dissemination.	1- The policy is supportive, but only in principle.
Total	62	81.6		

Finally, regarding the overall estimation and attitudes towards IJPs with DDs, the enrolled students are mostly satisfied with their programs of study and would recommend their IJPs to other students. Thus, 59 or about 77% of them would recommend other prospective students to pursue their studies in IJPs, in each cycle: BA, MA or PhD. 8 students or about 11% responded that they are not sure about their study program, 6 students are hesitant and cautious in recommending IJPs, 2 students have responded that they will not recommend their study program.

Table 12. Students' attitudes and recommendations about IJPs

Stance & recommendations on IJPs.	Frequency	Percent%	BA	MA
Yes, always	59	77.6		
I don't know.	8	10.5		
With reservations	6	7.9		
No	2	1.3		
Total	75	98.7		

The responses vary from the required interest and hard work to achieve results; obtaining the DD requires good grades and proficiency in a foreign language; and not everybody can manage to achieve results. For students who are unsure about recommending their IJPs, one relates it to unfinished studies, and the second, because lacks information on the prospective students' desire to study in this challenging program of study. And, two students (one in a BA program for getting all the possible opportunities and one in a MA program (PA) suggests that will recommend only programs that give students a profession in the fields of Economy or Information Technology, or something else that gives them better job opportunities). Summarizing the findings, first of all, the qualitative findings resulted from the ongoing interviews and the qualitative case study in relation with higher education internationalization and specifically the offering of IJPs:

- The focus and the importance of the IJPs with JDs or DDs, supported initially by government policies and then by the institutional level (HEIs).
- The necessity to increase the number of such programs as a means to connect the individual level of students and staff, with the other institutional, national, and international levels, for increased cooperation that leads to international and European universities.
- The increase of the number of international joint programs, IJPs, is associated with several benefits for the individuals (cultural awareness, added skills and competences for the future resulting from student mobilities, and better employment opportunities; staff mobilities and career advancements), for the HEIs (academic rankings and better positioning and prestige internationally by attracting international students) and for the state the benefits of consolidating the relations with other states, through these collaborations.
- IJPs are not related anymore only with the second level or cycle of studies (Master programs) but recently include collaborations for Bachelor and Doctorates programs.

Then, a questionnaire was developed to measure the perceptions and attitudes of IJPs (DDs) students, with major themes and coded variables of interest. The findings from the quantitative method indicate:

- The students' satisfaction with the IJPs with DDs, as a means to have better study and future employment opportunities, by gaining the double degree from both partner universities.
- The perceptions of students from different cycles of studies do not differ based on gender about the factors that attract them to pursue these IJPs. They mostly tend to emphasize the advantages of major IJPs, particularly in relation to multicultural perspectives in education, qualitative study programs, and future employment opportunities.
- Half of the students underline different challenges in relation to IJPs, like the criteria to fulfill for gaining the needed mobility semester abroad, the language criteria, the program and curricula complexity, and the associated levels of difficulty.

The study's unique contribution to the field is to better understand the internationalized joint programs, IJPs, from different perspectives, to evidence their advantages, and to analyze the challenges they face, and the students' perspective on IJPs with DDs. Actually, these programs evidence a limited number of students, and a very low number of enrolled students included in international mobilities to gain the double degree, and as such, it is necessary a deepening of the internationalization process of higher education.

5.4. Higher Education Internationalization with IJPs in Western Balkans HEIs

The Western Balkans countries initiatives regarding International Joint Programs that offer JDs or DDs indicate relevant progress made in the direction of creating international universities. As in the case of Albanian universities, these initiatives are crucial and present opportunities for collaboration for IJPs operating in the region.

Some of the IJPs that award JDs and /or DDs are found in Bosnia and Hercegovina, offered by the International University of Sarajevo (IUS) in collaboration with the University of Health Sciences in Turkey (SBU). The educational offer consists of two DD in Dental Medicine and Medicine; a two-year Master's program, an Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Program in Social Psychology of Transformation in collaboration with the International University Berlin (IPU Berlin); and other internationalized joint programs for six Master's (one-year programs) in different fields of study.

In Kosovo, there are two private HEIs that offer IJPs: the UBT College offers some interesting DDs in collaboration with other HEIs, and the "Universum" College. University for Business and Technology, UBT, has partnerships with countries like Austria, Italy, France, Hungary, the UK, and Poland. The other HEI, Uni-Universum International College offers several DDs in the Bachelor and Master levels, collaborating with Arizona State University in USA, with three Master programs, one DD for a Master program with Ludwigshafen University of Business and Society, Germany; one Bachelor program with Kajaani University of Applied Sciences, Finland; four DDs for Bachelor programs and 2 for Master programs with the University of Northampton, UK; and one DD for a Bachelor program with Mykolas Rumeris University, in Lithuania (Universum International College official website, 2025).

In Montenegro, the University of Montenegro offers two DDs for Bachelor programs with partner universities in France and an initiative with a JD for a Master in MEP&M with Albania and Italy, and other European universities. Also, Ulysseus European University offers several DDs for three Bachelor programs with partner universities in Italy, France, etc., and six Master's programs with universities in Italy, France, and Spain.

Regarding the internationalization of study programs in the Republic of North Macedonia, a private university, the American University of Europe, AUE-FON, offers one JD with CIFE, Nice for a Master program and, two DDs (Dual Degrees) with Mittweida, in Germany, University of Applied Sciences for the I and II cycles of studies, and the last with VUZF University, in Sofia, Bulgaria. Another university, International Balkan University, offers DDs with a partner university in Turkey. Athena European University is offering one DD for a Bachelor program and one JD with other partner universities.

Furthermore, Serbia is one of the WBs countries that has notable progress regarding the internationalization of HEIs' study programs. In this respect, the University of Belgrade offers two DDs for Master programs with partner universities in the UK, Slovenia, two JDs for "Astromundus" Master with Austria, Italy, and Sweden, and a joint program with Italy, South East European Studies. Moreover, the University of Nis has a collaboration with a German university, the Novisad School of Business and Singidunum University partnership with Franklin university in US.

As can be seen, WB countries are mostly at the beginning of their initiatives in offering IJPs, and their progress can be the subject of future comparative studies to explore the similarities and/or differences in their respective educational policies and the internationalization of HEIs in this direction.

6. Conclusion

Even if the beginnings of the internationalization of higher education are in the 1990s, in Albania it has started in the last three years. The internationalization of higher education encompasses several key aspects, including the mobility of students, academics, and researchers; the internationalization of the curriculum (IoC); participation in various university alliances; internationalization at home; and other related elements. The most important and highest level of internationalization for analysis is Joint Internationalized Programs, which offer Joint or Double Degrees, in the context of creating International Universities. As data and information indicate, and based on governmental policy on higher education, it can be inferred that the number of initiatives related to Joint and Double Degrees will increase, as they represent more opportunities in the dynamic environment in which HEIs operate. This is also related to the reforms and future integration of Albania into the EU.

What should be emphasized is that IJPs, as the most important and challenging part of the internationalization process of HEIs, are no longer limited to the second level or cycle of studies, such as Master's programs, but have recently expanded to include collaborations on Bachelor's programs and Doctorates.

In total, actually in Albania there are approximately 25 (twenty-five) internationalized joint programs, IJPs offered by public universities and 10 IJPs offered by private universities. Public universities are leading the process, even if only half of them (6 of 12 public HEIs) are engaged in the internationalization process of offering IJPs for JDs or DDs, and main partners for most of the internationalized joint programs are Italian universities, followed by French HEIs. The necessary procedure to be part of these internationalized programs is the same as for other programs, countrywide Albania. However, the new IJPs and adapted programs will require time to show results and to analyze their efficiency and effectiveness.

Some of the difficulties in the internationalization of higher education are related to transparency issues regarding the way in which these IJPs are undertaken, especially when existing programs are changed to align with the partner universities' curricula. Another issue is that of the teaching and learning standards and of the quality assurance in each HEI. Actually, it can be evidenced a limited number of students pursuing these programs and from the enrolled students, the mobility semester abroad, as a component of the IJPs is confined to a very low number of students.

In relation with the students' views about the IJPs they are pursuing, the majority of students show a cultural perspective for deciding to register in these programs, followed by the practical motive of getting two diplomas, to fitting to the competitive job market.

In conclusion, the HEIs' internationalization process is expected to gain more prominence in the near future, given the increasing number of IJPs that offer JDs or DDs, the favoring country's educational policy, and the HEIs' proactive approach towards higher education internationalization. HEIs' engagement in the internationalization process must be an instrument for quality improvement of higher education, and to give students the possibility of multicultural experiences in education and increased competencies later in the job market.

7. Suggestion

Creating partnerships to offer IJPs for JDs and/or DDs with other foreign HEIs is essential for an international university to expand its offerings. This implies opening new programs in each of the study cycles or modifying the existing curricula of the programs. Universities should consider the need for engagement in investing in the mobility component to increase the number of students who undertake mobility abroad as part of their internationalized joint program.

It is necessary to have clear and transparent collaboration agreements with partner universities regarding the terms and conditions, as well as all financial and other costs associated with offering IJPs. All the related information and all of the documents that serve as a base for IJPs, should be accessible for students, prospective students, and for all the interested parties. It is necessary to have closer collaboration with various local actors, such as businesses, municipalities, interest groups, and mass media, to adapt the universities' educational offer to the demands and requirements of the dynamic environment.

Declarations

Conflicts of Interest. The author declares no conflict of interest.

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