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KNOWLEDGE, POWER AND UNIVERSITY: THE CASE OF ALBANIA

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INTRODUCTION

The university, for more than a millennium, has been enduring in developed societies as the main institution of higher education and science. Higher education is not independent and immune from political, economic, technological, etc. transformations, hence it constantly has to reflect and re-dimension itself. In Albania, national education gained importance and spread at the end of the 19th century and during the 20th century, while higher education and science spread in the middle of the 20th century. After the fall of communism in 1991, higher education and science in Albania were re-dimensioned.

Knowledge is not *a priori* attribute, but being knowledgeable can be an attribute, and more knowledge we possess, more power we may have. Knowledge is considered as the most important resource of the twenty first century because, in addition to being accumulatively created, knowledge does not decrease through use (Al-Ali et al., 2020). According to Foucault (1980), knowledge cannot be separated from power. Nor can truth be separated from power. Power cannot be separated from knowledge because, through knowledge and practices, power reveals itself in different disciplines. For Foucault (1980), power is almost impossible to function or exist without having a relationship with knowledge. He explicitly stated that "*nothing can function as a mechanism of power unless it is deployed according to procedures, instruments, means, and objectives that can be validated in more or less coherent systems of knowledge*" (1997, pp. 52-53). Power needs knowledge in order to regulate, subjugate, and rule.

In this research, the term “power” is used in two meanings. On the one hand, it is related more to the formal power, which means the political bodies and other institutions or agents which, through their decisions, shape or affect policies and higher education. On the other hand, “power” has the Foucauldian meaning: any kind of power that each subject exercise to others through his/her actions or discourses (Foucault, 1980).

Research questions

The *research problem* that this thesis undertakes to analyse is related to the low-level performance of the universities in Albania, and the underlying causes of this low performance.

In the light of theoretical and empirical background, and research problem presented above, this study aims to address the following *research questions*:

- 1) What is the role of the knowledge-power relations in the low performance level of higher education in Albania?
- 2) What are the main constraints and powers that dominate the university in Albania, and impede its improvement?

Hypothesis

The first *hypothesis* of this doctoral research is as follows:

- 1) The knowledge-power relations in Albania have been dysfunctional and disproportionate, preventing the university progress and improvement.

The second *hypothesis* of this doctoral research is as follows:

- 2) The main constraints and powers that dominate the university in Albania and impede its improvement are the lack of will from the political power and the university leaders, and their clientelist relationships.

These hypotheses encompass a number of explaining variables related to education and society such as culture, academic freedom and independence, financial autonomy, accountability, knowledge management in HEIs, connection to the market, study materials, research production and publication, higher education policies, internationalization, services and links with third parties, etc.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

French philosopher Michel Foucault is one of the important references when it comes to power relations. His work has been used by education scholars as a tool to emphasize how education and social narratives compose their theoretical objects. The relationship between the subject, truth, power, and the constitution of lived experience was one of the focuses of Foucault. His theory on power is well-known for opposing the assumption that power is something that can be possessed or that it exists as a form of repression or domination. According to Foucault, power cannot be

considered as something which is held or owned by persons to be used, but as a relation between people or groups of people (Foucault, 1980). Power is something that is exercised, or as Foucault describes it, "a set of actions upon other actions" (Foucault, 1954-1984/2002, p. 341). For instance, in educational institutions, power mostly refers to the set of relationships between people and groups of persons such as teachers, students, and administrative personnel.

According to Taylor and Boser (2006), universities are highly hierarchical institutions. Usually, university staff find themselves governed by visible and invisible power structures. Not infrequently, students see themselves at the bottom of this hierarchy. Using what Foucault calls 'an inclusion through exclusion', in the case of universities, implies that students are a kind of excluded from the society in order to entangle them in or connect them to relations of power and knowledge (Deacon, 2006).

Foucault highlights the power generated in micropractices of relationships, including those in educational institutions. Each person experiences and exercises power, in different proportions. Power should be analysed at its extreme places of application, where it is in close interaction with its subject, and where it establishes itself and manifests its consequences (Foucault, 1980). From the perspective of Foucault, knowledge and power are not mutually exclusive nor equivalent. Instead, they are entangled in a correlative connection, which is grounded on its historical peculiarity (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983). In order to function and be effective, power must be founded in knowledge about the subjects it operates on and in connection to. Based on that, it can be said that the operation of power relies on knowledge about the subject, and power determines what knowledge is appropriate and relevant.

Even at their most radical, power relations are rarely one-sided, but are almost always reciprocal and multi-sided. Those who officially have the right to exercise "formal" power in the school or university are just as much involved in and subjected to its operations as those who are subjected to it. More than the exercise of power by various agents and actors in the educational institution, which is almost inevitable, both in the classroom and outside it, the concern may be to avoid or mitigate the effects of domination. The effects of domination have been one of the issues that has intrigued Foucault as well, especially in the pedagogical process. The lecture, which, compared to seminar, seems to be more non-reciprocal and unequal in terms of power relations, can be more sincere and less cunning than the seminar about power relations, which each of them inevitably

produce. Foucault was of the opinion that seminars, on the other hand, while important in the educational process, could be more suited for method training than for the development of free and critical thought. It is difficult to say that power relations and exercise have been dissolved or neutralized as a result of the twentieth-century move from traditional didactic or teacher-centred to more cooperative or student-centered educational approach (Deacon, 2006).

Different authors have different opinions on what the goals or objectives of pedagogy should be. Pedagogy is not just teaching. It is a complex process that must consider the characteristics of the student, the nature of the subject, the context, etc. (Chekour, Laafou, and Janati-Idrissi, 2018). Also, pedagogy is related to understanding, increasing motivation, student development, discovering student tendencies, etc. Several studies have shown that the problem that students have in acquiring knowledge in educational institutions does not lie in the knowledge itself but in the pedagogical approaches and techniques (Ma, Fulmer, and Liang, 2017). Pedagogy varies in approach and techniques. Different subjects may require different pedagogical forms and approaches.

During the communist regime, in Albania, formal education was massified, but not higher education. The pedagogical methods and model were mainly copied from the Soviet model of education, or rather, they were a kind of Leninist pedagogical model of “the one who knows”. Thus, pedagogy in educational institutions was very teacher/lecturer-oriented.

University as a concept has been defined by several researchers, theorists, and educational scientists. Each of them has contributed to having a broader and more accurate idea of the university today. Many educational scholars define the today’s university as an institution which has three main functions: 1) teaching; 2) scientific research; 3) service to third parties. These functions have implications, which makes the university have multiple roles for the society. For example, through teaching, the university contributes to education, information, culture, and emancipation of the society. Through scientific research, the university contributes to the advancement of scientific knowledge, scientific findings, providing data from scientific measurements, possible invention of technological devices, drugs, vaccines, etc. Through the service for third parties, the university offers society, companies, or institutions its experience, knowledge, expertise, scientific data, and scientific inventions it has achieved. In addition to these three main functions, there are authors who attribute other institutional responsibilities to the

university. For instance, Ben-David (1977) charges the university with the responsibility of advancing and expanding social justice as well. For him, the only way the university can fulfil this is by adequately educating capable, driven, and appropriately prepared students from all classes and communities. Another scholar of education, Allan Bloom (1987), defines the university as an institution or space that provides an atmosphere for learning.

For a long time, there has been a general opinion in Europe which differentiates universities into two main university models: the Anglo-Saxon model and the Continental model. For Ortega y Gasset (1930/2014), the contrasts between English and continental universities are overstated, and they ignore the fact that the most significant differences are to be attributed not to the universities themselves but rather to the very unusual English character. What should be compared is the trends that characterize the development of universities in different countries instead of the obviously varied degree to which those trends have advanced (Ortega y Gasset, 1930/2014).

Along with teaching and research, universities, additionally, have to contribute to society. Universities must guarantee the supply of qualified human resources for society and economy as well. Universities have a vast knowledge base that can serve to drive the development of new sectors and opportunities. The government should find ways to support universities to use this knowledge base efficiently. On the other hand, in addition to contributing in social and economic growth, it is the task of universities to put their knowledge and expertise to the market and, consequently, to generate income. With this revenue, universities may enhance the quality of the public good and the market services they offer (Birkner, 2022). In capitalist societies, whose economy and development are based on the free market, knowledge creators must be able of integrating their knowledge into the market. Also, companies need to connect with knowledge creators. Specifically, in the case of Albania, research institutions and HEIs must get more involved in business operations in order to assist Albanian ventures and companies grow and become more competitive.

In higher education institutions, research is essential for knowledge production and dissemination. Universities are not supposed just to provide knowledge to students, but also to manage existing knowledge and create new knowledge. Therefore, high-level universities nowadays have adapted to their growing position in a knowledge-based society (Singh, 2010). The sciences must set up their own centres and facilities around the university's core such as laboratories, workshop and

discussion areas, etc. The sciences serve as the foundation upon which higher education is based and as the source of its nourishment. Hence, its roots must extend out to laboratories of all kinds and draw from them for the sustenance they can contribute. The university students must move back and forth between the university and these scientific outlets, where they can find courses designed from a wholly scientific perspective almost on everything. Lecturers should work closely with science, under its critics, effects and stimulation. But we must be clear and careful so that teaching and scientific research do not create confusion in the university.

The use of knowledge to improve governance in field of education, at different levels of policy making, requires the identification of the main domains through which this can be done. A project of OECD, named *Strategic Education Governance (SEG)*, identifies six domains to increase the effectiveness of governing education systems. These domains are: 1) Accountability, which enables local discretion while limiting fragmentation, and promotes a culture of learning and improvement. 2) Capacity, which ensures capacity for policy-making and implementation, and stimulates horizontal capacity building. 3) Knowledge governance, which promotes production of adequate evidence and mobilizes produced evidence for convenient use, stimulates a culture of evidence-use and nurtures evidence-related capabilities. 4) Stakeholder involvement, which integrates stakeholder knowledge and perspectives and fosters support, shared responsibility, ownership and trust. 5) Strategic thinking, which crafts, shares and consolidates a system vision, adapts to changing contexts and new knowledge, and balances short-term and long-term priorities. 6) A whole-of-system perspective is recommended, which overcomes system inertia, develops synergies within the system and moderates the tensions (OECD, 2019).

The government, in order to exercise power in society, needs to produce and accumulate knowledge through its institutes, which are not only universities or research and scientific centres, but also hospitals, asylums, prisons, etc. In addition to the state, private companies and corporations also produce and accumulate knowledge themselves to understand society's purchasing behaviour. So, power and knowledge encompass one another in their own existence. The university is a place where knowledge is produced, consequently the university is also an institution of power.

As for knowledge-power relations within the university, of course there are dynamics and confrontations between the two. The American model of the university has long been closely

related to the production and dissemination of knowledge. The modernization of the American university system was mainly based on the nineteenth-century German university model (Bloom, 1987). The English model also had an impact. However, what was produced in the USA went beyond these models. Ben-David (1977) says that the American university reform can also be seen as an extension of the European university reforms. The German university model had the greatest influence in the world, mainly because of one fundamental principle: the unity of teaching with research. This unity gave extraordinary results in science as well. Also, the German university was more general in nature than specialized. Another distinguishing factor was the fact of being a self-governing institution (Ben-David, 1977). These were excellent premises for the reform of the American university which preserved the departmental autonomy and gave the university a more specialized nature, although it preserved the Liberal Arts programmes. But the biggest change that the American university faced is that it became part of the capitalist logic. This created new dynamics between departmental autonomy and freedom of competition which somehow shaped the American university. These dynamics between these two components, which often collide with each other, gave a new dimension to the production and positioning of knowledge in the US. In order to manage these dynamics, a professional and balanced management of knowledge, human resources, and institutional interests is needed.

Knowledge management is a process in which universities have devised methods to acknowledge and archive knowledge capital within the institution that are derived from staff from different departments or faculties, and occasionally, from other organizations that have similar goals or expertise (Firestone, 2001). Knowledge management may also be described as the process of converting information and intellectual capital into long-term value. It supplies individuals with the knowledge they need to take actions (Kidwell et al., 2000). Knowledge management deals with ensuring that the appropriate knowledge is available to the proper processor, whether human or machine, at the relevant time and in the right format for the right cost (Holsapple and Joshi, 1999). Kidwell et al., (2000) argue that universities that undertake initiatives to share knowledge in order to meet business goals are highly valuable.

Universities in Albania have the possibilities to implement knowledge management approaches to enhance all components of their mission, from teaching to public service to research. An institution-wide approach to knowledge management can bring major advancements in sharing knowledge, both explicit and tacit, and the associated surging benefits. Employing knowledge

management strategies and technology in higher education institutions can be just as important as it is in the business world. The spirit of organizations transforms as they become more efficient through exploiting knowledge capital. When implemented appropriately, it may result in improved decision-making abilities, shortened “product” development period time, better academic and administrative services, and lower costs (Kidwell et al., 2000).

HIGHER EDUCATION IN ALBANIA

Modern higher education in Albania has its beginnings immediately after the Second World War. Founded in 1946, a two-year pedagogical institute served as the first higher education institution in the country. Several higher institutes were established in the country during the communist regime, which after 1991 were transformed into universities. Albanian higher education, since 1991, has only undergone two significant reforms. During the period of 2007–2013, the right-wing government made changes in higher education in the country. The government managed the adoption of the Bologna Process for all degree cycles; through a central Matura assessment, it centralized the admissions procedure; it implemented the state examination for regulated professions; it raised institutional autonomy; it launched the process of integrating research institutes at public universities that were once part of the Academy of Science; it broadened the higher education system in terms of students, HEIs variety, and degrees (Tafaj and Shahini, 2019). In 2014, the leftist government changed, above all, the admission procedures, tuition fees, and academic governance by thoroughly separating the academic from the administrative operations. Since 2003, Albania has been a full member of the Bologna Process / European Higher Education Area.

From the data provided by the Institute of Statistics of the Republic of Albania (INSTAT), since 2018, a decrease in the number of pupils and students at all levels of education can be observed. An important indicator in education is the ratio of students per 1,000 inhabitants. In Albania this ratio is low, and, what is worse, it is decreasing. There are several reasons, such as studies in better universities abroad, population aging, emigration of young people, loss of trust in higher education institutions, etc. As for the fields of study that Albanian students choose to study in Albanian HEIs, for the period 2017-2021, it turns out that the largest number of them study in the field of "business, administration, and law". The second place is occupied by the field of "health and wellness",

although the number of graduates in this field is about half of those studying "business, administration, and law". The fields of study that have fewer and fewer students enrolled are social sciences, arts and humanities, and natural sciences.

METHODOLOGY

The topic of this research, which implies university, knowledge, and power, has mainly qualitative and theoretical features. One of the advantages of qualitative research is especially that it can provide the depth of necessary information, for instance, reform recommendations or potential explanations for why something works or does not (Burns & Schuller, 2007). The main interests of this research are not focused on technical issues. The use of both qualitative and quantitative methods and the high number of interviewees do not necessarily make the study more valuable. Due to its features, concepts and methods, this research can be categorized into the Critical and Interpretative paradigms.

In addition to a theoretical analysis, the research methods used in this doctoral research are interview method and document analysis method. In the context of global transformation of the university and its relations with knowledge and power, this study focuses on the case of Albania. Case study research is a research method that incorporates particular approaches to data collection and data analysis, based on a single or multiple case studies, and can be explanatory, exploratory, or descriptive (Yin, 1994).

This research work consists in analysing the university sector in Albania, especially the public sector; evaluating the relations of the university with knowledge and power; analysing the factors which keep the level of higher education in Albania in the current state; and suggesting the appropriate actions and reforms that need to be undertaken in order to increase the level and performance of universities in the country.

This research includes three main research methods of gathering data (information, ideas, considerations, suggestions). These three methods are (1) literature review, (2) documents analysis (Law no. 80/2015 "On Higher Education and Scientific Research in Higher Education Institutions in the Republic of Albania"; Final Report on the Reform of Higher Education and Scientific Research; etc.), and (3) open-ended structured interviews.

The selection of key publications related to university, knowledge, knowledge management, power, knowledge-power relations, and the specific publications related to higher education in Albania in the post-communist was the first step. The selection criteria are: (1) the focus of the publication: higher education (university), knowledge, knowledge management, power, and the relationships between them; (2) the period covered by the study: while studies related to theoretical concepts of power, knowledge, and university have no time criteria, studies related to higher education in Albania should cover the post-communist era. The main exclusion criteria are whether the studies have purely technical character or whether they focus more in the pre-university education. As for the document analysis, the main source is the law no. 80/2015 "On Higher Education and Scientific Research in Higher Education Institutions in the Republic of Albania" which is a product of the recent reform in higher education. This law is a core document that has given shape to higher education in Albania, but part of my analysis are also other documents such as the *Final Report on the Reform of Higher Education and Scientific Research* written by the Commission for Higher Education and Scientific Research, and the Statutes and Regulations of public universities.

Another source of data are the interviews. Doing open-ended structured interviews with three categories of interviewees (academics, decision-makers, students) is another way of gathering not only information about higher education sector in Albania, and its relations with power and knowledge, but also the experience, opinions, approaches, considerations, and suggestions of the interviewees. From the 31 interviews conducted, the most useful and valuable answers related to the topic of this thesis are cited in the following chapters.

Albania provides a very interesting, maybe a unique, case of study because it was one of the wildest and closed communist dictatorships in Europe (1945-1991). It was the most isolated country in Europe for almost half a century, and the last country in Eastern Europe where the communist regime fell down. Albania was an "island" or a "bunker" in the heart of Europe. From its beginning to nowadays, the higher education in Albania has passed through several reforms tending to implement different models which have often caused confusion and malfunction.

Several reforms have shaped and are still shaping the higher education sector in the country. Higher education in Albania has passed through several education models, struggling to find itself in each of them. From 1951-1992 the education system had the characteristics of the soviet model of

education. From 1992-2015 the system of higher education changed gradually towards the continental model. From 2015 on, as the result of the last governmental reform, higher education has been trying to move towards the Anglo-Saxon model. Due to the permanent legal changes that have been made to the higher education sector in Albania in the post-communist period, the Albanian university seems to have difficulty creating a stability and a tradition as it is constantly changing.

The interview sampling methods of this research are snowball and purposive sample. By meeting and interviewing relevant people who belong to one of the three defined categories, they also served as a bridge to meet and interview their colleagues who have expertise or interest in higher education. The snowball sampling method became more necessary because the interviews were mainly conducted during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic, which made it very difficult to ensure the relevant participants for interviews. On the other hand, purposive sample is also employed, which allowed me to choose the interviewees according to preselected criteria relevant to the research topic. That means that I could select the individuals I think have more experience and insights into this topic, respecting the inclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria for the selection of the interviewees are as follows:

- has an interest in higher education,
- has been engaged in higher education policy making,
- has been or is part of the public debate on higher education in Albania,
- has expertise in higher education studies
- has done research on higher education,
- has been or is a representative of a certain organization, movement, body, or group related to higher education.

The selected interviewees meet at least one of the criteria listed above. Most of the interviewees (academics and students) are from the higher education institutions in Tirana. Albania is a small country with about three million inhabitants, and therefore the vast majority of universities and students are concentrated in the capital. In this way, this is quite representative. Regarding the decision-makers, their selection is made taking into account one main criterion: decision-making job position related to the higher education sector. Lecturers/professors, university leaders, students, and politicians are the main actors of the education sector. Lecturers and professors are the ‘knowledge’ of the university; students are the ‘inhabitants’ of the university; and politicians

are the decision-makers of higher education sector. Interviews are individual, structured, and open-ended because this is qualitative research. 31 individuals were interviewed, of which 19 are academics (lecturers and researchers), three are decision-makers; and nine are students. The questionnaire for the category of academics has 32 questions; for the category of decision-makers has 24 questions, and for the category of students has 24 questions. Of these questions, 16 questions are common to all three categories of interviewees. The interviews include three categories of people in order to be as comprehensive as possible.

No.	Category	Number of persons interviewed
1	Academics (lecturers and researchers)	19
2	Decision-makers	3
3	Students	9

Table 1. Categories of interviewees and the number of people interviewed for each category

All 31 interviews were conducted by me personally during the period November 2020 - August 2021. 30 interviews were conducted face to face, while one interview was conducted via online video call. All interviews were taken in Albanian. There were no language barriers during the interviews because Albanian is the native language of the interviewees and mine.

ANALYSIS OF LEGISLATION AND OTHER RELEVANT DOCUMENTS

If we go back to the suggestions and principles of the Commission for Higher Education and Scientific Research, we see that law no. 80/2015 "On Higher Education and Scientific Research in Higher Education Institutions in the Republic of Albania" has not resolved a good part of the issues.

Putting competition at the foundation of funding is one of the principles suggested by the Commission which the higher education law seems to have addressed to some extent. HEIs can apply for project funding at the National Agency for Scientific Research and Innovation (AKKSHI). But, on the other hand, since AKKSHI is a state institution, the allocation of funds to HEIs can increase the government's influence and power over universities.

Eliminating bureaucracy and increasing the effectiveness of the university operation, which was one of the main suggestions of the Commission, has not been fulfilled at all. On the contrary, the management of HEIs with two heads (administrator-rector) has increased the bureaucracy, and made the operation of the university more difficult and slower.

Creation of control and accountability mechanisms is a principle of the Commission which is somewhat fulfilled by the law through the Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ASCAL). However, the accountability mechanisms for the high leaders of public HEIs remain weak.

Guaranteeing the institutional autonomy of HEIs is another issue that should have been addressed by the higher education law. As a matter of fact, as long as the government has the majority of members on the boards of public universities, it controls all the financial and administrative activities of the universities, diminishing the institutional autonomy of the HEIs.

In fact, in addition to knowledge institutions, universities are also political institutions. As such, it is probably impossible to consider universities (especially public ones) today as completely detached from political power. In fact, in a way, the government has some rights over the universities although the latter are supposed to enjoy autonomy. Overall, public universities are the responsibility of the government so, in this view, the government has a right to orient them or have some influence on them. Thus, universities, while they should enjoy academic autonomy, find it very difficult to enjoy inherent political autonomy. Also, the world of research and publications is greatly influenced by the will of the political power to provide funds, build scientific centres, etc. These elements make the university connected to political power. Anglo-Saxon universities can also be considered quite politicized nowadays. In fact, in today's world, it is very difficult to imagine public universities totally detached from political power. In itself, this relationship is not an issue. Even if a government tries to orient the university according to an ideology voted for, which suits national strategies and interests, this can still be acceptable. Normally, the political power should be interested in the functioning of the university along with the elements it carries such as study programmes, curricula, research topics, scientific activities, publications, etc. What is problematic is when the political power is interested in the university with one main goal: to control it so that the university does not become an opponent of the government, but on the contrary, remains silent or, worse, propagates the work of to the

government. Exactly, this kind of interest of the political power towards the university is observed in the Albanian context.

The entire reform of higher education in Albania was carried out in the name of democratization, autonomy, and liberalism for universities. The left-wing government in Albania has promoted this reform, saying that it is based on the British model. In fact, what is happening in the higher education sector in Albania can be explained as a certain reduction of liberalism in the economic side without the political one, in Adam Smith without John Locke. According to Hysamedin Feraj, founder of the Department of Political Sciences at the University of Tirana, this reduction is the feature of neoliberalism, while its significance is given by an analogy: neoliberalism is to liberalism as Stalinism is to Marxism. It is simple, clear, understandable, and rhetorically winning because it is somewhat superficial. Within the liberal discourse, neoliberalism is a rhetorical and practical winner because, just like Stalinism within the Marxists, neoliberalism makes for itself the crowd and the political parties, which are tired of slightly more complicated but deeper thinking, and settle in the calmness that scholarly certainty gives them in support of simple "truths" (Feraj, 2015).

On the other hand, the internal regulations of universities and faculties are not very functional and efficient. Moreover, more than half of the interviewed students stated that they are not aware of the internal regulations in the HEI where they study. This shows the little importance that internal regulations have in the life of the university. Many university practices and procedures are applied more out of inertia than due to regulation. Also, several academics claimed that the regulations are violated from time to time, especially when there are internal elections for the governing bodies of the university.

CONCLUSIONS

This doctoral dissertation has focused on the relationship between power and knowledge, particularly in the university setting. The university itself is also an institution of knowledge and power. As a result, university leaders, in addition to the knowledge they possess, carry considerable power. Due to the characteristics of the university as an institution of knowledge and power, it has attracted the attention and interest of political power. The attention of the government and high-level politicians to the university can lead to different decision-making and actions. The way the

political power behaves with the university is also related to other external factors such as the level of democratization of the country, the culture of the society, the economic level, etc. But, the attention and interest of the political power towards the university can result in the development and strengthening of the university or in controlling and slackening the university.

Regarding the first research question of this thesis, "*What is the role of the knowledge-power relations in the low performance level of higher education in Albania?*", the hypothesis, expressed at the beginning of this thesis, is generally consistent with the findings of this research. The knowledge-power relations in Albania are mostly disproportionate and problematic in their way of functioning, preventing the university improvement and empowerment. The relationship between political power (government and high-level politicians) and knowledge is disproportionate because political power controls and influences the institution of knowledge that is the university, for its own interests. On the other hand, knowledge and the university have very little influence on political power.

Of the 31 interviewees participated in this doctoral thesis, none answered that the decision-makers in Albania have a strong relationship with knowledge, not even the decision-makers themselves. The current left-wing government has been in power since 2013, and is considered a government of reforms. In order to make reforms, it is needed to create and have deep knowledge, as the premise of making these reforms. The lack of appropriate knowledge leads to the failure of reforms. The reform of higher education, which culminated in the law no. 80/2015 "On Higher Education and Scientific Research in Higher Education Institutions in the Republic of Albania", did not have any significant effect, and, in some aspects, had negative effects. This happened for several reasons. The drafters of this reform, although they had knowledge of higher education in the country and in the world, did not take into account the context where the law would be applied; due to political interference in the draft law before approval in the parliament, the law itself, rather than improving, tries to control the university; the political power is not interested in the empowerment of the university as an autonomous unit because the empowerment of the university could produce a power of knowledge that can disturb the political power.

Moreover, knowledge is a factor of little importance in the university hierarchy and carrier, as claimed by the academics themselves, the students, and even the decision-makers interviewed. Thus, those who hold positions of power in public universities in Albania do not necessarily have

the strongest connections with academic or managerial knowledge. Therewith, university management turns out to be one of the weakest aspects in the public universities. The academic conjuncture within the university, and the political relationships and affiliations are the main factors that determines who come to power in the university. Despite the degrees and titles required by the law, which guarantee the possession of a certain knowledge, employment of academic staff in public universities is mainly done through nepotism and clientelistic connections, as widely acknowledged by the interviewees.

In the **knowledge-power-university** helix, each of the three poles exercises power and influence over the other poles, and is also subject to the power exerted on itself by the other poles. Thus, the dynamics of the exercise of power can be versatile and ubiquitous. Any entity exercising power cannot escape the exercise of power over itself by others. Of course, the amount or strength of the power exercise is not the same for all entities or subjects. This varies depending very much on the context and circumstances. The university, as an institution of knowledge and power, stands between the two. It interacts with the political power by experiencing their power and exercising its own power over them.

Regarding the second research question of this thesis, “*What are the main constraints and powers that dominate the university in Albania and impede its improvement?*”, the second hypothesis, expressed at the beginning of this thesis, does not answer the question fully and properly. Based on the findings of this research, the main constraints and powers that dominate the university in Albania, and impede its improvement, are the interests of the political power to keep the university under its own control, which are reflected in the clientelistic relations between the high-level politicians and the leaders of the public universities. Clientelistic/nepotistic relations continue further down the line between university leaders and lecturers, and between lecturers and students. The relationships between these actors, not based on meritocracy and professionalism, can be said to have been the main obstacle to the advancement of the university in Albania. Such building of these relations occurs in a top-down manner. Furthermore, the main dominant powers that hinder the advancement of the university in Albania are the university leaders, who are at the service of the interests of political power. This kind of relation has an impact on knowledge production and transfer activities in the university in several ways. In fact, the political power in Albania is not very interested in intervening in academic matters such as research topics, study programmes,

shaping of curricula, international relations of HEIs, etc. The political power affects knowledge in the university through nepotistic and non-meritocratic hiring, which has filled the university with individuals with limited academic skills and without much interest in science. It affects knowledge through clientelistic relations with the heads of public universities and faculties, which has led to the level of knowledge management in these institutions being very weak. The political power in Albania does not really interfere in the selection of research topics, but it influences the research by not funding it or by funding it based on clientelistic relations.

In the case of Albania, the political power pays attention to the university leadership, but the main goal is not to empower it, but to keep it under control. In this way, the political power puts the knowledge and power of the university under control to some extent. This control of the university by the political power is mainly done through university leaders, specifically through rectors, administrators, the board of administration, and deans. In fact, the control of the university by the political power is not done primarily for the purpose of orienting knowledge and research in the university according to the interests of politics, but rather it is done to neutralize the power of the university that can be uncontrollable by them.

In other words, the Albanian government is generally uninterested in the university as long as the mass that makes up the university (lecturers, researchers, students, academics) does not become a disturbance for the government. The political power in Albania does not pay a particular attention to the university – besides leadership – as long as the knowledge and power of the university are not a threat to the government. Due to the control of public universities by the government – mainly through the board of administration and the rector – the university rarely appears as a power that can disturb the political power.

Because the leaders of public universities are more connected, in one way or another, to political power than to knowledge and their mission, they not only do not "threaten" the political power but serve to neutralize the power that lecturers and students could exercise. This is proven by the way public university leaders are elected and appointed, which I have explained in the previous chapters of this thesis. Also, it is proven by their actions. The clearest example was the December 2018 student protest, which was the largest student protest in Albania since the December 1990 student protest that was followed by the fall of the communist regime. None of the rectors, administrators, and deans of public universities publicly supported the 2018 mass student protest although the

demands of the students were basic and necessary (most of them) for the university life. Apart from the widespread popular support, the only ones within the university who publicly supported the students in that protest were a small part of the academic staff. The leaders of the public universities aligned themselves with the interests of the political power that had supported them to reach those leadership positions in the university.

Administrators, rectors, and deans of public universities in Albania are almost all affiliated with a political party. Heads of departments are partly connected to political parties. Because the power of the head of the department within the university is small, the interest of political power in this position is also smaller. Academic staff are also connected with political power due to nepotistic and clientelistic employment in public universities. However, a good part of the academic staff has maintained a certain independence from the interests of the political parties in the country. Within the university, students are the most independent community from political power. Although youth forums of political parties are active in the university, their influence on students seems to be small. The exercise of the power that the students have, in the service of improving the university, is hindered mainly because of their disorganization, and the non-cooperation, even opposition, of the university leaders. In those cases when lecturers or students organize or protest, their power immediately turns into a "threat" for the political power which activates its own mechanisms within the university (board of administration, administrator, rector, dean) to neutralize that power. The power that originates from the university can also be called the power of knowledge and, in many cases, it can be disturbing or threatening for political power, especially for political power with authoritarian features. For this reason, the political power tends to control the power of knowledge through different ways such as legislation, university leaders, clientelistic employment at the university, etc.

On the other hand, the public universities in Albania have somewhat lost their power as institutions of knowledge. This has also happened with the help of the political power. Small budgets for the university; financial, administrative, and academic mismanagement; and non-meritocratic hiring are the main factors that have led to the decline of the power of the university as an institution of knowledge. Political power tries to control knowledge (the university) in order to, in this way, control the power of knowledge. The will that the political power may have to develop and empower the university collides with the interest to control the power of the university.

The relations between politicians/decision-makers and university leaders of public universities in Albania are ethically corrupt. As a result, public universities in Albania, in most cases, do not operate based on meritocracy, knowledge, and professionalism. These kinds of clientelistic and nepotistic relations, which also extend to the other actors in the university, have caused bad management of public universities and lack of accountability. On the other hand, there is also a significant group within the university that has managed to maintain its own autonomy. This mass of people is very large among students, smaller among lecturers, and very small among university leaders (mainly heads of departments). But due to the legal and administrative powerlessness in decision-making, this group of people, not captured by the interests of political power, is mostly silent and unorganized. However, there are cases when these autonomous groups exercise their power through activities such as student protests, protests of lecturers, their public opposition to government policies on higher education, etc.

Despite the fact that the conclusions presented in this chapter are about the knowledge-power-university relations, particularly in the case of Albania, I have to emphasise that it is not only or primarily about universities, but about the social environment. Also, it can be said that this logic power relations goes beyond Albania. Power, as a complex instrument, can be exercised by each individual, institution, entity, of course, in different proportions. The more important the individual, the institution, the entity, the greater the power it can exercise. The university, as an institution of knowledge, possesses a considerable amount of power that can exercise over society, government, politics, etc.

The political power has no interest in having in front of itself other powers that could oppose or challenge it. Also, a political power - mainly with authoritarian features - which has significant deficiencies in the possession of knowledge, does not prefer to develop and strengthen other institutions of knowledge which are not at its own service, but can be a concern for it. In short, the political power - with not very democratic features - has an interest in developing the university as long as it is under its own control and service. But a powerful and developed university has the risk of getting out of the control of the political power if the latter is not strong enough and authoritarian.

Regardless of the authoritarian or dictatorial features it may have, if the political power is very strong, then it can prioritize and develop the university without risking its own power because no

matter how powerful the university becomes, it does not endanger the political power. In this case, the political power uses the university in its own interest. This may be the case of other countries such as China or Singapore, but it is not the case of Albania. The interest of the political power in Albania is to keep the university not too empowered because the development and strengthening of the university can make the university gain enough power to get out of the control of the political power. Being outside the control and influence of the political power, the power of the university can turn into a problem or threat to the political power itself.

RECOMMENDATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS

Recommendations

In a thesis with complex notions such as knowledge, power, and university, in the context of Albania, giving recommendations that can be effective and applicable is not an easy task. In fact, if read carefully, suggestions and conclusions that prompt actions can be found throughout this thesis, mainly at the theoretical level. Nevertheless, I try in this chapter to give some concrete recommendations that can improve the relationship between knowledge and power in a university setting in Albania, and, consequently, improve and empower it.

- The primary objective of a higher education reform, and its spirit, cannot simply be to correct the abuses. Reform, at its core, is always the production of new utilization and uses, and abuses are almost never of major significance (Ortega y Gasset, 1930/2014). An institution can be comparable to a machine in that its whole design and operation must take into account the objective it is supposed to complete. Thereupon, the cornerstone of university reform should be a comprehensive approach and formulation of the institution's goals and principles. As a result, my first recommendation for the government of Albania is to design a comprehensive strategy for the development of higher education in Albania based on (a) social dialogue, (b) the evidence produced by evaluation research, and (c) with the involvement of international expertise such as EU expertise. Moreover, philosophers, scholars, and administrators were the ones who initiated university reform and modernization in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Ben-David, 1977). Such actors (internal and external) should also be involved in the reform of higher education in Albania.

- Globalization and the advancement of technology have caused higher education, professional and academic training to be in a constant struggle to keep up with the latest developments. This requires that for a country like Albania, which is not a vanguard of knowledge and technological developments, it is worthwhile to establish an independent higher education research centre that can produce background knowledge for continuous improvement of higher education, and its reforms.
- The establishment of an independent anti-plagiarism centre in Albania is necessary. Anti-plagiarism check is one of the main steps towards building normal relations on ethical grounds. Taking into account the large number of public denunciations of plagiarism of high-level politicians, decision-makers, university leaders, professors, etc., anti-plagiarism check is a decisive action to put higher education and science in Albania on the ethical track. Considering the current situation, the anti-plagiarism check needs to be centralized first. In order to create credibility as a process, the centralized anti-plagiarism check should be carried out from top-down. The anti-plagiarism system should be mandatory for all high-level decision-makers (MPs, ministers, etc.) with academic degrees and titles, rectors, deans, heads of departments, and university lecturers. If the system detects plagiarism, the person who committed it should face legal and administrative consequences. I am aware that this process would certainly be difficult and encounter much resistance but it would ensure a more fair and sincere relation between power and knowledge.
- The cooperation of HEIs in Albania with international actors and institutions, which are obviously more developed, would contribute to the improvement of the management of HEIs, the quality of education, the management of projects in Albanian universities. For this, I find it valuable and useful that Albanian universities build partnerships with European universities, beyond the short-term Erasmus+ exchanges. Also, a significant strengthening of the involvement of Albanian leaders of HE in the work of the European University Association (EUA) it would be very beneficial.
- Increasing the funding for universities is another important action that higher education in Albania needs. This can be done through the creation of a small higher education development fund that financially supports individuals, institutions, organizations, etc., that initiate modernizing innovations in higher education institutions, and support the

emergence of change agents. But, increased funding should be accompanied by financial autonomy as well. Accountability is a crucial facilitator of good governance and management in the setting of complex systems.

This research was mainly focused on the post-communist period in Albania. However, due to the unique nature of the Albanian state during the 20th century, until the 1990s, the study of the relationship between power, knowledge, and the university in communist and pre-communist Albania remains a research task for the immediate future.

Limitations and Ethical Implications

Like any other research, this doctoral study has its own *limitations* as well. This research is limited in time, taking into account the state of the university in Albania and its relations with knowledge and power in the post-communist period. Another limitation is the analysis of only public universities in Albania. The inclusion of private universities in the study could expand and complicate the research scope because private universities in Albania, in many aspects, face different problems compared to public ones. Although public universities occupy about 70% of the higher education market in the country, the non-inclusion of private universities in the study remains a limitation to mention. Another limitation of this thesis is the lack of a comparative perspective. Since I did my doctoral studies in Hungary, a comparative approach between Albania and Hungary, regarding the relations between knowledge, power, and the university, could make the research more valuable.

The total number of interviewees of 31 individuals can also be considered a limitation. A larger number of interviewees, especially students, could present a more complete picture of the state of the university in Albania. However, I must mention that ensuring and interviewing the proper individuals in person has been of particular difficulty because the interviews were conducted during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. During that period, universities in Albania carried out all their activities, including teaching, in online mode. The research also has literature limits. While international literature on university, knowledge and power exists, the literature on the relationship of these three concepts in the Albanian context is lacking. Although in my judgment the philosophical approach of the theory used in such a research topic is almost necessary, for some, this approach may seem too abstract to explain the concrete malfunctions and problems of a

system. I strongly believe that the power of philosophical thought is that it makes you think, reflect, and those reflections can be converted into concrete ideas and actions. However, since this is not always easy to do, it can be considered as a limitation of this work.

Regarding the *ethical implications*, all the persons interviewed for this research were adults (over 18 years of age) at the time when the interviews were conducted. All interviews were conducted by me. Each interviewee was briefly informed about this research and invited for an interview. After the brief briefing, each of the interviewees gave their written consent for conducting the interview. All interviews were conducted in Albanian language because it is the native language of all interviewees, as well as my native language. I have no family ties or financial interest with any of the individuals interviewed by me (decision-makers, university leaders, lecturers, researchers, students). Also, I have no such relationship with any of the persons mentioned in this thesis. Consequently, I have no conflict of interest with any of them.

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