



Academic Research and Educational Policies under the Neoliberal Umbrella: The Case of Albania

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Abstract

The global ascendancy of neoliberal doctrine has reconfigured higher education, increasingly framing it as a market where universities must align their qualifications with market demands. This paradigm privileges applied sciences, technology, and medicine, while systematically devaluing the social sciences and humanities. This paper investigates this phenomenon through a case study of Albania, a post-socialist country navigating a complex transition. We argue that the confluence of market-driven educational policies and insufficient public investment creates a precarious environment for certain academic disciplines and stifles scientific research, particularly in developing nations or those with hybrid political regimes. This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining a national survey of 800 university students with a thematic analysis of policy documents and national statistics. The findings reveal that student choices are overwhelmingly dictated by perceived employment prospects, leading to a crisis in enrollment for humanities and social science programs. Concurrently, state funding for scientific research is critically low, undermining the academic community's capacity for knowledge production and innovation. The Albanian case demonstrates how neoliberal pressures, exacerbated by limited state capacity and a lack of alternative funding sources, endanger the sustainability of essential academic fields and the broader public-good mission of higher education. The study contributes to the international discourse on academic capitalism by providing empirical evidence from a peripheral, transitional context, highlighting the acute vulnerabilities faced by non-market-oriented disciplines when marketization is compounded by state and market failure.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, Higher Education Policy, Academic Capitalism, Albania, Social Sciences, Humanities, Scientific Research Funding

1. Introduction

Globalization has profoundly reshaped the landscape of higher education, intensifying competition and demanding that universities adapt to a new economic reality. A central feature of this transformation has been the infusion of neoliberal ideology, which prioritizes market logic in the governance and orientation of academic institutions (Torres, 2013; Harvey, 2005). This shift has led to the massification and privatization of higher education, the introduction of corporate management practices, and the conceptualization of education as a commodity within an "educational market" (Müller & Gangl, 2003). Consequently, universities are increasingly pressured to align their curricula and research agendas with immediate market needs, a trend that has significant implications for the structure and purpose of academic life.

Within this neoliberal framework, students are often positioned as "entrepreneurs of the self" (Christiaens, 2019), making educational choices based on a calculated investment in their "human capital." The decision of what to study is less an act of intellectual curiosity and more a strategic choice aimed at maximizing future earnings. This logic has precipitated a re-stratification of academic disciplines (Gumport, 2000). Fields with direct application in the market—such as information technology, engineering, and medicine—have seen their value and funding increase. Conversely, the social sciences and humanities, whose contributions are less easily commodified, face systemic devaluation, declining enrollments, and reduced institutional support (Slaughter, 1998; Rhoades, 1988).

This paper examines these dynamics within the specific context of Albania. As a post-socialist nation undergoing a prolonged political and economic transition, Albania presents a compelling case for understanding how neoliberal policies are implemented and experienced in a "hybrid regime" or developing country context. The central argument is that the combination of market-oriented policies and a chronic lack of public investment places certain study programs and the broader scientific research ecosystem at significant risk. The state's limited capacity to provide alternative funding streams exacerbates the pressures of marketization, threatening the very survival of disciplines essential for critical thinking, societal understanding, and democratic citizenship.

This study addresses two primary research questions:

1. How does the market-driven orientation of students in Albania affect enrollment in, and the institutional viability of, academic programs in the social sciences and humanities?
2. What is the impact of insufficient state funding for scientific research on the academic community and knowledge production in a context where alternative, private-sector funding is scarce?

By analyzing enrollment data, student survey responses, and national policies, this paper aims to provide a nuanced, evidence-based account of the challenges facing Albanian higher education. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to the broader international literature on academic capitalism. While much research confirms the deleterious effects of neoliberalism, this study articulates the specific mechanisms through which these pressures are intensified in a peripheral European nation, thereby offering insights relevant to other countries in similar transitional stages where marketization is not supported by robust state or private sector investment.

2. Literature Review: Neoliberalism and the University

The influence of neoliberalism on higher education has been a subject of intense scholarly debate for several decades. As a dominant ideology, neoliberalism champions the free market as the most efficient mechanism for allocating resources and organizing social life. When applied to education, this logic promotes privatization, commercialization, and corporatization as primary drivers of reform (Kezar, 2004). This section reviews the theoretical foundations of this critique and situates the Albanian case within contemporary international scholarship, focusing on the concepts of academic capitalism, the role of the market as a regulator, and the specific manifestations of these trends in post-socialist contexts.

2.1 The Rise of Academic Capitalism

The foundational work of Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) conceptualized the shift towards market logic in universities as "academic capitalism." This concept describes how universities and academics increasingly engage in market-like behaviors to generate external revenue, moving beyond traditional state funding. This includes patenting research, forging industry partnerships, and tailoring academic programs to corporate needs. While not always entailing outright privatization, academic capitalism redefines the "public space" of the university, pushing it to seek alternative revenue streams and prioritize activities with commercial potential (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004, p. 306). Recent scholarship has expanded this concept, showing how academic capitalism has become embedded in institutional performance metrics, academic hiring and promotion, and national innovation policies globally (Cantwell & Kauppinen, 2014).

A key consequence of this shift is the pressure on academics to become entrepreneurial, securing external grants and producing commercially viable knowledge (Cannella & Koro-Ljungberg, 2017). This environment inherently favors disciplines with direct links to industry, such as STEM fields, while marginalizing those whose value is not easily quantifiable in monetary terms. As Giroux (2014) argues, professional autonomy is eroded as researchers are compelled to align their work with corporate interests, leading to a decline in critical, publicly-oriented scholarship. This is particularly acute in contexts where state funding for basic research is withdrawn, forcing academics to depend on private funding, which often comes with specific commercial expectations. This creates a "new funding landscape"

where the logic of competitive, project-based funding supplants stable institutional support, further intensifying inter-disciplinary competition and precarity.

2.2 The Market as a Flawed Regulator for Education

Proponents of market-based reforms argue that aligning education with market needs enhances efficiency and ensures graduates possess relevant skills. However, critics contend that the market is an inherently flawed and volatile mechanism for guiding educational priorities (Green, 1997; Currie, 2004). As Boudon (1992) explained, market signals can create herd behavior, where a surge of students enters a temporarily high-demand field, leading to an eventual oversupply of graduates and market saturation. This "boom-and-bust" cycle is ill-suited to the long-term planning required for university education and curriculum development.

Furthermore, an exclusive focus on market demand ignores the broader needs of society. Many professions essential for public welfare, such as social work, teaching, and public administration, may not be highly lucrative but are vital for social cohesion and development. Zemsky (2003) warns that when market interests dominate universities, their capacity to serve as "venues for the testing of new ideas and the agendas for public action" is significantly diminished. The state, therefore, has a crucial role in protecting and subsidizing programs that serve a public good but may not be profitable. The World Declaration on Higher Education reinforces this, stating that "Public support for higher education and research remains essential to ensure a balanced achievement of educational and social missions" (UNESCO, 1998). The danger, as highlighted by recent scholarship, is that a relentless focus on employability metrics can lead to a narrowing of the curriculum and a neglect of the formative, civic-oriented goals of higher education.

2.3 Neoliberalism in Post-Socialist and Peripheral Contexts

While much of the literature focuses on Western Europe and North America, a growing body of work examines the effects of neoliberal reforms in post-socialist and peripheral economies (Jones & Sellar, 2019). In these contexts, the transition to a market-based system is often rapid and occurs without the robust institutional frameworks or historical traditions of university autonomy found elsewhere. In countries like Albania, the legacy of a centralized state system, combined with the pressures of European integration and global market forces, creates a unique set of challenges (Lami & Mile, 2013).

In such settings, the state's role is often contradictory. On one hand, it actively promotes marketization through legislation; on the other, its limited fiscal capacity means it cannot provide the substantial public investment needed to cushion the negative effects of these reforms (Shattock, 2019). The lack of a mature private sector willing or able to fund research and development further exacerbates the problem. This creates a "double jeopardy" for universities: they are pushed to act like market entities but lack access to the diverse funding streams (e.g., large corporate R&D

budgets, philanthropic endowments) available to their counterparts in more developed economies. The result, as argued by Petrović (2020) in a study of the Western Balkans, is a particularly stark and damaging form of academic capitalism, where the humanities and social sciences are left in an exceptionally vulnerable position, not merely marginalized but facing existential threats. This paper builds on this line of inquiry, arguing that the Albanian case exemplifies a scenario where market failure is compounded by state failure, leading to an accelerated erosion of academic capacity.

3. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, utilizing a case study approach focused on Albania. A sequential explanatory design was adopted, where quantitative data was first collected and analyzed to identify broad trends in student attitudes and enrollment, followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data from policy documents and national statistics to help explain and contextualize these findings. This approach allows for the triangulation of data, providing a comprehensive and multi-faceted understanding of the research problem.

3.1 Research Design: Case Study Approach

Albania was selected as a case study for its unique position as a post-socialist country in Europe undergoing rapid socio-economic transformation. Its higher education system has been subject to significant liberalization and market-oriented reforms over the past two decades, particularly following the enactment of Law No. 80/2015 "On Higher Education and Scientific Research." This makes it a highly relevant site for investigating the impacts of neoliberal policies in a context of limited state capacity and a developing private sector. The case study approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the complex interactions between global policy trends and local contextual factors.

3.2 Quantitative Component: Student Survey

To capture student perspectives on program selection, career aspirations, and the academic environment, a national survey was conducted between November and December 2022. The data was collected using the Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) technique via the Google Forms platform.

Sampling and Participants: The target population for the survey was undergraduate students in their second and third years of study at Albanian universities. This cohort was selected because they had already committed to a field of study and had sufficient university experience to reflect on their choices and the academic environment. A multi-stage sampling procedure was employed. First, 22 universities (both public and private) were purposively selected from major urban centers (Tirana, Durres, Elbasan, Shkoder, Vlore, Korce, Gjirokaster) to ensure geographical and institutional diversity. Second, within these universities, a combination of stratified and convenience sampling was used. The research team

collaborated with university administrators and lecturers to distribute the survey link to students in various faculties, aiming for a balanced representation across major disciplinary areas (e.g., social sciences, humanities, STEM, business, medicine). Participation was voluntary and conditional on meeting two inclusion criteria: (i) being enrolled in a first-cycle (Bachelor) program, and (ii) being in the second or third year of study. A total of 800 valid questionnaires were completed, providing a robust sample for descriptive and inferential analysis.

Instrument: The survey instrument was designed by a team of academics from the Mediterranean University of Albania and reviewed for content validity by external experts. It consisted of three sections: (1) demographic information (age, gender, area of residence, university type); (2) factors influencing the choice of study program, using 5-point Likert-scale questions to rate the importance of factors like personal interest, family influence, and employment prospects; and (3) perceptions of the labor market and the research environment at their university, including questions on involvement in academic research and the visibility of faculty research in teaching. A pilot test was conducted with 30 students to ensure the clarity, reliability, and validity of the questions before full-scale deployment.

Data Analysis: The quantitative data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, Version 25.0). The analysis focused primarily on descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means) to identify key trends in student attitudes and choices. Data was disaggregated by field of study to draw comparisons between students in market-oriented disciplines and those in the social sciences and humanities, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the pressures affecting different academic areas.

3.3 Qualitative Component: Document Analysis

The qualitative component involved the analysis of secondary data sources to contextualize the survey findings within the broader national landscape of higher education policy and scientific research. This phase aimed to provide the macro-level policy and statistical backdrop for the micro-level student perceptions gathered through the survey.

Data Sources: A range of official and public documents were collected and analyzed. These included: (1) legislative and policy documents, most notably Law No. 80/2015 "On Higher Education and Scientific Research in the Republic of Albania" and subsequent ministerial decrees; (2) official statistical data on student enrollment by institution and field of study from the Albanian Institute of Statistics (INSTAT) and Open Data Albania for the period 2016–2021; (3) reports from national agencies such as the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (ASCAL) on program accreditation and closures; and (4) reports on labor market demand and salary trends from institutions such as the Employment Promotion Project Center (EPPC).

Analytical Approach: A thematic content analysis was performed on the collected texts. The analysis followed a structured process: first, documents were systematically reviewed to identify recurring concepts and keywords related to the research questions (e.g., "market needs," "priority programs," "research funding," "employability"). Second, these concepts were organized into broader themes, such as the marketization of higher education, government funding priorities, the status of different academic disciplines, and the state of scientific research. This process involved systematically coding the documents to extract relevant information and patterns, which were then used to build a narrative explaining the policy context and its consequences, providing a robust framework for interpreting the survey data.

4. Results

This section presents the findings from the analysis of national statistics and the student survey. The results are organized to first illustrate the macro-level trends in student enrollment and the structure of the Albanian higher education sector, followed by a micro-level analysis of student motivations and perceptions of the academic environment.

4.1 National Trends in Higher Education Enrollment

The liberalization of higher education in Albania has led to a significant increase in the number of institutions, with 42 public and 27 non-public Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) operating as of 2023 (ASCAL, 2023). Despite this expansion, overall student enrollment has seen a decline. Between 2016 and 2021, total registrations in higher education decreased by 12%. This trend was driven by a substantial 19% drop in public university enrollments, while private institutions saw a 20% increase over the same period, indicating a significant shift in the educational landscape (Table 1).

Table 1: The number of students enrolled in public and private universities in the years 2016-2021

Education	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	Change
Public	116,896	108,516	113,277	104,802	97,380	94,487	-19%
Non-public	24,514	23,102	25,766	25,462	26,417	29,393	20%
Total	141,410	131,618	139,043	130,264	123,797	123,880	-12%

Source: Open Data Albania, 2022

The decline in overall enrollment is attributed to two primary factors: demographic change, with a decreasing number of high school graduates (Table 2 shows a drop from 120,062 in 2017 to 103,457 in 2021), and a significant "brain drain," with a large number of Albanian students choosing to study abroad. Albania ranks first in the region for students studying abroad, with 18,181 students reported in 2021 (INSTAT, 2021).

Table 2: Number of students enrolled in secondary school 2017–2021

2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
120,062	116,646	109,533	107,989	103,457

Source: INSTAT, 2022

Enrollment trends across different public universities reveal significant disparities (Table 3). While some universities, particularly those in major urban centers with applied profiles like "Aleksandër Moisiu" University of Durrës (+123%) and the Polytechnic University (+7%), have grown, regional universities with a traditional focus on humanities and education have suffered dramatic declines. For instance, the University of Shkodra (-53%), the Agricultural University of Tirana (-48%), and the University of Elbasan (-33%) have seen their student populations shrink considerably. This data points to a centralization of higher education and a crisis for regional institutions.

Table 3: Registered Students by Public Universities, 2016–2021

Institutions	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	Trend
University "Luigj Gurakuqi" of Shkodra	7,927	6,149	8,245	6,616	3,974	3,723	-53%
Agriculture University of Tirana	10,848	9,537	8,916	7,608	6,188	5,633	-48%
University "Aleksandër Xhuvani" of Elbasan	13,112	11,748	11,420	9,448	8,490	8,774	-33%
University "Fan S.Noli" of Korçë	4,476	4,330	4,261	3,557	3,297	3,383	-24%
Tirana University	28,394	26,785	29,460	28,550	26,309	23,140	-19%
University of Medicine	7,427	7,347	7,117	6,422	6,684	6,647	-11%
Polytechnic University	14,349	14,483	14,566	14,983	14,316	15,285	7%
University "Aleksandër Moisiu" of Durrës	8,801	17,159	19,278	18,585	19,495	19,654	123%

Note: Table abbreviated for brevity. Source: INSTAT, 2022

4.2 The Influence of the Labor Market on Student Choice

Official data on student enrollments by field of study confirms a strong alignment with perceived labor market demands. As shown in Table 4, the most popular fields are "business, administration and law," followed by "engineering, production and construction," and "health and well-being." Conversely, fields such as "arts and humanities," "agriculture, forestry, fishing and veterinary," and "services" have the lowest and, in some cases, declining enrollments.

Table 4: Students in Higher Education by Field of Education, 2018-2021

Field of Education	2018	2019	2020	2021
Education	11,324	10,211	9,650	9,548
Arts and Humanities	4,481	4,168	4,013	4,064
Social sciences, journalism and information	14,111	12,790	12,128	12,308
Business, administration and law	38,986	36,258	34,606	34,714
Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics	5,324	4,879	4,548	4,554
Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)	5,488	5,330	5,389	5,744
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	22,238	21,950	20,958	21,118
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary	4,422	3,839	3,313	3,074
Health and welfare	16,838	15,961	15,191	15,310
Services	5,831	4,878	4,001	3,446

Source: INSTAT, 2018-2021

Our survey of 800 students provides direct evidence of this market-driven decision-making. A significant majority of respondents (63%, $n=504$) affirmed that "employment perspective" was a determining factor in their choice of study program. When asked to rate the importance of various factors on a 5-point Likert scale, "Employment perspective" received the highest mean score ($M=4.58$, $SD=0.67$), ranking significantly higher than "personal interest in the subject" ($M=3.89$, $SD=0.91$), "family influence" ($M=2.45$, $SD=1.12$), or "high school performance" ($M=3.12$, $SD=1.05$). This confirms that students are acting as rational economic agents, prioritizing fields with clear and lucrative career paths.

The direct consequence of these trends is a severe enrollment crisis for programs in the humanities and social sciences. According to an analysis by the "Civic Attitude" organization, 41 study programs nationwide were at risk of closure in 2022 due to failing to meet the minimum legal requirement of 10 registered students. The most affected universities are regional ones: Gjirokastra (13 programs at risk), Elbasan (12), and Shkodra (12). The programs facing closure are overwhelmingly in fields such as mathematics, physics, philosophy, political science, teaching, anthropology, and foreign languages. A further 22 programs have already been closed in non-public HEIs for the same reason.

The survey data reveals a high level of dissatisfaction among students currently enrolled in these vulnerable fields. When asked, "If you were given the opportunity again, would you choose the same branch you currently have?", only 40% answered

"yes completely." A notable 33% were ambivalent ("somewhat yes and no"). Crucially, disaggregation of this data revealed that approximately 86% of the ambivalent or negative responses came from students in the humanities and social sciences. Furthermore, when asked about continuing to a Master's degree in the same field, a clear tendency to change disciplines emerged from this same group, citing poor job prospects and low salaries as the primary reasons.

4.3 The State of Scientific Research: Funding and Perception

The situation for scientific research in Albania is equally precarious. Albania has one of the lowest numbers of researchers in the region, with only 262 researchers per 1 million inhabitants, compared to 2,030 in Serbia and a regional average that is significantly higher. Despite this small academic community (estimated at around 6,000 lecturers and researchers), funding is critically inadequate.

In 2021, the national fund for scientific research was a mere 1.5 million USD. This translates to less than 20 USD per researcher per year. The 2022 budget allocated approximately 9 million USD, but after accounting for international obligations, the effective fund for domestic research was around 5-5.5 million USD. This amounts to roughly 80 USD per researcher per year, a figure that is 7-9 times lower than that of neighboring countries like Serbia or Slovenia (as a percentage of GDP). Furthermore, R&D spending by the business sector is negligible at 0.2% of GDP, with almost no investment directed towards the social sciences and humanities.

This lack of funding has a direct impact on the academic environment, as perceived by students. Our survey revealed a profound disconnect between students and the research activities of their lecturers. The findings were stark:

- When asked, "How many of you have been involved in research projects with a lecturer?", 97% of students (n=776) stated they had never heard of such a practice at their university.
- When asked, "How much are the scientific publications of the pedagogues reflected in the syllabus?", 86% (n=688) responded "no."
- When asked, "How many of the lecturers give examples from their research work during the lecture?", over 79% (n=632) responded "no."

These findings suggest that the academic community is largely confined to teaching, with minimal capacity for knowledge production. The lack of research activity not only hampers academic career development but also impoverishes the educational experience for students.

5. Discussion

The results presented above paint a stark picture of a higher education system under severe strain from neoliberal pressures, exacerbated by the specific socio-economic conditions of Albania. This section interprets these findings by linking them to the

theoretical framework of academic capitalism and discussing the unique implications of the Albanian case, arguing that it represents an acute example of marketization compounded by state and market failure.

5.1 Market Logic as the De Facto Policy Driver

The data unequivocally demonstrates that the Albanian higher education landscape is shaped by market logic. The strong correlation between high-demand, high-salary professions and student enrollment patterns in fields like business, IT, and engineering is a clear manifestation of students behaving as "entrepreneurial subjects" (Christiaens, 2019). Their choices are not being made in a vacuum; they are rational responses to a system that signals which forms of knowledge are valuable. This confirms the central tenet of academic capitalism: the university is increasingly seen as an engine for economic growth and a producer of human capital for the labor market (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

The crisis facing the humanities and social sciences is a direct and predictable outcome of this market-driven re-stratification (Gumport, 2000). These disciplines, which are fundamental for developing critical thinking, civic engagement, and cultural understanding, are rendered "uneconomical" in a system that measures value primarily through immediate employability and salary potential. The high levels of student dissatisfaction within these fields and their desire to switch to more "practical" disciplines at the Master's level indicate that the neoliberal discourse has been deeply internalized by the student body itself. They are not merely responding to external pressures but have adopted the market-based calculus as their own, a testament to the ideological power of neoliberalism in shaping individual aspirations.

5.2 The Failure of State Intervention

The Albanian government has not been entirely passive. Recognizing the risk to certain disciplines, the Ministry of Education, through Law No. 80/2015 and subsequent policies, introduced scholarships and fee waivers for students in "national priority" programs, many of which are in the humanities and natural sciences. However, as the enrollment data from 2017-2021 shows, these interventions have failed to reverse the trend. This failure can be understood through two lenses.

First, the financial incentives are likely insufficient to outweigh the perceived long-term economic disadvantages of pursuing a career in these fields. As research by Mokyr, Vickers, and Ziebarth (2015) suggests, future employment prospects and salary potential are far more powerful motivators than temporary tuition support. The government's policy, while well-intentioned, fails to address the structural problem: the market's devaluation of these professions. Second, this highlights a core contradiction in post-socialist states like Albania. The government simultaneously promotes a market-oriented ideology while attempting to apply small-scale corrective measures. This creates policy incoherence, where the overarching neoliberal framework undermines targeted state support, rendering it ineffective.

The state is essentially trying to patch the holes in a system it is actively helping to create, a strategy that is destined to fail.

5.3 The Compounding Crisis of Research and Brain Drain

The critically low level of funding for scientific research adds another layer to the crisis. At just 80 USD per researcher per year, the state's investment is symbolic at best. This reality transforms academic capitalism in Albania from a system of pursuing market opportunities (as seen in developed economies) to a struggle for basic survival. Without public funds for basic research, and with a private sector that does not invest in R&D, academics are left with few, if any, resources. This "non-existent funding" means the potential of the academic community is largely untapped, reducing academics to mere transmitters of existing knowledge rather than producers of new knowledge.

The student survey data on the invisibility of research in the classroom is a damning indictment of this system. It suggests a cycle of decline: lack of funding prevents research, which in turn diminishes the quality of teaching and the intellectual vitality of the university, making it less attractive to prospective students and scholars. This environment is a powerful push factor for "brain drain." Talented Albanian scholars and graduates who study abroad see no viable career path at home, particularly in research-intensive fields. The UNDP estimate that 40% of Albanians with a doctorate reside abroad is a stark indicator of this loss of intellectual capital, which further weakens the country's capacity for innovation and development. The lack of a vibrant research culture not only affects current students but also ensures that the next generation of academics is either lost to other countries or never cultivated in the first place.

5.4 The Unique Contribution of the Albanian Case: Academic Capitalism in a Context of State and Market Failure

While the challenges described are not unique to Albania, this case study's primary contribution is its illustration of how these pressures are amplified in a peripheral, post-socialist context. Unlike in wealthier nations where universities can draw on large endowments, robust corporate partnerships, or substantial competitive research grants, Albanian HEIs lack these alternative funding sources. The state's fiscal weakness means it cannot play the compensatory role that some European states do to protect the public good aspect of education (Shattock, 2019). Therefore, the Albanian case provides a crucial empirical example of what happens when neoliberal reforms are implemented in a context of low state capacity and an underdeveloped private sector.

This moves the discussion beyond simply "confirming the thesis" that neoliberalism is harmful. Instead, it demonstrates a specific, intensified mechanism of decline. The "double jeopardy" faced by Albanian universities—being pushed by the state to act as market entities while being deprived of both state funding and a viable market to

engage with—creates a uniquely precarious situation. This is not the academic capitalism of Slaughter and Rhoades (2004), characterized by a dynamic, if problematic, pursuit of new revenue. It is a hollowed-out version, where the rhetoric of the market is adopted without the material resources to support it. The result is a rapid and potentially irreversible erosion of vital academic fields, driven by the synergistic failure of both the state and the market.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to examine the impact of neoliberal policies on higher education and scientific research in Albania. The findings confirm that the pervasive influence of market logic, coupled with chronic underfunding by the state, has created a deeply stratified and precarious academic environment. Student choices are overwhelmingly driven by perceived labor market outcomes, leading to a severe enrollment crisis in the humanities and social sciences. These programs, vital for the cultivation of a critical and informed citizenry, are at risk of extinction in many regional universities. Simultaneously, scientific research is crippled by a near-total lack of public and private investment, which stifles innovation, degrades the quality of education, and fuels a debilitating brain drain.

The Albanian government's attempts to mitigate these effects through targeted scholarships have proven insufficient, highlighting the difficulty of applying piecemeal solutions within a dominant neoliberal framework. The case of Albania serves as a stark warning about the consequences of marketizing higher education in developing or transitional countries that lack the robust economic and institutional buffers present in more developed nations. In such contexts, academic capitalism manifests not as a dynamic search for new revenue, but as a grim struggle for survival that threatens the very mission of the university as a public good.

6.1 Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

This study, while providing a comprehensive overview, has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, as a single case study, its findings may not be generalizable to all post-socialist or developing countries, though they offer valuable comparative insights into the mechanisms of policy implementation in peripheral contexts. Second, the student survey, while robust in sample size, relies on self-reported data which may be subject to social desirability bias. The sampling method also included an element of convenience, which could limit the statistical representativeness of the findings despite efforts to ensure diversity. Third, the study focuses primarily on the institutional and student perspective; it does not include in-depth qualitative interviews with academics and policymakers, which could provide a more nuanced understanding of their experiences, agency, and decision-making processes within this constrained environment.

These limitations point to several important avenues for future research. First, comparative studies across the Western Balkans could explore whether similar

patterns of disciplinary decline and research underfunding exist throughout the region, potentially identifying moderating factors in different national contexts. Second, longitudinal research is needed to track the career trajectories of graduates from both market-oriented and devalued disciplines to empirically assess their long-term employment outcomes and social contributions, moving beyond short-term market signals. Finally, future studies should incorporate the voices of academics through qualitative interviews to explore their strategies of resistance, adaptation, and survival. Understanding how faculty navigate these pressures is crucial for developing more effective and context-sensitive policies to safeguard the future of higher education in Albania and beyond.

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