From Legal Approximation to Institutional Change in Albanian Higher Education during EU Accession

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Abstract

This article examines the consequences of the provisional closure of Albania's EU negotiating Chapters 25 and 26 for the higher education and research and how institutional change can subsequently be evaluated. It is based on a comparative analysis of the European Commission's Albania 2025 Report and the July 2026 EU common positions, interpreted alongside European higher education standards and institutional theory. Documents are selected based on the authority of the source, their relevance to the subject of the study, and the period they cover in relation to the key phase of the negotiations. The analysis distinguishes between confirmed progress, expectations regarding implementation, and the mechanisms provided for its monitoring. Documentary analysis shows that Albania's progress in accession negotiations is accompanied by persistent demands for implementation, yet it does not demonstrate uniform changes within universities. On this basis, the article proposes four areas for assessment: accountable governance, quality assurance, the recognition of qualifications and inclusive mobility, and the administration of scientific research. For each area, the study identifies documentary sources and indicators that could assist future research in distinguishing between formal harmonisation, implementation within institutional activities, and the consolidation of academic practices. The article's contribution lies in the development of a practical framework that links accession commitments to university-level decision-making, while clarifying the necessary evidence and the limitations that must be considered when evaluating institutional Europeanisation.

Keywords: ***Europeanisation; higher education; Albania; EU accession; institutional change; quality assurance***

1. Introduction

On 14 July 2026, the EU–Albania Accession Conference provisionally closed negotiations on Chapters 25, Science and Research, and 26, Education and Culture, together with Chapter 30, External Relations. This was a negotiating milestone, subject to the principle that individual chapter agreements remain provisional until an overall agreement is reached (Council of the European Union, 2026). For higher education, this development provides an opportunity to examine how progress between governments relates to changes inside universities.

The two developments have different focuses. Accession negotiations assess a country's preparedness and

commitments within a defined process. University change concerns decisions about teaching, recruitment, research support, recognition and the allocation of resources. A national assessment can acknowledge advances without establishing how consistently every institution implements them. Equally, an institution can develop strong international practices before the country reaches a particular negotiating milestone. Treating these processes as interchangeable would weaken both legal analysis and educational evaluation.

This article asks: what does the provisional closure of Chapters 25 and 26 establish about the Europeanisation of Albanian higher education, and how should subsequent institutional change be assessed? It advances the proposition that closure is best understood as a shift in the focus of evaluation. Attention should increasingly move towards evidence that approved commitments operate through university decisions and survive beyond individual projects, leadership terms and external reporting cycles. This is an interpretive proposition to be examined, rather than an assertion that every Albanian university currently exhibits the same implementation problems.

The scope of the article covers higher education governance and university research. It does not attempt to evaluate every policy area within the two chapters, which extend beyond universities. Nor does it attempt to measure the causal effect of closure, as the short period between July and October 2026 could not support a credible assessment of durable outcomes. Instead, it analyses the significance of this negotiating milestone through documentary evidence and develops a prospective framework for future research into its institutional consequences.

The article's contribution is specific: it connects national accession documents to questions that university administrators, academic bodies and researchers can investigate through identifiable records. This connection matters because a framework based solely on the adoption of legislation may overlook its implementation, while one based only on international activity may fail to establish whether that activity changes routine institutional practices. Both forms of evidence are relevant, but they address different questions.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

2.1 Europeanisation and institutional mediation

Börzel and Risse (2000) explain domestic change through the interaction between European adaptation pressures and the institutions and actors that mediate them. Their distinction between resource redistribution and learning helps explain why similar external expectations can lead to different responses. They also caution against assuming that Europeanisation necessarily produces uniform institutional outcomes. This article uses their approach as an analytical starting point, rather than as empirical evidence of specific conditions in Albania.

Accession conditionality adds a distinct explanation of adaptation. Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2020) identify the credibility of EU incentives as a central condition of Europeanisation, while stressing the need to specify domestic circumstances. For this study, conditionality explains why national authorities may prioritise demonstrable compliance. It does not, by itself, explain whether university staff acquire the authority, time and resources needed to sustain new practices. The analysis therefore combines attention to external incentives with attention to organisational mediation.

For the purposes of this study, Europeanisation refers to the incorporation of European expectations into the rules, routines and decisions that shape the operation of higher education. European integration, by contrast, refers more narrowly to participation in European institutional and policy arrangements, including the accession process. This distinction is important for the analysis. Membership in a network, adoption of an action plan or participation in a programme demonstrates a connection with European structures. Assessing Europeanisation also requires examining what changes within the participating organisation.

The article distinguishes between three levels. Legal alignment concerns the existence and scope of rules and formal commitments. Organisational implementation concerns assigned responsibilities, available resources and working procedures. Durable institutional change concerns the consistent application of these arrangements and their effects on academic activity. These levels do not necessarily follow an automatic sequence. An established practice may precede its formal recognition in legislation; a new rule may remain poorly implemented; and a functioning procedure may later deteriorate if the resources supporting it are no longer available.

The distinction also helps avoid errors in evaluation. A well-written regulation is relevant to legal assessment, but it does not establish whether recognition decisions are made in a timely manner. An international cooperation agreement demonstrates an institutional relationship, but it does not show whether students can access the opportunities it provides. Similarly, a research strategy sets out priorities, but it does not establish whether academics receive support when preparing a research proposal. Evaluation requires evidence appropriate to the claim under examination.

Institutional theory also clarifies why implementation cannot be inferred from formal adoption. Bromley and Powell (2012) distinguish policy–practice decoupling, where an organisation adopts policies that are weakly implemented, from means–ends decoupling, where activities are implemented but their contribution to substantive goals remains uncertain. Applied to higher education, these distinctions separate an unused quality assurance procedure from a functioning evaluation system whose findings have little influence on learning. They justify examining both whether procedures operate and whether the resulting decisions address academic purposes. Decoupling is used here as a possible explanatory mechanism, not as a diagnosis established for Albanian universities.

2.2 European arrangements and national responsibility

Albania's participation in European higher education began well before the recent negotiating milestone. The European Higher Education Area country profile records that Albania joined in 2003 (European Higher Education Area [EHEA], n.d.). This longer history means that reforms observed after July 2026 cannot automatically be attributed to the provisional closure of the negotiating chapters. Earlier cooperation and national decisions may also continue to shape current university practices.

National legal guarantees are another part of that history. Eurydice's official country overview identifies constitutional protection for higher education autonomy and legal guarantees concerning academic, financial and research freedom (European Education and Culture Executive Agency [EACEA], 2025). These guarantees provide an essential starting point for the analysis, but their formal recognition does not necessarily mean that they are fully implemented in practice. This article does not examine every relevant provision of Albanian legislation or assume that formal guarantees are either fully effective or ineffective.

A university may have legal authority to make decisions but lack the resources needed to exercise it. Conversely, additional funding may have limited value if internal decision-making excludes those responsible for implementation. The proposed framework therefore understands autonomy as a relationship between authority, capacity and accountability. It examines who has the power to make decisions, what resources are available, which procedures must be followed and how decisions are reviewed. These questions make autonomy possible to assess in practice rather than treating it as a single formal indicator.

The comparative autonomy literature provides a more differentiated account of these relationships. Bennetot Pruvot et al. (2023) distinguish organisational, financial, staffing and academic autonomy. Their scorecard is principally concerned with regulatory conditions across European systems. It therefore provides categories for analysing authority, rather than a direct measure of effective autonomy in individual Albanian institutions. The present framework extends the question to implementation by asking whether formally available discretion can be exercised through budgets, appointments and academic decisions. This approach also avoids treating greater managerial discretion as sufficient evidence of academic freedom or meaningful staff participation.

2.3 Recent research on European cooperation and institutional change

Recent studies of the European Universities Initiative show why common European objectives can generate different organisational responses. Charret and Chankseliani (2023) find that alliances combine existing partnerships with experimentation in institutional forms. Stensaker et al. (2023) similarly show that alliance formation draws on established institutional and personal networks and is shaped by different historical trajectories. Together, these studies suggest that cooperation builds on accumulated relationships rather than beginning with a uniform European organisational model. For Albanian higher education, this implies that the institutional consequences of participation should be investigated against each university's prior experience, mission and support capacity. The studies do not establish the outcomes of participation in Albania.

Charret et al. (2026), in a study first published online in 2025, examine how national histories, institutional contexts and policy priorities shape understandings of the European Universities Initiative. Their analysis challenges the assumption that a shared European programme carries a single meaning across participating systems. It supports examining how European objectives are interpreted and incorporated into existing arrangements. In this article, such interpretation is observable through decisions about responsibilities, recognition and resource allocation. These processes may change established routines incrementally, even when organisational structures retain familiar names. Conversely, the creation of a new office or partnership may leave existing decision-making practices largely intact.

Institutional change also has a distributive dimension. Lambrechts et al. (2024) find that alliance participation

largely reproduces existing institutional hierarchies, while particular design features create opportunities for institutions of lower status. Their findings qualify the expectation that international cooperation necessarily spreads benefits evenly. Accordingly, this article treats inclusion as a substantive question: who applies, who participates, who withdraws and what support is available? The relevant comparison includes opportunities across institutions and among students and staff within them. These questions guide future investigation; they do not imply that the distributional patterns identified elsewhere have already been demonstrated in Albania.

At policy level, the European strategy for universities links deeper transnational cooperation with quality, inclusion, academic values and research and innovation (European Commission, 2022). These objectives provide a policy rationale for institutional reform, but the strategy itself is not evidence that reform has occurred. The distinction matters when assessing internationalisation: the number of agreements or funded projects can describe activity, whereas institutional transformation requires evidence of changes in teaching, recognition, research support or governance. Policy ambitions and empirical studies thus serve different purposes in the analysis.

2.4 Synthesis and analytical propositions

The literature identifies complementary mechanisms rather than a single sufficient explanation. Conditional incentives can encourage formal adoption; learning and access to resources can support implementation; existing organisational arrangements can shape how reforms are interpreted; and unequal capacities can affect access to their benefits. The framework therefore links European expectations to institutional responses through three mediating conditions: decision-making authority, sustained administrative capacity and opportunities for academic and student participation. These conditions are proposed for examination rather than assigned causal weights.

Three propositions follow. First, legal alignment is more likely to influence routine practice when implementation responsibilities are accompanied by usable resources. Second, international participation is more likely to produce durable change when knowledge and support functions remain available beyond individual projects. Third, quality assurance is more likely to support educational improvement when evaluations lead to reasoned decisions and subsequent review. These propositions connect the literature to the four domains examined below. Their value lies in making explanations testable; the documentary design does not establish their validity across Albanian institutions.

3. Methods

The study relies on a qualitative analysis of documents, guided by theoretical approaches concerning Europeanisation and organisational institutionalism. The primary comparison covers the period between the 2025 European Commission Report on Albania and the negotiation developments of July 2026, with the interpretation reflecting the situation as of October 2026. The core corpus consists of three documents: the Commission's report and the two EU common positions on Chapters 25 and 26, dated 10 July, 2026. A Council announcement dated 14 July, 2026, serves to identify the outcome of the accession conference. Albania's profile within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the Eurydice summary, and the 2015 Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) are used to explain the historical, national, and normative context. The European Strategy for Universities and comparative indicators of university autonomy provide additional categories for the analysis of policy and governance. These contextual sources are not treated as equivalent assessments of Albania's readiness for accession. The scholarly literature on conditionality, the decoupling of formal structures from institutional practice, and European university alliances provides the explanatory concepts for this study. The selection of this literature is thematic rather than a systematic review.

The documents were purposively selected based on criteria defined in relation to the research question. Inclusion required an identifiable issuing institution, the availability of the full text, and a direct link to the assessment of the accession process, higher education governance, the recognition of qualifications, quality assurance, or university-based scientific research. The 2025 report serves as the baseline for comparison, while the positions from July 2026 reflect the subsequent assessment within the framework of the negotiations. Official profiles and standards are utilised only insofar as they pertain to the contextual issues under examination. Media commentary, promotional statements from universities, and documents unrelated to the research question have been excluded from the comparative corpus. Consequently, this study constitutes a limited comparison of authoritative institutional documents and does not aim to provide an exhaustive examination of Albanian reforms or all documents available during 2026.

The analysis is conducted in four steps. First, each relevant excerpt is examined within the context of its source

document, identifying the issuing institution, the date, and the policy area addressed. Second, the excerpt is classified based on the content of the assertion it supports: formal alignment, action or progress acknowledged in the document, a call for further implementation, or a provision for monitoring. Third, the level to which the assertion refers is determined: national authorities, the higher education system, or a process that can be examined at the university level. Fourth, additional institutional documents required to assess practical implementation are identified. The unit of analysis is an assertion or recommendation with substantive content; the analysis does not rely on word counts, nor does it treat each document as a single observation. This structured reading facilitates an interpretive comparison, without claiming to employ automated coding, statistical content analysis, or the measurement of inter-coder reliability.

Publication dates are treated as part of the evidence. A concern raised in the 2025 report is not automatically presented as an unresolved condition in October 2026. Where the July 2026 positions recognise subsequent progress, that later assessment takes precedence for the documentary account. This approach is necessary because institutional and legislative reforms may occur between annual reports. It also avoids treating the absence of a new public statistic as evidence that no progress has occurred.

To clarify the nature and limitations of the evidence used, the article distinguishes between three categories of results. Documentary findings present or paraphrase assessments expressed in the sources examined, identifying the institutional author and the relevant reference. Analytical conclusions clarify what these assessments imply regarding universities and which issues remain unsubstantiated. Indicators proposed for future research specify the data and documents that should be collected to evaluate implementation at the institutional level. Thus, a provision stipulating continuous monitoring indicates that implementation remains subject to review, but it does not, in itself, prove that a university has failed to meet its obligations. Likewise, the fact that an indicator can be expressed in numerical values does not render it an empirical result of the study.

The documentary analysis focuses on policy expectations, while the proposed framework focuses on university procedures and decisions. No interviews, surveys, administrative microdata or participant observations were collected. No institution was scored, and no numerical index was calculated. The results therefore concern the interpretation of documentary evidence and the design of an evaluative framework; they do not constitute measured findings about the behaviour of Albanian universities.

The main limitation is the gap between authoritative policy documents and actual institutional practice. Official assessments help identify expectations, but cannot, on their own, establish staff experiences, informal decision-making processes or the distribution of benefits. The selected literature broadens the conceptual framework, but much of the recent alliance research concerns institutions operating in other European contexts. Its findings therefore inform research questions rather than constitute evidence about Albania. The study cannot establish causal effects, generalise across Albanian universities or validate the proposed indicators. These limitations define the scope of its contribution to documentary interpretation and research design.

4. Results of the Documentary Analysis

4.1 The meaning of provisional closure

The Chapter 25 common position recognises that the closing benchmarks have been fulfilled, while maintaining expectations regarding the actual execution of research budgets, reliable statistics and continued reform. It also provides for ongoing monitoring and the possibility of returning to the chapter (Conference on Accession to the European Union—Albania, 2026a, pp. 4–6). The coexistence of recognised progress and further expectations is central to interpreting the document. It confirms progress at a particular stage of the negotiations while maintaining scrutiny of implementation.

For Chapter 26, the common position calls for continued work on education financing, the structures required to manage Erasmus+, Bologna commitments and monitoring of European Education Area targets. It likewise maintains scrutiny of administrative capacity and implementation (Conference on Accession to the European Union—Albania, 2026b, pp. 3–7). These expectations extend across the education system. They cannot all be attributed to universities, but several create a direct rationale for investigating university-level procedures.

The analysis therefore supports two conclusions that can coexist: Albania has achieved a recognised negotiating milestone, and institutional performance remains a relevant subject for assessment. There is no contradiction between these conclusions because they concern different types of evidence. A declaration that a chapter requires no further negotiation at a particular stage does not provide evidence of how every university operates. Similarly, a difficulty in implementation at one institution would not, on its own, invalidate the national achievement.

This distinction also matters for public communication. If chapter closure is presented as proof that transformation is complete, later monitoring can appear unnecessary. If it is dismissed because further work remains, the significance of verified progress is lost. A more precise account identifies the achievement, explains its provisional nature and identifies the evidence still needed to assess institutional outcomes.

4.2 Changes between the annual assessment and closure

The Commission's 2025 report placed science and research between having some and a moderate level of preparation, and education and culture between a moderate and good level of preparation. It identified areas requiring further implementation in research and raised continuing concerns about educational quality and inclusion (European Commission, 2025, Chapters 25–26). These assessments provide a baseline for 2025 rather than a definitive account of the situation after the provisional closure of the chapters.

In July 2026, the Chapter 25 common position subsequently welcomed the adoption of delegated acts related to the scientific research law (Conference on Accession to the European Union—Albania, 2026a, p. 5). The comparison between the documents therefore supports a limited but meaningful finding: an implementation issue identified earlier was followed by recognition of further action. However, this does not establish the effects of these acts within individual institutions. Assessing those effects requires additional evidence, such as decisions taken under the new arrangements and records showing how they have been implemented.

The 2025 report also recorded Albania's association to Horizon Europe and 46 signed contracts benefiting the country, worth EUR 7.3 million (European Commission, 2025, Chapter 25). These are dated programme participation figures. They should not be treated as October 2026 totals, university-only figures or evidence of equal participation across the sector. Their analytical value is to establish that programme access and activity existed before closure, making it necessary to examine how participation translates into organisational learning.

4.3 Quality assurance as an institutional question

The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) place responsibility for quality assurance within higher education institutions and link it to programme design, student-centred learning, information management, public information and periodic review. External quality assurance is a related but distinct part of this framework (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education et al., 2015, Part 1). These standards provide a European reference for examining the relationship between formal arrangements and everyday academic decisions.

Examining the documentary findings through the lens of the ESG raises a question regarding the functioning of institutions—without predetermining the answer: are the results of the evaluation reflected in subsequent academic decision-making? Identifying a problem during an evaluation is not sufficient to demonstrate institutional change. To assess this, future research at the university level should track the response of the responsible body, the measures taken, and the follow-up on their implementation. Even a decision not to accept a recommendation can reflect accountable governance, provided it is based on clear and documented reasoning. This interpretation stems from an analysis of the standards and does not necessarily represent a practice currently observed in Albanian universities.

Taken together, the documentary findings support shifting research focus from national-level evaluations towards processes occurring within universities. The central issue is how these processes translate European expectations into daily academic practice. The framework proposed below outlines how this issue can be examined, while maintaining a distinction between conceptual categories and conclusions that require empirical support.

At this point, the limitations of the evidence used are also defined. Sections 4.1 and 4.2 present the progress achieved to date and the requirements for further implementation as outlined in accession documents, while Section 4.3 identifies normative standards that can guide research at the institutional level. These analyses do not determine the extent to which effective governance, the timely recognition of qualifications, or organisational learning are prevalent within Albanian universities. The subsequent framework translates these open questions into a research model. Its four areas address the second part of the research question, while the documentary comparison addresses the first.

5. A Framework for Evaluating Institutional Change

5.1 Governance and accountable autonomy

The first area concerns whether decision-making authority is clearly defined enough for institutions to act and whether their decisions can be reviewed and decision-makers held accountable. Future research should examine how responsibilities are divided among governing bodies, academic units and administrative offices. It should compare formal responsibilities with actual decision records and investigate how disagreements are resolved. The existence of several governing bodies does not necessarily indicate fragmentation; the key question is whether responsibilities become unclear when operational decisions must be made.

One practical indicator would be the proportion of sampled strategic decisions that identify an implementing unit, a resource allocation and a review date. The denominator should include all decisions within a defined category and period, rather than only successful initiatives selected for publicity. Qualitative analysis should then examine whether the responsible unit had sufficient authority to implement the decision. Combining these approaches would help prevent a completed administrative form from being mistaken for effective governance.

Consider a hypothetical decision to establish a joint study programme. Approval by an academic body may be necessary, but implementation may also depend on tuition arrangements, workload allocation and recognition procedures. This is an illustrative example, not a documented case from Albania. It demonstrates why the relevant evidence must extend beyond the approval document and why institutional autonomy should be assessed through the practical exercise of responsibility.

5.2 Quality assurance and educational improvement

The second area examines whether evaluation results influence academic decision-making. To this end, a research team could select a sample of study programme reviews and track how recommendations are addressed in subsequent meetings, budgetary decisions, and curricular changes. The assessment should distinguish between recommendations that were implemented, those rejected with a stated rationale, those deferred (with specified resources and timelines), and those for which no decision has been made. Relying on a single implementation percentage would obscure the distinction between a reasoned decision not to proceed and a simple lack of administrative action.

To apply this approach in practice, the quality assurance office could calculate an "institutional response indicator." The denominator would include all recommendations for which the response deadline falls within the academic year under review. The numerator would include recommendations for which a decision has been documented and responsibility for follow-up has been assigned, where applicable. A separate assessment would examine the implementation of measures and evidence of improvements to the teaching and learning process during the subsequent review. The first indicator measures the institutional response, without directly assessing the quality of teaching itself. Its interpretation requires an examination of minutes, action plans, and subsequent programme reviews. Objectives should be defined once the initial situation has been identified and the reasons for unresolved cases have been analysed.

Student participation should be assessed through the relationship between contributions and responses. Counting representatives or collecting questionnaires provides information about access to a process, but does not establish influence. Investigators could examine whether student concerns appear in meeting records and whether institutions explain their subsequent decisions. This approach would allow participation to be studied without assuming that every request must be adopted or that dissatisfaction alone demonstrates poor governance.

The time dimension is essential. A programme revision may require more than one academic year before its effects can be evaluated. A monitoring system should therefore distinguish between the completion of an administrative action and evidence of educational benefit. It should also allow for corrective action when an adopted solution proves ineffective. Otherwise, institutional incentives may favour activities that can be reported quickly over changes that require sustained academic work.

5.3 Recognition and access to international learning

The third area examines the predictability of recognition procedures and access to academic mobility opportunities. A future study could track a defined set of cases, measuring the time elapsed from the submission of complete documentation to the communication of the final decision. The analysis should distinguish between delays resulting from

incomplete applications, those stemming from institutional processing, and those caused by disagreements regarding the substantive criteria for recognition. This distinction would help identify necessary interventions, without equating every extension of the procedure with institutional failure.

The relevant denominator is equally important. Reporting only successful participants excludes eligible students who withdrew because of cost, uncertainty or practical barriers. An institution could record applications, accepted offers, withdrawals and completed mobility, while collecting reasons through proportionate procedures. Such information would provide a more informative account of access while respecting the confidentiality of personal circumstances. The purpose is to understand the process, not to create an intrusive classification system.

Recognition performance and inclusion should be examined together. Even a procedurally efficient system can remain inaccessible if participants must bear substantial upfront costs or cannot reconcile mobility with caring responsibilities. These possibilities are proposed research questions rather than findings about Albania. Their inclusion prevents internationalisation from being evaluated solely through activity counts and makes the distribution of opportunities part of institutional assessment.

In practice, a register of recognition procedures can track the average number of calendar days from the completion of an application to the communication of the final decision, alongside the total number of cases, the distribution of procedure durations, and any cases remaining unresolved as of the reporting date. The register may be managed by the international relations office, while academic units confirm decisions regarding the academic content of the recognition. A supplementary indicator could express the ratio between completed mobility periods and accepted offers, while separately noting withdrawals and the reasons voluntarily provided for them. These indicators offer insight into the predictability of procedures and the actual level of participation. Assessing the fairness of the process also requires examining contested decisions, as well as any barriers affecting students who meet the criteria but choose not to apply.

5.4 Research administration and continuity

The fourth domain examines whether participation in research programmes builds capabilities that remain available after a funded project ends. Evidence could include stable support roles, accessible procedures for costing proposals, arrangements for ethical review and records of staff training. Investigators should ask whether knowledge acquired through a project is transferred to colleagues and incorporated into routine practice, rather than assuming that repeated participation automatically achieves this result.

A useful indicator would be the continuity of essential support functions across project cycles. For example, the study could examine whether proposal development support remains available between grants and whether changes in personnel interrupt financial reporting. This would help distinguish organisational capacity from the exceptional efforts of a small number of individuals. Both can produce successful projects, but they have different implications for sustainability.

Funding execution should be connected to research purposes. Expenditure records establish that money was spent, but they do not establish whether equipment is available to intended users, whether training addresses identified needs or whether funded time supports research activity. A prospective assessment should connect financial records with operational evidence, while recognising that research outcomes may be uncertain and long term. It should avoid rewarding predictable short-term projects simply because their outputs are easier to count.

Continuity can be assessed by examining the number of months during the academic year in which support services—such as assistance with drafting project proposals, financial reporting, and guidance on ethical review procedures—are genuinely accessible. Research offices can document how staff or shared services are organised, as well as any interruptions in the provision of support. Academic units can verify actual access by reviewing a sample of requests and how they were handled. The proposed indicator measures the availability of support; it is not a measure of scientific excellence. The existence of a funded position is not sufficient evidence if the service cannot actually be utilised; conversely, a shared service can ensure continuity even without a dedicated position at each individual university.

5.5 Evidence standards across the framework

For each domain, evidence should be classified as a rule, an operational record or an observed consequence. No composite ranking is proposed at this stage. Combining different indicators into a single score would require justified weights, reliable data and a clear explanation of what the score represents. A university could perform well in recognition while facing difficulties in research support; preserving this variation is more useful for improvement than concealing it in

an average.

Each indicator also requires a baseline, a reporting period and a named source. Missing data should be recorded as unknown, rather than automatically classified as failure. Equally, the existence of an institutional report should not be treated as evidence of success without examining its contents. These rules would make future assessments reproducible and reduce the risk of selecting indicators retrospectively to support a preferred narrative.

A feasible pilot implementation could focus on a completed academic year and a limited number of processes that fall within the institution's remit. The governing body would approve the scope and extent of the assessment; the responsible offices would compile the data; and a group comprising representatives of the academic staff and students would examine the interpretation of the findings and any corrective measures. In the area of governance, all strategic decisions within a defined category could be analysed; for the recognition and review of programmes, complete annual records of cases could be utilised. When sampling is required, selection and exclusion criteria must be defined and documented prior to the analysis. For each indicator, the following must be documented: the source, the basis of calculation (including the denominator, where applicable), the responsible unit, the date of review, and the reasons for any missing data. Repeating the assessment in subsequent years would allow for the tracking of changes over time. Comparisons between universities would require common definitions and the consideration of differences in their respective institutional missions.

6. Discussion

Documentary findings and the theoretical framework highlight the mediating role of institutions in the Europeanisation process. Requirements for further implementation, as outlined in accession-related documents, underscore the need for examination at the institutional level. Meanwhile, Europeanisation theory explains why the same external engagement can manifest in different forms within organisations (Börzel & Risse, 2000). In the case of Albania, early participation in the Bologna Process, national guarantees of university autonomy, and recent developments regarding accession necessitate that institutional change be analysed within the context of intersecting reforms. The provisional closure of a negotiation chapter or the existence of an international partnership is not sufficient to determine the underlying cause of a decision made by a university. Furthermore, differences in university missions may justify diverse organisational structures, provided that responsibilities are clearly defined and performance claims are supported by verifiable evidence.
One proposition for future testing is that stable support functions mediate the relationship between international participation and durable change. Where responsibilities and resources remain available between projects, lessons may be more likely to influence routine practice. Where activities depend heavily on temporary arrangements, continuity may be more difficult to maintain. This proposition follows from the framework; it has not been tested across a sample of Albanian institutions in this study.

A second proposition concerns internal feedback. Participation in European arrangements may generate information about alternative practices, but institutional learning requires a way for that information to influence decisions. Interviews could examine how staff returning from exchanges share their experiences, while decision records could establish whether proposals lead to changes. Combining these sources would help distinguish reported enthusiasm from observable organisational responses, without assuming that foreign practices are always appropriate for local adoption.

Alternative explanations must also remain visible. Changes attributed to Europeanisation may instead result from domestic political priorities, institutional leadership, student demand or financial pressures. A later study should reconstruct the chronology of selected decisions and compare documentary records with accounts from different actors. It should seek evidence that could challenge the preferred explanation, including cases where European participation increased without meaningful internal change and cases where change occurred without substantial international involvement.

The proposed monitoring approach also carries risks. Increasing the number of indicators may heighten the reporting burden and encourage a "box-ticking" approach—fulfilling formal requirements without achieving substantive improvements. The distinction made by Bromley and Powell (2012) helps in interpreting this risk: the existence of an unused procedure suggests a decoupling of policy from practice, while the completion of activities without demonstrable educational benefits raises questions about the link between the means employed and the intended goals. However, a lack of evidence for benefits does not, in itself, prove their absence. For this reason, the framework combines procedural indicators with an examination of outcomes and long-term consequences. Research on university alliances also highlights the importance of prior partnerships and national priorities in understanding organisational change (Charret et al., 2026; Stensaker et al., 2023)". For Albanian institutions, these mechanisms serve as potential explanations that

require verification through decision-making documentation and testimony from participants. Such an assessment should also account for contradictory evidence.

For public policy, the analysis supports a division of responsibility. National authorities can provide predictable regulatory and financial conditions and coordinate reporting expectations. Universities can translate those conditions into transparent procedures and maintain evidence of implementation. External review can assess whether institutional claims are supported while allowing for differences in institutional missions. These are proposed allocations of evaluative responsibility, not a description of a new legal obligation created by chapter closure.

The practical contribution of this study lies in providing a framework of evidence for institutional self-assessment. It enables the university to distinguish between instances where a membership-related commitment is reflected only in formal rules, instances where it is implemented through functional procedures, and instances where longitudinal assessment demonstrates the consolidation of practices. This framework can assist in justifying budgetary requests, defining administrative responsibilities, and facilitating external quality assessment. Its innovation lies in the link it establishes between national-level commitments and university processes, as well as in clarifying the evidence required to support conclusions regarding institutional transformation.

7. Conclusion

The documentary analysis establishes that the provisional closure of Chapters 25 and 26 recognises progress in Albania's accession negotiations while preserving expectations concerning implementation, administrative capacity and continued monitoring. The July 2026 common positions therefore support a qualified conclusion: a negotiating milestone has been achieved, but its institutional consequences remain open to investigation. Comparing the 2025 assessment with the later positions identifies recognised regulatory progress without establishing its effects on teaching, research or university governance.

Three findings organise the analysis. First, national accession assessments and university performance concern different units of analysis; progress at one level cannot establish uniform outcomes at the other. Second, formal guarantees, programme participation and organisational activity provide relevant but incomplete evidence of institutional change. Third, credible evaluation requires records that connect commitments to decisions, implementation and subsequent review. The proposed domains of governance, quality assurance, recognition and research administration translate these distinctions into questions that can be investigated, with inclusion considered across them.

The study's contribution is an analytical connection between accession documentary analysis and research on institutional Europeanisation. It brings conditionality, organisational decoupling and recent research on European university alliances into a framework that distinguishes legal alignment, organisational implementation and durable academic practice. This combination specifies what additional evidence is needed before claims of transformation can be sustained. The indicators and explanatory propositions are research contributions, rather than validated measurements or a ranking of Albanian universities.

For Albanian higher education institutions, the first practical recommendation is to review a limited set of European commitments against existing university procedures. During the first annual planning cycle, governing bodies could identify the responsible unit, implementation resources and review date for each selected commitment. A baseline should be established before targets are adopted. Institutions should begin with records they already maintain and prioritise decisions within their authority, while identifying regulatory or funding obstacles that require national action.

Quality assurance offices and academic units should then establish a documented response to programme reviews. Each recommendation should receive a reasoned decision, an implementation responsibility and a follow-up date. Student representatives and teaching staff should participate in reviewing the response. The next review should distinguish completed administrative actions from evidence of educational benefit. Such an approach would make it possible to assess whether quality assurance influences curriculum design, assessment or student support, while allowing institutions to explain why particular recommendations are deferred or rejected.

International relations offices should publish clear recognition procedures and record processing times from the receipt of complete documentation. They should also examine withdrawals and barriers to participation through proportionate, confidential enquiries. Financial support, accessible information and predictable recognition should be considered together. Research offices should identify essential proposal development, financial management and ethics support functions and plan for their continuity between grants. Where a permanent specialist post is unaffordable, institutions could consider shared services, provided that responsibilities and access remain clear.

Institutional leaders should review this small set of measures annually and publish an aggregate account of

decisions taken and unresolved obstacles. National authorities and external reviewers can support this work by coordinating reporting requirements, providing predictable regulatory conditions and allowing for different institutional missions. Monitoring should remain proportionate: a measure that generates paperwork without informing decisions should be revised or discontinued. These recommendations follow from the analytical framework; they are not new legal duties arising automatically from chapter closure.

Future research should compare institutions with different missions, resources and levels of international participation over several academic years. It should combine decision records with interviews and administrative data, examine unsuccessful as well as successful initiatives, and consider domestic explanations alongside European influences. This would test the proposed mechanisms and establish whether improvements endure beyond individual projects and leadership terms. For Albania, the substantive question after provisional closure is whether European commitments become dependable institutional practices that support academic work and equitable access to opportunities.

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