

STRENGTHENING THE LINK BETWEEN PRE-UNIVERSITY EDUCATION AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN ALBANIA: STRATEGIC APPROACHES AND GOOD PRACTICES

E. FITA

Enis Fita

University College of Business (UCB), Tirana, Albania

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7366-333X>, E-mail: efita@kub.edu.al

Abstract: *The transition from pre-university to higher education is a critical phase that shapes students' academic success and long-term development. In Albania, bridging this gap is essential for creating a more coherent, inclusive, and responsive education system. Among the most promising strategies are those that focus on building concrete bridges of cooperation between secondary schools and higher education institutions. Formal cooperation agreements and joint initiatives between these institutions significantly improve students' awareness of academic pathways and career opportunities. Likewise, regular collaborative activities—such as co-designed workshops, mentoring programs, and shared academic projects—not only enhance mutual understanding of curricular expectations but also contribute to smoother student transitions. To support these efforts, adopting a benchmarking approach—drawing on successful models from comparable countries—can provide practical direction. The centers are jointly supported by schools, universities, and local authorities, and play a vital role in aligning educational pathways with labor market needs and higher education demands. This paper explores these strategic approaches and highlights good practices that foster alignment between competencies, programs, and institutional cultures. By reinforcing these links, Albania can enhance student preparedness, reduce dropout rates, and foster a more integrated academic journey for future generations.*

Keywords: *Cooperation between secondary and higher education; Career Center model; Student transition; Benchmarking approach.*

1 Formal School–University Partnerships and Agreements

Establishing formal partnerships between secondary schools and higher education institutions is a foundational step in strengthening the education pipeline. Such partnerships typically involve cooperation agreements or official frameworks that commit schools and universities to work together on student preparation and orientation (Center for American Progress, 2010, p. 15; European Training Foundation, 2023, p. 22). Formal agreements create accountability and regularity in collaboration—for instance, by scheduling annual orientation days, teacher exchange programs, or joint curriculum reviews (Conley, 2007, pp. 45–46; Kintrea, St Clair, & Houston, 2015, p. 118). They also signal to students and parents that there is a continuous pathway linking the secondary and tertiary levels, encouraging more students to see higher education as an accessible and supported goal (Institute of Education Sciences, 2022, p. 9; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020, pp. 33–34).

1.1 Improving student awareness of pathways

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Research indicates that formalized partnerships can significantly enhance the information and guidance available to students about university pathways (Center for American Progress, 2010, p. 12; Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011, pp. 25–26). By breaking down the institutional silos between K–12 and higher education, partnerships expose secondary educators, students, and families to college expectations and opportunities they might otherwise overlook (Conley, 2007, p. 45; Kintrea, St Clair, & Houston, 2015, p. 118). For example, a policy analysis by the Center for American Progress noted that “formal agreements for partnership can expose educators, students, and parents to college and career preparation opportunities,” thereby supporting students’ academic and professional growth (Center for American Progress, 2010, p. 14). In the Albanian context, where families may be unfamiliar with university application processes or new fields of study, having high schools and universities jointly hold information sessions or college fairs can greatly improve awareness (Halimi & Zogaj, 2023, p. 7; Institute of Education Sciences, 2022, p. 9). Such initiatives ensure that students receive timely guidance on course selection in high school (aligned with university prerequisites), scholarship and financial aid options, and the long-term career implications of different academic tracks.

Many universities worldwide maintain “feeder school” partnerships or adopt-a-school programs; these formal ties often lead to dedicated admissions advising for the partner schools’ graduates, priority opportunities in bridge courses, or even dual-enrollment programs allowing high-achieving secondary students to take introductory college courses (European Commission, 2022, p. 41; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020, pp. 55–56). The overarching goal is to institutionalize a continuity of guidance: rather than leaving the gap between high school and university to be navigated by students alone, the institutions on both sides actively collaborate to guide students across that gap.

From a policy perspective, Albania’s education authorities can encourage such partnerships by providing frameworks and incentives (World Bank, 2022, p. 19). One approach could be developing a national scheme where each public university is paired with several pilot secondary schools in its region to develop joint transition programs. Over time, successful practices from these pilots (such as improved university enrollment rates or reduced first-year attrition from those schools) could be scaled up. International experience underscores that when secondary and postsecondary institutions coordinate their efforts, it leads to better alignment of curricula and reduces the need for remedial coursework at university (European Training Foundation [ETF], 2023, p. 27; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020, pp. 60–61). In the United States, for example, some state-wide K–16 partnerships focus on faculty collaboration to adjust teaching standards and expectations on both sides, thereby addressing college readiness gaps before students graduate high school (Conley, 2007, pp. 52–53). Applying a similar ethos in Albania—through formal school-university agreements—would formalize the currently informal or ad-hoc collaborations and ensure that every student benefits from a guided transition plan.

1.2 Engaging multiple stakeholders

Effective partnerships often extend beyond just schools and universities to include local government and community organizations (European Training Foundation [ETF], 2023, p. 22;

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2021, p. 18). Municipalities can play a coordinating role, especially in Albania's context of decentralizing certain educational services (Halimi & Zogaj, 2023, p. 7; Municipality of Tirana, 2023, p. 11). As will be discussed in a later section, the Municipality of Tirana has piloted a career guidance center that connects with local schools—exemplifying how local authorities can bolster these partnerships with resources and additional outreach (Institute of Education Sciences, 2022, p. 9; RisiAlbania, 2021, p. 5). Likewise, employers and vocational training providers can be brought into the fold via these agreements, to ensure that the guidance provided aligns with labor market realities (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020, pp. 60–61; World Bank, 2022, p. 19). In summary, formal cooperation agreements lay the groundwork for a network of support around students. They create a strategic linkage between secondary and tertiary levels of education, within which various collaborative programs and activities can then be implemented.

2. Collaborative Activities for Smoother Transitions

While formal agreements provide the framework, it is the practical collaborative activities that directly impact students' transition experience (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020, p. 58; Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011, p. 30). A range of joint initiatives can be undertaken by secondary schools and universities (often in partnership with career centers or local organizations) to help students navigate the academic, social, and emotional leap to higher education. Here we discuss several types of such activities and their proven benefits: orientation and campus visits, mentoring and counseling programs, joint curriculum projects, and career exploration events.

2.1 University orientation programs and campus visits

Inviting secondary students to universities for tailored orientation programs is a powerful way to make the unfamiliar campus environment more approachable (European Commission, 2022, p. 41; European Training Foundation [ETF], 2023, p. 22). Many good practices can be drawn from neighboring countries. In Slovenia, for example, universities routinely host information days for high schoolers, where students visit campus, attend sample lectures, and meet faculty and current undergraduates (University of Nova Gorica, 2022, p. 3). These visits allow prospective students to ask questions about academic life, compare different fields of study, and visualize themselves in the university setting. Such interactions not only spark students' interest in particular disciplines but also clarify the level of rigor and self-directed learning expected at university (Conley, 2007, pp. 52–53; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020, pp. 58–59). In Albania, universities could collaborate with education offices to ensure every Grade 12 student has the chance to attend at least one on-campus event or open day. These could be scheduled during the academic year or in the summer before enrollment. By familiarizing students with lecture halls, labs, libraries, and campus facilities, these visits reduce anxiety and build a sense of belonging, which is linked to better adjustment and persistence in the first year of studies (Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011, p. 30).

2.2 Mentoring and counseling initiatives

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Another effective practice is pairing students with mentors or providing enhanced counseling during the transition (European Training Foundation [ETF], 2023, p. 23; Rashidi & Nura, 2020, p. 15). Mentoring can take the form of university students or alumni mentoring high school seniors, or academic staff from universities acting as advisors to cohorts of secondary students interested in their field. Personalized support and one-on-one coaching have been shown to improve confidence and agency in students from under-represented backgrounds as they prepare for university (Kintrea, St Clair, & Houston, 2015, p. 119). For instance, programs in the UK that trained university students to coach college applicants found that mentees were more confident and had higher university retention once enrolled (Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011, p. 32). Albanian institutions could implement a “near-peer” mentoring scheme: recent high school graduates now in university could return to their alma maters for occasional Q&A sessions or online mentoring, guiding students on study strategies, application essays, or simply sharing how they overcame the transition challenges. In addition, strengthening the role of school counselors is key. Where available, school counselors can coordinate with university career centers to get up-to-date information on programs and admission criteria, which they then relay to students (Institute of Education Sciences, 2022, p. 10). The importance of this is underscored by Slovenia’s policy, where Article 24 of the Labour Market Regulation Act mandates that lifelong career orientation services be provided as a preventive measure to “pupils, secondary-school students, university students and their parents” as part of the education system (Slovenian Ministry of Labour, 2019, p. 8). This integrated approach, treating career and academic guidance as a continuum across educational levels, ensures that students’ questions and concerns are addressed well before they step onto a university campus.

2.3 Joint academic projects and curriculum alignment

Schools and universities can also collaborate through academic initiatives that align curricular content and standards (Conley, 2007, p. 46; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020, pp. 57–58). A promising approach seen elsewhere is to create “vertical” professional learning communities involving secondary teachers and university faculty in key subject areas (such as math, science, or language). In the U.S., the Wyoming School–University Partnership is one example where high school and college faculty meet to examine student work and discuss curricular expectations in subjects like mathematics and writing, ultimately developing a shared language of instruction and clarifying academic standards needed for college-level work (Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011, p. 33). Participants in that initiative reported that these collaborations produced common terminology and clearer alignment between high school exit skills and college entry expectations, which is exactly the “missing middle ground” often blamed for freshman difficulty (Conley, 2007, pp. 50–51). For Albanian educators, establishing similar joint workshops could help address the known gaps—for example, if university professors note that first-year students struggle with academic writing or research skills, they could work with high school teachers to introduce more of those skills in the senior year of secondary school. Some Albanian universities have already begun to introduce bridging courses (in math or language) for first-year students who need extra help; however, a better solution is to push that preparation earlier into the secondary

level through collaboration, thereby reducing the need for remedial courses (World Bank, 2022, p. 20). Joint academic projects can also involve students directly. For instance, a university might invite high school students to participate in a simplified research project or a science competition judged by university faculty (European Training Foundation [ETF], 2023, p. 24). Such experiences challenge students to apply their school knowledge in a more advanced context and make the academic transition more gradual. Importantly, when secondary and tertiary educators jointly plan these activities, it builds professional respect and understanding—high school teachers gain insight into higher-order skills their students will need, and university faculty better appreciate the constraints and opportunities in today’s high school curriculum (European Commission, 2022, p. 42).

2.4 Career exploration and guidance events

A crucial aspect of smoothing the school-to-university transition is helping students clarify their goals and how higher education connects to those goals (Marope, Wells, Hazelkorn, & Lee, 2013, p. 21; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020, pp. 59–60). To this end, collaborative career guidance events are very effective. In Slovenia, a multi-partner initiative called Career Day (Karierni dan) was developed by the National Education Institute in cooperation with the Employment Service and the Chamber of Commerce, targeting secondary students and their parents (Slovenian National Education Institute, 2021, p. 12). This annual event brings pupils into workplaces or invites professionals to schools, introducing promising professions and fields of study (European Training Foundation [ETF], 2023, p. 26). By seeing real-world applications of various university courses (for example, visiting an engineering firm or a hospital), students can make more informed decisions about which university program to pursue. Joint career orientation fairs – involving schools, universities, and employers – could address this mismatch by guiding students toward in-demand careers and the educational paths to reach them (RisiAlbania, 2021, p. 5). Encouragingly, there are already initiatives in Albania moving in this direction: for example, an annual Professions Fair in Tirana, where universities and companies jointly present career pathways to youth (Municipality of Tirana, 2023, p. 9). By coordinating such events nationally (possibly under the Ministry of Education and in partnership with municipalities and the private sector), Albania can ensure that career guidance is embedded into the transition process. These events should actively involve parents as well, since family support is often decisive in whether a student pursues higher education (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2021, p. 18). Slovenia’s Youth Guarantee career guidance project explicitly included events for parents as part of its outreach, and over 60 parent-focused activities were organized to help families understand higher education and career planning (Slovenian Ministry of Labour, 2019, p. 8). Albanian schools and universities could emulate this by hosting joint parent nights that explain university application procedures, costs, and long-term benefits of higher education, thereby addressing any parental concerns that might otherwise discourage students from enrolling.

In summary, collaborative activities operationalize the school–university link on the ground. They turn the abstract concept of cooperation into tangible experiences that prepare students academically and inform them about their futures (Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011, p. 34). By implementing a combination of orientations, mentoring, joint curriculum

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efforts, and career exploration events, Albania's educational stakeholders can greatly ease the transition for students. Notably, these efforts also contribute to equity: first-generation college students or those from under-resourced schools benefit immensely from additional guidance and early exposure, leveling the playing field in university access (Kintrea, St Clair, & Houston, 2015, p. 120; Rashidi & Nura, 2020, p. 16). As new research from the U.K. has shown, supported transitions not only improve retention but also help diversify university populations by giving all students—regardless of background—the tools to succeed (Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011, p. 35).

3 Benchmarking Good Practices: The Career Center Model in Slovenia

A valuable case study is Slovenia's Career Center model, which demonstrates how structured cooperation between secondary and higher education can be achieved at a systemic level (European Commission, 2022, p. 43; European Training Foundation [ETF], 2023, p. 27). Over the past decade, Slovenia has developed a network of career guidance centers that serve youth across different education stages, effectively acting as a bridge between schools, universities, and the labor market (Slovenian Ministry of Labour, 2019, p. 9; University of Primorska, 2021, p. 6).

In Slovenia's model, career centers are established at universities (and complemented by services in public employment offices) with the mandate to assist both current university students and prospective students from secondary schools (European Training Foundation [ETF], 2023, p. 28). These centers are typically staffed by career counselors who have expertise in education pathways, career planning, and labor market trends. They operate as a one-stop hub for guidance services: high school students can come to the centers (or access their online resources) to get information on study programs, admission criteria, student life, and scholarship opportunities (University of Nova Gorica, 2022, p. 4). At the same time, these centers engage in outreach, going into secondary schools to run workshops or invite classes to visit the university. The integration of services is codified in policy—Slovenia's law explicitly supports lifelong career orientation for pupils through to university level, underlining that guidance is a continuous process (Slovenian Ministry of Labour, 2019, p. 10). One hallmark of the Slovenian approach is the involvement of parents and community in career guidance. The career centers routinely organize sessions not just for students but also for their parents, acknowledging that familial support and understanding are key to smooth transitions (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2021, p. 19). By demystifying higher education for families, the centers help create a supportive environment around the student. Additionally, career centers in Slovenia coordinate with local employers and incorporate labor market information into advising. This means a student in secondary school doesn't just hear about "what it's like to study engineering" but also what careers an engineering degree can lead to, and what skills employers are seeking. Such information is crucial for aligning educational pathways with economic opportunities (Marope, Wells, Hazelkorn, & Lee, 2013, p. 22; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020, pp. 61–62).

3.1 Activities and initiatives

The range of activities undertaken by career centers in Slovenia illustrates how multifaceted the support can be. According to a recent national report, a youth-oriented career center project (as part of the EU's Youth Guarantee) in 2019–2020 achieved extensive outreach, including 400 career events in schools, 61 parent-focused activities, and over 1,100 individual counseling sessions for students deciding on their future studies (Slovenian Ministry of Labour, 2019, p. 11). Activities commonly include career workshops delivered inside secondary schools (often co-planned with school counselors), where topics like choosing a university program, managing the transition, and planning one's career are discussed interactively (Slovenian National Education Institute, 2021, p. 13). There are also company visits arranged for students to see workplaces related to fields of study—for example, visits to tech firms for those interested in IT, or hospitals for those considering medicine. Notably, the center engages the broader social environment by working with employers to identify their needs and then helping match students and graduates to those opportunities (European Training Foundation [ETF], 2023, p. 29). In effect, the Career Center acts as a broker between secondary education, higher education, and employment (University of Primorska, 2021, p. 7).

3.2 Joint support and funding

The success of Slovenia's model is partly due to its multi-stakeholder support. The career centers are jointly supported by educational institutions and government (and often local authorities) (European Commission, 2022, p. 44). For instance, university-based centers may receive funding from the Ministry of Education for their student services, while special projects like the Youth Guarantee career workshops were co-funded by the Ministry of Labour and the European Social Fund (Slovenian Ministry of Labour, 2019, p. 12). Local municipalities also play a role—in Slovenia's case, career guidance is considered part of community services. This is evidenced by the fact that 12 regional career centers operated under the Employment Service and provided guidance not only to unemployed youth but also to school students as a preventive measure (Employment Service of Slovenia, 2020, p. 6). The shared ownership of these centers ensures sustainability and relevance: schools trust the services because they are developed in collaboration with school authorities, universities see them as tools for better-prepared entrants, and local governments view them as investments in human capital development (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2021, p. 20).

In practice, this means career centers can facilitate communication: for example, a high school counselor can directly refer a student to the university career center for specialized advising on a field of interest, or a career center counselor might sit down with school staff to discuss trends in student preferences or skills gaps observed. The coordination is systemic rather than ad-hoc.

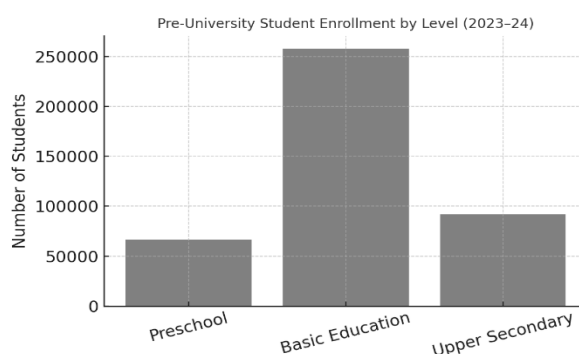
3.3 Lessons for Albania

Adopting a similar career center model in Albania could substantially reinforce the pre-university to university link (European Training Foundation [ETF], 2023, p. 30; Halimi & Zogaj, 2023, p. 8). According to the Institute of Statistics of Albania (INSTAT), Albania's pre-university education system enrolled over 416,000 students in the 2023–2024 academic year, with a significant portion concentrated in basic education (grades 1–9) (INSTAT, 2024, p. 5). However, the system has experienced a steady decline in enrollment, particularly in upper

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secondary education. This trend is visualized in Figure 1, which illustrates the distribution of students across educational levels for Albania. Adopting a similar career center model in Albania could substantially reinforce the pre-university to university link. According to INSTAT, Albania's pre-university education system enrolled over 416,000 students in the 2023–24 academic year, with a significant portion concentrated in basic education (grades 1–9). However, the system has experienced a steady decline in enrollment, particularly in upper secondary education. This trend is visualized in Figure 1, which illustrates the distribution of students across educational levels.

Figure 1. *Pre-University Student Enrollment by Level in Albania (2023–2024)*



Source: (Institute of Statistics of Albania [INSTAT], 2024, p. 5)

Currently, some Albanian universities have career offices or centers, but these typically focus on helping enrolled students transition out to the job market (World Bank, 2022, p. 21). Opening up these centers to serve secondary students (perhaps starting in their final two years of high school) would fill a notable gap in guidance. There are positive signs: Albania's recent Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan (2023–2024) has recognized the need for career orientation, resulting in the approval of a national Career Orientation Guide in October 2023 to standardize counseling for youth (Institute of Education Sciences, 2022, p. 11). Building on this, the country could establish pilot career centers in major universities with dedicated staff to liaise with surrounding secondary schools. By institutionalizing career centers that bridge secondary and tertiary education, Albania can ensure that every student has access to professional guidance in making one of the most important decisions of their young life.

4 Toward an Integrated Transition Framework for Albania: Recommendations

Drawing on the analysis above, several strategic actions emerge for strengthening the link between pre-university and higher education in Albania. These recommendations aim to create a more seamless transition framework, incorporating both policy-level changes and on-the-ground practices.

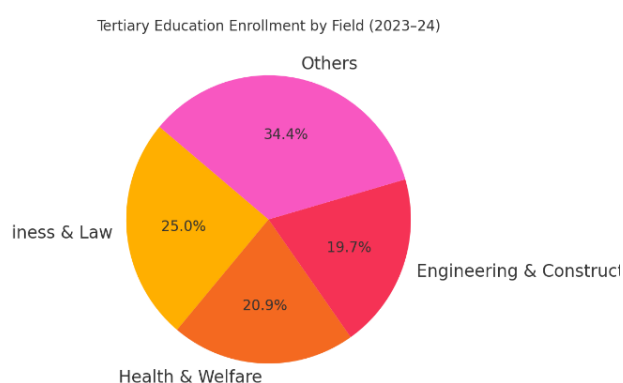
Institutionalize School–University Partnerships: The Ministry of Education (in coordination with the Ministry of Youth and other relevant bodies) should develop a formal program encouraging partnerships between secondary schools and universities (Center for American Progress, 2010, p. 15; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020, pp. 57–58). This could involve a network of cooperation agreements where

each university is linked with a set of high schools. Measurable targets—such as number of joint events per year or percentage of students receiving counseling—can be set to ensure these agreements lead to action. By formalizing partnerships, schools and universities will be accountable for maintaining communication. As seen in practice, when such formal partnerships exist, students benefit from early and concrete exposure to higher education options (Kintrea, St Clair, & Houston, 2015, p. 119; Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011, p. 34). The government can facilitate this by providing guidelines or toolkits on partnership activities and perhaps modest funding for joint initiatives (European Commission, 2022, p. 43).

Expand Career Guidance Centers and Services: Albania should establish dedicated career guidance centers or offices that serve secondary school students in addition to youth in tertiary education (European Training Foundation [ETF], 2023, p. 31; Halimi & Zogaj, 2023, p. 9). This could be achieved by expanding the mandate of existing university career centers (where they exist) or setting up new centers in regional education directorates. The Slovenian model demonstrates that having an impartial, well-resourced center focused on counseling yields significant outreach—tens of thousands of youths reached through workshops and counseling—and ensures consistency in the quality of guidance (Slovenian Ministry of Labour, 2019, p. 12). In Albania, leveraging the momentum of the Youth Guarantee and recent Career Orientation Guide (2023), authorities could standardize the training of career counselors and embed them in schools and universities (Institute of Education Sciences, 2022, p. 12).

Ultimately, every secondary student—whether in a general high school or a vocational school—should have access to a career counselor or center by the time they are making post-secondary choices. Student choices at the tertiary level reflect both traditional preferences and emerging labor market demands. As shown in Figure 2, Business & Law remains the most popular field, accounting for approximately 25% of enrollments, followed closely by Health & Welfare and Engineering-related disciplines (Institute of Statistics of Albania, 2024:6).

Figure 2. *Distribution of Tertiary Education Enrollment by Field of Study (2023–2024)*



Source: (Institute of Statistics of Albania [INSTAT], 2024, p. 6)

Mentoring and Transition Support Programs: It is recommended to implement structured transition support programs at the school level, starting in 12th grade and extending into the first year of university (Conley, 2007, pp. 48–49; Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011, p. 36).

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This might include a peer-mentoring system where university students (especially alumni of the same high school) mentor current high school seniors. Additionally, universities could deploy “transition coaches”—staff or trained senior students—to check in with first-year students who come from partner schools. The logic is to create a continuum of support: the same mentor or counselor who advised a student in high school could remain a point of contact as that student enters the university (European Training Foundation [ETF], 2023, p. 32). Supported transitions have been evidenced to improve not only enrollment but also student retention and success in higher education (Rashidi & Nura, 2020, p. 17). By proactively addressing academic or personal challenges that new university students face (often due to adjustment issues), mentors can help reduce first-year dropout. Given that Albania’s tertiary education enrollment has been declining in recent years—with a 13% decrease in student numbers from 2016 to 2021 (World Bank, 2022, p. 22)—it is crucial not only to get more students into university but to help them persist once there. A combination of mentorship, orientation modules (e.g., summer bridge courses), and ongoing counseling can significantly mitigate the shock of transition.

Parental and Community Engagement: Schools and universities should jointly host information sessions for parents about higher education pathways, financial planning for university, and the long-term benefits of completing tertiary education (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2021, p. 21). This is particularly important in Albania, where first-generation university students might come from families unfamiliar with higher education. As noted, Slovenia’s approach included dozens of events specifically for parents, which is credited with building broader support for students’ choices (Slovenian Ministry of Labour, 2019, p. 13). Involving local businesses and alumni in these community sessions can further reinforce the message—for example, successful professionals from the community can share how their university education contributed to their career, thus highlighting the value of higher education (Marope, Wells, Hazelnorn, & Lee, 2013, p. 23). The Open Government Partnership in Albania and various youth initiatives could be tapped to sponsor or promote such community dialogues about education-to-career pathways (Municipality of Tirana, 2023, p. 10; RisiAlbania, 2021, p. 6).

Career Exploration and Work-Based Learning in Secondary Education: To align education with labor market needs—and keep students motivated to pursue further education—secondary schools should integrate more career exploration and even work-based learning opportunities with the support of universities and employers (European Training Foundation [ETF], 2023, p. 33; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020, pp. 62–63). This might include expanding job shadowing programs, internships, or project-based collaborations that involve both a school teacher and a university representative in mentoring the student. Albanian schools, especially vocational schools, could replicate this by leveraging university industry networks (University of Nova Gorica, 2022, p. 5). For instance, a technical high school could coordinate with the nearest polytechnic university to send students to engineering firms for short observations, with preparation and debrief facilitated by university staff. These experiences make classroom learning more relevant and help students formulate concrete goals (“I want to study IT at X university because I saw how it leads to a career in software development”). Importantly, they also address the issue of mismatched

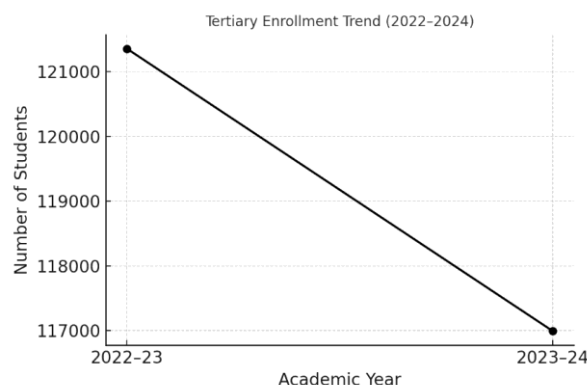
expectations—students often enter university programs without a clear idea of the careers they lead to, sometimes resulting in dissatisfaction or dropout (Conley, 2007, pp. 50–51; Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011, p. 37). Early career exploration can prevent such misalignments by ensuring students choose fields that genuinely interest them and meet their aspirations.

Implementing the above recommendations will require coordination, resources, and a shift toward a more student-centric, pathway-oriented mindset in education policy (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2021, p. 22). However, the payoff can be substantial. By strengthening the link from secondary to tertiary education, Albania stands to gain a higher tertiary enrollment rate, lower university dropout rates, and graduates who are better equipped for the demands of the economy (World Bank, 2022, p. 24). These measures are not just about individual student success—they are about building national human capital and stemming brain drain. Every student successfully guided from high school into and through higher education is more likely to become an active, skilled participant in Albania’s social and economic development.

Conclusions

Despite efforts to expand higher education access, enrollment in Albanian universities has decreased from 121,352 in 2022–2023 to 116,994 in 2023–2024—a 3.6% drop (Institute of Statistics of Albania [INSTAT], 2024, p. 7). This is visualized in Figure 3, underscoring the urgent need for stronger school–university partnerships and early intervention strategies to reverse this trend.

Figure 3. *Trend in Total Tertiary Education Enrollment in Albania (2022–2024)*



Source: (Institute of Statistics of Albania [INSTAT], 2024, p. 7)

This line graph presents the declining trend in overall student enrollment in higher education institutions over the last two academic years.

Bridging the gap between pre-university and university education is a strategic imperative for Albania’s education system. By implementing formal partnerships, collaborative transitional programs, and borrowing proven models like Slovenia’s career centers, Albania can create a seamless continuum from secondary school to higher education. Such an integrated approach ensures that students are not left to navigate the leap to university alone, but rather cross that bridge with awareness, preparation, and support. The good practices discussed – from joint school-university workshops to career mentoring and orientation centers – collectively contribute to a more student-focused transition framework. This framework

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aligns curricula and expectations across education levels, involves multiple stakeholders (educators, families, employers, and authorities) in student guidance, and keeps an eye on the ultimate goals: student success in higher education and relevance to the labor market.

Strengthening the secondary–tertiary link will yield multifaceted benefits. At the individual level, students who are better prepared and informed enter university with greater confidence and realistic expectations, which research shows improves their academic performance and likelihood of degree completion. We can expect to see fewer students making ill-informed program choices or dropping out due to academic shocks. At the institutional level, universities will receive cohorts of freshmen who have the prerequisite skills and motivation, easing the pressure on remedial instruction and improving overall retention and graduation rates. Secondary schools, on the other hand, will be able to bolster their prestige and appeal by demonstrating higher rates of graduates progressing to and succeeding in university. On a societal level, a smoother pipeline to higher education means a more qualified workforce and citizens who are better equipped to contribute to innovation and economic growth. This aligns with Albania’s aspirations to increase tertiary education attainment and curb the exodus of young talent.

In conclusion, by reinforcing partnerships and adopting targeted transition interventions, Albania can turn the vulnerable gap between high school and university into a strong link that propels students forward. The approaches outlined in this paper – cooperation agreements, joint activities, career center models, and comprehensive guidance – are mutually reinforcing pieces of a strategy that places the student’s journey at the center. As Albania looks to the experiences of others and to its own pilot initiatives, it is clear that the time is ripe to institutionalize these good practices. The result will be a more integrated education system in which students seamlessly move from one stage to the next, fully supported to achieve their potential in higher education and beyond. This investment in the educational continuum is ultimately an investment in Albania’s future, ensuring that each new generation is better prepared, better informed, and better connected to contribute to the country’s development.

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