Polis University after the Lean Startup

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Abstract

In 2015, the article 'Polis University as a Lean Startup Innovation' was published in this journal. The present article is a sequel, researching how the follow-up phase after the initial startup has evolved. The purpose of this article is to: i) review Polis University management since the startup phase in terms of lean, entrepreneurial management, and ambidexterity; and ii) examine strategic directions for the future of the university.   The article explains Polis University's management of new and existing business opportunities, and observes that, like so many other organizations, daily business management and incremental improvement tends to receive the most attention. Ambidexterity is organized both structurally through the establishment of an Innovation Factory, and contextually – expecting from staff that they continuously improve their work. Regarding the university's strategic direction, we conclude that Polis University adheres to the aim of bearing relevance for society, identified by European Commission for the future of universities. Polis University was started with the mission to be relevant for society – not only through providing education and conducting research, but also through its envisioned positive impact on Albanian and Western Balkan development.

Keywords: lean startup, innovation, universities, ambidexterity, Albania, Western Balkans

1. Introduction

In 2015, the article 'Polis University as a Lean Startup Innovation' was published in this journal (Nientied, 2015). Using the lean startup approach (Ries, 2011), the case of a new and rapidly developing university in Tirana (Albania) was presented. Polis University's aim was to provide quality education and research and have a positive impact on society. The university began providing education in architecture, planning, environment, and design and grew rapidly during the first ten years in terms of student and staff numbers, research output, and networks and activities impacting society. The last few years have shown consolidation and an increased focus on quality and internationalization.

Albania, a small Western Balkan country with 2.8 million inhabitants, counts 16 public higher education institutions and 23 private higher education institutions (Barlett and Uvalić, 2018; Bino et al., 2021). Higher education systems across the Western Balkans produce many graduates relative to the needs of the labour market, especially from business, administration, and law, leading to high graduate unemployment rates throughout the region. One of the reasons for this is that government funding for higher education is limited, and quality is assessed on the basis of compliance with various bureaucratic standards rather than on the quality of teaching and research delivered and relevance for the labour market. In the Albanian context, Polis University is doing much better than average. The university specialises in Architecture, Planning, Design, Engineering, Environmental Management, and Computer Sciences, and recently launched business studies with a focus on entrepreneurship rather than conventional business administration. 85% of Polis students are employed after graduation. Due to the continued emigration of young, educated people from the Western Balkans (especially Western Europe), unemployment currently decreases.

During the first phase of Polis University, the principles of a lean startup were prominent; exploration and the development of activities in a university (education, research, networking, generating funding, etc.) received the most attention. Seven years later, and with over 15 years of presence, Polis University cannot be labelled as a startup anymore. Since the initial startup phase of Polis University, an emphasis has been placed on the continuous improvement of educational services and research, with less emphasis on innovation. After the initial phase it is crucial to both leverage existing business and explore new business, a quality known as ambidexterity.

This requires combining different styles of management.

In the present article, we study the path that Polis University has walked since the initial startup phase. This path is conditioned by the environment in which universities in the Western Balkans operate – an environment quite distinct from the business contexts sketched by lean startup authors such as Ries (2017) and Furr and Dyer (2014). They do not pay much attention to development constraints, such as restrictive educational policies, bureaucracy, and politics. They focus rather on innovation management in companies that can design 'blue ocean' conditions, meaning that a market can be created that has a lot of potential for the growth of new products and services (Chan Kim and Mauborgne, 2015).

The purpose of this article is to address two issues: i) how the management of Polis University since the startup phase can be characterized in terms of the lean startup approach, entrepreneurial management, and ambidexterity; and ii) the future strategic directions that can be pursued, taking into account the environment, stakeholders' demands, and the university's vision. In private business, shareholders demand the maximum return on their investment in the longer term. The founders of Polis University take a different position; Polis' mission is about social goals, development in the quality of work, impacts on society, and local activism related to the sustainable development goals (SDGs).

This article examines a single case of an emerging university in a small European country, but has wider relevance for other private universities in the region. For the league of well-funded universities in OECD countries that are competitive in the global Shanghai rankings, the lessons learned by Polis will have limited relevance. However, the case of Polis is meaningful for other categories of universities operating in challenging contexts, such as public and private universities that work with limited means to deliver quality outputs in education and research and to serve society. Private universities in the Western Balkans do not receive any government funding and rely, to a large extent, on tuition fees and external project funds.

It is useful to summarize the essence of the earlier article (Nientied, 2015) in which the principles of the lean startup approach were applied, taking into account that setting up a university in Albania is quite different from say, an ICT venture in Silicon Valley. An analysis of the empirical situation based on lean startup principles led to the conclusion that in the case of Polis University, principles of the lean startup approach were at work, namely:

- the entrepreneurial spirit can be everywhere;

- entrepreneurship means management;

- a start-up is an institution, not just a product;

- a startup learns how to build a sustainable business; it is not there to just make stuff or money (validated learning);

- a startup is to turn ideas into products, measure how customers respond and then learn whether to pivot or persevere (i.e. a feedback loop); and

- a new way of accounting is needed to measure progress, set up milestones and how to prioritize work (innovation accounting).

These principles were at work in the development of Polis University despite Polis University being started before the book of Ries (2011) was published. This article concluded that, in the case of Polis University, the startup approach was a logical entrepreneurial strategy to manage objectives in light of high uncertainty and risks in the environment.

Entrepreneurs understand that risks and uncertainties are a part of business development, but most entrepreneurs don't like gambling and wasting funds. A startup approach helps entrepreneurs to manage risk and uncertainty in a rational manner. In his book *The Startup Way*, Ries (2017) focuses on entrepreneurship in existing companies to drive long-term growth and transform culture. The startup way resembles the entrepreneurial management method discussed by Furr and Dyer (2014), juxtaposing traditional management focused on growth, planning, and control against entrepreneurial management focused on handling uncertainty and furthering innovation activities. This approach builds on principles of ambidexterity – the management practices that simultaneously seek to exploitation of resources and explore new business (O'Reilly, 2013).

In the remainder of the article, we first describe the concepts that are used for the case study, namely: the startup way, entrepreneurial management, ambidexterity, and strategic directions in a university environment. These descriptions are concise since the article is oriented towards the application of concepts in real world practice and does not intend to discuss theory. We then offer a description of the development of Polis University since

2015. We report the results of interviews conducted and we discuss management types in relation to ambidexterity. Our attention then turns to a discussion of the strategic directions that Polis University pursues in the challenging context of the Western Balkans, including university-business collaborations, the SDGs (sustainable development goals), and the university's role in service to society and lifelong learning.

2. Concepts

The Startup Way and Entrepreneurial Management

Traditional management practices are no longer able to create long term growth and results, asserts Ries (2017). In today's uncertain world – with new global competition, technological change, and startups emerging everywhere – traditional   management may take care of commodity production but is unable to find new sources of growth that come from innovation. Within a given management portfolio, innovation is often limited to incremental innovation to satisfy relatively predictable investment. When leaps of innovation are attempted, traditional management tools don't fit as entrepreneurship is missing. Ries (2017) describes a 'unified theory of entrepreneurship' for companies with implications for the vision of the company, the skills and resources of would-be entrepreneurs needed to 'think big, start small and scale fast'   (Ries 2011)), and the careful handling of the risks and liabilities of corporate entrepreneurs. In their book *The Innovator's Method: Bringing the Lean Startup into your Organization*, Furr and Dyer (2014) share similar principles of traditional versus entrepreneurial management. They elaborate entrepreneurial management in terms of the innovation method. Figure 1 gives an overview of the innovation process.
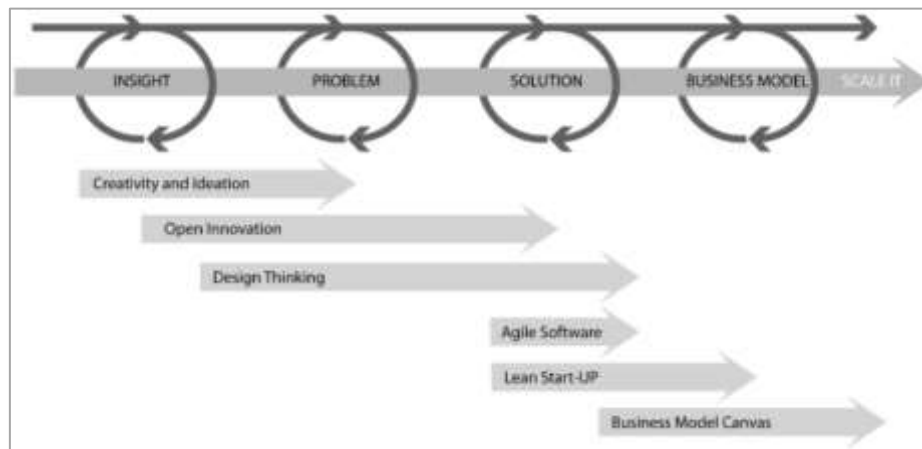

Figure 1. The Innovator's Method (adapted from Furr & Dyer, 2014, 11)

Hampel et al. (2020) suggest that existing literature and practices have started to explore the organisational devices that established firms employ to implement lean, experimentation-based approaches to corporate innovation. However, two blind spots remain, Hampel claims. First, how does corporate innovation work beyond specific, time-limited programs that serve as add-ons?   Secondly, little attention has so far been paid to the study of corporate experimentation as a unit of analysis in its own right.

Ambidexterity

The pattern of traditional management and entrepreneurial management under one roof has a longer history than the startup way. The concept of ambidexterity has been explored over the past few decades (Tushman and O'Reily, 1996; O'Reilly, 2013). The term ambidexterity was first coined by Duncan (1976; in Zimmerman et al., 2018). Duncan suggested that exploitation is supported by mechanistic designs, and exploration by organic organizational designs. Ambidexterity means that an overarching goal allows the leveraging of existing business and exploration of new business (innovation) to coexist. Exploitation of business demands conventional management; exploration demands entrepreneurial management. While ambidexterity, as a suitable balance between exploitation and exploitation, is beneficial, finding this balance is challenging. The two activities have contradictory organizational requirements regarding structures, cultural foci, target systems, and monitoring systems. Organizational solutions often focus on the design of organizational structures; separating exploitation and exploration or integrating them within a single unit. Birkinshaw et al. (2015) take the concept a step further and develop a conceptual integration of dynamic capabilities and ambidexterity perspectives in order to understand how firms adapt to discontinuous change. Birkinshaw and Gibson (2004) suggest that in contrast to organizational ambidexterity (separating exploration from exploitation, contextual ambidexterity represents a complementary process. This is detailed in Table 1 below, adapted from Birkinshaw and Gibson (2004, 50).

Table 1. Two Forms of Ambidexterity

	Structural Ambidexterity	Contextual Ambidexterity
How is ambidexterity achieved	Running the business and exploration/innovation are in separate units or teams	Individual employees divide their time between running the business and innovation
Who decides on ambidexterity	Top of the organization	Professionals, front line workers, teams
Role of top-management	Define the structure	Develop the organizational context in which individuals (teams) act
Nature of roles	Relatively clearly defined	Relatively flexible
Skills of employees	More specialists	More generalists

Zimmerman et al. (2018) show that the focus of ambidexterity solutions in literature is on top management decisions. The authors conclude however that frontline managers play a proactive role in initiating ambidextrous strategies because they are the ones who actively shape organizational systems and processes to reconcile exploration-exploitation tensions. Additionally, in the experience of the authors, existing organizations tend to favour exploitation, if just for the 'urgent versus important' tensions in the organization. This tension is often won by 'urgent' things that need to be done to achieve quarterly or annual performance targets, solve operational issues, or manage complex production systems.

Ambidexterity and the environment of universities

Reconciling exploration and exploitation, as well as conventional management and entrepreneurial management, should be seen from an environmental perspective, referring to what the market and various internal and external stakeholders demand from a university in the present and the future. The environments and force fields of universities are complex since there are many stakeholders with different demands. This makes formulating an innovation agenda quite difficult. Delivering education and publishing quality research results is not sufficient (EC, 2020; van't Land et al., 2021) – stakeholders often demand much more. Among other matters, universities are expected to engage in university–industry collaboration and be entrepreneurial, transfer pro-social skills to students, contribute to SDGs, show transparency in their operations, and help tackle disinformation and build trust in science among the public, among other things. From the various expectations, YERUN (2021) identifies four missions for universities, namely a mission in education, research, innovation, and impact policies/supporting communities. These missions require constant interaction and a long-term strategy.

3. Research Approach

In our 2015 article, an account was given of the first decade of Polis University. Here, we focus on the period since 2015. After selecting key literature to explain the concepts of lean startup and ambidexterity, we reviewed documents concerning (the future of) higher education in Europe and the Western Balkans. We examined Polis University documents (to which we had full access) to study management practices. During the empirical research, one author of the present article conducted participant-observation in management and staff meetings at the university, department, and project levels, while the other author critically examined the observations made. Observations were specifically focused on work priorities and time allocated to innovation. Next, a total of 12 interviews were conducted with the rector, the administrator of the university, (vice) deans, coordinators, and staff. In addition, we conducted eight interviews with other stakeholders, including government and business representatives as well as alumni. The functions of the interviewed persons are detailed in Annex 1. For the interviews we used an item list (summarized in Table 2, and detailed in Annex 1) to allow for discussion and in-depth follow-up questions. Interviews were conducted in May and June 2022.

Table 2. Main Interview Items

Management	Staff	Other stakeholders
- strategy/external environment - conventional/entrepreneurial management - balance between exploitation and exploration - corporate entrepreneurship	- attention to regular tasks of education - attention to research - attention to innovation - management practices/support for development	- expectations from society - triple helix and university–industry relations - LLL lifelong learning - role of government

For the study of Polis' management practices, 12 interviews were sufficient to reach information saturation, given the information obtained from observations and our first-hand knowledge. Regarding the interviews with other stakeholders, the experience of a study on post-secondary education in Albania conducted in 2021 for the United Nations Development Program by the authors was very useful (UNDP, 2021), especially the results concerning private sector expectations of students and universities, and business-university collaboration.

4. Research Results

Interviews: Management and Staff

The management of Polis University states that the university's strategy continues to be one of gradual growth. Presently, the average annual turnover of POLIS and its legally autonomous units such as Co-PLAN and Metro-POLIS amounts to about 4-4.5M EUR per year. The strategy of gradual growth implies that the diversification of the academic offer is mostly vertical: only a limited number of study programs in terms of new disciplines (computer science and business management) have been developed, and most attention has gone into specializations in master-level education, short-term courses, and establishing a high-quality PhD program. This is viewed by the respondents as incremental innovation. Management has been stressing quality and the consolidation of programs in terms of content, delivery, and assessment. Polis University management speaks about its management activities as a 'balancing act' beyond the tensions of innovation/exploitation; there is great competition to attract new students, pressure to meet the external demands of society, and give due attention to the government bureaucracy.

The university has pursued internationalization objectives, meaning that Master degrees have been organized as joint or double degrees with foreign universities from EU countries. This has contributed to the increase in staff and student international exchanges . The mobility of students and staff has been primarily funded by the EU's Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility program. International projects in general (such as Creative Europe, bilateral projects, EU's Horizon program) and especially the Erasmus Capacity Building in Higher Education program have become very important for the university, with Polis acting as either a grant-holder or consortium member, providing significant contributions to enhancing capacities and know-how.

In 2015, the new Law on Higher Education in Albania became effective. Many adjustments in university governance had to be carried out in order to comply with the provisions of the new law and subsequent bylaws. Conformity with the legislation continues to be a demanding task considering the bureaucracy and centralization of many educational processes in Albania. A new set of quality standards and indicators was also introduced. For Polis' management, institutional accreditation by an international institute was a milestone. Quality Assurance Agency (based in the UK) was contracted by the Albanian Government to conduct an institutional quality assessment of the Albanian Higher Education Institutions in 2017. The accreditation review was based on a self-evaluation report that the university submitted with a number of supporting documents and evidence, as well as a visit to the institution where a series of meetings were held with various stakeholders (management, faculty, students, administrators, alumni, and employers, among others). A survey with both staff and students was also conducted prior to the visit of the evaluation group. The final review was very positive, confirming not only full compliance with quality standards but also identifying best-practices. Polis University was granted accreditation for the maximal validity foreseen by the law - six years. For the management, a positive accreditation meant that less energy was needed to 'explain'(sometimes 'justify') Polis University as a private university delivering quality outputs.

The interviews evidenced that it was important that Polis University had started to gain more awareness of its identity and the perception of stakeholders through various feedback channels. These channels include an increasing pool of graduates (hence a growing community of alumni and their employers), as well as feedback from accreditation processes, partners, and collaborators. Such feedback has triggered deliberations to envision a distinct profile for Polis University and has led to discussions on how to optimally capitalize on its good

reputation. These discussions (in various management levels) informed the Development Strategy 2015-2020, a document that outlined the university's short and mid-term objectives regarding academic programs, research, and internationalization. Innovation was not an explicit aim of the development strategy, although many objectives entailed incremental innovations.

The management of Polis University considers continuous internationalization essential for quality, staffing, research, and fundraising, especially because of the university's objective to have a stronger regional impact at Western Balkan level. This implies more impactful research outputs, a more structured cooperation with industries, stronger ties with (international) partner organizations, and a more active role as an ecosystem actor.

Both management and staff members mention the high level of students and alumni engagement in activities adopting a problem-based or challenge-based approach, which was considered a best practice during the accreditation process. Together with a large share of students that are self-employed, free-lancers, or that start their own company, these dynamics have pushed Polis to be more active in its attempt to foster entrepreneurship among its students and graduates. An important contribution to this end was provided by 'EU for Innovation,' a European program implemented in Albania by the German and Swedish Cooperation. Through funds and technical assistance provided by this program, Polis University established a maker-space that seeks to serve start-ups and businesses with know-how and expertise in design thinking, digital fabrication, 3-D printing, and prototyping. Acknowledging the positive effect that a more entrepreneurial mindset can bring, especially for applied research and in fostering university-industry cooperation, Polis University, together with four other Albanian universities, became the initiator of the first multi-university incubator in Albania called Tirana Inc. The challenge now is to make such structures sustainable beyond donor project support. Hence, a high priority is given by Polis University to project acquisition and diversification of revenue streams, next to the big EU programs for education, science, and innovation that will   remain the primary potential sources for the coming years.

Regarding the balance between exploration (innovation) and exploitation, answers from respondents vary. Representatives from management say that while not very well structured, the intentional focus on innovation has already set a series of developments in motion, such as the activities mentioned in the previous paragraph and the intensification of cooperation with local and international actors. However, management expects more from the staff so that bottom-up initiatives become the prevailing model. At the same time, the staff acknowledges that more can be done but that the time available to them to invest in innovation activities (among teaching, students counselling, and reporting) is limited. They have the freedom to develop new products, but they need time and support to do so. The PhD program, facilitated by the university, is designed to serve that purpose but a better alignment between individual research and institutional research objectives is needed. Fostering a group research culture is a top priority in the institutional strategy 2021-2026 (Polis University, 2021). Another issue is that room for new initiatives is offered, but top managers have many initiatives that also need to be given priority attention, for example time needed to support new, inexperienced staff when they start working at Polis University.

Interviews: External Respondents

Interviews with stakeholders vary according to the background of the respondents. Representatives from other universities share Polis's issues with bureaucracy and the diminishing number of potential students due to emigration, while representatives from business and not-for-profit and government organizations focus on their demands in terms of skilled staff. Government representatives tend to focus on educational quality and regulation.

Beyond education, expectations from society regarding universities are not clearly articulated. This mirrors findings from our recent study on post-graduate education in Albania (UNDP, 2021). Representatives from business and other organizations state that they need well-educated graduates with relevant skills. IT companies for example approach Polis University to acquire fresh graduates because of the lack of IT professionals elsewhere. Collaboration between higher education and employers is limited. Employers and companies have limited input on the curricula, as deliberations and decision-making on new study programs, teaching resources, and methodologies is usually done within individual departments. Government representatives have limited demands, expecting that universities work according to the guidelines given in the Law on Higher Education. In other countries, universities are engaged by governments for advice is various fields. In Albania, this is much less the case – the belief in the public sector is that the government's function is to finance public institutes and control the quality of education, not to ask for studies or advice. The topic of triple helix (private sector – public sector – university collaboration) has been discussed in seminars, but the

implementation of triple helix arrangements is very rare and have been initiated by international donors present in Albania. The recent project Tirana Inc., financed by donors, is a collaboration between universities, ecosystem actors, and the private sector. The government is represented but not active as partner.

Regarding lifelong learning (LLL), Albanian companies and individuals show a rather reluctant attitude. Government representatives know that LLL is in vogue but they do not have a clear vision of what the government's role is, except for legal requirements like recognition of achievements. New developments such as the recent law on Vocational Education Training, as well as the increasing number of providers in VET trainings, primarily target secondary schoolers and secondary school graduates.   Even though the needs of the current labour force to upskill and/or reskill are eminent (increasing with the pressing demand for digitalization), adult participation in formal or informal training is very low (below 10% - OECD 2022). In response to this low participation, universities are expected to deliver well-tailored LLL courses to equip participants with practical skills as opposed to the theory-based education that is still dominant in the Albanian higher education. Companies are reluctant to recommend their staff to LLL.

5. Discussion

The Lean Startup Way and Ambidexterity

As a university that developed in a lean startup fashion, the practice of innovation and entrepreneurship in learning cycles is part of the DNA of Polis. There are many ideas and potential initiatives but managing the now routine processes of education on the one hand, and scarcity of funds on the other, limits turning ideas and initiatives into reality. Indeed, managing routine business is at times harder than developing ideas and potential initiatives. As a new, specialised university, Polis University started with an innovative concept that has been elaborated in practice. Over the course of time, various small improvements (incremental innovations) have been introduced, like new educational programs and international research projects. These improvements have strengthened the exploitation and business development side of the university. Exploration of new activities has received less management attention, in part because of the continuous effort to make ends meet and search for finances for research and projects.

From the observations and interviews, it became clear that Polis University employs both structural and contextual ambidexterity. On the structural side, a unit called Innovation Factory was initiated, with the aim of spurring and coordinating innovation. Innovation Factory developed a maker space equipped with various 3-D printers, 3-D scanners, CNC machines, and a robotic arm, to help students and outside companies to develop products. Polis University also became a principal partner in Tirana Inc., a donor-supported program to help start-ups. On the contextual side, department and academic staff members are expected to devote time and energy to innovation. From the interviews and observations, we concluded that more is expected with regards to innovation, but expectations differ between the staff (who expect better articulated milestones and indicators from management) and managers (who expect more innovation initiatives and outputs from the staff). For all parties, innovation management, including coordination, is still unsatisfactory.   Polis' recently established Innovation Factory has yet to act as the leading coordinator of innovation at the university. An overall innovation strategy (Pisano, 2015) is missing. The academic staff is mostly concerned with teaching and activities related to improving education. Carrying out research and working on high quality publications is more challenging. Moreover, academic staff is often not clear on what kind of innovation they should or could be working on, how to form interdisciplinary teams, and how to get funding. Contextual ambidexterity as an expectation is in the minds of Polis' management but is still limited in practice.

The External Environment and Strategic Options

We concluded from the interviews with stakeholders outside of the university that the demands on universities are generally limited to education. Companies look at universities as a pipeline for new staff. When it comes to research and innovation, there are very few structured and effective collaboration models between academia and industry in Albania. An exception is the agricultural sector, where modest technology transfer centres are functioning. For the managers of Polis University, and for many staff members as well, the limited expectations from stakeholders is not a motive for refraining from activities with an impact on society. One respondent used the phrase 'we are a bit of a missionary institution.'

6. Strategic Options for the Future

Earlier in this article, reference was made to European perspectives on the future of universities. In the context of universities in the Western Balkans, two significant factors need to be mentioned. The first is that national investment in R&D in the Western Balkans was only about 0.4 % of GDP (Sphere, 2017). Jusufi and Ajdarpašić

(2020) make clear that Western Balkan universities have become dependent on EU education and research programs to develop new curricula, new study programmes, and research projects. Brajkovic (2016, 29) concludes that more funding, like in EU countries, is not a solution: "..experience in post-transition countries, especially in this region, suggests that some of the institutional and systemic challenges in these societies exceed anything that developed countries have ever faced - such as strict government oversight paired up with inefficient bureaucratic structures, lack of long-term strategies, and, in some cases, corruption." National governments in the Western Balkans need to revise their approaches towards higher education and their role in national development, fostering the accountability of universities not by means of centralization and rigid, detailed legislation, but by effective monitoring and evaluation instruments that respect the autonomy of performing institutions. The second contextual factor is emigration. In Albania, net emigration of well-educated young people is substantial and accounts for almost 40% of the total estimated cumulative outflow. This is substantial. Well-educated people leave the country because of economic, social, institutional, and political motives. The non-negligible unemployment rate among the highly educated is an important push factor (Leitner, 2021).

The demands placed on universities depend on their national contexts. In the Western Balkans, formal demands from the government are concerned with education and the management of educational processes. Other university missions in research, innovation, and impacting policies are not supported by the government in the case of Polis University. Most countries pursue models of academic excellence based on standardization of performance systems and rankings, for instance. In that pursuit however, key facets of a university's mission are lost (Salmi, 2021), such as equity, access, truth-seeking skills, the foundations of a genuine liberal arts education, ethics, engagement with and commitment to local communities (Hazelkorn, 2020), and the sustainability of its own operations. YERUN (2021) identifies four missions of universities in: education, research, innovation, and impact policies. YERUN concludes that these missions require constant interaction and a long-term strategy covering all four. Expectations of universities in Europe are high (and they should be) as social, economic, cultural, and environmental challenges are enormous (EUA, 2021). Summarizing the reports reviewed (See Endnote 1), these expectations can be summarized as follows:

- Education: develop quality teaching and learning for life;

- Research: become trustworthy and authoritative to society;

- Service to society: serve communities, governments, and industries;

- Activism and impact: work as an 'objective activist' on the Sustainable Development Goals.

These challenges are broad, interrelated, and multidisciplinary. Universities have to partly shift attention from disciplinary education and research activities towards other activities with relevance for society.

Polis University's vison and mission contain these elements and mentions, next to education and research, 'serving innovation' and 'professional leadership for students in order to exert influence for positive development of the country and the region' (brochure *Polis at a Glance*). Impact policies are framed through leadership but Polis University aims at making a more direct, positive impact as well. It provides post-secondary professional programs in Energy Efficiency and IT, as well as lifelong learning courses in the fields of energy, real estate, and land assessment. Another type of impact is delivered through the offices of Co-PLAN Institute for Habitat Development and Metro-POLIS architecture and design. These two institutes have social goals and work on the basis of current and expected demands. They also pro-actively support social developments. Some examples include: Co-PLAN's many community-based projects and recently-prepared, model earthquake emergency plan at the municipal level after the 2019/2020 earthquakes; and Polis University's 'Albania 2030 Manifesto' (Aliaj et al., 2014), as well as the institution's studies leading to new legislation. Results and experiences obtained in design studies and community work are linked back to education and research, and staff of the institutes also teach in Polis University. Polis University attempts to create synergy by combining their missions in education, research, innovation, and impacts on communities (Aliaj and Perna, 2021). Regarding Polis University's development, Aliaj (the Rector of Polis) and Perna (2021, 89) state: "The constant awareness that we develop through almost two decades has been possible only through defining some untouchable pillars of our vision: being independent, being legitimate, and being sustainable/resilient to the external world."

The term 'higher education institute,' which is widely used, seems inadequate for universities that are engaged in innovation and making a positive impact on communities. The term multiversity was introduced long ago (Kerr, 1963). Kerr saw the modern university as a "whole series of communities and activities held together by a common name, a common board and related purposes (Kerr, 1963, 1), and stressed the resilient character of universities. Frank and Sieh (2016) use the term multiversity to characterize modern universities more generally as fulfilling multiple functions of teaching, research, and engaging in knowledge transfer. Krücken (2020)

approaches the university as an actor (a coherent, integrated, goal-oriented and competitive organizational actor) rather than an institution (consisting of communities). He discusses new missions for universities, for example, "the direct transfer of knowledge and technology to society, termed the 'third academic mission,' as well as tackling grand challenges, the promotion of equal opportunity, internationalization or sustainability." (Ibid., 164)

Hazelkorn (2020, 7) indicates that there are three broad approaches for engagement. The social justice model focuses on students, curriculum, and pedagogy. At the other end of the spectrum is the economic development model, which focuses on the commercialization of research through intellectual property deals and technology transfer, for instance. The public good model, in contrast, sees engagement as wholly embedded within and across all functions and units of the university; it is a bridge across teaching and research. Polis University is engaged in all three forms of engagement. Next to improving the education and research processes, social justice is addressed through fellowships for bright, deserving students and under-represented groups. The economic development model is also adopted, for example by offering paid services to companies. The public good model is the core of Polis, as a bridge across education, research, and innovation, as well as impact work on society. It should be kept in mind that Albanian universities differ from the Western European universities that receive more public funding for innovation and where high-tech companies actively search for collaboration with universities. While Polis realised a makerspace in its Innovation Factory in 2021, Western European universities work with much more advanced labs.

Directions for European Universities

The European Commission (2015) has encouraged discussion in and among European universities to consider the future of higher education. The European Commission identified globalisation, demographic changes, and technological development as trends that bring challenges and opportunities, and highlighted the importance of the 'knowledge triangle' (the acts of learning, discovering, and innovating) as an engine for creating, sharing, using, and transforming knowledge for the benefit of society. Three broad principles guide the EU's thinking about Europe's knowledge institutions and governance: openness, experimentation, and European-level cooperation. The EU took initiative in creating a single market for knowledge – the European Research Area. In 2020, the European Commission discussed a 2030 vision of the future of universities in Europe (CESS, 2020) in the field of research and innovation. The main challenges identified included the sustainable development goals (SDG) and digitalisation. A key point of the report is, "In a knowledge triangle context, universities need to build on their core missions of education, research and 'services to society' in a way that encompasses both existing and new challenges: delivery of talents and knowledge to society, societal engagement, citizen outreach, social innovation, and technological innovation for the benefit of the economy" (ibid., 23). The report concludes with a long list of strategic recommendations at the EU, national, and university levels to be implemented in the coming years.

Consortia of European universities (see endnote 1) have developed a 2030 vision for universities and, by and large, its goals fall in line with the EU 2030 vision. For example EUA (2021, 5) states that all of Europe's universities will be responsible, autonomous, and free, with different institutional profiles, but united in their missions of learning, teaching, research, innovation, and culture in service to society, and that ".. universities will build on their capacity to evolve and will become engines of societal change. They will provide an open, transformative space for common knowledge production through research, education, innovation and culture. Together with other societal stakeholders, they will shape the future of a knowledge-driven society." EU universities are very diverse, and in some countries (for example Bulgaria) the underfunding of education and research and societal issues are comparable to the issues Polis University faces in Albania.

Polis University has been active in European networks of research and education, and service to society is in its DNA. Moreover, as a young university with a vision to serve society, Polis University does not have the legacy structure of "the 'ivory tower' of the 19-century type of academia" (European Commission, 2021, 6). However, Polis University operates in an Albanian policy and regulatory context based on this outdated thinking, reinforced by half a century of harsh communism and unstable conditions during the transition period. Given these conditions, falling back on traditional academic models is somewhat understandable. The EC (2021) suggests that universities propose new social contracts with stakeholders in their local, regional, and national ecosystems and should become drivers of open science; collaborative entrepreneurship and innovation; and societal and economic renewal and transformation. This is a welcomed development. European universities are nonetheless asking questions about autonomy and especially about funding in response to these new priorities, as is apparent from the reports reviewed.

Taking the recommendations of the EC (2021) as a yardstick, a picture for Polis University is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Reforms according to the European Commission

EC (2021) Strategic Reform Recommendations	Polis University Considerations
To reform curricula and learning paradigms to educate students and life-long learners for a fully sustainable economic development model	Continued connections between research and teaching and experiences from practices; development of lateral skills training (leadership, innovation and entrepreneurship); strengthening of university – industry relations
To lead, as organizations, the way towards sustainability in the broadest sense	Study the SDGs and formulate an agenda for Polis contribution; Set goals for reducing own carbon footprint; increase inclusivity and diversity; strengthen innovation; Strengthen SDG research and outreach; Collaborate with business, NGO,s and government to pursue SDG's; Strengthen SDG activism
To embrace fully digitalization for improving education (access, quality)	Continued development of blended learning formats; Develop online lifelong learning
To strengthen strategic collaboration networks	Further develop networks for lifelong (online) learning; pool talent; develop pan-European learning and innovation platforms; Mature networks in the Mediterranean / Balkans
To focus on lifelong learning rather than a five-year degree; provide a link to knowledge and education to SMEs	Develop and deliver teaching and learning for life: learners, companies who need the talent and research universities create, and society at large should be at the heart of philosophy, culture, strategy, and policies of universities.

In this snapshot of considerations for the future, all relevant stakeholders are present. Students will become alumni and engage in lifelong learning. Companies will benefit if Polis University delivers graduates with relevant skills and if the university can offer services like the makerspace and advisory assistance via Co-PLAN and Metro-Polis. Society locally and at large will benefit from the university's engagement in socio-economic and environmental issues. The most distant actor is the government, since the government acts like a regulator rather than a stakeholder supporting new university profiles. As a private university, Polis has to deal with regulations concerning education and academic governance, which are compliance and control related rather than development orientated. Polis University does not receive funding and has to earn its income through student fees and revenues from projects and services. As an independent university however, policies and regulations cannot stop Polis University from undertaking innovation, collaborating with communities and companies, and developing training for lifelong learning.

Recommendations

Polis University still needs to make significant efforts to achieve the EU reforms outlined in Table 3. We conclude that Polis University is doing many things right, such as focusing on quality development and internationalization. The reform elements are present (Polis University, 2021) but require consistent work to be developed further. The regulatory and financial context in the Western Balkans is rather unfavourable and therefore perseverance is needed. We suggest two key recommendations. Firstly, both management and staff should have the same idea of the balance between the various types of activities (i.e. how much time/effort should be spent on education and research, various innovations, and actions towards society). An innovation strategy with broad participation from the staff could be instrumental. Both the execution and sustainability of such a strategy is highly dependent on the competences and capabilities of the staff. In order to mitigate the potential risk of high staff turn-over, it is imperative to have an institutionalized and broadly shared strategy as opposed to one that is dependent on a handful of people. Secondly, Polis University should strengthen university – industry relations. This is far from easy since many industries have a limited interest in the potential benefits that university – industry collaboration may offer. In Albania, 90% of enterprises are SMEs, which makes it challenging to engage in a continuous dialogue with the academia. Polis University is actively moving in meaningful industry - university relations. Making particular use of its alumni network and business school stands to improve collaboration and promote lifelong learning.

7. Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this paper has been to examine Polis University since its initial startup phase in terms of the concepts that define the startup way, entrepreneurial management, and ambidexterity. Secondly, this paper considers strategic directions for the future. In this conclusion, we briefly summarize the findings and the submit a reflection on the relevance of this case for other studies.

We have concluded that Polis University makes tangible efforts to manage both exploration and exploitation and that, like so many other organizations, the daily management of exploitation and incremental improvements tend to receive more attention. Ambidexterity is organized both structurally through the establishment of an Innovation Factory, as well as contextually with the expectation that staff continuously improve their own work and add to Polis's innovation portfolio. Polis University realises that in the field of innovation there are still significant efforts that can be made. With regards to the future of universities as sketched by the EC (and generally confirmed by many universities) we can say that Polis University in headed in the right direction. Given its organization and activities, the concept of 'multiversity' seems to be a more appropriate term to describe Polis than higher education institution. Polis University was started with a mission to be relevant for society not only through providing education and conducting research, but also in its envisioned positive impact on development. A high level of engagement in society is therefore present.

We claimed in the introduction that this study of a single, upcoming university in a small European country has wider relevance due to the unfavourable conditions in many countries for universities to do more than just deliver education. Yet, the only way for universities in these conditions to remain relevant actors that play a key role in their regional innovation ecosystems is to seek for impact, with and for society and industry. The EC (2021) strategic reform recommendations offer, in our view, a suitable agenda for research. Further research is needed on the possible implementation of: 1) reform of curricula and learning paradigms to educate students and life-long learners for a fully sustainable economic development model; 2) leadership needed for contributing to sustainability in the broadest sense; 3) digitalization for improving education access and quality; 4) strategic collaboration networks; and 5) lifelong learning rather than a five-year degree. Research priorities may vary. For example, in Polis University's case, digitalization receives the attention it needs, but reforming learning paradigms to educate students and life-long learners for sustainable development is a topic that is insufficiently dealt with. Involving government agencies in the suggested reforms is a difficult but essential task, that may be facilitated by networks of higher education institutions.

Notes

[1] Documents selected regarding demands on universities and the future of universities are: Davey et al., (2018); van't Land, H., Corcoran, A., & Camelia Iancu (2021); CSES (2020); EUA (2021); Morisson & Pattinson (2020); European Commission (2021); and YERUN (2021).

[2] Bassett (2021, 401-402) expands the concept to 'omniversity'; "With its four-dimensional dynamic, the 21st Century omniversity is a multiversity without borders or limits to its academic mission, taking the convening power of the university truly global. Creating hubs for teaching, research, innovation, entrepreneurship, and more than those previously anchored in local, regional, and national communities to create a span of impact and influence across the entire globe. The omniversity is a place where location—the institutions', students', and academic staff's—is almost irrelevant." The term omniversity is relevant for institutions like ECIU University (2021). For the case of Polis University, we prefer the term 'multiversity' because Polis embraces digitalization but is not a global institution.

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Annex 1: Interviewed Persons and Item Lists

Interviews: Polis University (internal)

Persons interviewed

1. Rector
2. Vice-rector
3. Administrator
4. Head International Projects
5. Dean Faculty of Architecture and Design
6. Vice-Dean Faculty of Research
7. Staff member, Faculty of Architecture and Design (a)
8. Staff member, Faculty of Architecture and Design / Innovation Factory (b)
9. Staff member, Faculty of Planning
10. Staff member, Faculty of Research
11. Staff member, MBA (since 2022: Business School)
12. Staff member, Computer Sciences Department

Interview Topics: Management

- Strategy follow-up 2020
- Is there an innovation strategy? What/who directs innovation?
- Is there enough innovation? Innovation initiatives (who, which ones)
- Slow development of the Innovation Factory - Comment

- Type of management - conventional (administrative) versus more entrepreneurial management
- Balance between exploitation and exploration
- How management deals with staff comments about work pressure / not enough time for research and new developments
- Corporate entrepreneurship – delegation of tasks and budgets for new ventures.
- Sketch of Polis University's current position/external environment
- Demands on university from stakeholders
- Process of strategy formulation

Interview Topics: Staff

- Balance between regular tasks of education, research, and new developments
- Involvement in innovation? Why (not)?
- Involvement in internationalization? How?
- Expectations from management
- Management practices and support for development (research, innovation)

Interviews: External Stakeholders

1. Alumnus, presently in businesses
2. Alumnus, presently in businesses
3. Alumnus, presently in businesses
4. Director, private business
5. Representative National Agency for Scientific Research and Innovation
6. Representative Ministry of Education
7. Rector, private university
8. Dean, public university

Interview Topics: Stakeholders (adjusted to the background of each respondent)

- Relationship with higher education institutions/Polis University
- Expectations from higher education
- Participation in triple helix/in university – industry relations
- Pursuing lifelong learning in own company (university/policy)
- Opinion regarding the role of the government