

LIFESTYLES OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN ALBANIA¹

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1. Introduction

Throughout decades Albania has been considered the “Cinderella of Europe”, a victim of a contemporary and double dispute, on the one hand during the Cold War between the different blocs and, on the other hand, for the domestic rivalry between Fatos Nano and Sali Berisha. Nowadays, after more than twenty-five years of democracy, the Country of the Eagles has got solid foundations and aims at a both regional and European growing integration.

However, the transition from Hoxha’s dictatorship to democracy was tortuous. After Enver Hoxha’s death in April 1985, Albanian governments, unlike the politicians of Eastern Europe countries which were following the path of democratic reforms, continued to support the idea that they were the only country to build “the true Socialism in the world” (Dell’Erba, 1997). Shortly this situation inevitably resulted in a collapse of all the Albanian state institutions, from political to economic, from military to education ones. At the same time, since 1990 to present a large number of Albanians have seen both temporary and permanent migration as a valid opportunity to improve their living conditions. Moreover, the geographical proximity with some destination countries represented an advantage for those attracted by the economic well-being shown in Western TV shows and commercials. The Albanian governments themselves have not hindered this process of migrant leak because they thought that the migrants remittances would represent a source of growth for the Albanian state. Actually, only in the last years the negative effects of mass migration on family, economy and population structure are emerging. The westbound migration has also caused a considerable influence of Western models on the traditional structure of the Albanian society which has also led to a real cultural and identity crisis. On top of that, an important element of the Albanian transition is to be focused: the transformation of the education system,

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especially University. Indeed, University, as a hotbed of the ruling class and “channel for transmission” of the national culture, represents a fundamental institution within society and a pillar in the democratization and re-modernization process of the country (Pantella, 2004).

2. The University system in Albania

The first University in Albania, established in Tirana, was founded in 1957 by the Albanian Labour Party, which considered the educational institutions of great importance. Since its inception the Albanian University followed a “Communist” approach, i.e. the faithful to the party and to the dogmas of the Stalinism was considered a *conditio sine qua non* to access the University teaching and career².

During the Communist regime, in Albania even the University enrollment depended on the political careers of the students’ fathers and only after the Central Committee approval a student could access the limited University vacancies in the country.

Following the collapse of Communism, the demand of the increasing number of post-diploma students did not match the inadequate offer of the University system. To cope with the increasing demand the Albanian government decided that the high average grade in the high school years combined with the outcome of the state exam was a prerequisite for the University access³.

Due both to the limited vacancies of the state University and the rigid procedure of state selection the number of private Universities increased, whose enrollment costs were much higher than the state system,

Therefore, since the first years of 2000, the liberalization of the University system on the one hand has opened up greater opportunities for training, on the other hand it has led to University degrees not always in accordance with the needs of the socio-economic development of the country.

For the sake of clarity of a situation that in a few years seemed to get out of control, in January 2014 the Albanian government set up an ad hoc committee – chaired by Prof. Arjan Gjonçaj and composed by academics of the state and private system – whose role was to examine the locations, the curricula and the papers of all the Universities throughout the country.

² In the first academic year 1957-1958 the University of Tirana had 3,613 students in 15 Faculties. Nowadays the University of Tirana is the largest public University in the country and the first choice for high school graduates, with about 40,000 students, <http://www.unitir.edu.al/index.php/sq/rrethnesh/historiku/universiteti-i-tiranes>.

³ Further details may be found in Ligj n. 80/2015 “Për arsimin e lartë dhe kërkimin shkencor në institucionet e arsimit të lartë në Republikën e Shqipërisë”.

The report of the Gjonçaj Committee revealed that Albania had 59 Universities, 15 were public and 44 were private; about 1,500 syllabi, 650 Bachelor's Degrees, 600 professional and scientific Master courses, 100 Doctorate degrees were offered. More than 78% of 160,000 University students were enrolled to public Universities. Yet, beyond the data, during the investigation irregularities have been encountered. Consequently the above Committee has launched work towards a reform of the University system in line with the international standards (Gjatolli, 2015). In addition, following the Report of the Committee the government has adopted an action plan structured in three categories to improve the University system: the Universities in the first category were allowed to continue with their academic activities, under close monitoring, up to the effective implementation of the Ministry's suggestions; the Universities in the second category were requested a temporary suspension of their activities as a matter of urgency, lasting two years, during this period the institutions would be unable to enroll new students until the legal requirements were met; but, the Universities in the third category underwent a definite withdrawal of the license: 18 private institutions and 6 branches of public Universities were closed down⁴.

3. The research

Lifestyle is "a way of living based on identifiable patterns of behaviour which are determined by the interplay between an individual's personal characteristics, social interactions, and socioeconomic and environmental living conditions" (WHO, 1998, p. 16). The aim of the research is to analyse the lifestyles of the Albanian University students, the children of a nation which in the last 25 years has undergone significant changes, opening up to markedly Western behavioural patterns. The democratization process which started a quarter century ago in Albania, involved several areas, and also influenced the lifestyles of the population. The Country of the Eagles, which in the last years of the Communist regime had a predominantly agricultural and labour intensive economy, necessary to meet the nation's food demand, since the nineties has undergone a fast process of urbanization and economic growth. This change, that in low- and middle-income countries resulted in a decrease of the opportunities of physical activities (Monda *et alii*, 2007; Ng *et alii*, 2009; Abubakari *et alii*, 2009; Sobngwi *et alii*, 2002), was decisive for Albania as well. Indeed, since the first democratic elections, the Country of the Eagles has undergone a significant change by adopting markedly Western patterns and behaviours. Some of the consequences were: an increase in

⁴ Further details may be found in the Report of the Committee, available in the following link: http://www.arsimi.gov.al/files/userfiles/reformaalksh/Raport_Final_Ministria_Arsimit.pdf.

the number of people who owned a car, a higher availability of Western food, and consequently the introduction of new eating habits and a decrease in the levels of physical activities (Shapo *et alii*, 2003). The democratization process also contributed to remove the main prejudices of the regime time: for instance, smoking cigarettes, which in the Albanian culture of the past was a men's prerogative, has gradually spread among women as well, as a sign of the emancipation towards new lifestyles, mainly among the young generations (Zaloshnja *et alii*, 2010). A similar attitude happened with the consumption of alcoholic beverages which increased among women over time (Burazeri, Kark, 2010).

This research contributes to increase the knowledge of the lifestyles in a country where "new" behaviours and habits, once unpopular, are growing, especially in young generations. Furthermore the lifestyles mirror the wellbeing of the population as they may play a significant role in preventing illnesses, in controlling the evolution, or, likewise, they may represent the cause. This is what happens for the main cause of death in the world, namely non-communicable diseases: a high percentage of these illnesses could be prevented through the reduction of the risk factors linked to people behaviour, such as the physical inactivity, incorrect eating habits, tobacco smoking habit and the harmful use of alcohol (WHO, 2013). Indeed, these last habits represent the object of investigation in this research, which contributes not only to outline the behavioural patterns of the young Albanians, but also to identify the risk factors in order to carry out prevention and information actions, aimed at promoting a health and wellbeing culture.

4. The sample and the survey

The research has involved the students enrolled in the Albanian Universities during the academic year 2016/2017. The nonprobability sampling technique, quota sampling, has been used for the construction of the sample (Corbetta, 2014); this on the basis of two known variables: the gender of students and the type of University attended (public or private) (Table 1), setting the sample size to 1,000 units (Table 2).

Table 1 – Population: University students in Albania for type of University attended and gender, a. y. 2015/2016 (a. v. and %).

	Public University		Private University		Total	
	A. V.	%	A. V.	%	A. V.	%
Men	48,946	33.4	12,697	8.6	61,643	42.0
Women	72,692	49.5	12,421	8.5	85,113	58.0
Total	121,638	82.9	25,118	17.1	146,756	100.0

Source: our elaborations on INSTAT 2017 data.

Table 2 – Sample: University students in Albania for type of University attended and gender, a. y. 2015/2016 (a. v. and %).

	Public University		Private University		Total	
	A. V.	%	A. V.	%	A. V.	%
Men	334	33.4	86	8.6	420	42.0
Women	495	49.5	85	8.5	580	58.0
Total	829	82.9	171	17.1	1,000	100.0

Source: our elaborations.

Data were collected through the administering of an anonymous self-completed assessment questionnaire, from January to March 2017, at the Albanian Universities. The questionnaire detected many areas of interest: the socio-demographic characteristics; anthropometric measures, such as weight and height; numerous lifestyle-related aspects, such as physical activity, tobacco smoking habit and the consumption of alcoholic beverages.

Once the questionnaires were administered, data were imported and processed using the SPSS software for the calculation of the univariate descriptive statistics with the distribution of frequencies, and bivariate, with contingency tables. For the purpose of assessing the significance of the relationship in the double entry tables, the χ^2 test was adopted, examining only those tables for which the value of p was less than 0.05.

4.1 Socio-demographic characteristics

The research involved 1,000 students enrolled in Albanian public (82.9%) and private (17.1%) Universities, 420 males (42%) and 580 females (58%). Depending on the distribution by age groups, 559 students (55.9%) are aged between 18 and 21, 406 (40.6%) are aged between 22 and 24, and 35 (3.5%) between 25 and 30, with an average of 21.4 years (standard deviation 1.565).

Almost all the students reside in the University town (46.6%) or in a place that allows daily transfer to the University attended (46.3%); few of them, instead, reside in a distant place from their University and so they have an accommodation near the same (7.1%). Studying in the city where one resides, along with commuting, represents therefore the prevailing situations in the Albanian Universities. Commuting, in particular, seems to be an adaptation strategy for students who, having to bear the costs of studies and less supportive capacity from their families, do not give up studying but make choices that are compatible with their condition and their own resources.

Also finding a job is symptomatic of such a widespread habit among the Albanian students, usually connected with an aspiration for a better social

independence or for improving the skills acquired through the academic training. Five students out of ten have a paid employment: in the vast majority of cases this is a temporary job (37.8%); about two students out of ten have a continuous permanent (8.3%) or temporary (7.5%) job. Females prefer devoting full time to academic commitments; males, instead, are mostly burdened by both the training and job commitments ($p < 0.001$). For both sexes, the spread of employment is linked to their age (males: $p < 0.01$; females: $p < 0.05$): among younger students temporary job in its different forms prevails; as the students grow, this type of job is progressively associated with the continuous one (Table 3).

Table 3 – Distribution of the students for the employment status, distinguished for gender and age group (%).

Gender and age group	Permanent job %	Temporary job %	Occasional job %	No %	Total %	<i>p for comparison of age groups</i>
Men*						
All ages	7.4	7.4	46.9	38.3	100.0	
18-21 years	3.1	7.6	49.8	39.5	100.0	
22-30 years	12.2	7.1	43.6	37.1	100.0	<0.01
Women*						
All ages	9.0	7.6	31.2	52.2	100.0	
18-21 years	6.5	6.3	33.9	53.3	100.0	
22-30 years	12.3	9.4	27.5	50.8	100.0	<0.05
Both sexes						
All ages	8.3	7.5	37.8	46.4	100.0	
18-21 years	5.2	6.8	40.2	47.8	100.0	
22-30 years	12.2	8.4	34.7	44.7	100.0	<0.001

**p for comparison in relation to gender <0.001.*

Source: our elaborations of survey data.

4.2. Smoking habit among the young Albanian University students

Smoking habit among young University students confirm the change in national customs compared with the early 1990s when tobacco smoking was still considered a taboo for women.

Table 4 shows that 29.3% of female students smoke or have been smokers, whereas for male students the result is rather worrying, as about half of them are smokers. Furthermore, tobacco smoking is a more widespread habit among working students (35.4%), probably due to economic independence.

Table 4 – Distribution of students for their smoking habit distinguished for gender and employment status (%).

	Smoker %	Ex- smoker %	Non- smoker %	Total %	<i>p for comparison of the employment status</i>
Men*	49.5	22.6	27.9	100.0	
Working	57.1	25.5	17.4	100.0	<0.001
Non-Working	37.3	18.0	44.7	100.0	
Women*	12.8	16.5	70.7	100.0	
Working	15.2	23.8	61.0	100.0	<0.001
Non-working	10.6	9.9	79.5	100.0	
Both sexes	28.2	19.1	52.7	100.0	
Working	35.5	24.6	39.9	100.0	<0.001
Non-working	19.8	12.7	67.5	100.0	

*p for comparison in relation to gender <0.001.

Source: our elaborations of survey data.

4.3. The consumption of alcoholic beverages

Table 5 shows that the habits of the consumption of alcoholic beverages among young Albanian students vary according to gender. Indeed, female students are found to be one-off users (56.9%), while one third of male students frequently consume alcohol (38.6%), i.e. 1 or more times a week.

Moreover, the analysis of the relationship between the consumption of alcohol beverages and the employment status shows that the working students tend to have a greater propensity to consume alcoholics than non-working ones.

Table 5 – Distribution of students classified for their alcohol consumption habit, distinguished for gender and employment status (%).

	Almost every day/every day %	1-2 times a week %	Occasionally %	Never %	Total %	<i>p comparison of the employment status</i>
Men*	7.4	31.2	46.7	14.7	100.0	
Working	7.3	33.6	51.4	7.7	100.0	<0.001
Non-working	7.5	27.3	39.1	26.1	100.0	
Women*	0.7	8.6	56.9	33.8	100.0	
Working	0.7	10.1	59.9	29.3	100.0	0.140
Non-working	0.7	7.3	54.1	37.9	100.0	
Both sexes	3.5	18.1	52.6	25.8	100.0	
Working	3.9	21.5	55.8	18.8	100.0	<0.001
Non-working	3.0	14.2	48.9	33.9	100.0	

*p for comparison in relation to gender <0.001.

Source: elaborations of survey data.

4.4. Physical activity, weight and security

As has already been stated above, the increase in urbanization, together with the overall improvement of socio-economic conditions in Albania has determined a change in the ways of life especially among the young generations. As a matter of fact, a reduction in the level of physical activity and changes in the eating habits, which could lead to the emergence of obesity, among other issues, have been observed.

The survey indicates (Table 6) that more than a half of the interviewed students have stated they do not do a minimum 30-minute physical or sports activity a day (52.8%), with a difference of more than 10 percentage points with women (10.2%) who are disadvantaged.

Table 6 – *Distribution of students for minimum 30-minute physical or sports activity a day and gender (%)*.

	Men %	Women %	Total %
Yes	53.1	42.9	47.2
No	46.9	57.1	52.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: our elaborations of survey data.

The following table shows the results of the calculation of the Body Mass Index (BMI)⁵ which is a biometric value derived from the weight (in kilograms) and the square of the body height of an individual (in metres), used as an indicator of the target weight (Table 7). As regards the body weight, the fact that 10.3% of the female students are under-weight clearly emerges from the data processing in this survey. Thanks more to eating habits than to sports activity, 87.5% of the young Albanian students are normal-weight, while obesity is not frequent (0.4%).

Finally, to consider the attitude towards the rules for the road safety, the students were asked if they travel by bike, motorcycle or scooter, and in this case if they wear a helmet. Only a half of the interviewed students use these means of

⁵ This index was used for the first time in 1832 by Adolphe Quetelet, a Belgian mathematician and statistician, who, in his studies on anthropometric data of the human growth, came to the conclusion that “the weight increases with the square of the body height” (Eknayan, 2008). This index, later named Body Mass Index by the physiologist Ancel Keys, is considered the first approximate index to define the status of the target weight of an individual, as it does not take into account further fundamental features such as gender, shoulders width, pelvis width, head circumference and further factors (WHO, 1995; WHO, 2000). In addition, it is fundamental to consider the percentage of fat and lean body mass of the individual (Bei-Fan, 2002).

transportation (50%); among them 48% do not respect the elementary rules of safety as they do not use any protection like wearing a helmet.

Table 7 – *Distribution of students according to body mass index and gender (%)*.

	Men %	Women %	Total %
Under-weight	0.7	10.3	6.3
Normal-weight	90.7	85.2	87.5
Over-weight	7.6	4.5	5.8
Obese	1.0	-	0.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: our elaborations of survey data.

5. Conclusions

The picture that emerges from the survey is overall positive, even though it shows that the interviewees often adopt incorrect behaviours regarding fundamental aspects of their life and security. Undoubtedly, issues such as the tobacco smoking and the alcohol use/abuse, but also the inadequate or lack of physical or sports activity, considered typical “Western habits”, emerge among the young Albanian University students. The failure to adopt measures of road safety and the poor information on the health risks of incorrect attitudes highlight the importance of health education and citizenship, so that especially the young could choose their lifestyle more consciously, thus avoiding risky behaviours that may be dangerous or prejudicial for their physical or psychological integrity.

Appendix

Questionnaire

- Please, indicate your University:
-Public University -Private University
- How old are you?
- What is your sex?
- What is your height (in cm)?
- What is your weight (in Kg)?
- The status you have as a student:
-Resident -Outside the venue -Commuter
- Are you currently working?

- Yes, on a permanent basis -Yes, on a temporary basis -Yes, occasionally -No
- Do you smoke?
- Yes -Not anymore -No
- Do you happen to drink alcoholic beverages?
- Almost every day/every day -1-2 times a week -Occasionally -Never
- Do you practice at least 30 minutes a day of physical activity or sport for at least 5 days a week?
- Yes -No
- If you move using bicycle/motorcycle/scooter, do you usually wear the helmet?
- Yes -No -I do not use bicycle/motorcycle/scooter to move

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SUMMARY

Lifestyles of University students in Albania

The Albanian University system demonstrated to be inadequate following the transition from Communism to democracy. In the past the University enrollment depended on the Central Committee and an high average grade in the high school years was a prerequisite for the University access. After the collapse of Communism, anyone was granted to access University, which has represented a means of the democratization process and of the re-modernization of the country. However, the limited vacancies of the state system were unable to satisfy the demand of an increasing number of University students. Consequently, several private Universities were set up in order to enroll all the students left out by the procedure of state selection. The democratization process which had started 25 years earlier, in a country which had been isolated from the rest of the world for a long time, also influenced the lifestyles of the young University students. The prejudices linked to the habits are being removed: for instance smoking tobacco is no longer a man's prerogative but is spread among women as well.

The aim of this research is to analyze the lifestyles of the young Albanian students in the period of democracy. More specifically, this study involved 1,000 students enrolled at the public and private Albanian Universities in the 2016-2017 academic year. A survey was used from January to March 2017. Subsequently, the data were processed using the SPSS software. Many lifestyle aspects of the young Albanian University students have been examined: the physical activities and shape, risk behaviors like the use of tobacco and the consumption of alcoholic beverages, because these habits had been the object of the state control up to the advent of democracy.

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