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## **DEVELOPMENT OF THE INNOVATION ECOSYSTEM OF UNIVERSITIES – CASE OF INTERNATIONAL BALKAN UNIVERSITY**

### **Introduction**

Universities are acting beyond their main educational and research roles, becoming key catalysts in development of innovation ecosystems by enabling knowledge transfer, fostering innovation, initiating start-up formation and promoting entrepreneurship. Nowadays, universities are more and more focused on value creation based on knowledge and allocate a lot of resources, efforts and professionals for enlivening this purpose. Hence, undertake crucial position in driving broader regional and local economic development, especially in developing countries where the public administration and institutions lack funding and expertise to cultivate an innovation ecosystem. Likewise, the university role and contribution in this domain has attracted the attention of all the stakeholders in the society. In addition, universities are continuously deepening the collaboration and interface with the industry that de facto represents one of the key pillars in the development of the innovation ecosystems, bridging academia and the real sector.

This thesis analysis the development of innovation ecosystems in universities through examination and outline of the International Balkan University innovation ecosystem, as an emerging research institution in North Macedonia and beyond in the Western Balkan region.

International Balkan University have already built core pillars of an innovation ecosystem, as a result of a carefully designed strategy focused on driving innovation and promoting entrepreneurship through establishment of innovation hubs, dedicated centers, professional labs, project & research office, numerous partnerships with national & international diverse entities and most recently, a knowledge valorization center.

## **Current Situation of IBU's Innovation Ecosystem**

IBU is significantly advancing in development of a highly promising innovation ecosystem that will position the university as a leading research institution in North Macedonia and in the Balkan region. The achieved results and clear vision are an argument per se that IBU is strongly focused on further integration and complete alignment with European Research Area and innovation ecosystem.

Until now, the university have established the following foundational elements and structures:

- **Innovation Centre (INNOX)** established in 2024, which acts as a hub for linking academia and industry, with modern and equipped premises of 1,000 m2 offering multiple opportunities such as co-working, incubation, acceleration, collaboration, networking and event vibrant spaces oriented on digital transformation, sustainability, creative & innovative projects, entrepreneurship and youth engagement.

- **Balkan Information Technology (BIT Loft)** located within the IBU campus designed to integrate IT, AI and start-up incubation with the focused goal of launching incubation programs and digital innovation enhanced by AI, which significantly enrich the IBU's tech and start-up profile. In a nutshell, BIT loft is a creative & vibrant space that foster collaboration among students, tech creators, developers and professionals aiming to drive change through teamwork, innovate and develop cutting-edge technology solutions based on applied learning and oriented to community driven growth.

- **Balkan Economy and Finance Laboratory (BIST Lab)** is a unique lab of this kind in North Macedonia, established in cooperation with Borsa Istanbul (Stock Exchange of Istanbul) build to serve as a bridge between theory and practice in economics and finance. It provides a decent platform for both students and professionals to examine data driven insights, financial trends and economic analysis, along with learning on real world application through hands on experience and simulations.

- **Project & Research Office** - aims to enhance the university's scientific research capacity that will reinforce the IBU position in the global research ecosystem, with main focus on innovation, technology and sustainable development research. PRO office supports a wide range of academic disciplines and in particular, provide support to faculty members and students in the following areas: project proposal development, grant and funding monitoring, project management and implementation, assistance in academic publishing, different trainings and seminars, initiate collaborations and establish partnerships.

- **Knowledge Valorization Center (KVC\_IBU)** – the center is recently opened within the project IMPACT-Campus: Knowledge Valorization Centers for Sustainable Entrepreneurship and Digital Transformation, funded under the EIT HEI Initiative. It is designed to serve as a bridge between higher education, industry, public authorities, public authorities and civil society, aiming to translate knowledge into tangible impact for the region. The KVC\_IBU has already given the first results in further development of the university ecosystem and made notable achievements in designing new interdisciplinary training program that offered modern teaching approaches including project based learning, innovation challenges, digital skills development and collaborative teamwork.

- **Centers, Offices and Clubs** – IBU have established numerous centers that further strengthen and enrich the innovation ecosystem such as the Career Center, Student Wellbeing Center, International Relations Office, Balkan Research Office, Green Office, Modern Library and various clubs that boost student activism, which operate within the university.

- **Partnerships, Events & Initiatives** – IBU has established numerous and significant partnerships with different institutions, successfully hosted and co-organized various impactful events in national and international level, and become part of multiple initiatives knowledge driven, impact - community oriented and socially responsible, that reinforced further its role as a convenor in the North Macedonian & Balkan ecosystem.

### **Identified Gaps and Development Priorities**

Undoubtedly, the undertaken actions, established structures and existing initiatives represent significant steps in further development, enrichment and advancement of the innovation ecosystem within the International Balkan University. Nevertheless, several gaps are identified and further improvements are recommended in the following areas:

- The existence of a sort of fragmentation within IBU innovation ecosystem that highlights the need for development of a “IBU Innovation Ecosystem Strategy” that connects all of these established structures together with external partners under one roadmap with clear set Key Performance Indicators (KPIs).

- Limited scaled outputs in form of start-ups and patents.
- Detected certain resource gaps in funding and staff for enhanced scaling of the newly established facilities.

- The need for closer and tight alignment with international initiative such as EIT, COST, SEAL NR, and with the WB region innovation agendas that can free additional resources and further integrate IBU in European research ecosystem.

- The need for additional scaling and design of the student-oriented programs with industry partners that will further deepen the pipeline from education to entrepreneurship.

### **Future Actions and Development Priorities**

For the purpose of further development and enrichment of the IBU innovation ecosystem, the university should work on the following areas seen as priorities based on the analyzed current situation:

- Establish the IBU Innovation Council that will integrate the rectorate & management of the university, all the established structures within the university innovation ecosystem such as (INNOX, BIT Loft, BIST Lab, KVC\_IBU, PRO Office, Centers, Offices, all faculties, student bodies and clubs, industry partners) which will serve as a body to synchronize, coordinate and set priorities, approves programs & strategies and continuously monitor ecosystem metrics (short term – 2026)

- Draft and adopt an “IBU Innovation Ecosystems Strategy” that will serve as roadmap for advancement of the IBU innovation ecosystem and future guidance (short term - 2026)
  - Design and organize cross-faculty challenges such as logistics, green tech, AI hackathons hosted at INNOX, BIT Loft and BistLab (short term – 2026).
  - Develop and Implement Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and ecosystem metrics (medium term 2026-2028).
  - Scale through Erasmus+ and other exchange programs for students exchanges in innovation hubs, and adopt incubation tracks for students & alumni of IBU (medium term 2026-28)
  - Strengthen further the international positioning by active participation in EU projects, innovation forums and ministerial platforms, along with measuring realized impact with number of start-ups established, jobs created, IP commercialized and similar ecosystem metrics, that will position IBU as a regional innovation center and act as a gateway of WB region and EU innovation networks (long term 2026-2030).

The achieved results and the current stand of IBU innovation ecosystem represents a real example of how and what kind of impact higher education institution – universities can provide to enhance innovation, promote entrepreneurship and sustainability, and create values based on knowledge. Nevertheless, for IBU to excel and be a leading research institution with impactful innovation ecosystem needs extensive systematic work and strategic cohesion that will enable maximization of its potential to fully mature the university's innovation ecosystem.