

What is undergraduate psychology education for? A comparative analysis of international frameworks in transitional higher education contexts

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Abstract

Undergraduate psychology programs are increasingly expected to demonstrate coherence, accountability, and alignment with broader educational and professional standards. In contexts where national frameworks are absent, however, curricular development may be shaped by implicit and potentially incompatible educational logics. This paper examines this problem through the case of Albania, where undergraduate psychology programs have expanded rapidly without a shared framework to guide their purpose, structure, or outcomes. Adopting a qualitative and analytic comparative approach, the study analyzes three influential international models: the APA Guidelines for the Undergraduate Psychology Major (Version 3.0), the International Competences for Undergraduate Psychology (ICUP), and the EuroPsy framework, across six dimensions: internal architecture, educational philosophy, pedagogical philosophy, unit of concern, graduate role, and assessment logic. The analysis demonstrates that these frameworks embody distinct educational logics: performance, formation, and authorization, which carry different implications for curriculum design, graduate identity, and the distribution of responsibility within higher education systems. The paper argues that, in the absence of strong institutional and regulatory infrastructures, the question of framework alignment is not merely technical but conceptual and ethical. It concludes that making such alignment explicit is essential for ensuring coherence, accountability, and the development of graduates capable of functioning responsibly within transitional higher education contexts.

Keywords: undergraduate psychology education; higher education reform; Albania; ICUP; APA Guidelines 3.0; EuroPsy; curriculum models

Introduction

Academic programs are expected to meet the expectations of their institutions, accrediting agencies, and various stakeholders. At the same time, programs must be tailored to their own priorities, institutional missions, available resources, and student populations (American Psychological Association [APA], 2023). Psychology programs, in particular, face increasing demands within higher education to provide accountability data that document the quality and coherence of educational provision (APA, 2023; Norcross et al., 2016). In this context, anchoring curricular and assessment practices to an explicit

framework or model may offer a stable foundation for thoughtful planning and evaluation (Cross et al., 2024). Where national frameworks for undergraduate psychology are absent, faculty collaboration can play an important role in developing distinctive programs that integrate local institutional missions with internationally articulated guidelines (Halonen et al., 2025). Internationally, there have been sustained calls for clearer articulation of the purposes of undergraduate psychology education, the kinds of graduates it should produce, and the curricular structures required to achieve these aims (Nolan et al., 2024a; Takooshian et al., 2016). In many higher education systems, such questions are addressed through explicit curricular frameworks or accreditation guidelines that articulate educational purposes, expected graduate outcomes, and quality standards (Engler et al., 2025; APA, 2023; Cranney et al., 2022). In Albania, by contrast, undergraduate psychology programmes have developed within a relatively young and evolving higher education system shaped by post-socialist transformation, external reform pressures, institutional constraints, and inherited cultural patterns (Sokoli et al., 2025; Karafili et al., 2024; Çela, 2024; Çekrezi, 2021). While reforms have aligned the system structurally with European standards, their implementation remains limited by weak institutional capacity and entrenched cultural practices (Çani & Ollidashi, 2020; UNESCO, 2017). Although Albanian programmes often draw implicitly on international models through translated academic textbooks (Nolan et al., 2024b; Karafili et al., 2024; Çela, 2024; Tarifa, 2012), there has been limited explicit discussion of which educational frameworks should guide undergraduate psychology education at the national level. In recent years, undergraduate psychology has attracted growing student interest in Albania, accompanied by a broader cultural fascination with psychological knowledge and its perceived professional promise. In response, higher education institutions have rapidly expanded their offerings, with nine undergraduate psychology programs currently operating across public and non-public universities (ASCAL, 2026). This expansion has been marked by considerable enthusiasm, evident in the proliferation of courses, ambitious claims regarding learning outcomes, early promises of professional readiness, and strong emphasis on clinical knowledge and applied skills from the outset of study. At the same time, these promises unfold within a higher education system, increasingly portrayed as one that has lost coherence in its core functions. Instead of operating as a site of knowledge production, critical inquiry, and intellectual formation, universities are functioning primarily as a mechanism for credential distribution. This reflects a broader transformation in which the expansion of higher education has not been accompanied by a corresponding consolidation of academic standards, research capacity, or epistemic orientation (ETF, 2025; Bjanku, 2024; Partners Albania, 2023; Tarifa, 2012). Continuous reform cycles, often misaligned with the internal capacities of institutions, have limited the space available for reflection, pedagogical consolidation, and critical self-examination (Çela, 2024; Çani & Ollidashi, 2020; Tarifa, 2012). Reforms are adopted symbolically, quality assurance mechanisms operate procedurally, and academic practices evolve

slowly, if at all (Çani & Ollidashi, 2020; UNESCO, 2017). The result is a system that appears aligned with international standards at the formal level but remains constrained in its capacity to deliver substantive outcomes. Within this inherently tense landscape, attractive professional futures are articulated to students, frequently without sufficient anchoring in institutional coherence or developmental feasibility (Çani & Ollidashi, 2020; Hoxha, 2026). Taken together, this landscape reveals a field in need of conceptual orientation. Beyond the accumulation of courses or the amplification of professional claims lies a more fundamental question: *What vision of undergraduate psychology education is appropriate given Albania's institutional conditions, professional pathways, and societal needs?* This paper addresses this question through a comparative analysis of three influential international frameworks for undergraduate psychology education: ICUP, the APA Guidelines 3.0, and the EFPA/EuroPsy framework. These models are treated as distinct articulations of what undergraduate psychology education is intended to accomplish. The aim is not to identify a single “best” model, but to clarify their underlying pedagogical orientations and structural logics, and to consider their relative adequacy for informing curriculum development in the Albanian context. The absence of explicit framework alignment within undergraduate psychology education may leave curricula shaped by unexamined assumptions, partial inheritances, or fragmented priorities (Çani & Ollidashi, 2020; Hoxha, 2026). In such contexts, questions of alignment are not merely technical matters of compliance with international frameworks, but conceptual and educational ones.

Methodological approach

Design rationale

This study adopts a qualitative and analytic approach to comparative policy analysis in higher education. The analysis focuses on the internal logic, pedagogical philosophy, and normative assumptions embedded in major international models of undergraduate psychology education. Such an approach is appropriate where the object of study consists of formal policy and framework documents, and where the analytic aim is conceptual clarification (Bray et al., 2014). Drawing on traditions of interpretive synthesis and comparative curriculum analysis (for example Cronbach & Shapiro, 1982), the study treats educational models as normative architectures that deduce assumptions about learning, professional identity, accountability, and institutional responsibility. Such a comparative clarification constitutes a necessary methodological step for informed curriculum design and policy.

Analytic sample

The analytic sample included three authoritative frameworks/models for undergraduate psychology education, selected for their institutional legitimacy,

international influence, and relevance to curriculum design in emerging or reforming higher education systems.

ICUP Model

The International Competences for Undergraduate Psychology (ICUP) model was developed by the International Collaboration on Undergraduate Psychology Outcomes (ICUPO), a consortium of one hundred psychology educators and scholars from over forty countries, under the auspices of the ICUP initiative, through expert working groups and consultative processes involving multiple national contexts. The latest version of the model was disseminated in January 2025 (Nolan et al., 2024b) as a non-binding, globally oriented reference model intended to support coherent undergraduate psychology education across diverse systems.

APA Guidelines for the Undergraduate Psychology Major (Version 3.0)

The American Psychological Association [APA] guidelines were produced by the *Board of Educational Affairs* of the APA. Version 3.0 was formally adopted in 2023, updating earlier versions, and articulating learning goals, curricular principles, and assessment guidance for undergraduate psychology programs, primarily in the United States.

EuroPsy/EFPA Guidelines

At the European level, the EuroPsy framework is developed and maintained by the European Federation of Psychologists' Associations [EFPA] through its standing committees on education, training, and professional standards. EuroPsy functions as a European reference framework for psychology education and professional formation, articulating minimum standards for academic training, supervised practice, and professional competencies across EFPA member countries. The most recent guidelines were issued in 2025, reflecting updated expectations regarding curriculum structure, competence-based learning outcomes, and alignment between academic and professional pathways in psychology.

Analytic approach

The analysis proceeded in two stages. In the first stage, each framework was examined independently to reconstruct its internal logic, avoiding premature comparison or evaluation. In the second stage, the frameworks were compared across six analytic dimensions that emerged inductively from the initial analysis: internal architecture, educational philosophy, pedagogical philosophy, unit of concern, graduate role, and assessment logic. This staged approach reflects the view that meaningful comparison requires prior interpretation (Cronbach & Shapiro, 1982). Educational frameworks are not merely collections of competencies or standards, for they embody distinct assumptions about learning, professional formation, and the relationship between psychology and

society. By separating model reconstruction from comparative analysis, the study preserves conceptual clarity while enabling a more precise synthesis at a later stage.

Analytic dimensions

The comparative framework is structured around six analytic dimensions, each designed to capture a distinct aspect of how undergraduate psychology education is conceptualized across models.

1. Internal architecture refers to the structural organization of a framework: how its components are arranged, related, and operationalized to translate educational philosophy into curricular design and governance. This includes the nature of organizing units (e.g., competences, learning outcomes, standards, and phases), hierarchical or non-hierarchical structures, sequencing (developmental, cumulative, or integrative), and the degree of prescriptiveness versus flexibility. Internal architecture reveals how a model functions structurally, independent of its stated values.

2. Educational philosophy addresses the broader orientation toward what undergraduate psychology education is for. It captures how models position undergraduate psychology within higher education more broadly (e.g., liberal education, professional formation, or capability development), and how they differ in the balance they strike between knowledge, application, identity, and social responsibility. This dimension is explicitly comparative and interpretive, emerging from the relationship between models rather than from their internal descriptions alone.

3. Pedagogical philosophy refers to the underlying conception of learning, formation, and educational purpose that informs how undergraduate psychology is understood as an educational process. It captures assumptions about: what learning in psychology fundamentally involves (e.g., mastery, integration, formation, or preparation), the role of the student (recipient, developing learner, or emerging practitioner), and whether undergraduate education is conceived as an end in itself or primarily as preparation for later stages. Pedagogical philosophy is often implicit rather than explicit, but it shapes curriculum design, teaching approaches, and the value attributed to application, reflection, and context.

4. Unit of concern refers to the primary entity or level at which a framework directs its attention and responsibility. This category asks: Who or what is the framework primarily designed to serve or regulate? Is the focus on the individual learner, the graduate, the discipline, the profession, or society? Identifying the unit of concern helps clarify whether a model is primarily learner-centered, discipline-centered, profession-centered, or system-centered. This distinction has significant implications for contexts where institutional and professional structures differ.

5. Graduate role refers to the type of actor the framework assumes or constructs the undergraduate psychology graduate to be. This dimension examines what graduates are expected to do upon completion, the degree of autonomy they are assumed to have, and how they are positioned in relation to professional practice, civic life, or further education. This dimension makes visible how models script graduate identities.

6. Assessment logic refers to how a framework conceptualizes evidence of learning, competence, or readiness, and to whom such evidence must be demonstrated. This dimension captures: what counts as valid evidence (e.g., mastery, progression, competence-in-context), how assessment is structured (local vs standardized; formative vs summative), and where accountability is located (institutional, accrediting body, professional authority).

Together, these six dimensions enable a differentiated comparison of undergraduate psychology education frameworks that respects their internal coherence while rendering explicit the distinct educational assumptions and institutional logics they embody.

Results

Comparative analysis of APA 3.0, ICUP, and EuroPsy across six variables

This section tightens the comparison by treating each framework as a distinct answer to the same practical question: How should an undergraduate psychology curriculum be organized to produce, and by what logic is that production justified and evaluated? Table 1 provides a synthetic overview of the principal educational logics, pedagogical orientations, developmental assumptions, and assessment structures characterizing the APA 3.0, ICUP, and EuroPsy frameworks. The matrix is intended as a comparative synthesis of the distinct centers of gravity that organize each model.

1. Internal architecture: Matrix, process, and phase. How does each model build an education?

The internal architecture of each framework clarifies their divergence not only structurally, but conceptually.

APA 3.0 architecture is hierarchically structured across three levels. Level 1 includes broad competence domains encompassing content knowledge, scientific inquiry, values, communication and literacy, and personal and professional development. Level 2 specifies student learning outcomes (SLOs), where each domain is articulated into 3–6 competencies. Level 3 defines developmental indicators across two stages: foundation (midpoint) and baccalaureate (endpoint). This three-layered hierarchy operates alongside three competence clusters: disciplinary competence

(psychological concepts, subfields, and integrative themes), scientific-methodological competence (research design, statistics, open science, and socio-cultural sensitivity), and transferable and workforce competence (ethical reasoning, collaboration, communication, technology use, career planning, and self-regulation). In this way, APA 3.0 extends competence beyond “knowing psychology” toward the formation of a psychologically trained civic and workforce actor. Structurally, it functions as a competence progression matrix aligned with outcomes-based education and Bloom’s taxonomy (Bloom, 1956). Its central design principle is development over time, expressed through the transition from foundation to baccalaureate indicators, capturing both cognitive and applied maturation. Professional readiness elements are horizontally integrated across domains rather than staged through formal practicum phases. The architecture can therefore be understood as a hybrid cognitive–professional readiness framework.

ICUP, by contrast, adopts a competence-based, non-hierarchical, and integrative structure organized around seven competence categories. Two of these are discipline-specific (psychological knowledge and research methods), while five are cross-cutting (values and ethics, cultural responsiveness, critical thinking and problem-solving, communication and interpersonal skills, and personal and professional development). These competences are neither sequenced nor developmental stages; rather, they are mobilized and integrated around a central organizing principle: the psychologically literate graduate (McGovern et al., 2010; Nolan et al., 2024a; APA, 2023, p. 37). This integrative core functions as the model’s conceptual engine. The explicit telos is the application of psychology across personal life, work contexts, and community settings (from local to global) (Nolan et al., 2024b). The positioning of Personal and Professional Development (PPD) at the center of the model is therefore not incidental, but structurally and philosophically significant. It signals that competences acquire meaning only insofar as they are integrated into lived experience. ICUP can thus be read as a process-based competence ecology, in which the curriculum enables repeated coordination of competences across contexts.

EuroPsy’s internal architecture is organized as a three-phase model of professional formation: Bachelor, Master, and Supervised practice, typically totaling 360 ECTS (including 1,500 hours of supervised practice). Academic study (Phase 1 & 2) and supervised practice (Phase 3) are formally distinguished and externally validated. The model is structured around a professional competence cube integrating functional competences (what psychologists do) and foundational competences (how psychologists work) across developmental stages (readiness for supervised vs independent practice) (Rondolfa et al., 2005). Its central organizing principle is progression toward professional autonomy, validated through external regulatory thresholds. In this sense, EuroPsy functions as an education-to-practice pipeline, reflecting a

pedagogy of situated professional development, where competence is ultimately demonstrated in practice contexts.

Taken together, these architectures represent three distinct structural modalities: matrix (APA 3.0), process (ICUP), and phase (EuroPsy). APA 3.0 and ICUP explicitly theorize undergraduate education as a complete phase in its own right, granting it educational dignity beyond preparatory value. Both models construct undergraduate psychology as an integrative space oriented toward psychological literacy and plural futures. EuroPsy, in contrast, embeds undergraduate education within a regulated sequence leading to professional authorization. It provides structural continuity toward licensure, anchoring competences within a longer trajectory of professional formation. Despite sharing a commitment to psychological literacy, APA 3.0 and ICUP differ in their structural and pedagogical emphasis. ICUP positions experiential learning and practicum as epistemic conditions of competence formation, whereas APA 3.0 incorporates them as contextual sites within a broader competence framework. Their divergence lies not in their objectives, but in the degree to which integration is structurally embedded. More fundamentally, the models differ in their formative intent. APA 3.0 is oriented toward producing graduates prepared for workforce participation, while ICUP emphasizes personal and professional development, with reflexivity and ethical engagement as foundational competences. EuroPsy acknowledges these elements, but subordinates them to the demands of professional coherence and regulation. ICUP also expands the social imagination of undergraduate psychology by recognizing its application beyond the profession itself. It allows students to engage in psychological thinking across everyday life, organizational contexts, and community settings, including prevention and wellbeing promotion. EuroPsy remains largely silent on these domains, as they fall outside its regulatory mandate. Instead, it operates within anticipatory public-risk logic, where even undergraduate education is shaped by concerns about safe practice and future responsibility toward clients. This contrast reveals a deeper divergence in formation logics. EuroPsy assumes eventual responsibility to clients within regulated systems, while ICUP assumes responsibility to learners and society more broadly. The distinction is not merely pedagogical but conceptual. ICUP answers the question: *what should a psychology graduate be capable of doing as an educated person?* EuroPsy answers a different question: *what must someone complete in order to move safely toward professional psychological practice?* Confusing these questions risks premature professionalization, overloaded curricula, symbolic practicum structures, and forms of assessment that mimic licensure without corresponding authority.

2. Educational philosophy and developmental logic

EuroPsy: Regulatory professional phasing: Sequential, transmissive, and function-oriented education

The EuroPsy framework is underpinned by a sequential and function-oriented educational philosophy, in which undergraduate education constitutes the first phase of a regulated professional formation pathway. Knowledge is conceptualized as a structured body of disciplinary content that must be systematically transmitted, consolidated, and verified prior to progression into supervised professional practice. EuroPsy is, fundamentally, a professional formation framework. Its pedagogy is implicitly apprenticeship-like, with learning organized through curricular architecture: specified courses, content domains, and proportional requirements, designed to ensure coherence and comparability across institutions and national systems. This educational philosophy reflects a pragmatic commitment to standardization, transparency, and public protection, and is therefore well suited to contexts in which psychology is a regulated profession requiring clear thresholds and safeguards. One of its guiding principles is the establishment of a common education, training, and competence standard for psychologists across Europe (EFPA, 2025). Within university curricula, this philosophy is expressed through theory–method–application cycles that structure problem-solving and disciplinary understanding. At the vocational level, it is organized around fields of practice, each defined by specific work settings and client populations. Within this framework, a psychologist is understood as an individual who has completed a recognized course of study in psychology and fulfilled the criteria for professional status prescribed by national associations. In contexts with legal recognition, this status is formalized through licensure or registration, granting the right to practice professionally. Undergraduate education in itself provides foundational knowledge in core psychological domains and research methods, preparing students for progression to advanced training. It does not confer readiness for independent practice. Foundational competences at this stage include disciplinary knowledge and research methods, alongside initial professional competences such as communication, observation, and feedback. Practicum plays a defined but limited role at the undergraduate level. It is primarily oriented toward exposure and orientation, offering early contact with professional settings rather than full competence development. The majority of supervised practice is located in later phases, reinforcing the model's emphasis on delayed responsibility and regulated progression.

APA 3.0: Developmental scaffolding, liberal education, and psychological science

APA 3.0 is grounded in a liberal-scientific educational philosophy that positions psychology as both a scientific discipline and a resource for broad undergraduate education. It integrates two traditions: psychology as a STEM field and psychology

as a foundation for civic and personal development. Undergraduate education is conceptualized as a structured developmental process in which students acquire knowledge, skills, and values that enable scientific reasoning, ethical judgment, and applied problem-solving. The underlying assumption is that a strong curriculum is one that both progresses students systematically and generates assessable evidence of that progression. Unlike EuroPsy, APA 3.0 is not organized as a professional training pathway, but as a framework for curriculum design and assessment within the undergraduate major. Progression is intra-programmatic rather than credential-based, and curriculum design remains intentionally flexible to preserve institutional autonomy. APA Guidelines 3.0 articulates a vision of psychology as a high-impact undergraduate major that equips students to contribute meaningfully to their communities. Ethical and socially responsible behavior is central, extending across personal, professional, and institutional contexts. Students are expected to develop from exploring the potential applications of psychological knowledge to actively engaging in improving community functioning. Personal and professional development is further elaborated through frameworks such as *The Skillful Psychology Student* (Naufel et al., 2019), encompassing self-regulation, collaboration, professional judgment, and career planning. Learning is supported through both formal coursework and co-curricular experiences, including internships, leadership roles, and extracurricular engagement. Importantly, these experiences are integrated into the curriculum as sites for skill development, but not as structurally central components of competence formation.

ICUP: Socio-ecological, student-centered integration. Competence as capacity to apply and integrate

In contrast, the ICUP model is grounded in a developmental and formation-oriented philosophy that conceptualizes undergraduate psychology as a complete and meaningful educational phase in its own right. Rather than treating learning as the accumulation of disciplinary units, ICUP defines competence as the capacity to mobilize knowledge, skills, values, and reflexive judgment across personal, professional, and community contexts. The student is therefore positioned as a developing person-in-context, and learning is understood as an active process of interpretation, application, and meaning-making rather than passive acquisition. Courses function as pedagogical means rather than epistemic containers, and psychological literacy becomes the organizing principle through which knowledge is activated. This orientation aligns with pedagogical approaches such as problem-based learning, community engagement, and reflective practice. However, more fundamentally, ICUP repositions the learner as an epistemic agent whose engagement with psychology already constitutes a form of knowledge use. In contrast to APA 3.0's emphasis on measurable outcomes and EuroPsy's emphasis on structured progression, ICUP centers its pedagogical logic on the formative potential of supervised engagement. Competence, in this model,

emerges through cycles of engagement, reflection, and guided responsibility within practice contexts. Development is therefore not limited to cognitive progression, but extends to identity formation through relational and situational learning.

Taken together, the three frameworks articulate distinct answers to the question of what undergraduate psychology education is for. EuroPsy situates education within a professional pipeline, where pedagogy is embedded in a sequence culminating in supervised practice and certification. APA 3.0 locates pedagogy within the curriculum itself, emphasizing structured progression and measurable competence. ICUP, by contrast, positions pedagogy within the learner's process of formation, emphasizing integration, reflexivity, and application across contexts. These differences reflect not contradictions, but distinct domains of emphasis.

3. Pedagogical philosophy

When examined through the lens of pedagogical philosophy rather than competence content alone, the frameworks reveal distinct conceptions of how undergraduate learning in psychology is expected to occur. These differences concern the role of teaching, the nature of learning activity, and the relationship between curriculum structure and student development. The pedagogical philosophy implicit in the EuroPsy framework can be characterized as curriculum-led and transmissive–scaffolded. Learning is organized through a structured sequence of courses designed to ensure systematic exposure to core psychological domains. Teaching is oriented toward the transmission and consolidation of disciplinary knowledge and methodological foundations, which are treated as prerequisites for later professional competence. The curriculum itself constitutes the core pedagogical unit, and learning progresses through clearly delineated stages anchored in specified content and methodological requirements. Within this logic, skill acquisition is grounded in knowledge mastery and methodological training, and pedagogical success is demonstrated when students acquire the competencies necessary to advance toward supervised professional practice. The role of the teacher is that of a disciplinary mediator, ensuring coverage, coherence, and alignment with standardized expectations. Practice, while present, remains indirect at the undergraduate level, primarily supporting readiness rather than constituting the central site of learning. The strength of this model lies in its clarity, standardization, and capacity to support professional mobility and recognition across systems. However, its implementation carries the risk of over-structuring learning in ways that may outpace the development of deeper pedagogical culture if not supported adequately.

APA Guidelines 3.0, by contrast, articulate a developmental–scaffolded pedagogy grounded in cognitive progression and assessment alignment. Learning is structured through stages, moving from novice to foundation to baccalaureate levels, with

increasing complexity of skills. The core pedagogical unit is student competence. Skill acquisition is therefore based on observable performance, and courses are expected to generate evidence of student learning. The pedagogical center lies in the progression of cognitive and applied competences, supported by structured assessment systems. Within this framework, the role of the teacher shifts toward that of curriculum designer, assessment architect, and facilitator of learning, responsible for mapping outcomes, providing feedback, and supporting the development of transferable skills. Practice remains indirect, embedded within coursework and co-curricular activities rather than functioning as a central organizing principle. The formation logic is one of cognitive progression, leading to graduates who demonstrate clarity, measurability, and transferability of skills. At the same time, this model carries the risk of disconnecting knowledge acquisition from lived professional formation if experiential integration remains limited.

In contrast to both EuroPsy and APA 3.0, the ICUP model is grounded in a learner-centered and integrative pedagogical philosophy that treats undergraduate psychology education as a process of formation rather than preparation alone. Here, the core pedagogical unit is not the curriculum or the measurable outcome, but the practicum process understood broadly as structured experiential engagement. Learning is conceptualized as experiential formation, where competence emerges through cycles of engagement, reflection, and application. Skill acquisition occurs through supervised interaction with real or simulated contexts, making practice central rather than peripheral to learning. The pedagogical center is thus located in structured experiential scaffolding, where integration across domains is continuously enacted. The role of the teacher shifts accordingly toward that of a pedagogical supervisor, facilitating integration, reflexivity, and contextual judgment rather than simply transmitting knowledge or evaluating performance. The formation logic is one of identity and professional becoming, rather than cognitive progression alone. Importantly, ICUP embeds a pedagogical philosophy that is outcome-oriented in intent but flexible in form. It avoids prescriptive learning paths, standardized pedagogical procedures, and narrow competency checklists, instead emphasizing capability development—the expansion of what students are able to understand, enact, and become. It does not ask whether a student can perform a predefined behavior to a specified standard, but whether the curriculum has enabled the student to act meaningfully and responsibly across contexts. This positions ICUP as pedagogy-agnostic in form but deeply pedagogical in spirit. Although the ICUP model does not prescribe specific instructional methods, it implicitly requires educational environments in which integration, reflexivity, and application can occur. Practicum, in this sense, functions as institutional infrastructure rather than a discrete curricular component. It provides a structured space in which students engage with the ethical, relational, and identity-related dimensions of psychological practice across personal, professional, and community domains. Pedagogically, the student becomes

the primary site of integration, rather than the curriculum alone. This orientation also presupposes a distinct teacher profile. Educators must combine strong disciplinary grounding with epistemic humility, enabling them to model critical engagement with knowledge while remaining open to multiple perspectives. Reflexivity therefore is not only confined to students; it becomes a shared pedagogical condition. Teaching therefore requires not only subject expertise, but the capacity to navigate uncertainty, articulate assumptions, and support students in developing judgment within complex contexts. Such pedagogy depends on professional autonomy and pedagogical discernment, rather than compliance with fixed instructional formats.

Taken together, the three frameworks articulate distinct pedagogical configurations, carrying specific strengths and risks. EuroPsy offers clarity and standardization but may constrain pedagogical depth, APA 3.0 provides measurable progression but may risk disconnection from lived practice, and ICUP supports identity formation and reflexive engagement but requires strong institutional capacity and high-quality supervision to be effectively realized.

4. Unit of concern: Performance, formation, and authorization

Perhaps the most analytically revealing distinction across the frameworks lies in what may be termed their *unit of concern*. This represents the model's center of gravity—the implicit answer to a simple but decisive question: who or what is this educational model primarily organized around when making decisions? In other words, what is the focal subject, whose needs, risks, development, and future shapes the logic of the framework? In APA 3.0, the unit of concern is the measurable performance event. The model is not centered on the forming person, the practicum process, or the profession as such, but on demonstrable student achievement through observable outputs: designing a study, evaluating claims, constructing arguments, communicating effectively, applying psychological principles, collaborating with others, and producing professional artifacts. The organizing question is therefore not *who the student is becoming*, but *what the student can demonstrably do*. In ICUP, by contrast, the unit of concern is the formative process itself. More precisely, it is the learner as a developing epistemic and ethical subject—a student-in-formation, engaged in becoming psychologically literate across contexts. The focus shifts from demonstration to transformation. What matters is not only what the student can show, but how the student becomes capable of judgment through engagement, reflection, and supervised practice. The educational “unit” is therefore neither a fixed curriculum component nor a checklist of competencies, but a competence that can be achieved through multiple pathways. For EuroPsy, the unit of concern is the professional-in-training. The undergraduate is positioned within a regulated qualification pathway, already conceptualized as pre-professional and evaluated in terms of readiness

to progress toward supervised and eventually autonomous practice. Even at the bachelor level, learning is shaped by anticipatory public-risk logic: the learner matters because they are becoming a professional who will assume responsibility toward clients. Competence is therefore validated not only internally, but through external certification processes that authorize practice. The central question becomes whether the individual has met the threshold required to enter or advance within a regulated profession.

Across the three models, these orientations crystallize into three distinct organizing principles: performance (APA 3.0), formation (ICUP), and authorization (EuroPsy). Each corresponds to a different question. APA asks: *What can the student demonstrably do?* ICUP asks: *How is the student being formed through guided engagement?* EuroPsy asks: *Is the individual qualified to assume professional responsibility?* These differences carry direct pedagogical and institutional consequences. In APA 3.0, curriculum design is oriented backward from performance indicators, privileging measurability and alignment. In ICUP, pedagogy centers on supervised identity development, reflexivity, and the cultivation of judgment within complex contexts. In EuroPsy, the emphasis lies on the completion of mandated academic and supervised phases that ensure readiness for regulated practice. Each orientation also carries its own risks. In performance-driven systems, demonstrable outputs may substitute for deeper formation. In the formation-oriented models, effective implementation depends on the availability of robust supervision and pedagogical culture. In authorization-based frameworks, standardization may outpace pedagogical depth if institutional conditions are not adequately developed.

5. Graduate status: Psychologically literate actor, formed practitioner-in-development, or emerging professional psychologist

What kind of graduate does each model produce? This question is not reducible to employment outcomes, but concerns the *ontological status* of the graduate at the point of exit. Each framework implicitly constructs a different graduate role, and this represents one of the deepest points of divergence across models. ICUP produces what may be understood as a *formed practitioner-in-development*. The graduate is not conceived merely as an academic specialist, but as an individual whose emerging professional identity has been shaped through structured engagement with practice, reflexive cycles, and situated learning. Through supervised exposure to complexity, the student develops the capacity to integrate theoretical knowledge with lived experience. The result is a graduate who embodies a *professional-becoming* orientation: not yet autonomous, but capable of acting with awareness, reflexivity, and contextual sensitivity. APA 3.0, by contrast, produces the *psychologically literate actor*. This graduate is characterized by the ability to think scientifically, evaluate

claims critically, apply psychological principles, communicate effectively, and operate ethically across diverse contexts. The identity constructed here is not a professional identity in the regulatory sense, nor necessarily a practitioner identity. Rather, it is a form of disciplined intellectual and practical capability—a psychologically trained individual prepared for further study, employment, and civic engagement. EuroPsy, in contrast, produces the *emerging professional psychologist*, whose identity is defined through regulatory recognition and progression toward autonomous practice. This is a juridical-professional identity, grounded not only in what the individual can do, but in what they are authorized to do within a regulated system. Importantly, the endpoint of this model lies beyond undergraduate education. The undergraduate, therefore, is already conceptualized as a pre-professional subject in formation, evaluated in terms of readiness to advance within this pathway. The key distinction across models lies in their temporal and conceptual framing of the graduate. ICUP and APA 3.0 primarily theorize the undergraduate exit point, EuroPsy by contrast, theorizes the endpoint of professional entry, and reads undergraduate education through that horizon. What emerges, therefore, is not simply variation in graduate outcomes, but fundamentally different constructions of who the graduate is understood to be: a *formed but not yet autonomous practitioner*, a *psychologically literate and cognitively equipped actor*, or a *regulated professional-in-formation progressing toward certification*.

6. Assessment across models: What counts as evidence, and who must be convinced

How is competence validated? This question shifts attention from what frameworks *claim* to produce to how they *verify* that production. Across models, assessment is not merely a technical procedure, but a reflection of what counts as legitimate evidence of learning and to whom that evidence must be demonstrated. In APA 3.0 assessment is institutional, outcome-aligned, and performance-based, embedded within the curriculum itself. Indicators are explicitly designed to be measurable, and validation occurs through course-level assessment, program-level mapping, and broader accreditation processes. Evaluation serves both internal purposes (program improvement and curriculum alignment) and external ones (accountability and quality assurance). In ICUP, assessment is embedded within practicum and guided engagement, taking a supervision-based, reflective, and process-oriented form. Validation occurs through supervisor evaluations, iterative feedback cycles, and forms of reflective documentation. Essays, projects, case analyses, portfolios, simulations, and community-based tasks are all valid as they make competence visible. What ICUP explicitly rejects are forms of assessment based solely on recall or reproduction. Knowledge-only examinations are considered insufficient as they do not demonstrate mobilization in context. In EuroPsy, assessment is external, standardized, regulatory, and phase-based. Validation occurs through the completion of required academic and

supervised practice components, documented hours, and evaluation by accredited supervisors and national bodies. The unit of assessment is the verified professional competence threshold—whether the individual has met the criteria required to progress toward or achieve independent practice. Evaluation is ultimately conducted by professional committees operating under EFPA regulations, and is oriented toward authorization rather than curriculum development. Taken together, these models articulate three distinct validation regimes: institutional accountability (APA 3.0), pedagogical supervision (ICUP), and regulatory certification (EuroPsy). While APA 3.0 and ICUP primarily use assessment to strengthen educational coherence and support learning, EuroPsy employs assessment to regulate entry into professional practice, ensuring readiness and protecting both the profession and the public.

Analytic Dimension	APA Version 3.0 (Undergraduate Major)	ICUP (Pedagogical Formation Model)	EuroPsy / EFPA (Professional Framework)
Educational philosophy	Developmental, outcomes-based, liberal-scientific, psychological literacy as integrating aim,	Experiential and dialogical formation, competence arises through supervised practice and reflection,	Phase-based professional standardization, competence validated toward autonomous practice,
Pedagogical philosophy	Cognitive and applied competence progression	Structured experiential scaffolding	Regulated competence progression
Internal architecture	Hierarchical matrix: Five goals → Seventeen SLOs → Indicators, scaffolded, Foundation → Baccalaureate	Two core competence categories; twenty-four competence statements; Process scaffold centered on practicum: progressive responsibility + structured reflection	Regulatory sequence: academic phase + supervised practice phase (credentialed threshold) (300 ECTS + 60 ECTS = 360 ECTS/1500 hours)
Developmental logic	Novice → midpoint (foundation) → endpoint (baccalaureate), Bloom-aligned measurability	Formation through situated engagement and supervised integration. Competence is emergent and consolidated through supervision.	Formal progression across phases with defined requirements, readiness is externally validated
Unit of concern	Measurable performance event (assessable indicators, observable behaviors)	Formative process (supervised engagement, reflexive learning cycles)	Professional threshold (authorized competence for independent practice)
Graduate status	Psychologically literate actor: cognitively and ethically equipped graduate, not a licensed practitioner	Formed practitioner-in-development: identity shaped through supervised practicum	Emerging regulating professional: identity conferred by credential and regulated competence

Assessment system	Program/institution-led assessment, curriculum-embedded outcomes mapping, accountability compatible	Supervisor + program assessment, reflective documentation, process + performance evidence	External/regulatory validation, supervision documentation, standardized criteria
Role of practicum	Valuable but not architecturally central or mandated as a spine (mentioned as possible experience)	Central pedagogical spine: practicum is the formation engine	Required supervised practice as a condition of professional recognition
Teacher/supervisor role	Educator as curriculum designer and assessor, feedback provider, facilitator of student development	Pedagogical supervisor, Supervisor as formative guide, containment, feedback, ethical judgment-in-context	Disciplinary mediator, Supervisor as validator of readiness and competence toward autonomy
Strength (analytic)	Clarity, transferability, assessability, Strong literacy and workforce readiness scaffold	Secures formation, judgment, and ethical maturity through practice	Secures professional legitimacy, mobility, and clear thresholds
Primary limitation (analytic)	Context-dependent: assumes mature experiential and supervisory ecosystems to consolidate literacy into formation	Resource-intensive, depends on supervision quality and institutional capacity	Regulatory demands may outpace pedagogical culture if transplanted without formation infrastructure

Table 1. Comparative synthesis of educational logics across APA 3.0, ICUP, and EuroPsy frameworks

Note. The distinctions represented in the matrix indicate analytic emphases or centers of gravity. All three frameworks contain elements of performance, formation, and professional orientation to varying degrees.

Discussion

Competing frameworks for undergraduate psychology education under conditions of institutional absence

Drawing on a comparative examination of three influential frameworks, the APA Undergraduate Psychology Guidelines 3.0, the ICUP, and EuroPsy, this discussion advances a context-sensitive argument for structuring undergraduate psychology programmes in Albania. In contexts, characterized by partial professional regulation, uneven institutional capacity, and the absence of national curricular standards, the issue is which model is adequate under specific institutional conditions and at a given stage of the educational–professional continuum.

A structured critical dialogue between frameworks

From a professional-standard-first perspective, early adoption of a EuroPsy-aligned logic at the undergraduate level appears attractive for contexts such as Albania, where psychology as a profession continues to struggle with fragmented public understanding and uneven legitimacy (Qoli et al., 2025; Poçi, 2014; Tarifa, 2011). Aligning undergraduate education with European professional standards may be expected to raise expectations, discipline curricular variation, and signal seriousness to policymakers, institutions, and the public (Sokoli et al., 2025). In this sense, a EuroPsy-first approach could function as a symbolic and structural anchor for professional consolidation. However, this position rests on a crucial presupposition: the availability of functional professional containment. In the Albanian context, however, such containment remains uneven (McElvaney et al., 2025; Treska, 2020). Undergraduate graduates are frequently employed in schools, non-governmental organizations, community projects, and social services in roles that involve psychological tasks or relational responsibilities, often in the absence of systematic supervision or clearly delineated professional jurisdictions. Under these conditions, a EuroPsy-first undergraduate orientation risks producing a normative disjunction: graduates are socialized into professional expectations that the system is not yet structurally equipped to support. Responsibility is thus effectively transferred from institutions to individuals, not by design but by default. This outcome reflects not ethical rigor, but a form of moral offloading, whereby graduates are held to standards without being afforded corresponding protection or authority. APA 3.0 offers a different locus of responsibility by emphasizing program-level coherence and assessment. Its strength lies in its capacity to structure curricula, align learning outcomes, and generate evidence of student achievement. However, the model implicitly assumes relatively stable institutional conditions and a developed culture of assessment. Yet, while APA 3.0 excels as an operational framework, it remains largely silent on the question of how graduates are expected to function ethically and professionally in systems exhibiting weak accountability norms. Its normative assumptions implicitly presuppose that programmatic coherence and assessment transparency can compensate for external uncertainty. Where institutional environments are still consolidating, the locus of responsibility shifts toward the graduate, without an explicit theoretical account of how such responsibility is to be borne. By contrast, ICUP begins from the premise that undergraduate psychology graduates may be required to operate responsibly *before* professional regulation and supervision are fully available. Accordingly, it foregrounds personal and professional development, ethical judgment, cultural responsiveness, and communication not as aspirational outcomes or later-stage refinements, but as foundational competences. In doing so, ICUP internalizes responsibility at the level of graduate capability while explicitly acknowledging contextual variability. Under conditions of institutional constraint (UNESCO, 2017; Çani & Ollidashi, 2020), this orientation does not lower standards, rather, it reframes ethical responsibility as a competence to be developed, not merely a status to be granted (Çekrezi, 2021; Tarifa, 2011).

Which model fits Albania best for undergraduate psychology? A context-sensitive evaluation

The comparative analysis suggests that selecting an appropriate framework requires consideration of three interrelated criteria: the practical problem undergraduate education must address, the structural intent of each model, and the distribution of moral responsibility. Three criteria are proposed for evaluating model alignment:

Criterion 1: What problem an Albanian bachelor in psychology (BA) must solve (not in theory, but in reality)

From *the current* empirical and conceptual work, undergraduate psychology in Albania needs to consider three facts which are hard to escape:

1. The BA is not a professional license. Albanian BA graduates do not enter regulated independent practice; rather they disperse into NGOs, schools, HR, social services, migration projects, paraprofessional roles, or remain unemployed/underemployed (ETF, 2025; Partners Albania, 2023).
2. Institutions are structurally thin (Bjanku, 2024; Partners Albania, 2023; Çani & Olldash, 2020). Practicum is often placement-based, weakly supervised, normatively overloaded but experientially under-scaffolded (Poçi, 2019; Poçi, 2017).
3. Youth face legitimacy and trust fractures. Graduates must function in low institutional trust, ambiguous professional boundaries, and fragile role recognition (Bjanku, 2024; Tarifa, 2012; Tarifa 2011). Therefore, the *real* problem of the BA is not “training psychologists”, but how to produce graduates with usable, transferable psychological capability and moral-professional orientation under conditions of institutional fragility (Çekrezi, 2021; Naufel et al., 2019; Tarifa, 2012; Cranney & Dunn, 2011).

Criterion 2: Structural intent of the three models (what they were built to do)

As demonstrated by the comparative analysis across six variables, the structural intent of the models differs significantly. APA 3.0 functions as a curriculum design and assessment framework, effective in contexts with stable institutional conditions. EuroPsy provides a coherent model for professional formation but is oriented toward later stages of training. While normatively coherent, this logic is temporally displaced from the undergraduate level. EuroPsy answers the question of who may practice independently, but not what constitutes a competent bachelor-level graduate. ICUP, by contrast, is explicitly designed for heterogeneous contexts, emphasizing competence formation independent of strong institutional infrastructures. It defines what graduates should be capable of, rather than prescribing how institutions must be organized. Unlike APA 3.0 and EuroPsy, ICUP does not assume strong institutions. Rather, it is oriented toward producing competent graduates within weak or mixed

systems, an orientation that constitutes its central rationale. Taken together, these differences highlight the need for a context-sensitive framework that integrates the strengths of each model in line with institutional realities in Albania.

Criterion 3: Unit of moral responsibility (the decisive test)

The divergence among these frameworks becomes most apparent when examined through the lens of moral responsibility. A central question emerges: who bears the risk if the model fails? EuroPsy locates responsibility primarily in regulatory systems and supervisory structures, APA in programmes and their assessment mechanisms, and ICUP in the graduate's internalized capacities. In contexts where institutional protections are limited, responsibility inevitably shifts toward individuals. A framework that fails to acknowledge this risks presupposing conditions that do not exist. In the Albanian context, this consideration becomes decisive for framework selection. Graduates frequently encounter ethical ambiguity, role uncertainty, and limited supervision. From this perspective, ICUP's graduate-centered competence logic represents not a retreat from professionalism, but a contextually grounded ethical response to structural conditions. Taken together, these differences suggest that any national framework for undergraduate psychology education in Albania must explicitly account for where responsibility is located, ensuring that educational design aligns with the realities of institutional capacity rather than presupposing protections that are not yet structurally secured (Hoxha, 2026; Karafili et al., 2025; Çani & Olldash, 2020; Tarifa, 2012).

Curriculum implications of adopting alternative alignment models

This comparative analysis demonstrated how different international frameworks implicitly position undergraduate psychology along the continuum between liberal education and professional preparation. The choice of an educational framework has direct implications for curriculum design, institutional strategy, and the organization of higher education provision. If undergraduate psychology programs are conceptualized primarily as sites of liberal education, oriented toward the notion of the *psychologically literate citizen* (Cranney & Dunn, 2011), they remain structurally open to a broad and heterogeneous student population (Halonen et al., 2025). Frameworks such as ICUP and APA 3.0 support this orientation by emphasizing transferable skills, critical thinking, and application across contexts. Undergraduate psychology does not presuppose progression into the psychology profession, but rather prepares graduates for diverse occupational and educational trajectories (Nolan et al., 2024a). Such frameworks appear more resilient under conditions of transitional uncertainty (Nolan et al., 2025; Cross et al., 2024). Within these frameworks, higher education institutions (HEIs) are not compelled to maintain multiple psychology master programs; instead, a single, well-designed master's program offering specialized training may be sufficient. By contrast, a professional-formation orientation, such as EuroPsy, requires the construction of a coherent

pathway extending beyond the undergraduate level, including specialized master's programs and supervised practice. This approach demands significant institutional investment in supervision capacity and practice-based learning infrastructure. Where such resources are limited, the risk is that professional expectations are symbolically adopted without being structurally supported. If undergraduate psychology is conceptualized as the first stage of a professional formation trajectory, HEIs assume a fundamentally different responsibility. Undergraduate education must then be explicitly aligned with subsequent stages of professional training, requiring the construction of a coherent educational pathway spanning Cycle 1, Cycle 2, and a pre-licensure phase of supervised professional practice. This model obliges institutions to rethink not only curriculum sequencing but also the number and structure of master's programs, ensuring that they provide credible incentives for students to continue their training within the same department. Crucially, such a professional trajectory demands substantial institutional investment in supervision capacity and practice-based learning infrastructures (McElvaney et al., 2025; Treska, 2020). Where supervision remains weak, symbolic, or insufficiently resourced (Karafili et al., 2024; Poçi, 2017), the promised development of professional competencies cannot be fully realized, leaving graduates inadequately prepared for the subsequent phase of supervised practice and licensure. HEIs therefore face a strategic choice: either to consolidate undergraduate psychology as a robust educational program with broad applicability, or to commit to the full development of a professional training pathway. Attempting to combine these logics without explicit differentiation risks undermining both educational coherence and professional credibility. The comparative value of the frameworks lies in making these choices explicit. Rather than implicitly combining incompatible assumptions, institutions can use these models to clarify what graduates are expected to achieve, how competence will be developed, and where responsibility will be located.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was not to prescribe a single model for adoption, but to make explicit the need for deliberate and contextually grounded framework alignment in undergraduate psychology education. It compared three influential models guiding undergraduate psychology education in Europe and beyond, situating the analysis within a national context marked by the absence of formal guidelines for undergraduate psychology curricula. Rather than seeking to identify a "best" model or to advance a prescriptive recommendation, the analysis examined the potential affordances and limits of each framework when read against Albania's specific institutional, cultural, and professional conditions (Karafili et al., 2024; Çani & Ollidashi, 2020; UNESCO, 2017). The comparative analysis supports the argument that **explicit alignment with an educational model is both necessary and beneficial** for undergraduate

psychology programmes operating in such contexts. Albanian programmes may draw selectively on models that emphasize graduate capabilities, contextual application of knowledge, and flexible approaches to assessment, while remaining attentive to local institutional constraints and realities. Making these alignments explicit, rather than implicit or symbolic, can enhance curricular coherence, transparency, and institutional accountability, and can support the formation of psychologically literate graduates capable of meaningful contribution within their social environments (Cranney et al., 2022; Çekrezi, 2021; UNESCO, 2017; Tarifa, 2012; Cranney & Dunn, 2011). Beyond the Albanian case, the paper contributes to international debates on undergraduate psychology education by extending capability-based frameworks toward a **moral-institutional reading of professional formation**. This perspective foregrounds questions of responsibility, risk distribution, and ethical alignment in contexts where institutional infrastructures are fragile or incomplete. Such a contribution is particularly relevant for higher education systems navigating transitional, post-authoritarian, or structurally underdeveloped conditions, where undergraduate education often carries disproportionate responsibility for professional and civic formation. In such contexts, the critical question is which framework distributes responsibility in ways that institutional reality can sustain and graduates can ethically carry.

Limitations and Future directions

The present analysis is necessarily context-bound. Its conclusions are conditioned on the current institutional landscape in Albania and should be revisited as regulatory, supervisory, and professional infrastructures evolve. Should these conditions change substantially, a EuroPsy-first orientation at earlier stages may become not only viable but normatively preferable. Future research should therefore examine longitudinal outcomes of graduates educated under competence-first versus professional-standard-first models, with particular attention to ethical decision-making, role adaptation, and professional identity development in early career stages.

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