heinnovate

Exploring HEInnovate's Eight Dimensions through an Escape Room at AAB College

AAB College, Kosovo

Abstract

Following the HEInnovate Train the Champions programme, AAB College in Prishtina developed an Escape Room introducing HEInnovate's eight dimensions through collaborative puzzles and reflection. Delivered during International Staff Week to College staff and international partners, it combined dimension-based challenges, a presentation, peer exchange and a facilitated SWOT discussion. The activity made the framework accessible, promoted institutional reflection and encouraged participants to consider its application in their institutions. It complemented AAB College's relaunch of the HEInnovate self-assessment, supported by leadership and systematic follow-up, which increased participation from around five to approximately seventy respondents. Findings are expected to inform the forthcoming five-year strategy update. The approach illustrates an adaptable, interactive format linking active discovery with institutional reflection.



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Institutional Background

AAB College is one of the largest private higher education institutions in Kosovo, located in Prishtina. Since its establishment, it has grown into a multidisciplinary institution offering study programmes across law, economics, social sciences, computer sciences, arts, communication, health sciences, and foreign languages (see Table 1).

TABLE 1. AAB COLLEGE FACTS

Year of establishment	2000 (first non-public higher education institution in Kosovo)
Total student enrolment	20,000+ active students
International student share	~10% (mainly from Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and the diaspora)
Academic structure	14 faculties, offering Bologna-compliant Bachelor and Master programmes
Internal R&D reinvestment	~12% of the annual operational budget allocated to the internal scientific advancement fund

Source: *AAB College website*

AAB College has a large and diverse student population and is committed to **accessible, high-quality, student-oriented education** that prepares graduates for professional and societal challenges. Its priorities include **quality assurance, internationalisation, applied learning, student support, employability, practical skills, critical thinking, active citizenship and links with labour market needs**.

Through participation in European initiatives — including **Horizon Europe, Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education, Erasmus+ Cooperation Partnerships, EIT Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and Jean Monnet Actions** — it strengthens institutional development and alignment with European standards. The College also promotes innovation, entrepreneurship and pedagogical improvement, viewing entrepreneurship as a cross-disciplinary mindset encompassing creativity, initiative, problem-solving and adaptability.

AAB College is actively engaged in European projects and international collaborations that promote entrepreneurial competencies and innovative teaching practices, including CreaTech and TBEAI. AAB College regularly reviews its institutional practices and strategic priorities through quality assurance processes, international collaboration, and engagement with European higher education frameworks.

Starting Point: Limited Engagement with HEInnovate

Previous Experience with the HEInnovate Self-Assessment

AAB College first used the HEInnovate self-assessment tool in November 2024 as part of its application to the CreaTech project under the EIT HEI. However, take-up was minimal: only around **four** or **five** people completed it. With so few respondents, the results could not credibly represent the institution, limiting the tool's usefulness as a basis for institutional decisions.

Two further challenges were identified. First, **institutional tools such as self-assessment frameworks are often perceived as highly technical or administrative exercises**, restricting genuine engagement; there was interest in more interactive approaches that could increase participation, motivation, and understanding among staff and partners. Second, there was also a **risk that institutional self-assessment would capture only senior-management views** rather than perspectives from across the College, motivating a deliberate effort to broaden participation to academic and administrative staff throughout the process.

From Training to Broader Institutional Engagement

Participation in the HEInnovate Train the Champions programme in Finland in September 2025 marked a turning point in AAB College's engagement with the framework. The experience encouraged the institution to **reconsider HEInnovate** not simply as a self-assessment tool used in connection with external projects, but **as a framework that could support wider institutional reflection and dialogue**.

Objectives of AAB College's HEInnovate Engagement

Following a Project Development Officer's participation in the HEInnovate Train the Champions programme, AAB College set out to:

- Substantially broaden participation in its HEInnovate self-assessment, to obtain a more representative institutional picture;
- Raise awareness of the HEInnovate framework among AAB College's own academic and administrative staff;
- Explore more interactive ways of introducing HEInnovate and encouraging institutional reflection;
- Share AAB College's experience with international partner institutions, most of which had limited or no prior exposure to the framework; and
- Feed self-assessment findings into AAB College's forthcoming five-year institutional strategy update.

Putting HEInnovate into Practice

To translate these objectives into practice, AAB College pursued two complementary approaches. **First**, it relaunched the HEInnovate self-assessment internally, with the aim of involving a broader range of academic and administrative staff and obtaining a more representative institutional picture. **Second**, it developed an interactive activity to introduce the HEInnovate framework to colleagues and international partners and encourage discussion around its eight dimensions.

Both strands relied on **cooperation across different parts of the institution** and drew on **existing HEInnovate resources as well as materials developed specifically for the activities**.

Resources

Institutional Resources

AAB College's engagement with HEInnovate relied on collaboration across several institutional units, from project development and international relations to quality assurance and leadership (see Table 2).

TABLE 2. INSTITUTIONAL RESOURCES

Institutional actor	Role in the HEInnovate process
Office for Project Development	Led engagement with HEInnovate and coordinated directly with institutional leadership
International Relations Office	Organises AAB College's annual International Staff Week and integrated an Escape Room activity into its programme
Quality Assurance Office	Leads AAB College's five-yearly strategy update, in cooperation with management
Rectorate and Faculty Deans	Cascaded the self-assessment invitation to staff across AAB College's 14 faculties

HEInnovate Resources

AAB College drew on existing HEInnovate resources as the basis for both the self-assessment process and the interactive activities:

- The HEInnovate self-assessment framework and its eight dimensions
- The official HEInnovate SWOT analysis template

Materials Developed

To translate the HEInnovate framework into an interactive learning activity, AAB College developed **a set of supporting materials**, including:

- Scenario-based envelopes with interrelated puzzles and clues, one per eight HEInnovate dimensions

- Challenge and instruction cards
- Cut-out words, visual clues, codes, and icons
- A group answer sheet for recording each discovered dimension
- An HEInnovate wheel for tracking discovered dimensions
- A short presentation combining the Train the Champions experience, AAB College's self-assessment results, and an introduction to the HEInnovate tool
- Printed SWOT analysis handouts for group discussion, developed in-house based on the official HEInnovate SWOT template

Relaunching the Self-Assessment

To raise participation, **the Office for Project Development approached AAB College's leadership directly** — by email and in a subsequent meeting — outlining what had been learned through the Train the Champions programme and why broader participation mattered for the credibility of the results. The director approved wider distribution of the tool; the **rectorate then encouraged the faculty deans** to share it within their own faculties. An **invitation was circulated to academic and administrative** staff from the Office for Project Development's shared address.

A **tracking mechanism** was used to identify staff who had started but not completed the self-assessment, enabling individual follow-up requests to finish it. Two contextual factors were identified as having eased this process: AAB College's status as a private institution, which its Project Development Officer described as making approval processes faster and more flexible than they might be elsewhere; and the Office for Project Development's existing, direct working relationship with leadership.

As a result, self-assessment completions rose from approximately **four or five to roughly seventy** — a substantial increase that gave AAB College a considerably more representative institutional picture.

The HEInnovate Escape Room

To build on the relaunch and extend awareness further — both internally and among international partners — **AAB College developed an interactive Escape Room structured around HEInnovate's eight dimensions**. The activity was delivered during AAB College's annual International Staff Week, an open-call event attended by staff from partner institutions (in some cases using Erasmus+ mobility funding), alongside AAB College's own academic and administrative staff. The activity was designed specifically for higher education staff, not students.

Rather than presenting HEInnovate as a compliance or quality assurance exercise, AAB College sought an approach that would actively engage staff and international partners in discussing innovation and entrepreneurship; **the objective was not simply to familiarise**

participants with the framework's eight dimensions, but to create an environment that encouraged collaboration, discussion, and institutional reflection.

International Staff Week was chosen partly in the hope of mutual exchange — learning about the practices of visiting partner institutions, not only introducing them to AAB College's own experience. In practice, most visiting staff turned out to have little or no prior knowledge of the HEInnovate tool itself, which shifted the emphasis of the session toward raising awareness of the framework's existence and purpose.

Design and preparation took approximately two weeks, covering the design of individual clues and internal testing to confirm timing, clarity, and the connection between each puzzle and its corresponding HEInnovate dimension.

Workshop Timing

The workshop followed a five-step sequence, combining the Escape Room activity with an introduction to HEInnovate, structured reflection and peer exchange (see Table 3).

TABLE 3. INDICATIVE WORKSHOP SEQUENCE AND TIMING

Step	Activity	Duration
1	Introduction and explanation of the Escape Room rules	~10 minutes
2	Completion of the HEInnovate envelopes and the wheel	30–45 minutes
3	Presentation: The Train the Champions experience, AAB College's results, and the HEInnovate tool	~20 minutes
4	Group SWOT analysis using the HEInnovate template	~20 minutes
5	Joint discussion and exchange of institutional reflections	~15 minutes

Participants

Approximately 20–24 participants took part, representing AAB College and international partner institutions, including:

- SMK University of Applied Social Sciences, Lithuania
- İzmir Kâtip Çelebi University, Türkiye
- American University of Armenia, Armenia
- University of Lille, France
- İnönü University, Türkiye
- Jagiellonian University, Poland
- NEWTON University, Czech Republic
- EPOKA University, Albania
- Koç University, Türkiye
- AAB College, Kosovo

Implementation of the Escape Room Activity

Participants formed approximately **four groups of five to six people**, self-selected but encouraged to mix participants from different institutions. Each group received **a set of envelopes**, **one per HEInnovate dimension**.

Each envelope contained:

- a short institutional scenario and
- a set of interrelated puzzles — in some cases requiring an object included in the envelope, such as a coin or pen, to reveal a hidden clue.

Solving the puzzles in an envelope produced a number, letter, or word pointing to the relevant HEInnovate dimension, which participants identified only once the puzzle was solved.

Example Envelope 1: HEInnovate Dimension 'Impact of the Entrepreneurial HEI'

Participants were presented with a scenario in which a university reported numerous entrepreneurship activities, prompting its Governing Board to ask what had changed as a result.

To resolve the puzzle, participants were given four indicators:

- funding invested (48,500 euro) – digit sum: **8**
- training hours delivered (132) – digit sum: **6**
- participants engaged (279), and – digit sum: **9**
- start-ups launched (14) – digit sum: **5**

and were required to **reduce each value to a single digit through repeated digit-summing** (e.g. 48,500 → 4+8+5=17 → 1+7=8), producing the code **8695**, which was matched to the HEInnovate icon for 'Impact of the Entrepreneurial HEI' (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1. ENVELOPE 1: IMPACT OF THE ENTREPRENEURIAL HEI



Source: Authors' own elaboration, developed by the Project Officer at AAB College for the HEInnovate Escape Room activity (2026)

Example Envelope 2: HEInnovate Dimension 'The Internationalised Institution'

Participants were presented with a scenario in which a university engaged in Erasmus+ mobility, hosted international conferences, and signed partnership agreements, while its entrepreneurship activities remained local and international cooperation was not integrated into curricula or strategy.

To resolve the puzzle:

- participants identified six cut-out country flags – **G**ermany, **L**ithuania, **O**man, **B**elgium, **A**ustria, and **L**atvia,
- took the first letter of each, and rearranged the letters to spell **GLOBAL**, matching the result to the HEInnovate icon for 'The Internationalised Institution' (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2. ENVELOPE 2: THE INTERNATIONALISED INSTITUTION



Source: Authors' own elaboration, developed by the Project Officer at AAB College for the HEInnovate Escape Room activity (2026)

As each dimension was identified, its icon was added to the HEInnovate wheel displayed in the room (see Figure 3); the first group to correctly complete the wheel was declared the winner[1].

FIGURE 3. ESCAPE ROOM ACTIVITY: HEINNOVATE WHEEL AT USE



Source: *Picture provided by the author*

From Puzzles to Reflection

Once the HEInnovate dimension wheel was complete, a short presentation covered the Train the Champions experience in Finland, AAB College's self-assessment results, and an introduction to the HEInnovate tool — its dimensions, its application, and the type of results it produces. Groups then received AAB College's SWOT Analysis handout, based on the official HEInnovate template, and discussed their own institutions across the framework's dimensions, before sharing reflections in a joint discussion.

By combining puzzle-solving with structured reflection, it encouraged participants to consider **how innovation and entrepreneurship are embedded in their own institutional strategies, teaching practices and organisational culture**. The subsequent SWOT exercise also introduced participants to **a practical way of using the HEInnovate framework** for institutional self-assessment, helping them identify strengths, challenges and possible areas for further development.

[1] The full set of envelope materials is not currently available in an open-access repository. Interested institutions can contact the Project Development Officer (contacts provided) for guidance on the puzzle designs and preparation sequence.

Observed Engagement and Immediate Results

No formal evaluation questionnaire was administered. Based on debrief and group-discussion feedback, the activity was considered to have produced **three immediate results**:

1. increased **participant familiarity with the HEInnovate framework**, gained through exploring its dimensions interactively;
2. opportunities for **peer learning and the exchange** of institutional perspectives among participants from different higher education institutions; and
3. a **facilitated reflection** that encouraged participants to consider how the framework could be applied within their own organisations.

During the **SWOT exercise**, groups discussed differences in how entrepreneurship and innovation were integrated into their institutional strategies, staff-support systems, international cooperation, and approaches to measuring impact — discussions that helped participants identify both **shared challenges and practices that could be adapted** to their own institutional contexts.

Facilitator observations noted that **participants remained actively engaged** throughout the game: groups divided responsibilities, compared possible solutions, and connected clues across different puzzles to identify the relevant HEInnovate dimensions, with the competitive element sustaining motivation and the group structure supporting collaboration.

Participants reported being positively impressed by the **HEInnovate** tool and described it as **flexible in its application**. Several international participants had not previously encountered the HEInnovate framework; for them, the activity served as a first introduction. Participants responded particularly well to **identifying each dimension themselves** through the puzzles, **rather than having it presented to them directly**. Interested participants were also directed to the (then-open) call for the next Train the Champions programme.

The Escape Room's principal contribution was not immediate institutional change, but the **creation of an accessible, participatory way of encouraging discussion, reflection, and knowledge exchange** around innovation and entrepreneurship in higher education — complementing, rather than replacing, AAB College's wider use of the HEInnovate framework.

Challenges and Mitigation Approaches

Translating HEInnovate's eight dimensions into puzzles that were both engaging and educationally accurate was the main design challenge, requiring a balance between game elements and accurate representation of the framework. This was addressed through

iterative testing by the Office for Project Development, with adjustments made before implementation.

Designing and facilitating the activity single-handedly created a practical burden — preparing materials, monitoring four groups simultaneously, and responding to questions throughout. This was managed through **clear instructions, colour-coded envelopes, group answer sheets, and a structured activity sequence.**

The **HEInnovate self-assessment framework** and **SWOT template** were identified as particularly **useful reference points**; practical guidance on how to transform the framework's dimensions into interactive workshop activities would have further supported the preparation process.

Getting HEInnovate findings incorporated into the strategy in the first place is a separate question from implementing them once they are there. As of this writing, advocating for that incorporation has fallen largely to a single member of the Office for Project Development, working in close collaboration with the Quality Assurance Office and the rectorate; grounds for optimism include AAB College's use of self-assessment tools in other ongoing projects, seen as evidence of institutional openness to change.

Once changes are formally written into the strategy, leadership is not expected to be the primary obstacle to acting on them — **the anticipated challenge instead lies with implementation and monitoring at the level of individual faculties and administrative units**.

Success Factors

Several factors were identified, in AAB College's own account, as having contributed to the success of the Escape Room:

Alignment with existing institutional culture. The activity was firmly aligned with AAB College's existing commitment to student-centred and experiential learning. This institutional culture created a supportive environment for experimenting with an unconventional method of introducing the HEInnovate framework and engaging participants in institutional reflection.

The design of the methodology itself. Rather than presenting the HEInnovate framework through a conventional workshop or presentation, participants explored its eight dimensions collaboratively by solving a series of challenges before applying their learning in a facilitated SWOT analysis. The initiative benefited from the designer and facilitator's previous experience in developing and conducting Escape Room activities, which supported the creation of the challenges, appropriate pacing, and effective facilitation. The game-based format made the framework more accessible and helped sustain participant engagement, while the short presentation and SWOT analysis that followed connected the

puzzles to the broader institutional meaning of HEInnovate. This **combination of active participation and structured reflection** was reported to have encouraged discussion, knowledge exchange, and critical thinking while sustaining participants' engagement throughout and helping participants consider how the framework could be applied within their own institutional contexts.

Teamwork and competition. Based on informal participant feedback and facilitator observations, teamwork, competition, puzzle-solving, and the transition to structured reflection were the most valued aspects of the methodology. The competitive element sustained motivation, while teamwork allowed participants to exchange ideas and combine different perspectives when interpreting the clues.

International participation. Bringing together representatives from different higher education institutions and national contexts enriched the discussions during the reflection phase and allowed participants to compare institutional experiences and approaches to innovation and entrepreneurship.

The HEInnovate framework as the structural backbone. Rather than serving solely as the topic of the Escape Room, the framework provided the conceptual structure that shaped both the game challenges and the subsequent institutional reflection, giving participants a common reference point for discussing institutional strengths, identifying opportunities for improvement, and exchanging practices across different higher education contexts.

The balance between interaction and reflection. The Escape Room was not designed as a stand-alone game, but as a facilitated learning activity in which the game-based experience acted as a catalyst for strategic discussion; the SWOT analysis that followed ensured the activity remained focused on institutional learning rather than entertainment alone.

The connection between the game and the reflection. AAB College identified this as the single most important success factor: the puzzles created engagement, but the presentation and SWOT analysis that followed transformed that engagement into a meaningful understanding of HEInnovate and its possible application within participants' own institutions.

Lessons Learnt

Interactive formats can support engagement with HEInnovate: Reflecting on the format itself, AAB College's account notes that **even though the activity involves play, participants are actively working to solve something** — which helps them remember the content better than a conventional presentation would and made the framework better received specifically because it was interactive.

Awareness and understanding should come before strategic change: On the sequencing of the wider journey, AAB College's account explains that **raising awareness of the tool was deliberately prioritised before any strategy changes were introduced**: the reasoning was that **people who already understand the self-assessment results and how they were reached would be more willing to accept and implement changes once those changes appeared in the institutional strategy**. Implementation — whether people actually act on what the strategy says — is anticipated as a challenge in itself, which this sequencing was intended to ease.

Transferability, Sustainability and Scalability

Transferability and Sustainability

The Escape Room's design is not dependent on AAB College's specific institutional context. Because it uses the **HEInnovate framework as its foundation**, **the methodology can be tailored to different institutional priorities, disciplines, and participant groups**.

Its **sustainability lies in this flexibility**: game materials and discussion scenarios can be updated, while the structured reflection keeps the activity tied to strategic discussion rather than becoming a stand-alone engagement exercise.

Other institutions are encouraged to adapt the challenges and reflection activities to their own context rather than replicating AAB College's exact scenarios. **The value of the exercise lies in combining collaborative problem-solving with structured institutional reflection, not in the specific puzzles or game mechanics themselves**.

When adapting the activity, institutions should:

- Revise the scenarios, data, clues, and examples to reflect institutional priorities and participant profiles, while maintaining a clear connection to the HEInnovate dimensions.
- Test the adapted materials before delivery to confirm that instructions are clear, solutions are accurate, and puzzles can be completed within the allocated time.
- Preserve the underlying logic: each envelope should begin with an institutional scenario, followed by interconnected clues leading participants to identify one HEInnovate dimension; the icon is recorded on the group answer sheet and, once all dimensions are found, placed on the HEInnovate wheel.
- Conclude with a short presentation of the framework and a structured SWOT reflection using the official HEInnovate template.

A similar initiative can be organised with a relatively small team, provided roles are clearly assigned — one person or unit develops the methodology, a separate group tests and refines it, and the organising unit integrates it into the relevant institutional event.

The specific puzzles are therefore less important than the connection between **active discovery and structured reflection**. This allows the methodology to be adapted while retaining its central learning logic.

Scalability

Scalability depends on institutional commitment, appropriate facilitation, and the resources available to adapt materials for different audiences. Because the methodology is built on the internationally recognised **HEInnovate framework**, it **offers a common reference point** that can support implementation across diverse higher education contexts. For larger groups or repeated delivery, a small team should divide responsibility for adapting and testing materials, preparing envelopes and hidden clues, supporting participants during the activity, and facilitating the reflection that follows.

Institutional Follow-Up and Next Steps

Integrating HEInnovate into Strategic Planning

The HEInnovate self-assessment has provided AAB College with an additional reference point for identifying institutional development priorities and informing its strategic planning process. Following the assessment, the results were formally shared with the Quality Assurance Office via email in the form of an institutional report covering all eight HEInnovate dimensions and highlighting their potential relevance to institutional development and quality assurance.

This engagement coincided with the development of AAB College's new Strategic Plan 2027–2031. The strategic planning process is currently underway, with approximately six consultation meetings held to date involving representatives of academic and non-academic staff, students, and institutional management.

As part of this process, the Quality Assurance Office invited the Project Development Office to submit recommendations for consideration in the new Strategic Plan, including its strategic objectives, activities, mission, and vision. The recommendations were submitted through the official consultation form and drew directly on the HEInnovate findings.

The main recommendations focused on the following areas:

- **Entrepreneurial Teaching and Learning (4.3):** Integrating entrepreneurial competences, real-world problem-solving, and project-based learning into study programmes.
- **Preparing and Supporting Entrepreneurs (4.1):** Establishing mentoring mechanisms, training opportunities, and activities to support students in developing business ideas and innovative initiatives.
- **Entrepreneurial Ecosystem and Networks (4.1):** Strengthening collaborative research and innovation initiatives involving academic staff, students, and industry partners.

- **Organisational Capacity (4.2) and Digital Transformation and Capability (4.4):** Introducing periodic staff training in entrepreneurial teaching, innovation, digital competences, and industry collaboration.
- **Entrepreneurial Teaching and Learning and Preparing and Supporting Entrepreneurs:** Exploring opportunities to establish or adapt physical spaces for interdisciplinary collaboration, innovation, and student-led projects.

In addition, it was recommended that the revised institutional vision explicitly consider the concept of **an Entrepreneurial Higher Education Institution**, while the mission should place greater emphasis on developing students' entrepreneurial competences and facilitating knowledge transfer through cooperation with industry and the wider community.

As of October 2026, these recommendations have been formally submitted as part of the ongoing strategic planning consultation process. Their inclusion in the final Strategic Plan 2027–2031 remains subject to institutional review and approval. The process therefore represents an initial step towards translating the HEInnovate findings into strategic priorities, rather than evidence of their full institutional implementation.

Planned Follow-Up and Future Development

Building on this initial integration of HEInnovate findings into strategic planning, AAB College intends to pursue several complementary activities.

Further institutional integration. AAB College updates its institutional strategy approximately every five years through a process led by the Quality Assurance Office in cooperation with management and informed in part by accreditation requirements. The ongoing development of the Strategic Plan 2027–2031 provides an opportunity to consider how relevant HEInnovate findings can be reflected in institutional priorities and, where appropriate, subsequent implementation activities.

Broader internal engagement. Further involvement of academic and administrative staff could bring additional perspectives into the HEInnovate process, support shared understanding of the assessment findings, and strengthen institutional ownership of future improvement initiatives.

Further development of the interactive methodology. AAB College plans to refine the Escape Room methodology used to introduce HEInnovate, adapting it to different audiences and developing clearer facilitator guidance and supporting materials. In the longer term, these resources could form a reusable toolkit for other higher education institutions interested in adopting a similar interactive approach.

Exploration of external funding opportunities. AAB College is also considering relevant EU funding opportunities to support the implementation of improvement initiatives identified

through the HEInnovate self-assessment, particularly those that may fall outside the scope of the formal institutional strategy or require additional resources.

Together, these activities aim to build on the use of HEInnovate in the strategic planning process, while supporting broader institutional engagement and potential implementation of identified improvement priorities. The extent to which these priorities are incorporated into the final strategy and translated into concrete actions will become clearer as the strategic planning and implementation processes progress.

Contacts and Resources

Contacts

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Resources

1. AAB College Home Page
2. AAB College website
3. CreaTech
4. TBEAI
5. AAB College: Escape Room
6. HEInnovate Self-Assessment
7. HEInnovate eight dimensions

8. HEInnovate SWOT Analysis template
9. HEInnovate Website: Resources
10. HEInnovate User Story used as foundation for this resource: Using HEInnovate as a strategic learning process at AAB College