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Higher Education for Cohesion: UNIADRION and the Internationalisation of the Adriatic-Ionian Region

M. Giurato, *EUAbout, Bruxelles*

D. Bregoli, *Università Politecnica delle Marche, Ancona, Italia*

M.C. Liscio, *Università Politecnica delle Marche, Ancona, Italia*

J. Pange, *University of Ioannina, Ioannina, Greece*

P. Sospiro, *Telematic University eCampus, Novedrate, Italia; EUAbout, Bruxelles*

Abstract

The Adriatic-Ionian region, through shared history, cultural exchange, and economic interdependence, has become a laboratory for cross-border cooperation within the European Union (EU). Universities have long been more than just centers of learning: they are catalysts for cooperation, engines of innovation, and increasingly, key players in shaping regional integration.

This paper explores the role of universities in fostering regional integration through internationalisation, with a focus on the UNIADRION network as a case study from the Adriatic-Ionian macro region. Positioned within the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region, the network links 53 universities across ten countries, promoting academic cooperation, research alignment, and mobility. Drawing on recent literature and empirical data, the paper analyses how UNIADRION Association contributes to macro-regional governance, innovation ecosystems, and the mitigation of brain drain. It highlights both achievements and systemic barriers, such as fragmented policy frameworks, limited funding, and uneven institutional capacity. By doing so, it positions UNIADRION as a transferable model for cross-border academic cooperation in complex geopolitical contexts, offering concrete insights for EU cohesion policy, higher education strategy, and the future of regional academic integration.

Affiliations and attributions

Martina Giurato, EUABout, Bruxelles. E-mail: mgiurato@eu-about.eu.

D. Bregoli, Dept. of Information Engineering, Università Politecnica delle Marche, Ancona, Italia.

E-mail: d.bregoli@pm.univpm.it.

M.C. Liscio, Dept. of Information Engineering, Università Politecnica delle Marche, Ancona, Italia.

E-mail: m.c.liscio@pm.univpm.it.

J. Pange, University of Ioannina, Ioannina, Greece. E-mail: jennypagge@yahoo.gr.

P. Sospiro, Telematic University eCampus, Novedrate, Italia; EUAbout, Bruxelles. E-mail: psospiro@eu-about.eu.

1. Introduction

1.1. Universities as Regional Anchors in Europe

In recent decades, universities in Europe have evolved beyond their traditional functions of teaching and research to become strategic actors in regional development and internationalisation. The evolution of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), launched with the Bologna Process in 1999, consolidated the view of universities as not only providers of knowledge but also as central institutions for competitiveness, cohesion, and innovation across territories. As knowledge-intensive organisations embedded in specific socio-economic contexts, universities today operate as regional anchors: they educate human capital, generate research outputs, and orchestrate collaborations among public, private, and civic actors (Thomas et al., 2021). Regions differ greatly in their ability to design innovative responses to economic and social challenges, depending on their institutional frameworks, governance traditions, and the extent of investment in research and development. Such diversity also shapes the role of universities: in some places they act as international hubs of knowledge and innovation, while in others they primarily address local demands or reinforce cross-border cooperation (Makkonen, 2019; Rodríguez-Pose & Wilkie, 2019; Cooke, 2004). Internationalisation therefore cannot be understood as a uniform process; it is highly path-dependent and influenced by territorial characteristics. Regional integration has been widely acknowledged as a central driver of economic development and competitiveness. Garzoni (2013) highlights that regions characterised by deep intra-regional linkages, such as East Asia and the EU, have been able to sustain growth by leveraging trade, mobility, and knowledge flows. In contrast, areas with weaker integration, including Sub-Saharan Africa, have often faced persistent obstacles to industrialisation and innovation. In this perspective, universities emerge as strategic agents: beyond their traditional role in education and research, they provide cultural and institutional bridges that reduce fragmentation and foster regional cooperation. This positioning makes higher education institutions critical actors for regional strategies, particularly in macro-regions where political divisions and institutional asymmetries have historically hindered integration. The internationalisation of higher education has become one of the most visible expressions of this transformation. The concept has evolved from a narrow focus on student exchanges to encompass a wide range of activities, including joint curricula, dual and joint degrees, international research consortia, and “internationalisation at home” initiatives. Internationalisation is no longer a peripheral activity but a strategic axis cutting across teaching, research, and the third mission (Jones & de Wit, 2025). While early approaches were largely descriptive, more recent scholarship has highlighted tensions and asymmetries within internationalisation, particularly the persistence of a “Western paradigm” that privileges mobility flows towards English-speaking and Western European countries (Jones, 2014). These patterns reinforce reputational and economic hierarchies while leaving peripheral regions vulnerable to brain drain and dependency. At the policy level, the EU has invested heavily in internationalisation as part of its wider

strategy to build a competitive and cohesive knowledge economy. Flagship instruments such as Erasmus+, the European Universities Initiative (EUI), Interreg (European Territorial Co-operation) and Horizon Europe promote not only student and staff mobility but also the integration of higher education into territorial development agendas. The European Strategy for Universities explicitly frames universities as agents for the green and digital transitions, linking them to Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3) and to macro-regional cooperation frameworks (European Commission, 2022). Within this evolving architecture, macro-regional strategies (MRS) represent a distinctive governance tool. Conceptually, universities foster macro-regional integration through three interlinked roles. They act as producers and diffusers of knowledge, as intermediaries connecting local systems to European governance frameworks, and as community builders fostering trust through cross-border mobility and joint research. These functions create a soft layer of regional infrastructure that links territories with different capacities and provides continuity beyond political cycles (Cooke, 2004; Thomas et al., 2020; Iacobucci & Ruggeri, 2023).

This paper focuses on the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR) and the role of UNIADRION, the Association of Universities of the Adriatic–Ionian Area, as a case to analyse how universities can contribute to macro-regional integration in a politically sensitive and institutionally diverse environment. By analysing UNIADRION's evolution and activities, the paper investigates how university networks contribute to macro-regional integration and innovation while addressing the circulation and retention of talent in the Adriatic–Ionian Region. This perspective complements existing studies centred on national or EU policy frameworks and highlights universities as active governance actors within macro-regional strategies. It thus clarifies both the research question and the paper's contribution, positioning UNIADRION as an empirical case to understand how higher education can operate as a driver of cohesion in regions marked by institutional asymmetry and post-conflict legacies.

1.2. Internationalisation of Higher Education: Concepts and Strategies

Internationalisation in higher education has shifted from a peripheral activity to a core strategic priority embedded in universities' missions and policy frameworks. Definitions have evolved over time: (Knight, 2008) described it as *“the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of postsecondary education.”* More recently, (Knight, 2021) stressed its integration across teaching, research, and service, highlighting its centrality to institutional strategies. Yet the concept remains contested, continuously reshaped by diverse practices and discourses (Whitsed & Green, 2013). Two complementary modes are generally recognised: internationalisation at home, which embeds intercultural dimensions within curricula and domestic learning environments, ensuring that non-mobile students gain global competences (Beelen & Jones, 2015), and cross-border internationalisation, which encompasses student mobility, joint degrees, collaborative research, and branch campuses (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Osman Özturgut, 2014). While mobility has long been perceived as the cornerstone of internationalisation, home-based strategies have grown in importance as more inclusive approaches. Strategically, internationalisation serves dual objectives: advancing universities' academic missions by fostering collaborative research and intercultural learning, and supporting organisational priorities by improving reputation, rankings, and financial sustainability through the recruitment of international students (Maringe & Gibbs, 2009). Recent scholarship, however, calls for a shift beyond market-driven rationales towards more equitable and socially responsible models (Brandenburg & de Wit, 2011; Stein et al., 2016). At the European level, internationalisation has moved from fragmented initiatives to a coherent policy framework embedded in integration. The Bologna Process (European Ministers of Education, 1999) established the EHEA,

while Erasmus+, the EUI, and the European Strategy for Universities (2022) have progressively positioned internationalisation as a driver of Europe's digital, green, and cohesion agendas. Despite this evolution, international student mobility remains asymmetrical: flows predominantly channel students from the Global South to established hubs in the Global North, reinforcing what scholars describe as a "Western paradigm" (Jones & de Wit, 2014; van Mol & Michielsen, 2015;). Such concentration provides reputational and economic benefits for receiving countries but risks perpetuating epistemic dependency and marginalising non-Western knowledge systems (Stein et al., 2016). Even within the EU, mobility remains unevenly distributed, raising concerns about talent outflow from peripheral regions (Bo, 2024). Regionalised approaches are increasingly seen as alternatives. EU macro-regional strategies link higher education and research cooperation to territorial development priorities, moving beyond the Western-centric paradigm. The EUSAIR strategy exemplifies this approach: by bringing together EU and non-EU countries around shared objectives of growth, connectivity, and innovation, it embeds academic mobility within regional development (Habibi, Sauku, Ibrahim, & Ibrahim, 2018). Within this framework, UNIADRION plays a central role. Through exchanges, joint programmes, and collaborative research, the network reframes mobility as mutual capacity-building and knowledge co-production rather than a one-way "brain drain." This perspective resonates with wider EU debates on talent and skills. In an increasingly competitive global environment described as a "war for talent" (ICMPD, 2024), the EU has introduced instruments such as the Talent Booster Mechanism, the Harnessing Talent Platform, and the forthcoming EU Talent Pool to rebalance mobility and skills attraction across regions. UNIADRION contributes to these goals by bridging disparities between EU and Western Balkan countries, embedding higher education in place-based socio-economic strategies, and aligning academic cooperation with macro-regional priorities. Offering a counter-narrative to Western-centric internationalisation, it demonstrates how academic networks can advance cohesion, innovation, and sustainable development while promoting reciprocity, shared responsibility, and regionally relevant knowledge.

2. Macro-Regional Governance and the UNIADRION Model

2.1. The Institutional Architecture of UNIADRION

UNIADRION emerged in the early 2000s as a response to the need for closer academic cooperation across a region long marked by political divisions and institutional fragmentation. It was initiated in the context of the Ancona Declaration (May 20, 2000), which laid the political groundwork for collaboration among countries bordering the Adriatic and Ionian seas. Later that year, the Ravenna Declaration formalised the establishment of UNIADRION as a "Virtual University of the Adriatic-Ionian Region", initially led by the Universities of Bologna and Ancona. Its mission was clear: promote the advancement of culture, science, training, and research across the macro-region (UniAdriion, 2025). Over time, it evolved from a symbolic initiative into an operational consortium. It was formally constituted as an association in 2013 and, in 2014, recognised within the EUSAIR governance framework as a good practice in academic cooperation. Today, it includes 53 universities from 10 countries, spanning both EU member states and non-EU countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Greece, Italy, Montenegro, North Macedonia, San Marino, Serbia, and Slovenia.



Figure 1 Geographic distribution of UNIADRION member universities¹

Governance-wise, UNIADRION is supported through a mixed funding model based on membership fees, donations, reserve funds, and project-based revenues. These resources are used to fund its core activities and promote socially beneficial objectives in higher education and research. The consortium operates through thematic working groups aligned with EUSAIR's four main pillars, Blue Growth, Connecting the Region, Environmental Quality, and Sustainable Tourism, plus two additional focus areas: Societal Challenges and Economic and Policy Analysis. These working tables engage participating institutions in dialogue, project development, and joint research, forming a backbone for sustained academic collaboration (UniAdrion, 2025; Fasola, 2019). Concrete initiatives illustrate the network's capacity to act. For example, the "Migration and Mobility in the Balkans" Summer School and the E-Capital Culture programme help build skills in critical areas like migration governance and entrepreneurship for youth in the Western Balkans. Meanwhile, the Facility Point Project, developed during the COVID-19 pandemic, established a consolidated database for tracking expertise across the region, offering policy actors and researchers a tool for programming and matchmaking.

Further institutional consolidation came with the creation of the Erasmus+ UNIADRION Italy Consortium in 2020, aimed at boosting student and staff exchanges, particularly between Italy and the Western Balkans. Its goals include raising awareness of EUSAIR opportunities, improving mutual academic interest, and mitigating the persistent issue of brain drain, especially among young researchers and graduates from non-EU partner countries (Habibi, Sauku, Ibrahim, & Ibrahim, 2018). By acting as both a platform and a policy actor, UNIADRION illustrates how regional university networks can enhance the coherence of macro-regional strategies. It bridges local academic institutions with broader EU policy goals, helping to align institutional internationalisation with macro-regional integration. While operational and political challenges remain, the association represents a rare case in which a voluntary academic network has been embedded into an EU strategy and sustained over two decades with an expanding scope and recognised strategic value.

¹ Source: Adriatic Ionian Initiative – Permanent Secretariat. (2023, September 17). *UNIADRION Adriatic-Ionian Week, 17-22 September, Ancona*. Retrieved October 3, 2025, from <https://www.aii-ps.org/news/281-uniadrion-adriatic-ionic-week-17-22-september-ancona>

2.2. Embedding Higher Education in EU Macro-Regional Strategies

The EU pursuit of territorial cohesion has, over the past decade, increasingly relied on MRS as adaptive governance frameworks. In contrast to conventional EU policies, MRS are built on the “three no’s” principle, no new legislation, no new institutions, and no new EU budget allocations, and thus embody a form of “soft governance” (Samecki, 2009; McMaster, 2016). This mode privileges consensus-building and the coordination of existing resources across levels of government. While it offers flexibility and inclusiveness, it also exposes MRS to persistent weaknesses: dependence on political will, imbalances in institutional capacity, and vulnerability to shifting national agendas (Belloni, 2020; Gänzle et al., 2019). The EUSAIR, launched in 2014, illustrates both the opportunities and limitations of this governance model. Encompassing ten countries, six of them outside the EU, it was designed to address fragmented cooperation, environmental degradation, and infrastructural deficits (European Parliament, 2015; European Commission, 2025). Its five thematic pillars provide a broad framework for cooperation, yet the lack of binding instruments makes outcomes highly dependent on voluntary engagement. Within this setting, universities represent critical actors. They not only provide expertise and skilled human capital but also function as institutional anchors that can stabilise cooperation by embedding EU objectives within local contexts through research, mobility, and innovation projects (Iacobucci & Ruggeri, 2023). A comparative perspective, however, reveals that not all MRS engage the academic sector in the same way. The EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR, 2011) has institutionalised the academic dimension more effectively, with the Danube Rectors’ Conference providing a structured platform for over seventy universities and direct links to ministerial-level governance (Chilla & Streifeneder, 2018). This formalisation stength visibility and continuity, integrating higher education into policy monitoring and priority-setting. Similarly, the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (EUSBSR, 2009) has cultivated dense academic networks such as the Baltic University Programme, involving over ninety institutions, which are embedded in the strategy’s thematic areas, from maritime governance to sustainable innovation systems. Both cases illustrate how the academic sector, when structurally integrated, can become a governance asset rather than a peripheral stakeholder. By contrast, EUSAIR’s academic involvement remains more diffuse and less institutionalised. While universities contribute to projects and thematic tables, there is no dedicated academic platform with the visibility or continuity found in the Danube or Baltic cases. This structural gap has been partially filled by UNIADRION, which operates as an informal backbone of the strategy. UNIADRION’s initiatives, summer schools, Erasmus+ consortia, and thematic working groups, compensate for the lack of formal mechanisms, but their reliance on voluntary coordination and external project funding limits their systemic impact (Fasola, 2019; UniAdrion, 2025). A further dimension concerns the governance of academic networks, which directly shapes their sustainability and impact. Garzoni (2013) develops a typology of four governance configurations: (i) market-driven strategic governance, in which universities share common objectives and values, aligning cooperation with innovation and market opportunities; (ii) market-driven negotiation-based governance, where collaboration is fragmented and largely opportunistic; (iii) politically-driven strategic governance, where objectives are aligned but externally imposed by governments; and (iv) politically-driven negotiation-based governance, where both fragmentation and political dependency undermine stability. Among these, only the “market-driven strategic” configuration ensures durable cooperation and long-term effectiveness. Applied to the Adriatic–Ionian context, this suggests that UNIADRION’s ability to consolidate its role within EUSAIR depends on whether it can evolve towards this model, overcoming reliance on voluntary engagement and project-based funding. The comparison underscores a critical tension inherent in the “three no’s” principle. In contexts like the Danube and Baltic regions, where academic cooperation pre-dated the strategies and could be institutionalised, soft governance has been able to harness universities as stable actors. In the Adriatic–

Ionian region, however, where cooperation was historically weaker and fragmented, the absence of dedicated structures risks marginalising the academic sector or relegating it to a supplementary role. This imbalance reveals both the adaptive potential and the structural shortcomings of EU macro-regionalism. In sum, while Danube and Baltic strategies have transformed universities into formalised governance assets, EUSAIR remains reliant on bottom-up and voluntary mechanisms. UNIADRION's role demonstrates the possibilities of academic networks in filling institutional gaps, but also highlights the fragility of a model that lacks structural integration of higher education. This contrast suggests that the success of macro-regional strategies in leveraging universities is less a function of EU design and more a reflection of pre-existing regional capacities and the willingness to institutionalise academic cooperation.

3. Operational Realities and Regional Impact

3.1. University-Level Internationalisation Across the Consortium

While internationalisation has become a strategic priority across Europe, its practical implementation within UNIADRION universities reveals a highly uneven landscape. Empirical surveys of the consortium (Giurato et al., 2025) confirm a growing institutional commitment to mobility and academic cooperation, yet capacity gaps, fragmented coordination, and persistent structural barriers continue to constrain impact. One of the clearest markers of internationalisation is the expansion of English-taught programmes. Institutions such as the Politecnico di Milano have demonstrated that diversification of English-medium master's courses can significantly boost enrolment of foreign students (Arena, 2013). Comparable strategies are emerging at the Universities of Split and Rijeka, which have set quantitative targets to expand joint programmes, dual degrees, and international partnerships by more than 80% by 2025 (Ferara, 2008). Nevertheless, the majority of UNIADRION members still offer limited courses in English, curtailing their attractiveness to inbound students. This finding reflects broader European trends in which English-language provision is concentrated in metropolitan hubs and “mobility hotspots,” leaving peripheral universities at a competitive disadvantage (Georgoudaki et al., 2025). Staff internationalisation remains an even greater challenge. Wage disparities, rigid recruitment frameworks, and bureaucratic barriers undermine efforts to attract and retain foreign academics, particularly in Italy, where salaries lag behind European averages and appointment procedures are lengthy and restrictive (Arena, 2013). Montenegro, despite positioning internationalisation as a pillar of its EU accession process, faces similar obstacles: limited staff training, scarce institutional funding, and a dependency on externally financed Erasmus+ projects (Nešković, 2024). Croatian universities, too, remain marked by fragmentation and weak monitoring mechanisms, although the University of Rijeka's “European University of the Future” strategy stands out as an ambitious attempt to institutionalise mobility and dual-degree pathways (Ferara, 2008). Beyond programme design and staff recruitment, the provision of student support services emerges as a decisive factor for international student retention. Institutions able to invest in such services report higher satisfaction and stronger reintegration outcomes, while many regional universities lack the administrative capacity to provide these wraparound measures (Giurato et al., 2025; Zayim-Kurtay et al., 2025). The Erasmus+ UNIADRION Italy consortium has sought to mitigate these deficits by harmonising procedures, building mutual recognition systems, and promoting exchanges between Italy and the Western Balkans. Yet evidence remains mixed: institutional enthusiasm has not consistently translated into sustained mobility flows, partly due to limited infrastructure and weak joint promotion ((Habibi Sauku et al., 2018). At a systemic level, internationalisation strategies intersect with structural labour-market dynamics. The Adriatic-Ionian Region continues to face

significant loss of human capital, with highly skilled graduates relocating to Western Europe. Internationalisation, if pursued narrowly as mobility, risks exacerbating this outflow unless coupled with effective talent-retention policies. EU-level instruments such as the Talent Partnerships, the Harnessing Talent Platform, and the Talent Booster Mechanism are designed to address this challenge by linking mobility with reintegration and skills circulation (Migration Partnership Facility [MPF], 2024). However, their operationalisation at the regional level remains limited, leaving universities to act largely on their own. In sum, UNIADRION has played a catalytic role by facilitating exchanges, amplifying best practices, and offering a platform for institutional cooperation. Yet its impact remains constrained by institutional constraints (language provision, staff mobility, and resource disparities) that require systemic interventions at both national and EU levels. The consortium demonstrates the potential of regional university networks to rebalance mobility flows, but without parallel reforms in funding, governance, and talent retention, its efforts risk reinforcing rather than reducing regional divides within the European Higher Education Area.

3.2. Country-Level Internationalisation Across the Consortium

While institutional practices reveal important divergences, they cannot be fully understood in isolation. Universities operate within broader national and regional policy frameworks, where recognition regimes, information provision, and support services often determine whether internationalisation strategies can succeed or remain constrained. For this reason, it is crucial to complement the university-level analysis with country-level evidence. At the national level, data from the Mobility Scoreboard Tool managed by the EACEA (n.d) highlight important differences across the Adriatic–Ionian Region in terms of framework conditions for learning mobility. Two indicators are particularly relevant: information and guidance and recognition of qualifications. The first measures the extent to which national authorities make information on outward mobility accessible and ensure the provision of quality, personalised guidance to students. The second assesses progress in adapting recognition practices to guarantee the automatic recognition of qualifications obtained in other EHEA countries. The comparison reveals a highly uneven landscape. With regard to recognition of qualifications, Italy, Croatia, and Greece grant full automatic recognition of higher education qualifications issued in other EHEA countries, thus facilitating mobility. By contrast, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Slovenia, and North Macedonia do not provide automatic recognition, which may create significant barriers for international students. Similarly, differences emerge in the provision of information and guidance. In Italy, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Albania, national strategies exist, but centralised web portals and monitoring mechanisms remain limited, with support largely delegated to individual higher education institutions. Slovenia and Montenegro show even weaker conditions, with no comprehensive strategies or centralised support structures in place. By contrast, Croatia stands out as the only country in the region with a complete framework: a national strategy, centralised web portal, personalised services monitored at the system level, and involvement of multipliers in large-scale initiatives (Mobility Scoreboard, EACEA, 2022). Another useful lens for comparison is provided by the European Higher Education Sector Scoreboard (EHES), part of the European Higher Education Sector Observatory (EHESO). Recent data (2022) confirm a marked heterogeneity in patterns of mobility and international attractiveness across the region. According to the EHES, Slovenia and Italy record comparatively high densities of incoming Erasmus+ mobility (29.2 and 12 per 1,000 enrolments, respectively), well above the very low levels found in the Western Balkans, where Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Albania remain marginal despite sharp year-on-year growth rates. This reflects the stronger institutionalisation of Erasmus+ within EU member states' approaches to internationalisation compared to the more limited starting base of candidate countries.

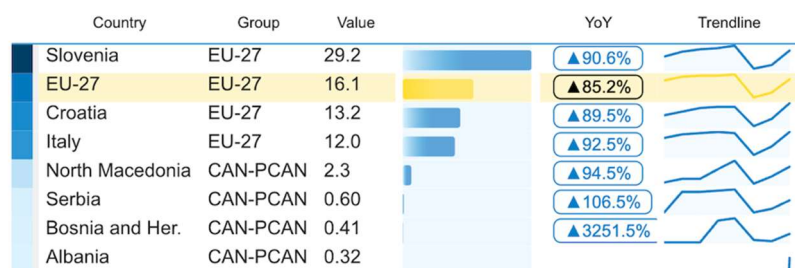


Figure 2: Erasmus+ incoming mobilities at ISCED 5-7 (per 1,000 students)²

A different picture emerges when considering the share of non-EU international students enrolled in full degree programmes.

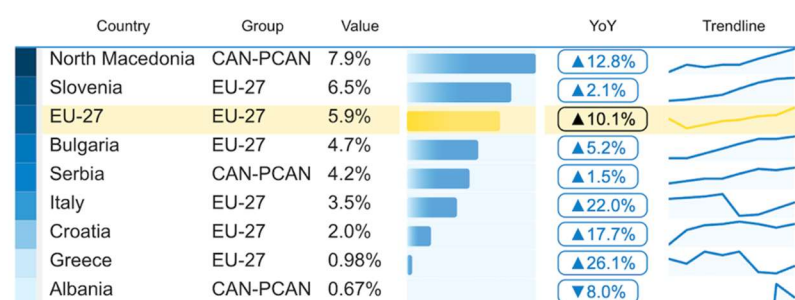


Figure 3: Share of mobile students from outside the EU-27 at ISCED 5-7³

North Macedonia (7.9%) and Slovenia (6.5%) exceed the EU-27 average (5.9%), while Italy lags behind at 3.5% despite sustained growth. Greece and Albania, both below 1%, reveal a very limited structural capacity to attract international students. Overall, these data highlight the coexistence of advanced hubs well integrated into international flows alongside countries where mobility remains episodic or weakly structured (European Higher Education Sector Scoreboard, EACEA, 2022).

3.3. Leveraging Academic Cooperation for Innovation, Talent Retention, and Cohesion

European institutions are increasingly aligning their international engagement with regional innovation priorities, as reflected in the synergies between Horizon Europe, Erasmus+, and macro-regional strategies such as EUSAIR (Amatore et al., 2025). Within this framework, UNIADRION plays a strategic role in translating policy coordination into concrete regional outcomes. Acting as a cross-border knowledge platform, the network connects universities, public administrations and local stakeholders, helping to overcome fragmented innovation systems, limited R&D capacity and uneven policy coordination across EU and non-EU countries (Amatore et al., 2024; Ruggeri, 2021). The contribution of UNIADRION to innovation and talent retention emerges through three main mechanisms. First, it strengthens knowledge transfer and policy learning: the *Facility Point* project developed during the COVID-19 crisis created a shared database that is now used by regional authorities to inform EU programming, identify expertise and match partners for collaborative projects (UniAdrion, 2025). Second, it promotes innovation-oriented mobility: through the Erasmus+ UNIADRION Italy Consortium, exchanges between Italy and the Western Balkans are designed not only as academic

² Source: European Higher Education Sector Scoreboard, EACEA, 2022.

³ Source: European Higher Education Sector Scoreboard, EACEA, 2022.

experiences but as circular mobility pathways, supporting the reintegration of young researchers and graduates in their home institutions. Third, it reinforces entrepreneurial skills and local innovation capacity: the E-Capital Culture programme has trained young people in the Western Balkans in creative and digital entrepreneurship, enabling them to launch start-ups aligned with EU priorities on youth employment and inclusive growth. Participation in Interreg ADRION projects such as ADRION 5 *Senses*, *BlueAir* and SMARTRANS further demonstrates UNIADRION's ability to link academic research with territorial innovation in areas like sustainable tourism, the blue economy and smart transport.

By integrating these activities within the pillars of EUSAIR and Smart Specialisation Strategies, the network contributes to transforming academic cooperation into place-based innovation and skill circulation. Beyond its technical achievements, UNIADRION also provides an apolitical academic space that normalises collaboration across a historically divided macro-region, facilitating trust-building among EU member states, candidate countries and post-conflict territories (Berisha, 2021; Fasola, 2019). While persistent challenges remain (such as uneven institutional capacities, limited funding and the absence of a formal academic pillar in EUSAIR's governance) the network has proven capable of acting as a practical integrator. Its evolution demonstrates how universities can operationalise macro-regional cooperation by advancing innovation, creating career opportunities that reduce outward migration, and strengthening policy coherence across the Adriatic–Ionian Region.

4. Conclusions

Despite progress in fostering cooperation and enabling mobility, UNIADRION still faces systemic constraints that limit its transformative potential. First, the uneven implementation of internationalisation across member universities creates asymmetries in capacity and practice, with some institutions advancing rapidly while others remain constrained by national frameworks or limited resources (Nešković, 2024; Habili et al., 2018). Second, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms remain weak: unlike the Danube Strategy, which employs formal indicators to track academic cooperation, EUSAIR lacks a systematic framework to measure progress in education and research (Chilla & Streifeneder, 2018). Third, the absence of a formalised academic pillar within EUSAIR governance reduces UNIADRION's institutional weight and continuity, leaving its contribution dependent on project-based initiatives and ad hoc funding (Ruggeri, 2021; Berisha, 2021). Yet significant opportunities exist. The digitalisation of higher education and mobility processes offers tools to reduce barriers and expand cooperation, particularly in regions with limited physical mobility infrastructure (Thomas, Faccin, & Asheim, 2020). Better alignment with Horizon Europe, Erasmus+, and Interreg could stabilise resources and reduce dependence on fragmented national schemes (Amatore et al., 2025). Improved data collection on mobility flows, programme uptake, and research collaboration would enhance both institutional learning and policy support. Finally, more strategic promotion of UNIADRION's initiatives could increase visibility, attract new stakeholders, and reinforce its role in regional policymaking. Lessons from other macro-regions and global trends further illustrate the way forward. The Danube Strategy demonstrates the value of structured monitoring and dedicated university networks, while the Baltic model highlights the benefits of linking higher education to innovation ecosystems (Thomas et al., 2020). At the global level, studies show how transnational university alliances can act as orchestrators of regional innovation and talent circulation (Arena, 2013; Thomas et al., 2020). Building on these experiences, UNIADRION has the potential to evolve from a facilitator of exchange into a strategic pillar of knowledge governance in the Adriatic–Ionian macro-region, provided systemic gaps are addressed

through stronger institutionalisation, stable funding, and harmonised internationalisation practices. UNIADRION demonstrates how universities can act as strategic agents of macro-regional cooperation, moving beyond teaching and research to contribute to trust-building, innovation, and policy alignment in fragmented geopolitical contexts. Three core findings stand out. First, academic networks can compensate for weak formal governance by providing stable platforms for mobility, joint programmes, and collaborative research, as shown by UNIADRION's integration into EUSAIR. In doing so, the consortium has advanced internationalisation, strengthened regional innovation through Smart Specialisation priorities, mitigated talent outflow by promoting circular mobility, and provided a soft-power channel for dialogue in a region historically marked by disparities and conflict. Second, this potential remains constrained by structural weaknesses, lack of stable funding streams, systematic monitoring, and formal representation in governance, which leave the impact of such networks vulnerable to discontinuity. Third, UNIADRION offers a transferable model: by acting as a neutral bridge in politically sensitive areas, it provides lessons for other macro-regions facing post-conflict legacies, uneven institutional capacity, or geopolitical tensions, such as the Danube or Black Sea regions. Future research should examine the long-term effects of UNIADRION on talent retention, innovation ecosystems, and policy coherence, while EU frameworks should prioritise the institutionalisation of academic cooperation as a formal pillar of macro-regional governance. Stable integration into Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, and Interreg, coupled with structured monitoring systems, would enable UNIADRION to evolve from a facilitator of exchange into a consolidated pillar of regional knowledge and innovation governance.

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