

# Brain Back Umbria

## *Good practice*

**Member State, (NUTS2) Region:** Italy, Umbria (IT12)

**Publication date:** July 2025



## Basic project details

**Main institutions heading the initiative:**

[Agenzia Umbria Ricerche](#) (AUR) (Umbria Research Agency)

**Organisations involved:**

[FORMA.Azione](#) and [ICT Studio](#)

**Project duration:**

2007 - 2015

**Main sector targeted:** Competitiveness and innovation

**Goals of the initiative:**

The overarching goal of the “Brain Back Umbria” project was to reverse the trend of brain drain in the Umbria region of Italy. Specifically, the project aimed to shift the migration pattern of Umbrian citizens from leaving the region in search of better opportunities to returning and contributing to the region’s growth and development.



## Implementation costs

**Total budget:** EUR 800,000.00

**Sources of funding:**

- Regional budget
- European Social Fund (Regional Operational Programme (ROP) Umbria 2007-2013<sup>1</sup>)
- European Regional Development Fund (Regional Operational Programme (ROP) Umbria 2014-2020<sup>2</sup>)

**Amounts:**

- Region’s contribution: EUR 450,000.00.
- EU Contribution (ESF, ERDF): 350,000.00.

## Short summary of the project

The **Brain Back Umbria** project, initiated by the Agenzia Umbria Ricerche (hereafter, AUR), tackled the pressing issue of talent migration from the Umbria region. With official data showing a sustained rise in skilled individuals moving abroad, the project aimed to better understand the phenomenon and develop strategies to leverage the potential of Umbrian expatriates. Through a series of surveys, AUR profiled emigrants from Umbria and local universities to understand their motivations for leaving and the factors that would encourage them to return. This uncovered how 50% of respondents showed a desire to return to their home region within three years, while all expressed a desire to contribute to the region's innovation and development. Equipped with these insights, Brain Back Umbria employed three key strategies to engage and benefit from expatriate expertise:

**1. Entrepreneurial Support:**

A business competition led to the creation of 16 new enterprises in Umbria, supported by non-repayable loans, targeted assistance in business planning, training, and post-launch consultancy.

**2. Knowledge Sharing:**

Expatriate networks were used to enhance the internationalisation of local businesses and cultural organisations. Specifically, three business visits were organised where expatriates could interact with local businesses in three strategic sectors: agrifood, tourism and culture, and textiles (including cashmere).

**3. Research Collaboration:**

Dedicated efforts encouraged expatriate researchers to participate in European projects (e.g., Horizon 2020, Erasmus+), fostering partnerships with Umbrian enterprises and research institutions.

Recognised nationally and internationally as a best practice, the project exemplifies a well-structured approach to reintegrating emigrants' expertise for regional growth and sustainability.

## Regional context

Umbria, a central Italian region covering 8,464.33 km, is the only one not bordering another country or the sea and has the fewest municipalities (92). As of 1 January 2024, its population stood at 856,407—a steady decline averaging 830 residents annually since 2004, driven by emigration (especially among young, educated people) and demographic shifts in fertility and mortality. The average age has risen from 44.8 in 2004 to 48.2 in 2024, with a shrinking working-age population (15–64). Economically, Umbria is diverse, with strengths in manufacturing (notably metallurgy, metal products, and high-quality cashmere), agriculture (olive oil, wine, and traditional foods), and tourism. While these sectors show strong export potential, the economy is dominated by small, often family-run firms, which hampers technological adoption and productivity.



# Effectiveness

## Types of activities

### Research

1. **The Keep in Touch Survey** – From the outset, AUR aimed to supplement limited official data on emigration by building an informative (though non-representative) sample of Umbrian expatriates. Through the “Keep in Touch” survey, respondents were asked about their reasons for leaving and conditions for returning. Conducted between May 2013 and October 2015, it gathered 147 responses, 135 of which were eligible for project support. The sample grew via word of mouth and social media. In 2015, LinkedIn began to complement—and partly replace—the survey, offering insights into Brain Back members’ professional backgrounds. An in-depth questionnaire was later sent to the LinkedIn network, and a special section—*AAA Ricercatori umbri in fuga cercasi*—was added to explore issues specific to researchers and EU projects.
2. **The Brain Back Umbria LinkedIn Page and “Your Ideas for Brain Back Umbria” Survey** – In early 2015, AUR expanded the Brain Back network on LinkedIn from 100 to over 1,400 contacts within six months, using a targeted research strategy to identify and connect with relevant profiles. With this expanded base, AUR analysed member data and launched the Your Ideas for Brain Back survey, completed by 313 respondents. This qualitative survey explored motivations for emigration and barriers to returning. The LinkedIn page also served as a key communication tool, sharing public notices related to project opportunities for start-uppers, researchers, and professionals.

### Support to business creation

Brain Back Umbria launched a competition to **support entrepreneurial projects by emigrants returning to the region**. Start-ups received assistance during both the launch phase—through financial support and help with business planning—and a second consolidation phase, which offered consultancy and training. Grants of up to €20,000 were available, covering a maximum of 80% of project costs, requiring co-investment. The first call, launched in 2012, targeted Umbrians by birth, residence, or descent who had lived abroad for at least 24 continuous months for work or study. A second call in 2014 expanded eligibility to include graduates of the University of Perugia and the University for Foreigners of Perugia.

### Support to Umbrian researchers abroad

As part of Brain Back Umbria, a call titled “Research grant for emigrants abroad from Umbria for participation in European programmes” offered €5,000 scholarships to encourage Umbrian researchers abroad to join European research projects.<sup>3</sup> The initiative also aimed to foster partnerships between grant recipients and firms, institutions, or research centres in Umbria. Eligible candidates included Umbrians by birth, residence, or descent, as well as graduates of the University of Perugia or the University for Foreigners of Perugia. The call was promoted through the Brain Back Umbria network and supported by the “AAA Ricercatori in fuga cercasi” survey.

### Business visits

In 2014, Brain Back Umbria launched a call to fund two-day Business Visits for a select group of Umbrian professionals living abroad. The goal was to connect expatriates with regional public and private actors to: (i) strengthen internationalisation among SMEs and cultural institutions; (ii) promote Umbrian participation in European programmes; and (iii) encourage brain circulation. Three sector-focused visits were held: agri-food (Dec 2014), tourism and culture (Apr 2015), and fashion/textiles (Oct 2015). Activities combined structured discussions with informal networking, and participants—identified through the Brain Back network and selected based on application quality—visited local businesses and institutions. AUR also presented funding opportunities under the 2014–2020 EU programmes to support regional internationalisation.



# Important outputs, results & achievements

## Research

The insights generated in the context of the research carried out for Brain Back Umbria were very useful. Since the beginning of the project, in fact, **the Keep in Touch online questionnaire has been an interesting source of information because it provides qualitative data** (such as, for example, the motivations that drive young people to emigrate, the difficulties they encountered abroad, what they would like to bring back to Umbria from their country of residence) that can hardly be deduced from official statistics, which were at any rate scarce at the time. Some of the most relevant learnings are summarised here:

- **Top destinations** for Umbrian expatriates were the **UK (14.1%)**, **Spain (9.6%)**, and **Germany (8.1%)**.
- **High educational attainment** was evident, with **53.3% holding a bachelor's degree** and **36.3% having completed a master's or doctorate**.
- **Professional engagement: 64.3% worked in highly specialised roles**, including technical, intellectual, scientific, and artistic professions.
- **Return intentions:** The sample was evenly divided, with **49% not considering a return in the near future**, while **51% expressed a willingness to return**.
- **Barriers to returning:** The most cited obstacles were **lower salaries (23.4%)**, high bureaucratisation (14.2%), **lack of resources for business start-ups (13.3%)**, **insufficient infrastructure and technology (11.8%)**, and **difficulty entering the research sector (10.4%)**.
- When asked about what **incentives they would consider to return**, **35.4% favoured financial incentives**, while **22.7% suggested tax breaks**.

These results were generally aligned with the ones obtained from the analysis of LinkedIn profiles, listed below (although these should be taken with some caution, as LinkedIn is known to have a positive bias towards highly educated and skilled professionals):

- The **main expatriate hubs were London, Barcelona, and New York**.
- Analysis of user profiles revealed that **93.3% held a university degree**, with 36% possessing two degrees. The most common academic disciplines included management sciences, marketing, international relations, engineering, and ICT.
- 17.5% of the sample had a doctorate, predominantly in STEM fields such as physics (15.6%), engineering (14.4%), and chemistry (13.1%).
- **Many users (70%) had international study experiences**,

particularly Erasmus and language courses.

- Professionally, over half of the sample worked in highly specialised professional or scientific occupations, while one-third held leadership roles as legislators, entrepreneurs, or senior managers.
- The average time spent working abroad was 10 years, reflecting the young demographic of the network.
- The **2015 survey** (Your Ideas for Brain Back Network), sent through the Brain Back Umbria LinkedIn page, further inspected the reasons expatriates mentioned for leaving and what would convince them to come back:
- It gathered **313 usable responses**, with **72.9% citing work as their primary reason for emigrating**.
- **Meritocracy and career transparency (25.7%)** and **job stability (20.8%)** were the main drivers for finding employment abroad.
- **56.7% expressed interest in returning to Umbria, but economic constraints, job availability, research accessibility, infrastructure, and high taxation** were key deterrents.
- **51% saw a return as feasible only in the long term**.

## Support for business creation

With the public notice for the creation of start-ups, Brain Back intended to provide a tool to encourage the return of young emigrants who wanted to start a business or self-employment activity in the region. **There were 16 start-ups born in Umbria thanks to the project** and they cover different sectors of activity: from mechanics to ICT, from culture to European planning, from healthcare to tourism. These 16 start-ups are summarised in [Table 1 of the Annex](#).

## Support to researchers

**The take up of the scholarships for expatriate researchers were more limited.** Eight candidates applied for the public notice, but only the projects submitted by two of them received a positive evaluation and, among these, one subject was not eligible for funding as the documentation was sent later than the set deadline.

## Study visits

Thanks to Brain Back, it was possible to organise 3 business visits which involved 31 professionals from abroad and 49 firms from the region in total. Among the main reasons expressed regarding the usefulness of these visits, participants mentioned the possibility for professionals to be an Umbrian bridge on foreign markets and the possibility, for firms, of getting to know hypothetical importers/customers from the professionals' countries of residence.

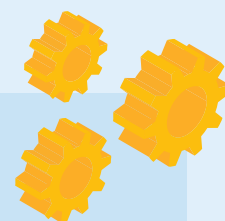
In recognition of its effectiveness, the Brain Back Umbria received the 2013 Unione degli italiani nel mondo (Union of Italians in the World).<sup>4</sup>



## Key success factors

Three key success factors contributed to the impact of Brain Back Umbria:

1. **Addressing Data Limitations:** Recognising the inadequacy of official statistics on emigration, which often lack comprehensive qualitative insights, **the project proactively gathered detailed information from Umbrian expatriates**. By conducting targeted surveys, they collected nuanced data on individuals' qualifications, professional experiences, motivations for leaving, and conditions for potential return. This enriched dataset enabled a deeper understanding of the brain drain phenomenon specific to Umbria, facilitating the development of tailored interventions.
2. **Establishing an Expatriate Network (via LinkedIn):** To bridge the gap between expatriates and their home region, the project leveraged LinkedIn to create a dedicated group for Umbrian expatriates. This platform served multiple purposes: it functioned as a research tool to gather insights into the expatriate community, informed the design of support measures by understanding members' needs, and acted as a conduit for disseminating information about public initiatives and opportunities in Umbria. The LinkedIn group became a dynamic space for engagement, fostering a sense of community and connection among Umbrians abroad.
3. **Emphasising Circular Migration:** The project embraced the concept of **circular migration**, acknowledging the mutual benefits of international experience. By valuing the skills and knowledge that expatriates acquired abroad, Brain Back Umbria encouraged the reintegration of these individuals into the regional economy. This approach not only enriched the local labour market with enhanced expertise but also promoted sustainable development through the continuous exchange of ideas and practices. Circular migration has been recognised for its potential to deliver development benefits to countries of origin, destination, and to migrants themselves.



## Key challenges

The Brain Back Umbria project encountered **a number of challenges**. Addressing these aspects could help refine similar initiatives in the future:

1. **Ensuring the Quality and Viability of Business Proposals:** One challenge was the **varying commercial potential** of submitted business proposals, with some requiring further refinement to enhance their feasibility. Strengthening **support mechanisms for applicants**—such as mentorship, business development guidance, or pre-application training—could have helped improve proposal quality. Additionally, enhancing the **evaluation process and capacity** of the managing authority could contribute to more effective selection criteria, ensuring that supported ventures have strong long-term potential.
2. **Encouraging Greater Engagement and Participation:** The project faced **lower-than-expected participation** in certain calls for involvement, which may have been influenced by **limited awareness among target groups, perceptions of available support, or concerns about long-term prospects**. Expanding outreach efforts, refining communication strategies, and further aligning support offerings with expatriates' expectations could help **increase engagement and attract a broader pool of talent and ideas**.

Addressing these challenges requires a **holistic approach**, including enhanced **proposal evaluation processes, targeted outreach efforts, and sustained support networks**. Strengthening these elements can help fully **harness the potential of expatriates** and reinforce their role in regional development.

# Scalability<sup>5</sup> and replicability<sup>6</sup>

## Scalability

The Brain Back Umbria initiative demonstrates strong potential for scaling to a larger context, whether at the national or European level. Its structured approach—combining data-driven policymaking, diaspora engagement, business support, and knowledge exchange—provides a replicable framework for broader implementation. Below are the fundamental elements that support the scalability of this type of initiative:

1. **Structured Data Collection for Targeted Interventions:** A key factor enabling scalability is the initiative's research methodology. By systematically gathering and analysing data on expatriates' motivations and barriers to return, the project informed targeted interventions. Expanding this approach would involve reaching a larger expatriate audience through embassies, diaspora networks, and digital outreach, while leveraging AI-driven analytics for more precise policy design. Establishing a continuous monitoring system would further enhance long-term impact.
2. **Digital Platforms for Networking and Engagement:** The project's digital engagement model also supports scalability. The LinkedIn network proved effective in reconnecting expatriates with local opportunities. At a larger scale, a dedicated digital platform could integrate job matching, business support, and professional networking, fostering stronger ties between expatriates and home regions. Complementary global and regional networking events—both virtual and in-person—could further enhance engagement.
3. **Business and Entrepreneurial Support as a Return Incentive:** Entrepreneurial support is another key pillar for expansion. By increasing investment in business incubation, co-investment schemes, and tax incentives, a scaled-up version could encourage more expatriates to return as economic actors. Strengthening links between returnees and existing businesses would also enhance knowledge transfer, benefiting regional innovation and competitiveness.
4. **Circular Migration and Knowledge Exchange:** Recognising the value of circular migration, the initiative showed that expatriates can contribute without necessarily returning permanently. Scaling this aspect would involve formalising short-term business visits, consultancy roles, and EU-funded research partnerships, ensuring sustained knowledge exchange between expatriates and home regions.
5. **Policy Integration and Long-Term Institutional Commitment:** To sustain large-scale implementation, long-term policy integration is crucial. Embedding expatriate engagement within national and multi-regional strategies, securing stable funding, and institutionalising support mechanisms would ensure the initiative's resilience and impact.

In summary, Brain Back Umbria's model offers a scalable solution to brain drain. By expanding outreach, strengthening digital networks, and integrating long-term policy support, this initiative could drive economic growth and innovation on a much larger scale.

## Replicability

The **Brain Back Umbria** project presents a highly replicable model for addressing regional brain drain, with no significant regional constraints hindering its application in other contexts.

1. **Research Methodology:** The project's approach involved collecting and visualising data through descriptive statistics to understand the motivations and demographics of expatriates. This methodology is straightforward and can be implemented in various regions. The advent of Large Language Models (LLMs) and advanced AI algorithms can further streamline data analysis, provided that surveys reach a sufficiently large audience to ensure meaningful insights.
2. **Business Support Framework:** The structure of business support in the project aligns with interventions seen in other EU Member States. Utilising *de minimis* aid<sup>7</sup> allows for agile disbursement of funds with minimal regulatory hurdles, facilitating the swift implementation of support measures.
3. **Leveraging Regional Identity:** The project's insights are applicable in other contexts, but it's important to note how unique regional identities should lie at the base of such an effort. Focusing on regional fosters a sense of belonging and increases the likelihood of expatriates engaging with and contributing to their home regions.

In summary, the strategies employed by Brain Back Umbria are adaptable and can be effectively implemented in other regions aiming to mitigate brain drain and harness the potential of their expatriate communities.





# Sustainability<sup>8</sup>

## **The Brain Back Umbria project formally ended in 2015.**

Certain aspects of the project had the potential for long-term sustainability but were unfortunately discontinued. A key example is the LinkedIn network of Umbrian expatriates, which required minimal resources to maintain. The termination of this platform undermined efforts to build a structured expatriate network, leaving its legacy primarily to informal personal connections between expatriates and regional businesses. While these connections may still exist, they are difficult to quantify or leverage in a strategic manner.

## **Despite its official closure, however, some lasting effects of the project can still be observed.**

Certain businesses supported through Brain Back Umbria continue to operate in the region, demonstrating the long-term impact of the initiative on local economic activity. Moreover, the project's influence extends into the new programming period, as evidenced by **the 2018 Regional Law on Umbrian Expatriates**, which builds on

Brain Back Umbria's objectives. This law, backed by €175,000 and an additional €100,000 in EU funds, seeks to reinforce social, cultural, and economic ties with Umbrians abroad, while also facilitating their reintegration into the regional economy. It offers business support<sup>9</sup>, scholarships, and relocation incentives and extends eligibility to expatriates, returnees, municipalities, and associations. Furthermore, the Regional Consultation Body (Consulta), established under this law, continues the work initiated by Brain Back Umbria by coordinating policy efforts on emigration, supporting expatriate networks, and fostering institutional collaborations.

As such, the core ideas of Brain Back Umbria have been integrated into regional policy, ensuring that the region remains engaged with its global diaspora in the long term.

# Innovativeness

The **Brain Back Umbria** project exemplified innovation in several key areas. Notably, it was an early example of initiatives countering demographic decline, and as such, it was a forerunner in Italy. Furthermore, the project leveraged social media platforms, particularly LinkedIn, to establish a network of Umbrian expatriates—a forward-thinking approach at the time. This strategy not only facilitated communication but also fostered a sense of community among Umbrians abroad.

A cornerstone of the project's innovativeness was its recognition of the **value inherent in circular migration**. This concept involves the repeated movement of individuals between their home country and other nations, allowing them to gain international experience and subsequently contribute to their region upon return. By embracing circular migration, the project acknowledged that international experiences can enrich the local economy and culture when expatriates bring back the skills and expertise acquired abroad. This approach not only aimed to reverse brain drain but also to transform it into brain gain, turning a potential regional challenge into an opportunity for growth and innovation.

In summary, Brain Back Umbria's innovative use of social media for community building and its strategic focus on circular migration positioned it as a pioneering model for regional development initiatives.





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## Endnotes

- 1 Axis V Transnationality and Inter-regionality, Specific Objective 'm': "To promote the implementation and development of initiatives and networks on an interregional and transnational basis, with particular attention to the exchange of good practices").
- 2 Axis I Action 1.3.1. 'Support for the creation and consolidation of knowledge-intensive innovative start-ups and research spin-off initiatives').
- 3 Such as Horizon 2020, Creative Europe, Erasmus+, Cosme, European Union Programme for employment and Social Innovation (EaSI), etc.
- 4 Umbria Region is awarded the 2013 Prize (Italians in the World). See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uvj19pu5pn4>
- 5 Scalability entails that a policy approach can be adapted to a bigger scale than just the local context.
- 6 Replicability entails that a policy approach can be applied to a different setting in a rather straightforward manner.
- 7 De minimis aid refers to small amounts of state aid that are considered too insignificant to affect competition or distort the internal market. Because of their limited financial impact, such aid measures do not require prior notification or approval from the European Commission, unlike larger state aid interventions that must comply with strict EU competition rules.
- 8 Sustainability refers to the capacity of the project to be sustained over the long term.
- 9 In 2018, a new public call reminiscent of the Brain Back Umbria project was launched. It was aimed at Umbrian expatriates who wished to establish a new start-up in the region, this time with a stronger focus on business ideas with a high technological content. See: [regional archive](#).

## Annex 1

Table 1: Start-ups which received business support

| Name of the firm   | Sector   | Location                       | Call                   |
|--|--|--------------------------------|------------------------|
| <a href="#">Poiesis di Elisabetta Abbondanza</a>                         | Seminars in creative writing                       | San Martino in Campo (Perugia) | 1 <sup>st</sup> (2012) |
| Noycom srls  | E-commerce, web development                        | Assisi (Perugia)               | 1 <sup>st</sup> (2012) |
| <a href="#">Umbria Kinetics srls</a>                                     | Mechanical engineering                             | Foligno (Perugia)              | 1 <sup>st</sup> (2012) |
| Oko Creative Lab & Multimedia di Attilio Brancaccio                      | Multimedia   | Perugia                        | 1 <sup>st</sup> (2012) |
| Autentica srl  | High-end tourism services                          | Perugia                        | 1 <sup>st</sup> (2012) |
| Giandebì srl   | Restaurant   | Perugia                        | 1 <sup>st</sup> (2012) |
| PL srls - Bricco Bono  | Sale of agri-food products                         | Narni (Terni)                  | 1 <sup>st</sup> (2012) |
| <a href="#">Grifo Scooter - Umbria Scooter Rental di Luca Mancinelli</a> | Tourism  | Assisi (Perugia)               | 1 <sup>st</sup> (2012) |
| Paolo Mariangeli (Freelancer)  | Video-making, music production, art and multimedia | Ponte San Giovanni (Perugia)   | 1 <sup>st</sup> (2012) |
| <a href="#">Espita Consulting Alliance</a>                               | European planning                                  | Terni                          | 1 <sup>st</sup> (2012) |
| <a href="#">Maishamani - Casa Maternità</a>                              | Midwifery and support to expecting mothers         | Castiglione del Lago (Perugia) | 1 <sup>st</sup> (2012) |
| Vortice  | Serigraphy workshop                                | Spoletto (Perugia)             | 2 <sup>nd</sup> (2014) |
| <a href="#">ER srls - Island of Meetings</a>                             | Event management                                   | Castiglione del Lago (Perugia) | 2 <sup>nd</sup> (2014) |
| Assisi Centre of the Mind  | Mindfulness Centre                                 | Assisi (Perugia)               | 2 <sup>nd</sup> (2014) |
| PB-Tech Srl  | Web-based education services                       | Perugia                        | 2 <sup>nd</sup> (2014) |
| Sangu Innovation   | Mechanical engineering                             | Perugia                        | 2 <sup>nd</sup> (2014) |