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Regenerative Design - Climate Adaptation & Mitigation
Circular Economy - Citizen Agency - Urban Livability

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- Urban Livability

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REVIEW NOTES

“Brain gain” in planning academia: learning from Albania’s practical approaches

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Abstract

This Review Note presents two successful “brain gain” initiatives implemented in Albania — READ, a planning research project, and GERMIN, a planning education project. Both programs represent structured efforts to mobilize diaspora expertise in order to strengthen higher education, research, and professional practice, addressing capacity gaps intensified by the prolonged emigration of skilled professionals. In this context, “brain gain” is understood not as permanent return, but as the circulation of talent. These models emphasize knowledge exchange, research partnerships, co-teaching, and global networking, often driven by strong personal and professional ties and implemented at relatively low financial cost. The lessons drawn may provide useful insights for policymakers, educators, and researchers confronting similar issues along the Mediterranean.

Keywords

Brain drain; Brain gain; Planning diaspora

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this Review Note is to present two "brain gain" programs implemented in Albania — READ, a planning research project, and GERMIN, a planning education project — in which the three authors participated. These programs exemplify structured approaches to mobilizing diaspora expertise to strengthen higher education, research, and professional practice in Albania, addressing gaps intensified by the prolonged emigration of skilled professionals. While the focus is on Albania, the experiences documented here have broader relevance in countries across the European Sunbelt — spanning the Iberian, Italian, and Balkan Peninsulas — which face comparable challenges related to brain drain, talent circulation, and the integration of diaspora knowledge (see, for example, GRS, 2024). Accordingly, the lessons drawn from our participation in these programs may provide useful insights for policymakers, educators, and researchers confronting similar issues along the Mediterranean. Below, we provide context on Albanian brain drain challenges before proceeding to a discussion of the READ and GERMIN programs.

2. Albanian emigration trends: the 'brain drain' problem

The dramatic collapse of Albania's communist regime in 1990 catalysed one of the most intense migration episodes in post-World War II Europe. During nearly five decades of strict communist rule, emigration was prohibited and the borders were tightly sealed. With the fall of the regime, all barriers to exiting the country were removed while the economy collapsed (state industries shut down, unemployment soared, and inflation spiked.) Desperate Albanians left the country in large numbers — usually for neighbouring Greece and Italy but also other parts of Europe, North America, and Australia — often in irregular circumstances. Over the three decades following 1990, it is estimated that more than one-third of the Albanian population has left the country — reducing the resident population from around 3.3 million to approximately 2.8 million in 2023 (INSTAT, 2024).

Annual departures have been roughly 42,000 people in recent years. Surveys of potential emigrants indicate that a significant share of young Albanians still contemplate leaving, driven by perceptions of better economic prospects, quality of life and professional opportunities abroad. While emigration continues at high levels, its patterns have evolved. Early migration was heavily motivated by immediate economic survival whereas more recent emigrants seek white-collar work, university studies, and postgraduate qualifications (King & Gëdeshi, 2020).

A core component of Albania's migration dynamics is the so-called "brain drain" — the emigration of highly skilled and well-educated individuals. From the 1990s onward, Albania has lost a substantial portion of its human capital. While the early emigration was heavily motivated by economic survival, also it is estimated that approximately 40% of university professors and research scientists emigrated during the 1990s, significantly weakening the country's academic and scientific capacity (MPI, 2025). Contemporary research on Albanian students abroad shows that large numbers of degree-seeking and highly educated young people do not intend to return (King & Gëdeshi, 2020). The economic implications of this sustained brain drain include not only the loss of national investment in education and training but also reduced innovation capacity and weakened institutional development.

Brain drain also poses a challenge for Albania's governance because it systematically removes the very social groups most critical to democratic consolidation. Skilled professionals such as planners, lawyers, doctors, engineers, and academics are essential for designing, implementing, and evaluating public policy. When these individuals emigrate in large numbers, state institutions become understaffed or reliant on less experienced personnel, reducing administrative effectiveness and policy continuity. In an economically and politically fragile context, this loss of capacity limits the state's ability to deliver services to the citizenry.

Furthermore, brain drain diminishes democratic accountability and civic participation. Educated citizens are disproportionately more likely to vote, engage in civil society, monitor government performance, and demand

transparency. Their departure has weakened watchdog functions and reduced pressure on the Albanian political elite to govern responsibly. This has further entrenched clientelism and patronage networks and undermined political pluralism and leadership renewal. With potential reformers gone, the likelihood of domestic institutional reform has been curtailed; the country risks turning into a "kakistocracy."¹

Finally, brain drain has distorted the state–citizen social contract. Remittances have helped stabilise household incomes and reduce poverty, but they are also substituting for public provision and muting demands for systemic reform. When livelihoods depend more on transnational family networks than on domestic institutions, trust in the state erodes and incentives for political engagement weaken. Practically, brain drain is replacing public participation as the primary response to governance failure. This is a structural challenge — not merely a demographic issue for Albania (see Politico, 2024; Tirana Times, n.d.).

3. A variety of "brain gain" programs

Despite major challenges — including weak governance, democratic deficits, and entrenched corruption — Albania has come to recognise that attracting and retaining skilled professionals is essential for national development. Achieving this requires proactive strategies to mobilise highly qualified members of the Albanian diaspora in the country's economic, academic, and institutional life. The urgency of this effort is heightened by widespread disillusionment with decades of foreign technical assistance, which often failed to produce sustainable outcomes (Pojani & Stead, 2018). External experts frequently lacked a nuanced understanding of the local context and did not speak the language (which is notoriously difficult and unrelated to any other language). In response, Albania has increasingly emphasised diaspora-linked expertise as a mechanism to bridge global knowledge with domestic realities. A number of programs and policy efforts, led by the government, universities, and civil society, have sought to leverage "brain gain" — the return or productive engagement of diaspora talent.

One of the earliest structured efforts was the Brain Gain Programme, initiated in the mid-2000s in coordination with the Government of Albania and international partners such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The program aimed to create incentives for highly skilled emigrants to return or engage with Albania's institutions by establishing policy frameworks that would welcome and integrate diaspora expertise into academia, public administration, and research sectors. It included an online diaspora database to match expertise with institutional demand and regulatory adjustments to facilitate employment and recognition of foreign qualifications. This approach explicitly targeted academics, researchers, and professionals with overseas experience, envisioning short-term consultancies, joint research projects, and temporary or permanent return placements that could enhance capacities within Albanian universities and public institutions (Zeneli et al., 2013).

More recently, Albania's national policy frameworks — including strategic documents developed under diaspora engagement and economic development umbrellas — have incorporated digital platforms and structured return programs. Notably, the Albrain Platform and the Diaspora Return Program are designed to connect Albanian professionals worldwide with opportunities for short-term projects, consulting, workshops, and innovation collaborations with government, academia, and industry in Albania (GoA, 2025). At the institutional level, some private universities have instituted their own brain gain programs that specifically aim to bring Albanian educators and researchers back into the country's educational landscape. These programs recruit mid-career and senior academics from the diaspora to participate in teaching and research, either through physical presence in Albania or through remote collaboration. The remainder of this Review Note focuses on two programs, READ and GERMINE, in which these authors participated through a planning research project and a planning education project, respectively.

¹ A *kakistocracy* is a system of government in which the least qualified or most unscrupulous people hold power. From Greek: *kakistos* (worst) + *kratos* (rule).

4. In focus: READ and GERMIN

AADF's READ Fellowship. The Albanian-American Development Foundation (AADF) is a non-profit organisation established in 2009 with original support from the U.S. government. Its mission is to advance sustainable development in Albania through strategic investments in education, leadership, entrepreneurship, cultural heritage, and community empowerment. One of AADF's flagship initiatives in the education and research sector is the Research Expertise from the Academic Diaspora (READ) Fellowship Program, launched in 2021 in partnership with the Institute of International Education (IIE). READ is a competitive fellowship designed to connect Albanian universities and other higher education institutions with highly qualified researchers and scholars of Albanian origin based in OECD countries. The program seeks to strengthen Albania's research and teaching capacity by facilitating collaborations such as co-authored research, joint supervision of doctoral candidates, curriculum and course development, and co-teaching activities (AADF, 2025; IIE, 2025).

READ operates on a dual-application model, in which projects are proposed by resident Albanian scholars and subsequently matched with diaspora academics. Fellowships typically support engagement periods of up to one year, either in person or in a hybrid format. The program has already received strong institutional support from Albanian universities, including formal cooperation agreements. A team composed of two of the authors (Erida Curraj as the resident scholar and Dorina Pojani as the diaspora scholar) was awarded a Fellowship for 2023–2024.

The team led a research project designed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Tirana's gendered mobility and accessibility patterns in post-industrial suburban areas and their connection to urban liveability. Issues of mobility, accessibility, and liveability are, of course, central to *TeMA: Journal of Land Use, Mobility and Environment* and its readership. The Journal was established specifically to connect urban studies with research on mobility in all its aspects, and it seeks to advance novel theoretical and methodological frameworks that move beyond approaches rooted in the scientific culture of the last century. Research on gender issues in the city, as well as within the urban and transport planning professions, is also growing — albeit slowly — within *TeMA's* volumes (see Stiuso, 2024; Carpentieri et al., 2023; Delatte et al., 2018; Pojani, 2011).

For the READ-supported study, three types of primary data were collected: field observations, quantitative population surveys, and qualitative focus groups. The project involved planning students who assisted with data collection and junior researchers who supported the analysis. Students reported that this experience was particularly valuable for learning how to gather data in a hands-on manner and for gaining exposure to applied research methods. Overall, the project was deemed highly successful, resulting in a conference presentation and an academic research article that is currently under review in a leading planning journal.

EU4Innovation's GERMIN Fellowship - The Global Engagement and Research in Migration Network (GERMIN) is a non-governmental organisation that connects the Albanian and regional diaspora with institutions in their countries of origin (GERMIN, 2025). Its programs are implemented in partnership with the EU4Innovation program, a multi-donor initiative funded by the European Union, the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), and delivered locally by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) Albania.

Similar to AADF, GERMIN's mission is to facilitate knowledge transfer, professional engagement, and innovation across sectors such as education, entrepreneurship, and research. Its work, however, is more targeted: it leverages diaspora expertise to address gaps between education and labor market needs and thus accelerate Albania's transformation toward a more innovation-driven, knowledge-based economy. As with READ, GERMIN has been well received by Albanian universities (EuroNews Albania, 2025).

Like READ, GERMIN operates on a team-based model. However, in this case, projects are proposed by faculty from the diaspora and implemented in collaboration with resident academics over the course of one year,

through a combination of in-person visits and online activities. In 2025–2026, one of the authors (Dorina Pojani, a member of the academic diaspora) was awarded a teaching fellowship, which she carried out in collaboration with Irina Branko (one of the authors, a lecturer in the Department of Urbanism at the Polytechnic University of Tirana).

The fellowship focused on refreshing a landscape planning course led by the resident lecturer. Normally, the course is delivered through a combination of theoretical lectures and studio-based work. Historically, this urbanism program has placed a strong emphasis on design rather than theory or policy. In this case, the key innovation was a series of guest lectures by domestic and international practitioners from the public, private, non-profit, and international assistance sectors. These lectures, complemented by visits to the lecturers' workplaces, introduced students to a range of career opportunities for planning graduates beyond the more typical employment in design studios. Although planning education and careers are not *TeMA's* specific focus, the Journal is interested in landscape planning, particularly when it relates to environmental sustainability. While case studies from across Europe have appeared in its pages, Italian examples (Leone et al., 2020; Zullo et al., 2015) are especially relevant, as Italy often serves as a reference point for Albania on these matters. Returning to the GERMIN initiative, student feedback on was very positive. In an anonymous survey completed by more than half of the students (20 out of 37), the course — and particularly the new elements — received an average score of 4.75 out of 5. Beyond the quantitative results, qualitative feedback gathered through a focus group attended by 15 students was especially illuminating. Students clearly expressed a desire for more than technical training. They sought greater exposure to real-world practice, including experiences outside the capital city in coastal and mountainous regions; insight into non-traditional career pathways; and stronger links between urban planning, architecture, and communities. Students highlighted the importance of learning about non-design aspects of professional practice, including coordination with institutions, financial management, budgeting, and project governance — areas they felt were largely absent from their formal training but central to real-world work. They also valued the interdisciplinary nature of several guest organisations. Importantly, students welcomed the territorial breadth of the course, which deepened their understanding of landscape, tourism, and regional challenges, and strengthened their appreciation of planning at multiple scales.

5. Success factors and lessons learned

Here the authors reflect on the factors that, in our experience, contributed to the success of these programs, as well as lessons learned and suggestions for future improvement.

Funding -While both fellowships are competitively awarded, they are low-cost programs. This is a positive feature, as it enables broader participation. The administrative burden is also limited, with short application forms and minimal reporting requirements. This stands in contrast to major EU-funded project applications, which typically have low rates of success but high potential rewards. These projects also involve substantial administrative burdens, often requiring researchers to spend a disproportionate amount of time preparing applications and reporting on the outcome of the project (see Dresler et al., 2022; Kooijman, 2015). In this case, the main cost was the return airfare for the diaspora scholar (who was coming from Australia), along with some project-related expenses and payments for casual research assistants. With planning being a social science discipline, project expenses were relatively low; natural science projects may involve higher costs (such as for labs, materials, and advanced software), and therefore it would be advisable to integrate diaspora scholars into university departments and/or ongoing projects for which the major infrastructure is already in place. READ provided funding for the resident participants, whereas GERMIN did not. Ideally, funding should also be available for domestic researchers and lecturers, as this represents an important incentive for participation — particularly given that academic salaries in Albania are lower than the OECD average.

Presence - While online collaboration is possible, some physical presence is essential for these fellowships to succeed. Research and teaching activities are less effective online than in-person engagement — as was clearly demonstrated during the Covid-19 pandemic. Being present allows the diaspora scholar to guide activities and provide mentorship, in line with Albania's relational culture. During their visit, diaspora scholars often take on additional activities, such as media appearances and workshops, which also help domestic scholars expand their professional networks. This networking support aligns closely with one of the program's key objectives and is highly valued by resident participants. In the case of *planning* academics from the diaspora, their commentary on controversial urban development projects is particularly valued in the media, as they are often freer to critique current practices than local professionals (the latter may face conflicts of interest or feel constrained by political pressures). Engaging senior diaspora academics, who are well respected in both Albania and their country of domicile, further amplifies the program's effectiveness and impact. In Albania's patriarchal culture, junior academics who are without international recognition — while potentially very capable — often struggle to have their voices recognized.

Collaboration - Some grant funding schemes are conservative and prefer teams with an established track record of collaboration. In this case, however, that was not necessary. While team members were acquainted prior to participating in the programs, they had not collaborated professionally before. Yet the programs were successful, driven by a strong motivation to work together. In the teaching fellowship, much of the success can be attributed to the course and resident lecturer being well liked, and to the positive rapport that already existed between students and the lecturer. This created a welcoming environment into which the diaspora academic could be effectively integrated. Both AADP and EU4Innovation have actively supported ongoing connections through formal and informal networking opportunities, including study visits, conferences, workshops, and, in the case of READ, an annual New Year's party for all fellows. While the latter may seem trivial, such events play a meaningful role in sustaining engagement and community.

Support - Government support, even symbolic, is important for the success of these programs. While neither fellowship was directly funded by the Albanian government, the presence of officials at events demonstrates recognition and appreciation, which carries real value. Albania is fortunate to have a diaspora that is emotionally attached to the country — reflected in the old proverb, "Albanian soil is sweeter than honey" — and eager to stay connected and contribute. Many diaspora members who received part of their education in Albania feel a strong desire and/or personal obligation to give back. This represents a special circumstance, whereby diaspora academics are willing to participate for nominal compensation out of allegiance to their country of origin. It is therefore important for the government to acknowledge and value this commitment, rather than only viewing the diaspora as a source of remittances.

6. Conclusion

Some countries, like Italy, take different approaches to brain gain — for example, giving priority in academic jobs to members of the Italian diaspora. However, this type of outcome cannot realistically be expected for Albania until higher education salaries, institutional capacity, and global rankings approach those of OECD countries, where most of the academic diaspora is based. In the Balkans, Serbia is the most committed state in terms of diaspora integration, with formal programs, dedicated budgets, and an established institutional infrastructure (Brojka, 2025).

In Albania's context, "brain gain" is often understood not as permanent repatriation of diaspora scholars and other professionals, but as circulation of talent: diaspora expertise is mobilized through temporary and sometimes virtual collaborations that support domestic development — in planning and other arenas. These models emphasize knowledge exchange, research partnerships, co-teaching, and global networking mainly propelled by human attachment at a very moderate financial cost.

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