

Internationalization at a Crossroads: Kosovo and the Western Balkans in the European Higher Education Landscape

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Over the last decade, the Western Balkans have shifted from Europe's academic margins to serving as a growing hub of international collaboration. Although Kosovo is one of this region's most dynamic participants, its global aspirations do not always match local realities. At the same time, a new generation is channeling international experience into entrepreneurship and innovation, pressing Kosovo to choose whether to embed internationalization into its own systems or remain dependent on external initiatives.

In the past decade, the Western Balkans have moved from the periphery of Europe's higher education map toward its center. From joint degrees to Erasmus+ exchanges, internationalization has become the most visible sign of progress and European alignment for universities in Kosovo, Albania, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Yet behind the steady growth in numbers lies a deeper question: can internationalization truly transform higher education in a region still grappling with limited resources and an uneven European Union (EU) integration process—or will it remain an externally driven success story without domestic reform?

Rising Mobility, Uneven Access

According to the latest Erasmus+ statistics, participation from the Western Balkans Six (WB6) has more than doubled since 2015. Kosovo alone has seen more than 11,000 outgoing and incoming students and staff participate in mobility schemes since joining the program, with rising shares of women and first-generation students. Regional participation in Capacity Building in Higher Education projects has also expanded substantially: more than 100 such projects were implemented in the region between 2021 and 2025. These initiatives address topics ranging from quality assurance to inclusive teaching and digital transformation. To date, all Western Balkan countries are engaged in European University Alliances, reflecting their growing integration in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

These numbers tell a story of progress. Put simply, the internationalization of higher education is no longer a luxury but a necessity. In this context, Erasmus+ International Credit Mobility offers one of the most powerful instruments for Kosovo's students and academic staff to connect with the European and wider academic world. Between 2021 and 2023, 2,398 students and staff from Kosovo participated in Erasmus+ mobility, while 1,304 counterparts came to Kosovo through the

same action. In 2024, Kosovo ranked third among four Western Balkan countries in mobility flows—an indicator of both steady commitment and untapped potential.

Beyond statistics, mobility reflects openness to cooperation, English-taught programs, and stronger institutional bridges with European universities. Erasmus+ is more than a mere project for Kosovo's higher education institutions; it serves as a strategic vehicle for aligning academic standards with Europe, enhancing competitiveness, and developing globally minded graduates. Each student or professor who studies or teaches abroad and returns home becomes an agent of change: they can transfer new ideas, teaching methods, and viewpoints that elevate their home institutions.

Yet mobility remains uneven and concentrated. A Western Balkans Alumni Association tracer study indicated that, while 85 percent of returnees reported greater employability and confidence, fewer than 40 percent found jobs related to their field within a year of return. The gap between skills gained abroad and opportunities at home remains wide. Academics in Kosovo frequently emphasize that, although graduates are increasingly internationally minded, the domestic labor market remains slow to absorb them.

Structural Barriers and Fragmented Systems

Despite remarkable progress, the Western Balkans' higher education systems remain fragmented and underfunded. Small systems and fragile governance structures limit institutional resilience. Harmonization of quality assurance, degree recognition, and research evaluation—all pillars of the EHEA—is incomplete. Kosovo, which lacks full UNESCO membership, faces particular challenges in the mutual recognition of qualifications; this situation directly constrains student and academic mobility. Kosovo has a relatively young higher education system, comprising nine public and 13 private institutions. Its higher education sector is eager to become a

member of the EHEA and the Bologna Process, the principles and objectives of which have already been accepted and applied. The Kosovo Accreditation Agency joined the European Quality Assurance Register as of June 2025, alongside Montenegro, confirming compliance with EHEA quality standards.

However, funding for outbound mobility, joint degrees, and research collaboration still relies heavily on short-term EU projects instead of on national investment. Internationalization thus often appears as an “external” process driven by European programs rather than domestic strategy. Without sustained policy continuity, long-term budgetary support, and incorporation into institutional frameworks, its benefits could remain isolated to a few universities or disciplines.

Opportunities for a New Generation

Despite these obstacles, opportunities remain. The greatest strength of the region is its people. The WB6 youth population is largely multilingual, digitally literate, and eager for global engagement. Surveys from the Regional Cooperation Council and the European Training Foundation show that nearly 70 percent of students in Kosovo and North Macedonia aspire to study or work abroad temporarily, with most expressing a strong desire to “bring back what they learn.” This mindset is reshaping the narrative from brain drain to brain circulation.

Kosovo’s universities are beginning to link internationalization with entrepreneurship and innovation. The Innovation and Training Park, supported by EU and German funds, hosts start-ups that translate mobility experiences into business ventures from green technology to digital learning. Innovation Center Kosovo, a hub for early-stage start-ups and incubators, does the same. These examples highlight how international mobility can promote academic growth as well as socioeconomic transformation.

However, research underinvestment is a persistent challenge. WB6 governments are still investing less than 1 percent of GDP in research and development, compared with an EU average of 2.2 percent. This limits the region’s ability to sustain international partnerships beyond teaching mobility. Although

Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe projects have started to change this landscape, most institutions still lack the infrastructure, language support, and expertise to compete in global research networks. Internationalization, in other words, has not yet fully reached the level of knowledge production.

Toward a More Inclusive and Strategic Internationalization

The next stage of internationalization in Kosovo and across the region will depend on inclusion, alignment, and strategy. It requires moving from counting exchanges to integrating global engagement in curricula, governance, and community outreach. Universities must develop clear policies for credit recognition, invest in language learning, and support returnee reintegration. Such efforts will help ensure that those who study abroad become catalysts for change at home. Shifts in perception are also needed: internationalization should not be seen as an “add-on” but as a core mechanism for institutional modernization, thereby strengthening autonomy, accountability, and quality assurance. For Kosovo, adopting Erasmus+ mobility as part of a national development strategy (rather than as an external opportunity) could accelerate this transformation.

Looking Forward

The Western Balkans’ higher education systems remain in transition but are increasingly dynamic and resilient. Internationalization has reshaped how universities view excellence, inclusion, and their place in Europe, with Kosovo’s growing Erasmus+ participation reflecting both commitment and potential.

At this crossroads, Kosovo must decide whether to embed internationalization within national reform or let it remain fragmented and externally driven. Aligning policy, investment, and institutional vision could transform mobility and cooperation into lasting renewal. The bridges built through education today will define Kosovo’s trajectory toward EHEA, deciding whether internationalization remains a door outward or evolves into a pathway forward.

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