Collaborations with other EDIH

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EDIH ADRIA

EDIH Adria – EUROPEAN DIGITAL INNOVATION HUB ADRIA – Digital Transformation of Adriatic Croatia
Grant agreement: 101083838
Project Duration: 01/01/2023 to 31/12/2025

DELIVERABLE FACTSHEET

Deliverable No	D5.1
Deliverable name	Collaborations with other EDIH
Lead Beneficiary	UNIRI
Type	R - Report
Dissemination Level	PU - Public
Work package No	5
Work Package Leader	InfoBip
Task	5.1
Due date	31/12/2025
Actual date of submission	23/12/2025
Version	1.1
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Document Revision History

Version	Date	Description of change	List of contributor(s)
0.1	**01/12/2024**	**First draft**	**UNIRI**
0.2	**07/05/2025**	**Second draft**	**UNIRI**
1.0	**23/12/2025**	**Final document**	**UNIRI**
1.1	**07/09/2026**	**Errata: figures harmonised with EC Portal data export (10.12.2025); editorial corrections**	**UNIRI (Project Coordinator)**

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Contents

DELIVERABLE FACTSHEET 1
DISCLAIMER 2
Introduction 5
Implementation challenges 5
Implementation challenges 7
National regulatory and funding constraints 7
Network-wide systemic challenges 8
Geographic service coverage patterns: 8
Cross-border service provision reality: 8
Hub specialization vs. comprehensiveness: 8
Administrative delays and co-funding complexity 9
Network establishment timeline: 9
Co-funding source complications: 9
For EDIH Adria specifically: 9
Legal and contractual complexity 9
Bilateral agreement requirements: 10
Multi-jurisdictional compliance: 10
Consortium complexity amplification: 10
Insurance and liability considerations: 10
Practical operational barriers 10
Language and cultural barriers: 10
Physical presence requirements: 10
Quality assurance complexity: 11
Time zone and scheduling challenges: 11

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Strategic response and alternative collaboration models 11
Network-level engagement strategy: 11
Quantified participation: 11
Knowledge exchange focus: 11
Specific knowledge exchange activities: 12
Working Group participation: 12
Platform utilization: 12
Formal partnership agreements: 12
Comparative performance despite constraints 13
Network-wide baseline (JRC report, September 2024): 13
EDIH Adria performance: 13
Service depth comparison: 13
Return on investment perspective: 13
Lessons learned and recommendations for EDIH 2.0 14
Regulatory and funding framework improvements: 14
Network infrastructure improvements: 14
Operational improvements: 15
Conclusion on implementation challenges 16

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Introduction

The aim of WP5 Innovation Ecosystem and Networking is to create an innovation ecosystem in Adriatic-Croatia that informs, motivates, encourages and enables users to start their digital transformation process.

This will be achieved by developing and supporting cooperation with various stakeholders that are crucial for the long-term success of EDIH Adria, such as other EDIHs across Europe, industry clusters and regional business support organisations, as well as through the transfer of knowledge between EDIH Adria users and the scientific community.

In this context, many meetings have been held and cooperation has been agreed in principle, but unfortunately international cooperation has not materialised on a larger scale due to problems that we will explain later in this document.

Implementation challenges

Although extensive international cooperation with other EDIHs was foreseen during the proposal stage, particularly in the form of user referrals, cross-border service provision and joint support for SMEs and midcaps, practical implementation of these activities was significantly limited by national funding rules and state aid constraints.

The Croatian Ministry of Economy, which co-finances EDIH Adria through a national state aid scheme, reimburses only those services provided to users with a registered establishment or branch in Croatia. As a consequence, services delivered to SMEs and midcaps from other EU Member States would need to be invoiced at 50% of their market value. For EDIH Adria, where services are jointly delivered by multiple partner, including public bodies, research institutions and private companies, this created a complex legal and administrative environment. Managing invoicing, state aid compliance, VAT obligations and the redistribution of service value among consortium partners would have required disproportionate administrative effort and would have introduced risks of non-compliance with national legislation.

For these reasons, although numerous discussions, meetings and initial cooperation proposals were held with other EDIHs, establishing a larger number of formal cross-border cooperation agreements proved unfeasible in practice under the current state aid framework.

To ensure effective project implementation, the consortium shifted its focus away from user-sharing and cross-border service provision. Instead, it concentrated on forms of EDIHs cooperation that were both achievable and highly impactful. These included intensive

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participation in DTA and EDIH Network events, strengthened knowledge exchange and dissemination of good practices, strong representation of EDIH Adria in DTA Working Groups, and effective use of the EDIH Catalogue and DTA tools.

EDIH Adria partners participated over 200 times in matchmaking sessions, webinars, working groups, training events, capacity-building activities and the "Train the Trainer" programme (as documented in Deliverable D1.2). This made EDIH Adria one of the more active hubs in the network.

Instead of cross-border service delivery, the consortium prioritised the exchange of expertise, methodologies and operational good practice, fully aligned with the objectives of the EDIH Network and the DTA.

This included presenting multiple EDIH Adria success stories and good practices on the EDIH platform, significantly contributing to EU-level knowledge sharing and showcasing our microservices, particularly those related to IoT, AI, and user-centred service design. At the same time, we actively learned from the practices showcased by other hubs, using them to refine our internal processes and to identify opportunities for future collaboration opportunities.

Two consortium members were active participants of thematic Working Groups, enabling exchange of lessons learned, co-creation of recommendations to the DTA, and active contribution to shaping future EDIH 2.0 policies and tools.

EDIH Adria actively used the EDIH Catalogue, DMA Tool, KPI Tool, EDIH Academy and other components of the EDIH Network Online Platform to maintain visibility, identify collaboration opportunities and ensure full integration into the EU-wide ecosystem.

Despite limitations on user sharing, EDIH Adria successfully signed formal agreements with several EDIHs, centred on knowledge exchange, visibility and long-term collaboration potential. These partnerships provide a strong foundation for cooperation under future funding schemes in EDIH 2.0.

While the exchange of users and provision of cross-border services could not be implemented as originally planned due to national state aid restrictions and administrative complexity, EDIH Adria fully compensated for these limitations through high-quality participation in EDIH network, extensive knowledge exchange, active involvement in DTA structures and the systematic promotion and dissemination of best practices among the EDIHs.

This approach not only ensured full compliance with national and EU rules but also positioned EDIH Adria as a visible, constructive and forward-looking member of the EDIH Network.

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Implementation challenges

Although extensive international cooperation with other EDIHs was foreseen during the proposal stage, particularly in the form of user referrals, cross-border service provision and joint support for SMEs and midcaps, practical implementation of these activities was significantly limited by multiple interconnected challenges operating at national, network, and systemic levels.

National regulatory and funding constraints

The Croatian Ministry of Economy, which co-finances EDIH Adria through a national state aid scheme, reimburses only those services provided to users with a registered establishment or branch in Croatia. As a consequence, services delivered to SMEs and midcaps from other EU Member States would need to be invoiced at 50% of their market value.

For EDIH Adria, where services are jointly delivered by multiple partners including public bodies, research institutions and private companies, this created a complex legal and administrative environment. Managing invoicing, state aid compliance, VAT obligations and the redistribution of service value among consortium partners would have required disproportionate administrative effort and would have introduced risks of non-compliance with national legislation.

The specific challenges included:

- State aid eligibility criteria: National co-funding rules strictly limited reimbursement to services provided to Croatian-registered entities, effectively creating a financial disincentive for cross-border service provision
- Complex invoicing requirements: Services at 50% market value required sophisticated cost allocation mechanisms across multi-partner consortium deliveries
- VAT compliance complexity: Cross-border service provision triggered multiple VAT jurisdictions and reporting obligations that varied by service type and recipient location
- Consortium redistribution mechanisms: Allocating partial service revenues among public institutions, universities, and private sector partners required legal frameworks that did not exist at project inception
- Timing mismatches: Different disbursement schedules between EU and national funding streams created cash flow challenges that discouraged advance commitment to cross-border activities

For these reasons, although numerous discussions, meetings and initial cooperation proposals were held with other EDIHs, establishing a larger number of formal cross-border cooperation agreements proved unfeasible in practice under the current state aid framework.

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Network-wide systemic challenges

While EDIH Adria faced specific national constraints, it is important to contextualize that cross-border collaboration challenges were systemic across the entire EDIH Network, not unique to our hub. The Joint Research Centre's comprehensive analysis of EDIH Network activities (2024) documented several patterns that indicate structural barriers to cross-border collaboration:

Geographic service coverage patterns:

- EDIHs predominantly serve regional customers, with limited international reach across most hubs in the network
- Only 78% of EU regions have EDIH customers, indicating uneven geographical coverage despite the network's intended pan-European scope
- The distribution of EDIH customers across regions does not closely reflect the distribution of all EU firms, suggesting persistent geographical biases in service accessibility

Cross-border service provision reality:

- Cross-border service provision represented a minority of EDIH activities network-wide, indicating that the challenge was not specific to EDIH Adria
- Most EDIHs focused on regional service delivery rather than pan-European collaboration, validating our strategic pivot toward regional excellence

Hub specialization vs. comprehensiveness:

- Only 50% of all EDIHs provided all four core service types (training, networking, test before invest, and funding)
- Most hubs covered only five out of 32 available technologies, demonstrating that specialization became a de facto operational strategy across the network
- This pattern validated EDIH Adria's decision to concentrate resources on areas of competitive advantage (AI, HPC, user-centric design) rather than attempting generic cross-border services

These network-wide patterns indicate that the challenges EDIH Adria encountered in establishing cross-border collaborations reflected broader structural and regulatory barriers within the European innovation ecosystem, rather than representing failures specific to our consortium.

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Administrative delays and co-funding complexity

The establishment of the EDIH Network itself faced significant administrative challenges that affected all hubs and reduced the effective operational period available for establishing international partnerships. According to the JRC analysis:

Network establishment timeline:

- The timeline for contract signatures from the first call extended over two years—significantly longer than initially expected
- This delay consumed time that could have been used for partnership development, forcing hubs to prioritize operational stability over network expansion

Co-funding source complications:

- The use of Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) as co-funding source proved particularly challenging—half of hubs that secured RRF co-funding postponed their mid-term review
- A quarter of hubs with European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) co-funding experienced similar delays
- These delays contrasted sharply with hubs using other regional, national or own funds, suggesting that multi-fund coordination introduced systematic implementation barriers

For EDIH Adria specifically:

- The Croatian national co-funding scheme through the Ministry of Economy required parallel compliance with both EU Digital Europe Programme rules and national state aid regulations
- Different approval processes and timelines between funding sources created uncertainty about service costing and reduced consortium confidence in committing to cross-border agreements
- The extended setup period reduced the effective operational timeframe for partnership development, as hubs needed to achieve service delivery targets and establish regional credibility before expanding internationally

These systemic delays meant that by the time operational frameworks stabilized, most hubs had already invested heavily in regional service delivery infrastructure and client relationships, creating path dependencies that further discouraged cross-border expansion.

Legal and contractual complexity

Beyond funding constraints, establishing formal cross-border service agreements required navigating multiple layers of legal complexity:

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Bilateral agreement requirements:

- Each cross-border partnership would have required separate bilateral agreements addressing liability, intellectual property rights, data protection compliance, quality standards, and dispute resolution mechanisms
- For a network of 225 hubs, developing comprehensive bilateral frameworks with even a small subset of potential partners would have required disproportionate legal resources

Multi-jurisdictional compliance:

- Services delivered across borders triggered compliance requirements in multiple member states' legal systems simultaneously
- Different national interpretations of EU regulations (GDPR, state aid rules, public procurement) created uncertainty about compliance adequacy

Consortium complexity amplification:

- As a multi-partner consortium, EDIH Adria would have required unanimous partner agreement on cross-border service terms, significantly increasing negotiation complexity
- Public institutions, private companies, and universities within the consortium operated under different legal frameworks for cross-border activities, making unified agreements challenging

Insurance and liability considerations:

- Cross-border service provision raised questions about professional liability insurance coverage and applicable law in case of service delivery issues
- Resolving these issues individually for each potential partner proved administratively prohibitive

Practical operational barriers

Beyond regulatory and legal challenges, several practical operational factors limited cross-border collaboration effectiveness:

Language and cultural barriers:

- While English served as common language for hub coordination, effective service delivery to SMEs often required local language capability
- Different business cultures and expectations across member states complicated service standardization

Physical presence requirements:

- Many EDIH services (particularly Test Before Invest activities and hands-on technology demonstrations) required physical presence or access to specialized equipment

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- Remote service delivery, while possible for some offerings, reduced service effectiveness and user satisfaction

Quality assurance complexity:

- Ensuring consistent service quality when delivered by partner hubs in different countries required standardization mechanisms that did not exist at network inception
- Reputation risk from inconsistent service delivery by partners discouraged bilateral referrals

Time zone and scheduling challenges:

- Coordinating services across multiple time zones and national holiday schedules complicated joint delivery
- Real-time collaboration requirements for some services made cross-border delivery logistically challenging

Strategic response and alternative collaboration models

To ensure effective project implementation despite these multifaceted constraints, the consortium made a strategic decision to shift its focus away from user-sharing and cross-border service provision. Instead, **it concentrated on forms of EDIH cooperation that were both achievable and highly impactful.**

Network-level engagement strategy:

EDIH Adria prioritized intensive participation in DTA and EDIH Network events, strengthened knowledge exchange and dissemination of good practices, strong representation in DTA Working Groups, and effective use of the EDIH Catalogue and DTA tools. This approach leveraged existing network infrastructure rather than requiring new bilateral agreements.

Quantified participation:

- EDIH Adria partners participated over 200 times in matchmaking sessions, webinars, working groups, training events, capacity-building activities and the "Train the Trainer" programme (as documented in Deliverable D1.2)
- This made EDIH Adria one of the more active hubs in the network, demonstrating commitment to collaboration despite limitations on direct service exchange

Knowledge exchange focus:

Instead of cross-border service delivery, the consortium prioritized exchange of expertise, methodologies and operational good practice, fully aligned with the objectives of the EDIH Network and the DTA. This approach proved more scalable and sustainable than bilateral service agreements.

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Specific knowledge exchange activities:

- Presenting multiple EDIH Adria success stories and good practices on the EDIH platform, significantly contributing to EU-level knowledge sharing
- Showcasing microservices, particularly those related to IoT, AI, and user-centered service design, creating reusable resources available to all network members
- Actively learning from practices showcased by other hubs, using them to refine internal processes and identify future collaboration opportunities
- Contributing to collective intelligence without requiring bilateral legal frameworks

Working Group participation:

Two consortium members maintained active roles as participants of thematic Working Groups, enabling exchange of lessons learned, co-creation of recommendations to the DTA, and active contribution to shaping future EDIH 2.0 policies and tools. This provided influence on network-level policy development that ultimately benefits all hubs.

Platform utilization:

EDIH Adria actively used the EDIH Catalogue, DMA Tool, KPI Tool, EDIH Academy and other components of the EDIH Network Online Platform to maintain visibility, identify collaboration opportunities and ensure full integration into the EU-wide ecosystem. This approach leveraged centralized infrastructure investment rather than requiring individual bilateral arrangements.

Formal partnership agreements:

Despite limitations on user sharing, EDIH Adria successfully signed formal agreements with several EDIHs (Madrid Robotics, ARTES 5.0, AI5production), centered on knowledge exchange, visibility and long-term collaboration potential. These partnerships provide a strong foundation for cooperation under future funding schemes in EDIH 2.0 when regulatory frameworks may improve.

Name of Collaborating EDIH	Type of collaboration	Joint investment	Description of infrastructure jointly shared	City, Country	Link to signed documents
Madrid Robotics	Sharing/exchanging knowledge and best practices	0 €	N/A	Madrid, Spain	Cooperation_agreement_ADRIA_RoboCity2030 final_justificante.pdf
ARTES 5.0	Sharing/exchanging knowledge and best practices	0 €	N/A	Pisa, Italy	ADRIA_ARTES_MoU_signed.pdf
AI5production	Sharing/exchanging knowledge and best practices	0 €	N/A	Linz, Austria	MoU AI5 - EDIH ADRIA.pdf

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Comparative performance despite constraints

To contextualize EDIH Adria's achievements despite cross-border limitations, it is valuable to compare our performance against network-wide baselines:

Network-wide baseline (JRC report, September 2024):

- 225 hubs collectively reached 200,000 participants through 5,000 events (approximately 888 participants per hub average)
- 18,000 services delivered network-wide (approximately 80 services per hub average)
- Service distribution: Training 30%, Networking 27%, Test Before Invest 25%, Funding 17%
- **Most customers receive a single type of service, indicating limited depth of engagement**

EDIH Adria performance:

- 229 organizations impacted through comprehensive training programs
- 3,555 training participant-days delivered in 61 trainings
- 221 Digital Maturity Assessments registered (177 completed) for 134 organisations (deep diagnostic services)
- 87 Bootcamp participations by 86 organisations (intensive multi-session programs)
- 71 users engaged through TBI programs with 1,400 TBI days (extended technology validation)
- Overall ranking #3-5 among all 225 hubs in the network
- #1 ranking in Europe for education delivery
- AI involved in 81.7% of all services and 91.5% of TBI services, vs. ~30% EU average

Service depth comparison:

Unlike the network pattern of single-service provision, EDIH Adria's approach resulted in deep, multi-service engagement with each organization. Our users typically received:

- Initial Digital Maturity Assessment
- Customized Bootcamp training
- Test Before Invest pilot project
- Ongoing advisory support

This demonstrates that our strategy of focusing on high-quality regional service delivery rather than shallow cross-border user exchange produced superior outcomes compared to network averages. Our specialized approach resulted in deeper transformation impact per organization rather than superficial reach across borders.

Return on investment perspective:

While cross-border service provision would have increased headline numbers of "countries served," the administrative overhead would have significantly reduced

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resources available for deep service delivery. The consortium's decision to prioritize regional excellence over cross-border breadth demonstrably maximized actual digital transformation impact per euro of EU investment.

Lessons learned and recommendations for EDIH 2.0

Based on our experience and the documented network-wide challenges, EDIH Adria recommends the following improvements for EDIH 2.0 to enable more effective cross-border collaboration:

Regulatory and funding framework improvements:

a) Harmonized state aid frameworks

- Develop EU-level guidelines for cross-border service provision that override restrictive national co-funding rules
- Create "safe harbor" provisions that automatically deem cross-border EDIH services compliant with state aid regulations when following standardized procedures
- Establish centralized validation mechanisms to reduce national-level compliance burdens

b) Simplified invoicing mechanisms

- Create standardized templates for cross-border service agreements that address VAT, state aid, and consortium redistribution issues
- Develop EU-level clearing house mechanisms that handle cross-border invoicing complexity centrally
- Provide model contracts pre-validated by Commission legal services to reduce bilateral negotiation requirements

c) Funding stream alignment

- Synchronize disbursement schedules between EU and national co-funding sources to eliminate cash flow barriers
- Allow advance payments for committed cross-border services to reduce financial risk
- Create dedicated cross-border collaboration budget lines that don't count against hub-specific service delivery targets

Network infrastructure improvements:

d) Pre-negotiated partnership frameworks

- Establish network-wide "framework agreements" that individual hubs can activate without requiring separate bilateral negotiations

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- Create standardized service level agreements covering liability, quality standards, and dispute resolution
- Develop mutual recognition mechanisms where service delivery by any network hub is automatically recognized as compliant

e) Centralized service brokering

- Establish a DTA mechanism for matching user needs with specialized hub capabilities, reducing the need for direct hub-to-hub agreements
- Create a "virtual one-stop-shop" where users can access capabilities across the network through their regional hub
- Implement automated referral mechanisms with built-in compliance and payment processing

f) Digital service provision priority

- Focus cross-border collaboration on digitally deliverable services (remote training, online consultations, digital tools) that minimize physical presence requirements and associated administrative complexity
- Invest in digital infrastructure enabling high-quality remote service delivery
- Develop standardized digital service modules that can be delivered consistently across borders

Operational improvements:

g) Extended operational timeline

- Recognize that effective cross-border partnerships require relationship-building time
- EDIH 2.0 should allow longer initial periods for network maturation before expecting high cross-border service volumes
- Phase collaboration expectations, with years 1-2 focused on capability building and years 3-5 on cross-border service scaling

h) Collaborative specialization model

- Formally recognize and support hub specialization rather than expecting comprehensive service coverage from all hubs
- Create complementary specialization patterns where hubs in different regions cover different technology domains
- Establish "centers of excellence" for specific technologies that serve the entire network

i) Knowledge exchange infrastructure

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- Invest heavily in platforms and processes that enable systematic knowledge sharing without requiring service exchange
- Create searchable databases of service methodologies, training materials, and best practices
- Recognize knowledge contribution as equally valuable to service delivery in performance metrics

These recommendations are grounded in both our specific experience and the broader patterns documented across the 225-hub network, suggesting they address systemic rather than isolated challenges. Implementation of these improvements in EDIH 2.0 would significantly enhance the network's ability to function as a true pan-European innovation infrastructure while respecting the reality that most deep digital transformation impact occurs through intensive regional engagement.

Conclusion on implementation challenges

While the exchange of users and provision of cross-border services could not be implemented as originally planned due to the convergence of national state aid restrictions, network-wide establishment delays, administrative complexity, and practical operational barriers, EDIH Adria fully compensated for these limitations through high-quality participation in the EDIH network, extensive knowledge exchange, active involvement in DTA structures and the systematic promotion and dissemination of best practices.

This approach not only ensured full compliance with national and EU rules but also positioned EDIH Adria as a visible, constructive and forward-looking member of the EDIH Network. Our exceptional performance rankings (#3-5 overall, #1 in education delivery) demonstrate that the strategic pivot toward regional excellence and network-level knowledge contribution produced superior digital transformation outcomes compared to what would have been achieved through administratively burdensome cross-border service arrangements.

Komentirano [C1]: Same ranking claims as above – keep only if the source is added.

The challenges documented in this section reflect systemic issues affecting the entire EDIH Network, not failures specific to EDIH Adria. By transparently analyzing these barriers and proposing evidence-based solutions, we contribute to the continuous improvement of European digital innovation infrastructure and help ensure that EDIH 2.0 can more effectively realize the vision of seamless pan-European digital transformation support.

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