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Italy – Croatia

DIH InnovaMare

D.2.2.2. Report on implemented surveys

Project identification
Project ID: ITHR0200416
Name of the lead partner organization: Hrvatska gospodarska komora
Name of the lead partner organization in English: Croatian Chamber of Economy
Project title: Cross-border digital innovation Hub for innovative marine technology
Project acronym: DIH InnovaMare
Program priority: Sustainable growth in the blue economy
Specific objective: Developed new innovative solution concepts for challenges in the blue economy that are ready for funding opportunities
Project duration in months: 30
Work package: WP2 Innovation network for development of innovative marine technologies for the sustainable blue economy
Activity title: A2.2 - Cross-border pilot program/model for talented young researchers to encourage collaborative
Expected date: 31st January 2026
Activity description: This model should be sustainable because it is based on the needs of companies on one side and the offer of expertise of young researchers. The needs of companies will be detected with a survey conducted on 30 companies. The idea of mentors who come from companies is to bring practical knowledge and challenges that companies are facing, so it can help young researchers to open cooperation with companies on specific challenges and activities. Mentoring sessions will be held based on the capabilities of mentors.
Partner responsible: LP CCE
Dissemination level: CO-Confidential
Status: Draft
Version: V1
Date: 15.11.2025.

1. Executive Summary

Deliverable D.2.2.2 presents the implementation and outcomes of surveys conducted within the DIH InnovaMare project as a key preparatory and analytical instrument supporting mentoring and collaboration between companies and young researchers in the blue economy. Building on the questionnaire developed under Deliverable D.2.2.1, the surveys systematically collected information on the needs, challenges, and expectations of companies and stakeholders, as well as the expertise, interests, and collaboration potential of young researchers from Croatia and Italy.

The survey results provided an essential evidence base for the organisation and structuring of mentoring sessions held in Zadar and Lecce. By capturing inputs from both sides before the events, DIH InnovaMare ensured a needs-driven approach to matchmaking, enabling discussions to be grounded in real industry challenges and aligned with relevant research competencies. The findings confirm a strong interest from both researchers and industry actors in applied collaboration, joint project development, innovation, and long-term cooperation within the Italy–Croatia blue economy ecosystem.

2. Introducton

Within the DIH InnovaMare project, surveys were implemented as a strategic tool to support the development of an effective, sustainable mentoring model bridging academia, industry, and other key stakeholders in the blue economy. The mentoring approach is based on the premise that innovation and impact are maximised when the concrete needs of companies are directly matched with the knowledge, skills, and research capacities of young researchers.

Following a series of mentoring sessions and preparatory activities, DIH InnovaMare developed and implemented targeted surveys addressed separately to companies and stakeholders (potential mentors) and to young researchers (potential mentees). The surveys were designed to identify priority thematic areas, technological and organisational challenges, expectations from collaboration, and potential areas for joint research, innovation, and project development.

Invitations to participate in the surveys were disseminated through multiple communication channels, including project social media, the project website, the Map of Excellence, and direct outreach through the partnership consortium in Croatia and Italy. This ensured broad visibility and engagement across sectors and territories within the cooperation area.

2. Survey Implementation

The survey implementation followed a structured yet flexible process designed to encourage broad participation and high-quality responses. Separate survey pathways were created for mentors from

companies and institutions and for young researchers, reflecting their different roles and perspectives within the mentoring programme.

Invitations to participate were disseminated through multiple communication channels, including project social media, the project website, the Map of Excellence, and direct outreach through the DIH InnovaMare partnership consortium in Croatia and Italy. This multi-channel approach ensured visibility across sectors and facilitated cross-border participation.

Participants were invited to reflect on their expertise, challenges, expectations, and interests in collaboration. The survey format allowed respondents to combine structured inputs with open-ended descriptions, enabling both comparability and richer qualitative insights. This approach encouraged participants to articulate not only what they do, but also what kind of cooperation they were seeking.

The survey implementation followed these steps:

- Collection of responses from mentors and young researchers.
- Analysis of responses to identify alignment between company challenges and the researcher's expertise.
- Use of survey results to design and structure mentoring sessions and discussion topics.

This process ensured that mentoring activities were grounded in real needs and expectations identified through the surveys.

3.1 Target Groups and Distribution

The surveys were implemented using the questionnaire developed under Deliverable D.2.2.1. The surveys targeted two main groups:

- Young researchers from universities and research institutions active in blue economy-related fields;

- Companies, public authorities, stakeholders operating in the blue economy and related sectors.

Two tailored survey versions were used, reflecting the different perspectives and roles of the participants. While the questionnaire structure was harmonised, questions were adapted to capture either research expertise and interests or industry needs and expectations. The surveys were conducted online and supported by direct communication during mentoring-related events. Data collected included structured responses and qualitative inputs, enabling both a quantitative overview and a deeper insight into needs and expertise

3.2 Role of Surveys in the Mentoring Process

The surveys played a central role in preparing and structuring mentoring sessions. Collected data were analysed before the events to: - identify thematic overlaps and complementarities; - support targeted matchmaking between mentors and young researchers; - define discussion topics aligned with real operational and research challenges; - and ensure meaningful, goal-oriented mentoring interactions.

3. Survey Results and Key Findings

3.1 Young Researchers' Profiles and Interests

Young researchers participating in the surveys expressed a strong interest in engaging with industry to better understand real-world challenges and emerging trends within the blue economy. Many highlighted the value of applying academic knowledge in practical contexts and contributing to sustainable, innovation-driven solutions.

The survey process enabled researchers to position their expertise in relation to industry needs and to identify mentors whose experience aligned with their research interests. Researchers also expressed interest in gaining insight into technology valorisation, market access, and funding opportunities, recognising mentoring as a pathway to professional development and applied research engagement.

Responses from young researchers indicated strong interest in:

- Gaining insight into industry needs and emerging trends.
- Applying academic knowledge to real-world challenges.
- Participating in collaborative research and innovation projects.

3.2 Industry and Stakeholder Needs

Survey responses from companies, port authorities, consulting enterprises, start-ups, NGOs, and regional institutions highlight strong demand for innovation, digitalisation, sustainability, and research-based support. Identified needs include renewable energy integration, aquaculture sustainability, environmental monitoring, data acquisition and processing, waste management, port development, and energy transition.

Many mentors highlighted concrete challenges they face in daily operations, including the need for new technologies, improved monitoring methods, digital solutions, and applied research support. Participation in the surveys allowed companies to clearly articulate these needs and identify areas where cooperation with researchers could add value.

Several stakeholders expressed interest not only in mentoring young researchers but also in longer-term cooperation and access to emerging talent. Survey responses from mentors highlighted several recurring needs and motivations:

- Interest in collaboration with young researchers to develop innovative and applied solutions.
- Need for new methodologies, technologies, and digital tools to address environmental and operational challenges.
- Desire to explore joint project development, including research initiatives and European funding opportunities.
- Motivation to share expertise and act as examples of good practice within the blue economy.
- Companies valued mentoring as a platform to bring forward real-life challenges and identify research partners capable of contributing to practical solutions.

3.3 Matchmaking Potential and Added Value

The survey results clearly demonstrate strong alignment between academic expertise and industry needs. Many thematic overlaps were identified, particularly in areas such as advanced maritime safety technologies, offshore wind farms, digital and AI-based solutions, environmental protection, and sustainable aquaculture. The interdisciplinary nature of responses further confirms the relevance of mentoring sessions as a platform for structured dialogue, knowledge exchange, and collaboration building.

4. Contribution to Mentoring Sessions

The analysis of survey responses directly informed the design and organisation of mentoring sessions held in Zadar and Lecce. Identified needs and expertise were used to guide mentor–mentee matching, shape discussion topics, and structure session agendas.

During the mentoring sessions, industry leaders and young researchers engaged in open dialogue, exchanged knowledge, and explored concrete ideas for collaboration. The sessions also included dedicated contributions on technology valorisation, market access strategies, and European funding opportunities, providing participants with practical tools to support the growth and competitiveness of their ideas.

By grounding mentoring sessions in survey findings, DIH InnovaMare ensured that interactions were focused, relevant, and action-oriented. Survey results directly supported the organisation and content of mentoring sessions held in Zadar and Lecce.

5. Mentoring Session Outcomes

- Facilitated direct interaction between industry leaders and young researchers.
- Enabled exchange of knowledge and identification of potential collaborative projects.
- Supported discussion on technology valorisation, market access strategies, and European funding opportunities, with contributions from external experts.
- Provided tailored advice to innovators, strengthening project development and competitiveness.

The sessions created a collaborative environment that strengthened skills, built partnerships, and catalysed new ideas across academia, business, and institutions.

6. Added Value and Lessons Learned

The implementation of surveys demonstrated the importance of structured preparation for effective mentoring. Key lessons include:

- Surveys enhance mentoring relevance by clarifying expectations and needs in advance.
- Open-ended responses uncover unexpected collaboration opportunities.
- Combining analytical preparation with in-person mentoring maximises impact.

Cross-border participation strengthens the innovation ecosystem within the Italy–Croatia area.

7. Conclusions and Next Steps

The implementation of surveys within the DIH InnovaMare project proved to be an effective and necessary step in establishing a needs-driven mentoring and collaboration model. The results confirm strong interest from both young researchers and industry actors in applied research, innovation, and long-term cooperation within the blue economy. By systematically collecting and analysing stakeholder inputs, DIH InnovaMare strengthened the relevance, impact, and sustainability of its mentoring activities across the Italy–Croatia cooperation area.
The outcomes demonstrate the value of surveys as a preparatory and strategic tool for mentoring activities and provide a strong foundation for future cooperation, project development, and sustainable growth within the blue economy.

This deliverable reports exclusively on the implementation of surveys and the use of collected data. The development and structure of the questionnaire are documented separately in Deliverable D.2.2.1.

Annex 1 – Overview of Surveyed Participants and Thematic Areas

A. Young Researchers – Expertise and Collaboration Interests

The survey responses from young researchers reveal a high level of thematic diversity and applied orientation, confirming strong potential for collaboration with industry and public stakeholders in the blue economy. Research expertise spans maritime engineering, navigation and safety, nautical tourism, renewable energy, environmental monitoring, marine ecology, aquaculture, artificial intelligence, and data-driven marine technologies.

Key thematic clusters identified include: - Maritime safety and navigation: navigation systems, emergency procedures, ship hydrodynamics, wave loads, structural reliability, electronic navigation devices, and decision-support systems. - Renewable energy and offshore infrastructure: offshore wind farms, renewable energy integration, safety of navigation near energy installations, and energy efficiency of ships. - Marine environment and monitoring: trace metal analysis, habitat mapping, multibeam bathymetry, oceanography, remote sensing, UAV applications, and AI-supported monitoring tools. - Aquaculture and fisheries: shellfish aquaculture, fish predation mitigation, ROV and AI applications, morphometric and phenotypic analyses, and environmental impacts. - Digital and data-driven solutions: GIS, Earth observation, data processing automation, AI in maritime operations, and submarine cable route optimisation.

Across all responses, young researchers expressed a strong motivation to: - Apply academic knowledge to real-world industry challenges - Align research directions with concrete market and policy needs - Develop joint research, pilot activities, and innovation projects - Build long-term cooperation with companies and public institutions

B. Mentors and Companies – Needs, Challenges, and Innovation Focus

Surveyed mentors and companies represent a broad spectrum of the blue economy, including aquaculture, renewable energy, port authorities, marine technology providers, environmental consultancies, cultural and creative industries, NGOs, and public institutions.

The main needs and interests expressed by mentors include: - Sustainability and environmental protection: sustainable aquaculture, waste recycling (end-of-life fishing gear), habitat protection, bioremediation, and environmental impact assessment. - Digitalisation and innovation: data collection using drones and ROVs, hydrographic data processing, 3D visualisation, automation, and AI-supported solutions. - Renewable energy and energy transition: wind farms, energy transition in coastal and historic areas, charging solutions, and renewable integration in maritime contexts. - Port development and maritime operations: port sustainability, digitisation, infrastructure planning, training simulators, and

workforce development. - Knowledge transfer and capacity building: mentoring, joint investigation, workshops, internships, and job opportunities.

Mentors consistently emphasised the value of cooperation with young researchers to address practical challenges, test innovative approaches, and develop solutions with real application potential.

C. Contribution of Survey Results to Mentoring Sessions

The structured analysis of survey responses enabled DIH InnovaMare to design mentoring sessions that were thematically focused and strategically matched. By clustering participants according to expertise and needs, the project ensured that mentoring discussions in Zadar and Lecce addressed concrete challenges such as: - Safety and navigation in the context of offshore renewable energy - Digital tools for environmental monitoring and data processing - Sustainable aquaculture and fisheries innovation - Port sustainability, digitisation, and training needs

This evidence-based approach transformed mentoring sessions from general networking events into targeted collaboration platforms, laying the groundwork for future joint research, innovation activities, and cross-border project development within the Italy–Croatia cooperation area.