

PERFORM

Performing and Responsive Social Sciences

Young Researchers Advocate for Better Quality PhD Training

KVALITET DOKTORSKIH STUDIJA U
DRUŠTVENIM I HUMANISTIČKIM
NAUKAMA U SRBIJI



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The system that is supposed to build the capacities of young scholars and prepare them for a career in research is not delivering in Serbia. The structure of PhD training is largely defined by the faculties, and while the curriculum generally looks good on paper, the implementation is of low quality. PERFORM supported a group of PhD students in Serbia to study the factors that most impact the quality of their training and advocate for changes based on the evidence of their research results.

Background

Young scholars form the backbone of a country's innovation system, not only tomorrow, but already today. They are the key to the competitiveness of a country. Brain drain, young scholars leaving their own country and (mostly) going west, is a sad fact. Few reliable figures are available, but it is estimated that 30,000 to 60,000 young people leave the country annually.

An [OECD report](#) states that roughly one quarter of the emigrants are highly qualified. The conditions for having a career in science and conducting high quality research are just not there. Every international conference and workshop related to science in Western Balkan countries comes up with resolutions and recommendations for stopping the brain drain. However, they rarely lead to actual change. No doubt, key stakeholder groups are increasingly sensitised to the issue. What they lack are **tangible steps** and a process to implement.

The system that is supposed to build the capacities of young scholars and prepare them for a career in research is not delivering in Serbia. In particular, the current structure and the content of PhD training **does not meet the requirements** and standards of today's research. Students are complaining about the quality of mentorship and about a lack of access to international literature. The teaching in design and methodology classes is outdated.

The structure of PhD training is largely defined by the faculties. The framework for setting the faculty-specific rules are developed by the university and the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological Development (MoESTD). The Ministry defines the rules regarding research funding, which also includes PhD projects. While the curriculum generally looks good on paper, the implementation is of low quality.

Focus of the Advocacy

The [Group for Analysis and Policy Making \(GAJP\)](#) approached PERFORM with the idea of *doing something* for young scholars. GAJP is a think tank / advocacy group of young PhD students, focusing on research, education, public policy analysis, and advocacy. Most members are associated with the Faculty of Political Sciences of the University of Belgrade. They have implemented numerous public policy related projects in the past.

After a long discussion process with the PERFORM team, GAJP decided that the current PhD training and its quality should be the focus of a future **advocacy campaign**. Changes in the regulatory framework and the training curriculum would have a significant impact on the quality of PhD graduates, and their motivation to work within the system.

Challenges

While the issue is quite relevant and important, it is also politically delicate. Many faculties have little interest in change, and a critical assessment could have repercussions for GAJP researchers themselves. Having the support and backing of a Swiss funded project such as PERFORM provided the necessary assurance to the group to take on this challenge.

The advocacy campaign had to be based on strong evidence obtained through a well-designed [study](#) that would include the main state universities of the country.

At the very beginning, GAJP faced the **lack of internal competencies** in designing a field research and developing a methodology. This was the first time they would prepare and implement such an

empirical field research. PERFORM supported the group in gaining a basic understanding of advocacy and advocacy strategies.

Another issue GAJP had to face was the **hesitance** of PhD students to participate in interviews and focus group discussions. *Please don't tell my mentor this*, was a common first response. The students were worried that their critical statements would be used against them by their mentors and supervisors. GAJP managed to alleviate some of their concerns by ensuring anonymity. The response from mentors tended to be mixed. Some were critical, considering their research as a stir-up, others were supportive. Heads of faculty doctoral studies were generally very sympathetic to GAJP's initiative:

“Making a doctoral thesis is a serious study that cannot be completed in two or three semesters, after spending a year on lectures that have mostly been already covered in Master studies. That first year is meaningless or rather an imitation of the American system, that cannot be applied here.”

The process of interviews and focus group discussions in different universities helped them to understand the dynamics in the system - which groups would be in support of measures to improve the quality of PhD training, and which groups would rather remain within the given system.

GAJP carefully analysed the results from their field research and developed a long list of recommendations. PERFORM took on the role of a sounding board to help the group focus and boil down the **list of recommendations** to just 4 points:

- Introduce clear and specific enrollment procedures and criteria for ranking candidates;
- Introduce high quality research methodology courses in PhD courses;
- Practice well-structured cooperation between mentors and PhD students during the course;
- Establish a fund for doctoral research projects to cover field research, conferences, study visits.



GAJP presents the results of their study at the Media Centre in May 2018

Advocating for Change

GAJP mapped different stakeholder and interest groups for their advocacy campaign, and worked on developing specific **messages** for these groups. PERFORM provided valuable coaching support to the group for framing their messages. Given the obvious polarisation within the system, it was important not to contribute further to the tension, but rather phrase messages in a positive way, such as reducing brain drain and increasing research performance of the faculty, and messages that are action-oriented.

GAJP has started to **present their results** to larger and mixed audiences, and has already seen some positive effects. Their findings attracted the interest of key stakeholders. The Prime Minister's Cabinet has requested an in-depth discussion on GAJP's findings; different media have taken up the issue, including TV interviews with GAJP.

The Change

A major change has taken place within GAJP itself. The group has **increased their confidence** in addressing this politically delicate problem. We recognise this by the way they establish contacts with high political offices, or give interviews on television.

Key stakeholders have started to listen: a group of young people working on their PhD dissertation are pointing out the weaknesses of curricula and structure of the current PhD training, based on a thorough field research. Well-founded ideas and proposals fall on a fertile and receptive ground.

The presence of PERFORM in the background has contributed to their credibility and the trust of stakeholders in their research results.



“PERFORM gave us the wind in our back and encouraged us to start this process. In addition to providing resources for conducting the research and advocacy, it was very helpful and important to us that we could rely on PERFORM for professional advice and guidance.”

– Tamara Vukov, GAJP President

Who is Driving the Change?

The process of advocating for and changing the regulatory framework of PhD studies is only at the very beginning. However, the fact that the debate has started should be seen as a positive development. The group of **young researchers in GAJP** has evolved as the driver that takes the process of change forward. They were able to take on this role through the support of PERFORM: as a coach, mentor and sounding board, and through financial resources provided to undertake the field research. The fact that PERFORM is considered in the system as a trusted and impartial player, significantly helped GAJP in their interactions with the stakeholders.

Measures to improve the situation of young researchers and reduce brain drain are politically not controversial and are falling on fertile ground at this level, if presented in a clear and tangible manner.

Change at the level of **faculties** in favour of a substantial betterment of PhD training will be a harder nut to crack. Inertia to change and polarisation will require strong strategic allies to affect change. Faculties claim autonomy for their governance and operation while the Ministry has been cautious to challenge aspects of this autonomy, particularly when it comes to performance.

The Expected Impact

Important groundwork has been laid, making it quite feasible for GAJP to successfully advocate for measures to improve the conditions of PhD training. The case would show that advocacy that is based on sound evidence and conducted by systems actors can bring significant change.

The changes that GAJP is advocating for will improve the quality of PhD training and thus the qualification of PhD graduates. It will be a step towards providing young researchers with better opportunities for development and thus less reason to leave the country.

Next Steps

GAJP will continue its meetings with specific stakeholder groups to present their findings, recommendations and key messages. GAJP will have a challenging task of mobilising a broader base for the advocacy campaign, since GAJP represents just one faculty from one university. The group needs to find **strategic allies** that can help them affect change particularly at the level of faculties.

Additional Sources

[Study on the Quality of PhD Studies in Social Sciences and Humanities in Serbia](#)

09/05/2018 [PhD Students in Serbia Cannot Compete With Their Peers in Europe](#)