



Project Summary

Serbia has experienced massive 'brain drain' during the past two decades, and the government is attempting to stem highly skilled emigration and attract experts from the diaspora to return. Bodies such as the International Organisation for Migration encourage migrants to return to help with development in the homeland. These individuals are seen as agents of knowledge contagion, facilitating investment and technological advancement.

This research examines the potential for international mobility to plug Serbia's skills gaps and help with technological catch-up. From the outset the research was designed to address a gap in the literature on highly skilled migration by using knowledge management theories and insights to analyse the conditions that influence knowledge sharing by mobile individuals with international experience at the micro-level, i.e. the workplace where individuals transfer knowledge to colleagues and to the organisation. This is based on the premise that the acquisition of knowledge is not sufficient for knowledge sharing to occur.

Knowledge transfer is not an automatic corollary of highly skilled mobility and several factors related to global integration, state policies, personal and professional motivations and workplace receptivity influence the ability for these individuals to contribute to development.



Contacts: tjmstja@ucl.ac.uk

Aims and Objectives

The research asks if and how individuals with international experience transfer valuable knowledge and expertise to the home country. One of the key questions of this research is why knowledge gains do not automatically follow repatriation, often in spite of micro and macro level efforts targeting skilled migrants. The project is also concerned with the following issues:

- What environment does Serbia need to encourage highly skilled individuals to return; what is a receptive competitive environment for returnees?
- Why do individuals go abroad and why do some choose to return?
- In the workplace, what conditions influence return migrants' ability to share what they know and for firms to translate and capture this knowledge and expertise for the benefit of the organisational knowledge base?



Methodology

Two methods of data collection were employed during a six-month fieldwork period in Serbia; A survey of 160 people and in-depth interviews with 70 returnees.

The questionnaire and interviews were designed to measure push and pull factors for going abroad, as well as disincentives for returning to Serbia. At the workplace level, returnees were asked about receptivity from others and their ability to influence work practices. The results are compared according to whether the workplace is Serbian or foreign, the age of the respondents, the length of time they spent abroad and how long they had worked for the company.



Outcomes and Impacts

- The research finds that domestic and international factors play a crucial role in the ability of return migrants to transfer knowledge to Serbia. In the workplace there are a number of conditions that influence knowledge sharing, including the need to build trusting relationships with colleagues. Many respondents and interviewees also indicated a lack of management skills among superiors, which leads to a failure to recognise and exploit staff expertise.
- Returnees frequently find it difficult to share knowledge because Serbia is poorly integrated into international markets and firms are oriented towards the local market. Internationally-relevant experience is thus often not recognised as important by local colleagues and managers.
- More opportunities for return migrants will emerge as international integration filters down to the workplace, changing organisational cultures and values, and orienting firms towards international markets. Individual motivations will change as people see more career opportunities in Serbia, even if they choose to experience work and life in another country temporarily.
- Through international integration in the guise of foreign partners, clients, owners and funders, Serbian workplaces are adopting international practices of business. Internationally-mobile individuals are a valuable instrument in the dissemination of new knowledge and working practices, but their impact is contingent on a receptive environment. As the research showed, organisations with international orientation are more likely to recognise the relevance of knowledge held by international migrants.



Consortium:
UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies
University of Birmingham Centre for Russian and East European Studies
University of Oxford Russian and East European Studies

Network of University Partners: Bath, Cambridge, Kent, Manchester, Sheffield, Warwick, SOAS

