

Training young academics in the Balkans



TRAIN



Five years ago, the King Baudouin Foundation added the training of academic newcomers in the Western Balkans to its agenda in the form of TRAIN - the Training and Research for Academic Newcomers program. Katarina Zeljic, Assistant Professor in the Department of Genetics and Evolution at the University of Belgrade, explains why she decided to get involved with the project and why she hopes that more young academics will have the chance to benefit from similar opportunities.

The objectives of the TRAIN are to develop, implement and evaluate a structured professional development training program consisting of seven modules for new academics at four universities in the Western Balkans. These are the University of Sarajevo, the University of Belgrade, the University of Novi Sad and the University of Montenegro.

A key aim of the program is to provide participants with the knowledge, skills, motivation and confidence to enhance their own practices and teaching and thereby improve student learning, their own research and their contribution to society and industry. TRAIN is also focused on improving collaboration among new academics, expanding their networks and enhancing their capacity for educational leadership.

The trainers were initially from a variety of European universities and organizations. However, since 2014, the trainings have been delivered by experts from the Balkan universities participating in the program. Over 1000 participants have benefited from TRAIN since it was set up, including Katarina Zeljic.

Why did you decide to participate in the program?

Katarina Zeljic: "I recognized that I had a lack of lecturing and soft skills that are useful for good teaching and for research, such as how to find appropriate calls for projects, and how to write and organize project proposals. I had been curious about what the TRAIN program had to offer and so decided to apply to join it."

How does the TRAIN project work?

"I found out about the project via an e-mail from my faculty. The project is divided into several modules covering different topics that are organized during the winter and summer semesters. After applying for a particular course, I met up with the participants from different faculties and institutes which belong to the University of Belgrade to attend the one-day or two-day long courses."

What was the best part of the project?

"In addition to all the practical information, the great lectures and good speakers opened new areas of thinking, of teaching and of research to me. I immediately started implementing my newly acquired knowl-



edge in my everyday life as a lecturer and in my research practice. I also met a lot of new people from different faculties and institutes at the University of Belgrade during the training.”

What did you get from the project?

“I gained a lot of practical knowledge on many, many issues. These include: how to set up an interesting lecture; how to keep a student’s attention; how to design higher education curricula; how to effectively present scientific results; the most important considerations for preparing good and effective poster

presentations of scientific results; where to find information on project calls; and what is most important when preparing projects. In fact, the list is nearly endless!”

There were obviously lots of personal gains, do you think TRAIN offers any long-term advantages for your university?

“Yes, as it is increasing the number of young people with good training in teaching and research soft skills and it is establishing connections between people with different backgrounds from different faculties of the same university.”

Do you have any recommendations to improve the program?

“Yes, the visibility of TRAIN should be improved through advertising via the appropriate academic and social networks so that more people know about it and can benefit. I would also like to see international lecturers from different universities abroad come to Belgrade to share their experiences and knowledge with us.”



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KATARINA ZELJIC,
Assistant Professor in the Department of Genetics and Evolution at the University of Belgrade

THE SEVEN MODULES OF THE TRAIN PROGRAM :

1. Research Methodology, Scientific Writing and Result Presentation
2. Higher Education Didactics
3. Preparing Funding Applications & Project Management
4. Communication & Presentation Skills
5. Entrepreneurial Skills
6. Networking & Teamwork
7. Designing Higher Education Curricula