

WUS Austria challenges the myths about migration

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Leaving one's homeland, especially in times of crisis and political upheaval, always involves making difficult practical and moral decisions revolving around the question 'should I stay, or should I go?'. As many prominent exile writers—from Joseph Brodsky to Aleksandar Hemon—have described, this question does not go away once the borders are crossed and one finds him or herself in the role of a refugee, a migrant, or a guest worker in a foreign country. For most migrants, finding the right answers to and balance between longing (for the place left) and belonging (to the place arrived at) becomes a life-long project. Rather than closing one chapter in order to start a new one, many migrants spend much of their lives living in a state of flux, on a permanent 'temporary' basis, split between the places and people 'here' and 'there', and developing a sense of moral obligation, even guilt, towards both societies: the homeland and people left behind, who might have endured hardship; and the host country, wanting to demonstrate that they are worth of being fully accepted as fellow residents and citizens. Thus, much of the dynamics relating to migrants' realities take place the domain of the psychological, emotional and social rather than economic and political. However, the studies and debates on migration have given much more attention to the last two areas, the political and economic: seeing migration in political terms through bi-lateral agreements, citizenship, visa categories, repatriation and so on, or measuring and quantifying migration in economic terms such as remittances, migrants' contribution to GDP and social capital. The use of the metaphors 'brain drain' and 'brain gain' is also popular among migration scholars. The concept based on these metaphors sees migration as a linear process in which the sending countries lose people with skills (human capital), while the receiving countries 'gain brains', i.e. poaching the human capital from other countries. The one-way movement is also understood to be mostly 'South to North', or from the poor to the rich countries.

In 2002, a group of enthusiasts and young scholars at World University Service (WUS) Austria, supported by their partners and associates, decided to challenge some of the preconceived beliefs and myths about migration, and to redirect the 'brain circulation'. They developed and implemented the Brain Gain Program (BGP), focused on the South-eastern European (SEE) countries, the region most heavily affected by the loss of human capital and infrastructure due to a series of violent conflicts, forced migration and political turmoil since the early 1990s. BGP invited former refugees, migrants and expatriates from the region, who are now established scholars in different fields at many universities across the globe, to share their knowledge and skills gained overseas with the colleagues and students in their 'former' homelands. Many scholars, who once might have fled their countries, have eagerly embraced the program and turned it into their dignified homecoming, even if it was only for a limited period of time.

Being one of those who left his country in dramatic circumstances in 1993, and who over the years has established himself as a university lecturer and researcher in Australia, I can testify how fulfilling it was emotionally, as well as socially and professionally, to return as a recognised scholar to my former university, which I left as an undergraduate student when the war interrupted my studies and forever changed the course of my life. Delivering the first lecture in my native language, after I had presented hundreds of lectures in English, was one of the most rewarding moments in my life—it felt like a new initiation into academia. Even though there is no physical home for me to return to in Bosnia and Herzegovina anymore (my house was destroyed during the war), and I have now a permanent place—and a permanent academic position—elsewhere on the planet, that day in 2008, in the crowded lecture theatre at the University of Sarajevo, I felt like I finally returned home. Since then, I have made a number of other symbolic and real returns, and continue to be involved in various teaching and research initiatives with my colleagues in the SEE region. With the support of WUS Austria, I was also able to connect my two academic and social worlds— my personal ‘here’ and ‘there’—by taking a group of my students on a study tour all the way from Australia (via Austria) to Bosnia and Herzegovina . This was a very special experience for everyone involved and has resulted in many positive outcomes since then.

Through its Brain Gain Program, and other projects and activities, WUS Austria has demonstrated that migration does not necessarily result in a fixed ‘brain gain–brain drain’ dichotomy, but can indeed be beneficial to both ‘sending’ and ‘receiving’ countries. WUS Austria, reminding us academics of our shared responsibilities as global citizens—in line with its mission to promote the right to education as one of the fundamental human rights—the organization continues to contribute to the idea that knowledge should not be restricted by borders, and that sharing knowledge may be one of the most efficient and possibly least expensive ways to empower, democratise and economically develop societies such as those in the SEE region. I am confident that WUS Austria will not remain lonely in its humanistic endeavours to make this world a better place for all.