

Supporting students' business ideas at the University of Belgrade's Startup Centar, Serbia



The case in summary

The Startup Centar (SC) at the University of Belgrade's Faculty of Economics is one of only a few programmes for developing entrepreneurial thinking and behaviour among students in Serbia. The SC is open for all students eager to learn how to build their company with support from some of the best mentors available. In the main part of the programme, participants focus on developing go-to-market strategies, becoming acquainted with potential clients and market size, and building a Minimum Viable Product. In addition, the SC organises events aimed at encouraging entrepreneurship. At the end of the programme, the teams can present to investors. By the end of 2019, 25 students in 15 teams completed the programme. The SC is searching for further financial partners to grow. With regards to curricular offers, the Faculty of Economics has a mandatory course in Entrepreneurship and Small Company Management. It takes place every year and consists of both lectures and practice classes.

1. Overview about the University's profile and its entrepreneurial activities

The **University of Belgrade** (UoB) is the oldest and largest university in Serbia. Its origins can be traced back to 1808. Today it has close to 100,000 students. The University comprises 31 faculties. One of them is the Faculty of Economics which was established in 1937. It has six Departments. One of them, the Department of Business Economics and Management, has offers in entrepreneurship. There are two major related activities: The Startup Centar that supports entrepreneurial students and a mandatory course in Entrepreneurship and Small Company Management. Furthermore, the University offers several extra-curricular entrepreneurial events.

The University and the Faculty of Economics are committed to promoting and supporting entrepreneurship. However, they have not yet developed a strategy and approach for agilely **promoting entrepreneurship** on a broader and deeper scale, which would mean more related centres, units and activities driving start-up mentality across the University. While there is, in principal, support for entrepreneurship, few people are ready to actively develop concepts and drive them through bureaucratic hindrances.

The **Startup Centar** (SC) is one of only a few programmes for developing entrepreneurial thinking and behaviour among students in Serbia. The SC's objective is "to help young people build their own companies". This case study highlights the objectives and contents of the programme as well as experiences made with it so far.

2. Startup Centar

Founders and partners

The SC began operations in 2017. The initiative to found it was seized by Nenad Stajić, who was a student at the time of initiating the idea, and Professor Dragan Lončar, Vice Dean for Corporate Relations. Their **motivation** was to improve the interest of students from all faculties to establish their

own businesses. The SC offers a free three-month start-up mentoring programme. This is the hub of its work. As such it is a kind of start-up incubator.

The SC was jointly founded and is jointly funded by the Faculty of Economics and the **MVP Workshop** Company. MVP Workshop is Belgrade-based and describes itself as “a blockchain product research and development studio”¹. Its motivation in co-funding the Startup Centar is “to develop an entrepreneurial spirit and help people turn their ideas into sustainable businesses”². Through the SC, MVP seeks to strengthen its corporate social responsibility activities and its attractiveness as an employer as well as to potentially integrate students from the start-up teams into their company. MVP provides mentors, lecturers and networking services as well as funds for space equipment and renovation. The Faculty of Economics and MVP Workshop signed a funding agreement for five years. After that, terms will be renegotiated. The SC is long-term oriented.

Moreover, the **Hubspot** Corporation is a partner. Hubspot is “a platform uniting software, education, and community to help businesses grow better”³, based in the US. It is an institutional partner that does not provide tangible activities.

Target group and application process

The SC is open for all students in Serbia eager to learn how to build their company with support from some of the best mentors available. All those who have a start-up idea and a team can apply. So far the **participants** have come from the UoB and some private universities. The students’ backgrounds are diverse, including for example business, engineering, organisational sciences, political sciences, and agriculture. Each team of applicants needs to have one student from the UoB’s Faculty of Economics.

Each year the SC has two **application** cycles for accepting new participants. Commonly between 20 and 30 teams apply per year. Teams are selected according to their value proposition, team diversification and strength, prospective market size, ripeness of the product as well as sophistication of the idea laid down in a business model canvas and in a customer interview. The programme could take on more teams if more space were available and, to some extent, if more promising business ideas were proposed.

Location

The SC is located in a modern, open space – one room of about 60 square meters for all teams – in a building in downtown Belgrade that belongs to the Faculty of Economics. The space was renovated in the design of modern start-up culture in order to be inspiring. It has a dedicated part for gathering all participants and performing lectures as well as workshops. In addition, the SC uses rooms and facilities in other Faculties, for example a creative centre with virtual reality technology.

Programme contents

In the **main part** of the programme, participants focus on developing go-to-market strategies, becoming acquainted with potential clients and market size, and building a Minimum Viable Product (MVP). For example, the team of a start-up named Trusteed shared its MVP version with several Serbian banks that gave feedback about its usability. At the same time, each team member works on personal improvement as well as acquiring better skills and knowledge. At the end of the programme, the teams have the opportunity to present to investors – so far to venture funds and corporations from Serbia.

¹ Source: <https://mvpworkshop.co/>

² Source: <https://mvpworkshop.co/about/>

³ Source: <https://www.hubspot.com/our-story>

In addition to the regular programme, the SC organises various **events** and conventions aimed at encouraging entrepreneurship among young people. This includes different kinds of panel discussions and guest lectures where Serbian entrepreneurs tell their stories as well as workshops for fostering creativity and product development. Each year there are more than 15 events.

The programme has the following phases:

- **Introduction:** Before the programme starts, the Centar offers a series of introductory lectures on the importance of start-ups in today's economy
- **First month:** Ensure that students can define their target market, investigate competition in that market and start customer development
- **Second month:** Collecting customer data, participants learn how to work on their assumptions and constructs as well as define their MVP and test it
- **Third Month:** Teams complete their go-to-market strategy and budget forecast and know how to defend it
- **Demo Day:** This is the crown of what the teams have been doing for three months. They have the opportunity to present their start-ups to investors

Mentoring

Mentoring is a key part of the programme. Experienced designers, product managers and engineers from MVP Workshop as well as visiting experts from various fields transmit their knowledge to the students as **mentors**. The mentors have many years of experience in running start-up companies. The mentors treat each team and idea with special care and "help them avoid rookie mistakes". For each team there is one mentor, i.e. three to five in each period. Most of them are from Serbia but there were also a couple of experts from Tel Aviv and London. The external experts are usually business owners. Mentors are likely to choose a team which is similar to their job. So far they have always felt comfortable with sharing knowledge with early stage applicants.

As regards to **matching**, potential mentors are invited to give a lecture and then asked about mentoring opportunities. If a team and a lecturer find mutual interest, the programme leaders try to connect them. Sometimes teams and mentors are matched on speed dates. The mentors and the start-up teams arrange their ways of communication on their own. Usually there is a mix of personal and Skype meetings.

Achievements

By the end of 2019, 25 students in 15 teams completed the programme. Table 1 provides an overview about the start-ups and their business ideas in the four editions that have taken place so far. Five teams actually launched start-ups which they had worked on during the programme. Three of them are still trading: Trusteed, Uradi Zaradi and PetGuards. The Centar supports them further through networking and space usage. Furthermore, the Centar organised 60 lectures and workshops with 36 successful entrepreneurs from different parts of the world.

Table 1: Start-up business projects supported by the Startup Centar from 2017 to 2019

Fourth generation	
QBIK	B2B SaaS provided precise analytics for content on social networks, by categories of products or services, using a machine learning algorithm and Creative Data Science methods.
Code Games	Cody Games taught programming games to children aged five to seven. The aim was to improve their cognitive abilities and develop abstract, logical and algorithmic thinking.
Gately	Gately was a mobile application that sought to increase security and facilitate access within a gated community, i.e. a closed community that has a guard at its entrance.

Case Time	Case Time was a web platform for dealing with case studies. All interested companies were asked to put case studies on the platform, and everyone who felt able to solve the challenges posed in the case studies could join.
Third generation	
Shop Guru	Shop Guru created a mobile application that helped buyers find a product at the supermarket by showing products from the shopping list at the stores. They wanted to ease everyday shopping.
Alpha Queue	This team created a chatbot that, in addition to its basic ability to respond to user messages, could retrieve real-time information from various APIs and distribute them to the user.
Rentijer	Rentijer was a web platform that connected landlords and renters. Landlords could earn money on an item that was not used daily, while the other side paid a much smaller amount than usual.
Pet Guards	Pet guards is a platform that connects pet owners with certified guards and walkers in situations where owners cannot devote the necessary time to their pets.
Second generation	
Box Quest	This team planned to create a product that would be a real Escape Room in a box, or a social game with puzzles leading to the final solution of the box.
Trusteed	Trusteed is an in-depth analysis tool for Instagram powered by artificial intelligence and data science algorithms to help get the most out of an account. See https://www.trusteed.co .
Work and Earn	This was an online platform where people such as bankers, lawyers, entrepreneurs, mothers with small children could take on a one-time job such as cleaning, ironing, and petty repairs.
SWW Solutions	This team sought to find a solution to manage the workforce on the ground as well as to provide a precise record of hours worked.
First generation	
Auxesia	This team created a "Linker", a device that provided easy communication while doing sports such as skiing, alpinism and mountain biking.
Bikeseeing	This team developed a web platform that connected cyclists and tourists. They wanted to provide biking tourists with an exciting and adventurous but also efficient guide for touring new cities.
Alt.Cult	Alt.cult was a team of altcoin analysts with the goal of generating excessively high revenues compared to portfolio investments in mainstream crypto currencies.

Source: <https://startupcentar.rs/en/alumni-2/>

Finance for students' startups

The Centar is searching for further financial partners, individual business angels or companies, to help the Startup Centar and the teams grow. The aim is to establish a pool of finance providers that are ready to invest in the teams when needed. Even small amounts can be crucial because the early stage student start-ups often do not have any funds available, not even for basic marketing activities.

3. Other entrepreneurship events

The University's most important curricular offer in teaching entrepreneurship is a **course in Entrepreneurship and Small Company Management** at the Faculty of Economics. It is mandatory for third-year bachelor students within the curriculum of Marketing and Management modules. The course is taking place every year during the spring semester, i.e. from February to June. The course consists of both lectures and practice classes. Within the lecture classes, specific topics are covered in theory and through the analysis of real-life examples. Practice classes, on the other hand, are mostly a practical guide for developing a business plan. In addition to traditional teaching methods, teachers use experiments outside of classrooms as well as various group-based case studies and games to make students understand the material in more depth. Each year, approximately 70 students enrol in the course. During the course, young entrepreneurs or start-up company founders are invited to share their practical experiences with students. Also, certain topics are jointly covered with guest professors from other universities. Several lectures take place at the SC in order to familiarise the students with it and to make them think about applying for the SC programme.

The UoB also organises **extra-curricular events** in entrepreneurship throughout a year. An example is the “Start-up Time Machine” that took place in December 2019. Five owners of businesses which began as start-ups and are now in a mature state, present their experiences. The audience was made up of 130 students from all over the University. The objective was to motivate them to start a business as well as to promote the Startup Centar.

Source

This case study was prepared by Dr. Stefan Lilischkis from empirica Gesellschaft für Kommunikations- und Technologieforschung mbH, Bonn, Germany, through collection and analysis of broad documentation about the University of Belgrade and interviews with key representatives from the University.

The status of information provided in this case study is December 2019.

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Links

Startup Centar: <https://startupcentar.rs/en/homepage/>

University of Belgrade Faculty of Economics: <http://www.ekof.bg.ac.rs/?lang=en>

MVP Workshop: <https://mvpworkshop.co/startup-center-faculty-economics/>

Hubspot: <https://www.hubspot.com>