

The State of Distance Education in Belarus: problems and perspectives

December 2016

Abstract

- In Soviet times, extramural education was extremely popular – the Soviet Union took pride in having created a system for obtaining almost all educational degrees remotely. It was the first in the world to do so.
- Extramural education still remains popular in Belarus, although its utilisation is less wide-spread than in neighbouring countries.
- Promoting distance education in Belarus would make education more accessible to broader circles of society, including those who are constrained by physical or economic factors.
- The established history of extramural education, good technical equipment at universities, and the wide-spread use of high-speed Internet mean that Belarus already possesses a good basis for the development of a high-quality system of distance education.
- In order to create a high-quality system of distance education in Belarus, it is necessary to create a corresponding legislative base, to organise additional trainings for specialists in the sphere of education, and to expand the cooperation between universities and the companies that work in the high tech sector.

1. Distance education in Belarus: the context

After the October Revolution in 1917, Soviet authorities drastically improved the literacy rate in the USSR. Literacy grew from 56% in 1916 to 99% in the early 1970s. In addition to the compulsory eight years of education, extramural education enjoyed large-scale development, as this allowed the working masses to combine education with work.

This lofty aspiration to make higher education accessible has been preserved in Belarus, which occupies a relatively high position on the Human Development Index in comparison with other CIS countries. Thus, according to data from 2014, about 90% of the population possesses secondary or higher education.¹ According to the Legatum Prosperity Index 2016, Belarus surpasses Russia, Ukraine, Lithuania, and certain other European Union countries with regards to access to education, quality of education, and human potential². However, education in Belarus still suffers from a number of significant problems, as universities remain strictly regulated and insufficiently integrated into the common European space. Moreover, the quality of available education often fails to meet the requirements of the labour market, especially when it comes to the humanities and social sciences.

Belarus has retained a system of extramural education in which students attend classes once every few months to sit exams. At present, 61% of Belarusian students are enrolled in extramural education, and 39.1% are studying distantly.³ However, the classic concept of a distance education remains closely linked to the active use of technology.⁴ Students enrolled in extramural education in Belarus do not use interactive methods of learning, nor do they have the benefit of a flexible schedule or opportunities to create an individual educational programme. Due to these factors, extramural education in Belarus does not qualify as distance education.

According to information from the International Council on Distance Education, 14% of students in the world obtain their education distantly. Most universities and other educational institutions around the world, including in countries which neighbour Belarus, offer distance learning which often does not require a prior educational background.

¹ Human Development Reports, 2015. "Belarus". <<http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/BLR>>, [Дата доступа – 25 листопада 2016].

² Селянинов Дмитрий Михайлович, 2015. "Дистанционное образование: международный опыт и возможности его использования в Республике Беларусь", Минск: Минский университет управления, с.62.

³ Образование в Республике Беларусь (учебный год 2015/2016), Белстат, Минск, 2016. <http://www.belstat.gov.by/ofitsialnaya-statistika/solialnaya-sfera/obrazovanie/operativnye-dannye_15/obrazovanie-v-respublike-belarus-uchebnyy-god-2015-2016/> [Дата доступа – 20 листопада].

⁴ Гарманова, Ольга, 2012. "Организационно-методическое обеспечение дистанционного обучения", *Проблемы развития территории*, № 5 (61), с. 95

Poland, Latvia, and Russia, unlike Belarus, have separate institutions of distance education. For instance, the Polish Virtual University in Łódź has already granted certificates to over 20,000 students. In Latvia, the International Baltic Academy is engaged in instructing approximately 8,000 students. In order to guarantee convenience and transparency of communication, as well as to protect the rights of students and professors, they use educational online platforms such as Moodle. Developed countries aspire to use new technologies and adapt them for educational purposes; in Belarus, meanwhile, only certain elements of distance learning are employed.

Distance education provides certain advantages:

- mobility – negotiability of time and location
- flexibility – the ability to adapt the educational programme to suit individual needs
- machinability – the use of informational and communication technologies in the process of studying
- interactivity – access to a broader audience and interaction with its members
- equality – the accessibility of education to various segments of the population
- economic efficiency – low prices for education⁵.

The establishment of a high-quality system of distance education in Belarus would expand opportunities for obtaining education: such aspects as place of residence, material security, and health would cease to be obstacles to learning⁶. According to some information, distance education is 35-45%⁷ more time efficient. Correspondingly, the resulting flexible schedule and opportunities to create individual learning plans would allow students to combine education with work.

As reflected in data provided by the International Telecommunication Union, Belarus ranks 31st with regard to number of subscribers to Broad Band WL, surpassing a number of European Union countries, including Denmark and Austria.⁸ The high tech sector, along with competitive export-oriented companies,⁹ is developing rapidly in the country: for example, the internationally successful application Viber was developed in Belarus. What's more, Belarus also has a low population density, comprising 50 people per 1 square kilometre. This is much less than, for instance, the Netherlands (393/km²) or Poland (124/km²). This makes distance education timelier, as it spares learners from long journeys.

2. The current state of distance education in Belarus

As stated in the 2013 version of the Code 'On Education', distance education is a form of learning which provides for active use of modern communication and information technologies¹⁰. 19 universities offer distance education in Belarus¹¹. The Belarusian National Technical University tops the list with regard to the number of students choosing to learn remotely – about 1,000 students graduated in 2014.

In 2000, the International Institute of Distant Education (IIDE) opened on the campus of the Belarusian National Technical University (BNTU). Its primary goal was to develop this new form of learning. In 2001, the Institute enrolled its first group of distance students, who graduated in 2006. Since 2005, the university has also offered a

⁵ Гарманова, Ольга, 2012. "Организационно-методическое обеспечение дистанционного обучения", *Проблемы развития территории*, № 5 (61), с. 95

⁶ А. Дорохова, Л. В. Романенко, 2015. "Дистанционное обучение в республике Беларусь в контексте болонского процесса", Гомель: Гомельский государственный технический университет имени П. О. Сухого, С. 294-295.

⁷ Селянинов Дмитрий Михайлович, 2015. "Дистанционное образование: международный опыт и возможности его использования в Республике Беларусь", Минск: Минский университет управления, с.63.

⁸ Fixed-broadband subscriptions 2000-2014, International Telecommunication Union official website, http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/statistics/2015/Fixed_broadband_2000-2014.xls

⁹ Eva Keller, Belarusian Tech Companies LEad a Global Technological Advance in Outsourcing and Product Development, 11 October 2016, Emerging Europe <http://emerging-europe.com/regions/belarus/belarusian-tech-companies-lead-a-global-technological-advance-in-outsourcing-and-product-development/>

¹⁰ Кодекс Республики Беларусь об образовании: Кодекс Республики Беларусь, 13.01.2011, № 243-3 // Нац. реестр правовых актов Респ. Беларусь. – 2011. – № 13. – 2/1795.

¹¹ Сычев, А. В. Электронное дистанционное обучение – проблемы и перспективы / А. В. Сычев // Проблемы современного образования в техническом вузе : материалы IV Респ. науч.-метод. конф., посвящ. 120-летию со дня рождения П. О. Сухого, Гомель, 29–30 окт. 2015 г. / Гомел. гос. техн. ун-т им. П. О. Сухого. – Гомель, 2015. – С. 25–30.

Master's programme. As of 2014, the Master's degree programme of the IIIDE BNTU covers seven different specialisations.¹² In 2013, over 1,400 students took advantage of this opportunity to study distantly at the IIIDE.

The Belarusian State University of Informatics and Radio-electronics (BSUIR) boasts the second largest distance learning programme among higher educational establishments¹³. The majority of distance students opt for programmes in the humanities and social sciences. Economic and pedagogical tracks are available to remote learners only at the Belarusian Institute of Law (BIL), a private higher education establishment. The Institute of State Governance of the Academy of Public Administration under the aegis of the President of the Republic of Belarus offers distance education to those studying State Governance and Economy. Distance education is also available at the Belarusian State University, the Belarusian State Economic University, and the Homel, Brest, Baranavichy, and Polatsk State Universities¹⁴.

In 2011-2015, the programme 'E-education and Human Capital Development' was included into the National Programme for Accelerated Development in the field of information and communication technology services. The main goal of this programme is to increase the availability and quality of education, also by means of distance learning¹⁵.

In May 2015, when Belarus became part of the Bologna Process, the authorities elaborated a plan on the development of education in various sectors, including distance education. The Ministry of Education elaborated the Concept of Informatisation of the System of Education in the Republic of Belarus.¹⁶ This Concept provides for active informatisation of education and establishment of a common learning ground.

The informal education sector is often considered to be more inclined towards using innovative technologies¹⁷. However, with some exceptions, such initiatives hardly offer distance education at all.¹⁸ Experts state that 'the disappointingly low level of development of distance education compared with the relatively high potential demand for e-learning among the Belarusian youth creates decent perspectives for institutes entering the market'.¹⁹ Successful examples of distance education include corporate programmes like the EPAM university and the joint online course offered by the SYMPA and the European Humanities University, which also allows learners to accumulate credits in the all-European ECTS system.²⁰

3. Problems of distance education in Belarus

Regardless of the existing legislative base, as well as the fact that several institutions do offer distance education in Belarus, there are certain obstacles hindering its further development. These problems are connected with human, organisational, and material-technical factors.

The human factor plays one of the most important roles in the establishment and development of innovations. In the distance education sphere, the human factor presents several barriers.

First, the introduction of a full-fledged system of distance education and optimisation thereof requires educated and competent personnel. In Belarus, the number of qualified experts is very small. Moreover, qualified potential

¹² Международный институт дистанционного образования <<http://www.bntu.by/mido/item/mido.html>>, [Дата доступа – 20 листопада 2016]

¹³ "Около 10-12 ВУЗов в Беларуси предлагают новую форму обучения - дистанционную. Какие наиболее востребованные специальности?" <<http://www.ctv.by/distancionnoe-obuchenie-norma-ili-alternativa>> [Дата доступа – 21 листопада 2016].

¹⁴ "Около 10-12 ВУЗов в Беларуси предлагают новую форму обучения - дистанционную. Какие наиболее востребованные специальности?" <<http://www.ctv.by/distancionnoe-obuchenie-norma-ili-alternativa>>, [Дата доступа – 21 листопада 2016].

¹⁵ Садовская, М.Н. "Проблемы внедрения электронного обучения в Беларуси", <<http://tinyurl.com/jm83urq>>, [Дата доступа — 21 листопада 2016].

¹⁶ А. Дорохова, Л. В. Романенко, 2015. "Дистанционное обучение в республике Беларусь в контексте болонского процесса", Гомель: Гомельский государственный технический университет имени П. О. Сухого, с.294-295.

¹⁷ Карпюевич, Dmitry, 2009. 'Sub'ekty neformal'nogo obrazovaniya: kluichevyye igroki i vozmozhnyie napravleniya dlia sotrudnichestva', *Adukatar*, No. 16, С.9

¹⁸ Яраслаў Крывой, Вадзім Смок. Нефармальна адукацыя ў Беларусі: пашырэнне прасторы навучання». 28 верасня 2016. <http://ostro.by/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Non-formal-education.pdf> [Дата доступа – 25 Листопада 2016].

¹⁹ Дунаев Владимир, 2009. 'Перспективы создания независимого университета в Беларуси', *Adukatar*, No. 16, С. 18.

²⁰ 'First Graduation of SYMPA/EHU Online Course', <<http://sympa-by.eu/en/articles/first-graduation-sympaehu-online-course.html>> [Дата доступа – 16 листопада 2016].

professionals are mostly concentrated in the IT sphere. This leads to certain disciplines not being represented in the system of distance education.

Secondly, university staff cannot, or are unwilling to, put distance education technologies to use. This leads to their inability to tap into the potential of distance education.²¹ Last, university administrations remain unprepared to develop systems of distance education. Sometimes, this problem is connected with a lack of understanding of the concept of distance education²².

The key problem relating to the *organisation of distance learning* lies in the absence of a split-level structure and development strategy at the state level. There is a need to create a national centre of distance education (like in Poland), centres for teacher training, and local centres of distance education²³. Local centres should be primarily aimed at assisting in the creation of educational- referential and methodological materials in an electronic format. Moreover, every university should have technical support services readily available for e-learners.

The material-technical factor in the system of distance education has several problems. First, there is a lack of investment and state donation into education. Because of this, universities are technologically under-equipped, precluding remote video-lectures, presentations, etc. Secondly, the lack of qualified specialists makes using new forms and methods of distance education²⁴ impossible.

The absence of effective common intra-university platforms (like Moodle or Blackboard) for distance education is yet another obstacle. At present, Belarusian universities offer timetables, some materials, and the opportunity to contact teachers online. In reality, however, online resources remain partly unavailable to students. Thus, communication between teachers and students often occurs on social media, rather than through a platform; this does not fulfill the prerequisite that learning communication be secure.

The full-fledged functioning of distance education systems requires an elaboration of the normative base at the state level, which would regulate and stimulate distance learning²⁵.

Another issue is the price of distance education. Despite saving material and non-material resources, distance education in Belarus does not cost much less than intramural education²⁶. For example, studying at the BSU distantly costs about \$520 per year. For certain segments of the population, such as people with disabilities, this amount is not necessarily affordable.

A good basis for the development of a high-quality system of distance education exists in Belarus already. Most universities possess basic technical equipment and have access to the internet. A third of Belarusian universities make use of certain elements of distance learning. A considerable number of people in Belarus have access to high-speed internet. However, improvement and development in the sphere of distance education in Belarus requires much time and resources. There is a need to deploy material, technological, human, and organisational resources.

4. Recommendations on distance education development

In order to develop a high-quality system of education in Belarus, it is necessary to take the following steps:

- **Development of a normative base**

²¹ Садовская, М.Н. "Проблемы внедрения электронного обучения в Беларуси", <<http://tinyurl.com/jm83urq>>, [Дата доступа – 20 листопада 2016].

²² "Дыстанцыйнае навучанне ў Беларусі: магчымасці і праблемы", Вольга Навасад. Гродна: Твой Стыль, 2013. <<http://www.t-styl.info/by/115/Education/10564/>>, [Дата доступа – 20 листопада 2016].

²³ Жук, А.И., 2002. "Концептуальные основы создания и развития дистанционного образования в Республике Беларусь". Минск: Белорусский государственный университет, сс. 4-17.

²⁴ А. Дорохова, Л. В. Романенко, 2015. "Дистанционное обучение в республике Беларусь в контексте болонского процесса", Гомель: Гомельский государственный технический университет имени П. О. Сухого, с.294-296.

²⁵ The same.

²⁶ Международный институт дистанционного образования <<http://www.bntu.by/mido/item/mido.html>>, [Дата доступа – 20 листопада 2016]

Despite nominal references in the Code on Education, the system of distance education in Belarus requires special regulation and stimulation. Legislation on education should include recommendations on better organising distance learning in universities, and a description of a monitoring system. It is important that the legislation attend to the issue of financing distance education. Moreover, the structure of the distance education system (from vocational to higher education) should be delineated; it should include education centres and training of specialists.

- **Expert assistance**

Belarus's recent accession to the Bologna Process will lead to the growth of contacts and exchange experiences in the sphere of education. In order to fully realise implementation of distance education, Belarus needs to train specialists in developing a distance education strategy for universities. This should take the specific features of each educational establishment and region into account. It is possible to achieve this by promoting expert assistance in the form of educational visits, exchanges, and recommendations.

- **Rooting distance education**

It is necessary to stimulate investments in the sphere of education and secure broader participation of the private sector. For the distance education system to function effectively, preparedness and support from the administrations of higher education establishments is crucial. Administrations must be willing to reform and introduce new forms of learning. There is also a need for teachers and other employees of higher education establishments to learn how to communicate and educate via technology.