



bologna process

Challenges to Belarus joining the European Higher Education Area

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Abstract

- In 2015 Belarus joined the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and committed to putting a Roadmap for higher education reform into effect by 2018.
- The implementation of the Roadmap is running behind schedule, which poses a threat to fulfilment of Belarus' obligations by the due date. To better implement the Roadmap we recommend the following suggestions:
- Elimination of bureaucratic barriers to mobility and increasing governmental funding of outbound academic mobility of students and teachers.
- Establishment of social partnership between higher education institutions (HEI) and employers; employment stimulation for university graduates through taxation mechanisms.
- Taking legislative measures to limit external interference in the process of studying and teaching, thus guaranteeing institutional autonomy of HEIs and the freedom to create functioning student organisations.
- Providing up-to-date information on the progress of reform to stakeholders and the public; engaging a wider spectrum of stakeholders in the activity of the Advisory Group on Support for the Belarus Roadmap and facilitating regular expert dialogue.

The European Higher Education Area: regional context and Belarus as a new member

At a conference of 47 EHEA Ministers of Education (May 14-15, 2015, Yerevan) Belarus took on commitments to implement a Roadmap for higher education reform. The Roadmap entails modernisation of the professional qualifications framework, thus making it compatible with the European framework by introducing a three-cycle system of higher education. The system of quality

Belarus took on commitments to implement a Roadmap for higher education reform

assurance in higher education should be reformed to conform with European standards with the help of an independent quality assurance agency.

The Bologna tools in Belarus are meant to ensure transparency and recognition of academic results using ECTS and the Diploma Supplement. Joining the EHEA also involves diversification of international mobility for staff and students, developing a system of lifelong learning, ensuring social equality in access to higher education, and limiting the system of obligatory work placements for university graduates. Another important requirement is the introduction of EHEA fundamental academic values in the Belarusian educational system.

The programme of higher education reform in Belarus stipulates a mechanism of international support and consultation for the implementation of the Roadmap by 2018, when the final report on the implementation of the Roadmap will be submitted at the Ministerial Conference in Paris.¹

An Advisory Group on Support for the Belarus Roadmap² was established to assist in implementation of the Roadmap. It includes representatives of governments, supranational institutions, and civil associations of member countries of the EHEA along with three representatives of Belarus from the Ministry of Education, National Institute for Higher Education, and the Belarusian State University. The Advisory Group assists the Belarusian authorities in the implementation of the Roadmap and the development of specific areas of education policy; it also informs the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) on the progress of the implementation of the Roadmap in Belarus.

It is expected that the harmonisation of Belarusian and European educational standards will ensure higher quality education, more opportunities for studying and employment, deeper integration in the European and global educational area, and inclusion of different social groups, including disadvantaged communities, in education. Another important feature of the Bologna Process is the active participation of stakeholders, both state and non-state.

Among the explicit benefits of joining the EHEA is the internationalisation of higher education; this is especially significant for Belarus. The country has long been isolated from global educational processes, primarily due to political tensions in relations with the West. Therefore, fostering student and faculty

¹ Дунаев, Владимир, 2016. Образование: между реформами и тоской по «золотому веку», Белорусский ежегодник 2016. С. 174-181, URL: <http://nmnby.eu/yearbook/get/yearbook2016.pdf>

² Консультативная группа по Дорожной карте, URL: <http://ag2.bsu.by/ru/main.aspx?guid=4261>



EHEA Ministerial Conference and Fourth Bologna Policy Forum,
14-15 May 2015, Yerevan, Armenia (© www.bsu.by)

mobility plays an exceptionally important role, alongside learning best practices for organising academic life. The educational system does not meet the needs of the labour market, and work placements after graduation are still a common practice; this is another significant challenge to the new economic environment. Centralised management in education has largely remained unchanged since the end of Soviet rule, therefore principles of academic and institutional autonomy need to be introduced.

The Bologna Declaration is not a binding norm. Each country chooses which EHEA principles to prioritise, adapting them to national traditions and setting deadlines. There are no sanctions for failing to meet the deadlines for EHEA principles, nor are priorities ranked by importance. It is in the country's interest to reach the set targets, and independent commitment plays a key role.³

Most post-Soviet countries joined the Bologna Process 10 years before Belarus: Russia joined in 2003; Armenia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia joined in 2005; Kazakhstan joined in 2010. The latter three's participation in the Bologna Process was an aspect of their foreign policy, as education was presumed to be an element of European integration.⁴ For this reason, the Russian government is cautious about the EHEA and remains reluctant to introduce deep reforms in its educational system. Meanwhile, pro-European Ukraine and Georgia view reforming their education systems as part of European integration. Nevertheless, the two countries have still not fully implemented the Bologna principles, and they are encountering difficulties in some areas.

Georgia is considered the leader in European integration among Eastern Partnership countries, but even there, the actual implementation of Bologna

³ Жук, Александр, 2010. Высшее образование Республики Беларусь от Болонского процесса к европейскому пространству высшего образования, "Вышэйшая школа", № 5, URL: <<http://elib.bspu.by/bitstream/doc/307/1/%D0%92%D0%A8%2c%E2%84%965%2c%202010%2c%D1%81.3-9.pdf>>

⁴ Luchinskaya, Daria, and Ovchynnikova, Olena, 2011. The Bologna Process policy implementation in Russia and Ukraine: similarities and differences, *European Educational Research Journal*, Volume 10, Number 1.

standards often remains nominal. Reforms have often been initiated ‘from the top’, by the political elites, without complete dissemination throughout the academic community.⁵

⁵ Lezhava, Diana, 2016. Bologna process: Europeanization of Georgia’s higher education system (working paper), URL: < http://css.ge/files/Papers/FES_paper_-_Bologna_Process_DL.pdf >

Challenges to implementing the Roadmap

As state educational officials have expressed, it is both practically impossible and counter-productive to isolate Belarus from processes taking place in Europe and in the rest of the world. However, Belarus would like to avoid a painful breakdown of its educational system, bypassing ‘empty-headed copying of western models’, as Aliaksandr Lukashenka likes to put it. He has named several possible negative effects of internationalisation for Belarus, including brain drain and loss of ‘patriotic, moral, and aesthetic education’. His reservations can be interpreted as referring to the active participation of the state in the ideological education of youth, thereby instilling certain ideas into young people’s minds.⁶ The fact that the country’s leadership takes this stance is a significant factor hindering the integration of Belarus into the EHEA.

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What’s more, relevant legislative changes proposed by the Ministry of Education are contested by other governmental bodies and ministries, which are often wary of change.⁷ The Ministry of Education acknowledges that little has been done to implement the Bologna instruments since Belarus joined the EHEA in 2015.

A group of experts from the Public Bologna Committee has developed methodology for monitoring the quality of Roadmap implementation. This allows monitors to use an index to measure the Roadmap’s progress. The structure of the index mirrors the structure of the Roadmap. The parts referring to structural reform and internationalisation were assessed in three dimensions: compliance with the Roadmap schedule, conformity with EHEA norms, transparency and the democratic character of the process.

Roadmap elements	Process	State	Transparency	Final value
Qualifications framework	10%	0%	0%	3,3%
Quality assurance	12,5%	40%	0%	25,8%
Recognition	21%	20,5%	0%	13,8%
Transparency instruments	11%	0%	20%	10,3%
Mobility of higher education staff and students and internationalization	0%	20,5%	0%	6,8%
Lifelong learning and the social dimension of higher education	0%	0%	0%	0%
Fundamental values of the EHEA	1,92%	0,07%	0%	0,66%

⁶ Лукашенко: не следует бездумно копировать западную систему образования, URL: <http://naviny.by/rubrics/society/2016/04/21/ic_news_116_473850>

⁷ Круглый стол «Реализация инструментов ЕПВО в национальной системе образования», URL: <<http://bolognaby.org/index.php/sobitiya/novosti/595-kruglyj-stol-realizatsiya-instrumentov-epvo-v-natsionalnoj-sisteme-obrazovaniya>>

It should be noted that the Advisory Group on Support for the Belarus Roadmap is more optimistic about the Roadmap's progress,⁸ but its working documents are not available publicly, making assessment difficult.

The term set for Roadmap implementation is three years. The final index value as of June 30, 2016 was 8,7%. This leads experts to conclude that Roadmap implementation is still in its initial stages, and in some areas has not even started.

The architecture of higher education, qualification frameworks, quality assurance and recognition

Experts assert that the development and implementation of the National Qualification framework, the quality assurance system, ECTS credits system, and Diploma Supplement has been delayed for unknown reasons. For three years, the Ministry of Labour has been working on the National Qualification framework, piloting projects for professional standards. However, the work is still not complete. Plans for Quality Department reform remain unknown. The Ministry of Education is developing a new version of The Educational Code, but the available drafts do not reflect the Bologna Process's values; there is no contribution from the public or stakeholders.⁹

Institutions which do not directly relate to the education system create barriers to student and staff mobility

The monitoring, carried out in May 2016, a year after Belarus joined the Bologna Process, has shown that most Belarusian HEIs have not detailed their efforts to implement EHEA instruments on their websites. They did not consider posting even general information about the EHEA and the Bologna Process necessary. 44 of 54 HEIs were unable to complete this task a year after Belarus joined the EHEA. 10 HEIs have made attempts to fulfil the Ministry's assignment, but 7 of these only did so *pro forma*.¹⁰

Student and staff mobility

Institutions which do not directly relate to the education system create barriers to student and staff mobility. For example, advertisements for activities by foreign universities are regulated by the anti-human trafficking law, developed by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The Ministry of Education has no right to interpret this legislation.

Today, Belarusian students mostly take advantage of grants provided by European Union programmes. The state funding of academic mobility remains very modest and does not allow to reach the planned EHEA student mobility indicator of 20% by 2020.

⁸ Presentation of the National Institute for Higher Education by vice-rector Ihar Citovič at the 4th Annual Dutch-Belarusian-Polish Conference 'Education as a Human Right: Modernising Higher Education to Meet the Challenges of the 21st Century', 13 December 2016, Minsk.

⁹ Ветохин, Сергей, 2016. Структурные изменения в высшей школе Беларуси для достижения целей Дорожной карты, в П. Терешкович (ред.), "Общественное участие в модернизации высшей школы: роль гражданского общества в имплементации Дорожной карты реформирования высшего образования Беларуси: материалы международной научно-практической конференции", Вильнюс.

¹⁰ Болонский процесс на сайтах белорусских вузов, URL: <<http://bolognaby.org/index.php/issledovaniya-analitika/533-bolonskij-protsess-na-sajtax-belaruskikh-vuzov>>

The social dimension and labour market

The obligation for students whose education is financed by public funds to accept work placements upon graduation has remained in Belarus since Soviet times. This does not correspond to EHEA norms. However, this is not the only reason the system must be reformed. Obligatory work placements do not correspond to demand in the economy. The shrinking of the state sector and stagnation in some areas has led to a lack of work places. Moreover, there is a discrepancy between the education sector and the needs of the labour market. It is extremely difficult for graduates to find a first job, as employers generally require prior work experience.

Academic freedoms and the principles of university autonomy

Most Belarusian HEIs are state run; they are subject to orders from higher executive powers. Rectors are appointed by the President and are under political governance. Universities are still used as a tool for political education by means of state ideology courses, youth organisations such as the Belarusian Republican Youth Union, obligatory work, and participation in state holidays and political events.

Real Student Self-Governance (SSG) does not currently exist in every Belarusian HEI. Although SSG principles in Belarus are in fact formalised, their wording often contradicts the fundamental principles of the EHEA. For example, statutes on SSG bodies allow for significant administrative influence over their activities. This ranges from vague statements about cooperation to the directly formulated requirement of obtaining approval before becoming an SSG leader or planning activities at HEIs.¹¹



Students of the Belarusian State University criticise fake self-government (© www.kp.by)

¹¹ Кузьміч, Аляксандр. Студэнцкае самакіраванне ў Беларусі: існуючыя тэндэнцыі развіцця, в П. Терешкович (ред.), "Общественное участие в модернизации высшей школы: роль гражданского общества в имплементации Дорожной карты реформирования высшего образования Беларуси: материалы международной научно-практической конференции", Вильнюс. С.81.

Belarusian legislation does not stipulate for active citizen or NGO participation in HEI management. All HEIs are under the sole authority of executive power. For the most part, civil society is only able to influence decisions by the authorities through external actors, primarily the European Union.

Recommendations on Roadmap implementation

To implement the Roadmap on time, the responsible institutions should consider the following recommendations:

- **Social dimension and labour market**

The obligation to accept work placements should be limited to specific areas, where there is a significant need for professionals. Legislative measures should be taken to provide incentives to employ university graduates via preferential tax treatment for employers and other fiscal mechanisms. HEIs should be encouraged to provide practically oriented education; they should strive for high employment rates among graduates. Tools to ensure this include ratings and monitoring of the quality of education. Moreover, HEI funding should depend on the level of employment among graduates. A system of professional consultation needs to be established in high school to provide high-school graduates with knowledge of labour market needs and existing in-demand professions.
- **Student and staff mobility**

Bureaucratic barriers to mobility should be eliminated in cooperation with the stakeholders among governmental bodies. State funding of academic mobility should be significantly increased. To prevent brain drain, students should be offered prospects for professional development through social partnership with employers.
- **Academic freedoms and principles of university autonomy**

Guarantees of citizens' and institutions' rights to free teaching, learning, research, and protection from government interference should be codified in legislation. Institutional autonomy should be guaranteed in organisational, financial, personnel, and academic spheres. Administrative barriers to creating freely functioning student unions, trade unions, and other public associations should be eliminated.
- **Transparency and involvement of a wide range of stakeholders**

The institutions responsible for the implementation of the Bologna principles should provide stakeholders and the public with up-to-date information on the progress of reform. The Advisory Group on Support for the Belarus Roadmap should engage a wider spectrum of stakeholders in its activity, including NGOs and business and student associations, as well as facilitate regular expert dialogue.

About the author

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Ostrogorski Centre

The Ostrogorski Centre is a private, nonprofit organisation dedicated to analysis and policy advocacy on problems which Belarus faces in its transition to market economy and the rule of law. Its work is nonpartisan and dedicated to achieving practical results.

Its analysts working in Minsk, Kyiv, London and Berlin understand the challenges of transition in the region because they have lived through it. Educated at the world's leading universities, the centre's experts have cultivated the culture and technical skills required to deliver Western-style analysis.

The mission of the Ostrogorski Centre is to contribute to better understanding of transition processes in Belarus and learn from experience of other countries. The Centre aims to promote reforms and thinking which helps the economy become more competitive, governance more efficient and integrate Belarusian scholars and analysts in pan-European and global networks.

The web site of the Ostrogorski Centre is www.ostrogorski.org.

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