

Higher Education in Belarus: Burdened by Soviet Traditions

Belarusian Minister for Education Siarhei Maskevich on 28 January 2013 expressed his hope that students will convert the Belarusian science "into the main factor of socio-economic and mental development of the country". But does the government really foster the progress of students' education in Belarus?

The lack of academic freedoms, mandatory and old-fashioned study plans have become the main defects of the Belarusian higher education. While government makes certain steps to approach these issues, the progress is rather slow.

The Myth of Free Higher Education in Belarus

Belarusian system of higher education consists of two levels: bachelor and master. It looks similar to the European system, with one rather significant difference. Belarus is the only European country that has not joined [Bologna process](#).

To get a BA in Belarus you have to study not three years like in the West, but the whole five. Followed by the two years of master studies, it makes the term of Belarusian higher education one of the longest in the world. 2013 will be the first year when the entrants start their four-year bachelor programs. This decision was made in order to approximate the Belarusian higher education to the Bologna system which is still an objective for Belarusian government.

Ministry for education statistics states that 428 500 students in Belarus. 51% of them study part-time, while the other – full-time. They study at 55 educational institutions (universities, academies, institutes and colleges). Only ten of these institutions do not belong to government. Private universities have their main specialisation on management and business (among them – a unique women's educational

institution – Envila, where only females can apply).

One of Belarusian universities exists in exile. European Humanities University was ousted from the country in 2004 due to the political reasons and now continues to operate in Vilnius, Lithuania. 1660 students get the higher education there; two thirds of them are Belarusians.

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Although education is nominally free in Belarus, in fact only a minority of all students do not have to pay for their studies. But even these students will have [to work for two years for very small wages](#) to compensate for their "free education". Those who have to pay for education, will face rather high fees. Considering the [average](#) Belarusian salary of \$500, the annual university fee ranging from \$900 to \$1900 imposes a serious burden on many Belarusian families.

Those who study for free can even receive a monthly allowance (from \$50 to \$100) called "a scholarship" in Belarus. Its size depends on how well students pass their exams and on financial resources of each particular university. But these students pay their share later, when they get [compulsory placed](#) to the prescribed work place for a couple of years after graduation.

Everybody Gets into a University

Since Soviet times entering the university has become not an opportunity, but a [social tradition](#). The society misapprehends those who do not have a higher education. The university diploma remains a certificate of one's normality instead of showing some degree of professionalism.

To enter the university high school graduates must pass three state-arranged exams in a form of tests. Every field of future

study requires a defined combination of three subjects with a state language necessarily included.

For instance, to become a physician one must pass chemistry, biology and Russian (or Belarusian), for a lawyer – social science, Russian/Belarusian and for some strange reason – math, for a programmer – math, physics and again, the language.

One has 10 days to apply to only one university for free of charge education and then, if failed to pass a selection, another 10 days to re-apply for usual chargeable education. Such specialities as "International law", "World economy", "International relations", "Stomatology", "Social communications" enjoyed the highest passing grade in 2012.

But the entrance rate in some universities remains extremely low. They even joked, that one can enter the university just constantly choosing answer "B" in all the tests. Some years, to become a math- or physics-student of the Pedagogic University (a future teacher of these subjects) it was enough to receive 20 of 100 in math or physics.

Study Process: Regulated but Chaotic

The study process in Belarus seems over-regulated. On 19 January 2012 the Working Group on Bologna Process expressed the view that academic freedoms are restricted in Belarus. A year later, on 11 January 2013 three Belarusian NGOs: Centre for Students Initiatives' Development, "Solidarity" and Public Bologna Committee – reaffirmed the same conclusion in their joint report.

While in most European universities students can choose most of the subjects they are going to study, in Belarus the choice can be given only during the final years of higher education and only for few marginal subjects. Study plans are sent "from above" as lecturers sometimes complain. The Ministry of Education plans to increase the number of these optional

subjects by 5-10% of all studied disciplines next year.

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Nearly 20% of all the courses are irrelevant to the student's main field of study. The author of this article studies at the international law department and had to study higher mathematics, ecology, natural science, protection from emergency situations, history of universities and higher education and some other strange disciplines.

Recently, the Ministry of Education has asked the academic chairs to prepare proposals to remove some disciplines from the study plan in order to move to four-year bachelor program. The only requirement was not to cut down these "odd" subjects. Some say that such a system exists in order not to leave many needless lecturers unemployed.

Every half a year (January and July) all students in the country pass their semester exams. The procedure has remained the same since Soviet times. Student pulls one upturned question card out of dozens of them. There he or she finds two or three questions randomly chosen from the whole course. Then the student has half an hour to prepare the answers. Finally he or she is interviewed by the lecturer who decides what mark every particular student deserves.

Cheating on exams remains really wide-spread. Here all the modern devices can assist: mobile phones, tiny printed crib sheets, micro ear-phones etc. While in other countries the punishment for cheating and plagiarism can result in expulsion, in Belarus a dishonest student risks only to get so-called "retaking" (passing an exam later once again).

Belarusian educational system shows very well the damaging effect too much regulation. As in Soviet times, technical specialists, such as engineers [programmers do relatively well](#) compared to their peers from other European countries, humanitarian disciplines such as political science or history remain in a pitiful state.

Artyom Shraibman