

# **Mandatory Placement: A Soviet Remnant of Belarusian Higher Education**

May is always a hot time for students in their final year at Belarusian universities. They have to prepare for their final exams, finish their papers and start thinking about graduation ball dresses. But besides that, nearly a third of the graduating students around the country have to worry about their first-job mandatory placement. These are the so-called “budget students” who study free of charge. The state demands that they work for two years wherever the authorities may send them after graduation.

Mandatory placement is supposed to give the state powers to distribute young labour force effectively. In reality, it fails to accomplish this goal. Mandatory placement breeds corruption and produces serious collateral damage. As a result, more and more young Belarusians decide to study abroad. The situation can hardly improve unless the government liberalises education and the labour market.

## **What is First-Job Mandatory Placement?**

Belarus inherited the system of mandatory work placement from the Soviet Union. Then it served as an organic part of the command economy with central planning. Communist ideologues wanted to plan and control all economic activities in the country. For that they also needed to educate a certain number of professionals in different fields and distribute them according to the general plan. Thus, all young specialists had to start their careers where the government sent them upon graduation.

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After the collapse of the USSR, first-job mandatory placement survived in Belarus as optional for university graduates but the authorities did not enforce it everywhere. However, at the beginning of the 2000s they decided to restore the system. In those days the main argument was the need to tackle the huge deficit of professionals in small towns and rural areas. The absolute majority of university graduates chose to stay in Minsk or other big cities after they received their diplomas. The supporters of the idea believed that a revived mandatory placement would help solve the problem.

However, there is one major difference with the experience of the USSR. In the Soviet times all universities taught their students free of charge. But after Belarus gained independence more and more universities started to introduce “commercial places” for students alongside with “budget places”. A number of private universities also emerged: today there are 45 state and 10 private universities in Belarus.

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Despite the myth of free education in Belarus, the majority of Belarusian students now pay for their education from their own pocket. In 2011, out of the 107,000 first year students about 70,000 were self-funded. And their number is growing. Of course, the state cannot dictate to such students where to work after graduation. That is why the system of mandatory placement applies to “budget students” and only in exceptional cases to self-funding students.

### **Mandatory Placement Proves Ineffective**

A decade after the reintroduction of mandatory work placement it is obvious that the system is highly ineffective. The

depopulation of rural areas, which mandatory placement aims to prevent, continues at a bewildering pace. According to the National Statistics Agency, in the last 10 years the population of almost all rural areas and small towns has decreased, while the population of cities and big towns has grown.

The main reason is the difference in the living standards. And the system of mandatory work placement is unable to break the trend. In the majority of cases graduates who go to work in rural areas leave after two years of obligatory work there.

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Besides, the system of first-job mandatory placement contributes to breeding corruption. As no one wants to work in rural areas, graduates and their parents try to find ways to stay in Minsk or, at least, in one of the regional centres. Sometimes the only way to do that is to bribe officials or employers.

Employers also suffer from this system. Under Belarusian law, once they offer jobs to recent graduates it is very difficult to fire them even if they manifestly fail to properly perform their duties. Therefore, most employers try to avoid hiring such young specialists. One of the collateral effects of this avoidance is that it is extremely difficult for young people to find a job without a previous two year-long professional experience.

### **Young Belarusians Simply Leave**

A growing number of Belarusian families choose one of the two pragmatic options to avoid the communist-style mandatory placement. The first option is to pay university fees from their own pockets. However, this option has become problematic for a large part of the population as the universities

increased fees after the dramatic devaluation of the Belarusian rouble in 2011.

The second option is to leave Belarus and study abroad. According to the Global Education Digest 2010, in 2008 around 15,000 Belarusian students preferred not to study in their own country. Most of them – nearly 8,500 – [went to Russia](#). Other popular destinations included Germany, Poland and Lithuania. About 1,500 students from Belarus went to each of these countries.

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For the same economic reasons this option is also burdensome for most families – not only do they have to pay their fees, but also living expenses in a foreign country. Unfortunately, very few programmes provide Belarusian citizens with full scholarships to study abroad.

### **Liberalisation of Education and the Economy Is the Answer**

The authorities are now trying to alleviate the problem of mandatory placement. Last year a new Education Code entered into force. One of its novelties is that upon graduation “budget students” can pay back the money that the state spent on their degree. In this case graduates are free to work where they want. The government also decreases the number of “budget places” in certain programmes that, in its opinion, are not needed in the labour market. For example, this year they cut the state financing of economic and legal programmes.

But these are all superficial measures. They really need to do away with the remnants of communism in Belarusian education and the labour market. Graduates should be free to work where they choose and employers to hire whom they deem suitable and without excessive paperwork. Otherwise, the gap between the universities and labour market in Belarus will only grow

bigger.