

How to Make the ESSYB Scholarships More Effective? An OESS Alumnus Perspective

This autumn nearly 200 aspiring students will start their studies at different European universities with the support of the European Scholarship Scheme for Young Belarusians (ESSYB) managed by the Nordic Council of Ministers.

It provided them an excellent EU-funded opportunity to overcome the country's isolation and to build the network of highly qualified and motivated peers interested in democratic and prosperous development of Belarus.

However, growing concerns about effectiveness and transparency of the programme, such as granting scholarships based on the programme platform not available to the public, undermine the credibility of the ESSYB scheme. This article puts forward a few ideas on how to make the scheme a more effective and respected mechanism for promoting democratic changes in the country.

The recommendations include increasing public awareness about existence of the programme, ensuring its transparency and possibly reconsidering the eligibility and selection criteria to better target promising catalysts of positive change.

Critical Engagement to Support Belarusian Youth

After the 2010 presidential election in Belarus and [the crackdown on opposition activists and NGOs](#), the European Commission initiated the [Open Europe Scholarship Scheme](#) (OESS) under its policy of critical engagement.

The financial proposal ([action fiche](#)) for the programme focused on providing young Belarusians with an education at

high-quality universities around Europe to prepare prominent leaders who can significantly contribute to the modernisation and democratisation of Belarus.

The Belarusian government has not accommodated this need to date [despite the existing proposals](#), unlike Russia and Kazakhstan which understood the importance of preparing international specialists at top universities and introduced similar funding programmes such as [Bolashak](#).

The OESS Steering Committee selected 77 aspiring students out of more than 3,600 applicants for the first intake and provided them full scholarships in 2012. The donor agreed to expand funding following the implementation of the first phase and provided nearly \$11 million for the second intake of 2014.

The implementer of the programme also rebranded it as the European Scholarship Scheme for Young Belarusians. However, this time the fund received only 395 applications for the total 170 master's degree scholarships available in 2013, meaning that almost every second applicant for a master's degree got a full scholarship.

Recipe for Success: Rewarding Merit and Commitment to Belarus

While other scholarship programmes such as the UK's Chevening, Clarendon or Weidenfeld unite scholars on the basis of academic excellence, professional or leadership potential, the ESSYB scheme does not openly highlight the need to have outstanding achievements in specific fields.

Motivation serves as the main criterion for the selection of candidates, thus making it [easier to abuse the scheme by opportunistic applicants](#). In the absence of any specific requirement to prove a commitment to Belarus through past actions or work, it is not a difficult task to present oneself as a liberal freedom fighter with words alone.

A one-page letter of motivation with kind words about

democracy and human rights, not substantiated by relevant previous experience, provides an applicant with a fair chance to land a full scholarship for business or finance studies in Paris or London. This may happen even if the background of such applicants indicates that they are not particularly willing to engage in Belarus-related activities, scholarships aside.

While the commitment to allocate 200 scholarships in one year deserves praise, the potential influence and quality of the subsequent education of scholars can possibly play a more important role than sheer numbers. Degree programmes at the best European universities usually cost more than in the universities of countries neighbouring Belarus, but they also often provide better education, experience and networks.

increase awareness among Belarusian students about the scheme through advertising and public presentations

In addition, the management can make more efforts to increase awareness among Belarusian students about the scheme through advertising and public presentations. In 2013, the application season had a very small window for students to apply, as it opened on 15 November and closed on 8 December.

It effectively lasted less than a month and there was no extensive PR campaign neither in print media nor on the Internet. Many young people, especially outside Minsk, did not even know about this great scholarship opportunity. The number of submitted applications and the eligibility criteria demonstrate that the process could be more competitive and inclusive.

Transparency Issues Undermine Credibility

Currently the implementer bases scholarship decisions on criteria formulated in the programme platform that is not available to the public. In addition, the selection process

relies on the pre-screening criteria some of which had been formulated or announced after the application round was closed.

For example, this year selectors automatically rejected several holders of offers for admission to the Master of Public Policy degree at the University of Oxford. The reason lied in having a master's degree from another university, though the ESSYB website did not explicitly forbid such applications as ineligible.

The financial proposal published on the European Parliament's website stipulated that scholarships should be allocated regardless of previous academic experience to candidates in the age range of 18-26 years old for any level of study.

Nevertheless, the implementer excluded PhD candidates and master's degree holders from getting scholarships and distributed some of them among individuals with the age as high as 32 years old. Such inconsistencies in making scholarship decisions undermine the credibility of the scheme if they are not backed up by a set of arguments easily available to the public.

establishing clear and transparent eligibility and selection criteria in advance

Taking into consideration the large sums of EU taxpayers' money involved in funding the project, the implementer may consider establishing clear and transparent eligibility and selection criteria in advance. In addition, making a complete list of previous and current scholarship holders publicly available could help to ensure the transparency of the decisions for stakeholders and the broader Belarusian society.

Towards an Effective Mechanism for Democratic Change

The ESSYB scholarship scheme meets the needs of young

Belarusians who are often deprived of an opportunity for quality and unbiased higher education and experience isolation that comes about as a result of Belarus' exclusion from [the Bologna Process](#).

Therefore, it should continue as one of the most relevant and useful EU-funded programmes in Belarus. It provides its beneficiaries an unrivalled opportunity to acquire international experience and expand their knowledge to the benefit of their native country.

To increase the effectiveness of the scholarship scheme, the programme implementer should consider marketing it more extensively in Belarus. It should also consider reviewing its eligibility and selection criteria to support highly qualified young people for whom an additional master's degree or PhD would help to produce more value added for Belarusian society.

prioritise candidates with experience of working for positive change in Belarus and those with significant achievements or potential

The programme administration should also prioritise candidates with experience of working for positive change in Belarus and those with significant achievements or potential. This is where the greatest value of the programme may well lie.

Such requirements would increase the participation of youth in civil society and associated activities aimed at the promotion of reforms in Belarus, as candidates would know that they have to prove their commitment to obtain a scholarship.

In addition, the programme implementer should consider providing scholars with incentives to come back to the home country and publish statistics on how many scholars actually return to Belarus and how much involved they are in Belarus-related activities at home or abroad.

This would increase the level of respect for scholarship

holders, largely because the public would see the fact of having an ESSYB scholarship as indicating a set of positive character qualities and a track record of meaningful activities for Belarus. The network of scholars would be stronger, more motivated, professional and united by the common goal of making Belarus a better place to live.