

The state of distance education in Belarus: problems and perspectives

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Abstract

- In Soviet times, extramural education was extremely popular in Belarus – 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, 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.

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, 39.1% of which are studying distantly.³ However, the classic concept of distance education remains closely linked to 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.

Poland, Latvia, and Russia, unlike Belarus, have separate institutions of distance education. For instance, the Polish Virtual University in Łódź already boasts 20,000 graduates. In Latvia, the International Baltic Academy is engaged in instructing approximately 8,000 students. In order to guarantee convenience

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¹ Human Development Reports, 2015. Belarus, URL: <<http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/BLR>>

² Селянинов, Дмитрий, 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, URL: <http://www.belstat.gov.by/ofitsialnaya-statistika/solialnaya-sfera/obrazovanie/operativnyye-dannye_15/obrazovanie-v-respublike-belarus-uchebnyy-god-2015-2016/>

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

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.

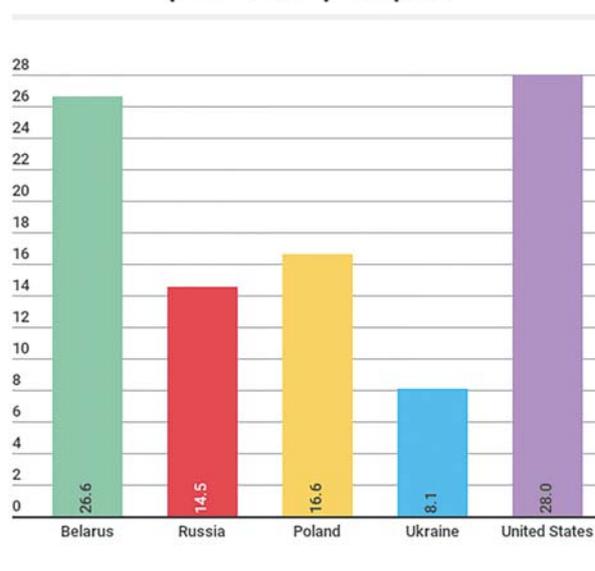
Distance education provides certain advantages:

- 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 Broadband 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

Fixed broadband subscriptions per 100 people



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Source: Fixed broadband subscriptions per 100 people, 2000-2014. International Telecommunication Union official website

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Дорохова, А., и Романенко, Л. В., 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, 2015. Дистанционное образование: международный опыт и возможности его использования в Республике Беларусь, Минск: Минский университет управления, с.63.

⁸ International Telecommunication Union official website, 2016. Fixed-broadband subscriptions 2000-2014, URL: <http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/statistics/2015/Fixed_broadband_2000-2014.xls>

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



Panel on distance education at the 4th Annual Dutch-Belarusian-Polish Conference 'Education as a human right: modernising higher education to meet the challenges of the 21st century' (© Ostrogorski Centre)

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). It makes distance education timelier, as it spares learners from long journeys.

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

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

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.

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

¹¹ Сычев, А. В., 2015. Электронное дистанционное обучение – проблемы и перспективы, *Проблемы современного образования в техническом вузе: материалы IV Республиканской научно-методической конференции*, Гомель, 29–30 октября 2015 года: ГГТУ, С. 25–30.

¹² Международный институт дистанционного образования, URL: <<http://www.bntu.by/mido/item/mido.html>>

¹³ Около 10-12 ВУЗов в Беларуси предлагают новую форму обучения - дистанционную. Какие наиболее востребованные специальности?, URL: <<http://www.ctv.by/distancionnoe-obuchenie-norma-ili-alternativa>>

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Садовская, М. Н., 2013. Проблемы внедрения электронного обучения в Беларуси, *Инновационное развитие экономики: предпринимательство, образование, наука: сборник научных статей*, URL: <<http://tinyurl.com/jm83urq>>



Smart class project at the Belarusian State University of Informatics and Radioelectronics launched in cooperation with Samsung and MTS companies (© www.tut.by)

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 non-formal education sector is often considered to be more inclined towards using innovative technologies¹⁷. However, with some exceptions, the non-formal education 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 EPAM 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 Belarusian universities, such as the International Institute of Distance Education of the Belarusian National Technical University, are also actively opening up branches abroad, ranging from the former Soviet Union region (e.g. Tajikistan, Georgia) to more distance areas including Egypt, where students are taught in English.²¹

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

¹⁷ Карпиевич, Дмитрий, 2009. Субъекты неформального образования: ключевые игроки и возможные направления для сотрудничества, *Адукатар*, №. 16, С. 9.

¹⁸ Кривой, Яраслаў, і Смок, Вадзім, 2016. Неформальная адукацыя ў Беларусі: пашырэнне прасторы навучання, Цэнтр Астрагорскага, аналітычны дакумент №6, 28 верасня 2016 года, URL: <<http://ostro.by/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Non-formal-education.pdf>>

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

²⁰ First Graduation of SYMPA/EHU Online Course, 5 April 2016, URL: <<http://sympa-by.eu/en/articles/first-graduation-sympaehu-online-course.html>>

²¹ Presentation of Ihar Satsikau, director of the Institute of Distance Education of the Belarusian National Technical University, Video of The 4th Annual Dutch-Belarusian-Polish Conference: Education as A Human Right, Belarus Digest, 27 January 2017, URL: <<http://belarusdigest.com/story/video-4th-annual-dutch-belarusian-polish-conference-education-human-right-28874>>

Problems of distance education in Belarus

Regardless of the existing legislative base, and the fact that several institutions do offer distance education in Belarus, certain obstacles hinder 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 professionals are mostly concentrated in the IT sphere. This leads to certain disciplines not being represented in the system of distance education.

An important problem is the absence of clear legislative regulation of distance education

Secondly, university staff cannot, or are unwilling to, put distance education technologies to use. They are thus unable to tap into the potential of distance education.²² 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 education²³.

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 for distance education (like in Poland), centres for teacher training, and local centres for distance education²⁴. Local centres should primarily aim to assist in the creation of educational-referential and methodological materials in an electronic format. Another problem is the training of staff members so that they can confidently work with new technologies. In the Netherlands, the role of stand training, coordination, and change of knowledge is played by the Dutch Ministry of Education. The Dutch Ministry maintains a special portal on distance education, which helps in coordinating and exchanging knowledge about distance education.²⁵ Every university should have technical support services readily available for e-learners.

The material-technical factor in the system of distance education faces several obstacles. First, there is a lack of investment and state donation in education. Because of this, universities are technologically under-equipped, precluding remote video-lectures, presentations, etc. Secondly, the lack of qualified specialists

²² Садовская, М. Н., 2013. Проблемы внедрения электронного обучения в Беларуси, *Инновационное развитие экономики: предпринимательство, образование, наука: сборник научных статей*, URL: <<http://tinyurl.com/jm83urq>>

²³ Навасад, Вольга, 2013. Дыстанцыйнае навучанне ў Беларусі: магчымасці і праблемы, *Твой Стыль*, URL: <<http://www.t-styl.info/by/115/Education/10564/>>

²⁴ Жук, А. И., 2002. Концептуальные основы создания и развития дистанционного образования в Республике Беларусь, Минск: Белорусский государственный университет, С. 4-17.

²⁵ Presentation of Nynke Kruidierink (University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands), Video of The 4th Annual Dutch-Belarusian-Polish Conference: Education as A Human Right, Belarus Digest, 27 January 2017, URL: <<http://belarusdigest.com/story/video-4th-annual-dutch-belarusian-polish-conference-education-human-right-28874>>

makes using new forms and methods of distance education²⁶ impossible. A related problem concerns managing the workload of people engaged in developing learning materials for distance learning courses. Pedagogues must be persuaded that the extra time invested will pay off later thanks to the improvement in quality, diminished preparation time, and increased efficiency. Money and time are necessary for new initiatives.

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 fulfil the pre-requisite that learning communication be secure.

According to experts in the area, an important problem is the absence of clear legislative regulation of distance education. Distance education is regulated locally, in the absence of national legislation.²⁷ 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 learning²⁸.

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 education²⁹. 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 unaffordable.

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.

²⁶ Дорохова, А., и Романенко, Л. В., 2015. Дистанционное обучение в республике Беларусь в контексте болонского процесса, Гомель: Гомельский государственный технический университет имени П. О. Сухого, С. 294-295.

²⁷ Video of The 4th Annual Dutch-Belarusian-Polish Conference: Education as A Human Right, Belarus Digest, 27 January 2017, URL: <<http://belarusdigest.com/story/video-4th-annual-dutch-belarusian-polish-conference-education-human-right-28874>>

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ International Institute of Distance Education of Belarusian Technical University, URL: <<http://www.bntu.by/mido/item/mido.html>>

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:

- **Develop a normative base**

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 addresses the issue of financing distance education. Moreover, the structure of the distance education system (from vocational to higher education) should be delineated.
- **Expert and knowledge exchange**

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.
- **Establish a centre for distance education**

The relevant authorities need to follow the best practices of other countries and establish a specially designated centre which would coordinate and facilitate the development of distance education in Belarus and offer trainings for education professionals.
- **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.

About the author

Yaraslau Kryvoi is the founder of the Ostrogorski Centre, Professor of Law at the University of West London and a fellow of the Higher Education Academy. A Harvard Law School graduate, he has been working for international law firms and taught law in the United Kingdom, Russia, Belarus, Sri Lanka, Japan and the United States for over ten years. He is originally from Minsk. His web site is www.kryvoi.net. His main areas of expertise are education, international public law, commercial dispute resolution and the business climate.

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.

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