

# **BELARUSIAN HIGHER EDUCATION: READINESS TO EHEA ADMISSION**

ALTERNATIVE REPORT

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## **I. OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM**

Belarusian higher-education system is regulated by the country's Constitution, Education Code and the President of the Republic of Belarus decrees.

The new Education Code came in force in September 2011 and became the primary legislation regulating higher education affairs in Belarus. However, in less than a year the new Code underlined the Belarusian higher education system faults, unwillingness to absorb international standards and weaknesses and that had to lead to Code revision. The fact that the Belarusian legislation blocks the European vector in higher-education system development became more obvious to different social groups in Belarus. The parliamentary hearings held on 4 December 2013 concerning the Education Code demonstrated that the idea to initiate legislation reforms found a number of followers among some State HEIs Rectors and officials. At the same time, the discussion about higher education system reform at the National Assembly doesn't affect the HEIs' autonomy level. Neither this doesn't reduce the academic repressions scale initiated by the presidential vertical at some of the Belarusian HEIs in 2013. The higher-education stakeholders interests are not addressed in the draft aiming to amend Education Code prepared by the Ministry of Education. The National Assembly continuously postpones the Education Code new version hearing. The legislation comes in conflict with the higher education reforms objectives fostering legal nihilism and administrative power abuse.

The higher-education management system set by law demonstrates extreme inefficiency and volatility.

Article 107 of the Education Code confirms the President of Belarus exclusive right to determine the governmental education policy and to guarantee its major provisions implementation. The law does not provide the National Assembly with the right to participate in the educational-policy formulation. The government, Ministry of Education and other governmental agencies role is reduced to this policy implementation only. Other higher-education stakeholders and social partners are excluded from the decision-making process completely.

While the governmental educational policy is intended to balance the main variables – access to education, its quality and expenses – the disproportions existence and its deterioration year after year in education unveils the educational policy failure itself as well as the fact that the current education management principles in Belarus can't be applied any longer.

In accordance with the formal education index Belarus should have exceptionally high quality of human capital. The total coverage of general secondary education in Belarus has increased from 86.3% in 2000 to 107.4% in 2011 (excessing 100% due to those who study for the second time). In higher education it has reached 85% or 467 students per 10 thousand residents, which is one of the highest indicator globally. Although the number of students per 10 thousand residents has fallen to 417 Belarus

has taken the fourth place in access to education. It also has reached the level of 91.5% of students in the student-age population. According to the World Bank Belarus has a huge gap in what competences are needed on the market and what is offered by the HEIs. Belarusian companies suffer from qualified workers absence even through the number of graduates with professional competences and diplomas could fill those positions. In spite of the declaration to pay attention to education quality, in reality, the higher-education policy implementation leads to socking academic standards deterioration and increasing employers disappointment with the graduates' competences level.

The attempts by the HEIs management to preserve numbers of students at any cost have its results: the number of places in the first years exceeds the number of school graduates. In order to save their budgets the universities authorities stopped using specific criteria for selection (filters) during admission campaign. Thus higher education quality deteriorates furthers reflecting the catastrophic decline of the secondary education quality. The poor financial means and real reforms contributes into this situation.

The global universities ratings prove convincingly that the leading HEIs achievements are directly related to the level of expenses per student. Cheap education cannot be of high quality. We can clearly see that Belarus lagging behind many using an index available in the international reports such as governmental expenses per student as % of the GDP per capita, which demonstrates that it is only 15% in Belarus <http://resourcecentre.savethechildren.se/content/library/documents/global-education-digest-2011-comparing-education-statistics-across-world> . In our country it is 15% while it equals 42% in the OECD.

There are a number of other quite important parameters that underline the differences between Belarusian higher-education system and those existing in OECD countries. Firstly, this is the higher education structure. New changes in the OECD countries higher education are connected with the Bologna Process. Belarus declared its commitment to such structural reforms.

However, if in the OECD countries 15% of students will be awarded master degrees while in Belarus it will be less than 2% of students studied in the 2<sup>nd</sup>-cycle programmes according to the Ministry of Education in 2013/2014.

Having the 1<sup>st</sup> cycle reduced, the perspectives to obtain the second (academic - MA) qualification are limited. This affects the professional education quality in Belarus higher education system.

Secondly, the Belarusian higher education 3<sup>rd</sup>-cycle programmes (postgraduate and doctoral studies) are underdeveloped while OECD countries pay significant attention to these types of programmes.

The share of postgraduate and doctoral students is twice as low in Belarus as in the OECD countries on average. Extremely low postgraduate training efficiency reduces

the importance of the programmes in our country. 3.2% of postgraduate and doctoral students complete their study successfully.

According to “Education at a Glance” 2012 report, 20% of students who had enrolled in 2010 were older than 26 years in the OECD countries. On the contrary, Belarus scales down part-time education due to its poor quality that doesn’t simplify the access to education for people older than full-time students.

According to the Belarusian Ministry of Education, only 13% of students were older than 26 years of age in the same 2010. The Belarusian educational system ‘generic defect’ is uncompromising statism, which encourages constant government interference into the educational stakeholders relations. The government does not refuse to lock and to mediate all relations with and between education stockholders and their interest on itself in spite of the fact that it doesn’t want to be responsible for financing education and/or creation the conditions and attracting investors for higher education in the country.

However the situation of the education-system crisis the Belarusian authorities are not ready to decentralise higher-education management. In the new amendment to the Education Code the Ministry of Education has preserved all the norms to eliminate even a slight hopes to strengthen the

academic communities autonomy, education stakeholders equal partnership or appointing educational institutions heads in democratic procedure. This is not only about political risks. The Belarusian students and academic staff do not demonstrate any opposition to the authorities. Other stakeholders do not threaten them as well. Total mistrust and suspicion in relation to any forms of independence is supported by the traditional statism ideology imposing the paternalism values and state monopoly on the truth.

Although the constitution guarantees equal rights to all types of ownership, in reality, private HEIs are constantly under administrative pressure and are victims of discrimination making them to reduce students’ enrolment.

From the 2010/2011 to 2013/2014 enrolment to private HEIs has reduced from 13,112 to 4,801 students. The admission to part-time programmes at private HEIs has been administratively reduced using the excuse that it proves low quality of education. Such approach undermines private HEIs financial situation.

The second application by the Ministry of Education of Belarus to join EHEA confirms Belarus, its academic community and majority of population interest in our country higher education system integration to the EHEA.

Recognising certain higher education achievements in Belarus in providing structural reforms and a progress in a number of Bologna principle implementation, unfortunately, we have to state that there are no positive changes in the legislation and in implementing fundamental European academic values. From 2011 the level of institutional autonomy, public participation in the higher-education management and/or faculty and students academic freedom have not improved. In some cases, we can confirm the situation deterioration and increased repressions in the Belarusian

HEIs. Thus, the reasons to postponement the Belarusian application review in relations to become EHEA member in 2015 are of importance today as well.

We strongly believe that when considering the Belarusian Ministry of Education application to join EHEA, the parties concerned should develop a roadmap jointly. This will allow to have consensual and mandatory for the Belarusian party plan-schedule to incorporate the European academic values in the legislation and implement it into Belarusian education.

## **II. STRUCTURAL REFORMS**

### **1. Degree structure system/ Qualifications Frameworks/ Employability**

Belarusian higher education system has two educational cycles according to Education Code No. 243-Z dd. 13 January 2011 (article 202, chapter 37). However, the 1<sup>st</sup> educational cycle represents existing till 2011 the only higher-education cycle in spite of the attempts to selectively reduce the studying time from 5 to 4.5 and 4 years respectively. The task was given to reduce studying time by 25 % in the higher-education institutions ('Transfer to Differentiated Periods in obtaining Higher Education of the 1<sup>st</sup>-Cycle'. The Minister of Education of the Republic of Belarus Order No. 389 dd. 28 May 2012). However, it is impossible to move to undergraduate educational programmes by reducing the studying time without changing the content of education.

The Belarusian graduate education which was known as the first cycle for Ph.D. (aspirantura) education prior to the 2011 Education Code coming into force became the second cycle.

The third higher education cycle introduced by the Bologna Process doesn't exist in Belarus simply because academic/researcher qualification in accordance with Education Code (article 218, chapter 42) is a postgraduate research oriented professional study and is organized in accordance with the Provisions on obtaining researcher qualification in the Republic of Belarus approved by Decree of the President of the Republic of Belarus No. 561 dd. 1 December 2011. The research specialties set in the Nomenclature of Specialties of Researchers of the Republic of Belarus and approved by Resolution of the Higher Attestation Commission of the Republic of Belarus No. 4 dd. 8 June 2009.

Thus, the cycles educational system in Belarus was established artificially to match the European structure, and until 2011 it has not taken into consideration the competences differentiation that are set as the basic competence by the Dublin Descriptors and in the European Qualifications Framework.

During 2011-2014 the positive dynamic has been noticed in the Belarusian education: as ground breaking changes have not happened at the country's legislative level (the articles of the Code concerning the higher education system have not been brought in line with Bologna), at the local regulatory level, the education system changes has becoming visible.

In 2013 new Educational Standard Framework for the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Higher Education Cycles were approved. A new generation of standards were also approved and they correspond to the Dublin Descriptors to a significant degree (2013-2014). The Belarusian higher-education latest standards generation correlate every course unit with the overall teaching load in academic hours and credits.

To ensure education cycles continuity, the 1<sup>st</sup>-cycle educational standard includes the clause '*Opportunities for Continuation to the Specialist level*'. A specialist may continue his/her education in the 2<sup>nd</sup> higher (graduate) cycle in accordance with the National Classifier of the Republic of Belarus OKRB 011-2009 recommendations ('Specialties and Qualifications', National Classifier of the Republic of Belarus).

At the same time, rigid regulation is preserved by the Ministry of Education concerning the study planning, syllabus, teaching documentation, curricula contents and structure, and syllabi. The education content and structure are determined by standard specialty (concentration) curricula; standard syllabi. The overall workload in hours per week (54 hours) with the mandatory classroom workload (24-32 hours per week) is regulated. Higher education institution is permitted to introduce changes into standard curriculum but within 15% limit of the number of hours to study subjects and into subjects' cycles within 10 % without exceeding the maximum weekly workload.

Previously graduate programmes in Belarus used to be designed with a very narrow focus on the preceding 1<sup>st</sup>-cycle programme for the same students groups, i.e. the specialist and master's degree holder were considered as a single coherent object. At present, the 1<sup>st</sup>-cycle specialties range for continuing education at the graduate level has been significantly extended although still regulated by the National Classifier of the Republic of Belarus 'Specialties and Qualifications' (OKRB 011-2009).

The new Educational Standard Framework provides a window to shift emphasis from the governmental component in favour of the educational institution: currently 30-35% of the study time is allocated for the governmental component, and 65-70% left at the higher education institution discretion. Within the latter, the so-called graduate student's component amounts for at about 50% of the higher education institution component and constitutes the whole graduate-studies programme variable part.

In Belarus, just like in all the countries, integrated long-term programmes in the fields, which train regulated trades specialists still exist.

All the specialties in which higher education institutions (permitted by the Ministry of Education) implement educational programmes are listed in the National Classifier 'Specialties and Qualifications'. Although in the past 3 years this classifier has been updated in respect of the list and specialties continuity for the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> higher education cycles, specialties selection is still limited. This does not allow educational institutions to introduce innovative interdisciplinary programmes and to incorporate new research results and knowledge addressing the labour market needs quickly.

The students of the same specialty gain the same knowledge and obtain the same skills across the whole education system. Such system does not permit to take into consideration the different students groups needs and capabilities, which are extremely important in case of mass education. Unified programmes result in inefficient use of the students' capacity and, as a result, education quality decrease.

Concerning competences, at this stage the graduates higher education qualifications level, *with certain reservations*, is comparable to the first cycle qualifications provided by the Dublin Descriptors and the sixth level of the European Qualifications Framework for the 1<sup>st</sup> cycle, and for the 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle to the second cycle of the Dublin Descriptors and the seventh level of the European Qualifications Framework.

Belarusian doctoral programs have traditional 2 cycle structure: Ph.D. and Doctors, and equal to the 3<sup>rd</sup> level of higher education in accordance with the international treaties between countries involved (for example Poland). However, in Belarus the responsibilities for professional and academic qualification are divided between Ministry of Education - higher education while academic qualification falls under the High Attestation Committee responsibilities. This division remains unchanged under the new Code confirming the declarative nature of the announced transition to the three-cycle educational system.

We would like to point out that in Belarus the researcher training system has been formed as an administrative vertical reporting to the president. The researcher specialties list is a separate document and is not comparable to the National Classifier of the Republic of Belarus 'Specialties and Qualifications', which confirms researcher training isolation from the first two cycles within Belarusian higher-education system. The researcher specialties specifications, the qualifying exams for the 'Candidate of Sciences' degree are not interdisciplinary, and do not correspond to the Dublin Descriptors and the European Qualifications Framework in terms of learning outcomes.

In Belarus the higher-education regulatory documents do not support alternative timeframe for receiving the qualification (informal and spontaneous learning) and awarding credits for these learning forms. This obviously does not correspond to the lifelong learning principle.

We can say that reform (or modernisation) in Belarus is still at its first stage although it has progressed. In order to see real results in the Belarusian higher-education system, the education structure should be changed, i.e. a three-cycle education system incorporated competences according to the Dublin Descriptors and the European Qualifications Framework should be introduced. Besides, higher-education institutions in cooperation with employers should be allowed to design educational programmes to be able align the educational standards, target groups needs and capabilities and labor market demands.

## **2. Quality assurance**

The main legal act governing the quality issues in the Belarusian higher-education system is the Education Code of the Republic of Belarus (hereinafter the “Code”). In spite of the parliamentary hearings due to strong criticism of this document, the Code saw formal revisions only. The Code revision has been postponed continuously, and the new versions do not introduce significant changes into the existing quality assurance system.

Pursuant to the Code, education quality is “education compliance with the educational standards requirements, the relevant educational programme syllabus documentation” (article 1). Assessment, including current, intermediate, and final assessment, is named as the quality control tool (article 93) and is conducted by the governmental agencies (article 124). An educational institution completes self-assessment (article 125), which is considered as internal quality control.

Teaching quality control is conducted through colleagues and administration representatives visit to the classes. A more thorough quality control is done every five years and linked to the competitive election procedure, which includes open classes, reports at the department and faculty council meetings, an anonymous students survey results followed by secret ballot elections.

The students’ learning outcomes quality is assessed through pass/fail exams, tests, course and graduation theses.

At the national level the Ministry of Education Quality Assurance Department is the only quality assurance agency in Belarus. Its tasks include licence and assessment procedures. The Department designs assessment programme, methods and presents its recommendations and comments to the Ministry of Education Panel that is appointed and chaired by the Minister. The inspection procedure is quite heavy, overloaded with indicators that form a part of the HEI’s annual report, i.e. are non-accreditation indexes simultaneously. All indicators are checked through the documents and exclude taking real measurements, which simplifies the accreditation process.

Since 2009 Belarusian HEIs began introducing quality management STB ISO 9000. This system introduction eased the control and pressure on HEIs: certified HEIs ceased to have Departmental control in terms of HEI management, main and additional internal processes as Department simplified accreditation process for certified HEIs.

The stakeholders play an insignificant role in the current higher education quality control system. Students participation in faculty and university councils is formally, their representatives are not involved in the courses content development, the students feedback is collected irregularly although some HEIs standards indicate it as a quality monitoring element. Meetings with the students’ parents are not organized. Employers involvement in the educational process is limited to participating in specialty state exams and final theses defence. However, the specialty standards approval by the main economic players employing the graduates is required by regulations and is in place. Following this up, we can state that the problem of having the national qualifications and professional standards framework at which the

Ministry of Labour has worked for several years remains unresolved. The Council of Ministers passed a Resolution on Some Issues of Developing the National Qualifications System of the Republic of Belarus No. 34 dd. 17 January 2014, which allows to test a new qualifications system as a pilot project for two areas: IT and Public Administration during 2014. This shows that we are lagging behind not only the Central and East European countries but also behind the partners of the Customs Union.

As we see the country has the internal and external higher education quality assurance system, which consists of a set of administrative procedures conducted by the state appointed Committees and Comissions. At the same time, the education quality (learning outcomes) is controlled only by faculty. The employers and other stakeholders opinions is taking into account very rare. All these show that the national system is ineffective and under developed.

During the last three years the quality assurance system hasn't changed. The accreditation and licensing system, legal framework, and procedures remain the same, there are no intentions to invite foreign experts and cooperate with foreign agencies. The system does not comply with the ESG requirements and complies with the ENQA network partially. This progress is also hampered by continuous debates about the failed Education Code and the Council of Ministers recent activities concerning the national qualifications framework and professional standards.

### **3. Recognition of Qualifications**

A.

Belarus signed the Council of Europe/ UNESCO Lisbon Convention on qualification recognition in 2002 and ratified in 2008 with enforcing the needed administrative procedures and nominating the responsible agency (Department on Qualification Recognition at the National Institute for Higher Education).

The foreign degree recognition is conducted by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Belarus. Currently, in accordance with the Ministry of Education order, a part of the recognition procedures is processed by the Expert Examination and Document Recognition Office of the Guidelines and Regulations Centre, Republican Higher-Education System Institute (RHESI). The office conducts diplomas and certificates expertise and ensures international information exchange on recognition issues. In the future, Belarus intends to establish the National Centre of Expertise and Document (Qualification) Recognition which would have a broader responsibilities.

In spite of the existing qualification recognition procedures, the qualifications received outside of Belarus is recognized based on bilateral agreements between Belarus and other foreign countries while degrees received in other countries falls under the Lisbon Convention provisions. The number of application that comes under this Conventions constituting at around 8% of all the application according to the Ministry of Education.

Following the results of the RHESI's expertise, an expert opinion is prepared on possibility of foreign degree recognition/non-recognition and determined whether it equals (corresponds) to a Republic of Belarus degree certificate. If RHESI expert opinion is positive, the Ministry of Education issues a foreign degree recognition certificate. Such lengthy and overloaded procedure established for qualification recognition confirms Belarusian government unwillingness to ease the administrative control over higher-education development and internationalization. We would like to underline that the major barrier in the qualification recognition process has been not so much related to the formalities but to the approach to educational programmes design, curricula, and understanding of the learning outcomes. However, we do believe that the situation may change to better soon.

The other milestone is academic (Ph.D. and doctoral) qualification recognition received outside of the country. It is impossible to confirm it in Belarus due to the rules of procedures shortcomings as well as existing politicizing and administrative control of post-graduate and doctoral studies. The Higher Attestation Commission controls academic qualification recognition process and not the Ministry of Education. This situation is common for many CIS countries and Belarus is not an exception. However, it has distinctive feature as no other has such as that Ph.D. or Doctoral dissertations defenses are considered illegal if the Higher Attestation Commission did not approve this. This clearly breaches principles of European Convention on qualification recognition. Unfortunately, there are no visible steps made to settle this precedent.

Thus, on the basis of the above it is possible to state that although the qualification recognition procedures in Belarus do exist, in reality this process does not comply with the European standards mentioned in the Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region.

### *B. The Diploma Supplement and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)*

The European Diploma Supplement (DS) introduction is still unresolved while the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) in credit units was incorporated into higher education standards, however, with some distinctions.

The ECTS is still considered in Belarus as an instrument of translating the national systems into somewhat European language and not as the basic feature of the programme design. At the Belarusian higher-education institutions, full transition from calculating the students' workload in academic (including in-class) hours to the system of calculating working hours according to the modern ECTS version still has not been completed based on the standards and other academic planning documents analysis.

The Diploma Supplement is one of the most important tools of the Bologna Process implementation.

In Berlin (2003) the agreement was reached that starting from 2005 all the graduates should receive the Diploma Supplement automatically and free of charge.

In Belarus all the higher education diploma are still issued based on traditions existed in the USSR. The academic transcript according to the form established (Instruction clause) is still used as the diploma transcript. It should be noted that the structure and content of the form do not comply with the contemporary European requirements. It provides insufficient information, is not protected forgery, does not provide unified approach to the education, degree, qualification description. In such format the transcript may not be used as an international document permitting automatic nostrification and ensuring Belarusian citizens mobility.

That is why Belarus has attempted to create a diploma supplement corresponding to the European standards in the recent years in order to be able to join Bologna. In 2010 the Presidium of the Rectors Council of Higher-Education Institutions of Belarus decided to create fist national supplement to higher-education diploma corresponding to the European diploma supplement in structure and content. It was believed that such supplements would be issued starting from 2010–2011 and then from 2011-2012 academic year and based on the student's request and fee applies at first and latter possibly on a mass scale. However, the fate of this decisions has remained unclear until present.

It is important to state that according to the international regulations the right to design, and issue the national diploma supplement shall belong to the HEIs and not to the governmental bodies (Ministry of Education in the case of Belarus) while the diploma supplement is an international (European) education document prepared by the European Union bodies and UNESCO. In this situation the Ministry of Education role should be limited to establishing the general rules and recommendations on the national supplement design and issuance compatible with a full diploma supplement to the Belarusian higher-education diplomas holders.

Taking into consideration the fact that in Belarus the ECTS system is underdeveloped and not introduced, its main documents describing this are not developed, including the Training Courses Catalogue in English. The official educational agencies representatives state that diploma supplement introduction will not be an easy task.

The only thing done in Belarus is inclusion of clause 17 into the Instruction to Calculate Labour Intensity of Higher-Education Programmes Using the Credit System approved by the Minister of Education of the Republic of Belarus order No. 405 dd. 27/05/2013.

It is possible to fall under the impression that the Ministry of Education of Belarus does not attempt to seek assistance from foreign experts as well as does not provide the higher-education institutions with sufficient rights to resolve the problems. Such situation also testifies that those processes could not be managed administratively but should have significant universities' involvement at all stages.

We believe that the following should be done to correct the situation with the ECTS and DS introduction:

- To speed up higher education programs reform and its curriculum revision based on the European standards and ECTS principles involving international community to assist in this.
- To involve the universities more actively using the existing European mechanisms.

### **III. OTHER KEY AREAS**

In addition to its structural reforms, the EHEA seeks to develop a common understanding and joint policies and guidelines in a number of other key areas of higher education policy. This part of the questionnaire seeks to assess the state of the implementation as well as the level of commitment of your country in two areas of key importance to making higher education in Europe both more attractive and more accessible to all.

#### **1. Academic mobility**

Academic mobility is not a priority for higher-education system in the Republic of Belarus. The confirmation of this fact is the absence of such term in the official documents terminology. This brought into the lights only in the context of discussing international cooperation or further academic staff training.

The State Higher Education Development Programme for 2011-2015 places international co-operation to the last of the seven objectives of its development (after providing students with dormitories. This objective is reduced to “improving the international prestige of the Belarusian higher education system and increasing educational services exports three times”. The programme states, “the universities have a broad international network”. No serious problems in the field are mentioned.

At the same time, the programme envisaged that 20 best students (0.03% of all the graduates) will be sent to the master programmes at the leading foreign research and educational centres at the expense of the national budget. Among such institutions, in particular, the Network University of the Community of Independent States is mentioned although it is not a higher-education institution in fact.

Its provisions will also allow the Belarusian faculty to obtain fellowships for studying at international doctoral programmes in the leading organisations and research centres as well as to invite faculty from foreign universities to teach innovative courses. The final form of international cooperation shall create the relevant organisational and economic conditions for foreign faculty but its parameters are not detailed in the Programme. It is obvious that the 1<sup>st</sup> cycle students do not fall within the scope of this Programme as potential participants for academic mobility.

The Programme determines increase of “exports of educational services” as the most important priority in the international relations. It is exactly why admission to Bologna is considered as an action permitting to improve competitiveness in the international educational arena. The Programme opens the opportunities for increasing a number of courses taught in English, increasing the foreign languages

study duration, introducing writing final theses in English, developing English-language master programmes, distance learning in English. However, all of these mean to attract foreign students and do not provide more opportunities for the Belarusian students and faculty to participate in international exchange programmes.

Thus, we believe that academic mobility value within the programme provisions in Belarus is not understood correctly. Academic mobility is not supported with the necessary financial resources. Moreover, unofficially it is not recommended for faculty and students to visit educational institutions in the European Union and the USA. To limit such visits, the most bureaucratized system of obtaining permits is established. It is applied even in cases when financial support is provided by the invited part. The participation in all international cooperation programmes as well as any faculty fellowships/internships that exceed 10 days should be approved by the Minister of Education personally.

The result is that academic mobility is more like exception than a practice. According to the official statistics 3,554 students (0.9% of all the students) and 3,700 faculty (16% of all the faculty) went to study abroad in 2012. This numbers, especially concerning student mobility, are way too far from the EHEA objectives. Moreover, this statistics could include participation in the conferences or seminars as the Ministry of Education considers such trips as “travelling abroad to study”. The Belarusian State University and Belarusian National Technical University which are the most advanced in terms of international cooperation, offer extremely limited study abroad possibilities. At the BSU 2,455 faculty are offered around 18-25 fellowships per year, 34,000 students 170-200 internships, at the BNTU where there are even more faculty and students 6 and 21 respectively.

We would like to point out that the governmental mobility programme offering up to 50 Belarusian students to study abroad has been functioning since 2012. It targets graduate students and postgraduate research training programmes students and does not consider the students of the 1<sup>st</sup> cycle studying in the second to fourth years. The number of places offered on the programme increased from year to year: in 2013 109 students went to study at foreign universities. However, its participants amount just to 0.05% of all the higher-education students. At the same time, the main destinations are China (38%) and Russia (14%).

In comparison, international mobility programmes targets second and third years students in the first place (in case of four years study in the 1<sup>st</sup> cycle), the graduate and postgraduate students are targeted separately as the selection criteria are different.. The Belarusian governmental exchange programme does not intend to support complete education cycles, which are especially popular in many CIS countries. The state interest in higher education internationalisation is minimal and it is obvious when comparing the programmes offered for Belarusian students by other countries. E.g., in 2014 the Kalinowski Programme alone provided more than 50 Belarusians with the possibility to study in Poland.

The most important reason limiting academic mobility is that the number of places for the Belarusian participants is low; non-transparent selection procedure controlled by the Ministry of Education; a low level of foreign languages knowledge by students, faculty and administrative personnel at HEIs. The number of European exchange programmes and the number of western foreign students studying at the Belarusian HEIs is extremely limited because mobility and internship programmes are to be approved by the Ministry of Education.

We are able to clearly define several mobility types existing in Belarus at present:

1. International exchange programs. They are recognized and accepted by the state in spite of the Ministry of Education official statement that participation in international exchange programs outside of the inter universities international exchange agreements is private undertakings by students. The same report clearly shows that the Ministry officially recognizes European exchange programs such as Erasmus Mundus, DAAD, Tempus, etc. This clearly shows the contradictions in the same official statements and dual face of the Ministry of Education internally and externally. This doesn't correspond to EHEA principles. In 2012 the official number of students offered places in Erasmus Mundus program is 221 and 56 places were for faculty exchange.

2. Informal mobility when students leave for studying abroad at their own expenses (parents cover the costs). These students are also enrolled to vocational study programs at Belarusian HEIs in many cases. This enables them to receive Belarusian degree (diploma) to avoid going through the qualification recognition process regularly resulting in Ministry's rejection to confirm foreign degree. At about 30 000 Belarusian students are studying abroad based on UNESCO data.

3. Alternative mobility. These are the programs launched by different countries and specifically designed for Belarusian students oppressed on political grounds. These programs are specifically designed to support academic refugees (Polish Kalinovsky program, EHU scholarships, ect.).

The situation with the academic mobility is not very different from the situation with the students and is quite low. In the case of the academic mobility significant role plays the time limits to travel abroad and is related to the workload. The situation could be improved by periodic sabbaticals but unfortunately the sabbatical does not exist within the higher-education system in Belarus. On the other hand, unofficial academic mobility is on the rise but there are no open statistics to assess the scope of participation in it while it is considered by the government to be private initiatives.

Procedures for participation in mobility programmes are extremely bureaucratized and often have political implications and designed in a way that the majority of students and faculty do not want to participate in them preferring to look for an alternative on their own.

The State Higher Education Development Programme for 2011-2015 stresses the importance of international cooperation development, specifically from the "exports

of educational services” point of view. It envisages new English language programmes launch and inviting foreign faculty for teaching. In 2013 13,505 foreign students studied at the Belarusian state HEIs where 58.2% were students from Turkmenistan, 10.3% from China, 11.7% from Russia, 2.5% from Nigeria, 1.9% from Iran and Azerbaijan each.

Belarusian HEIs have educational programmes in English includes specialist programmes ‘Telecommunications Information Security’ and ‘Telecommunications Networks’, graduate programmes ‘Telecommunications Information Security’; ‘Computer sciences, Systems, and Networks’; ‘Micro- and Nanoelectronics’. Other HEIs do not rush to introduce such programmes and, in certain cases, programmes in English with international participation closed down. The Belarusian State University states, e.g., that attractiveness of such programmes for foreign students remains low.

A number of programmes taught in English increase is slowed by legal framework absence and bureaucracy, lack of faculty able to teach on such programmes and absence of visiting foreign faculty. To develop programmes in foreign languages, the legislative reform is required to attract faculty from non-CIS countries and to allow Belarusian HEIs faculty to advance their professional qualifications in the country as well as abroad using modern educational technologies.

We believe that the following actions are required to further develop academic mobility:

1. Developing an alternative mobility scheme by a number of EC countries that will envisage the countries based scholarship support for Belarusian students who are repressed at their home university for social active position and their political aspiration that don’t fall into the state promoted policies.
2. Developing dual degree programs that will include mobility component for students, faculty and staff.
3. Developing legal framework adhering to best European practices in the field of higher education academic mobility.
4. Establishing transparent selection process without state control and run with the participation of independent evaluators.

## **2. The Social Dimension of Higher Education**

The social dimension of higher education within the Bologna Process characterises equality in access to higher education to all individuals. According to the EHEA requirements, applicants, students, and HEIs graduates should represent the variety of the country’s population. Special attention is paid to disadvantaged groups, rural areas and small towns residents, handicapped as well as the groups whose access to higher education is hindered by the dominating cultural or ideological influence.

From the legal point of view, there are no barriers for any of the above categories to obtain higher education. To ensure higher education equality and accessibility to

different social groups representatives, there exist a few support schemes for such groups such as: Scholarship fun (stipends only), the out of town students are provided with dormitory places, the benefit at admission for orphans to all specializations excluding the most popular among applicants, for example, international relations, medical sciences, law, etc.

However, in practice applicants from underrepresented groups face a number of barriers.

#### *Economic barrier.*

Although the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus guarantees free access to education for all citizens on competition base, the majority of students are admitted on tuition basis (2/3 of the full- and part-time students). The tuition fee for full-time students was 1,000-1,700/year and for part-time students 350-570/year depending on the HEI and specialization. Education loans are not popular due to the following reasons: only two banks (five previously) provided loans this year but just for one year of study. It is impossible to get a loan to cover living expenses. Loan repayment should begin from the start of graduate's employment, practically in the first year after graduation. The education loans interest rate increased by 10% and totals to 30-33%/year.

Due to low quality of secondary education the majority of prospective students have to turn to private tutors. Such tutorials are relatively expensive (5 to 25 euros/hour). This also creates an additional filter preventing school graduates from underrepresented groups to enter top HEIs and specialization in demand among applicants.

The current Scholarship system cannot support the student without other external financial support (mostly from their families). We want to stress that scholarships (stipends) are available only for full-time students studying at the expense of state budget allocations. The number of students eligible for such support at the full-time programs is no more than 1/3 of the total student population. The stipend is a financial support given to students on a merit base and totals from 50 to 80 euro a month (as of September 2014). The criteria to obtain a stipend got tougher in 2012 and a number of students receiving it decreased. In 2007/2008 over 90% of the students were eligible for stipend while in 2010-2014 only 50% of students were receiving stipends according to Belstat. The social stipend for orphans, disabled persons, pregnant women as well as the students in a complicated financial situation is just 25-30 euros per month. The share of students receiving such stipend has been around 0.8%-1.1% of the students during the last four academic years. At the same time, the official minimal student's consumer budget is 150 euros.

The students' financial support includes providing dormitories or housing allowance for out of town students. Limited number of dormitories and low housing allowance are among the most significant problems in students' life. New dormitories construction at the 'Students Village' in Minsk has not solved the problem:

accommodation deficit remains significant although it went down by 5.1% compare to 2010/2011. In 2010/2011 68.2% out of town students were provided with places in dormitories; 65.8% in 2011/2012; 68.1% in 2012/2013; 73.5% in 2013/2014. The dormitories accommodation costs 10-15 euros a month depending on its condition, HEI, and city (to compare: the one room apartment (studio) in Minsk costs 150-200 euros per month plus utilities). The housing allowance was significantly increased in 2011 but it still doesn't cover the rental fee. It is 33.5 euros in Minsk, 22.3 euros in other cities now. Besides, the process to obtain such housing allowance is over bureaucratic. According to the trade union information, in 2011/2012 29 students only (out of 18 thousand students in need of accommodation approximately) could obtain housing allowance in Minsk HEIs.

One of the most vulnerable groups are *people with disabilities*. Among HE students there is only below 1% of students with disabilities (in 2013 5.4% of the total population, 6.3% of the adult population).

The most difficult issues for these people are access to the buildings where the educational process takes place, limited information adaption for people with impaired hearing and sight problems. The improvement in such issues is insignificant. According to the opinion poll results conducted by the Office of the Rights of the Disabled in 2014 concerning the education accessibility for disabled students (around half of the country's HEIs responded), none of the HEIs has a special budget category to be used for eliminating existing barriers. The positive development in this area is the Belarusian State Medical University newly constructed campus that created an environment without barriers for all students.

Belarusian HEIs have limited methodology and tools to teach students with impaired vision and hearing, do not have academic staffs especially trained to work with this student's category. Their budgets have no expenses allocated to design and develop special educational programmes. That is why the number of people with disabilities having higher education degree is significantly lower than in the country on average. Thus, in 2009 more than 19% of population in Belarus had higher education degree, while according to the 2010 opinion poll results, 10.7% of people with impaired vision have higher education degree out of their total number; with impaired hearing, 6.3%; only 6% of disabled people. <http://www.disright.org/ru/info/pravo-lyudey-s-invalidnostyu-na-vysshee-obrazovanie-v-respublike-belarus>

Distance learning (on-line education) could significantly improve access to higher education for rural residents and small towns residents as well to seniors citizens, to develop LLL. The necessity to develop on-line education further is acknowledged more and more, however, although the draft aiming to amend Education Code prepared by the Ministry of Education introduces the distance learning as a separate study format; it has been developing slower than thought of. Besides, distance learning exists is a tuition based educational programs, which does not quite allow to consider it as an efficient channel extending access to higher education for vulnerable groups.

The health certificate considers as absolutely discriminatory requirements towards the applicants with disabilities. In case when the medical commission believes that the existing disease is a barrier to work, the disabled applicant is not admitted to HEI, i.e. in practice the right to education and to work are not differentiated.

The discrimination based on the language of instruction is still in place. Teaching in Belarusian is virtually absent from the Belarusian higher-education system; this violates the citizen's constitutional right. According to the official statistics, the number of students who study in Belarusian decreased from 1.9% in the 2005/2006 to 1 % in the 2011/2012 and to 0.2% in the 2012/2013. (Education in the Republic of Belarus. Statistics. National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Belarus. Minsk, 2013, p. 158)

Although access to education is not limited by gender formally, the gender imbalance problem in higher education remains, as well as in other industries of Belarus. This appears in a contradictory form between the high level of female education (21.33% of men and 25.0% of women have higher education at the age of 25-64 years) <http://bolognaby.org/?p=878> and their actual career progress. In 2014 5.8% women were HEIs Rectors; 34.3% - department heads; 36.5% -deans and deputy deans; 48.2% - associate professors; 63.7% - senior lecturers; 67.3% - lecturers at the Belarusian HEIs. <http://widm.by/Portals/0/bulletens/38/Bulletin38.pdf>

It is impossible to confirm the experience obtained outside formal education, which constitutes a serious problem for Belarusian education. It is especially important to senior groups.

In recent years the traditional benefits system has been revised. The population categories that had preferences at enrolment were reduced. For instance in 2014: (a) separate competitive selection for people from rural and small towns was cancelled; (b) a number of students receiving stipends was decreased; (c) the benefits for the National and International academic contests winners have been narrowed etc.

At the same time, none introduced a benefit system for social groups of population.

Modern mechanisms to provide an equal access to education for all populations groups such as loan scheme development, scholarships systems, benefit differentiation for each social group are not considered for further development. In spite of the fact that the higher education in Belarus could be characterized as mass education, it remains hardly accessible to socially vulnerable population groups.

## **IV. VALUES AND FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES**

### **1. Academic freedom and institutional autonomy**

#### **Academic freedom**

In accordance with eleven Belarusian human-rights organisations report [http://www.salidarnasc.org/sites/salidarnasc.org/files/file/UPR\\_Belarus\\_Alternative\\_r](http://www.salidarnasc.org/sites/salidarnasc.org/files/file/UPR_Belarus_Alternative_r)

[eport\\_en.pdf](#) academic-freedom situation in Belarus as follows: Violations of academic freedoms in Belarus' universities remain systematic and widespread. In the education system, there is evidence of restrictions and violations of the fundamental freedoms, such as the freedom of association, freedom to elect and to be elected, freedom of movement and travel. The right to participate in the University management is limited, improper disciplinary actions are taken and forced labour is used. E. g., the students are under pressure from the educational institutions administration, which increases when important public events occur. There evidence once again confirms faculty illegal persecution for their political views and their right to freedom of expression violation.

The academic freedom monitoring conducted by the Independent Bologna Committee is completely in line with the situation analysis by the human-rights organisations.

The Belarusian higher education institutions (HEIs) are **reluctant to provide information** about their operation. In spite of the statutory provision stipulating availability of HEIs constituent documents for prospective students and students, 28% of the HEIs only provide their statutes online. The composition of the council (the analogue of the Senate), which is certainly a public document can be found on the websites of 19% of the HEIs only. During the monitoring the Independent Bologna Committee's experts proved that in numerous cases the administration refuse to provide the information about the HEI's council even to their faculty and students. The monitoring results have demonstrated that the transparency level of the Belarusian HEIs does not exceed 38%. [http://bolognaby.org/?attachment\\_id=1716](http://bolognaby.org/?attachment_id=1716)In spite of request by the Independent Bologna Committee's to the HEIs' management to ensure better information access, the situation has deteriorated since 2011. If, e.g., in 2011 the application documents to join EHEA and their submission process were public, in 2014 the whole process was classified.

The Belarusian higher education system does not have indefinite term **employment contracts for the faculty**. The traditional university faculty competitive election system for the term up to five years set forth by law is completely depreciated. The HEIs' Rector can sign a contract for any shorter period of time irrespectively to election term and remains at their discretion. It undermines the Councils' reputation, which are stripped off real powers as well as became an efficient tool to intimidate and punish faculty. The faculty critical of the HEI's administration or the government often fall victim to the administrative power abuse. There are virtually no cases when the faculty who had suffered from the abuse could use any remedy.

The faculty **right of association** is routinely violated.

Contrary to the law that prohibiting activities of any political parties or NGOs at the HEIs, grassroot organisations of Belaja Ruś, a pro-government organisation seeking the become a political party, are created everywhere. The HEIs' faculty and units heads are under pressure to join the organisation or a pro-government trade union. On the other hand, the independent NGOs activities are opposed by the HEIs' administrations. Thus, the members of independent trade unions are under pressure at

many Belarusian HEIs. At Brest State University Free Trade Union primary organisation was liquidated under administration pressure.

The faculty are unable to **participate in the HEI's management**. The Rector is appointed by the governmental agencies and are not accountable to the academic community, the HEIs Councils or faculties do not real decision making power in key issues The HEIs' councils primarily consist of the units heads, and their elections cannot be considered free and fair.

The Belarusian **students** suffer from violations of their academic rights as well.

The academic freedom monitoring results at 16 Belarusian HEIs have demonstrated that the students fall victim to the violations of their academic rights en masse.

Approximately 19 thousand graduates of the HEIs who have studied at the expense of the governmental budget fall victim to **compulsory two-year job placement** annually as well. If they refuse such placement, they must repay to the government what was spent on their education. The graduates who have studied at their own cost do not have assurance that they would hold on at their first job. Although the students are **entitled to have a place at a student dormitory** by law, very few of them could use this granted right.

Under the eviction from the dormitories threat the students are forced to take part in early voting during state elections or to refuse to participate in public campaigns or NGOs not considered 'loyal' by the government or the HEI's administration. The students **rights to select study courses or research topics** are also violated on political grounds as well as they are expelled from the universities.

During the past 3 years passed from the time Belarus applied to join EHEA, there has been no positive dynamics in guaranteeing faculty and students academic freedom. The legal provisions stipulating its development haven't been changed as well as no practical steps made to implement it HEIs. Moreover, the access to information at HEIs and at the Ministry of Education has deteriorated since then, and the repressions against the academic staff and students have become rather academic than political.

### **Institutional autonomy**

The Education Code strips the university community of any tools to influence the HEIs' management and demonstrates the legislators' adherence to turning the universities into the structures of the governmental machinery. The Rectors have the absolute authority at the HEI and presiding over the HEIs' Councils are not elected by the university council members or any other autonomous body therefore are not accountable to the academic community. At the state HEIs they are appointed and dismissed by the President of Belarus or by the governmental bodies subject to his/her approval. At the non-state HEIs the Rectors are appointed and dismissed by the Minister of Education. However, the Rector him/herself doesn't have any legal immunity against the abuse of power by his/her superiors. For instance, in February 2013 Hrodna State University Rector was dismissed by Hrodna Regional Executive Committee head request because the president back-pedalled the faculty dismissal for publishing a book abroad ordered by the local authority. It is obvious that the

organisational autonomy of the Belarusian HEIs is actually absent by the majority of the parameters. By a certain stretch of imagination, the HEIs are more independent in establishing other legal entities and appointing outside council members.

### **Academic autonomy**

Academic autonomy is independence in determining enrolment figures, students' selection criteria, new educational programmes development, their curricula, and language of instruction. Besides, an important index of institutional autonomy is the HEI's right to select education quality control procedures and the agency conducting such control. In Belarus, the corporate model gradually migrates towards the governmental bodies' determination of students' enrolment plan. When determining the enrolment figures, the HEIs should follow the Ministry of Education and control enrolment figures and the number of students set forth by the license. Irrespective of the proprietary type, all the HEIs abide by the Education Code, Regulations about Enrolment to Higher Education Institutions approved by the Decree of the President of the Republic of Belarus concerning graduates' selection issues.

In Belarus, the HEIs are not permitted to decide on opening new educational programmes independently themselves.

Pursuant to the Education Code (article 217) the HEI's curriculum in a specialty (concentration, specialisation) shall be designed based on speciality curriculum standard. Moreover, even the HEI's subjects syllabus shall be designed based on syllabus standard approved by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Belarus.

The decision to accredit an educational institution is passed by the Education Quality Control Department of the Ministry of Education. It is the only body authorised to control quality. Thus, the Belarusian HEIs have no right to select the agency.

Thus we can conclude that the Belarusian HEIs academic autonomy is depressingly low. It is possible to assume that the Belarusian HEIs preserve certain independence in determining enrolment figures but autonomy in general actually equals to zero.

During the past 3 years passed from the time Belarus applied to join EHEA, there has been no improvements made in revising the legislation. The demand to change is in place but there is no relevant actions taken such as amending the Education Code. It makes the HEIs academic autonomy as low as ever.

## **2. Public responsibility for higher education**

Public responsibility is the responsibility of the governmental agencies to create the conditions for the HEIs to perform their functions in the interests of the society. **Recommendation CM/Rec (2007) 6** connects these tasks with preserving traditional institutional autonomy and academic freedom values. The authoritarian and extremely centralised higher education management system established in Belarus does not permit any independence for HEIs as well as seriously limits the all the higher education stakeholders rights, except the President.

For a long time, the authorities have set an unachievable objective to ensure the quality of higher education while preserving access to education and decreasing governmental expenses.

The number of students grew up by 2.3 times mostly because of tuition charges: from 189 thousand in 1989-1990 academic year to 430 thousand in 2011-2012 academic year. More than two thirds of the students of the Belarusian HEIs paid for their education themselves.

The demographic situation deterioration has significantly corrected this strategy as well as doesn't leave any ways to continue with raising the number of tuition based places, which has been compensating the lack of governmental financial resources. The attempt to address the issue by regularly increasing the educational services prices and increasing income from the foreign students inflow proved to be unsuccessful. While the higher education system hasn't been modernise or its reorganisation lags behind significantly, aggravation of the financing problems results in further deterioration of the higher-education quality.

### **3. Cooperation among stakeholders and student participation**

Full-fledged stakeholders relations in the field of higher education cannot leverage the situation when the government as one of the major players constantly exercises its powers as a dominant in such cooperation.

The Education Code doesn't introduce "social partnership" concept in spite of the fact that it has been declared one of the top priorities in the governmental policy. Currently social partnership is implemented through collective agreement between the Ministry of Education and the official Belarusian Education and Research Employees Trade Union. This agreement governs the relations between the government (represented by the Ministry of Education) and its employees but does not represent the interests of the other social groups: parents, employers and students.

The HEI and employers relations are governed by article 210 of the Education Code as customer and contractor relations only. At the same time, the customer, as well as other stakeholders, except the governmental bodies, are suspended from actual participation in the higher-education management and are not represented at the Council level.

The Public Council of the Ministry of Education has not been established yet. Board of Trustees has been established in a number of HEIs but cannot influence the education programmes content. The employers involvement will become visible at the stage when professional standards would be introduced and the education management quality system would be properly established.

The Higher Education Law of the Republic of Belarus as 11 July 2007 had the student self-governance concept, while the Education Code has neither the term "student self-governance" nor the norms defining the status, competence, establishing procedures and student councils composition.

The Education Code permits the students:

- to participate in the educational institutions management;
- to participate in trade unions, youth, and other NGOs activities do not contradict the legislation.

The new rules of procedures for HEIs Council establishment guarantees 25% of places to be reserved for students representatives but the Board doesn't have any power thus making such representation ineffective. The HEIs Councils composition and their activities remain non-transparent and unknown to the students. In November 2014 the Independent Bologna Committee activists addressed the Office of the Prosecutor General of Belarus requesting to inspect the HEIs abiding legislative norms concerning student representation at the HEIs' councils.

Although Belarus has a student self-governance organisations network, their role in the HEIs' activities is limited. Depending on the university, the name of the organisation as well as its structure and powers differ. A relatively unified system of student self-governance operates in the form of Students' Councils at students dormitories.

Elections to student self-governance bodies are not universal and free elections by the students of their representatives. As the monitoring results demonstrated, elections to majority of student self-governance councils are a mere formality by administratively appointed people. All the resolutions passed by the students' council have no real power and effect until approved by the university's management. Students' councils often pass the resolutions drawn up by the university administration and have no actual influence on regulating the students' lives.

Starting from 2001, the authorities keep closing any independent students' organisations or refuse to register them. Thus, in 2013 the Brotherhood of Student Self-Governance Organisers, an independent students' organisation uniting the self-governance leaders of almost half of the Belarusian HEIs, was refused governmental registration. The Belarusian Students Association representing Belarus at the European Student Union was liquidated by law in 2001 and has operated underground since then. The members of the BSA as well as the members of other involuntarily liquidated or not registered students' and youth organisations risk to fall victim to criminal prosecution for participation in non-registered organisations (article 193.1 of the Criminal Code).

## **Conclusion**

**Based on Belarusian Higher Education system analysis, the Independent Bologna Committee experts concluded the following:**

**In spite of the fact that during the time since the previous attempt to join EHEA, Belarusian higher education made a number of steps towards reforming educational structure, implementing credit system, introducing changes into the national qualification system, we believe that in general the Belarus higher education doesn't meet the candidate selection criteria.**

**The official statements on intentions to reform higher education funding allocation system, to increase institutional autonomy and to establish independent quality assurance agency as well as to involve students into higher education management are not legally binding upon the HEIs.**

**Higher education regulations and academic conditions reconfirm the administrative despotism in respect of students and faculty, academic and institutional freedom limitation.**

**We are positive that Belarus admission to EHEA must be conditional and sealed by Belarus obligations and accountability to international community concerning higher education system reform in accordance with EHEA values, objectives and policy. These obligations must be signed off in jointly developed by Belarusian and European experts “Road Map’ aiming to modernize the higher education in Belarus.**