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**SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF PROSPECTS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT
OF ONLINE HIGHER EDUCATION IN MODERN BELARUS**

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Abstract

In the article, based on the results of a sociological nationwide survey (September-November 2019), status and prospects of online higher education development in the Republic of Belarus are studied. It has been found out that despite respondents are generally positively assess the system of higher education, they are convinced that within its framework it is impossible to prepare good professionals in a number of areas. A positive attitude to the format of online higher education has been revealed, particularly on the basis of reputable Western universities. Categories of individuals potentially interested in online learning services are defined. It is emphasized that this form of learning fits only for highly motivated students. A set of motives is highlighted that encourage students to choose an online learning abroad. Both its advantages and disadvantages are indicated. A sociological study also fixes some risks for Belarus related to the fact that, having received Western diplomas, a significant part of their holders will seek to find a job in European countries. Assessment of employment prospects in Belarus and abroad for holders of "online" diplomas is given. Most Belarusians admit paid tuition for high-quality online education at Western universities and believe that payment should be adequate to the Belarusian standard of living.

The set of disciplines which can be popular in online format were defined. It has been established that social modernization of Belarus is to a great extent interested in this group of specialists. It is proved that today Belarusian universities are not able to compete with online offers from Western universities, because they are not ready for this from statutory, financial, organizational, logistical and human resources point of view. The study has practical importance, as empirical analysis results can be used for decision-making process in the country. This kind of study was conducted in Belarus for the first time.

Keywords: *higher education, quality of education, online education, students' motivation, employment.*

**Соціологічний аналіз перспектив розвитку
дистанційної вищої освіти в сучасній Білорусі**

Анотація

У статті, спираючись на результати соціологічного загальнонаціонального опитування (вересень-листопад 2019 г.), вивчаються стан і перспективи розвитку дистанційної вищої освіти в Республіці Білорусь. Виявлено позитивне ставлення до формату дистанційної вищої освіти, особливо на базі авторитетних західних університетів. Визначені категорії осіб, потенційно зацікавлених в дистанційних освітніх послугах такого роду, а також сукупність спеціальностей, які можуть бути затребувані в дистанційному форматі. Доводиться, що в даний час білоруські університети не в змозі конкурувати з дистанційними пропозиціями західних університетів, оскільки не готові до цього ні нормативно, ні фінансово, ні організаційно, ні в кадровому відношенні, ні матеріально-технічно. Результати емпіричного аналізу можуть бути використані при прийнятті державних рішень.

Ключові слова: вища освіта, якість освіти, дистанційне навчання, мотивація студентів, працевлаштування.

**Социологический анализ перспектив развития
дистанционного высшего образования в современной Беларуси**

Аннотация

В статье, опираясь на результаты социологического общенационального опроса (сентябрь-ноябрь 2019 г.), изучаются состояние и перспективы развития дистанционного высшего образования в Республике Беларусь. Выявлено позитивное отношение к формату дистанционного высшего образования, в особенности на базе авторитетных западных университетов. Определены категории лиц, потенциально заинтересованных в дистанционных образовательных услугах такого рода, а также совокупность специальностей, которые могут быть востребованы в дистанционном формате. Доказывается, что в настоящее время белорусские университеты не в состоянии конкурировать с дистанционными предложениями западных университетов, поскольку не готовы к этому ни нормативно, ни финансово, ни организационно, ни в кадровом отношении, ни материально-технически. Результаты эмпирического анализа могут быть использованы при принятии государственных решений.

Ключевые слова: высшее образование, качество образования, дистанционное обучение, мотивация студентов, трудоустройство.

Articulation of issue.

Today social transformations' success essentially depends on the quality of social elites, in the formation of which traditional universities play an important role. In Belarusian conditions, getting of a quality higher education is limited by five factors: 1) lack of highly qualified professionals at universities; 2) ideological censorship of educational process and researches; 3) poor integration of educational institutions in the European educational process; 4) limited training opportunities for Belarusians in highly-rated European universities; 5) low level of information and communication technologies usage during the educational process.

One of the ways to overcome such restrictions is wide usage in Belarus an online higher education on the basis of both the country's and reputable European universities.

Existing approaches how to solve this prob-

lem can be divided into several blocks. First, officially in the Code of Education of the Republic of Belarus, online learning method is legitimized as "a form of part-time education, when education is carried out mainly through the modern communication and information technologies usage" [Kodeks ob obrazovanny Respublyky Belarus 2011].

However, in practical terms, restrictions exist with regard to its distribution, as Belarusian universities are not yet ready for its active usage from financial, organisational, logistical and statutory point of view [Minadukatsyyi nazvala... 2019].

Second, information and advertising products about online education services in Belarus are presented in the Internet, but without their critical reflection.

Third, researches on the methodological aspects of online learning appeared [Savych 2018:

410-413; Selianynov 2015]. There is an increased interest with respect to online learning. So, at VIII Congress of Belarusian Studies (2019), there was a panel devoted to this issue.

In scientific and analytical terms two studies can be outlined. The most ambitious is the analysis of online higher education in Belarus, conducted by Y. Krivoy, head of the Ostrogorsky Centre. Having noted that only certain elements of online learning are used in Belarus, and having studied its statutory and physical resources, he offers a number of measures to develop this educational format: a) development of an appropriate regulatory framework; b) foreign experts assistance; c) creation of a national center for online education; d) boosting of investments in this area [Кривої 2017: 7,15]. Obviously, during pandemic, social demand for distance education has grown significantly.

First attempts to measure this process appeared, however sociological survey was carried out in a test mode and covered a limited range of indicators [Sokolovskaia 2019: 245-247].

Under these circumstances, it became necessary to conduct a nationwide sociological survey aimed at studying a wide range of problems in this area, particularly its consumers and development potential. The study was conducted in September-November 2019 with support of the

Konrad Adenauer Foundation.

The purpose of the article: to determine set of factors which facilitate development of online higher education in Belarus, or to restrain it, for the subsequent adjustment of educational policy by relevant social actors.

The research outcomes.

The sociological study shows that the vast majority of respondents (89.9%) know online method of getting higher education. Only 7.3% of respondents have no idea about it.

Gradually, a market for online education services is being formed in Belarus. Currently, six higher education institutions use this format, however, on a limited scale. In case foreign universities offer for Belarusians online courses, a real competitive environment will appear. Who could potentially become a winner in it?

The sociological survey shows that Western universities have the greatest chances, 35.3% of respondents vote in their favour. Only 2.0% of respondents supported Belarusian option. According to 35.4%, much depends on students' motivation, and another 21.9% have noted that it is necessary to take into account the factor of acquired profession (table 1). For example, human sciences studies in Western universities will be released from ideological pressure.

Table 1 – Allocation of answers to the question: «How do you think, in which universities, Western or Belarusian, you can get higher quality online higher education?», in %

Options	%
In Western	35,3
Everything depends on students' motivation	32,8
Depends in which areas	21,7
Everything depends on university prestige	3,3
In Belarusian	2,0
Other	1,7
Neither agree nor disagree (no answer)	3,2

Online education in Western universities might be interesting for Belarusians, first of all because, according to 66.7% of them, it involves knowledge of a foreign language, which in the modern world is necessary not only for profes-

sional development, but also in everyday life.

An individual competitiveness on a labour market is stipulated to a great extent by the quality of a received diploma. Therefore, 56.7% of respondents believe that it is important to have

a prestigious university diploma. For 54.0% of Belarusians significant is academic staff, which is more professional than in Belarus. 31% of respondents believe that higher requirements for students have positive effect on a learning process.

Immigration moods exist in Belarusian society. Belarusian sociologists have been fixing this fact for a long period of time. That's why it is not surprising that 51.7% of Belarusians emphasized that "Western education" would facilitate employment abroad.

Online learning "in the West" is associated with a different system of educational process organization. In the view of 35.2% of respondents, studying abroad students have freedom to choose

courses, and 34.5% of respondents believe that Western universities have wider offer of specialties. According to 22.3% of Belarusians, Western universities are more attractive as there is less bureaucracy during the educational process.

At the same time, the issue of finances is not important. Belarusians are ready to pay for a high-quality online higher education from their own family budget as well as using grants and scholarships opportunities. Obviously, financial issue will not be crucial when choosing form and place of study.

A small number of respondents (2.5%) note that in the field of online services, Western universities leave behind Belarusian universities in all respects (table 2).

Table 2 – Allocation of answers to the question: «What kind of advantages might Western universities have compare to Belarusian universities in terms of online education?» (several answers are possible), in %

Options	%
It is possible to learn foreign language	66,7
More prestigious diploma	56,7
More professional academic staff	54,0
It is easier to find a job abroad	51,7
They have higher ranking	49,2
More freedom in terms of course choices	35,2
More specialties	34,5
Stronger requirements to students	31,0
Less bureaucracy during the studies	22,3
Less financial expenses	7,5
Other	2,5
Neither agree nor disagree (no answer)	2,3

Among the possible advantages of the Belarusian education, three were underscored: a) students are likely to remain in the country, i.e. in Belarus (53.8% of respondents); b) less financial expenses (50.8%); c) attractive logistics (27.7%). It should be borne in mind that most Belarusian universities do not seek to develop an online format which requires serious physical and other investments, while simultaneously reducing tuition fees from full-time and distance students.

The sociological study recorded Belarusians interest in obtaining online higher education on the basis of a European university. Only 8.2% of respondents expressed skepticism regarding this option, while 44.0% were certainly confident in its existence, while 23.7% believed that it was possible, but only for certain categories of students (table 3).

Table 3 – Assessment to what extent Belarusians are interested in online higher education on the basis of European university, in %

Options	%
Yes	44,0
Only for some categories of students	23,7
Only with regard to some areas	17,3
No	8,2
Neither agree nor disagree (no answer)	3,8

Online learning based on Western universities can be attractive to modern Belarusians for various reasons. According to 55.5% of respondents it gives prospects of employment abroad.

54.2% of respondents note the attractiveness of a flexible schedule of studies, which allows to combine online learning with work/studies in another place.

Such opinions as “opportunities to obtain a

prestigious diploma” (49.1%), “prospects to get a good specialty” (47.0%) are also considered as important.

24.2% of Belarusians indicated that this kind of education would help them to find a good job in Belarus.

20.8% of respondents believe that financial issue might be also important – minimum financial expenses (table 4).

Table 4 – Evaluation of the reasons why Belarusians are interested in online higher education on the basis of European university, in % (several answers are possible), in %

Options	%
Prospects to get a job abroad	55,5
Flexible schedule of studies	54,2
Opportunities to obtain a prestigious diploma	49,1
Prospects to get a good specialty	47,0
Prospects to find a job in Belarus	24,2
Minimum financial expenses	20,8
Social and cultural contacts extension	18,7
Opportunities to get a Schengen visa	15,7
Other	0
Neither agree nor disagree (no answer)	4,0

According to 70.3% of respondents, online method of obtaining higher education abroad is mostly interesting for young people who want to receive a high-quality European education, as full-time education at Western universities is not available for them. Online education is a solution for them.

The modern world is extremely dynamic. Many professions and professional knowledge

are quite fast become obsolete. In order to have modern knowledge and to acquire new competencies it is necessary to study constantly. According to 62.8% of respondents online education in Western universities may allow to solve this problem.

There are no borders for globalization. Therefore, in the view of 54.7% of respondents, it seems natural Belarusians aspirations to find a

decent job abroad and Western diploma will help in that.

A majority of those who is interested in online learning is working in Belarus and see themselves in the future in Belarus. Knowledge and competencies obtained online, they need for successful professional activities, career growth and strengthening their positions in competitive practices. 30.2% of respondents are convinced that this format of education can be interesting for representatives of small and medium-sized businesses, and another 25.1% – for teachers of higher and secondary educational institutions, focused on improving their skills and modern knowledge acquisition.

The Belarusian authoritarian regime creates administrative barriers for its opponents to receive a quality education. Therefore, 17.2% of respondents believe that online education can be of high demand by party activists and civil society representatives, and another 10.2% – by students expelled from universities for political reasons.

In European countries, many retired citizens study at universities. They believe that middle age is not a person's decline, but time for new opportunities. 11.8% of respondents are convinced that this method of studies may be of interest for some representatives of the "third age" (table 5).

Table 5 – Categories of Belarusians, who might be interested in online higher education on the basis of European university, in % (several answers are possible), in %

Options	%
For young people who keen to get European education	70,3
For people, who want to upgrade their professional skills	62,8
For Belarusians who want to work abroad	54,7
For small and medium businesses representatives	30,2
For professors of secondary and higher educational institutions	25,1
For students expelled from universities for political reasons	10,2
For party activists and civil society representatives	17,2
For pensioners	11,8
For those who want to get multiple Schengen visa	11,8
Other	0
Neither agree nor disagree (no answer)	4,2

Answering on an open question about the Belarusians specialties preferences with regard to online learning on the basis of a European university, the following can be outlined: for 35.0% of respondents it is IT area (software engineering, computer technologies); for 29.2% of Belarusians – economy and finance; for 21.5% – management; for 27.5% – social and humanities area (political science, sociology, international relations). 16.7% of respondents are convinced that foreign languages can also be popular with respect to online format and relatively small

number of respondents (12.2%) believe that there may be a social demand for specialties related to legal area, what reflects existing in Belarus belief that problems in legal area are linked to its dependence on the executive branch, and not on the of lawyers training quality.

Among other possible areas for online learning abroad, respondents also mentioned: technical specialties (6.5%), logistics (5.0%), psychology (4.7%), architecture (3.0%), tourism (2.5%), design and advertising (2.2%), social pedagogy and journalism (1.7% each), ecology (1.5%),

computer linguistics (0.8%).

These specialties are important in the social dimension, as in modern Belarus efficient social transformation, formation of market economy institutions as well as technology development are needed.

Belarusians with European diplomas are often prefer not to come back to their home country and look for a job abroad. A logical question appears: what chances do they have of getting a decent job in Belarus?

The sociological survey shows that 46.7% of respondents believe they have chances to find a job in Belarus, and 35.7% think that opportunities exist, but only for certain categories of specialties. Apparently, there will be no problems to get a job for IT professionals, but, for example, for those with education in the humanities it will be quite difficult to find a decent job in Belarus.

With regard to payment for online education abroad, the vast majority of respondents suggest it should be paid, as they perceive free education as a low-quality. According to almost half of them (47.7%) paid education is acceptable, 31.7% cautiously add that a lot depends on the price, i.e. it should be adequate to Belarusian standards. Only 9.0% of respondents insist it should be for free.

Conclusions.

Sociological analysis allows us to make the following conclusions.

First, with a positive attitude towards existing system of higher education system in the Republic of Belarus, there is a belief that with respect to a number of specialties it is impossible to train specialists who will have modern competencies. Western system of higher education is perceived as a more high-quality and progressive, including online format of education.

Second, among the most sensitive problems of Belarusian system of higher education can be outlined its limited international communications and some closeness from the global educational process, which does not allow to get an education in some modern areas.

Third, the sociological study shows that respondents have not only a high level of knowledge about the format of online higher education, but also a positive attitude towards it, since it provides a flexible study schedule and education

expenses are low. Particular interest is for on-line higher education on the basis of European university, based on the belief that Western universities, in comparison with Belarusian: a) have high ranking; b) have more prestigious diploma; c) have better teaching staff; d) have wide variety of specialties and courses; e) less affected by bureaucracy; f) require compulsory knowledge of foreign language, which gives advantages for an individual on the labour market, including Western market.

Fourth, online learning can be attractive mainly for the following categories of Belarusians: a) young people who want to get European education; b) specialists focused on improving their skills; c) small and medium-sized businesses representatives for their activities optimization; d) professors of higher educational institutions; e) political parties and civil society activists.

Fifth, among the online learning specialties potentially of demand by future students IT, economics and finance, management and social disciplines (political science, sociology and international relations) are leading. The respondents indicate that there is a potential and real demand for representatives of these specialties in modern Belarus, as social modernization of society is interested in this group of professionals.

Sixth, respondents indicate that online learning is designed not only for a certain professional knowledge and relevant competencies, but it is suitable for highly motivated students and not “hunters” for formal knowledge and diploma.

Seventh, the majority of Belarusians admit paid tuition for obtaining high-quality online education at Western universities and stress that payment should be adequate to the Belarusian standard of living.

Eighth, the majority of respondents positively assess employment opportunities in their country for those Belarusians who have received higher education in Europe on online basis. However, many of them note that this does not apply to all specialties, but only to some of them. The sociological study also fixes risks for Belarus related to the fact that, having received Western diplomas, a significant part of their holders will seek to find a job in European countries.

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