

Belarus's response to Covid-19 in the education sector

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ABSTRACT

Remote learning has been considered one of the most important social distancing measures during the Covid-19 pandemic. In April 2020, over 1.2 billion children throughout the world were studying remotely. According to the World Bank, at least a further 1.7 billion students have been affected by complete or partial school closures.

This brief provides an overview of the measures taken by the Belarusian state authorities in the education sector in response to the pandemic. It concludes that despite repeated declarations concerning the usefulness of remote learning over the past decade, little has been done in practice. One of the reasons behind the apparent failure to introduce remote learning was a false perception that this form of education is much cheaper and simpler.

Belarusian educational institutions fell victim to inadequate state policies against Covid-19, including of the tendency to downplay the risks associated with the virus. Some elements of remote learning were introduced in secondary and higher education institutions on the initiative of their administrations or individual teachers and lecturers. However, these isolated efforts were only partially successful due to the absence of both legislation and the necessary infrastructure, as well as countervailing state policies. The absence of widely-implemented remote learning in the Belarusian education system must have greatly contributed to the rapid proliferation of Covid-19 infections in Belarus, particularly in autumn 2021.

■ Underdeveloped remote learning in Belarus

Belarus has a relatively high number of students with reliable internet access. According to the [Belarusian Statistics Committee](#), 85.1 percent of the population aged 6–72 have reliable internet access. The share of commercial and public organisations using the internet through fixed broadband access in 2018 [reached](#) 96.7 percent. All educational institutions in Belarus have access to the internet.

However, the introduction of remote learning in the education system has been at a much slower pace: in 2018, [only](#) 16.4 percent of educational institutions were covered by the project *E-school*. The E-school project, which started in, is aimed at creating a national digital educational space. No public information about the project's activities since May 2021 is available.

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the administrations of Belarusian higher education institutions repeatedly announced their readiness to introduce remote learning. However, there has been neither a special state programme nor sufficient investment, including by international organisations and Western donors, allocated for this purpose. Remote learning occupies an insignificant part of the [World Bank's project](#) “Modernisation of Higher Education in the Republic of Belarus”, which was approved in May 2020 and is worth EUR 100 million.

An analysis of official publications on remote learning, including [one](#) from the Belarusian State Economic University, suggests that the main goal of remote learning as perceived by the Belarusian universities was to reduce educational expenditures. However, to our knowledge, no comprehensive calculations on this matter were ever produced or made publicly available.

In 2018, the total market of remote learning in Belarus was [estimated](#) around USD 11 million, mainly in the field of informal education. Online courses in the higher education sector constituted only 1.8 percent of all curricula.

Furthermore, the legal foundations for remote learning in Belarus remain rather dubious. The Education Code mentions remote learning only once in the context of correspondence learning in higher education institutions. Correspondence learning is almost entirely absent in secondary schools, while in the academic year 2020–2021 only 93,500 students (36.8 percent of all students in Belarus) were engaged in correspondence learning.

An online focus group discussion (FGD) with Belarusian secondary school teachers and kindergarten workers in March 2021, organised by the EAST Center, revealed the very critical attitude of FGD participants to pandemic management

in Belarus. The following quotes below reveal education specialists' indignation at the inconsistent, chaotic and ineffective state measures:

- “A completely wrong, frivolous, reckless and careless approach. Nobody had a [military] parade on Victory Day, only us!”
- “We appeared to be completely unprepared for remote learning. Moreover, we received instructions to bring the children back to school.”
- “The Ministry of Education sort of hid away. Like [they were telling us], do something and later we will tell you something. This [approach] has been very irritating!”
- “I think our kindergarten [children] all contracted Covid-19. Parents are dying! In my group a 31-year-old mother died, a 4-year-old child was left alone. In another group a 38-year-old mother of many children died <...> I want to stress that [according to epidemiological practice in Belarus], a child is not a first-level contact. This is incomprehensible to me. In other words, if he does not have symptoms [even if one of his parents has a positive Covid-19 test], he is considered to be healthy.”
- “Schools and universities were completely unprepared for this. When it comes to distance learning, a huge number of professionals could not introduce it. The most important thing is that, as far as I know, the Ministry of Education did not provide any tools or educational programmes to allow specialists to introduce it.”

Ministry of Education responses to the Covid-19 pandemic

Once the Covid-19 pandemic reached the country, and in [response to](#) parents' requests to introduce remote learning, the Belarusian Ministry of Education referred to the above-mentioned legal provision. The ministry [made it clear](#) that remote learning can only be used at universities by students who are enrolled on correspondence education programmes. The [relevant document](#) on the ministry's website, dated 21 June 2011, lists specialties which cannot be studied through correspondence (including remote) learning. The ministry's website does not contain any methodological recommendations on the organisation of remote learning.

The ministry's [document](#) "On the organisation of the educational process in higher education institutions during the 2020–2021 academic year" does not mention remote learning at all and has no direct mentions of the pandemic situation.

Instead of introducing remote learning programmes, the Belarusian authorities resorted to the use of sanitary measures. The Ministries of Education and Healthcare prepared joint methodological recommendations on the organisation of education in educational institutions during the pandemic, which were [approved](#) on 20 August 2020.

The main recommendations included social distancing, wearing masks, washing hands, and measuring temperatures. Paragraph 5.6 of the document speaks about the possibility of "organising educational processes with the use of information and communicative technologies completely or partly (in particular disciplines or classes), if such a need arises." This document became the legal ground for educational institutions to organise remote learning occasionally. It also (in paragraph 7.6) explicitly allows the introduction of remote learning for foreign students who arrived in Belarus less than 7–14 days before the commencement of classes.

Due to the absence of unified legal recommendations for organising remote learning, Belarusian educational institutions used different approaches and tools of remote learning. The policies adopted by the Belarusian State University are briefly reviewed below.

■ Policies by the Belarusian State University

The Belarusian State University (BSU) is one of the largest Belarusian universities and is considered to have been one of the most successful Belarusian higher education institutions in implementing remote learning. The university uses the [Moodle platform](#) and its regulatory documents recognise the e-University platform (euniversity.bsu.by) and open [online courses](#) developed by BSU professors (available through Coursera, EdX, Udacity, Udemy, and similar).

Anecdotal evidence suggests that, during the Covid-19 pandemic, BSU departments and even individual professors did use other instruments for remote learning. However, such use was not directly approved and supported by the BSU administration. The administration provided no financial compensation for the use of paid versions of other learning applications. Tools other than Moodle were therefore largely excluded from the educational process.

Despite the prolonged period of time since the outbreak of the pandemic, by autumn 2021 adaptation to remote learning by the BSU and Belarusian education system overall remained insufficient and chaotic. Progress differed significantly across university departments, ranging from complete or nearly complete remote learning to its use only in certain parts of the curricula.

The BSU attempted to introduce online courses for foreign, mainly Chinese, students. However, the quality of learning was so low that the Chinese authorities [warned](#) the Belarusian Ministry of Education that it may not recognise diplomas obtained through remote learning in Belarus.

No official reports discussing the pros and cons of the Moodle learning platform are available on the BSU website. These issues are partly reviewed in the 2020 [academic article](#) “On the problems of learning programming remotely”. The authors discuss their experience of developing and using distance courses in “Programming” and “Operating Systems” for students of the BSU’s Applied Mathematics and Computer Science Department. They identified the following problems in introducing remote learning in their department:

- lack of quality materials for providing electronic content;
- lack of didactic materials with a high degree of interactivity;
- unpreparedness of professors and students for remote learning;
- low motivation among professors since remote learning demands far more time, which is not compensated by the university;
- lack of copyright regulations covering materials provided by professors for remote learning;
- unclear regulation of remote learning within the education process;
- deficit of finances for the normal functioning of remote learning.

These daunting challenges concern virtually all aspects of the remote learning process and suggest that little was done by the Belarusian state authorities to support remote learning despite the matter being raised repeatedly over the past decade.