

Belarus Human Rights Index

<http://index.belhelcom.org>

2019

Right to education¹

Score: 5.1

Including scores by component:

- Pre-school and primary education – 6.0
- Secondary education – 5.1
- Vocational and technical education and secondary specialised education – 5.5
- Higher education – 5.6
- Educational opportunities and academic freedom – 3.3

The state guarantees the right to education in Article 49 of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus, which states: 'Everyone has the right to education. Access to and the free provision of general secondary and vocational education are guaranteed. Secondary specialised and higher education are available to all in accordance with each person's abilities. Everyone may, on a competitive basis, receive the relevant education free of charge in state educational institutions². Thus, the legislation provides for the possibility of free higher education on a competitive basis, which is more advanced than the minimum international standard of the right to education set out in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights³ and Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights⁴.

- **Pre-school and primary education**

Pre-school and primary education are generally accessible regardless of region. However, the number of primary schools is limited; for example, in Minsk, there are more children than the schools can

¹ Given that statistical data on the right to education is limited or consists solely of figures published by Belstat, it is impossible to objectively assess and analyse the statistics. Therefore, the index presented here is, first and foremost, a subjective reflection of the experience and knowledge of experts in the field of education in the Republic of Belarus.

² Constitution of the Republic of Belarus, Article 49,
<https://pravo.by/pravovaya-informatsiya/normativnye-dokumenty/konstitutsiya-respubliki-belarus/>

³ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, https://www.un.org/ru/documents/decl_conv/declarations/declhr.shtml

⁴ International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,
https://www.un.org/ru/documents/decl_conv/conventions/pactecon.shtml



#human rights

#business and human rights

#discrimination

#human rights based approach

#international human rights enforcement
mechanisms



office@belhelcom.org



www.belhelcom.org

accommodate. There is an approved pre-school education curriculum called ‘Praleska’⁵. There is a shortage of nurseries, and it is common practice among parents to send their children to private nurseries, unofficially registered nurseries, or development clubs/centres for pre-schoolers.

Sanitary rules and standards (hereinafter ‘SanPiN’) are, on the whole, at a satisfactory level; however, there are issues with sanitary standards in school canteens and toilets. In most primary schools, individual cubicles in toilets are not fitted with locks, which fails to ensure privacy. This situation is linked to the existence of outdated safety standards introduced during the Soviet era, which have clearly lost their relevance.

Primary education is not fully accessible to everyone, particularly for vulnerable groups. The number of educational institutions in the regions, especially for children with disabilities, is limited or such institutions are entirely absent. Distance learning is underdeveloped. Children are unable to study remotely if they have been forced to leave temporarily or move to another country. Teaching staff employ outdated teaching methods, lack the willingness to adapt to new challenges such as distance learning, and demonstrate poor awareness of modern teaching technologies. The Education Code does not include the concept of ‘distance learning’. Children with disabilities are in a vulnerable position. According to expert estimates, only 60% of children with disabilities attend school; the rest are home-schooled. Access to and coverage of education for children with disabilities at home is limited. Roma children and refugee children face difficulties in accessing education. In rural areas, there is a persistent trend towards a reduction in the number of schools, which consequently worsens access to education.

Thus, the education system is geared towards the average child. Children with particular characteristics or special needs, and children of a certain social status, ‘fall through the cracks’ of the education system.

Primary education is free for all, but indirect costs are significant in many cases. School fees, including those for routine maintenance, are a common practice. At the same time, in rural schools, regardless of family income, children receive education and meals; some schools admit children to Year 1 from the age of 5, and rural schools also operate during the summer, thereby fulfilling a social function.

Overall, primary education meets the basic educational needs of all children. However, the lack of a flexible and adaptive approach to children from vulnerable groups, and the absence of modern teaching methods, are serious problems in the primary education system.

- **Secondary education**

The secondary education system has a sufficient number of active educational institutions for the provision of secondary education. At the same time, there are issues regarding the level of professional training of the teaching staff. This is evidenced, in particular, by the low entry scores for

5

https://www.adu.by/wp-content/uploads/2014/umodos/ypyp/2015/Uchebnaya%20programma%20doshkolnogo%20obrazovaniya_RUS.pdf



#human rights

#business and human rights

#discrimination

#human rights based approach

#international human rights enforcement mechanisms



office@belhelcom.org



www.belhelcom.org

teacher training universities, which also speaks to the motivation and level of knowledge of applicants to teacher training institutions who will be teaching children in the future. Sanitary and epidemiological standards in secondary schools are at an acceptable level, but are not tailored to people with disabilities, for example.

Secondary education is not accessible to everyone, particularly the most vulnerable groups. Only 3% of children with disabilities complete school, and few 'make it' to secondary education. Children with special educational needs are unable to follow a curriculum designed for everyone, and teachers do not adapt the curriculum to suit them. Children living in rural areas and children from poor families are also vulnerable groups; they are not always able to access education or continue their education. The state system has a distorted understanding of inclusivity and equal opportunities in education and access to education for various vulnerable groups. This is confirmed by the document 'Conceptual Approaches to the Development of the Education System of the Republic of Belarus until 2020 and with a View to 2030', approved by the Minister of Education in 2017⁶. This document does not set the objective of ensuring equal access to either secondary or higher education for vulnerable groups; inclusivity is understood solely as improving the physical accessibility of school buildings for people with disabilities. All other social groups in need of preferential support mechanisms are ignored by the authorities⁷. Furthermore, according to data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA-2018), a rural school leaver lags three years behind a lyceum graduate⁸, which tells us about the accessibility and standard of education in cities and regions.

Overall, secondary education is accessible to children; however, high-quality secondary education is not available to everyone, as a family's financial situation influences access to quality education. Consequently, the practice of hiring private tutors to prepare pupils for the Unified State Examination (USE) has become widespread, as schools and teachers are unable to provide the level of education required for admission to higher education institutions. Just as in primary school, distance learning is underdeveloped in secondary schools; children have no opportunity to study remotely if they are forced to leave temporarily or move to another country. The teaching staff employ outdated teaching methods; there is a clear reluctance to adapt to new challenges, such as distance learning, and a lack of awareness of modern educational technologies.

Secondary education is free for all, yet there are still indirect costs that fall on parents. Moreover, the cost of private tutors for specialist subjects represents a significant item of expenditure in the family budget.

⁶ 'Conceptual Approaches to the Development of the Education System of the Republic of Belarus until 2020 and with a View to 2030.' Ministry of Education of the Republic of Belarus, www.edu.gov.by

⁷ Vladimir Dunaev, Schools and Universities: The Distortion of Education Policy, <https://nmnby.eu/yearbook/2020/page15.html>

⁸ PISA 2018 Study, Education in the Republic of Belarus, <https://www.belstat.gov.by/upload/iblock/02f/02f0dcce5ea8e20041bca7728366684c.pdf>

According to experts, the cultural characteristics of pupils are not taken into account when designing the curriculum; teachers lack both the necessary competence and the motivation to adapt the curriculum to the needs of children and to modern realities. The curricula are outdated. The quality of education is insufficient; it is not geared towards developing individuals with critical thinking skills. Teaching staff lack the necessary digital skills. Curricula are developed by the Ministry of Education and lack flexibility: neither parents nor children can influence the curriculum. In most cases, schools do not offer an extended list of specialisations to choose from, apart from maths and chemistry classes. Children have no opportunity to deepen their knowledge in specific subjects; they are forced to study all subjects superficially. At the state level, it is extremely difficult to establish and register a private school; education is monopolised.

- **Vocational and technical education⁹**

There are a sufficient number of active educational institutions offering vocational and technical education, and there is a shortage of applicants for the places available. There is a lack of infrastructure for high-quality vocational and technical education. Given that vocational and technical education combines the 10th–11th-year secondary education programme with only two years of specialised training afterwards, the quality of education suffers. Modern technologies and materials are rarely used in teaching. However, in each sector, one institution serves as a resource centre where the infrastructure, technologies and curriculum are of a high standard. Distance learning presents challenges due to the specific nature of the professions being taught, which are applied in nature.

Vocational education is accessible to all; however, as experts have noted, statistics show that it is children with low grades—mostly boys—who enrol in such institutions. In essence, vocational education is concentrated among certain social groups. Few continue their studies at a higher education institution after receiving their school certificate. This selective education begins as early as secondary school, where assessments determine whether a pupil ‘will make it through Years 10–11’ or ‘you’re headed for a college or lyceum’, which stigmatises pupils at these institutions and stigmatises a pupil’s choice to attend a college or lyceum and study what interests them, regardless of their average mark on their school certificate. As for children with disabilities, according to experts, they face difficulties in accessing vocational education.

Vocational education provides an opportunity to acquire knowledge and skills that contribute to personal development, independence and employment even more so than higher education. However, specialised education is not provided to the full extent it could be, as students spend the first two years studying school subjects. As a result, college or lyceum graduates do not always fully possess high-quality skills and knowledge upon leaving.

Vocational and technical education does not provide retraining for adults whose knowledge and skills have become outdated as a result of changes in the fields of technology, the economy, employment and social relations.

⁹ This section discusses so-called post-secondary education, including vocational secondary education



#human rights

#business and human rights

#discrimination

#human rights based approach

#international human rights enforcement mechanisms



office@belhelcom.org



www.belhelcom.org

- **Higher education**

According to experts, there are 51 higher education institutions in the Republic of Belarus, 42 of which are state-run and 8 are private. 28 of these are located in Minsk. Of the 260,000 students, 144,000 are in Minsk. There is a geographical imbalance and a disparity between state and private higher education institutions.

The number of teaching staff has fallen from 25,000 to 20,000, yet the qualifications of the staff remain unchanged. The level of equipment in universities is, on the whole, outdated and unsatisfactory. Insufficient funds are allocated from the budget to improve the situation. According to experts, this is evidenced, in particular, by the authorities' attempts to secure a \$100 million loan from the World Bank for the reconstruction of existing infrastructure. According to experts' estimates, funding for higher education has fallen by 44% in dollar terms over the last five years. Per student, funding has fallen by 25%. In 2014, funding per student stood at around €2,300; currently, it is around €1,700. Overall, funding for higher education is on a downward trend. Over the past 10 years, funding for higher education has fallen by almost half as a share of GDP. There is a strong focus on 'importing' international students, as they can help fill the gaps in the budget. The proportion of fee-paying students is also declining. The teaching staff are, on the whole, qualified, and a high standard of education is maintained. Salaries for teaching staff at universities are higher than in schools. However, since 2019, salary levels have begun to fall.

Higher education is not accessible to all without discrimination based on individual ability. Thus, according to expert estimates, fewer than 3% of children with disabilities 'make it' to higher education. The proportion of students with disabilities is decreasing year on year. There is a lack of inclusivity in higher education. In essence, one can observe the segregation of children from vulnerable groups, particularly children with disabilities, and their discrimination, starting with the centralised testing (hereinafter 'CT') and the conditions under which it is conducted (in particular, there are no provisions for applicants with impaired vision when sitting the CT), right through to the lack of a barrier-free environment and the failure to adapt the curriculum to the needs of people with disabilities. The teaching staff lack both the motivation and the practical skills, methods, and specialised communication techniques required to integrate and make education accessible to students with various special needs. At the same time, it is worth noting the authorities' intention to introduce introductory lectures on inclusion at teacher training universities.

The Unified State Examination (USE) is an accessible mechanism for applicants in the context of anti-corruption, as each person takes the USE themselves, and favouritism is virtually impossible. At the same time, according to experts, the problem with the CT system is that it does not allow for a full assessment of an applicant's abilities; in essence, it assesses the applicant's ability to memorise a body of information and the CT algorithms.

Higher education is feminised, which is linked to the fact that girls are more likely to pursue higher education than boys. As experts have noted, the accessibility ratio in higher education shows that over the last 10 years, the level of accessibility to higher education has fallen by 20% due to the lack of an inclusive approach. There are no tools to influence the system from the outside, nor is there a



#human rights

#business and human rights

#discrimination

#human rights based approach

#international human rights enforcement mechanisms



office@belhelcom.org



www.belhelcom.org

system of preferential mechanisms, such as quotas. Thus, until 2014, there was a separate admissions process for urban and rural applicants; in 2014, this separate process was abolished, and almost immediately there was a noticeable decline in the number of students from rural areas entering higher education institutions, which is directly linked to the quality of education in rural and urban schools. Many children cannot afford to study at a higher education institution, as their families are unable to support them financially, even if education is free. Since 2019, deferment from conscription for military service on the grounds of continuing education has been granted only once¹⁰.

Since 2015, people in the prison system have been able to study remotely at Minsk Innovative University; however, at the end of 2019, the licence for this activity was revoked, studies ceased, and no alternative was offered by the Ministry of Education.

Another shortcoming of higher education is the fact that, according to experts, not a single pupil from boarding schools ‘makes it’ to higher education.

Equal opportunities face serious challenges. As noted by experts, the widespread practice of ‘importing’ foreign students has led to lecturers being pressured to award passing grades so as not to expel such students and thus not to halt the flow of financial inflows into the educational institution. Foreigners are admitted to master’s programmes without exams, based solely on an interview, which discriminates against Belarusian students. Moreover, upon completion of their studies, a foreigner and a Belarusian citizen receive the same graduation certificate, yet the level and quality of their knowledge are completely different, which undermines the reputation of Belarusian education as a whole. The allocation of funding for higher education is carried out without a human rights-based approach, with the result that vulnerable groups are overlooked.

The issue of inclusion and equal access in education, both at higher education level and at other levels, is absent from the authorities’ discourse; this issue is hushed up, and no work is being done on it, except in relation to people with disabilities, where inclusion is understood by the authorities solely as a barrier-free environment. All other vulnerable groups in need of preferential support mechanisms are ignored by the authorities¹¹.

According to expert estimates, over the last five years, the number of state-funded places in higher education has fallen by 76,000. There is a trend towards reducing state-funded places in certain ‘undesirable’ specialisms; moreover, the number of state-funded places per specialism depends directly on whether they are confirmed by letters from potential employers requesting that number of students, meaning there is a dependence on the ‘needs of the national economy and the state

¹⁰

<https://www.belta.by/comments/view/ranee-predostavlennye-otsrochki-ot-armii-budut-sohranjatsja-do-utraty-osnovanij-dlja-nih-6964/>

¹¹ Vladimir Dunaev, Schools and Universities: The Distortion of Education Policy, <https://nmnby.eu/yearbook/2020/page15.html>

apparatus'. The cut places are reallocated to other specialisms within the university, which shows how the system perceives the demand for certain professions.

Free higher education is, in essence, not free, as all state-funded students, upon graduation, are subject to placement and are obliged to work for two years. If a graduate refuses, they are obliged to repay the money spent on them to the state budget. According to experts, 'Belarusian-style' free higher education is a deferred loan or a form of payment in kind.

Whilst noting the importance of subsidised loans for education, experts also point out that these loans impose 'strict' conditions on students and do not apply to study at private universities. Thus, there is discrimination against private higher education. Moreover, if an applicant consciously chooses a private university, their right to education is impeded.

As for the adaptability, flexibility and quality of higher education, curricula, programmes and changes to them depend on the university and the management of individual faculties. The duration of education has been reduced by one year, and the master's degree has 'disappeared', which speaks volumes about the quality of graduates. Belarus is the only country in the region that has not transitioned from the Soviet classification system to the European one: we have no national qualifications framework, and there is no link between the labour market and education. The system is not adapted to the conditions of mass higher education. The quality of education varies from university to university, from faculty to faculty. The system's ability to respond to challenges and adapt to them is non-existent.

According to experts, the prevailing trend in Belarus is to obtain a 'piece of paper' rather than knowledge. The system does not work to foster active citizens with critical thinking skills, but rather unmotivated individuals.

- **Educational opportunities and academic freedom**

Parents/guardians are free to choose between state and non-state schools without interference from the state or third parties, provided that such schools meet minimum educational standards; however, this choice may be limited by financial constraints.

As for the freedom of parents/guardians to provide religious and moral education for their children in accordance with their own beliefs, experts estimate that this is difficult in state schools, as there is an excessive imposition of Orthodox culture, and there is an agreement between the Belarusian Orthodox Church and the Ministry of Education. Furthermore, the ideological orientation of education is enshrined in Belarusian legislation. On a positive note, in schools—whether state or private—parents can influence the topics covered in class discussions.

There is state discrimination against private educational institutions. In 2019, the number of private educational institutions increased, resulting in the introduction of mandatory licensing of their activities, which is a discriminatory mechanism. With regard to SanPiN (Sanitary and Epidemiological Rules), state bodies use inspections in private schools as a pretext to close the educational institution.



#human rights

#business and human rights

#discrimination

#human rights based approach

#international human rights enforcement mechanisms



office@belhelcom.org



www.belhelcom.org

Since the closure of the European Humanities University (Euu) and its relocation to Vilnius, it is difficult to speak of academic freedom. According to the Academic Freedom Index, in 2019 Belarus was placed in the group of countries with an Index value between 0.4 and 0.2 (Belarus's Index was 0.225). Belarus's neighbours in this group were Rwanda, Libya and Sudan, with Index scores of 0.223, 0.228 and 0.238, respectively. The Index score indicates a minimal level of academic freedom¹². Science is formalised, politicised and subject to strict state supervision. There is censorship and self-censorship among lecturers. Thus, certain topics for postgraduate theses, such as freedom of association in the Republic of Belarus, will never be permitted. In universities, the compulsory first-year module is 'Fundamentals of the Ideology of the Belarusian State'. Opportunities for academic exchange do exist.

Universities do not operate independently. Some rectors are appointed by the President of the Republic of Belarus, whilst others are appointed by the Minister of Education with the President's consent. Lecturers and students have minimal involvement in the management of the university. Article 2 of the Republic of Belarus's Education Code prohibits the activities of political parties and other public associations pursuing political aims within educational institutions. In reality, this does not hinder the monopoly of pro-government political organisations, such as the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRYU) and the Republican Public Association 'Belaya Rus'. Their activities are funded by the state; they practise forced recruitment of members and claim full control over university life¹³.

State universities offer the possibility of obtaining scholarships, whereas private ones do not. The existing system of free education means that the state does not introduce a system of benefits or scholarships for low-income families if a student is studying on a fee-paying basis. This is despite the fact that a significant proportion of university students are studying there on a fee-paying basis.

¹² For more details, see Belarus in the Academic Freedom Index, prospects for the return of academic values to the agenda, <https://nmnby.eu/news/analytics/7099.html> and the index study itself here: https://www.gppi.net/media/KinzelbachEtAl_2020_Free_Universities.pdf

¹³ Belarus in the Academic Freedom Index: Prospects for the return of academic values to the agenda, <https://nmnby.eu/news/analytics/7099.html>