

Conference Paper

Distance Education in Higher Education: The Perspective of Key Social Actors

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Abstract

This article considers the perspective of the key social actors (students, teachers and university management) regarding distance education development in Russia. In the modern information and digital age, distance education – based on the possibility of disseminating knowledge through modern computer technologies – is being actively introduced into the Russian higher education system. The pace of implementation is increasing in Russia, yet its assessment as a new form of learning and teaching is ambiguous. There are clear advantages to this form when compared with traditional face-to-face classroom instruction including: the accessibility of education to a wide audience; the possibility to earn a degree irrespective of place of residence; variability of learning time selection; relatively low tuition fees. At the same time, however, many believe that the quality of education received by distance students is lower than that received via face-to-face teaching, due to both the lack of student' readiness and the difficulties related to pedagogical process organization and management. This study considers whether distance higher education will continue to develop in Russia. The answer to this question depends to a large extent on the perspective of the key social actors. The study analyses their attitudes to distance education and make the following conclusions: 1) University management generally accept this form because of its economic advantage and attitudes of the higher education authorities. Students also vote in favour, because it allows them to earn a degree without giving up work, family and home-related commitments. The most negative assessment is given by teachers who conduct classes at a distance and can compare distance learning outcomes with those in the traditional face-to-face classroom instruction.

Keywords: distance education, quality of education, social actors, students, teachers, university management.

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Published: 21 January 2021

Publishing services provided by
Knowledge E

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Selection and Peer-review under the responsibility of the XXIII International Conference Conference Committee.

1. Introduction

Nowadays the share of distance education in the Russian system of higher education is not high. According to some data, it accounts for about 1.1% (for comparison, in the USA, Japan and some European countries — 20–30%), but the growth rate of the Russian distance education market is currently ahead of the overall world market dynamics [1].

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Researchers and educators argue that the development of digital information and communication technologies allow distance education to successfully compete with the traditional face-to-face classroom instruction [3]. It enables to successfully overcome the challenging barriers to higher education related to gender, race, income, place of residence, health status, special needs, and complex schedules. One of the key advantages is its accessibility to a wide student population. In recent literature, international researchers have attempted to assess the influence of geographic accessibility on the decision to earn a degree at a higher education establishment [6]. It is overall admitted that the proximity of universities is of great importance, while a travel distance has a significantly negative impact. Increasingly, distance education creates the conditions for meeting the need for education of a broad category of citizens, especially those residing in settlements that are geographically remote from the large cities in which higher education institutions are concentrated [19]. It enables educators to close the educational gap between the inhabitants of small and medium-sized cities and the inhabitants of megacities.

The second clear advantage is the flexibility of learning time. Lectures, teaching materials, tests, practical tasks and assignments, questions for formative and mid-term assessment, placed on LMS portals, can be viewed at any time convenient for students. This turns distance education into a flexible form and it is its undeniable advantage.

Thirdly, students pay a relatively low tuition fee for distance learning. It is concerned not only with the tuition fee itself, but also with those benefits that students receive from saving time and money on commuting to the university, accommodation charges, loss of income due to the necessity to take time off for educational purposes, etc. The average evaluation of the world's educational systems shows that distance education costs 50% less than traditional educational modes. The experience of Russian non-state distance education centers shows that their training costs account for about 60% of the training costs in face-to-face education mode [15]. A relatively low cost of training is ensured by prenting and delivering training materials in a much more concentrated and unified way, distance education technologies are designed for a large number of students, and the existing educational facilities, hardware and software can be used much more efficiently.

Fourthly, the richness and diversity of the visual and sound presentation, the dynamism of the educational materials delivery make distance education attractive for young students, many of whom have grown up in the computer-led environment. These and other advantages of higher education explain its popularity and a rapid spread in the education system at its various levels [9].

At the same time, distance education is not devoid of disadvantages, the main of which is the lower quality of education that students receive [17, 19]. This is due to a number of reasons. Thus, at present there is no educational filter that determines the level of students' preparedness and capabilities for distance education mode. It is not only about entrance examinations, but also about the fact that distance education requires students to have such qualities as self-organization, self-discipline, responsibility, interest in acquiring knowledge. But do students have these qualities in reality?

The research question arises: what is the point of learning at a distance if the level of knowledge is likely to be poor? If it is not a matter of obtaining only a document ('covers'), this is the key issue in terms of the further promotion of the distance education mode in higher school, as eventually students of all education modes receive diplomas that do not specify the form of education.

2. Methodology and Methods

Since its emergence, the phenomenon of distance education has been discussed by a large number of researchers and educators at both theoretical and applied levels. The German researcher Otto Peters considered distance education in the context of the unfolding industrialization process and pointed to the similarity of distance education with the production process of goods and services (division of labour, standardization and mass-production, adaptability to streamlined manufacture) [12]. The researcher perceived time and space disconnectedness between social actors as a financial opportunity for universities due to an increase in the number of distance students. The phenomenon of distance education is also studied in terms of interaction between the key social actors (teachers and students) rather than the geographical distance between them. Moore argues that the existence of distance between the subjects of education is a positive factor contributing to the development of the student's independence and autonomy. This distance is supposed to change the structure of learning, so it requires the learners to possess personal characteristics and skills enabling them to act autonomously [10]. B. Holmberg considered distance learning as a student's exceptionally individual activity and stated that 'live' teacher-student interaction can be replaced with well-structured teaching materials [7]. The introduction of advanced information and communication technologies in the teaching and learning process has significantly changed distance education methods and teaching/learning practices [5, 9] and shifted the focus to the need to create an educational environment able to minimize

the consequences of time and space distance for teachers and students as well as provide them with an appropriate psychological, pedagogical and technical support [9].

We conducted the first empirical study in autumn 2015 (N = 703) [19] and early 2016 (N = 830). The second survey was carried out in spring-summer 2019 (N = 571). The general totality made up students of Ural State Economic University (USUE) and Ural Federal University named after the first President of Russia B.N. Yeltsin (UrFU). The survey involved students aged between 19–54. The geography of participants is represented by large and small cities of the Ural region, cities of Khanty-Mansi Autonomous District and some other big cities of the Russian Federation (St. Petersburg, Surgut, Perm, Tyumen, Omsk, Ufa), as well as cities of the other countries — Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The authors' questionnaire sample was available through a live online link distributed by the management authorities of universities' Distance Learning Centres.

The questionnaire contained a total of 26 questions; most questions offered choice; some were open-ended questions designed to illicit a qualitative response from respondents and four questions used a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree”. Some questions had the option “I find it difficult to answer”. The scope of the topics covered in the questionnaire included: the general use of technologies and resources, efficiency of distance learning, motives to choose this mode of learning and the problems, encountered by students, students' interaction and communication practices, their self-assessment of the knowledge obtained, satisfaction with quality of learning, acquired through distance mode of learning.

3. Findings and Discussion

The answer to the research question seems to depend largely on the social forces that will either lobby or oppose the distance education project in higher education. Today, researchers identify three key social actors: university management, higher school teaching staff and students.

The management of universities (rector, employees of the relevant structural subdivisions, who oversee the educational process) act under the influence of two factors. On the one hand, they are under the pressure of directives issued by higher authorities (federal, regional and municipal), which, through their instructions and decisions, exercise control over higher school activities. So, according to Order 137 of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation dated May 6, 2014 “On the Use of Distance Educational Technologies”, summative assessment in distance education can be carried out both face-to-face and remotely [12]. In 1997, the Ministry of Education of

the Russian Federation issued Order No. 1050, allowing to carry out an experiment of distance education in the field of education [15]. Article 16 of the Federal Law “On Education in the Russian Federation” specifies the implementation of educational programs using e-learning and distance educational technologies [14]. On the other hand, they are under the financial pressure. In these circumstances, distance education is becoming a profitable source of funds, allowing universities both earn and save financial resources. Thus, it can be concluded that the university management is a force that encourages and supports the introduction of distance education into the higher school system.

Such social actor as students is another key stakeholder. The potential contingent of this group is quite diverse. It comprises residents of settlements located remotely from universities and large cities, disabled people and military personnel, or temporarily unemployed people. Students not only take full advantage of all the above-mentioned advantages of distance education, but also understand that while studying at a distance they can form important soft qualities and skills, such as self-organization, time management, self-discipline, responsibility, and self-study skills.

Our study showed that among the advantages of distance learning students rank first such factors as “possibility to combine work and study” (78.3%) and “possibility to study in the place of residence” (67.8%) (2019). The importance of the factor “freedom to choose the time of training” was pointed out by 28.2% of our respondents. Unlike the first survey, the cost of training, on the contrary, began to matter for a smaller number of students: 20.5% against the previous 24.7%. However, saving financial resources still remains an important motive for students: they often highlight the significantly lower cost of this form of education.

It is considered that distant education is the fate of more purposeful and well-organized people, it contributes to the formation of various skills and competences, such as the skill of independent work, the ability to plan and organize, the skill of time management, the ability to solve problems, analyze and synthesize information, improves computer skills, teaches to take on responsibility, etc. However, do modern students really have these qualities? The results show that students lack such qualities, without which it is difficult to effectively master distance education courses and acquire high quality higher education. Among the main difficulties students face when studying online, they again point out “high degree of independent work” (56.6% compared to 53.6%), “necessity to self-organize the learning process” (34.2% compared to 31.1%), lack of constant control by the teacher (22% compared to 20.5%). Difficulties for students remained the same, while the number of students who experience them has increased.

In our view, these results can be attributed to major two factors: students' poor background academic achievements and realities of their daily life. In the first case, applicants are not admitted to universities based on the quality of their educational background (no entrance examinations, selection tests, etc.). As a result, one of the distinguishing characteristics of Russian student population is a significant proportion of students characterized by poor motivation for educational activities and lack of relevant knowledge and skills required to study at a university [20: 397]. In the second case, the downside of the distance education advantages is the necessity to combine work and studies. This quite often leads to students' inability to escape from the daily flow, jungle properly work, family and study commitments, and concentrate on the learning activities.

The position of the third group — teachers — proves to be the most disturbing [8]. Teachers believe that “various formats of e-education, in most cases, are a convenient, budgetary, easy-to-work, formally legalized way to ‘buy’ a diploma. Studies of recent years on the social effectiveness of e-education clearly have shown the simulation nature of the latter” [20: 402]. Distance education puts a teacher in new working conditions: being locked in a specially designed booth for several hours, and having to deal with Internet systems and new material delivery modes. Teachers are entrusted with new functions, such as coordination of the cognitive process with the account of the distance education specifics, online — consultations, management of online educational projects, etc. All these dramatically increase teachers' stress and frustration levels. In addition, most teachers are able to compare teaching and learning in classical face-to-face classroom instruction with distance education and they can clearly identify the shortcomings of the latter in the context of a Russian university. Among them, lack of control over the students' audience during the teaching process (lectures or practical exercises) is one of the most crucial. A teacher acting as a virtual participant, students find it difficult to maintain self-discipline and tend to ‘wander’ around and leave the classroom. This, undoubtedly, prevents the other students from focusing on the learning process and studying effectively. The absence of face-to-face interaction and dialogue between the teacher and students is another important issue. In the classical mode, an experienced teacher can assess the degree of student involvement in the educational process and how much a student understands the delivered educational material. This allows the teacher to contact the student directly, ask them questions and involve them in the learning process. Distance education does not allow this not only due to technical reasons (the whole audience is not visible), but also because of the students' anonymity.

Our findings are in line with some recent surveys that indicate that “only 22% of respondents are fully satisfied with their learning experience in a distance degree course, 46% are only partially satisfied. The percentage of those who are partially not satisfied with distance education is quite high (20%) [18]. According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, in 2015, there were 18.6 million university students in the United States. Of these, about 29% were trained online — full-time or part-time. At the same time, about 42% of professionals from the field of higher education of the USA consider blended learning to be more effective than exclusively distance education [11].

4. Conclusions

Thus, the study has revealed three social actors — university management, university staff and students — two forces are clearly working towards the introduction of distance education into the Russian higher school system. Given that the course towards informatization and digitalization of our country has now been declared a priority, it should be noted that distance education will continue to gain popularity. This means that there must be taken measures to improve its quality. Much closer attention is required to the selection of those who included into distance education courses, the assessment of applicants in terms of their initial educational background. University staff also requires attention — they need to be re-qualified, trained for teaching at a distance, and exploiting all the advantages that distance education mode provides. Otherwise, we can hardly expect any positive changes in students’ and teachers’ perceptions of their distance teaching / learning experience.

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