

## **E-learning Technologies in Russian Higher Education System in a pandemic of COVID-19: Who is Guilty and What to Do?**

**Oksana Besschetnova**

Russian State Social University, Losinoostrovskaya street, 24,  
Moscow, RUSSIA, oksanabesschetnova@yandex.ru

### **Abstract**

The article is devoted to the issue of functioning higher education system in Russia during a pandemic of COVID-19 which has covered most of the countries in the world, and led to different changes in all spheres of people's lives, including higher education system. The purpose of the study is the critical view on the quality of university education, making stress on some problems, caused by poor preparedness of all participants of educational process: university administration, faculty, students, etc. to an unexpected situation. Despite the fact that modern youth actively use the advantages of the Internet for learning, development, recreation, communication and leisure, nevertheless, most of them faced many problems in mastering basic educational programs using e-learning technologies. Among others: difficulties managing time, which resulted in chronic academic failure and violation of the deadlines for completing assignments; the only computer with Internet access for all family members (siblings of school age; parents, working remotely); inequality in education due to the low quality of the Internet connection, undeveloped infrastructure especially in rural areas of the country; inadequate level of using e-learning technologies of academic staff in educational process.

**Keywords:** Russian Higher Education System, Pandemic of COVID-19, E-learning, Problems and Perspectives

### **1. Introduction**

A pandemic of COVID-19, firstly recorded in Wuhan (China) in December 2019, and covered most countries in the world, has led to changes in all spheres, including education system. In this regard, since March 2020, distance computer technologies have been introduced as a main tool at all levels of Russian education system.

According to the methodological recommendations of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation, universities, based on their capabilities and resources, must develop conditions for the implementation of e-learning in the educational process. Based on the Art. 16 of Federal Law No. 273 "About Education in the Russian Federation", "... distance learning technologies are educational technologies implemented mainly with the use of information and telecommunication networks with indirect (at a distance) interaction between students and teachers" (About education in the Russian Federation, 2012).

### **2. Data and Methodology**

#### **2.1 Methods and Materials**

The purpose of the study was to take a critical look at the situation of the emergency implementation of e-learning technologies in Russian higher education system (based on the example of Saratov National Research University named after N.G. Chernyshevsky) because of the pandemic caused by the coronavirus infection COVID-19, which had a great influence on all participants of the educational process – the university administration, staff, faculty, and students.

The study was carried out in March-August 2020 in Saratov National Research University named after N.G. Chernyshevsky. The main methods of study were participant observation and focus group methods. Participant observation is a qualitative research method which has been used in a variety of disciplines as a tool for collecting data in which the researcher not only observes the research participants, but also actively engages in the research's activities. Observations enable the researcher to describe existing situations, providing a "written photograph" of the situation under study (Erlandson, et. al, 1993). C. Marshall and G.B. Rossman define observation as "the systematic description of events, behaviors, and artifacts in the social setting chosen for study" (Marshall and Rossman, 2006).

At present, the method of participant observation as a sociological tool of qualitative research, unfortunately, is in little demand by sociologists in comparison with quantitative research methods, despite the fact that it was developed by the American sociologist E.K. Lindeman in 1933 and described in his book "Dynamic Social Research" (Madge, 1962). Later this method was repeatedly used in foreign, less often in Russian empirical studies. Thus, on its basis, a unique ethnographic material was collected, regarding life of American homeless men in the 1920s (Anderson, 1923) or life of the average American town (Lind & Lind, 1927).

In domestic science, the method of participant observation was used to study the values of soviet workers (Olshansky, 2002); the relationship between the team and the individual (Novikova, 2010); peculiarities of age and individual development of adolescents in grades 5-8 (Elkonin and Dragunova, 1967).

In the conditions of self-isolation caused by the pandemic, every participant of the educational process could become an observer, who had an opportunity to follow the development of the situation "here and now", to record changes, moods, creation of new social practices and forms of interaction between different levels of the educational system, difficulties and ways of their overcoming. That is why this method was chosen for the research for collecting information, which allowed the researcher as a direct participant in the educational process, familiar with the internal structure and content of the higher education system, to form the opinion about the events taking place. In order to obtain information in the process of participant observation, free interviews, the method of natural situations were used for data analysis.

Focus groups were held on the online platform Zoom, where participants had the opportunity to express their points of view on the advantages and limitations of online training, the difficulties that hinder the effective assimilation of getting knowledge by students, current problems and collectively find an acceptable solution for their subsequent elimination. During the study, three separate focus groups were organized: the first with the representatives of the administration staff, including deans of faculties and heads of departments (n = 6); the second group was consisted of representatives of the faculty (n = 15); the third contained 1-4 year undergraduate students of humanitarian faculties (n = 12). The duration of each session was about two hours.

The sample of the first and the second group was formed from the university staff aged 30-60; the average work experience was 28 years. The participation was voluntarily. Three days before the session each participant of the focus group received the list of questions which had to be discussed in order to be well prepared.

The quota sample of students was carried out according to several criteria: age, gender, nationality, type of settlement, social status of parental family; course of study, including students combining work and study or other types of activity. As a result, the student focus group contained students aged 18-23, boys (n = 7) and girls (n = 8), by nationality: Russians and Turkmen; representatives of middle and low resource families; by type of settlement: urban and rural; combining work and study or study and other types of activity (volunteering).

### **3. Results and Discussion**

Because of the pandemic, all face-to-face classes at the university, including lectures, practical and laboratory classes, were urgently moved to the online environment. To organize the educational process, Saratov State University, like most other Russian universities, turned to such e-learning technologies as LMS-platforms designed for posting educational content and monitoring of students' progress; webinar services that allow university staff to broadcast online lectures in real time, conduct practical/ seminar classes, give advises students on current issues such as completing essays, coursework; create groups in social networks and messengers (Viber, WhatsApp, Instagram, etc.) to post relevant information, clarify difficult questions that are immediately available to all participants of the educational process; using e-mail to send additional

training materials, feedback from a teacher and students, in case of difficulties with attaching completed files on the online platform, etc.

According to the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, in conditions of self-isolation, about 80 % of Russian universities have completely switched to the electronic format of working with students (The Ministry of Education and Science, 2020). Unfortunately, not all universities were ready for this radical restructuring of the educational process based on objectively different levels of information infrastructure development, provision of disciplines with electronic educational resources and the readiness of faculty to use digital platforms and services in teaching.

According to IPOboard, in 2014 the volume of the domestic distance education market was estimated at 9.3 billion rubles; the average annual growth rate was 16.9%. At the same time, according to experts, the Russian e-learning market lags behind western markets by 5-7 years (Sinelnikov et al, 2016).

The school education system was in an even more critical situation; according to the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation, schools could provide e-learning for no more than 25% of schoolchildren due to differences in epidemiological situation in the Russian regions, schools' resources and infrastructure, qualifications of teachers, etc.

In this regard, the rapid transition from traditional to distance education has given rise to a number of problems, especially for small universities and branches of leading universities, located in Russian regions: firstly, some of them did not have their own IT infrastructure to ensure an effective learning process, so they faced to the need to create their own online platform in a short period of time or conclude the agreement with external organizations; secondly, filling on-line platform, regularly updating its content, posting high-quality online courses (as a rule, the development of one online course takes about 6-9 months on average); thirdly, providing teachers' online skills training to enhance their knowledge to adjust educational materials, give assignments and check students' works.

University teachers had to organize the educational process through distance learning technologies more independently, relying on previously acquired knowledge and computer skills, since the number of technical personnel in the information technology department was small, and who could provide the prevention and rapid elimination of cardinal failures in the system.

In addition, the educational, methodological, organizational load on the administrative apparatus (deans, heads of departments), staff, and faculty had increased unprecedentedly. They were faced with the need not only to prepare and conduct lectures and student assignments, fulfill the electronic training system in an emergency, but also to solve organizational and methodological issues related to explaining to students new requirements for completing assignments in e learning; organizing access to electronic library resources, giving advices and instructions to eliminate difficulties in educational process, etc. The most helpful resources allowed to bring update information to all stakeholders were groups in social networks (Vkontakte, Odnoklassniki, Facebook, Instagram, etc.) and instant messengers (Viber, WhatsApp).

Of course, most big universities with well developed infrastructure which have already developed and successfully used distance learning technologies before the pandemic along with other forms of education found themselves in a more advantageous situation, which routine work was not changed so much.

Despite the fact that modern youth actively use Internet for learning, development, recreation, communication and leisure, nevertheless, about a third of students noted difficulties in mastering basic educational programs using e-learning technologies.

During the focus group session students named the following reasons for dissatisfaction with the distance education. Firstly, the lack of a clear division of time for study and rest during the period of self-isolation, the need to independently determine the work regime, procrastination, all

these factors became the reasons for irrational time management, which presupposes the skills and abilities of rational use and distribution of time, prioritization, and the formation of sustainable motivation for learning. The consequence of this was chronic academic failure and violation of the deadlines for completing tasks; high stress levels; chronic fatigue; dissatisfaction with the education system of a quarter of student audience.

Secondly, some students noted the presence of one laptop or a computer with Internet access for all family members (siblings of school age; parents, working on-line), that created a priority in the performance of work, and provoked family conflicts, tension in interpersonal marital and child-parent relationship.

Thirdly, the decline in the quality of education of students from families with low socio-economic status (incomplete, large, low-resource) was aggravated by the lack of home computer or laptop, which is why homework was carried out using a mobile phone, making the learning process time-consuming, ineffective, destructively affecting the physical and mental health of the student.

Fourth, the poor quality of the Internet connection, especially in rural areas, did not allow students to receive and send completed assignments on time. For this it was necessary initially to “find” a place with the strongest signal, often outside the house (on a hill, near the TV antenna, etc.), in order to send homework from a mobile phone via social networks, messengers or e-mail.

Fifthly, unemployment caused by the pandemic led to a decrease in income, a restriction on the consumption of food and services, which negatively affected the quality of life of most Russian families, made impossible paying utility bills, including Internet, which created additional difficulties for students.

Foreign students, studying at Saratov State University, who were unable to travel to their homeland due to the pandemic, used their own electronic gadgets as well as university resources such as computer classes, access to Wi-Fi, to continue their education. The main difficulties they had were language difficulties, socio-cultural adaptation, restrictions on face-to-face interpersonal interaction with tutors and faculty members regarding developing skills and knowledge of work in the e-learning system.

At the same time, despite the whole conglomerate of problems caused by the urgent restructuring of the education system at all its levels, it is possible to highlight a number of advantages of e-learning, which might be used in further professional activities.

In particular, holding meetings using webinars, especially in large cities, with high traffic congestion, long distances, was recognized as successful by the overwhelming majority of representatives of the administrative apparatus and the teaching staff.

A number of teachers noted an increase in the level of computer knowledge and practical skills, which will be used in the future for self-development and increasing professional efficiency.

In terms of students, two-thirds of the them pointed out the successful combination of online learning with work employment; the opportunity to “attend” on-line lectures and practical classes as well as repeatedly refer to the video material at a convenient time of the day.

Nonresident students drew attention to a reduction in the costs associated with living expenses in another city, such as utility bills, meals, and transportation. Some of the students, especially freshmen, experienced a feeling of relief after returning to their parental family, where they were able to get rid of some of the household chores of cleaning, cooking, buying food, etc., which they had to do while living on their own in another city. Also freshmen in comparison with senior students, noted as an advantage an increase in the intensity of contacts with parents, siblings and other relatives during the period of self-isolation, which is explained by the period of social adaptation to new conditions of study and living, as well as the degree of responsibility for independently decision making.

#### 4. Conclusion

The urgent introduction of distance technologies into the educational process of a number of Russian higher educational institutions, including small universities and branches of leading universities in connection with the pandemic COVID-19, can be described as a stressful situation for all subjects of education – administration, faculty, and students, which negatively affected the quality of education and attitude towards online learning.

The results of the study using qualitative methods indicate the different readiness of Russian universities to use e-learning technologies in the educational process, especially in small educational institutions and branches of leading universities; underestimation of their role and place in the educational process by the administration and faculty members, which, ultimately, aggravates the social inequality in education for students living in different regions of the country and types of settlements. In this regard, a thorough assessment of the current situation is necessary, the identification and elimination its causes, the adoption of not only short-term, but also long-term measures to normalize the educational process, taking into account future possible risks.

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