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REVUE EUROPEENNE D ETUDES EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF MILITARY STUDIES
Social Science Journal

Problems And Trends In Distance Learning Under Pandemic Quarantine

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Abstract

The introduction of a widespread regime of self-isolation for the citizens of the country, which was caused by the universal, total spread of the coronavirus infection COVID-19 (an acronym for Coronavirus Disease 2019) with its further transition to pandemic level in the first half of 2020 entailed, in turn, serious changes in the entire organization of the Russian educational system at various levels, from primary and secondary schools to the entire complex of higher educational institutions in the country.

Of course, all of this eventually translated into a temporary cessation of all face-to-face classes, followed by a transition to remote (distant) sessions via various electronic platforms and programs.

Previously, there was no real need for digitalization of the educational process in Russia, hence the appearance of its introduction, use and achievements, which was clearly manifested in the emergence of a specific need for widespread use of distance education technologies after the introduction of self-isolation regime in Russia and the termination of all types of full-time education in the country's system of higher education.

Such a transition to a universal system of education on a remote (distant) basis, of course, revealed a number of advantages and unexpected problems in the organization of the entire educational system in the country, which is the focus of this publication.

Keywords: university, education, distance learning, educational technology, remote technology classes.

Introduction

Over the past few years, the scientific life of higher education in Russia has been marked by a burst of a series of conferences devoted to the digitalization of both the educational process and academic life. At the same time, regardless of the scale and level of such events, all universities faced a set of homogeneous problems. And, if before the subject matter of speeches and reports at interuniversity, city, regional, all-Russian and even international conferences was reduced mainly to theoretical views and arguments about the relevance, necessity, advantages and necessity of using computer technology, detached from real life, then, with the introduction of remote learning mode, all universities were faced with the real implementation of distance learning and the need to use digital technology.

Previously, everything was limited to theory, abstracted from the realities and needs of the university, and in internal practice, as a rule, everything was reduced to the automation of the occasional tests of students [1]. Certainly, there have been developments and methods that were really in demand, but were rather ad hoc, occasional, an exception to the common practice. For the most part, all other pseudo-achievements were reduced to certain rating assessments of the "advancement" of universities in the evaluation of their performance by higher authorities, and all this despite the fact that the real intra-university potential in achieving real implementation of various forms of digitalization of the elements of the educational process are available, but in the absence of real forms of encouragement for their development and implementation, they were unrealizable [2].

In other words, there used to be no real need for digitalization of the educational process in Russia, hence the appearance of its introduction, use and achievements, which was clearly manifested in the emergence of a specific need for widespread use of distance education technologies after the introduction of self-isolation regime in Russia and the termination of all types of full-time education in the country's system of higher education.

Methods

The methodological basis of this research work is the following methods:

Study and generalization. This method is used to analyze the current state of the object of research, identifying its bottlenecks and conflicts, its constituent elements, its efficiency and accessibility in order to identify leading trends, as well as negative and advanced experiences [3], [4], [5].

Abstraction. The use of this method makes it possible to distract from insignificant aspects/properties/relationships of the object under study in the process of study [6].

Analysis and synthesis. By combining these methods, it is possible to obtain the fullest and most comprehensive knowledge of reality. With the help of analysis we can study individual elements, and with the help of synthesis, based on the results of the analysis, we can combine the considered elements, which will provide knowledge of the object of study as a whole [7], [8].

Induction, deduction. In the first method, the connection between results and conclusions is not based on any logical law; as a result, the conclusion follows from the assumptions accepted in the study only with a certain probability. The second method is already an inference, when the connection between the results and the conclusion relies only on the law of logic [9].

Results And Discussion

After the decision to temporarily terminate all forms of full-time education at Russian universities from the middle of March 2020, each higher educational institution was faced with an unavoidable task of conducting lectures, practical and other types of classes using distance (digital) methods, for which a significant number of universities were simply not prepared. This, in particular, explained the long (a week or more) pauses in the required instantaneous transition from full-time to distance learning methods for students. The whole pseudo-pyramid of "reportable achievements" collapsed immediately.

First, in the absence in most educational institutions of a set of simple tools and techniques for conducting such classes there were no banks of specially developed software available, nor were there banks of records of basic lectures and courses such as those that were available in the school distance learning system, not to mention the trained staff of professors who were ready and able to conduct their classes remotely.

Second, an unaccounted for problem of a psychological nature was revealed when a certain part of the teaching contingent, delicately termed in the current trend as "65+", although in a particular situation it would be appropriate to lower this digital threshold significantly, simply refused to "retrain". Added to this is the fact that not all institutions of higher education had and have a sufficiently professional staff of programmers and technical consultants who could provide qualified assistance to "teachers-outsiders" in the field of distance learning and work with personal digitalization tools.

The inevitable tension bordering on embarrassment was automatically relieved at such institutions of higher education, but another problem immediately arose: an increase in the teaching load of precisely that portion of the faculty who were ready to replace "self-distancing colleagues" in the current remote pedagogical process. However, this is another topic that goes beyond our generalized observations.

As for methodological and technological support of remote classes, in its absolute majority it was limited to the use of the simplest and most accessible remote conferencing program Microsoft Teams for all (lecture, practical, language etc.) forms of classes, as well as the use of e-mail, already widely used in the current control of extracurricular tasks and operational control of the content side of course and diploma design.

At the same time, regardless of the specific technological means used to con-duct remote classes, another problem stood out in an unexpected way, diagnosed as "administrative and demonstrative syndrome of incompetence," when the leadership of a certain part of universities introduced "draconian measures" for fear of public evaluation of their "professional suitability: all classes, in order to facilitate interuniversity control over teachers ("just in case something went wrong"), were ordered to be conducted only through personal offices, with a strict warning that failure to comply with the circular would be followed by penalties (financial ones). In this case, we are mainly talking about the recently "advanced" in terms of self-praise universities that held numerous pseudo-scientific conferences on "achievements in the digitalization of the educational process".

We do not undertake to state how legitimate such solutions are, noting only that even in such a limited segment of technological possibilities there are problems "on both sides of the computer screen".

It is no secret that many teachers first encountered the possibilities of the "Teams" program, which had been simply unclaimed until now, despite its fantastic capabilities. The truth is that their use, unlike the available software, requires serious financial expenses from universities.

At the same time, a certain part of the lecturers (hereinafter there is only a statement based on the personal experience of the authors, as well as on their sample-representative survey of colleagues from a number of Moscow universities, not claiming to analytical generalization and obtaining certain conclusions on the problems of remote learning technology organization in the system of higher education) at first felt increased physical fatigue from communicating with the audience through the computer screen, as well as the awareness of the ineffectiveness of some traditional forms of control and maintenance of academic discipline by the outdated roll call of those present - the monitor already records the total number of participants in the videoconference.

Regarding the technology of communication between teachers and students submitting specific assignments for review, despite the simpler and faster way of re-marks as they read the texts and view the completed tests, a form of feedback in the body of the letter should be considered more effective, which not only disciplines the student by making him or her work not by automatic editing technology, but by focusing and summarizing remarks with subsequent corrections, but also mobilizes the teacher himself to go more deeply into the heart of the entire work and not to confine himself to individual remarks[10,11].

At the same time, an important consequence of a fairly long process of lessons on remote technology was the identification by teachers of their own methodological flaws and failures, when those or other teaching aids used by students in the absence or limitation of constant live contact, did not provide a full opportunity to conduct fully independent work on the received assignment [12]. This, in turn, will require educators to make the necessary adjustments when republishing existing textbooks and preparing new ones, taking into account the accumulated experience of the "remote classroom" period.

A particularly difficult situation is associated with the distance form of taking tests or examinations, when some erosion of control in any form other than an individual conference mode is inevitable, which leads to unwarranted overrun of the normative time fund, regulating the time of communication between the student and the teacher in any type of control of progress.

On the part of the student body, the forced transition to distance learning did not cause any particular problems or difficulties. Distance learning was conducted through the Microsoft Teams program, where each of the students received a personal account. All lectures and seminars were held on schedule and not only in the form of a monologue by the teachers, but also in the format of conversation, discussion, and even debate. The performance of current course assignments and its delivery also took place electronically, both in front of the entire group, with the broadcast of their own monitor, and in person to the teacher.

One of the advantages of distance learning can be the possibility of direct communication with the teacher at any time, since the program base includes almost all teachers of the institute, and, importantly, it is possible to get a timely response to any questions posed. Also a definite plus is the access to online lectures directly from home or any other place. Students spend an average of 1.5 hours commuting one way, and the ability for professors to teach online classes brings an extra 3 hours of time back into our lives.

Another positive thing is the recording of lectures and seminars, which one can watch or listen to again, and it was especially important for term projects and papers. What someone didn't have time to understand or write down in a lecture before, had to be searched for on the Internet in a pile of useless and incorrect information, and now people can listen to an incomprehensible point as many times as they want, which makes it much easier to prepare for defense, final tests or exams.

However, it should be understood that not all specialties can be trained remotely. For example, it is not possible to train engineers or doctors remotely, especially in their practice. With the help of online lectures it is possible to prepare the theoretical knowledge of students well, but without application in practice this knowledge is worthless, and it is quickly forgotten. Proof of this was the open letter of HSE students who opposed the total transition to the so-called "digital distance learning". The fact is indicative [13].

Also one of the disadvantages is a psychological factor: the student under-stands that it is possible to turn off the camera and just not listen to the lecture material, and the program will simply reflect the presence at the lecture. However, this is also possible in face-to-face classes. Is there a big difference in this regard between face-to-face in a classroom and distance learning? We don't think there is. If a person doesn't want to gain new knowledge and learn, none of the types of training will work for him or her.

As mentioned earlier, there is a problem in passing exams and defending the diploma in distant form. Since there has never been such a precedent, no one under-stands exactly how things should happen. Several options have been voiced, and one of them is assessing students' knowledge with a test form [14].

Summary

To summarize the total experience of the digitalization of the educational pro-cess caused by the epidemiological situation, it should be noted that the computer in the educational process is only a means of communication, not a teaching tool. Otherwise, there is a real danger of not only a decrease (erosion) in the quality of education, but, even worse, the creation of diverse access to knowledge for students. We mean that the possibility of higher education on a "caste basis" is real: there may be a "caste of full-time students," which, from a cost perspective, is much more expensive than training only by remote technology, forming a "caste of virtual students," which is slightly cheaper than the first case, which is unacceptable.

To prove the validity of our reasoning, we refer to the "Agenda 2030" published by the UN in 2006, which discussed the cheapening of education through the widespread introduction of virtual technologies for developing countries. And this document has been heavily criticized in terms of "caste-based quality" of education in rich and poor countries, with all the consequences.

As a result, instead of the criticized language, the fourth goal, on access to education, did not include text on the specifics of full-time and distance forms of education in the final document on the list of Sustainable Development Goals adopted at the anniversary (2015) session of the UN General Assembly [15].

Conclusions

Naturally, our work reflects only the most general aspects encountered on "both sides" of the computer screen that separates the teacher from the student in the remote technology of university classes. But the observed features will undoubtedly become useful for exiting the pandemic and the removal of self-isolation, since "tasting freedom", and in our case - the need (and freedom, according to the well-known classical formula, is a conscious need) of the total introduction of distance education system, higher educational institutions simply cannot fail to use the experience of the real digitalization of the educational process. In this regard, methodological recommendations focused on routine digital operations, as well as materials published in scientific periodicals that summarize such experience can be of great practical help [16-17].

But there is another problem, which, although still far from being a total and radical technological change, should certainly attract the attention of the broader scientific community. It is about the fact that domestic education, faced with the problem of total transition to distance methods and forms of classes, which had been forced by the coronavirus pandemic, was forced to recognize its limitations, which are reduced only to the supporting function of the educational process [18-19].

Acknowledgements

This paper has been supported by the Kazan Federal University Strategic Academic Leadership Program

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