

## Transition To Distance Learning As A Stress Test For Russian Higher Schools And Student Reaction

By

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### Abstract

The abrupt and forced transition to new formats of work and training became a serious challenge for Russian universities, as well as for the entire system of higher education. In this situation, it is important to monitor social and psychological well-being and the level of adaptation to distance learning, both among employees and students. This article offers an analysis of the results of a pilot sociological study using the Internet survey method.

The results of the pilot survey showed that students are generally well informed about the current socio-economic and socio-political situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, most students declare a responsible citizenship and compliance with anti-epidemic measures.

At the same time, many survey participants stated that they faced some difficulties and problems when switching to self-isolation and distance learning. At the same time, a significant part of these difficulties is not only psychological in nature, but also due to different levels of digital technology proficiency, and different levels of software and hardware availability.

It should be emphasized that, although students generally appreciated the level of organization of the University's work on the transition to distance learning, there are also serious shortcomings. In particular, unstable operation of University LMS systems, fragmentation of online resources and means of communication with teachers, etc.

**Keywords:** Distance learning, quarantine, applied research methods, Internet survey.

### Introduction

The transition to distance education due to the COVID-19 pandemic has become a challenge for education systems around the world, including higher schools [1; 2; 3; 4; 5]. In the spring of 2020, in connection with the coronavirus pandemic, Russian universities were transferred to distance learning. Kazan Federal University and Kazan National Research Technological University were no exception. For teachers and students, organize training and communication through the university website, through the electronic library, LMS MOODLE, as well as through e-mail, social networks and instant messengers [6]. The abrupt

and forced transition to new formats of work and education has become a serious challenge for the entire education system in Russia. According to this Ministry of Higher Education and Science of Russia, Valery Falkov said: «The higher system coped with the transition to distance learning largely due to the fact that teachers switched to practical individual work with students. At the same time, we understand that the load on all participants in the educational process has grown» [7].

The work of universities in remote mode continued until the summer holidays - about three months. In some regions and universities of Russia, distance learning was resumed during the fall semester of 2020/2021.

## Methods

The online survey was conducted through Google forms, was opened during March-April 2020 and continued in October-November 2020. Students of 2-4 courses of various specialties answered the questionnaire. A total of 225 people aged 18-23 gave answers, including 130 girls and 95 boys. Some of the questions in the questionnaire concerned the assessment of the situation in the country and in the world as a whole.

We also used the results of two opinion polls. The first was conducted by the All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion (VCIOM) from May 14 to May 16, 2020 (800 school graduates and students were interviewed) [7; 8]. The second survey, conducted by the Russian Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (RANEPA) in conjunction with the Ministry of Higher Education and Science of the Russian Federation, studied the attitude of teachers to distance learning (33,987 teachers and professors were interviewed, or about 15% of the total teaching staff) [9].

## Results and discussion

The problems associated with distance education and the socio-psychological well-being of students and teachers were not ignored by sociologists. In particular, the RANEPA and the Ministry of Higher Education and Science of the Russian Federation conducted a large-scale study of the attitude of teachers to distance education. According to the research results, «teachers are formally loyal to what is happening, they accept the transition to distance education. However, there is a great degree of internal, latent rejection of distance education in all areas of training, regardless of gender, age, social and professional status of the teacher» [9].

Also, this study showed that: 96.2% of teachers personally switched to the distance education format; 91.0% of teachers consider the measures taken in their educational institutions to be sufficient; 87.8% of teachers believe that it is better to conduct classes in their courses in person; 67% of teachers do not agree that the majority of lectures and seminars will be transferred to the online format in a year; 53.2% of teachers have completed online training courses in the last month [9; 10].

According to the VCIOM survey, more than half of the students (53%) rated the level of teaching in the distance format as high or rather high, only 12% of students gave low marks. At the same time, «the majority of students are satisfied with how distance education is organized at their university in the context of the spread of COVID-19. This was reported by 72%, with every fourth reporting an extreme degree of satisfaction - 25%. The fact that the

organization of distance education has been carried out to some extent unsatisfactorily was expressed by 26% of students» [8]. The studies cited above are very interesting and important. Nevertheless, they do not negate the relevance and necessity of operational research on the scale of one university. A similar study was carried out at the Kazan Federal University [11].

Within the framework of the courses «Sociology» and «Organization and Conduct of Applied Sociological Research» the authors carried out a pilot study on the topic «Studying at the University: Expectation vs. Reality in the Transition to Distance Learning». This survey made it possible to realize both research and educational and methodological goals. The educational and methodological goal was to demonstrate to students the diagnostic capabilities of applied sociological research, namely, surveys, to collect operational empirical information. Students were able to get acquainted with the results of the survey in the framework of a special author's lecture devoted to the methods of sociological research [12]. In fact, it was the author's master class on conducting an Internet survey, in which the students themselves took part as respondents. The scientific goal was to assess the attitude and readiness of students to distance learning.

Some of the questions in the questionnaire concerned the assessment of the situation in the country and in the world as a whole. To the question: «How do you think the coronavirus epidemic will affect the world in the future?» the answers were distributed as follows: 59% chose the option «The world will change, but insignificantly»; 16% - «The world will not change, everything will return to its place»; 23% - «The world will change significantly»; 2% chose the «Other» option. An example of the answer «Other»: «The situation with the coronavirus, like a story from a fantastic book about the apocalypse. It is funny and sad. The world will learn a lesson for a while, and later everything will return to the old».

To the question: «If, in your opinion, the world will change, then how?» the answers were distributed as follows: «Distance forms of work and study will take on a more significant scale» - 46%; «There will be a significant decline in production» - 29%; «People will become more distant from each other» - 19%; «Other» - 6%. Answers «other» touched upon such spheres as economics, management and business, medicine, ecology, family.

To the question: «Has your life changed in connection with the coronavirus epidemic?» the answers were distributed as follows: «Yes, it has changed» - 66%; «No, it hasn't changed» - 32%; «Other» - 2%. Explaining their answer, students most often noted the following: «Not globally, if distance learning is considered a change, then yes, it has changed»; «Has changed, but not significantly, I also study, I go out less».

To the question: «Note the changes that have occurred in your life», the students chose the following options: 100% of the respondents switched to distance learning; 55% stopped leaving home. Canceled trips - 46%; left the city - 41%; switched to remote work - 9%; 3% of respondents were forced to go on vacation.

Answers «Other» essentially clarify and concretize the above answer options and relate to plans, trips, events, sports and an active lifestyle, work, communication, etc.: «Many cultural events that I planned to go to have been canceled»; «I began to communicate with people less»; «I have no opportunity to work as before»; «I was forced to leave for my hometown»; «I had to cancel trips, plans»; «We canceled training sessions and a football

tournament, closed the sanatorium where I went to swim»; «There are few services for buying groceries with home delivery».

A projective question in the form of an unfinished sentence «Distance learning for me is ...», clearly demonstrated the ambivalence of students' opinions. More than half of the respondents note the benefits of online education: «... with some adjustments... successful innovation», «maximum convenience and efficiency». But another part of the respondents believes that the distance student has more disadvantages than advantages: «this is not learning».

Students' answers to the open-ended question: «What problems did you encounter after going into quarantine and remote learning?» Approximately 22% of the surveyed students noted that they had no problems. The rest of the answers most often covered several areas, namely: problems related to studies; limitations, opportunities for live communication; restrictions on leaving the house and walking; unstable work of the Internet and Internet resources; violation of the usual mode of life.

The survey of students clearly confirmed the assumption that for all participants in the educational process, quarantine restrictions and the transition to distance learning meant leaving the comfort zone, disrupting the usual rhythm of life and, as a result, serious stress.

Depending on the severity and depth of crisis moods and experiences, all survey participants can, with some degree of convention, be divided into two groups: adapted and anxious.

The group of relatively successfully adapted in general feel normal and calmly perceive the current situation: «It is quite comfortable to be in quarantine at home, given that you can freely go to shops and pharmacies».

The anxious group is painful and critical of the quarantine restrictions. In particular, the following opinions were expressed regarding the study: «Technical problems: there is no fast Internet, the university website is unstable, unstable work of online resources, problems with connecting to webinars, etc.»

Some students experience difficulties in mastering new technologies. Some people don't have the skills to work with MOODLE, webinar platforms, etc. Most note that the volume of independent work and the overall workload have increased significantly. Some of the students felt a lack of online classes. Also, many people note the lack of live communication with teachers.

From the students' answers: «... lack of consultations with teachers on FQW (final qualifying work), coursework, laboratory work. Hence the lack of necessary information and explanations: how to carry out tasks, where to send them for verification, etc.»; «There is no direct contact with the teacher»; «I realized that the topic is easier to master in the real presence of a teacher, it is easier to formulate questions orally»; «In a home environment, it is more difficult to concentrate and not be distracted».

Students' answers to the open-ended question: «What opportunities have opened up in connection with the transition to distance learning?» Approximately 20% of students did not see any potential benefits from switching to distance learning. A significant part of the

surveyed students, namely 59%, noted that they had «more free time», including thanks to savings on travel.

From the students' answers: «There are now opportunities to start learning completely independently, to spend more time with your family, to learn something new, to watch a movie that I haven't been able to watch for a long time, or to do something that I have wanted for a long time»; «You can complete tasks at a convenient time for yourself»; «... That I found time for everything that was not enough time during the normal course of the educational process. Even thoughts appeared - to get the next education by correspondence or part-time».

In the last question, the respondents were asked to give a forecast for the development of the general situation in the country and in the world for the next six months. An analysis of the answers to this question shows that the majority of students, looking into the future, are primarily afraid of economic troubles: economic recession, unemployment, rising prices, as well as a deterioration in the situation with civil and political freedoms («closure of state borders»). At the same time, young people are not very afraid of the continuation of the pandemic: «they will find a vaccine».

The answer to this question divided the respondents into optimists, moderate optimists, pessimists and those who were at a loss. And, despite the somewhat lighter approach shown by the optimists regarding the creation of a vaccine, today, in September 2021, we can state that they were rather right.

## **Conclusions**

The results of this pilot survey showed that students are generally well informed about the current socio-economic and socio-political situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, most students declare a responsible citizenship and compliance with anti-epidemic measures. At the same time, many survey participants stated that they faced problems in the transition to self-isolation and distance learning. At the same time, a significant part of these problems were not only psychological in nature, but were also due to different levels of digital technology skills, and different levels of software and hardware equipment. It should be emphasized that, although students in general highly appreciated the level of organization of the university's work on the transition to distance learning, there are also serious shortcomings. In particular, the unstable operation of university LMS systems, the fragmentation of online resources and means of communication with teachers, etc. Since remote forms of work with students will actively develop in the coming years, the study of the social aspects of distance learning is, of course, of considerable interest.

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