Distance Format in Higher Education for Disabled Students
under the Circumstances of the Pandemic:
A Move Forward or a Step Back?

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Abstract

The intensification of inclusive processes in higher education has resulted in the possibility to educate people with disabilities with diverse disorders at universities in various training programmes. At present higher education is forced to be maintained in conditions of COVID-19 pandemic, which led to a large-scale move to distance learning at universities. The purpose of this study was to define the range of academic problems, which students with disabilities came across while studying at universities and using distance education technologies in the period of pandemic. At the methodological level the study was based on the assumption that during the move of universities to a distance learning mode disabled students will have other difficulties than all other students. To figure out problematic students experience, including those with disabilities, and their attitude towards distance education transition, oral (interview) and written (questionnaires) field enumerations were used as the main methodological tool. The authors have identified a problem area for the implementation of the training process at universities for students with and without disabilities. It was established that problems, which students came across during distance education period during the pandemic, have no significant differences within two given groups of students. The experience, acquired by students from both groups, sets the major directions of implementing the distance learning in inclusive higher education in a post-pandemic period.

Keywords: *higher education, inclusion, students with disabilities.*

1. Introduction

Events of spring 2020 demanded a full transition to distance learning in higher education. Under these circumstances all students faced the restriction of attending the university and acquiring theoretical and practical bases of educational programmes. The survey made among students with disabilities revealed that they felt as they returned back in the past when they were educated at home. There was a question about distance education. Is online format of disabled students professional training a step forward or a step back? What is the future of higher education of disabled people? Will it remain inclusive as we know it or will it change? Let us analyze the specific circumstances the higher education system, including also the inclusive one, came into. Regarding COVID-19 pandemic, research and training activities almost in all world universities were limited by remote access capability, distance technologies were completely put into practice. All university campuses were closed. Higher education institutions might start the academic year still in distance learning format. Almost all countries have similar situation with higher education. World universities faced the question of adapting to the new realities of life. A great number of universities concluded that effective performance in new post-pandemic circumstances depends on organization of work in training facilities, which are mostly enclosed spaces where, taking into consideration large gatherings of students, it seems impossible to avoid physical contact and keep necessary social distance (at about 2 metres). Firstly, higher education institutions will have to reorganize their educational spaces, so that a large number of universities will have a chance to make them inclusive and address the peculiarities of students with special needs. Secondly, it is essential to set up a set of online training sessions to train university staff and all students to work in a new environment established according to new sanitary requirements, conditions and inclusive design implementation. Thirdly, universities will need to implement a monitoring system (for instance, SafeEntry, Health Check) to monitor health status and to regulate entry into educational facilities. Fourthly, face-to-face meetings schedule should be changed and planned for small groups, that means some radical timetable alterations should be introduced. Fifthly, some additional space zoning must be done and there should be some contact tracing on the campus with the help of smartphone apps (for instance, TraceTogethter). Based on the above, it should be stated that when universities return to full-time work, social and educational spaces of higher education institutions will undergo some alterations, and students and teachers

community will have to live and work differently. Higher educational institutions will need to establish some models of professional training and develop mechanisms for rapid transition from one model to another, depending on constantly changing situation. This might be a model of online learning or a model integrating on-site and online education. All these factors determine the emergence of new issues in professional training of people with disabilities within inclusive higher education. New formats of implementing inclusion in higher education must be rethought, it is also essential to adapt educational technologies and design new ones, if necessary; to establish centres supporting students and teachers having problems with adapting to a new educational format within the virtual space of university; to set up a database of methods of using various platforms for productive interaction, services for professional training.

2. Literature review

In society the attitude towards problems of people with disabilities has seen significant changes for the last decade so that it has determined establishing new frameworks in social and educational policies in disability field. Social model of disability dominance [1, 2, 3] leads to a higher degree of disabled people integration into the society. Consequently, the process of searching new ways (studying foreign experience and its adaptation to domestic realities; adaptation of existing technologies and methods, providing a high level of social integration of disabled people, and working out new ones; intensification of civil organizations activities; improving inter-agency, inter-sectoral and inter-institutional cooperation) of solving various problems connected with the development and improvement of socializing process for such a group of people with the assistance of social institutions, including education as well. The key component of socializing disabled people is to ensure their socially useful and successful employment with the help of acquiring professions which are competitive in the modern labour market. Consequently, a great attention is paid to the development and improvement of inclusive higher education for people with disabilities [4, 5, 6, 7], as one of the key elements in long-life inclusive learning, which increases their chances for employment to a greater extent. Getting higher education by such a group of people stands out for one of the most significant conditions for their meaningful participation in the country and society life, their self-realization in their own life, social and professional activities. Thus, inclusion becomes development ideology of modern society and state, contributing to the understanding of disabled people position in society, education system; and inclusive design stands out as a source of creating social and educational space [8, 9, 10]. All these things determine objectives which have been set and are being solved by higher educational institutions while implementing professional training in online format using distance education technologies, online learning [11]. Indeed, applying distance education technologies while training people with disabilities in inclusive higher eduction allows to structure this process as open, available, "limitless" [12]. Consequently, distance learning [13] as an open form of educational process is a condition for implementation of inclusive principles in disabled people professional training. The integration of online learning with traditional off-line learning offers new opportunities for people with disabilities in getting higher education in demanded specialties and their further successful employment, which allows them to implement the concept of independent living [14]. Designing inclusive higher education based on a concept of independent living implies not only getting inclusive higher education but also social inclusion of students with disabilities [15] with the help of creating social and educational environment which carries out a function of compensation and contributes to breaking the barriers, solving problems and improving higher education system drawbacks. All these things lead to successful employment, and as a result, improving social status of disabled people. The extension of independent living concept contributed to the appearance of social design and one of its varieties – inclusive design [16]. The use of inclusive design as a universal one in higher education system will provide perfectly-balanced inclusion and integration of all subjects of professional training process and the surrounding world. It is inclusive design implemented as a universal one in higher education functioning in post pandemic period will become the major mechanism which can provide creation of social and educational university environment, allowing its functioning in new conditions, characterized by a high degree of uncertainty about future. It is incredibly vital for inclusive higher education development, as the aim of disabled students higher education is not only to master a profession but also to acquire skills for adapting to new life conditions, abilities to be a part of the team, communicate, which is mainly achieved when students are at university.

3.Methodology

In study, to get basic pedagogical information, field enumeration was used [17], such as oral (interview) and written (questionnaires) field enumerations. The choice of methods is justified by the

fact that they provide an opportunity to interview a significant number of respondents and allow to get information of how typical these or those phenomena of educational reality are. Field enumeration made it possible to establish common views, students opinions in questions of a rapid transition to remote access format of education implementing distance education technologies under the circumstances of the pandemic. The survey methods used are based on the combinations of questions which are offered to respondents, whose answers are later analyzed by a researcher. Field enumeration, based on a well-planned combinations of questions, allows to justify conditions and tendencies of events and processes in the study with the help a comparatively small number of respondents. As the situation of higher education system functioning under the circumstances of the pandemic has taken place for the first time, the above mentioned survey methods have been chosen on the earliest stage of studying the influence of this situation on the students with disabilities while they have been still trained online. Empirical data obtained were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. Southern Federal University became a base for this research. The choice of this university is justified by the fact that an inclusive system of professional training has been implemented there for about ten years. People with disabilities with diverse disorders are educated at this university in various training programmes. Among all universities in the south of Russia Southern Federal University has the biggest number of students with disabilities educated and trained. Under the circumstances of COVID- 19 pandemic in order to stop the spread of the coronavirus among teachers and students in March 2020 the university, using all its possible resources, made the transition to distance education mode within 5 days. At the end of this period at the university classes, consultative meetings, management and scientific events went on being provided in full according to the academic schedule on the base of Microsoft Teams and other services. For study the list of questionnaire and interview questions was made in Russian, the language of the country, where the survey has taken place. The questionnaire questions were both open and closed, with a comment field. One and half month after the beginning of the distance educational process implementation all university students received an electronic questionnaire. The essential prerequisite was the participation of students with disabilities as well as normotypic students. The respondents were informed that the aim of the study is to examine the problems connected with the large scale move to distance education format at university under the circumstances of the pandemic and to define the frequency of further distance learning technologies usage in inclusive professional training system at university.

4.Results

Distance education as a part of inclusive education must be improved during pandemic and in the post-pandemic period. It should be mentioned that the experience acquired by universities while working in the conditions of preventing the spread of the virus COVID -19 could be of some interest in the post-pandemic period, for instance it could allow to increase the possibility of getting higher education by a larger number of people with disabilities for all nosologies. We carried out the research which was aimed at defining positive and negative effects of full transition of disabled people professional training to remote access format in conditions of inclusive higher education. In the study masters degree candidates from Southern Federal University were interviewed. The interviews were similar for all the students, however, later a division has been made to have two groups of students, one of them is students with disabilities. Comparative analysis of results of obtained data allowed to define peculiarities of distance education at university. According to the results obtained we should mention that adaptation period of disabled students to carry out their activities within professional training at university under the circumstances of distance education turned out to be much shorter. 82% students with disabilities adapted for new conditions within one week. For other students the adaptation period turned out to be significantly longer (from 2 weeks to 3,5 weeks), 71,4 % of these students noticed that adaptation caused some difficulties they could not cope quickly with. It can be explained by the fact that students with disabilities have a more substantial experience in distance learning while 47,6% normotypic students have never had it, and 25,4% have just had some sporadic experience of distance learning. In this regard, a series of educational seminars and workshops, aimed at forming and development of skills of working with content and using educational services and platforms, had to be organized for normotypic students. Answering the question: "Has you workload and time spent on studies changed after the transition to distance education? disabled students (64,2%) answered positive, but noticed that these changes were insignificant. Normotypic students (77,8%) said that the workload and time spent on studies increased significantly. The results thus obtained confirm that students with disabilities already have the experience of organizing their studies in a distance learning format while the others have to include in their schedule additional lessons on

developing skills in designing educational activities using distance education technologies and educational platforms and services. Answering the questions: "Has the frequency of your interaction with teachers increased? Has the quality of this interaction improved?" all students (71,4%) including those with disabilities answered positive. They also noticed that the frequency of interaction increased significantly. Also students of both groups expressed the wish to carry on consultative meetings with their academic advisors, tutors, group and individual mentors online using Microsoft Teams. Both groups noticed that they participated in webinars, networking online conferences more often. That fact broadened the horizons of their possibilities and allowed to participate in events of the world universities. It could also be mentioned that the students increased the level of their virtual international mobility. Also students of both groups remarked that they started doing more online courses both in their native language and in English. Answering the question: "Would you like to carry on your distance education?" all students noticed that they would want to listen to the lectures and have consultative meetings with their teachers online. All students expressed their wish to have practical lessons in face-to-face format. In their answers disabled students noted that different organizations, agencies, businesses are operating online these days, and this fact could cause a demand in specialists with the high level of abilities to realize their professional activities online, thus increasing their chances for further successful employment. At the same time students with disabilities also remarked that they belong to a group of people vulnerable to a coronavirus, which means they are the last to come out of self-isolation and have to continue their distance learning. For many of them it means having a personal learning plan, which implementation poses a number of challenges, especially in practical part of professional training. In their opinion, longer distance learning could also impact the level of forming their skills of building a professional network, thus having a lower degree of socializing and social and professional adaptation.

5.Conclusion

Study of the impact of higher education system transition to distance learning format to prevent the spread of the virus COVID -19 on functioning and development of professional training of disabled people in inclusive environment led to a number of conclusions. Higher education institutions functioning in distance learning format creates new possibilities for getting professional training and further employment for people with disabilities but, on the other hand, it takes them back to previous circumstances of inefficient socializing, low level of social and professional integration. New educational reality bears a tremendous influence on various processes of forming new social habits in the 21st century, including these in the higher education sphere. The difficulty of professional training implementation in conditions of remote access to a greater extent is connected with the lack of experience of all the participants of educational process in higher education, as there has never been such a difficulty throughout the history of Russian and foreign higher education. Certainly, it should be mentioned that using the Internet as means of education is not a new discovery, although the dependence on it in education and even daily activities is unprecedented nowadays. A new virtual world has created a parallel reality, which makes us reassess and review education in general, and inclusive education in particular. Pandemic influence on the ways of transferring knowledge, implementation of education under the circumstances of social distancing determines the creation of new methods of social contacts, new educational technologies; methods of education, characterized by a different level of health protection for working with online content which demands adaptation for disabled people too. Such a full immersion of education system into the Net demands educational practices restructuring, which acquires a new configuration based on the ideas of a wide inclusion, universal inclusive design of social and educational environment, meeting the special needs of all categories of citizens. In conditions of COVID-19 pandemic a new type of education system is being formed – it is a hybrid system, which should have such features as a high availability, adaptivity, openness, mobility, inclusiveness, health protection, including face-to-face and distance learning, and also being able to transform rapidly.

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