



Learning Online in Lockdown. Russian Students' Opinion

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Abstract

For the last decades University educators tried to find the ways to introduce various kinds of online learning and teaching in higher education. Researchers and practical instructors tried to analyze the advantages and drawbacks of these education, to create different tasks and educational trajectories to attract learners and teachers to a wider use of modern information communication technologies in educational environment. In 2019 the situation in the world has changed so greatly, that the higher education had to move online. All seminars, lectures, exams, the presentations of diplomas and graduation thesis had to be held online. All participants of higher educational institutions, namely, managers, instructors, researchers, and, naturally, students faced many challenges in the frames of this new educational reality. Apparently, the main goal of a University is to teach and train students. So, the question of how comfortable they feel under the new imposed conditions, how effective and efficient the education is in lockdown is of primary importance. To settle these questions a survey among the students at Law Institute RUDN University was held. The goal of this paper is to present the output of this survey and make some finding that might be useful for the perspective

Keywords: *Online education, modern challenges, imposed educational environment, lockdown.*

1. Introduction

Since February-March 2020 when the pandemic of COVID19 seized the world, the higher education institutions started a new era of distance learning. The heads of the Universities managed a new educational environment no matter what online platform it started to work at. The RUDN University (Peoples' Friendship University of Russia) realized the education and training on the Microsoft Teams platform. Formally, the online timetable was identical the onsite timetable. It included the same subjects; the time of the classes and seminars was not changed. But as the experience showed the workload increased greatly both on the part of the students and of the instructors.

For years academics and practitioners debated about the pros and cons of the online learning. This year they had an opportunity to scrutinize the advantages and disadvantages of this type of learning. This paper examines the students' opinions on the distance learning.

2. Literature review

Various aspects of education in the COVID 19 environment were the subject of thorough analysis in the papers of the international professional community.

The impact of COVID19 on the national and international Higher Education environment is studied by various institutions such as DAAD [1], Institute of Education in London's Global University [2], American Educational Research Association [3], on the one hand, and, on the other hand, by many researchers e.g. Osler, A., & Stokke, C. [4], Berberich R., & Berberich B. W.[5], Scull J., et al. [6] etc.

The consequence of the pandemic for the national higher education is observed by researchers from different countries e.g. Menon S., S., & Unni M. V. [7], Wilson S., Pallant J., Bednall S., & Gray S.[8], Abdullah, M., Husin, N. A., & Haider, A. [9].

However, the students' opinions on the efficiency of the imposed online learning have not been studied yet. Apparently, the lack of any information on the issue makes the current research quite topical.

3. What students think

The survey of the students was held in two stages, the first stage was carried out in two weeks after the beginning of the remote learning and the second one, in three months, at the end of the semester. The participants of the survey were the undergraduate students and the students studying at Master programs at Law Institute RUDN University.



Originally, the students came from various regions of Russia and many foreign countries such as Vietnam, Iran, China, Kirgizstan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan etc. The number of students interviewed was equal to 50 including 30 at Bachelor's degree level and 20 at Master's Degree Level.

When the period of lockdown started all students were advised to return home and continue their education online. At that moment, that decision was supported by all students due to several reasons: (1) it looked like the extension of the holidays. Everyone hoped that the lockdown would be over in no time and did not expect it would last for three months and a half. In fact, the lockdown in the University lasted till the end of the academic year, the students were not allowed to return to their classrooms and all exams, thesis defense and graduation events were held remotely.

(2) As Moscow occupies a vast territory (about 2,511 square kilometers) whereas Moscow region occupies 44,300 square kilometers [10], usually it takes many students more than an hour to get to the University in rush hours. If case of traffic jams this period can be longer. Apparently, everyone is happy to avoid early waking up and hard way to the University. Among other advantages of online education, the respondents mentioned the ability to have tea or coffee at online classes, more time spent with the family etc.

In June, the second interview was held. This time the students' opinion was not so unanimous. Admitting the obvious pluses of online learning, the respondents focused on its negative aspects e.g. distance learning resulted in a high increase of written papers and various tasks that had to be done for each online session. The students had to spend more time in front of the computer screen and consequently they had headaches and pain in eyes. Moreover, many young people really missed onsite interaction and communication. The internet connection is very poor in some towns and villages where students stayed for the period of lockdown, so during classes the internet disconnections and other technical failures could occur.

The output of the second survey showed that 50% of the respondents learning at Bachelor level of education assessed the efficiency of distance learning as negative, 45% considered it positive and 5% claimed that online and offline education should be interconnected. As far as master students are concerned, two thirds of the students were strongly against distance learning whereas the other part of the students supported the integration of online learning into offline learning.

4. Conclusion

The experience of learning and teaching in the lockdown environment showed that the University management, teaching staff and students coped with the challenge of educating and training under COVID 19. The education was realized in a complete scope. Though it took much extra time and efforts, but the quality of teaching and learning, in particular, foreign languages for specific purposes was almost the same in comparison to the regular teaching and learning. The students participated in the survey mostly expressed their negative opinion to the remote learning. However, they did not mention poor quality of the online education as the main reason for their negative assessment, in most cases they focused of the subjective reasons such as the absence of educational atmosphere and the necessity to overcome the personal laziness that is hard to fight with without a teacher.

Taking into consideration the students' opinions on the imposed online teaching and learning it can be emphasized that, apparently, online education has its pros and cons. But transforming the words from the American serial "The X-Files", it can be said that: "The truth is somewhere in the middle". In the modern educational environment, the online learning has become an integral part of education, it should be incorporated into traditional higher education, enhance its quality and potential.

The academic year 2020/2021 in Russia started on September 1 as usual. However, as the risk to be infected remains quite high, most of the students, namely, the undergraduate students as well as the master students continue studying online. At the end of the summer semester everyone hoped that we could come back to our Universities and continue studying in a regular mode, but our hopes failed. Only the junior students i.e. the first-year students were allowed to attend the University personally. Naturally, they must wear medical masks and special gloves, and furthermore they must follow special regulations of in room behavior.

How do the first-year students feel in an almost deserted University? What do the other students think about their learning after such a long period of isolation and the lack of real communication? These are the issues that can become the subject matter of further research.



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