

# Experience of the Russian Higher Education System's Operating During the Pandemic

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## ABSTRACT

The article presents the experience of the higher education system of the Russian Federation during the global spread of the SARSCOV-2 virus and the related coronavirus disease (Covid-19). Radical changes are described and difficulties of transition to distance learning in the education system are updated. The article considers the results of a large-scale study conducted by expert teams of thirteen universities aimed at assessing and monitoring the emergency situation in which the entire Russian education system found itself. The article analyzes the readiness of teachers and students to switch to distance learning based on the study of the opinions of the university communities, conducted sociological surveys. Various modes of organization of the educational process (correspondence, remote, mixed) are considered. The possibilities and limitations of digital technologies in the educational process of Russian universities in remote mode are shown. The importance of improving computer literacy and developing digital competencies of all participants in educational relations is emphasized.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, distance learning, higher education, digital technologies, monitoring, electronic communication

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In January of 2020, a new SARSCOV-2 coronavirus was detected in China, belonging to the same strain of the virus as SARS. The global spread of the SARSCOV-2 virus and the related coronavirus disease (Covid-19) has forced all countries to adopt important safety standards and reorganize social reality at once. The virus-related disease (classified by the abbreviation COVID-19) is highly contagious and unpredictable in terms of both symptoms and side effects. In a few weeks, Covid-19 spread around the world. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared a pandemic.

The Covid-19 pandemic has revived acute sociological issues such as the perception of global risk and the importance of cultural and communication processes in emergency situations. It also revealed the fragility of some organizational and social systems of health care, education and social protection, which increase the psychological, social and pedagogical problems of people [8; 9].

The COVID-19 emergency, the period of quarantine and social distancing represented a social event of unprecedented global significance in recent history, forcing people to remake and reorganize social reality as they knew it. The world community has undergone radical changes in organizational structures and practices, which have resulted in all human activities being directed towards a common and comprehensive goal: to avoid collapse in the areas of health, education, social and

economic development. As human activity was suspended in many aspects, the family microsystem (home) became a new space for reorganization, supported by technology and digitalization. Home became a safe place for everyone where they can continue to be themselves in all areas of life, from school to work, from communication to leisure [4].

In March-April 2020, all the world's higher education systems faced serious difficulties. Within a few weeks, almost all students switched to a mixed (face-to-face - remote) and entire (remote) training format. Higher education institutions found themselves in a very difficult situation. The problem of ensuring the quality of education became urgent for most countries [1; 3; 6; 7]. There were obstacles to the implementation of the stable model that institutions and universities have been working on for the last decades. To reduce the pandemic, it would be easier to place universities under quarantine. However, all universities, including Russian ones, continued their work. It was decided to help students complete their studies and get an education at any cost. This situation became a "stress test" for the higher education system.

## 2. METHODS OF RESEARCH

The methods of this study were the analysis of domestic and foreign psychological and pedagogical literature, the experience of the higher education system of the Russian Federation during the global spread of the Covid-19 virus.

The opinions of university communities were studied and sociological surveys of students, teachers, heads of institutes and universities were conducted; the real experience of Russian universities was analyzed, and their problem areas were identified. The results of various studies were used: a survey of Russian university students on distance learning (first wave - end of March: 10,983 people; second wave - end of May: 24,428 people); a survey of Russian university teachers (33,987 people) [11].

### 3. RESULTS OF THE STUDY

On March 14, 2020, the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation recommended that universities, when implementing educational programs, provide for the organization of contact work of students and teachers only in the electronic information and educational environment. By March 23, more than 80% of Russian universities had switched to working remotely. The Ministry of Education and Science refused to regulate the work of all universities during the pandemic, pointing out the importance of initiative activities of specific universities depending on regional conditions [2]. By granting independence to universities, the Ministry of Education and Science increased the transparency of the higher education system by monitoring the activities of universities in the context of the pandemic. In response to requests from universities, the Ministry expanded access to the Internet for universities (Rostelecom).

The Ministry stimulated the active position of leading universities that already had extensive experience in working in a remote format. Universities with rich experience in building online learning have become centers of expertise for the entire higher education system (they conducted online consultations on the transfer of training to remote mode). The analysis of statistical data showed that more than 200 universities in the country have opened social networks (both for their teachers and for teachers of other universities) services for the use of distance technologies (digital libraries, online education platforms). The best educational practices were actively exchanged. Leading universities in the country worked to coordinate activities in solving common problems. The system of monitoring, collecting and open discussion of data was actively used.

Russian universities were given a difficult task - to maintain their previous efficiency (to implement more than 1,000,000 academic disciplines, including lectures and practical classes). Most of the training courses were completed on time and were not rescheduled for later semesters. Complete suspension of education was an exception to the rule, but, unfortunately, in some Russian universities it was observed.

A million students and tens of thousands of teachers had to switch to the remote work format. This significantly improved the effectiveness of measures that should prevent the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. Most universities were able to restructure their activities; they kept students engaged in the educational process - students

completed academic tasks and made projects, actively interacting with teachers.

During the period of remote work there were several modes of organization of the educational process:

- correspondence (students' studying educational material at any time convenient for them);
- remote, real-time (simultaneous participation in a lecture or practical session of the teacher and students in the webinar format);
- mixed (alternating correspondence and remote training, depending on the set pedagogical tasks).

Different modes of organization of the educational process reflected the differentiation of the Russian higher education system in the context of the pandemic. Unfortunately, many universities immediately transferred most of their students to correspondence training. Insufficient development of digital technologies in a number of universities created difficulties for the transition to the remote work format [5].

Unfortunately, some Russian universities do not meet modern requirements in the field of organization and management of the educational process.

The experience of a number of universities working remotely has shown not only the possibilities of digital technologies, but also their serious limitations. Effective use of information technologies requires special competencies of teachers and students, specific organization of the educational space. Without this, it is impossible to talk about full-fledged effective training in the online format.

Full implementation of higher education programs in the remote format is almost impossible. A number of important aspects of the university's life are not easily digitized. Most modern researchers see the future of higher education in the widespread use of information and digital technologies and distance learning, combined with productive interaction between teachers and students in the general educational flow.

It is the awareness of new opportunities that will allow us to take a new step towards enhancing the competitiveness of higher education in Russia.

### 4. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

It was especially difficult for teachers to transfer educational activities into a remote format. This transition took place not at the beginning of the semester, but in the middle of it (in March-April). Teachers in general tried to mobilize all their forces to work in the new conditions.

In the first weeks of the pandemic, there was a lack of awareness about available resources and operating modes. It was revealed that many teachers do not have modern methodological and technological tools for organizing high-quality remote training. According to the monitoring, after two months, 36% of teachers completed various advanced training courses and improved their competence to conduct classes in an online format. About 20% of faculty members are at risk for coronavirus (over 65 years of age). Most of the teachers, working from home,

experienced social and psychological difficulties. 65% of teachers working in a remote (online) format noted difficulties in retaining students' attention and involvement. They believe that conducting classes remotely does not allow them to control the activity of students in the classroom.

More than 70% of the teaching staff are afraid of dishonesty among students during exams, which is much more difficult to notice and control in a remote format [2].

The leading universities of the country created a system to support the activities of teachers. 60% of higher education institutions developed special websites / sections of official university websites to inform and assist teachers promptly in the current mode. Some universities launched programs of methodological assistance for teachers. A number of teachers used the websites of these universities. The most active of them shared their experience through social networks and held webinars. Only some universities (Moscow City University, the Herzen Russian State Pedagogical University, etc.) organized the shooting of author's video lectures of 2 to 8 hours promptly, which were then posted on the website of the educational institution for internal use, as well as for teachers and students of other universities. 19% of the teaching staff had problems with the necessary technical equipment.

For millions of Russian students, distance learning became a reality. Unlike teachers, the issue of digital competencies was not so acute for them. For universities, the most difficult and urgent task was to inform students about new formats and ways of productive communication in the process of distance learning. Unfortunately, 15% of universities did not have a system of electronic communication with students. There was no clear information about changes in the schedule, as a result of which students "dropped out" of the educational process.

A large number of students were unaware of the new requirements for the test and examination session, how it will be held in a remote format. Unfortunately, only 50% of the respondents were informed about the formats and dates of tests and exams. 40% were not informed about the organization and conduct of the defense of the final qualifying work. Due to the fact that conducting the SAC (State Attestation Commission) in a remote format takes a significant amount of time, many universities canceled the state exam in the training profile in the summer. Students and undergraduates defended only the final qualifying works. Thus, the workload of teachers and students was reduced during this difficult time.

In some areas of higher education, there was a high percentage of students with negative distance learning experiences. A large number of students who are not satisfied with distance learning were noted in such areas of training as technical sciences, medicine and art.

The format of verbal and non-verbal communication of all participants in the educational process (teachers and students) changed gradually. More than 40% of students believe that the main difficulty of organizing remote training is the lack of real (face-to-face) communication with teachers and fellow students. A third of students experience discomfort from teachers' asking to turn on the

webcam. 35% of students find it difficult to ask the teacher questions online.

More than 40% of students believe that the implementation of distance learning increased the academic load significantly, which is primarily associated with a significant increase in the share of test papers and independent work.

A positive aspect was the fact that many universities recorded a gradual increase in attendance at lectures and practical classes. In general, students, unlike teachers, emphasize the positive experience of distance learning. 34% of students consider the remote format to be more effective than face-to-face attendance. Positive aspects of distance learning are associated with an increase in sleep time (55%), a decrease in fatigue from studying (64%), and the having additional free time (49%) [2].

Unfortunately, differences in the social status of students and economic opportunities for access to higher education have become more apparent.

## 5. CONCLUSION

- At the current stage of higher education development in the Russian Federation, it is extremely important to introduce modern technologies and new training formats. It is not a question of replacing traditional approaches completely; it is necessary to introduce digital technologies that will improve the efficiency and quality of the existing formats.
- Unfortunately, the transition to a full remote work format often creates a negative basis for the introduction of innovative formats and modern digital technologies into the educational process.
- Large-scale training courses for the professional development and methodological competence of the teaching staff of all Russian universities are needed in order to improve their mobility.
- It is necessary to create a system of motivation and encouragement for the part of teachers who actively design and implement innovative educational and digital practices.
- Currently, there is an urgent need to create flexible educational paths for students and a variety of variable forms of education.
- It is important to give students the opportunity to increase the standard terms of study at different rates of development of educational programs.
- It is necessary to develop new formats of independent work of students, as well as modern methods of its pedagogical assistance.
- For first-year students, it is advisable to develop and conduct special adaptation courses in order to master new information and digital technologies in educational activities and teach them the basics of self-organization in education.

Thus, the six-month experience of 2020 has demonstrated the broad possibilities of using all aspects of remote work to solve both traditional and new tasks of universities. In most cases, the transition to a remote format of work is the

most important factor in the successful adaptation of universities to changing conditions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has given us the opportunity to rethink not only new digital, online, and pedagogical opportunities, but also the main goals of education, and how a renewed vision of education can be used to develop more democratic and fair societies [10].

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