

Sociocultural Factors Influencing the Quality of Distance Learning

Yulia Nadtochiy^{1,2,*}

¹ *Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation, Moscow, Russia*

² *Moscow University of Industry and Finance "Synergy", Moscow, Russia*

*Corresponding author. Email: Yflnjxbq-7e@yandex.ru

ABSTRACT

Distance learning, e-learning in particular, started to gain growing popularity even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Numerous training courses and training events have been designed and conducted both remotely and online. Since distance learning has become such a necessity, research that focuses on public opinions regarding the possibility of receiving quality education by means of distance learning is currently of special interest. The present article discusses the factors influencing the quality of distance learning, especially the external factors (social and cultural ones), and the internal factor of motivation for distance learning. As before, people have ambivalent attitudes towards distance learning: some recognize and trust it, while others are opposed to receiving education in such a way. This difference of opinions leads to the development of blended learning which combines traditional and distance learning.

Keywords: *Distance learning, Education, Education quality, Factors, Blended learning.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The modern society is characterized by sufficiently high rates of development: new areas of the economy are emerging and requirements for employees are changing, thereby affecting the requirements for graduates of educational institutions. According to Western scientists, at the current pace of scientific and technological development, most workers have to change their line of work and qualifications at least 4 - 5 times during their working life in order to meet requirements.

The Global Education Futures Report "Educational Ecosystems for Societal Transformations" outlines megatrends that shape future in general, and the future of education, in particular. They include digitalization, automation, transformation of social institutions, demographic shifts, and transition towards sustainable societies. In accordance with the indicated megatrends, new following emerging spheres (sectors) of economy

are identified [1]:

- "New" technological sectors;
- Human-centered services;
- Virtual economies;
- Knowledge creation sector;
- Eco-regenerative economy.

One of the key ideas in the report "*Russia in a New Era: the Choice of National Development Priorities and Goals*" by Ya.I. Kuzminov is transformation of modern education as one of economic areas. The report identifies three focus areas for the advancement of education [2]:

- providing accessible lifelong learning;
- preventing and correcting academic underachievement;
- ensuring accessible and quality higher and secondary vocational education according to modern requirements.

Additionally, the report emphasizes the need to design an effective system of supplementary education and to promote the system of lifelong

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education for adults, and lists the prerequisites for improving the quality of education [2]:

- digitalization of educational institutions, creation of a domestic network of accessible technologies;
- providing educational institutions with the necessary material and technical resources;
- enhancing the legislative foundations in accordance with the existing needs, and improving the regulatory framework;
- creating the necessary conditions and environment (regulatory and institutional) for the implementation of educational programmes;
- targeted financing of programmes aimed at improving the quality of educational institutions, etc.

These days, with the context of lifelong education, information overload is becoming a serious issue. Due to this, the following questions regarding information are to be answered: how to get the required information, and how to reduce or avoid irrelevant or redundant information.

Other expected concerns are related to finding the time for learning, and studying without disrupting one's employment. This is where distance learning comes to the aid.

This form of education turned out to be an indispensable, forced measure in the conditions of the COVID-19 breakout.

In connection with the above, the issues of the quality of distance education and motivation for this mode of study are becoming particularly relevant.

1.1 Theoretical Aspects

Presently, the concepts of "distance learning" and "online learning" are frequently used interchangeably. However, distance learning is considered to be a broader concept: it is learning remotely and not necessarily in real-time mode, while online learning implies using the Internet connection here and now, and is just one of the ways of distance learning.

Distance learning is an educational technology which gives any person regardless of their place of residence the opportunity to do a course at any

college or university (any vocational or higher educational institution). There is a set of modern information technologies to ensure this goal, including textbooks and other printed material, sharing learning materials by means of telecommunications, videos, discussions and seminars conducted online, videoconferences, etc. Such a training mode provides students with the opportunity to choose the place and time for studying, and to study without disrupting their employment, which is especially relevant for those living in remote areas. Moreover, distance learning gives freedom to choose disciplines, and the opportunity to communicate with prominent representatives of science, education and culture; it contributes to interaction between students and teachers, independent work, and satisfaction of students' needs for self-education [3].

Online learning, as opposed to distance learning, is learning by means of the Internet in real-time mode.

1.2 Current State of the Research Subject

Current research into distance and online education is varied and covers different aspects of the research subject, some of which are discussed below.

As mentioned earlier, one of the key issues of distance learning is its quality. In this regard, the statement of V.N. Falkov, the Minister of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation, is of interest. He admitted that the quality of distance education in Russia in general is worse than the quality of classroom, or in-person learning: "Yes, the quality of distance education differs from the quality of in-person education, because face-to-face communication is one thing, while online communication is quite another. Nevertheless, it is a forced measure" (quote from RIA Novosti) [4].

Table 1. Factors influencing the quality of education

Internal factors	External factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • global • governmental • economic • political • social • cultural • legal • demographic • psychological • technological 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • purpose and strategy of education • responsibility and commitment from senior management (administration of an educational institution) • content of education (including educational programmes) • quality management system of an educational institution • working and learning conditions • focus on the quality of training of personnel and students • motivation of students, teachers and other personnel categories of an educational institution • educational, methodological, informational, material and technical support • the level of training of the teaching staff and other employees of an educational institution • the level of training of applicants and students • organization of studies (means, methods, teaching technologies, etc.) • psychological climate in the labour collective and student groups

It is essential to consider the factors influencing the quality of education. In general, they can be divided into two large groups: external and internal factors ("Table 1"). These groups of factors are important for traditional (offline), distance (online), and blended (offline and online) learning.

As shown in "Table 1", the group of external factors includes social and cultural factors.

Social factors are mainly associated with satisfaction of the public needs in terms of education, and the demand for quality education and training. Cultural factors in their turn are related with the need for higher education, and the connection between culture and the level of education in the country.

Sometimes these two groups are combined and considered as one group of socio-cultural factors which involves public perceptions of the impact that the changes in the education system have on our daily life, and addressing emerging social issues.

However, the factors affecting the quality of education have their specific features which are reflected in different education modes.

Internal factors that determine the quality of distance learning (including online learning) are listed below:

- the policy of the educational institution;
- the level of teachers' competence in the digital learning environment;

- appropriate resourcing (financial, personnel, material and technical, etc.);
- the level of organization of the distance learning process;
- the quality of teaching and learning materials (digital resources);
- individualization of education;
- no negative impact on the students' health.

Another significant internal factor that influences the quality of distance learning is motivation of both teachers and students. Student motivation is their desire to study, complete a course, receive higher education in a distance mode, undergo retraining or advanced training, etc. depending on their preferences, willingness to learn in in such a way, their abilities, and resources (financial and temporary), etc.

It should be highlighted that the extraordinary situation which is due to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in the world has changed the distribution of training formats. According to the "Pulse EduTech" educational technologies market review conducted by Sberbank Corporate University, 57% of companies support the format of blended learning, whereas 54% recognize in-person, face-to-face training as one of the best formats for carrying out major training programmes ("Figure 1") [5].

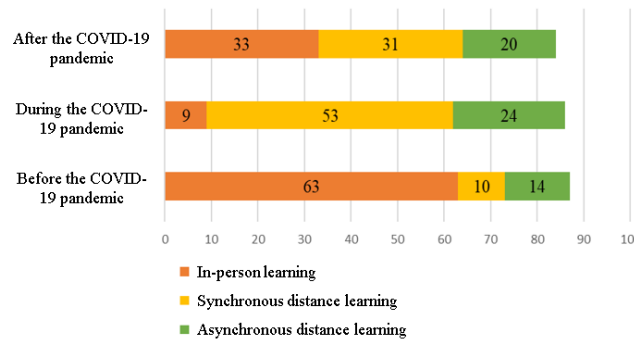


Figure 1 Distribution of educational formats (based on the report "2021 Trends: Learning and Development in a COVID World" by The Ken Blanchard Companies (<https://resources.kenblanchard.com/ebooks/2021-trends-report>))

Generally, there exists a steady trend for online education development (online educational institutions, schools, etc.), and experts see considerable potential in the development of online education in all market segments. The number of people who want to change careers and do it online has increased significantly. One of the most popular training areas nowadays is business skills training.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

In order to seek out public opinion on the issue of distance learning in higher education, a series of surveys was conducted. For the purpose of comparison, the results of a 2006 survey (190 people interviewed) and a 2019 one (180 people interviewed) were analysed in order to identify people's attitudes towards this form of education before the pandemic, and the results of a 2021

survey (164 people interviewed) aimed at studying students' motivation for distance learning (when transition to this form of training was a forced measure).

3. RESULTS

The results of a survey of intramural and extramural students (140 and 50 people respectively) conducted in 2006 show that the overwhelming majority of respondents (94.6%) would refuse to receive education in a distance mode because of the lack of direct interaction with teachers and other students ("Figure 2"). However, according to those interviewed, the benefits of distance learning include saving time for education, as it appears possible to combine work and studies [6].

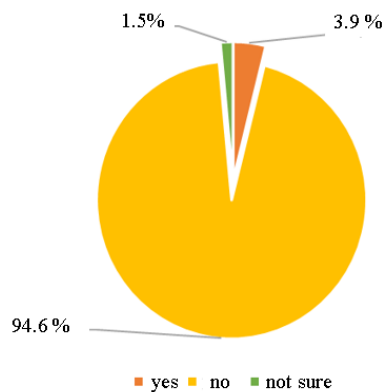


Figure 2 Responses to the question "Would you like to receive education through distance learning?".

The extensive survey of 2019 covered not only schoolchildren and students but also working and

retired people representing different areas of employment (teachers, doctors, engineers, etc.), and

working students - 180 people aged 16 to 68, in total.

One of the questions asked in the survey was aimed at identifying the attitude of interviewees to distance learning. There was a very wide range of opinions given, so the author of this article presents only the ones that were given over 8% of votes ("Figure 3").

Half of those surveyed (51.1%) are convinced that studying is more interesting and engaging

provided there is direct communication when acquiring knowledge and skills. It encourages exchanging opinions, mutual learning, obtaining a qualified teacher' opinion, etc. 48.3% of respondents indicate that distance learning should be used as a supplement to in-person, classroom learning. This point is of interest, taking into account the fact that most people these days do not communicate directly much, they communicate with others mainly without distracting from their gadgets, in the classroom environment in particular.

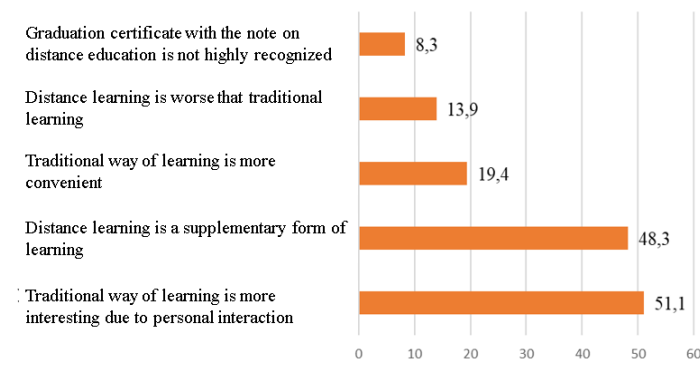


Figure 3 Responses to the question "What is your attitude towards distance learning (online learning)?" (as percentage of those questioned).

The next question was related to choosing the option of distance learning ("Figure 4").

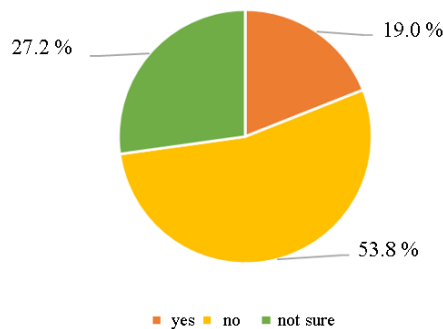


Figure 4 Responses to the question "Would you like to study in a distance mode?".

More than a half of the survey participants answered negatively (53.8%). However, it can be noted that the number of people not considering the option of online learning or distance learning has significantly reduced, as compared to the results of the 2006 survey.

Some responses, both positive and negative, and the author's comments are listed below:

- Yes, because it is convenient to combine with work;
- I consider it only as an option for advanced training;
- No, since it is just a formality;
- Yes, because I do not have to waste time commuting;
- Yes, it is convenient;

- Only in exceptional situations, as I find self-organization difficult;
- No, I want to learn in a group;
- No, I need emotional contact with the teacher.

The two most common answers to the question "What would you like to study online?" were

studying foreign languages and improving qualification.

When asked to choose educational services that can be implemented by means of distance learning ("Figure 5"), the majority mentioned creating separate distance learning courses for students (60.3%).

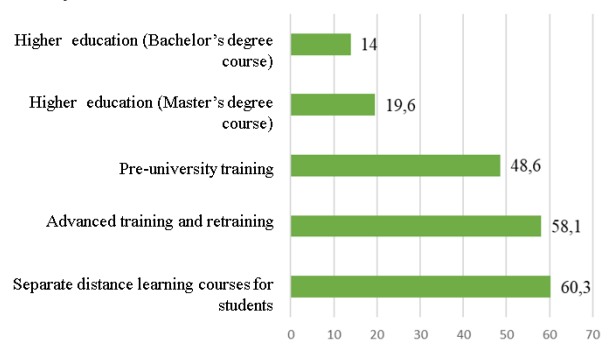


Figure 5 Responses to the question "What educational services, in your opinion, can be implemented by means of distance learning?" (as percentage of those questioned).

When determining the effectiveness of distance learning or online learning, opinions divided ("Figure 6"), but most people assessed it as average (42.6%).

The last question of the survey was about using distance learning as part of blended learning in educational institutions, and the responses showed that 68.2% of respondents support this idea ("Figure 7").

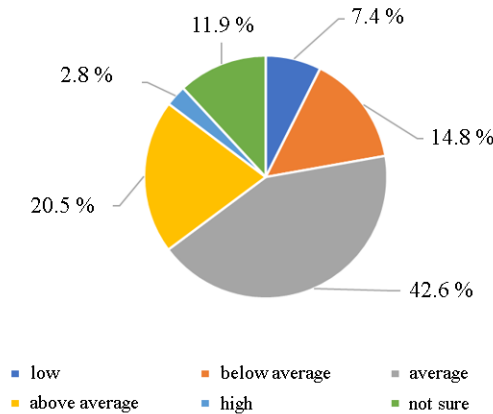


Figure 6 Responses to the question concerning the effectiveness of distance learning.

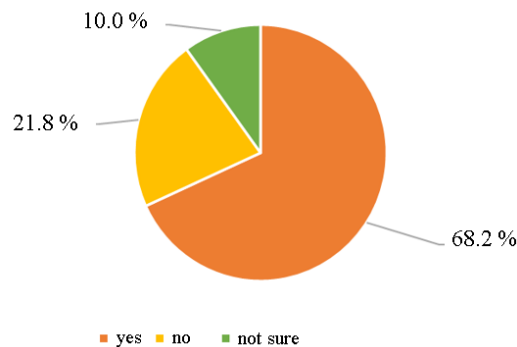


Figure 7 Responses to the question "Do you support the idea of introducing distance learning into the educational process in higher education institutions, along with the traditional form of education?".

The answers to this question show that the participants in the 2019 survey expected the further development and spread of distance learning, even though the survey was conducted at the very beginning of the year.

4. DISCUSSION

The most important thing that many people find confusing about distance learning as the main form of education is a significant proportion of self-studying. Self-studying (including students' independent work) is an essential component of intramural education as well; however, its proportion is much less than when studying in a distance mode or online.

Therefore, a key aspect of distance learning is motivation, including motivation for self-studying, as it can be rather challenging to force oneself to learn. In essence, distance learning is mainly self-studying supplemented with teacher's feedback, which helps a student to control how much they have managed to learn, and how well they have studied the discipline or some learning material, etc.

In the current situation of the transition to distance learning, special attention should be given to the results of an extensive survey conducted in 2020 by the Ministry of Education and Science of Russia in cooperation with the Institute of Social Analysis and Forecasting of the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (RANEPA), and teachers of educational institutions. The research was focused on the development of the online environment amid the COVID-19 pandemic and involved 58,612

teachers assessing their attitude to distance education and the associated changes in their professional activity and personal life. After selection, 33,987 teachers were interviewed, which makes up about 15% of the entire teaching staff. The following data about the reasons for rejection of distance learning was obtained [7]: 87.8% of respondents believe that it is better to teach classes in their academic subjects in the traditional, face-to-face format; 85.7% say that the transition to the distance learning has significantly reduced the amount of their free time; 66% have a negative attitude to working from home; and 34% complain about uncomfortable home offices, not suitable for conducting classes.

The survey aimed at studying motivation for distance learning was conducted in 2021 (with 164 students of Synergy University, and the Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation taking part). According to its results, 39% mention knowledge acquisition as a motivating factor; for 31% it is acquisition of skills and abilities; 57.9% are motivated by the opportunity to save time on commuting to an educational institution; 55.5% appreciate a comfortable home environment; while 50% - find a free study schedule motivating. Only 15.2% of respondents indicated their lack of motivation for distance learning ("Figure 8").

The presented article outlines just some of the main factors that influence the quality of distance learning. As this sphere of education is developing and modernizing, these factors and their significance may change.

It should also be noted that, before the COVID-19 pandemic, there existed an opinion that online learning is for people with low incomes, because

only wealthy people can afford in-person, intramural education [8].

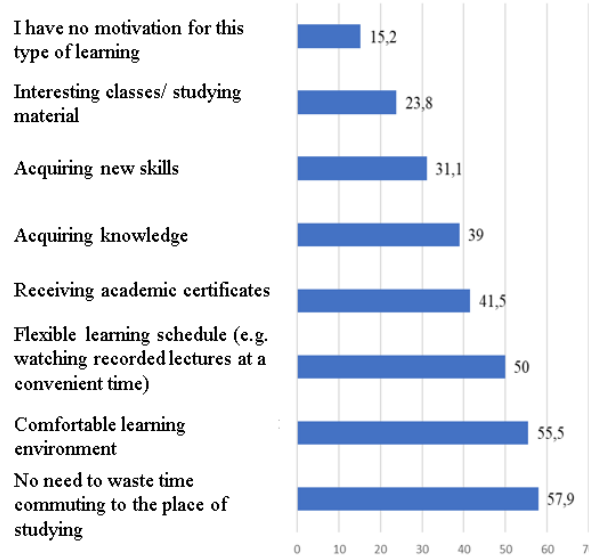


Figure 8 Responses to the question "What motivates you to for distance learning?" (as percentage of those questioned).

The experience of organizing distance learning allows identifying a number of acute problems affecting its quality, both general and specific, and providing options for addressing them [6].

The most significant problems for students include readiness, responsibility and motivation for self-studying; allocating one's own time (this one is connected with the challenge of combining work and studies); and limited opportunities for studying certain disciplines independently. To some extent, the problems mentioned above can be solved by teachers arranging individual consulting sessions for students as and when needed and providing them with the opportunity to attend lectures and practical classes together with intramural students.

The question of teachers' readiness to participate in the educational process using distance learning also requires special attention. Teachers encounter certain difficulties, namely: the difficulties of student identification, coursework supervision, checking and marking homework (essays, laboratory works, etc.), etc. It is possible to overcome these difficulties by introducing a requirement for students to use a digital signature when submitting completed homework to teachers.

From a psychological point of view, there exists a semantic barrier. Even if instructions and guidelines are clear, students may keep asking for clarification because of the fear of doing the work incorrectly or inaccurately, etc.

Currently, there is a lot of research devoted to identifying the advantages and disadvantages of distance learning. Nevertheless, there is no common opinion yet: each person determines for the pros and cons of distance learning themselves.

More and more people are already considering the possibility of distance learning, and in the future this number is expected to increase.

The most promising type of learning at the moment is blended learning, a combination of offline and online learning, which makes the educational process more effective and interesting due to the advantages of both of these two different forms of learning [9].

5. CONCLUSION

From the author's perspective, online learning or distance learning should only be used as a supplementary educational form. The areas and disciplines should be appropriate for studying and

mastering through online courses. In technical areas, for instance, some subjects and disciplines are impossible to master remotely. This is why their curricula incorporate laboratory and other works, etc. which are to be performed under the guidance of a knowledgeable and experienced teacher. Even virtual reality cannot provide a deep insight into a certain field of activity, so people have to experience it themselves.

Judging by personal distance learning experience, the author of the present article considers blended learning as the most beneficial form of education. It is very difficult to comprehensively cover the learning material on one's own, and to decide on the correct interpretation of concepts and approaches to solving certain problems within the topic under study. The issue that comes to the forefront in this regard is professionalism and the level of competence of a teacher in in-person learning: if they are not competent enough, online training may appear to be more effective [10].

Although online learning is expected to develop and improve in the near future, it is unlikely to fully replace offline, in-person learning, which has been confirmed by the results of conducted studies and surveys.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This article is independently completed by Yulia Nadtochiy.

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