

ISCKMC 2020**International Scientific Congress «KNOWLEDGE, MAN AND CIVILIZATION»****HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF NEW SOCIAL
REALITY**

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Abstract

The purpose of our research was to study the practice of the organization of educational, research and volunteer activities of higher educational institutions during the pandemic and to develop solutions based on the results of the generalization of university experience. For us it was relevant to analyze the process of complete replacement of the traditional format of education with distance learning. In particular, we analyzed the activity of the use of electronic educational resources offered by universities by students, the impact of the change in the traditional system of university education on not only educational activities, but also on the process of internationalization, research and social activities. The leading research methods were theoretical analysis, review of scientific literature and information of Internet resources, comparative analysis and interpretation of the results of the study. In our research, we found that in general many higher education institutions were able to provide seamless online learning. It was found that today internationalization, international research of scientific teams to study global problems and volunteer activities are more relevant than ever. The practical relevance of the research is in the use of the results and research materials in the organization of higher education.

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Keywords: Distant education, online learning, offline learning, university environment, international mobility, research work



1. Introduction

The transformation of university education in the era of globalization is reflected in the form of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC). The characteristic features of MOOC are the provision of the mass and accessibility of higher education, the increase in the body of students differing in age, occupation and social status, open international competition from leading global universities and the growing pace of internationalization. According to statistical reports, the number of enrolled in online courses is growing exponentially. In 2017, nearly 800 universities developed 9,400 courses for students. The number of students on Coursera alone has grown to 30 million and online courses has increased to 2,700 (Sun & Jiang, 2015; Shah, 2017). Already in 2018, Coursera cooperates with 149 universities around the world. The total number of online course listeners reaches 81 million.

The advent of MOOC in the educational space showed that university education is developing, combining the classic traditions of higher education and breakthrough digital innovations. This very flexibility of the programs and technologies of higher education allowed universities to continue the educational process in the face of a dramatically changed scenario and a massive transition to distance learning during the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. A number of research materials have already been published on the problems caused by COVID-19 and its direct or indirect impact on every member of society and all social groups around the world (Liu et al., 2020; Brooks et al., 2020).

2. Problem Statement

The issues of the modernization of higher education through the introduction of modern educational technologies are of great interest in political, scientific and pedagogical circles. Moreover, they are the subject of active scientific developments in recent decades. In the context of a pandemic, the analysis of the specifics and experience of the organization of educational activities of higher education in the forced massive transition to a distant learning format is extremely acute and relevant problem.

3. Research Questions

The entire range of research issues can be divided into three main sections:

1. What problems did students experience in the implementation of educational programs in the context of the transition to digital technologies?
2. What challenges determine the strategy for the development of internationalization of education and international research after the pandemic?
3. How is volunteer activity of students organized in times of crisis?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the research is to study the practice of the organization of educational, research and volunteer activities of higher educational institutions in the context of a pandemic and develop solutions based on the results of the generalization of the experience of universities.

5. Research Methods

During the study, the authors used theoretical (analysis, synthesis, generalization) methods. In addition, the following methods were used: a systematic approach, which allows considering online learning together with its internal and external relations, and an integrated approach that ensures the quality of this form of education.

6. Findings

6.1. Online learning

The coronavirus pandemic accelerated the process of the mastering and scaling a new learning format due to the closure of educational institutions. As of April 1, 2020, the number of pupils and students being in lockdown reached 1.598 billion in 194 countries. Online learning, which turned out to be the only means of communication and the format of the educational process, motivated teachers and students to a hard transition from a real environment to a virtual one and active mastering or improvement of IT skills.

The majority of higher educational institutions managed to switch to online education without significant problems, although at the local level there were certain difficulties associated with a number of universities with uninterrupted Internet connection of students and teachers from their locations, especially those living in remote rural areas (Wang & Zhao, 2020). The lack of technical means that meet the requirements of the educational resources of universities among students from low-income families (where the only available gadget for online learning is mobile phone) and the unpreparedness of the relevant structures for the increased channel loads resulted in unequal access to the development of educational programs (Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Demuyakor, 2020; Kapasia et al., 2020; Owusu-Fordjour et al., 2020; Sahu, 2020).

The attempts of students to solve technical problems and keep contact with a teacher via a phone with simple functionality or such social networks as VKontakte, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Skype, face chat, etc. characterize a situational solution to the problem. In the future, universities will need to provide them with technical equipment in order to preserve the body of students, provide payment and simplify the mechanism of access to the Internet. The presence of such inequalities in the position of students will cause a decrease in the quality of mastering the educational material and difficulties in studying the next modules of a discipline.

In the research, the main purpose of which was to analyze the attitude of students to various forms of online learning after the cancellation of face-to-face classes in educational institutions, it was noted that the most common forms of online lectures were video conferencing in real time, email distribution of presentations to students, recording of videos, online chatting and the rarest form was audio recording (Aristovnik et al., 2020).

According to a number of similar studies the unexpected loss of live social and physical contacts, the rejection of the usual way of life and the universally adopted strict measures of distance were the reasons for negative emotions in students (Cao et al., 2020; Brooks et al., 2020; Elmer et al., 2020). The pandemic closed all the doors of the socio-cultural sites and placed them in a closed space.

Students were isolated in a wide variety of geographic locations and they were physically, socially and emotionally in unequal safety conditions. This inequality of provisions led to the decrease in the quality of summer examination of some students, dissatisfaction with the educational process in remote mode, deprivation or reduction of the amount of scholarships – the only income of a significant part of student body. Moreover, it is necessary to take into account such an important point as the psycho-emotional state of students in any scenario of the conditions for the organization of the educational process in new academic year.

6.2. Challenges of internationalization of higher education

In the context of a pandemic, such key areas of modern education of the 21st century as student mobility, internationalization, international research collaboration on global problems are under threat, although international cooperation is now more relevant than ever.

According to the materials of the Dutch platform Studyporals, in mid-April, almost 40 % of mobile students searched for educational programs in online format. As a result, there is a logical question – will international mobility remotely be able to fulfill the assigned tasks if the pandemic continues? Perhaps student mobility will become less stable, less widespread, which will provoke the increase in competition between universities for attraction of foreign students. For foreign applicants, the fundamentally important criteria in choosing a university will be safety, tuition fees, social support and the ability to choose offline or online education.

The forced measures of quarantine, isolation and work remotely made serious adjustments in scientific research. At the initial stage, international scientific experiments, business trips, laboratory and test work were temporarily stopped or not carried out at the proper level due to limited access to equipment, including unique scientific equipment. Scientific and practical conferences, forums and workshops also changed their traditional format to online. Some of them were completely canceled or limited to the issue of a collection of conference materials. The new practice of scientific conferences in online format proved the possibility of coverage of the largest number of participants and representatives of different scientific interests, which increased the range and depth of discussion and solution of problems, taking into account openness, publicity and relevance.

It took some time, but with the extension of the pandemic threat in the world, international scientific groups resumed their research activities. Many of global leading universities focused their research projects and applied developments on Covid-19, directing them to combat the pandemic. Scientific conferences in their turn focused on the exchange of experiences on the fight against crisis.

The pandemic resulted in the emergence of unified platforms with unique data and experimental materials, open expertise, access to publications of authoritative scientific groups and library funds of the world's leading universities. For the first time in the world, scientific data has become open to all specialists interested in the problems of Covid-19 research. The universities in the regions act as large “brain centers” for taking specific anti-crisis measures.

In order to delay the spread of the virus due to the closure of educational institutions, a number of universities were forced to direct all efforts only to the organization of remote educational process.

6.3. Volunteering is a social mission of universities

Clinics at universities, doctors – teachers of many universities, students who became volunteers provided great help in the fight against coronavirus. Students of Russian universities also became a part of the volunteer movement, organizing large-scale volunteer activities. The most widespread types of volunteer activity are delivery of food, medicine, necessary goods to the elderly people and low-income families, assistance in observation facilities, distribution of information materials among the population on measures to prevent infections, protection from the virus, organization of a hotline for people who are in difficult life situations during the period of self-isolation; psychological and legal assistance; fabrication of protective masks, etc.

During the pandemic, many Russian students-volunteers chose types of volunteer initiatives, taking into account the profiles of their educational programs. Through participation in volunteer activities, students not only fulfilled a social mission in the form of helping people in need, but also updated their professional competencies and practical skills. For example, volunteer students of medical direction provided medical care, volunteers – psychologists and volunteers – lawyers held consultations, students of technical fields participated in the solution of technical tasks and worked as “digital volunteers”.

According to the data of Russian Public Opinion Research Center, 22 % of young people from 18 to 24 years old were involved in volunteer activities. The same numbers were confirmed by the results of the Levada Center poll: the most active age group in volunteering was young people between 18 and 25 years old (6 % versus 1 % in other age groups).

The main types of participation in the volunteer activities of students of foreign universities were student initiative projects and initiatives of inter-university student organizations. The most common forms of student volunteer participation were intellectual volunteering and participation in crowdsourcing projects, the creation of educational and information resources about coronavirus infection, non-medical care and delivery of food and drugs to the most vulnerable groups of citizens as well as non-medical assistance to medical workers and their families (Skovova et al., 2020).

7. Conclusion

It is impossible not to agree that work remotely has become an effective and powerful substitute for offline learning. However, higher education is not only the transfer of new information and knowledge, but also their creation, the process of the formation and development of a personality through live communication, which is accompanied by emotions, spiritual and moral convictions, the feelings of mentors and students without looking back at time, without dependence on functional capabilities of electronic educational platforms.

Unfortunately, the experience of mass distance learning has once again proved that it is difficult to update soft skills, which predetermine a personal life success, in online environment.

Nevertheless, the experience gained by universities in the field of online education in a pandemic suggests that remote forms of education will receive a new impetus for development after the pandemic. Its natural continuation will be the consolidation of a new hybrid model of the educational process, where

the traditional format of interaction between students and teachers in educational, research and social activities will be combined with the use of the distance format.

The growing inequality between students in access to online education is due to weak Internet connection in remote places of residence, lack of personal modern technical means and the impossibility of a number of higher educational institutions to provide a high-quality electronic educational resource. In order to preserve the student body, increase the attractiveness of a particular university and provide equal conditions for university students, it is important to provide students with technical means including payment and simplification of the mechanism of Internet access.

Remote scientific conferences justified their relevance in crisis conditions, providing a wide coverage of participants and saving funding as well as giving the opportunity to discuss scientific problems with the involvement of a wide range of specialists. Along with such large-scale events, there are scientific problems that require the participation of narrow specialists. The use of the online format in this situation allows organizing local and thematic groups of researchers.

Thus, this mastered new experience in a pandemic will allow universities to organize both scientific events and educational process, combining online and offline formats. Further, the openness and accessibility of scientific research, formed in the process of combating Covid-19 can be continued in order to address new global challenges.

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