THE DIGITALIZATION OF THE UNIVERSITY AND HIGHER EDUCATION ETHICS

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Abstract

The article analyzes those aspects of the university digitalization process that create difficulties for the implementation of its complex mission. Among them are a decrease in the influence of the teacher's personality on the emerging researcher or professional practitioner, the loss of creative and critical components from the learning process at the university, the erosion of the academic freedom of the university teacher, the fragmentation and hierarchization of the academic community, the tendency towards the division of universities into universities of the first and second "varieties" with the subsequent "ossification" of this division. The author of the article believes that none of the listed difficulties is fatal, although each of them should be the subject of attention of the developers of a morally grounded educational policy of the state and active "academic citizens" within the universities themselves. According to the author of the article, in the process of properly oriented and controlled by the academic community, digitalization of the university will significantly change some of the professional and ethical practices of its employees and the body of its ethical documents: declarations, codes, codes of practice, etc. These changes will affect the requirements for communication between the teacher and students in the "online classroom", the rules of collective work on the creation of massive online courses, new forms of ensuring respect for diversity, the use of educational analytics and electronic systems to maintain academic integrity.

1. Introduction

The digitalization of higher education is far from a new process. If we talk about Western countries, then the first, rather primitive electronic educational resources used by university teachers in their work, appeared in the 1990s. In Russia, this process lagged behind, but on the whole in the same forms and in the same directions. However, until a certain time, the transition of some part of education to a distance digital format did not create prospects for a large-scale structural transformation of the university. In other words, the beginning of digitalization did not raise the question of the possibility and necessity of the existence of what is now commonly called a "digital university". The situation changed dramatically with the beginning of the third wave of digitalization of higher education according to Picciano's (2017) classification. We are talking about the creation of full-fledged massive online courses that operate on specialized educational platforms. The widespread use of massive online courses within universities has given rise to the possibility of revolutionary changes in traditional university practice, and their proliferation outside university sites created the basis for the emergence of networked educational structures competing with universities (Picciano, 2017). The changes associated with the proliferation of massive online courses have been intermittent. A meticulous sociological study of their effectiveness, which began in 2013, slowed down the pace of change somewhat, and the peculiarities of teaching during the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020, on the contrary, spurred them on. It is possible that the return of university campuses to the usual work format will be another reason for the slowdown. However, the overall direction of the transformation of the university is unlikely to change significantly. It follows that it is impossible to evade an assessment of this transformation from the perspective of the ethics of higher education.

2. Problem Statement

The starting point for such an assessment is an understanding of the social mission of the university. University is a special educational institution within which the synthesis of teaching the basics of a science and its research practice takes place. This synthesis focuses on the figure of a university professor who is both a researcher and a teacher and as a researcher - an expert not only on how best to transfer knowledge to students, but also on what should be considered actual knowledge in a particular cognitive field. As such an expert, they have a significant freedom of choice, extending to the definition of the content and methods of constructing training courses. The quality control of their work is carried out by the same professors-experts, which reflects the wide autonomy of not an individual professional, but of their community or corporation - the autonomy of the university.

Although the university is an institution of professional education, professional training is supplemented and counterbalanced in it in the form of a theoretical and research component of educational programs. During their studies at the university, a student becomes involved in the research process and gets the opportunity to critically evaluate the results of scientific knowledge, as well as methodological approaches to their receipt. If a university professor acts as a research instructor, then a university student is always a research student. Professor and student not only occupy different levels in the research hierarchy, but also belong to a single scientific community in which knowledge is the result

of a collective discussion of data and theoretical hypotheses. Accordingly, a university graduate turns out to be not just a professional, but a critically reflective professional, which meets the needs of any open, volatile and rapidly developing society. Additional components of the university's mission are traditionally considered to be the comprehensive development of the student's personality and the formation of their critical thinking skills, which is inextricably linked with civic engagement.

3. Research Questions

The main questions of this study are the following: a) is the university capable of realizing its mission in the context of wide and rapid digitalization; b) what are the typical directions of professional and ethical self-organization of the academic community for a digital university?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study of the first question is to assist the academic community as a whole and its individual members in making a choice between two strategies: to fight to the best of our ability with the ongoing digital transformation of the university or to promote full-scale adaptation to it. The study of the second question turns out to be relevant in the case of recognition of the justification of the second strategy and makes it possible to clarify the main directions of changes in professional and ethical practice associated with it.

5. Research Methods

The methodology for finding an answer to the first question involves correlating various pros and cons of the process of forming a digital university, as well as assessing ways to block negative trends in digitalization of higher education and more fully disclose its positive potential. The second question is answered on the basis of identifying those practical contexts of the university professional's work in the digital environment, the regulation of which is impossible on the basis of currently existing ethical documents (declarations, codes, sets of rules, etc.).

6. Findings

The social arguments for digitalizing higher education are well known. It provides access to educational opportunities at any time and from any place, and also significantly reduces social costs in this area. The complex logistics of delivering higher education have historically posed significant challenges to ensuring accessibility. Universities have been and remain elite educational institutions, and this is such an elitism that does not always correspond to the principles of fair selection of candidates. Various circumstances make higher education inaccessible. This is also its high cost, which is determined by both historically random factors and completely objective ones. This is also the low "throughput" of universities, which is associated with the limited capacity of their infrastructure and the lack of personnel reserves. This is the geographical remoteness of many potential students from university centers, which, superimposed on the low "bandwidth" of campuses, turns into an insurmountable barrier to university

education. This is also the difficulty of combining study and other activities of potential students: a university with its rigid and rigid curriculum turns out to be poorly compatible with work, raising children, systematic social or political activism, etc. There is no particular doubt that an education consisting of online courses has a lower cost, can reach a much larger contingent of students, and is provided to them on an extremely flexible schedule and regardless of physical location.

These advantages are external in relation to the mission of the university, since this mission in itself does not determine the optimal number of individuals enrolled in university education and does not form the entire set of criteria for access to this education (in any case, it does not directly include the principles of accessibility and fairness of access). Although from the point of view of public good and social justice, both expanding access and ensuring it based on complex moral criteria are well-founded goals. However, there is at least one side of the digitalization of the university, which can be considered a plus directly in the light of its mission. The more qualified, successful and recognized in the scientific community a university professor is, the more solid and fruitful the synthesis of research and teaching is. Getting access to the courses of such a professor, students are more likely to encounter "big science" in the learning process, they get the opportunity to master all the most relevant in it and from the point of view of the most promising trends in its further development. Few students find themselves in this position in a non-digital higher education system. In a system based on massive online courses, their number increases several times or even an order of magnitude.

However, along with the advantages, general social and associated with the mission of the university itself, the digitalization of higher education has quite significant disadvantages.

1. Massive online courses, open or limited to students of a particular university, reduce the intensity of interpersonal contacts between the professor and students, since they do not involve or almost do not involve their live communication in real time. The wide digitalization of the university turns into a convention a very important phrase in the academic environment: "I am a student of such and such a scientist". Some higher education researchers believe that even a simple transition of lectures and seminars from classroom to online format has irreparable negative consequences. It leads to the fact that the impact of the teacher's personality on the student audience is sharply reduced. And this factor is no less important for quality education than the correct selection and effective ways of presenting scientific knowledge (Rose, 2017; Zembulas & Vrasidas, 2005).

2. Massive online courses reduce the student's opportunities for discussion and creative work. A student as a member of the scientific community should have the opportunity to demonstrate their creative and critical abilities in the framework of their own more or less serious, more or less detailed research, as well as in the framework of discussing the current state of their research discipline with qualified interlocutors. The massification of higher education in any of its forms leads to the fact that the student is deprived of such a privilege. However, the digitalization of the university creates unprecedented opportunities for creating a continuous learning system reaching thousands and thousands of students. And this exacerbates the negative consequences of massification (Ostenson et al., 2017).

3. In the system of digital higher education, a division of teaching labor is inevitably formed, which raises doubts from the point of view of the university's mission. To ensure a successful online presentation of the history and the current state of the cognitive discipline (or the results of studying a

particular scientific problem), a small number of specialists are required. The same goes for the overall design of online courses. On the other hand, their interactive component, in the part that cannot be transferred to automatic mode, requires a significant number of instructors and facilitators. Thus, the freedom to choose the educational content of the course, and this is an important part of academic freedom, remains only with those teachers who form the course and provide its lecture presentation. As a rule, this role is played by "academic stars", and their numerous colleagues are deprived of their professorial status.

4. The academic freedom of even those professors who in their activities can preserve the traditional for the university combination of their scientific research with the creation of educational courses is limited due to the wide participation of specialists in information technology, marketing of educational services, digital education in the work on massive online courses etc. This leads to the development of coursework into a series of continuous compromises that force professors to compromise their principles (McCluskey & Winter, 2014).

5. The segregation of individual faculty members within higher education, which widely uses massive online courses, can lead to the segregation of universities themselves. Some of them may turn into generators of educational resources ("universities of professors"), while others - into pure consumers of educational products ("universities of assistants"). Ultimately, this will contribute to monopolization not only in the field of teaching, but also in the research field. The scientific schools and approaches dominating in a small number of universities of the highest category will subordinate the entire system of training professional practitioners and research personnel.

6. Creation of a wide system of online courses, replacing a significant part of traditional teaching, is an option for reforming higher education, which is very convenient for the implementation of plans of state and regional authorities to "optimize" universities. The fully justified general social advantages of digitalization easily turn into a screen for reducing the number of teachers or the number of teachers with high, and therefore requiring higher wages, academic positions. The trend towards online learning is contributing to the degeneration of full-fledged universities into professional schools that provide stereotypical applied education.

The listed disadvantages lead to the fact that the academic community is rather ambivalent about the digitalization of the university. This process splits it along a wide variety of lines (Stackhouse et al., 2020). Examples include the well-known case of opposition to the introduction of the Harvard course on Justice at the University of San Jose (USA, 2013) or the nature of the discussion on digital initiatives of the Higher School of Economics in Russia in 2019-2021. However, I believe that proponents of widespread digitalization are not defenseless in this debate. They quite reasonably emphasize the possible improvement of the quality of university courses, convincing opponents that scientific and teaching cooperation of "academic stars" and numerous young facilitators can develop around the constantly improving massive online courses, that the system can be fine-tuned so that universities will exchange high-quality courses. all directions (both from the center to the periphery and from the periphery to the center). Such opportunities are not closed, and technological progress is unlikely to be stopped. Only the sixth objection retains its weight, despite the arguments of the technology-oriented digital university enthusiasts. The opportunities for misuse of digitalization in higher education are indeed great, and

attempts to accelerate digital reforms are only expanding these opportunities. As a result, a situation arises in which supporters of digital transformation look like ideologues or even agents of the destruction of the university.

However, it seems to me that there is a universal, yet non-technological recipe for overcoming such threats. This is the complete openness of the university's digitalization reforms for public discussion and democratic control over reform activities by the academic community as a whole. If these conditions are met, the university has a chance to successfully complete the digital transformation.

7. Conclusion

Recognizing the inevitability of a more or less profound digital transformation of higher education institutions, we automatically recognize the need to correct the professional and ethical standards in force in a traditional university (a "brick and mortar university") (for a general overview of this issue, see (Thompson, 2019)). I could identify several directions of such a correction, which is already taking place in many universities, although it is progressing at a slow pace. Firstly, this is the consolidation of ethical and etiquette requirements for conducting distance learning, involving live communication between a teacher and students (various kinds of electronic conferences) Special attention is required in this case a) blurring the boundaries of public (business) and private and b) a significant update of the communicative context, in which respect or disrespect for partners in the educational process is shown. The latter circumstance is important not only for electronic conferences, but also for teaching in asynchronous mode. Working in an "electronic classroom" creates new forms of indifference, tactlessness, demeaning, and ethical documents should draw the attention of teachers and students to them (see Flynn, 2020; Hopkins et al., 2017). Secondly, it is the consolidation of the normative basis for collective work on the creation and maintenance of massive online courses. It should include such requirements that reflect the transformation of academic freedom in the digital university and at the same time ensure its preservation in the new environment (McCluskey & Winter, 2014). Third, the creation of a regulatory framework for responding to an increased degree of heterogeneity of the audience of massive online courses (cultural, social, age specific). Such a response is provided both through the practical implementation of the idea of tolerance and through special efforts to adapt and localize the content of the courses and the way they are taught (Donovan et al., 2021; Woodley et al., 2017). Fourth, the creation of a regulatory framework for the use of statistical data in educational analytics (it is known to pose certain threats to the information security of students and some additional grounds for discrimination) (Ferguson, 2019; Kitto & Knight, 2019; Slade & Wintrup, 2017). Fifth, fixing the ethical restrictions on the use of the latest systems for the automatic maintenance of academic integrity in a networked educational environment. On the agenda of modern universities is the development of a proctoring ethic that protects the privacy and dignity of the student and prevents proctoring systems from becoming a means of alienating students from their alma mater (Gudiño Paredes et al., 2021; Lee-Post & Hapke, 2017).

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