

Challenges to Distance Learning Program at a Major Russian University

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Abstract

This study is built upon the personal experience of the author and relevant literature. The main aim of the study was to describe the status of the distance learning program at a major Russian university. The author worked as a Fulbright specialist at one of the Federal universities in Russia in 2018. The outcomes are based on multiple unobtrusive observations of the faculty and conversations with the faculty and administration. The major challenges and barriers to the development of distance learning curriculum at the university are indicated and described. The author assumes that these problems may be typical for the higher education in Russia.

Keywords: online curriculum, distance learning, blended, hybrid, course design, administration, professional development, faculty

Introduction

Distance learning (DL) in Russia has a relatively long history. The vast areas and a large population have always called for education through distance. According to some sources, education by correspondence became available in Russia as early as in the second part of the 19th century (Ossietzky & Kourotchkina, 2012). With the formation of the Soviet Union came a need in qualified workforce. Education by correspondence developed rapidly and reached its peak in the mid-1970's with 1.2 million students (Энциклопедия. История, 2019).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, and with the advent of digital technologies and the Internet, elements of DL became available via the Internet. According to some authors, an annual increase of the DL participants in Russia has reached 25% in the present days (Vaganova et al., 2018). It is expected that the number of DL students will soon exceed 3 million (Safiullin et al., 2014).

Higher education determines the quality of the national education and shapes development of its science and culture. Consequently, DL as part of higher education has become a major focus. Internet-based DL in Russia is rapidly replacing the evening and by-correspondence types of education. The Russian universities are improving their DL curricula, but the process does not

seem to develop smoothly, nor does it have a detailed plan for the future (Gerashchenko & Gerashchenko, 2017). The process is occurring in the context of changes in the Russian higher education system: Russian universities are still producing specialists for the outdated resource-based economy; the commercialization of higher education presents barriers for the young people with a low socio-economic status; the level of informational technology is still inadequate; the value of higher education is replaced with the value of its diploma; university research is becoming increasingly unattractive for the potential scholars; the practices of admission, testing and examination are often connected to corruption (Яо, Л., 2009).

The main components of a distance learning program at any modern institution of higher learning should include a professional online/hybrid course design and a developed learning management system also known as LMS. In other words, in the distance learning programs the faculty who teach online use the principles of effective instruction (Merrill, 2002) as applied to distance learning through online technology. While literature on principles of online instructional design is readily available in Russia, the practice of effective online/hybrid teaching may not be quite as developed. Most Russian universities and the university in question maintain modern LMS (Moodle, Blackboard, Sakai etc.). The acquaintance with the faculty and administration made it possible for the author to do some research on the effectiveness of the university's distance education program and come to some conclusions.

The Nature of the Study

This exploratory study is based upon the impressions, observations and other personal experiences collected during the author's visit to a major Russian university as a Fulbright specialist. The experiences were derived from unobtrusive observations, formal and informal conversations, and other interactions with the faculty and administration of the university in question. The derived experiences have been analyzed and summarized in the form of outcomes and suggestions. References to the literature in English and Russian on the topic have been offered to suggest that the observations and conclusions may pertain to the larger context of the entire higher education in Russia.

Setting

As a Fulbright scholar, the author was conducting a series of seminars on distance curriculum design at one of the major public Russian universities that had recently acquired the status of a "federal university". This status means that the university belongs to the ten top-tier

public universities funded by the federal government. As of 2017 the enrollment exceeds 25,000 undergraduate and graduate students. The author had three meetings with the top administration of the university to discuss the state of DL at the university. He had two major meetings with the Department of Distance Learning of the university. All the formal meetings with the faculty included administrators. While conducting the seminars, the author had a unique opportunity to communicate with the faculty on the subject of DL, hear their concerns, opinions, and accounts of their experiences of teaching online courses. Of special interest were numerous questions about the practices of online teaching at U.S. universities.

There were six seminars conducted for the faculty of different colleges and departments with at least 200 faculty members and administrators participating over a period of three weeks. The subjects of the seminars included the methodology and standards of online course design and best practices of online teaching. The seminars were conducted in a friendly atmosphere of exchange of experiences and opinions.

In the meetings with administration, the author discussed the questions of certifying online courses, incentives for the faculty, and related issues. The administrators included those in charge of faculty professional development and the online program. The administration expressed interest in developing online curriculum at the university and issues of professional development of the faculty in distance learning.

Considerable amount of information was obtained from unrestrained and unobtrusive conversations with individual faculty and small groups during informal meetings outside the university. As a native speaker of Russian and a former faculty member of a Soviet university, the author was able to participate in first-hand and unabridged discourse on the issue of distance learning at the university in question. Below are the outcomes derived from the experiences.

Outcomes of the study

The major conclusion of the study is that the distance education curriculum at the university is at the stage of its conception. The terminology of DL at the university has not been fully established. The international word *distant* has a similar meaning and pronunciation in Russian; however, there are several derivatives of the word with identical meanings but differing spellings. This suggests that the university's documentation has not yet determined one single term for DL. This is not to say that the faculty do not teach online. However, the online courses they offer do not constitute part of the university's distance education curriculum. For the most part a faculty

member who posts her or his teaching material online considers the course an online course. Interestingly, the idea of an online course is often interpreted as a video-recorded lecture. The University has a special studio where the faculty can record their lectures, some of considerable length. It is a popular belief that a decent lecture should contain elements of oratorical mastery, therefore video recording of lectures in studios is popular at the university and in Russia at large. Detailed advice on methodology of recorded lectures is offered as part of online course design both by the university's administration and on the national level (Козлюба et al., 2014).

The administration pushes for a unified model of an online course, but the standards of the model are unclear. No unified format of an online/hybrid course is offered. As one faculty member put it "The administration pushes us to teach online, but they do not offer any sample". The administration expressed genuine interest in having and applying a unified standard-based online course model.

What barriers for developing a DL curriculum at the university existed in the described period? As observed in the study, the barriers to a creating a DL curriculum at the given university can be divided into the following categories: the barriers related to the national culture and psychology, the barriers of methodology and administrative barriers. While the observations in this particular study may not be extrapolated to other universities, the barriers listed below have also been described in the literature on the Russian DL as typical to the entire system of the Russian higher education. Let us consider each barrier in greater detail.

The barriers related to the national culture and psychology. The problem includes resistance to change both on the part of the veteran faculty, which is quite typical of seasoned faculty throughout the world (Richard, 2017), lack of belief in the effectiveness of online learning, traditional fear of plagiarism and cheating inherent in the Russian education, mistrust of online evaluation and assessment methods (Frolova, 2015; Gerashchenko & Gerashchenko, 2017). At the seminars one of the typical questions was "How can I be sure that it is the right student taking the test, not someone else?" In addition, the push of the administration for more online courses creates the fear of increase in teaching load and downsizing of the teaching personnel. The disgruntled faculty members referred to the history of the university in question: several smaller local universities and colleges were merged into one major organization, which made part of administration and faculty redundant. This gave rise to the suspicion that online curriculum enforced by the administration will lead to increase of teaching load. While hiring additional

faculty would seem natural, the faculty fear further layoffs. Severe staff and funding cuts have become a grim reality in the Russian higher education (Dvornikova, 2016).

Better communicating the advantages of online teaching to the faculty, demonstrating successful online courses and other practices, professional development and personnel training and other activities promoting online teaching are offered to remedy the above problems (Ассоциация, 2018).

The problems of methodology. The practical instructions to utilize an online teacher-student communication tool are frequently mistaken for online curriculum design. The administration has developed “methodological instructions” for the use of the Learning Management Software Sakaj, which is offered as online course design. Any kinds of online communication between the faculty and students (for example, email, posting assignments online, use of the internet resources, web placement of lecture notes and other teaching materials including texts and/or video recordings of their lectures) are confused for online course design. There are multiple articles and brochures on tips of effective online teaching, available online or as printed material. However, there is no nation-wide list of pedagogical standards and requirements for online teaching in higher education. Professional development for the faculty is rare and includes technical issues rather than methodology of online instruction. Lack of pedagogy in online learning has been recognized as a more severe impediment than technical issues (Образование, 2020)

The idea of online/hybrid course certification based on the uniform national standards is being widely discussed within the Russian university education, but the practice of course certification has not yet been introduced (Gerashchenko & Gerashchenko, 2017; Safiullin et al., 2014). While some recommendations for online course design may be quite reasonable and built on solid pedagogical background, they are not uniform to online curriculum design nationwide. The process of accreditation of an online/blended course using international standards such as Quality Matters (www.qualitymatters.org) is known in the U.S. as course certification. In contrast, the practice of issuing certificates of completion to the students is currently viewed as “course certification” both at the university in question and in Russia in general. Absence of unified standards in the process of online course certification leads to deficiency of effective pedagogical strategies in teacher-student communications, adaptability, accessibility and other online practices.

Administrative problems. While online course curriculum at Russian universities is heavily encouraged by the administration, the faculty appear to be less enthusiastic, which is

typical for the entire university system in Russia (Daletskaya, 2008). The online curriculum of most US universities is primarily designed for the students enrolled at these universities; in contrast, the administration of this and other Russian universities tends to offer online courses for the students outside their universities. This trend may be reflective of the increased commercialization of the Russian higher education (Yachina, 2015). Some participants of the seminars feared that including students from outside their university would lead to increasing of their teaching load which is already “unbearable”.

Special legislation is being devised to achieve mutual recognition of such courses as part of the general university curriculum (Ассоциация, 2008).

Material and meritorious incentives and compensations to the faculty to design and teach online curriculum are either insignificant or non-existent. While some universities and/or their units include online curriculum in the practice of faculty merit evaluation, designing/implementing online courses does not translate into additional pay. Generally, the federal legislation broadly encourages incentives for the faculty for “introducing technological innovations” without mentioning online course design in particular (Ozernikova & Gainullina, 2011). Consequently, because standardized online/blended curriculum does not exist, including its aspects in the objective merit evaluations presents serious challenges.

Lack of professional development (or absence thereof) in the field of distance learning represents a major barrier to the development of online curriculum at the university and in the country at large. Irina Smirnova maintains that many students are more skilled in computer technology than their instructors. This could be easily overcome by training faculty (Smirnova, 2012). Smirnova points out to the lack of professional development specifically in online curriculum design. She also indicates that some old norms and regulations are contradictory to the reality of distance learning (Smirnova, 2012).

Bureaucratic restraints present one of the most critical barriers to an effective DL curriculum (Yachina, 2015). On the one hand, the government regulation of DL is too complex and self-contradictory, on the other it sets goals for 40% reduction of the number of the existing universities in the upcoming future. According to the plans, the reduction of the number of universities should not lead to a reduction in enrollment. It is expected that by 2025 the enrollment will include 5 million students as a result of the development of online curriculum. These plans

breed fear of further downsizing among the faculty and ultimately give rise to reserved attitudes toward online curriculum (Солдаткин, 2018).

Conclusion

The administration of Russian universities is pushing for the increase of DL in their curricula. However, this push does not always find adequate response among the faculty. The faculty are concerned with possible downsizing and view DL as part of the threat to their job security. While the amount of online teaching material and faculty-student communication in the Russian universities can be impressive, the DL courses have various degrees of pedagogical effectiveness. There are no uniform nation-wide sets of pedagogical/methodological standards of online/hybrid course design applicable to most content.

Developing and applying these standards on the national level would be a breakthrough in Russian DL. However, the initiative should come from the universities as stakeholders and involve the faculty with experience in DL. The final product could be something akin to the standards of Quality Matters (www.qualitymatters.org) and include aspects specific to the nature and traditions of the Russian higher education. This practice would make it easier for the Russian universities to develop the system of mutual recognition of online courses. At a glance, the problems indicated in the study can be typical of the most post-Soviet countries.

While the study does not include any changes in the Russian DL caused by the pandemics, it can be assumed that COVID-19 exposed the unpreparedness of the Russian universities for a transition to online teaching (Образование, 2020)

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