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**DISTANCE LEARNING IN THE UNIVERSITIES OF THE  
REPUBLIC OF NORTH OSSETIA-ALANIA**

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### Abstract

The transition to distance learning in higher education during the 2020 pandemic became a new stage in the development of this education model in Russia. Distance learning and the creation of a digital educational environment as priorities for the modernization of the educational process have both federal and regional dimensions. The purpose of this study is to analyze the practice of using distance learning technologies in the universities of North Ossetia in the period from March to June 2020 and to develop proposals for enhancing the potential of distance learning in the region. The authors conducted a sociological study in June 2020 by the method of formalized interviews with 35 students and 19 teachers of the North Ossetian State University, the North Caucasian Mining and Metallurgical Institute and the Vladikavkaz Institute of Management. In the course of the study, some of the already known advantages and disadvantages of distance learning technologies were confirmed. At the same time, general and specific assessments of the potential and prospects for the development of distance learning were identified and formulated in the opinion of the main participants—students and teachers. The comparison of assessments of the respondents on the effectiveness of distance educational technologies enables deeper understanding of the main problems of distance learning and clearer view on the prospects of its development. In particular, distance learning, which provides for the cooperation of several universities in the republic, can improve the quality of education.

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*Keywords:* Distance learning, university, North Ossetia, survey



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## 1. Introduction

The transition to distance learning in higher education during the 2020 coronavirus pandemic marked a new stage in the development of this education model in Russia.

From the moment of institutionalization of distance education by the order of the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation in 1997 until the submission of the draft law on distance education to the State Duma of the Russian Federation on May 15, 2020 as part of amending Federal Law No. 273 "On Education in the Russian Federation", the urgency of the prospects for the development of distance learning has considerably increased. The currently acquired experience of widespread implementation of distance educational technologies requires its theoretical understanding and assessment in order to choose a better relevant model.

Distance learning and the creation of digital educational environment as priorities for the modernization of the educational process have both federal and regional dimensions. For regions with depressed economies, the inclusion of the potential of distance learning in the strategies of socio-economic development can become one of the growth factors provided that the model of federal-regional relations in the management of higher education is updated (Leshukov, 2020).

The demand for highly qualified personnel for the digital economy and the need for a new trajectory of regional development determine the importance of analyzing the experience of distance learning in the universities in North Ossetia in March–June 2020 and developing proposals to improve the efficiency of distance learning technologies in higher educational institutions of the republic.

## 2. Problem Statement

In recent years, many scientific articles on the problem of the development of distance learning in higher education have been published in Russian journals. The authors describe the strong points and drawbacks of distance learning from different perspectives. In some works, the advantages of distance learning include availability of required technologies, accessibility, low cost of training, independence of students, individualization of training; the disadvantages include problems with authentication, limited use for training specialists in the fields of engineering, machinery, medicine, etc. (Grigorash, 2014). Other studies emphasize such benefits of distance education as saving time, the possibility of cooperation between universities, etc., while the downsides are insufficient methodological provision, the necessity of technical services, etc. (Shevchenko & Ivko, 2018). Obviously, the advantages of distance learning in the form of flexibility, modularity, efficiency and manufacturability meet the needs of the modern economy and the economy of the future in the best possible way (Goreva & Osipova, 2015).

However, the known characteristics of distance learning during the period of the forced introduction of the distance learning model in all universities in Russia in connection with the coronavirus pandemic could undergo some changes. Therefore, it makes sense to study the assessments of the distance learning effectiveness by direct participants—teachers and students.

On the other hand, ideally, the distance education model should be promoting interuniversity cooperation and included in the regional development strategy as an organic part. The existing system of federal-regional relations in the management of higher education does not contribute to the active role of

universities in the development of regions. Nevertheless, the strengthening of interuniversity cooperation in the development of distance educational technologies can be an effective growth factor in the regional economy.

### **3. Research Questions**

The subject of the research in this article are the practical aspects of the distance learning technologies implemented in the universities in North Ossetia in March-June 2020.

The study is to identify the features of a complete transition to a distance learning model at a university based on the results of a sociological study, using the method of formalized interviews with students and teachers of the North Ossetian State University, the North Caucasian Mining and Metallurgical Institute and the Vladikavkaz Institute of Management.

Based on the analysis of the practical experience of using distance learning technologies in the universities of the republic, it is planned to develop proposals for developing the potential of distance learning in higher education in conjunction with the strategy of economic growth in the region.

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to analyze the practice of using distance learning technologies in universities in North Ossetia in the period from March to June 2020 and to develop proposals for enhancing the potential of distance learning in the region.

### **5. Research Methods**

To solve the set tasks, in June 2020, a sociological study was conducted by the method of formalized interviews with 35 students and 19 teachers at the North Ossetian State University, the North Caucasian Mining and Metallurgical Institute and the Vladikavkaz Institute of Management.

### **6. Findings**

The analysis of the results of the sociological research showed the following.

When answering the question about the systems used in the process of distance learning, student respondents noted EIOS based on the Moodle platform, WhatsApp, Discord, Zoom, Portal.nosu.ru, JustTalk, FCC. One of the most popular among the student community is the Moodle distance learning system with its wide functionality: from a platform for informational materials on training courses, a platform for teamwork, discussions to a communication tool (Dronova, 2018).

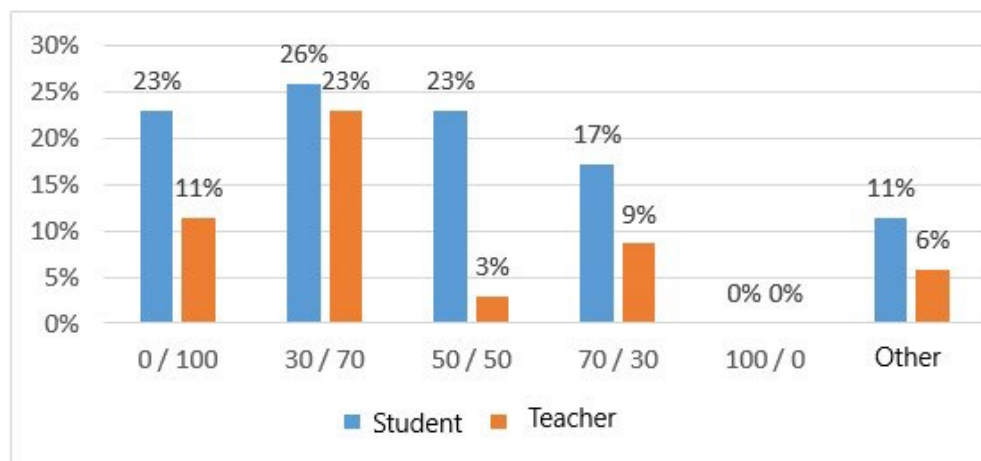
The peculiarity of the answers of the surveyed students to the question whether, due to the transition to distance learning, the time spent on completing study tasks by them has changed in comparison with the traditional (full-time) form of education, manifested in the fact that approximately the same number of students (slightly more than one third) chose the answers “yes, significantly” and “no”; while a little less than a quarter of the students recognized a slight increase in time spent studying.

Every fifth student believes that the level of knowledge gained with distance learning is higher than with traditional education. The overwhelming majority of students, four out of five, adhere to a polar position and believe that there are opportunities for obtaining better knowledge in traditional teaching.

The answers to the question about the convenience of the EIOS distributed as follows: slightly less than a quarter of the students evaluate the EIOS as an inconvenient system, a little more than a third of the respondents have the opposite opinion. A fairly large part of the respondents, a third of the respondents, found it difficult to answer. Respondents with a critical assessment of EIOS noted that “the system is not ideal, and we constantly have to endure failures; of course, it is tolerable, but not convenient”.

According to some student respondents, the regular form of education is better than the distance form, since students gain more knowledge while being in a class, listening to how the teacher provides them with educational material. A number of very critical remarks were the following: "the load has increased many times", "all the material is analyzed independently", "the demand is higher than it was on on-campus pairs".

An analysis of the respondents' answers to the question about the optimal ratio in the educational process of distance and traditional forms of education shows that a quarter of the surveyed students are supporters of completely traditional education. Another quarter supports the ratio of distance learning to traditional education to be 30/70, another quarter of respondents supports 50/50, while a fifth of respondents believe it should be 70/30. The rest of the respondents offered their options: 15/85, 90/10, 60/40. Interestingly, none of the respondents fully supported distance learning (Figure 01).



**Figure 1.** Optimal ratio in the distance/traditional educational process in the opinion of students and teachers

The model of integration of traditional and distance learning, undoubtedly being a priority model of education in the future, has its potential advantages in freeing on-campus classes from routine and concentrating on the creative component of the educational process, discussions on the most important issues of theory and practice, etc. (Kislyakova, 2009). The mixed model allows the teacher to focus on more interesting and complex topics of the course, while the basic concepts of the theory can be learned independently by the student using distance learning technologies (Kulova et al., 2019).

When asked whether the respondents-teachers consider their knowledge sufficient to work in the distance learning system, almost all teachers, with the exception of two, answered positively. Such self-assessments of the level of training of the teaching corps are mainly related to the fact that in recent years the introduction of ICT has been quite active in higher education. Compared to an earlier survey conducted in one of the Russian universities, the situation with the methodological and technical training of teachers to work in the framework of the distance learning model has clearly improved. Then it was revealed that every fifth teacher is absolutely ready to present their courses in the format of distance learning, two-thirds of the interviewed teachers are partially ready, and almost every tenth teacher is not ready.

When asked how much time teachers spend on the preparation and implementation of the educational process with distance learning compared to the traditional form, more than half of the respondents answered “more”, less than half answered “less” and “same time”.

The distribution of the most common answers of students and teachers to the question about the advantages and disadvantages of distance learning is presented in Table 01.

**Table 1.** Advantages and disadvantages of distance learning

Students' answers		Teachers' answers	
Advantages	Disadvantages	Advantages	Disadvantages
Self-education	Problems in understanding the material	Stimulates independent activity of students	Some material is more convenient to be presented in the traditional form
Availability of training at a convenient time and place	Independent study of a large amount of material	Ability to work at a convenient time and place	Does not provide an opportunity to deliver team skills to students
Saving time and money	Lack of live communication and emotions	Individual approach to students	Difficulty in unlocking students' potential
No excessive control	Need for a PC and internet access	Objective control of results	Irregular working hours
More time is given to study the material	Strong motivation is needed in the absence of control	Ability to revise material multiple times	Problem of user identification when checking learned material

Evidently from Table 01, more than half of the surveyed students and teachers recognize self-education and stimulation of students' independent work as one of the main values of distance learning. At the same time, a little less than half of students consider independent study of a large amount of material as one of the main disadvantages of distance learning. With this disadvantage, some students associate problems with understanding the material, which reflects the fact that a large part of students are not ready for independent work on distance learning.

Students and teachers similarly appreciate the opportunity to work at a convenient time and place. Although it is noteworthy that some teachers indicated irregular working hours as one of the main disadvantages of distance learning. There is a schedule of classes, but some students consider it possible, in the absence of clear time constraints for classes as in traditional teaching, to contact a teacher, for example, for advice at any time. It is clear that such behavior of individual students can be regarded as

rather an exception than the rule itself, but it raises the issue of the legislative definition of the teacher's working time norms in distance learning.

The student respondents acknowledged saving time, money for travel and food as one of the undoubted advantages of distance learning.

The absence of excessive control on the part of teachers is actually one of the important advantages of distance learning for a third of students.

According to the overwhelming majority of the surveyed students, the lack of live communication and emotions to a certain extent reduces the value of distance learning for them. The teachers also pointed to this lack of distance learning technologies; however, on the part of students, dissatisfaction was much more pronounced. Among the answers of the students, we often met the following answer: "distance learning does not develop communication skills, teamwork, since communication between students is minimal (mainly correspondence)". The teachers, in turn, expressed themselves in this way: "there is no eye-to-eye contact, which does not make it possible to check whether the material is clear to students; there is no response which does not make it possible to "hammer it in". If they "rewrite" someone else's work wisely (without just mindlessly copying it), it is hard to define plagiarism, etc."

The need for a personal computer and Internet access, the lack of psychological motivation and self-motivation limit the potential of using distance learning technologies for some students.

Students' assessments regarding the organizational and methodological support of distance learning sounded in the phrases: "small deadlines for huge tasks", "a bunch of useless reports", etc.

According to many teachers, the important advantages of distance learning are an individual approach to a student and objective control of students' knowledge.

Along with the recognition of the advantages and potential of distance learning by the overwhelming majority of the teachers, the responses of individual teachers were very negative assessments of the distance education potential in general: "you can write a whole treatise about the shortcomings!", "I see no advantages", "wasted time for both students and the teacher ", etc.

A serious drawback, in the opinion of teachers, is the problem of user authentication when checking knowledge.

The effectiveness of distance learning is narrowed by technical constraints: students might not have a PC, smartphone, there can be power outages during online classes, poor internet connection, etc.

## **7. Conclusion**

The analysis of the results of the study showed the multidimensionality and contradictory nature of the assessments by students and teachers of the advantages and disadvantages of distance learning. Some of the known assessments of the advantages and disadvantages of distance learning have been confirmed, for example, the lack of digital traces of the educational process (Brodovskaya et al., 2019), the lack of technical, organizational and methodological support. Other assessments reflect the ambiguity of many attitudes in the educational environment. For example, more than half of students recognize self-education as one of the advantages of distance learning, while for less than half of students it is one of the main disadvantages. In our opinion, interuniversity cooperation can become a promising area of distance learning in the republic (Kuchepatova & Khazratkulova, 2011), based on joint projects of

individualization of learning using distance educational technologies, the construction of individual educational tracks. Activating the potential of distance learning technologies requires the integration of the university community of North Ossetia with the support of the regional government authorities.

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