

AMURCON 2020  
International Scientific Conference**WORLD EXPERIENCE OF ORGANIZING DISTANCE LEARNING  
FOR STUDENTS IN A PANDEMIC**Anna Sergeevna Smirnova (a)\*  
\*Corresponding author

(a) Sholom-Aleichem Priamursky State University, 70a Shirokaya St., Birobidzhan, Russia, dmvan2013@mail.ru

**Abstract**

The paper is devoted to the study of the world experience of distance (electronic) education of students in a pandemic Covid-19. The issues of organizing distance learning in universities are observed from three opinions: difficulties connected with the development of the information educational environment at the university and preparation of the teaching staff to use educational technologies in the learning process online. Teaching quality depends on the level of students' learning motivation, lack of a sufficient number of modern and reliable communication tools (computers, laptops, tablets) and high-speed communication channels in some students' places, dorms; the technical unavailability of Internet resources to the increased amount of information and a number of participants. The paper describes the possibilities of solving the problem of organizing high-quality and affordable distance learning through the integration of new elements of e-learning (synchronous and asynchronous online discussions, online forums) into the traditional education system. The article presents the experience of the International Telematic University UNINETTUNO (Italy), in the cyberspace of which one can get access to educational contents: digitized video tutorials connected in a multimedia and hypertext way with books, texts, bibliographic references, lists of sites and virtual labs. It proves the advantages of distance learning over traditional methods. It is important to realize that the lecture hall is no longer the only place for getting knowledge, since everyone from anywhere in the world can build their learning trajectory. The access to educational contents does not depend on gender, culture, beliefs, or physical disabilities any longer.

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## 1. Introduction

In 2020, because of the Covid-19 coronavirus infection spread in the world and the announcement of the coronavirus pandemic in the world by the World Health Organization, universities in all countries were forced to shift to the online learning format. The impact of the pandemic on the higher education system varies from country to country, but it also has a lot in common: universities are forced to adapt to current events in the shortest possible time, appropriate significant financial resources for accelerated digitalization of education. The pandemic harmed international cooperation: international trips, exchange programs and students' academic mobility and scientific and academic personnel were cancelled.

The time-critical shift to students' distance teaching caused several problems:

- Not all countries were able to shift to online education because of the lack of content and technical support of universities and insufficient Internet coverage. For example, Latin American countries froze university classes completely.

- Students in several countries (Philippines, Tunisia, Chile and others) protested against the shift to distance learning because, in their opinion, distance learning is not an equal substitute to traditional forms of education.

- Decrease in the quality of education while distance learning in the absence of existing learning management systems in the countries.

- Problems with online applications through which universities give online lectures or seminars. There is such a concept as Zoombombing, which characterizes actions related to the violation of online spaces, including hacking virtual classes, using offensive language, and so on.

- University websites are failing because of the extra load.

- The teaching staff qualifications are not often sufficient enough for the shift to online learning: there is no knowledge of the current platforms and services for distance learning, effective teaching techniques for an online format, etc. (Karpinskaya, 2020)

In mid-March 2020, the Ministry of Education and Science recommended universities to stop classroom classes and transfer training to a distance format because of the situation connected to the spread of Covid-19, trying to protect students and academic staff. Universities were forced to solve a lot of urgent issues in a short time: in what forms to conduct distance learning; what technical tools to use for this purpose; how to assess the performance of the content by students; how to take final exams and in what way to admit students for the next academic year.

Most Russian universities were able to adjust their curricula in a short period and put students' and teachers' classes online. This caused a unique situation: on the one hand, tens of thousands of students received a common topic for discussion that united them. On the other hand, all of them faced different experiences from the very beginning: lectures on Skype, seminars in the VKontakte chat, organizing conferences on the Zoom platform.

For many of them, it was a new experience: to have all their studies online, to attend classes without leaving home. There was an unusual moment for students – the presence of a teacher in chats and video calls. However, students faced a lot of problems: Skype calls were constantly disrupted. Students

accidentally wrote something wrong in chats. Online university courses were overloaded because of the influx of users. They also had to do much more homework.

Students noticed that they did not have enough face-to-face communication with group mates and lecturers. A classroom environment with jokes, a friendly atmosphere, “wisdom of crowds”, a personality of each group member, which creates a psychological climate and a working spirit in the team. Educators added that not having eye contact, it is impossible to understand if a student realized everything, if he still had questions since there was no case of a quick response on the spot.

## **2. Problem Statement**

There is a discrepancy between the strict requirements of reality for distance learning caused by the spread of coronavirus infection Covid-19 in the world and the preparedness of universities to organize and hold learning in a digital format, using various information technologies.

Currently, the issue of organizing distance learning in universities can be observed from several viewpoints.

On the one hand, difficulties are referred to the development of an electronic educational environment, the readiness of the teaching staff to use information educational technologies in the learning process online, the development of electronic educational contents that correspond to the organization of a high-quality learning process.

On the other hand, the quality of education depends on the level of students’ educational motivation, but honestly, the difficulties are caused by the lack of a sufficient number of modern and reliable hardware, software, communication tools, computers, laptops, tablets and high-speed communication channels at students’ homes and dormitories.

In addition, one should not forget the technical unavailability of Internet resources. Many participants of learning had difficulties with authorization and personal account, sending and checking homework, putting up teaching aids, which were usually limited to 500 kilobytes.

## **3. Research Questions**

The subject of the article is distance learning of university students based on using Internet resources that provide the opportunity to gain knowledge from anywhere in the world at a convenient time for each person, regardless of gender, age, beliefs, culture, physical disabilities.

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

Observation of the world experience in organizing distance learning for university students in the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic is the aim of the research.

## **5. Research Methods**

Research methods: analysis of Russian and foreign pedagogical, educational and methodical literature on the issue of research; generalization, comparison, analysis of pedagogical processes and phenomena.

## **6. Findings**

A number of international researchers believe that students have a huge international potential to communicate through social media and massive open online courses around the world. These students represent a new "third category" of international education, as they learn through institutions based on the culture of a country situated far away from their own, while staying in their motherland (Mittelmeier et al., 2019). A new notion of Internationalization at a Distance (iAd), in which all forms of education are possible, skipping spatial boundaries, where students and employees of educational institutions are separated by geographical distance, but supported by technology. Therefore, distance and time, at least in theory, are no longer obstacles to international influence.

The scientists believe that it is necessary to integrate new elements of distance learning smoothly (synchronous and asynchronous online discussions, online forums for discussing cross-cultural learning topics and projects of online learning groups) into the current education system. This will not only achieve the necessary learning outcomes but also ensure that the level of training of educational institutions meets present-day requirements. Of all the options for online learning, blended learning takes a special part, in which distance learning is combined with person-to-person learning and does a special sense and prospects for the modern development of both the education system as a whole and the local learning process (Timur et al., 2013).

The problems faced by educational institutions are that lecture halls are no longer the only places where training courses can be held. Anyone from anywhere, if they have the necessary computer equipment and proper content, can construct their educational path. New technologies allow universities and a user to communicate directly using an easy-to-understand computer, a tablet or a smartphone: lessons, multimedia products, databases, self-assessment systems, exam arrangement, and other learning aids can be quickly redirected to users, which contribute to the process of co-education in dynamic virtual environments, triggering online interaction among people having different cultural levels, having different traditions and experiences, and located in different countries of the world.

The International Telematic University UNINETTUNO (Italy) (<https://www.uninettunouniversity.net/en/default.aspx>) is famous for its lecturers from European and Mediterranean universities teach their courses in several languages in various faculties, including Engineering, Philosophy, Nature Protection, Cultural Heritage, Law, Economics, Psychology and Communication Sciences (Figure 1).

Students can attend the university without the time and place limitations. One can learn in his chosen language via TV and the Internet from anywhere in the world. In the didactic cyberspace, one can access various teaching aids of the environment: digitized video tutorials connected in a multimedia and hypertext way with books, texts, bibliographic links, lists of sites and virtual laboratories. In the virtual classroom,

lecturers in each subject interact with students and support their learning process. They share knowledge through forums and chats, and mental power is interconnected.

Currently, the International Telematic University UNINETTUNO, thanks to its psychological and pedagogical model and a computer-based learning environment, can create an educational content of various countries of the world and the Mediterranean region, cooperate and design knowledge information networks that allow enriching the curriculum with new content (Garito, 2013).

It is obvious that for a high-quality organization of distance learning, not only students but also educators have to develop appropriate technological competencies and computer literacy. Most university lecturers are competent in using information technology tools and applications, such as email, text editor, Internet access, Microsoft PowerPoint, and Excel. Many professors are aware of open access technologies, social media, blogs, educational platforms, but they do not use them quite often in the traditional version of teaching. About 62% of scientists admit that they are ready to switch to online teaching completely, but also clarify that they need additional training in new technologies (Martins & Ungerer, 2015).

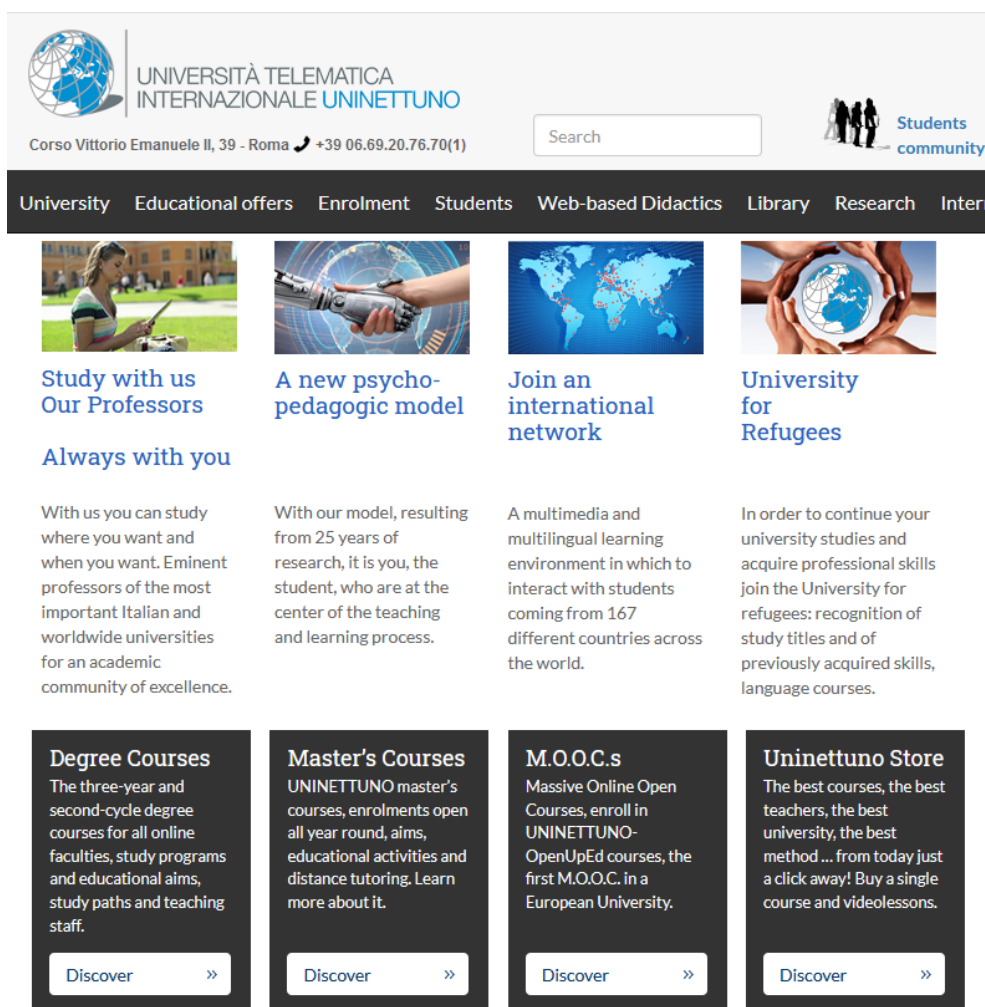


Figure 1. The website of UNINETTUNO University

Teachers' positive attitude to information and communication technologies also affects students' perception of their distance learning experience. In general, teachers should understand that online learning generates new forms of interaction, student support, and assessment. They conclude that only immediate

feedback from teachers allows students to monitor their learning and monitor their performance. Consequently, successful and effective distance learning of students requires significant efforts on the part of teachers. They should develop educationally effective, high-quality educational software to fully utilize the possibilities of interaction using information and communication technologies in a virtual learning environment (Markova et al., 2017).

According to the research results, the advantage of distance learning over traditional methods is the freedom of time and place of training. This conclusion is supported by the fact that these programs give access to knowledge to people regardless of their gender, culture, beliefs, as well as to those with disabilities (Tsipianitis & Groumpos, 2018).

In the Russian Federation, distance learning systems (e-learning systems) are used to organize e-learning. The leaders of the popularity ratings of distance learning tools most often include the following services: YouTube; Google Docs; Twitter; Skype; Prezi; WordPress; Moodle; Slideshare; Dropbox.

The Moodle system is widely used in many universities around the world. According to experts of the e-learning industry, Moodle occupies one of the leading places among modern LMS (Learning management system). Developed using Moodle tools, a distance learning course can include a large set of different resources and elements: files, web pages, forums, tests, assignments, glossaries, surveys, chats, lectures, books, seminars, wikis, SCORM objects.

## 7. Conclusion

The educational model in which a teacher and a student are physically located in different places during the learning process is called distance learning. It can be held with modern technological devices, such as computers and mobile phones with an Internet connection, televisions, tablets and all similar electronic devices that help bring e-learning to life (Volkova, 2020).

However, the absolute substitution to the distance learning format in Russian universities is impossible. This was stated by the head of the Ministry of Education and Science Valery Falkov, speaking about the readiness of the higher education system to work in the new conditions, the minister noted that by now universities have had experience in solving the most complicated problems referred to the situation that has developed in connection with the coronavirus: broadcasting live lectures through network platforms and interactive communication with students (Agranovich, 2020). Moreover, in certain cases, the distance learning format is justified. For example, when it comes to personal sessions, especially when a student lives far away from the university.

Russian universities use two main approaches. In the first one, ready-made online courses are adapted into educational curricula. These can be either ready-made courses on online platforms or university home-grown products. In the second approach, universities are switching to a distance format using university and external information frameworks. The number of higher educational institutions (MSU, MIPT, St. Petersburg State University, Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia, Professor M. A. Bonch-Bruevich St. Petersburg State University of Telecommunications, Moscow State University of Foreign Affairs, Moscow State Technical University, Ural Federal University, Novosibirsk State University, Plekhanov Russian University of Economics) have their platforms where lecturers give lectures and seminars (Abramyan & Katasonova, 2020).

In general, Russian universities for more than two decades have been installing, filling and experimentally applying various Russian and foreign LMS platforms, distance learning systems and network telecommunications: Moodle, Prometheus, Proctortrack, Canvas, Google Classroom, Google Meet, Sakai, Skype, Hangouts, Zoom, YouTube, Webex - for organizing synchronous and asynchronous channels of learning contents and students' work. The choice of a system depends on its commercial appeal, access to a high-speed Internet connection, and the number of students.

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