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Distance learning as a relevant educational technology in higher education institutions

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Abstract. The relevance of the subject is conditioned upon the fact that the current conditions, namely the COVID-19 epidemic and the introduction of martial law in Ukraine, cause dynamic changes in various spheres of human activity, including education. Despite internal and external obstacles, the educational process does not stop, and there is a need to adapt to large-scale changes in the country. The educational sector has transformed from the conventional form of the educational process, namely face-to-face, to online distance learning. Considering this, the purpose of the study is to analyse the peculiarities of implementing the distance learning process in a higher education institution in Ukraine, namely, the Higher Educational Institution of the Ukoopsilka "Poltava University of Economics and Trade". For a broad understanding of the problem and outlining the prospects for a quality educational process in the context of global processes, the study used several methods, including analysis, synthesis, deduction and surveys. The study outlines the main changes implemented by the management of higher education institutions in response to the social challenges posed by the pandemic and war. The effectiveness of using special programmes during training sessions in the distance education process is assessed. The flexibility of the educational sphere is substantiated, and the advantages and disadvantages of distance learning in terms of the quality of education are identified. The results of a student survey reflecting the real attitude of students to online learning are presented. The practical value of the work is that its results can be used by teachers to select high-quality tools designed to implement learning tasks in a distance educational format

Keywords: pandemic; digitalisation; training; university; acquisition of professional competence

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INTRODUCTION

The history of distance learning dates back to the 19th century, and it was from that period that its various forms began to gain popularity and development. As for Ukraine, it was not typical to use this approach to organise the educational process, as the conventional form usually prevailed.

Attempts to introduce distance learning tools into the higher education system have been made since the early 2000s, but they have not gained much traction. To a large extent, it is caused by distrust on the part of the management of educational institutions, and students themselves, in the



possibility of acquiring quality knowledge remotely. However, the situation in the Ukrainian educational environment has changed dramatically due to the spread of the acute respiratory disease COVID-19 and the introduction of quarantine restrictions in 2020 (Nazarenko & Polishchuk, 2021).

It was from this period that the problem of distance learning as an effective approach to the organisation of the educational process began to receive special attention in scientific discourse. It has been examined by scholars from various fields: educators, sociologists, lawyers, psychologists, etc. Their interest was driven by the measures implemented by the state authorities, as all educational entities were obliged to switch to distance learning. However, as noted by researchers L. Vasilchenko & N. Shatska (2021), there are not yet sufficiently effective organisational solutions for the organisation of the distance educational process, and yet several teachers are looking for innovations in this area. In addition, after the pandemic's spread declined and quarantine restrictions were lifted, the question of the feasibility of using distance learning is still relevant for Ukraine (Perepelytsia, 2022). The war unleashed by Russia has complicated, and in some areas made impossible, the traditional face-to-face educational process.

In particular, G.A. El Refae *et al.* (2021) in their study explained the content of the concept of distance learning, and its structural elements. The researchers were able to identify the significance of this mechanism and consider the approaches based on which it is implemented. L. Branchetti *et al.* (2021) proved the prospects of the distance learning process and argued that it is more effective than the conventional one. Therefore, these scholars described the benefits of using this approach in modern social conditions, especially in higher education institutions. The opposite position was demonstrated by G. Debeş (2021), as she identified the disadvantages of distance learning, in particular in the context of acquiring professional knowledge and skills. The author examined this issue from the standpoint of the quality of the educational process in a distance format and explored the level of professional competence acquired by students. E. Arthur-Nyarko *et al.* (2020) analysed the priority approaches and tools that can be used to deliver training and consultations remotely. Researchers support this approach and note that it is more rational than the conventional one. M. Wotto (2020) in her research examined the international experience of using distance learning. Based on the conclusions of the analysis, she described the priority measures that should be taken in the Ukrainian educational environment to ensure that the distance learning process is highly effective. It is important that the researcher was able to establish the impact of digitalisation on society and justify the learning activities of citizens. She noted that distance learning is an effective mechanism for the future development of the information state.

The author of this study defined the purpose of the research, which was to analyse the features of the distance learning process and to substantiate its effectiveness as

an educational technology within higher education institutions. To achieve this purpose, the following tasks have been set: to define the content of the concept of "distance learning", to consider its structure and properties, to explore the advantages and disadvantages of this approach, to examine the tools for introducing and implementing a distance learning in higher education institutions of Ukraine, to propose ways to improve the quality of higher education in the context of distance learning and active processes of European integration.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The method of analysis was used at the beginning of the work to conduct a thorough study of distance learning, namely to identify its features and characteristics. It was used to analyse the structure and principles underlying the above mechanism. The method of synthesis was used to describe the theoretical positions that were identified during the analysis. It was possible to establish a link between the concepts of "distance learning" and "educational technology".

In addition, the study used the method of deduction, which was responsible for the development of its logical structure. Accordingly, at the beginning of the work, a general analysis was conducted, which was expressed in the theoretical study of the main concepts related to its object. Further, specific provisions relating to distance learning within higher education institutions in Ukraine were examined, namely, the specifics of its implementation. Priority means for its improvement in the future have been identified, and recommendations for improving the quality of distance learning in Ukrainian higher education institutions have been developed.

The survey method was used to develop the empirical component of the research. In particular, a survey was conducted among master's students majoring in 011 "Educational Pedagogical Sciences", specialising in "Higher Education Pedagogy" at the Department of Pedagogy and Social Sciences at Poltava University of Economics and Trade. The respondents were 21-23 years old, including 15 girls and 15 boys. The survey asked 3 questions, namely: "Are you satisfied with the quality of the distance learning process?", "Do you want to receive professional knowledge in the future in the distance learning mode?", "Does the form of the learning process affect the level of professional competence?". The results obtained during this process are presented in percentage terms.

All procedures conducted in research involving people complied with ethical standards, did not violate the honour and dignity of respondents, considered the age of the respondents and preserved the anonymity of the results. In the course of the survey, the interviewer adhered to the provisions of the recommendations on the ethical aspect of conducting pedagogical research developed by reputable organisations, including the American Educational Research Association (2011) and the British Educational Research Association (2018).

RESULTS

The concept of distance learning and its main advantages

The concept of “distance learning” should be understood as a modernised educational process implemented based on the latest digital and telecommunication programmes that provide the subjects of the educational environment with the opportunity to engage in learning activities remotely, namely in the absence of physical interaction between them. To characterise the features of this mechanism, and to identify its main advantages and disadvantages, the author focuses on its attributes.

First of all, it was found that distance learning is characterised by flexibility. This property is expressed in the possibility for subjects to acquire knowledge and skills at a place and time convenient for them. This aspect is especially important for students of higher education institutions, as they have the opportunity to combine academic activities with practical ones in the form of internships or full-time employment. Thus, it allows them to immediately master a broad base of theoretical knowledge and implement it in life, during their professional activities (Dietrich *et al.*, 2020).

Another feature of distance learning as an educational technology is modularity. It consists in dividing the curriculum into relevant modules that deal with different subjects of the same discipline. According to the authors, this approach allows students to develop a full understanding of the content of a particular subject area in a particular course. In turn, teachers are able to teach courses individually or in groups, according to the approach chosen by students.

In addition, notably, the high cost-effectiveness of the distance learning process, which is an advantage for all actors in the educational environment. In particular, students get the opportunity to save their time and resources, which they usually spend on travelling to higher education institutions. Teachers are empowered to manage their own resources rationally, using them to their maximum effectiveness (Chen *et al.*, 2021).

A particular feature of distance learning that characterises it as a modernised and up-to-date educational technology is the changing role and importance of the teacher in this process. This property demonstrates the improvement of the learning environment in accordance with the conditions of modernity, and the specifics of social ties. During distance learning, the teacher appears to students as a subject of providing information and presenting educational material and as a guide who analyses the learning process and seeks to help students. What is fundamentally new is that the relationship between the above-mentioned entities develops both during classes and in the course of additional consultations, which certainly has a positive impact on the quality of the educational process (Branekova, 2020).

Adverse aspects of distance learning and their impact on the professional competences of future specialists

In addition, the impact of distance learning on the student was characterised, since the distance learning process has

distinctive features from the conventional one in the context of the student's personal development. It is reflected in the fact that during distance education, students have to organise the learning process and distribute tasks to a greater extent on their own. In addition, distance learning has a significant impact on the development of the creative and intellectual potential of the student's personality, which is expressed in their desire to acquire additional knowledge and master new skills through using digital tools and the latest technologies (Garad *et al.*, 2021).

Therewith, for a qualitative analysis of distance learning as an educational technology, it is necessary to analyse its shortcomings. Such an approach is driven by the need to consider both the positive and adverse aspects of the distance learning process, and to provide a fair assessment of the latter (Migocka-Patrzałek *et al.*, 2021).

Distance learning cannot be implemented in the absence of special digital devices and communications. In this context, this means a personal computer or laptop, and a stable internet connection that the student can use freely. These tools ensure the implementation of learning activities, and in the absence of at least one of them, learning is impossible. Another disadvantage is the lack of “live communication”, which is an important component of communication between the subjects of the educational process. Some students prefer face-to-face learning precisely due to the unhindered interaction with the teacher and other students.

However, these shortcomings are not significant, as it is possible to develop conditions under which they will not affect the learning process. Regarding the first comment, which concerns internet connectivity, all cities in Ukraine that are not under occupation by the Russian army have mobile networks and internet providers that allow users, including students, to have both wired and wireless access to the internet. To support communication and communication between teachers and students, additional online meetings can be organised for consultations on the subject or free extracurricular communication between the subjects of the educational process (Sousa & da Silva, 2020).

However, distance learning has a significant drawback that makes it virtually impossible to use in some cases. First and foremost, it is about training specialists in areas that require the perfect development of practical skills. Such specialities include medical, technical, natural and other fields that require a high need to acquire knowledge and skills related to using special tools, devices and technologies. Therefore, the main activity of students enrolled in such specialities is laboratory and practical work. This indicates an urgent need to practice the acquired skills and acquire professional competence. Admittedly, there are a number of digital and virtual reality tools available nowadays that students can use to develop their practical skills. However, this approach is not perfect and cannot guarantee the high quality of knowledge acquired by students (Brady & Pradhan, 2020).

The state of implementation of distance learning at Poltava University of Economics and Trade (PUET)

Based on the analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of distance learning, it can be established that it is currently a priority for society and has a high potential for possible use in the future. It was established that for a certain number of professional areas and, accordingly, academic specialities, it is necessary and mandatory for students to conduct laboratory classes and acquire the necessary practical skills.

As such an educational institution as the Higher Educational Institution of the Ukoospilka "Poltava University of Economics and Trade" (PUET), it actively uses a distance approach to the organisation of the educational process. In particular, the experience of using distance learning in this institution reaches 13 years, which indicates its priority. Moreover, about 25,000 students from different territorial units received education based on distance and information technologies. The contribution of PUET lecturers to the development of the distance Ukrainian educational environment is important, as they have managed to develop more than 2000 distance courses. In addition, local PUET distance education centres are located in 10 Ukrainian cities, which certainly allows asserting the active activity of the educational institution and the desire for development, including through

distance approaches (Main Distance Learning Centre of the Poltava University of Economics and Trade, 2022).

In addition, the principles underlying distance learning at PUET should be analysed. First of all, each student is given a personal page in the e-learning system. The sequence of training is expressed in the development of a schedule of classes in the disciplines provided by the training course. It is important to visualise the progress of knowledge acquisition during distance learning, and demonstrate the grade book. Priority is given to using a virtual record book and conducting an exam session remotely via online conferences. As for the student's presence at the university, it is mandatory only during the submission of documents and final certification.

To complete the assessment and define distance learning as an educational technology, a survey was conducted among master's students of Poltava University of Economics and Trade. The following results were obtained for the first question ("Are you satisfied with the quality of the distance learning process?"): 87% of respondents chose the answer "yes", 13% – "no". To the question "Would you like to receive professional knowledge in a distance form in the future?" 91% of respondents answered "yes", while 9% preferred the conventional form of education. The results of the third question ("Does the form of the educational process affect the level of professional competence?") were as follows: 79% of students answered "yes", 21% – "no" (Fig. 1).

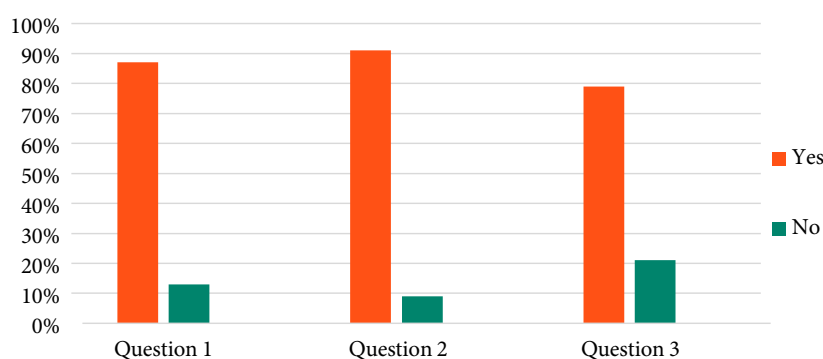


Figure 1. Results of the survey among PUET master students

Thus, it can be established that students express satisfaction with distance learning and consider it a priority for future use.

DISCUSSION

P. Faisal & Z. Kisman (2020) paid special attention to effective tools that can be used to conduct the learning process in a distance format. They stressed the priority of cloud environments, namely the possibility of storing educational materials in them for use by a large number of students. The researchers argued that this way, it is convenient to use information from any digital device, which allows learning anywhere. In addition, these scientists believe that such an approach will accelerate the optimisation and increase the efficiency of the process of transitioning educational activities from conventional to distance learning. According to

the author of this research, using cloud environments is an important tool in distance learning. He agrees with this position and believes that in this way, it is possible to speed up the exchange of information between the subjects of the educational process and make it more accessible.

T. Corlatean (2020) expresses an adverse attitude to the implementation of the educational process in a distance format. He highlighted the main risks that can arise during distance learning. The researcher is convinced that the quality of students' professional knowledge and competence is significantly deteriorating as a result of remote learning and the inability to develop practical skills. In addition, the researcher emphasises the inability of the teacher to exercise full control over the activities of students during classes and to objectively determine their level of knowledge. However, it is difficult to agree with the statements

made by T. Corlatean, as most of them are not true. In particular, the author of this research observes no difference in the levels of efficiency and quality of education in distance and face-to-face learning. In addition, it is impossible to agree with the researcher's position that there is no control over the educational process by the teacher, as today there are platforms that allow monitoring the actions of students during classes and tests.

The scientific work of E. Daroedono *et al.* (2020), in which the researchers focused on approaches to the acquisition of knowledge by students in medical specialties in distance learning. The authors noted that this process was implemented quite effectively at the beginning of the pandemic and continues to develop at the present stage. Therefore, it was possible for both teachers and students to perform the assigned learning tasks. It is because teachers can teach educational materials in several formats at once: video, audio, or text, and students can choose the most convenient way to work with them. For future doctors, it is extremely important to acquire and develop practical skills, which are achieved through using special computer programmes and virtual reality technologies. They allow students both to acquire new practical skills and to work with modern technologies and tools that will be essential in their future professional activities. This position can be partially agreed with, but it should be noted that the entire process of training medical specialists cannot be implemented through distance learning, as there is an objective need for laboratory and control classes.

M. Kuldashv *et al.* (2021) described the main problems faced by teachers and students in the course of distance learning activities. The authors focused mostly on technical shortcomings, but they did not ignore personal ones. The researchers highlighted the problems that arose as a result of overloading local servers in higher education institutions. In addition, they outlined problems with the Internet connection that hampered the training sessions. As for personal shortcomings, they include the low degree of computer literacy of the subjects of the educational process and their psychological unpreparedness for work in such conditions. These shortcomings can be considered reasonable, but, notably, they can be resolved and eliminated, which will certainly improve distance learning.

I. Bakhov *et al.* (2021) managed to describe the approaches that are prioritised for the development of the educational distance environment in Ukraine. Their recommendations are largely based on international experience and relate to reforming the entire educational process. First of all, the authors note the necessity to consolidate the role and place of information and communication technologies in the educational sphere at the legislative level as a way to further its development. In addition, the development and support of a systemic Ukrainian educational and scientific information mechanism, which would include telecommunications infrastructure, digital resources, virtual library services, and information and analytical tools for managing the educational environment. Notably, these approaches are

rather general, and the researchers did not identify specific ways to implement them. Thus, the proposed positions can be partially agreed with, but they should be more specific.

The development of distance learning in Ukraine was explored by V. Shevchenko *et al.* (2021). In their research, they described the current problems that are typical for Ukrainian society in the field of distance education. The researchers focused on such shortcomings as the lack of appropriate budgetary support for the development of distance learning tools, and other elements that are part of the structure of the educational and scientific information system. They argue for the necessity of developing and implementing consistent multi-vector financing of information and communication technologies used in distance learning activities. The proposed ideas are indeed quite a priority, as they will have a positive impact on the implementation of distance learning activities in Ukraine.

In terms of tangential surveys among students, such a study was conducted, for example, by N.O. Terenda *et al.* (2020) at the I.Ya. Horbachevsky Ternopil National University of the Ministry of Health of Ukraine. The results obtained by these researchers confirm that students are mostly satisfied with online learning. The majority of participants in the survey have a generally good attitude to distance learning and name only a few of its shortcomings, find it easy to learn the material, have access to consultations, and in most cases receive comprehensive answers to their questions. In addition, students note that in the learning process they mainly use electronic materials received from teachers, although they have many comments on these educational sources.

Most of the shortcomings mentioned by students were subjective, and the level of obstacles is closely related to self-motivation and the ability to self-organise. However, notably, the majority of respondents (42.3%), although they are quite successful in studying remotely, would like to return to conventional education. 28.8% want to learn remotely, and the rest cannot answer this question (Terenda *et al.*, 2020). These results are very different from those obtained by the authors of this study. These differences can be explained by the fact that over the past two years, significant positive changes have occurred in the Ukrainian educational process and the level of distance learning has increased significantly. On the other hand, over time, this form of education has become more familiar to students, and they have been able to better adapt to the challenges of the modern world. Thus, in general, it can be concluded that distance learning has been quite successful and the existing problems are gradually being resolved.

Thus, the discussion revealed the main problems facing Ukrainian society and the ways to overcome them. It indicates the priority of developing approaches and tools for distance learning in the future, under normal external social conditions.

CONCLUSIONS

The study established that distance learning is indeed a relevant educational technology that should be used in higher

education institutions in Ukraine. The research has succeeded in establishing the content of the concept of “distance learning”, which includes the educational process that occurs in the absence of physical contact between students and teachers, through information and communication technologies. In addition, it was possible to explore the features inherent in the above-mentioned form of the educational process. These included flexibility, modularity, reforming the role of the teacher in educational activities, and effective influence on the student’s personality. All of them were disclosed and considered, which allowed describing the vectors of distance learning.

However, for a qualitative assessment of the distance learning process, the authors considered its adverse properties. The authors described the dependence on the availability of unimpeded access to the Internet and digital devices for the subjects of educational activities and the lack of “live communication” between students and teachers. Therewith, the author suggests ways to overcome and avoid them, which gives grounds to assert that the above shortcomings are not significant. In addition, the research notes that there is a list of specialities that require practical training of specialists, namely, compulsory training. In this case,

it is impossible to completely replace the conventional form of the educational process.

To determine the subjective attitude of students to distance learning, a survey was conducted among master’s students enrolled in the speciality “Higher Education Pedagogy” at the Department of Pedagogy and Social Sciences at Poltava University of Economics and Trade. The survey had certain limitations, including quantitative (only master’s students were involved in data collection) and geographical (the research was conducted within one educational institution). Accordingly, the level of satisfaction with the quality of education received was determined, and it was established that using distance learning in the future is a priority approach. Therefore, in the following works, it is appropriate to consider effective ways for medical students to perform learning activities in a distance form, and qualitative testing of their skills.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

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Дистанційне навчання як актуальна освітня технологія в закладах вищої освіти

Анотація. Актуальність теми зумовлено тим, що сучасні умови, а саме епідемія COVID-19, а також уведення воєнного стану на території України, зумовлюють динамічні зміни, що стосуються різних сфер життя людської діяльності, зокрема освітньої. Незважаючи на внутрішні й зовнішні перешкоди освітній процес не зупиняється і є потреба підлаштуватися під масштабні зміни в країні. Освітня сфера трансформувалася від традиційної форми навчального процесу, а саме очної, до дистанційної в режимі онлайн. З огляду на це сформульовано мету дослідження, що полягала в аналізі особливостей реалізації навчального процесу дистанційного формату в закладі вищої освіти України, а саме у Вищому навчальному закладі Укоопспілки «Полтавський університет економіки і торгівлі». Задля широкого розуміння проблеми та окреслення перспектив якісного освітнього процесу в умовах глобальних процесів у дослідженні використано низку методів, серед яких: аналіз, синтез, дедукція та опитування. У результаті дослідження схарактеризовано основні зміни, які реалізувало керівництво вищих навчальних закладів у відповідь на суспільні виклики, що постали під час пандемії та війни. Проведено оцінку ефективності використання спеціальних програм під час навчальних занять у дистанційному освітньому процесі. Обґрунтовано гнучкість освітньої сфери, а також визначено переваги й недоліки дистанційного навчання, які стосуються якості освіти. Представлено результати опитування студентів, що відображають реальне ставлення здобувачів освіти до онлайн-навчання. Практична цінність роботи полягає в тому, що її результати викладачі можуть використати для підбору якісних інструментів, призначених для реалізації навчальних завдань у дистанційному освітньому форматі

Ключові слова: пандемія; цифровізація; підготовка фахівців; університет; набуття професійної компетенції
