
Motivation for Distance Learning as A Factor Affecting the Quality of Education

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Abstract: Online learning is becoming increasingly popular in today's world. This can be clearly seen through the number of training courses and various training activities that are being developed and offered. At the present time, 'distance learning' and 'online learning' are often used as interchangeable terms. However, distance learning is considered to be a broader concept, it is the remote learning which is not necessarily real time learning, and online learning is learning via the Internet connection "here and now" and is considered only as one of the forms of distance learning. So, one can also note that there is an ambivalent opinion regarding distance learning: some people recognize and trust this form of learning while the others have a negative attitude towards receiving education in this way.

The article shows the results of surveys conducted in different years in order to find out people's opinions on the possibility of getting proper education through distance learning.

Keywords: learning, distance learning, online learning and offline learning, higher education, self-study.

INTRODUCTION

Relevance of the problem

Quite a fast-paced life is a typical characteristic of the modern society. The reality is changing, the economic situation is changing, and the requirements to people are changing. According to Western researchers, at the current pace of scientific and technical development, most of the employed need to change their specialty and qualifications at least 4 to 5 times during their working lives in order to be able to meet the requirements. And many specialists, both domestic and foreign, insist that now it is necessary to study constantly during the whole life.

Natural questions arise, such as how to find time to study, how to work your way through school? And the distance learning may help here.

At the present time, considering the need for lifelong learning, there is a great information overload (information stress). And the following questions are to be answered: how to find the needed information, how to get rid of or avoid unnecessary information?

Given that the current generation is the one that is already born with gadgets, and these various devices are already an indispensable part of their lives, the necessity in the online learning has arisen.

But then the following question arises: how to choose the right online courses for yourself, taking into account your capabilities and properly designed course and, accordingly, the information provided and necessary for your job?

Let's give an example based on the experience of the author who have signed up for the online advanced training courses. The information for the courses was provided from Wikipedia and from the students' papers that are freely available on the Internet. Therefore, the quality of distance learning is often a significant issue. However, it should be noted that some courses are properly designed, and their mandatory requirement is to write various papers in order to assess how well the student has mastered the information provided to him/her, what skills and abilities he/she has acquired.

Theoretical aspects

Distance Learning is an educational technology in which everyone living anywhere has an opportunity to study the program of any college or university (any educational institution of vocational or higher education). The realization of this goal is ensured by a rich set of modern information technologies: textbooks and other printed publications, transmission of learning materials via computer telecommunications, video tapes, discussions and seminars held through computer telecommunications, bilateral video conferences, etc. Such learning provides the students with a flexible choice of place and time of studying; an opportunity to have an on-the-job training, including for those living in the most remote regions; freedom of choice of disciplines; an opportunity to

communicate with prominent representatives of science, education and culture; facilitates interactive communication between students and teachers, activation of self-directed learning and satisfaction of self-educational needs of students (Kodzhaspirova, Kodzhaspirov, 2000).

Online learning, unlike distance learning, is the learning through an Internet connection in real time.

The distance learning technologies are classified as follows (Solovov, 2006):

- face-to-face — communication between teachers and students;
- audio, video — use of audio and video recordings designed for learning purposes;
- printed materials — use of different types of educational printing products;
- offline media — use of digital learning materials, mainly interactive learning programs;
- e-mail — use of e-mail for communication, delivery of learning materials;
- WWW - online use of digital learning materials using World Wide Web technologies;
- LMS — use of online Learning Management Systems.

Interesting is the opinion about the components of the online learning for the software developers and project promotion managers, which components can be integrated with modern online learning (e-learning). Thus, among the components of online learning are as follows (Chashchin, Sarafanov, Kudryavtsev, 2018):

- Blended Learning means the learning that combines the offline learning and the online learning (project creation, self-study, etc.);
- Mobile Learning means the learning using mobile communication devices and portable IT devices (mobile phones, laptops, etc.);
- Informal Learning means the online learning, learning activities outside the formal environment.

Some researchers of distance learning and online learning point to the fact that in defining the online courses within such learning, the distance learning and the e-learning are often considered to be the same (i.e. synonymous concepts); this is incorrect. They give the following definitions: distant is the one produced or operated from a distance, and electronic is the one that exists in a digital form (e.g. e-book) or is effected by means of the network technologies (e.g. email or e-business) (Grechushkina, 2018). Therefore, a concept of Distance E-Learning Course exists.

Current trends

Modern studies in the field of distance learning and online learning are diverse and are conducted in very different directions. Let us discuss some of them.

In some modern works, the issues of moving some of the distance learning tasks onto a mobile platform; and the possibilities using the mobile application for the research work and performance of various practices (e.g., upon obtaining professional skills and professional experience) that occupy a significant place in the training of contemporary students (bachelors, masters) are studied. The approaches to implement an individual distance learning system based on the standard application modules are also being developed.

The task of creating the distance learning systems designed for studying various disciplines, for example, for learning the methods of how to develop digital equipment is deemed to be one of the relevant tasks.

Some modern author believe that the Mass Open Online Courses (MOOC) that operate online are becoming widespread nowadays (e.g. educational courses in the Russian language for foreign students). A Mass Open Online Course is an online course the typical characteristic of which is an open access (without restrictions) to the learning materials and to the testing and assessment materials for the participant in the course in the scope sufficient to achieve the planned (stated) learning outcomes and their evaluation (Grechushkina, 2018).

Some works address the organizational issues associated with the benefits and challenges of the online learning. The online learning changes the organization of resources and, hence, the structure of learning services, training courses. Students have a choice, an increased opportunity to compare good and bad courses, weak and strong teachers. Higher education becomes available for adults, for the working professionals who would be hard pressed to interrupt their careers for a new cycle of an intramural form of study or even for just a systematic training. It can also be noted that training courses are not linked anymore to a particular educational institution. You can take a course taught by a Harvard professor or by a professor at a Russian educational institution, regardless of where you study. However, it should be noted that there is a situation that the online courses passed are disregarded by the serious universities (Kuzminov, 2015).

It has been also argued that the prospect of widespread use (application) of mobile learning (m-learning) is one of the prospects for modern distance learning. The studies have been conducted showing that most students are technically and psychologically ready to use mobile technologies in education (Golitsyna, Polovnikova, 2011).

RESEARCH METHODS

Surveys have been conducted to find out people's opinions on distance learning. Let us discuss the results of the surveys of 2006 (190 persons) and 2019 (180 persons): what changes have occurred in people's attitude towards this form of learning.

RESULTS

The results of the survey of the intramural students (140 persons) and extramural students (50 persons) conducted more than ten years ago (in 2006) show that 94.6% of the respondents would refuse distance learning, in most cases explaining it by the lack of direct contact with teachers and with each other (Fig. 1). However, it was pointed out as a positive aspect that distance learning helps to save time for education and makes it possible to combine job and educational activities. (Nadtochiy, Shilin, 2006).

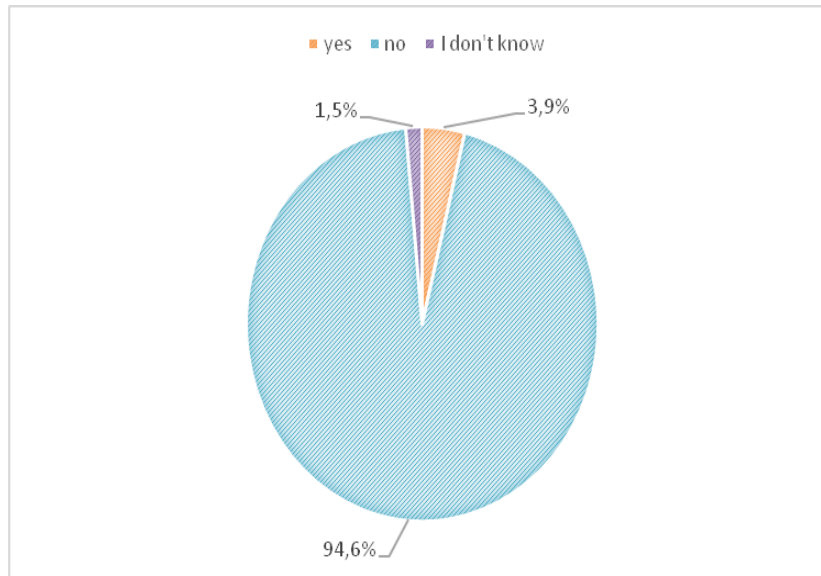


Fig. 1: Distribution of answers to the question: "Would you like to receive education through distance learning?"

The 2019 mass survey was attended not only by pupils (schoolchildren, students), but also by the working people, retired persons; and the participants in the survey are from different areas of labor activities (teachers, doctors, engineers, etc.). Among them are the students who work. A total of 180 persons aged 16 to 68 years were interviewed. Unlike the 2006 survey in which the respondent were asked one question, in 2019 respondents were asked to answer six questions (the questions are specified in the caption text of Figures 3 through 8 with the diagrams) and the questionnaire contained questions in an open form and in a closed form. Figure 2 shows the gender composition of the respondent group.

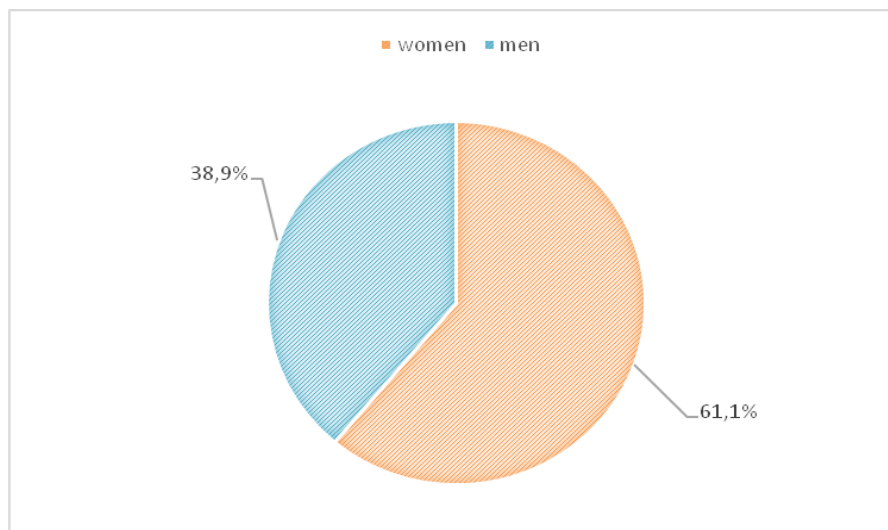


Fig. 2: Gender composition of the respondent group

Almost all respondents answered in the affirmative to the question: "Do you know what distance learning is?" (Fig. 3) It should be noted that the vast majority of respondents see no difference between distance learning and online learning and consider the two forms to be absolutely identical in content.

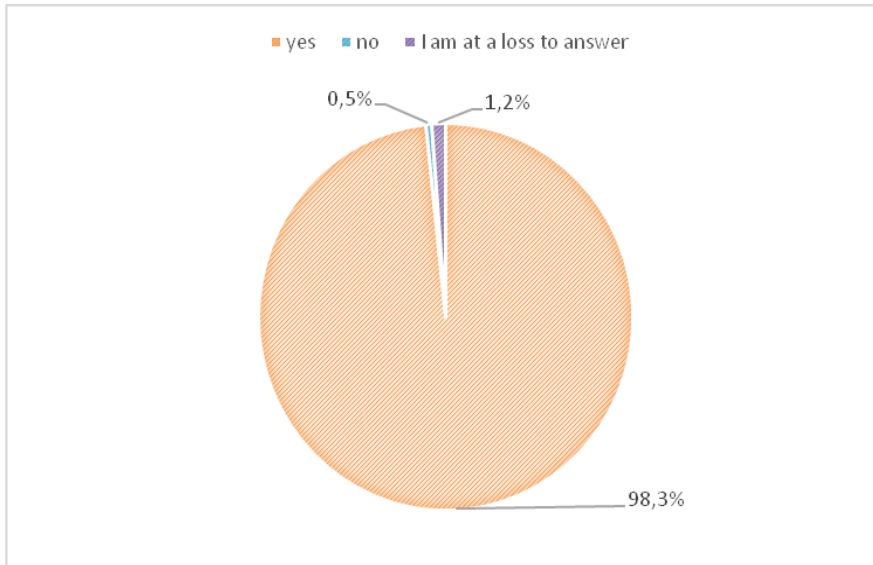


Fig. 3: Distribution of answers to the question: “Do you know what distance learning is?”

A question was then asked about the attitude to the form of learning in question. There was a wide range of opinions; therefore, we will present only the answers that received over 7% of votes. (Fig. 4).

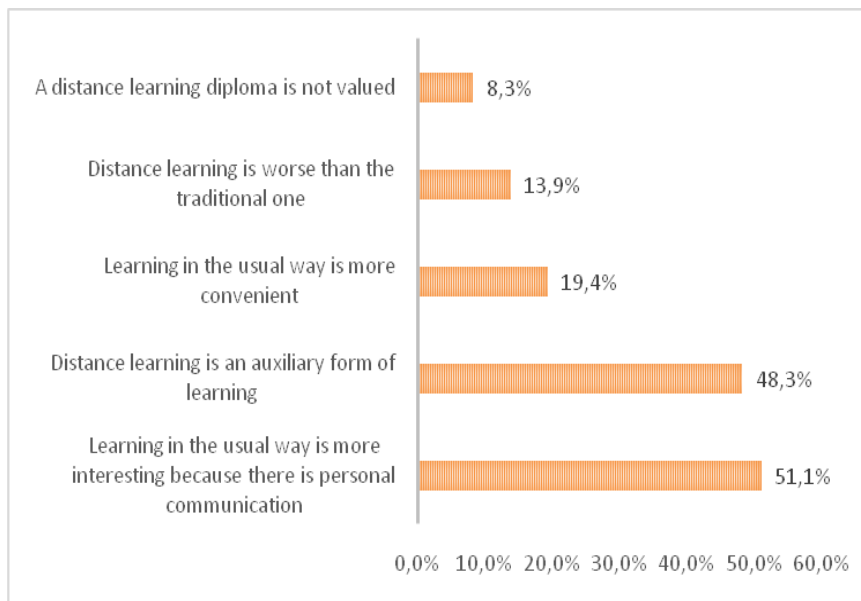


Fig. 4: Distribution of answers to the question: “What is your attitude towards distance learning (to online learning)?” (In % of the total number of respondents)

Half of the respondents (51.1%) believe that it is more interesting to learn when there is direct communication in learning (when acquiring knowledge). This facilitates the exchange of different opinions, mutual learning, obtaining a competent viewpoint from the teacher, etc. And about half of the respondents (48.3%) point out that distance learning can and should only be used in combination with offline learning as an additional form. And it is interesting to note that the majority of people do not use the opportunity to communicate directly, they communicate with others mostly without leaving their phones as well as the students in classrooms keep hold of their personal gadgets.

The next question was about the choice of distance learning (Fig. 5).

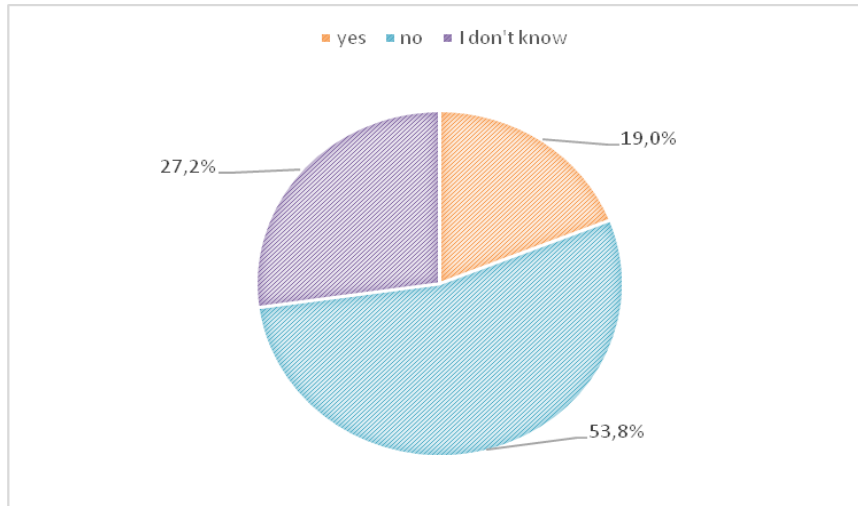


Fig. 5: Distribution of answers to the question: “Would you like to have distance learning?”

Still, a little more than half of the respondents answered in the negative (53.8%). However, it can be noted that considerably fewer people do not look into options for online training (or distance learning) as compared to the above results of the 2006 survey.

Let us give some options of both affirmative and negative answers to this question, with explanations:

- Yes, it is convenient to combine with job;
- I consider it only as an option for further training;
- No, as this is a formal process;
- Yes, you don't have to waste time to travel;
- Yes, it is convenient;
- Only on extraordinary occasions — it's difficult to organize yourself;
- No, I want to study in a group;
- No, emotional contact with the teacher is important etc.

Opinions were divided as to the question “In what area would you like to study online?”— Mostly they prefer to have distance learning to study a foreign language and improve their skills.

However, when choosing the learning services that can be implemented through the use of distance learning (Fig. 6), most respondents mentioned the service of creating the learning courses for students in some disciplines (60.3%).

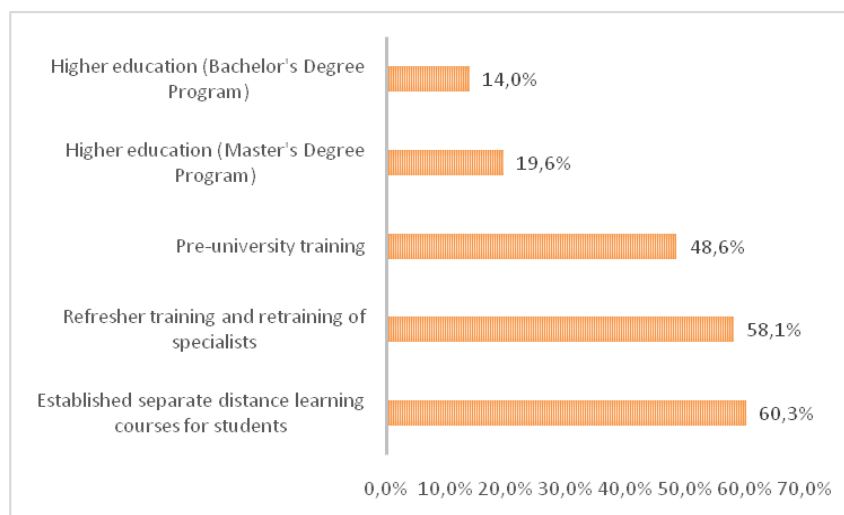


Fig. 6: Distribution of answers to the question: “In your opinion, what educational services can be implemented using distance learning?” (In % of the total number of respondents)

Opinions were divided as to how efficient distance learning (online learning) was (Fig. 7).

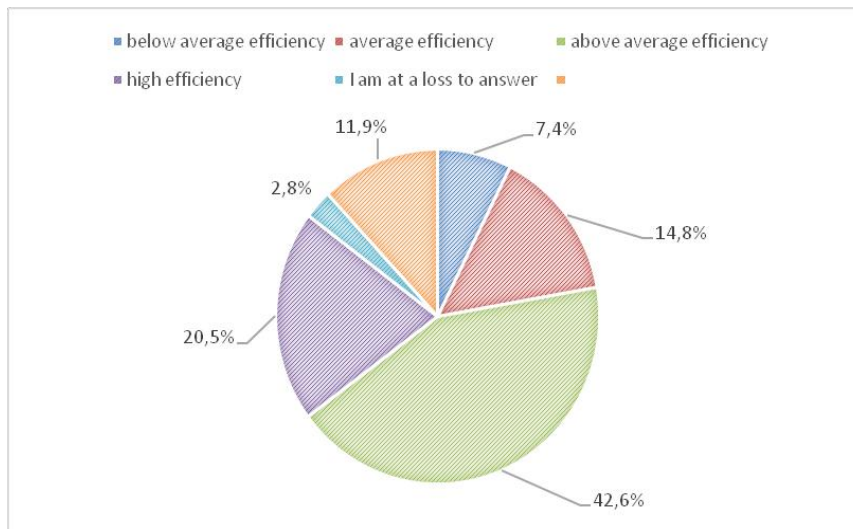


Fig. 7: Distribution of answers to the question on the efficiency of distance learning

The answer of the majority of the respondents was “average efficiency” (42.6%). And the last question about the use of distance learning (as a combined offline form and online form of learning) in educational institutions showed that the majority of the respondents (68.2%) tend to support such an idea (Fig. 8).

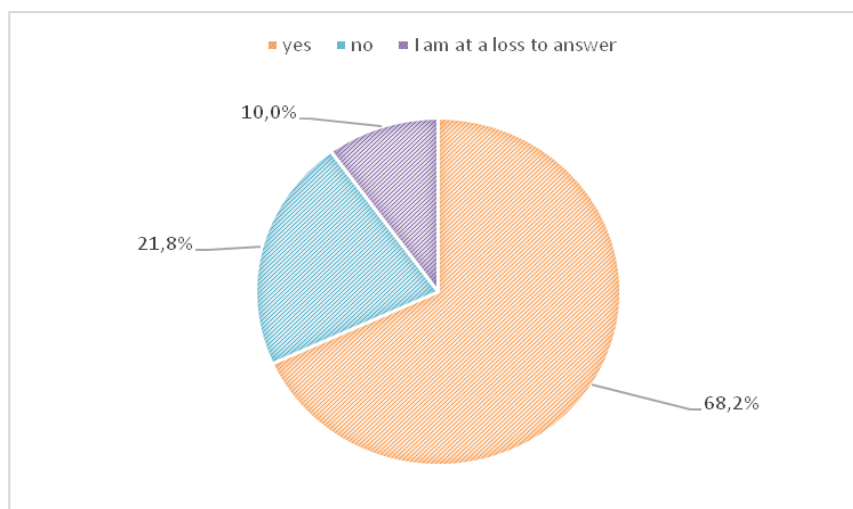


Fig. 8: Distribution of answers to the question: “Do you support the idea of introducing the distance learning system into the educational process of the higher education institutions?”

The answers to this question show that the respondents predict further development and expansion of distance learning.

Here are some interesting comments that were given in the answers to the questions (the comments are given verbatim).

A.A.: “What is my attitude to distance learning (to online learning)? In such learning, the students are not left unattended. Each higher education institution has its own program through which the students’ performance is monitored. For example, the Moscow Institute of Technology has a distance learning system. By its functions it imitates the dean’s office, the library and even a place for general informal networking. A student gets access to the system and enters his or her account. There he/she becomes aware of the curriculum, can view his/her grades, receives textbooks and communicates with fellow students. On the portal, the students take their exams and tests. Those who do not meet the deadline may be expelled. It’s hard to cheat off as the time for answer is limited and the questions are formulated in such a way that it will be difficult to google information. Distance learning has many advantages. Thanks to the flexible schedule, you can work and study at the same time by adjusting the lecture schedule. Applying knowledge in practice is a great opportunity for a recent graduate. The online format enables you to study from any part of the world and save time without having to spend hours in traffic jams on the subway on your way to the university. However, a reservation has to be made:

this form of study is not suitable for everyone. For example, if you are looking for a fraternity atmosphere, it is better to enter the university that offers intramural courses. Besides, the online-learning has many temptations: sometimes one is tempted to open a tab page with a YouTube video or browse the Facebook news feed. So the e-lessons can turn out to be both a real torment and a useful training to develop the strength of will and self-discipline.

You can develop yourself in any direction; the main thing is that it should be fascinating. Because it's much easier to master an area that fascinates you than the one that makes you bored. And then I would formulate some most general recommendations that are suitable for any humanities scholar. 1) Understand your relationship with computers and information networks. It is best to master them at a decent level, up to and including programming skills. Even if you do not become a great programmer, you will still acquire the skills that will enable you to understand the areas in which there are relatively few humanitarian professionals. This is a serious competitive advantage. 2) Check out your competence in project management. It sounds a bit scary, but it is required quite often in real life. Ability to manage projects by setting goals/tasks, calculating estimates and scheduling."

V.S.: "Distance learning has two main advantages over face-to-face learning; these are independence from the territorial location of both the learner and the educational institution, and the opportunity for the learner to plan his or her timing of learning.

However, this applies only to those learners who really want to learn, rather than just obtain a diploma. After all, the teacher, communicating via the Internet, does not know who is sitting at the computer at that moment — the student or his friend, relative, a hired teacher, etc.

Besides, in distance learning, there is no such an important element as the skill of speaking to the audience and defending your viewpoint in discussions.

Most likely, the way out would be a combination of distance learning and periodic presence of learners at seminars, laboratory and other practicals. One must not forget that personal and direct communication between the learner and the teacher is also an effective element of the learning process."

Questions to be discussed

Perhaps, the most important thing that embarrasses most people when choosing distance learning as the main form of learning is a high proportion of self-learning. The intramural form of study involves self-learning as well (including the independent work of students), however the proportion of self-learning is much smaller there as compared to distance learning or online learning.

As mentioned above, the pace of life of people and, consequently, the pace of learning is increasing nowadays. Today, there is a need to have more than one education degree (including higher education) and to study constantly because of modern requirements to the content knowledge, to mastering certain skills and abilities.

It should also be mentioned that there is an opinion that online learning is the one for the people with little income and only the wealthy people can afford learning offline (Tokarev, 2019).

Experience in organizing the learning process using distance learning has enabled us to identify a number of relevant problems (both common and private) and find ways for solving thereof (Nadtochiy, Shilin, 2006).

One may note that the issue of readiness for self-organization of learning (formation of motivation and awareness of responsibility for their own development) is most significant for the students. The next issue is the issue of allocation of own time, which issue is correlated with the issue of performance impairment in the process of simultaneous labor and training activities (fatigue after working hours, lack of time to master the material of textbooks). There is also a problem of insufficient opportunities for independent learning of some disciplines without performing certain practical work.

Part of the above mentioned problems are now solved by organizing individual consultations for students by the teacher on as-needed basis and by providing them with the opportunity to attend lectures and practical classes together with intramural students.

The issue of teachers' readiness to participate in the learning process using distance learning also attracts attention.

Let us discuss some difficulties encountered by teachers, and namely, the difficulties of personal identification of students, management of paper works and checking home works (abstracts, laboratory work, etc.). The above difficulties can be overcome by introducing the requirement for students to use electronic digital signatures when submitting their home works to the teachers.

From the psychological point of view, the existence of the problem of semantic barrier (misunderstanding of information due to mismatched peoples' thesauruses) should be recognized. Even in the event that clear written methodological recommendations on how to study the discipline and do home works are available, the students have many clarifying questions associated with the fear of incorrect or inaccurate performance of work, etc.

The opportunities for the development of the form of study in question arise from the advantages of distance learning (saving time, developing the will, learning at one's own pace, etc.) which advantages are accepted by

more and more people year by year. And it is worth pointing out a new trend in education, i.e. getting a dual degree (domestic and foreign) which is also made possible through online learning.

At the present time, many studies are devoted to identifying the advantages and disadvantages of distance learning. But there is no common opinion: each person defines for himself the pros and cons of distance learning.

The reality is that (according to the results of the survey of 2019) a bit more than half of respondents are already considering the possibility of distance learning and in the future their number will only increase.

Distance learning is quite a wide area for discussion; therefore, there are many questions to be discussed. Based on the experience of the author, it may also be noted that it takes guts to force yourself to learn and that a good motivation for self-learning is needed. After all, distance learning is basically a self-learning, in essence, with the feedback that helps the learner to control how well he or she has mastered a particular discipline, material, etc.

At the moment, a mixed (combined) learning is recognized to be the most promising, i.e. the offline learning combined with the online learning elements, which makes the learning process more effective and interesting because of the advantages of such different forms of learning (Golitsyna, Polovnikova, 2011).

CONCLUSION

According to the author, the online learning or distance learning should be used only as an additional form. One must always choose a learning area that can be mastered through the online courses. For example, in technical areas, it is impossible to master many subjects completely through distance learning. There are good reasons why various laboratory works, etc. are designed to be done under the guidance of a knowledgeable teacher. Even virtual reality is unable to ensure complete sensation and understanding of any field of activity. One has to experience it himself/herself.

Based on the personal experience of distance learning, the author also advocates the advantages of a combined form of learning. It is very difficult to comprehensively study the topic on your own, i.e. to identify the right and wrong interpretation of concepts and approaches to solving certain problems within the framework of the topic in question, and even to correctly pronounce and use professional terms. However, this raises a question about the professionalism (competence) of the teacher in offline teaching. In the absence of a competent teacher, the online learning may prove to be more effective than the classroom learning.

As a forecast, we can say that online learning will be developing and become more perfect in the near future, but it cannot yet completely replace offline learning. The above survey results just confirm this fact.

Comment on public access to data, ethics and conflict of interest

All the procedures of the research with the participation of people comply with the existing ethical standards (in this research we refer to the anonymous questionnaire survey of students).

There is no conflict of interest relating to this work.

The comments of the survey participants (A.A. and V.S.) presented in this article are published with the consent of the authors of such comments.

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