

Online Learning As A Factor of Increasing Competitiveness In The Higher Education Field

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Abstract

The global economic crisis caused by the Covid19 pandemic has had a serious impact not only on the global economy, its foreign trade and finance, labor markets, but also on the social life of mankind, lifestyle, culture, and the scientific world. Higher education was among the areas most affected by this impact. In order to continue fulfilling its important socio-economic task, it was forced to improve the mechanisms and methods of managing and organizing the educational process. Among them is online education, which by this time has proven itself well in Europe.

Keywords: full-time education, distance learning, e-learning educational process, comparative advantages, competitiveness.

Introduction:

In the process of globalization, there are significant changes in external factors that determine the competitiveness of national goods and services. Inter-country competition is intensifying, with the development of information and communication technologies, and the importance of state regulation and management is increasing. The transformation of the theory of competitiveness is significantly influenced by the increasing global financial and economic crises, in particular, the coronavirus pandemic of 2019-2022. External factors of competitiveness also have a transformative effect on its internal factors, which include both the macroeconomic environment and the choice of an innovative development path, the state of national institutions and infrastructure, and the quality of human capital. In this regard, crucial transformations are taking place in the university environment of Uzbekistan, which are designed to increase the competitiveness of this area and provide high-quality human resources for the innovative development of industries in the Republic of Uzbekistan. An important condition for this process is the study of the experience of foreign countries, the accelerated mastery of modern information and communication technologies and methods, including online learning and distance education.

Research methods. Various methods of economic research as observation and collection of facts, modeling, the method of scientific abstractions, analysis and synthesis and a systematic approach have been used in this scientific paper.

Results and discussion. Increasing competitiveness is a determining factor in social production, prompting participants in the competitive process to quickly meet social needs, expressed through demand, introduce scientific and technological achievements, reduce costs, improve quality, and expand the supply of goods and services. Since the 2000-s, these issues have been constantly in the focus of attention of

national experts, forums and conferences in Uzbekistan. Thus, the multilevel forms of the economy's competitiveness are: the competitiveness of goods; competitiveness of the commodity producer; industry's competitiveness; and finally, the country's competitiveness. They were considered in the materials of the Republican Scientific Seminar "Problems and Prospects of the Competitiveness of the National Economy" (Tashkent, 2004), at the Forum of Economists of Uzbekistan "Strategy for Further Improving the Competitiveness of the National Economy" (Tashkent, 2012) and others. These problems have gained particular urgency in the last 5 years.

The development of the educational potential of the higher education sphere is the initial and determining direction for the modernization of the national economy of the Republic of Uzbekistan. In this regard, the authors studied the experience of foreign countries in increasing the investment attractiveness of their universities for domestic and foreign students.

An important tool for achieving these goals has been the use of distance education in European countries. A number of experts highlight its features and benefits in Germany. For example, for a long time, the Hagen Correspondence University (Fernuniversität in Hagen) was the most famous German university specializing only in distance learning. It is the first and only public correspondence university in Germany. And today, the German portal FernstudiumCheck.de publishes a ranking of the best educational institutions in Germany offering distance learning [1].

Some experts in their article "How German Universities Save from Coronavirus" draw attention to the individual training approach in the federal lands of Germany, taking into account the coronavirus situation and the specifics of each university [2].

Leading experts from Jedium, a Microsoft partner company, V. Chashchin, A. Sarafanov, S. Kudryavtsev [3] conclude that in the modern world the concept of e-learning is complex and includes several components:

- *Blended learning* - learning that combines instructor-led and online learning with out-of-class activity options. The student can create projects, use the help of mentors, and so on.;
- *Mobile learning* - Learning using mobile devices; • *Informal learning* – activities outside the formal environment (classroom, online class, etc.). Their opinion is, that this type of learning works through social interaction.

The Russian expert K.Vasiliev notes in his article "7 main problems of modern distance learning": "Despite the fact that distance education has existed for quite a long time, it has only begun to be actively used in the last 5 years. Moreover, some countries faced a new way of learning literally in the 2019-2020 academic year due to urgent need (coronavirus pandemic)".

During the period of scientific 60-90day internships within the framework of the programs of the German Academic Exchange Service (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst), the authors of this paper had to pay attention to the fact that in many German universities, the number of students studying at the correspondence department even exceeded the number of full-time students. So, in 2019, at the University of Applied Sciences in Wismar, this difference was almost 2 times. However, this fact and the process itself were not in the sphere of scientific interest of the authors. Scientific interest in it arose only with the onset of the coronavirus crisis and the introduction of online learning in the countries of the world, including Uzbekistan, which prompted a deeper study of it.

Distance education in European countries. As our research has shown, the system of e-learning (electronic education) in Europe is the most developed in comparison with other continents. In Germany, as well as in a number of European countries, such as: Finland, Spain, France, Italy, they have long realized

the prospects of distance learning. In the German education system, there is a virtual institute - Virtuelle Fachhochschule, which is a kind of association of 15 German and 4 Swedish universities, which offers higher education in a number of applied sciences.

Features and organization of distance learning in Germany. Full-time and part-time forms of information education in Germany are of a specific nature. The country's leadership has set a goal to improve the remote learning system so that it becomes an excellent alternative to the full-time stationary form of the educational process. In addition, great emphasis was placed on the fact that in addition to obtaining a diploma in the process of learning in this way, students perfectly master their working skills with Internet technologies. Germany sets itself the goal of taking a leading position in the field of e-learning and is aimed at cooperating with European and other foreign countries.

The academic year usually consists of two semesters. With the beginning of each semester, students receive ready-made educational material in the form of abstracts with all the necessary information. If additional materials are required, they can always be found on the official website of the department. And also teachers can give assignments every week, sending them by e-mail and indicating the deadlines. Part-time students are required to participate in online group work, complete projects, participate in virtual seminars. Exams and sessions are taken directly at universities or at regional training centers at the end of each semester [3].

The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the organization of the educational process. Today, taking into account two years of experience in the context of the coronavirus pandemic, we can note a wide range of national approaches in the combating this new type of virus, as well as protecting the population and the gene pool - from complete bans and severe restrictions to full or partial liberalization and tolerance. The difference in approaches was explained by the specifics of local conditions - the healthcare system, its material, as well as scientific and technical base, population structure, etc. The breadth, and in some cases, the opposite of approaches have manifested themselves not only on the scale of individual countries, but also within their regions and federal states.

For example, European universities have taken specific measures to slow down the spread of the coronavirus. So, in 2021, following Italy, Greece, Denmark, Poland, Austria announced the temporary closure of its universities, where from March 10 until the beginning of April, training took place remotely - using the Internet and multimedia. The university system in Germany chose its own path - universities throughout the country should not be closed, but adapted to the new conditions as much as possible, while maintaining the foundations of the educational process. Many universities have created special headquarters and developed recommendations to prevent the spread of infection. But since the federal states themselves dictate conditions in the field of education, some of them have gone further than federal recommendations. So, during 2021, universities in Bavaria were closed for quarantine, and in Berlin they were allowed to take exams at home [4].

Online learning as a challenge and requirement of the time. As our study has shown, universities around the world have been eyeing the introduction of online education for a long time. Back in 2018, that is, before the onset of the coronavirus crisis, experts from Jedium, a partner company of Microsoft Russia, began to note that online learning was beginning to really crowd out face-to-face learning [5]. According to them, some progressive Russian universities have begun to introduce online courses designed to replace academic hours within the walls of educational institutions. A lot of materials about the problems and trends of modern online learning, as well as the possibility of creating VR projects that can be integrated with modern e-learning, have appeared in the university and expert environment. A retrospective analysis

shows that the classical education system was built on behavioral principles - the teacher was in the center, and around him were students who silently listened to him. As the industrial society, the Internet, information and communication technologies developed, the transition to more complex learning models began.

We see that the introduction of any innovation is accompanied by a number of difficulties. Despite the fact that distance education has existed for quite a long time, it has been actively used only in the last 5 years. At the same time, some countries, including the Republic of Uzbekistan, faced a new way of learning only in the 2019-2020 academic year due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Distance education in Russia: experience and practice. Distance learning in Russia appeared about 10-15 years ago with the development of Internet technologies, but it has acquired a more advanced and modern form relatively recently. It was used only in higher educational institutions as a "new department", along with full-time and part-time. But due to the serious epidemiological situation, "remote interaction" was established almost everywhere: in schools, colleges and universities, at workplaces [6]. The desire, despite the coronavirus pandemic, to preserve the basic foundations of higher education and fulfill the social order of society for the training of specialists prompted the Ministries of Higher Education of Russia, a number of CIS countries to turn to the experience of online learning, which has proven itself so well in European countries. At the same time, the coverage and intensity of distance education were largely dictated by the sanitary and epidemiological situation. A comparative analysis showed that the approaches of 2020-2021 different from the conditions of the 2022. So, according to the TASS report with reference to the statement of A. Popova, from February 6, 2022, the transition to distance learning was carried out according to the new rules. The reason for this was the incidence rate of 20% or more. Innovations are caused by the peculiarities of the symptoms of the Omicron strain, which is similar to the same with the usual VRI (viral respiratory infections).

According to the order of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, the leadership of universities can independently assess the epidemiological situation regarding the spread of coronavirus in each specific region. Based on the indicators, decisions are made on the transition to a remote learning format. So, at RUPF (Russian university of people's friendship) University, the curriculum is designed in such a way that until February 27 only lectures were held. Students who entered the preparatory faculty this academic year will have to attend practical classes. At MSU (Moscow state university), as of January 25, 2022, the final decision on the start of full-time education has not yet been made. It is likely that this will be considered separately for faculties, taking into account the Covid19 incidence [7].

Introduction of online learning in Uzbekistan: experience and problems. For the past 5 years, Uzbekistan has been actively working on the introduction of modern information and communication technologies. The ongoing measures to introduce modern information and communication technologies have made it possible to achieve certain results in the digitalization of economic sectors, including in the development of e-commerce [8]. In 2018, this work was also intensified to introduce distance correspondence education in the republic [10]. From the 2019-2020 academic year, that is, before the start of the coronavirus pandemic, classes began to be conducted remotely online for students of the special correspondence department.

The online learning platform itself was implemented by the Center for the Implementation of Electronic Education in Educational Institutions under the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Specialized Education (MHSSE). The development of 144 electronic textbooks for special correspondence education has begun. Distance learning is also planned to be introduced for part-time and evening studies at

universities. All the necessary elements have been created on a platform designed for organizing online training courses. In particular, lectures, video tutorials, tests, assignments, chats, forums, glossaries, feedback and a webinar. In addition, in order to create the necessary conditions for users, the platform was integrated with country's social networks.

Meanwhile, the Chinese word for "crisis" is a compound character. The first part, actually means "threat". But the second one, means only "a key moment; a critical point" [11]. Using this analogue, we would like to note that the accelerated transition to online forms of education has become just such a "key moment" under conditions of Uzbekistan.

In the period of 2020-2022 not only an assessment of the sanitary and epidemiological situation was carried out in real time regime, but also the maximum possible provision of the educational process at the universities of the republic. According to the order of the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Specialized Education, the authority to independently assess the epidemiological situation has been given the leadership of universities regarding the spread of coronavirus in each specific region. Based on these indicators, decisions were made to switch to a remote learning format. So, from January 24, 2022 for a period of 1 month, schools, universities (including private and foreign ones), lyceums and vocational education institutions began to study online [12]. This decision was made by the Special Republican Commission on Combating Coronavirus.

In the context of the coronavirus pandemic, it became possible to get education at Belarusian and Russian universities in a remote format from anywhere in Uzbekistan. For these purposes, the Center for Distance Education in Uzbekistan, (Postupi.uz) helps to enter the faculties of distance learning in Bachelor's programs (promising legal, economic, humanitarian and other specialties); Master's programs (management, economics and trade, business, pedagogy, psychology, technical areas; SPO (IT, economics, humanitarian, legal) [13]. During the study authors researched materials of foreign experts on the history of distance education and its introduction, the experience of Germany, other European countries, and Russia. A number of Decrees and Resolutions of the President of Uzbekistan, orders of the Ministry of Higher and Secondary Specialized Education of the Republic [14], orders of Tashkent State Transport University and Tashkent Institute for Finance on organizing this process have been analyzed. Based on the study, the authors came to a number of results and conclusions:

1. In general, the rich experience in the field of distance learning has significantly expanded the capabilities of German universities and allowed them to provide high-quality educational services, and their diplomas are recognized all over the world. It became good comparative advantage for universities in Germany in the competitive field worldwide.

2. The introduction of distance education has become demand of the times and has become widespread with the onset of the Covid19 pandemic.

3. In the higher education sector of the Republic of Uzbekistan, along with the active development of international experience, its own practice has appeared.

4. For the national experts of Uzbekistan, a wide field of opportunities opens up for a critical assessment of the results of the implementation of online learning, its advantages and disadvantages.

5. As the experience of the Uzbekistan's universities of 2019-2022 has shown, online education is not only a classical form of education in undergraduate or graduate programs, but also international seminars, conferences, retraining and advanced training of personnel.

Definitely, the above mentioned three years are not enough to draw deep conclusions. Nevertheless, based on the SWOT analysis, which is used more in the field of economics, we will try to highlight the

strengths and weaknesses of the online education process, taking into account our own practice. In general, in our opinion, the introduction of online education during the coronavirus pandemic gave impetus to the introduction of best practices, modern information and communication technologies. At the same time, our study revealed a number of problems and difficulties (section Treats), that require a state approach, large-scale and systematic work of the country's universities to implement them which will also increase their competitiveness.

The universities included in the list received, in particular, the right to independently determine the cost of education on a paid-contract basis, will be able to attract professors and specialists, including those from abroad, at their own discretion, set their salaries, allocate scholarships and grants for students for account of own funds, purchase educational and scientific literature and teaching aids from foreign manufacturers, determine the procedure for the provision of paid services in empty buildings and structures.

The international e-learning market is growing at a tremendous pace: it is expected that by 2025 it will reach \$ 325 billion [15]. In our opinion, in order to work in the changed conditions, universities should work more actively on the quality of education, constantly improve their competitiveness. And the income part of universities can be significantly expanded through the introduction of a wide range of online forms of education.

One of the important indicators of the competitiveness of universities in Uzbekistan for the coming period will be an increase in profitability by expanding the volume of educational services, including through distance education, and as a result, the share in the market of educational services. Another important criterion will be the investment attractiveness of higher education in the republic for foreign students, primarily from the countries of Central Asia, as well as India, China, Mongolia, Afghanistan, Vietnam, Cuba, and European countries.

At the beginning of the 2020/2021 academic year, among the 130 higher educational institutions of Uzbekistan, there were 31 non-state and more than 20 branches of foreign universities, the number of which is constantly growing. Currently, there are already 15 branches of Russian universities in Uzbekistan. The opening of branches of the Kosygin University of Design and Technology and the University of Geodesy and Cartography is expected in the near future [16]. This implies increased competition, both between Uzbek universities and in the general market of higher education. Thus, over 40,000 Uzbek students are currently studying in Russia itself.

• In addition, during the working visit of the delegation of the Ministry Uzbekistan for the Development of Information Technologies and Communications to India, negotiations were held with a number of Indian universities. During the negotiations, interest was expressed in opening branches of Indian universities in Uzbekistan [17]. Among them are such well-known and prestigious ones as Lakshmi Narain College of Technology (LNCT Bhopal), Lal Bahadur Shastri Institute of Management (LBSIM), BGS Institute of Technology (BGSIT), Manipal University. Representatives of Acharya University of Technology and Vinayaka Mission University also expressed interest in cooperation. The latter, as carriers of advanced information and communication technologies, in our opinion, will significantly affect the pace and scale of online education in the Republic of Uzbekistan.

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