

The Experience of a Distance Learning Organization in a Private Higher Educational Institution in the Republic of Tatarstan (Russia): From Idea to Realization

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Article abstract

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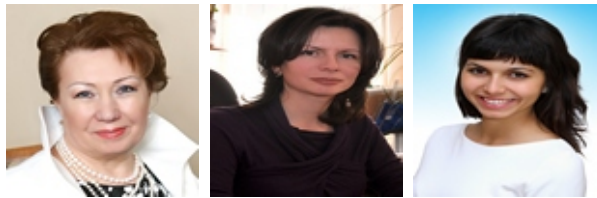
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The Experience of a Distance Learning Organization in a Private Higher Educational Institution in the Republic of Tatarastan (Russia) : From Idea to Realization



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Abstract

The article is devoted to the unique experience of distance learning development in the conditions of Russian reality. The model of distance learning in the Institute of Economics, Management and Law (Kazan city, Russia) is created on the basis of educational sphere diagnosis taking into account foreign and Russian experience. The specificity of the model is the permanent diagnosis of the components of the educational environment such as teachers' qualifications, level of students' actual knowledge, filling the educational process with information technologies, availability and quality of electronic resources, the correct choice of learning technologies, and policy in the field of the computerization of the professional education process.

Keywords: Distance learning; Russia

Introduction

During the last decade, a robust system of distance education has been created in Russia, especially in higher educational institutions, where serious attention is being paid to the reform of the existing system of education. The experience of the Institute of Economics, Management and Law (IEML, Kazan city) is a good exemplar of distance education reform. The Institute passed several stages in the development of distance learning in order to implement the most appropriate model of e-learning.

Development of Distance Learning Education in the Institute of Economics, Management and Law

The Institute of Economics, Management and Law began the delivery of educational programs using distance education in 2003. In the first two years, IEML built the technical, pedagogical, methodological, administrative, financial, and organizational foundations for the successful implementation of distance education programs in the following specialties: Finance and Credit, Law, Organizational Management, and Pedagogy and Psychology. As a result, IEML was the first institution in the Republic of Tatarstan to create a multi-service corporate network. This high-speed network was comprised of a telecommunication system with voice-over-IP, which supported direct tele-bridging for both audio- and video-conferencing in real-time with any location on earth. To take advantage of this system, course-relevant e-textbooks were created (Akhmetova, 2009, p. 93).

The first students were admitted to the technology-enhanced distance education programs in 2004. The special organizational structures needed for distance education were created, based on a decision of the institution's Academic board along with orders and instructions from the rector. First, the Center for Distance Learning was established, followed by the Institute of Distance Learning and regional centers for distance learning in five satellite campuses. In 2012, more than 3,000 distance education students were studying in the Institute and its five satellite campuses.

From the beginning distance learning was considered by us as a pedagogical system. We investigated the experience of distance learning organizations in many countries, for example Great Britain, Australia, the Czech Republic, and so on. We studied the status, trends, and basic models of online distance education in the U.S.A, the experience of some universities in the U.S.A, and the historical stages of distance learning development (Jensen, 2005). Special attention was paid to the study of using videoconferencing systems in some countries. We studied the use of the VTC (via video teleconferencing) technologies in Athens, the RESIT non-profit corporation in Greece, whose mission was to establish a centre of excellence for research and education in the areas of software engineering, telecommunications/networking, embedded systems, and electronics (Tomkos, 2005). With great interest, we acquainted ourselves with the experiences of the International Institute of Management LINK, Moscow State

Industrial University, Peoples Friendship University of Russia, Moscow State University of Economics, Statistics and Informatics, and so on.

We received specific support from the Russian State Institute of Open Education under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation. We also signed a formal agreement with the Distance Learning Laboratory of the Institute of Learning Content and Methods under the jurisdiction of the Russian Academy of Education. This agreement included carrying out the seminars devoted to the role of information technologies in the development of professional education. Also it included the training of teachers of educational institutions in the region. Taking a scientific approach to the organization of distance learning, as well as to the psychological, pedagogical, and technical aspects, is important for supporting quality. Overall, the technologically enhanced distance learning system is influencing educational processes throughout the Institution. The system is promoting the integration of interactive learning technologies in the teachers' lessons, even among those instructors who are not actively involved in distance learning.

Russian laws, which regulate the organization of distance learning, pre-determine the need for a blended learning model of part-time education using distance learning technologies. For example, physical classroom lessons are required during both the introductory class and the examination sessions. Distance support of the educational process is possible with automated controls to help students absorb the training materials.

The institutional distance education implementation was based on several key principles, integrity, unity, interoperability in a systemic approach, which would support maximum efficiency along with excellent quality of learning. The educational and methodical basis as well as the legal basis for the creation of this model were the following documents; some were developed by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation and others were locally produced by IEML:

- Act of the Institute of Distance Learning (IDL) and Act of the Centers for Distance Learning in satellite campuses;
- Duties of leaders, teachers, members of the Institute of Distance Learning and centers of Distance Learning in satellite campuses;
- Training plans and curriculum for the specialties: Finance and Credit, Law, Management of Organization, Pedagogy and Psychology;
- Orders on the establishment of classroom norms (time characteristics) and individual counseling of students using distance learning technologies, specific to student learning;

- Orders on an individual training schedule for students who can not attend classes in the prescribed manner;
- Order on the organization of training programs for teachers who work in the IEML;
- Other local acts.

We have created a special introductory course, Information and Communication Technologies for Learning, which is aimed at providing students with a smooth entry into the world of information and communication technologies (ICTs); teaching students how to use the educational portal of the Institute; working with electronic textbooks; and showing students how to interact online with teachers, staff, and other students. Practice showed that this has been the right approach: During full-time lessons the potential of students is aligned because of this individualized work, which is carried out with the novices, raising their level of knowledge and skills using ICTs. It is expected that in a distance learning system, the students are significantly more active and responsible than in traditional forms of education (full-time or correspondence study).

The results of surveys on student activity and interviews revealed that the students lack self-organization skills, lack experience in self-study (setting up a study space, preparing for the work, following through on the planned exercises, dealing with difficulties as they arise, etc). This was expressed in procrastination as students put off studying until “the best time” or “when I have free time”. Tutors at IEML have developed detailed instructions, which explain how to succeed using the training material (modules) and a concise timetable for task completion in order to support students in the organization of their self-study.

From the very beginning of the distance education implementation, there was a need for specialized training of pedagogical staff in the normative legal requirements stated in documents, which regulate distance learning in the Russian Federation. Six teachers passed this specialized training at the Russian Institute of Open Education and received the certificate “Internet-based Learning” granted by the Russian Public Institute of Intellectual Property under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Science and Education of the Russian Federation. A program of advanced courses for teachers entitled “Using ICTs in Distance Learning” (with a duration of 72 hours) was developed and published as an electronic textbook for tutors and used in training courses in a blended learning environment (24 hours – full-time lessons, 48 hours – distance lessons). This program included the presentation and evaluation of the participants’ creative work and the issuance of an official state certificate. More than 600 IEML instructors passed this training. Individual consultations on the use of multimedia equipment, on the creation of training courses, and on test items, and so on were organized for teachers. Along with the targeted training of teachers and specialists in courses and seminars for higher

qualifications, other forms of training were used, such as internships in the most successful higher educational institutes, mentoring (supervising of novices by more proficient tutors), and so on. In aggregate form, these measures created an internal institutional system for improving the professional competence of teachers and specialists in distance learning.

The material and technical foundation for distance learning was strengthened not only at the main Institute, but also in the satellite campuses. In addition to the corporate institutional multi-service network of more than 2,000 computers, special computer training classrooms have been set up, equipped with multimedia projectors and screens, both at the Institute of Distance Learning and in the faculties and satellite campuses. If necessary, students can work directly at the Institute if they do not otherwise have access to a computer. These students do their assignments on the computers with internet access in classrooms designated for that purpose.

In order to support the distance learning system a multimedia technologies laboratory was created. It was equipped with the most modern equipment designed to support the learning process, for the wide implementation of ICTs in education. The laboratory is used to conduct research and analyses of existing software and multimedia technologies to determine the most efficient technologies for their possible use in distance learning processes. The laboratory also supports the development of multimedia textbooks in the natural and engineering sciences and humanities as well as the development of modern technologies for the distribution of educational materials based on interdisciplinary themes and heterogeneous sources using a single methodological platform. Other uses for the laboratory include the design, development, and use of digital presentations; the copying of multimedia products using electronic media, as well as on magnetic media for use in both training and promotion campaigns. New learning technologies using portfolios and case studies are also being studied along with multimedia technology and other approaches to learning design using ITCs. The development of materials supporting different teaching methods using the network of distributed resources (educational Web sites, online tutorials, etc.) will also support learning processes.

Special attention was paid to the development of electronic training and practical guides in the Institute of Distance Learning. We created a technology “passport” for electronic guide creation on orders from the director of the Institute of Distance Learning for the replication of these e-guides on disks and placing them in an e-learning portal. A group of experts takes responsibility for the quality of these e-guides along with the author. The department head takes responsibility for ensuring that the guide content conforms to state educational standards. An e-learning design specialist checks to ensure the inclusion of mandatory components. These include the subject matter, the modular structuring of the educational material, assignments for checking on the achievement level of the students (tests, formative and summative evaluations), a glossary, and the time limits set for the completion of the learning tasks. A multimedia specialist creates supplementary video lectures, working with audio and video applications to

complement the textbook. Every year teachers review the content of the textbooks in order to improve them, make corrections and changes taking into account new standards and regulations. Students receive textbooks recorded on a CD-ROM, and at the same time they can access them through the electronic library. Presently, more than 450 electronic manuals are available in this library.

Special attention was paid to the development of video courses. The most qualified teachers recorded introductory or final lectures on video disks which were replicated so that students could learn independently. The main program and technical aide for the implementation of distance learning at IEML was an automated system – a virtual representation of IEML, which was located on a federal government portal RGIOO (<http://vueml.openet.ru>). This educational portal facilitates the registration of students, teachers, trainees, and library users. They can also access certain (closed) portal resources to carry out their educational activities. Information, training materials, and tests are located on this portal. Maintenance of the software and hardware systems was carried out by the system administrator of the portal.

The IEML uses videoconferencing technologies in real time. They are used in order to promote learning about the latest technologies, as well as for individual work with students who do not have the possibility of personal involvement in class. As an experiment, video conferencing has also been used for carrying out tests and examinations. Videoconferencing is also used to connect the Institute of Distance Learning with its satellite campuses.

In response to the personal request of students, individual training schedules are set for certain categories, for example, for those who are unable to attend due to health or are on maternity leave, students with disabilities or who are on business trips, military personnel, and others who are not able to attend classes due to specific work-related problems. Individual schedules mean special supports for students in the learning process (self-help, test and examination planning, student-teacher meetings, and time management). Students with disabilities and military personnel receive exceptional treatment and are supervised in groups by individual specialists. The Department of Theoretical and Inclusive Pedagogy at IEML looks after these special groups.

The training of military personnel is being carried out as an experiment in Russia. The Institute provided a military unit with a computer classroom loaded with appropriate software. Teachers regularly visited these military units for training sessions. The commander of the unit provided the students, who were all conscripts, with time to focus on their assignments. In addition the IEML has implemented training programs for persons detained in prisons (Akhmetova, 2009, p.100).

IEML distance learning students presently live in Kazan, the capital, and other cities and regions of Tatarstan as well as in all regions of Russia with more than twenty students in the former Commonwealth of Independent States and other countries.

Distance learning is mainly chosen by people who already have a degree or vocational diploma. They are very strongly motivated to study. Among the main reasons for studying are the need to build a career, a change of profession, and personal development. However, there is a group of students who have just secondary education. Systematic motivational support from teachers, organizers of distance learning, is very important for this category; also it is necessary to help students to organize their self study.

The legal and regulatory framework for distance learning in Russia was imperfect for a long time. Due to the Act of the Ministry of Education № 137 of May 6, 2005, “On using distant educational technologies,” the educational institutions may use distance educational technologies for all under the law forms of education or a combination of these forms, for different kinds of educational, laboratory, and practical training practices.ⁱ

It caused contradictory understanding of distance learning and using blended learning technologies (full-time, part-time education) instead of online education. However, we are thankful for the recent changes in the education legislation in Russia. Due to the Federal Law dated February 28, 2012, “On inclusion of changes to Federal Law “On education” in the part of electronic education, distance educational technologies,” the distance and elearning forms of education are now officially equal in status to traditional full-time and part-time forms of education.ⁱⁱ

IEML is heavily involved in promoting education in the region of Tatarstan; in the coordination of universities in the field of distance learning; in explaining and promoting the concept of distance education among authorities and, specifically, the scientific and educational communities as well as the public through the media and personal meetings (in governmental offices, educational institutions, and other organizations). Regular seminars and scientific conferences, both national and international, are held in the Institute and online.

Using the Integrated System Moodle and OpenMeetings in the Institute of Economics, Management and Law

In order to develop the distance learning system effectively, not only to maintain it, we need to keep up with the times to improve the distance learning technologies used in the Institute. The Institute investigated a variety of LMS (learning management systems) including MOODLE, Prometheus, Blackboard, and so on. But the choice was to introduce MOODLE, which is widely used in many foreign countries. Despite the enormous capabilities of MOODLE (the presence of a wide variety of content, applications, and forms of communication available in the e-learning system with a detailed description of options), we had to develop an Institution-specific model of distance education. We began to use a videoconferencing system which supports close to real-life interactions between and among people who are at a considerable distance

from each other because of their inability to be physically present at the lesson at a particular time and place.

The Institute of Distance Learning uses an “organic” mixture of two systems: a videoconferencing server, OpenMeetings, and MOODLE as LMS. The practical importance of these systems is to organize an e-media environment, which supports both synchronous and asynchronous interactions . This media environment, developed by the creative team of the Institute, is a unified virtual space for training sessions that increases the level of interaction between teacher and students. Thus, the system OpenMeetings complements the MOODLE LMS by supporting “live communication” (Zaynullin, 2011, p.48).

Moreover, the Institute has developed an elective author’s course Information Technologies in Distance Learning, which is built in MOODLE in order to train teachers how to facilitate students during educational processes. This course allows users to adapt rapidly to the online environment. It helps students to acquire the skills of searching out and finding training information, in MOODLE and the educational portal, and includes open educational resources, Web sites, and other electronic resources which are open access or otherwise available online. The main goal of the author’s course is to teach students and educators how to use e-learning tools.

International Projects of the Institute of Economics, Management and Law in the Field of Distance Learning

The ICTs which are used in our Institute and the pedagogical support of distance learning allow us to implement international projects in the field of distance learning. One of them is the online teaching of the Russian language and culture for those who live in foreign countries. This project was rolled out in the Republic of Madagascar, where 50 teachers have passed the courses (Ahmetova, Morozova, Khoroshavina, & Zaynullin, 2012, p. 6). Now our university is preparing projects for the Republic of Nepal, Congo, Slovenia, South Korea, and Brazil. In order to realize these projects we are investigating each country's socio-economic, national, and linguistic features, and other specifications. Then we will develop a customized model of distance learning for each country, taking into account all the factors mentioned above.

Another prospective area of international activity for the Institute is conducting research with foreign partners in the field of pedagogy and the psychology of inclusive pedagogy. We have studied the experiences of inclusive education implementation in Scandinavian countries in the framework of the Russian seminar on Inclusive Education in the Context of the Integration Process, conducted in the Nordic countries.

In order to cooperate, to use creatively and selectively the experience of the Scandinavian countries and the development of inclusive education in Russia, we have created a Department of Theoretical and Inclusive Pedagogy. Today the Department carries out collaborative research with various centers of inclusive education, with

institutions. Among them are the Folk High School of Karis (Finland), Department of Teacher Education of University of Helsinki, Department of Special Education of the University of Stockholm, and the Agency for Lifelong Learning VOX (Norway), and others.

Our university joined the European Foundation for Quality in E-learning (EFQUEL) in 2012. So, now we are beginning to implement projects and carry out research in collaboration with members of EFQUEL in the following areas: open educational resources (OER), the impact of social media (social networks) on the quality of student learning, providing pedagogical support for the e-learning process, and e-learning quality. This research will be conducted in the European Framework with projects such as Erasmus Mundus, Leonardo da Vinci, and others.

Ideas and prospective areas of research in line with development trends in the educational process in Europe and in the world inspire the employees of our Institute and encourage us to develop strongly and to cooperate with international partners. We believe that a future UNESCO Chair which is now being promoted in our Institute will support this process. Real changes in the legitimization of e-learning and in the development of a firm regulatory basis give confidence that the IEMML and other Russian institutions will adequately fit into the global system of education, not as “stepchildren” but as worthy partners and equal players.

Conclusion

Thus, the experience of creation and development of distance learning in a private higher educational institution, the Institute of Economics, Management and Law, and some recommendations for its quality assurance will guide the implementation of new innovative projects in other educational institutions. Today, it is especially important when many universities can share their ideas and experiences in the field of distance learning that they are open to international cooperation in this field. In addition, the experience can be useful to specialists and managers of the education authorities, because it contains both theoretical and practical materials that can be a guide to create a unique system of distance learning in educational institutions at all levels.

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ⁱ Приказ Министерства образования и науки РФ от 6 мая 2005 г. N 137 "Об использовании дистанционных образовательных технологий"[Act of the Ministry of Education № 137 of May 6, 2005 “On using distant educational technologies”].

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ⁱⁱ [Federal Law dated February 28, 2012 “On inclusion of changes to Federal Law “On education” in the part of electronic education, distance educational technologies”]

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