

Conference Paper

Online Education Participants: Standing Together or Falling Apart?

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Abstract

The paper summarizes the findings from research by Russian scholars into the expansion of online education technologies into Russian universities. Risks are described connected with the unpreparedness of the education process participants to be fully engaged in the new education format. Two opinion polls were organized among students and university staff in order to reveal their assessment of education strategies and their involvement in online education. The study has shown that neither students nor academic staff at provincial universities are sufficiently involved in the process, which does not enable any forecast to be made pertaining to online training efficiency. So far, it is only the opportunities to access, participate and use online education that can be assessed. The survey has revealed a significant difference in students' and lecturers' perception of online education. While students are ready to switch to the new format, lecturers prefer classical approaches. They display negative attitudes, tend to avoid changes and stress that the expansion of online education services may result in a lower status and loss of prestige for the teaching profession. The possibility of their participation in developing online education products is doubtful. The lack of either experience or desire to be involved in the process may result in a low quality of online courses and programs, if developed. The study enables the authors to define a problem field of youth education choice management. This field includes issues of self-study needs satisfaction, a lower level of knowledge in today's young generation and information retaining difficulty, the "external memory" problem resulting from the abundance of gadgets et cetera. Risks are described pertaining to youth's uncontrolled involvement in online education alternatives connected with human capital structure changes, emergence of negative generation characteristics and education prospects.

Keywords: youth, academic staff, education, education strategies, online education, self-study.

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1. Introduction

The development of online education is a global trend, Russia far from being a leader. Our universities face the need of digital transformations including those pertaining to the education process. The existing risks which are well understood by lecturers, psychologists and education managers make us study the preparedness of provincial

education systems (universities) for the implementation of innovations and adoption of new training forms, along with building strategies for the inclusion into global online education agenda. Another reconstruction of the education system is connected with process restructuring, search of online training forms and mass coverage. Moreover, we must consider whether or not the main participants — lecturers and students — are prepared to be involved in this reconstruction. Do lecturers display readiness to find their place in the new education format, as well as to produce and to service a high-quality online education product? Are students ready for a new education format, conscious consumption and digestion of information and, what is more, are they highly motivated for self-study and self-discipline? The findings summarized in this paper focus on the above questions.

2. Methodology and Methods

Being a youth socialization mechanism, education frequently becomes a subject of study. Researchers focus on educational path choices, education role in self-identification, self-study as a personal development driver and a factor defining an individual's potential and personal characteristics, and so on. We would like to mention studies by D. L. Konstantinovskiy [1], [2], [3], [4] which describe changes in academic interest towards youth education issues. For instance, the scholar addressed education inequality problem as early as in 1997. Though it is a pressing issue in Western countries today, most scholars only begin to turn their attention toward it [5].

Youth education issues are studied from various scientific perspectives. On the one hand, education may be addressed as a value in youth value system [6], on the other hand, researchers are interested in the reverse causality, that is, what value system is formed by education [7], [8]. Scholars pay special attention to the study of education stages, focusing mainly on higher education and vocational training [9], self-study and further education during employment. Some other issues increasingly raise scholastic interest, that is, how education digitalization is developing, how online courses are received by the education process participants and, generally, how online education is evolving in Russia. A number of studies by Russian scientists have been devoted to these aspects, including conceptual papers by Ya. A. Vagramenko and A.A. Rusakov [10], T. F. Kryaklina and S. V. Rettikh [11], S. L. Lobachev, and V. I. Soldatkin [12], V. L. Makarov, A. R. Bakhtizin and M. A. Burilina [13], G. P. Sikorska and T. V. Savelyeva [14], I. S. Shapovalova [15, 16].

The main question dealt with herein is whether the education process participants are ready to be actively involved in production and use of online products, and whether they can interact as one team. A comprehensive research has been conducted including a questionnaire-based survey of students and academic staff at a provincial Russian university. The sampling student population amounted to 3,188 respondents, with quota sampling applied (depending on fields of training, age and gender). Confidence interval equaled to 1.65%, while confidence probability equaled to 95.0%. The sampling academic staff population amounted to 500, quota sampling applied (depending on official capacity, age and gender). Confidence interval equaled to 1.65%, while confidence probability equaled to 95.0%.

3. Results and Discussion

The research findings have shown that students are aware of online education format. One-third of the students (32.97%) have applied it in practice, 47.02% have heard about it, failing any actual experience, and 20.01% have not tried it at all (Figure 1). Such statistical distribution poses a great risk of users' mis-adaptation, given an abundance of online elements in the education process. Before transferring to online training, contemporary universities should consider providing introductory courses, including those aimed at teaching effective techniques of studying online. This will help students avoid superficial involvement and imitation of participation. The questionnaire survey among lecturers has shown that 22.6% participate in online education, about 50% would like to join the process, while 30% are strongly against the innovation. These results enable us to see the scope of work to be done in terms of academic staff involvement in online programs development and implementation.

The survey has revealed two different opinions pertaining to the convenience assessment. 51.57% of students find online education format convenient enough, while 48.43% are not satisfied with it. (The "Undecided" option was not provided for this group of respondents). As for the academic staff, their assessment of the trend has a negative shift, with 38.8% answering "No", and 40.8% displaying doubt. In this respect, correlation calculation is necessary in respect to groups who have tried developing online courses and those who have not had such experience. We believe there is a link between a lack of experience and a negative assessment of the trend.

Students and lecturers were offered different elements of the education process enabling them to construct an effective interaction model. Students need the following opportunities in the education process: the opportunity to ask the lecturer a question

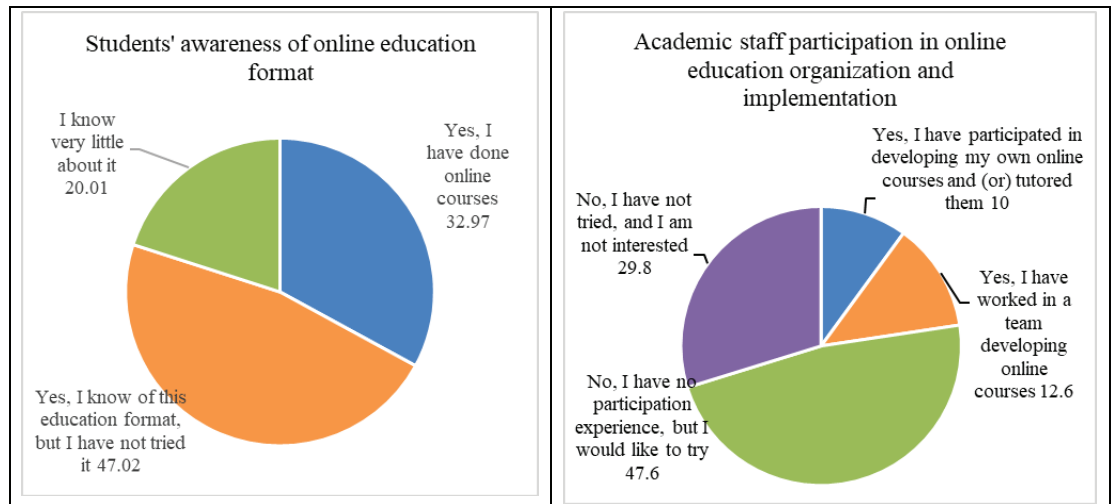


Figure 1: Students' and academic staff involvement in online education

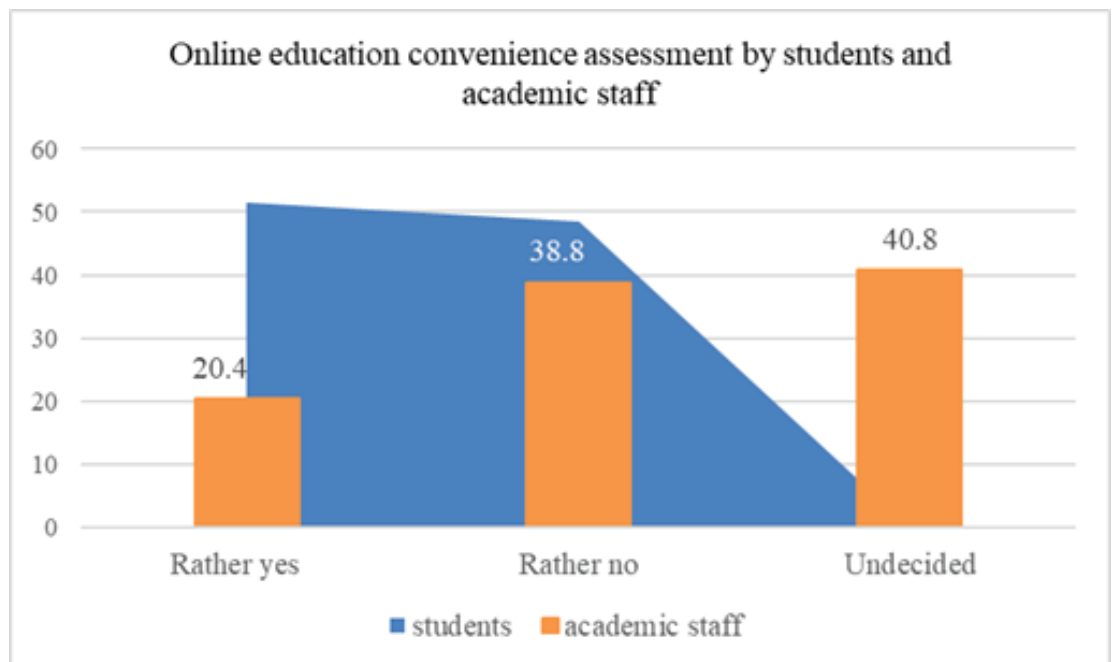


Figure 2: Answers to the question “Do you find online education format convenient?”

(91.94%); direct interaction between students and lecturers (89.43%); individual approach to students (85.19%); educational resources and course accessibility irrespective of geographic location and time (84.69%); interaction with fellow-students, exchange of opinions (81.84%). Table 1 below displays the distribution of the above assessment characteristics for the two education formats under study. The total of votes is equal for the traditional education and online training. The former reveals a bigger weighted average, though the difference is insignificant.

Unlike students, lecturers are determined in their choice of the traditional education format. Over 80% vote for the characteristics inherent in the traditional process, while

TABLE 1: The total of students' votes for alternative choices in different education formats

Traditional education format		Online education format	
Direct interaction between students and lecturers	89.43	Student's opportunity to choose a lecturer for one or another subject	73.53
The opportunity to ask the lecturer a question	91.94	Student's opportunity to build education schedule himself/herself	68.38
Interaction with fellow-students and exchange of opinions	81.84	Student's opportunity to choose the lesson length	56.84
Teamwork in the course of studying	76.35	A free choice of any course available	79.89
Individual approach to students in the course of studying	85.19	Education resource and course accessibility irrespective of the geographic location and time	84.69
Direct student-lecturer contact during assessment	77.38	The use of the latest IT achievements in the education process	79.23
		Remote assessment of knowledge and performance	61.73
TOTAL	502.13	TOTAL	504.29

about 40% choose online training characteristics. Two options make an exception, including the use of IT in the education process (77%) and access to educational resources (66%). In our opinion, they are ambivalent. They can be equally attributed to both formats, though being more typical of the new trend. The total of votes given in favour of the education format speaks for itself: the traditional format evidently prevails, with 543.4 votes against 305.6 (Table 2).

Thus, we can see that university lecturers strive for a preservation of characteristics inherent in traditional education format. We should also keep in mind that when we analyze the opinion of two different persons, worldviews of at least two different generations are concerned (to be precise, 3 or even 4 generations may be taken into consideration, depending on the generational theory). Definitely, about half of student respondents represent Generation Z. A conflict of requirements toward the education process is natural. Still, it may result in a significant contradiction connected with the education process organization.

There are a number of established opinions and misconceptions about online education. In order to understand the way it is actually perceived by respondents, we have asked the students and lecturers to assess the truthfulness of such opinions. Widespread opinions about online education which have been confirmed by the student respondents include: the convenience of educational environment, schedule convenience and the range of training programs (68.13%), the convenience of online tools

TABLE 2: The total of academic staff votes for alternative choices in different education formats

Traditional education format		Online education format	
Direct interaction between students and lecturers	97.6	Giving the students an opportunity to choose a lecturer for one or another subject	36.2
Feedback and the opportunity to answer the students' questions	97.8	Giving the students an opportunity to build their schedule themselves	24.2
Organizing student opinion exchange in the course of studying	88.8	Giving the students an opportunity to choose the lesson length	18.8
Organizing student teamwork in the course of studying	81.6	Giving the students a free choice of any academic course available	40.8
Individual approach to students in the course of studying	90.2	Providing access to educational resources and courses irrespective of the students' geographic location, time of the day and time of the year.	66.6
Direct contact during assessment	87.4	The use of the latest IT achievements in the education process	77.6
		Remote knowledge and performance assessment opportunities	41.4
TOTAL	543.4	TOTAL	305.6

(60.98%), the equivalence of online education and distance learning (59.44%). As for all other options, none of them received more than 50% of votes. In the academic staff survey, the following three opinions about online education have been confirmed: the convenience of educational environment, schedule convenience and the range of training programs (58.0%), the convenience of online tools (46.4%), the equivalence of online education and distance learning (45.0%); depreciation of the teaching profession (45,2%). Besides, lecturers have supported the opinions that students do not have enough self-control for studying online (57.61%); and that online education may hamper communication skill building (54.94%) (Figure 3).

The drawing illustrates respondents' choices of the opinions and misconceptions offered. Thus, 51.63% of students consider online education inefficiency to be a misconception, while 44.54%, 47.3% and 42.79% respectively do not support the myths concerning the lack of feedback, poor quality and high cost. The academic staff judgements coincide with the students' opinions in two major aspects, including the myth regarding the high cost of online courses (51.8%) and the lack of feedback (46.4%).

Should online education continue to grow rapidly, the behavior of students and academic staff may be controversial. On the one hand, most students (41.06%) will participate in the new training forms. On the other hand, 38.46% will only join the

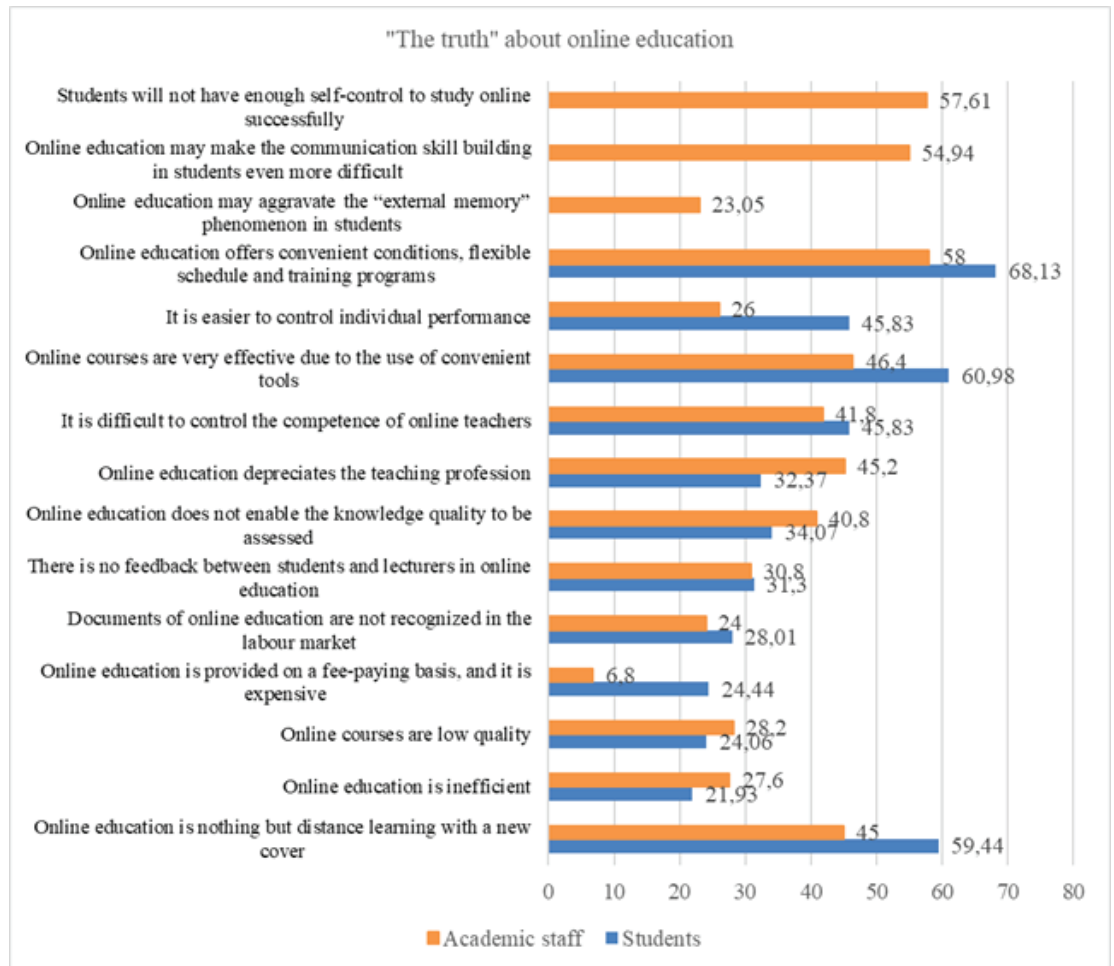


Figure 3: Assessment of misconceptions regarding online education by students and academic staff

online courses recommended by their lecturers. Such cautiousness has its advantages and drawbacks, as it enables education content to be controlled, but displays a lack of digital thinking culture. As the majority of the academic staff surveyed display a negative attitude toward online education’s expansion, they are likely to be quite reserved in recommending online courses to students (Figure 4). Coupled with those who exhibit an active resistance to the trend (18.64%), we can see that only a minority of respondents support the shift to online learning. Holding the neutral stance, we cannot provide a vector assessment of the situation. Such development may not be bad if a well-considered and slow transformation, or even a re-engineering, should take place. But if systemic changes are to be introduced in the education process, the facts revealed in our survey may become a substantial barrier.

The configuration of the academic staff’s actional stance is slightly different. 27.2% of respondents are going to be proactive in supporting the implementation of online

education. The majority of respondents (43%) choose cautious waiting, while virtually 30% of lecturers are expected to resist the trend determinedly.

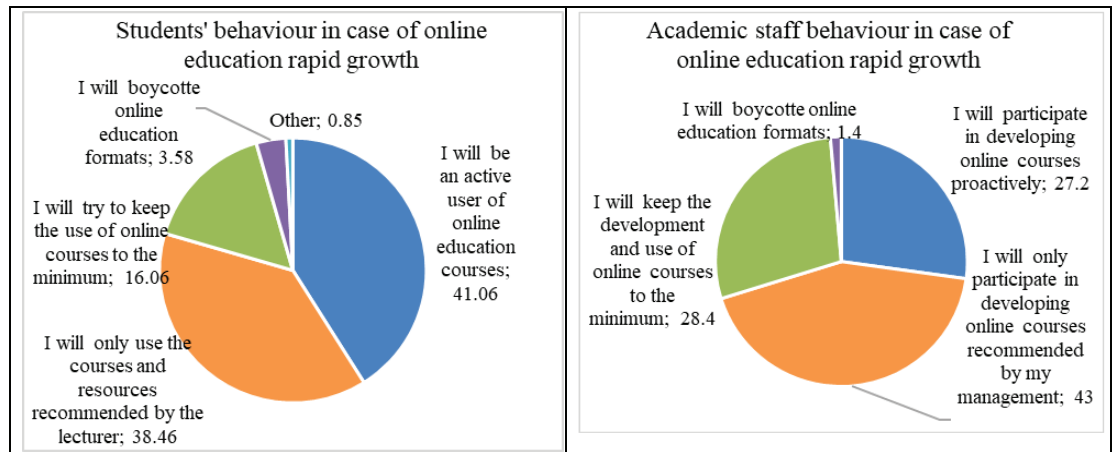


Figure 4: Respondents' answers to the question "What will you do if online education grows rapidly?"

We have also tried to assess the academic staff readiness to participate in various activities connected with development and support of online courses. Due to some disorientation and the novelty of this education form, lecturers tend to choose teamwork in online course transformation and development at the information collection stage (75% of respondents). 64.2% are ready to participate in combined forms of online education provided that physical interaction takes place. 54.8% of the academic staff are ready to record their online courses and to provide a voice over, while 51.8% are prepared to tutor such courses. 48.4% of respondents display full readiness to develop their own online courses, while lecturers are least prepared to tutor courses developed by somebody else.

4. Conclusions

Summarizing the research findings, we should stress that while educational establishments are aware of the youth's needs and interests, online education expansion may result in a bigger number of education products along with a lower quality. Focusing on the youth's need of self-study, we understand that it is online education platforms and products that young people will choose in order to meet their educational needs. The mosaic and superficial character of such formats will aggravate the existing risks and specifics of the young generation's mentality (which includes mosaic thinking, external memory and gadget addiction). In view of this, a negative illusion may emerge, as young people will believe that they meet their self-study needs, while in fact they will be based on superficial and insufficient information. What should be done in the

situation? In developing education products, we must comply with specific standards and reference points. The difference between high-profile platforms and quick-study products must be understood. We must encourage young people to pursue education and self-study, but it is only formal assessment procedures that will enable them to receive an actual assessment of their performance and teach them to reject poor quality education products.

The rapid expansion of online education into the education market may either contribute to the development or aggravate the situation. The study has revealed that about 50% of students are involved in the new format or support this idea. The questionnaire survey has shown that the critical attitude toward the systemic change perception is a misconception. We cannot but understand that the Russian system tends to “adopt the experience” and to “keep up at any cost”. This is how “good intentions” pave the way to hell. We believe that the education market may become saturated with poor quality online products, quasi-technologies may be used in the scaling and legalization of online education format. All of the above is aggravated with the fundamental unpreparedness of the academic staff for new interaction patterns and for the development of high-quality products and services in the field. The lack of critical thinking and the authorities’ imposing the need to use the new format do not allow for natural filters to evolve in the young people. This is especially significant, given globalization trends, life pace acceleration, global resource saving and deficit.

What is to be expected? Much as we would like, young people cannot achieve sufficient self-control in terms of building an effective educational trajectory, given the risks described and the innovation “temptations” which aggravate the typical characteristics of contemporary youth (including mosaic and fragmented thinking, cyber-addiction, superficial character, multitasking, external memory and case memory). In view of this, the new trend may result in human capital deformation and science reproduction cycle disruption. What can be done? In the first place, comprehensive systems to control and adjust student participation should be developed (ones incorporating traditional forms of instruction). They should constitute additional components of online formats, expanding, though not replacing them. A pattern of effective educational trajectory with a module expansion may be suggested, which would enable us to preserve the national achievements of the education system acquired throughout its many decades’ history.

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