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ONLINE LEARNING RESOURCES ENSURING THE QUALITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Abstract: *In this article, we consistently analyze some aspects of higher education related to each other by the desire to determine the availability of online learning resources (with the potential to ensure the quality of higher education).*

This issue is actualized by the transfer of a certain part of the higher education process to the online form. All that causes some concerns that the new form of higher education will not allow maintaining the quality of higher education.

The theoretical framework of this article is based on the methodology of the neo-institutional approach. The empirical baseline is based on the mass sociological survey conducted among High School students. The results of this study showed that the online learning form lacks the necessary resources to maintain the quality of higher education at the expected high level.

The conclusion is partially consistent with the established discourse on the quality of higher education since a considerable part of researchers is convinced that online learning has a great potential for the development of higher education at the proper teaching level.

Keywords: *Online Learning, Higher Education, Electronic Courses, Educational Process, Online Learning Resources, Higher Education Quality*

1. Introduction

All processes in the modern world are interconnected. One cannot study an isolated phenomenon without determining its connection with the surrounding world. In this context, the online form is an inseparable part of modern culture. An excess of digital gadgets, software and information networks and services is an important element of the present stage of civilization's development. Under such conditions, a large number of goods and services, which had or could have acquired a digital form, became a part of the digital

economy. It covered the sphere of trade and financial services, administration and art, tourist services and production. Education, as a process that is directly connected to information activities, cannot remain aside. As with any other phenomenon in life, education is influenced by the surrounding factors and effects (Siemens & Matheos, 2010), so it cannot stay aside from society's digitalization.

In recent decades, one of the main factors of civilization's development was technological progress. It covers production, information, and other processes. Due to technological innovations, labor efficiency, speed and

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quality of communications and comfort of life grow. It should be taken into account that not all spheres of life activities are equal in the successful cooperation with technological innovations. Higher education is one of such spheres, which, due to its specifics, requires a particular elaboration.

The process of learning and acquiring qualifications unifies a large number of operations with the domination of socio-psychological aspects. Under such conditions, traditional methodologies of teaching are replaced or supplemented with innovative elements, of which online learning is one of the main directions. At that, traditional methods and means require specification or correction depending on the situation.

The decisive question in the context of using online technologies in higher education is as follows: are the elements of online education able to replace certain aspects of time spent in an auditorium and ensure higher flexibility without any damage to the quality and productiveness of education? (Owston & York, 2018). This question has become especially important under the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic when many universities considered the possibility of partial or full replacement of classroom studies with online forms of education (Peters et al., 2020).

Despite the high potential of this form of education, it should be taken into account that its implementation and expansion are possible only if this does not lead to the reduction of the objective quality of students' success.

An important aspect of the research is defining the notion of "quality of higher education". The peculiarity of this definition comes from the specifics of education, as a form of service, which results are determined in the future. At that, the process of provision of an educational service and determination of its quality are differentiated in time. The first stage is the one-time process of production and consumption of

the service. The process of using the services comes after the end of the first stage.

Thus, at the first stage, there is a possibility to assess the quality of higher education based only on formal criteria: testing, solution of tasks, and trainings. In its turn, the determination of the quality of education in the process of labor activities has almost no formal criteria. In other words, there is no common measure for the quality of the obtained education in the process of labor activities.

Based on this, in the context of this research, the quality of higher education will be considered at the stage of learning, based on its formal criteria: scores, acquisition of skills and competences, etc.

The relevance of our research topic is determined by the prospects of online learning (displacing classical education from higher school programs). In the works of Russian sociologists and representatives of other social sciences, this issue had rarely been treated until 2012. The interest in it was also stimulated this year by the program for mass open online courses (MOOC) establishment. Among the first MOOCs, there were Coursera, MTx and Udacity (Miri et al., 2016). This experiment was considered to be successful, so there appeared a lot of different educational platforms operating on similar principles (Kizilcec and Schneider, 2015). This gave rise to great social excitement, so science could not but respond to it. Now a multi-layered discursive space is taking shape all over the world. It is formed from a wide variety of thematic aspects: the concept of online learning, its types, content and instrumental capabilities, motivation of students and teachers, etc. (Watters, 2014; Clark, 2014; Admiraal et al., 2015).

Russian Sociology, up to a certain point, had little interest in this issue. However, in 2016, this situation radically changed (as the President of the Russian Federation signed the Form Document "Modern Digital Educational Environment in the Russian

Federation". On this basis they adopted the workflow chart on gradual introduction of online courses into the Russian educational space in 2016-2021, expecting that by 2026 the number of "remote mode students" will increase to 11 million (Form Document, 2012).

From this moment on, Rectors of Russian universities initiate the development of their online courses in higher educational institutions, promoting cooperation with Russian and the world's leading MOOC platforms, trying to integrate into the structure of the global e-education market. The academic community has immediately responded to that with a large number of publications. Thanks to the normative legitimation of the above-mentioned document the term "online education" began to dominate (for the first time), replacing the concepts of "distance education" and "e-learning" (more typical for the previous stage of this discourse). But the true surge of interest in the analyzed problem has taken place only in 2020, when the whole world, including Russia, was forced to switch to online training form due to the pandemic.

The ubiquity of online education in university systems puts on the scientific agenda the question of ensuring the quality of education in the online form (Fahrurrozi et al., 2021). Accordingly, the purpose of this article is to establish the availability of online learning resources, ensuring the quality of higher education (Rawashdeh et al., 2021; Nabokikh et al., 2020).

In the past, different forms of online learning were a part of informal education, but today they replace – fully or partially – the formal system of education (Mishra et al., 2020). In this context, it is important to determine to which extent these forms will be able to ensure the same level of education as traditional classes.

2. Materials and Method

The neo-institutional approach served as the theoretical framework of this research. The main idea of neo-institutionalists (regardless of the features adhered to the paradigm of New Institutionalism theory) is as follows: the actors of social relations system have a certain degree of freedom in determining their social trajectory (Demsetz, 1988); each (or almost every) actor has a set of alternatives in choosing social goals and resources to achieve them.

Such an understanding naturally follows from specifics of the modern society (the properties of its actors being individualism, pragmatism and rationalism). These qualities emphasize their awareness and acceptance of freedom as the dominant value. First of all, we mean freedom of choice. This choice is possible in the process of various social interactions, including those related to entering the institutional space of higher education. However, freedom of choice does not provide absolute freedom. It is impossible and can generate the risks of social deregulation and a high potential for conflict in conditions of pragmatization and rationalization of social action (Saveliev, 2016). They need some reasonable social boundaries, which differ from the boundaries of traditional society (established as a result of a free contract between social actors).

The boundaries should ensure transparency of social behaviour and prescribe clear rules of the game to all the players (acting in their social field), compliance with the rules being ensured by a system of incentives (primarily from the point of view of simplifying the possibilities of goal-achieving activities). Incorrect attitude to the rules is suppressed by the system of sanctions, including getting out the regulated social space (Moskovsky, 2005). In such coordinates of meanings, the social institution is assessed as a stable set of formal and informal norms, regulating a certain segment of social relations (North, 1997). The institution with stable norms

functions properly, providing social actors with alternatives for social action. Such sustainability depends on two main factors: the solidary consent of actors (to support the norms) and the institute's potential to contribute to the achievement of social actors' actual goals. Thus, the objective reality of a social institution is confirmed by the presence of formal and informal norms recognized by the actors, and subjective reality is confirmed by the coincidence of their goal-achieving trajectories.

Our basic concepts of "higher education quality" and "online learning" play an important role in the course of social interactions in the institutional space of higher education. On these concepts there depend both the vectors of goal-achieving activity and the ways of influencing a particular choice of alternatives to social behaviour (through the norms providing them). These properties of neo-institutionalism determine the choice of our research theoretical framework.

In this article, the institutional space will be represented only by the students' point of view. To represent it, we conducted a sociological survey among the students of three universities (Rostov-on-Don). The sample included: the Southern Federal University (612 respondents), Rostov State University of Economics (534 respondents) and the Don State Technical University (656 respondents). The total sample was 1,802 respondents. We conducted the study using Google forms and SPSS 22 program for processing the data.

Thus, the basis for the institutional determination of the quality of higher education, obtained with the help of online learning is the results of a sociological survey of students, as one of the sides of the process. The survey's methodology is based on the theoretical framework of sociological research. The issues were compiled in view of the requirements to the educational programmes and the required competences for obtaining education.

It includes the development and structuring of the form of a survey, which, in our case, is presented by six blocks of issues, which allow determining such aspects of quality of online learning as:

- Understanding of the essence and mission of higher education;
- Determination of the level of online learning facilitating the receipt and development of educational competences;
- Determination of the influence of formalization of online learning on the productive work and involvement of teachers;
- Assessment of students' motivation for online learning compared to the activities in a classroom;
- Determination of the technical possibility to avoid dishonesty in the process of final and intermediary testing;
- Assessment of the influence of online learning on the quality of education.

The conducted survey is connected to a time interval. It was held in 2022, after the COVID-19 pandemic, which, in our opinion, is the decisive condition for the mass transition to online learning. Due to this, the objective conditions that determine the quality of online education and the attitude toward it were as follows: limitation in time, non-standard form for most of the participants from both sides, the low starting level of the readiness of teachers, material and technical basis, control systems, etc.

The purpose of the survey was to determine how online learning influences the quality of education and the manifestations of this. The research hypothesis was that online resources negatively influence the quality of higher education.

3. Results

Initially, we suggested that the students would evaluate the significance of several

legitimately fixed higher education signs. This allowed determining the understanding of the essence of higher education and

became a basis for the treatment of further answers (Table 1-6).

Table 1. “Select the features that, in your opinion, characterize the concept of higher education”

Evaluation Criteria	Results (%)
1. The unity of the learning process and scientific activity	30.8
2. A public good that is significant for a person, family, society and the state	15.4
3. Intellectual, spiritual, moral, creative, physical and professional development	76.9
4. Providing educational services meeting the individual needs and goals of consumers	33.3
5. Training qualified specialists for professional activity	69.2

We expected a high frequency of "Training qualified specialists for professional activity" (69.2%), but the leader of student preferences turned out to be an option actualizing different types of development (76.9%).

Some specialists state that online learning can develop some skills but is unable to

develop a personality. We suggested that this aspect should be evaluated by the students themselves.

This block of questions included the ranking scale of assessing the level of correspondence of a certain statement to students' perception.

Table 2. “Select the features that, in your opinion, characterize the concept of higher education”

Evaluation Criteria	Results (%)					I _c
	1	2	3	4	5	
1. Does online learning contribute to the development of public speaking skills?	30.8	46.2	12.8	7.7	2.6	205.1
2. Does online learning contribute to your ability to express thoughts?	10.3	23.1	43.6	15.4	7.7	287.2
3. Does online learning contribute to the development of creative abilities?	17.9	17.9	30.8	23.1	10.3	290.0
4. Does online learning contribute to your teamwork skill?	17.9	41	17.9	12.8	10.3	256.7
5. Does online learning contribute to your conflict-resolving ability?	15.4	38.5	25.6	10.3	10.3	261.7

Note: I_c – index of correspondence.

According to the obtained data, we can say that students have a low or average assessment of online learning resources ensuring the development of the stated parameters. Moreover, there prevails the choice of low ranks, rather than medium.

To generalize the results, we calculated the index of correspondence (I_c) according to the following formula:

$$I_c = \sum_{i=1}^5 I_i \times i,$$

where *i* – identifier of the option of an answer (1 - 5); *I_i* – score of the corresponding option of an answer, %.

The median level of correspondence 250 determines the boundary value, below which the studied parameter conforms to the statement to a lesser extent. Above 250 – the statement conforms to students' attitude to a larger extent; 0 – does not conform at all, 500 – fully conforms. The level of

correspondence of the statements in students' perception is above average. Only in the first case, "Does online learning contribute to the development of public speaking skills?", the respondents predominantly think that online learning does not contribute to the development of these skills.

In this block, the maximum value of correspondence is peculiar for criteria 2 and 3. Thus, according to students' treatment, online learning contributes to the ability to express thoughts to a larger extent but contributes to the development of teamwork if conflict resolution to a lesser extent. Such

understanding is directly connected with the specifics of resources for online learning, which, in most cases, are based on connections between "student-lecturer", not "student-student" and "group of students-lecturer". This requires from students more creativity, including in the context of expressing their thoughts.

It would be interesting to compare the obtained results with some questions affecting other aspects of online teaching. In this regard, the question of teachers' ability to work efficiently in the system of online learning is indicative.

Table 3. "Will formalization of the online education process prevent teachers from working efficiently and enthusiastically?"

Evaluation Criteria	Results (%)
1. Yes, as the full-time contact form is an educational environment where students and teachers mutually develop in a dialogue mode	74.4
2. Yes, as the teachers will lose motivation to work and improve their professional skills outside of the classroom	28.2
3. No, teachers should not attract and motivate anyone, as their role is to transmit information and check its qualitative assimilation	2.6
4. No, a teacher is a provider of educational services, who works formally in any conditions	2.6

Here the situation looks as categorical as possible. Almost all the students were convinced that teachers will not be able to work efficiently and enthusiastically online. Such conclusions are made based on personal experience, when, due to an increase or decrease in the number of COVID-19 infected students and teachers they were either studying (working) online, or returning to their classroom. In this regard, now we have a unique situation that allows us to evaluate both training formats almost at the same time.

In this block, an important aspect is that students do not see teachers as the ones who transmit information and check its qualitative assimilation (option 3) or provide educational services (option 4). Approximately one-fourth of the respondents see the differences in the motivation of teachers under the conditions of classroom

and online work, and $\frac{3}{4}$ focus on the fact that the full-time contact form is an educational environment where students and teachers mutually develop in a dialogue mode.

Given this, it is possible to take into account the period of the survey, according to which the teaching, learning and control methodologies were introduced without any preliminary preparation, which influenced the quality of their use.

It seems important to assess the motivation for work: not only of teachers but of students as well. To clarify this, we asked them a corresponding question.

In this block, the respondents selected one option of answer. Accordingly, the total number of answers is 100 %, and the number of answers to each question characterizes their distribution.

Table 4. “Is your motivation to study online changing (compared to the classroom work)?”

Evaluation Criteria	Results (%)
1. It is changing for the better, because I can better set myself up for studying at home	10.3
2. It does not change, as the one who intensively studies in the classroom will intensively study at home as well	25.6
3. It changes for the worse, as motivation for learning in the classroom is higher due to the teacher’s control and suitable learning environment	64.1

As is seen, the students were not as categorical about themselves as about teachers, but most of them state, that there is a decrease in "home training" motivation. If option 2 in this block is defined as median, then the ratio of those whom online learning influences negatively to those whom online learning influences positively will be approximately 1 to 6.

One can say that the new regime is unfamiliar to the students and teachers, so in the future, these problems will disappear (under the influence of necessity), but this is nothing more than a hypothesis that has not been confirmed in practice.

On the other hand, the motivation in which transition to online learning tools place also influenced the level of motivation. The specific features of the online regime of work, during which there is no direct communication channel between teacher and student, as well as the absence of the period of gradual transition and adaptation to this

form of learning on the whole, aggravated the level of students’ interest in the educational process. Besides, the assumed factor of the determined ratio is the retrospective and, accordingly, opposition to the change. While the previous experience of motivation came from teachers, in the case of the absence of internal motivation and transformation of the traditional channels of lecturer's influence, the level of motivation will be reducing up to the moment of an increase in student's personal interest or development of an effective channel of stimulation from the university or teacher.

We know that online learning is built not only on students’ independent responsibility for their educational process but also on the technical methods of knowledge control. They issue certificates for completed online courses based on testing. In this context, the student's attitude to the correctness of such a knowledge accounting mechanism seems to be interesting.

Table 5. “Is it possible (due to exam proctoring and other methods) to technologically solve the problem of unfair testing after the end of training course?”

Evaluation Criteria	Results (%)
1. No, one can always find a way to bypass technical control	64.1
2. No, as the developers of proctoring and other tools will try to earn money, developing "anti-proctoring" tools	30.8
3. Yes, as technological progress provides reliable technologies for monitoring students	10.3

The obtained data indicate some possible prospects of online higher education. If students’ motivation to study is not high and such a model does not treat teachers as the main motivator, then technologies could save the educational situation. However, as we can see, students (at least, some of them)

are convinced, and therefore expect some prospects for falsification in the future.

The problem of honesty and effective control is one of the most important ones in the context of ensuring the quality of higher education during the use of online resources for learning. Despite the multiple advantages

of online learning, online environment contains many risks, which are connected with educational processes. In this context, fraud and plagiarism are the most urgent problems of online learning (Fuller & Yu, 2014) are a threat to the academic integrity

of students (Bell & Federman, 2013).

Finally, we will turn to students' assessment of the prospects for maintaining the quality of higher education after the introduction of the online form.

Table 6. "Do you think there will be a decrease in the quality of education in conditions of online learning?"

Evaluation Criteria	Results (%)
1. Yes, people tend to simplify their tasks, so that it is easier to solve them online	53.8
2. Yes, reduction of the teacher's role as the quality guarantor and abolition of the educational environment (teaching a group in the classroom, full-time form) will lead to the elimination of the very concept of "quality standard"	46.2
3. No, the roles of the teacher and educational environment are not essential for ensuring the quality of education	7.7
4. No, the quality of education is a subjective concept, any student can easily evaluate it independently	10.3

As you can see, the vast majority of students have an extremely negative assessment of online learning resources maintaining the quality of higher education (at least, at the current level). This indicates that the online form, which is declared as accessible and capable of mass replication, is potentially able to eliminate the very concept of higher education (as it has developed historically and is understood at the present stage).

4. Discussion

The entire online learning problems discourse can be divided into three semantic blocks: 1) establishment of online learning concept terminological certainty and clear understanding of its content; 2) definition of specific characteristics of online learning since it cannot be considered to be a homogeneous concept; we suppose, that this determines a different amount of resources affecting the quality of higher education; 3) assessment of online learning resources in the context of their use as opportunities to achieve the quality of higher education.

1. Establishment of online learning terminological certainty depends on the definition of two other concepts: "e-

learning" and "distance learning". When analyzing their relationships, they have developed two approaches: identification as synonyms (Gorelova, 2019) and division into volumes of different semantic content (Kovalev et al., 2020b).

The first approach can be considered an unsubstantiated one if we do not take into account the dubious references to legislation, through which e-learning (mentioned in the Federal Law on Education) is identified with online learning. However, it should be noted that this law does not contain the term "online learning" and its semantic content cannot depend on legal definitions. The position of specialists within the framework of the second approach is more reasoned, although the assumptions of many scientists lack both general grounds for distinguishing these terms and clear definitions (including the definition of online learning itself).

2. The definition of specific characteristics of online learning is carried out with allocation of the three most relevant and sustainable practices: 1) MOOCs; 2) commercial online learning in the form of combining universities with commercial e-learning providers (educational Internet platforms (such as Coursera) or leading

universities); 3) synchronous online learning, which has become widespread due to the social distancing measures.

The attitudes of specialists to MOOCs can be divided into three groups. Experts from the first group support the opinion that MOOCs are ready to become an effective substitute for higher education. This group of authors is convinced that the MOOC model will become the basic one for the entire future higher education system, transforming it most radically. In most cases, nothing is mentioned about the contours of this transformation in the considered works (Barak et al., 2016; Grechushkina, 2018).

Based on this concept, they identify only two possible directions of development: 1) the gradual replacement of classroom teaching in classical universities with electronic teaching materials created at the expense of their resources (Shakhov et al., 2016), and 2) the use of third-party electronic teaching materials based on well-known educational platforms (edX, Coursera, Udacity, Courson, INTUIT, Universarium, Open Education, etc.) (Firova et al., 2020). In both cases, universities become the virtual ones.

The second group believes that MOOCs can ensure the quality of education only in the status of additional education based on higher education obtained traditionally, or a complex combination with traditional education. This approach to assessing MOOCs can be reduced to the two fundamental characteristics. First, it is a mechanism for the transformation of extended education, which, after transferring to the commercial sector, can find itself in a deep crisis (Stepanova and Kryzhanovskaya, 2019). Secondly, the universities' electronic courses (free of charge for students) can become a tool for improving the quality of education, acting as an additional resource for classroom training.

In the third group, they have sharply negative judgments about the ability of MOOCs to ensure the quality of higher education (Kurbakova and Sulitskaya, 2019).

We believe that this position of scientists is directed not so much against online learning, but rather to counteract the rash, violent, forced policy of its introduction into the curriculum of bachelors, specialists and masters.

There are not so many works on commercial online training in general, and most of them belong to economists or managers of organizations providing commercial educational services with electronic content. The range of issues is mainly subordinated to the assessment of the external and internal competition in the educational services market, where quality issues are secondary or positioned in the form of advertising their services (Kosolapova, 2018).

The discourse on synchronous online learning (Teams or Zoom) is the least of the fully presented ones. The vast majority of specialists note the temporary nature of such educational activities caused by the complex epidemiological situation (Vaskov et al., 2020).

3. The assessment of online learning resources in the context of their use as opportunities to achieve the quality of higher education has allowed us to identify the three areas with fundamental differences: 1) acceptable quality of higher education can already be provided online (Gul, 2014); 2) the quality of education can be ensured in the future by solving some problematic issues that currently arise in online learning educational process (Bazylevich, 2020); 3) the quality of online learning is inferior to the classical one because it has a limited amount of resources (Kovalev et al., 2020a).

5. Conclusion

We used the neo-institutional approach as a theoretical framework for our research to study the representations of social actors separately, with an opportunity to synchronize them through the coincidence of value orientations. The presence of consent may indicate institutional stability (in our

case - the social institute of higher education). The basis of this empirical research was a sociological survey conducted in three universities of the Russian Federation (the Rostov region): the Southern Federal University, the Rostov State University of Economics and the Don Technical University. The total sample was 1,802 respondents.

The results of our research indicate that the online form, which is declared as accessible and capable of mass replication, is potentially able to eliminate the very concept of higher education (as it has developed historically and is understood at the present stage). It has no resources to maintain the educational process at the current level of quality.

On the other hand, the mass experience of online learning was obtained by students as a result of the unpredictable circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. This condition predetermined the specifics of transition to online learning, which include the absence of the preparatory phase and gradual adaptation, subjective attitude toward the assessment of online learning from the position of retrospective, as well as the presence of technical and methodological aspects that require improvement. Besides, in the traditional forms of obtaining education, the teacher is assigned an

important role not only in teaching but also in motivating students. The online form of communication at this stage somehow eliminates this influence. Under such conditions, students' skill to motivate themselves independently and evaluate the quality of education not based on received scores but from the position of possession of the necessary competences and achievement of success in the labor activities is more valuable.

Summing up the current discourse, we can note that despite the wide representation of approaches and directions, there are some gaps, without filling which it is impossible to solve the issue of online learning resources in achieving higher education quality. First of all, these gaps include the lack of a clear definition of the online learning concept, insufficient understanding of its types in real educational practices and the level of online learning quality in higher education.

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