

**TRANSFORMING EDUCATION IN A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD:  
DISTANCE LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

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The current COVID pandemic brought about a variety of challenges in the educational environment under the prevailing circumstances. It proved to be a powerful accelerator of trends towards digitalization and distance learning that were already present in the field of education, including in higher education.

With the advent of information technology in educational activities, distance learning was part of education even before its widespread use as a necessary mode of instruction during a

pandemic. Professional training requires the use of a PC and is no longer possible without the use of internet. Innovative teaching technologies uplift the educational process to a qualitatively new level. Students are expected to take an (inter)active part in their own educational journey. One of these innovative methods is distance learning. It is meant to allow greater access to the knowledge transfer and to accommodate the specific needs of various audiences, including vulnerable people who, due to their physical limitations, cannot fully participate in the classic form of the educational process. Another advantage is the flexibility of the approach in terms of time schedule, that allows the students to contact the teacher at any time of their convenience and promptly receive an answer to the question of interest. Students are enabled to choose a convenient and comfortable learning timeslot, while conducting self-study tasks and independent study of the material through the internet.

At the same time distance learning has obvious limitations and disadvantages. These include, *inter alia*, the following:

Distance learning cannot substitute for learning through discussion among each other and with the lecturer in a living atmosphere of a classroom. During a zoom session the nonverbal communication is lost which account for up to 80% of communication.

Digital learning requires much greater degree of self-motivation whereas a good teacher is somebody who motivates students to learn. Often this interaction also depends on how the students perceive the role model of their teacher.

Distance learning depends heavily on the availability of reliable electronic infrastructure, internet access, internet speed and the adequacy of the programming tools. In the event of unequal access to infrastructure a potential digital divide may emerge, resulting in form of exclusion.

Digital learning remains ill equipped to reflect the values related to education including empathy and sympathy, aspects of ethics and integrity, etc. It is difficult to maintain control over the quality of the knowledge obtained online, since the student covers most of the educational material on his or her own.

Thus, for example, authors as teachers of the specialty International Relations, confidently note that in the learning process, the following methods are needed: live discussions, negotiation games, debates, teamwork, etc. The conduct of negotiation games is a particularly telling example. The online exchange cannot enable adequately the intra- and inter-group discussion that are central for successful application of such behavioral methods.

While admitting the strong disruptive effect of the COVID crises, some educators align themselves to a generation who, in the words of Masha Gessen from *The New Yorker*, understand the return of normalcy as «trying to recreate the status quo ante». [1] Recreating the educational *belle époque* can never be full and comprehensive. However, the transformation processes should take into account all three pillars on which the universities' role, prestige and importance stood: satisfying the learning needs of graduates; certifying the degree of qualification that will enable the diploma holders to earn more and reach higher in their professional career; and building *an esprit du corps*, through an allegiance to a particular network of faculty and peers. [1]

One of the drawbacks of distance learning is the total dependence on technology. Every student seeking to enroll in a distance learning program must invest in a range of equipment, including a computer, webcam, and stable internet connection. There is absolutely no physical contact between students and teachers, as a rule, training is carried out via the internet. In the event of any software or hardware malfunction, the class session will end. Even without a teacher for

personal interaction and without classmates who can help with constant reminders of unfinished assignments, the chances of distraction and loss of control over the deadlines are remarkably high. As a result, these technological and behavioral shortcomings and weaknesses could significantly reduce the quality of the learning process and the information received.

In addition, the complex nature of the technology and its use in distance learning restricts online education only to students who are computer and technology savvy. Therefore, it is important to take into consideration the degree of development of digitalization in the field of education and in the country as a whole. To begin with, the state program «Digital Kazakhstan» is being implemented in Kazakhstan. According to the plan, by 2022 the share of internet users in the country will increase to 82%, the level of digital literacy of the population will increase to 83%, the system of secondary and higher education will meet the needs of the digital economy. [2]

Even though there are already numerous online universities in the education market, there is no concept of online learning in Kazakhstan's legislation. According to the report of the Minister of Education and Science, today holders of online university diplomas compete on a par with holders of regular diplomas, while the quality of documents in the first case is questionable. Therefore, Askhat Aimaganbetov urged not to recognize diplomas of online universities in Kazakhstan. [3]

Obviously, this requires new standards for the recognition of online degrees from such universities. Meanwhile, according to a decree of the Prime Minister already signed in Uzbekistan, the online form of education is not recognized in the state. In such an environment, online university students are at risk if they rely entirely on distance education for their degree. They can get a degree, but this will not be recognized neither by private companies in the labor market, nor by public institutions and providers of government jobs. Therefore, employers prefer a regular college degree to online or distance education. They believe that distance education is still not a reliable form of education.

The ENU Professor Bakhyt Nurbekov identified as main obstacles for the further development of distance education in Kazakhstan the low level of digital literacy of teachers, inadequate technical equipment in rural areas and non-systematic development of distance learning in universities. To eliminate these disadvantages The National Education Development Program was developed with a focus on the standardization of all educational resources into a unified national network. This centralized approach, advocated by Prof. Nurbekov, may also contain various challenges. As one student said in a private conversation: during the recent lock-down, the pre-recorded online lectures were particularly boring; most of the students consulted these pre-recorded lectures only at the end of the semester, a day prior to the exams.

One can assume that what is true for the unequal access on a national scale in Kazakhstan is valid for the entire region of Central Asia. In the pre-2019 version of the EU Central Asia Strategy, the Education Platform was one of its three main pillars alongside the Rule of Law and the Water Management Platforms. [4] In educational terms, Kazakhstan belongs to Europe ever since the country became an active partner of the Bologna process. Hence, increased responsibility of the educators in the region goes hand in hand with harnessing their energy and talent in consortium-type interaction with European universities when it comes to the educational program development including for IT-supported transfer of knowledge.

New methods, innovative technologies in teaching and the current quality of education are among the pressing themes that bother all countries in Central Asia and beyond. This conclusion

was confirmed during the Web Forum "Education and Leadership Now and in Post-Pandemic World" that was held in June 2020, within the Caspian Week, with the participation of educators from Europe, Japan, India, Russia, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. [6]

The compatibility of the credit systems in Kazakhstan and in Europe should remain a defining compatibility factor. When discussing the possibility to eliminate the existing grades and switch all or most courses to a pass-fail system, Kazakhstan should align its policy with the European universities, particularly the ones who receive Kazakh students under the Erasmus Plus exchange programs.

As the Harvard Professor Bharat Anand wrote in *The Boston Globe*, "the coronavirus allows people to reimagine the college experience... Everyone must pivot to a new mindset. These new vistas will most likely be related to scalability (and no capacity constraints), interactivity (with a click), and many-to-many interactions (the defining hallmark of digital technologies)". [5]

While students are not on campus, the education system should treat geographical dispersion not as a liability but as a chance to create a learning environment that is literally global in scale. Courses can feature live conversations with the most prominent experts from around the world. In Kazakhstan, there exists a Generation of the Future – the beneficiaries of the so called Bolashak program. Several thousand young people studied at least for a semester in the best European universities. This is a special group of people in Kazakhstan, proclaimed by some sociologists as the bearers of liberal and cosmopolitan values and aspirations. It is pertinent for these Bolashak group members to re-create Europe locally, on the ground, including by engaging with high school and university students and young researchers from academia.

Like with natural disasters, to improve their resilience, the universities in Central Asia should move on from COVID impact mitigation measures, towards post-COVID adaptation activities. The optimal Pareto principle-based paradigm will most likely prove to be a hybrid form of academic programming that will increase the IT components but will preserve some substantial in-person teaching methods. The system needs change, but also continuity.

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