

## DISTANCE LEARNING EXPERIENCE IN GEORGIA UNIVERSITIES

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***Annotation.** The covid-19 pandemic has put the higher education system of Georgia in front of serious challenges. Universities have had to quickly adapt to distance learning methods. Two years of distance learning experience has shown that this method of learning has its advantages and disadvantages. The description of these parties in the paper is based on the personal experience of the author's academic activity.*

***Key words:** distance learning, quality of education, problems of distance learning*

***Анотація.** Пандемія COVID-19 поставила систему вищої освіти Грузії перед серйозними викликами. Університетам довелося швидко адаптуватися до дистанційного навчання. Дворічний досвід дистанційного навчання показав, що цей метод навчання має свої переваги та недоліки. Опис цих сторін у статті базується на особистому досвіді наукової діяльності автора.*

***Ключові слова:** дистанційне навчання, якість освіти, проблеми дистанційного навчання*

In many developed countries of the world, distance learning has decades of experience. Moreover, in some countries distance universities even function, for example, a significant part of students in Turkey studies in such universities, and in the

USA 81% of higher education institutions offer at least one distance course to students and such universities include the world's leading universities, such as MIT, Yale University and other.

Distance learning is technically a form of education where teachers are physically separated from students during the teaching process (Simonson, 2016). The world uses asynchronous, synchronous and mixed models of distance learning [4].

In synchronous online learning, the learning process takes place online, which means that the lecturer and the student must be online at the same time. Asynchronous online learning does not require the teacher and student to be online at the same time. The blended learning method combines synchronous and asynchronous learning components.

Along with the growth of technological innovations, academic spaces are also talking about seamless learning (Seamless Learning) and comprehensive learning (Ubiquitous Learning), which are not limited to the planned online learning process, and the possibility of mobile smartphones in informal learning is actively discussed [5].

Restrictions in the field of higher education caused by the Covid-19 pandemic have become an important challenge for Georgia. Until 2016, the legislation of Georgia did not provide for distance education. Only the synchronous method was allowed as distance learning, while in many developed countries asynchronous learning is given great importance. However, pandemic processes have refined the law on distance learning. To date, in the higher educational institutions of Georgia, the simultaneous use of the mixed method of teaching - synchronous and asynchronous methods has been introduced.

Before the pandemic, distance education was not a form of education. Society was not ready for distance learning. An opinion was formed that distance education is less effective. Therefore, there was no attempt to introduce distance education. Universities were not equipped with the necessary technologies for distance learning, and access to the Internet and computers in Georgia is still limited, especially in the regions. As of

2019, the Internet was available to 86% of households in urban areas and 70% in rural areas, and the same figures for computers are 75% and 45% [2].

Therefore, the transition to such a teaching mode required the rapid mobilization of appropriate resources to maintain the continuity of teaching.

Universities in the implementation of distance learning were guided by the e-learning and quality assurance guidelines developed by the European Association of Higher Education Quality Assurance Agencies (ENQA). In addition, a supporting document for providing e-learning was specially created, on the basis of which all universities developed a similar document.

Higher education institutions used various applications and online platforms supporting distance learning: Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Moodle, Google Classroom. They have also developed relevant guides and video tutorials for academic staff and students. Curriculums were modified to facilitate the learning process, online lecture/seminar recordings were uploaded on the relevant platform and made available to the students.

Also, teaching methods and assessment systems were revised. Universities have defined the evaluation mechanism. The final exams would mainly be held in the VI phase of relaxation of restrictions according to the format and schedule developed by the universities. Defense of bachelor's and master's theses was carried out according to an individual schedule based on the agreement of the student and supervisor.

It is worth noting that the training courses, which include practical components and laboratory work, are conducted intensively today when returning to the university space. Paid services such as Elsevier, Scopus, Sciencedirect, EBSCO, Econlit England Journal, JSTOR, Cambridge Journals Online and many others were opened for universities. They were made available for free to students and academic staff in the library's online space. The university libraries scanned the educational literature in an accelerated mode, which was also made available online for students.

In 2020, Tbilisi State University conducted a survey of 18,000 students regarding distance learning [1]. Population-based/Census-based approach was used in the study, which involves placing an online questionnaire on the electronic management system (LMS) for all members of the population (in this case, students with an active status of TSU in the current semester - 17952 students).

A population-based approach is widely used in the field of education (e.g., the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE); Student Experience in the Research Universities (SERU); the National Student Survey in the UK (NSS) and the Dutch National Student Survey in the Netherlands (NSE)) [3].

Zoom was the most frequently used online platform for remote work, while LMS and E-learning (Moodle) took the second and third places.

Students rated the effectiveness of the e-learning format on a 5-point scale. 24% believe that e-learning is completely ineffective, 10% believe that e-learning is very effective, and the majority (26%) rate it as average.

The general picture of online lecture attendance rates is as follows: the majority of students (36%) report 100% attendance, while the lowest rate of attendance (less than 50%) occurs in 20%.

Based on two years of distance learning experience, some conclusions can be drawn about how effective this type of learning was and how it was perceived by students and academic staff.

In the process of distance learning in Georgian universities, many problems were identified, some of which I will mention:

1. There was a small category of students who did not have either a computer or access to the Internet. Universities could not solve these kinds of problems.

*From personal experience:* Some of my students used their smartphones to attend lectures and seminars. According to them, they took the inline exams from their work or friend's computer.

2. Certain problems were noticed in the use of online learning platforms. This was particularly the case for academic staff, although this problem was soon overcome.

3. Student attendance at online lectures was minimal. Since all online lectures were recorded and videoed on the relevant learning platform, students could listen to the lecture recording at any time.

*From personal experience:* during the course of the lecture, the students did not have the video on and were hiding under the avatar. When trying to interact, 5-9 students were communicating, which probably meant that the rest did not want to participate or were not at the computer at all. I have had cases where students attended lectures from their cars or from work.

4. Conducting the seminar work was complicated, especially the impossibility of using the laboratory or conducting a written survey, case analysis, etc.

*From personal experience:* In the workshop, the students used the study material to tell the material, which they could not do in the classroom. Therefore, their assessment was largely conditional. The way out of this situation was to ask problematic questions, the answer to which was impossible to read.

5. Conducting exams online was not found to be effective in terms of testing knowledge. University examination centers tried to prevent students from rewriting the question, but this did not always work.

*From personal experience:* when correcting open-ended exam questions, when the student had to write a summary of the topic, I came across papers that were copied directly from the educational literature on a copy-paste basis. Some problems were also observed when solving econometric problems, when the calculation process could not be written correctly.

6. The process of defense of bachelor's and master's theses did not allow a full assessment of the student's training level.

*From personal experience:* during the online defense of bachelor's and master's theses, students were actually reading a pre-prepared written text behind the screen presentation, and it was difficult to adequately answer the questions.

7. The defense of doctoral dissertations in remote mode lacked the academic scientific atmosphere that accompanies the defense process in the hall.

*From personal experience:* one of my PhD students had to defend his thesis online. He shared his impressions with me and told me that speaking in front of doctors would be much more exciting and nerve-wracking for him than online. He, in fact, did not feel that he shared the scientific circle and became its member.

Among the advantages of distance learning, I would like to mention the following:

1. Access to educational material from any place where there is an Internet connection. This applies to both study literature and lecture notes.

*From personal experience:* My students are satisfied that they don't have to go to libraries and have all the study materials they need on their computers. My doctoral students are especially pleased, as they have free access to previously closed scientific databases.

2. Flexible schedule for taking exams.

*From personal experience:* students could choose any time for 2 weeks to take the exams, which they were satisfied with, since many of them work and had the opportunity to take the exams when they have free time.

3. A drop in the quality of learning was noticed in the first semester of distance learning when students and academic staff were adjusting. In subsequent semesters, the quality of teaching was practically the same as in the classrooms.

4. It was possible to study from any place, including abroad.

*From personal experience:* during the entire period of online education, I had only two students who could not come to Georgia and continued their studies abroad through Internet access. They were satisfied that they did not have to suspend their student status and waste time.

Despite the positive moments of distance learning, students were happy and satisfied with the opportunity to continue studying in classrooms. This is justified, because being a student is not only a learning process, but also an important stage of life, when communication is strengthened, friends are made and life is enjoyed.

The academic staff is also satisfied with the return to the Auditorium. Communication with students, interactive lectures, full-fledged seminar training are the most important prerequisites for quality education.

While the shift to distance learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic has certainly created some challenges, it has also produced some advantages. Distance learning provides an opportunity to improve education delivery methods and focus on new technologies. In fact, the standards by which we benefit in many areas of life will fundamentally change in the post-pandemic period. The full reopening of educational institutions will not return them to the same situation as it was before the COVID-19 pandemic. Higher education institutions should take the opportunity to strengthen and develop distance learning practices and make the learning process more responsive to the changing needs of higher education.

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