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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Distance Learning in the Humanitarian Field amid the Coronavirus Pandemic: Risks of Creating Barriers and Innovative Benefits

Aprendizaje a distancia en el campo humanitario en medio de la pandemia del coronavirus: riesgos de crear barreras y beneficios innovadores

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Summary

The goal of the research is to study the risks and innovative benefits of distance learning. The main research method is an anonymous survey of academic staff (university teachers) and students (future philologists, foreign language teachers), based on the need to clarify the situation associated with the use of distance learning technologies in the conditions of the quarantine. The following data have been obtained in the course of the study: the most significant opportunities for distance learning, the level of satisfaction with distance learning technologies, the compliance with the previously drawn up training schedule in the distance learning conditions, the satisfaction with the promptness of informing about the training schedule, the use of distance learning technologies to provide feedback, the factors that affect the quality of the implementation of distance learning technologies, the teachers' positive experience of using distance learning technologies, the use of distance learning technologies when providing students with lecture materials, as well as the use of information resources of the institution by the students. The results of the study have revealed that both students and teachers are aware of the need to work in a distance learning environment, but the coronavirus pandemic has created new risks for the higher education system, which require an innovative approach to overcoming barriers in the distance learning system. The results of the article can be used in the organization of distance learning at a humanitarian university.

Keywords: Philology Students, Covid-19, Curriculum, Learning Barriers.

Resumen

El objetivo de la investigación es estudiar los riesgos y los beneficios innovadores del aprendizaje a distancia. El principal método de investigación es una encuesta anónima al personal académico (profesores universitarios) y estudiantes (futuros filólogos, profesores de lenguas extranjeras), basada en la necesidad de esclarecer la situación asociada al uso de tecnologías de aprendizaje a distancia en las condiciones de la cuarentena. En el transcurso del estudio se han obtenido los siguientes datos: las oportunidades más significativas para la educación a distancia, el nivel de satisfacción con las tecnologías de educación a distancia, el cumplimiento del cronograma de formación previamente elaborado en las condiciones de educación a distancia, la satisfacción con la prontitud de informar sobre el cronograma de capacitación, el uso de tecnologías de educación a distancia para brindar retroalimentación, los factores que afectan la calidad de la implementación de tecnologías de educación a distancia, la experiencia positiva de los docentes en el uso de tecnologías de educación a distancia, el uso de tecnologías de educación a distancia al brindar estudiantes con materiales de lectura, así como el uso de los recursos de información de la institución por parte de los estudiantes. Los resultados del estudio han revelado que tanto estudiantes como profesores son conscientes de la necesidad de trabajar en un entorno de aprendizaje a distancia, pero la pandemia de coronavirus ha creado nuevos riesgos para el sistema de educación superior, que requieren un enfoque innovador para superar barreras a distancia. sistema de aprendizaje. Los resultados del artículo se pueden utilizar en la organización del aprendizaje a distancia en una universidad humanitaria.

Palabras clave: Estudiantes de Filología, Covid-19, Currículum, Barreras de aprendizaje.

Introduction

Interest in distance learning arose much earlier in education than in any other field of activity. The coronavirus epidemic has forced universities to rapidly switch to distance learning.

The distance learning system has been traditionally viewed as an active technology, i.e., as a form of interactive distance learning mediated by the appropriate software (Anderson, Dron, 2011; Nikulicheva, 2016; King et al., 2001; Shevelev, Kuznetsova, 2011).

As part of the implementation of distance learning, its participants must complete a specially organized course and master a set of educational material, allowing users to study the theoretical part, to pass intermediate testing, and to attend a workshop, if necessary, as well as to pass control testing (Manning et al., 2003; Picciano, 2017; Gagne, Shepherd, 2001). A course implemented in distance learning can be an element of an educational program aimed at studying theoretical and practical material (Beldarrain, 2006; Rogerson-Revell, 2015; Gafurova et al., 2020).

Education with the use of distance learning technologies is actively developing and acquiring supporters and opponents in professional circles as the number of students attending distance learning programs and courses increases; the affordability of such educational products increases as well (Joksimović et al., 2015; Guri-Rosenblit, 2016; Heydenrych, Prinsloo, 2010). There are reasons to believe that the mass transition of educational institutions to the use of distance learning tools is explained exclusively by economic motives and the desire to reduce the payroll of the academic staff (Carver, 2012; Moore et al., 2011).

The question of whether there are any objective prerequisites associated with a change in the education quality or the request from applicants remains open, although it has been covered in some works (Webster, Hackley, 1997; Lieblein, 2001; Harper et al., 2004), and the number of opinions on this matter indicates exceptional pluralism of views. The technological part of the issue has been worked out in sufficient detail, and there are a lot of project developments that describe the process of creating and implementing distance learning in detail (Chris

tensen et al., 2001; Harper et al., 2004; Cinar, Torenli, 2010).

The problem lies in the following part of the question: what will be the ratio of risks and innovative benefits of replacing the traditional approach to organizing the educational process with distance learning?

The goal of the article is to study the risks and innovative benefits of distance learning.

The objectives of the study include:

– identification of innovative benefits, as well as reflection of risks associated with the use of distance learning technologies; and

– determination of the main trends in the further development of using distance learning technologies.

Hypothesis of the study is as follows: students and teachers are aware of the need to work in a distance learning environment, but the coronavirus pandemic has created new risks for the higher education system, which require an innovative approach to overcoming barriers in the distance learning system.

Following the results of the study, it can be concluded that the goal set in the study has been achieved.

Methods

To achieve the goal, solve objectives, and prove the hypothesis of the study, an anonymous survey of the academic staff and students of higher education institutions (future philologists, foreign language teachers) was conducted from May 25, 2020 to June 05, 2020, based on the need to clarify the situation associated with the use of distance learning technologies in the conditions of the quarantine.

The purpose of the survey was to identify innovative benefits and to reflect the risks associated with the use of distance learning technologies, to develop options for solving such problematic issues, and to identify the main trends in the further development of the use of distance learning technologies.

The survey included answers to the questions about the most significant opportunities for distance learning, the level of satisfaction with distance learning technologies, the compliance with the previously drawn up training schedule in the distance learning conditions, the satisfaction with the promptness of informing about the training schedule, the use of distance learning technologies to provide feedback, the factors that affected the quality of the implementation of distance learning technologies, the teachers' positive experience of using distance learning technologies, the use of distance learning technologies when providing students with lecture materials, as well as the use of information resources of the institution by the students. Most of the questions involved multiple answers.

A total of 143 respondents took part in the survey: 112 philology students and 31 academic workers. All survey participants were warned about the purpose of the survey and that the organizers of the study were going to publish its results in a generalized form.

Results

According to the survey results, both groups of respondents (teachers and students) almost unanimously identified the most significant opportunities for distance learning for them (Fig. 1): flexibility in choosing the most convenient conditions (place and time) – 62.1 % and 59.2 %, study of theoretical material on various online platforms – 37.8 % and 30.3 %, and individualization of training – 33.7 % and 28.7 %, respectively. Another benefit for the students was the possibility to extend the time of mastering the material (30.6 %).

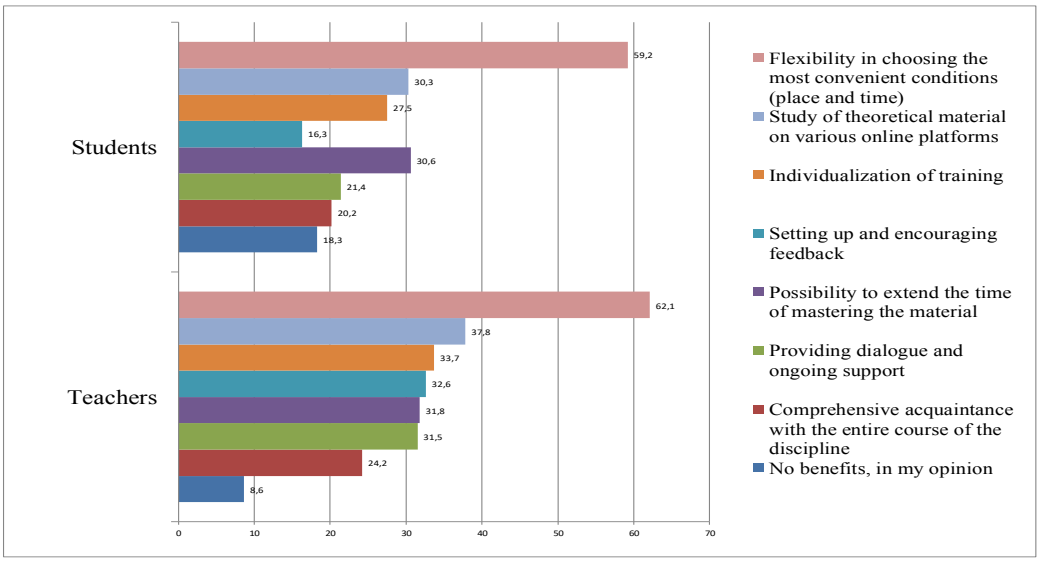

Figure (1): The most significant opportunities for distance learning, %

An extremely important indicator is the level of satisfaction of participants in the educational process with technologies that are used in higher education institutions in the distance working conditions.

The results obtained in the study indicate that the majority of the respondents, both students and teachers, are satisfied with the introduction of distance learning technologies in higher education institutions. In particular, 70 % of the respondents from among the students and 91 % of the teachers, respectively, expressed their full and partial satisfaction with such forms of education. Only a small proportion of the students (19.2 %) and teachers (8 %) expressed their dissatisfaction (Fig. 2).

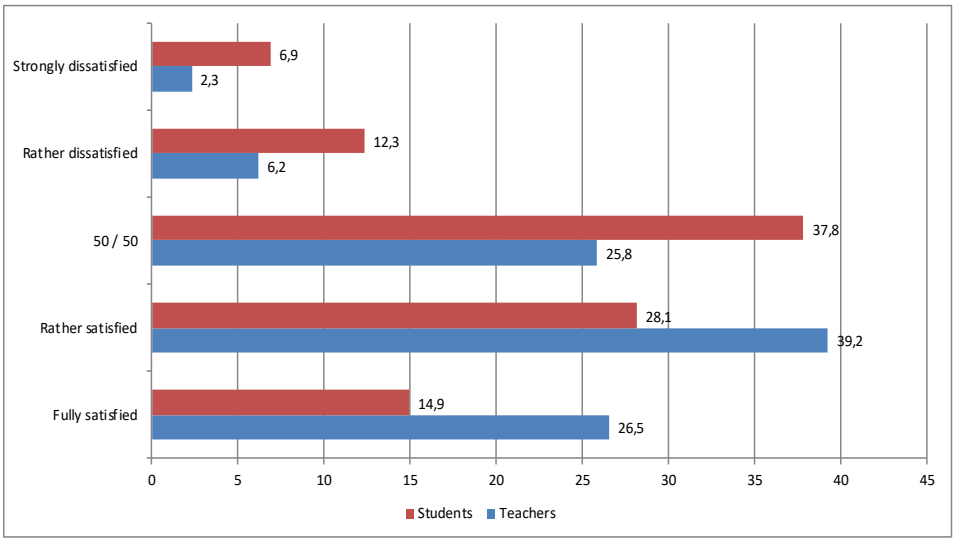

Figure (2): Level of satisfaction with distance learning technologies, %

The results of the respondents' assessment of the level of training organization using distance learning technologies indicate that in order to fulfill the curricula and programs, the university left the sequence of studying disciplines that had existed before the quarantine unchanged – namely, the continuation of work according to the existing schedule. At the same time, two-thirds of the respondents, both from among the students (64.4 %) and from among the teachers (71.7 %), confirmed that they had managed to ensure compliance with the previously drawn up training schedule in the distance working conditions. However, the rest of the respondents indicated the opposite: almost every fourth respondent denied adherence to the schedule in the university in full, and some respondents (7 % of the students and 3 % of the teachers) were categorical in their opinion: the schedule was not being complied with (Fig. 3).

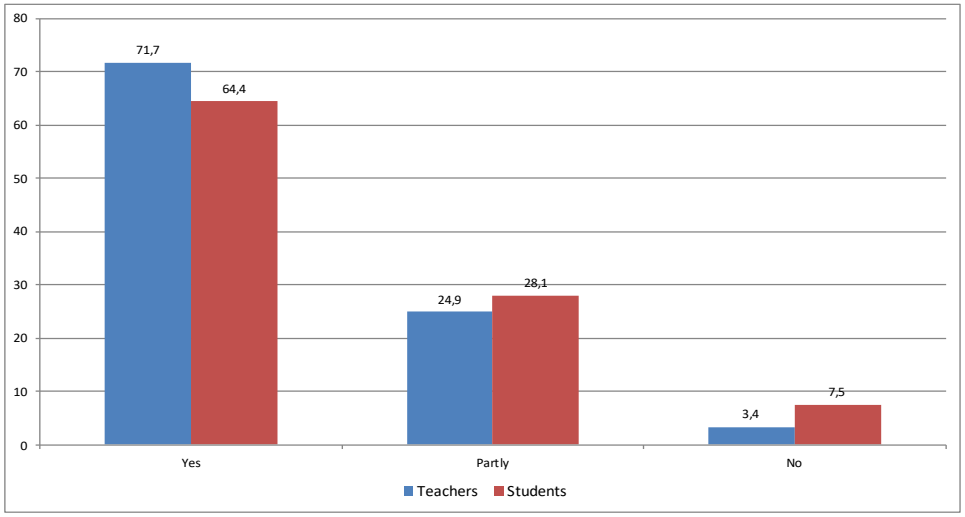

Figure (3): Compliance with the previously drawn up training schedule in the distance learning conditions, %

Considering the previous conclusions, it can be assumed that strict adherence to the schedule makes it difficult to implement the main benefit of distance learning, according to the respondents: flexibility in choosing the most convenient conditions (place and time).

However, the implementation of curricula and programs is mandatory, and a stable schedule facilitates this. Consequently, it can be assumed that about a third of the respondents' responses indicate the risk of institutions to fail curricula and programs.

With this in mind, the issue of the influence of noncompliance (partial compliance) with the training schedule on the education quality cannot be assessed unambiguously and requires additional study.

The analysis of responses about the satisfaction with the promptness of informing about the training schedule (changes in the schedule) in the distance working conditions, the timing of work, reporting deadlines, etc. indicates that only two-thirds of the respondents in both categories are relatively satisfied. A third of the respondents do not receive full information about the course of the educational process, which contains the risk of the students not receiving educational services in full (Fig. 4).

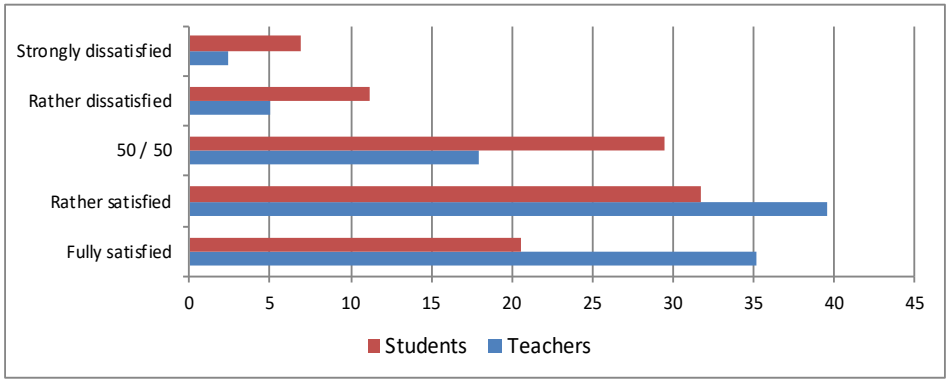

Figure (4): Satisfaction with the promptness of informing about the training schedule, %

At the same time, attention is drawn to the difference in the points of view of the respondents: only every fifth of the students surveyed is fully satisfied with the level of informing about the course of the educational process, while every third respondent among the teachers has such an opinion. In addition, the share of the students surveyed who expressed their

strong dissatisfaction with the level and promptness of informing about the progress of the educational process was three times higher than the share of the teachers surveyed.

This confirms the preliminary conclusion that due attention is not paid to the issue of the consistent application of information technologies in the organization of the educational process, due to which the information tools that are efficient for a particular university, student, and teacher are not sufficiently studied.

The analysis of the share of respondents using distance learning technologies to provide feedback (transfer/receipt of information) indicates that asynchronous teaching techniques remain the main tools of distance learning: messengers (noted by more than two-thirds of both the students and the teachers), e-mail (every second respondent from both categories), and online accounts on the websites of institutions (every fifth respondent from both the students and the teachers). At the same time, more than half of the respondents of both categories indicated the use of synchronous teaching techniques as well: virtual learning environments (Fig. 5).

However, in contrast to the assessment of the use of asynchronous means to provide feedback, where the position of both categories of the respondents did not differ significantly, the teachers and the students did not come to a common opinion in the case of the share of using synchronous teaching techniques. Only slightly more than half of the surveyed students (56 %) confirmed their use of synchronous teaching techniques, while teachers believed that the level of their use was much higher (about 70 %).

This unambiguously confirms the insufficient consistency of promptly informing the students about the timing of events with the use of synchronous teaching techniques and a relatively small share of participants from among the students in each synchronous event.

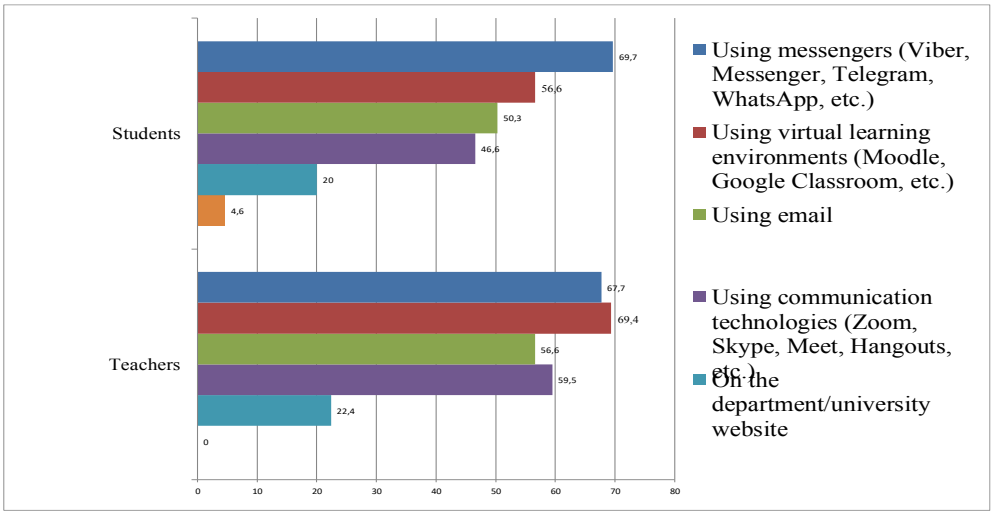

Figure (5): Using distance learning technologies to provide feedback, %

Another purpose of the survey was to determine the factors that affected the quality of implementation of distance learning technologies and, in particular, led to a low level of the students' involvement in learning and prevented the teacher from providing a high-quality educational service.

The analysis indicated that the surveyed students were most often faced with the problem of the lack of uninterrupted access to the Internet (38 %), as one in four students noted that they did not have the necessary equipment at home, 15 % of the students lacked the necessary skills to work with the equipment, and each fourth surveyed student pointed to a lack

of self-organization (Fig. 6). These reasons may complicate the timeliness of initiation to distance learning during the quarantine.

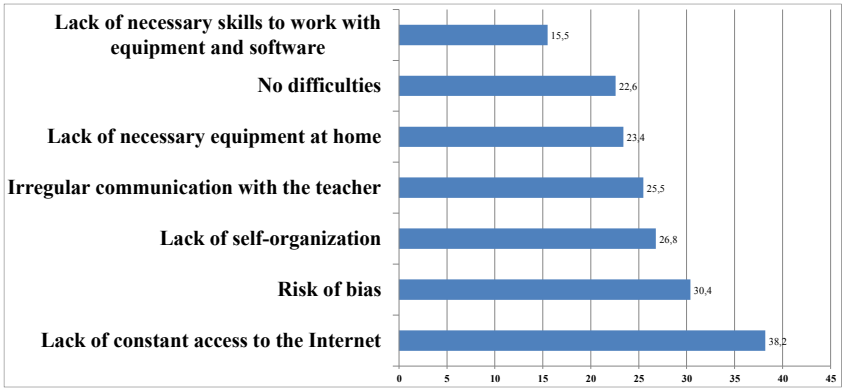

Figure (6): Factors that affect the quality of implementation of distance learning technologies (students' responses), %

Teachers also agree with these risk assessments: about 40 % of the respondents note the risk of a decrease in the education quality due to the insufficient level of proficiency of all participants in distance learning technologies in the educational process and its insufficient technical support (Fig. 7).

In addition, the students participating in the survey take other factors that complicate learning using distance technologies seriously: every third respondent admits the possibility of biased assessment, which obviously results in an irregular communication with the teacher, confirmed by 25 % of the surveyed students.

The teachers also assessed the factors that prevented them from providing a high-quality educational service to students in the distance learning mode (Fig. 7). Two-thirds of the teachers surveyed determine the lack of live contact between teachers and students as the most significant factor, as indicated by 64 % of the academic staff. Every third teacher is concerned that there were no developed online courses at the time when the large-scale use of distance technologies began, and their urgent development significantly increased the risk of using insufficiently developed courses.

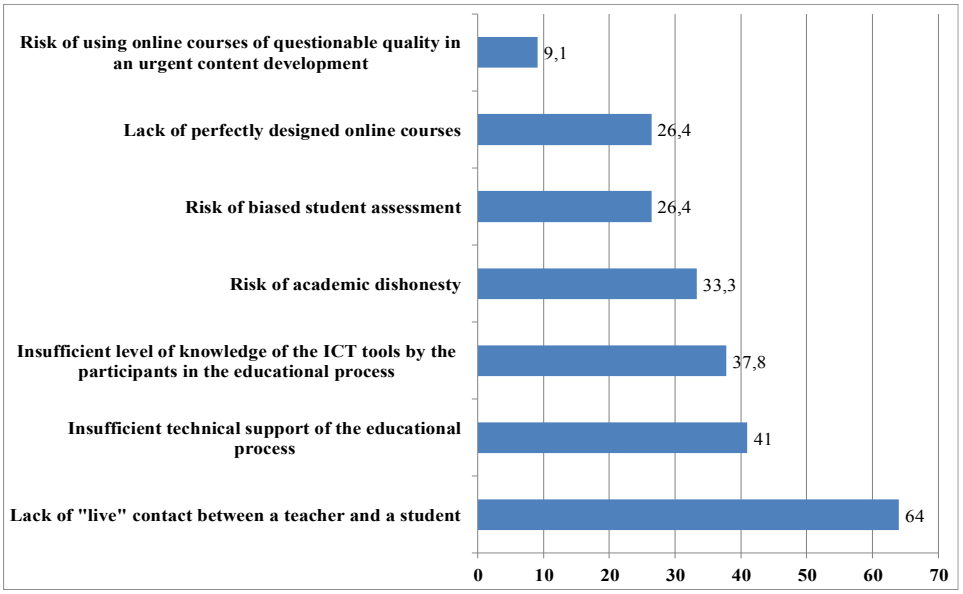

Figure (7): Factors that affect the quality of implementation of distance learning technologies (teachers' responses), %

The issue of the level of the teachers' proficiency in distance learning technologies was studied by analyzing the responses to the question about their positive experience in using distance learning technologies (Fig. 8).

Unfortunately, every third teacher surveyed did not show any positive experience of using distance technologies but would like to know about the positive experience of their colleagues and apply it in their practice. At the same time, it is alarming that every second teacher surveyed uses virtual educational environments.

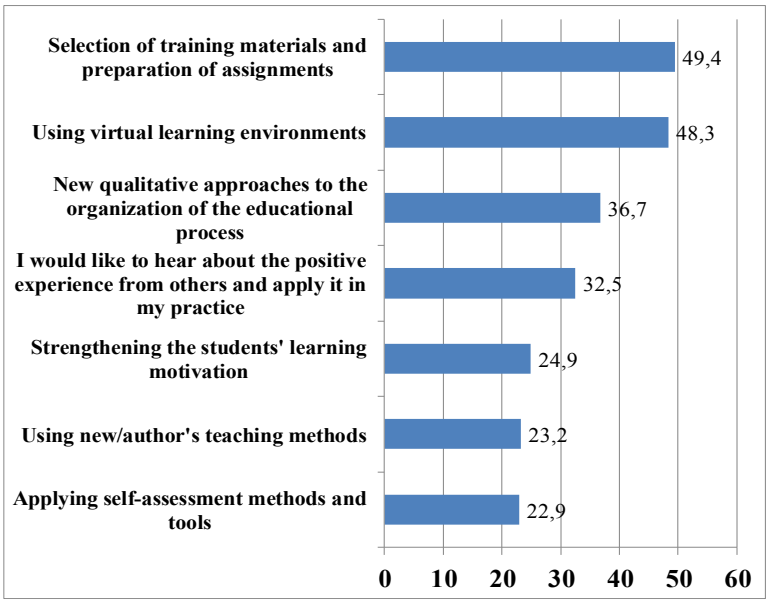

Figure (8): Own positive experience of using distance learning technologies (teachers' responses), %

The rest of the respondents generally have a positive experience in all the components offered for selection. At the same time, the results of the survey indicate that the teachers noted the selection of teaching materials and preparation of assignments for students as the most popular tool of distance learning in the context of positive experience – this was noted by every second surveyed teacher, more than 49 %.

Only 48 % of the surveyed teachers assess their experience of working with virtual educational environments as positive. At the same time, 80 % of them believe that this particular tool of distance learning technologies is the most efficient in organizing the educational process using distance technologies. However, among the respondents with a positive experience in virtual educational environments, every fourth does not use them to develop their own educational content, and only every third provides advisory guidance for laboratory, practical, and discussion classes with their use.

It is noteworthy that among the persons with a positive experience in using various distance learning tools, every second would like to know about the positive experience of their colleagues and apply it in their practice.

The analysis of using distance learning technologies while providing students with lecture materials (Fig. 9) revealed that every second teacher and student were able to use online methods: they received lecture materials through video communication. While almost 60 % of the teachers say they provide such services, only 48 % of the students surveyed were able to use this tool. A similar interdependence of responses also exists regarding the ability of applicants

to use these presentations: this possibility is provided by the teachers, but is not in demand among the students (54 % and 41 %, respectively).

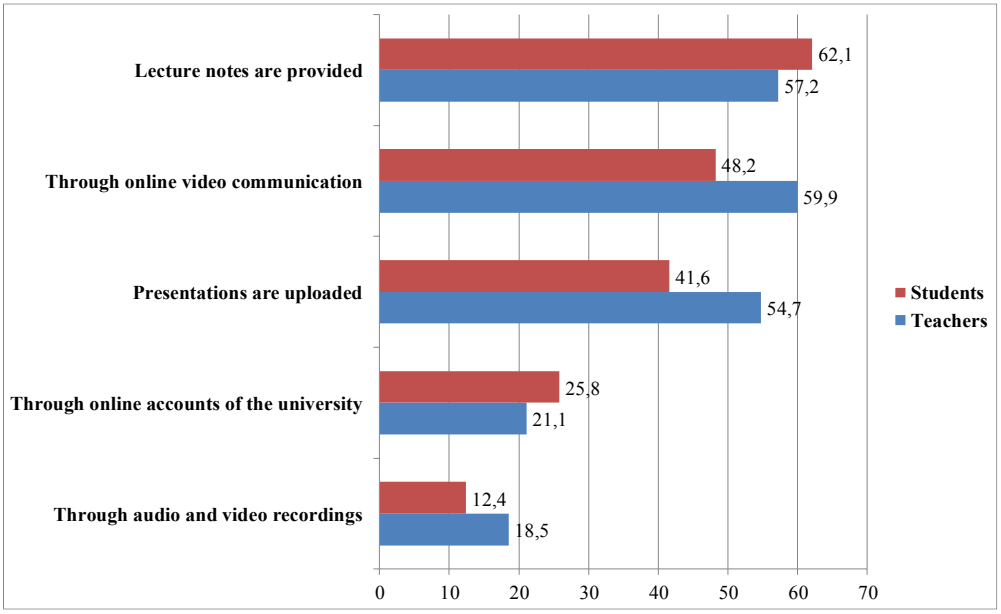

Figure (9): Use of distance learning technologies when providing students with lecture materials, %

The ranking of the most popular tool – the provision of lecture notes by teachers – has not changed since the massive use of distance technologies, as stated by about 60 % of the surveyed students and teachers.

Discussion

The survey results have revealed that distance technologies helped increase the level of the students' cognitive activity and achieve certain results in theoretical and practical skills, and in the forms of final control this conclusion was generally confirmed by the previous studies in this area (Galizina et al., 2020; Skripak et al., 2020; Golubeva et al., 2020; *Rostovskaya et al.*, *2020*), which helped in training future specialists.

As part of this study, the final assessment of the performance of the educational process in the distance working conditions was carried out according to five level indicators (low, below average, average, above average, and high).

It has been found that the students were less optimistic (more critical) in assessing the performance of the educational process in the context of distance learning. At the same time, the overwhelming majority of both students and teachers recognized the performance as average (36 % and 41 %, respectively) or above average (28.5 % and 35.8 %, respectively).

Twice as many of the respondents from among the students, in contrast to the teachers, assessed the performance of the educational process as low and below average (every tenth student (10 %) and every 25th teacher (4 %) considered the performance low; while 12 % and 7.1 %, respectively, considered it below average).

The opinion of both groups of the respondents on the relatively high performance of the educational process in the distance working conditions completely coincided, but, unfortunately, it was only 12 %.

In the future, it is worth considering the steps required to create the appropriate conditions and opportunities that improve the performance of the educational process in the context of distance learning:

1) with the aim of forming and deepening information and digital competence among future philology teachers and academic staff:

to introduce modules for mastering virtual educational environments, using them in their professional activities and creating digital content, in the context of updating the content of educational programs for the training of academic staff; and

to introduce advanced training courses for academic staff in mastering virtual educational environments;

2) supporting the development and implementation of e-learning tools (e-textbooks, video content, online tests, etc.) at the state level. The recent introduction of electronic means has been one of the most important directions of many universities, not only in Russia (Korotaeva, Chuksina, 2020) but also in the world (Nikiforov et a., 2020);

3) expanding the use of digital technologies during classes, in particular, with the aim of developing the students' stable skills in using information technologies to solve professional, educational, and domestic problems. Interesting studies that develop this thesis about the mechanisms of skills development in students and their control are presented in the studies of some scientists (Safonova et al., 2020; Kalyanova, 2020; Kondratiev et al., 2020); and

4) including indicators on the development of the institution's IT infrastructure and the introduction of electronic teaching techniques in the target performance indicators of the heads of higher education institutions.

Conclusion

The extreme conditions caused by the quarantine have created a situation where using various modern information and communication tools, despite habits and knowledge, becomes necessary. These conditions have become an incentive for many to accelerate the mastery of distance learning technologies, which are already an integral part of the digital environment.

The results of the study confirm the hypothesis of the study that both students and teachers are aware of the need to work in a distance learning environment, but the coronavirus pandemic has created new risks for the higher education system, which require an innovative approach to overcoming barriers in the distance learning system.

The functioning of the university in the conditions of quarantine restrictions has identified both the risks and the innovative benefits of using distance learning. In the opinion of the authors, education at the university should be fairly flexible, and the transition from full-time education to online and vice versa should be a natural continuation of education for students in accordance with the working curriculum of the discipline in full. The authors believe that all university students must be registered in all distance courses in accordance with the list of disciplines in the major curriculum prior to the start of classes in the current semester for the correct transition to online learning.

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