Professional Training Scheme in USUE: COVID-19 Pandemic Impact

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Abstract. Over the past decades, the Russian tertiary sector has undergone profound changes caused by economic and social factors. The paper focuses on the challenges that modern universities are facing nowadays. One of the challenges is pedagogical and methodological professional development of academic staff, which has been affected by the COVID-19 crisis. However, a rapid shift to online teaching and learning has offered new opportunities to capacity building of staff and faculty who have learned and tested new tools and systems to enable distance teaching and learning. USUE case is considered.

1 Introduction

For many years the model of higher education in Russia was considered as conservative and not open to change. However, over the past decades, this field has undergone profound changes which have resulted from a range of economic and social reasons, including the creation of a competitive economy which is based on high-tech industries, and social modernization of society. Education is becoming a more complex, global system. The Bologna process has also contributed to structural changes, particularly with regard to curricular reforms, quality assurance and student mobility [1].

Russia joined the Bologna process in 2003. A tangible positive outcome for the Russian higher education would be standardization and unification and national curriculum restructuring with implications for teaching and learning strategies, which could assist Russia in entering the single European educational space; ensure student and academic staff mobility and open up the Russian market of educational services. Nevertheless, the introduction of the Bologna system raises some controversial issues. Some experts [2; 3; 4] question the validity of persistent claims in Russia about the positive consequences of ratifying the Bologna Declaration that turned out to be myths. In reality, the provisions of the Bologna Declaration have been applied fragmentally; the transition to the Bologna process in Russia has been limited by the introduction of the bachelor and master level programs only. The most important task has not been completed, i.e. a shift from teacher-centered to student-centered teaching and learning. The once well-functioning Soviet system of higher education was mechanically replaced with a new one. As a result, none of the systems is working. This context entails problems associated with the state regulation of the education system through

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Federal State Educational Standards (FSES), and with teaching and learning strategies, in particular, formulation of learning outcomes.

2 Challenges of academic human resources policies

While demands on higher education have been increasing, little attention has been paid to the impact on academic staff [5]. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are tasked with enhancing quality assurance and training qualified workforce for the most important sectors of the country's economy, which largely depends on motivation and competence of lecturers and researchers. Changes in the higher education environment mean that there are inevitably changes to the expectations, work roles, status and professional conditions of academic staff. However, this process is impeded by the challenges the tertiary sector in Russia is facing currently with regard to human resources policies.

One of the issues is the aging demographic of academic staff. According to the statistical data, for the last two decades the 65+ age group has grown three times as much [6] and accounted for 19% of total faculty members in 2018 [7]. In the 2018/2019 academic year, the share of staff over 60 exceeded the category under 30 five-fold (67.8 thousand vs 13.1 thousand respectively) [8]. A large share of older academic staff could signal some problems in the generational renewal of profession. The exiting later-age staff may be more reluctant to engage fully with less transmission-based pedagogies and the potential of modern teaching and learning technologies [9]. Other challenges relate to shortage of qualified teaching staff for postgraduate studies; differentiation of universities by the level of teacher qualification and quality of teaching; and poorer quality of new teachers' training.

In 2019, the Russian Federation adopted the Federal State Educational Standards of secondary and higher professional education of the third generation (FSES 3++), which put forward the requirement for a transition to new milestones of the whole education system, i.e. to the outcome-based approach and meeting labor market demands. It refers to students' abilities to gain relevant information from a variety of resources; critically analyze it, and apply for solving existing problems. One of the essential factors in setting learning outcomes is teaching staff understanding of what learning objectives are. However, the reality is that university teachers often do not have relevant pedagogical and psychological training, or maybe went through it long ago. Young educators, who join the academic staff of the university, are, as a rule, this university graduates, and thus lack pedagogical training. That is why, at the beginning of their teaching careers young tutors experience considerable difficulties: copying the teaching models they were observing while students, they continue to play the outdated role of a teacher as a translator of knowledge.

In order to comply with the qualification standard [10], educators are required to undergo pedagogical retraining every four years. Though universities offer various forms and types of teacher training, the approach to improving pedagogical skills is often quite formal and narrow either limited by pedagogical theory, or focused on innovative educational technologies without discussing how the use of technologies helps to set and attain relevant learning outcomes.

The main areas of training academic staff are determined by the need to update the existing educational programs, which must meet the changing needs and expectations of society. Under the conditions of fierce competition, universities should offer interdisciplinary courses that meet the expectations of future students, both in terms of content and quality of teaching [11]. In order to successfully deliver new training programs, universities need not only to form a cohort of young educators, but also to develop new skills for experienced teachers and offer, among other things, new approaches to improving their skills.

In the authors' opinion, the system of university teacher training should be built around innovative pedagogy and methodology; assist educators in application and design of blended

and advanced methods of delivering educational content [12], which calls for the presence of such skills as an ability to encourage students to acquire skills of critical thinking, problem solving and decision making; to search, evaluate and deploy learning materials; an ability to work in multicultural classrooms, to name just a few. For example, the Ural State University of Economics (USUE), located in Ekaterinburg (Russia), has designed and implemented the Teachers' Training Program (TTP) within the framework of the Erasmus−ENTEP Project in order to enhance the quality of teaching and learning. The TTP is comprised of six modules and covers a variety of active and interactive teaching strategies and methods, from learning outcome-based approach to student engagement and evaluation.

3 Opportunities related to the shift to distance learning

The Covid-19 crisis has completely changed our world. The measures taken to resist the viral pandemic such as forced closure of universities have had an immediate effect on higher education. They have impacted dramatically the conditions under which higher education all of a sudden had to perform what is now often referred to as 'emergency online education' which has often been looked at as a nice-to-have option, rather than a critical model to ensure continuity of education [13].

Educators were forced to start teaching remotely within a short time span, even though systems were not fully ready. By the mid-March 2020 only 11% of Russian universities had had the necessary technological and technical infrastructure to support virtual courses. Every tenth university had no resources or digital capacity to move to full online delivery. Nevertheless, by the end of March, 60% of Russian universities provided distant learning without major interruptions [14].

During the early months of the year 2020, under traumatic conditions of a pandemic, faculty had to shift from conventional to online teaching and learning under circumstances that typical online course development does not have to face. Those circumstances were (1) a need to rapidly, with little to no preparation, transfer instruction online; (2) a need to execute the transition online and subsequent online instruction; and (3) a need to pursue extended online teaching with little to no information regarding if this transition to online teaching will be temporary or more permanent [15].

To keep abreast of distance learning education trends, teachers should be equipped with the knowledge and skills in distance learning education. Digital competence has immediately become the most essential skill. Faculty were asked to create and implement online teaching with no choice but to teach online even if they did not feel properly prepared to do so, or formerly had little interest in online teaching. According to the statistical data [7], 60% of Russian members of faculty have no or very little experience of online teaching or presenting a webinar.

Universities with a strong emphasis on classroom and laboratory-based education and where online learning has been implemented mostly in a supplementary function to classroom activities, report that the closure of the university has exposed a number of critical weaknesses to this approach. There is an urgent need for providing fast track training for the teaching staff in online teaching and learning methodologies. The open mindedness and flexibility of teaching staff in developing teaching material for the online platforms and in using the online teaching systems, as well as the cooperation and support of administrative and IT staff are key factors in the switching to online learning. Online forums may contribute to the exchange of ideas, good practices and experiences regarding e-learning among academic staff. Particular emphasis should be placed on how to do formative and summative assessment of student learning while teaching online.

4 Conclusion

It is clear that the future of higher education needs rethinking. The short term consequences of COVID-19 are a start for addressing the long term consequences. The lessons learned so far must guide future developments of higher education. It is now becomes understandable that a return to 'normal' as we knew it will not be possible, and we will need to adapt for the long-term.

The coronavirus pandemic of 2020 became a push factor that can help everyone to better understand that all the attributes of higher education such as online defences, online entrance and final exams, as well as online academic jobs are as good as those conducted 'in real life'[16].

Most of the institutions have been confronted with a sudden and unprepared shift to online teaching to respond to the need to continue teaching and learning activities and to engage and motivate students when social distancing measures are in place. Many of the academic staff see the experience of working and teaching from distance as an important opportunity to learn from this exceptional situation and to propose more flexible learning possibilities, explore blended or hybrid learning and mixing synchronous learning with asynchronous learning [13].

This unplanned and unprepared experiment in distance teaching and learning has led to capacity building of staff and faculty who have learned and tested new tools and systems to enable distance teaching and learning. It is therefore possible that a shift in mindset is happening or that this experience has opened a new horizon of opportunities for teaching and learning. This might offer a push forward in terms of exploring the potential of flexible learning and more acceptance for online learning to become a more integral part of study plans. We might expect to see an increased innovation in the field of teaching pedagogies as well as delivery modalities of teaching and learning. The learning assessment and examination approaches will also be reviewed in order to build on the experience.

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