Chapter 6

Russia

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Introduction

Distance Education in the present Russian Federation and former Soviet Union has a long tradition that prevails down to this present day. This tradition causes a distinction between the Russian and international standards of distance education. In Russia, so called “distance learning” is not a term for a special mode of study at the university. It is the complex of new information and communication technologies (cf. e-learning, blended learning, flexible learning), which are applied within three main modes of study, namely, conventional on-site study at the university, regular evening courses at the university combined with self-study, and self-study combined with some hours of on-site study (Russia, 2012, §16, §17). Each mode of study at the Russian university can implement the technologies of distance learning (Russia, 2012, §17, no. 2). This chapter represents a way to understanding of the Russian forms of distance education and conditions of their coordination with the international standards.

The history of the Russian higher education system is characterized by enormous structural change, which has been procured by ideological ambitions directed towards the qualification of citizens who enjoyed only little access to higher education. Yet, at the same time it leads to problems regarding the quality of educational opportunities within distance education. Today, universities invest in the development of

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“modern” online distance education, allowing for flexible study, independent of time and place. Half of the total quantity of approximately 5.2 million enrolled students in higher education is registered in distance education programs. This indicates the existence of a well-established system for distance education, of which only little is known in Western literature (see Zawacki-Richter et al., 2009; Zawacki-Richter & Kourotchkina, 2012).

Within international distance education studies, Russia remains uncharted territory. This chapter aims at shedding light on the Russian higher education system in general and distance education in Russia in particular. The first part deals with the historical development of distance education in Russia. The second part then explores the Russian higher education system, focusing on its particular structures, including the different forms of higher education institutions and modes of study. The third part demonstrates the changes in quantity of students involved in distance education at Russian universities with reference to current statistics.

Brief History of Distance Education in Russia

This part represents stages of development of adult education that lead to forming the distance education in the Russian Federation and former Soviet Union.

Adult Education in the Imperial Russia

Adult education in Russia began between the 40s and 60s of the 19th century with the foundation of “Literacy Committees” and with the development of Sunday-schools as well as the Zemstvo schools for adults in rural areas around 1860. According to the Soviet Encyclopaedia (1967–1978) approximately 27,500 Zemstvo schools had been established in Russia by 1911. This type of education was not a part of higher education. A main aim of Sunday-schools and the Zemstvo schools was the overcoming the general illiteracy. Similar to the development of the so-called correspondence schools for instruction by letter in Germany (e.g. established by Gustav Langenscheidt, cf. Zawacki-Richter, 2011), it were private institutions that predominantly initiated the development of the first print-based distance classes in Russia throughout the 2nd half of the 19th century (e.g. by the Society for the Advancement of Technical Sciences and the Society of Community Colleges). Many evening schools (“evening education”) were founded around the same time as well (Rosen, Gardner, & Keppel, 1965, p. 3).

In general, adult education in the Imperial Russia served as the substitution of elementary school, helping to solve the problem of illiteracy. Higher education was an elite institution, which was not easily available for the general population (Khanin, 2008).

Russian Education in the Soviet Period

During the Soviet period, overcoming aftermaths of World War I and Civil War, and the development of industries caused involvement of the general population in educational institutions. It became the ground for the formation of specific features of distance education in Russia. The correspondence and evening schools were incorporated into the public educational system and expanded nationwide. Shortly after the October Revolution, the Communist Party demanded in its manifesto from 1919 the financial support from the government to promote the “self-education and self-development” of workers and peasants, following the ideological ambitions to elevate the educational standards of the proletariat. Three years later in 1922, a government committee for the advancement of self-education was established, which was also responsible for organizing a nationwide correspondence education system.

Various educational institutions for self-education were established thereafter, including the “Labour Faculty” (*rabochiiy fakul'tet*, abbreviated *Rabfak*). Labour Faculties were not part of the higher education. These faculties were the institutions, in which workers and peasants ages 16 and up were prepared for higher education studies (Rosen et al., 1965).

Labour Faculties took the place of intermediaries between elementary schools and universities. These education opportunities can be regarded as a preliminary stage of distance education. During the academic year of 1925/26, 40% of all freshmen were graduates from Rabfaks (Soviet Encyclopaedia, 1967–1978). However, with the development of the general education system during the 1930s the Rabfaks were quickly dissolved (cf. Egorov, Vendrovsky, & Nikandrov, 2000).

In 1924, several broadcast universities for workers and peasants were established. These universities were not the real institutions of the higher education. In broadcast universities, the courses were broadcast via radio (e.g. in science of education, social sciences, engineering, radio technologies, agricultural sciences) and contained lessons ranging from 20 to 30 h. After students had listened to the lessons, they could participate in a written examination, which had to be turned in to the broadcast university for grading. However, the educational standards did not reach those of regular universities. The broadcast universities never became part of the officially accredited educational system.

The development of print-based distance education in the form of so called “correspondence education” (*zaочноe obuchenie*) as regular part of higher education began in the 1920s:

In August 1926, the Councils of People's Commissars made correspondence education a regular part of the higher education system. In 1927, a Central Institute for Correspondence Education was established and correspondence preparatory departments prepared young people for entering Communist universities. (Rosen et al., 1965, p. 6)

The five-year-plans for the economic development of the USSR, which had started in 1926, demanded a high quantity of qualified specialists, which the common education system failed to “produce”. The correspondence study opportunities were greatly expanded. With the beginning of the 1930s, a network of correspondence

education institutions and technical schools (professional schools) was established, particularly with regard to heavy industry workers and their education on-site of the factory grounds.

While, prior to 1929, distance education programs had been designed as mere self-study courses, in which the students had only little and irregular contact with teachers, the development of distance education in the following years was characterized by alternating distance—and face-to-face sessions, which can be compared to today's format of “blended learning”. Nickolas de Witt, member of the Russian Research Centre at Harvard University, described the system of the different study forms as follows:

The three basic types of instruction programs offered by Soviet higher educational establishments were: regular day, or full-time study; part-time evening; and part time extension-correspondence programs. Attempts to equate these programs with particular institutes produce a good deal of confusion. (de Witt, 1961, p. 229 et seq.)

In addition, a fourth form, the so-called “Externat” was established, in which students are not obligated to attend the university at all, instead they “merely” have to pass the final exams. In 1951, the Externat was abrogated, only to be reintroduced shortly thereafter.

Between 1940 and 1959, the quantity of part-time students enrolled in distance education courses increased by 4.5 times, while the quantity of on-campus students doubled. More than half of all students studied part time:

In the fall of 1960, of the total 2,396,000 higher education students, 1,240,000, or 51.7 percent, were enrolled in evening or extension-correspondence programs. (de Witt, 1961, p. 231)

In 1959, the article 121 of the Russian constitution was changed and the new version emphasized the right of the Russian population to education. In order to secure that right, evening and distance education courses had to be further developed.

Against the background of the development of higher education at the Russian universities, Otto Peters, founding president of the FernUniversität in Hagen, Germany, presented a research in 1967, dealing with the “Distance Education at Higher Education Institutions in the Soviet Union”. He declares, that

[...] the high percentage of distance education students allows for the conclusion, that higher education in the Soviet Union underwent structural changes, which are unprecedented in the history of higher education. (Peters, 1967, p. 9)

Unfortunately, the enormous expansion of distance education proceeded at the expense of its quality:

In their resolution from September, 10th, 1966, the CPSU central committee and the USSR's Council of Ministers listed the distance education system among problems, which have been solved insufficiently so far. (Peters, 1967, p. 11)

The problem of quality became one of the central issues within distance education studies in the present Russian Federation.

Post-Soviet Period

Despite the efforts to prevent distance education institutions from becoming second class schools (e.g. equal appointments to professorships etc.), the general problem of lacking quality within distance education could not be solved. The OECD report (1999) “Tertiary Education and Research in the Russian Federation” criticizes the suitability of the study material for self-study:

There is little evidence of any kind of instructional design and, in some cases, the material provided is barely readable because of poor quality reproduction. [...] Much of the material as it stands does not really enable independent study by the student. (OECD, 1999, pp. 76–79)

Due to the development of internet-based Online-education, many higher education institutions today distance themselves from traditional correspondence studies and invest in “modern” distance education. The following parts illustrate these latest developments in more detail after the Russian higher education system is described in general.

Higher Education in the Russian Federation

This part represents the argument with respect to the specifics of the forming the higher education in the Russian Federation. According to requirements of the national legislation, the educational system in the Russian Federation consists of four levels (Russia, 2012):

- Preschool education (*doschkol'noe obrazovanie*)
- General education (*obshchee obrazovanie*)
- Professional education (*professional'noe obrazovanie*)
- Continuing education (*dopolnitel'noe obrazovanie*).

Higher education falls into the branch of professional education, which consists of primary/beginning professional education, mid-level professional education, higher education and postgraduate education.

Continuous Consolidation Process

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Russian higher education system has undergone continuous reformation, of which the latest developments are all connected to the political goal of improving the quality and therefore international competitiveness of the country's universities. Political initiatives focus particularly on the consolidation of the system, which is characterized by a very high quantity of higher education institutions, many of which do not meet national and international quality standards.

According to the Russian Federal State Statistics Service (Rosstat, 2015), after the collapse of the Soviet Union the quantity of higher education institutions more than doubled in only twenty years—from 514 in the academic year 1990/91 to 1115 in 2010/11 (Rosstat, 2015). This quantity is doubled if the branches of higher education institutions in some of the 85 regions of the Russian Federation are also taken into account. In order to reduce the multiplicity of institutions, in 2012 the Russian Federal Ministry of Education and Science started a countrywide program of “efficiency monitoring” concerning higher education institutions and their branches. This exercise has been repeated annually since then, resulting in a high quantity of shut downs each year. The latest statistical survey for the academic year 2014/15 shows the quantity of higher education institutions has so far been reduced to 950. There are 548 state-owned and 402 independently operated higher education institutions in the Russian Federation (Rosstat, 2015).

Modes of Study

In Russia, there are three possible ways of studying at universities and other higher education institutions (Russia, 2012, §17, no. 2; see Table 6.1):

- conventional on-site study at the university (*ochnoe*, on-campus)
- regular evening courses at the university combined with self-study (*ochno-zaochnoe*, evening study)
- self-study combined with some hours of on-site study (*zaochnoe*, distance study per se).

From the academic year 2013/14 onwards, the former fourth type of study—the externat, i.e. pure self-study beyond sitting the final exam at the institution (Russia, 2012, §17, no. 1–2)—was officially included in the “correspondence study” group of programs (Rosstat, 2015).

Forms of Higher Education Institutions

Shutting down a considerable quantity of higher education institutions (HEIs) is seen as the only way to enlarge quality and international competitiveness of the remaining HEIs (Berghorn, 2014). Among those remaining a group of so-called “leading universities” (*veduyushchie universitety*), which are selected by means of countrywide competitions, receives special government funding. The group of “leading universities” consists of:

- the two “Autonomous Universities” Lomonosov Moscow State University (*Moskovskii Gosudarstvennyi Universitet* or *MGU*) and Saint Petersburg State University (*Sankt Peterburgskii Gosudarstvennyi Universitet* or *SPbGU*)

Table 6.1 Changes in quantity (thousands) of students since 1914 according to modes of study

Year	Total	On-campus	Distance study	Evening study	External study ^a
1914	86.5	86.5	–	–	–
1917	149.0	149.0	–	–	–
1927	114.2	114.2	–	–	–
1940/41	478.1	335.1	128.0	15.0	–
1950/51	796.7	502.6	277.1	17.0	–
1960/61	1496.7	699.2	629.9	167.6	–
1970/71	2671.7	1296.5	985.4	389.8	–
1980/81	3045.7	1685.6	959.1	401.0	–
1990/91	2824.5	1647.7	892.3	284.5	–
1995/96	2790.7	1752.6	855.8	174.8	7.5
2000/01	4741.4	2625.2	1761.8	302.2	52.2
2002/03	5947.5	3104.0	2399.9	346.0	97.6
2003/04	6455.7	3276.6	2703.7	351.3	124.1
2004/05	6884.2	3433.5	2942.5	361.8	146.4
2005/06	7064.6	3508.0	3032.0	371.2	153.4
2006/07	7309.8	3582.1	3195.9	372.3	159.6
2007/08	7461.3	3571.3	3367.9	352.9	169.2
2008/09	7513.1	3457.2	3540.7	343.7	171.5
2009/10	7418.8	3280.0	3639.2	323.6	175.9
2010/11	7049.8	3073.7	3557.2	304.7	114.1
2011/12	6490.0	2847.7	3289.7	263.4	89.2
2012/13	6073.9	2721.0	3053.3	229.6	70.0
2013/14	5646.7	2618.8	2783.9	189.2	54.7
2014/15	5209.0	2575.0	2475.5	158.5	– ^b

Rosstat (2015)

^aHistorically, this mode of study was additional to the distance education^bFrom 2013/14 onwards the “external” was integrated into the category of “distance study”

- National Research Universities
- Federal Universities
- other leading universities with a special profile, for instance Moscow State Institute of International Relations (*Moskovskii Gosudarstvennyi Institut Mezhdunarodnykh Otnoshenii (Universitet)* or *MGIMO University*).

The “Autonomous Universities” Lomonosov Moscow State University and Saint Petersburg State University, as the oldest and most prestigious classical universities of the country (Russia, 2009, §1, no. 1) received a special legal status beyond the general Law on Education in The Russian Federation of 2012 (Russia, 2012, §4, no. 8). According to the Law on the Lomonosov Moscow State University and the Saint

Petersburg State University (Russia, 2009), they are for instance permitted to establish programmes and issue degrees to their own educational standards (Russia, 2009, §4, no. 1), but with the restriction that those should not be lower than the official federal educational standards (Russia, 2009, §4, no. 2) and independently establish branches overseas (Russia, 2009, §3, no. 3). The aim of this special status is to strengthen their worldwide reputation making them the “lighthouses” of the Russian higher education system. It might seem like more autonomy but can be also interpreted as growth of the state control. The heads of the two autonomous universities are the only ones directly appointed and dismissed by the Russian President (Russia, 2009, §2, no. 5), also the two universities receive their funding directly from the Federal Budget but not by ministerial budgets as applies for the other Russian state universities (Russia, 2009, §5, no. 1).

The second group of Russian “leading universities”, namely, the National Research Universities are mainly Technical Universities, which receive funding in order to build up their research activities (MON, 2015a). This is accompanied by the consolidation of the Russian Academy of Science (*Rossiiskaya Akademiya Nauk* or *RAN*), and the limitation of its autonomy by a new law issued on September 13th 2013. So far the *RAN* was exclusively responsibly for all research activities in the Russian Federation, while universities had a pure educational mandate. The law 2013 led this 300-year tradition to the end. Politics aim at reducing the size of the *RAN* and its activities while enlarging research activities of the universities, mainly of those having received the status of a National Research University (Gathmann, 2013).

The third and last group of “leading universities” are the Federal Universities, which were implemented to reach a consolidation of universities by merging the best universities of a federal district. In each Federal District one federal university was established. In addition to those universities, there is the Baltic Federal University in the exclave Kaliningrad.

Between 2010 and 2012 the “leading universities” received 90 billion Roubles of funding, and back then this equalled 2.2 billion Euros (MON, 2015b). Among “leading universities” 21 receive further funding by another government project called “Project 5-100”, which aims at placing 5 Russian universities among the 100 top universities worldwide by 2020 (MON, 2015c). A very ambitious if not even unrealistic goal considering that so far only one university, the Lomonosov Moscow State University, takes a place in the top 100 of international ranking lists. And this is not even true for every ranking. In the QS-Ranking of 2014/15, the Moscow State University was ranked place 114 (QS, 2015).

Current Forms of Distance Education in Russia

The different Russian definitions of the concept of “distance education” and its various forms complicate the methodological discussion at this point, since they do not transfer to the definitions that dominate the German or Anglo-American literature. In Russia, distance education corresponds to use of new information and commu-

nication technologies (cf. e-learning, blended learning, flexible learning) during the educational process in general (Russia, 2012, §16, no. 1). It is necessary thereby to coordinate the definitions of distance education that dominate the German or Anglo-American literature with the Russian approaches. This part then describes the situation in the Russian distance education, demonstrating the changes in quantity of students involved in distance education at Russian universities with reference to current statistics.

Concepts of Distance Education

Rosen et al. (1965) use the term “Part-time education” as a broader term to describe extra occupational qualification, continuing education, and adult education as well as distance education in Russia and the USSR:

Part-time education in the Soviet Union encompassed general education and specialized training of urban and rural youth and adults, ‘without interruption of production’. The term, ‘part-time education’, as applied to the Soviet system may be related to educational programs in the United States known as work-study programs, continuing education, evening correspondence, and part-time study.

Nowadays the term “distance education” (*distantcionnoe obrazovanie*) in Russia is used to describe the modern version of distance education, which employs the elements of e-learning, blended learning, and flexible learning, whereas the term “correspondence education” represents the traditional Soviet system of distance education and carries a rather negative connotation. Within the Russian literature the term “distance education” is similarly discussed but conceptually isolated from the older term “correspondence education”.

Russian Students enrolled in off-campus programs are—depending on their mode of study—categorized as “*ochno-zaochnoe*” [internal extrasessional] and “*zaochnoe*” [extrasessional] students (Rosstat, 2014a). Yet of those programs only some are organized in the form of modern distance education. Selected programs can be recognized by their categorization as “*distantcionnoe obrazovanie*” or “*online-obrasovanie*”), whereas the term e-learning (*elektronnoe obuchenie*) describes the technology itself (Russia, 2012, §13, no. 2).

Modern distance education is officially promoted by the Russian Government (Vlasova, 2014, p. 43), providing its implementations by various sections of the Law on Education (Russia, 2012, §16, §13, §18 etc.). The Russian Government also fosters the development and implementation of distance education and e-learning by providing project funds, for instance via the Federal Program for the Advancement of Education 2011–2015 (<http://www.fcpro.ru>). The aim of this program is that 85% of all teachers in schools and universities should use educational technologies effectively in their classes. Another federal program concerning the development of education for the period 2013–2020 (Russia, 2013) stresses distance education as a vital part of Lifelong Learning (*nepreryvnoe obrazovanie*), a topic of declared importance in a country suffering demographic decrease. In the federal program mentioned

above lifelong learning is characterized as one of the four pillars of Russian educational politics (Russia, 2013). As stressed in the program, the future development of lifelong learning in Russia requires a “radical innovation of learning methods and technologies” (Russia, 2013). The Law on Education in the Russian Federation confirms the right of every citizen to receive lifelong learning (Russia, 2012, §10, no. 2). In this regard, HEIs play a vital role (Russia, 2013). By 2020 the percentage of 25- to 62-year-olds taking part in courses of further qualification should be raised from 26 in 2012 to 55 (Russia, 2013), while a significant part of each study should consist of self-study and Internet-based distance education (Russia, 2013).

Furthermore, various portals have been launched, providing access to over 100,000 electronic educational resources: the Russian Education Federal Portal,¹ the Federal Centre for Educational Resources² and the Russian General Education Portal.³ The most current is the portal “Open Education” (*otkrytoe obrazovanie*),⁴ launched by the Russian Ministry of Education and eight of the country’s “leading universities” in 2015.

Statistical Fluctuations

In the last years the quantity of distance education students in Russia has decreased rapidly from 4.1 million in 2009/2010 to 2.6 million in 2014/2015. This trend corresponds with the general decline of quantity of students in Russia. In particular, student numbers fell by one third, from 7.4 million in the academic year 2009/2010 to 5.2 million in 2014/15 (see Table 6.1).

This dramatic decline can be explained by recent demographic changes in Russian society such as the decline in the birth rate, which has continued since the 1990s (Rosstat, 2014b). The quantity of 15 to 19-year-olds, i.e. potential students, fell by one third—from 9.6 million in 2009 to 6.9 million in 2014 (Rosstat, 2014a), corresponding to the likewise decline in university admissions. There is a significant demographic “hole” in the generation of potential students in the Russian Federation. This in turn causes problems for Russia’s higher education institutions, even threatening the existence of some of them, since state funding has recently been made dependent upon student enrolments (Berghorn, 2014). To fill the gap, Russian higher education institutions could focus on recruiting more foreign students; so far the percentage of foreign students is very low—2.2% in 2012/13. A goal that is vigorously pursued by the Russian Government is to increase the quantity of foreign students. It is a major task and challenge for Russian higher education institutions and involved researchers.

¹http://www.edu.ru/db/portal/sites/res_page.htm.

²<http://fcior.edu.ru>.

³<http://www.school.edu.ru>.

⁴www.npoed.ru.

Despite the overall decline in quantity of students in Russia, distance education remains very relevant in the Russian higher education system. Half of the 5.2 million students at Russian HEIs are enrolled as “*ochno-zaochnye*” respectively “*zaochnye*” students (Rosstat, 2014a).

The quantity of correspondence students at private institutions is higher than at state universities. In the academic year of 2014/15 only 44% of students studying at state-owned institutions but 84.3% of students studying at private institutions were enrolled in distance education courses. Looking at state-owned institutions, the percentage of students enrolled in distance education over the last five years even decreased, from 51.3% in 2009/10 while the percentage at private institutions stayed approximately the same (2009/10: 85.6%). The stronger decrease at state-owned universities could be caused by financial matters. The state funding of HEIs in Russia has recently been made dependent upon their quantity of students (Berghorn, 2014), while students enrolled in distance education are not taken into calculation.

Compared to Russia's total population of 146.2 million (in 2015), 35 out of 1000 citizens are students. In 1990/91 only 19 out of 1000 Russians studied, even though the total population amounted to 147.7 million in the same year. Still, not only quantity of students, also the share of the population enrolled in study programs has decreased over the last five years.

Russian MOOCs

After the educational achievements of the Soviet era, the Russian Federation education system lost momentum and the roughly 1000 public and private universities are therefore seeking to raise the overall quality in higher education provision. Responding to the decline in student numbers, they seek to adopt best international practice in MOOCs; engaging in inter-institutional collaborations aimed at developing high quality open online courses equal in weight to more traditional modes of study for more learners at lower costs; promoting Russian MOOCs internationally; and launching a national ‘EdTech incubator’ to support educational startups (Konanchuk & Volkov, 2014).

2015 saw the launch of The Open Education project (<http://openedu.ru>), initially involving eight of the country's leading universities, including Moscow State University, St. Petersburg State University and Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology. Ural Federal University has launched and tested the ‘Examus’ system to control online tests and rule out cheating or cribbing (Istomin, 2016).

The Ministry of Education and Science has drafted new regulations to allow all Russian universities to include Open Education courses in their programmes. All of the courses are developed in accordance with the federal state educational standards and the number of MOOCs currently available on this platform is 200 and continually growing.

Some characterize this new platform as the “Russian Coursera” but this is a misnomer. Open Education primarily aims to support university students, nearly all

of the courses are part of higher education programmes and compulsory modules in their respective disciplines. The Open Education certificates have a unique feature for the Russian education system—they can be transferred into university credits by students studying in Russian universities. Moreover, whereas the US platform is only partly free, Russia's is entirely so, although both charge for issuing certificates (Kureev, 2015).

Two other noteworthy examples are Universarium (<http://universarium.org/>) and Lectorium (<https://www.lektorium.tv/>). Universarium mainly focuses on interdisciplinary courses for continuing professional education and retraining. Lectorium started up as a platform for sharing video-lectures and then developed into a MOOC platform which offers support to those interested in developing their own MOOCs.

The Ministry of Education and Science is encouraging more people to study online. English language MOOCs developed by the world's leading providers with the greatest potential to benefit the development of Russia are being translated into Russian, mostly by Digital October (<http://www.digitaloctober.ru>), official translator of Coursera's MOOCs in Russia. And there are signs that Russians are keen on seizing these opportunities. There are already more than 120,000 Russian students learning with Coursera and the number is steadily rising, even in courses that are taught in English (Konanchuk & Volkov, 2014). Russia-based users of Coursera are even more likely than their overseas counterparts to be graduates and they demonstrate significant persistence in completing their courses (Ryabchikov, 2015). A number of Russian universities already take into account, albeit informally, Coursera and edX certificates during examinations and tests and if Russian universities start to recognize Open Education, courses taken by students on Western educational platforms could also come to be accredited (Kureev, 2015).

Russia is also seeking to internationalize its MOOCs, concentrating on those subjects in which the country has traditionally been strong and have a strong worldwide reputation which makes it easier to attract international audiences—mathematics, physics, computer science, culture and art—and to this end, is creating English language versions. In this regard, the leading provider is the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, one of the preeminent economics and social sciences universities in Eastern Europe and Eurasia. It has already enrolled more than a million online students worldwide in its 56 MOOCs, 22 of which are English, which puts it in the top 10 providers of courses on Coursera (Roshchin, 2017).

MOOCs are now regarded as a greenfield development area with enormous opportunities (Konanchuk & Volkov, 2014). There are many conservative educators who are skeptical of the idea of replacing teachers with computers, fear that the use of MOOCs will lead to universities laying off staff and replacing them with high-quality online courses from the top schools, and doubtful the economics of MOOCs. For example many regional universities and colleges will need new equipment such as workstations with Web cameras and dedicated Internet access in many lecture theaters. Alexander Yevshin, director of the Ivangorod (Leningrad Oblast) campus of St. Petersburg State University of Aerospace Instrumentation, believes that in their current form, online courses are better suited to established specialists with a clear understanding of what additional knowhow they wish to acquire.

However, given that the concept and aims of online education enjoy the support of the Russian leadership, it is clearly set to come on stream fairly rapidly. Russian universities are far less independent than those in the West, so the system allows new methods technologies to be imposed ‘from above’ regardless of how the schools themselves may regard the interventions. The ultimate goals are to improve the quality of higher education by replacing distance learning with online courses, using the new methods and technologies to enable the programme creators produce more research resources for universities and increase quality competition in higher education by enabling students and administrators to choose their online options. As Kureev (2015) advises, the establishment of a national educational online platform and the advancement of Internet education in universities will enable Russia to strengthen its provision of higher education.

Summary and Outlook

Historically and at present, distance education has played a prominent role in the Russian educational system. Due to the different modes of delivery in distance education, a disparate picture is created which is corroborated by the different terminologies used: the traditional correspondence education on the one hand, and “the modern distance education” employing new media or e-learning, on the other hand.

As it was already shown by the OECD report (1999), the traditional print-based distance education lacked quality. Kruglov (1997) points out that the instructional design is not laid out for the specific needs of correspondence students and the study materials are often not suitable for self-study. Today, universities operating as providers of E-Learning separate themselves deliberately against this distance education of low quality. Correspondence education departments are shut down, while new online distance education programs are established.

Kruglov (1997) observes that in terms of the development of distance education as web-based e-learning, two fundamental points of view are represented in Russia, namely, the “technocratic” and the “system developing”. Representatives of the first advocate a radical break with the traditional distance education and intent to newly develop the “modern” online distance learning. This point of view is widely spread in Russia which also shows in the technological orientation in the journals. In contrast, representatives of the system developing approach support a further development of distance education.

There are strong efforts by the Russian Government, and higher education institutions, for instance by the Federal Program Development of Education (Russia, 2013) and the efforts to develop Russian MOOCs, to increase the range of programs offered online as well as their quality and therefore enlarge international reputation and enrolment quantities of Russian higher education institutions.

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