Chapter 7

Russia—Commentary

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The previous chapter on Russia gives a broad picture of distance education in Russia building on earlier research in the field. It is an updated version of the article on Russian and Soviet distance education by Zawacki-Richter and Kourotschkina (2012), and provides the historical development, analysis, theoretical evaluation and statistical data. This commentary focuses briefly on the historical aims of distance education, information technologies used, issues of access, quality, power, and openness in Russian distance education.

As the authors identify, the tradition of correspondence education can be traced to a 150-year history, up until the most recent developments in distance education in the modern Russia. The Russian and Soviet experience prior to distance education and involved transforming part-time studies and correspondence education. The aim was to improve adults' literacy, their overall education levels and to prepare people for different occupations as technological progress evolved. It is important to note that literacy rates in the Russia Federation today are not alarmingly low anymore and that the levels of complexity of occupations keeps rising.

The Russian experience of distance education reflect the field's unique nature. Distance education in the Russian Federation is both a distinct mode of instruction and a method of learning. These are characterized by the active use of information technologies. Russia has a tradition of broadcasting general knowledge materials on radio. Today the Internet plays an important role in fulfilling this function and allows education to be truly accessible. Currently, the most popular distance education platforms are Moodle (70%), BlackBoard (15%), and Openet, etc. (15%) (Kirilova, Soleimani, & Vlasova, 2017).

Accessible education implies the existence of meaningful opportunities for off-campus studies. Accessibility has another layer of meaning in Russian; providing opportunities for achieving specific educational goals by making materials and

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instructions simple enough to be understood at specific levels of preparedness. Prospective students can achieve university requirements through attending crash courses and using other educational options provided by universities. These courses are made available to people considering applying to university. This experience of providing crash courses prepared universities to cater for different learners who aim to catch up with others pursuing the same goals as they are. It is an essential factor to keep education truly accessible.

The current quality of distance education is an issue. Educational materials are not always adapted for self-study. This is consistent with our research conducted from 2008 to 2017. In order to improve the quality of distance education it is necessary to transition towards individualized paths and interactive open sources. This can be done by moving away from the traditional forms of educational materials that do not enable learners to be in control of their own learning and towards actively interacting with others. The current trends are as follows: In 2008 80% of distance courses were simply transferred from traditional correspondent education without much adaptation. The proportion of such courses in 2012 dropped to 30% and then dropped again to 20% in 2016.

In Russia distance education has historically been controlled from above. But this is changing. Distance education was first initiated and popularized by educators from various universities (Kirilova, Grunis, & Azimi, 2017). By 2012 independent educators and university activists were responsible for 80% share of all distance education while only 20% was initiated and controlled from above. Educators were actively looking for distance education opportunities. At present, however, distance education is being reordered to become more manageable and compliant to standards with the recently introduced normative documents (Kirilova et al., 2017).

The term “openness” can be understood in three important ways in Russia. First, it implies fundamental accessibility for everyone. Second, educational materials are usually open for educators to make any changes while constantly monitoring the quality of the materials. Third, the educational space is open for development by all the participants of the educational process (Cao, Kirilova, & Grunis, 2017). This allows learners to observe and learn from other people’s experiences engaged in the same educational process, as well as to showcase their own achievements and experiences. These trends in Russian context that are leading to higher accessibility and openness which are ultimately facilitating the progress towards blended learning (Kirilova, 2008).

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