

IU.A. PROKOPENKO AND L.M. BAKSHEEVA

College Students' Need for the Distance Model of Education

Changes in present-day education as a result of new information and communication technologies have led to a whole industry of educational services that together fall under the general heading of "the distance education model." It appears that the use of the model makes it possible not only to solve problems of access to educational services and the individualization of the instruction but also to raise the level of the diversity and interactivity of the educational process, to ensure that education advances rapidly in response to the needs of society and, ultimately, to enhance the effectiveness of the instruction.

The distance education model in Russia, in contrast to those in other countries, is going through a stage of emergence and practical testing in the market of educational services. As a consequence, certain questions arise: Are the consumers of educational services likely to be in favor of learning under the conditions of the dis-

Iuliia Aleksandrovna Prokopenko is an assistant professor at Belgorod State University. Larisa Mikhailovna Baksheeva is a candidate of sociological sciences and an associate professor at Belgorod State University of Technology.

tance model? Are Russian consumers of educational services ready for a high level of intensiveness of information and communication technologies in education? Is the distance education model capable of satisfying people's actual needs in education? To explore these questions we conducted a survey in 2006 in five higher educational institutions in the city of Belgorod, institutions that have had experience in organizing distance pedagogical activity that makes use of up-to-date information and communication technologies. The study, in the form of a questionnaire survey, was carried out among students in regular daytime enrollment and those learning by correspondence. Two groups were singled out: (1) those that have had personal experience of doing school work with the distance model; and (2) those that are doing their school work on the basis of the traditional model. Together they made up a quota, representative sample, with a total of 1,500 respondents.

It has been pointed out in the literature that the distance education model is distinguished from the traditional model first and foremost in regard to parameters such as flexibility, economic effectiveness, the use of technology, and the fact that students can act independently [1]. Our objective was to see how popular these parameters are among the consumers of educational services in higher educational institutions.

The determination of preferences in the choice of a model of education is an individual matter. In order to make the correct choice, every individual has to know the semantic component of the forms by which knowledge is acquired—their characteristics, advantages, and disadvantages—as they are offered in the market of educational services. Information that is inadequate or that has been interpreted incorrectly can result in making the wrong decisions. The data from the questionnaire survey showed that 85 percent of the students surveyed are acquainted with the distance model of education, but only 34 percent of them are certain that they know about all its characteristics. A total of 15 percent of the respondents do not have any idea about the model. It turned out that people's need for distance education has definite boundaries, within which there is a contingent, 28.7 percent of the respondents, who want to pursue their studies specifically by this model (see Table 1).

Table 1

College Students' Preferences of Education Model (% of respondents)

Students	Model of education preferred			
	Traditional (TME)		Distance (DME)	
	enrolled in TME	enrolled in DME	enrolled in TME	enrolled in DME
Regular daytime enrollment	26.9	9.9	1.4	11.8
Education by correspondence	24.4	10.1	1.1	14.4
Total	71.3		28.7	

The survey revealed that 95.4 percent are satisfied with doing their schoolwork on the traditional model; only 4.6 percent are not happy with that form of schooling. Among the respondents who are working with the distance model, only 56.6 percent are happy with it, while 43.4 percent would prefer the familiar traditional form. The high proportion of respondents who are dissatisfied with the distance model of education makes it necessary to think about whether to adopt it in the regions. Practical testing may not adequately ensure the content and quality of that type of education, and consumers may choose it with expectations that might not even be the objective of the distance model. No matter which model is chosen, each has its requirements and has to monitor whether these are met. *It is evident that the advantages of the distance model of education discussed in the literature are often not in demand, leading to consumer dissatisfaction.*

The basis of the distance model of education consists of the active use of up-to-date information and communication technologies. What this requires, first and foremost, is the ability to use the computer intelligently, to make use of the latest information and telecommunications media, which serve as the basis for interaction between the instructor and the student. Students must have computer skills and know how to use the Internet, as well as how to work with information found there. To do this, students must have good abilities in various types of reading—for studying,

searching, exploring, and working with electronic references and dictionaries. These require not just knowledge but acquired skills. What actual skills and knowledge do the respondents have?

It was found that 78 percent of the respondents have a personal computer (PC) for their own use. In comparison, in 2000, 96 percent of the students enrolled in higher educational institutions of the capital cities had a computer at home [2]. We can see that regardless of the type of region, whether a capital city or the provinces, the level of PC availability is already quite high, even though the difference is still appreciable. In regard to the intensiveness of Internet use, however, the situation is different. Only 8 percent of respondents prefer to use Internet resources in their studies in a higher educational institution; 7 percent would like to study academic subjects on their own using a computer program. Moreover, those studying by the distance model as well as those studying by the traditional model agree that it is *difficult* for them to study an academic subject on their own by means of a computer program (42 percent and 46 percent, respectively).

Looking at the respondents' self-assessment of their computer skills, only 7 percent report that they lack the necessary skills. However, more objective data were obtained by means of a question concerning levels of mastery of information technologies. On the first, elementary level, one is able to engage in game-playing software and the typical tools of MS Office, or similar tools. On the second, the user level, one knows how to coordinate the operation of the software on one's computer. On the third level, one is able to program tasks on the basis of one's packets of applied programs. We did not look at the professional level of people who work with operating systems on the level of system administrators, inasmuch as these skills require special knowledge. In actuality, the number of people who have not mastered the skills of using software is a great deal higher than indicated in the self-rating results. About 12 percent of the respondents have not mastered a single one of the program products listed above. Most (68 percent) are ordinary PC users on the most elementary level—they use the computer as a kind of typewriter.

As is well known, in addition to huge numbers of computer

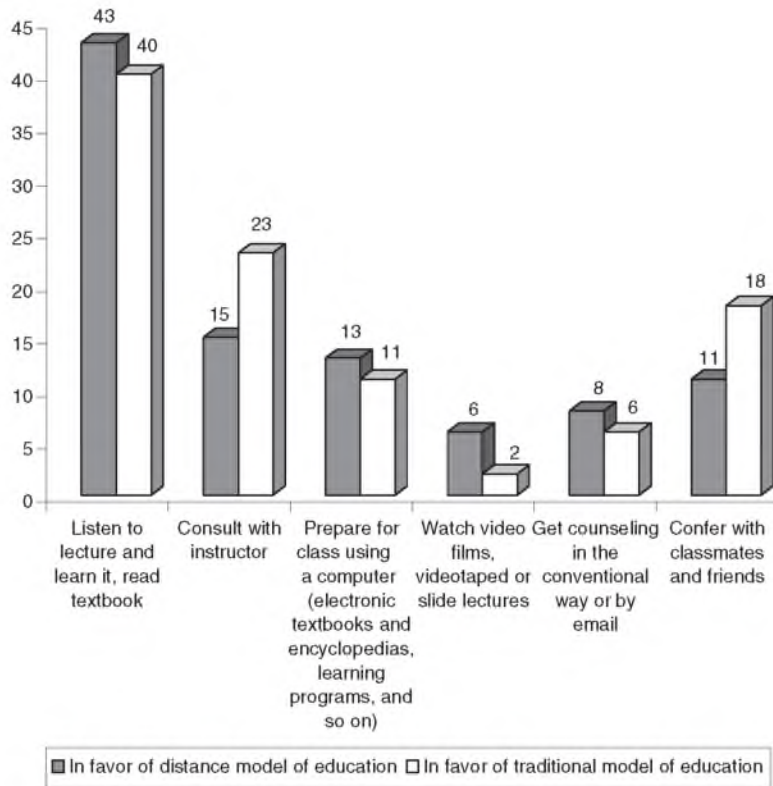
programs that are represented in the form of supertutors, professional tutors, complays [*komplei*], R-tutors, and so on, the distance model of instruction also involves the extensive use of forms of telecommunications such as teleconferences, teletutoring to prepare for course projects or for graduation qualifying projects, and also a variety of imprinting video films and slide lectures.

However, despite the attractiveness of distance learning, a great many people prefer the methods used in the conventional system of higher education. Even among those who would like to work with the distance model of education, *43 percent prefer face-to-face interaction with the instructor*, attending lectures, seminars, and counseling in the traditional way. The ability to receive assignments and instructions on how to carry them out as well as counseling by email are preferred only by 8 percent of the students who are in favor of the distance form of learning. A total of 13 percent of the respondents in the group are oriented toward preparing for classes by using electronic textbooks, encyclopedias, and learning programs. The least desirable form of instruction for those who prefer the distance model of learning is video films or slide lectures (6 percent).

It is clear from Figure 1 that the preferences of those who favor the traditional model of education and those who are favor the distance model are quite similar. Mathematical calculation confirmed that this preference as to the source of information that is to be learned does not depend on the education model. We may conclude, first, that some prefer the distance form of instruction not because it is a form by which to obtain material to be learned; something else motivates them. Second, students do not use information technologies to obtain the information they are to learn; as before, they are attracted more by traditional forms of face-to-face interaction with an instructor. It is reasonable to suggest that their preference for this form of learning is a consequence of their education in school, which was built exclusively on the basis of direct interaction between subject and object.

One advantage of the distance model of education is that the instruction is individualized, its purpose being to enable independent study and learning. This means that every student can have

Figure 1. Sources of Obtaining Information by Students in Favor of Traditional and Distance Models of Education (% of respondents, by group)



an individual syllabus on the basis of variable choice, in terms of content and pace of accomplishment. The individual syllabus of every student must include required academic disciplines in the amounts stipulated by the state educational standards. The student need not be limited to that amount, and his individual plan is allowed to have a larger number of required disciplines. The choice of additional academic disciplines is made from a list of elective (chosen) and facultative (nonrequired) disciplines that are included in the educational program in the area of the training [3].

The time frame in which the basic educational program is to be

mastered can also vary. This means that if the student already has a secondary professional education of the appropriate profile, or a higher professional education of various levels, he has the right to go through what are known as *abbreviated* basic educational programs of higher professional education. The abbreviation of the time frame within which the basic educational program is to be learned is based on the student's knowledge, abilities, and skills, abilities acquired in the previous stage of schooling. If a student enrolled in the distance model of education is not able to master the basic educational program during the normative time frame, he has the opportunity to transfer to a slower pace of instruction.

From the standpoint of those who develop the programs this is convenient and attractive for people who would like to acquire a higher education in accordance with an individual plan. In the survey it was found that 33 percent of respondents would like to have their own individual learning schedule. One-fifth (20 percent) would like to do the work based on an abbreviated educational program (of whom two-thirds were enrolled in the correspondence form of instruction and one-third were in regular daytime enrollment). Practical experience has shown, however, that only a very few students decide to take the abbreviated educational program; very often, their desires and their intentions do not coincide with their abilities.

A total of 31 percent of the respondents who are doing their schoolwork *on the traditional model* of education would like to have the opportunity to make their own independent choice of additional academic disciplines to study. A total of 21 percent place their confidence in the program of education and want to study their academic subjects only in accordance with it. A total of 39 percent would like to reduce their program and study only narrow professional disciplines. In choosing academic disciplines, the needs of those using the *distance model* of education do not differ much from those of the first group. The most notable difference is their confidence in the program of education: 36 percent chose that point. A total of 23 percent (somewhat fewer than in the first group) wanted the opportunity to choose additional academic disciplines to study. It should be kept in mind that a large proportion of students have to work in order to pay for their schooling. The

system of distance learning makes it possible to combine their work activity with their studies. In our analysis of the data obtained concerning the respondents who would like to acquire an education on the basis of an abbreviated program that involves the use of distance educational technologies, we singled out two groups. The first group included students between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five who are going to school in regular daytime enrollment; the second group consisted of people between the ages of thirty and forty-five who, as a rule, are engaged in acquiring a second higher education by correspondence.

One of the most important differences between the distance model of education and the traditional model is the development of the student's qualities of personality, in particular the ability to engage in continuous education and self-education; this is in keeping with one of the trends in education. "The main task of distance learning is that of creating the conditions necessary to shape students' independent cognitive activities in a well-developed academic environment that is based on computer and telecommunications technologies" [4]. The results of the questionnaire survey, however, showed that in actual practice there is a great deal that is otherwise. Those enrolled in the distance model of education are not, by any means, relying on their own abilities. It turned out that only 36 percent hope to accomplish the objective on their own. The dominant group (51 percent) are willing to accept *help* if encountering difficulties in their studies; 13 percent rely on help from "influential people." It was also found that only 39 percent of the respondents are studying their subject very carefully and completing their assignments without taking shortcuts. Another 10 percent count on using "crib sheets," and 11 percent are just hoping to "luck out" and are not putting in any special effort to pass exams and tests.

In organizing instruction involving the use of distance technologies, an important function is played by *self-checking*, because the student has to accomplish the bulk of his school load on his own. While 51 percent of the respondents do try to monitor themselves, their attempts do not always end up with the desired result. Psychological problems that the student is not able to overcome often

arise, so additional incentive is needed "from outside" in the form of either moral encouragement or "penalty." Another category of students (15 percent) do not even try to monitor themselves and keep to the syllabus, learn the lecture material, and complete practical assignments, right up until exam time. Another 14 percent wait around for a certain amount of time before the report period (e.g., two weeks), and only then do they begin to prepare for testing. Only 20 percent of the respondents really monitor their own learning process, regularly completing all types of assignments. It could be concluded that students do not really prefer the model of education that is built on mandatory systematicity, independent effort, and self-monitoring, which is what the distance model entails.

In both the traditional model and the distance model of education the system that has become prevalent is testing to evaluate mastery of the knowledge. The requirements used for testing are expressed in a number of qualitative indicators such as efficiency, reliability, practicality, and effectiveness. The most popular system in the case of distance technology, with respect to monitoring mastery of knowledge, is *electronic testing*. This includes operational lecture testing; individual computer drills; modular control testing with respect to the results of the study of a unit; a written examination testing the results of the study of the discipline, in writing or on the computer. Despite all the pluses and minuses that have been discussed in the literature in both this country and elsewhere, this form of assessing the level of knowledge is popular among students. For example, 37 percent of those acquiring a higher education by the traditional model or the distance model would prefer testing to evaluate the quality of their knowledge.

And so, the data from the survey provide evidence that *the traditional form of organizing instruction, which is based on face-to-face interaction between the instructor and the student, is still dominant among college students' educational needs*. The distance model, in the form in which it is being adopted in various regions, is not as fully accepted. According to the survey, the reasons are as follows: first of all, the level of the requirements for the use of information and communication technologies in education is a great deal higher than students' actual knowledge, abilities, and skills;

second, levels of education such as preschool and school education have not offered any alternative to classes taught by a teacher, and, as a consequence, college students characteristically are much more used to the classical methods and find it difficult to adapt to more modern methods of instruction, since the latter are designed first and foremost to require independent mastery of the material. For this reason, the distance model has not yet fully realized all the advantages that are built into it, the complete use of which, without a doubt, could substantially enhance the effectiveness of instruction in higher education.

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2. See *Vysshee obrazovanie v Rossii*, 2000, no. 5, pp. 98–108.

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