

Alexey Mikhailov & Mariia Burlakova (Russia)

## A Provincial University at the Times of the World Pandemic: Preservation or Development?

**Abstract:** The authors describe the issues a Russian provincial university has attempted to adjust during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the significant challenges as well as the opportunities that faculty members and students continue to encounter during these times of uncertainty.

**Keywords:** Provincial university, challenges and opportunities, uncertainties

**摘要** (阿列克谢·米哈伊洛夫 & 玛利亚·布拉科娃: 世界大流行时期的一个省级大学: 保护还是发展?): 作者描述了俄罗斯省级大学在新冠病毒大流行期间试图进行调整, 以及在这一不确定时期, 教职员和学生继续面临的重大挑战以及机遇。

**关键词:** 省级大学, 挑战与机遇, 不确定性

\*\*\*

**摘要** (阿列克谢·米哈伊洛夫 & 玛利亚·布拉科娃: 世界大流行时期的一个省级大学: 保护还是发展?): 作者描述了俄罗斯省级大学在新冠病毒大流行期间试图进行调整, 以及在这一不确定时期, 教职员和学生继续面临的重大挑战以及机遇。

**关键词:** 省级大学, 挑战与机遇, 不确定性

**Zusammenfassung** (Alexej Michailow & Maria Burlakowa: Eine Provinz-Universität zur Zeit der Weltpandemie: Bewahrung oder Entwicklung?) Die Autoren beschreiben die Probleme, die eine russische Provinzuniversität während der Covid-19-Pandemie zu lösen versuchte und die großen Herausforderungen, aber auch die Chancen, denen Fakultätsmitglieder und Studenten in diesen Zeiten der Unsicherheit weiterhin ausgesetzt sind.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Provinzuniversität, Herausforderungen, Möglichkeiten, Unsicherheiten

**Резюме** (Алексей Михайлов & Мария Бурлакова: Региональные университеты в период пандемии: выживание или развитие?): В статье описываются проблемы, с которыми сталкиваются и которые пытаются решать российские региональные вузы в период пандемии. Авторы исходят из того, что данная ситуация сопряжена с серьезными вызовами, нестабильностью. В то же время новая реальность предоставляет представителям факультетов, студентам новые шансы для развития и самореализации.

**Ключевые слова:** региональный университет, вызовы, возможности, факторы нестабильности

The history of Shuya Affiliated Branch of Ivanovo State University dates back to 1815. It was founded as a school of theology, training both clergymen and teachers for village parish schools. After the revolution of 1917, the school was closed down. Instead, some courses for teachers were organized, which later developed into a college, then into a teacher training institute, and finally a pedagogical university. Due to the federal reforms of 2013, the university was joined together with a larger Ivanovo State University, getting the new status of the Affiliated Branch. Throughout its history of over two hundred years, Shuya University has had a long-established reputation of excellence in educating teachers and research.

Currently, Shuya University offers Bachelor's, Master's and Postgraduate programs. The total number of students is 1,860. There are over 100 staff members and 100 faculty members, 95% of whom have an academic degree, including 20 Doctors of Science. The twenty-one degree programs are:

- Bachelor's Degrees in Service, Education (with one or two majors), Education and Psychology, Special Education, Physical Education and Sports, Physical Training for People with Disabilities, and Folk Arts;
- Master's Degrees in Pedagogical Education;
- Postgraduate programs in Biology, Cyber Security, Education and Pedagogical Sciences, Linguistics and Literature Studies, Ethics and Religious Studies, Culture Studies.

The largest number of educational programs (21, which is 81%) and, consequently, students (1450, which is 88%) relate to the Pedagogical Studies. There are over 120 international students earning

their degree at Shuya University.

The University provides high-quality facilities, among which there is the Digital Information Education Environment (DIEE), created on the 1C: University platform and the Moodle distance learning platform. In March, 2020, when the coronavirus pandemic took over, Shuya University temporarily closed the campus, like many other educational institutions worldwide, in an attempt to contain the spread of COVID-19. The students and the faculty were encouraged to move to online and distance learning using the available platforms. At the same time, there arose some issues to be addressed that had not been relevant before, namely:

- selecting proper distance learning methods;
- choosing proper technical teaching aids;
- developing some methods of the assessment of academic progress while students are learning at home;
- facilitating the end-of-course assessment;
- holding the forthcoming 2020 enrollment campaign.

Apart from that, the urgent issues to be immediately addressed were the virtual maintenance of the moral educational process and the online support of graduate employability and career advice.

It is worth mentioning that some issues were quickly resolved, for the majority of the students and the faculty had been using social networks and web resources prior to COVID-19 both for communication and education purposes. They had also been working in the DIEE. The difference was that those resources became the only means of teaching and learning.

At the same time, the University faced a number of challenges, which were:

- the instability of the online platforms;
- the failure of online applications;
- poor competence of some students and faculty members in the matters of what online learning is all about;
- insufficient technical support and resources for online interactions with the residents from some remote villages.

Yet, the three months of working in the new conditions have made it obvious that e-learning is going to be on the rise at Shuya University even after the pandemic ends because it has brought about new learning possibilities for almost all teaching and learning situations, including traditional classroom teaching, distance learning, and self-learning. It goes without saying that some new issues will have to be addressed, namely:

- developing supporting academic measures for students and faculty members;
- leveling inequality among students (providing some students with Internet access and necessary equipment);
- arranging courses for the faculty and the staff members teaching about the specifics of online teaching, the functionality and the potential of the available platforms and Web Services (including Google Classroom, Microsoft 365 Groups, WizIQ, Moodle, iSpring);
- providing psychological support and counseling for the students and the faculty members.

A new centralized faculty platform is to be created with the purpose of sharing the experience and best practices, dealing with various issues, providing methodological support to the university professors and lecturers in adapting their courses to teaching them online.

It is clear that some new courses, like "Digital Didactics", will be designed for Shuya students to do, because the teachers of the New Post-Coronavirus Age will have to be able to organize and maintain distance learning for schoolchildren both in traditional classroom and for co-curricular activities. Besides, new electronic learning media for the traditional school curriculum have to be designed and used in training all prospective teachers at Shuya University. Such media are in great demand now that distance learning seems to have come to stay. Also, the faculty members have been encouraged to start designing online courses for students and increasing the number of further education courses on distance learning for school teachers. All those improvements may make Shuya University a modern and competitive institution, that can be adaptable to new social and educational challenges.

Recently, the Russian federal government has planned an increase in budget-funded enrollment to the provincial universities that are ready to offer courses in the priority economic and social areas. Shuya University is ready to offer up-to-date programs for the new applicants, and we expect to be

among the institutions that will be able to receive more students this year.

Among the other changes that are going to take place in the nearest future are the options for the students to get a trade qualification while studying at the University. Career broadening programs will be in great demand because a trade job can help one solve financial problems in case of massive loss of jobs. Another program that is going to remain a priority at Shuya University is training students to work with children at summer camps.

It is obvious that the University management is going to be changed: the management model is already being partly digitalized; the administration staff are being made redundant; the job descriptions are being changed.

As for the international admissions, the University is about to start receiving applications online in the form of a portfolio, or, in other words, by an applicant's cumulative files, because the 2020 enrollment campaign is going to be held online for all applicants.

Shuya University successfully passed federal accreditation in March, 2020, and the new license is valid until 2026, so we have high hopes for the future. We are going to continue scientific collaboration with other universities and with the Russian Academy of Education, as well as with relevant educational, social, culture and sports institutions. The University is going to increase cooperation with Ivanovo authorities and maintain the leadership in training and retraining teachers and educators in the area.

We are looking forward to resuming and sustaining our international scientific cooperation and student exchange with the University of Vechta (Germany) within Erasmus + Program. We hope to re-establish our joint scientific research in the field of education as well as the student and faculty exchange with Seattle Pacific University (WA, USA). We expect to sign Cooperation Agreements with universities from Poland and Tajikistan as soon as the pandemic ends.

In conclusion, although the University has faced a few challenges in the past three months, generally, the situation could be viewed as a stimulus to develop its potential. Distant learning environments could have positive effects in giving some time for the students to explore and reflect on their knowledge construction. Distance learning-based programs could increase access to higher education for the students who have been discouraged to study before due to individual challenges. The available electronic platforms could remain an effective tool in maintaining educational process at all levels.

Even during times of lockdown, Shuya University is developing, while preserving its fundamental principle of pursuing excellence in education.

## About the Authors

**Dr. Alexey Mikhailov:** Director of Shuya Affiliated Branch of Ivanovo State University (Russia); e-mail: [rektorat@mail.ru](mailto:rektorat@mail.ru)

**Dr. Mariia Burlakova:** Associate Professor, Department of Romance and Germanic Languages, Shuya Affiliated Branch of Ivanovo State University (Russia); e-mail: [teacher12@yandex.ru](mailto:teacher12@yandex.ru)

