Post-Covid-19 Teacher Training: The Trends That Are to Stay

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on Shuya University. For a year, the students had to do all their academic work online, which has turned out to be both intellectual and emotional lockdown for them. Now that the students are back at the campus, there has been a significant fall in the students' motivation to study and a rise in the withdrawals from the courses. The escape into the Internet and the absence of face-to-face communication with peers and professors have disorientated the students and have had an impact on their academic integrity. Yet, the crisis has showed some positive implications that result from revealing the potential of virtual learning environments with new methods of interactions between students and teachers and changing the overall way of governing the university. The authors present an overview of a few "new-normal" academic trends that emerged after the pandemic outbreak and seem to have set in at the provincial Russian university in the city of Shuya.

Keywords: trends, teacher training institution, post-Covid education

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The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has put Shuya University under great pressure. During the lockdown, the staff had to quickly adapt their educational offer to an online format. This crisis has forced everyone to quickly change their ways of working and their environments, dramatically shaking up the community in general. Also, this situation has brought to light the weaker points of the curriculum, a rigidity with which the university staff had to be confronted. As a result, some changes have been effected as a consequence of the lockdown.

Education and Learning

Trend 1. Before the coronavirus pandemic, Shuya University had been following the standard traditional teaching style, and digital education had been an additional, even minor, means of instructing students. After the coronavirus outbreak, the students were forced to do all their academic work online. It didn't come easy because most faculty members and many students had poor digital skills. But the situation has improved over the past year: now digital teaching and learning is a daily routine for both university professors and students. So, the first trend that has set in for many months to come is that the university staff are now far more digitally capable, and more virtual training sessions have been offered recently to assist them in sustaining online formats and methods of learning.

Of course, there are more things to be done, for example, providing the necessary access to digital tools and pieces of equipment to the freshmen who have come from low-income family backgrounds or maintaining training sessions for prospective teachers, including ClassDojo, Google Classroom, Schoology, WizIQ Moodle, and spring. It is obvious that there will be differences among the education provided by teachers with high digital skills and others that lack training or adaptability. But generally, the university has

moved on from the emergency distant learning and teaching format to more or less fully embracing online education.

Trend 2. A second trend embraces the academic innovations that were introduced last year and are likely to become part of the university routine in the future. The first innovation is the three modes of digital learning. One is the distant mode, that makes it possible for students to study at their own convenient time within the time frame set by the professor. The second is the so-called synchronic mode, which is attending a lecture or a seminar by the means of a videoconference. The third is the combined form of both the distant and the synchronic modes. The students can choose the mode that suits them best. We believe that it helps ameliorate the inequality coming from the students' different backgrounds, because some students do not have even mobile internet, while the wealthy ones enjoy attending the lectures from home. Another innovation is a new course, titled "Methods of Blended Learning," that has been most successful recently and will be in demand further on. It is clear that hybrid teaching (online for some students and face-to-face for others) and blended education (online content plus rotation system for on-site activities) will be in place for at least two more academic years.

Trend 3. The third trend addresses the emotional and mental conditions of staff members and students. The outbreak of the pandemic has resulted in mandatory isolation and quarantine, and the main psychological impact to date involves elevated rates of fear, uncertainty, worry and concern in the students and the faculty members. The intellectual and emotional lockdown has resulted in alienation of many students who are now struggling having to communicate with peers and teachers. The teacher's job requires great communication skills and a positive outlook, so it is becoming more evident now that we will have to deal with the aftereffect so that our students will gain needed skills to help school children overcome the learning crisis. Students affected by the pandemic and the lockdown

will need counselling and academic support for many months to come. Yet one thing is not in doubt: the emotional experience of the staff and the students will be the starting point. Necessary attention will be given to the role of emotions and to the affective dimension of teaching and learning.

Trend 4. The fourth trend is the shift towards the development of students' soft-skills. The pandemic has made it clear that a teacher needs to be able to meet a range of challenges beyond academic learning. Emphasis is needed on life-long learning, effective planning, open-mindedness, getting and giving feedback, and self-coaching . It is very important for a teacher to carefully analyse student strengths and weaknesses and concentrate on education design.

Education design embraces a vision of education and learning which is oriented toward innovation in the maintenance of the educational environment. The teacher's pedagogical culture is understood as a specific field in the theory of education where it is possible to extend the patterns of the design culture into pedagogics. The extension is meant to make the process of students' vocational training more efficient and to advance their readiness to work in the current global conditions of the social and cultural unrest. Soft skills training is a fundamental method, used to perfect the pedagogical culture at Shuya University, which includes the development of various skills of team-building, productive negotiation, conflict resolution techniques, and creativity, as well as promotion of attitudes emphasizing life-long learning and the skills of positive adaptation to changing environments. Prospective teachers' advanced soft-skills competencies help upgrade and improve their proficiency level. And, the most up-to-date soft skills that a modern university teacher ought to be developing are as follows:

- skills of productive communication;
- skills of efficient team-building and team management;

- skills of evaluation of innovation in education;
- critical and systematic thinking;
- self-management;
- time-management;
- emotional intelligence;
- leadership;
- persuasion and reasoning;
- goal orientation.

Soft skills development is a complex process, and, to achieve that, teachers need to be equipped with ways and means of integrating soft skills into the fabric of traditional subject-specific academic growth and development. To promote attitudes of life-long learning, effective life planning, open-mindedness, daily study of profession-oriented resources, getting and giving feedback, networking, self-coaching. Meeting this challenge is a current focus in teacher education at Shuya University.

The University Management

For the past year, the Shuya University administration has been confronted with hard decisions, especially given the decision to close buildings for safety and security reasons. Faculty members have had to be provided with additional tools and new working methods. Another challenge was the plan to reopen, considering the new security distancing measures. Now, there are all sorts of special provisions on security in place, i.e., the indicators for access and exit via dedicated points at campus and building sites, physical distancing measures, hands hygiene, access regulation, and time slots, and these provisions are likely to continue in the future.

Trend 5. Timely and accurate communication with the university community has become very important. The enrolment campaign 2020 was done online, and it was a tough one. This year enrolment has been of mixed character, to say the least. Students have had a

choice of applying either in person or online. Many students came to the university to apply in person, but the option to send application letters and pass entrance exams online proved popular as well. The reasons were various: people lived far from the University or had financial difficulties and could not pay for several train trips to and from their hometown, or they found it more convenient to do it from home. This was not convenient for the university, but given the situation, the administration concentrated on the support of the prospective students. It seems that it is likely that a hybrid enrolment pattern will continue to be an option.

Trend 6. The lockdown changed people's lifestyle, and significant numbers of students now are working part-time "without leaving home," given the convenience of the Internet. The result appears to have been a significant decline in: 1) certain students' motivation to study and 2) a rise in withdrawals from courses. The comfort and isolation of home removes them from the academic atmosphere of university life. This is an issue the university will certainly have to address.

So far, the expenses of security and safety provisions have been immense. However, time is still needed to determine the aspects of the university life that have been severely affected from the campus closure and the lack of international students. The University has been forced to cutback certain faculty members because of the economic losses sustained over the past year. Keeping students actively engaged in learning and maintaining faculty well-being are large and pressing concerns.

Trend 7. Another negative trend is that of student escapism into the Internet. The absence of face-to-face communication with peers and professors appears to have had negative effects on students. There is for some the feeling that it is nice to be in the digital world, especially for those for whom social interactions are often disturbing. And if the world is changing in ways they are unsure of, they would prefer to be in the safety of their own

digital reality for the time being. It is a worrying trend, that might have lasting negative impacts. An attendant concern is abuse of the rules of internet safety which can put both them and their families at risk. Online communication ethics is a related concern that will have to be addressed and probably taught formally.

It is worth mentioning, however, that despite these negative trends, there are a few things on the plus side. Given the numbers of resignations in school faculties, employment prospects for university graduates are greatly improved. Another optimistic trend is the rising percentage of students involved in volunteer work, a phenomenon which was not the case a few years ago.

General Conclusions

In conclusion, it is safe to say that the past year was a challenge. The university had to adapt swiftly and decisively to the new realities of the pandemic. A lot of "good old things" had to be left behind, and a "new normal" in academic life with a different understanding of the role of teachers, students, and technology in education has emerged. At this point, we believe that the new normal is more effective, more equitable, and more inclusive than that of pre-pandemic times. We have been forced to provide a safe and academically sound transition to the changing times for a new generation of students. It is certain that this crisis will be remembered as a moment of redesign, a remodelled, and we hope, a better teacher education process at Shuya University. In spite of the many tragic aspects of this pandemic, there are reasons to think that our response and pursuit of the achievement of excellence in teacher training and research at Shuya University will usher in a new era of excellence.