

A VIRTUAL UNIVERSITY: CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CONCEPT (BY THE EXAMPLE OF THE SYRIAN VIRTUAL UNIVERSITY)

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The relevance of the problem lies in the necessity of detailed study of the Middle East region and its potential in the field of virtual education caused by the fact that all existing studies cover the projects which were implemented in the educational space of North America and Western Europe. The basic approach is presented by the method of observation, the method of interview with the ideologists of the Syrian Virtual University, which is the subject of our study, as well as the survey of students. The main results of the study consist in identification of distinctive features of virtual learning, definition of the required conditions for adaptation of the model, as well as determination of the main problems occurred within the process of implementation of the virtual university model by the example of the Syrian Virtual University. The research creates necessary prerequisites for a more detailed and deep analysis of the educational process development in the Middle East; the results of the study may be included in teaching materials and textbooks on pedagogy.

Keywords: distance learning ; virtual learning ; virtual university ; educational model ; Syrian Virtual University.

INTRODUCTION

The world in the XXI century is a space where the members strive for globalization and unification of processes in order to achieve coherence, fast decision-making, efficiency of their activity in all areas. However, at the same time we are able to observe another phenomenon which is the trend to expansion of personal capabilities and personalization of activities in the context of globalization (Polat, 2006). In pedagogic science the vivid demonstration of such process is the shift of “distance education” in the direction of “virtual education” (Khutorskoy, 1999).

The interest to the virtual university model is increasing day by day, which is a natural process in the context of technological development and changes in the social educational paradigm where education for a modern member of society is a continuous process throughout all his life, resulting in development of educational opportunities. The educational process is becoming more flexible, it is not limited by the frames of time, specialization, location of an educational institution (Farrell, 1999). Many virtual projects have been successfully implemented worldwide (Chingos & Schwerdt, 2014; Sheikhalard & Daoudi, 2007). However, the concept

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of “virtual learning” confuses the understanding of what “virtual learning” is, and in which way it is different from “distance learning”, and what the main characteristics of the virtual educational process and the problems on the way of its implementation are.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The Objectives of the Research

The research aimed at: identification of essential characteristics of the concepts of “distance learning” and “virtual learning”; study of the virtual university model based on the example of the Syrian Virtual University; analysis of problems, occurred within the process of implementation of the model.

Theoretical and Empirical Methods

To test the hypothesis we used general scientific theoretical methods of observation, analysis and synthesis, as well as special empirical methods, such as interviews with the ideologists of SVU project, survey of university students.

The Basis of the Research

The basis of the study is the Syrian Virtual University, established in 2002 on the initiative of the government within the framework of the state educational reform.

The Stages of the Research

The research was carried out within three stages:

In the first stage we investigated the problem of essential characteristics of the concepts of “distance learning” and “virtual learning”, which some researchers erroneously determine as synonyms.

In the second stage within the study of materials from the archives of the Syrian Virtual University and personal interviews with the ideologists of the project and the students of the university, we presented a model of SVU.

The third stage was associated with the analysis of problems arose during the process of implementation of this model, as well as search of possible solutions to the identified problems.

RESULTS

One of the most interesting examples in the field of virtual education is the Syrian Virtual University. The activities of the Syrian Virtual University started in 2002, SVU became the first virtual educational experiment in the Middle East.

Within the primary analysis of the model of the Syrian Virtual University it was established that the requirements for students do not differ significantly from distance learning programs, widely implemented by many universities around the

world: the students must attend up to 50% of online lectures and actively participate in them, they also have the right to watch video recordings of the rest 50% of the lectures, or download educational materials from the Internet. In addition, students must complete course projects in core disciplines, and successfully pass semester and final exams. At the end of the program, students must submit their thesis; the scope of the project should not be less than 15,000 words (Sheikhalard & Daoudi, 2007).

The logical question arises herein: what are the characteristics of the “virtual university” model, and why is it incorrect to identify this model with distance learning, which has been widely developed in recent years? To find a possible answer to this question we decided to analyze the problems associated with organization of learning through virtual universities by the example of the Syrian Virtual University. The virtual university is a technically complicated model, and in the stage of formation the ideologists and founders of SVU faced a number of problems. So, *the first problem* is related to the organization of training online, and ensuring high-quality Internet access of all students in Syria. In remote areas of the country there is a problem with Internet access. The university supported by the Ministry of Higher Education decided to establish so-called “telecentres” which are small centers with Internet and modern computer equipment. For SVU students this service is completely free. Later telecentres were established in all regions inhabited by registered students of the university; telecentres were also charged with a monitoring function during interim and final online exams. This function was given to telecentres in order to exclude the possibility of cheating (The observatory on Borderless Higher Education Syrian Virtual University Launched: with North American universities as dominant partners, 2002).

The second problem deals with the impossibility to use alternative operating systems other than Windows, as soon as the main applications were developed in accordance with certain technical requirements. For example, the Linux operating system which is popular among IT students did not support any applications used by students within online educational process. For this reason, the research center of the university has developed a number of interim applications for alternative operating systems. Thus, in the present stage SVU is not only an educational, but also a research center and its activity is aimed at development in the field of information technologies. (Sheikhalard & Daoudi, 2007).

The third problem was associated with the development of teaching methods needed to organize the educational process through the Internet. This teaching model is significantly different from other existing models: it considers a lack of personal contact between participants in the educational process: this factor increases the share of student’s individual work in relation to the share of group classes. For this reason, the teacher should be guided by the choice of methods that allow effective delivery of educational material via the Internet. The communication

of teachers and students is organized through synchronized Internet session (Najib, 2007). During these sessions, students have possibilities for direct audio and visual communication with their teachers: they can ask questions, using the application for transmission of voice messages, receive answers and consultations, send documents in different formats, and participate in group discussions. At the end of the lesson all Internet sessions are recorded and sent to all students to enable them to reflection and analysis of the studied material.

The fourth problem is the quality control: during 5 years SVU specialists were developing the concept of quality evaluation system and presented it in 2007. This system received the name of AMS (assessment management system - system of evaluation and control) (Sheikhalard & Daoudi, 2007). This system consists of several subsystems, allowing to assess the quality of education as by the students themselves (through feedback forms, applications for technical errors occurred during classes, reporting forms, which must be filled by students within a certain period), and the quality of students' knowledge (through forms of knowledge level evaluation filled by teachers, and an automated system preparing students' personal rating for certain educational periods).

The fifth problem faced by the ideologists of SVU was the inability to use traditional methods of learning as the part of virtual learning. The traditional methods should have been replaced with the modern methods that allowed to take into account all the specific features of this model. The educational model of "education, aimed at achieving the result" developed by Dr. Charles Schwahn and William Spady became the basis of the new teaching paradigm. The researchers considered all new technological tools that had become available in the field of education in recent decades. It involves changing of the teacher's role in the paradigm of the "teacher-student" relations: the authors consider a teacher as a "coach" who does not teach but helps and directs a student within the independent learning process; he does not suppress student's individuality, but on the contrary, develops student's leadership qualities. The model of Schwahn-Spady is based on the concept that the Internet is not an additional learning tool, but a basic source of information (Schwahn & Spady, 2010).

DISCUSSIONS

Many authors pay close attention to the development of virtual education in the world. One of the pioneering researches in this field was a joint work of the group of authors led by Dr. Glen M. Farrell (1999). The authors carried out a detailed analysis of the process of development of virtual education in the world for each region. However, the authors do not separate the terms of "virtual learning" and "distance learning", suggesting that distance learning is a form of virtual learning. And we believe that the essence of these two concepts is quite different, and an identity sign between the concepts confuses the understanding of their basic

characteristics. Among other things, the authors excluded the Middle East from their list of regions under study. We believe that the contribution of the Middle East countries to the development of virtual education is unappreciated as evidenced by the vivid experience of the Syrian Virtual University - the first virtual project in the region (National Report on the Development of Education in Syrian Arab Republic, 2008).

Another study in the field of virtual education that deserves special attention is the research of Matthew M. Chingos and Guido Schwerdt devoted to the experience of the Virtual University of Florida (Chingos & Schwerdt, 2014). This study is focused on experience in organization of virtual learning at the Virtual University of Florida. Due to the narrow focus of this research the data obtained by the authors is not universal and does not characterize the model of a virtual university as a whole. When analyzing the experience of the Syrian Virtual University we tried to identify not only the characteristics of SVU as an academic institution, but the universal features of the SVU as a virtual university model.

CONCLUSIONS

The key findings include:

1. The model of a virtual university by the example of the Syrian Virtual University is presented in the article, the basic characteristics of the model are disclosed, the educational process in the context of this model is identified, the key problems within the organization process are highlighted.
2. By the example of the Syrian Virtual University we consider that the trend to virtualization of education is not only characterized by implementation of telecommunication tools, multimedia, technical solutions that can rather be described by another term such as “informatization” or “computerization” of education, but also by the process of reconstruction of virtual environment. We can observe a change in the status of education as a real institution and its transformation into a virtual process. We indicate the change of the role of a teacher in this process: a virtual teacher performs the role of a manager, a provider of information, and the unit of information itself is becoming a structural unit of the educational process.

Recommendations

The research extends the field of theory and practice of development of education in the world, theoretical propositions and conclusions contained herein create necessary prerequisites for further detailed study in the field of virtual education, as well as contribute to a more complete and systematic coverage of education development process in Syria; the results can be useful for researchers studying the process of educational development, as well as can be included in teaching materials and textbooks on pedagogy.

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