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A Paradigm Shift: Blended Learning Integration in Russian Higher Education

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Abstract

The main objective of the article is to contribute to an understanding of the value of blended learning within the scope of new paradigm in Russian higher education. We consider blended learning as a unique approach that aims to solve a series of tasks connected with the necessity of raising education quality. Such competences as self-organization, knowledge management, the ways of getting and processing it are brought to the forefront. The article analyzes the didactic capacity of blended learning as the means to implement the effective transition from a traditional learning model to an integrated one where electronic environments and resources are widely used. The existing blended learning models are considered and the ways of their adaptation towards the requirements of the Russian higher education system are discussed with the focus on the course “foreign language”.

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1. Introduction

The modern conditions of the world development dictate the high educational level of an individual as it defines the development perspectives of the whole country. Therefore the building of new educational environment for training highly qualified specialists has become an urgent issue in Russia.

There are at least two approaches for defining the role of education in the society. According to the first one education is an instrument for fixation, reproduction and compiling of the existing system of relationships in the society. In this case education plays a subordinate role and follows the society development. It is just the condition of the society that defines the content of education and possibilities for future change. The second approach is based on the idea that education is not only the factor of knowledge reproduction but it is motive power of society development. It is a unique tool that allows reconsidering the existing system of relations in the society and transition

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to a new stage of development. This means completely different content of educational system and its organization. In our opinion the second approach should underlie in Russian education reforms.

The higher education institutions recognize the necessity of critically examining the current practices and the potential of information and communication technologies (ICT). The challenge now is to gain a deep understanding of the need, potential and strategies of such technology as blended learning to approach the ideals of higher education (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). It is obvious that only continuing the formation of new educational paradigm, Russian higher education will get a chance to acquire leading positions in the world.

2. Background

National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University (TPU) was one of the first Russian universities which introduced multilayer system of specialist training according to the demands of Bologna Declaration. At present TPU defines a more global goal, its development strategy is dedicated to the ambition of getting into Top 100 world university ranking, which is considered the characteristic of recognition in the academic world and indicates the conformity with the quality standards of specialist training. For the aims of forming a development strategy for next 7 years TPU worked out a programme of competitive growth. This programme fulfills the function of a roadmap timeline, which defines step-by-step evolution of all interconnected components of higher educational system such as scientific research, staff development and the development of educational technologies. Thereby as a global goal of further development TPU states the establishment and development of the university as a research university, the world leader in the field of resource efficient technologies, which can solve the global problems of humanity on the way to steady development.

The goal specified above forms a system of primary objectives and defines the first-priority directions of the development. They are the following:

- 1) world level research;
- 2) formation and implementation of global competitive engineer education programmes;
- 3) distribution of the best academic and engineering practices;
- 4) establishment of strategic partnership with academic and business communities;
- 5) qualitative student training;
- 6) involvement of academics and scientists with worldwide reputation for forming the academic society, scientific schools and as a consequence of this knowledge transfer;
- 7) university transition to master-postgraduate type;
- 8) formation of effective resource management mechanism.

The solution of each objective implies the implementation of the procedures which provide both fast victories and long-term university development. All these initiatives have one common point – the necessity of increasing language competence of the staff and students. Only high level of foreign language proficiency allows faster integration in the world academic environment at the expense of academic mobility expansion, publication activity increase in journals indexed in Scopus and Web of Science, increase of internalization level in scientific and educational activity of the university.

3. Blended Learning Approach

The new and complex tasks need a paradigm shift. Within the scope of the new paradigm students shouldn't be only given some extent of knowledge, they should be taught different ways of thinking, developing creativity, finding new solutions without assistance, performing well in standard and nonstandard situations. These changes in higher education, within the Bologna Process, represent the transition from centralization of transmittal teaching towards awareness of the added value of a learning process in which students have a more active role in building knowledge (Monteiro, Leite & Lima, 2013). Information technologies make this possible, they allow to organize the interaction between instructors and students in a different way. They transform ordinary transfer of knowledge into cooperative learning, help to bring together the positions of instructors and students, activate their creative potential.

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