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THE QUALITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND THE PROSPECTS FOR POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

The COVID-19 pandemic, which spread widely around the world at the beginning of 2020 and continues to this day, has seriously affected the field of higher education. In a short time, it forced to change the traditional form of education to distance learning. Most of the world's universities were not ready for this: neither technically nor conceptually. As a result, there is widespread criticism of online education, the quality of training is declining, the negative consequences of covid education are being actualized. At the same time, researchers are looking for new vectors of development, studying the mistakes of the past, realizing that the pandemic did not have a special impact, but only aggravated the problems already existing in the education system. In this regard, a study was conducted in Kazakhstan, the purpose of which was to study the quality of higher education during the pandemic through the eyes of students, their preferences and proposals for reforming higher education. As part of this study, a sociological survey was conducted that covered a thousand students from different regions of the Republic of Kazakhstan. This study will complement the ideas about the prospects of higher education after the pandemic, and the results will be useful for teachers of higher educational institutions, philosophers of education and anyone interested in the problems of higher education.

Key words: philosophy of education, pandemic, higher education, quality of education, distance education, post-secondary education.

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COVID-19 пандемиясы кезіндегі жоғары білім сапасы және постковидтік білім берудің перспективалары

2020 жылдың басында бүкіл әлемде кеңінен таралған және бүгінгі күнге дейін жалғасып келе жатқан COVID-19 пандемиясы, жоғары білім беру саласына айтарлықтай әсер етті. Қысқа мерзімде ол дәстүрлі оқыту формасын қашықтан оқыту жүйесіне ауыстыруға мәжбүр етті. Әлемдегі көптеген университеттер бұған – техникалық жағынан да, тұжырымдамалық жағынан да дайын емес еді. Нәтижесінде, онлайн-білім берудің сын-қатері барлық жерде айтылуда. Онымен қоса, оқыту сапасы төмендеп, ковидтік білім берудің жағымсыз салдары өзекті мәселеге айналды. Сонымен бірге, зерттеушілер дамудың жаңа векторларын іздеуге көшті. Пандемия соншалықты әсер етпегенін түсіне отырып, бастарынан өткерген қателіктерді зерттей бастады. Алайда бұл жағдай білім беру жүйесіндегі мәселелерді одан сайын ушықтыра түсті. Осыған байланысты Қазақстанда пандемия кезіндегі жоғары білім сапасын студент жастардың көзімен, олардың жоғары білім беруді реформалау жөніндегі артықшылықтары мен ұсыныстарымен зерделеу мақсатында зерттеу жүргізілді. Осы зерттеу аясында, ҚР әр өңірінен мың студентті қамтыған әлеуметтік сауалнама жүргізілді. Бұл зерттеу пандемиядан кейінгі жоғары білімнің болашағы туралы түсініктерді толықтыра түспек. Ал нәтижелері жоғары оқу орындарының оқытушыларына, білім саласының философтарына және жоғары білім беру мәселелеріне қызығушылық танытқандарға пайдалы болады.

Түйін сөздер: философия, білім, пандемия, жоғары білім беру, білім сапасы, қашықтан білім беру, постковидтік білім.

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Качество высшего образования в период пандемии COVID-19 и перспективы постковидного образования

Пандемия COVID-19, которая широко распространилась по всему миру в начале 2020 года и длится по сей день, серьезно сказалась на сфере высшего образования. В краткие сроки она вынудила сменить традиционную форму обучения на дистанционную. Многие университеты мира не были готовы к этому: ни технически, ни концептуально. Как итог – повсеместно звучит критика онлайн-образования, качество обучения снижается, актуализируются негативные последствия ковидного образования. Вместе с тем, исследователи ищут новые векторы развития, изучают ошибки прошлого, понимая, что пандемия особого влияния не оказала, но лишь усугубила уже имевшиеся в системе образования проблемы. В этой связи в Казахстане было проведено исследование, целью которого стало изучение качества высшего образования в период пандемии глазами студенческой молодежи, их предпочтения и предложения по реформированию высшего образования. В рамках настоящего исследования был проведен социологический опрос, охвативший тысячу студентов из разных регионов РК. Настоящее исследование дополнит представления о перспективах высшего образования после пандемии, а результаты будут полезны педагогам высших учебных заведений, философам образования и всем, кто интересуется проблемами высшего образования.

Ключевые слова: философия образования, пандемия, высшее образование, качество образования, дистанционное образование, постковидное образование.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, which spread widely around the world at the beginning of 2020, has seriously affected the education sector. Already in mid-April, according to UNESCO, schools were closed in 191 countries of the world, and more than 1.5 billion students switched to distance education (UNESCO Report, 2020). This process, which, only at first glance, seems temporary, in fact causes serious concerns of the academic community with deep socio-economic consequences and a new round of the global educational crisis. It is believed that the main negative factors of the pandemic are failures in the work of educational institutions, poor technical equipment, interruptions in the Internet, limited access to educational products, poor digital training of teachers and students, growing unemployment in the field of education, the growth of student debts, etc. (UN Concept Note, 2020). But all this is just the tip of the iceberg. The COVID-19 pandemic has shaken the very foundations of education: its ability to be.

“Is it worth studying further?” (Hiler, 2020) – this question is asked by millions of students around the world, seeing how quickly the quality of education is falling and that it does not justify their hopes.

The restoration of the education system can no longer seem like a purely mechanical action to get

out of isolation, open schools and universities. Re-suscitation of the system will become a much longer and more complex process, since the pandemic has affected not only the external side of the education system, but also penetrated into the very depths.

The return to “normality” and the old quality of education can no longer be considered as a goal. We are talking about a new quality, a new “normality” based on working on the mistakes of pre-visual education. Serious scientific work is required to understand what education should be like after the pandemic and how the reform will affect the quality characteristics of higher education. In this study, we will only try to understand what factors have most significantly affected the quality of higher education in Kazakhstan and the world, and what are the prospects for post-secondary education in the future.

Literature review

The issues of the quality of higher education in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic are being discussed today by leading scientists of the world. Numerous studies on this topic are conducted, technical and conceptual aspects of online education are studied, surveys of students and teachers are conducted.

American researchers believe that the pandemic as a whole has exacerbated the problems that already

existed in education: a reduction in student enrollment (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2019), the student debt crisis (Federal Reserve, 2021), low graduate wages and growing unemployment, etc. However, despite this, the pandemic has also laid the foundations for a long-term positive transformation. Innovative teaching methods that are actively implemented in the educational process can increase classroom engagement, expand access to university resources outside the university walls (Adler, 2021), and, accordingly, improve the quality of education.

Scientists from Egypt pay attention to the emergence of a new hybrid model of education after the pandemic, which would take into account the digital gap among students and open up new opportunities for distance education. Scientists conducted a special study in Egyptian universities, comparing the academic performance of students graduating in 2019 and 2020. The study showed an insignificant difference in students' knowledge and grades (El Said, 2021).

Researchers from India believe that during the forced online education, their country has made significant progress in online learning. The opinion is expressed that in order to improve the quality of education in the future, a large number of technically competent professionals are needed, as well as the introduction of modern technologies into the educational process, regardless of whether students will continue to study online or offline. Scientists tend to consider the current situation of the pandemic as an opportunity to develop new teaching methods and improve the educational base (Ramola, 2020).

A number of scientists from Saudi Arabia, India and Bahrain associate the quality of online education with seven different factors: administrative support, course content, course design, social support, technical support, characteristics of teachers, characteristics of students. After interviewing 784 students in India and Saudi Arabia, scientists came to the conclusion that female students cope better with distance learning than male students (because it is more introverted), senior students study better than junior ones (because senior students are characterized by greater student independence and less contact classes). Technical equipment and administrative resources also affect the quality of training (Elumalai, 2020: 731-753).

Researcher Ann L. Saurbier from the USA, in turn, believes that today the entire education system is in question. Until recently, getting a higher education was considered a worthwhile occupation. However, factors including rising tuition costs, graduates' willingness to work and the associated debt

have reduced the perceived value of higher education diplomas at all levels. This has led to the fact that higher education institutions are now forced to look for new ways to demonstrate their advantages. And these advantages are contained in the integrity of values, the researcher believes. Higher education should offer students higher values and long-term prospects. Only in this way can it be preserved (Saurbier, 2020: 62-74).

The main topic of the research works of the last year was the problems of the pandemic and the prospects of higher education after its completion. How is education possible under quarantine and is it possible at all?

Thus, researchers Manuel Mazzara, Petr Zhdanov, Mohammad Reza Bahrami and others believe that the digitalization of education and the transition to online is a natural stage in the development of education. The pandemic only accelerated it and helped to achieve the fourth industrial revolution (Mazzara, 2021). Post-secondary education has changed not only the ways of teaching, but also the very essence of the educational process. So, the teacher in online training will no longer perform the role of an instructor who directly interacts with the whole class, but rather the role of a moderator. The most difficult task of online education is the qualitative assessment of students' knowledge. In this regard, the assessment of knowledge will be given maximum attention (instead of the final exams – a cycle of intermediate assessment of knowledge). Online education will require open Internet resources, access to large libraries and databases, it will also require more cooperation from students, remote cooperation on solving projects (Begalina, 2021: 50).

As for assessing the quality of education through the eyes of students themselves, most students from different countries talk about its decline during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thus, a study conducted by scientists in 62 countries among 30,383 students showed that in the conditions of isolation around the world and the transition to online learning, students at the initial stage were most satisfied with the support provided by the teaching staff and universities. Subsequently, they considered computer skills insufficient, and also noted an increase in the training load. Students were concerned about questions concerning their future professional career and studies, they experienced boredom, anxiety and frustration (Aristovnik, 2020: 8438).

In the report prepared by the International Labor Organization "Youth and COVID-19: impacts on jobs, education, rights and mental well-being", it

is reported that 65% of young people received less knowledge during the pandemic [Report of the International Labor Organization, 2020].

In the United States, the results of a survey conducted by Goodwin Simon Strategic Research showed that respondents rate the quality of education in the pandemic low: many believe that both quality and experience have significantly deteriorated in the covid era (Equitable Futures National Youth Poll, 2021).

About half (49%) of students in the UK reported that the pandemic has significantly affected their academic performance (Office for national Statistics, 2021).

In Russia, the transition to distance learning, according to research, did not become a “disaster”, the Russian higher education system has shown resistance to abrupt changes. However, due to the lack of social contacts and student life, the physical and psychological well-being of students has significantly worsened (Ochepovskiy, 2020).

In Australia, the majority of students are pessimistic about the prospects of their education: most young people said that they are unlikely to retire before the age of 65, find their dream home or a job that is not only related to paying bills (Zhou, 2020).

The pandemic also affected the quality of education in India. Thus, the study showed that almost all respondents in India had access to virtual platforms; 48.3% were inattentive during online classes, and 71.6% were not satisfied with the understanding of the topic [Gupta R., 2021].

Thus, we see that the quality of education in the context of a pandemic is decreasing everywhere. Nevertheless, scientists tend not to absolutize the negative consequences of the pandemic, but, on the contrary, to jointly seek a way out of the current situation. In their opinion, the pandemic is a new opportunity for radical reforms in the field of education (introduction of innovative technologies, open access, democratization of education, etc.), as well as the emergence of mixed educational forms.

Material and methods of research

In a study conducted within the framework of the scientific project “Transformation of the values of the Kazakh higher education system in a multicultural and globalizing world”, implemented by the Ablai Khan KazUIR&WL research group with the support of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan, students of higher educational institutions of the Republic of Kazakhstan took part. Only 1000 people. The study covered

all 14 regions of Kazakhstan, students of different courses (from 1 to 4), different departments (studying in Russian, Kazakh and English), different specialties (technical, humanitarian, medical, etc.).

However, the main share of students was retained in the sample (male/female population, the share of large megacities and small cities, popular and unpopular specialties, etc.).

The study was conducted online, using the Google Forms application. Based on the analysis of the sociological survey, the general satisfaction with the quality of higher education in the Republic of Kazakhstan, the transition to distance education, the main educational values of students, trends and prospects of higher education in the Republic of Kazakhstan are shown.

Out of 1000 students of universities of the Republic of Kazakhstan who took part in the survey, 78.5% were women and 21.5% were men.

The positions of students from all 14 regions of Kazakhstan are presented. The largest number of questionnaires were received from Almaty and Almaty region (31.8%), Shymkent and Turkestan region (11%) and Karaganda (10.4%). 5.9% – from Kostanay and Pavlodar, 5.7% – from East Kazakhstan Region, 5.4% – from Kyzylorda, 5.1% – from Aktobe, 4.6% – from Atyrau, 4.4% – from North Kazakhstan Region, 2.9% – from West Kazakhstan Region, 2.6% – from Nur – Sultan and Akmola region, 2.5% – from Mangistau region, 1.8% – from Taraz and Zhambyl region.

Students of various departments and specialties participated in the survey, including: students of humanities (45.8%), education (17.2%), social sciences, economics and business (13.7%), natural sciences (5.2%), technical sciences and technologies (5%), services (4.5%), art (3.3%), law (2.6%), agriculture (2.3%), medicine (2%).

According to the training courses, the respondents were distributed as follows: 1 course – 47.3%, 2 course – 21.1%, 3 course – 20%, 4 course – 11.6%.

Ethnic composition in the survey was attended mostly by students of the Kazakh nationality (85,1%) and Russian (5,3%), Korean (2,7%), Uzbek (1,3%), Uyghur (1.2%) and others (less than 1%: Tajik, Tatar, German, etc.).

Age of the respondents represented the views of students of universities of Kazakhstan under 18 (46.2 per cent), 19-21 years old (48.3 percent), 22-24 years old (4.8%) and older than 24 years old (7%).

Thus, the representative composition of the participants of the online sociological survey reflected the diversity of the participants’ opinions on topical

issues of modern higher education and can be considered as a reliable source of generalizations.

Results of the study

For more than a year, students of universities of the Republic of Kazakhstan have been studying in a distance format. When asked what format of training you prefer, most of the respondents were in favor of full-time training (50.6%), a little more than a quarter – for distance learning (26.7%), the rest – for mixed training (22.7%).

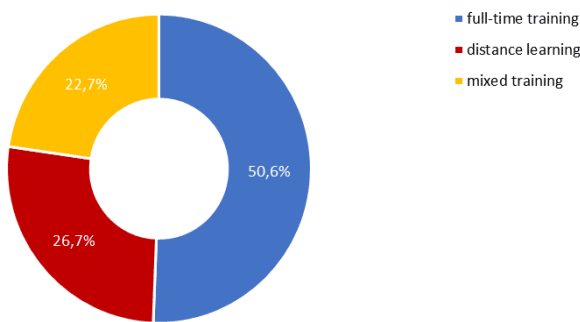


Figure 1 – Preferred training format

Almost half of the respondents (49.4%) supported distance education in pure or mixed form. When asked about the advantages of distance education, they noted the following: saving time, saving money, the opportunity to further develop in other areas, convenience, safety, accessibility, freedom and flexibility, independence, the possibility of self-development, no need to look for housing, no transport crossings, the development of new technologies, the opportunity to be at home, near parents, etc.

Among the disadvantages of distance education, the respondents noted: reduced quality of education, lack of live communication and student life, unstable Internet, lack of practical skills, lack of direct communication with teachers, health problems (back pain, visual impairment, physical fatigue from the computer), technical problems during classes, the inability to separate household chores from school, etc.

The coronavirus pandemic has forced all universities of Kazakhstan to urgently switch to a remote format. But have universities managed to maintain the quality of education? Students answered this question in different ways: most of the respondents (40.8%) rated the quality of distance education as high, 30.2% – above average, 24.5% – average. A

small part of students believe that the quality of education has decreased: 3.2% believe that it has become below average, and 1.3% – as low.

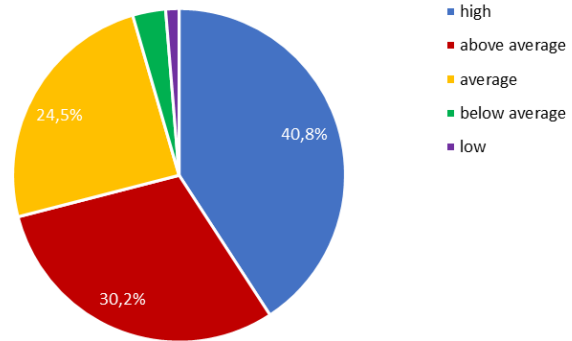


Figure 2 – The quality of distance education

The level of satisfaction with the education received at the university varies from 1-5: most of the respondents gave a rating of 4 (36.8%), more 34.3% – 5, 21.9% – 3. A small part of the students scored 2 (5.5%) and 1 (1.5%).

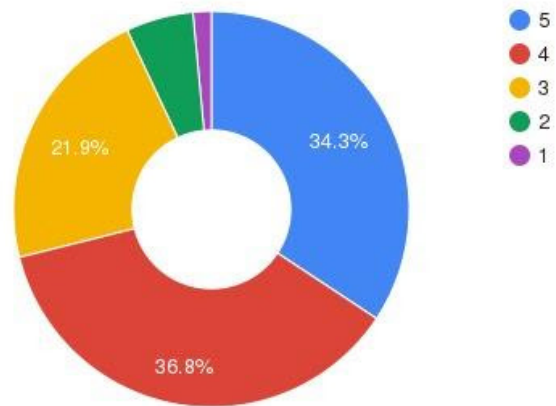


Figure 3 – The level of satisfaction with the education received

In conclusion, the respondents were given the opportunity to make their suggestions on improving the quality of higher education in Kazakhstan. Among the answers were the following suggestions: teachers should be more objective and treat students with greater understanding, more practical classes, listen to young people and be able to consult with students, make education accessible, add financial literacy as a mandatory subject, more relevant information in lectures, creatively present lecture ma-

materials, recommend more books to read, more available information resources on the Internet, increase teachers' salaries so that they have more motivation, open special interest clubs according to the specialty, etc.

Discussion

As we can see, the situation in Kazakhstan has not become an exception to the global trend. Despite the fact that, in general, students are quite loyal and sympathetic to emergency innovations at their universities, the overall assessment of the quality of education is at level 4. Compared to traditional, full-time education, the quality of distance education is worse. Kazakhstani students noted such negative factors as the lack of live communication and student life, unstable Internet and technical problems, lack of practical skills and direct communication with teachers, the appearance of health problems (back pain, visual impairment, physical fatigue from the computer), the inability to separate household chores from school, etc. More than half of Kazakhstani students (50.6%) want to return to universities for full-time study. The remaining half are ready to study either in a mixed version or remotely.

It should be noted that the decline in the quality of higher education around the world and in Kazakhstan has objective factors. If at first researchers associated them more with the low quality of the Internet, poor technical equipment of universities, lack of preparation for distance learning, etc., then later more essential problems related directly to the pedagogical process came to the fore (Begalinov, 2021). Among the many negative consequences of pandemic education, researchers highlight the lack of personal and live interaction. "Personal contact between the teacher and the student and the humanistic influence that this contact has on both sides plays a great role in the learning process. The lack of real personal interaction can lead to serious pedagogical losses, it hinders the process of education that accompanies most educational programs," says Kevin Williams, a scientist from the UK (Williams, 2020).

The environment in which students and teachers stay does not contribute to the quality of the educational process either. Scientists pay attention to such a phenomenon as "merged existence", that is, the performance of several social roles at the same time. For example, teachers conduct classes in the kitchen (Williams, 2020), and students-on buses or on the street.

The pandemic leads us to the emergence of a "new normality", which will become obvious immediately after the end of quarantine measures, scientists believe. And in this regard, the decline in the quality of education, in their opinion, will push the higher education sector to the necessary reforms at the moment:

- **Democratization of higher education and access to lifelong learning (Barnett, 2020).** It is becoming obvious that e-learning and blended learning are generating a new digital inequality. To overcome it, it is necessary to have open access to educational courses, research, as well as to the library database, archives, etc., the development of a network of open universities;

- **Overcoming the neoliberal agenda in education, which considers learning as a commodity.** The neoliberal educational concept, which has been failing since 2008 (since the beginning of a series of global financial crises), has significantly worsened during the pandemic (Apple, 2020). Students from different countries realize that their credit invested in education may not pay off at all with a debit (prestigious job, high earnings, etc.) (Adler, 2021). Modern universities prepare students for a certain profession or job, but they do not prepare them for life and overcoming difficulties (Gupta A., 2020). Therefore, during the pandemic, education especially shows its inefficiency. COVID-19 clearly showed: the university is not a place for the market and market relations. "Universities should protect their students from the total rhetoric of science and teach their communities to critically evaluate science and contextualize them in the discourse of love and empathy. We need universities to act as places of compassion, learning and, above all, wisdom; not as forms of government machinations and commercial interests focused on profit and votes" (Gibbs, 2020). The pandemic, according to a number of scientists, gives a chance to turn our universities not into a gathering place for "intellectual technicians", but into a place where "people of thought trained to think essentially, holistically, transdisciplinarily" will gather (Gibbs, 2020).

- **Strengthening of interdisciplinarity in the educational process and the inclusion of the discipline "impact on the planet".** "There have long been arguments in favor of the fact that global terror, pandemics, climate change and other problems require interdisciplinary approaches. Interdisciplinarity has become a buzzword in research, but in practice it has had little impact on research, and even more so on university curricula and teaching" (Gibbs, 2020).

- **Interdisciplinarity in the educational process means not only the inclusion of ethics and social justice in each curriculum, but also the impact that each specific discipline, type of activity has on humanity.** “Impact on the planet” should become an integral part of disciplinary knowledge, “R. Gorur believes,” not as a six-week course in the first semester, but as the fundamental basis of any discipline. The orientation of each discipline towards understanding how decisions in this area affect society, with case studies evaluating past contributions and effects, will justify and implement the abstract missions and visions that universities support” (Gorur, 2020).

- **Development of distance education with elements of interactivity and a mixed form of education.** The reforms in distance education imply, first of all, a departure from copying the classroom-based system online, and interactive instead. E-education opens up a lot of opportunities, including positioning students as knowledge producers and co-authors of knowledge communities. Scientists propose models in which both the teacher and the students are co-creators of general knowledge [Kalantzis, 2020]. Despite the disadvantages of online education, this is the education of the future. Not only the content is changing, but also the form of training. “This entails rethinking, and sometimes abandoning familiar elements of classroom learning that we could feel comfortable with; it includes new views, for example, on what “communication” means in the classroom and what it is intended for” (Burbules, 2020). Therefore, in the near future, the provision of high-quality distance education in pure or mixed form will become the prevailing trend in the development of the entire field of education.

- **Formation of new thinking based on criticism and creativity. A new education presupposes a new order of thinking.** There is no need for memorization, today the devices that we hold in our hands serve us as cognitive prostheses: they remember things for us. Applications also perform the simplest mental procedures for us. The fundamental goals of education are changing. The education of the future is a thorough navigation through the existing knowledge resources, the development of critical and creative thinking. Distance education provides an opportunity for the development of such thinking. Moreover, it allows you to study continuously, throughout your life (Grunt, 2020: 47).

Conclusion

Summarizing the above, it should be noted that the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected the

higher education system around the world, including in Kazakhstan. The students interviewed in the Republic of Kazakhstan noted such negative factors as the lack of live communication and student life, unstable Internet and technical problems, lack of practical skills, direct communication with teachers, the appearance of health problems, the inability to separate household chores from educational ones, etc.

At the same time, scientists tend to consider the pandemic as a positive phenomenon in the field of education rather than a negative one, since it pushes this conservative sphere to changes and reforms.

Tracing the research literature of recent times, it comes to an understanding that there will never be an education that existed before the pandemic. A new type of education is being formed, and it depends on the efforts of modern scientists and teachers what it will be, what its foundations, values and meaning will be. Returning to the past in the perspective of future assessment of the development of events is a regression, while adaptation, improvement, transition to the digital space and interactivity, in pure or mixed form, is the main trend of the future development of education.

“The coronavirus brought the powerful to their knees, and the world slowed down like no one else could. Our mind is still racing, desperately trying to find a way to return to “normality”, to sew the future with the past and not notice the gap. But the gap has already occurred. There can be nothing worse than a return to normality. Pandemics have always forced people to break with the past and imagine the world anew. The current pandemic is no exception. This is a portal, a gate that separates one world from another, the future. We can pass through them, dragging a dead weight of prejudice, hatred, greed, databases, empty ideas, poisoned rivers and dirty sky. And we can – light, without this stuff, ready to imagine another world and fight for it” (Roy, 2020).

The widespread decline in the quality of education, the drop in the level of student satisfaction with this education, the need to provide a mixed form of education (both online and offline), as well as many other factors force universities to look for new strategies and methods of teaching. Education is being revised from the very roots. In this regard, scientists hope that after the pandemic, the education sector will be able not only to regain quality, but also to significantly improve it, due to such processes as the democratization of education, the development of a network of open universities, interdisciplinarity, eth-

ics, interactivity and others. There is no doubt that the post-pandemic education will not be the same as before. Its future depends on the efforts of modern scientists and teachers.

«This work was carried out with the financial support of the Ministry of education and science of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the framework of the scientific project AP09058341».

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