

Rector of SPbPU and Leaders of Over 20 TOP Universities Discussed Mass Transition to Online Education

Pandemic topics can be treated differently. For example, Tsinghua University and UNESCO decided to consider quarantine as an occasion to reconsider the approach to higher education and initiated a Special Dialogue “Online education in the COVID-19 Response and Beyond”. On April 24, an online meeting of the leaders of more than 20 leading universities of the world took place. During the virtual meeting, the participants shared their experience of the mass transition to distance learning. Rector of SPbPU, Academician of the Russian Academy of Sciences Andrei RUDSKOI became the only representative from Russian universities. He took part in the discussion at the personal invitation of the President of Tsinghua University, Professor QIU Yong.



Vice President and Provost of Tsinghua University YANG Bin moderated the discussion. The President of Tsinghua University Professor QIU Yong and the Assistant-Director-General for Education of UNESCO Stefania GIANNINI made welcoming remarks. After that President of Yale University Peter SALOVEY, Vice Chancellor of University of Cambridge Stephen TOOPE, President of Imperial College London Alice GAST, Rector of Politecnico di Milano Ferruccio RESTA,

President of University of Toronto Meric GERTLER, President of Waseda University (Japan) Aiji TANAKA, Chancellor of Washington University in St. Louis Andrew MARTIN spoke.

The panelists also analyzed cases of online education implementation at the following universities: Australian National University, University of Buenos Aires, University of Chile, University of Exeter (UK), Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology, University of Malaya (Malaysia), University of Nairobi (Kenya), etc.



The discussion showed that in the transition to distance learning, most universities in the world act intuitively: there are practically no protocols for this emergency. The forced transition to the distance format makes the universities revise the principles and approaches in teaching - it is a mistake to teach the same material now in the same ways. Online education assumes other rules, etiquette, and dynamics. In this sense, the experience of Tsinghua University, which switched to online education in February and implements more than four thousand online courses (and even physical education, instructing students on health and physical fitness), has become the most interesting and revealing. Algorithms and understanding of further steps are at those universities that already successfully practice online education, first of all, SPbPU. A high level of internationalization also helps. SPbPU lecturers can join the international discussion on best practices. So, in late April - early May, professors and staff of SPbPU will take part in a series

of webinars organized by Tsinghua University and dedicated to best practices in creating online courses, ensuring the quality of education, using ICT in education, sustainable development of universities in the field of education, etc.



During his presentation, Rector of SPbPU Professor Andrei RUDSKOI recalled that a year ago he gave a lecture at Tsinghua University and talked about how the world is changing rapidly and how important it is to combine the efforts of leading universities - drivers of such changes. No one could have guessed then what awaits us just a year later. Professor RUDSKOI said that SPbPU took the necessary measures to support more than 34,000 students, including 7,500 foreigners, tried to create a comfortable atmosphere in dormitories in the period of isolation, regularly conducts disinfection of rooms. All students (both Russian and foreign) received an additional scholarship.

Since March, when the COVID-19 epidemic reached Russia, the Polytech completely switched to online education. "Since 2015, we have headed for the development of online education, so we were ready for the situation of urgent transition to the distance format. In our experience, I can say that regular webinars for teachers and students on the use of online platforms, modernization of information resources, attracting volunteers are something that should be paid special attention from the very first days" said Professor RUDSKOI. Moreover, today, taking into account the experience, Polytech is involved in organizing assistance to other Russian universities with a quick transition to distance learning.

In more detail, Rector RUDSKOI spoke about the two most striking cases of practice-oriented learning in a distance format, which is the most difficult and relevant for engineering universities, and which SPbPU successfully implements. This is the Synergy International University Network Project, aimed at real-time laboratory work by students to design intelligent robotic systems and process control with a large amount of data, and an online course and distance laboratory workshop on additive technologies based on SPbPU “Computer Engineering Center”.



“The situation in which the whole world is now will lead to constant changes. But only those who are able to change, have the future” said Professor RUDSKOI. In his opinion, the education system is constantly transforming, and a pandemic will become a catalyst for many changes. Various scenarios of the digital transformation of education, a possible symbiosis of full-time and distance formats, and the development of network partnerships are already being developed. “And we will be ready for them if we join forces now. But our main duty as leaders of leading world universities in this difficult period is, first of all, to take care of the health and well-being of our students and staff” concluded Professor RUDSKOI.

In the course of summing up and evaluating the next steps, the participants of the discussion agreed that distance learning at universities brings not only challenges but also new opportunities.

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