

# Distance Education and Mega-Universities

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## Abstract<sup>1</sup>

The practice of Russia's mega-university – Modern University for the Humanities (MUH) – numbering 160 000 students from all regions of Russia, and also from the CIS countries, Bulgaria, Greece etc., illustrates the new opportunities and challenges of distance education on an international scale.

## 1. Introduction

The traditional system of higher education in the near future will not be able to meet the huge and ever-increasing demand for higher education in the developing countries, especially in the countries of Asia. In these circumstances, the role of mega-universities in the development of international education system greatly increases.

The practice of Russia's mega-university - Modern University for the Humanities (MUH, Moscow) illustrates the new opportunities and challenges of distance education on an international scale, promotes cross-border education. MUH is included in the Guinness Book of Records as the largest educational network covering 14 % of a land of a planet.

In 2005 Modern University for the Humanities became a founding member of a global network of mega-universities GMUNET.

## 2. Mega-universities - a new type of higher education institutions: mission and main features

At the turn of the century begins a new stage in the development of higher education associated with the emergence and rapid growth of mega-universities - a special category of higher education institutions, which, according to John Daniel, an internationally known researcher in the field of distance education, "are the best examples of global learning" [1].

The introduction of this new category of higher education John S. Daniel [2] substantiates by the influence of the scale factor to the problems faced by the distance-

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teaching university. The formal criterion of a mega-university is the number of students no less than 100,000 simultaneously enrolled in degree-level programmes. However, the concept is much broader, it includes a number of criteria, of which the main ones are:

- distance education technologies based on ICT
- accessibility and openness of education
- guarantee of high quality education, while targeting mass education
- effective support for students.

According to the results of expert interviews and questionnaires of representatives of various mega-universities and the corresponding analysis of university websites [3], strategies for all mega-universities are focused on a common goal - increasing the number of students. To achieve this objective, it is necessary to develop training technologies, the most effective in terms of geographical coverage and the perception of students.

To the above mentioned strategy fully responds the mission and purpose of the Modern University for the Humanities (MUH): education at the place of residence. [4]. Based on the analysis of practical experience of this university its leaders proposed the definition of a *distributed university*, which includes the essential criteria for belonging to mega-universities. According to this definition the distributed university is understood as a higher educational institution which consists of a basic scientific and administrative nucleus and a network of training educational centers, united by flexible system of delivery of educational resources to the location of their customers by using modern information-communication technologies (ICT) [5].

## 3. Mega-university as an effective way of development of distance-teaching education

Why the mega-universities to the greatest degree characterize a level of development of distance education system in the country? Is there a more natural way to further expansion of the sector of distance learning, which in a given scale is used in almost any large university? However, for anybody it's not a secret that in the most prestigious universities with traditional technology of education the quality of distance-teaching education does not always correspond to the level of prestigious



university. This long-existing technology of correspondent education is often characterized by poor quality of education, poor educational materials and minimal student support. "We can not achieve the quality of distance education by upgrading traditional technologies only" – such is the conviction of the founder of Russia's mega-university Michael Karpenko.

That's mega-universities as a special category of distance-teaching schools of the distributed formation, initially aimed at high-quality mass education, determine the degree of development of distance education in the world countries.

The sequence of creation of such university of a new type M. P. Karpenko defines as follows: new technology of training → new didactics of training → new material embodiments of the university (the distributed formation) [6].

#### 4. Mega-universities of the world - facts and figures

Data on the number of students of mega-universities are gathered from three sources:

- "Perspectives on distance education: lifelong learning and distance higher education"/Ed.by Christopher McIntosh. 2005, UNESCO/COL. It is the most authoritative source in which the data about 9 mega-universities, received directly from presidents or vice-presidents is cited.
- Mega-universities' sites. It would seem, this source proceeding directly from the university, should be the core. However, many sites indicate the total number of students mastering the different types of programs, including short courses. These sites on the number of students for three years (2005–2007) changed little (data from 2005 are given in [7, 8]).
- Wikipedia – Encyclopedia, published in the Internet. For a number of mega-universities is the only source of information on the number of students.

##### Total in the world:

24 mega-universities in 17 countries; more than 10 million of students of mega-universities (over 7% of the global number of students – fig.1), including:

- 8 largest mega-universities in 7 countries of the developing world with the number of students more than 400 thousand in each – a total 7.3 million;
- 16 mega-universities with the number of students from 100 to 400 thousand in each – a total 2,8 million; located in 13 countries, including in 8 industrialized countries.

Leading positions in the development of distance education belong to the developing countries (over 85% of all mega-universities' students – fig.2). There is an

obvious special role of China and India in the development of mega-universities (over 50% of mega-university students of the world) – fig.3.

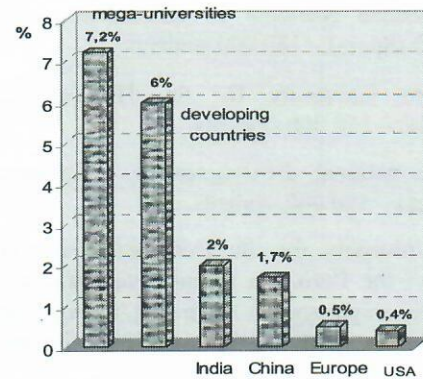


Fig. 1. Share of mega-university students in total number of students in the world.

As India and China are the world's leaders on the total number of students in tertiary education [9], models of learning selected by them, obviously, will determine the economic and technological changes in higher education globally.

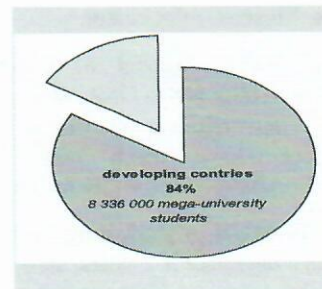


Fig.2. The role of developing countries in mega-universities

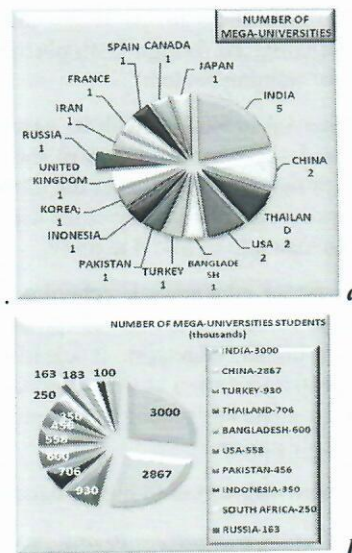


Fig. 3. Distribution by countries: a – number of mega-universities, b – number of mega-universities' students



*Mega-universities of Europe:*

- The Open University, UKOU (United Kingdom) – 180 000 students,
- Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia, UNED (Spain) – 180 000 students,
- Modern University for the Humanities, MUH (Russia) – 160 000 students,
- Centre national d'enseignement a distance, CNED (France) – 120 000 students.

Modern University for the Humanities (Russia) – the youngest of the European mega-universities (founded in 1992) – has high growth rates and a large number of training centers (5-th in the world by the number of centers).

**5. Russian mega-university – Modern University for the Humanities: efficiency indicators**

Educational technology of MUH is based on the use of one- and two-way digital satellite communications, providing access to learning materials from any computer training place and quality training on a single technology, developed at the Moscow pilot center.

At the Second World Summit of mega-universities (Global Mega-University Net – GMUNET), held in 2005 in New Delhi, 17 universities numbering no less than 100 thousand students have taken part. Russia was represented by the Modern University for the Humanities.

The experience of MUH, a graduating bachelor's for 15 years and master's degrees for 8 years, shows the benefits of education technology, originally aimed at maintenance of availability to quality higher education accessible to all social strata, and regardless of where they live.

Access to training centers in MUH are more than 800 settlements, including 10 foreign (5-th place in the world in the number of training centers).

The results achieved in Russia (with its vast territory and clearly expressed social stratification of the population), show the role of mega-universities in the global. Here are details on the prospects of ensuring equal access to higher education as an example of MUH activity.

The effectiveness of educational technology of Russia's mega-university in the decision of problems of the accessibility of higher education is clearly evident in three main aspects: education at the residence, increasing egalitarianism of students, access to higher education of socially vulnerable groups.

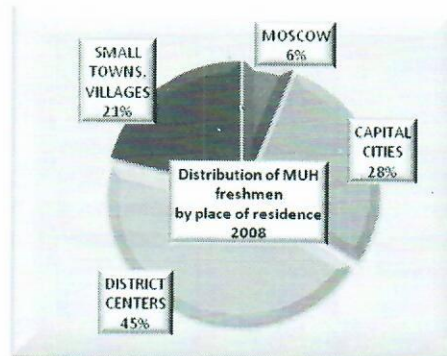
Examples of improving access to higher education:

*1) Education of capital quality – to any place of student residence*

In Moscow, where there are more than 40% of Russian universities, according to the survey in 2004, only 30% of

students come from other localities. Of these people from the village (the place of birth) – 4%, from the settlements with a population of less than 20 thousand people – 6%.

Ensuring the education of capital quality directly to the student residence is one of the main objectives of MUH. According to surveys 2004-2008, every fifth freshman of MUH resides in the village, small town or urban settlement – fig.4.



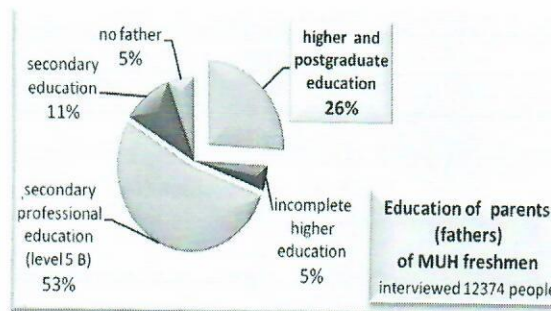
**Fig.4. Distribution of MUH freshmen by place of residence.**

**2) Social base of students**

In 2000, according to research of the Institute of Sociology, Russian Academy of Sciences, in Russia on average more than 50% of students had fathers with higher education. This is a very high percentage, indicative of the elitism of the student population.

This is especially true for Moscow, where, according to 2004, 66% of students had fathers with higher and postgraduate education (levels 5A and 6).

Features of the mega-university can overcome the caste system of higher education. In 2002 – 2008 the percentage of MUH students having fathers with higher and postgraduate education was less than 28 % – fig.5.



**Fig. 5. Education of parents (fathers) of MUH freshmen**

As to the value of the Educational Equity Index in higher education Russia in 2002/2003 occupied, in our estimation, 13-14 place among 14 countries – the United States and leading European countries, ranked by Canadian researchers A. Usher and A. Cervenan [10].



Providing for the whole country the structure of student population, typical of MUH, would mean a sharp jump in the ranking on Educational Equity Index in higher education (increase of the index from 38 to 65 – 2nd place after the Netherlands) – fig.6.

In the ranking on the accessibility of higher education, including besides Educational Equity Index (weight factor of 40%) three more indicators, Russia, ceteris paribus, would be moved from 12 to 7-th place at the expense of reducing the elitism of students – fig.7

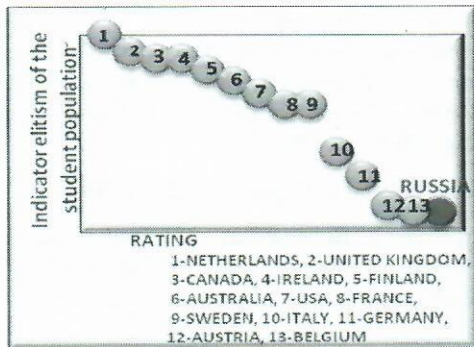


Fig. 6. Indicator elitism of the student population

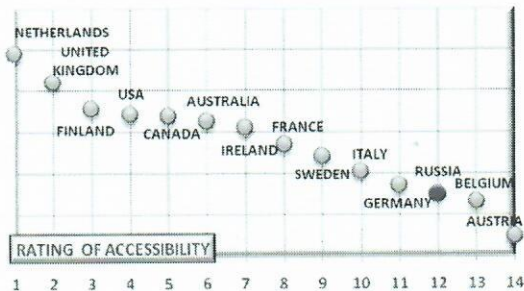


Fig. 7. Rating of accessibility.

3) Access to higher education of socially vulnerable groups

Training of social groups with difficult access to higher education:

|                             |                                      |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| persons with disabilities   | about 200 people from remote regions |
| prisoners                   | about 2000 people                    |
| military and their families | about 3000 people                    |

Access to education for citizens who are in extreme conditions, particularly in “hot spots” is one of the important components of MUH activities, which has political significance. Training centers in Chechnya did not stop working even in the most difficult years.

4) Long life learning

Along with the main activity (training for bachelor’s and master’s degrees – more than 160,000 students, nearly

300,000 graduates) there are continuing education courses for the specialists of state bodies.

Examples of improvement of professional skills under state orders:

| Partners  | Implementation   |
|---|--|
| <i>System of the centralized simultaneous testing of experts in all territory of Russia</i> |  |
| Ministry of Finance of Russia   | have passed test more than 28 thousand applicants for the certificate of the auditor   |
| <i>Courses of improvement of professional skill</i>   |  |
| Ministry of Finance of Russia   | Upgraded their qualification more than 700 auditors (since 2004)   |
| Federal Customs Service   | Upgraded their qualification 6851 state employees of customs bodies (eight programs)   |
| Pension fund of Russia  | Upgraded their qualification:<br>- under contract of 2007 - 2151 chiefs of departments;<br>- under contract of 2008 - 8613 experts of territorial bodies.<br>- In 2009 a contract for the upgrading of qualification of more than 7000 specialists of the territorial authorities was concluded          |
| <i>The All-Russia television conferences and seminars</i>                                   |  |
| Russian academy of State Administration;<br>Russian institute of the suffrage               | In 2005-2006 there were organized 6 conferences and seminars for municipal officials with the participation of leading experts of the State Duma, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Regional Development, Ministry of Health and Social Development. More than 20000 persons attended the teleconferences |

## Conclusions

1. Distance education which became evident reality in the modern world, will develop most rapidly, because only through economic and technological advantages of this model the huge demand for higher education expected in developing countries in the near future can be satisfied.
2. The optimum way of development of distance education is the creation and growth of mega-universities – large distributed universities with distance learning ICT-based technology, with a guarantee of quality teaching and effective support of students.
3. For today there are 24 mega-universities in 17 countries; more than 10 million of students of mega-universities (over 7% of the global number of students).
4. Leading positions in the development of distance education belong to the developing countries (over 85% of all mega-universities’ students). There is an obvious special role of China and India in the

development of mega-universities (over 50% of mega-university students of the world).

5. The results achieved in Russia (with its vast territory and clearly expressed social stratification of the population), show the role of mega-universities in the global. The effectiveness of educational technology of Russia's mega-university in solving the problems of the accessibility of higher education is clearly evident in three main aspects: education at the residence, increasing egalitarianism of students, access to higher education of socially vulnerable groups.

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