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ADVOCATING FOR THE DEVIL, OR THE POSITIVE SOCIAL EFFECTS OF THE FORCED TRANSITION TO DISTANCE LEARNING FORMAT IN UKRAINIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

This article explores the potential and actual positive social effects of the forced transition to distance learning in Ukrainian higher education institutions, particularly those in frontline regions during 2022–2024. While the transition is often viewed negatively, this study aims to present the other side, focusing on the benefits at three levels: everyday life of participants, institutional, and societal. This study is part of the project "Social Effects and Challenges of Distance Learning in the Higher Education of Ukraine: from COVID-19 to the War", which is implemented by the one of the authors within the framework of "Cambridge – NRFU 2022. Individual research (developments) grants for researchers in Ukraine (supported by the University of Cambridge, UK)". Using data from comprehensive research, including desk research, expert interviews, focus groups with students and graduates, and a quantitative online survey of students, the article reveals both short-term and long-term benefits of transition to distance format of education. At the individual level, distance learning saves time, enhances flexibility for combining study and work, and fosters self-discipline. At the institutional level, it promotes the development of digital skills, inclusivity, and international collaboration, etc. At the societal level, it promotes decentralization, equal access to education, and the transformation of labor markets. Although limitations such as technical issues and potential biases are acknowledged, the study argues that distance education provides some opportunities for progressive change in Ukrainian higher education. However, even after a detailed analysis of the positive effects, the authors of the article remain skeptical about the distance format of higher education.

Keywords: distance education, distance learning, higher education, forced transition to distance format, education during the war, social effects of education, social transformations, Ukraine.

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АДВОКАТУЮЧИ ДИЯВОЛА, АБО ПОЗИТИВНІ СОЦІАЛЬНІ ЕФЕКТИ ВИМУШЕНОГО ПЕРЕХОДУ ДО ДИСТАНЦІЙНОГО ФОРМАТУ НАВЧАННЯ В УКРАЇНСЬКІЙ ВИЩІЙ ШКОЛІ

У статті досліджено потенційні та реальні позитивні соціальні ефекти вимушеного переходу на дистанційне навчання українських закладів вищої освіти, зокрема у прифронтових регіонах протягом 2022–2024 рр. Хоча перехід часто сприймають негативно, це дослідження має на меті представити інший бік, зосереджуючись на перевагах такого переходу на трьох рівнях: повсякденному житті учасників, інституційному та суспільному. Дослідження є частиною проєкту "Соціальні ефекти та виклики дистанційного навчання у вищій школі України: від COVID-19 до війни", який реалізує один з авторів у рамках "Кембридж – НФДУ 2022. Індивідуальні гранти на проведення досліджень (розробок) для українських вчених (за підтримки Кембриджського університету, Велика Британія)". Використовуючи дані комплексного дослідження, яке включає кабінетне дослідження, експертні інтерв'ю, фокус-групи зі студентами та випускниками, а також кількісне онлайн-опитування студентів, стаття розкриває як короткострокові, так і довгострокові переваги переходу на дистанційний формат навчання. На повсякденному рівні дистанційне навчання економить час, дає додаткові можливості для поєднання навчання та роботи, а також сприяє самодисципліні. На інституційному рівні воно сприяє розвитку цифрових навичок, інклюзивності та міжнародній співпраці тощо. На соцієтальному рівні вона сприяє децентралізації, рівному доступу до освіти та трансформації ринків праці. Хоча визнаються такі обмеження, як технічні проблеми та потенційні упередження, у дослідженні стверджується, що дистанційна освіта надає деякі можливості для прогресивних змін у вищій освіті України. Проте навіть після детального аналізу позитивних ефектів автори статті залишаються скептичними щодо дистанційного формату вищої освіти.

Ключові слова: *дистанційна освіта, дистанційне навчання, вища освіта, примусовий перехід до дистанційного формату, освіта під час війни, соціальні ефекти освіти, соціальні трансформації, Україна.*

> *We don't need no education*
> *We don't need no thought control*
> *No dark sarcasm in the classroom*
> *Teacher, leave them kids alone*
> *— George Roger Waters, Pink Floyd, "Another Brick in the Wall"*

As if it were a self-evident truth and part of the common sense of those who provide higher education services, as well as of researchers on this topic, is the rather unambiguous interpretation of the forced transition to the distance format exclusively in a negative and dysfunctional perspective. We largely agree with this position, because we provide educational services and research the topic of education, and in principle we have quite

conservative views on this issue. Nevertheless, both from the point of view of the aspiration to scientific knowledge objectivity, and logical completeness, and a simple sense of contradiction to the mainstream, it will be appropriate to consider the opposite side – positive, progressive and socio-functional effects of the current situation in the Ukrainian field of higher education. We propose to deal with the potential and real consequences of the forced distance learning format at universities in the frontline regions of Ukraine at three main levels: I) *the level of everyday life of the participants of the educational process*; II) *the level of the institution / field of higher education*; III) *the societal level*. The other cut is temporal, namely comparing *short-term positive effects* (which may already be observed now) and *long-term positive effects* (which are more or less likely to be realized in the foreseeable future).

Accordingly, the **purpose** of this article is to determine the real and potential positive social effects of the forced transition to the distance learning format in frontline higher education institutions of Ukraine in the period 2022–2024. This study is part of the project "Social Effects and Challenges of Distance Learning in the Higher Education of Ukraine: from COVID-19 to the War", which is implemented by the one of the authors within the framework of "Cambridge – NRFU 2022. Individual research (developments) grants for researchers in Ukraine (supported by the University of Cambridge, UK)". Therefore, we plan to pay special attention not so much to the organizational or pedagogical aspects of the situation but to the social context and social consequences.

Theoretical lens. In general terms, the research project is theoretically and methodologically based on a combination of: a) critical pedagogy of P. Freire [1], which sees education as the necessary condition on the road to 'conscientização' – conscientization (or critical consciousness); b) critical theory in the interpretation of H. Marcuse [2], E. Fromm [3], G. Agamben [4] – here education is, on the one hand, a specific industry of cultural production and, on the other hand, an apparatus for the realization of state policy and ideology; c) and critical sociology of education [5; 6], which considers processes that are heterogeneous in relation to education, that threaten both the institution itself and will have consequences at the societal level. In analyzing the Ukrainian higher education industry, we largely agree with L. Sokuryanska and A. Golikov [7], who tend to notice a number of ambiguous trends: 1) decrease in intellectual and communicative efforts; 2) decrease in involvement in the educational process; 3) commodification of education; 4) reification of the quality of education; 5) unification of educational processes; 6) (neo)liberalization and privatization of the educational sphere; 7) attention to economy and commercialization of the educational process, etc. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this publication, we slightly depart from this thrice-critical optics in the name of dialectics – we are going to probe the apologetic side of the coin. And in this, we shall not hesitate to use neither structural functionalism, nor technological determinism, nor communication theory, nor any other paradigm or concept that is usually alien to us.

Empirical basis. The article is based on the data of a comprehensive authors' research, which is conducted in 2023–2024 and includes:

1. Desk research stage (analysis of publications on the topic of distance learning in higher education in Ukraine; an array of more than 100 articles, monographs and conference

papers was processed, which made it possible to determine the main projections of the situation in the theoretical dimension and to formulate working hypotheses). The main results of the scientific publication analysis are presented in our previous paper [8], so in this article *we would not pay additional attention to the literature review*.

2. Qualitative research stage – 33 expert interviews with lecturers and administration of universities in Ukraine; 6 FGDs with students and graduates of Ukrainian universities who study or studied in a distance learning format. This made it possible to determine and characterize the current relationship between distance learning practices and the above social processes. In addition, the qualitative stage of the study made it possible to develop the tools for the next stage as accurately and correctly as possible.

3. Quantitative research stage – online questionnaire survey (CAWI) of students of Ukrainian universities studying in a distance learning format (N = 863). Despite the rather large sample size, this survey cannot be considered fully representative. It has some systemic biases: the survey was conducted online, so the sample was less likely to include students with technical problems with access to the Internet; the sample was less likely to include students with weak contact with the university; there may be a bias in the sample because the data were not weighted by areas of study and by different universities. Nevertheless, this data array still made it possible to determine the structural links between distance learning practices and the social processes mentioned above, and to test the formulated hypotheses using statistical measurements.

Data Analysis. Since mass education is one of the foundations for (post)modern society, it has embodiments at different levels of sociality. First, it is service and functional in terms of reproduction of social order and cultural capital of society, i.e. it has a direct effect at the macro (societal) level. Second, it has long been a separate, distinct and relatively autonomous sphere of activity – it can be labeled as an industry, an institution, a field, a subsystem, a meso-level structure, and much more. Thirdly, for a significant part of the society (actually, the participants of the educational process – students, educators, university administrators, etc.) it is in fact the main activity, i.e. it determines their actions at the micro-level – their everyday life. Allowing ourselves to neglect the mega-level (since the object of the study is the higher education system of Ukraine, not the world), let us begin the analysis with the latter one.

I. The Level of Everyday Life of the Participants of the Educational Process. The *short-term* benefits of moving to distance learning format are similar for both those who provide educational services and those who receive them, and the benefits are obvious:

1.1. Saving time resources, which in the usual format were spent on travel to and from the place of study/work; this frees up additional time for other activities (personal life, recreation, hobbies, etc.), simplifies the organization of the day, and increases the efficiency of time use. Transportation costs are also reduced. Almost all respondents systematically mentioned this advantage.

1.2. Additional opportunities to combine study and work (or teaching with other work). The quantitative data are unambiguous: 83% of surveyed students claim that the distance format is more convenient from this point of view. The qualitative data also show the same:

both experts and students say that it is much easier to combine study and work, if only because it is possible to attend online lectures directly from the workplace.

1.3. Reducing student workload, simplifying the learning process, and conserving more energy and effort. And while the majority of students surveyed (61%) say that the workload has remained about the same in the online and offline format, there are still more students who believe that the workload is higher in the face-to-face format (25%) than those who believe that the workload is higher in the distance format (14%). Qualitative data also suggests that the threshold for entry into the educational process is much lower in the distance format, meaning that less able students can also be successful in their studies. Yes, this is rather a dysfunction of the educational institution, but at the level of everyday life of the students themselves, it is an unambiguous advantage. It is also an opportunity to independently set priorities, concentrate attention and efforts on the more important classes according to their own assessments and to save efforts on less important ones: *"Those subjects that are read just for show, I calmly listen to as a background while washing dishes or walking the dog; and lectures on the main subjects, of course, I master with a pen in hand, making notes, listening to them several times"* (4th year student, Psychology)[1].

1.4. If we talk about *long-term* positive effects, it is rather difficult to fix them at the everyday level (because of the very routine and inert nature of everyday life). Nevertheless, we emphasize one probable advantage: the distance format of work forces all participants of the educational process to shift to the internal locus of control, to develop self-discipline, personal time management. If the distance format of work is used in the educational process, the participants of the educational process will be forced to develop self-discipline and personal time management. And if the classical format of education was based to a greater extent on external control and coercion, then in the distance format a kind of compulsory emancipation occurs: "*It may not sound very politically correct, but natural selection is taking place – both of students and, most importantly, of educators. Those who can manage their own time, who can force themselves to work without a boss's stick, who do not need an overseer, they continue to work. And it is even easier for them, they want independence, and this is how they get it. But if you constantly need someone to wipe your nose, to tell you what, when and how to do – you will not be able to resist, and the system will get rid of you. It is cruel, but it is a business approach*" (Head of Department, 13 years of experience, Economics).

II. The Level of the Institution / Field of Higher Education.

2.1. Forced emergency and real professional development of educators. We have disclosed this point as long-term at the everyday level, but it is also *short-term* and *long-term* at the institutional level. Separately, we note that both educators and students had to master new communication tools (Zoom, Google Meet, Google Classroom, Moodle, YouTube, electronic document management, etc.) in the *short term*, expand their arsenal of social networks ("*Finally, all professors have installed Telegram, now neither emails nor any*

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[1] Here and below we are going to quote the most prominent quotes of students and experts, anonymizing them. The year of education and field of education for students and the position, experience and field of teaching for experts are given in parentheses.

Vibers are needed", – 3rd year student, Physics). At the same time, the need to develop specific digital skills became relevant, namely working with electronic documents and creating content (screen recording, audio processing, video shooting and editing, etc.), the development of which is certainly an advantage in the long term.

2.2. Simplified access to information, digitalization of materials. This had a special boost during the period of asynchronous learning, when teachers were forced to create digital content replacing traditional lectures: presentations, audio and video recordings of lectures, screensavers, text notes, etc. This creates a base of educational content, that in the *short term* allows students to independently choose the time and pace of learning, and in the *long term* (subject to the systematization of these educational content bases) – the ability to study without being tied to the personality of the educator. This advantage was emphasized mainly by university administrators and professors, but also by some students.

2.3. Stimulates the development of new progressive work formats that are not in demand in the offline format – collaborative work with documents and files online, active Internet surfing and searching, screen casting, etc.:"*In order not to turn my classes into a talking head (and I actively demanded the same from my colleagues), there are opportunities for such activity that cannot be held in the classroom. For example, group work on a presentation during a seminar: this experience, when the teacher sees how a joint product is born. Students solve the issue of communication in difficult moments of limitation, and one, two, three times – and they no longer feel that they are sitting at the computer at home, they are already in constant contact, have established a work process*" (Vice-Rector, 25 years of experience).

2.4. It is easier to achieve inclusivity, because it is simpler to adapt education to the individual needs of students. It is no secret that Ukrainian universities and cities in general have enough problems with spatial barriers, which significantly complicate the educational process of people with musculoskeletal disorders; also, the classic offline format of education is poorly suited for people with hearing and vision impairments. The online format provides more opportunities to create an inclusive barrier-free educational space, which will be especially relevant in the context of "traces of war", when the number of people with disabilities due to injuries is constantly growing. Moreover, the institute of higher education must consider this in its further development: "*Before the war, our university came close to creating an inclusive educational space, but this is really easier to achieve in a distance format*" (Vice-Rector, 25 years of experience).

2.5. Increased opportunities of getting higher education as an adult / on maternity leave. It is no secret that it is typical for Ukraine to get higher education right after school, and this is not always an independent, well-founded, conscious decision; a number of imperfections of the educational institution are also connected with this (low motivation for learning, low preparedness, formalism, etc.). The distance learning format, which, as mentioned above, provides greater opportunities to combine study with work and other activities, opens up the new ways for invitation adult, interested and prepared students: "*We have a tradition that students are yesterday's schoolchildren who go to university on a whim or at the behest of their parents. In the West, for example, the average age of a student is several years older, it is normal to still be studying at the age of 25. It is also normal when you already have 10*

years of work experience and decide that you need higher education. And interested adults who understand their needs come to university. This is quite productive, and it seems to me that this is becoming more and more common. The online format contributes to this" (Professor, 22 years of experience, Philosophy).

2.6. The possibility of creating transnational educational platforms, implementing joint international courses and training programs. Already now, in the *short term*, there are sufficient opportunities for productive cooperation with international partners (holding joint events in a mixed format, inviting foreign lecturers and conducting classes for foreign students by local lecturers, providing international practice bases, etc.). In addition, the digital base of educational content, which we discussed in one of the previous points, in the *long term* can develop into new international collaborations in the global educational market: "*We have a great case of Wildau-Kharkiv IT Bridge, when professors from Kharkiv universities read online courses for both Ukrainian and German students. This is a trial run for one semester, an experiment, but all parties were very pleased with the work done. We are also trying to find new areas of cooperation, in particular, to develop joint educational programs, invite foreign speakers, look for practice bases, etc.*" (Lecturer, 3 years of experience, Computer Sciences).

2.7. Potential for the development of pedagogy of cooperation. Due to forced distancing, the structure of relations between students and educators is currently undergoing a transformation, and outdated approaches based on an educational hierarchy now have purely procedural limitations. This provides potential in the *long term* for building progressive models of relationships, some of which are based on cooperation: "*Now the teacher and the student are on equal positions, and the student should not just wait for guidance from the mentor, but search, ask, be interested. The teacher is forced to constantly meet halfway. This is no longer a 'master – padawan' format; this is collaboration between equal parties*" (Associate Professor, 10 years of experience, Mathematics).

2.8. Simplification of the quality control process for education. University administrations have a simpler and more transparent way to check whether a lecture was held, whether the class was conducted well, whether students were present, etc. If in the offline format this was associated with some organizational difficulties (ranging from the banal need for physical presence to the fact that the visible presence of the management in the auditorium automatically affects what and how it happens; such checks were purely formal), then in the online format the inspector can connect incognito via a link, thereby organizing higher-quality control: "*We have been collecting all the links of all the classes for a long time, and I or the heads of departments can connect via them, check whether the class is held according to schedule, whether the students have come, how professionally the educator is working. The same goes for exams. And the same applies, for example, to parents who are happy to check what they are paying money for at universities to educate their children, and then call me and complain*" (Dean, 21 years of experience).

2.9. Additional tools in the fight against corruption, maintaining the objectivity of educators. Continuing with the previous point, this also has positive effects in terms of minimizing the risks of direct corruption in the educational process. The development of electronic document management technologies (e.g., electronic assessment sheet), which is

associated with the transition to an online format, minimizing live contacts between potential participants in corrupt connections, etc. – this can have a positive effect in terms of preventing corrupt activities: "*Now a student simply will not carry money for a test in an envelope. Yes, there may be a transaction to a card, but no one will risk it, it is very easy to check. Unless they can use cryptocurrency [laughs], but let them try*" (Senior Lecturer, 6 years of experience, Chemistry). Separately, we also note that the lack of live contacts between educators and students also contributes to objectivity in assigning grades, the influence of the personal factor is minimized: "*Now for a teacher, students are a set of papers and lines in a table. They won't increase your score for pretty eyes*" (Associate Professor, 20 years of experience, Political Science).

2.10. Awareness of the shortage of offline education, which increases the interest of participants and the efficiency of work during limited live meetings: "*If earlier you couldn't get students into the classroom, now they themselves ask for live classes to be organized at every opportunity, at least in a mixed format. They come there motivated and prepared*" (Head of Department, 8 years of experience, Sociology). Some experts also note a rather unusual effect, that those specialties and education that cannot be obtained entirely online (for example, vocational education) may begin to be valued in society more than before.

III. Societal Level.

3.1. Corresponding transformation of the labor market. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown, and the protracted distance learning format has confirmed, that for a significant part of professions ("office work") it is possible to work remotely without loss of efficiency and productivity. This format, of course, has many disadvantages, but the ability to connect to the work process without being tied to the workplace – from home, from travel, from public places, etc. – is a kind of liberation, and we continue to observe such transformation: "*After four years, Sharp-eyed Falcon [employer] noticed that it was not necessary to keep everyone in the office from nine to eighteen, and the distance learning format, among other things, helped to ensure that*" (Head of Department, 8 years of experience, Sociology). Related to this is the fact that in the *long term* it is possible to reduce what David Graeber called bullshitting jobs [9] – activities that are not so much aimed at achieving a result, but at occupying the working time of an office worker: endless meetings, gatherings, discussions, etc. In this regard, there is potential to reduce the exploitation of workers' time and the exploitation of human by human in general.

3.2. Revision of the concept of a city with a business center towards decentralized cities. Universities in such cities are either part of the business center or are located in corresponding student towns and campuses that combine educational buildings and dormitories. In the conditions of mass distance education, there is no need to maintain such a system; it can be built (especially in the conditions of post-war reconstruction) based on more egalitarian and decentralized models of urban planning [10–12]. At the same time, the intensity of daily pendulum migration of the population decreases, the load on the transportation infrastructure during rush hours decreases. The interviewees did not directly state this thesis, but implied it.

3.3. De-hierarchization and development of social networks, in terms, e.g., of Mark Granovetter [13]. That is, due to the de-hierarchization of the higher education system, a

larger-scale effect is quite possible – de-hierarchization of the social structure, the development of egalitarian social networks: "*If in a large auditorium the student is pressured by the authority of the walls and is shy to approach the educator, it is much easier to write online and strike up a business conversation*" (Lecturer, 3 years of experience, Computer Sciences). It is quite difficult to talk about this in terms of probability, however, as a reasonable hypothesis of the *long-term* effects of distance education, this can be conceptualized although this requires detailed argumentation, for which there is neither place nor time now.

3.4. Reduction of the educational urban-rural cleavage. We discussed the cleavages in 'Ukrainian society' in more detail, but using the example of electoral processes, in one of our previous publications [14]. Returning to the topic of education, since the vast majority of higher education institutions are inextricably linked with large cities (trivially, they are physically located there), residents of rural areas have had and still have obviously unequal opportunities to obtain higher education – it is much more difficult for them to study than for students from these cities, since along with the educational process they have to adapt to life in new conditions. The distance learning format allows rural residents to obtain an education without having to change their place of residence and everyday life, which somewhat equalizes their life chances with urban residents. In addition, this can stop the process of 'brain drain' from the village to the city, contribute to the fact that rural residents who have received higher education will continue to live and work there: "*The village has been dying out for several decades; there are many reasons for this, including higher education. The most successful and promising young people go to study in the city, get used to city life and stay in the cities. Only a few return to villages. Now, when you can study remotely and continue to live in the village, and after studying, stay there and use your knowledge for the benefit of your native village*" (Associate Professor, 19 years of experience, History).

3.5. Support for interregional and international cultural ties: "*The very possibility of studying, for example, at Kharkiv University, while living in Zakarpattia or even in another country, contributes to the establishment and maintenance of cultural and professional networks between residents of different regions and countries*" (Associate Professor, 12 years of experience, Law). Moreover, even if these are weak connections, we are well aware of the strength of weak ties [15].

3.6. Overcoming the negative features of group dynamics. Constant presence in a group is a necessary condition for successful socialization (including professional), but it also carries a number of risks – conflicts, bullying, physical violence, etc. Yes, this is more typical for the teenage environment, and the same bullying is possible in cyberspace, but everything that concerns the immediate negative physical consequences of group dynamics in a distance format is minimized. This thesis has no direct empirical support but follows naturally from the theoretical understanding of the learning process. On the other hand (like any other thesis), it has its opposite – the hypothetical development of cyberbullying and other unpleasant online practices.

3.7. Reduction of epidemic risks. Let's not forget how the global forced transition to distance learning began, because even during the war, COVID-19 has not gone away [16], just like other potential pathogens of epidemics and pandemics: "*And, of course, the remote*

format should help prevent pandemics. Or then what was it all for?" (Head of Department, 8 years of experience, Sociology).

Conclusions. From the point of view of the stated theoretical and methodological basis, it would certainly be much more promising and fruitful to analyze the 'dysfunctional' aspects of distance education both in its forced and in its voluntary embodiment. In response to each of the above-mentioned positive social effects of distance higher education, we constantly wanted to write several counterarguments and counter-theses revealing the negative nature (we have already successfully done this in a yet unpublished article, which, by the way, is about three times larger than this one). Nevertheless, we consider this dialectical exercise necessary: indeed, even considering the forced and inevitable nature of such a transition, the distance learning format itself is one of the possible ones both in everyday and institutional terms. Such a transition has really become a stimulus for development for participants in the educational process in terms of mastering new digital tools and technologies, which is undoubtedly a breakthrough. The same applies, for example, to the revision of empty formal events that are more a tribute to tradition and the inertia of the system than meaningful – countless meetings, sessions, 'public discussions', formal votes, etc.; in the distance format, there are enough ways and tools to save time and energy from these social rudiments and cultural artifacts. These and other impulses of distance education towards progress should be noted.

Moreover, although the aforementioned literature review [8] showed that the Ukrainian sociological discourse is filled with either nostalgic-decadent notations or apologetic-optimistic statements, the truth is not even in the middle – it is in the unity and struggle of opposites. We consider the dialectical view of this problem to be the only correct one, but it requires further consideration: the correlation of the view from inside the education industry with the view from outside; the correlation of production and consumption of education; the correlation of distance and time, etc. In addition, all kinds of comparative research designs are extremely promising: forced distance education vs. voluntary distance education; comparison of education in frontline and rear regions; comparison of specifics of distance school and higher education. In the coming years, enough materials will be collected to trace the different stages of distance education in its current iteration.

Although now the distance format is perceived as temporary, even after the end of all these social perturbations and the normalization of life, the distance and online format will not disappear anywhere. It will become an option of normality, adding to the arsenal of educational services: the opening of distance learning programs (for example, at the master's level), the constant holding of educational and scientific events in a mixed format, etc. – a progressive reality that will be in the bright future. In addition (here we will express our civil and pedagogical opinion), the distance format is an excellent substitute for the outright profanation called 'Correspondence education'. But that's a completely different story.

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