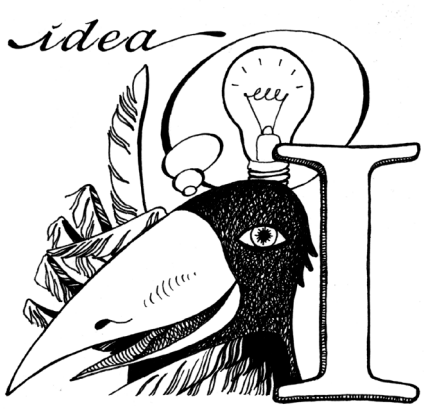
The HSE LOOK

Research amidst uncertainty

NO. 2 (45), April 2020

When you come out of the storm, you won't be the same person who walked in. That's what this storm's all about.

— Haruki Murakami, Kafka on the Shore



In the turbulent times we are all experiencing now, the only thing which is obvious about the future is that the life will never be the same both personally and professionally. And that's why it is noteworthy that HSE University continues its postdoctoral recruitment programmes. Two campaigns for domestic and international recruitment have been successfully launched, and we are looking forward to welcoming nearly 100 new colleagues to join us for the new academic year. Why it is crucially important for HSE University to continue attracting young researchers who are dedicated to pursue academic careers?

The university wants to stay agile, resourceful and fit to face new challenges and make use of new opportunities, and the key stone to achieve this is developing academic community. In view of this, our current issue of The HSE Look continues introducing the readers to the research done by the international postdoctoral fellows, through the interviews with colleagues Dr Isabelle R. Kaplan and Dr Sabyasachi Tripathi working in history and innovation respectively. We are also delighted to share the article from our parental bulletin "Okna Rosta" in which colleagues are giving advice on how to switch productively and less stressfully to the online mode of work under the temporary circumstances of social distancing.

Yulia Grinkevich
Director for Internationalisation

Studying Cultural History of Ethnic Minorities in the USSR

Isabelle R. Kaplan, *a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at the International Centre for the History and Sociology of World War II and Its Consequences, talked about her research on non-Slavic minorities in the Soviet Union*

What is your educational and professional background?

I came to history later in life – I was not a history major in college. I was a literature major as an undergraduate and I have a Master's degree in post-Soviet area studies. I taught English and Language Arts in public high schools for a number of years -- all the grades from the 8th grade up. When I moved to Washington, DC where my husband got a job, I adjuncted for a year teaching Russian literature at George Washington University, and following that experience I decided to go back to school for a doctorate. So, my background is in teaching and in cultural studies. I wanted to do something comparative among different

non-Slavic Soviet cultures. I enrolled in a History PhD programme at Georgetown University, intending to study cultural history under Richard Stites, who, sadly, passed away during my second semester.

Then I switched to the University of Maryland in order to work with Michael David-Fox. He was then hired by Georgetown, and I switched back to my original school to continue working with him.

How has your interest in history emerged? And especially in the post-Soviet area?

I was interested in the cultural history of non-Russian groups – of ethnic minority groups of the Soviet Union during the Soviet period – and the interplay with Russian culture.

When I was an undergraduate [Dr. Kaplan received a BA in Comparative Literature from Yale University], work on the non-Russian cultures of the Soviet space was a rarity in literary studies. There was little discussion of, say, Azerbaijan or Kazakhstan, in departments of Slavic languages and literatures.

I don't think these cultures received much attention in Near Eastern studies departments either, at least not from the standpoint of literature and the arts. In the past, I think those fields were more developed in Russia because of the imperial and Soviet experience, but in the United States, for example, they were more obscure.

Nowadays, Slavic departments have come to embrace them, and today there are people doing fantastic work on Georgian, Azerbaijani, Chechen, Tajik, and other literatures, sometimes under the rubric of Turkish or Near Eastern studies, as well. In addition, the work of scholars from the Caucasus and Central Asia is increasingly available in English.

So, the academic landscape has changed a lot over the last couple of decades. I chose History because it seemed the most capacious, and because I had encountered specific historians whose approaches appealed to me and whose work served as models. First, I started learning Turkish, and then Azerbaijani. The languages are very similar – many Azeris can understand Turkish – but as a non-native speaker, I find the differences between them very pronounced and cannot switch back and forth easily.

I also studied Uzbek and hoped to do some dissertation field work in Uzbekistan, but in the end, I limited my research to Azerbaijan because of time and other constraints.

What did you research in Azerbaijan?

My dissertation looks at not only cultural production among ethnic minority groups in the Soviet Union, but also cultural consumption. Soviet nationalities policy mandated the sharing of cultures across national lines. I was particularly interested in this idea because the development of national culture is closely linked in the scholarship to the development of national identity.

Typically, the audience for national cultural products is envisioned as belonging to the nation that produced them. But the Soviet Union envisioned a multinational audience for national art, and set up institutions to facilitate the consumption of national art by audiences beyond the producing nation.

For example, in the 1930s the All-Union Committee on Arts Affairs began to organise ten-day festivals of national art, referred to as 'dekady.' I became interested in the dual dynamic of these festivals. On the one hand, they presented an opportunity for identity-building on the level of the national republics of the USSR, but they were also a way to pursue a kind of pan-Soviet nation-building through the cross-cultural consumption of national art.

The festivals were initially held in Moscow, where the audience was predominantly Russian, but the events received press coverage in all the republics, so the art and artists showcased in the dekady received some attention throughout the Soviet Union. Another example I treat in my dissertation is the celebration of national poets. When we think of celebrating national poets in the 1930s, we think of the Pushkin centennial in February 1937, which introduced a new standard for honoring a literary figure on an all-Union scale.

The Pushkin event established guidelines for subsequent national poet celebrations, such as Georgia's Rustaveli jubilee in December 1937 and Azerbaijan's Nizami jubilee in 1947. So, here other national groups followed Russia's example, unlike the case of the dekada of national art. There was no dekada of Russian art to use as a model, so the republics were inventing the genre.

Of course, they were directed and approved by authorities in Moscow, and the accomplishments of Russian art were articulated as the standard to strive for – each national republic was supposed to identify its own Glinka, for example – but it's still interesting to look at what the republics generated in response to the signals from Moscow. In Baku, I was able to research the planning of the Dekada of Azerbaijani Art, held in Moscow in April 1938.

This was at the height of the Great Terror, when the artistic leadership, both in Moscow and on the republican level, was in flux, so it's particularly interesting to look at the decisions made in Azerbaijan.

Do you continue working on this topic at HSE?

There were some leads I identified during my dissertation field work that I could not pursue at that time, so I'm delighted to have an opportunity to look into them now, during my year at HSE. One is the case of operas presented at the dekady of national art that were subsequently selected for inclusion in the Bolshoi Theater's repertoire, but were later dropped.

For example, after Zacharia Paliashvili's Abesalom & Eteri was presented at Georgia's dekada in January 1937, the opera was produced by the Bolshoi and ran there for two seasons. Similarly, after the Dekada of Azerbaijani Art in 1938, the Bolshoi began work on its own production of Uzeyir Hajibeyov's opera Keroghlu, but the production never had its premiere.

Do you have any ideas why this could have been?

I can conjecture. Maybe there was resistance among the theatre leadership and its artists to adopting these national operas. From the documents, it is clear there was a mandate to include national operas in the repertory of the country's most prestigious theatre. On a practical level, I think that national operas would have required Bolshoi performers to develop new musical skills, certain singing styles that were unfamiliar to them. It could be a significant undertaking to prepare for a role in a completely unfamiliar opera, and it seems the performers were stretched thin already – each year the plan called for an increase in performances, often alongside cuts in personnel. Just like any other sphere of the Soviet economy, the Bolshoi theatre had a plan to fulfill, and increasing production was always on the docket.

I also think that in the performating arts there is a tension between authenticity and making art accessible across national lines. So, when artists from the republics that produced these operas were invited to work on the Bolshoi productions, it may have caused some tension on both sides. Not only because of a lack of receptivity or esteem on Russian side, but also because for a work of art to become "international," sometimes it has to be modified. On the one hand, it was a mark of prestige to have a national work embraced by the Bolshoi, but, on the other, it can be difficult to surrender the right of interpretation to others, especially to those outside the national group who have less understanding of the national cultural context.

And, of course, once the Soviet Union declared war and the Bolshoi was evacuated, the plan's multicultural aspects became less of a priority.

What are some difficulties you face researching the topic?

There is so much to look at – you never know where there could be a clue. For example, I find myself looking not only at the archives of the Bolshoi theatre repertory section, but also the bookkeeping section, which has information on tickets sales and box-offices grosses, contracts with artists, and budgets for each production. The language of accounting is new to me in English, let alone in Russian.

Also, when you apply for permission to work in a state archive, you have to identify your research topic, and it can be difficult to explain that I am researching non-Russian cultural production. I think staff in Moscow archives are more accustomed to advising researchers who are focused on Russian culture, which, of course, stands to reason. At times it has been a challenge to find what I am looking for. I wonder sometimes if the problem is having something in particular to look for. Maybe it's better to just use whatever you find and adjust your project accordingly. In the end, it comes down to a combination of both processes.

Are there specialists at the Centre who help you to navigate through the research?

I am working independently although the Centre has a lot of distinguished scholars and highly experienced researchers who really know their way around the archives. I am planning to try to get their input. I will give a talk in February as part of the Centre's seminar series, so I am looking forward to the feedback and guidance I'll get.

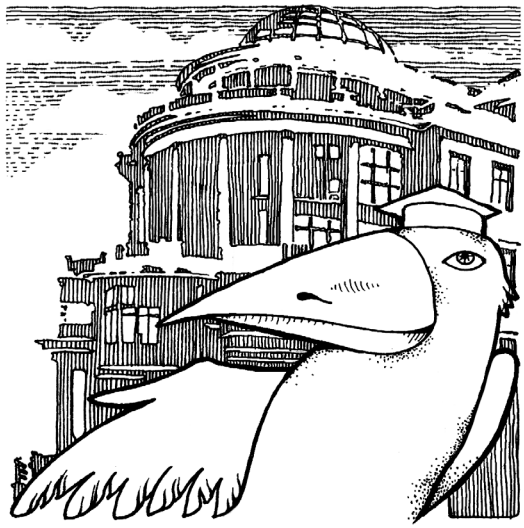
What was your main motivation to come to HSE?

A chief reason is that being at HSE allows me to access archives in Moscow. Another reason is that it is one of the liveliest and most progressive academic environments in Russia. It seems that every Russian scholar you meet turns out to have some affiliation with HSE. And, of course, the Centre is home to some of the most prominent scholars of Soviet history.

Did your expectations come to be true?

It is an extremely supportive environment especially at the Centre, very warm and welcoming. Many postdoctoral positions make a lot of demands of you, which can make it difficult to work on your own research.

In contrast, the Centre is very mindful of the time archival work requires. That was a huge draw for me. In addition, my husband is a professor of post-Soviet politics, so he is very happy to have an opportunity to spend time in Moscow. Being here is beneficial for both of us.



Researching innovations in rapidly growing cities

Sabyasachi Tripathi *is a postdoctoral fellow at the Laboratory for Science and Technology Studies, Institute for Statistical Studies and Economics of Knowledge, and he is researching urbanization and innovation in Russia.*

What is your educational and professional background?

I come from a very small town. In school there was a lot of emphasis on adhering to what teachers or parents would deem a 'good subject', so this is why I was focusing on economics at the time. When I passed the college tests, I got the highest marks in 64 years, and I was told to go to a good university in Kolkata - the Jadavpur University, it is one of the best universities in India.

After getting my degree I got a chance to study for a PhD at the Institute for Social and Economic Change in Bangalore where I did my research on urban agglomeration and urban economic growth in India.

I worked in Delhi for two years at Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations and National Institute of Urban Affairs, and then moved to Punjab for two years to work at Lovely Professional University. After my daughters were born we moved to Kolkata where I work as an assistant Professor at the Department of Economics at Adamas University. I took a year off from my university to come do research at HSE.

Do you have previous connection to HSE?

Back in 2011 I was one of the students from India to attend the Lindau Meeting in Economic Sciences in Germany, or Lindau Nobel Laureate Meetings where Nobel laureates in economics give lectures every 4 years. I was looking at the researchers' affiliations and found that some of them were also coming from HSE. Later on when I started to work as an Assistant Professor and was creating a syllabus for undergraduate students, I was looking for examples at other universities, and found many useful things in the courses taught by Higher School of Economics. So I was already familiar with HSE in passing by the time I saw an open call for postdoctoral positions and applied.

What are your main research interests?

My PhD was on how to manage urbanization. Cities are said to be the engines of economic growth in developing countries, and I am interested in how we can address the poverty and inequality. In my research I want to focus on how urbanization can foster innovations, which in turn are necessary for long-term sustainable economic growth.

To illustrate the idea about urbanization creating conditions for innovation, let's look at the cities as a concentrated network of knowledge and commerce.

Best universities and business schools provide the high-skilled employees that innovative business needs, and competition drives the innovation level up, because everyone wants to do better to succeed. Different funding sources are also more abundant in the cities. Here at HSE I am working with Dr. Evgeniy Kutsenko, the director of Russian Cluster Observatory, and I am researching how Russian urbanization has led to increase in innovations.

How do you collect data for your research?

That is a big challenge, actually, because of the language barrier. Dr. Evgeniy Kutsenko has an assistant who helps us to get and code data in Russian from government statistics portal, and I deal with sources in English.

We are trying to measure how many commercialized patents have originated in Moscow region from 1997 up to 2017. We use this data to create a model and see which factors are contributing. We are planning to collect data on other Russian cities with population over 1 million people as well. Besides that, as city level data are inadequate we are also trying to get data for 84 regions in Russia.

Do you already see any striking differences between India and Russia?

Yes, like the percentage of urbanization, the total urban population by total population. In India it is very low - 31%, but in Russia - almost 74%.

Both countries experience advantages and disadvantages of urbanization, such as heavy traffic, health hazards and other things. That is why it is important to have sustainable growth, so that people have a job, access to good water, electricity, health facilities, as well as physical space for urban and community life. For instance, it's easy to walk in Moscow – by contrast, in Kolkata it is difficult to navigate a pavement because of small kiosks.

Cities are expanding, but there is also a limit to what makes sense in term of transport connectivity, commute length and other things. How much commute time makes living in a large city unsustainable for a particular person?

I do not know about Moscow, but in India it bigger cities are experiencing negative population growth rate. People are not coming to Delhi anymore; they are going to smaller towns like Raipur, Asansol, Surat- somewhere they can actually live with lower living costs.

What should urbanization look like to be sustainable?

Countries like Germany, France, Norway, Switzerland do not have many large cities, but lots of places which are attractive for people to live comfortably. I think it's the key – we have to improve small towns to balance urbanization, but it's a complex task involving many inequalities and resources distribution in the country.

We have to have better infrastructure facilities to provide to urban dwellers. In India, many people from rural areas do not come to cities because of language and caste problems, and their affinity towards home place.

We have only 20% of urbanization due to rural to urban migration. Within that, only 5% are inter-state migration. The rest is happening within one state only.

My policy recommendation is that if you want to increase urbanization, there should be good conditions, accessible housing and employment opportunities, as well as training programmes helping people learn new skills relevant for urban and digital economy.

What are some difficulties that you face with the research?

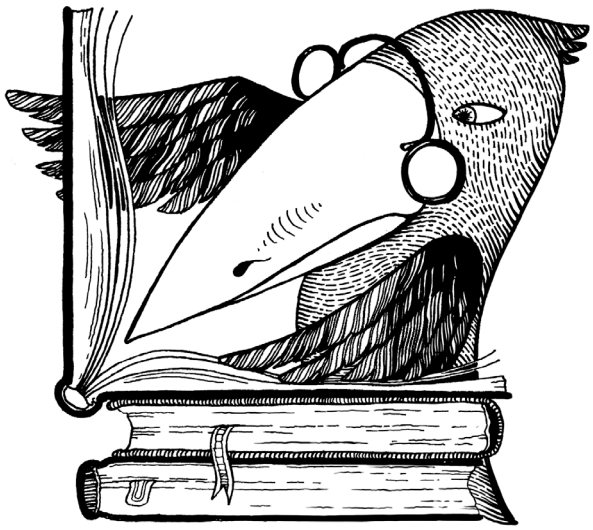
Getting data for 84 regions is very tough and we have about 15 indicators to assess innovation, so I work a lot, but manage to carve out some time to see Moscow on weekends.

It was very tough when I first came here because of the language barrier, but I made some Indian friends, and students from other countries are always willing to talk in the dormitory. I also enjoy discussing research with senior professors at HSE, both in my laboratory and outside it. I have my family in India and I miss them, but try to use this solitary time to focus on my research to a greater extent.

Do you have any plans for the upcoming year besides the research?

I want to go to Murmansk to see the polar lights, but I do not want to go alone because my Russian is not yet very strong. I would like to go to St. Petersburg also to meet my colleagues from campus there.

If we think bigger, I would like to develop scientific collaboration between Russia and India because we are in BRICS but so far away from each other in many ways, and I believe it could lead to many interesting insights in terms of comparative research.



University ‘at Home’

The HSE Look is glad to present an article which first appeared in our parental bulletin Okna Rosta. Since March 17, 2020, HSE students and staff have been working and studying remotely. It's time to find out if online teaching and learning is as easy as it is commonly believed.This transition is a new and challenging experience for many. To survive this period with the least losses, and even with some gains, the HSE staff offers several recommendations for organising online delivery of knowledge.

Ulyana Zakharova, *postdoctoral researcher, Center for Sociology of Higher Education, author of MOOC in Online Technologies in Education*

Self-discipline

Working from home is not easy, since our usual routine has gone astray, household tasks are looming, and time seems to flow differently, so all these things often make us fall into one of the two extremes - overworking or doing very little.

Several things can help to cope: setting up a distinct workspace at home, following our usual work schedule, staying focused on the task at hand, and talking with family members about not being disturbed while we work.

Making a plan for the day and then assessing the results can help make the progress clear to both you and your supervisor. If you find yourself suffering from procrastination, try finding which techniques to combat it work for you specifically, for instance, the Pomodoro Technique (alternating cycles of 25 minutes of work and 5 minutes of rest), or the app Forest: Stay Focused (the longer you work without distractions, the more trees you ‘plant’).

You can experiment with time-tracking if you haven’t done this before: write down what you’ve done every hour, it might help you identify time leaks or and find out how long it actually takes you to complete specific tasks. These self-discoveries will also be useful when we return to a face-to-face work mode.

Work and leisure

We are shifting to working remotely for safety reasons. The most important thing now is to take care of your health and the health of your loved ones. First, we should follow social and medical recommendations for the prevention and treatment of the disease. Secondly, we should not give up reasonable level of physical activity as they keep us healthy and increase our work focus.

Naturally, going to a gym now is perhaps unsafe, but doing a series of exercises at home, in a well-ventilated room, can offer a good break from work, and if you go jogging around your neighborhood, make sure not to shake hands or give hugs to neighbors).

Working or studying from home is infamous for disrupting not only sleep patterns but also eating habits; keep yourself within limits, but listen to your body.

Creating a shared understanding of the new rules

For work from home to be effective, it is important to agree with your team and supervisors on the basics that we usually take for granted. For staff such rules concern our work hours, how often we hold meetings, what the main communication channel is, and where we keep track of tasks and their progression.

In case of students such agreements can touch upon: which web platform we use primarily and which is secondary, which channel we use to communicate and how (video, voice-only calls, texting, etc), what the deadlines and rules for submitting assignments look like, and what their assessment criteria are.

Whether you are dealing with colleagues or students, it’s important to not only name the tools and apps, but also link a guide or a or record a screen-cast (video from the screen)

on how to use it. Providing a template for a task or a couple of examples with comments on why they are good or bad can anticipate and help resolve many questions.

You may find these measures excessive but in the absence of face-to-face meetings and visual contact it is very difficult to quickly see who needs assistance, especially if they are afraid to ask a 'stupid' question.

With online learning, it's always better to be more explicit than not enough. It's important not to lose anyone, so we need to evaluate whether everyone has enough resources (i.e. a computer with a stable internet connection) and access to source materials for productive work or study. We should try to be flexible and set deadlines taking into account that overcoming technical difficulties and learning to use new tools will also take some time.

Keeping the community alive

A great advantage of face-to-face interaction is the opportunity to create a strong community. Do not neglect modern technologies for video and audio communication – try making the effort to hold project meetings, lectures and seminars via Skype or Zoom where you can see and hear each other.

Beware that instant messaging (the inevitable evil of our time) can negatively affect not only your work focus, but also the relations within the group, so it's best to reserve chats for urgent messages that require everyone's attention, for instance, sending updates on the project or assignment deadlines.

It's good to keep using the usual channels for the majority of communications – by email with colleagues, in LMS with students. Keep in mind that now you need a space for informal communication as well, so creating a separate chat for relaxed communication and fun can help to smoothen the quarantine.

Lecturers may find it helpful to create a student chat so that students do not experience a sense of isolation and connect with each other for assistance. Also, it is important to agree not only on the channel per se but also on the rules of communication, for instance, on not writing in the chat at night or not waiting for a quick response if a message is sent after a certain hour.

Many colleagues and students can be subject to seasonal colds or be otherwise unwell; their children stay at home since kindergartens and schools have been quarantined, together with elderly parents who are primarily at risk during the epidemics. We should respect each other's right to personal time, but we should also remember that although we are working remotely, we are indeed working and email has to be checked regularly.

Learning new things and sharing experiences

It's time to get to know your university's LMS better and consult with colleagues about features you've never used before. The modern world is full of various digital educational technologies and different content but beware of 'expert' comments from non-professionals.

At the same time, an immense space opens up to share our findings and best practices, from collaborating in creating and editing documents (for instance, Google Docs, Sheets, Presentations) and task-management software (my favourite is Todoist), to video editing services and development of simple simulations.

And yet we understand that it is important not to get too immersed into researching new apps and services and not to overload ourselves, our colleagues and students with them. Remember the golden rule: the task determines the choice of a tool, not vice versa.

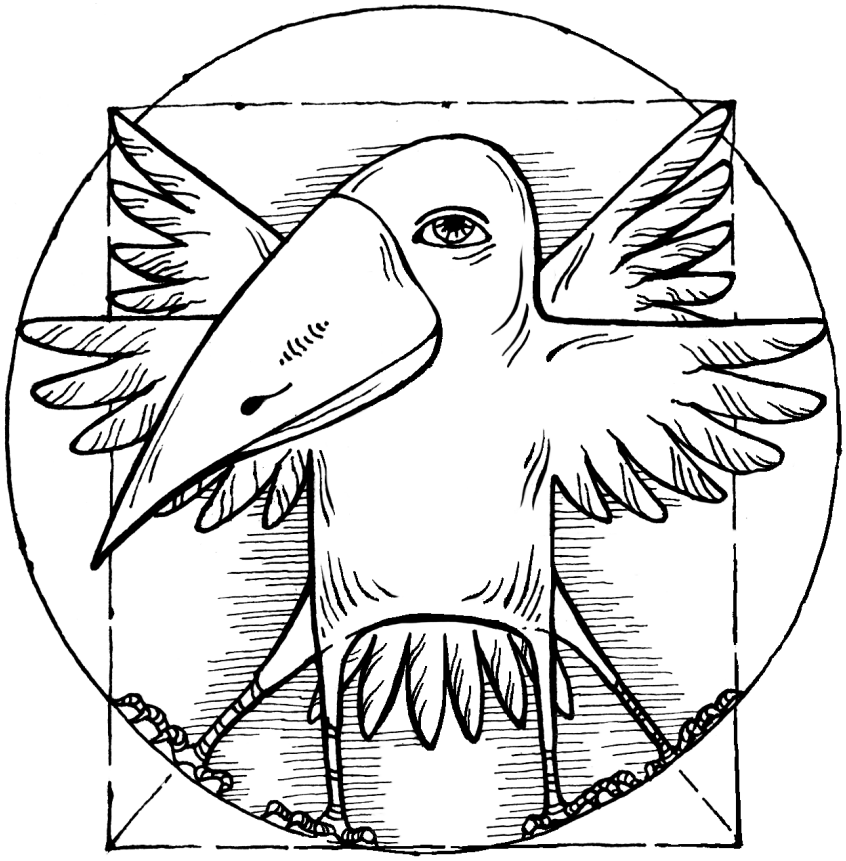
Be calm and…

Be sympathetic to possible inconsistencies and organisational difficulties and be prepared that your colleagues and students will write to you about their challenges. Perhaps, it's worth taking the time to list potential problems you can predict at the very start, and bring them to the attention of your team or class so as to work them out together.

Make suggestions and give feedback but stay constructive, mutually polite and proactive. Collect feedback proactively since it's easy for a person to fall through the cracks when remote work or studying is a new experience for them. Make it a rule to collect questions and suggestions for improvements on a regular basis, and approach this creatively rather than asking "Is everything clear to everyone?" which usually proves unproductive.

For instance, you can use the easy-to-learn Kahoot or Menti tools, which will enrich offline classes when we return on campus. Transferring all the processes of a large organisation online is a big challenge, but having coped with it we will become resilient and improve upon our practices of online learning and work, which are an integral part of a modern university.

Let's stay healthy and productive!



A few tips for lecturers:

Boris Demeshev, *senior lecturer, Faculty of Economic Sciences*

1. Do not be afraid to post your content in the public domain.
2. Organise a Telegram chat with students since many students already use it.
3. It's extremely easy to make a video of a seminar. To do this, you just need a modern smartphone and a tripod for 1,000 rubles. Put the tripod on the table, turn off the mobile network temporarily so that the video does not interrupt, and then immediately upload the recording to YouTube. Each lecturer and seminar tutor can handle this.
4. I post all my materials openly on *github.com/bdemeshev;*
5. I communicate with students via Telegram (I will answer email as well but the main communication is the app);
6. I post videos of seminars on YouTube.
7. Some of my colleagues prefer piazza.com to publish materials and communicate with students.
8. For a remote tutorial, Zoom is better than Skype in my experience.
9. A marker or chalk board is useful to have at home. It's also possible to tap a relatively inexpensive white film on the wall for the same purpose.

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