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**D.V. Burimskaya<sup>1</sup>, N.H. Frolova<sup>1, 2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> HSE University,  
Moscow, 101000, Russian Federation

<sup>2</sup> Linguistic University of Nizhny Novgorod,  
Nizhny Novgorod, 603155, Russian Federation

## Online course “Academic English” under blended learning

In the abrupt lockdown of 2020, educational institutions had to arrange all forms of teaching remotely. Implementation of English language teaching was mostly chaotic and based on giving the students extra assignments. The given article puts forward a blended learning model which was successfully incorporated and proved to be effective. The development of this online course for blended learning was in huge demand as it offers flexibility, variability, differentiation and ease of access. The benefits and barriers the authors faced within the given case are featured in the article. *Aim.* This paper aims to share the expertise with the teaching community and provide a comprehensive analysis of the exam results before and after blended teaching. *Research methodology.* General scientific methods and comparative analysis of the students' academic performance were used. The research was based on the English exam result statistics for the last three years ( $n = 400$  students), and an experimental case of four months of blended ELT in NRU HSE ( $n = 600$  students) was carried out. *Results.* The results of the experimental use of online courses in the university setting could be transferred to various fields of application while teaching other subjects and are of particular interest to EL teachers. *Practical significance.* The undertaken research materials have significant implications for the further development of the content of digital didactics and justification of the digitalization of vocational education.

**Key words:** digitalization, online-course, Moodle, blended learning

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**Д.В. Буримская<sup>1</sup>, Н.Х. Фролова<sup>1, 2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Национальный исследовательский университет  
«Высшая школа экономики»,  
101000 г. Москва, Российская Федерация

<sup>2</sup> Нижегородский государственный лингвистический университет  
им. Н.А. Добролюбова,  
603155 г. Нижний Новгород, Российская Федерация

## Онлайн-курс «Академический английский» в условиях смешанного обучения

В связи с внезапным объявлением карантина в 2020 г. учебным заведениям пришлось организовать все формы обучения дистанционно. Преподавание английского языка было в основном хаотичным и основывалось на предоставлении студентам дополнительных заданий. В данной статье предлагается модель, которая была успешно внедрена и доказала свою эффективность. Этот онлайн-курс для смешанного обучения пользовался огромным спросом, поскольку он предлагает гибкость, вариативность, дифференциацию и легкий доступ. Цель статьи – поделиться опытом с сообществом учителей и предоставить всесторонний анализ результатов экзаменов до и после смешанного обучения. Для этого были использованы общенаучные методы и сравнительный анализ успеваемости студентов. В ходе исследования была собрана статистика результатов экзаменов по английскому языку за последние три года (400 студентов), а также проведен эксперимент смешанного формата обучения в Национальном исследовательском университете «Высшая школа экономики» (600 студентов). Результаты эксперимента могут быть применены в различных предметных

областях. Материалы проведенного исследования имеют существенное значение для дальнейшего развития представлений о сущности и содержании дидактики в условиях цифровизации, а также для обоснования и формирования оптимальных условий для профессионального образования.

**Ключевые слова:** цифровизация образования, онлайн-курс, онлайн-курс иностранного языка, смешанное обучение

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## Introduction

The digitalization of education influences the innovative development of contemporary didactics, including changing the goals, content, organisational forms and methods, means, and the students' anticipated results and learning outcomes at a university. Traditionally, the goal of foreign language teaching is interpreted as the planned outcome of learning a language and its respective culture. However, today, the goal of teaching a foreign language at a university must meet societal requirements, namely the development of all essential skills such as reading, speaking, listening, and writing and their professional application while communicating across cultures. Today, the focus of foreign language teaching is on the practical use of a foreign language.<sup>1</sup>

According to recent research conducted in Russia [1; 3; 5; 9; 12; 22; 24; 26; 28], the integrated use of ICT in teaching a foreign language develops system-forming skills in a systematic, consistent, and interrelated manner. In this regard, ICT's integrated use in teaching students a foreign language is the consistent and interrelated use of information resources and educational information systems such as Google Classroom, Socrative, LMS, MOOC, Coursera, Future Learn, Zoom, MS Teams, Skype, Discord, etc., for all stages of the education process. Teaching a foreign language involves distributing information resources from the internet and developing Electronic Education Resources (EER) based on the information and educational environment, focusing on achieving the following goals:

- the organisation and implementation of reading authentic English texts;
- listening to authentic audio files and watching educational videos; writing

<sup>1</sup> Concept of modernization of Russian education. 2014. URL: <http://static.government.ru/media/files/mlorxfXbbCk.pdf>

- various types of essays; preparing oral presentations and speeches; drilling lexical and grammar exercises in English;
- the automation of information interaction and various activities of collecting, storing, transmitting, processing, producing, and replicating professionally significant information;
  - the automation of monitoring and self-monitoring of the teaching and learning outcomes.

The creation of an information and educational environment is one of the main challenges of modern methodology. Moreover, the implementation of the main components of the methodological system aims at language competence, namely from knowledge to skills, from skills to ability, and from ability to experience and practical implementation.

The Russian Federal project “Digital Educational Environment” stipulates that a modern and reliable digital educational environment focused on the students’ self-development and self-education in all Russian educational organisations should be designed by 2024.

The National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE University) development programme 2030 presents a plan for the implementation of blended learning, consisting of a combination of traditional classes and contemporary online courses. This model has the following didactic opportunities, such as the visual perception of the material (visual information makes the learning process easier, faster and more reliable); the use of various operating modes (time, rhythm and pace of learning); the possibility of using an electronic library, and audio and video content; monitoring and controlling students’ progress using thematic, mid-term and final testing; analysing personal statistics of the student’s progress by both teachers and students, identifying trends in the improvement or deterioration in the assimilation of learning material; the possibility of open planning of the learning process (drawing up an individual educational trajectory which is a sequence of modules from the set of educational courses based on the corresponding curriculum); and the ability to find, process, store and transmit the necessary information.

Universities of higher education worldwide are increasingly adopting blended learning as a new mode of delivery, based on the concept that blended learning is a part of the digital revolution [23; 27]. There are some publications and meta-analyses focused on blended learning [6–8; 10; 23; 25; 27; 32; 33] which emphasise that an effective blended learning environment includes face-to-face interaction in the classroom, online content, assignments, announcements, synchronous conversation, asynchronous forum discussions, and online chats. Blended environments provide strong support, create opportunities for students to actively engage in shaping their own learning,

and facilitate greater reflection on course content [11; 20]. Nevertheless, it cannot be assumed that all online education is superior, regardless of how it is implemented. In fact, research points clearly to the idea that it is the implementation, the pedagogy, and the design of courses that result in better educational experiences [15].

J. Bidarra and E. Rusman stated that learning activities must be “applicable and relevant to contemporary life and transferable to ‘real-world’ situations” by using today’s flexible, interactive, and immersive technologies [16]. R. Boelens, B. De Wever, and M. Voet advocated for the following key objectives: (1) incorporate flexibility; (2) stimulate interaction; (3) facilitate students’ learning processes; and (4) foster an effective learning climate [7]. M. Milad suggested considering reflection, collaboration, cooperation, multiculturalism, critical thinking, and problem-solving in the learning activities to enhance students’ knowledge [19]. The activities must be designed so that they promote student-to-student and instructor-to-student interactions if the affordances of blended learning are to be realised [21].

H. Staker, M.B. Horn [29], A.V. Kudryashova [17], and T.G. Bekisheva [4] distinguish six models of blended learning, such as face-to-face model, rotation model, flex model, online lab, self-blended model, and online model. In addition to these models, a number of researchers [2; 14; 18; 19; 31; 34; 35] identify another model: a flipped classroom, where students independently read, listen to the material, and study it. Moreover, the students work with the same material in class but engage in exercises of a more complex level (retelling, discussing, answering questions, making up dialogues, making presentations, working in groups, acting out some situations, and so on).

Blended learning is a necessary model of modern education that combines traditional forms of teaching with the use of online courses. The focus has been shifted from the teacher’s activity to the students’ performance. Most teachers at HSE University were not ready to apply blended learning, but the coronavirus put them in a position where they had to design online courses (on the Moodle platform) for blended learning. What are the results?

## Research methodology

While carrying out the research, theoretical (analysis, comparison, and generalisation) and empirical methods (collecting and organising material for the online course, studying documents and questionnaires) were used: a literature review and thorough analysis (scientific works, dissertations, regulatory documents) to study blended learning in language education; the systematisation of blended learning models; the identification and generalisation of the didactic opportunities of educational information

systems for blended learning in language education; assignment modelling; and the development of an online course for blended learning.

Within the framework of the given study, the students' academic performance dataset, which consists of the students' marks dated back to 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020, was used. An experimental English language web-based education programme was made available in several branches of the HSE University located in Moscow, Nizhny Novgorod, and Perm. A quantitative analysis was carried out in Nizhny Novgorod ( $n = 630$ ). The participants have been taught academic English in the Management, Economics, Humanities, Mathematics, and Computer Science, Law Bachelor programmes. It is worth noting that English is one of the elective subjects in their curriculum, but they have all enrolled in it.

First and foremost, there was a preparatory stage when the authors of the article carried out a preliminary study of the real state of the issue, reviewed the scientific literature, and made a choice on the platform to be used. The second step was to create the online course, including the search for appropriate authentic materials in open sources and the set of assignments like pre-reading, reading, post-reading activities, and final tests; pre-listening, listening, post-listening activities, and final tests; pre-writing, writing, post-writing activities and final tests; and pre-speaking, speaking, post-speaking activities, and final tests. This stage was followed up by the implementation of the blended course and generating the results by calculating the means. And the final one was the results' evaluation.

The author's course was developed specifically for teaching English at HSE University, taking into account the programme of a specific discipline, "English for Academic Purposes" (optional), for 1–4 modules of the first-year course. The development of this online course for blended learning is extremely relevant, as the educational process becomes flexible (providing the independence of the course from the time and duration of classes), modular (you can plan an individual educational trajectory in accordance with educational needs), accessible (achieving independence from the geographical location of the student), and mobile (thanks to the established connection between the student and the teacher). Bearing in mind the level of the groups, the professional interest of the teacher is to plan the classes and teach accordingly. The focus is on acquiring the corresponding skills to master the language.

The course assumes the existence of synchronous and asynchronous feedback and individual consultations. The course is focused on the formation and development of the following skills: reading, writing, and listening, including drilling lexical and grammatical exercises. The online course has the technical ability to conduct speaking since there is a function called

webinar.ru (for students who cannot attend classes for some reason such as mobility, illness, conferences, and so on).

Such a system provides round-the-clock access to the course and contains a full course of methodological support: training and test tasks (reading, listening, grammar, and terminology), a lecture course, audio and video recordings, and an electronic library. The student's progress is also reflected in the grade book. The information system should provide for the organisation of various groups of students in the form of a complex multi-level structure with the possibility for collective interaction (project activities) and the individualization of training: you can divide students into groups to perform common tasks for this group or participate in a certain type of activity. Students can perform the following activities within the Educational Information System (EIS) (for example, Moodle):

- reading: the ability to repeatedly read an authentic text in English (with links to the translation and the pronunciation of target vocabulary), followed by exercises for understanding the text and working out the lexical material;
- listening: the ability to repeatedly listen to and view authentic audio-visual information (the student can choose the speed, and it is possible to include subtitles for students with low-level English), followed by doing exercises to help understand the text;
- writing: grammatical study material according to the curriculum and the level of students; the study of the type of essay and its structure; learning phrases typical for each type of essay; writing essays with further analysis on the structure, contents, and errors (grammar, spelling, punctuation) in the classroom.

## Discussion of the results

The research was a long-lasting experiment that took three years, and the final stage took 4 months. In order to confirm the advantages of blended learning described above, there was a comparison of the exam data taken in 2017, 2018, and 2019 in a conventional format with the current academic year, which included both traditional teaching and the implementation of online elements in the 4th module.

Incorporation of the given course did not require extra installation of the software. All the students have access to the LMS platform, which they enter with the private passwords. The students were asked to sit for the exam with access to web cameras and microphones. During the exam itself, they used special verification and proctoring systems. If there was a risk of cheating, the recording had a special signal. The pool of tasks was diverse and had a randomly selected number of questions. In order to avoid

uploading materials of an unauthorised type, the essays and graph description was arranged on the platform itself. Though it required additional time and some practice typing.

According to CEFR level, the complexity of tests corresponds to B2 or C1. The assignments were chosen within the frames of international exams with the import and export functions to exchange the papers of the class teacher with a substitute interlocutor who is not emotionally involved with the test takers.

The experimental groups are made up of the first-year students of the campus located in Nizhny Novgorod ( $n = 630$ ) who participated in the summer exam in June 2020 after completing the online course within blended learning. In the previous years, the number of students was not as large about 450 students. The faculties of Management, made up of an average of 130 ( $n = 130$ ) students, Economics ( $n = 90$ ), Humanities ( $n = 45$ ), Mathematics and Computer Science ( $n = 160$ ) and Law ( $n = 70$ ) of HSE University (Nizhny Novgorod) provided the statistics shown featuring students' performance indicators reading, listening, and writing, respectively.

Figure 1 illustrates the students' reading results. It is evident that they start at 60% and reach 70% ('fairly good' and 'good'). The lowest results were shown by the students of the Mathematics and Computer Science Department in 2018, which was about 58%. But according to the university regulations, it is considered 'good'.

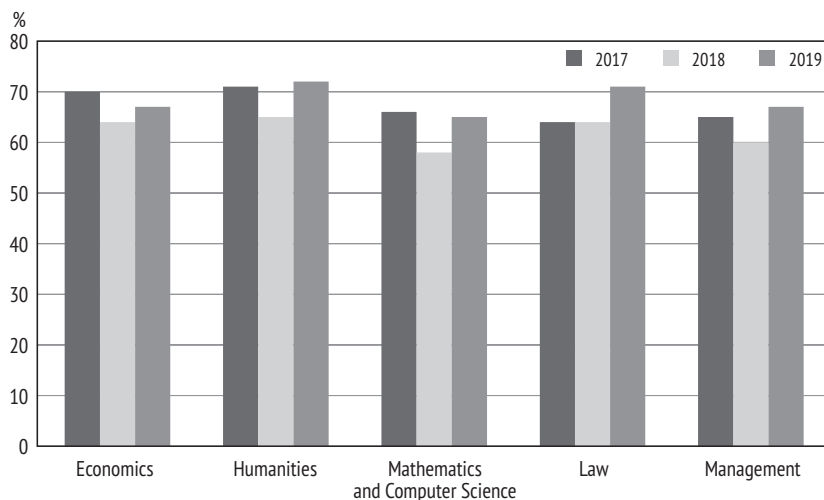
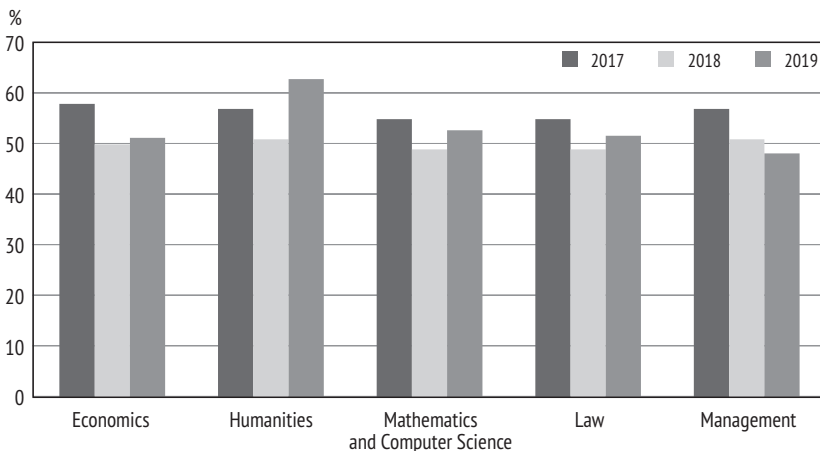


Fig. 1. Reading

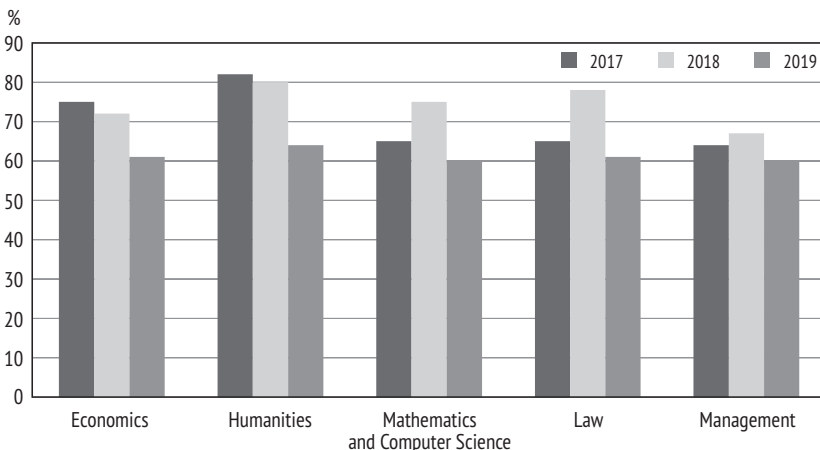


The students' results in the listening exam tasks are featured in figure 2. They are considerably lower than the Reading ones. The mean is 50–53%, meaning 'satisfactory'. Though it is clearly seen that in 2017, the students showed better results, with 55–58% reaching 'good'. The students in the Humanities had the highest grades, with the exception of 2017.



**Fig. 2.** Listening

The writing results (graph description or essay writing) are the highest of all of them (fig. 3). The Humanities and Economics Departments reached almost 80%, which is 'excellent'. In 2018, Law students also achieved 'excellent' for their writing papers.



**Fig. 3.** Writing

The exam results for 2019 are taken as an indicator of traditional class output. Management students ( $n = 77$ ) had an average score of 'Fairly Good', whereas the highest 'good' belonged to the Humanities Department ( $n = 60$ ). The results can be seen in Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4 and are visualised in fig. 4.

Table 1

### Percent and grades correlation for June Exam 2019

Percent of accomplishment, %	The grade range	Exam mark
95–100	57–60	10
88–94	53–56	9
81–87	49–52	8
74–80	44–48	7
66–73	40–43	6
58–65	35–39	5
50–57	30–34	4
41–49	25–29	3
31–40	19–24	2
Less 31	18 and less	1

Table 2

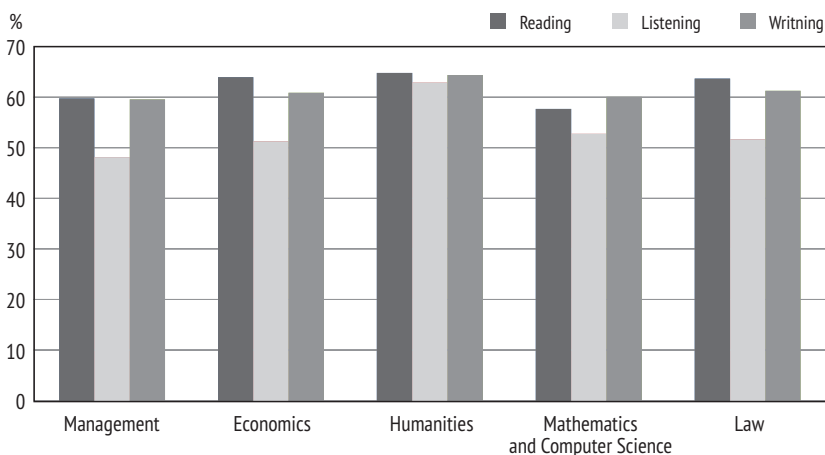
### Detailed results of the 2019 English exam

Department	Total score	Range, %	Final grade
Management ( $n = 77$ )	65.30	66–73	6
Economics ( $n = 86$ )	68.35	66–73	6
Humanities ( $n = 60$ )	74.20	74–80	7
Math and Computer Science ( $n = 102$ )	67.90	66–73	6
Law ( $n = 64$ )	69.60	66–73	6

Table 3

**Detailed results of the 2019 English exam based on the skills**

Department	Total score	Reading	Listening	Speaking	Writing
Management ( <i>n</i> = 77)	65.30	69.80	58.20	63.8	69.6
Economics ( <i>n</i> = 86)	66.35	73.90	61.30	67.3	70.9
Humanities ( <i>n</i> = 60)	74.20	74.80	72.90	75,0	74.4
Math and Computer Science ( <i>n</i> = 102)	67.90	67.70	62.80	71,0	70.1
Law ( <i>n</i> = 64)	69.60	73.70	61.70	71.8	71.3

**Fig. 4.** 2019 Exam results

The total score levels in regards to all skills, excluding Speaking are given in fig. 5. Now let us examine the results of the summer session 2020 for first-year students in Nizhny Novgorod who studied “Academic English” face-to-face in modules 1–3 (September–March) and module 4 (April–June) using the online course “English for Academic Purposes” (<https://online.hse.ru/course/view.php?id=2136>) because of coronavirus infection (reading, listening, and writing) and online classes in ZOOM or MS Teams (discussions, presentations, responses to questions, and so forth).

Figures 4 and 5 show the differences in their results. The groups in 2019 showed good outcomes, but the outcomes in 2020 were better.

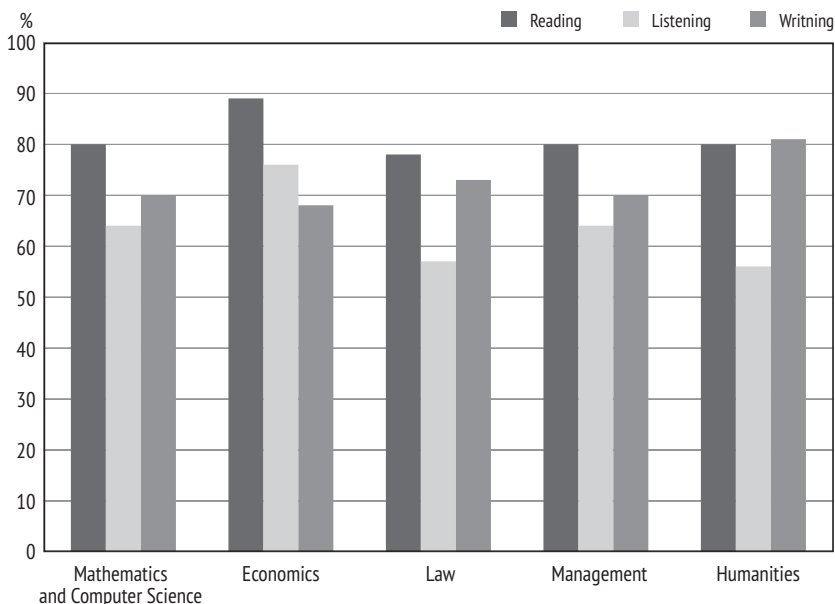


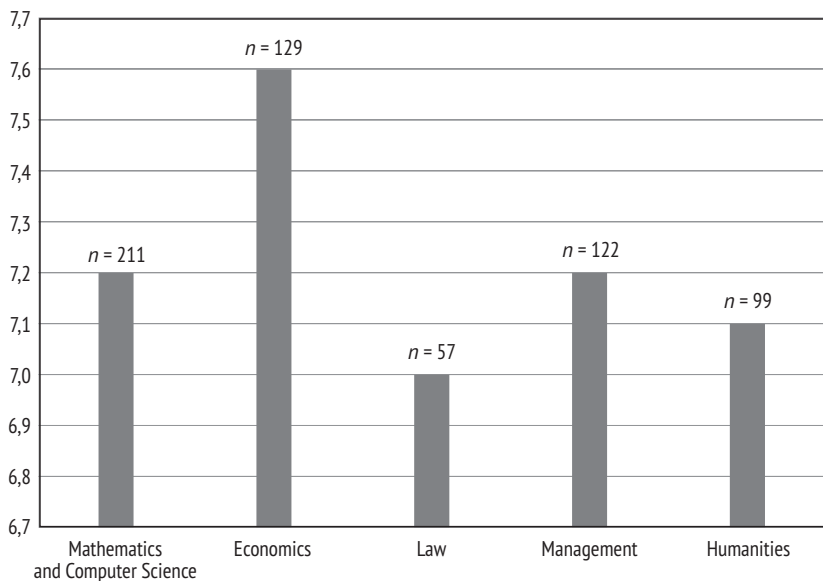
Fig. 5. Exam results 2020

Table 4

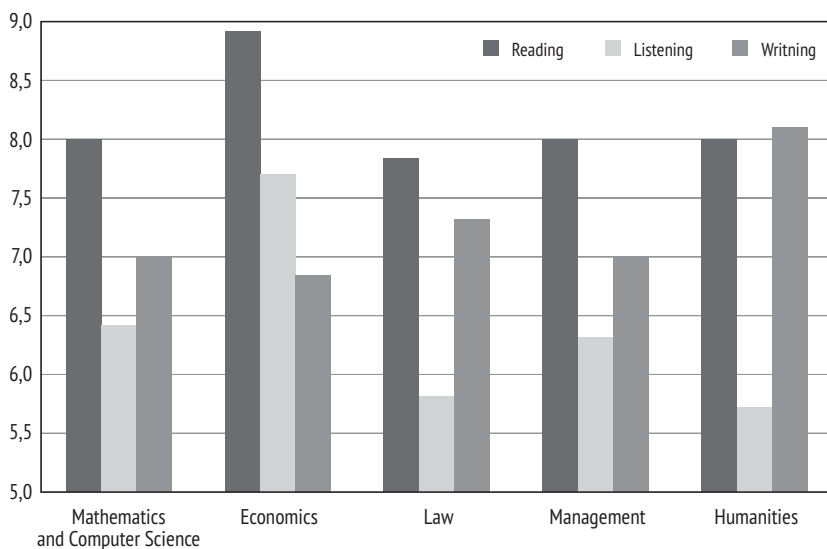
Exam results 2019 vs 2020

Department	2019	2020
Management	6	7
Economics	6	8
Humanities	7	7
Math and Computer Science	6	7
Law	6	7

The educational information environment promotes the improvement of forms and methods, the individualization and differentiation of education; creates a comprehensive educational environment at HSE University for students' training; designs an educational process based on the principles of modularity, variability, interactivity, and multimedia; entails a change in the structure of the educational process, the transition from traditional to blended learning. Along with this, online courses for educational



**Fig. 6.** Average score of all skills 2020



**Fig. 7.** Final exam 2020

purposes allow the simultaneous use of content by all students of the group, the possibility of more lexical and grammatical material, viewing video material out of class, providing educational material for working individually and in groups. EIS can be considered as a self-organising system for managing the educational process, which allows you to control the independent work of students quickly.

## Conclusion

The given course is implemented on regular bases and blended with the traditional one. The students usually have classes of English weekly and on-line course is to make up for the lack of face-to-face classes. Every week the assignment is given to be completed at the convenient speed and on student's request. The deadline is set and is mentioned at the instructions at the very beginning. The weekly tests and the final ones are the foundations for the calculated general marks.

It should be considered that when using online courses in the educational process (for blended learning or distance learning), the possibility of direct contact between the student and the teacher will be more limited than in the traditional form. The student works more independently with the educational material (search, analysis, comparison, control of retention), so the educational content should be effectively, methodologically, and technologically built, and systematically organised. The automated execution of all routine, non-creative information processing procedures should be provided at all stages. The online courses should provide an opportunity for more in-depth learning of the discipline and increase the volume of tasks done by students. Based on the exam results, we can confirm that blended learning is the perfect form of learning nowadays. We should design more and more online courses that can be involved in blended learning.

With regards to the pandemic circumstances, the above-mentioned online course was a panacea, though once back to normal, the course is valid, be it online, face-to-face, blended, or hybrid.

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### About the authors / Сведения об авторах

**Diana V. Burimskaya** – PhD in Pedagogy; Associate Professor at the School of Foreign Languages, HSE University, Moscow, Russian Federation

**Буримская Диана Владимировна** – кандидат педагогических наук; доцент Школы иностранных языков, Национальный исследовательский университет «Высшая школа экономики», г. Москва

E-mail: [dburimskaya@hse.ru](mailto:dburimskaya@hse.ru)

**Natalya Kh. Frolova** – PhD in Pedagogy; Associate Professor at the Department of Foreign Languages of the Faculty of Humanities, HSE University, Nizhny Novgorod; Director of the Institute of Distance Learning, Linguistic University of Nizhny Novgorod, Nizhny Novgorod

**Фролова Наталья Хайдаровна** – кандидат педагогических наук; доцент департамента иностранных языков факультета гуманитарных наук, Национальный исследовательский университет «Высшая школа экономики», г. Нижний Новгород; директор Института дистанционного обучения, Нижегородский государственный лингвистический университет им. Н.А. Добролюбова

E-mail: [nfrolova@lunn.ru](mailto:nfrolova@lunn.ru)

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