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DISTANCE EDUCATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN LATVIA

Abstract

For a modern society it is common to have a new point of view about education, which changes functional role of system of education and makes it an integrative social institution. The process of globalization in all spheres of public life makes implementation of the task of continuing education of the population a necessity.

The Education Development Program for 2007 – 2013 period provides for "the introduction of new educational technologies and principles of the educational process to ensure effective implementation of new educational models, lifelong education, including the use of modern information and communication technologies". Innovative educational technologies include distance learning. Modern distance education technologies offer real prospects for improving the quality of knowledge and efficiency of the educational process, to address various social issues related to the functioning of the education system.

Development of distance education requires a special scientific investigation in two keys, interrelated problems of higher education – **social accessibility and quality**.

Introduction

Creating a system of education relevant to the modern image of the world and capable to prepare the population of the planet for living in these conditions is one of the most fundamental and pressing problems of society where the development and improvement of methods and tools of modern information and communication technologies (ICT) create viable opportunities for their use in the system of education (Carnoy, 2005). These are the technologies on which the society pins its real hopes for the establishment of an open distance education system, which would not only enable each and every person to choose their educational tactics, but also allow each and every educational space at national or regional level to actually interact with others and bring such cooperation to the global level (Rowntree, 1996).

To gain insight into the high expectations at European level, we will provide an extract from the European Community Memorandum on the areas where the introduction of distance education can play an important role and on the expected effect thereof:

- extending opportunities of access to and participation in education and training at all levels;
- strengthening the education and training infrastructure of less favoured regions and of remote areas by extending the range of training available in local institutions and directly to individuals and groups;
- creating trans-European networks for training and hence creating a greater cohesion of the European education and training systems for exchange in the field of open distance learning;
- providing continuing education and training for the workforce;

- improving the quality of training programmes through the incorporation of external high quality inputs and by utilizing multimedia competence;
- consolidating partnerships in training both within and between Member States and between institutions and industry;
- supporting the reconversion and innovation of education and training in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe;
- delivering advanced training and disseminating the results of research;
- making available a European dimension in the education and training of those who do not have the opportunity to spend a period of study abroad and in particular providing such a dimension in the in-service training of teachers. (Skujina, 1996)

Distance education in Latvia

LATVIA'S SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY 2030 includes a recommendation for universities to establish training programmes that are fully implemented on the basis of distance education.

Distance education is a reality of modern life. By "distance education" the author first of all means *an efficient technology for providing a set of quality educational services*. It is in this context that distance education should be considered as an important factor in the modernization of the present-day higher education in Latvia.

Currently, distance education in Latvia is offered by 5 universities, 10 institutions of higher education and 3 colleges. One of the private colleges offers training through distance education only.

According to provisional data, (databases for high schools), about 10% of all off-site students pursue distance education courses in Latvia today. Data of the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia shows that there were 2,788 off-site students in the academic year 2010/2011 (CSB, IZG27, 2011). This figure indicates that the system of distance education is not particularly popular in Latvia, and this happens for several reasons.

First of all, using only one form of communication of knowledge through the Internet is not always optimal. There are many complex issues concerning the compatibility of ICT with human psychology, ease of use and so on. It is usually believed that the Internet is a very simple technology, which does not require almost anything from the user, except for the presence of a computer and network access. However, the situation is more complex. There is a need for a "*humanized*" form of contact with the teacher, the ability to combine information and so on. There is also a need for motivation to acquire knowledge, which arises during communication with teachers, etc. (Badrul, 1997). Distance education is not only a technological innovation, but also a *social innovation* which includes the efficiency of the educational process. What are the most important social functions of this type of training? Above all things is the *enhancement* of each and every person's opportunity to choose the most appropriate *forms of exercising the constitutional right to a quality education* in view of living conditions, psychophysiological characteristics and social status. The introduction of ICT is a response to the need of the modern civilization for the mass and continuing education and for improvement

of its quality level due to the growing requirements towards the consumer and the producer of material and spiritual values. These days, not only the commonality of language, but also the single principle of organizing the information infrastructure of society is crucial for preservation of the nation as a whole. This is an important argument in favour of the introduction of ICT in the educational processes at all levels and by any means possible, as *an individual and a citizen thereby establishes new communication channels with the society and the state*, regardless of where he or she lives (Shailendra, 2005).

There is no alternative to ICT in solving this problem. The two fundamental principles advocated by UNESCO: “Education for All” and “Learning throughout Life” are now complemented by the third principle: “Education at the Place of Residence”, which is essentially impossible without reliance on the information and communication technologies (UNESCO, 1996).

Distance education reinforces the importance of *individual approach* to the student. Students acquire knowledge and skills through a variety of individual forms of learning – from self-study of subjects using specially designed training aids and deepening their knowledge through educational computer software to different types of active workshops (business and operating games, discussions, etc.). In this regard, the *expansion of the range of educational opportunities for an individual* is becoming notable (Dede, 1995).

Distance education gives him or her fundamentally new options, providing not only an increased amount of information, but also acquisition of new skills and abilities. Among them is the ability to freely navigate today’s databases, interact with members of the academic staff in order to achieve common and socially significant results and increase the level of intellectual development.

Taking into consideration the prospects for distance education, the author has developed quality criteria for distance learning based on the higher education quality assurance system, which operates in accordance with the ENQA Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area adopted during the Meeting of European Ministers of Education held in Bergen on 19th-20th May 2005.

Distance education could significantly improve access to higher education for secondary school graduates from the provinces. The distance education quality criteria developed by the author are included in the *Methodology for Assessing the Activities and Quality of Implementation of Educational Programmes in Educational Institutions and Examination Centres*, which has been designed in accordance with State Cabinet Regulations No. 852 on *Procedures for Accreditation of General and Professional Education Programmes, Educational Institutions and Examination Centres* of 14th September 2010 and adopted on 24th May 2011. Below you can see the two main criteria.

AREA 1. STUDY CONTENTS AND ORGANIZATION

Criterion 1. Study Programmes Implemented by the Educational Institution

Satisfactory:

- Study programme in the form of distance education (via technical and/or electronic means of communication) is implemented in accordance with the university’s regulations.

- Teachers plan the sequence of learning the study contents according to the specific features of distance education, ensuring compliance with requirements of the course standards. A relevant implementation methodology has been designed.
- There is a schedule for review sessions on-site and off-site (via e-mail and Skype).

Good:

- Study programme in the form of distance education (via technical and/or electronic means of communication) is implemented in accordance with the university's regulations.
- Teachers plan the sequence of learning the study contents according to the specific features of distance education, ensuring compliance with requirements of the course standards and the intradisciplinary link. A relevant implementation methodology has been designed for the scope of the whole study programme.
- A schedule for review sessions on-site and off-site (via e-mail and Skype) has been drafted for the whole academic year.

AREA 2. STUDIES AND ASSESSMENT OF KNOWLEDGE**Criterion 2.1. Quality of Studies****Satisfactory:**

- During the process of studies teachers use teaching methods that meet the principles of distance education.
- Study materials in electronic form have been designed.
- Electronic learning environment provides access to supplementary literature and links to sources of information.
- Tests and practical assignments for self-control have been designed.

Good:

- During the process of studies teachers use a variety of teaching methods that meet the principles of distance education. Self-assessment methods (tests and pass-fail tests) have been planned for each theme of study.
- Electronic learning environment provides access to supplementary literature and links to sources of information.
- Study materials in electronic form have been designed according to the programme. Study materials in printed form are available in the library. Video materials and video lectures are available too. Study materials are regularly updated and supplemented (if necessary or if required by the specific character of the subject).
- Virtual practical assignments can be performed during the study process.
- Tests (for intermediate control and final assessment), laboratory assignments and practical assignments for self-control have been designed.

Criterion 2.2. Quality of Learning**Satisfactory:**

- Information on requirements laid down for the studies is available in the e-environment.
- Feedback from the students is enabled. Students have the opportunity to express their views and ask questions, using electronic means of communication.

- Students are given the opportunity to interact via e-mail and Skype.
- Students may contact their teachers at certain times.
- The university monitors the regular fulfilment of the study plan (via pass-fail tests).

Good:

- Information on requirements laid down for the studies is available in the e-environment.
- Feedback from the students is enabled. Students have the opportunity to express their views, ask questions and hold discussions, using electronic means of communication.
- The information exchange system between and among students, teachers and administration has been established.
- Students are clearly informed of the ways to communicate with teachers; the necessary support can be received from teachers during the learning process.
- Students have the opportunity to visit on-site group sessions, review sessions and individual on-site review sessions.
- Students are given the opportunity to interact via e-mail and Skype.
- The university encourages students' interaction through a variety of options, such as Affinity Groups on the university's website, electronic discussion forums, etc.
- The university analyzes the e-environment visit frequency by the students and monitors the regular fulfilment of the study plan (via pass-fail tests). (Vasilevska, 2011)

Distance education quality assurance would bring this type of study to a wider public attention.

The introduction of distance education is an important factor which contributes to the use of new opportunities of high technologies in education and the "export of knowledge". It is a politically important, socially significant and economically sound fact. It is beneficial for Latvia also because thousands of the country's citizens are now working abroad. Many of them are not sufficiently proficient in foreign languages to attend university. To help these people not to lose contact with their country and have a good education on their return, it is essential to give them the opportunity to pursue higher education in their native language. It is a known fact that educated people tend to be better performers, no matter where they work.

First of all, it would be advisable to establish an *association of universities in Latvia, offering export of education*. Export of education services carried out with support from the government will lead not only to economic, but also moral and political benefits and increase the international prestige of this country.

Institutions of higher education that implement distance education are fully capable of self-financing through tuition fees paid by the students. Therefore, the question is not about extra budgetary funds, but about available loans, financial guarantees, etc. Secondly, the *students do need* financial support from the state, and this support should be provided as *tax incentives* for educational institutions which make financial investments in the development of distance education. Experience has shown that the introduction of distance education leads to substantial cost savings by reducing the expenses on transport, construction and operation of new buildings, including dormitories, and a whole range of other items.

Conclusions

The continuously pending questions are: Who to teach and how much time can be allocated to teaching? There are countries which have solved these questions fundamentally for themselves. This does not mean that all problems are solved there, yet the goal has been defined. In the circumstances of knowledge-driven economy, training should be provided to as many people as possible, as intellectual work becomes large-scale. *For Latvia, the introduction of comprehensive higher education lies ahead as a promising strategic national goal.* The use of ICT in education will help in solving this problem (Latvia's Sustainable Development Strategy 2030).

It should be noted that distance education based on ICT, while being an important factor in modernization, is associated with a number of difficulties that impede its use. Among them, for example, is the high cost of teaching aids and latest technologies: not every university can purchase them. Insufficient computer literacy of a large proportion of teachers and students is by no means unimportant. These data confirm that the introduction of distance education facilitates the students' access to new knowledge and more advanced training materials, provides training regardless of their remoteness from the educational institution and helps individualize the learning process. Therefore, in conjunction with other forms of education it promotes quality growth of the intellectual potential of students. Distance education is becoming an important part of the process related to improving the entire education sector in this country.

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