

## **The development trends of the main drivers for attracting students into the tertiary education sector in Latvia – distance learning and internationalization**

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### **Abstract**

*The European Union (EC-JRC, 2010), has stressed that higher education must change and adapt to economic and social needs, that institutional change is essential to educational innovation, and that information and communication technologies (ICT) must form part of the teaching and learning process. The second international challenge is to encourage international cooperation between institutions in order to share knowledge across borders and facilitate collaboration (Morin, 2009) and post-cosmopolitan citizenship.*

*The main research question of this paper is: the general development trends of the main drivers for attracting more students into the tertiary education sector in Latvia by means of online education and internationalization.*

*The methodology of the study includes: critical analysis of scientific and educational literature, analysis of statistical data and analysis of empirical data.*

*The relevance of the research: the authors review the intersections of the distance learning and internationalization as the optimal solutions for the critical situation in the Latvian higher education sector where supply exceeds the demand (the trend of constantly decreasing students in the highed education institutions in Latvia).*

**Keywords:** *higher education; HEIs; distance learning; internationalization; Latvia.*

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## **1. Introduction**

Rapid changes in the labour market as well as **globalisation** and the **development of the information society** have made the operational environment of higher education more complex (Jääskelä, Nykänen, Tynjälä, 2016). The **European Union** (EC-JRC, 2010), has stressed that higher education must change and adapt to economic and social needs, that institutional change is essential to educational innovation, and that **information and communication technologies (ICT) must form part of the teaching and learning** process. The second international challenge is **to encourage international cooperation between institutions** in order to share knowledge across borders and facilitate collaboration (Morin, 2009) and post-cosmopolitan citizenship (Dobson and Bell, 2006).

The dramatic decrease of the number of students in the last 10 years in the higher education institutions (HEIs) in Latvia (number of students has decreased from 129 503 in 2006 to 82 914 students in 2016, dropping by 64%) and disproportionally high number of HE institutions (58 higher education institutions for the population of less than 2 million people), makes Latvia's Government, the Ministry of Education and Science and higher education institutions to look for new ways to structure and optimize the processes in the higher education sector. Additionally, Latvia has to follow the latest trends of the HE industry worldwide, such as distance learning and internationalization, and try to develop attractive offers in these fields for local and international students.

**The methodology of the study** In this study, the following research methods were primarily used: critical analysis of scientific and educational literature, analysis of statistical data and analysis of empirical data.

The **main research question** of this paper is: the general development trends of the main drivers for attracting more students into the tertiary education sector in Latvia – online education and internationalization and what is required in order to improve their development in Latvia. One of the **research tasks** is to analyse and develop a new scheme that shows the current situation and the future development trends in the distance learning and internationalization of the higher education. The **relevance of the research**: the authors review the intersections of the distance learning and internationalization as the optimal solutions for the critical situation in the Latvian higher education sector with lack of students.

## **2. Distance learning and the use of ICT in modern education**

Distance education as one of the new and perspective forms of completing higher education increases in popularity around the world. The two main factors have led to an explosion of interest in distance learning: the growing need for continual skills upgrading and retraining;

and the technological advances that have made it possible to teach more and more subjects at a distance (UNESCO, 2002). In 2013 the European Commission launched an initiative "to set out a framework for enhancing learning and teaching through new technologies and open digital content at all levels of education." The changing learning and teaching environment encourages higher education institutions to use distance learning tools more intensively (Bierne, Titko, 2016).

The current trends in the field of distance learning involve the shift in pedagogical prospects and theoretical frameworks, while the cooperation of students underlies the student-oriented constructivist environment (Beldarrain, 2017). Today the learning process is occurring as follows: the cooperation of a lecturer and students with each other takes place at a distance via the Internet, without losing the components of the learning process.

Global informatization of the society initiates the education informatization. The education informatization implies the information and educational environment establishment process. This process is directly connected with the establishment of the necessary material and technical base of the educational system, and includes the preparation of the training materials of the new generation, as well as the formation of a fundamentally new culture of teaching in the conditions of applying the information education environment. It is considered that the process of informatization of the educational system is developing in the following key areas (Figure 1):

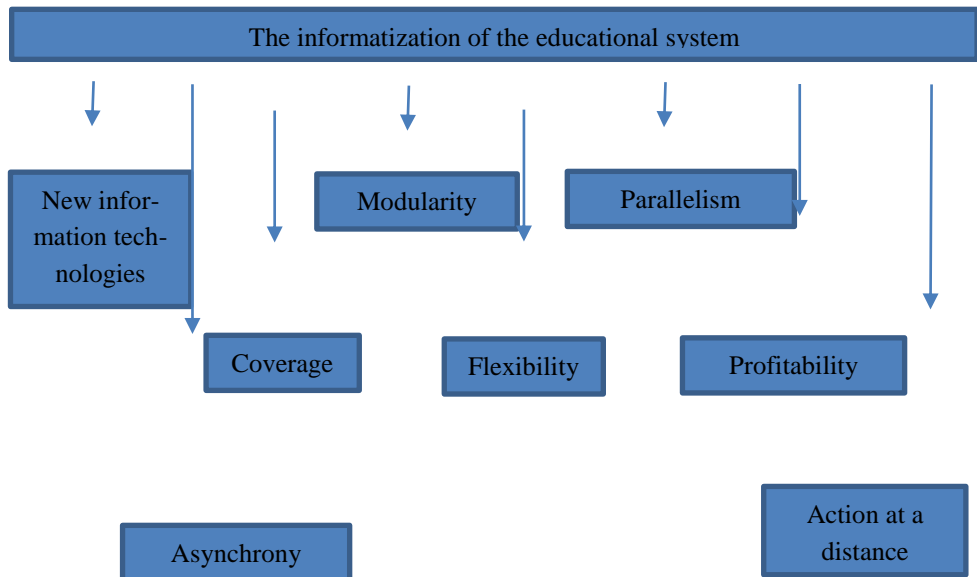


Figure. 1. The key areas of development of the informatization of the educational system. Source: authors (2018).

### 3. The Distance Learning in Latvia

The distance learning in Latvia appeared more than 12 years ago and successfully existed on experimental basis for improving the pedagogical skills of the Latvian lecturers and preparing reports for international scientific conferences. Over the past three to five years, the situation has changed significantly. Almost all Latvian universities started using teleconferences for communication between their branches located in different regions of Latvia. The active use of the European Union funds essentially improved the electronic communication capabilities in the country.

According to the authors' opinion, it is necessary to understand the fact that this method of education does not suit all students, but only well-motivated ones. For school graduates without the previous work experience and self-discipline, it is better to study full-time under the supervision of experienced lecturers, attending classes every day at an university. Distance form of learning requires the certain self-sufficiency and time management skills.

The distance learning system should include four main components, which are shown in Figure 2 below.

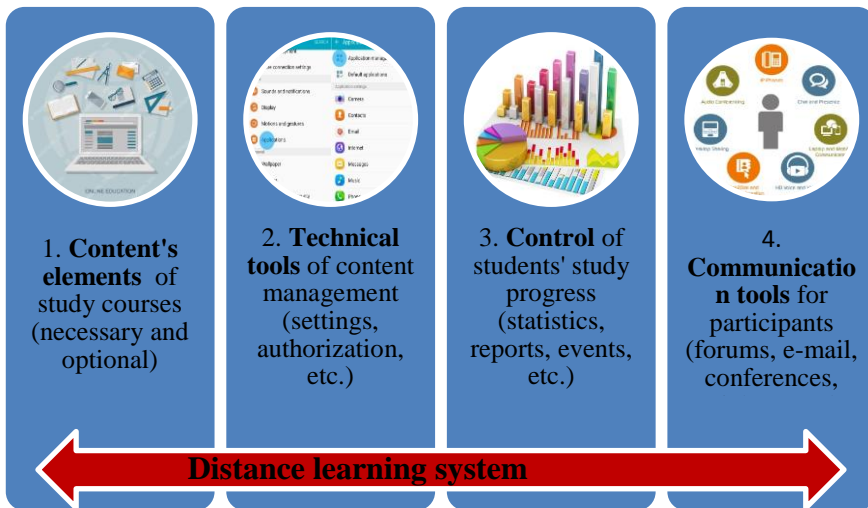


Figure 2. Main components of the distance learning system. Source: authors (2018).

According to the authors' conclusions inspired by the experts presentations at CEEMAN conference in Bled, Slovenia in December 2017, the following components will become important in the digital learning (Figure 3 below):

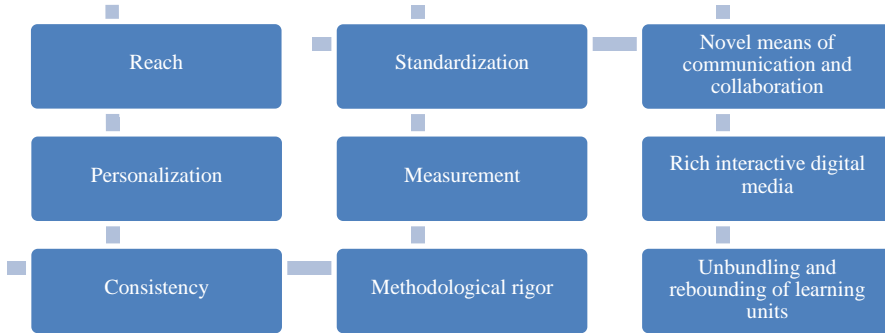


Figure 3. The future most important components in the digital space. Source: authors (2018).

As the outcome of the research, the authors of the work suggest the following principles of distance learning at the level of each course:

1. Separate the technical, factual, mechanistic components and deliver them online via new-style instructions and assessment tools.
2. Maintain the consistent quality and measurement of the attainment.
3. Focus on face-to-face sessions exclusively on experiential learning: project work, games, simulations, debates, etc.:
  - a. Make contact hours more engaging and memorable, more satisfying for both students and academic staff.
  - b. Autonomous, self-directed learning.
  - c. Faculty as coach.
4. Free up to 30%-50% of programme faculty hours:
  - a. Reinvest in more experimental learning.
  - b. Add more students (class sections).
  - c. Direct to faculty research.
5. Adjust to Full-Time, Part-Time, Modular, or Distance formats.

According to Vasilevska et. al. (2017) the distance education model in Latvia at the current stage of development remains not fully demanded. However, according to the same authors, there is evidence that full-time students are willing to have their education supplemented with up-to-date teaching and learning methods, using information technologies (Vasilevska, Rivza, Pivac, 2017). Despite the need for improvement, the future of distance learning in Latvia seems bright. Increasing numbers of students enrolling in distance learning classes underscore the need for comprehensive and thoughtful evolution of distance education if it is to become the educational model of the future (Harnar, et al., 2000).

#### **4. Internationalization of HEIs in Latvia**

As per the Ministry of Education and Science of Latvia (2016), since 2006-2007, when the number of local students started to decrease, **the percentage of international students in Latvia raised from 1 % in 2006-2008 to 10% and reached the number of 8 137 students with large potential and tendency to increase every year.**

The internationalization of study programmes has for years been perceived as one of the basic factors of development of higher education institutions (Deardorff, Wit, & Heyl, 2012; Churski, et al., 2017). As per Jensen and Thøgersen 2011:19, the more international students, the higher the quality of education. In addition, internationalization, either abroad or at home, is almost automatically considered to improve students' language and cultural skills and provide them with better opportunities in the labour market (Coleman 2006: 5, Lam and Wächter 2014: 18, Saarinen and Nikula 2013: 139). Moreover, internationalisation is crucial as it brings in new students desperately needed for improving the bleak demographic outlook of many European countries (Hazelkorn 2011), including Latvia. Therefore, this makes internationalisation largely a matter of economics.

However, it is not always a manifestation of the actual measures taken, often remaining in the sphere of marketing slogans (Rizvi, 2007). Its significance grows with the advancing globalization of the world (Killick, 2015) and its consequences, including the spread of economic crises (Fortuijna, 2012). The measures taken to foster internationalization go in two directions. They involve on the one hand the organization of educational programmes increasing the proportion of foreign students (Ryan, 2013), and on the other the expansion of programmes to include various classes conducted by international experts, workshops and practical placements abroad, as well as modules or semesters implemented as part of inter-university exchanges (Lemmons, 2015; Mullens & Cuper, 2015). Of special significance for the development of those didactic innovations boosting the level of internationalization of educational programmes is the extension of the networking of university staff, with networks often starting in the field of scientific cooperation and with time growing to embrace didactic activity as well (Wakefield & Dismore, 2015). While those are the usual changes in standard development trends in higher education in advanced countries, their

adaptation and course in the conditions of the new member states of the European Union, demonstrate interesting individual features (Halangescu, 2015; Wende, 2001; de Wit, 2002; Zgaga, 2009), with Latvia being no exception (authors' comment). The implementation of such innovations is a real challenge in these states because of a lack of former experience (Churski, et al., 2017).

As result of research, the authors came to conclusions that in order to improve the distance learning and internationalization aspects of HEIs in Latvia and become a more attractive destination for the international students in the higher education industry, the Latvia's government as well as the Ministry of Education and Science and higher education institutions have to work on the following aspects:

- **Develop a common strategy and action plan for the export of higher education, providing changes in the law that foresee the full implementation of the internationalization of the higher education in Latvia, and improve consular and immigration questions.**
- **Implement required changes in faculty, curriculums, structure, processes in order to change mentality, processes and procedures from localization to internationalization.**
- **Improve policies about English language as the officially allowed language of teaching and academia in Latvia.**
- **HEIs should ally with each other in order to pool resources to be more efficient and more visible on the international higher education market.**
- **Promote and develop the marketing and advertising campaigns about the study opportunities in Latvia.**
- **Focus on face-to-face sessions exclusively on experiential learning: project work, games, simulations, debates, etc.**
- **Free up to 30%-50% of programme faculty hours by: reinvesting into more experimental learning; adding more students (class sections); directing to faculty research.**
- **Separate the technical, factual, communication tools and deliver them online via new style instructions and assessment tools.**

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