

# **E-LEARNING – A CONTEMPORARY TERTIARY EDUCATION SOLUTION IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALISATION**

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**Abstract.** Social, economic and political changes under the influence of globalisation and the economic crisis has led to migration of Latvians to other EU member states or abroad in search of better work opportunities often discontinuing tertiary education in Latvia. The lack of proficient knowledge of foreign languages hinders pursuing tertiary education. Therefore this paper looks at e-Learning as a contemporary solution for pursuing tertiary education.

The aim of the paper is to ascertain the e-learning offer in Latvia in comparison to other European countries. The reasons for the choice of e-Learning as a form of acquiring education have been explored in the paper using the statistical information gathered by the E-projects department of the School of Business. The main focus of the paper is on academic e-learning programmes offered by higher education institutions that result in the award of a professional diploma, bachelor or master's degree.

Theoretical and practical research point out that opportunities offered by e-Learning are yet to be exploited fully in Latvia in comparison to other European countries. E-learning development and management policy in Latvia lacks goal-oriented organisation. The quality of methodological materials and organisation in various institutions in Latvia differs widely.

Nevertheless as indicated by the practical research there is an increasing trend of demand for e-Learning as a form of education.

**Key words:** e-learning, distance learning, academic and professional e-learning programmes

## **Introduction**

The apparent dissolution of borders between states due in part to the virtual environment has been characteristic of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The information space is open and easily accessible from any country in the world. Only two skills are necessary preconditions – information technology skills and language skills for successfully becoming a part of the modern day society. The free labour market offers each and every member of the society the opportunity to work in any part of the world. The precondition is the competitiveness of each individual in terms of his knowledge, skills, abilities and desire to learn lifelong. A learning society is the need of the present and the future and therefore the process of internationalisation of education is becoming ever more topical and the ability of an individual to adapt to the demands of the new era is ever increasingly important. It is important to constantly further one's professional qualification to successfully compete in the labour market.

The tasks set for personal development of each individual during his lifetime in the European Commission white paper: further the employability and working life potential paying special attention to the enhancement of knowledge, skills and social abilities, foreign language skills, communication skills, skills of working in a team etc. (Kristovska, 2005).

In order to develop adult competences, ensure their enhancement to satisfy the needs of each and every individual lifelong, it is necessary to change the learning content, forms, methods and means. Distance learning or e-Learning is most appropriate for this offering the possibility of learning at any age, place or at any convenient time. The main advantage is that it is a form of studies that enables an individual to successfully combine studies and work using a study system based on information technologies (Mayer, Seufert, 2002, Mangale, 2006, Maier, 2006).

### **Research methodology**

The aim of the research is to ascertain the e-Learning offer in Latvia compared to some European countries and how the changes in the labour market and economy have impacted the demand for education through e-Learning.

The following research methods were used to carry out the research:

- Analysis of theoretical literature and sources to ascertain and compare the organisation and development of e-Learning in Latvia and Germany;
- Data gathering through a questionnaire to ascertain the reasons for the choice of e-Learning as a form of studies and to study the changes in the demand for acquiring education through e-Learning under the influence of the economic crisis and changes in the labour market;
- Data processing using Excel for closed questions and content analysis of open questions included in the questionnaire;
- Mathematical statistical methods analysing the data on changes in number of students under the influence of changes in the economy and free labour market.

The research was carried out using the statistical information gathered by the E-project department of the school of Business Administration Turiba on the number of students, student flow, trends over the various years and the survey of students. The age of student respondents ranged from 23 – 58 years. 83% of the respondents live and work abroad. The sample of the survey consisted of forty three 1<sup>st</sup> level professional higher education study programme students and sixty two students of professional bachelor programmes of the School of Business Administration Turiba.

### **Theoretical grounds of the research**

An increasing number of people are opting for e-Learning as a convenient, contemporary and sufficiently qualitative form of learning (Fernunterrichtsstatistik, 2011, Wiepcke, 2006, Maier,

2006, Fernstudium, 2011). Based on the analysis of literature and sources it could be concluded that e-Learning is an innovative form of learning based on the use of computers and the Internet in the study process thereby ensuring higher accessibility and quality of studies (Mayer , Seufert, 2002, Kokina, 2009, Wiepcke, 2006, Kristovska, Ivanova, 2002). E-Learning is widely practised in Universities and it is provided for by the accessibility to study content in a variety of forms using multimedia, compact discs, printed materials and opportunity to work on the universities' e- forums and contacting the teachers through e-mail or skype as well as in person. Studying in a web based environment, an individual independently resolves all the study tasks but has the possibility of using an Internet consultant which helps him understand the study content and resolve the tasks (Sauter , 2004, Kokina, 2009).

The memorandum on recognition of distance learning in Europe in 1991 (Position paper on distance learning in Europe, 1991) recognises distance learning as one of the most effective instruments in education and further qualification of individuals. The European Union stimulates and financially supports the development of e-Learning, however the development of e-Learning in each member state differs. For example 220 000 adults study at the Open University in Great Britain through distance learning and 600 study courses and over 250 specialities are offered (Study at the OU, 2011).

383 000 people studied part time through distance learning in Germany in 2009. More than 2 363 state accredited study programmes and modules are offered in e-Learning form in more than 316 institutions in Germany. 43% of the study programmes offered are bachelor programmes and 57% (162) are postgraduate programmes. One fourth of the programmes offered are in the field of entrepreneurship and commerce (Fernstudium Rundschau, 2011).

Germany has two administrative institutions that supervise and organise the development of e-Learning in the country: the forum "Distance e-Learning" (das Forum DistancE-Learning) and State distance learning Centre (ZFU- Zentralstelle für Fernunterricht) (Forum Distanc E-Learning, 2010).

The Forum DistancE-Learning is a professional union for the organisation of e-Learning. This union organises, supervises and popularises e-Learning in more than 80% of institutions in Germany (Forum Distanc E-Learning, 2010).

All the education offered in e-Learning form is supervised in Germany by the State distance learning control (ZFU) in Cologne. The organisation checks the quality of the study material, its content and technical support before the implementation of any new e-Learning study course. The ZFU checks the legal aspects of the study contracts to ensure they comply with the distance

learning legislation. The new programmes are supervised over a period of three years to ensure that they comply with the contextual, technical and legal preconditions (Forum Distanc E-Learning /2010).

Distance learning or e-Learning was started in Latvia in the 90's of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Kristovska, Ivanova, 2002). In accordance to the Law on Education of the Republic of Latvia, e-learning is defined as an extramural form of education (Law on education, 1999). After regaining of independence, a small group of enthusiasts developed and offered learning solutions in distance learning form. A wider research on the management of distance learning study support systems for the enhancement of competences of adults was carried out by Ineta Kristovska in 2005 underlining the fact that distance learning has proved itself to be an innovative form of adult education.

The introduction of distance learning as an innovative study form is a complex process, which requires special organisational provisions and management (Kristovska, 2005).

The term “management” in distance learning according to I. Kristovska is the organisation, maintenance and development of goal oriented (clear, concise, feasible and achievable goals), creative, open and flexible study support system using various resources (Kristovska, 2005).

The distance learning support system according to I. Kristovska definition is a complex system whose main task is to assist adults, stimulate their activity, motivate and support them to acquire the competences (Kristovska, 2005).

The School of Business Administration Turība has been implementing part time professional and academic study programmes for already 11 years based on I. Kristovska's support model. It has been proven in practice and has been highly appreciated by the students. Of course with the rapid development of information technology resources the technical support system for the study process has been modernised: the methodological learning materials and communication between students and educators in the virtual environment.

As there is a lack of an unified e-Learning organisation and management system in Latvia the quality of design of learning materials, their contents and choice of Internet technology has been left to each individual institution itself be it a state or a private higher education institution or a big or a small training centre and as a result they differ considerably in terms of quality. Most of the HEI's and colleges use separate IT elements (Internet, DVD, CD) in their study processes that are integrated with traditional forms of studies or offer several subjects in the form of modules to be acquired through a web based environment (University of Latvia, Riga Technical University, Latvian University of Agriculture, Latvian Arts Academy, Music Academy etc.) (Kokina, 2009).

Only few Latvian higher education institutions offer the possibility of studying in accredited study programmes that result in the award of bachelor, master's degree or a college diploma (School of Business Administration Turība, Baltic Business College, Vidzemes University of Applied Sciences, Law College) (Kokina, 2009).

The study programmes, content of learning materials and requirements to be met for students of distance learning or e-Learning do not differ from the traditional study forms and the only difference is the form of studies. E-learning take place through independent learning on a web based environment using Internet, computer and learning materials specially designed by the educators.

The fact that e-Learning opportunities and the desire and necessity for acquiring education through e-Learning in Latvia is increasing is validated by the fact that the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Latvia accredited the first distance learning secondary school in Latvia and the Baltics a year ago ( Matisāne I., 2010).

The opportunity to acquire secondary and tertiary education through distance learning is a very successful solution under the present economic crisis when a part of the teenagers along with their families have moved to live abroad and are unable to integrate themselves in such a short period in a different education system due to the lack of knowledge of languages and psychological problems.

## **Research results**

The practical part of the research focuses on the impact of the free labour market and the world economic crisis on the demand for education through e-Learning.

The economic crisis and the ever more increasing opportunities of gaining employment in labour markets abroad after the accession of Latvia into the European Union positively influenced the demand for e-Learning. It is shown by the statistical data for the period 2005-2010 gathered by the School of Business Administration Turība. As can be seen in the Fig. 1 the number of students over the period 2005-2010 has a growing trend.

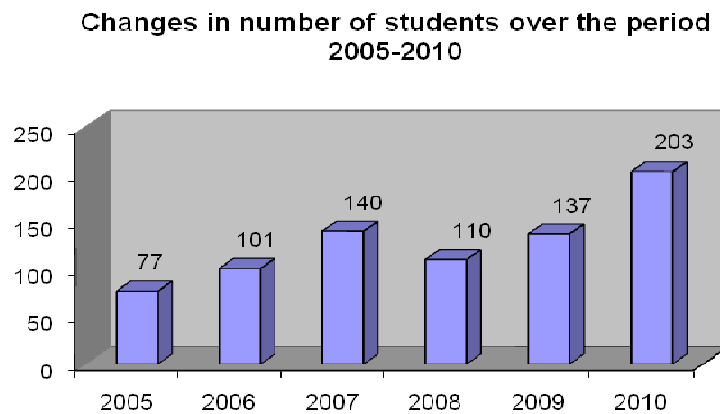


Fig.1. Changes in number of students over the period 2005-2010.

At the beginning of the economic crisis in 2008 there was a rapid fall in the number of students. This was due to the inability of students to pay tuition fees as a result of which a lot of students requested academic leave or discontinued studies. The world economic crisis also deterred a lot of students from commencing studies. The priorities of a lot of individuals changed as a result of the economic crisis. They were not ready to invest in their own personal development and chose to earn a living in the short term.

However it can be seen from the figures for 2009 that the number of students reached the pre crisis level (refer Fig. 1) when the Latvian society experienced the worst impact of the economic crisis with raise in taxes, liquidation of social guarantees and rise in unemployment. As a result of these official government policies people in masses left Latvia in search of employment abroad and choose e-Learning as the only possible form of continuing or commencing studies. Therefore there was an increase in demand for this form of studies and the levels almost reached the pre crisis figures.

Fig.2 shows the reasons for discontinuation of studies and validates the fact that the worsening of the financial situation of students was the main reason for discontinuation of studies and therefore leading to the fall in student figures for 2008.

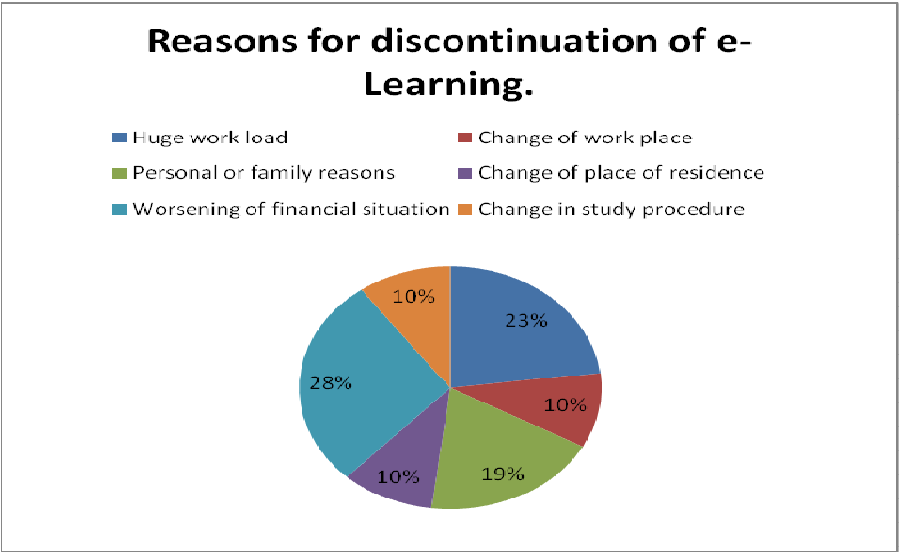


Fig. 2. Reasons for discontinuation of e-Learning.

The Fig.3. analyses the distribution of students by study year to ascertain the impact of emigration abroad and the economic crisis on the commencement of studies at various stages of studies.

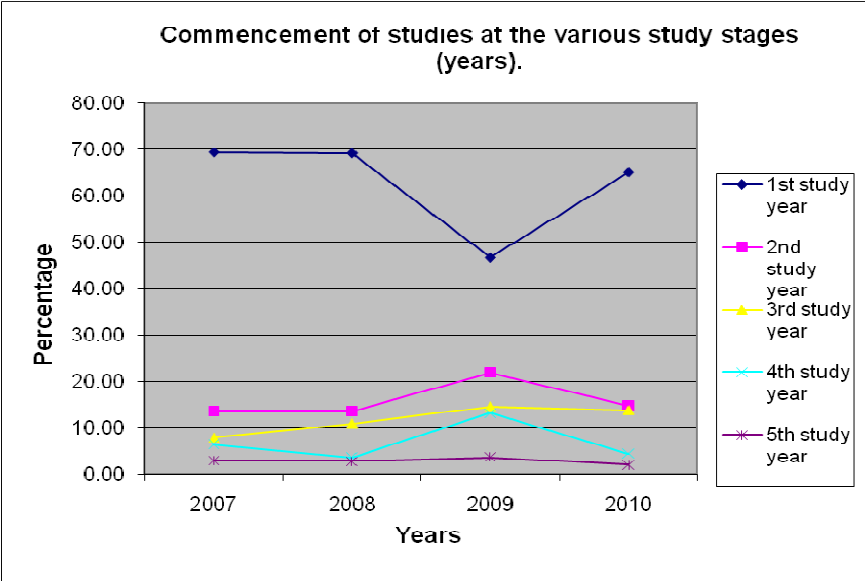


Fig. 3. Commencement of studies at the various study stages (years).

It can be seen that although the number of students in 2009 almost reached the pre crisis level, the number of students commencing studies in the first study year considerably decreased and the number of students in the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> study years increased. If before the economic crisis in 2007 majority of the students (70%) started studies in the 1<sup>st</sup> study year then starting from 2008 the proportion of these students started decreasing and the number of students starting studies in the

2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> study years increased. It can be explained by the fact that part of the students came over from traditional forms of studies to e-Learning enabling them to continue their studies while living and working abroad as can be seen from the information depicted in Fig. 4. The Fig. 4 shows the reasons for the choice of e-Learning as an appropriate form of studies.

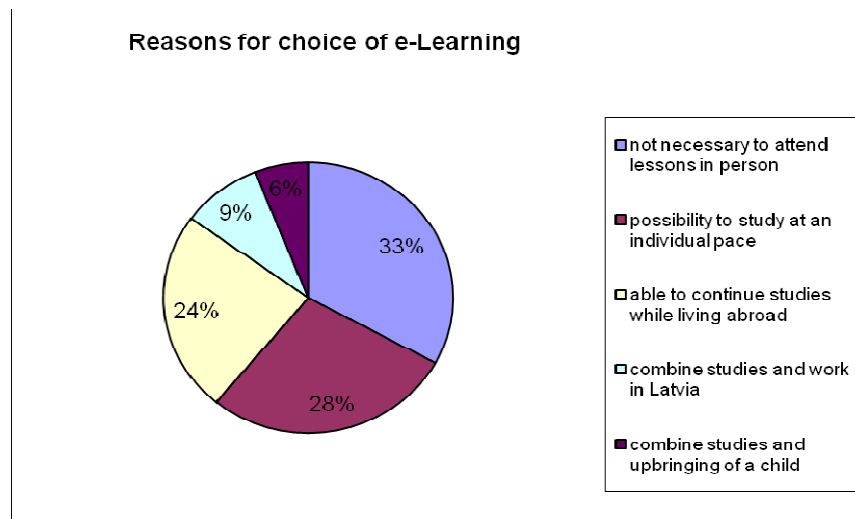


Fig.4. Reasons for choice of e-Learning.

As can be seen only 9% of students had opted for e-Learning in order to combine studies and work in Latvia. After the opening of labour markets and under the impact of the economic crisis the commencement of studies at various study stages has changed.

## Results and Discussion

Summarising the theoretical and practical results of the research it can be said that the opportunities offered by e-Learning are yet to be exploited fully in Latvia in comparison to other European countries. There is a lack of goal oriented organisation and development of e-Learning and management policy in Latvia. There is also a lack of information of this form of studies as a comprehensive form of obtaining education. Nevertheless despite the drawbacks mentioned, as can be seen from the results of the practical research under present economic circumstances the demand for acquiring education through e-Learning is on the increase.

## Conclusions

The analysis of literature sources and the research carried out shows that:



1. Distance learning or e-Learning is considered to be one of the effective means of education and further qualification of individuals in Europe;
2. Distance learning started in Latvia in the 90's of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and is considered to be an innovative form of education;
3. In contrast to Germany there is a lack of unified system of organisation, development and administration of e-Learning in Latvia as a result of which the quality of methodological learning materials, their content and organisation of studies in various education and training institutions differ;
4. The demand for e-Learning has increased under the impact of the economic crisis and free labour market;
5. The main reasons for the choice of e-Learning is the opportunity of studying without attending lessons in person at an individual pace at the same time combining studies with work while living abroad.

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