Blended learning in lifelong adult education in the aspects of covid-19 epidemical restriction

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Abstract. Digital skills are one of the most important skills that were highlighted in the times of COVID-19, including areas like landscape architecture. COVID-19 pandemic raised possibilities for blended-learning in adult education that were not used much before the pandemic. Data shows that Latvia’s inhabitants digital skills compared to the EU average is much lower and there is a need for innovative ways to attract lifelong learners to participate in skills’ advancement courses. At the end of 2020, a survey was conducted with the aim of the survey to find out the society’s self-assessment of digital skills and the need to improve them for remote working. Results showed that a high number of respondents are willing to participate in blended learning courses and are eager to develop their digital skills.

Keywords: blended learning, digital skills, human capital, COVID-19, landscape architecture

Introduction

The World Economic Forum in a statement said that by 2025, about half of the workforce would need to retrain [17]. It is noted there that most of the professions of the future do not currently exist (65% – 2030) and a large part of the current professions will be automated (47% – 2030). In order to realize the set goal, the people of Latvia will need to improve or acquire digital skills. For many professions digital skills emphasized as compulsory skill. For example, Landscape architects must have the ability to use information technologies [10] (Regulations on the Classifier of Professions, basic tasks corresponding to the profession and basic qualification requirements). It is the same for almost every profession. That is why it is important to make effort on national level.

One of the ways to implement it is to organize courses for the unemployed and professional development. National employment services have become co-responsible not only for providing social support mechanisms, but also for developing the necessary skills of the workforce.

COVID-19 pandemic brought large changes in society and had a high impact on education. James & Thériault (2020) [8] in their research on COVID-19 impact on adult education writes that pandemic lightened out inequalities that had a high impact on access and participation of learners in lifelong learning. On the other hand, Latvia’s case showed that pandemic opened new possibilities for adult learners to participate in lifelong learning. There was very high activity from people to participate in lifelong learning courses co-financed by the state. If to compare - in 2017 there were 5565 people willing to participate in courses, but in 2020 there were 19893 people (see Figure1, data from https://www.macibaspieaugusajiem.lv/). In addition, if in 2017 there were most of the courses face-to-face then in 2020 all courses offered online or in blended mode because of COVID-19.

In 2019, 7.4% of the population aged 25–64 in Latvia were involved in lifelong learning, compared to 20.2% in Estonia and 7% in Lithuania. Latvia ranks 18th in the EU according to this indicator (EUROSTAT, 2016).

The aim of the research was to find out reasons and possible solutions for learners to motivate their participation in lifelong learning and to analyse blended-learning possibilities in COVID-19 restrictions.

COVID-19 blended-learning in adult education

Blended learning is defined as planned, pedagogically meaningful integration of face-to-face and e-learning [12]. Blended learning not only enriches the learning process but it gives possibilities for learners for more active participation in the learning process [5]. Blended learning gives new learning experience for learners as well as new teaching experience for teachers [13]. Meaningful integration of e-learning tools gives opportunity for learners for personal development, as well as to develop such cognitive skills as critical thinking and conversation leading [5; 15]. Blended learning experience enriches learners’ learning as well as teachers’ teaching praxis.

COVID-19 brought a new meaning of blended-learning where offline learning is blended with online learning (not face-to-face with e-learning). There is a lot of difference if every online learning happens using videoconference tools as a replacement for face-to-face sessions. Many
Fig. 1. Number of participants in the state co-financed lifelong learning courses in Latvia [created by authors]

Fig. 2. Digital Economy and Society Index, 2020 [DESI 2020, European Commission]

Fig. 3. Comparison of human capital Latvia and EU average, 2020 [created by authors]

COVID-19 also highlighted issues related to digital skills. The poor digital competence can lead to unsuccessful blended learning/online learning experience as well as impact outcomes of the learning. To use technological tools effectively learners and teachers have to know them and have to know how they work [6; 3; 16; 17]. Usage of different technological tools depends on users’ skills and historical body [14] – it means that users use technological tools as they used to use. So, as a more advanced IT user learner is, it is easier for them to use it for learning (in this case, for blended and online learning), because learners can pay their attention more on the content not on the technology itself [11]. However, pandemic pushes develop not only digital skills of learners but teachers as well.

Digital skills of learners

The digital skills of European citizens needed for further education assessed using the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) [2]. DESI is a composite index published every year by the European Commission since 2014 and tracks the progress of EU countries in their digital competitiveness. The DESI is composed of five principal policy areas, which regroup 34 indicators overall. Five principal policy areas are as follows:
Comparing 28 EU countries according to the DESI index, Latvia ranks 18th-19th in the period from 2014 to 2018. In 2019, the DESI calculation methodology was slightly changed, but the result remained unchanged both in this year and in 2020; Latvia is still in the 18th place (see Figure 2).

In some principal policy areas, like Connectivity, Latvia ranks one of the leading places in the EU (4th place). The main problem in Latvia is a poorly developed Human capital area (24th place), which consists of two equally important sub-dimensions (Internet User Skills and Advanced Skills and Development) and six individual indicators of sub-dimensions.

Internet user skills includes at least Basic Digital Skills, Above basic digital skills, At least basic software skills, but Advanced Skills and Development includes ICT (Information and Computing Technology) Specialists, Female ICT specialists, and ICT graduates.

Comparing these four groups between Latvia and the EU average, it is Human capital that has been the biggest problem for a long time and this sub-dimension has been continuing to decline since 2017 (see Figure 3).

Latvia compared with the other EU countries by 2020, shows that it holds one of the lowest positions and the gap continues to grow (see Figure 4).

Looking in more detail at the Latvia’s individual indicators of the sub-dimension Human Capital:

2a Internet User Skills: 2a1 At least basic digital skills; 2a2 Above basic digital skills; 2a3 At least basic software skills; 2a4 Advanced digital skills.

2b Advanced Skills and Development: 2b1 ICT Specialists; 2b2 Female ICT specialists; 2b3 ICT graduates.

The figure 5 shows a significant increase in only 2b3 ICT graduates (increase – 0.7 scores) but other indicators are declining.

According to the trends shown in the figure 5, Latvia should pay special attention to the development of Above basic digital skills (2a2, decrease – 1.2 scores). At least basic digital skills (2a1, decrease – 1.7 scores), At least basic software skills (2a3, decrease – 1.7 scores), ICT Specialists (2b1, decrease – 2.9 scores). Female ICT specialists (2b2, decrease – 4.1 scores), that can be achieved, firstly, by organizing lifelong learning courses as well as possible, and secondly, involving as many people as possible. Analysing data from lifelong learning participants who

1. Connectivity;
2. Human capital;
3. Use of internet;
4. Integration of digital technology;
5. Digital public services [2].
participate in the state co-financed courses, around 40% of learners participate in courses related to digital skills (information from the Ministry of Education and Science of Latvia, 2021).

Comparing the average Internet User Skills (2a) on Above basic digital skills and At least basic software skills field of Latvia and the EU in detail, it shows that Latvia lags behind in all positions (see Figure 6).

The most decreased is Above basic digital skills (2a2) compared to EU level decrease in 2019 is 2.21 scores but 2020 is 4.48 scores. At least basic digital skills (2a1) compared to EU level in 2019 difference is 3.04 scores but 2020 is 5.12 scores. The same situation is about At least basic software skills (2a3) field where compared to EU level difference in 2019 is 3.7 scores but 2020 is 5.56 scores. Those are the most important topics that lifelong learning’ system can react more quickly and need to do proactive steps, for example, offer wide range of courses, prepare MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), collaborate with IT companies and educational institutions in the field of IT.

ICT Specialists’ (2b1) situation compared to EU level shows that differences in scores are – in 2019 are 6.67 scores but in 2020 are 10.48 scores. Female ICT specialists (2b2) scores are in 2019 scores are 3.44 but 2020 is 7.57 that pushes Latvia’s lifelong learning institutions as well as other informal educational institutions to react more quickly, for example, there is initiative in Latvia TechGirls that tries to correspond this issue and organize free of charge IT courses for women. However, such initiatives must come also from lifelong learning institutions as the main players in the professional development field (see Figure 7). Some educational institutions make effort on development of digital skills. For example, Ogres tehnikums provides an opportunity to acquire digital skills in four professional development education programs in 2021 - “Landscape Architecture, Spatial Planning”, “Garden Landscape Planning”, “Video Development - Basics of Filming and Editing” and “Working with InDesign CC in the field of printing and media technologies” in the framework of European Union funds project no. 8.4.1.0/16/I/001 Implementation of the 6th round “Improvement of Professional Competence of Employed Persons”.

Results and Discussion

According to statistical data analysis, research questionnaire was conducted.

In order to establish a lifelong learning course contribution to tackling the problem the survey has been conducted. The aim of the survey was to find out the society’s self-assessment of digital skills and the need to improve them for remote working. The main motivators for further supplementing knowledge and skills in lifelong learning courses were also identified.

The survey was conducted in November and December 2020, distributing it electronically. Respondents were mainly those who attended some lifelong learning courses in Riga remotely, but also from regional universities.
The survey involved 525 respondents, 12 questionnaires were not correctly filled in, and so the analysis was aided by only 503 questionnaires.

Means (M), standard deviation (SD), absolute and relative frequencies were calculated for descriptive statistical analysis. A total number of respondents were 503; aged 24 to 60 were interviewed. The average age of the respondent is 37.8 years (SD = 8.7). In this sample 375 females (74.6 %), with average age 37.7 (SD=8.7) and 121 male (24.1 %), with average age 37.6 (SD=42.7). 6 respondents (1.4%) did not want to indicate their gender (M = 42.7, SD = 6.8). 81.2% of respondents had higher education (BA – 38.6 %, MA - 39.4 %, PhD – 3.2 %). On the question “How do you rate your digital skills in the time of remote working?”, respondents gave a self-assessment of their digital skills. 415 participants assessed their skills. 303 respondents (73.0 %) acknowledged that their digital skills were sufficient, 100 employees (24.1 %) needed to acquire some additional skills, but only 12 respondents (2.9%) needed to acquire a large number of additional skills. This self-assessment of digital skills differs from that seen in EU statistics (see Figure 5). In general, the self-assessment of digital skills in Latvia is high, 73 %. Only about 3 % of respondents agree that digital skills need to be significantly improved.

To the question, "Would you take professional development courses again?" 358 respondents answered. 256 respondents (71.5 %) are convinced that they will repeatedly be involved in professional development courses. 88 respondents (24.6 %) are partially sure that they will participate, 8 (2.2 %) have not decided and 6 (1.7 %) have answered with no. Rather convincing or convincing in Zemgale, Latgale and Kurzeme – 100 %, Riga – 96 %, Vidzeme – 95 %. The main advantages and disadvantages of re-attending the courses are shown in Table.

**Conclusions**

Research showed that several indicators of digital skills describe Latvia’s situation as critical (in EU context), around 40% of inhabitants between years 2017 and 2020 were willing to develop their digital skills by participating in the state co-financed lifelong learning courses. Reasons not to participate...
can be different - lack of information, lack of time, problems of combining family, work and learning, bad experience in courses.

Research showed that even learners are willing to participate in lifelong adult education; there are negative aspects they see, especially in the frame of remote learning. Learners see an opportunity to learn remotely as positive and as a negative aspect at the same time. Future research must be done on reasons that brought negative experiences to learners. One suggestion is that there is a need to teach adult education teachers on remote learning methodology and develop their digital skills to make learning more meaningful and goal-oriented.

Particular attention should be paid to innovative methods of engagement to increase the number of people attending lifelong learning courses, for example:

- to create a more flexible educational offer that meets the needs and opportunities of adults;
- note a lower minimum number of learners to start group training;
- tax incentives for companies and individuals;
- grant for companies and individuals;
- training leave;
- organize courses with the state co-financing.

One more suggestion is to use the advantage of blended learning as remote learning increases people's involvement in courses, but some also want online meetings. Involvement in lifelong learning courses in the national education strategy should be a priority, because according to the data shown above; Latvia is rapidly lagging behind the EU average and, starting from 2017, is reducing its performance.

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