CHALLENGES OF THE ADULT LEARNING SECTOR IN CONTEXT OF COVID-19 IN LATVIA

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Abstract. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the way people work and learn in unprecedented ways. Also, the pandemic has moved more business activity online, increasing the need for training and prompting them to build more online trainings. In this time of crisis, a suitable response requires novel ways to enable interaction between adult learners, adult learners and teachers, adult learners and content using online tools so that no one is left behind.

In the context of regional development, online adult learning provides economic active inhabitants with wide opportunities since employees are able to attend high-quality trainings regardless the place of residence.

In context of COVID-19, during the emergency situation Latvia has fully moved to remote learning, including adult learning. Educational institutions as well as enterprises that organise trainings for adults have to implement remote learning using several online tools.

The aim of the paper is to analyse the main challenges of the adult learning sector in Latvia in context of COVID-19 taking into consideration the regional development issues.

In order to achieve the aim, following research methods have been used: scientific literature studies, statistical data analysis, interviews.

Main results of the survey: in case of Latvia, the Ministry of Education and Science of Republic of Latvia has launched several initiatives towards enabling the shift to online learning, providing recommendations, digital tools as well as good practice sharing. At the same time, there is no methodology and detailed step-by-step recommendations, how to develop the online education learning for educational institutions in Latvia. However, there are incentives to develop online adult learning via project funding.

Key words: adult learning, online learning, regional development, COVID-19.

JEL code: I25.

Introduction

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic situation has disrupted education provision all over the world, including adult learning and education. This crisis is forcing adult education institutions to rethink how education opportunities, including adult learning, are offered.

Adult learning and education is a core component of lifelong learning. It comprises all forms of education and learning that aim to ensure that adults can participate in their societies and the world of work. It denotes the entire body of learning processes, formal, non-formal and informal, whereby those regarded as adults by the society in which they live develop and enrich their capabilities for living and working, both in their own interests and those of their communities, organisations and societies (UNESCO, 2015).

With educational institutions across the world having to close as part of broader measures to curb the spread of COVID-19, information and communication technologies (ICTs) have been used more than ever before. It is therefore important to instil or reinforce competences that enable people to feel confident in a digital environment (UNESCO, 2020).

Leading surveys like the OECD's Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) show that adults with lower levels of education, lower paying jobs, and lack of or insufficient employment are least likely to participate in adult learning (OECD, 2019).

In the same time, it is admitted that adult education can be a force for connecting people who, after months of social isolation and physical distancing, may recognise more than ever the value of supportive networks and solidarity among members of society (Boeren, et al., 2020).

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Since adult students are heterogeneous regarding their previous life, work, and educational experiences, a one-size-fits-all approach is insufficient for supporting adult learners (Vanslambrouck et al., 2019). In this context, it is crucial to train self-regulating learning skills. There had been studies arguing that older adult learners have higher self-regulating learning skills (Kizilcec et al. 2017); while adult learners with masters and PhD degree reported stronger self-regulating learning skills (Basol and Balgalmis, 2016).

Nowadays, nearly 75 % of adult education is related to the workplace (Boeren et al., 2020). As highlighted by the Fourth Global Report on Adult Learning and Education, adult education is currently positioned as a way to serve economic needs (UNESCO, 2019). In the same time, it is indicated that situation in adult learning and training sector could lead to a "Matthew effect," where education often serves the already highly educated adults (Boeren, 2017). Boeren et al. (2020) also emphasise that older adults might be even harder to reach now, because their access to learning opportunities may be further restructured at a time when access to information and learning is most vital.

There are limited studies concerning the implications of pandemic to adult learning. E.g., Lopes and McKay (2020) argue that adult learning and education can play a pivotal role particularly in countries where average literacy levels are low. They explain why adult learning and education, especially the promotion of health literacy as part of lifelong learning, is necessary to enable individuals to make informed health-related decisions. In this context, adult education and learning is understood as inherent element of every national emergency strategy. In turn, Boeren et al. (2020) stress that difficult-to-reach and underserved populations face further obstacles to adult education.

Latvia, similarly as other EU Member States, has fully moved to remote learning, including adult learning. Educational institutions as well as enterprises that organise trainings for adults had to implement remote learning using various online tools. The Ministry of Education and Science of Republic of Latvia has launched several initiatives towards enabling the shift to online learning, providing recommendations, digital tools as well as good practice sharing (Ministry of Education and Science of Republic of Latvia, 2020).

Another aspect in favour of development of online adult learning process in Latvia is promotion of polycentric development that is indicated as one of the long-term priorities of Latvia (Cross-Sectoral Coordination Centre of Latvia, 2010). Riga is a centre of economy, formal and non-formal education. Recently adopted administrative-territorial reform aims to decrease the disparities between the regions and municipalities (Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development of Republic of Latvia, 2020). On the one hand, the established territorial units should provide quality services, including education, on the other hand, the new territorial units are in dire need of human capital, which could ensure the economic growth of the region. Online adult learning can address both these challenges.

The aim of the paper is to analyse the main challenges of the adult learning sector in Latvia in context of COVID-19 taking into consideration the regional development issues.

Tasks are formulated as follows:

1) to review the framework of adult learning sector in Latvia;
2) to compare the practice of organisations involved in online adult learning process in Latvia;
3) to define the main challenges of online adult learning sector in Latvia.

In order to achieve the aim, following research methods have been used: scientific literature studies, statistical data analysis, interviews.

Research results and discussion

In this section, the analysis of the adult learning sector is provided.

1. Adult learning sector in Latvia – state of the art

According to Education Law of Republic of Latvia, adult education is a multi-dimensional educational process of persons which ensures the development of the individual and his or her ability to compete in the labour market during the lifetime of a person. It may be offered in formal and non-formal educational programmes. In addition, non-formal adult education programmes shall lay down the content of such education and the conformity thereof with the interests of the State and employers, as well as individual development, and adults have the right to undertake the completion of such programmes throughout their lives regardless of the previous education. Educational institutions the tasks of which include implementation of adult education programmes are entitled to implement non-formal adult education programes without obtaining a licence, but other legal and natural persons which are not registered in the Register of Educational Institutions - after receipt of a licence from a local government (Education Law of Republic of Latvia, 1998).

According to recent available data from the Register of Educational Institutions (March, 2021) there are 100 accredited continuing professional education and development educational institutions. In the same time, there are 26 accredited higher education institutions providing adult education programmes (Ministry of Education and Science of Republic of Latvia, 2021). As it can be seen from Fig. 1, most of the educational institutions are located in Riga (66 %) and Pieriga region (10 %). However, there are other institutions that are not registered in the Register but receive a licence from local governments delivering adult education programmes. Precise information on the number of these institutions are not summarised.
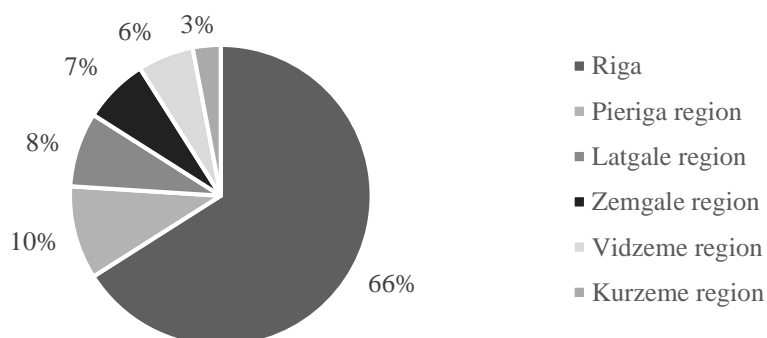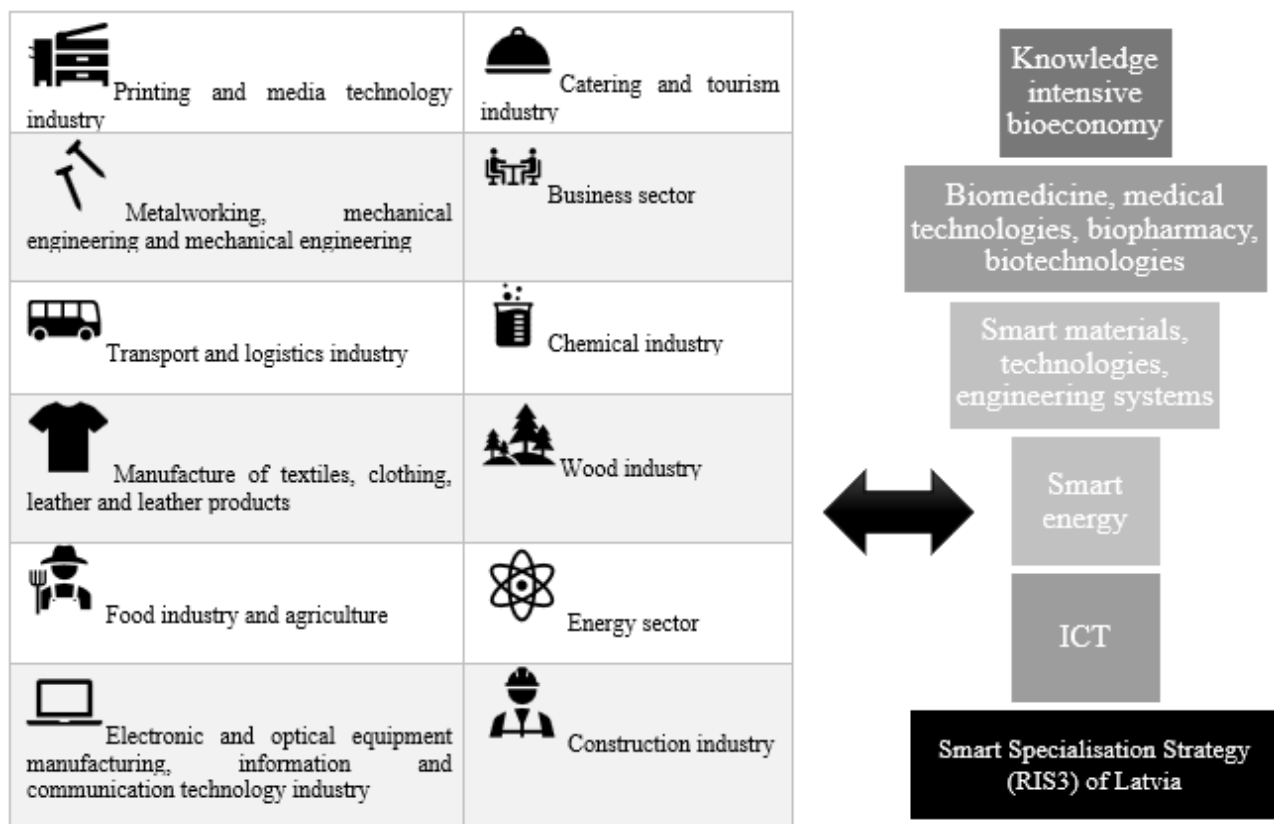

Source: Ministry of Education and Science of Republic of Latvia, 2021

Fig. 1. **Regional distribution of continuing professional education and development educational institutions in Latvia (03.03.2021)**

Analysing the scope of the provided adult education programmes, it may be concluded that they cover a wide range of offer starting from very specific professional training programmes for targeted audience to general trainings to a wider audience. However, within the scope of this research, under analysis of this study are education programmes that serve the needs of the economy in Latvia. In this context, State Education Development Agency (SEDA) has developed an initiative aiming to eliminate the mismatch of labour force qualifications with the demand of the labour market (within ESF project "Improvement of professional competence of employed persons"). In addition, as a response to COVID-19, SEDA has announced the call of proposals for adult trainings to be organised online. Within this call, online adult learning is offered by 23 education institutions in 11 economy sectors (expected number of learners – 5000). Also, over the next call announced (learning process has started in February 2021), almost 20 000 adult learners develop their competences according to 12 economy sectors, thereby ensuring the competitiveness of labour market that serves to the needs of Latvian economy. The interconnection between supported economic sectors and Smart Specialisation Strategy of Latvia is shown in Fig. 2. Also,

in following calls educational institutions will be able to organise online or blended adult learning process (State Education Development Agency, 2021). Thereby, there are incentives for educational institutions to move towards online adult learning process in Latvia.

Source: Authors' illustration based on State Education Development Agency, 2020 and Ministry of Education and Science of Republic of Latvia, 2018

Fig. 2. **Interconnections between smart specialisation areas of Latvia and supported economy sectors within adult education programmes**

In may be concluded that there is a need of development of online adult learning processes, so adult learners could develop their competences based on the needs of the regions regardless of place of residence.
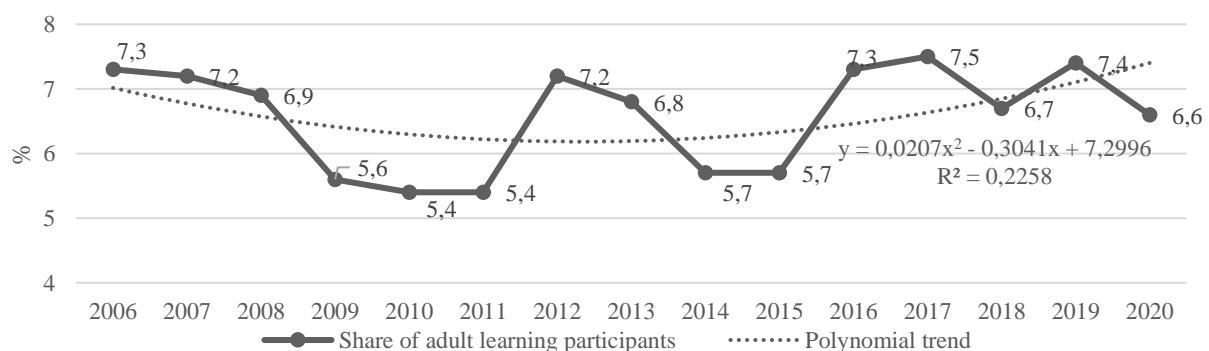
Source: Authors' calculations using databases of Official Statistics of Latvia (2021)

Fig. 3. **Share of population aged 25-64 years participating in adult learning in Latvia (Labour Force Survey) (per cent) in 2020**

In turn, analysing the overall tendency of participation of the labour force in adult learning process, the participation rate of population aged 25-64 varies from 5.4 to 7.5 % per year (Fig. 3.). Time series analysis showed that there is no certain tendency describing the variation of data in the period from 2006 to 2020

(determination coefficient shows that only 22.6 % of data fluctuations can be explained by the Polynomial trend model).

In addition, analysing the recent results of the Labour Force Survey on adult learning participants (Fig. 4), in 2020, 8.4 % of women and 4.6 % of men in the age category 25-64 have participated in adult learning process. It shows that women tend to use the possibilities of adult learning programmes more often. In the same time, from the educational perspective, the adult learning programmes are attended higher by participants with higher education.

Source: Authors' illustration using databases of Official Statistics of Latvia (2021)

Fig. 4. **Share of population aged 25-64 years participating in adult learning in Latvia by highest educational level attained and gender (Labour Force Survey) (per cent) in 2020**

In 2020, 12.8 % of women with higher education aged 25-64 have participated in adult learning process, while only 6.4 % of women with secondary and 3.6 % of women with professional secondary education have attended adult learning programmes. In case of men, the state of art is similarly distributed. 8.4 % of men with higher education aged 25-64 have participated in adult learning process; while only 3.9 % of men with secondary education and 3.1 % of men with professional secondary education have attended adult education programmes.

2. Adaptation to online learning - analysis of practice

In Latvia, the emergency situation was declared from 12 March 2020 to 9 June 2020 (Latvijas Vestnesis, 2020) and from 9 November 2020 to 6 April 2021 (Latvijas Vestnesis, 2020b). During these time periods, the completion of adult continuous vocational training, vocational in-service training and non-formal adult education programmes shall be held remotely, except for some practical and clinical trainings. Also, between the periods of emergency situation, there were specific organisational requirements, e.g., regarding the size of the groups, mixing of the groups and others.

As regards the adult education institutions, they were forced to quickly adapt the situation. However, in the same time, there are some adult educational institutions that had focused on online adult learning process before the pandemic situation. For example, online training centre "TALIZ" provide adults with online courses for more than ten years. Director of the centre Tatjana Juskane stressed that in case of the online adult learners one of the success factors is to develop **a platform** that promotes participatory process where adult participants are not passive listeners. Aspects like functionality (availability of reports, available functions, administration, etc.), necessary investments, complexity, stability of the platform
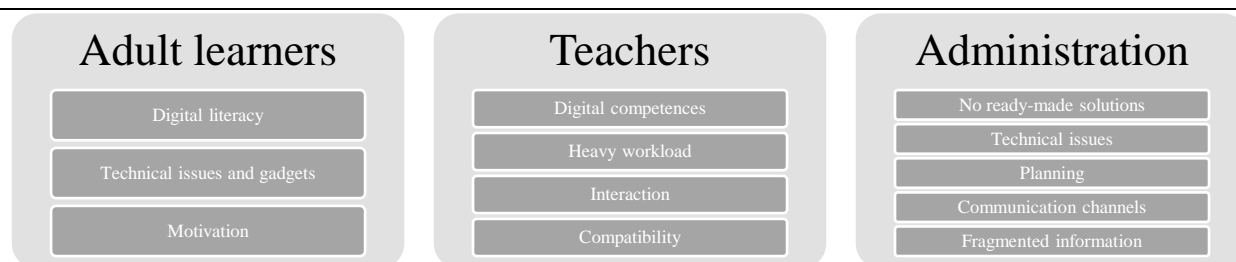
should be analysed. Another key success factor is **quality management** regarding the teachers and study materials. T.Juskane admitted that it takes from two to six months to develop a qualitative online course. Experience of the teacher is important, however, quite often experts are not aware of recent tools used for interactive learning process; thereby, the combination of various skills is crucial there. The training centre provides teachers with the methodology for developing structured and logical materials, as well as methodological and technical support in the development of teaching materials (Ministry of Education and Science of Republic of Latvia, 2015). According to the vision of the centre, main principles of the study programme and study materials are following: **topicality, usefulness, quality, compliance with regulations and interactivity**. At the same time, the centre has developed methodological materials for adult learners, explaining online teaching process and how to improve self-regulatory skills. It is highlighted that it is important to create a specific study environment, allocate at least two hours for studies (three times per week) and apply practically gained knowledge as much as possible (TALIZ, 2021).

In turn, adult education institutions that had not implemented online learning process before had to adapt to it quite quickly. As it was mentioned before, the support for EU structural funds contributed to this transformation process. The educational institution "Training Centre MP" is a structural unit of SIA "Magnetic Professional", which is engaged in the provision of professional development and lifelong learning courses for adults. In 2020, more than 2000 adult learners had participated in the adult learning programmes. Director of the training Centre Ina Gudele admitted that transformation to online process was challenging. The centre used ESF funding for development of Moodle system, ZOOM licence, trainings of teachers to improve their competences in online environment. In the same time, I. Gudele admitted that to ensure the quality of the online learning process, the centre used trial and error approach. Over the first period of emergency situation, the centre including its teachers did not have much experience in online teaching; however, by implementing regular feedback mechanisms for both adult participants and teachers, the process was constantly improved. Now, during the second period of emergency situation, it is much easier to organise a process as both adult participants and teachers are used to distance learning process and more upgraded tools are available. I. Gudele explained that key success factors for adult online learning process are following:

- **precise, timely and dozed internal and external communication** by using effective information channels;
- **continuous team development** (this concerns the improvement of competences of administrative personnel and teachers);
- **cooperation with other adult education institutions and strategic partners** (SEDA, international adult education institutions, Latvian Adult Education Association, Latvian Internet Association, etc.).

3. Main challenges of online adult learning

During the initial research, the pilot unstructured interviews were conducted with representatives of the adult education institutions to have an overview of the strategies how adult education institutions adopted to online teaching process as well as to outline the main challenges that adult education institutions have faced in context of adaptation process. Main identified challenges are summarised below (Fig. 5).

Adult learners	Teachers	Administration
Digital literacy	Digital competences	No ready-made solutions
Technical issues and gadgets	Heavy workload	Technical issues
Motivation	Interaction	Planning
	Compatibility	Communication channels
		Fragmented information

Source: Authors' illustration using the results of expert interviews

Fig. 5. **Main challenges of adult learning sector during the pandemic situation**

All challenges were categorised in four groups according to perspective of adult learners, teachers and administration. Considering that adult learners are heterogenous, the digital literacy of the learners differs. The same refers to the self-motivation and technical equipment. In turn, teachers are facing heavy workload due to the fact that they have to adapt all study materials to online mode and improve their competences to develop a qualitative content. In addition, depending on the content, teachers find it difficult to adapt their teaching methodologies to online environment. In the same time, administrations of the adult education institutions face the situation that there are no ready-made solutions or practice available that could be adopted by the institution regarding online adult learning processes. In addition, there is fragmented information available from public institutions. Thereby, the administrations go through trial-and-error process and spend much time on planning and communication processes.

As the next step of the research will be a development of the questionnaire for adult education institution to analyse more in details the challenges that they have faced in context of pandemic situation and online learning process. Based on the results of the survey, the recommendations will be formulated towards improvement of implementation of online adult learning process.

Conclusions, proposals, recommendations

1) COVID-19 has strongly affected the adult learning sector in Latvia. During the period of emergency situation, adult education institutions had to adapt their programmes to online mode. In the same time, the EU structural funds support was available to the institutions to implement this transition. However, adult education institutions admitted that public authorities did not provide any ready-made solution, methodologies or good practice how to ensure the transition to online learning sector in the most efficient way.

2) The analysis of the adult learning sector showed that the number of adult learning institutions and higher education institutions that provide adult education programmes is significant. In the same time, most of these institutions are located in Riga. Thereby, it may be concluded that online adult programmes promote the strengthening the competences of regions as there are no obstacles to participate in the education process related to the distance. In addition, there is developed support mechanism funded by the EU structural funds for the adult learning programmes that serves most important economic sectors. This leads to the conclusion that online adult learning programmes also serve the needs of the regions for development.

3) Pilot expert interviews showed that the main challenges regarding the transition to online mode are following: no ready-made solutions, heavy workload and intensive planning process, limitations regarding the information and communication channels and technologies. In the same time, from the perspective of the adult learners, main challenges are regarding the digital skills, motivation and technologies. Teachers also have to deal with heavy workload, due to the adaptation of the study materials to the online mode, continuous improvement of their digital skills.

4) Taking into consideration preliminary results of the research on main challenges of adult learning sector, the recommendations could focus on actions to provide adult education institutions with ready-made solutions, summary of good practice and methodologies that adult education institutions could apply to ensure implementation of online adult learning process in the most efficient way.

Acknowledgements

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