

THE DEVELOPMENT OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN LATVIA (1991–2004): HISTORICAL CONTEXT, METHODOLOGY AND COMPARISON WITH TRADITIONAL EDUCATION

Ieva Kalniņa¹

¹University of Latvia, Latvia

ABSTRACT

In the early 1990s, Latvia underwent significant political and social changes that also impacted the field of education. This article analyzes the overall development of the concept of distance education in Latvia from 1991 to 2004, highlighting its historical, socio-political context, teaching methodologies, use of technology, accessibility and flexibility, as well as challenges associated with quality assurance. It compares the distance education system of that period to the traditional face-to-face learning environment to better understand how the characteristics of these new educational forms influenced the learning process. Key findings indicate that although international initiatives and governmental support, particularly in collaboration with European Union programs, initiated the expansion of distance education, limited resources and uneven technological infrastructure hindered rapid development. Despite these challenges, distance education in Latvia offered opportunities for students who needed to balance professional or personal responsibilities with academic pursuits, thereby expanding access to education for various social groups, including those in remote regions or with special needs. Over time, the emergence of internet-based tools began to shift the focus from purely correspondence models to a more interactive, technology-driven approach, not only within European Union member states but also in Latvia. However, quality assurance and public trust remained critical areas of concern. This study's historical perspective highlights the early successes and setbacks that continue to inform the evolution of distance education in Latvia, emphasizing the ongoing necessity of thorough support systems, accreditation and quality assessment mechanisms, and strategic resource allocation for ensuring long-term sustainability and effectiveness.

Keywords: *distance education, educational reforms, technology in education, educational accessibility, quality of education, pedagogical innovations*

Introduction

In the 21st century, distance education has become a significant alternative to traditional schooling, particularly as its popularity has grown over the last few decades. In

Latvia, this trend is evident not only due to pandemic circumstances but also in official statistics. Between 2021 and 2024, the number of students choosing distance programs in secondary school has nearly doubled (Ministry of Education and Science, 2021–2024). Also, there are 28 college-level programs, 10 bachelor's programs, 11 professional bachelor's programs, 12 master's programs, 8 professional master's programs, and 7 doctoral programs offered in Latvia that students can complete through distance learning (NIID, LV, n.d.).

At the same time, concerns have been raised regarding educational quality and effectiveness of this type of education compared to traditional schooling. Data analysis by Latvian Television (LTV) indicates lower exam results in distance education schools, which highlights the necessity for improvement in this field (LTV News Service, 2024). To fully understand this phenomenon and its impact on the education system, it is important to explore the historical foundations of distance education in Latvia. This article analyzes the development of distance education between 1991 and 2004 in Latvia and compares it to the traditional educational model, highlighting its key features and challenges, along with a brief insight into the changes in the use of technology and advancement of distance education in Europe as a whole. The aim is to understand how historical, socio-political changes, as well as pedagogical and technological innovations, influenced the introduction and quality of distance education in Latvia, and to indicate the factors that facilitated or hindered its comprehensive development.

After the restoration of independence in 1991, Latvia underwent extensive political and social reforms, including in the field of education. The new Education Law of the Republic of Latvia of 1991 established the legal framework for obtaining general secondary and higher education. However, the limited availability of state-funded university seats meant that students had to pay for their own schooling. Although the interest was evident, a way that provided young people with the opportunity to work alongside studies had to be established. The growing demand for a skilled workforce in the newly established society also stimulated the need for flexible educational formats (Bleiere et al., 2005). In the European context, distance education was seen as a key element to meet the demand for education as well as provide flexibility, as it started becoming more legitimate in 1992. All the member states, with the exception of Luxemburg, adopted some variation of higher distance education. The enrollment in higher education institutions that were part of the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities in 1990 was around 360,000 students and had tripled by 2004 at more than 1,150,000 students making it a clear alternative to traditional education (MacKeogh, 2005).

Distance education was first officially mentioned in Latvia in 1994 in a conception by the Ministry of Education and Science, which called for creating a Distance Education Council to promote adult education and retention, to address unemployment issues. (Concepts. Education and Science, 1994). Government involvement in international programs, such as the PHARE “Multinational Cooperation in Distance Education” (PHARE “Starptvalstu sadarbība tālmācībā”) project, together with 10 other countries emerging from Soviet occupation, facilitated the foundational infrastructure for distance education

in Latvia (Ivanova et al., 1999). In a 1996 interview in *Latvijas Vēstnesis* Janis Gaigals (Jānis Gaigals), Minister of Education (1995–1996), emphasized the need for educational reform to help Latvia become competitive in comparison to other European countries and join the EU. He noted, “education is a personal choice of individual, but nevertheless these people together form society”. Although the EU had no specific educational guidelines for joining, an educated and cooperative society was a prerequisite for Latvia’s membership (Ozols, 1996). As part of this reform, in 1996, Cabinet Order No. 453 for the first time included distance learning in the classification of types of educational provision (Ministry of Education and Science, 1997). Journalist Inga Pāparde pointed out the growing popularity of distance education, highlighting institutions like the Latvian Academy of Entrepreneurship and Management and the Riga Commerce School as pioneers in distance learning programs (Pāparde, 1996, 1997). The Ministry of Education and Science, in collaboration with the Latvian Distance Learning Council developed a strategy to expand distance learning and created the Latvian Distance Learning Centre in order to support organizations and educators (Ivanova et al., 1999).

Literature Analysis

Distance education is broadly defined as a formal learning process in which teachers and students are separated in time and/or space, with instruction mediated through technological or other means. Communication in distance education can be synchronous or asynchronous, and its success relies on learner autonomy as well as institutional support (Fidalgo et al., 2020).

While distance education is often associated with higher education, it has become increasingly prevalent across multiple educational levels globally. In higher education, flexibility and accessibility are primary drivers. Universities have adopted online and blended formats to widen participation, generate revenue, and respond to globalization pressures (Morris et al., 2020). For example, in the United States in fall 2021, 9.4 million undergraduate students (61%) enrolled in at least one distance education course, and 4.4 million (28%) took courses exclusively online. This represents a 97% increase in online course enrollment between 2019 and 2020 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024).

Contrary to the common assumption that distance education primarily operates at higher education level, evidence indicates its substantial implementation at the primary and secondary levels. Longitudinal data from Michigan, USA, show that over 159,000 K-12 students, representing 11% of public school enrollment, took virtual courses during the 2022–23 school year, spanning 68% of districts statewide. Elementary students demonstrate the highest virtual course pass rates, often exceeding 80%, whereas outcomes vary by grade level and implementation model. Full-time virtual schools served nearly 49,000 students through dedicated cyber or online school programs (Freidhoff et al., 2024).

Internationally, K-12 distance education has been implemented in diverse contexts. In Australia, the Country Areas Program provides online learning to 248 remote schools, while Canada's Provincial Learning Management System serves over 25,000 students. Singapore integrates e-learning into 75% of schools, including dedicated "e-learning weeks" during which students complete all lessons online from home (Powel & Patrick, 2006). By 2011, countries such as Australia and China had established fully online schools serving thousands of students annually. Australia's Schools of the Air, operational for over fifty years, exemplify longstanding K-12 online learning programs. In British Columbia, Canada, online schools offer complete programs or individual courses to 71,000 students, roughly 12% of the student population, while Singapore uses blended learning to complement traditional classroom instruction (Barbour et al., 2011). More recently, Canadian online learning programs enrolled nearly 400,000 students in the 2021–22 school year (Barbour & LaBonte, 2022).

Evidence also indicates that distance education is a viable alternative for students who are unable to attend school in person due to health or other constraints. Academic outcomes in online learning environments are comparable to in-person schooling, suggesting that digital modalities can maintain educational standards while offering flexibility (Black et al., 2022). Moreover, participation in online schools may contribute to improved health outcomes, highlighting additional benefits of distance learning beyond academic achievement (Thompson, Ferdig, & Black, 2012).

Overall, the literature demonstrates that distance education has evolved into a well-established and flexible modality across all educational levels, not only higher education. Evidence from multiple countries shows that both full-time and blended online programs can support academic achievement and provide equitable access to learning for students in diverse circumstances.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and exploratory approach, analyzing a diverse range of historical documents, legislation, ministerial concepts, newspaper articles, and prior research on the implementation and development of distance education in Latvia. The aim is to provide a broad and inclusive examination of how distance education evolved within the selected time period rather than to conduct a systematic review. Data were obtained from official state institution websites, archival sources, and publications by scholars, policymakers, and journalists (Ivanova et al., 1999; Páparde, 1996, 1997; Deķe et al., 2000).

Additionally, this study provides a comparative analysis of distance education and traditional classroom-based instruction during the historical period in question. This comparison seeks to highlight key similarities and differences in pedagogical approaches, accessibility, and policy development.

Results

Distance Education Learning Methodology and Use of Technology

The Distance Learning Handbook, published in 1999, defined the significant differences between face-to-face and distance learning studies in methodology and use of technology. Face-to-face studies were based on standard programs, with lectures and classes, rarely using technology. In turn, distance learning offered the principle of “free study”, using specially developed materials and modern technologies, promoting student independence and responsibility for their own learning process. Feedback in face-to-face studies took place twice a year, during sessions, but in distance learning it was regular, ensuring constant support for students. (Ivanova et al., 1999). The Distance Learning Consultant Handbook, published in 2000, provided practical recommendations for educators, emphasizing the need to clearly define learning objectives, relevance, and achievable results in learning materials in order to promote student interest and motivation. In distance learning, similar to the traditional learning environment, the learning process included self-control exercises and assignments to be submitted at the end of each topic. The concept of a “distance learning consultant” was also defined: unlike traditional teachers, the task of a distance learning consultant was not to teach, but to interest and guide students towards an independent learning process (Deķe et al., 2000). Programs like the Riga School of Commerce’s “Practical Entrepreneurship” delivered educational materials and assignments by mail, with students regularly submitting their completed work, in 1998 a total of 2 500 people participated in this course (Rumbēna, 1998). A similar model was used by the Dutch International Correspondence Course, where students, from Latvia, of various ages from 9 to 77 learned languages via written and audio materials. These materials were specially created to be structured and provide gradual acquisition of knowledge without a teacher present, indicating the wide availability and adaptability of distance learning (Hicemberga, 1997; Ivanova et al., 1999).

In the European Higher Education Memorandum distance education was described as having the “potential of the new technologies based on informatics and telecommunications” (Commission of the European Communities, 1991). However, while distance education theory suggested extensive use of modern technologies – computers, the internet, audio, and video materials – such resources were limited in Latvia during the 1990s because of high equipment costs and low internet availability. Therefore, course materials were frequently provided in print, and the development of interactive online options evolved slowly (Ivanova et al., 1999; Deķe et al., 2000).

In the early 1990s the use of technologies in European distance universities was minimal, with printed materials dominating, similarly to the situation in Latvia. However, this changed with the introduction of the internet into educational settings, in 1998, the first virtual learning platforms were created which provided both the opportunity to share materials in a more structured way, as well as gave students and tutors the ability to communicate more effectively (MacKeogh, 2005). Though not all European member states had the same issues with the lack of technology, for example in 1995 the University

of Iceland was able to gift some computers and training resources to the University of Latvia (Riekstiņa, 1995).

In 2000 the European Commission adopted the “eLearning: Designing tomorrow’s education” initiative, which intended to educate students about the use of technology and promote universal digital literacy. This initiative was planned to be established in the period between 2000 – 2004, and meant to encourage the member states to “rectify the shortage of skills associated with new technologies, and improve social inclusion” (Commission of the European Communities, 2001). In 1997, Moffett (1997) reported that from the point of view of the United States, the Baltics appeared to be in the lead, ahead of other formerly occupied countries, in terms of internet connectivity and use of technology. However, the development was not equal, as Estonia had made Internet connectivity a national priority and hoped to provide all secondary schools with an internet connection by 2000 (Moffett, 1997). However, in 2002, in Latvia the usage of internet in education was a regular occurrence, and Kuzmins (2002) in his article mentioned the shift to a more virtual education, even mentioning advanced tools like virtual and augmented reality which had the potential to benefit both learners in traditional classroom as well as a virtual one (Kuzmins, 2002).

Latvia’s distance learning evolved in the 1990s and early 2000s from print-based, student-centered programs to technology-enhanced education. Early initiatives emphasized independence, structured materials, and regular feedback, while limited access to computers and the internet slowed digital integration. Support from international partners, virtual learning platforms, and European initiatives gradually expanded technological use, enabling more interactive, accessible, and engaging learning. By the early 2000s, Latvia was increasingly adopting virtual education, laying the foundation for modern, technology-driven teaching and learning.

Accessibility and Flexibility

Distance education drew attention primarily for its ability to accommodate a wide range of learner needs allowing representatives of different social groups to obtain education regardless of place of residence, time resources or personal circumstances. In the European Higher Education Memorandum distance education was described as “having an extraordinary potential to contribute to education and training deriving from the freedom which it enjoys from constraints of time and place, giving it an extensive flexibility of application for use on its own or in conjunction with other learning systems” (Commission of the European Communities, 1991).

In the context of Latvia, Paparde (1996) also highlighted the opportunity to participate in seminars with representatives of other countries, promoting international cooperation which otherwise would not be possible (Paparde, 1996). Largely, however, distance education was advertised for people living in remote regions, outside of the larger cities, as well as those who for any reason had not completed primary or secondary education as it offered students who were already employed to acquire additional skills or retrain (Tabore, 1997; Deķe et al., 2000). As traditional education in Latvia was focused on

mentally and physically healthy people, distance education offered broader opportunities for young people who could not afford to study full time in a traditional setting, as well as for people with disabilities, those in prisons, or those needing professional development (Ivanova et al., 1999; Deķe et al., 2000; Distance learning is a new and still little-known learning method in Latvia, 1998).

All in all, distance learning offered a good alternative to traditional education, also drawing attention to the problems of access to education outside large cities (Deķe et al., 2000). In addition, in 2002, the newspaper *Latvia in America* popularized the opportunities for distance learning at foreign universities, emphasizing the availability of education at any time and place. (Studying on the Internet, 2002).

However, not all reviews of distance education at that time were positive and hopeful. For example Lase (2001) highlights some of the drawbacks such as missing out on the face-to face contact with fellow students. She also emphasizes that by studying in distance education one might skip out on some crucial student activities, like participating in conferences and living in dormitories. Moreover, there is also no opportunity to join student clubs and associations. All in all, Lase (2001) concludes that while distance education offers ample learning opportunities, the Internet in the virtual world is no substitute for human contact.

In short, distance education in Latvia provided flexible opportunities for diverse learners, including those in remote areas, working adults, and people with disabilities, while also promoting international cooperation. It offered an alternative to traditional education by overcoming geographic and personal barriers.

Quality Assurance Challenges

In the European Higher Education Memorandum distance education was noted to have some critical drawbacks which included “lack of standardization and the cost of developing multimedia products; the rate of obsolescence; limited experience of use by teachers and learners; and the lack of user friendliness of packages and course delivery systems” (Commission of the European Communities, 1991, p. 24). Therefore, despite the popularity of distance education in both Europe and in Latvia, discussions arose about the quality.

A 1999 article in *Latvijas Vēstnesis* highlighted the rapid growth in demand for quality education in Latvia, with student numbers nearly doubling since 1993, but raised concerns about insufficient funding, ageing equipment, and staff, which could impact education quality (Ensuring the quality of higher education. External evaluation of the University of Latvia, 1999). Initially focused on face-to-face studies, these concerns later extended to distance learning.

In 1999, the European Union created a Higher Education Memorandum in which distance education was identified as a critical area for development, as this gave the opportunity to meet the demand of people who wanted to study while working. (MacKeogh, 2005) By 2000, *Latvia in America* analyzed challenges in distance learning, such as lower perceived knowledge quality, lack of student motivation, and difficulties in time

management. (Studying on the Internet, 2002) To address these issues, the Concept for the Development of Education 2002–2005 called for a quality assessment system of distance learning and emphasized making higher education accessible to students with disabilities and special needs, advancing diversity and inclusion. (Concept of Education Development for 2002–2005, 2002) As part of EU accession preparations, the Latvian Government collaborated with the European Commission to establish the Joint Social Inclusion Memorandum, which stressed the importance of accessible education for people with reduced mobility and mothers during childcare leave via distance learning, enabling them to use e-work opportunities later. (European Commission, & Government of the Republic of Latvia, 2003). Despite its potential to increase accessibility, distance learning faced significant challenges in quality assurance and gaining public trust.

Discussion

The historical analysis of the development of distance education as a concept in Latvia between 1991 and 2004 reveals a complex interplay of socio-political transformation, technological advancement, and educational innovation that mirrors broader European trends while reflecting unique national circumstances. The technological trajectory from correspondence-based to digitally-mediated learning exemplifies the adaptive capacity of educational systems during political transitions, with Latvia's initial reliance on printed materials and gradual integration of internet technologies paralleling the broader European shift described by MacKeogh (2005). The emphasis on democratizing education through flexible access for remote populations, working adults, and individuals with disabilities demonstrates early recognition of distance education's equity potential, aligning with contemporary research on widening participation (Morris et al., 2020). However, persistent quality concerns identified in early European and Latvian policy documents, including lack of standardization, teacher inexperience, and questions about knowledge quality, continue to manifest in current debates about online learning effectiveness, as evidenced by recent concerns about exam performance in Latvian distance schools (LTV News Service, 2024). The proactive approach to policy integration within EU accession frameworks suggests that international alignment can accelerate domestic educational innovation, yet the enduring challenges indicate that foundational issues in quality assurance and pedagogical design established during this formative period require ongoing attention to ensure that the expanded access achieved through distance education translates into meaningful educational outcomes.

Conclusion

The implementation and evolution of distance education in Latvia in the early 1990s and the first half of the 2000s mirrors national and social transformations and highlights the need for more flexible forms of education. On the one hand, the demand for continuous and lifelong learning created a favorable environment for experimenting with new

learning formats. On the other hand, limited financial and technical resources, as well as a shortage of trained instructors, hindered quick developments.

- **Pedagogical Approach:** In the 1990s, distance education in Latvia was characterized by a “free study” principle and individualized learning processes. Its major differences from traditional education included scheduling flexibility, in terms of time, place, and pace, and the greater use of technology.
- **Flexibility and Accessibility:** Distance learning models expanded educational opportunities for individuals restricted by geographic, financial, or personal circumstances, thereby contributing to a more inclusive and democratized educational landscape.
- **Limited Technological Resources:** The reliance on correspondence materials and infrequent access to modern digital tools slowed the transition to interactive online platforms, highlighting the importance of adequate funding and infrastructure.
- **Evolving Instructor Roles:** Moving from traditional teacher-centered models to those requiring “distance education consultants” and the development of structured self-study materials highlighted a shift toward facilitating independent learning and continuous feedback mechanisms.
- **Quality Assurance Concerns:** Widespread public uncertainty about the quality of distance learning, as reflected in policy documents and media coverage, highlighted ongoing challenges in establishing public confidence. The development of quality assessment frameworks outlined in national education policies represents systematic efforts to address legitimacy concerns.
- **Policy and International Support:** Government engagement in programs such as PHARE, along with EU initiatives, laid the groundwork for distance education reform; however, limited local resources and disparate regional development meant that implementation varied significantly.

These findings indicate that successful distance education development requires harmonizing national policies, funding, technological progress, and high-quality pedagogical approaches to strengthen public trust in the effectiveness and value of distance education.

Based on these historical insights, modern distance education in Latvia and beyond can benefit from several targeted approaches. Strengthening the technological infrastructure is essential for ensuring reliable internet access and bridging the digital divide, especially in remote or underserved areas. Equally important is enhancing teacher training, so educators have the skills and support to adopt interactive methodologies and remain responsive to the diverse needs of distance learners. Establishing transparent quality standards and rigorous accreditation processes will help solidify public trust in distance education programs. Moreover, inclusive and flexible course design, coupled with the use of adaptive learning technologies, will allow working professionals, students with disabilities, and others with special circumstances to achieve educational goals more efficiently.

Lastly, continued collaboration with international partners, can facilitate resource sharing, promote best practices, and maintain alignment with evolving educational trends. By addressing these key areas, contemporary distance education can build on historical lessons to offer equitable and high-quality learning experiences for all.

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