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PART-TIME STUDIES AS A SOLUTION FOR EQUAL EDUCATIONAL ACCESS IN LATVIA (1991–2004): A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON DISTANCE EDUCATION POLICY

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses the role of part-time studies in ensuring educational accessibility in Latvia after the restoration of independence, interpreting this form of education as an early approach to expanding equal educational opportunities during the post-socialist and institutional transformation period. The study forms part of a broader doctoral research project examining quality criteria for the blended learning approach in distance education at the basic education level in Latvia, focusing on the balance between educational accessibility and educational quality within contemporary education policy.

The theoretical framework is grounded in concepts of educational accessibility, inclusive education and lifelong learning, viewing non-traditional study forms organised outside full-time face-to-face schooling as mechanisms for engaging diverse learner groups in education. The aim of the study is to examine how part-time studies functioned as an instrument of educational accessibility in Latvia between 1991 and 2004 and how this form of education was interpreted within public and regulatory discourse.

The research is designed as a qualitative historical source analysis based on a systematically compiled corpus of press publications from the digital archive periodika.lv, complemented by an analysis of education-related legislative and policy documents. Sources were structured into thematic categories to examine institutional practices, public attitudes, and policy initiatives related to part-time education.

The findings indicate that part-time studies expanded access to education for working learners, individuals living in remote regions, students with special educational needs, and other social groups for whom full-time education was less accessible. At the same time, historical sources reveal a persistent tension between the expansion of educational access and concerns related to quality and academic prestige. The historical analysis provides a basis for interpreting contemporary debates on restricting distance education as part of a historically recurring educational policy dilemma between accessibility and quality, rather than as an entirely new educational challenge.

Keywords: *distance education, distance learning, education policy, educational accessibility, history of education in Latvia, lifelong learning, part-time studies, post-socialist education*

Introduction

Distance education has become a significant form of contemporary education, contributing to broader educational access, lifelong learning and more flexible participation in education. Since the mid-nineteenth century, the development of distance education has been closely linked to advances in communication technologies, evolving from correspondence courses to technologically mediated forms of study beyond the traditional classroom (McIsaac & Gunawardena, 2001; Nguyen & Sit, 2025; Urankar & Jamšek, 2022); moreover, the importance and need for distance education for ensuring continuity of learning has also been reinforced by periods of crisis and disruption, including pandemics and natural disasters (Barbour & Hodges, 2025), as well as armed conflicts (Salha et al., 2024). In the European context, the modern model of distance education was substantially influenced by the Open University approach, in which learning materials, student support systems, and flexible study organisation were developed as an integrated educational model (Tait, 2003; McIsaac & Gunawardena, 2001).

In Latvia, educational reforms following the restoration of independence in 1991 took place amid extensive political, economic, and institutional transformation. The transition from a centrally planned Soviet system to a democratic and market-oriented society fundamentally reshaped the education system, including institutional autonomy, legislative reforms, and integration into the European educational space, a process that culminated in Latvia's accession to the European Union in 2004 (Plakans, 2011; Abens, 2020; Sarv, 2020). Simultaneously, rapid technological development and labour market transformation contributed to increasing demand for adult learning, professional reskilling, and alternative pathways for continuing education.

The necessity of distance education and digitally supported learning began to emerge more clearly in Latvian educational policy in the mid-1990s, particularly within the broader discourse of lifelong learning and regional accessibility (Izglītības un zinātnes ministrija, 1994). The 1998 Education Law formally defined distance education as a subtype of part-time studies (Izglītības likums, 1998a), reflecting the gradual institutionalisation of flexible forms of learning within the Latvian education system. At the same time, public and policy discourse concerning educational quality, equality, learner socialisation, and self-regulated learning continued to shape discussions surrounding the development of distance education.

In this context, part-time studies became an important means of educational accessibility. During the historical period examined in this study, the Latvian term *neklātiene* was commonly used to describe educational practices organised outside traditional full-time face-to-face instruction and was officially translated in pedagogical terminology as "part-time studies" (Beļickis et al., 2000; Skujiņa, 2000a; Skujiņa, 2000b). However, the analysed historical sources demonstrate that the practical implementation of *neklātiene* frequently overlapped with correspondence education and early forms of distance education. Contemporary Latvian educational terminology differentiates between the two terms *neklātiene* and *tālmācība*: *neklātiene* refers to a form of education in

which learners complete most of the educational programme independently (Izglītības terminu skaidrojošā tiešsaistes vārdnīca, n.d.-a), whereas *tālmācība* (distance learning) involves independent, individually paced learning supported by specially structured learning materials and an organised learning support system (Izglītības terminu skaidrojošā tiešsaistes vārdnīca, n.d.-b). Current Latvian educational legislation distinguishes more explicitly between *tālmācība* and *nepilna laika klātiene* (extramural learning) as separate forms of education, while the term *neklātiene* is not defined in the Education Law (Education Law, 1998, Sections 1 and 8; Izglītības likums, 1998b).

Internationally, distance education has increasingly been recognised as an important instrument for educational accessibility, inclusion, and lifelong learning (UN, 2015; UNESCO, 2020). Within the European educational context, increasing attention has been paid to lifelong learning, adult participation in education, and alternative forms of learning in response to ongoing educational digitalisation (DEPP, 2020). Research demonstrates that technology-supported learning may achieve outcomes comparable to, or in some cases superior to, traditional face-to-face education when educational processes are appropriately designed and supported (Means et al., 2013; Kusmaryono et al., 2021; Sahni et al., 2021). Studies have also emphasised the importance of learner support, flexibility, and broader participation opportunities within online and distance learning environments (An et al., 2021; de la Varre et al., 2010; Picciano et al., 2012; Borup et al., 2013).

Nevertheless, recent Latvian public and policy discourse continues to reveal differing views regarding the implementation, quality requirements, and appropriate scope of distance education, including proposals to restrict its use at the primary education level. These debates are reflected in media reporting, draft legislation, and official parliamentary information (Kuzmina, 2024; Grozījumi Izglītības likumā, 2025; Latvijas Republikas Saeima, 2026; Valsts prezidenta kanceleja, 2026), as well as in publicly expressed positions of individual Members of Parliament presenting their views on such restrictions (Batņa, 2025; Grasbergs, 2025; Stobova, 2025). At the same time, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to the historical role of part-time studies in ensuring educational accessibility and to their gradual transformation into distance education within post-socialist Latvia. Historical analysis, therefore, provides an opportunity to examine how part-time studies and early forms of distance education were implemented in Latvia during the post-socialist transition period (1991–2004), how they addressed educational accessibility, and what benefits, challenges, and criticisms emerged within public and regulatory discourse.

The aim of this study is to examine how part-time studies functioned as an instrument of educational accessibility in Latvia between 1991 and 2004 and how this form of education was interpreted within public and regulatory discourse. To achieve the aim of the study, the following research questions were formulated.

- How did part-time studies contribute to educational accessibility in Latvia between 1991 and 2004?

- Which learner groups and for what purposes benefited from part-time studies during this period?
- How were part-time studies represented in public and educational policy discourse?

The study is theoretically grounded in the concepts of educational accessibility, inclusive education, and lifelong learning. These concepts are closely associated with contemporary international education policy frameworks that emphasise equitable access to quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all learners (UNESCO, 2015). Within this framework, part-time studies are interpreted as a non-traditional educational form that enabled broader participation in education for diverse learner groups during a period of significant institutional and social transformation.

Methodology

The study was designed as a qualitative historical source analysis. Following the principles of historical and documentary research, the study drew upon primary historical sources, while secondary sources were used to contextualise Latvia's post-socialist educational transformation and to support the study's theoretical and methodological framework (Cohen et al., 2018). The research material consisted of a systematically compiled corpus of historical press publications from the digital archive periodika.lv, complemented by education-related legislative and policy documents. The final corpus comprised 187 historical sources published between 1991 and 2004: 72 sources from 1991–1994, 79 from 1995–1999, and 36 from 2000–2004.

The primary search keyword used in source selection was the Latvian term *neklātiene*, which, during the historical period examined, broadly referred to part-time studies and educational practices organised outside traditional full-time, face-to-face education. As the analysis revealed the gradual emergence of distance education discourse and the increasing use of related terminology in Latvia during the 1990s, additional searches were conducted using the term *tālmācība* (distance education) to identify sources reflecting the conceptual and institutional transition from traditional part-time studies towards technology-supported forms of remote education. Only sources containing substantive discussion of part-time studies, distance education, related educational policies, institutional practices, or public attitudes were included in the analysis, while incidental references were excluded.

The collected sources were organised into thematic categories reflecting public attitudes, policy initiatives, and institutional practices. Institutional practices were examined through 68 sources, including interviews, institutional reports, descriptions of educational initiatives, and reports on study organisation. In addition, 38 school and university advertisements were analysed to identify the availability of part-time study programmes and courses across educational institutions. The analysis of public attitudes drew on a corpus of 43 opinion articles, interviews, public commentaries, and discussions that reflected societal perceptions of part-time studies. Policy initiatives were explored

through 38 laws, government programmes, educational policy planning documents and strategic initiatives related to educational accessibility and distance education.

The corpus included 25 publications from Latvian diaspora periodicals, representing 13.4% of all analysed sources. Of these, 15 concerned educational developments in Latvia, six connected Latvian and diaspora contexts, and four focused primarily on education within Latvian diaspora communities. These sources were classified according to their thematic focus rather than their place of publication alone.

The analysis incorporated principles of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), including the identification, review and interpretation of recurring themes across the collected historical materials. Thematic analysis was selected because it enables the systematic examination of recurring patterns across heterogeneous historical sources while preserving sensitivity to their historical and social context (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

To ensure consistency and transparency, the first author screened all search results using the stated criteria and conducted the initial thematic coding. The second author reviewed inclusion and exclusion decisions, particularly ambiguous cases, as well as the coding framework, category assignments, and theme interpretations. Differences were resolved through discussion and consensus, key decisions were documented, and the final themes were checked against the full corpus for coherence, distinctiveness, and grounding in the historical sources.

The thematic categories were informed by concepts commonly discussed in research on educational accessibility, distance education, inclusive education, and lifelong learning (McIsaac & Gunawardena, 2001). These concepts provided a framework for organising and interpreting recurring themes within the historical sources. Consequently, the analysis focused on themes related to educational accessibility, educational quality, institutional organisation, technological development, regional accessibility, social inclusion, professional reskilling, and lifelong learning.

The historical period from 1991 to 2004 was selected because it represents a formative phase in Latvia's post-socialist educational transformation, beginning with the restoration of national independence and concluding with Latvia's accession to the European Union (EU). During this period, the education system underwent substantial legislative, institutional, and organisational changes, including decentralisation, increased institutional autonomy, labour market restructuring, and the gradual emergence of technology-supported educational models. Education and training policies were also regarded as important prerequisites for accession to the EU (Sarv, 2020). In a broader historical context, EU accession marked the transition from the initial post-socialist transformation towards Latvia's development within the European political and educational space, while the designation of the Baltic states as post-communist countries became increasingly less applicable (Plakans, 2011). Therefore, 2004 provides a meaningful historical boundary for this study, which forms part of a broader doctoral research project on quality criteria for blended learning in distance basic education in Latvia.

Historical Context of Part-Time Studies in Latvia (1991–2004)

Following the restoration of Latvia's independence in 1991, the country underwent rapid political, economic, institutional, and technological transformation, accompanied by reintegration into international and European political structures, including membership in the United Nations and increasing integration into the European political and educational space. The education system transitioned from the centrally regulated Soviet model toward a democratic and legally regulated framework characterised by growing institutional autonomy, decentralisation, and alignment with European educational structures (Plakans, 2011; Abens, 2020; Sarv, 2020).

An important aspect of this transition involved the reorganisation of educational governance and legislation. During the early reform period (1991–1993), Latvia restored the 1922 Constitution and adopted the Education Law in 1991, which established the legal basis for restructuring the education system (Plakans, 2011; Sarv, 2020). Under the leadership of Minister of Education Andris Piebalgs, Soviet research structures were dismantled and new educational institutions, including the Education Development Institute *(Izglītības attīstības institūts)*, were established. At the same time, broader academic reforms were initiated, including the modernisation of higher education governance, the restructuring of academic degree recognition practices, and the development of master's-level studies to improve teacher qualifications (Sarv, 2020).

From the mid-1990s onwards, the direction of educational reforms in Latvia was increasingly shaped by the objective of European integration. Latvia gradually aligned its educational development priorities with European-level initiatives and cooperation frameworks, including the Bologna Process, the Lisbon Strategy, and lifelong learning policies emphasising educational quality, mobility, and teacher professional development (Plakans, 2011; Sarv, 2020). These developments contributed to the expansion of discussions about more flexible forms of education, adult participation in learning, and the broader modernisation of the education system.

Technological development became an important component of educational transformation during this historical period. In the early 1990s, internet access gradually emerged in Latvia, significantly expanding access to information within educational and scientific institutions. At the same time, Western educational literature increasingly became available through translation initiatives and materials provided by Latvians living abroad (Plakans, 2011; Sarv, 2020; Rubene & Ozola, 2020). Government policy documents, including the Latvian National Employment Plan for 2003, indicate that in 1997, a state-supported educational informatisation system was launched as part of the national investment programme. Through this initiative, schools were equipped with computer technologies and training opportunities were provided for both educators and learners (Par Latvijas Nacionālo nodarbinātības plānu 2003. gadam, 2003).

At the same time, Latvia faced substantial socio-economic challenges associated with the transition from a centrally planned economy to a market economy during the early 1990s. This transition resulted in a sharp decline in GDP, high inflation, rising

unemployment, and deterioration in living standards. Labour market restructuring and changes in professional demand increased the need for adult education, professional reskilling, and alternative continuing education opportunities. Meanwhile, privatisation processes and growing social differentiation increased the risk of social inequality, while issues related to citizenship and language policy, influenced by the large proportion of Soviet-era migrants, created additional tensions within Latvian society and the education system (Plakans, 2011).

Together, these political, institutional, technological, and socio-economic transformations created both a growing demand for expanded access to education and favourable conditions for the development of part-time forms of education. Consequently, part-time studies from 1991 to 2004 can be interpreted as part of a broader transition toward lifelong learning approaches, institutional autonomy, and the adaptation of Latvia's education system to the requirements of the European educational space, in which the increasing role of information and communication technologies also became significant.

Results

Part-Time Studies as a Flexible Educational Form

The analysed sources show that part-time studies in Latvia between 1991 and 2004 were implemented as formally structured educational programmes. However, their practical organisation often relied on combined organisational models that integrated self-directed learning with regular face-to-face assessments, consultations and intensive study periods. Initially, part-time studies largely functioned as a supplementary mode attached to full-time institutional structures rather than as an autonomous educational system. However, the diversity of institutional practices and the growing demand for flexible learning gradually contributed to the emergence of more independent and technology-mediated educational models.

In the early 1990s, part-time studies were legally and practically linked to evening education, self-education, and external examinations, especially for learners who had exceeded the compulsory school age of 15 (Latvijas Republikas Izglītības likums, 1991). At the same time, the legal framework also allowed learning outside school premises for children and adolescents in cases of long-term illness, for example, in hospitals, sanatoriums or at home, which indicates that education outside ordinary full-time schooling was already linked to accessibility, but not yet developed as an alternative form for all learner groups (Latvijas Republikas Izglītības likums, 1991). The legislation also strengthened institutional autonomy in organising the study process, which created conditions for highly diverse implementations of part-time education across different educational sectors.

In practice, part-time studies were implemented in higher education institutions, specialised secondary education institutions, evening and part-time secondary schools, and vocational technical institutions using evening study formats (*Par papildatvaļinājuma*

laikā saglabājamās darba algas apmēra noteikšanu darbiniekiem, kuri apvieno darbu ar mācībām, 1991). Thus, within the normative framework of the early 1990s, part-time studies in Latvia were defined as one of the mechanisms for ensuring educational accessibility for persons beyond compulsory school age, while also allowing diverse institutional practices in the implementation of part-time education. Beyond formal educational institutions, part-time and correspondence-based learning also appeared in various non-formal educational initiatives, including correspondence schools, diaspora education programmes and subject-specific educational programmes.

The organisation of part-time studies usually combined independent work with periodic face-to-face components. In schools, this could involve attending classes once a month for an intensive study week in order to receive assignments and complete assessments (Zandovskis, 1992). In higher education, part-time students were expected to complete a substantial part of the learning process independently, using libraries, regional consultation centres and examination sessions at the end of the semester (Ungurs, 1991). Other sources reveal more flexible organisational models, including initiatives described as "free university" *(brīvā universitāte)* operating on a part-time basis, where learners could regulate the intensity of studies more independently (Vaicāsit-zināsit, 1994). These arrangements created combined educational models in which self-directed learning, institutional supervision and periodic face-to-face assessment coexisted.

This organisational diversity also exposed uneven material conditions. Some sources show that part-time students did not always receive sufficient institutional support, premises or learning resources. In one case, students were described as studying in corridors because rooms were occupied (Dubra, 1995). Therefore, part-time studies served as a mechanism for educational accessibility, but their quality depended heavily on the institutional capacity and resources available for implementation. Educational accessibility did not in itself guarantee equal study conditions; these remained dependent on institutional capacity and support during the post-socialist transition period.

Part-time and correspondence-based learning also extended beyond formal adult education. The University of Latvia A. Liepa Correspondence Mathematics School offered correspondence-based learning opportunities for pupils from grade nine onwards (Siliņa, 1996). In the Latvian diaspora, correspondence learning was used to support Latvian language acquisition, cultural knowledge and education at different levels without strict age limitations (LNAK, 1991; Sidare, 1993; Norītis, 2001). Taken together, these initiatives extended part-time education beyond a compensatory role for adults who had not completed formal education, supporting educational continuity, talent development, and cultural transmission.

From Part-Time Studies to Distance Education

From the mid-1990s onwards, the analysed sources reveal increasing attempts to modernise part-time studies and gradually redefine them through the concept of distance education *(tālmācība)*. Public discussions described distance education as a subtype or development of part-time studies, but with a stronger modern emphasis on structured

learning materials, organised feedback and technological communication (Ivanova, 1996). At the same time, the term "part-time studies" itself was increasingly perceived as outdated or compromised in public discourse, thereby encouraging the search for new terminology and modernised educational approaches (Ivanova, 1996). International models also influenced these discussions. In 1995, the development of distance education in Latvia was discussed in relation to communication technologies and specialised methodology, while Latvia's limitations were compared with more technologically advanced foreign examples (Grunte, 1995).

The practical implementation of distance education during the 1990s extended beyond individual home-based learning. Sources describe centre-based organisational models in which specially equipped regional facilities allowed students to follow lectures delivered remotely while remaining in their own locality (Budkeviča, 1996). Similar approaches appeared in higher education development initiatives, including plans to provide access to foreign university lectures without leaving one's own classroom (Vembere, 1996). By the end of the 1990s and into the early 2000s, technological elements became increasingly visible within educational practice. Multimedia distance education courses were demonstrated at a telecommunications conference in 1999 (Rīgas Tehniskā universitāte, 1999), while in 2002 sources mention the development of video lecture cycles for higher education studies (Rīgas Pedagoģijas un izglītības vadības augstskola, 2002). At the same time, face-to-face examinations, consultations and assessments continued to function as important mechanisms of academic supervision and quality control (Diena, 2002).

Distance education in Latvia developed gradually alongside existing part-time study practices rather than completely replacing them. Independent learning, correspondence-based elements and periodic face-to-face assessments remained important components of study organisation even as technological solutions became increasingly visible in educational practice.

These organisational developments also became increasingly reflected in educational policy documents, where distance education was associated with adult education, lifelong learning and regional accessibility. The Adult Education Concept included distance education among the recognised forms of educational acquisition and emphasised the role of information and consultation centres as well as existing educational infrastructure (Latvijas Pieaugušo izglītības koncepcija, 1997). Government-level programmes similarly presented distance education as an instrument for providing educational services outside the full-time attendance model, including the long-term goal of developing a virtual university, while acknowledging that progress was limited by insufficient and expensive telecommunications infrastructure (Nacionālā programma "Informātika", 1999). The e-Latvia programme described distance education as a flexible instrument for postgraduate education, further training, and professional reskilling, regardless of age, place of residence, or social status (Sociāli ekonomiskā programma e-Latvija, 2000). Within broader European educational policy discourse, e-lifelong learning and educational technologies were increasingly associated with reducing the digital divide and expanding educational access beyond traditional classroom settings, including

through radio and television, as well as internet-based learning (Līdaka & Pilsētniece, 2001; Greiškalns, 2001). International organisations also presented distance education as a practical mechanism for expanding educational accessibility (LETA, 2001).

Overall, the analysed sources suggest that, between 1991 and 2004, part-time studies in Latvia continued to rely on traditional organisational elements such as independent learning and periodic face-to-face assessments, while gradually incorporating distance education approaches and technological solutions. The development of distance education during this period was closely associated with the expansion of telecommunications infrastructure and broader educational policy discussions on lifelong learning and educational accessibility.

Public and Institutional Criticism of Part-Time Studies

During the early 1990s, public discourse in Latvia frequently reflected sceptical and at times openly negative attitudes towards part-time studies, particularly regarding questions of prestige, educational quality and equality. Several sources associated part-time education with lower academic status and questioned its legitimacy in comparison with traditional full-time studies. One student explicitly rejected this study form by arguing that "part-time studies are not serious" (Randers, 1991). Public discourse also included ironic and degrading descriptions of "masses of evening and part-time students" (Kacs, 1991), while part-time education was at times stereotypically described as "education for housewives who simply wanted a diploma" (Millere, 1994). Such criticism extended beyond pedagogical concerns and reflected broader assumptions about educational prestige and academic legitimacy.

Concerns regarding educational quality appeared repeatedly throughout the analysed materials. Representatives of the Ministry of Education argued that during the Soviet period, evening schools had often allowed students to obtain educational documents "without knowledge", thereby creating a need for stricter quality-control and supervision mechanisms (Siliņa, 1991). Similar concerns arose in discussions about students formally remaining in part-time studies for many years, primarily in order to obtain diplomas rather than knowledge (Vizule, 1992). Other sources emphasised insufficient self-discipline and low learner motivation, which were presented as characteristic risks of part-time education and associated with absenteeism and weak study engagement (Buliņa, 1991; Dubra, 1995). Criticism also appeared at the institutional and policy level. The rector of the Latvian Academy of Culture, Pēteris Laķis, supported the idea of gradually reducing part-time studies in higher education and replacing them with external examinations, arguing that knowledge itself should be the main criterion rather than the form of study (Kalveite, 1991).

At the level of student experience, part-time studies were also described as outdated and insufficiently supported by the institution. Some students criticised the limited material and organisational support available for part-time learning, arguing that "the provision is ridiculously inadequate", which contributed to distrust of this mode of study (Elsbergs, 1991). Public debates additionally addressed unequal requirements for

full-time and part-time students, including discussions regarding the use of the Russian language in examinations and diploma theses (Čaklais, 1994). According to ethnodemographic analyses from the period, Russian-speaking students more frequently chose part-time studies (Mežs, 1993). Some sources also warned that part-time education could be misused in questionable foreign educational offerings, where the problem was perceived not in the study format itself, but rather in the lack of institutional legitimacy and the imitation of educational processes (Pilsētniece, 1998). Criticism of part-time studies thus intersected with broader debates on language policy, institutional trust, and educational regulation during the post-socialist transformation period.

Economic inequality formed another recurring dimension of criticism. Some sources argued that part-time studies could become an expensive educational pathway because students were often required to pay tuition fees while simultaneously combining employment and studies (Dreimanis, 1995; Vaicāsit-zināsit, 1994). Such conditions created concerns that educational opportunities might become more accessible primarily to financially secure social groups. Other sources, however, argued that paid full-time education could be even less financially accessible than part-time studies (Miķelsone, 1994). In some discussions, tuition fees in part-time education were interpreted as a form of "economic pressure" intended to increase student motivation (Šenberga, 1992). At the same time, attempts were made to reduce educational inequality through compensation mechanisms for teachers studying in part-time or external programmes, which were introduced as part of broader state support measures for teacher recruitment and professional development (Izglītības informācijas centrs, 1995; Miķelsone, 1995).

Overall, during the early post-socialist period, part-time studies were represented simultaneously as a means of widening educational access and as a potentially low-status form of education requiring stricter supervision and regulation. Questions related to educational quality and equality were also addressed at the legislative level, for example, by establishing that the content, volume and examination requirements for full-time and part-time higher education studies should remain equivalent (Augstskolu likums, 1995). With the gradual emergence of internet-based distance education discourse in the early 2000s, some earlier concerns persisted in reformulated forms. Criticism increasingly focused on the limited experience of the academic environment, the unequal prestige associated with different diplomas, and the risks related to learner self-motivation, even in paid study programmes (Diena, 2002). The emergence of distance education did not eliminate earlier concerns about educational quality and institutional legitimacy; instead, it recast them within new technological and organisational settings.

Part-Time Studies as a Mechanism of Educational Accessibility

Despite criticism and scepticism, the analysed historical sources consistently show that part-time studies fulfilled important practical functions in ensuring educational accessibility across multiple sectors of Latvian society. Rather than functioning merely as a secondary educational pathway, part-time studies became an adaptive institutional

response to uneven social, regional and economic conditions during the post-socialist transformation period.

Particularly positive and pragmatic attitudes towards part-time studies appeared within state security and internal affairs institutions. In these sectors, part-time studies were viewed as an efficient mechanism for rapidly training personnel, improving qualifications and professionalising state institutions while simultaneously allowing employees to continue working (Brila, 1991; Zeps, 1992; Berga, 2003). Similar approaches appeared within military education. The National Defence Academy used part-time studies to prepare volunteer commanders and personnel for the National Guard (Zebris, 1995), while the Latvian naval forces relied on part-time education to retrain experienced instructors as officers amid financial and personnel shortages (Balodis, 1996). Policy documents similarly linked part-time education to addressing military personnel shortages and strengthening national defence capacity in the newly independent Latvian state (Valsts Nacionālās drošības koncepcijas izveides pamatprincipi, 1995). In the security and defence sectors, part-time studies formed part of broader processes of post-socialist state-building and institutional consolidation.

Educational accessibility through part-time studies was equally important within the education sector itself. During the early 1990s, sources repeatedly highlighted shortages of teachers and educational specialists. Music teachers argued that eliminating part-time studies would worsen the shortage of singing teachers because this form of study enabled teacher preparation alongside employment (Latvijas mūzikas skolotāji, 1991). Other sources stressed that many part-time students were already working teachers and that part-time education allowed them to obtain additional qualifications or retrain in new subject areas (Vaiders, 1991; Pundurs, 1991). Over time, regional branches and distance education centres increasingly expanded access to teacher education outside Riga (Žukovska, 1993; Kaņepe, 1995; Budkeviča, 1996; Cipija, 1996). Some sources additionally argued that regional distance education centres could reduce shortages of teaching staff by eliminating the need to establish multiple small higher education institutions in different regions (Žukovska, 1993). In some cases, part-time studies were presented as a fully legitimate academic pathway even before equivalent full-time programmes had been established, for example, at Liepāja Pedagogical Higher Education Institution, where part-time studies were mentioned prior to the introduction of full-time master's programmes (Ozols, 1995). These examples suggest that part-time studies played an important role in reducing regional educational inequality and supporting the decentralisation of educational opportunities.

Rapid labour market transformation and economic restructuring also increased demand for flexible professional education. Sources mention part-time studies in forestry (Jakaitis, 1995), economics (Laizāne, 1992), agricultural economics (Latvijas Valsts agrārās ekonomikas institūts, 1991), business education and foreign language learning (Latvijas Biznesa skola, 1992), as well as construction, water management and melioration, land management, landscape architecture, gardening and horticulture (Klismeta, 1994; Bulduru dārzkopības tehnikums, 1994), and beekeeping (Mertens et al., 1994).

In some cases, part-time studies were described as the only realistic option under conditions of limited financial and institutional resources, for example, in film education (Rietuma, 1992). Customs administration also proposed part-time courses to rapidly prepare specialists for newly established state institutions during a period of rapid institutional expansion and shortage of qualified personnel (Gulbis, 1991). Maritime education similarly relied on part-time studies to allow working sailors to obtain higher education qualifications without interrupting employment (Zvirgzdiņa, 1991). Part-time studies became closely connected with professional reskilling and labour-market adaptation during Latvia's transition to a market economy.

From the second half of the 1990s onwards, sources increasingly linked distance education to Latvian language acquisition and the integration of non-Latvian-speaking professional groups, including employees in internal affairs, railway services, medicine, defence, and customs administration (Kvelde, 1997; Liepiņš, 1998). In these discussions, distance education was linked with broader technological modernisation processes integrating universities, media and internet-based educational initiatives.

Part-time studies also widened educational participation among groups facing barriers to traditional full-time education. Historical materials refer to educational opportunities for persons with disabilities and hearing impairments (Ungurs, 1991; Dubra, 1994; Dubra, 1995), as well as for working adults who needed to continue employment while studying (Siliņa, 1991). In prisons, part-time education was described as one of the few realistic opportunities to obtain higher education within weakly developed, financially limited prison education systems (Kalniņa, 1997). Professional athletes also pursued part-time studies either to combine education with their sports careers or to resume studies after the end of their professional sporting careers (Ķīsis, 1998; Pagodkins, 2000). For several of these groups, part-time study was not merely a flexible alternative but one of the few realistic routes to continued education.

Part-time studies played an important role in preserving cultural identity and strengthening diaspora education. Latvian communities abroad used correspondence-based learning to teach Latvian language and cultural knowledge within primary and secondary education programmes without strict age limitations (LNAK, 1991; Sidare, 1993; Norītis, 2001). In diaspora contexts, additional initiatives explored possibilities for developing part-time master's programmes connected with Latvian language teaching and translator education in cooperation with the University of Latvia (Z. D., 1994; Prauliņa, 1994). Religious and civic organisations similarly used part-time educational courses to prepare youth leaders, theology students, religious workers, and teachers in both Latvia and abroad (Černevskis & Kleimanis, 1992; Leitis, 1993; Norītis, 1992; Štauvers, 1996; Cakars, 2003a; Cakars, 2003b). Thus, part-time studies functioned not only as a mechanism of labour-market adaptation but also as an instrument for maintaining cultural continuity and social cohesion across geographically dispersed communities.

Finally, part-time educational initiatives supported school-age learners. Sources describe correspondence courses designed to prepare for olympiads and university entrance examinations, to advance subject knowledge, and to provide educational

support for pupils living outside major urban centres (Šteinfelde, 1993; Gžibovska, 1996; Norīte, 1996). Additional courses allowed learners to repeat educational content, prepare for graduation examinations and improve academic results (Latvijas Universitāte, 1991). Therefore, part-time studies extended beyond adult education, contributing to talent development and broader educational opportunities for younger learners.

Alongside the practical advantages of part-time education, sources from the late 1990s and early 2000s increasingly associated distance education with technological modernisation and the broader digital transformation of higher education. Discussions referred to virtual university initiatives, information networks and lifelong learning strategies (Dobelis, 1996; Dienas Bizness, 2000; Vitrams, 2000). Within internet-based distance education discourse, advantages were increasingly framed in terms of the ability to study at a convenient time and place, to continue employment alongside studies, to maintain access to consultants, and to reduce the psychological and financial burden on students who might otherwise need to study abroad (Diena, 2002). By the early 2000s, part-time and distance education had become associated not only with practical educational access but also with technological and institutional modernisation in higher education.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a historically recurring tension between educational accessibility and educational quality. Concerns regarding learner self-discipline, institutional legitimacy, academic standards, and educational prestige recur throughout the analysed sources and have parallels in recent Latvian debates on restricting distance education. Parliamentary and presidential materials emphasise educational performance, direct teacher support, learner socialisation, legal certainty, sufficient preparation time, and the child's best interests, while also preserving access to distance education in specific health, social, and geographical circumstances (Latvijas Republikas Saeima, 2026; Valsts prezidenta kanceleja, 2026). Media coverage, draft legislation, and publicly expressed positions of individual Members of Parliament further demonstrate that the appropriate scope of distance education remains contested (Kuzmina, 2024; Grozījumi Izglītības likumā, 2025; Batņa, 2025; Grasbergs, 2025; Stobova, 2025). These parallels provide an interpretative basis for viewing current debates as part of a historically recurring educational policy dilemma between accessibility and quality rather than as an entirely new educational challenge. Since contemporary discourse was not systematically analysed in this study, however, this comparison remains interpretative rather than comprehensive. In this respect, the findings are consistent with distance education research indicating that educational quality depends not only on the mode of delivery itself but also on the organisation of the learning process, learner support systems, and quality assurance mechanisms (McIsaac & Gunawardena, 2001; Tait, 2003).

At the same time, the analysed historical sources demonstrate that part-time studies expanded educational opportunities for diverse groups of learners, including working adults, residents of remote regions, teachers, military personnel, people with disabilities,

prisoners, athletes, and members of the Latvian diaspora. Although diaspora periodicals may have increased the visibility of themes related to the Latvian language and cultural identity, most publications in the corpus concerned education in Latvia or linked Latvian and diaspora contexts, rather than focusing exclusively on diaspora education. Overall, the findings suggest that part-time studies fulfilled several functions that are now associated with UNESCO's vision of inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all (UNESCO, 2015).

Several functions later associated with lifelong learning policy were already visible in the historical material. Opportunities for professional qualification, reskilling, continuing education, and career development recur throughout the historical materials. Although lifelong learning had not yet emerged as a central educational policy concept in the 1990s, the findings indicate that part-time studies already offered educational pathways that supported learning across different stages of life.

The findings indicate that the development of part-time and distance education in Latvia occurred within the broader context of post-socialist educational transformation, characterised by institutional restructuring, labour market adaptation, and increasing educational diversification (Abens, 2020; Sarv, 2020). Within this context, part-time studies served not only as an educational alternative but also as a practical means of addressing the social, economic, and institutional challenges that emerged during this period of transition.

The uneven chronological distribution of the corpus should also be considered when interpreting these developments. While 72 sources dated from 1991–1994 and 79 from 1995–1999, only 36 dated from 2000–2004. This difference may partly reflect changing terminology rather than declining relevance. During the later period, *neklātiene* (part-time studies) increasingly coexisted with *tālmācība* (distance learning), *nepilna laika studijas* (part-time studies), and *e-studijas* (e-studies). Since *nepilna laika studijas* was not used as a search term in the periodika.lv database, sources from 2000–2004 may be underrepresented; future research should therefore apply a broader range of historically sensitive keywords.

The study is limited by its reliance on historical press publications and policy documents, which primarily reflect public and institutional discourse rather than direct evidence of learner experiences or educational outcomes. Advertisements similarly document publicly promoted educational provision rather than its actual implementation or quality. Future research could combine historical discourse analysis with institutional archival materials, statistical data, and oral history approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the historical development of part-time and distance education in Latvia.

Conclusions

The qualitative historical source analysis reveals that, between 1991 and 2004, part-time studies in Latvia developed unevenly but functioned as a practical response to

the institutional, social, and economic needs of the post-socialist transformation period. Initially, they provided an educational pathway primarily for individuals beyond compulsory school age and for working learners. Over time, however, their functions expanded as institutions adapted this form of education to changing labour-market demands, regional conditions, and technological developments. By combining independent learning with periodic face-to-face consultations, assessment, and institutional supervision, part-time studies enabled participation outside regular full-time attendance. Regional branches, consultation centres, and correspondence-based provision further reduced dependence on major urban educational centres. Nevertheless, wider access did not guarantee equal study conditions, since the quality and practical availability of provision remained dependent on institutional capacity, learning resources, learner support, and, in some cases, the ability to pay tuition fees.

The range of beneficiaries and purposes extended considerably beyond the completion of interrupted formal education. Working adults could obtain qualifications without leaving employment, while teachers and specialists in state security, internal affairs, the military, maritime services, economics, and other sectors used part-time study for professional training, qualification improvement, and reskilling. In the context of the newly independent state, these opportunities also helped address personnel shortages and supported institutional consolidation. The historical sources document expanded educational opportunities for diverse learner groups, including residents of remote regions, persons with disabilities, prisoners, and professional athletes, whose access to traditional full-time education was often limited. At the same time, correspondence-based education supported Latvian language learning and cultural continuity within diaspora communities, whereas correspondence schools and subject-specific courses expanded opportunities for talent development and further education among school-age learners. Part-time studies therefore served professional, regional, social, and cultural purposes in addition to their original compensatory role.

In public and educational policy discourse, part-time studies were represented ambivalently. They were recognised as a necessary means of widening educational access, responding to labour-market and personnel needs, and reducing regional inequality. At the same time, they faced low academic prestige and were associated with insufficient learner motivation and self-discipline, weak institutional support, unequal material conditions, and doubts about the quality and legitimacy of education. Economic accessibility was also contested: the possibility of combining employment and education increased flexibility, whereas tuition fees could restrict participation and reproduce inequality. From the mid-1990s onwards, policy discourse increasingly connected flexible education with lifelong learning, regional accessibility, and technological modernisation. The gradual development of distance education introduced greater emphasis on structured learning materials, organised feedback, and technological communication, but it did not eliminate earlier concerns about quality and institutional legitimacy; instead, these concerns were reframed within new organisational and technological conditions.

Taken together, the findings identify part-time studies as an important component of Latvia's post-socialist educational transformation and as a precursor to the later development of distance education. Despite their uneven development and contested status, they provided important opportunities for professional training and reskilling, expanded access in regional areas and among socially vulnerable groups, and supported cultural continuity within Latvian diaspora communities. Their historical development also reveals a persistent educational policy dilemma: flexible forms of education can widen participation, but their effectiveness and legitimacy depend on adequate institutional support, academic standards, learning resources, and quality assurance. Although contemporary discourse was not analysed systematically in this study, this historical pattern provides a basis for interpreting current debates on distance education as a renewed expression of the long-standing tension between accessibility and quality rather than as an entirely new educational challenge.

AUTHOR NOTE

OpenAI ChatGPT and Google NotebookLM were used to support English-language editing, stylistic revision, selected structural improvements, and checks of the manuscript's internal consistency. The tools were not used for source selection, coding, or generating research findings. All suggestions were critically reviewed by the authors, who take full responsibility for the final manuscript.

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