# SHIFT IN DISTANCE LEARNING AND ITS RELATED ENGLISH TERMINOLOGY IN THE CONTEXT OF EDUCATION DIGITALISATION IN LATVIA

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**Abstract.** Distance education has been existing for decades; however, it has become prominent in the process of education digitalisation, and its popularity has boosted lately. In the course of time, the implication of the term distance education has been undergoing changes along with the technological developments in the sphere of education and the emergence of the Internet. As a result, such terms as e-learning, online learning, distance learning and remote learning have appeared. COVID-19 has made its adjustments in the sphere all over the world, including Latvia. Consequently, the above-mentioned distance education related terminology has been affected as well. Thus, the necessity to research the new implications of the terms has arisen. The goal of the current corpus-based research lies in the investigation of new implications of the terminology, influenced by COVID-19. To trace shifts in meaning over the last two decades, emphasising the changes brought by the current situation, such sources as research papers and online press were investigated. The data were collected and analysed with the help of the AntConc software. The results revealed that the terms have acquired new connotations and undergone shifts in their meanings. Moreover, they are used ambiguously, which has caused the necessity to clarify the distinctions and the application of stated terms. It was reached within the framework of the present research.

Key words: distance learning, terminology, Latvia, higher education, corpus

### INTRODUCTION

Numerous fields of life have been affected by the pandemic situation. Education at its different levels has not been an exception. COVID-19 has caused dramatic changes at schools and higher education institutions. The changes also affected the form of learning. In less than no time, a study process was transferred to a distant mode of learning, when neither the majority of learners nor educators had been prepared for it and were forced to adapt to the new mode of education without proper preparation and training. Nevertheless, educators managed to adapt materials and teaching methods to the remote mode of learning with the aim to continue a study process. The rapid shift to a different mode of

education resulted in the appearance of new terminology as well as changes in meaning of the existing terms in the field of education.

Such terms as distance learning/education, online learning/education, e-learning, remote learning/education and other terms related to the new format of education as well as the concept of studying at a distance have existed for a long time and all of them have implied the idea of student and teacher separation in time and/or space (Bishop, Boling, Elen and Svihla, 2020: 38), independent studies (Simson, Zvacek and Smaldino, 2019: 107), high motivation due to its interactiveness (Cleveland-Innes and Garrison, 2021: 50) and other numerous features characteristic of distance education (Simson and Seepersaud, 2019). However, these terms cannot be completely referred to the education mode implemented during the lockdown all over the world from 2020 till 2022. COVID-19 waves have led to the emergence of new terms, for instance, emergency remote learning, and cases of shift in the meaning, when the existing terms have obtained new connotations. Specifically, the terms distance learning/education, online learning/ education and e-learning/education have been used when referring to any kind of a learning mode which implies studying at a distance, for example, from home or any other place, outside education institution, including the studies from home when schools and universities were forced to change the customary routine to a different way of instruction. The multiplicity of terms, absence of clear understanding of the differences between the concepts have resulted in the fact that the terms have been used interchangeably, with no differentiation when talking about both, real distance education and remote learning introduced during the COVID-19 outbreak.

In the context of the discussed situation, the present study aims at researching distance learning terminology, namely, such most widely-used terms as *distance learning*, *online-learning*, *remote learning* and *e-learning*, concentrating on their emergence, concept behind the term and connotation development/changes. In the context of the present research the terms *learning* and *education* were used interchangeably. In order to explore the issue, the following research questions were formulated:

- 1. What is the meaning of the terms distance learning/education, e-learning, online learning/education and remote learning/education?
- 2. What changes in meaning of the terms have taken place under the influence of COVID-19?
- 3. What are the new meanings and characteristics of the above-stated terms in the context of Latvia?

Intending to answer the stated questions, theoretical material on distance learning, its development as well as the emergence of new terminology was explored. To trace the shift in meaning over the last two decades, emphasising the changes brought by the current situation, such sources as research papers

and online press were investigated. The data were collected and analysed with the help of the *AntConc* software.

The scope of the terminology related to educational technology is very wide and it continues to change and develop since new concepts in the field of education arise. Some terms have disappeared and are not relevant to the present situation any longer. The pandemic the world has been experiencing for the last two years has led to the emergence of new terms related to technologies application in education. Despite a wide variety of the terms, the present research concentrates only on four of them: *e-learning, online learning, distance learning* and *remote learning*. The decision to select the indicated terms is explained by the fact that these terms appear to be the most appropriate and frequently used lately to refer to the form of education that had been adopted in order to ensure a continuous study process in secondary and higher education institutions in Latvia.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The present part includes the definitions and characteristics of such terms as distance learning/education, online learning/education, e-learning, remote learning/education which are at the core of the present research.

The first term to be discussed is e-learning, which was introduced in the 1990s and has survived throughout decades due to its adaptability (Yang, 2020: 4). According to Clark and Mayer (2011: 8), what is known nowadays as e-learning is not new; its earlier versions have been successfully implemented as well. The concept has already been defined by many researchers in different ways; nevertheless, certain common features can be differentiated. Brown and Voltz (2005: 2) define e-learning 'as teaching and learning that are delivered, supported, and enhanced through the use of digital technologies and media'. It is also pointed out that e-learning is not solely about distance learning, it also refers to 'face-to-face [...] and mixed mode or blended delivery models' (ibid.). Clark and Mayer, in their turn, provide quite a concise definition of e-learning, stating that it is 'instruction delivered on a digital device such as a computer or mobile device that is intended to support learning' (Clark and Mayer, 2011: 7), this way, concentrating only on a single aspect of this non-traditional form of education. The idea of e-learning being delivered by means of technologies is supported by other academics, for instance, Babic (2012: 3) claims that the term implies 'learning and teaching using information and communications technology, or more broadly, e-learning technology'. Pontes, Silva, Guelfi and Kofuli (2012: 9) hold a similar view, stating that e-learning relates to the transfer of all kinds of knowledge using electronic devices for the purpose of teaching and learning. The scholars see technological advances as the reason for the widespread use of this form of instruction. However, it has to be noted that e-learning is not simply about technologies, rather it can be defined as 'an approach and

a particular pedagogy around the use of technology to support and enhance education' (Quinsee, 2012: 246). This definition is indicative of the broad notion of *e-learning* as an umbrella term that covers more than just the application of technology to learning but considers the nuances and subtleties around what that application means in practice for both learners and teachers. Thus, having familiarized with a range of definitions provided by academics at different periods of time, it can be stated that the concept of *e-learning* is quite complex and, as stated by Quinsee, exists on all levels of educational system and implies a wide range of learning activities, including the application of different kinds of gadgets, technological solutions, watching *Youtube* videos and many more. Thus, the scope of *e-learning* and what is implied by the term is very broad (ibid.).

The term distance learning/education appeared in the 1970s (Toth, 2015: 186). It implies an institution-based, formal type of education where an educator and students are separated in place and time or both of them; however, they are connected with the help of various interactive telecommunication systems (Schlosser and Simson, 2009: 1; Toth, 2015: 192; Yang, 2020: 2). There are two types of distance learning, synchronous and asynchronous. Synchronous distance learning means that a learning process takes place with the help of Web-based video systems, for example, Zoom or MsTeams. In its turn, asynchronous distance learning means that students decide themselves when and where to learn and when and where to access instructional materials (Simson et al., 2019: 9-10). Distance education is viewed as 'institution-based, formal education where the learning group is separated, and where interactive telecommunications systems are used to connect learners, resources, and instructors' (Schlosser and Simson, 2009: 1).

Distance learning possesses a number of characteristics among which there are the following ones: (1) it is institution based; (2) it implies separation of an educator and student; (3) it exploits interactive communications; (4) it includes sharing data to create learning experience (Simson and Seepersaud, 2019: 1-3). As concerns the first peculiarity, it implies that studies are conducted by a specific institution, which means that it takes place in an academic environment, and it has to be accredited. The second peculiarity, which is separation, either geographical or time, implies that an educator and students are in different locations or different time zones. The third peculiarity, interactive telecommunications, means that an educator and students are connected via different electronic media, for example, e-mail, with the aim to receive instructions and feedback. Interactive telecommunication can be of two types, synchronous, taking place at the same time, and asynchronous – at different times. The last characteristic to mention is the resources that permit a learning process to include different types of data, voice and video experience.

Distance teaching possesses a number of advantages and disadvantages. As concerns the advantages, they include flexibility in terms of both time

and space, affordability, student-centredness, interactiveness and modifiability (Simson et al., 2019: 107; Bishop, Boling, Elen and Svihla, 2020: 38; Al Rawashdeh A. Z., Mohammed, Al Arab, Alara and Al-Rawashdeh, 2021: 108; Cleveland-Innes and Garrison, 2021: 50). When it comes to the disadvantages, it is significant to mention that distant learning requires high level of self-discipline on students' side, technical issues, fewer possibilities for interaction, absence of a place where to study, delayed feedback and challenges for an educator in terms of the development of a distance learning course and their ability to adapt a study process to such type of learning (You and Kang, 2014; Edwards and McMillan, 2015; Kizilcec, Pérez-Sanagustín and Maldonado, 2017; Simson et al., 2019: 107; Bishop et al., 2020: 38; Rawashdeh A. Z. et al., 2021: 108-109).

The explosion of the popularity of the Internet in 1991 influenced the field of education. Therefore, in the 1990s, the notion of *online learning/education* was prospering. *Online learning* implies that a learning process is delivered by the web-based or Internet-based technologies, and all learning materials are displayed there (Toth, 2015: 210; Yang, 2020: 4). For this reason, the terms *web-based learning* and *networked/Internet learning* are often used interchangeably with *online learning*.

Online learning possesses a number of characteristics among which there are the following ones. First of all, it takes place only on content delivery platforms (Carhill-Poza and Williams, 2020), such as Moodle, Canvas or others. As concerns the format, a study process in online learning can be both synchronous and asynchronous (Schwarz, Barbosa, Crawford and Luck, 2021: 46). Synchronous format refers to the one that ensures classroom participation in real time, while asynchronous is the type of studies when students are separated both in time and place (ibid.: 47). Another characteristic refers to its content design. In order to keep students' attention, a variety of information sources and modes are expected to be used in online classes, among which, besides traditional means such as PowerPoint presentation, there are interactive multimedia, interactive 3D modelling (Davis and Frederick, 2020). One more feature relates to the methods that are usually used in this type of learning. According to Isaias, Demetrios and Sampson (2020: 179), they have to be aimed at a dynamic environment. For this reason, such types of work as collaboration and discovery learning are much appreciated (ibid.). Among the above-mentioned aspects, there are different ways of assessment. Assessment typically takes place with the help of different virtual platforms, such as Kahoot it, Quizlet or others.

As any type of learning, online learning has its own advantages and disadvantages. As concerns the advantages, it includes media diversity, easy navigation of study resources, comfortable communication and low cost (Yuhanna, Alexander and Kachik, 2020: 14). However, there are also a number of disadvantages, including incompatible materials, copyright issues, issues related to technological illiterateness, absence of Internet connection (ibid.: 1).

Finally, the term remote learning is to be discussed within the framework of the given study. The concept of remote learning has become especially prominent since 2020 as the only way to provide non-continuous flow of the study process. Various resources demonstrate that the term remote learning is used interchangeably with distance and online modes of learning, thus creating ambiguity in the related terminology application. Remote learning and different modes of distance learning do share certain common features, for instance, student teacher separation, students' independent work, application of technologies, nevertheless, certain differences can be pointed out. According to Ray (2020: 4), one of the major differences between online and remote learning lies in the fact that remote education is a mode of learning that is switched to when the necessity arises, for example, the case of the pandemic. Thus, all face-to-face components are transferred online with the goal to ensure a continuous study process. In this case, such factors as preparedness, available tools and learners support infrastructure play an important role (ibid: 4). The scholar highlights such a sufficient benefit of remote learning as the opportunity for students and teachers to remain connected and be engaged in the content while working from their homes (ibid.). Another distinction between remote learning and other forms of non-traditional forms of education is included in the employed curricula. Ray states that during the remote learning process no specially designed curriculum is applied, rather the existing one, developed and approved for traditional face-to-face education, is adopted; the goal of the teacher or institution is to make the remote study process "... as seamless as possible in covering the curriculum and to cause as little disruption as possible to lesson and unit flow' (ibid.: 14). Another feature differentiating remote learning from other forms of non-traditional learning relates to the role of instructors and teachers in the study process (Bozkurt, 2020; Ray, 2020; Reich, Buttimer, Fang, Hillaire, Hirsch, Larke, Littenberg-Tobias, Moussapour, Rapier, A., Thompson and Slama, 2020). To specify the role of the teacher, it can be claimed that they 'play two major roles: curating asynchronous curriculum and providing regular feedback, coaching, and support' (Reich et al., 2020: 2). Thus, the role of the teacher/instructor is of utmost importance in the remote learning process and they have to possess a certain set of skills to be able to manage remote studies in an efficient way. Technologies, as another essential component of all non-traditional forms of education, play a vital role since specifically various technological solutions allow remote study to take place in its best possible way. Nevertheless, 'availability of technology is a necessary but not sufficient condition for effective remote learning, as it needs to be suited to the context in which it is deployed. Finally, engaged learners 'whose engagement depends on intrinsic motivation, teacher and technology effectiveness' (Muñoz-Najar et al., 2021: 4) is one of the essential characteristics of remote learning.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The aim set at the beginning of the research determined the research methodology, namely, a corpus-based quantitative and qualitative analysis. Two DIY corpora allowed us to observe the prevailing definitions as well as the context of the investigated terms before and during the COVID-19 outbreak, this way, tracing the shift in meaning.

The developed corpora possess the following characteristics:

- 1) they are monolingual, since they are limited to the English language;
- 2) written, since only articles were collected;
- 3) specialised, since they are focused on specific terminology;
- 4) synchronic, since they contain texts from the specific periods, namely, pre-COVID-19 and COVID-19;
- 5) and annotated at the lexical level to ascertain the use of the terminology in the pre-COVID and COVID-19 discourse.

The corpora were created by means of such an instrument as *AntConc* (version 4.0). In order to reveal the definitions and the context the investigated terms are applied in, research papers and online press articles published in Latvia in the time period from 2003 to 2022 were selected. The corpus data were initially transferred in the format of a plain text, namely, UTF-8 format. The articles and publications containing the terms *distance learning/education*, *online learning/education*, *e-learning* and *remote learning/education* were downloaded from a wide range of online journals and magazines as well as online press sources, namely, news portals, available in Latvia. The journals and news portals were not pre-selected; the criteria of the publications and articles selection were as follows:

- 1) the presence of the above-mentioned terminology;
- 2) their relevance to the education in Latvia;
- 3) the publications in the time period from 2003 to 2022.

Overall, 50 research papers and articles were collected. As mentioned previously, to trace the possible shift in the meaning of the terms, two corpora have been compiled. Thus, Corpus 1 contains articles and publications published before the COVID-19 period, namely, in the time period from 2003 to 2020 (till March). Corpus 2 contains articles and research papers published in the time period from 2020 (from March) till 2022. The created corpora contain a total number of 214 327 tokens.

The terms were analysed applying corpus linguistics methodology: frequency lists were produced, and further the contextual analysis of the terms was conducted by the extraction of the concordance lines and examination of the context the terms are applied in.

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The analysis of the terminology used in the online press and scientific articles in the pre-COVID-19 and COVID-19 time was performed. The first step of the analysis was focused on compiling frequency lists. The results were obtained through *n-grams*. It allowed us to observe what the most frequently used terms in the time period from (1) 2003–2020 (till March) and (2) 2020 (from March) – 2022 were (see Table 1). The second step in the present research was to trace the contexts in which the terms appear and this way identify the characteristics of these types of learning/education in the settings of Latvia. The last step under consideration was a comparison of shifts in the application of the terminology, if any.

Table 1 Frequencies of the e-learning related terminology

Terms	Pre-COVID 19	COVID 19
Distance learning	240	154
Distance education	340	10
E-learning	461	112
Online learning	62	43
Online education	11	6
Remote learning	0	400
Remote education	0	9

The first terms under consideration are the ones used in the pre-COVID-19 time. Table 1 demonstrates that the terms distance learning/education were actively used before the COVID-19 crisis took place. There are 580 occurrences of these terms in the online press of Latvia and in the articles related to education in Latvia. It was ascertained that before the COVID-19 time they were used to refer only to higher and vocational education, but not schools. In the examined articles such type of learning/education is viewed as affordable, which means that it does not require very high costs. Also this mode of learning before COVID-19 is viewed as a flexible one; it means that students can adapt to a study process easily taking into account their lifestyle. In addition, the authors of the examined articles typically associate this type of learning with part-time studies, which, in its turn, are tightly connected with the previously-mentioned characteristics - flexibility and convenience. As concerns teaching approaches, it was established that this type of learning exploits a student-centred approach; educationalists take a passive role, since they are just mediators. In reference to teaching tools used in this type of learning, it has to be highlighted that it exploits a variety of e-technologies. The majority of scholars and educationalists also agreed that distance learning

definitely brings international experience, since it creates international environment. They also emphasise that when choosing this type of education, students have to be aware that it requires a high level of motivation.

The next term under consideration, which is *e-learning*, occurred in the pre-COVID-19 corpus 461 times. Before the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, it was related purely to life-long learning, which denotes that it is aimed only at adults. It is considered that one of its greatest strengths is that this type of education enables students to overcome timing, attendance and travel difficulties. The researchers also agreed that it integrates digitally delivered content, services and support; for this reason, developed digital competence is required. However, these are not the only skills that are required from students. Students' self-discipline is also highly important. It also has to be highlighted that such type of learning exploits a student-centred approach, which means that these are the students who take an active part in a study process, and an educator just regulates it.

Online learning/education appears to be the next term in the focus of the present research, with just 73 occurrences in the compiled pre-COVID-19 corpus. In the analysed articles their authors claim that this type of learning is mostly referred to informal education. They also emphasise that it gives opportunities for long-life learning. Similar to distance learning/education and e-learning, this format is viewed as flexible, since students can adapt and choose any space and time. It is also claimed that it is impossible to carry out online learning/education without the Internet. Interestingly, in the analysed articles it is used interchangeably with such terms as distance learning/education and e-learning. Although they have some common characteristics, they are not identical. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has given new implications to the term. In this period, it was referred as the online format of traditional learning. Respectively, it has become the substitution of onsite studies when offsite classes cannot be held due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It means that it has preserved the characteristics of traditional offline classes.

The last but not least important term to consider is *remote learning/education*. It is noteworthy that in the context of Latvia, it has not been identified in the texts written in the timespan from 2003 till 2020 (till March). The exploitation of this term was noticed only after the outbreak of COVID-19.

At this point it is essential to analyse the use of the same terms appearing in the online press of Latvia and articles during the COVID-19 outbreak. As it is demonstrated in Table 1, the term *remote learning/education* was used quite extensively during the COVID-19 time in the investigated research articles and online press, namely, 400 occurrences were observed in the materials published during the COVID-19 outbreak. This fact can be explained by the rapid shift from traditional mode of learning to studying from home and *remote learning/education* being the only form of education at that time. The process of remote studies lasted for nearly two years for higher education institutions, whereas the situation in

secondary education institutions was different, where remote and traditional study processes were combined. There were periods of time when younger learners were forced to study solely from home, whereas at some points they were allowed to go to school. Taking into account the topicality of the concept of remote learning/ education, it explains such a frequent use of the term in online press, however, mostly in scientific publications, since a lot of research devoted to various aspects of education during COVID-19 has been conducted. The contextual analysis of the term was performed; its results revealed that apart from definitions of the term found in the corpus, numerous difficulties and challenges faced during the remote study process were discussed, namely, unpreparedness, Internet connection issues, learner engagement, the application of various digital solutions in order to provide continuous flow of the study process. Features characteristic of remote learning/ education, which are covered in the theoretical background of the article, as well as skills necessary to perform successfully in this study mode are also extensively described, in particular, the presence of digital skills and the ability to study independently are thoroughly discussed. Consequently, the analysis of the theoretical background and the compiled corpus allows defining remote learning/education as a form of full-time studies that takes place with the aid of various electronic devices and is suitable for specific or emergency situations, such as COVID-19, implying the use of technologies and digital tools. It includes such essential features as the availability of equipment, appropriate materials preparation, the development of digital skills, provision of the access to necessary study information as well as support for learners, especially the younger ones.

The second frequently used term is distance learning/education, with 154 occurrences in the compiled COVID-19 corpus. Such frequency of the term used during the pandemic can be explained by the fact that distance learning is not a new concept which had been implemented into the study process in many education institutions long before the COVID-19 outbreak. Consequently, it cannot be fully referred to the form of education implemented during the pandemic situation in Latvia when all schools and universities were forced to work remotely. Nevertheless, the term occurs in the collected research papers and online press. Contextual analysis revealed that distance learning is used interchangeably with the term remote learning, thus making the two terms synonyms. However, the investigation of the theoretical material proved that these are two different concepts sharing, though, some common features, namely, students-teachers separation, students' independent work, the availability of necessary equipment, implementation of technologies and tools. What makes the two concepts different is distance learning programmes that are initially planned as distant including all the components characteristic of this type of studies, whereas remote learning follows the curricula initially designed for onsite studies. It has to be kept in mind that remote learning/education was only a solution to the emergency situation the country faced. Having analysed the context of the publications and

online press articles, it can be claimed that the term *distance learning/education* started to be utilized also in the context of the pandemic in Latvia as a synonym to *remote learning/education* and, thus, has obtained a new connotation, implying that the term is also used when referring to the mode of learning that took place during the COVID-19 waves and, as a result, has acquired features characteristic of the remote mode of studies.

The following term under consideration is *e-learning* with 112 occurrences in the compiled COVID-19 corpus. The analysis of the term sheds light on the context the term is used in, which mostly refers to higher education and, in some cases, vocational and adult education. Nonetheless, some occurrences of the term in reference to secondary education are also present, particularly in the context of the pandemic. Consequently, the interchangeable use of the terms *remote learning/education* and *e-learning* is obvious, meaning that no distinction was made between the terms when referring to the education mode implemented in Latvia during the COVID-19 outbreak and both terms were applied synonymously.

The term *online learning/education* is the least frequently used term in the analysed publications and online press, namely, only 43 occurrences were detected. The analysis of the corpus revealed that it is utilised as a general term when referring to the form of education that took place in Latvia during the pandemic. It is used when referring to different contexts, namely, higher education, adult and vocational education, the form of education during the pandemic and, in connection with it, also secondary education. The contextual analysis of the compiled corpus revealed that the term is even regarded as a method for acquisition of education remotely, which again confirms that the terms *online learning/education* and *remote learning* are used interchangeably. Thus, it can be stated that the term has acquired a new connotation, specifically has become close in meaning to the concept of *remote learning/education*.

Referring to the terms *e-learning* and *online learning/education*, it can be stated that the performed analysis of the corpus allows us to summarise the application of terms. Specifically, it can be claimed that *e-learning* and *online learning/education* are the forms of non-traditional education employed in higher, secondary as well as vocational education and due to their interchangeable use, they have acquired the features characteristic of the concept of *remote learning/education* and obtained a new connotation.

#### CONCLUSIONS

The investigation of the created corpora containing the scientific and online press articles published in Latvia in the time period from 2003 till March 2020 enabled us to make the following conclusions. First of all, it was revealed that the researched terms have been often used interchangeably and inappropriately. Specifically, the terms *online learning/education*, *e-learning* and *distance learning/education*,

*education* have acquired the features characteristic of the concept *remote learning/education* and were used synonymously in many cases. It has to be specified that these concepts are not the same and the awareness of their distinctions allow applying the terms appropriately.

Another finding reveals that *online learning/education, e-learning* and *distance learning/education* were used in the pre-COVID-19 time to refer to adult/long-life/vocational education; whereas, after March 2020 they have been actively exploited to refer to primary and secondary school education. It has to be highlighted that they were implemented in the emergency situation without understanding the difference between the researched concepts.

In relation to the term *remote learning/education*, it can be stated that it has been extensively used in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Latvia denoting the education mode that was predominant during that period of time; however, it was not referred to in the investigated articles by the educationalists of Latvia before the COVID-19 pandemic.

The last but not least important finding of the present research shows that the terms *distance learning/education*, *e-learning* and *online learning/education* have acquired new connotations and features that are characteristic of the term *remote learning/education*.

Despite the small number of the articles and terms in the sample selected, the findings could be treated as useful for analysing other pre- and COVID-19 articles, including the above-stated terminology, and researching the issue. In order to make wider generalisations, the number of articles and terms should be increased to fully explore the issue.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Actual study is a part of European Social Fund project No 8.3.6.2/17/I/001 "Monitoring the Quality of Education Establishment and Implementation of the Quality Monitoring System".

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