



Weekly Briefing

Latvia social briefing:

The coronavirus pandemic has become a challenge for the Latvian education system: distance learning implementation experience

Nina Linde

The coronavirus pandemic has become a challenge for the Latvian education system: distance learning implementation experience

On March 14th, 2020, the government of Latvia declared an emergency situation due to the global pandemic. Because of that all educational institutions now have been closed for more than a month thus making one of the historically biggest challenges for all members of the education process such as teachers, students, parents, and the Ministry of Education. Although previously there had been developed virtual tools for contribution to the educational process, the capacity of them is insufficient since they were not originally developed for ensuring the learning process for all students of Latvia simultaneously. The shift of educational approach has been drastic and demanded a fast reaction from all the sides involved. Despite the pressing issues and all the difficulties in such a short period of time, the educational institutions and the government have developed new tools and innovative approaches to ensure the continuation of the remote education process in Latvia.

One of the first challenges right way that restricted ensuring virtual educational process was the students' limited access to technologies with an internet connection. A research made by the Ministry of Education in March 2020 showed that approximately 3% , which is around 5300, of the students studying in school do not have access to nor computer, nor a smartphone with an internet connection, which made it difficult for these students to participate in the distance learning process.¹ In the age group from 1st to 5th grade there were slightly more than 3000 or 3.6% of the total number of children who did not have any smart devices, in 6th-9th grade there were almost 2000 students or 2.8% in total, but from 10th to 12th grade - 361 or 1.22% of the total number of students in the particular age group who did not have the access to the internet. The survey data showed that in schools with less than 100 pupils, the percentage regarding the lack of smart devices is higher – approximately about 4.5% of pupils lacked the smart devices, while on average in the country there were 2.9% who did not have the necessary facilities for distance learning process.

To solve this problem the Ministry of Education by working together with one of the biggest mobile operators in Latvia were able to ensure the needed tools including free of charge internet connection for the students. By far the problem has been solved partially as the Ministry of Education continues to receive notice from large families with one or two devices on a

¹ <https://izm.gov.lv/lv/aktualitates/3978-izm-kopa-ar-partneriem-plano-nodrosinat-5000-viediericu-latvijas-skoleniem>

household for 3 or more children by that limiting proper access to virtual education tools in larger families. Because of that there are approximately 2000 pupils who still lack facilities for distance learning process.²

To ensure accessibility, quality education content and provide more support to parents, especially in primary school during the distance learning process the Ministry of Education came with an innovative initiative developing a TV channel “Your class”, which aim is to simulate a class environment for students. The lessons consist of 20-minute-long audiovisual materials, in which teachers, enthusiasts in their field from different cities of Latvia, present the subjects in an interesting and student-friendly way. The curriculum is designed so that the younger students can complete a task after each subject and move on to the next subject. The project “Your class” solves various problems, that have been identified during the first weeks of distant learning approach. One of the key problems for ensuring distance learning was that there was a crucial necessity to ensure high quality study environment for pupils in grades from first to sixth. Experts of education system have claimed that for this age group it is practically impossible to obtain such a large amount of study material independently.³ Additionally, the project will also facilitate distance learning in families with several students. Besides that, with the implementation of this project equal educational opportunities are created throughout Latvia, reducing inequalities that arise due to the lack or inaccessibility of teachers or infrastructure.

During April 2020 the main discussion regarding distant education process revolved around State examination. By far the Ministry of Education is still planning to hold exams for 9th and 12th grade students, and has currently elaborated three working plans regarding State examination depending on the development of the pandemic in the continuous months. Currently the Ministry of education has only postponed the exams for a certain period. However, depending on the development of the Coronavirus there will be made some amendments to the content of exam, or the exams will be canceled completely replacing the results with final grades. Additionally, it has been proposed to hold combined examination for 9th grade students instead of four separate exams. However, the representatives of the Latvian Association of Local Governments and the Union of Educators and Researchers recommended that in the case of 9th grade, exam this year should be cancelled and that the innovation - combined exam – should not be introduced especially in the times when the education process

² <https://www.la.lv/vel-2000-skoleniem-trukst-attalinatajam-macibam-nepiecesamas-viedierices>

³ <https://izm.gov.lv/lv/aktualitates/4006-izm-izveido-izglitajosu-tv-kanalu-tava-klase>

is already difficult. Additionally, a recent survey showed that 88% of Latvian 9th and 12th grade students have expressed that they do not feel fully prepared for the upcoming exam session.⁴

During April 2020 there had been made survey in 4 days' time by the Ministry of Education with approximately 60000 respondents focusing on students, parents, and teachers regarding the transformation of education process. The aim of the survey was to understand how distance learning takes place in Latvian schools, to identify areas where the Ministry of Education and Science, municipalities and schools can improve the learning process remotely, as well as to get feedback from students, teachers and parents on the organization of the learning process. Overall the implementation of distance learning has been described as good by the respondents. Furthermore, the respondents of the survey had emphasized that there is an operative exchange of information between all parts involved – teachers, students, and their parents. Approximately 99% of the students and parents noted that they have received all the information about distant learning.⁵ In addition, 86% of the teachers think that continuing learning remotely has succeeded quite well. However, the teachers have noted that with the implementation of distance learning approach they have been facing various challenges. Almost half of the teachers noted that they are facing additional workload because they have to develop new or adjust the previous educational materials and have to spend more time on giving feedback to their students. Although the distance learning approach has been identified as overall successful the survey showed that there is one alarming aspect that has not been taken enough into consideration – the overall workload of students. Despite the fact the Ministry of Education and Science has recommended to lower the overall workload of studies by up to 50% in primary schools and at least 10% in high schools⁶, 60 % of the students claimed that with the implementation of distance learning they devote more time for their studies as they used to.

The innovations have not only been implemented in schools but as well in higher education institutions. Latvian university students have already proven that they have been able to create and develop original and practical solutions in various short programs, hackathons. Because of that on April 2020 five universities jointly created a new program “CrisisLab”. The aim of the developed program is to involve students to come to a solution for such pressing issues, which have appeared due to the Coronavirus, in field of education, healthcare, security of organizations and businesses, offering innovative tools and methods to improve distance learning, patient consulting remotely, tackling the economic crisis and other challenges. Students of all Latvian higher education institutions will be able to participate in the program

⁴ <https://www.db.lv/zinas/88-skolenu-nejutas-pilnvertigi-sagatavoti-eksameniem-495919>

⁵ <https://home.edurio.com/izm-attalinato-macibu-rezultati>

⁶ https://www.izm.gov.lv/images/MaciesMajas/VISC_Skola2030_Vadlinijas-attalinatam-macibam.pdf

in order to develop solutions to problem situations of local governments and the public sector, industry, non-governmental organizations that have arisen or may arise due to the global pandemic, emergency and restrictions on movement, assembly and social distance. Student teams will be formed to develop solutions, assisted by mentors and experts.

Summary

Although the implementation of distance learning education process has been one of the greatest challenges in history of Latvian education system, the shift to a distance learning process has been successful with the help of innovative approaches and solutions. While the overall transition to distance learning process has been described as smooth, Latvian authorities are still facing challenges such as lack of smart devices with internet connection and the workload of students. To solve the pressing issues with the lack of smart devices for distance learning, Ministry of Education and Science together with one of the biggest mobile operators in Latvia have come to a solution and were able to provide mobile devices with free internet connection for 3% of the Latvian pupils who did not have any access to mobile devices. This has solved the problem partially as households with larger families do not have enough devices to ensure the distance learning process for all children simultaneously. To simulate the class environment for younger students the Ministry of Education and Science in a week's time developed a new, innovative TV channel. Survey by the Ministry of Education and Science shows that overall the distance learning process has been seen positively as almost all of the students and their parents have received sufficient information regarding distance learning process. Although 86% of the teachers think that overall the shift to distance learning has been successful, 88% of Latvian 9th and 12th grade students have expressed that they do not feel fully prepared for the upcoming exam session.