

Digitization and the Bioeconomy in Lifelong Learning in the Context of the COVID Pandemic

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Introduction

Digital skills are one of the most important skills that were highlighted in the times of COVID-19. COVID-19 pandemic raised possibilities for blended-learning in adult education that was not used as much before the pandemic. Data shows that Latvia's inhabitants' digital skills compared to the EU average is much lower and there is a need for innovative ways to attract lifelong learners to participate in skills' advancement courses. COVID-19 pandemic brought large changes in society and had a high impact on education. James & Thériault (2020) in their research on COVID - 19 impact on adult education writes that pandemic lightened out inequalities that had a high impact on access and participation of learners in lifelong learning. On the other hand, Latvia's case showed that pandemic opened new possibilities for adult learners to participate in lifelong learning. There was very high activity from people to participate in lifelong learning courses co-financed by the state. If to compare - in 2017 there were 5565 people willing to participate in courses, but in 2020 there were 19 893 people. In addition, if in 2017 there were most of the courses face-to-face then in 2020 all courses offered online or in blended mode because of COVID-19. The aim of the research was to find out reasons and possible solutions for learners to motivate their participation in lifelong learning and to analyze blended-learning possibilities in COVID-19 restrictions.

Methodology

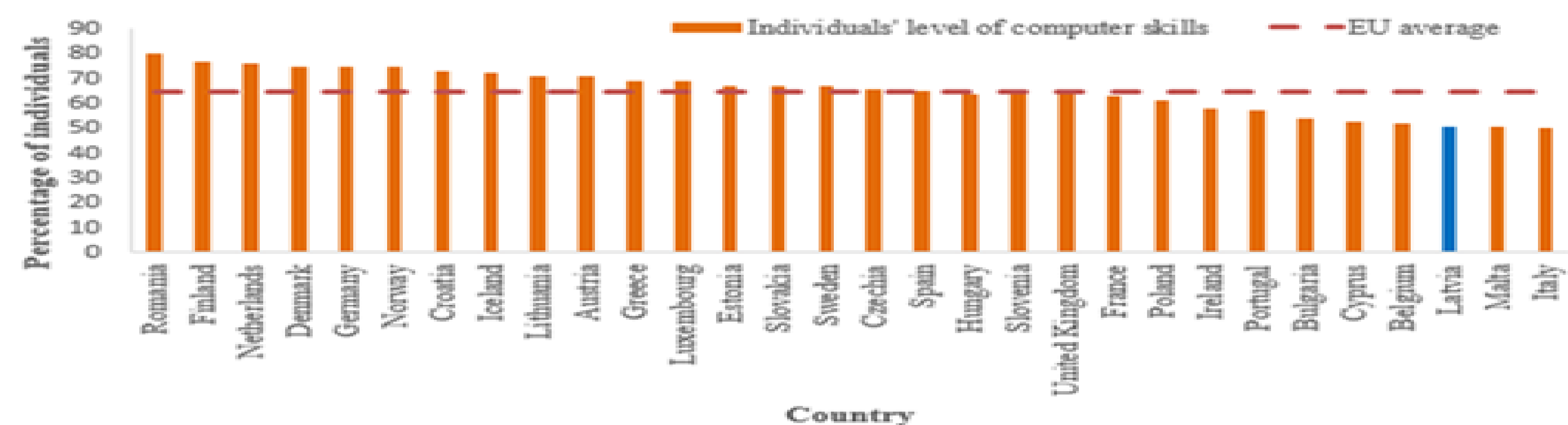


Figure Comparison of Human Capital with all 28 EU countries, 2020

According to statistical data analysis, a research questionnaire was conducted. In order to establish a lifelong learning course contribution to tackling the problem, the survey has been conducted. The aim of the survey was to find out the society's self-assessment of digital skills and the need to improve them for remote working. The main motivators for further supplementing knowledge and skills in lifelong learning courses were also identified. The survey was conducted in November and December 2020, distributing electronically. Respondents were mainly those who attended some lifelong learning courses in Riga remotely, but also from regional universities. The survey involved 525 respondents, 12 questionnaires were not correctly filled in, and so the analysis was aided by only 503 questionnaires.

Results

Research showed that several indicators of digital skills describe Latvia's situation as critical (in EU context), around 40% of inhabitants between years 2017 and 2020 were willing to develop their digital skills by participating in the state co-financed lifelong learning courses. Reasons not to participate can be different - lack of information, lack of time, problems of combining family, work and learning, bad experience in courses. Research showed that even learners are willing to participate in lifelong adult education; there are negative aspects they see, especially in the frame of remote learning. Learners see an opportunity to learn remotely as positive and as a negative aspect at the same time. Future research must be done on reasons that brought negative experiences to learners. One suggestion is that there is a need to teach adult education teachers on remote learning methodology and develop their digital skills to make learning more meaningful and goal-oriented.

Main conclusions

Particular attention should be paid to innovative methods of engagement to increase the number of people attending lifelong learning courses, for example: to create a more flexible educational offer that meets the needs and opportunities of adults; note a lower minimum number of learners to start group training; tax incentives for companies and individuals; grant for companies and individuals; training leave; organize courses with the state co-financing.

One more suggestion is to use the advantage of blended learning as remote learning increases people's involvement in courses, but some also want online meetings. Involvement in lifelong learning courses in the national education strategy should be a priority, because according to the data shown above; Latvia is rapidly lagging behind the EU average and, starting from 2017, is reducing its performance.

