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Marko Radovan[1], Sonja Klemenčič[2], Tanja Možina[3]

The Impact of COVID-19 on Adult Education: Insights from Slovenia

ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of a study that explored the experiences of adult educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. This online survey was conducted in June 2020 and included directors and teachers in adult education from various institutions in Slovenia. Tutors at Slovenian Third-Age Universities and other associations that provided adult education were also included. The aim of our study was to examine how distance education was implemented during the pandemic, using the concept of 'emergency remote teaching' (Hodges, 2020). The study sample included 30 directors of adult education institutions and 124 teachers or tutors. The results showed that organisations providing adult education responded during the lockdown by providing adults with the opportunity to continue their education through distance learning. However, this was not the case for all of adult education programmes. Mostly language courses and formal education were offered. The results show that most adult educators quickly adapted to the new working conditions, but that teaching approaches were rather static and asynchronous teaching solutions. An analysis of the problems teachers faced and the support they needed has shown that action is needed to remove the obstacles to the future provision of adult education as much as possible.

Keywords:

distance education, emergency remote teaching, COVID-19, adult education, pandemic, non-formal education.

1 Department of Educational Sciences, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. e-mail: marko.radovan@ff.uni-lj.si orcid: 0000-0002-6564-9201

2 Department of Quality and Development, Slovenian Institute for Adult Education, Slovenia. orcid: 0000-0003-2730-9887

3 Department of Quality and Development, Slovenian Institute for Adult Education, Slovenia. orcid: 0000-0001-8988-3468

INTRODUCTION

In times of the pandemic, distance learning has become part of everyday education. When it comes to educating children, this is new and challenges many of the established pedagogical foundations in education. Many questions have been raised about whether children, especially the youngest, already have sufficiently developed learning skills and the abilities and motivation to learn independently, which is a prerequisite for successful distance education (Masonbrink & Hurley, 2020; Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Shin & Hickey, 2021). Questions have also been raised about the socialising and social role of education – how distance education can replace social contact between children and achieve the educational and socialisation goals of distance education

Although at first glance these issues may not seem so important in adult education, this is not entirely the case. Similar questions are raised in this field, except that they may have been raised much earlier (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006; UNESCO, 2020). As far as adult education is concerned, in historical sense, distance education is not unique, and has been around as a method in adult education since the 19th century. Since then, however, the characteristics of distance education have changed a lot, mainly due to the development of technology, which has fundamentally altered the role and position of the teacher, the learner, the types of programmes, the organisation of education and the role of educational organisations (Bates, 2015; Anderson, 2008). In recent decades, the term 'distance education' has almost completely been replaced by the terms 'online education' or 'online learning'. During the pandemic, many experts were critical of the context in which education was delivered, pointing out that we cannot really speak of distance education methodology, but rather of what they called "crisis education". Later, the term 'Emergency Remote Teaching', first defined by Hodges et al. (2020), has gained acceptance among experts in the field of education.

THE ROLE OF NEW LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES AND ADULT EDUCATION

In adult education, distance education was in many cases focused on providing education to excluded populations. Technology was intended to overcome geographic, financial, and other constraints and provide access to education for marginalised audiences. This emphasis was embodied in the Hamburg Declaration on Adult Education (UNESCO, 1997), at a time when it was not yet entirely

clear how important modern technology would be for the future development of adult education and education as a whole. The Declaration emphasised that new media and technology would enable all adults to participate equally in learning activities and foresaw other positive consequences, such as strengthening the educational function of media and raising awareness of the importance of media in promoting adult education, developing media literacy, empowering local communities, developing new skills for teachers, etc. (UNESCO, 1997). Predictions made in the late 1990s about the (positive) role of technologies were more than optimistic and, as some analyses show, have not fully materialised in terms of increasing accessibility (Dinevski & Radovan, 2013). The widespread use of the Internet was still in its infancy at the time, and distance education was therefore mainly about instruction that would be delivered through mass media and would be primarily one-way. This is perhaps the biggest difference between the way distance education was seen in the past and today, with the development of online environments and algorithms that aim to make learning as individualised or 'personalised' as possible (Zanker, Rook, & Jannach, 2019).

THE CONCEPT OF EMERGENCY REMOTE TEACHING

Although distance learning is already an established practise in adult education, the pandemic crisis has given adult educators the opportunity to reflect on their role in the educational process, the importance of learner support, social contact, etc. This reflection has been particularly valuable considering the occurrence of so-called Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT), which has revealed the unpreparedness of both the education system and educators themselves for such forms of education.

Despite their differences, ERT and online education share a common feature: the use of digital technologies to teach and focus on self-directed learning via published learning materials. Based on Xie, Gulinna A, and Rice's (2021) summary, ERT and online education do not have the same definition, the same goals, the same processes for instructional design, the same modes for teaching, and the same ways of integrating technology. ERT emerged primarily as a temporary change in teaching due to pandemic circumstances (Hodges et al., 2020) and was primarily aimed to provide a fast, reliable, and permanent way to access teaching that did not allow for actual preparation for online activities and online learning materials.

PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTING OF ONLINE EDUCATION

The main feature of ERT was the lack of time, resources, and support, which mainly led to synchronous online classroom meetings. In contrast, authors working on the concept of online education (e.g., Anderson, 2008; Bates, 2015) cite among the conditions for success: good planning (which can take months), teacher's competences (knowledge of the dynamics of working in an online environment, use of appropriate methods and ways of working, mastery of online learning environments, etc.), the size of the groups involved in virtual classrooms, and good technological equipment for delivering learning, together with a strong support service available to both teachers and participants when problems arise.

Many experts emphasise that the integration of distance education into any educational organisation needs to be strategically planned (Bates, 2015; Ko & Rossen, 2017; Lowenthal & Dennen, 2020; Simonson, Smaldino, & Zvacek, 2015). It should be based on an analysis of the needs and characteristics of the learners who will be involved in this teaching, and adequate professional and technical support should be provided to all stakeholders (teachers, assistants, participants, technical staff) at the entry point and during the distance learning process.

As Keengwe and Kidd (2010) point out, not all actions and activities required for online education can be implemented overnight, but require careful consideration and long-term, strategic planning. Yet this is exactly what happened to us during the pandemic, we had to introduce distance education "overnight" throughout the education system. While we were able to build on existing good practises and the results of innovation and development projects, we cannot say that we had systematically introduced forms of adult distance education on a large scale in Slovenia before the pandemic. Perhaps adult education had the advantage of being forced to develop so-called out-of-school forms of education at a very early stage. Andragogical didactics contains some professional principles that can be applied very well to the implementation of online education. In adult education today, it will be difficult to come across a classical "school subject" form of education. There are many flexible forms, and much of the organised educational work is done independently by the participants in a wide variety of educational programmes. These are good professional prerequisites for a more systematic development of adult distance education. On the other hand, this is also a major challenge in adult education, especially when it comes to adults with lower levels of education, lower literacy levels, adults from economically disadvantaged groups, and so on. This is because there are important

issues of equity and equality of opportunity at stake, which have also proved crucial in adult education during the pandemic (James & Thériault, 2020; Waller et al., 2020).

The report from UNESCO (2020) showed that the closure of schools during the pandemic greatly increased inequality of educational opportunities worldwide. It is also pointed out that this increase in inequality of educational opportunities is not unique to poor and underdeveloped countries. It has also been shown in the education of children and youth in developed and rich countries that not all students have a computer and Internet connection at home, that they have less developed computer skills, etc. This is also the case in the first foreign analyses that have looked at the digital divide among adult learners (Waller et al., 2020). Although this may seem to suggest that the issue of fairness and equality is marginal, the opposite is true. When the focus shifts to independent learning, differences in ability, motivation and, most importantly, learning habits become even more apparent. As with youth, this is also true for adult learners. Their learning habits and motivation vary greatly, and there are also big differences depending on their age (Boeren, 2017; Li, 2019). The less teachers are aware of this in lesson planning and delivery, the more impact these differences have. And as is usually the case, the most vulnerable (young people or adults) will be the most affected.

One of the biggest challenges in distance education is the question of what channels of communication we should use when we are physically distant from each other so that, despite the physical distance, we do not compromise social contact and the social space in which practitioners, teachers and adult learners operate. Over time, both asynchronous and synchronous forms of communication have developed in this field. As Knox, Williamson, and Bayne (2020) point out, the first problem with distance education is that it transforms teaching into learning, i.e., an individual practise that lacks the social context that is crucial for the emergence of new ideas and deeper levels of understanding. Recognising that this is a serious problem for distance education, the first task is to pay particular attention to how we help maintain social context through commitments and solutions, and to try to make up for these deficits in the so-called virtual environment by developing an environment that enables networking, support, and development (Radovan, Kristl, & Makovec, 2019). This means that it is important to maintain social and emotional closeness even when physical closeness is prohibited or severely hindered.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study was to investigate how Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) was implemented in adult education organisations during the pandemic. To get an indicative picture of the state of adult education and the programmes implemented, we surveyed school directors and headmasters. Teachers would not have been able to answer this question, and in what follows we focused mainly on the 'pedagogical aspect' of the implementation of the educational programmes, so the remaining research questions relate mainly to the work of the teachers.

This was an exploratory study to answer the following research questions (RQs):

- RQ1: What programmes did adult education institutions run during the pandemic?
- RQ2: Which teaching approaches did most teachers use during ERT?
- RQ3: What difficulties did teachers and adult learners encounter in implementing ERT?
- RQ4: What support and help did teachers receive during the pandemic?

METHOD

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study used a quantitative methodology. A survey questionnaire was sent to directors of adult education organisations and teachers or tutors in adult education programmes (using the online survey tool "1ka", available at: https://www.1ka.si/d/en).

PARTICIPANTS

In our sample we included all folk high schools, secondary schools and school centres that offered vocational and professional adult education during the 2019/2020 school year. We also involved all members of Slovenian University of the Third Age, with a request to forward the survey questionnaire to tutors who provided distance education during the pandemic. 30 (out of a total of 34 in Slovenia) directors of folk high schools took part, as well as 124 teachers or mentors from folk high schools (41%), secondary schools (24%) that provide programmes for adults, the rest were mentors or teachers at the Slovenian University of the Third Age or in various associations that provided adult education (35%).

INSTRUMENTS AND PROCEDURE

The views of the different actors on the issues were collected by means of an online survey. For this purpose, a structured online survey questionnaire was developed for each of the entities involved. The following questionnaires were developed: (1) *Questionnaire for directors of folk high schools*, and (2) *Questionnaire for teachers in formal and non-formal adult education programmes*. School directors and headmasters were contacted directly as their emails are available on educational websites. Teachers and mentors were approached in various ways, e.g., through referrals from head teachers, invitations from various associations, etc. The sample was thus selected ad hoc. The survey was conducted in the form of online questionnaires (with "1ka" online survey tool). Both questionnaires (for directors and teachers/mentors) consisted of similar topics: the organisation, implementation, and follow-up of distance education during the pandemic, the experience of distance adult education during the pandemic, and professional support needed for further development of distance adult education. The questions for the teachers were more related to the problems and teaching methods during the lockdown, while the questions for the directors were more related to the problems and difficulties in delivering the training in the institution.

RESULTS

RQ1. WHAT PROGRAMMES DID ADULT EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS RUN DURING THE PANDEMIC?

We looked at whether all the organisations we surveyed had received training during the pandemic, or if not, what the reasons were for not doing so. From the responses of directors, it can be concluded that during the pandemic, adult education took place in the form of online education in most of the folk high schools (30 or 96% of all the folk high schools directors in Slovenia), but not for all educational programmes.

Table 1. Types of Education for Which Online Education Has Been Set Up at the Folk High Schools: Responses from the Directors (N = 30)

Type of programme	%
Language courses	76,7
Formal secondary education courses	63,3
Adult Primary School	60,0

Type of programme	%
Other non-formal education courses	46,7
University of the Third Age courses	40,0
Public non-formal adult education courses	33,3
Study Circles	23,3
Project-based learning for youth	16,7

Note: Respondents could choose one or more answers, so the percentages are calculated according to the number of respondents (N = 30).

As can be seen from the responses, most of the directors of the educational institutions answered that they ran language programmes and formal programmes at primary and secondary school level. Among other general non-formal education programmes, the respondents mentioned mainly computer programmes and various courses and workshops. In their written responses, directors stated that they also offered support activities such as counselling, learning support and organised self-directed learning. In fewer cases, public adult education programmes (e.g., "English as a Second Language" programmes, English for foreigners, etc.) were conducted at the adult education centres. Directors indicated that in the pandemic situation they had to decide which programmes to run and which not, as not all were possible. Priority was given to the programmes that were necessary for the participants or were linked to funding or were part of the public service. However, these were also the programmes where there were several administrative obstacles that led to some of them not being implemented. Difficulties in proving eligibility of implementation costs, documentation of implementation, etc., were mentioned (e.g., in ESF projects). The circumstances of the participants and their interest in the training were also important factors.

RQ2. WHICH TEACHING APPROACHES DID MOST TEACHERS USE DURING ERT?

We wanted to know which working methods were most frequently used by teachers during emergency remote teaching for adults. We wanted to find out which was the dominant working approach or method. Respondents could only choose one answer.

Table 2. Distance Teaching Approaches Most Frequently Used by Teachers (N = 101)

Teaching approaches	%
Sending teaching materials by e-mail	44,6
Publication of learning materials and synchronous remote meetings	24,8
Publication of teaching materials in the online classroom	12,9

Teaching approaches	%
Publication of teaching materials and sending them by e-mail	7,9
Sending teaching materials by ordinary mail	5,9
Publication of lecture recording in the online classroom	4,0
Total	100,0

Teachers' responses indicate that the predominant mode of delivery of training was through the creation of learning materials that were emailed to participants or posted in an online learning environment. Gradually, after acquiring new knowledge about the use of videoconferencing systems, they began to incorporate these methods in their work with participants. However, according to the responses, it was not the predominant way that teachers prepared pre-recorded lectures and made them available in online classrooms or otherwise disseminated them.

The fact that much of the education was delivered through non-interactive, asynchronous forms of communication should not be viewed negatively, given the fact that distance education was not systematically used in adult education before the pandemic. Even with asynchronous education, organisations and their colleagues did much to ensure that it did not disappear completely. However, teachers did notice the lack of direct, face-to-face contact with participants as well as the lack of possibility for participants to communicate with each other remotely. They also responded quickly to this by training themselves in the use of tools for synchronous communication with participants and immediately incorporated this new knowledge into the teaching process. In this way, the asynchronous communication channels were gradually supplemented by synchronous ones. At this point, the question arises whether the cases in which teachers simply sent learning materials to participants can really be considered a form of online education or merely institutionally guided "self-directed learning". Further in-depth research would be useful to investigate this topic.

RQ3. What difficulties did teachers and adult learners encounter in implementing ERT?

Teachers were asked which aspects of ERT caused them and the participants the most problems during the pandemic. First, we summarise the responses regarding the difficulties teachers encountered. Respondents could choose more than one answer.

Table 3. Which Aspects of ERT Have Caused the Most Problems for Teachers? (N = 98)

	%
Encouraging unresponsive participants	51,0
Supporting participants in their learning	25,5
Didactic competence for distance learning	21,4
Motivation for distance education	21,4
Competence in distance learning assessment	19,4
Competence in working with ICT tools	16,3
Maintaining social contact with participants	8,2

Note: Respondents could choose one or more answers, so the percentages are calculated according to the number of respondents (N = 98).

The most common response was that teachers had difficulty finding ways to actively approach unresponsive learners (51% of teachers and mentors). This was by far the most dominant answer. The second most frequent answer relates to support for participants during the learning itself. This answer was chosen by 25,5% of teachers. In many studies it was pointed out that teachers lack the skills to use ICT tools that are mostly age-related (Saikkonen & Kaarakainen, 2021), refuse to use ICT due to their negative attitudes (Scherer, Siddiq, & Tondeur, 2019) or other contextual factors, such as digitalization policy, institutional equipment, or technical and educational support (Lohr et al., 2021). Interestingly, these aspects were less frequently raised as a problem by teachers in our study. Only 16,3% of teachers chose the answer that they have problems with competence in using ICT tools; 21,4% of teachers respectively chose the answer that they have problems with competences to use ICT to prepare suitable teaching activities for adults. The reason for this discrepancy may be that teachers were interviewed at a time when ERT had been running for some time and they had acquired new knowledge about the use of ICT tools in the meantime. Alternatively, teachers may have been less self-critical of their own knowledge and skills. The difference between the secondary schools and the folk high schools is not so great, but there is a perceptible difference between these two institutions and the University of the Third Age and the various associations. Teachers in the more 'traditional' educational institutions have more pedagogical skills, are often younger and have used ICT in the classroom before.

Teachers were also asked which aspects of ERT caused the most problems for them when delivering distance education. Respondents could select several answers.

Table 4. Teachers' Views on Participants' Problems in ERT (N = 103)

	%
Inadequate ICT equipment	51,5
Unresponsiveness when working remotely	47,6
Lack of motivation	38,8
Lack of ICT competences	35,9
Poor conditions for learning at home	28,2
Ensuring equal learning conditions	22,3
Underdeveloped competences for self-directed learning	18,5
Poor organisation of time for learning	18,5

Note: Respondents could choose one or more answers, so the percentages are calculated according to the number of answers (N = 269).

As can be seen from the table above, the following problems were most frequently mentioned by teachers: difficulties of participants with ICT equipment (PC, Internet access, etc.), competence of participants in using ICT tools, motivation of participants for distance learning and readiness of participants for distance learning. Fewer problems were observed in relation to participants' competence in learning independently and organising time for self-learning. The perceived problems with initial participant motivation and retention are not surprising; such problems have been perceived in other areas of the education system. Numerous studies on online education point to a decline in motivation after a possible initial enthusiasm, as there is no direct 'outside pressure', and much of the work is organised independently (Chen & Jang, 2010; Hartnett, St. George, & Dron, 2011; Rovai, 2003). It is certainly a professional challenge, not only in adult education, what approaches still need to be developed and how to train teachers to deal with this problem more successfully. This challenge is particularly relevant for tutors at the University of the Third Age, where the problems of lack of digital skills and age-related reluctance to use technology are even more acute (Blažič & Blažič, 2020).

However, we were surprised that the respondents do not see major problems in training participants to learn independently. In fact, several studies that have looked at this issue show the opposite – that in many cases adults are not able to learn independently, especially the less educated, and that they do not have sufficiently developed skills to organise their own learning (Dynan, Cate, & Rhee, 2008; Haggis, 2002; Kim et al., 2014). We can only hope that this is not an underestimation of the problem.

RQ4. WHAT SUPPORT AND HELP DID TEACHERS RECEIVE DURING THE PANDEMIC?

Our research also looked at the support teachers had in delivering adult distance learning during the pandemic. Respondents were asked to rate the statements on a five-point Likert scale (1 – strongly disagree; 5 – strongly agree).

Table 5. From Whom Did Teachers Get Support to Implement Online Education during the Pandemic? (N = 117)

	M	SD
Adult education organiser	3,7	1,3
Guidelines drawn up by the institution	3,4	1,3
Teachers among themselves	3,0	1,3
Director	2,8	1,2
Expert groups	2,8	1,2
Teachers from other educational institutions	2,6	1,3
School counselling service	2,5	1,2
I did not get support	2,3	1,2

Note: M = Mean; SD = Standard deviation.

The responses show that teachers received most support from their own teams and from professional colleagues in other organisations. They also received professional support from their directors or school boards. Teachers from different organisations and colleagues in their own teams also worked well together. All of this can be seen as good, as it shows that there are many professional links in adult education organisations, both between staff and between educational organisations, which helped to maintain cohesion both within collectives and between adult education organisations during difficult times when traditional forms of work and educational organisation collapsed overnight. It also seems that professional associations at the provider level played a very important role in the first period, when systemic support at the national level was obviously not yet able to respond so quickly to the needs of providers. They have also played this role in communicating with stakeholders at national level.

DISCUSSION

Our study shows that adult education organisations have also responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by providing adult learners with the opportunity to continue and complete their initial education through distance learning. As various reports produced in the aftermath and during the pandemic point out, enabling adults to receive education is also extremely important, both for their mental health (e.g., older adults, adults with disabilities) and for their employability. Major deficits have also been identified in economic progress of societies (Boeren, Roumell, & Roessger, 2020; OECD, 2021). The results of our study do not allow an assessment of the proportion of adult education programmes that did or did not take place at a national level, but it is certainly possible to conclude that among the institutions that participated in the study, the focus tended to be on formal education, while a significant proportion of non-formal adult education came to a halt during the pandemic. As our results show, the main reasons given by directors and headmasters of educational organisations for not providing all training can be divided into internal and external reasons. Internal ones include professional and technical barriers within the training organisations and their behaviour, or the fear that the participants themselves are not professionally and technically prepared for such training. External causes include the slow and inadequate response of external institutions (e.g., different ministries, expert associations, etc.). Also, numerous administrative hurdles faced by providers, e.g., in proving eligibility for distance learning costs, and the lack of information in this regard, have led some to suspend the delivery of such training programmes.

Notwithstanding these findings, our findings should be considered good, as distance education for adults was not developed before the epidemic, except in a few cases. So, everything that happened must have happened virtually overnight, without the necessary training, without the provision of technical support, without thoughtful planning. In our research, we have adopted the Hodges et al. (2020) conceptualisation of Emergency Remote Teaching for adult education during the pandemic. It is true that this was also the case with youth education, but with one important difference. In the past, education policy gave primary and secondary schools the means and more opportunities for technical equipment and staff training for developing competences to teach with ICT – several national tenders were launched for this purpose, supported by large amounts of funding. Adult education, however, did not have access to all these funds and opportunities. Adult education institutions have been self-equipping; even the training that was provided on a small scale from time to time has dried up in recent years. In any case,

the provision of equipment and especially the ability to conduct distance learning emerged also in our survey as a problem that needs to be addressed immediately and systematically in Slovenian adult education.

But our findings also show that the pandemic has also revealed some other weaknesses. The most basic is that part of adult education has simply stopped, especially programmes that are not "compulsory", either from the learners' or the educational organisations' point of view. This is mostly non-formal education, though not exclusively; it should not be overlooked that very few publicly certified adult education programmes were run during the pandemic. A few months of this situation is certainly not fatal, but if it were to happen again, the consequences could be much greater. The fact is that today's social and economic life requires lifelong learning, without which social or economic development is inconceivable (OECD, 2021), and this learning does not only take place in formal education and at a young age. Unfortunately, education policy is still too little aware of this, so it has not been questioned why an important part of adult education simply stopped during the pandemic. Besides the harm caused by the abandonment of adult education in terms of reduced opportunities for knowledge acquisition, we cannot ignore the negative consequences for social relations and social inclusion. This is not only the case in adult education – there are also numerous articles on the impact of isolation on the socialisation of young people, including in the field of education for children and youth (one of the most recent studies, e.g., Racine et al., 2021). Some European (and other) countries have been quick to recognise that these dimensions also make it necessary to bring education back into educational institutions as soon as possible (OECD, 2020). For adults, it is not so much about socialisation, but about inclusion in society, which is made possible through education. Although this was not directly identified in our study, it can be deduced from the teachers and mentors answers that the problem of social isolation was apparent also in adult education.

In general, however, it was found that we do not have sufficiently developed didactic recommendations for distance education of adults. Unfortunately, not much has changed for the next school year (2020/21). The teachers and mentors have certainly learned a lot from their own experiences with distance learning, and there have been many short workshops and trainings. However, we cannot say that there have been major changes at the national or strategic level. These issues were sometimes completely neglected and, as results of our study show, teachers often found themselves in a dilemma as to how to plan and deliver lessons to ensure that they were of good quality, relevant to the curriculum requirements, feasible and suitable for the participants, etc. Often, they found no answers. And this is also

an important message of our research, that much more professional attention and development work needs to be devoted to the didactics of online distance education in the coming years, not because we expect the pandemic to continue for many years, but because even without the pandemic, much of education is gradually shifting to the web and other sources of knowledge are gaining in importance (e.g., online communities, self-paced informal learning online, etc.), so the role of (adult) educators as supporters of this learning is changing significantly.

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