

# THE DIVERSITY AND MULTIFUNCTIONALITY OF LIFELONG GUIDANCE SERVICES IN THE DISTANCE EDUCATION SECONDARY SCHOOL AS AN OPEN EDUCATION ENVIRONMENT

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**Abstract.** Lifelong guidance is a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary process, where different types of organisations, institutions in general and individually, have their own roles to play in the overarching lifelong guidance system. From this perspective, the advantages and contribution of distance education secondary schools in development of lifelong guidance system have so far been underinvestigated and underappreciated. The aim of the study: based on theoretical research and personal experience, to substantiate diversity and multifunctionality of lifelong guidance services in the open education environment of a modern distance education secondary school to form theoretical basis for developing assessment methodology. Research methods: 1) theoretical research methods: studying, analysing and evaluating scientific literature and various types of documents; 2) empirical research methods: reflection on own experience. The research findings allow for a main conclusion to be made that thanks to the principles of openness, overcoming distance and flexibility, lifelong guidance e-services in modern distance education secondary school are accessible to everyone, anywhere and anytime. Modern distance education secondary schools have large target-audience. These schools offer opportunities of education in alternative way. Thanks to offered formal and non-formal distance education (incl. second chance formal education, recurrent formal education), cooperation network of social partners (incl. school graduates with their career development success stories (narratives)), e-counselling etc., learners are able to self-develop and self-direct their careers according to their life goals and career intentions, combining distance learning with job and others important activities in their lives. The important place and role of distance education secondary schools within the lifelong guidance system is also evidenced by the teachers' continuous professional development, incl. professional training courses, offered in a distance education environment. The modern distance education secondary school as an open environment occupies an important place in the Latvian lifelong guidance system.

**Keywords:** distance education, diversity and multifunctionality, lifelong guidance, open school.

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## Introduction

Nowadays traditional career guidance conception transforms and new lifelong guidance paradigm forms and develops highlighting education, professional training, labour market reforms and a key-components of national lifelong and lifewide learning, and employment strategies as important components of lifelong guidance system. Lifelong guidance is a new paradigm in theory and practice as well. The aim of lifelong guidance is to provide career support to people of all ages at all stages of their career development in a lifelong and continuous process. Moreover, career support is necessary on a continuous basis: not only in moments of crisis, but also in moments of career success. Various global documents have highlighted the need to strengthen policy, national lifelong guidance systems that support main functions of lifelong guidance at all levels of education, professional training and employment support. In a lifelong guidance system, several parties work in balance, each with their own tasks, goals and benefits in delivering a wide range of services. Lifelong guidance is therefore a multifunctional system of cooperation between several institutions and individuals

(CEDEFOP, 2005; CEDEFOP, 2008; Jackson, 2014; Katane & Katans, 2023; Sultana & Watts, 2005).

The concepts and strategies of lifelong guidance (career lifelong guidance – authors' comment) are especially relevant in the European Union countries nowadays because the main goal of lifelong guidance is to promote the sustainable development of society. This is evidenced by several publications of recent years (Barnes, Bimrose, & Brown, 2020; Dekeister & Lapie, 2023; European Commission, 2023a; Kalēja & Katane, 2022; Katane & Katans, 2023; Lifelong Guidance in Finland, 2012; Puulmann & Rammo, 2021; Rammo & Larini, 2023; Sloka, 2022; Toni & Vuorinen, 2020).

The research findings allow for a conclusion to be made that the provision of lifelong education plays a central role in lifelong guidance. Thus, the provision of lifelong education and lifewide education is one of the main goals of lifelong guidance. In this point of view, providers of formal and nonformal education at all levels are considered as components of the lifelong guidance system (Barnes et al., 2020; Jackson, 2014; Makārtijs, 2015). Thus, lifelong learning as a value is one of the main priorities not only in education (Balceraitė, Lubkina, & Usca, 2021), but also in comprehensive lifelong guidance system nowadays (Doyle, 2023; Katane & Katans, 2023). In the context of lifelong learning, lifelong guidance refers to a range of activities that enables citizens of any age and at any point in their lives to identify their capacities, competences and interests, to make educational, training and occupational decisions and manage their individual life paths in learning, work and other settings in which these capacities and competences are learned and/or used (Council of the European Union, 2004; Lifelong Guidance in Finland, 2012; Toni & Vuorinen, 2020). The important priorities in the implementation of lifelong guidance are the following: expanding access to learning, supporting social inclusion, labour market liberalization and promoting sustainable development of modern society (Daija, Krastina, & Rutkovska, 2018). Several research testify that positive trend has been identified: improved lifelong guidance provision at schools, including general and vocational education secondary schools. Schools, including distance education schools, offer career support services not only for learners, but also for educators (CEDEFOP, 2005; CEDEFOP, 2008; Sloka, 2022; Soika, 2015; Soika & Vronska, 2023; Sultana, 2006; Vāvers & Katane, 2021). The experience of the authors shows, that nowadays distance education secondary school is an important part of a lifelong guidance system.

Distance education schools not only offer formal and informal education opportunities for their learners, but also offer career support services, significantly expanding their functions within lifelong guidance framework. In turn, distance learning is a way and means of dealing with problems caused by crises different kinds. For example, distance learning has become particularly relevant in school, university and even pre-school settings in the context of the global Covid-19 pandemic (Adam & Metjalk, 2022; Hillman & Ward, 2023; Rice, 2020; Telg, 2021; Van Allen & Katz, 2020; Yorkovsky & Levenberg, 2022). The experience of the authors testifies, that distance education secondary school environment has own specificity. This specificity should be respected by both the school administration, students and their parents, and the entire society in general, especially valuing the work of distance education teachers in maintaining and further developing the open distance education environment (Segbenya, Minadzi, Bervell, & Somuah, 2024).

In the current post-pandemic situation and under global level continuing changeable conditions, another aspect of the relevance of distance learning in the context of different geopolitical types of crises is being addressed, namely the provision of access to education, offer various career support and counselling, where refugees and migrants must be provided with education within framework comprehensive lifelong guidance in countries of asylum or new home countries in this way promoting their integration in society and ensuring their employment (European Commission, 2023b).

Supporting and promoting the sustainable development of distance education secondary schools, it is important that the specific features and contribution of the modern distance education secondary school as an open and multifunctional educational environment is recognised and properly valued in the framework of lifelong guidance system.

The aim of the study: based on theoretical research and personal experience, to substantiate diversity and multifunctionality of lifelong guidance services in the open education environment of a modern distance education secondary school to form theoretical basis for developing assessment methodology.

Research methods: 1) theoretical research methods: studying, analysing and evaluating scientific literature and various types of documents; 2) empirical research methods: reflection on own experience.

## Methodology

The theoretical investigations were carried out with the aim was not only to substantiate diversity and multifunctionality of lifelong guidance services in the open educational environment of a modern distance education secondary school based on theoretical research and personal experience, but also to develop methodological basis for evaluation of this diversity and multifunctionality of the lifelong guidance.

The research results were analysed, summarized, and grouped (structured) according to the three basic principles of open distance education. Authors formulated criteria for analysing and evaluating theoretical research results accordance with these principles (Table 1).

*Table 1 Principles and Criteria for Evaluation of Diversity and Multifunctionality of Lifelong Guidance Services in Open Distance Education Secondary School (Created by the authors)*

N <sup>o</sup>	Principles	Criteria
1.	Principle of Openness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Diversity of target-groups (ensuring open inclusive environment for various learners' groups who learn at any stage of life, including teachers who are: educators and at same time learners as well).</li> <li>▪ Diversity of education offer (formal and non-formal distance learning for learners, including the <i>second chance education</i> and <i>recurrent education</i>; continuous professional development: knowledge management, exchange of experience, professional training courses for educators etc.).</li> </ul>
2.	Principle of Overcoming Distance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ ICT based education (using new modern ICT and according to them teaching methodology).</li> <li>▪ Promotion and support self-directed/self-managed distance learning.</li> <li>▪ The offer of career e-counselling services.</li> </ul>
3.	Principle of Flexibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Differentiation,</li> <li>▪ individualisation,</li> <li>▪ personalisation</li> </ul> <p>in distance educational process, which allows learners to learn in a suitable way and to combine studies with work or with another type of occupation.</p>

Thanks to these principles and criteria, and obtained theoretical research results as well, in their further studies authors developed a methodology for evaluating diversity and multifunctionality of lifelong guidance services in an open distance education secondary school. This methodology in full amount has not yet been published.

## **The Offer of Lifelong Guidance Services in a Distance Education Secondary School as an Open Education Environment According to Three Basic Principles: Theoretical Research Results and Discussion**

In order to shed light on and understand the specifics of lifelong guidance services in a distance education secondary school, it is important to justify the concept of a distance education secondary school as an open education environment.

Research results shows that in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the concepts of open education and distance education, as well as the explanation and validation of open school and distance education school, are interlinked (Clinton-Lisell, 2021; Katane, Katans, & Vāvers, 2021).

Under the influence of the concept of open education, the concept of open school has emerged and is continuously evolving, where the access to school education at any age throughout a person's life plays important role as an important condition for lifelong guidance. An open school environment encourages, motivates, promotes, supports, and builds confidence and belief in oneself, one's potential for self-fulfilment and one's ability to enter the education process in a way and at a time that suits oneself, thus supporting the implementation of life goals and career intentions. The characteristics of open schools allow for the conclusion that open schools with their activities explicitly provide lifelong guidance to their learners.

One of the open school's roles is to help people integrate into society by promoting their participation and employability in the labour market, where education becomes a tool for career development and the education process itself an integral part of learners' career development. An individual's knowledge, skills, attitudes, competencies, experiences, and other individual qualities that help their job search and integration into labour market, and to be a dependable source of efficiency, innovation, and productivity for an employer are analysed as the employability of an individual, which is defined as a set of personal qualities, skills or abilities (Troshkova, & Katane, 2023)

Especially in the last 10 years of the 21st century, the term *open education* has been used in scientific publications to refer to distance learning, which has given rise to the new concept of Open Distance Learning (ODL) (Ambeth & Saravanakumar, 2020; Bozkurt, 2019; ICODE, 2022; Lewis-Perinbam & Daniel, 2005; Patru & Khvilon, 2002; Roffey, 2006; Saidi, Sharip, Rahim, Zulkifli, & Zain, 2019), describing the modern stage of the historical development of distance learning. This indicates that the emergence of the new concepts of open distance learning (ODL) and open distance learning environment (ODEE) is determined by the development of educational philosophical thought, as they most accurately describe the specifics of the modern distance learning environment, which is open to both: 1) the general public as distance education target-audience and 2) introduction of new information and communication technologies (ICT) in the distance learning process. Investigations also testify that the new concepts have already entered the lexicon of academic community and scientific terminology around the world, opening new opportunities for research into the specific features of open distance education environment in order to gain a broader picture of distance learning, highlighting ICT-based learning experiences.

The main principles of the open school are the following: openness, overcoming distance and flexibility by using the latest ICT in learning. Thanks to these three basic principles, many authors equate the notions of open school and distance education school, considering them synonymous (Abrioux, 2009; Haughey & Stewart, 2009). Theoretical research shows that a number of Latvian researches of distance education (Katane, Kristovska, & Katans, 2013; Katane, Kristovska, & Katans, 2015; Ozoliņa, Slaidiņš, Slaidiņš, & Žuga, 2003; Vāvers, 2022) also list and describe the above mentioned basic principles of

open education school as the basic principles of distance education, which supports the idea of the concept: 1) open education and distance education; 2) the close relationship between open school and distance education school. Therefore, the principles of openness, overcoming distance and flexibility are the common basic principles of open education and distance education. This leads to the further conclusion that all these principles are the core principles of open distance learning (Katane et al., 2021). This in turn proves the relevance and scientific validity of the concept of open distance education environment and open distance education school.

As the distance education secondary school environment is open to all and anyone, anywhere (with an internet connection) and at any time, it can be called an open education environment of a distance education secondary school.

Based on both theoretical research and the authors' reflexion of personal experience, authors worked out a substantiation of the basic principles of open education environment of a distance education secondary school, highlighting in more detail the ways in which these principles are manifested in lifelong guidance.

Research shows (Katane et al., 2021; Tlili, Burgos, Huang, Mishra, Sharma, & Bozkurt, 2021) that the modern distance education secondary school is an open education environment with its own specific characteristics. Experience has shown that distance education secondary schools have significantly expanded their functions beyond the traditional school.

Nowadays modern distance education secondary schools have broadened their target groups, becoming open, inclusive, and multifunctional learning environments. Thus, thanks to the specific features of their activity, they have become an essential part of a lifelong guidance system.

The lifelong guidance offered by modern distance education secondary school has several manifestations and functions. The authors offer an insight into the most typical manifestations and functions basing on the principle of openness, the principle of overcoming distance and the principle of flexibility.

## **1. The Offer of Lifelong Guidance Services According to the Principle of Openness**

Experience shows that modern distance education secondary schools are attended by teenagers, young people, and adults.

As distance education secondary schools are attended not only by school-age teenagers and young people, but also by adults aiming to complete compulsory national primary and/or general secondary education, it is fair to say that in terms of lifelong learning, is not simply state-recognised formal education, which is very important for everyone's career development.

● ***Second Chance Formal Education.*** Formal education is offered, which also has a compensatory function in adult education. In educational theories and concepts, this formal education is called *second chance education*.

The globally accepted concept of *second chance education* provides that second chance education opens new learning opportunities not only for adults, but also for school-age young people who have been unsuccessful in traditional face-to-face schools. The open education environment of a distance education secondary school therefore gives this second chance to try again to successfully complete a primary or general secondary education programme and graduate with a state-recognised diploma. Second chance distance education is also often chosen by children and young people who have been affected by health, behavioural and/or social exclusion problems while attending a face-to-face school. These students (learners) include individuals with special needs, many of whom have medically diagnosed disabilities (CEDEFOP, 2023).

Second chance education provision needs to take into account the fact that the target audience for such programmes is people who have prematurely stopped studying in a traditional face-to-face school. Given the negative learning experiences of this target group, it is important to stress that many of the second chance learners are psychologically vulnerable to change in their lives, having lost faith in their own abilities and also in the existing opportunities because of the difficulties and failures they have overcome in the past. At the same time, they are aware of the need to acquire a necessary formal school education, while at the same time building a bridge to further education and thinking about possible changes in their careers. Research shows that the majority of second chance learners, however, are already highly motivated, learning in a meaningful way, because they have returned to education, continuing to learn, changing the form and environment of their education, and realising the importance and role of their education in their lives - in their lifelong careers (Bloomer & Hodgkinson, 2000; Lamb, Walstab, Teese, Vickers, & Rumberger, 2004; Ross & Gray, 2005). To succeed in second chance education, a balance needs to be struck between acquiring education and a range of other activities in social life as well as in professional or employment activities that are also relevant to adult learners. Education should be on the same level of priority as other activities within a career.

It is very important to offer an educational environment in a distance education secondary school where *pedagogical, psychological, and technical support* can be found in the form of study guides or instructions, psychological, motivational and encouraging learning, allowing learners to get rid of previous inferiority complexes, forget previous failures and allow them to accumulate new, positive learning experiences. Several second chance education providers abroad, such as in Australia, offer specially trained *educational mentors* to help and support learners with various types of problems, so that they do not stop learning again. In this process, it is very important to ensure a collegial approach as well as to build friendly, supportive relationships with learners (Savelsberg, Pignata, & Weckert, 2017).

● ***Recurrent Formal Education.*** Distance education in the open education environment of secondary schools offers students (potential learners) not only a second chance education, but also a ***recurrent education.***

As the concept of lifelong education has developed, the concept of second chance education has been separated from the concept of lifelong education and is now successfully developing within the concept of recurrent education (Bengtsson, 1989). The interpretations of recurrent education and second chance education have both similarities and differences. The difference is that the stage of second chance education follows early termination of studies, when the full stage of education has not been completed and the content of the education programme has not been covered in full. In turn, recurrent education is when all the previous stages of education have been completed, the full cycle of each stage has been completed and the content of the education programme has been fully covered. The main idea of the *recurrent education* concept is that not all people can learn continuously throughout their lives. The learning process is periodic, resuming after a period of time when there is a need to acquire new knowledge, a new level of education or professional development. The concept of recurrent education thus developed as an alternative to the concept of further education and the concept of continuous education. Unlike the second chance education concept, the recurrent education concept has been successful in the intermittent phases of the education process and has always resulted in acquiring a document certifying the education.

● ***Non-formal Distance Education.*** In the open education environment of a distance education secondary school, distance learning makes it possible to provide not only the content of formal education (including second chance education, recurrent education, inclusive education) to any individual in society, regardless of age, health, or previous learning experience, but also ***the content of non-formal education*** at any time and in any

place with an internet connection. Non-formal education is a complement to formal education, but it can also be an alternative to formal education, to provide learners with content that is relevant and accessible to their interests and needs, and to help them develop the competences they need for their careers. There is no formal assessment in the process of non-formal distance learning. The educational process itself, as well as the resulting knowledge, skills, competences, and new experiences of the learners, is mostly assessed on the basis of the learners' evaluation and self-assessment. Non-formal education has greater flexibility, as it can respond more quickly to demand by offering a wide variety of non-formal education topics according to learners' interests and needs. The knowledge, skills and competences acquired in non-formal education can also be useful in professional activity. Non-formal education has many different functions: 1) up-bringing function; 2) informative and educational function; 3) developmental, cognitive and active learning function; 4) supportive function; 5) socialization and culturalization functions; 6) preventive function; 7) professional self-determination and professional development function; 8) compensatory function; 9) recreational function (opportunities for rest and relaxation) (Katans, Jurgena, Katane, & Svareniece, 2015; Smith & Flores, 2005). The non-formal education offered at the distance education secondary school has both distance learning and non-formal education features, so it can be said to be **non-formal distance learning**. Non-formal distance education, like formal distance education, uses different types of ICT, different digital solutions and tools, different types of media (internet, television) to enable all types of e-learning: i-learning (internet learning), m-learning (mobile learning via smartphones), t-learning via different types of telecommunications, social media, etc. (Colin, 2018). Open access learning resources are widely offered and used in non-formal distance learning (Romi, 2000). Experience shows that non-formal distance learning offers a wide range of different types of online courses, video materials, video presentations, e-books, online interest clubs such as e-sports training and competitions, learning games where the learner actually learns content of some curriculum (a subject/topic) by playing video games, etc.

For distance learning (both formal and informal distance learning) to be successful, learners' ICT competences, good learning technology not only at school but also at home, and self-directed and self-managed learning competences necessary for independent learning in a self-determined learning process are important prerequisites. Distance learning is always self-directed learning, as learners learn most of the content independently, but this is possible if learners are motivated to learn, able to plan their time and learning, manage and control their learning, and self-assess their learning results (Askin-Tekkol & Demirel, 2018). To promote self-directed and self-managed learning, distance education secondary schools provide pedagogical support, including methodological, such as self-assessment questions and answers, and psychological self-assessment tests. Psychological support is also offered through individual counselling support. A multifaceted support provided by schools contributes to the development of learners' self-management competences and helps them to accumulate positive independent learning experiences. In turn, self-management competence is an important component of career self-management competence (Katane & Korna-Opincāne, 2020). Based on experience, it can be said that the development of career self-management competences is the result of a methodically correctly managed and guided distance learning process, which is one of the most important tasks of lifelong guidance.

It can therefore be concluded that in an open distance education environment, learners have the opportunity to pursue both formal and non-formal education throughout their lives, successfully self-managing their careers.

• ***The offer of Educators Continuous Professional Development in Modern Distance Education Secondary School as Learning/Knowledge Organisation.*** Today, not only the learners, but also the educators learn in the open education environment of a distance

education secondary school. The authors' experience shows that many *distance education secondary schools* are becoming learning organisations (knowledge organisations), promoting ***continuous professional development*** of their teachers, including developing and offering ***professional training programmes***. It is a form of continuous learning and exchange of experience, where, thanks to information and communication technologies (ICT), knowledge stored in the school environment is transferred, re-created, and reproduced in any form, giving each teacher the opportunity to share their experience and acquire knowledge, skills and competences that can be useful for their professional development and pedagogical practice.

Theoretical research (Kennedy, 2016; Kyndt, Gijbels, Grosemans, & Donche, 2016; Opfer & Pedder, 2011) has generally concluded that professional development for teachers encompasses a wide range of activities, including structured, especially organised courses, collaborative learning in the workplace, reflection and sharing of experience, including unscripted non-formal discussions with colleagues (teachers), supervision, pedagogical observations and their analysis and evaluation; pedagogical-methodological, psychological literature reading clubs are working at schools (studying and discussing the latest professional literature), etc. According to the knowledge organisation conception (Katans, 2019), in this way distance education secondary schools become learning organizations in which everyone learns: both students and educators as well. Professional development courses for teachers, the main aim of which is to introduce a common approach and methodology in the educational process, are often called 'workshops', where teachers are assigned student roles, participating in structured activities such as lectures and discussions, using role-plays and a simulation approach. Professional development thus includes any type of activity aimed at and resulting in the development of teachers' professionalism (including different types of competences).

The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the IT incompetence of several teachers to use the latest information and communication technologies. There was also methodological incompetence in organising distance learning. There was a real need to support teachers' professional development in distance learning methodologies (Raimers, Schleicher, Saavedra, & Tuominen, 2020).

As information and communication technologies are continuously developing and changing, distance education secondary schools as open education environments are continuously developing and changing as well. ***Distance education methodology*** is increasingly improving. The professional development of educators in distance education methodology includes distance education planning, distance education curriculum development, digital learning resources development, various information and communication technologies and ICT based teaching methods (online internet platforms, e-learning platforms, software, applications, various digital tools, digital learning resources development methods etc.). It is important to know that there are differences between distance learning and e-learning, as e-learning can be part of face-to-face learning, including students' (learners') ICT based independent study. Teachers working in distance education need methodological support, ensuring a wide range of freely available distance education methodological literature and organising professional training courses. Much remains to be done in this field, despite the fact that Latvia has accumulated positive experience in the production of distance education methodological literature from the end of the 20th century to the present day (Deķe, Ivanova, & Kristovska, 2000; Kazuša, Laiveniece, Rozenfelde, Slaidiņš, & Štāle, 2011; Ivanova, Kristovska, & Slaidiņš, 1999; Slaidiņš, 2003; Slaidiņš, 2005).

In the aspect of methodology of distance education school managing it is important to point that managers of distance education need to undertake a job analysis so as to define the job description and job specification for online facilitation and their associated remunerations. This would enable course tutors to assess and determine if they would not be worse off in



terms of remuneration on online facilitation. On work relations, managers would need to provide social platforms where course tutors could collaborate and interact with their co-course tutors to share knowledge and experiences (Segbenya et al., 2024)

With the modernisation of access to lifelong guidance, a strong emphasis is being placed on the importance of using information and communication technologies (ICT) in the provision of lifelong guidance, including lifelong and lifewide education (Douce, 2022; Jaunzeme, 2013; Leon & Castro, 2014). Education is also undergoing significant changes, thanks to the fact that ICT have entered all areas of human activity and have become an integral part of people's lives and activities. Modern information and communication technologies become tools for both access to education process and distance learning open educational content (Hornidge, 2011; Swanson, 2020; Wu & Contreras, 2020). ***Modern information and communication technologies open new perspectives for lifelong guidance, including for supporting lifelong learning and access to education in open education environment.***

## **2. The Offer of Lifelong Guidance Services According to the Principle of Overcoming Distance**

There are three dimensions of *open distance education*: time, space, and process. Open distance education is closely linked to the *Information Society* paradigm, which is based on the idea that, in nowadays society, the main people's tools are information and communication technologies (ICT). ***Thanks to ICT, it is possible to cover long distances in education, save time, it is possible to learn at any time and in any place where there is an Internet connection.*** In the context of open distance learning, many scientists/researchers talk about the phenomenon of time and distance compression. From the point of view of the *Open School*, the importance of the educational process itself is growing, for example, how it takes place. The diversity of the learning process is relevant: from independent studying in the e-environment to online learning using the latest online platforms. The conception of the Open School actualizes the place and role of teachers and learners in the educational process, their shared (common) responsibility for the educational process, where the emphasis is shifted from the teacher-centred approach to the learner-centred approach in the learning process. The many roles and functions of the educator are important. Special emphasis is placed on counselling and instruction, promotion and support of self-managed learning, adaptation of the specifics of the learning content creating concise, comprehensible, and accessible e-learning tools, distance learning materials, e-books (Katane et al., 2021).

● ***Promotion and support self-directed or self-managed distance learning.*** It was previously emphasized that one of the main goals of lifelong guidance is to promote the readiness for career self-management of individuals as members of society, incl. to promote development of employability as internal resources set.

By the self-management of career processes, the scientists mean an individual's conscious influence on the own psychic phenomena (processes, conditions, and qualities), actions, his/her behaviour characteristic to him/her, including his/her self-directed and self-managed lifelong and lifewide learning in order to retain or change the nature and direction of their lifelong career (Īriste & Katane, 2016). Thus, self-directed or self-managed learning, on the other hand, is an important part of a self-directed career. This is also confirmed by one of the many definitions of a career: a career is an individual's lifelong progression in learning and work (Ryan & Hopkins, 2013; Watts, 2000).

Distance education is one of the forms of part-time education characterized by ICT-based self-directed and self-managed (mostly independent) distance learning.

The self-directed studies have cyclic nature, where the following fundamental stages could be identified (Īriste & Katane, 2016):

- *planning of independent studies* (identifying the own needs of learning; identifying the aims of learning; identifying the necessary resources, including human resources, material resources);
- *realization of independent studies* (choosing and using the corresponding learning strategies);
- *self-evaluation of independent studies* (evaluation of not only learning results, but also the study process, including learning skills and competencies).

Self-directed and self-managed learning is a characteristic feature of adults' autonomous learning process, however, it is no synonym to self-education. It may take place both independently (in an autodidactic manner) and by involving other people in the learning process due to two reasons: 1) under the influence of external conditions; 2) under the influence of an individual's own volition. The personality's self-management function is characteristic also to *the reflection*, which we would like to view from: 1) the aspect of professional development management; 2) the aspect of career self-management (Avis, Fisher, & Thompson, 2015; Baranova, 2012; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2007).

The authors' experience shows that modern distance education secondary schools offer various pedagogical, psychological, methodological and technical support for promoting learners' self-directed/self-managed distance learning.

It is important to know that educators and learners have different roles to play in distance learning process than in traditional full-time (face-to-face) learning process (Isman, Altinay, & Altinay, 2004). For example, as distance education places a strong emphasis on motivated, self-directed, planned, independent learning, compared to full-time (face-to-face) education educators, the distance learning educator has an additional very important role to play, that of a *distance learning instructor* (Telg, 2021). The distance learning instructor introduces the distance learning plan, informs learners about the online tutorials and tests, the deadlines, the specific content to be covered, specifying what to focus on in a particular subject, digital learning materials and the environment in which they are available. The teacher, as a kind of guide, introduces the learners to the labyrinth of the distance education environment, presenting the learning objectives, tasks, possible problems or obstacles to learning that should be avoided. Offering professional development for teachers in the open education environment of distance education secondary schools is further evidence that distance education secondary schools provide lifelong guidance and are an important part of a lifelong guidance system.

• ***The offer of career e-counselling services.*** Like all schools, distance education secondary schools offer career counselling. As all learning and counselling processes in a distance education secondary school are carried out remotely using the latest ICT, the career counselling offered in this school can be called *Distance Counselling, Online Counselling* and/or *e-Counselling*. Both group and individual career counselling is offered (Carvalho, Mourão, & Freitas, 2023). *Cyber-counselling* is also a concept in contemporary academic terminology (Wang, Yuan, Shi, Tang, & Ši, 2022), which can be used in a narrow sense as a synonym for remote, online or e-counselling as mentioned above. At the same time, with the development of Smart technologies and the introduction of artificial intelligence into the everyday life of today's society, the concept of cyber-counselling is expanding, shedding light on the future perspectives of education and career e-guidance. Several researchers are already exploring the use of artificial intelligence in education (Bozkurt, Karadeniz, Baneres, Guerrero-Roldan, & Rodriguez, 2021; Chiu, Xia, Zhou, Chai, & Cheng, 2023; Holmes, Hui, Miao, & Ronghuai, 2021). Experience shows that distance education schools already have bot-counsellors who provide the most frequently requested information. But this is only the

beginning of the use of artificial intelligence in education and career counselling. At the same time, there is a debate in society, including programmers, scientists, about how much of the function of providing counselling services to humans can be entrusted to artificial intelligence (Adams, Pente, Lermeyer, & Rockwell, 2023). There is research (Wang et al., 2022), supporting the assumption that Generation Z, also known as the technology generation, is more loyal and flexible in their attitudes towards cyber-counselling than other generations. Generation Z also accepts psychological cyber-counselling in an ICT-based learning environment.

As part of the lifelong guidance, distance education secondary schools have established extensive networks of social partners with colleges and universities, various sports clubs, e-learning platform providers, providers of open access learning resources, distance education schools' alumni, family members of learners, etc. to open new perspectives in the career development of their learners. Experience shows that the success stories of the graduates of distance education secondary schools, available in the schools' e-environments, play an important role in career support, inspiring, encouraging and motivating distance learners not to give up when they encounter their first difficulties in distance education and/or setbacks in their careers.

The results of the theoretical studies highlight the multifunctionality of the distance education secondary school as a lifelong guidance environment, both in terms of its broad target audience and the multifunctionality of the lifelong guidance offered, where the development of ICT competences, lifelong learning competences and career self-management competences play an important role.

### **3. The Offer of Lifelong Guidance Services According to the Principle of Flexibility**

The broad, multidimensional meaning of career is linked to the many social and professional roles a person plays throughout his or her career, linking career development to the diversity of a person's life and living environment, where the focus is on career formation and development in interaction with a person's diverse life and work environment (Berlato, 2015; Hall & Chandler, 2005; Īriste, 2018).

As experience is broadly defined in contemporary definitions of careers, rather than just occupational experience, the definition implies that a career is shaped by a person's diverse experiences in different fields of human endeavour, so that careers can be viewed from different perspectives or aspects of a person's life and activities. Thus, the many dimensions of a career are also considered:

- professional development and employment;
- family, including up-bringing children;
- formal and non-formal education;
- membership of various governmental and non-governmental organisations, unions and associations;
- civic participation in local and national government;
- civilian and military participation in national defence;
- spending free time in meaningful ways, taking part in different types of recreational activities (e.g. tourism, sports, motorbike clubs, artistic groups: choirs, dance groups, folk theatre, applied arts or visual arts studios, etc.);
- other activities

that contribute to personal development, the acquisition of new social roles, the acquisition and accumulation of new experiences throughout a person's life.

Thanks to the inclusive, multifunctional environment of distance education secondary schools, learners are trying to combine their careers according to their life goals, combining

studies with other activities. They successfully combine their studies with: (▪) up-bringing young children in the family; (▪) household management; (▪) working, professional activities; (▪) succeeding in high-performance sport; (▪) developing a career in the fashion industry (as models)); (▪) acquiring knowledge, skills and competences in the field of national defence through their training and practical activities in the Jaunsardze (The Young Guard) or in the Zemessardze (The Latvian National Guard), which are an important part of the Latvian National Armed Forces, etc.

Experience also shows that many distance learners are able to combine several activities at the same time, which together shape their careers. This is possible thanks to the flexibility of distance education secondary schools offered lifelong guidance e-services, including distance education programmes and plans, and for individual schedules of tests. Modern distance education secondary schools offer various education opportunities thanks to ***differentiation, individualisation, personalisation of distance educational process*** (Andersone, 2017; Bray & McClaskey, 2014; Ozols, 2020):

- *differentiation* of the educational process involves providing methodological, didactic and organisational measures to adapt learning to the abilities, motivation and talents of a group of learners; internal differentiation involves providing groups of learners with different tasks appropriate to their abilities and interests, in which case the number of tasks, their degree of difficulty, timing, teacher support, working and reference materials etc. vary;
- *individualisation* of the educational process (learning according to individual learning plans, including individual timetables and deadlines for tests of learning achievements, with individual time allocated for learning the curriculum, etc.);
- as well as the *personalisation* of the educational process, primarily through the management of distance learning in the e-environment, where each learner has their own profile or learning account in the e-environment,

making a significant contribution to supporting learners' careers.

Thus, we can conclude, that ***the modern distance education secondary school as an open environment occupies an important place in the Latvian lifelong guidance system.***

## **Conclusions**

The paradigm of lifelong guidance is considered a new paradigm that has gained its rapid development, popularity and relevance in the 21st century. The aim of lifelong guidance is to provide career support to people of all ages at all stages of their career development in a lifelong and continuous process. Moreover, career support is necessary on a continuous basis: in moments of career success and in moments of crisis. Provision of lifelong education is the spotlight of lifelong guidance, as it is key to successful career development and a guarantee of employment. Cooperation networks of all kinds, at both interpersonal and inter-institutional level, have an important place in the lifelong guidance system.

Therefore, providers and implementers of education of all kinds are seen as important parts of lifelong guidance system. Thus, nowadays distance education secondary schools are the providers and further developers of lifelong guidance. Thanks to the principles of openness, overcoming distance and flexibility, lifelong guidance e-services in modern distance education secondary school as open education environment is accessible to everyone, anywhere and anytime.

Modern distance education secondary schools have large target-audience: teenagers, young people, and adults, including persons with disabilities, who have opportunities to obtain education in alternative way. In parallel with school-aged students who receive formal education in a continuous learning process, the open distance education environment allows

to offer second chance formal education and/or recurrent formal education. These opportunities allow many young people and adults to return back to schools after study breaks at traditional full-times (face-to-face) schools. This is a great support in the realization of their life goals and career intentions. Distance education secondary schools offer also non-formal distance education. Non-formal distance education contributes to the development of different types of competences outside of formal distance education. It is an additional opportunity and also an alternative to formal distance education for the development of personal and various professional competences of learners, which are necessary for career development.

Formal and non-formal distance education is characterized by ICT-based self-directed and self-managed (mostly independent) distance learning. In turn, self-directed and self-managed learning is an important part of a self-directed career. The self-managed distance learning process develops not only ICT competences, methodological competences of distance education, but also lifelong learning competences and career self-management competences, which are very necessary for career self-development in continuous changing conditions in the information and knowledge society, including continuous changing labour market.

Many distance learners are able to combine several activities at the same time, which together shape their careers. This is possible thanks to the flexibility of distance education secondary schools offered lifelong guidance e-services, including distance education programmes and plans, and for individual schedules of tests. Modern distance education secondary schools offer various education opportunities thanks to *differentiation, individualisation, personalisation of distance educational process*.

Distance education secondary schools have established extensive networks of social partners with colleges and universities, various sports clubs, e-learning platform providers and developers, providers of open access learning resources, distance education secondary schools' alumni, family members of learners etc. to open new perspectives in the career development of their learners. The success stories (narratives) of the graduates of distance education secondary schools play an important role in career support, inspiring, encouraging and motivating distance learners not to give up when they encounter their first difficulties in distance learning and setbacks in their careers. Distance education secondary schools offer career e-counselling, also known as online counselling and cyber-counselling, which is an important part of lifelong guidance e-services.

The important place and role of distance education secondary schools in a lifelong guidance system is also evidenced by the teachers' continuous professional development, incl. professional training courses, offered in a distance education schools environment. Thus, distance education secondary schools can be called not only open distance education environment, but also learning or knowledge organizations where both teachers (educators) and students (learners) learn.

The modern distance education secondary school as an open environment occupies an important place in the Latvian lifelong guidance system.

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