

## Remote learning in basic education schools in Latvia during COVID-19 Pandemic: Experience of pedagogical internship

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### Abstract

Due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, most students were forced to study remotely, including students in Latvia. This publication aims to reflect on the remote learning process during Covid-19, analysing the results obtained by students during their internships. The research study involves 81 full-time and part-time students of Liepaja University study programmes. This publication is based on qualitative empirical research, using the case study method within a natural environment. The results were analysed using content analysis. As the result of this study, the conclusions are drawn, revealing the identified problems, strong points and contradictions in the learning process, providing a basis for improvements. The obtained research results can serve as a foundation for the research in future.

**Keywords:** consequences of Covid -19, remote learning process, internship

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## **1. Introduction**

In 2019, an unexpected change of situation was caused by an outbreak of a new virus in China, which later covered the whole world and is known as Covid-19 pandemic. This outbreak changed the lives of millions of people around the world, forcing them to adapt to the new situation. In the field of education, this meant reviewing the existing organization of the learning process and finding new solutions. Thanks to the possibilities of information technologies, the solution was found by applying and rearranging the existing resources, and as a result, the learning process was organized remotely. The remote learning process implemented during this outbreak created new challenges for everyone – for teachers, students, pupils, and their parents (Covid -19 Health System Response Monitor, 2020).

The organization and implementation of remote learning required new ideas, it created unprecedented feelings, reflections requiring self-analysis and evaluation of the achievements. Implementation of remote learning in schools of Latvia can be divided in two stages: spring, 2020 and school year 2020/2021 from autumn to spring. In spring, 2020, starting from March 13, an emergency situation was declared in the country due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the Ministry of Education and Science decided to switch the full-time learning process to a complete remote learning. This applied to both schools and universities (Latvia: VET during the Covid -19 outbreak, 24/06/2020). Other countries acted similarly. In the summer of 2020, the cumulative rates of the disease were reduced, therefore in the following autumn the learning resumed in person at both schools and universities. However, in November the epidemiological situation worsened, and it was again necessary to switch to remote learning (Covid -19 Health System Response Monitor. Policy responses for Latvia. Measures in other sector. 2020, 2021; Guidelines for the implementation of full-time, combined and distance learning, 2020).

The situation in Latvian schools was unique, as implementing the epidemiological safety measures, the government prolonged the remote learning process until the end of the school year (The state of school education: One year into the COVID pandemic Preliminary results - March 2021). To be more precise, at the end of October, the full-time studies did not resume for learners of Classes 7 to 12, but solutions were sought for pupils of Classes 1 to 6. For example, the regional principle was introduced in March, 2021 - if in some region the cumulative infection rates lowered, then the teachers were tested on weekly basis, and if the result was negative, the learning could take place in the classroom (Covid -19 Health System Response Monitor. Policy responses for Latvia. Measures in other sector. 2020, 2021). The teachers and students had to adapt to this specific weekly situation. The studies at universities took place mainly remotely, except for specific practical courses. Liepaja University used MS Teams for remote learning. Since the pedagogical internship is an important part of the study process, this situation required a new approach and solutions for how to carry out the internships for students of pedagogy, adjusting to the remote learning process (Gözde & Osman, 2020; Latvia: VET during the Covid -19 outbreak, 2020).

### **1.1. Purpose of study**

The aim of this article is to answer the research questions that were put forward: What tasks can students perform during pedagogical internship if the learning process in schools takes place remotely? What experience do the students gain during the pedagogical internship? What are

students' observations about the pupils during the remote learning? How does the student's collaboration with internship moderator (teacher-mentor) take place, and what is the teachers' opinion about the remote learning process? How can the implementation of the content of pedagogical internship be improved using the remote learning experience?

## **2. Methods and Materials**

The new unprecedented situation, caused by Covid-19 pandemic, called for finding solutions to various problems and it had consequences, so it is a relevant research topic for scientists of various fields, including pedagogy, both now and in the future. Already in 2020, Gozde and Titrek published a study in the Journal of 6<sup>th</sup> international ICLEL Conference on learning experience during Covid-19 pandemic at Sakarya University (Gozde & Titrek, 2020).

This article will describe the remote learning process in Latvian basic education schools during the Covid-19 pandemic, as observed by Liepaja University students during their pedagogical internships. The publication is based on empirical exploration of the quality of remote learning process, using the method of case study conducted in a natural environment, which serves as a foundation for the detailed description and analysis of the data. The students' pedagogical internship diaries were analysed in this study. The internships took place between April, 2020 and May, 2021, when the learning process was remote due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

### **2.1. Participants**

The research study involves 81 full-time and part-time students of Liepaja University study programmes: "Primary education teacher", "Teacher/Basic education teacher". Most of them completed one internship, while 24 students had two pedagogical internships within the given period. The internship tasks were designed for 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> Year students of teacher education programmes, and they have accordingly been implemented in Classes 1 to 9. The internships were conducted in various Latvian schools, and each student had at least one teacher as a mentor in this remote learning process. During the internship, a feedback was also provided by the director of the study programme who is also the author of the tasks, as well the evaluation of internships took place within a group of students.

The study programme "Primary Education Teacher" is a new licensed programme, which is in a process of approbation. During the period from January to May, 2021, within the framework of ESF SO project "Reduction of fragmentation of study programmes in LiepU" (No. 8.2.1.0/18/I/002), regular (once or twice a month) remote meetings took place with the experts of the study programme "Primary Education Teacher" from cooperation partners – University of Latvia, Daugavpils University and Rezekne Academy of Technologies, and internships was one of the issues for discussion. The aim was to clarify and improve the content of internships during remote learning, and to summarize the learnings of this period in order to perfect the content of internships in the process of implementing the study programme "Primary Education Teacher". The conclusions drawn from these discussions will be employed in the future planning of the content of internships, but some recommendations were already included in the internships implemented in May, 2021.

## **2.2. Data collection**

As a source of data, the author employed the students' reports – internship diaries, where the internship progress is recorded together with students' personal feelings and self-reflection, as well as the interviews conducted by students with the teachers (mentors) on remote learning process, which revealed the problems, strengths and outcomes. Although the internship diary is a subjective source of information, it still contains enough factual material about the progress and problems of pedagogical internship during remote learning process. Diaries give also a historical sequence of events, they date events accurately, they are specific, describe details that are important to their authors, help to perceive the process of events more vividly. However, as diaries are subjective sources, their content should be compared with other sources of information (Gavriljins, 2017). Therefore, the information from the material collected from the surveys conducted by Edurio together with the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) on the remote learning process will be employed for the comparison. Edurio is a unique feedback platform, which, employing surveys, aims to help to improve the quality of education by providing an opportunity to listen regularly to teachers, pupils, parents, and principals of schools and pre-schools (<https://home.edurio.com/lv>). The surveys are developed in cooperation with experts of the field of education, keeping especially in mind the needs of educational institutions and the municipalities.

The goal for the interviews conducted during the internships was to learn and apply the interview designing methodology in order to be able to apply it later for research required for the studies. The interview questions were not uniform; each student had to come up with their own questions, taking into account the specific situation of the internship environment. The students conducted interviews with the teachers (mentors) in the final stage of their internship, when students already had an idea how the remote learning process works. Students interviewed the teachers using email or other technological tools used at the particular school, or conducted telephone interviews. The diversity of interview questions complicated the processing of data, but they were used with an aim to understand teachers' experiences and their reflections on remote learning.

## **2.3. Analysis**

The results from the collected data were analysed using content analysis. The responses were first themed and then analysed based on the content. As the result of this study, the conclusions are drawn, revealing the identified problems, strong points and contradictions in the learning process, providing a basis for improvements. The obtained research results can serve as a foundation for research in future.

## **3. Findings**

### **3.1. Research question: What tasks can students perform during pedagogical internship if the learning process in schools takes place remotely?**

First of all, it is necessary to describe the previous experience in the implementation of pedagogical internships and substantiate the need and scope of internships in teacher study programmes at Liepaja University, because teachers' competence is characterized not only by knowledge but also by the ability to manage the learning process. Therefore, the knowledge obtained during the internships is so important. The internships of Teacher study programmes are planned in the volume of 20 CRP in accordance with the regulations of the Cabinet of

Ministers No. 512 (Noteikumi par otrā līmeņa profesionālās augstākās izglītības valsts standartu, 2014); they are related to the study courses and are arranged in succession. The internships are implemented in accordance with an agreement, and the internship agreement is signed by the higher education institution and by the employer. The internship agreement states the objectives and tasks, the internship schedule, the procedure for evaluating the internship achievements, as well as the duties and responsibilities of both parties. The learning outcomes of the internship are coordinated with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and competences specified in the Standard of the teaching profession and in the description of corresponding study courses. Internships are planned in accordance with Liepaja University regulations on internships. The planning strategy of internships envisages the involvement of practicing teachers – mentors.

During the internship, employing the theoretical knowledge previously acquired in study courses, students perform a pedagogical observation, participate in the planning and management of the educational process together with the teacher – mentor, engage in practice-related mid-seminars and in the final seminar (conference), as well as reflect on and assess their activities using the theoretical knowledge. There is a unified approach to the implementation of each internship: the internship begins with a joint introductory seminar, students themselves must choose the potential internship location, but there is also an opportunity to implement the internship in the schools that are cooperation partners of Liepaja University. Each internship has mid-seminars and a closing conference at the end of the internship. During the internship, students are practically acquainted with competency-based approach by observing and teaching the lessons and receiving assessments for them. Thus, the students can apply the theoretically acquired knowledge in specific fields of studies, as well as observe and analyse the experience and activity of the teacher – mentor, and perform self-analysis in order to improve the learning outcomes.

During the internship, students develop a portfolio that consists of materials gathered during the practice, which is presented at the final internship seminar, when the students discuss and share their reflections both with their mentor and with each other, thus confirming their ability to apply the acquired knowledge in professional work and their ability to independently acquire, select, analyse and critically evaluate the information. The internship results are evaluated by the internship supervisor. The final grade consists of the evaluation given by the internship supervisor and by the teacher-mentor from the educational institution about the planning, teaching and analysis of the daily pedagogical process; also the student's self-assessment and the presentation at the final seminar is taken into account. The final seminar also envisages the mutual exchange of the experience gained during the internship, which would promote professional growth and contribute to the improvement of internships in the future.

In order to improve the knowledge, skills and competences in pedagogy and methodology of the field, during the internship students receive an individual teacher - mentor's support at the educational institution and internship supervisor's support at Liepaja University. The duties of internship mentor: (1) to coordinate the student's activity in the educational institution, (2) to observe and analyse the student's pedagogical activity, (3) to cooperate with the student's internship supervisor, providing information on observations, recommendations, student's knowledge, growth, skills and competences during the implementation of learning content, mentioning also the indicators of growth.

The duties of internship supervisor: (1) to advise and to provide support to the students on the issues of pedagogical internship, (2) to review and evaluate the internship documentation, (3) to organize the internship assessment seminars and to provide feedback.

For successful implementation of internships, a special attention is paid to the mutual cooperation between the educational institution and the University, students and teachers, as well as between the students themselves. The internship supervisor develops the internship schedules in cooperation with teachers – mentors. At the same time, the cooperation between Liepaja University and educational institution during the student's internship is a potential support not only for the professional development of the students, but also for the professional perfection of the teachers – mentors and internship supervisors. The implementation of the internship goals ensures the transition from a semi-independent professional activity to independent professional activity, as a result of which the students' research, self-evaluation and self-reflection skills are improved, as well as skills to analyse the study process and obtain the research data for research and development of bachelor's thesis.

Starting from March, 2020, the remote learning due to emergency situation introduced in relation to Covid-19 pandemic, created a new, unprecedented situation. Initially, the internships for students was rescheduled in a hope that the epidemic will be short-lived, following the epidemiological requirements and the situation in schools, learning how to adapt to this process. After the first two weeks of remote learning, the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) and Edurio conducted a survey (March 30, 2020 - April 2, 2020; survey of directors: March 23 - April 1) in the Edurio web platform with respondents authorizing by using the e-Class or Mykoob passwords, or upon a receipt of a specific link. The aim of the survey was to understand how the remote learning takes place in Latvian schools, to identify the areas where MES, municipalities and schools can improve the remote learning process, as well as to get the feedback from pupils, teachers and parents on the organization of the learning process. It was concluded that, in general, the remote study process is going well, the communication takes place with the school, parents, as well as among the learners, and that there is an operative exchange of information (Attālināto mācību pirmās 2 nedēļas. IZM un Edurio aptaujas rezultāti, 2020).

Already from the very beginning, the successful remote learning is the merit of teachers, parents and school leaders. The teachers worked long hours to prepare appropriate teaching/learning materials and to provide the feedback on pupils' work. Parents both worked and supported one or more children in the learning process. School leaders developed a structure and guidelines to keep the learning organized and meaningful. However, shortcomings or challenges were also noted – lack of technical support, need for feedback and socio-emotional support for all parties involved – for students, teachers and parents. Since remote learning includes the use of information and communication technologies, it was concluded that the technical support generally is good, but problematic in some cases – 29% of teachers needed a more stable Internet connection as most (90%) of teachers worked only or mostly from home. The e-Class is mainly used for communication between school and families, followed by WhatsApp and telephone calls. 11% of teachers gave instructions and received the completed work in a printed form. After this survey, on April 6, in response to the current situation, with the support of Ministry of Education, an educational TV channel "Your Class" began to broadcast educational content for 1<sup>st</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> Class learners.

Most learners indicated that they have access to teacher's support often (32%) or always (45%) if they need it. However, there were also enough pupils who only occasionally received teacher's support (15%), or received it rarely (2%) or very rarely/ never (1%) (Attālināto mācību pirmās 2 nedēļas).

IZM un Edurio aptaujas rezultāti,2020). Based on the shortcomings or challenges identified from the survey results, the National Centre for Education (VISC), in cooperation with Skola2030, developed a Memorandum or methodological recommendations on the implementation of remote learning for general and vocational education institutions (2020).

Consequently, in the remote learning process in spring, 2020, the existing textbooks were used along with the learning materials prepared by the teachers; the pupils learned independently and sent in their work to the teacher at the end of the week – the online lessons were practically non-existent due to the lack of experience and relevant skills. Not all teachers, as well as pupils and their parents, were ready for such learning process and were able to learn successfully. It was during this period when the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year full-time and part-time students of the study programme “Teacher/ Basic Education Teacher” had their pedagogical internships. The internship tasks for students were developed taking into account the real situation – fully remote learning due to the emergency situation. At this stage, the internship tasks were as follows:

1. The student-intern gets acquainted with the learning process in the particular class, helping a pupil, recommended by the teacher-mentor, to deal with learning difficulties in any subject area due to the remote learning process. The student communicates with the pupil remotely, consults the pupil.
2. If possible, the student participates in elaboration of materials designed for remote learning, designs or corrects the tests and carries out other teacher’s duties in accordance with the vision of the teacher – mentor.
3. The student records the achievements of each day in a diary, both the achievements from cooperation with the teacher-mentor and from working with the learner, as well as adds the corresponding teaching materials that were designed for teaching, notes personal feelings and reflections on the internship process, analysing the process. An interview with the teacher was not required.
4. At the end of the internship, the student carries out the assessment (on cooperation with teachers and pupils in the learning process) and self-analysis of one’s own performance, which he/she adds to the internship diary.

In 2020/2021, from the end of October, the government prolonged the remote learning implementing the epidemiological safety measures, it was possible to clarify and perfect the tasks of internship, as by then a new experience was gained both in schools and universities. As early as August, 2020, the Guidelines for the implementation of full-time, combined and distance learning were developed, anticipating that the epidemiological situation in schools could change. Methodological guidelines for comprehensive and vocational educational institutions during Covid-19 were updated in August, 2020. The guidelines were based on the methodological recommendations prepared by VISC and Skola2030 in spring, 2020. When it was time to switch again to remote learning, VISC prepared additional and updated support materials for teachers (Supporting materials in preparation for distance learning after the students' autumn holidays).

During this time, the concept of remote learning was also legally defined, making appropriate changes in Article 1 of the Education Law. Amendments to the Education Law, from November 20, 2020, determined that remote learning is a part of the full-time education process in which the pupils learn, using information and communication technologies, without being physically in the same room or place with the teacher (Education law).

In 2020/2021, from November to May (different groups at different times), the internships were conducted not only for full-time and part-time students in the study programme "Teacher/ Basic Education Teacher", but also in the new study programme "Primary Education Teacher", therefore the internship tasks were developed in a more differentiated way. The study programme "Primary Education Teacher" is designed at Liepaja University together with cooperation partners - University of Latvia, Daugavpils University and Rezekne Academy of Technologies, implementing ESF SO project "Reduction of fragmentation of study programmes in LiepU" (No. 8.2.1.0/18/I/002). Thus, the partner universities could share their experience in the approbation process of the programme in terms of designing the internship tasks and documentation and implementation of internship during the time of remote learning. The cooperation with the experts of the project partner universities and discussions on pedagogical internships gave the following benefits for the further improvement of the content of internships in the study programme "Primary Education Teacher":

- the exchange of experience and awareness of similar problem issues,
- the terminology and content of the internships were specified, as well as documentation the students must submit at the end of the internship,
- the importance of feedback was highlighted, as well as the need for mid-seminars during the internship, employing the remote learning experience for communication,
- the importance of cooperation with employers was actualized, as well as the need for the base-schools for internships; the requirements for the professional competence of the teacher-mentor were defined,
- the importance of the internship supervisor (from university) in the process of development, implementation and evaluation of the internship tasks was actualized.

If in November, 2020, the internship tasks were developed only for a remote learning process, then in February/March, 2021, the tasks were developed for both remote and semi-remote learning at school. The internship tasks for the remote learning process were as follows:

1. The student helps the teacher-mentor in ensuring the pedagogical process – to develop teaching/learning materials, to compose or mark the tests, prepare lessons for remote teaching and to perform other teacher's duties according to the vision of the teacher-mentor;
2. The student gets acquainted with the learning process in a particular class, helping a pupil, recommended by the teacher-mentor, who has learning difficulties in any subject area. The student communicates with the pupil remotely, consults the pupil, explains the tasks and, if necessary, communicates with the teacher remotely.
- 3.

As previously, the internship documentation includes a practice diary, to which the student adds the appropriate teaching/learning materials, which were developed or used during the teaching. As part of the internship, the students also conduct a self-prepared interview with the teacher-mentor about the remote learning process.

### ***3.2. Research question: What are students' observations about the pupils during the remote learning?***

Summarizing the students' observations of the learners, recorded in their practice diaries during the remote learning, it can be concluded that it has been a psychologically difficult time for the



pupils. The students have arrived to such conclusion both by observing the online lessons and by conducting the online lessons themselves, as well as by working individually with particular pupils. In Classes 1 to 3, the lessons did not take place in all subjects, as teachers were encouraged to organize integrated lessons. The teaching hours per week also were different in different schools – from a few hours per week up to 1-3 hours a day. According to students' observations, the ZOOM platform was used most often, some used e-Class environment, some – MS Teams. It proves, that it is more than it was stated in the international study, conducted by International Network for Government Scientific Advice and the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker, which stated that in Latvia the online learning is provided only by e-Class platform, in addition to the educational TV channel 'Your Class'. (Online education for schoolchildren during COVID-19: a scan of policies and initiatives around the world. April 23, 2021).

During the internship, students observed that the learners join the online lesson and work together with the teacher in specific, previously arranged times, but they lack a direct contact with their classmates. There were students who interfered and did not follow the progress of the lesson, thus, making the teaching difficult. They noticed that the pupils got tired; it was difficult for them to concentrate, especially for the first-graders. As a positive aspect, the students observed that during the remote learning the pupils became more independent, they had developed self-directed learning skills – they were able to plan their daily workload, join the online lessons, submit completed assignments, as well as perform other learning activities with a computer, phone or tablet. In comparison, in May, 2021, Gatis Narvaišs, the director of school improvement at Edurio, summarizing the information obtained from Edurio surveys on remote learning, stated that the pupils have acquired the following positive outcomes from remote learning: digital skills and electronic communication, independence, ability to learn independently, time management skills (Narvaišs, 2021).

Students also emphasized the responsibility of parents in helping pupils and explaining what they did not understand, and many parents did that. However, they were not satisfied with the fact that during the online lessons, particularly in the times of independent work, some parents told their children the answers or completed the task instead of the learner. Also, Narvaišs (2021) agrees that this is a problem, because the parents often exaggerate the meaning of the marks, so it is necessary to explain why the particular work is assigned in order to take off the pressure from an assessment. The problem arises if the parents cannot help their children in the learning process, especially in the Classes 1 to 3. In this aspect, Narvaišs (2021) points out that parents should keep an eye on the process of learning that the responsibility does not get too heavy for a small child (Narvaišs, 2021). After individual work with pupils, the students concluded: learners not always precisely understand the question, they need help and explanation for their homework, especially in the lessons of Latvian and Mathematics. There are learners who are in a need for communication with an adult because their classmates are not available, and their parents are at work. After encouragement and support from the student-intern, the ability to act independently is developed.

It is more complicated if the pupil has learning difficulties and needs an individual approach. This problem was also mentioned by teachers at national level, therefore, with a slight improvement in the epidemiological situation, starting from March 2021, individual consultations for pupils were allowed once a week for this group of learners. One of the students mentioned a specific problem she faced during the internship when working together with the teacher-mentor: in Class 2, there were two

children who had recently returned with their parents to Latvia from abroad, and they had poor knowledge of Latvian. Thus, every day the work was carried out individually, talking in Latvian remotely to the pupil at least for an hour a day. In Classes 4 to 6, the marks for many pupils had lowered due to the lack of motivation, and as a result, these pupils did not join the online lessons or ignored the tasks or homework given by the teacher, or just copied the answers from their classmates. The individual lessons with these pupils showed that their prior knowledge is very weak. The following problem factors – schools teach less academic knowledge online than in face-to-face lessons, and it is difficult for learners to concentrate and find motivation for their learning, are also mentioned by Narvaišs (2021).

### ***3.3. Research question: What experience do the students gain during the pedagogical internship?***

The students unequivocally acknowledged that during the internship they have obtained an idea of how the remote learning process works, more specifically, how this process works in a particular school. For example, a learning plan for the entire week was sent to students and parents in their e-Class mail, then the students completed their work and submitted it to e-Class, or took a photo and sent it to teacher's WhatsApp, then the teacher replied providing the feedback. If necessary, individual face-to-face consultations were provided. This type of work organization is easier to provide in classrooms with a small number of students. If there were no online lessons in the spring of 2020, then in the school year 2020/2021, the situation changed and online lessons were taking place, which was also indicated in the students' list of weekly tasks. However, there were teachers who did not teach lessons online, only sent weekly assignments to the pupils, and then it was good if parents could help and explain.

The students concluded that the learners of Classes 1 to 3 are still too small to learn completely independently. Therefore, it is understandable that parents were not satisfied with the teacher's work when lessons did not take place remotely. The educators' argument is that in the families with several school-age children, the necessary technical support is not available for everyone; therefore, the preference for remote lessons was given to the older children. Such approach contributes to social inequality and would require more in-depth research: what contributed to the situation that, despite the MES recommendations to organize remote learning, not all pupils of Classes 1-3 had online lessons using available technologies. Social inequality as one of the negative features of remote learning is also mentioned in the experience of other countries (Analysing the impact of Covid19 on children, 2021).

During the internship, students gained experience in how to prepare and conduct lessons in the remote learning process. The exception was schools that used e-Class in the study process, because then only students and teachers of that class could join the lessons. In those cases the student worked with some pupils individually as a teacher's assistant, using the Zoom platform, as well as helped the teacher to prepare the learning materials, such as worksheets. Students mentioned that it is more difficult to conduct a lesson remotely, because there is a lack of cooperation and direct contact with learners, especially if they previously have had the classroom learning experience. In addition, the technical problems can arise, when the online lesson gets interrupted. Students have also observed that some teachers, especially the elderly, lack previous experience in use of technologies, and the remote learning process creates difficulties for them. Students also gained remote work experience in marking and commenting on students work, also in communicating with parents. The students

acknowledged the valuable and satisfactory experience they gained when advising the pupils individually, explaining them issues they did not understand.

When working with pupils individually, the importance of socialization process was emphasized. In the conversations, the students tried to find out the learners' interests and where do they see the problems areas, and why they cannot complete their homework, in order to understand why the pupils lose learning motivation during the remote learning process. Analysing the remote learning process, the students have also noticed a significant general problem related to the introduction of the new competency-based approach in schools (Noteikumi par valsts pamatizglītības standartu un pamatizglītības programmu paraugiem, 2018). The new competency-based content is being introduced gradually, and in the school year of 2020/2021, it is introduced in Classes 1, 4 and 7 (Mācību satura ieviešanas grafiks, 2018). Such implementation plan was designed already before the Covid-19 pandemic. Students observed that the curriculum is designed, but the teaching aids corresponding to the new curriculum are not fully available. Consequently, the workload of a teacher doubles, as it is necessary to prepare both the teaching/learning materials for the remote learning process as well as materials corresponding to the new content of competency-based approach, because the available resources do not cover all topics. A part-time student mentions outdoor lessons as a positive feature, which could take place in regions with a low Covid-19 cumulative rate starting from May, 2021.

***3.4. Research question: How does the student's collaboration with internship moderator (teacher-mentor) take place, and what is the teachers' opinion about the remote learning process?***

The students choose their internship place themselves or it is recommended by the programme director and internship supervisor, because the study programme has signed agreements with some schools. Then the teachers-mentors are informed that, according to the contract, the students will do their internship with them. However, due to the remote learning process, many schools refused to accept students for internship. The refusal was based on the fact that with remote learning, the teachers' workload has increased, and being a mentor to a student will increase the workload even more. Another argument was that due to the epidemiological situation of Covid-19, the student's arrival at school could have a negative impact on the school's environment, as well as uncertainties would arise in the planning of the learning process.

However, those teachers who cooperated with students during their pedagogical internships were satisfied, especially with their work with individual learners who faced difficulties during the remote learning process. In turn, the students highly assessed the professional competence of teachers, the opportunity to get acquainted not only with the teaching, but also with the upbringing process in remote learning conditions. Students were grateful for suggestions, support, and feedback from the teacher-mentor. At the same time, the students realized how much time, strength and energy the remote learning process requires from the teacher, creating an overload at work, that this is a difficult stage not only for the learners and their parents, but also for the teachers. Students also benefited from being able to observe not only remote lessons of their own teacher-mentor, but also of other teachers, which allowed them to compare the methods and approaches employed. Students appreciated the opportunity match the theory with practice.

During the internship, students conducted an interview with their teacher-mentor, thus, besides their own observations of about remote learning process, they could learn and also analyse the

teacher's opinion. From the interviews, it can be concluded that the remote learning process is perceived as a solution to the specific situation caused by Covid-19 pandemic, but it is better to teach in the classroom. In the process of remote teaching/learning, the teachers themselves had to learn new ways of teaching, it was a new experience, especially in the field of technologies, therefore it was important to get support from the school administration. The teachers also benefited from the use of new methods of teaching, assessment, work planning. However, there have been technical problems – insufficient Internet speed and interruptions, the fact that not all pupils used computers, some used telephones and tablets in their work.

The large number of pupils in the class caused difficulties as well, therefore some primary school teachers divided their learners in groups. As a result, the amount of work increased, because in addition to online lessons, there were also individual consultations during the day, but in the evenings, it was necessary to mark the work submitted by the pupils and answer the questions of pupils and their parents. The additional time was required also for preparing the teaching materials, especially in classes with transition to new competency-based learning content. The teachers had observed that their pupils were tired from the prolonged remote learning process and they predicted socialization problems in the future due to the lack of opportunities for meeting their peers and classmates.

In online lessons, some students were undisciplined, interfered with the learning process, did not join the lesson on time, did not turn on the camera or sound, in other words, not all pupils participated in the learning process. This can lower the knowledge level in the future, especially for learners who already had learning problems – now they went deeper. The volume of the knowledge acquired was reduced, as during remote learning only part of the curriculum was acquired with the thought not to overload the learners. Also it was difficult to check what knowledge the pupils have mastered. Teachers were concerned that the remote learning will make a bigger divide between the different levels of pupils' knowledge, and this is a problem, which needs to be addressed when face-to-face learning resumes. As Narvaišs (2021), an expert in education, emphasizes the teachers should not try to catch up all the academic knowledge in one go; the process of returning to school should take place very slowly, and it is important to appreciate the independence and skills the learners acquired during the remote learning. He refers to the study conducted in UK (Results on Primary-Age Pupils in Reading and Maths, 2021), where it is concluded that during the remote learning, the pupils have lost about two months volume of learning, but he suggests to look at these data with the caution because, as Edurio Surveys show, that one school can be very different from another.

In terms of benefits gained from remote learning, the teachers mention digital literacy, self-directed learning skills, time planning. According to the teachers' observations, also pupils prefer learning in the classroom. Teachers, who work in Classes 7 to 9, have noticed that their students need different learning strategies and that there are students who do better when learning remotely. Teachers also emphasized the role of parents, as without their support and help the remote learning process would be much more difficult for the learners. Parents, who followed the online lessons, gained a better idea of the learning process and the role of the teacher. On the other hand, teachers were not satisfied with the exaggerated help of parents, especially in the younger classes – doing homework instead of pupils. Teachers believe that the remote learning experience could be used in the future, for example, when working on projects, organizing teachers' meetings and courses. As Narvaišs (2021) suggests, the remote teaching was beneficial also for the teachers – the

use of electronic facilities can be a time-saver, and essential improvement in teachers' digital skills can be observed.

### ***3.5. Research question: How can the implementation of the content of pedagogical internship be improved using the remote learning experience?***

In the internship diaries, there were only a few suggestions contributing to this issue. The students placed more emphasis on the unique practical experience they gained, and they were surprised that it was possible at all to carry out internship during this time of the Covid-19 pandemic. The students understood the role and significance of digital technologies in the modern learning process and pointed out that in the study process it is necessary to master technologies even more and use them in courses such as pedagogical theory and subject methodology. Students linked their knowledge obtained in theoretical courses with what they experienced in practice, and evaluated it positively, as they also observed how the new competence-based curriculum is being implemented at schools. Students had noticed that the teacher does much more than just prepare and lead the lessons, thus, it is important to link the theoretical courses of the study programme even more to the problems of real life. Several students faced difficulties in finding an internship school because of refusals they received; they recommended that the university should get more involved in cooperation with internship schools. The content of the study programmes must go with the times, as discussions continue whether and to what extent, and in which classes the remote learning process should remain as part of the full-time learning process (Šķietniece, 2021).

## **4. Discussion**

Covid-19 pandemic forced to look for new solutions for ensuring the learning process, and the role and possibilities of the use of technologies increased significantly. As a result, the face-to-face learning process became remote. In an accelerated tempo, everyone (teachers, students, pupils, parents) had to learn to operate new digital tools. If at the beginning of the pandemic there was hope that this situation will be short-lived, and the face-to-face learning process will not be completely stopped, then later, based on the specific epidemiological situation, the remote learning in Latvian schools took place for a long time (Covid -19 Health System Response Monitor, 2020).

For students of pedagogy programmes, the internships coincided with the remote learning in schools, thus, a new approach and solutions were sought for implementing the internships, therefore, the specific internship tasks according to the new situation were developed. Developing the tasks, the previous experience of Liepaja University on implementation of internships was taken into account. As the study programme "Primary Education Teacher", developed at Liepaja University together with cooperation partners - University of Latvia, Daugavpils University and Rezekne Academy of Technologies, as part of ESF SO project "Reduction of fragmentation of study programmes in LiepU" (No. 8.2.1.0/18/I/ 002), is in the process of approbation, the partner universities also shared their experience in the development of internship tasks and their implementation during the remote learning (Guidelines for general and vocational education institutions for the implementation of distance learning, 2020).

In the process of remote internships, the student's cooperation with the teacher-mentor was of great importance. Because of successful cooperation, the students were able to observe the teacher-mentor's online lessons, prepare and conduct lessons themselves, as well as develop teaching/learning materials and learn about application of new technologies in the learning process (Šķietniece,

2021). An individual work with learners with learning difficulties due to the remote learning process was carried out, thus experiencing the remote learning from both – the teacher's and the student's point of view.

It was important for teachers, students and parents to adapt to the new situation. When observing the pupils, it was concluded that in the beginning the remote learning seemed new, unexpected, interesting, but in the later stages the learners gained fatigue, lost concentration, and they had to acquire time-management and self-directed learning skills (Gavriļins, 2017). This was especially noticed in the younger classes, and in the future it could have an impact on pupils' emotional state, learning outcomes and socialization.

In terms of the learning content, it was observed that the competency-based approach was gradually introduced. However, the observations show that organization of the remote learning process together with the introduction of the new learning content has given additional strain to the teachers, as there was uncertainty about the content and evaluation process, as well as provision of learning materials was incomplete, therefore teachers had to prepare the teaching materials themselves (Gözde & Osman, 2020).

## **5. Conclusion**

Evaluating the remote learning process, the benefits and problems were recognized. The diverse possibilities for the use of information technologies should be noted, and the development of technologies requires the life-long perfection of teachers' knowledge. However, the remote learning is considered by teachers as only one of possibilities, because the teacher's work is based on face-to-face interaction with learners using the appropriate methods of teaching. Both – students' observations, analysis and recommendations and teachers' evaluation that is recorded in the internship documentation, are essential for the improvement and perfection of the theoretical courses and the internship content of teacher education programmes.

The internship experience during remote learning has demonstrated that the appropriate tasks and content give student the opportunity to get to know the specifics of the learning process, to participate in it and ensure the unity of theory and practice, including the feedback from the university. As a result, the student acquires knowledge, skills and abilities that form the teacher's professional competence. Experience gained during remote learning shows what skills are needed in crisis situations, how to overcome these situations, and what skills are needed in the future.

## **6. Recommendations**

To continue to ensure the unity of the theory and practice in teacher education programmes, improving the course content, taking into account the experience of remote learning, which means including acquisition and use of information technologies, as well as the development of content designing and planning skills.

To improve cooperation with internship schools and teachers-mentors, using the experience of remote learning. When planning the content of internships, to focus not only on lesson preparation

and teaching, but also on observation of pupils and upbringing process, keeping in mind the consequences of remote learning with regards to pupils' behaviour and lack of socialization.

To include more analysis of students' activities and self-reflection in the internship documentation, to consider the internship diary and the interview with the teacher-mentor as a form of report. To stress the relevance of the mid-seminars of internship, which helps to maintain the feedback between the educational institution, students and the place of internship.

To continue the exchange of information and experience about the content and organization of internships between the universities participating in ESF SO project "Reduction of fragmentation of study programmes in LiepU" (no. 8.2.1.0/18/I/002) (Liepaja University, University of Latvia, Daugavpils University and Rezekne Academy of Technologies), with the aim to improve the existing content of the programme "Primary Education Teacher" and to strengthen the link between the theory and practice.

In future perspective, to accept the challenges of 21<sup>st</sup> century, not only due to Covid-19, to assess the experience and skills gained during remote teaching/learning and their importance in teacher's professional competence development, in order to make responsible decisions in crisis situations of diverse nature.

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