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## ACCESS TO INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND PROSPECTS OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN PENAL INSTITUTIONS IN MOLDOVA

*This research examines the current issues of implementing distance education and information technology in the penitentiary system. The legislative provisions governing inmates' access to educational and information resources are analyzed and the challenges faced by both inmates and institutions in implementing distance education programs are discussed. The article emphasizes the importance of ensuring equal access to education and information technologies for all inmates and offers practical solutions to improve current educational practices in the penitentiary system. The conclusion discusses the prospects for the development of distance education and the use of information technologies in penitentiary institutions in order to improve their effectiveness and safety, as well as to prepare inmates for successful reintegration into society after serving their sentences.*

*Keywords: distance education, information technology, penitentiary system, legislative provisions, equal access, reintegration, effectiveness.*

## ACCESUL LA TEHNOLOGIA INFORMAȚIONALĂ ȘI PERSPECTIVELE EDUCAȚIEI LA DISTANȚĂ ÎN INSTITUȚIILE PENITENCIARE DIN REPUBLICA MOLDOVA

*În acest articol științific se examinează aspectele curente ale implementării educației la distanță și a tehnologiilor informaționale în sistemul penitenciar. Se analizează prevederile legislative care reglementează accesul deținuților la resursele educaționale și informaționale, și se dezbate provocările cu care se confruntă atât deținuții, cât și instituțiile în implementarea programelor de educație la distanță. Se subliniază importanța asigurării unui acces egal la educație și tehnologii informaționale pentru toți deținuții, și se propun soluții practice pentru îmbunătățirea practicii educaționale curente din sistemul penitenciar. În concluzie, se discută perspectivele dezvoltării educației la distanță și a utilizării tehnologiilor informaționale în instituțiile penitenciare în scopul creșterii eficienței și securității acestora, precum și pregătirii deținuților pentru reintegrarea lor cu succes în societate după executarea pedepsei.*

*Cuvinte-cheie: educație la distanță, tehnologii informaționale, sistem penitenciar, prevederi legislative, acces egal, reintegrare, eficiență.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION.

Currently, with the rapid development of information technologies, education is un-

dergoing radical changes. However, despite the fact that distance learning, correspondence education, and information technologies

of distance education may seem relatively new concepts, they have become important elements of the modern educational system. In previous decades, they were rarely mentioned in the literature and rarely were the focus of academic research. However, with the development of information technologies, these concepts have become an integral part of our daily lives and have undoubtedly affected the field of education.

In particular, distance learning is being introduced as a new form of education, coexisting with already established methods such as face-to-face, correspondence, and external studies, and becoming an integral part of the system of lifelong learning. This form of education, made possible by information technologies, opens up new opportunities and challenges, rethinking the ways knowledge is transmitted and access to education is provided.

## 2. METHODOLOGY.

Theoretical, normative, and empirical materials were used. The study of the relevant topic became possible due to the application of a number of scientific research methods, characteristic of the theory of activity of special research activity: historical method, method of comparative analysis, system analysis, logical-legal analysis, as well as other procedures based on logic (deduction, induction, analogy, etc.).

The research topic required extensive use of the comparative method, through which the content of legal acts regulating access to education and information technologies in different countries was studied. The application of the historical method allowed to consider the evolution of legislation in this area and identify trends in development.

Empirical material was obtained through the analysis of data on the current state of the education system and the availability of information technologies in Moldova, as well as an assessment of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the educational process and problems of access to online learning.

Normative material included an analysis of Moldova's legislative acts regulating access to education and information technologies,

taking into account their application in the penitentiary system. This analysis helped identify obstacles and propose legislative changes to improve the situation.

System analysis methods were also applied to identify interconnections between various aspects of the education system and optimize their interaction.

## 3. RESULTS.

### 3.1. Analysis and significance of distance education in penitentiary institutions.

Following authors Shelyudko V.N., Tupik V.A., and Lysenko N.V. present distance education as a modern form of learning that utilizes various information technologies for delivering educational materials, self-study, and communication with instructors and other learners [10]. They emphasize that distance education is not limited by place or time, providing learners with greater flexibility in organizing their learning. The general definition given by the authors is accurate and precisely reflects the essence of distance education, its advantages, and fundamental principles. We agree with the authors' opinion since the definition of distance education as a synthetic, integral form of learning based on the use of a wide range of information technologies and devoid of constraints regarding place and time. This definition effectively encapsulates the main principles and benefits of distance education, such as flexibility in organizing the learning process and the absence of restrictions on location and time.

The use of information technologies allows learners to access educational materials and communicate with instructors and fellow learners anytime and anywhere. This is particularly important for those in remote regions or with limited access to traditional forms of education. Additionally, distance learning enables learners to flexibly organize their study time, allowing them to balance work and education and avoid scheduling conflicts and other circumstances.

Thus, defining distance education as a synthetic form of learning based on information technologies and devoid of constraints regarding place and time is accurate and reflects

the essence of this form of education.

With the invention of the Internet, educational technologies have advanced significantly. In the 1980s, real-time learning technologies became popular, successfully utilized by companies and educational institutions. Today, over 80% of European universities have the necessary technical solutions and faculty for conducting distance education (e-learning). For 75% of universities, the development of e-learning is a top priority [5, pp.107-113]. This indicates that distance learning has gained widespread acceptance and recognition in the educational community, not only in Europe but also in other countries worldwide, including Moldova. Despite certain issues with the legislative framework and implementation of distance education in penitentiary institutions, modern technologies can help address the situation and provide prisoners with opportunities to receive quality education and develop skills, even while incarcerated. It is necessary to develop and implement appropriate distance learning programs and methodologies, provide access to the Internet and educational resources, and conduct necessary educational work with both teaching staff and prisoners. The development of distance education in Moldova can significantly improve the education and training of prisoners and help them successfully reintegrate into society after serving their sentences.

Distance education is defined by key factors such as geographical separation of instructors and learners, use of educational materials to ensure course content assimilation, interaction between instructors and learners, prioritization of self-control over instructor control [5, p.9]. These factors greatly enhance the accessibility, flexibility, and effectiveness of education.

It is important to emphasize that distance education entails interaction between instructors and learners, as well as among learners within the educational process, but this interaction is facilitated by special internet technologies or other interactive means [8]. It should be noted that such interaction does not require geographic proximity between instructors and students, which significantly increases the ac-

cessibility and makes education more flexible and effective.

In the near future, the development of distance education will continue to focus on improving technical and technological tools and forms of learning, as well as methodological and didactic content of distance education. Efforts by developers will primarily focus on enhancing the accessibility, flexibility, intensity, and personalization of the educational process using telecommunication and virtual network technologies, as well as on integrating local-corporate and regional-national learning systems into the global mega-system of planetary scale [9, pp.1-9]. This approach allows for a substantial expansion of geographical coverage and accessibility of education, as well as increased flexibility and adaptability to student needs.

Currently, education is one of the key factors in the successful rehabilitation of prisoners and their subsequent integration into society. Educating prisoners is also an important element in enhancing their qualifications and preparing them for employment after release. However, in the conditions of the penitentiary system, education faces a number of specific organizational-pedagogical and psychological problems related to student employment, access to educational materials and technical means, as well as the peculiarities of organizing the learning process in prison conditions.

### **3.2. The Role of IT Technologies in Moldova's Education During the COVID-19.**

**Pandemic** Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries, including Moldova, were forced to transition educational institutions to remote learning. Ensuring the continuity of distance education using information and communication technologies became a top priority for Moldova's education system in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Considering that the Internet penetration rate in Moldova was 79.9% in 2019 (significantly lower than the EU's penetration rate of 90% in 2019), distance learning proved to be a challenging task for approximately 16,000 students (4.8% of the total) and 3,000 teachers (10.6% of the total) who lacked access to IT technologies (laptops, tab-

lets, or internet access) [7]. However, the lack of access to IT technologies became an issue for some educators and learners. Despite this, with the support of external partners, the Moldovan government swiftly took steps to address the issue. The Ministry of Education and Research of the Republic of Moldova implemented numerous measures to ensure the continuation of the educational process in new conditions, including the development of a readiness and response plan for COVID-19, as well as methodologies and norms for distance learning with the support of national and international partners. Overall, this underscores the importance of using IT technologies to ensure the continuity of the educational process in crisis situations.

As a result, several initiatives related to the computerization of education by both the public and private sectors were introduced. For example, with the support of "Orange Moldova," the Ministry of Education and Research of the Republic of Moldova launched the "Uniting Teachers" campaign, while "Moldtelecom" and "Moldcell," in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Research of the Republic of Moldova, provided free internet access to teachers for two months. Additionally, websites such as [www.educatieonline.md](http://www.educatieonline.md) under the guidance of the Chisinau City Hall and <https://invat.online> under the leadership of the Association of ICT Companies are two examples of converting educational content into electronic format to facilitate the process of distance learning. The platform <https://studii.md>, developed by "Simpals," provides unique opportunities for managing the educational process. This allows teachers and school administrations to more effectively organize and manage the learning process, including monitoring student progress and grades, as well as interaction between teachers and students [7]. Furthermore, the use of such tools can significantly streamline the educational organization management process, which can enhance the efficiency and quality of education.

These initiatives can also contribute to the development of IT infrastructure in education in Moldova, which in the long term may lead to lower prices for technologies and ser-

vices related to education. This, in turn, can make education more accessible and economically efficient for all participants.

Thus, computerization of education and the development of IT infrastructure can help not only overcome the challenges associated with distance learning during the pandemic but also make education more accessible and effective in the long term. However, efforts should continue to improve the accessibility of IT technologies for all participants in the educational process, especially in remote and underprivileged areas of the country.

To effectively exercise the right to education, access to appropriate technologies, including terminals with internet access, is currently necessary. Access to technologies is also necessary for education and work in places of detention. "Individuals deprived of their liberty who wish to independently use a computer, the Internet, or distance learning, or who need to search for information on the Internet and use it, should also have access to suitable connected equipment" [3]. Therefore, governmental institutions and organizations should ensure that suitable equipment and technologies are available for these purposes.

### 3.3. Ensuring Access to Distance Education in Correctional Facilities: Challenges and Perspectives.

Correctional facilities in Moldova face the issue of Internet accessibility for inmates, as in some cases, access to the Internet is prohibited according to legislation, particularly in Article 208, Paragraph 6 of the Criminal Code of Moldova [4]. However, this can create challenges for inmates who wish to pursue distance education or use the Internet for their work. In light of this, alternative solutions are possible, such as utilizing local networks or organizing access to educational materials and resources through other communication channels, such as compact discs or flash drives. Nevertheless, regardless of the approach taken, it is essential to adhere to the rules and regulations of the correctional facility to avoid legal violations or security threats.

Thus, to ensure the right to education and the use of information technologies in Mol-



dovan correctional facilities, alternative means of accessing information and educational materials that do not contradict legislation and institutional rules need to be explored.

Authors A.A. Andreev and V.I. Soldatkin express the viewpoint on distance educational technologies as technologies primarily implemented using information and telecommunication technologies in indirect (remote) or partially indirect interaction between the learner and the educator [1, pp.14-21]. We agree with this viewpoint, as distance educational technologies indeed utilize IT for learning, conducted through the Internet or other communication technical means. They allow learning remotely without the need for physical presence in the classroom or face-to-face interaction with instructors. However, it is worth noting that distance educational technologies may not be entirely indirect, such as during online consultations or webinars with instructors. Additionally, they do not exclude opportunities for students and instructors to interact in person, meet in classrooms, or discuss lecture materials live. Overall, distance educational technologies provide a flexible and convenient way of learning, enabling knowledge and skill acquisition anywhere and anytime. They are becoming increasingly popular, especially amid the COVID-19 pandemic, when physical presence in classrooms could be impossible or undesirable.

However, the current legislation in Moldova does not define the concept of "distance education" nor specify mechanisms and procedures for its implementation. This has led to difficulties in organizing the educational process during the pandemic. Therefore, we believe that improving legislation in Moldova regarding distance education is necessary to ensure more effective organization of the educational process in the future. This will help facilitate a more efficient organization of the educational process in the future, both during pandemics and in regular times. Legislation should define the concept of "distance education," establish clear procedures and mechanisms for its implementation, and set standards, methodologies, and norms to be used in the educational pro-

cess. This will enable educational institutions, instructors, and students to be better prepared for transitioning to distance learning and ensure higher quality education. Furthermore, clear norms and procedures for distance education will help educational institutions and instructors to adapt more quickly and efficiently to any crisis situations in the future.

Providing access to distance education and corresponding technologies in correctional facilities can have a positive impact on such institutions. Firstly, it can help inmates acquire the education and qualifications necessary for successful reintegration into society upon release. Secondly, education can help occupy inmates, reducing the likelihood of conflicts within the facility and enhancing overall safety. Additionally, education can serve as a tool to reduce recidivism and increase the chances of successful rehabilitation and career retraining for inmates.

In 1998, UNESCO proposed the creation of "prison universities" to provide inmates with opportunities for higher education. Today, universities abroad have experience in distance learning, which can be utilized for educating inmates. Moreover, having a higher education is becoming increasingly necessary for employers, which is particularly important for those serving sentences who need to secure future employment. To achieve this, conditions for educating inmates must be created and access to appropriate technologies provided.

The prison university program represents a significant step in rehabilitating inmates and preparing them for successful reintegration into society after serving their sentences. Education plays a crucial role in the rehabilitation process, helping inmates develop skills, acquire knowledge, and gain perspectives for their future lives.

Access to education through distance learning opens up wide opportunities for inmates, especially considering the limitations imposed on their freedom of movement. Distance learning technologies enable inmates to receive quality education even while incarcerated, contributing to their personal and professional growth. This also contributes to re-

ducing recidivism, as educated individuals are more likely to return to society as productive members ready to contribute to its development. Ultimately, investing in the education of inmates benefits society as a whole, leading to a reduction in crime rates and an increase in the overall education and qualifications of the population.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS.

Thus, considering distance education as a means of realizing the right to education in correctional facilities is a relevant and important topic. It is necessary to clarify formulations in the legislation to avoid inaccuracies and contradictions in the understanding of this type of education, as well as to make appropriate changes and additions to the Executive Code of the Republic of Moldova and the Rules of Internal Order of correctional institutions to eliminate possible difficulties in the practical implementation of the right to education for inmates.

In conclusion, it can be noted that distance education and access to information technologies represent significant potential for improving education and enhancing the quality of life in places of incarceration. This article has examined various aspects of distance education in the context of correctional facilities, emphasizing the importance of providing ac-

cess to education and technologies for inmates.

By learning remotely, inmates can acquire higher education and professional skills, thereby increasing their chances of successful reintegration into society upon release. This can also contribute to reducing conflicts within institutions, enhancing security, and decreasing the likelihood of recidivism.

The legislation of some countries, including Moldova, grants inmates the right to education, including higher education. However, access to distance education may be limited by various factors, such as resource availability, permissions for education, etc. Therefore, it is important to take additional measures to ensure the accessibility of education for all inmates.

Distance education in correctional facilities can serve as tools for improving the quality of life of inmates and their prospects for the future. Government, institutions, and educational organizations must work together to create accessible and effective education systems in places of incarceration, taking into account technical and organizational aspects.

Overall, distance education in the context of correctional facilities can have a positive impact on the lives of inmates and society as a whole if suitable conditions and resources are provided for its implementation.

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