

Cedefop Info 2/2006

Slovakia

Internet access project gives rise to controversy

After years of passivity in the face of comparative studies on digital literacy showing Slovakia among the lowest performers in the EU, especially in the use of ICT for learning purposes, the country is now trying to catch up with more developed countries. The first such policy, involving the introduction of PCs in the school system, was reported in Cedefop Info 2/2004 ' (*PCs for schools: from rhetoric to reality*). The latest one seeks to make Internet access more affordable to citizens.

The 2003 SIBIS project, Statistical Indicators Benchmarking the Information Society, which is closely linked to the *eEurope* and *eEurope+* initiatives of the European Union, revealed a clear digital divide between Slovakia and the EU 15: Slovakia scored 0.4 in the Digital Literacy Index (DLI) in comparison to 0.8 for EU15 and 0.7 for Estonia and Slovenia, the leaders among EU newcomers. The 2005 data of the Institute for Public Affairs survey commissioned by the Slovak government confirmed the digital divide with the DLI 0.33 for Slovakia. What the score means is that Slovaks' average ability stands at 33 % of complete digital literacy. The low penetration of PC and Internet links in households provides evidence that the high prices demanded for high-speed connections - especially in relation to purchasing power - have limited digital literacy.

The National Lisbon Strategy Action Plan on the Information Society, approved by the government on July 13, 2005, included a measure to counter this trend, Action 19 - Internet for All. In April 2006, the government launched a project backed by this Action Plan to increase access to high-speed Internet (minimum speed 512/128 kbps) by providing SKK 240 million (EUR 6.398 million) in subsidies to users.

However, the subsidies, of SKK 6 016 (EUR 160.4) per person over a two-year period, were aimed at only 5 000 users from each of Slovakia's eight regions. This meant that instead of the announced 100 000 new users, by the end of 2006 there were only 40 000 projected new applicants across the country. This was partly due to the fact that only families that included 15 to 25-year-olds had been deemed eligible, instead of all families declaring an interest.

Not surprisingly, the measure was widely criticised. To some, the conditions violated the principle of equal treatment; others wondered whether the real aim of the project was to attract young people about to vote for the first time in the parliamentary elections scheduled within two months of the project being announced, rather than its stated aim of assisting access to Internet services. To small Internet providers, this project was an attempt on the part of the government to back Slovak Telecom (T-Com), the former telecoms monopoly - 49 % of its shares are now owned by state. Others believed that the policy missed its target by excluding those who had already purchased access to Internet; they pointed out that in this way the government punished the more forward-looking of the poorer strands of the population, while subsidising rich families with a heretofore weak interest in the Internet.

The objections that the policy is discriminatory must be taken seriously. There were 135 860 and 180 145 households wired to the Internet without subsidy in 2004 and 2005, respectively. Thus, without any subsidy, at least 40 000 new clients (regardless of age) could have been expected in 2006. While it is true that it is 15 to 25 year olds who show the greatest interest in the Internet - and that the project is called Internet for Education, not Internet for all - questions remain: what about young families with children under 15? And why impose an equal quota for all regions, regardless of population?

2004 Internet penetration data and results of the project as of September 4, 2006 Region

Region	Households with Internet in 2004		Population*		Population aged 15-24*		Clients served		Free places from quota		Drawing from quota
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	%
Bratislava	39 544	29.1	599 015	11.1	96 672	10.7	2 987	12.3	2 013	12.8	59.7
Banská Bystrica	12 333	9.1	662 121	12.3	109 092	12.0	2 242	9.2	2 758	17.5	44.8
Košice	21 355	15.7	766 012	14.2	130 457	14.4	2 915	12.0	2 085	13.2	58.3
Nitra	14 942	11.0	713 422	13.3	116 364	12.8	2 793	11.5	2 207	14.0	55.9
Prešov	10 409	7.7	789 968	14.7	139 990	15.4	4 284	17.7	716	4.5	85.7
Trenčín	11 622	8.6	605 582	11.3	102 253	11.3	2 791	11.5	2 209	14.0	55.8
Trnava	14 333	10.5	551 003	10.2	92 835	10.2	2 389	9.9	2 611	16.6	47.8
Žilina	11 322	8.3	692 332	12.9	118 668	13.1	3 841	15.8	1 159	7.4	76.8
SR	135 860	100.0	5 379 455	100.0	906 331	100.0	24 242	100.0	15 758	100.0	60.6

*Census 2001

As to the charges of discrimination in favour of Slovak Telecom, the company (xDSL) took 47.4 % of subsidised clients; the affiliated T-mobile (Flash-OFDM) took 7 %. Nevertheless, alternative providers and even small local player managed to win a respectable market share (e.g. the second best provider Slovanet (xDSL and microwave) 14.3 %, fourth Wimax (wireless) 5.3 % and fifth CondorNet (cable and microwave) 3.7 %.

Having discovered that the money earmarked for the project will not be entirely spent, the government has now decided to subsidise clients irrespective of age. Nevertheless, the regional quota will be adhered to, which is bad news for young families or older people in regions where most of the budget has already been committed. A new wave of complaints is thus expected - though it is worth pointing out that such complaints and criticisms have already proven to be constructive.

Further information:

Proceedings of the 6th International Conference Virtual University 2005 at

http://virtuni.eas.sk/rocnik/2005/data/program/54_31_Vantuch.pdf

Internet for Education project: <http://www.telecom.gov.sk/index/go.php?id=2546>

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