

## How Students Assess Their Careers in the Context of COVID-19

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*The research goal is to present the views of Russian students on the relation between the COVID-19 pandemic and their future career opportunities. The research is based on a survey of 138 students studying for their bachelor's degree. Comparing the responses given by students of the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> academic years allows the author to estimate the differences in their opinions. The survey illustrates that students' assessments depend on their academic year. Therefore, students of the junior years lack interest in tackling sustainability issues, which probably appear detached from their lives, while the students of the senior years feel more involved in the current situation. The suggested perspectives of Education for Sustainable Development include (1) motivation towards the involvement of students into professional and general life-supporting activities, (2) further development of the interdisciplinary approach in higher education, and (3) development of distance learning with a strong emphasis on professional use of electronic devices instead of using them primarily as a mean of communication.*

*Keywords: education for sustainable development, higher education, professional career, employment opportunities, COVID-19*

### INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 pandemic has hindered the achievement of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by all United Nations Member States in the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and has exacerbated gaps that the SDGs have managed to overcome (United Nations, 2015). In fact, as the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs Policy Brief No. 81 states, COVID-19 is having a devastating effect on all 17 goals and threatens the achievements already achieved in many areas (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020). Challenges that the education system is currently facing are considered among the toughest in the pandemic context since education has been seen as a “key enabler” for achieving all 17 SDGs (Giannini, 2020). Meanwhile, university students undoubtedly do not always realize the connection between the consequences of the pandemic and their future professional career and the connection between their future life and the Sustainable Development (SD) concept in general. The research goal is to present the views of Russian students on the relation between the pandemic and their future employment or career growth opportunities and discuss the prospects of the Education for Sustainable Development concept in this respect.

### Sustainable Development and COVID-19 Issues

In March 2020, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic. By June 2020, when the practical part for the paper was being prepared, the pandemic had affected over

200 countries, with more than 9 million confirmed cases and over 470,000 reported deaths worldwide (World Health Organization, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged the health and medical care system and has affected all spheres of human life, including government, social and economic affairs, employment, and education. Unemployment, underemployment, and vulnerable employment in the so-called “informal economy,” which accounts for half of the global workforce, has become crucial for many sustainable development researchers since non-disabled adults, their employment, and income ensure the efficient work of the medical system. The same is accurate about the connection of the employment issues with other aspects of the Sustainable Development concept, such as inequalities (Bonacini, Gallo & Scicchitano, 2020), consumption effects (Farrel et al., 2020), and vaccination policy (Mejia, Hotez, & Bottazzi, 2020).

Among the essential findings of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs Report are that an estimated 71 million people are expected to be pushed back into extreme poverty in 2020, the first rise in global poverty since 1998. Besides, global population income was estimated to fall by 60% in the first month of the crisis brought by the pandemic (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020). In Russia, a decrease in labor incomes affected approximately 40% of Russian households in April 2020, with the worst situation for younger families, whose incomes are much more dependent on the labor market (Kartseva & Kuznetsova, 2020). Possible ways of solving the mentioned issues are seen in shifting to the digital economy and online workplace and measures taken by the government. The effectiveness of such methods is suggested in numerous papers (Buklemishev, 2020; Denisova, 2020; Grigoryev, 2020).

Apparently, job opportunities must be a burning issue for university students and undergraduates who are about to join the workforce in the pandemic context. Pandemic-era graduates risk becoming an unemployed generation (Varsegova, 2020).

### **Education Challenges in the Pandemic Context**

Educational quality is among the top global Sustainable Development goals since education provides upward socioeconomic mobility and is a key to escaping poverty. With the global spread of COVID-19, most countries have announced the temporary closure of schools, impacting more than 91% of students, including children and youth, worldwide (United Nations, 2020a). Presumably, the most severe pandemic consequence is that 369 million children deprived of school meals have almost lost their daily nutrition (United Nations, 2020b).

In order to foster the continuing education program, educators are seeking context-appropriate solutions to provide classes remotely, using information technologies. Therefore, digital sustainability – the term discussed in Shan L. Pan’s and Sixuan Zhang’s paper (Pan & Zhang, 2020). – has become ever more crucial. Scholars study changing behaviors of educators and learners in the digital learning environment (Mogaji & Jain, 2020). The revealed issues include the lack of home Internet and devices critical for the online learning process and the poor digital literacy among teachers (Garcia & Weiss, 2020). The related issues discussed in research papers on the COVID-19 pandemic consequences may seem similar to the issues of distance learning suggested before the pandemic (Conrad & Openo, 2018). Nevertheless, there is a difference between online learning and “emergency remote teaching” (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust & Bond, 2020). Students have felt dissatisfaction not only due to the lack of Internet access but mostly because they have lacked communication with teachers and classmates (Sokolovskaya, 2020). Besides, distance teaching technologies have often been substituted by making students read textbooks (Pashkin, Lisovskaia, Pchelkin & Sarkisova, 2020).

The listed challenges have caused social and emotional heaviness among students, though intensive development of distance technologies in education induced by the pandemic may lead to positive effects in the long term. The literature review allows the author to conclude that despite all difficulties caused by the COVID-19 lockdown and adapting to new teaching and learning methodologies, educational institutions, in general, have demonstrated significant efforts to find solutions to the challenges raised the pandemic (Tsyganov, 2020). However, the uncertainty connected with the employment perspective adds to the range of issues university or college students face.

## **Career Opportunities in the Pandemic Context**

According to the estimations of Banks Today analytical report, bachelor's degree graduates are more vulnerable in the Russian job market competition than master's degree graduates since the latter usually acquire a job before graduation. The suggested solutions to avoid youth unemployment include tax incentives for employers who hire young professionals and implementing professional standards requiring a university diploma. Nevertheless, the most crucial solution is to increase students' motivation to join the workforce in the potential economic recession.

The Government of the Russian Federation is taking measures to support university graduates in their competition for available jobs. Young IT professionals, doctors, and teachers possess favorable chances for employment, while Humanities majoring students are likely to fail in acquiring a job in their major because the demand for such professionals is supposed to decrease to 20% (Khabibullina, 2020; Varsegova, 2020).

The views of Russian students on the relation between the COVID-19 pandemic and their future employment may differ from the expectations. Studying students' opinions on the issue may provide insight into the matter.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

Research materials are provided by the Altai State University (ASU) students (Barnaul, Russia) during the COVID pandemic outbreak in May–June of 2020. The survey participants are 138 students of the ASU Institute of Mass Communication, Philology and Political Science. All students are bachelor's degree students of such majors as Linguistics, Philology and Literary Studies, Mass Communication and Journalism, Political Science, Advertising and Public Relations, and Art. According to the review in section 1.3 of the paper, these students are regarded as the most vulnerable in seeking a job in their major field. The paper aims at identifying how students of Humanities majors assess the potential effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on their career opportunities (if they see any connection between the pandemic and their future employment).

The survey has been carried out on a volunteer basis. The most active are the students of Mass Communication and Journalism (49% of the total number of participants), Linguistics (28%), and Philology and Literary Studies (13%); students of the other majors comprise 13%. The age of participants is 18–25 years old, and the academic years are the following:

- First-year students – 44 participants (31.9%);
- Second-year students – 64 participants (46.4%);
- Third-year students – 8 participants (5.8%);
- Fourth-year students – 22 participants (15.9%).

The research has been conducted with the help of the survey method, which includes four questions regarding students' opinions. All questions suggest multiple-choice responses, and questions 2 and 4 imply an open-ended answer in which the participants are supposed to offer their response if not satisfied with the given optional responses.

The first question is, “Are you aware of the Sustainable Development concept?” The question is meant to identify if the students of the Altai State University are aware of the Sustainable Development concept since, evidently, Russian higher education students and teachers may lack knowledge regarding the approach (Ermakov, 2016). A participant can choose one out of the suggested answer options: “yes,” “no,” “not sure” (the latter is short for “I am not sure”).

The second question is, “In your opinion, which issues is Sustainable Development connected with?” The question is primarily addressed to students who are unaware of the Sustainable Development concept. The question should help them understand the aspects of the Sustainable Development concept, and the researcher should understand the level of the participants' awareness at the same time. Suggested answer options include the following:

- Substance;
- Ecology and environment;

- Climate;
- Agriculture;
- Culture;
- Psychology;
- Health and medical care;
- Arts;
- Economy;
- Society and social behavior;
- Education;
- Politics;
- Other (write own answer).

The given list consists of the items connected with the primary Sustainable Development Goals. Such items as “Ecology and environment,” “Economy,” and “Society and social behavior” are considered to be strongly connected with the Sustainable Development concept since they name the three pillars of the concept. Such items as “Climate,” “Health,” and “Education” contain the exact words used in the 17 Sustainable Development Goals and may be associated with the Sustainable Development concept. The other words are used in different descriptions and interpretations of the SDGs and may be associated by individuals with the Sustainable Development concept.

One supposes that if a participant is not familiar with the Sustainable Development concept, they may intuitively or, based on their associations or logical thinking, identify the topics, which in their opinion should be connected with the Sustainable Development concept. The participants’ responses to the second question may help one outline a range of issues associated with Russian students with a general view towards sustainability. The participants are supposed to choose one or several items or to write an answer. Incidentally, the responses may overlap in percentage.

The third question is, “Do you think COVID-19 may influence the sustainable development?” It aims at understanding if the students can realize the connection between the pandemic and Sustainable Development in general. Answer options are “yes,” “no,” and “not sure.”

The fourth question is the most crucial for the survey – “Do you agree that the COVID-19 pandemic may affect your personal career opportunities and employment?” Suggested answer options include “yes,” “no,” “not sure,” and “other.”

The methodological design of the questions and suggested answer options are carried out based on recommendations by Jon A. Krosnick and Stanley Presser (Krosnick & Presser, 2010), and the following considerations: to use simple words and syntax and wording that is specific and concrete and make response options mutually exclusive and exhaustive.

Since the time of the survey has fallen on the pandemic lockdown period, the questionnaires have been sent to the students by e-mail or proposed via open distance courses on the digital educational platform of Altai State University.

## **RESULTS**

There may be a different reason why only 22 senior students have participated in the survey. The reasons may include lack of time because of the immense amount of other – more important for the fourth-year students – work to be done (the months of May–June, when the survey was done, was the time of final state examinations and bachelor’s degree theses for the last-year students) and unwillingness to participate due to various personal reasons. Nonetheless, the responses of the 22 students who participated are considered to demonstrate the opinion of those who are about to enter the job market and must constantly think about it.

Responses of others provide insight into the general perception of the COVID-19 pandemic effects by average Russian students. Comparing the responses given by students of each year allows the author to estimate the change in opinion from first-year students to seniors.

Results of the survey are presented in a series of tables.

Table 1 depicts the responses to the question “Are you aware of the Sustainable Development concept?”

**TABLE 1**  
**RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION, “ARE YOU AWARE OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT CONCEPTION?”**

Answer options	Academic year							
	1		2		3		4	
	Number of participants	%	Number of participants	%	Number of participants	%	Number of participants	%
Yes	12	27.2	18	28.1	-	-	14	63.6
No	6	13.6	18	28.1	4	50	-	-
Not sure	26	59.2	28	43.8	4	50	8	36.4

The responses given by the participants indicate higher awareness of the Sustainable Development issues by the seniors than by junior students. The average number of senior students familiar with the Sustainable Development concept is more than twice as substantial (63.6%) as the number of the first- and second-year students (27.2% and 28.1%, respectively). It signifies that high school graduates (first-year students) are likely to lack awareness concerning global sustainability issues, do not think of them, or do not sense the responsibility for the issues. Evidently, they do not relate these issues to their everyday life.

The responses of the third-year students are not indicative since third-year students are the most reluctant to participate in the survey due to various reasons.

According to the estimations presented in D. S. Ermakov’s research in 2016, in Russia, the concept of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) was still at the beginning stages at that time. The figures presented in Table 1 allow the author to assert a shift in progress towards implementing the ESD approach among senior students, although one-third of them (36.4%) are not confident in their sustainability knowledge. The fact that there are no negative responses (containing the word “no”) among the fourth-year students may imply that students start to realize the vitality of sustainability issues in their last year of study.

Table 2 presents the responses to the question, “In your opinion, which issues is Sustainable Development connected with?”

**TABLE 2**  
**RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION, “IN YOUR OPINION, WHICH ISSUES IS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT CONNECTED WITH?”**

Answer options	Academic year							
	1		2		3		4	
	Number of participants	%	Number of participants	%	Number of participants	%	Number of participants	%
Substance			2					
Ecology and environment	26	59	34	53.1	4	50	20	90.9
Climate	10	22.7	22	34.3	-	-	10	45.4
Agriculture	12	27.2	16	25	-	-	6	27.2
Culture	10	22.7	16	25	-	-	6	27.2
Psychology	6	13.6	22	34.3	-	-	4	18.2
Health and medical care	20	45.4	30	46.8	4	50	10	45.4
Arts	-	-	6	9.3	-	-	-	-

Economy	26	59	44	68.7	4	50	14	63.6
Society and social behavior	34	77.2	50	78.1	2	25	18	81.8
Education	18	40.9	34	53.1	2	25	2	9.0
Politics	16	36.3	30	46.8	1	12.5	4	18.1
Other (write own answer)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

The provided table is the most informative in revealing the issues associated by Russian students with the Sustainable Development concept.

Knowledge of the issues related to Sustainable Development should help university students actualize their role in society and may contribute to their successful careers. Students of all academic years can indicate the three pillars of sustainability – society, economy, and environment – as the most relevant issues. It is also indicative that students of all academic years include health and medical care issues in the top 5 most vital sustainability issues with response results of 45.4%–50%.

Table 3 presents responses to the question, “Do you think COVID-19 may influence the sustainable development?”

**TABLE 3  
RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION, “DO YOU THINK COVID-19 MAY INFLUENCE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT?”**

Answer options	Academic year							
	1		2		3		4	
	Number of participants	%	Number of participants	%	Number of participants	%	Number of participants	%
Yes	34	77.2	48	75	6	75	22	100
No	-	-	2	3.1	-	-	-	-
Not sure	10	22.8	14	27.9	2	25	-	-

Responses for the third question given by the first- to third-year students are significantly similar in percentage. All senior students are unanimous in concluding that the COVID-19 pandemic may absolutely change the world and influence sustainable development.

Table 4 presents responses to the primary research question, ‘Do you agree that the COVID-19 pandemic may affect your personal career opportunities and employment?’

**TABLE 4  
RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION, ‘DO YOU AGREE THAT THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC MAY AFFECT YOUR PERSONAL CAREER OPPORTUNITIES AND EMPLOYMENT?’**

Answer options	Academic year							
	1		2		3		4	
	Number of participants	%	Number of participants	%	Number of participants	%	Number of participants	%
Yes	26	59.1	26	40.6	6	75	20	91.0
No	-	-	10	15.6	-	-	1	4.5
Not sure	18	40.9	28	44.2	2	25	1	4.5
Other	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

The students of the fourth and third years realize the significant impact that the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic may have on their future career opportunities and employment, though there has been one “no” and one “not sure” response among the fourth-year students.

First-year students choose options “yes” and “not sure,” where “not sure” can be interpreted as “I am not sure what to answer,” as well as “I am not sure if the COVID-19 pandemic may affect my personal career opportunities or not.” However, by choosing this option, a participant demonstrates uncertainty. The answer options that are chosen by the first- and second-year students may indicate infantilism and reluctance to carry out responsibility for their future career decision.

Those participants who chose the “no” option either do not feel dependent on the external circumstances or do not realize the scale of their influence correctly.

No one has chosen the “other” option, which is predictable, as respondents tend to restrict their responses to the substantive choices that are explicitly offered (Krosnick et al., 2010).

## **DISCUSSION**

The survey results demonstrate Russian university students’ uneven perception of the COVID-19 impact on all spheres of everyday life. Only shortly before graduation time, most students come to understand their dependence on social, economic, and environmental (in a general sense) processes occurring in their country and worldwide. As the undertaken research indicates, beginners are not so conscious about their professional opportunities.

One of the primary reasons why younger university students in Russia are not conscious of the necessity of being involved in the Sustainable Development approach is that the concept of Education for Sustainable Development does not work in Russia as well as it must work. It occurs due to the fact that all levels of education in Russia, including higher education, are highly subject-oriented, which prevents the interdisciplinary interaction necessary for the ESD concept (Grishaeva, Wagner, Tkacheva, Lugovskoy & Moro, 2018).

The second possible reason why Russian students seem to be unaware of the pandemic consequences may be connected with the fact that the survey was conducted when the number of infected people in Russia was low. Incidentally, the pandemic has probably been perceived as an issue in other countries. In this case, the lack of a sustainable approach in education leads to the lack of understanding of how the situation may develop further.

Besides, it is possible to assume that most first- and second-year students are not accustomed to using their electronic devices for needs other than entertainment and social networking. The assumption is based on the survey by the Economic Policy Institute, USA, which demonstrates that 57.4% of adolescents use their electronic devices for social networking daily and only 24.2% – for schoolwork and study (Garcia et al., 2020). Therefore, the pandemic lockdown makes Russian students feel isolated by spending more time on social networking and entertainment rather than using their electronic devices to take control of the situation.

Comparison of the response percentage in Tables 3 and 4 makes the author conclude that students realize the relation between the present situation and possible future in the pandemic context. However, junior year students do not connect the situation development with their personal life, while for those who are finishing their university studies, the dependence on the external circumstances is much more evident.

## **CONCLUSION**

Students’ assessment of their future career opportunities and employment chances in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic depends on their academic year. Junior year students lack interest in considering sustainability issues, which probably appear detached from their lives, while the students of the senior years feel more involved in the current situation.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is undoubted in all spheres of human life. Career and employment opportunities of the graduates in the job market depend on economic issues and the work of

the healthcare system, social and political processes, and environment – with all aspects combined into one highly complex system of life support and development. A student may understand this factor only within the Education for Sustainable Development approach.

Possible perspectives for the ESD approach in the pandemic context include the following:

- Motivation towards the involvement of students into professional and general life-supporting activities by putting the accent on personal dependence of every student on the current context;
- Further development of the interdisciplinary approach to reveal the connection and systematic relations of professional competence taught to students with primary sustainability issues;
- Distance learning via electronic devices with a strong emphasis on professional usage of the devices instead of using them primarily as a means of communication.

The practical value of the research consists in the modification of the Education for Sustainable Development approach in higher education institutions.

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