

TENTATIVE CONSIDERATIONS ON THE FUTURE OF ECONOMY AND SOCIETY DURING AND AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE CONTEXT OF EDUCATION

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Abstract: The consciousness of modern society has been rapidly and instantly divided into the period before and after the pandemic. What to expect from the restrictive measures that are established in each region of Russia in different ways? What measures should the government take to stabilize the economy and society? The paper proposes some tentative insights into the future of the economy and society during and after the pandemic. The restrictive measures affected all areas of public and private life; governments were called upon to take measures aimed at stabilizing the economy and society. The developing crisis processes after a lockdown affect all spheres of civil life and trigger a revision of social agreements recorded in the basic legal documents. There are large-scale institutional failures in several areas and industries. Education recorded its own share of failures and needs to restructure, to build resilience in the face of major disruptive events.

Keywords: higher education; pandemic; lockdown; post-pandemic risks.

1. Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic, which began in the People's Republic of China in early December 2019, quickly received coverage in the world media and began to be viewed as a global threat. Given the rapid spread of the disease, the World Health Organization was forced to recognize the epidemiological situation as a pandemic, thus institutionalizing the attitude already formed in the expert community to this threat as one of the global risks (WHO, 2020). By April 2020, more than 2.6 billion of the world's population found itself in conditions of forced social distancing and self-isolation (Nestik, 2020). Despite the experience of dealing with other epidemics, accumulated over the past 20 years, the social institutions of most countries turned out to be ill-prepared for this threat. As long as the primary challenge for governments was to contain the spread of the virus, the public debate focused on the economic and psychological implications of quarantine measures for people in quarantine. Nevertheless, it is already clear today that a pandemic will have not only short-term, but also long-term consequences for individuals and society.

Education and culture were among the forerunners to suffer from restrictions introduced in the first months of 2020. In the field of education, for example, educational and research programs developed in Russia, quite popular among Chinese students in recent years, have been suspended. Chinese students could not return to Russian educational institutions after the winter holidays due to problems in their country. In addition, many young people were actively involved in volunteering to help contain the epidemic locally and were later unable to leave China due to the cancellation of national and international flights. The cultural sphere was affected by guidance to suspend mass

entertainment events and a ban for mass gatherings. Citizens also felt compelled to refrain from attending cultural events. Libraries, museums, and places of worship faced a dramatic drop in visitors in early 2020 compared to the same period in the previous year. Structural distortions in the economy caused by government restrictive measures deserve attention, analysis, and forecasting.

The modern COVID-19 pandemic has developed in a relatively prosperous material world; however, people were not ready for the challenges of the "digital" community, which require rational explanations of what is happening. One of the important criteria for assessing the current state is the mental and psychological health of society in the 21st century. The ongoing COVID-19-related measures affect the formation of a psychological portrait of a modern person, their motivation for staying in this world, self-esteem, and the search for the meaning of life (Dvorakovskaya, 2020).

Against this background, a comparative cross-cultural analysis of the level of health-related stressors (agents associated with stress) and stress management tactics during the COVID-19 pandemic among various professionals and students in different countries is of high interest. The present paper unveils some of the main findings.

2. Research method

The study consisted of an anonymous survey, distributed online via Google forms in January 2021. The 17 questions required 15-18 minutes to fill in. This study aimed to compare the effects of age, gender, education, profession, years of service, and marital status on the level of health-related stressors (stress-related agents) and stress management methods during the COVID-19 pandemic among professionals and students. A sample of 122 respondents was obtained, the largest groups by age being those of 18-29 and 40-49 years. This study provides an opportunity to expand knowledge about health stressors and stress management methods during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Results

The discussion of result starts with the presentation of the structure of the sample. Figure 1 below shows that the bulk of the respondents have the title of candidate or Doctor of Science (or in the process of obtaining the title) and slightly fewer bachelors and school graduates. At one level, they have completed two years in a technical school and have the title of master (or in the process of obtaining). The smallest number is represented by the attendees of post-graduate studies, other than the master's programs. This structure of the sample is motivated by the fact that no special measures were undertaken to elicit responses, while the questionnaire was distributed among university members and partners of the institution. A note on the method needs to consider the fact that in the times of social isolation the reaction of traditional respondents was slower and less engaged, a "survey fatigue" being signaled by many researchers, who commented that the restricting data collection methods during the COVID-19 pandemic led to a rise in survey-based studies and that respondents developed resistance mechanisms (de Koning et al., 2021).

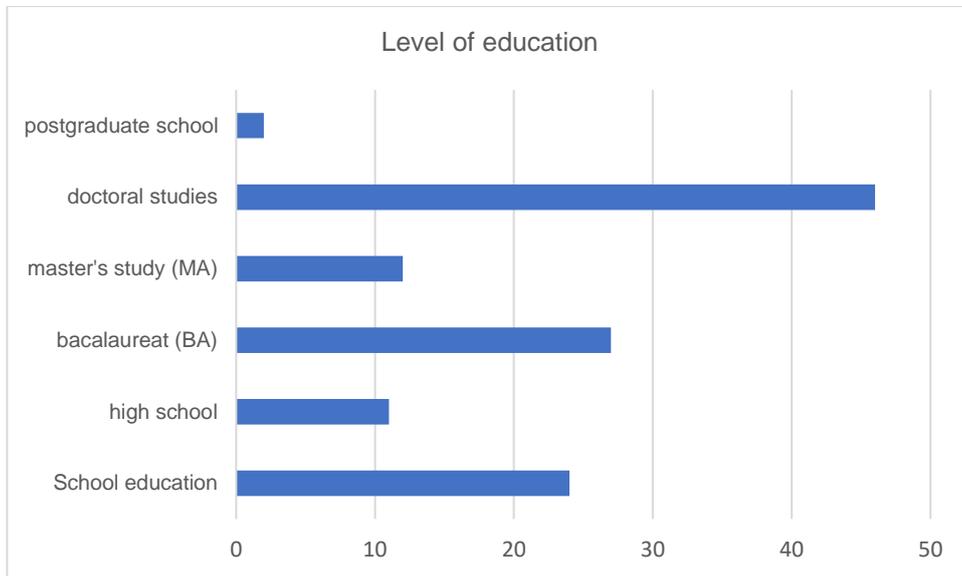


Figure 1. Structure of the sample by levels of education

Further the sample was analyzed along the specialties of the respondents.

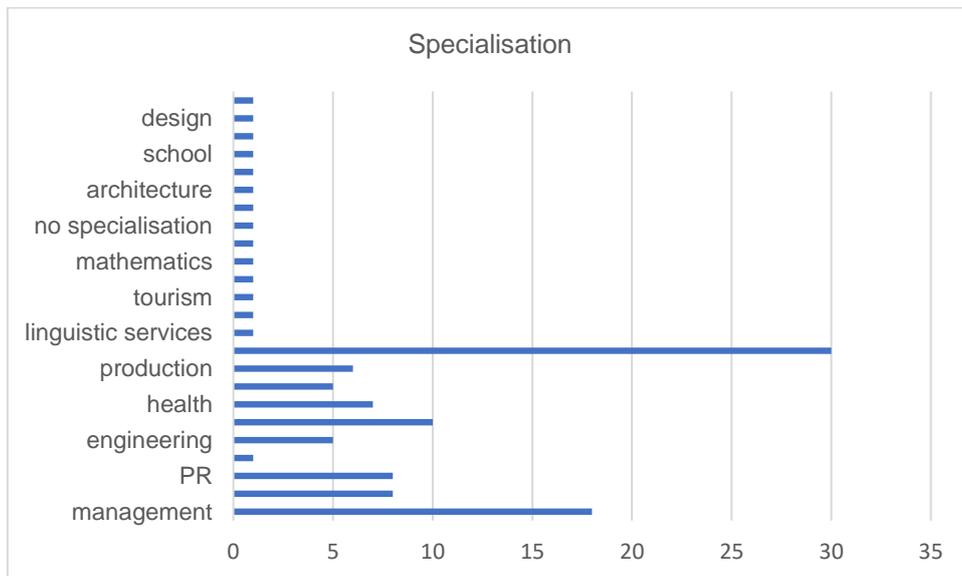


Figure 2. Structure of the sample by specialisation of the respondents

As the figure above highlights, the respondents belong to a large variety of specialties, the largest group being represented by research or teaching in the fields of management, economics (or statistics), civil service. Also significant is the group belonging to accounting, or finance; advertising, marketing, or sales; the medicine; legal services, technology, or computer services; trading; manufacturing and engineering. The

other groups are more modestly represented. Only one person from such spheres as: public relations and press; linguistics; tourism; service, teaching (mathematics); transport services; logistics; architecture; mounting; education; school; electrician; design; teaching (coach) and one person from those who do not have any specialty and do not belong to any of the areas, or do not have a job. And one respondent is in the process of studying. While for research purposes the age group, level of education and specializations of the respondents are important, the focus of this study was to highlight the respondents' reaction to crisis-related stress.

The shift of secondary and higher education from traditional formats to emergency remote solutions, accompanied by the social isolation recommended in most countries to prevent the spread of COVID-19 resulted in dividing society. In the field of education, professional groups of teachers and spontaneous or existing parents' associations found themselves in confrontational, hostile camps. Radically minded groups ardently advocate a general rejection of traditional forms, which, in their opinion, have outlived their usefulness and are completely ineffective in an era of rapid changes in the modern information world. Their opponents are very conservative and advocate a return to in-person classroom formats, with the assumption of the evolutionary penetration of digital technologies into the field of education. In addition, society was not ready for the transition to a unified digitalization of the educational space (World Bank, 2020; Lim-Lange, 2020).

Among the most ardent problems that teachers faced during the emergency remote education are an increase in the load of a temporary and economic nature, a lack of technological facilities affordable to students, a loss in the quality of the pedagogical process (the risk of misunderstanding the subjects, errors in electronic teaching aids, not all children are ready to switch to distance learning). All this suggests that a restructuring is required not only of the technical elements of the educational process, but of the entire paradigm of education.

Students, on the other hand, note the positive aspects of online learning: more time with the family; saving time since they stopped commuting to the university for classes; the increased use of information technology in the learning process. Such positive appraisal is signaled by other researchers as well, with reflecting a critical view on the educational process, especially in higher education (Cernicova-Buca & Dragomir, 2021).

But there are more disadvantages for students, and educational institutions are urged to reflect on strategies to counteract them: the quality of education decreased; the perceived workload on students increased; the lack of interaction with fellow students put its' mark and resulted in feelings of isolation and anxiety, elements presented also in UNESCO documents (UNESCO 2020). Other issues raised by students: there is no clear distinction between working time and leisure time; the constant work with a computer leads to increased fatigue; emerging problems with the Internet connection affect the decrease in the level of students' grades, since students are not always able to connect to classes on time; the motivation to learn decreases, since the teacher cannot always track whether the student is peeping at the textbooks during the oral answer; the personal contact between teachers and students is dropping.

In general, several problems of an institutional nature have arisen:

- The new conditions require the training and retraining of a whole generation of teachers, the transformation of certain pedagogical areas, the search for new methods and techniques of pedagogical actions to form professional

competencies through the digital environment. The training of students for online education is also necessary.

- Despite the abundant webinars initiated by the Ministry of Higher Education and Science and the Ministry of Education in the Russian Federation, the formation and development of regulatory and legal documents do not provide a deep understanding of a clear and systematic building of the educational process.
- There was also an economic problem for educational institutions, which in January-February 2021 began to restructure their functioning processes.

Against this context, the research aimed to identify the influence COVID-19 had on the respondents' level of stress, as presented in Figure 3 below.

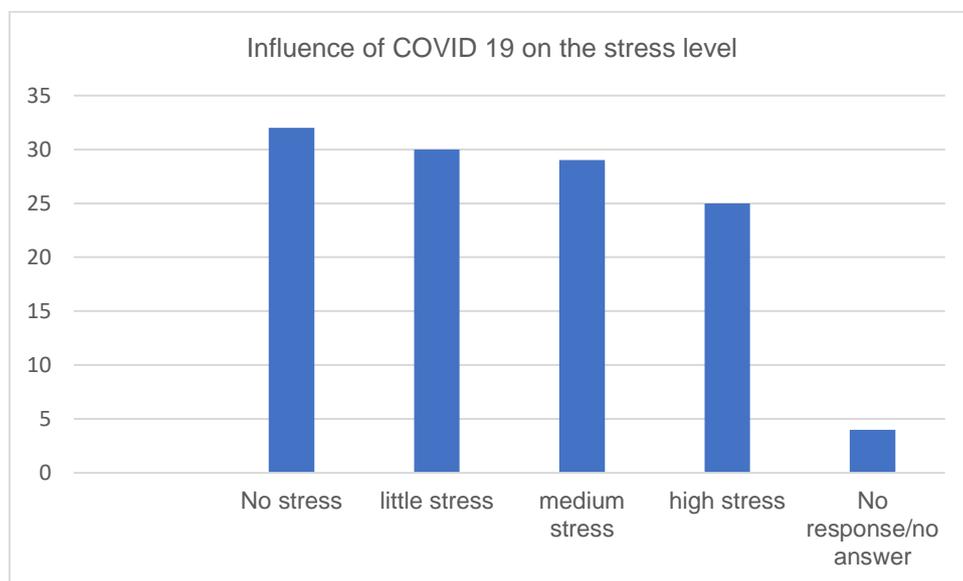


Figure 3. Perceived influence of COVID-19 on the respondents' level of stress

The survey aimed to assess whether COVID19 had an impact on the level of stress on the respondents. The responses were codified on a scale from 1 to 4, where 1 - "does not cause stress" 2 - "little stress", 3 - "medium stress" 4 - "high stress", 5 - I prefer not to answer/I refuse to answer. For the largest number of respondents, COVID-19 was not perceived as stressful. At about the same level, the number of those with COVID19 causing a little or moderate stress and least of all those who experience high stress in connection with COVID19. In addition, 2 respondents refused to answer this question.

The circumstances in which society found itself for more than a year - the threat of the virus, lack of control, uncertainty, social isolation, a change in the usual rhythm of life - are ideal conditions for the development and intensification of anxiety and depression. In these conditions, the psychological problems that existed in a person earlier can be aggravated, as highlighted by researchers who focused on the state of society during the COVID-related restrictions (Clemente-Suárez et al., 2021). And if no coping mechanisms are present, the prolonged situation may lead to the onset of depression. Increased stress is a factor contributing to a decrease in immunity, which makes a person

more susceptible to contracting COVID-19. In already infected patients, one can observe the development of a whole range of different psychopathological conditions, which are also caused by the stress associated with the new coronavirus infection. Therefore, raising public awareness and public campaigns to reduce overall stress levels should be encouraged. Also, extensive psychological counselling services need to be put in place.

4. Conclusions

We can assume that in the new, post-pandemic reality, many material elements of modern educational institutions are becoming redundant, excessively expensive, and unattractive. Opportunities for easy digital accessibility to educational, spiritual, and aesthetic benefits can lead to the elimination or re-profiling of buildings and real estate complexes that provide substantial access to these areas. It is difficult to predict the global consequences of such changes for society, but it is possible to accept the emergence of new professions, new industries and fields of activity that will replace obsolete ones. The economy, like nature, does not tolerate a vacuum. All spheres in demand will be filled with a specific supply. Consequently, the education sector needs also to adapt. Forecast scenarios will depend, of course, not on the speed of the spread of the epidemic and not on the number of victims, but on the options chosen by governments, the government of Russia included, and on the timespan intended for the validity and implementation of such measures, as suggested by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2020). The "new education" will face a qualitative transformation and change. Despite the fierce battle between pessimistic voices, that education is lost, and overoptimistic voices claiming that a shift towards radically rejuvenated, online education is at the doorstep, a thorough analysis and planning for the "new education" is necessary, considering not only the technological and pedagogical affordances, but also the economical and psychological aspects of the intended changes.

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