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Impact of COVID-19 on achieving the goal of sustainable research and education: case of Volgograd State University

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Abstract. It is of no doubt that the pandemic had and still has a great impact on all the spheres of human activities. The situation has changed the traditional way of life and we have to get used to the new “normality”. Given the unusual and never experienced circumstances, educational institutions all over the world have been forced to establish new ways out and paths to keep the balance and be sustainable. Despite the various obstacles, universities around the globe are still fighting for the SDG 4 and seeking appropriate solutions for achieving this and other goals. Research and education practices have undergone consequential changes which can be positive or negative. In the case of Volgograd State University the authors will try to get the reader acquainted with its best practices that have been implemented to support the students, the faculty and administrative staff during this fluctuating period and go on achieving SDG 4.

Keyword:

sustainable development, sustainable education, SDG 4, green thinking, green education

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has a great impact on the world. The circumstances, which we face and will be facing in the future, force everyone to find new ways out and do their best to adapt. Educational sphere is not an exception. Fighting for Sustainable Development Goals is a tough process that touches upon various aspects and each change, especially global change, is an obstacle. “Why is SDG 4 so important? Education is a key element that will enable many other Sustainable Development Goals to be achieved. If people have access to quality education, they can break out of poverty. Education therefore contributes to reducing inequalities and achieving gender equality. It also increases opportunities for

people around the world to live healthier, more stable lives. Education also plays an important role in fostering tolerance between people and contributes to more peaceful societies” [1].

Various initiatives on “sustainable development” (in its contemporary meaning) which are put into a university have come from the 1990s, mainly from Northern American universities. The great impact of policies of nations, different declarations, claims and statements have resulted in those sustainable initiatives. As for today, green policy has become the natural responsibility of any higher educational institution and is adopted internationally.

Sustainability should be intrinsic to the institutional mission and therefore implemented in different formats to all campus operations. Universities have a crucial role in educating and disseminating sustainable ideas among future generations. They, in turn, will spread the ideas further, become policy-makers and implement their initiatives from regional to global level. The functioning of a university green educational policy is a model and example for any other institutions, residents and administrations to promote sustainability around the globe.

2. Brief history of SDG 4

Sustainable development was primarily viewed within the ecological aspect and afterwards the social and economic ones. Plenty of conferences, summits and meetings have been held resulting in various declarations, agreements and resolutions on environmental problems. Universities around the globe started supporting and following the global goals. At first, they concentrated on greening territories, improving landscapes and the interior. Then in order to realize a greater potential, universities introduce their best practices within education and research processes. Hence, the educational aspect is emerging. HEIs are now not limited with the environmental development of their campuses. Their initiatives are also focused on educational and research activities.

In September 2015, at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit, Member States formally adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in New York. The agenda contains 17 goals (Fig. 1) including a new global education goal (SDG 4). SDG 4 is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’ and has seven targets and three means of implementation [1].



Figure 1. Sustainable Development Goals

This goal came about through an intensive consultative process led by Member-States, but with broad participation from civil society, teachers, unions, bilateral agencies, regional organizations, the private sector and research institutes and foundations.

Education is a human right and a force for sustainable development and peace. Every goal in the 2030 Agenda requires education to empower people with the knowledge, skills and values to live in dignity, build their lives and contribute to their societies [2].

3. SDG 4 and Covid-19

The COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic has affected education systems around the world, which has led to the mass closure of schools and universities. As at March 20, 2020, Governments in 135 countries have announced or implemented school closures, including 124 countries that have closed schools nationwide and 11 countries that have closed schools in only some regions. School closures across the country affected more than 1.254 billion students worldwide (72.9 % of the world's students), while school closures in some regions affected more than 283 million students. Earlier, on March 10, due to the closure of schools and universities due to the spread of COVID-19, one in five students in the world did not attend school [3].

Let us see some expert points of view on the role of education.

“Education as a fundamental human right is the key to universal peace and sustainable development”. (Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO) [5].

“In order to end poverty, strengthen common prosperity and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, we must use the experience and knowledge in the field of financing for development to implement radical changes. We need to join forces to ensure that all children have access to quality education and lifelong learning opportunities, regardless of their place of birth, gender or family wealth”. (Jim Yong Kim, President of the World Bank Group) [5].

“In today's world, knowledge is a source of strength, and education expands opportunities. It is an integral part of the development formula. It has an inherent value that goes far beyond economics – to give people the opportunity to determine their own fate. That is why the opportunity to get an education is the key to human development”. (Helen Clark, UNDP Administrator) [5].

The statistics show the poor situation which influences in a negative way to the core objectives and tasks of the SDG 4. That is why, the SDG 4 remains the one of the important SDGs during the coronavirus pandemic.



Figure 2. SDG 4 “Quality Education”

Access, and beyond access, affordability are immediate barriers for at least half of the world’s population. Those less advantaged face a range of frightening immediate and long-term consequences that include permanent school/university abandonment but also inequalities and vulnerabilities that can become entrenched and intergenerational. We will have to wait for evidence about how well on-line learning worked for those students who had enough access, in spite of self-interested claims by elements of the tech industry about the superiority of on-line learning. Learning by mobile phone—the connected medium for the vast majority of people in poor countries—has severe limitations for most types of learning [5].

4. VoISU reaching SDG 4 during the pandemic

Universities from around the world use their best practices to achieve SDG 4 and Volgograd State University is not an exception.

It is worth to say that the SDG 4 is connected with 5 more SDGs: SDG 3 “Health and Well-being”, SDG 5 “Gender Equality”, SDG 8 “Decent Work and Economic Growth”, SDG 12 “Responsible Consumption and Production” and SDG 13 “Climate Action”. And VoISU has its highest indicators for SDG 5 “Gender Equality” and SDG 8 “Decent Work and Economic Growth” according to the Times Higher Education Impact Rankings.

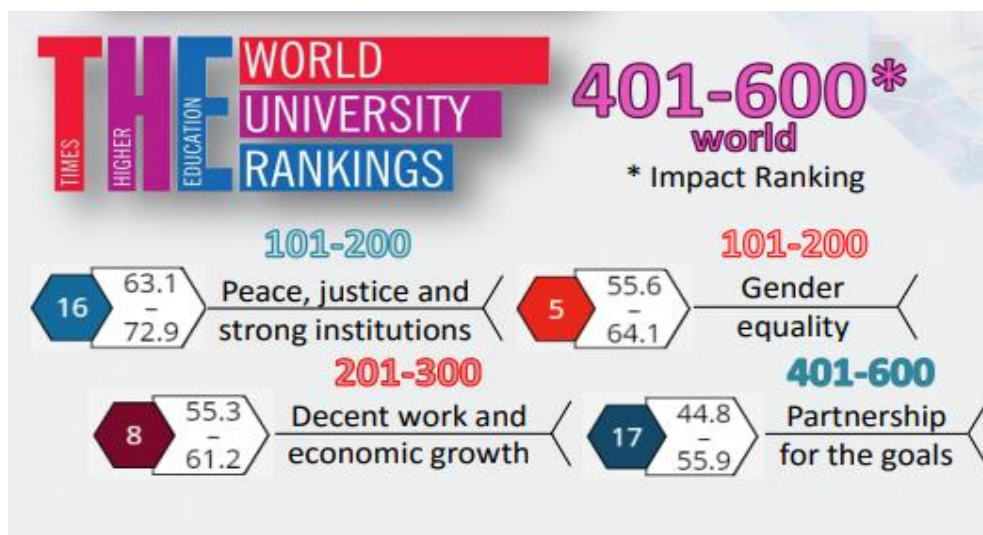


Figure 3. VoISU highest indicators for THE Impact Rankings 2021

During the pandemic, Volgograd State University switched to a distance learning and teaching format like other institutions. The university took out a free subscription to Zoom and Microsoft Office Teams platforms for its students and professors. A special platform (personal accounts for students and faculty staff) was also developed by the IT university staff where they can view their schedules and grades, as well as switch to an Electronic information and educational environment (ЭИОС in Russian) for communicating with professors, as well as for viewing and submitting their homework and educational materials.

The university also purchased video cameras and laptops for its students, staff and teachers. All students who lived in the university dormitory, if necessary, could get a laptop for free in order to keep up with the learning process during the self-isolation regime.

It is also worth noting that during the pandemic, the psychosocial and material support services were available and absolutely free at the university. The university committed a large number of resources (tangible and intangible) to cope with difficulties of various kinds during the pandemic.

The coronavirus pandemic has also changed international cooperation. Due to the pandemic, restrictions on the entry of foreign citizens began to operate in Russia. Therefore, Volgograd State University provided an opportunity for foreign students who wanted to participate in the academic exchange program to take an internship in an online format. Online education is far more affordable as compared to physical learning. This is because online learning eliminates the cost points of student transportation, student meals, and most importantly, real estate. It saves time and money. This format of an internship also allows students to attend classes from any location of their choice.

In order to stay in touch with its partner universities, the university has started holding various forums and conferences in an online format. The International Office of Volgograd State University provided various kinds of support in organizing online national and international events.

As we have already mentioned, the pandemic has not just affected education, it has radically changed it. The crisis forced us to rethink or change the foundations on which education was based. Educational technologies, which seemed to be a form of education of the future, also changed their former essence and purpose.

5. Summary/ Concluding Remarks

The education crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic exposes vulnerabilities in education systems and stimulates states and societies to innovate and promote inclusiveness. To ensure continuous and universal education, it is necessary to deploy a national electronic educational platform and provide access to it for students (electronic devices, access to the Internet). It is of high importance to remove administrative barriers to international exchange of knowledge and experience, as well as scientific research in the field of vaccine and drug development against COVID-19. A significant number of studies on education in the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, based on material universities. These studies clearly demonstrates strengths and weaknesses the whole system has and helps to form a systematic approach for finding the solutions and finally reach the SDG 4 and other goals as well.

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