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## IMPLICATIONS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES' PLANS AND EDUCATION PATH

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# Implications of the Covid-19 pandemic on high school graduates plans and education path<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Over the period 2020-21 Latvian schools experienced one of the longest closure periods in Europe. Hence Covid-19 significantly impacted high school pupils, especially those graduating in 2021, i.e. half of the secondary school programme they acquired was delivered remotely. Their learning and social experiences are distinct from that of previous cohorts. The findings are directly relevant for higher education institutions to further adapt to the background and needs of this student cohort.

To examine this cohort's experience, this chapter empirically examines adolescents at the point of their graduation from high school to learn what impact the pandemic has had on their quality education and plans. The findings provide insight into how they evaluate the remote studies and their knowledge, how they perceive their mental state, and what disruption to plans it has caused. We learn that most students found remote studies more difficult than onsite learning and associate it with lack of knowledge behind the grades earned. They have experienced lack of motivation and miss real life communication with their friends, even though they occasionally admit not breaking lockdown rules and meeting peers. The most common concern among graduates is lost opportunities they would otherwise have, however, we also notice impressive resilience when they imply that the pandemic has opened new opportunities that otherwise would not be possible, along with self-development and character growth. Overall, the stress level for adolescents was moderate to high. Covid-19 has caused disruptions to plans, some more like opportunities others like limitations.

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The insights may provide understanding to how these students require a very different approach from educators and staff alike. Higher education institutions have the opportunity to adapt and innovate, to custom the content of studies and communication form to the diverse incoming generations.

**Key words:** Secondary school graduates, adolescents, study plans, Covid-19, pandemic, school-life transition

## **Introduction**

In 2020, as high school graduates were preparing for their transition to the next chapter of their lives, the world changed. The Covid-19 pandemic rapidly transformed how societies across the world operate. This global phenomenon impacted Latvian pupils too. Latvian secondary schools, like many others, moved to remote studies in mid-Spring 2020. Attending classes in person, or even meeting people, was not possible for most of the following 2020-2021 academic year. By the time adolescents in Latvia graduated from secondary schools in Spring 2021, they spent almost half of their three-year secondary school programme studying remotely. Indeed, Latvian high schools had the longest closure period in the European Union (EU). This cohort of students, in Latvia and elsewhere with similar restrictions, are different from graduates the years before because of this experience. Their learning and social experiences are distinct from that of previous cohorts. For the higher education sector, the circumstances and impact of the pandemic on this cohort mean that these students may require a very different approach from educators, recruiters, and other staff HEIs. The pandemic also reduced the movement of people. Since Latvian graduates are highly internally and internationally mobile, restrictions on mobility continue to have an impact on graduate destinations. As the world enters the second winter of the Covid-19 pandemic in Europe, we realise that it is not anywhere close to ending. Thus, the result is possibly permanent changes, and continuous adaptation in the education process during the pandemic and beyond.

Until recently, remote learning was a solution mostly used for the adult population (Daniela and Visvizi, 2021), who have more experience to organise their time and effort for studies. The pandemic took education systems by storm in spring 2020 requiring everyone in schools, even the less prepared members of society, to start learning remotely. School children in Latvia – aged anywhere from 7 to 19 – used online platforms and communication tools to learn, submit works, and contact with teachers. Apart from some distance learning secondary education institutions, the environment was not designed and well adapted for fully remote mode. Hence quality education, in the meaning the concept as outlined by Visvizi, Daniela and Chen (2020) “assisting individual in the process of growing and excelling both as a person and a member of given society” was challenged. The shortcomings in secondary education send ripple effects into higher levels of education. The cohorts admitted to higher education in 2020-2021 and possibly in the years to come, may have unbalanced experiences – their ICT skills are likely superior to the previous enrolments, while social skills and subject knowledge may lag.

In contribution to the discussion in this collection, the chapter empirically studies secondary school graduates in Latvia in the middle of the second year of the Covid-19 pandemic. School graduates are clients of higher education institutions, and the ones entering university – are key stakeholders in the system. Even in the years before the pandemic, HEIs started to welcome a different generation of students. While millennials were known to be digital natives, Gen-Z were digital natives in every sense, they have no memories before the Internet. Covid-19 has made both generations still more regular consumers of ICT than they would otherwise be. Admitting this divergent pool of people to higher education presents challenges for institutional change and the need to adapt. We offer a close look at this generation and discuss what potential implications their experiences bring along.

At the point of transition to adulthood, the pandemic is likely playing out as an important factor with implications on their view of the world, choices, and further career. Hence the objective of this chapter is to examine what effects the pandemic has had on adolescents’ schooling, emotional state, plans, and education paths. The study is based on representative survey data collected in Spring 2021, close to the secondary school graduation time, as well as interviews

with high school graduates. These findings allow us to gain insight into a very unusual time of a cohort of students who seem to be standing still but would otherwise be on the move. The chapter is structured as follows. First, a brief overview of the Covid-19 pandemic specifics in Latvia insofar as it relates to the school context. Further, we describe our approach and data and follow by detailed analysis and discussion.

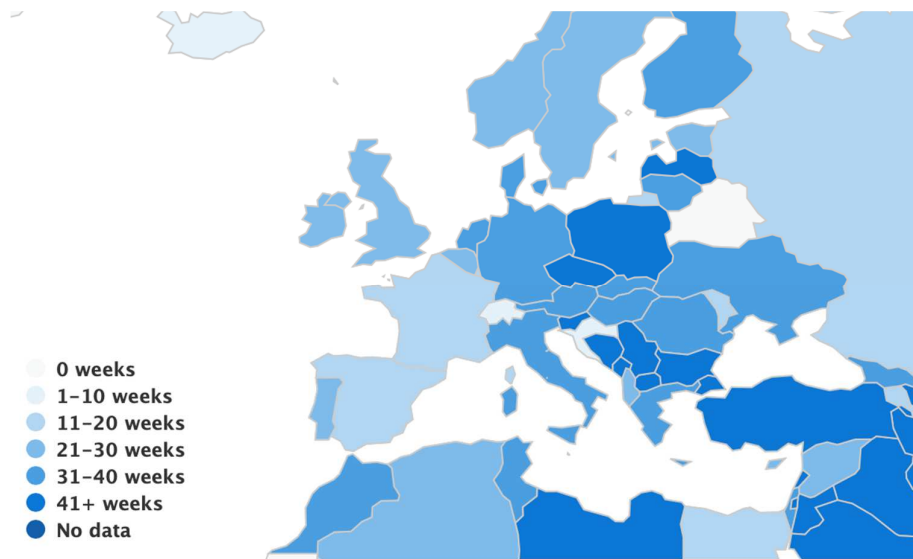
## **2 Covid-19 pandemic in Latvia**

Like in most countries, the response to the pandemic in Latvia has been changing between ‘normal’, ‘the new normal’ and highly restricted. Periods with low infections and seemingly ‘normal’ life and high infection rates resulting in school closures, meeting restrictions, and lockdowns alternated. The disruption to the education system was arguably the most severe – if it can be measured at all. While many workplaces remained open or been on and off remote work, school doors for secondary school pupils (and higher education students) in Latvia remained closed for 49 weeks in the period between March 2020 and November 2021 (see Figure 1). This is the longest closure period in European Union, followed by Slovenia (47 weeks), the Czech Republic (46 weeks), and Poland (43 weeks). While the Americas and parts of South and Central Asia have kept schools closed even longer, Latvian policies should be seen in the regional context. For comparison, neighbouring countries have seen substantially shorter remote studies periods – Estonia half the time (26 weeks), Lithuania (just like Germany) – 38 weeks.

In the context of remote learning, it is important to assess the conditions students have at home and how well they are prepared for studying. The three pre-requisites that make remote studies possible are internet connection, a computer available for work, and an appropriate quiet place to study. According to OECD PISA 2018 results, in Latvia, 93 percent of students have a computer for studies, and 91 percent have a quiet place to study (OECD, 2020). Both these results stood above the OECD average in 2018, and the availability may have improved in three years with purposefully establishing the conditions that students can study at home. However, there remains a part of students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds where the home

environment has not been adjusted for home learning. The situation has been widely reported in analytical media (Re:Baltica, 2021) and social and municipal projects have been available (IZM, 2020). Still, it has to be acknowledged that some adolescents have been underprivileged, while others, primarily from higher social backgrounds have benefitted from private tutoring and extra support at home (Re:Baltica, 2021).

**Figure 1. The total duration of school closures**



Source: Excerpt from the map, UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2022).

Life is not all about studies, even for students finishing high school. Restrictions as a response to the pandemic impacted all parts of students' lives. While these activities are not part of the core education process, the adequate balance of work (here: school), physical activity and rest have been recognised as preconditions for good academic performance and mental health. It is worth noting that extracurricular activities such as sports, arts, and music have been taking place remotely for even longer periods or closed where the online option is not possible. Restrictions and social changes meant that students' lives and routines changed, including extracurricular, physical, and social activities. What students do, moved even more online, which impacted their health and behaviour. The year before transitioning from high school to higher education or work is always seen as stressful for many students, because of the need to

prepare for exams and overall unknown changes in life. Isolation and remote format put additional stress on many.

This suggests that the graduating cohort of 2021 may perform differently from previous school leavers and may face different challenges than their predecessors. The switching to remote learning and associated student experience during the pandemic in the world is well documented, and common problems found are mental health, technology knowledge, concentration, engagement, time management and study-life balance (cf. Besser et al., 2020; Maqableh et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021; Walters et al., 2021). This is in line with international studies that highlight that both high school students and university students faced increased stress and mental health challenges during the pandemic (Son et.al., 2020; Wathelet et.al., 2020, Fegert et.al, 2020). At the same time, students were very well accustomed to the online learning environment and had fewer difficulties switching to remote studying when required again in October-November 2021. Little is known about high school pupils' perceptions of their wellbeing, the level of stress, their thoughts of the future, and their next career steps.

### **3 Methods and data**

To better understand the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the lives of students in general and their plans after high school, SSE Riga together with Baltic International Centre for Economic Policy Studies organized an anonymous survey of secondary school two senior grade (11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade) students. It was carried out from October 2020 to April 2021, the majority of responses were between March and April 2021. Pupils answered questions about their plans after high school and about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on their lives. They also reflected on their experiences and feelings in an open-ended question. Some of the citations from these answers are reported in this chapter. These pupils can be perceived as school graduates as the moment of the survey was chosen as close to their graduation day as possible, but before they exit the school door with a diploma and cannot be realistically reached as a cohort anymore. The survey was organised online, through the channels of schools'

administration and Stockholm School of Economics in Riga's (SSE Riga) high school outreach programme.

The sample consists of a total of 447 students from schools in the capital Riga (58%), surrounding Pieriga (14%), and regions (28%). Two-thirds of respondents (70%) studied in the final year – 12<sup>th</sup> grade and 30% were 11<sup>th</sup> grade students. 64% of respondents were females, and 24% attended minority schools. The distribution of respondents by relevant demographic characteristics – geographical location, gender, school type, and grade – fits the target group and sample frame. In addition to the survey, 6 youngsters were interviewed within three months of graduation from secondary school, as well as 12 graduates at the beginning of the pandemic (2020 April) to gain a deeper understanding of their feelings and reasoning behind further careers choices, as well as the role Covid-19 pandemic in their plans. All interviewed students and graduates are 18 and 19 years old unless otherwise noted.

This study uses descriptive analytical approach and applies a classic stress assessment instrument, the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), adapted to Latvian language by Stokenberga (2008, 2010). The tool, while originally developed in 1983 (Cohen, Kamarck and Mermelstein, 1983), remains a popular choice for understanding how different situations affect feelings and perceived stress. The questions in this scale ask about feelings and thoughts during the last month. In each case, an individual is asked to indicate how often he/she felt or thought a certain way.

The results organised in five areas of interest help to earn knowledge and understanding about the implications of pandemic on the youngsters who are soon to start adult life and many of them – become students in higher education. The areas are: reflections on remote schooling, concerns and perceived impact of Covid-19, stress and emotional state of pupils, and plans after graduation.

## **4 Results**

### **4.1 Reflections on remote schooling and concerns**



The ways schools adapted to remote teaching took place quickly. Yet, even a year and a half later, students think remote studies are not a proper replacement for going to school physically: *“the teaching process was badly influenced... you cannot learn a lot through a device online, moreover if you lack motivation... Even though, the school was very well prepared and equipped, it still could never replace classes on site”* (Irina, person names changed throughout the text). Indeed, in the interviews with graduates, the way schools adapted to remote learning was mentioned as critical. One aspect students highlighted is the education process itself: *“To me it left a negative impact for my education. Sitting in front of the laptop, it did not motivate me at all to learn”* (Irina). Diana, who herself wants to become a teacher, expressed admiration for her school and teachers for their response to moving online, and keeping it moving: *“Of course, teachers as others have to adapt to these new conditions. It has also enlightened the problem of the lack of knowledge and ability to use digital tools. However, I still admire the rapidity at which almost everyone adapted to it and learned how to deal with it!”*

By the time students graduated, they have been studying remotely on and off for almost a year and a half, and they, therefore, had the opportunity to get more used to it. An interesting aspect was the comparison between those who graduated in 2020 and graduated in 2021. Those graduating in 2020 switched to remote mode a few months before exams and finishing school, while those graduating in 2021 have studied remotely with short periods of on-site attendance for over a year by then. *“We could not imagine that we will be in the very same situation for our own 12<sup>th</sup> grade, that we will have it also mainly online. However, I still think that it was worse for those who had to switch to online teaching at the end of their 12<sup>th</sup> grade”* (Arturs).

Remote learning also made a difference in terms of how students study, which proved challenging for some: *“I am better in sciences, maybe I am not so good in languages, in Latvian. I don’t like to write essays, but we have to write them a lot. Yes, I have the feeling that now we have to write more than before, which is a challenge for me. I definitely prefer to respond mutually, and this is one of the major differences now, when we have classes online.”* (Arturs). There are others that emphasize the convenience of remote studies – no need to spend time on commuting, self-paced lessons, ability to sleep longer and study later in the evening.

Most students find remote studies more difficult than onsite learning, but an associated problem is the possible lack of knowledge. Young people are worried about learning outcomes and exams because they feel that the quality of their learning and their knowledge is suffering. Often students note that they receive relatively high grades, but there is no real knowledge behind them because requirements in tests and exams are being lowered. Also, teachers, fearing that their own work quality could be questioned, tend to be more lenient and less critical in their assessments. Even the content of centralised examination that is taken by all secondary school graduates in the end of the programme, in 2020 and 2021 was adjusted to the level and content expectedly covered during the last year. In this way, the results are comparable across schools and individuals, as they always are, but does not allow to estimate the actual knowledge level compared to pre-pandemic time. Ministry of Education and Science of Latvia estimates that in the 2020-2021 academic year, pupils have learned only between 60 (in younger grades) and 80 percent (in older grades) of content compared to a standard pre-pandemic year. The opinion expressed by our respondents is indeed grounded. The education system will take long to catch up and bring young people's knowledge to the standard pre-pandemic level. For higher education institutions this will present a challenge to see those new student cohorts entering with lower expertise and weaker skills.

The lack of motivation commonly emerges in graduate reflections. *"It is hard to concentrate and motivate myself to do something. Also, I don't feel confident about my knowledge, and I am very nervous about how good or bad my exam results will be because I don't feel ready to write any exams,"* Inga says. The young people very directly relate it to the isolation at home and lack of real-time communication. *"I'm afraid this will have a very bad impact on my grades and future. It is hard not seeing friends. It makes me less happy, less motivated"* (Ilze).

Daniela and Visvizi (2021) note that everyone needs "social contact, opportunities to meet and build friendships, and remote relationships can affect people's psycho-emotional state". Lack of real-life communication with friends is unsurprisingly a very common problem, which causes additional stress and frustration for the youngsters. *"I'm fed up. I want society, to meet other people, my friends and most importantly – my beautiful, beloved girlfriend,"* Victor

mentions. The importance of this aspect in adolescents' life should not underestimated, the age when friends and 'gang' commonly play even more important role than family (Rogers, Ha, Ockey, 2021). Some students admitted that they did not follow the strict restrictions and met friends. Arturs linked these meetings not only to face-to-face communications but also joined activities and hobbies they continued to engage in during the pandemic: *"I would be lying if I would say that I don't meet my friends. We try not to break too much the rules, but it is how it is... We prefer to meet each other outside, then we talk and do some sports. I used to play basketball, so I prefer to play it still in my spare time."*

When asked about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on their lives, students often mentioned that they felt as if life was going by and that opportunities were being lost that would never happen again. *"I think this all is very unfortunate. Many opportunities have been thrown away because of Covid-19"*, Daiga explains. They regret the situation has paused or slowed down their life which in the dynamic teenage years feels especially unfortunate: *"Our lives stopped, that's sad"* (Ance). The lost opportunities emerge as one of the commonly mentioned reflections, as Dainis puts it: *"It has definitely changed my life because I have lost a lot of good opportunities for international experiences as well as the ones here in Latvia that could help in my future studies"*.

At the same time, students express a very high level of resilience. They recognise the challenging situation, at the same time reflecting that through difficulties it brings out a lot of positive in field of self-development and character growth. Madara says: *"It has been very hard, but at the same time, it has been the best time for character development."* Adolescents evaluate the situation from both positive and negative perspectives, and in fact very commonly find the benefits stronger, like Carlina here: *"For me personally, this situation has both its pros and cons. Learning at a distance is a time when I am able to test my self-discipline and determination to maintain the same results as in-person learning."* This self-development aspect indeed surfaces in conversations with the soon-to-be graduates.

In the positive context, students commonly mention also new opportunities, that would have not become available had the pandemic never come. For example, Rudolfs thinks that *"the*

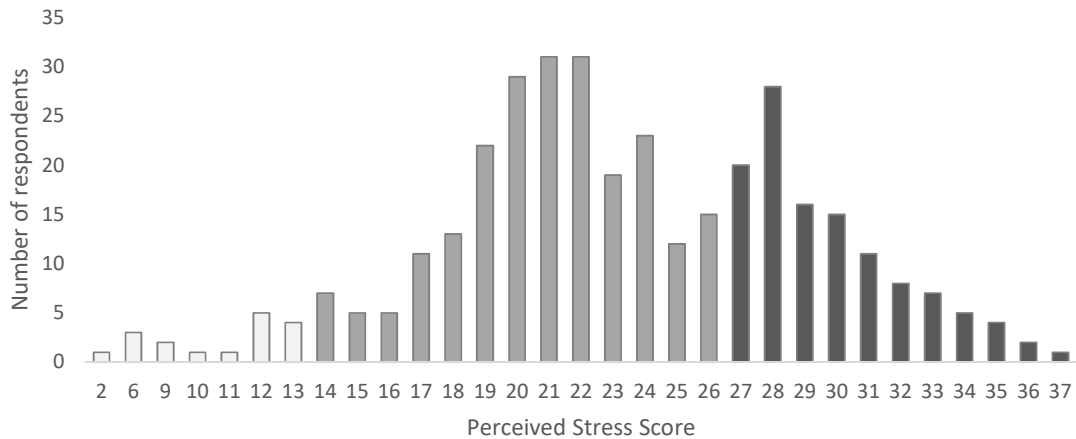
*situation will bring new opportunities in many different areas.*” While some other students, like Toms, turn the attention to the personal development perspective as an opportunity: *“We should never forget that it is (a) great opportunity to improve yourself”*. Some embraced the pandemic as an opportunity to grow. Diana used reflected on her experience after graduation. She started playing the piano again: *“I have returned to piano during pandemic. It is due to the fact, that the time that I spend at home has increased... Not to say – increased, since now everything takes place at home.”* Mihails took up running, instead of football: *“I run. I have learned to endure longer distances in football, so running is also something hard but rewarding.”*

Students are looking at the impact of the pandemic beyond themselves also. Yet another perspective, apparently a matter of high concern for adolescents, is the positive effect the slow-down would have on climate: *“It is an opportunity to digitalize and slow down climate change”* as *“... changes force us to think, act differently ...”* (Ilona). This was already recognised by students early in the pandemic: *“Traffic is very limited. Air pollution has decreased... And in Venice the water has clearer... You can even see fish. The fact that there are less flights... So there are some good and some bad points”* (Emilija).

#### **4.2 Stress and uncertainty**

High levels of stress can have a negative effect on overall academic performance. At the same time, moderate levels of daily controlled stress can even be healthy in form of, for example, enhanced memory (Hupbach and Fieman, 2012) and better human performance (Driskell and Salas, 2013). Higher education institutions welcoming students benefit from awareness of the students’ recent stress levels, which may also be indicators of how students will cope and adjust not only to higher education but hybrid or online higher education, which is the new reality for many.

#### **Figure 2. The Perceived Stress Scores among survey respondents**



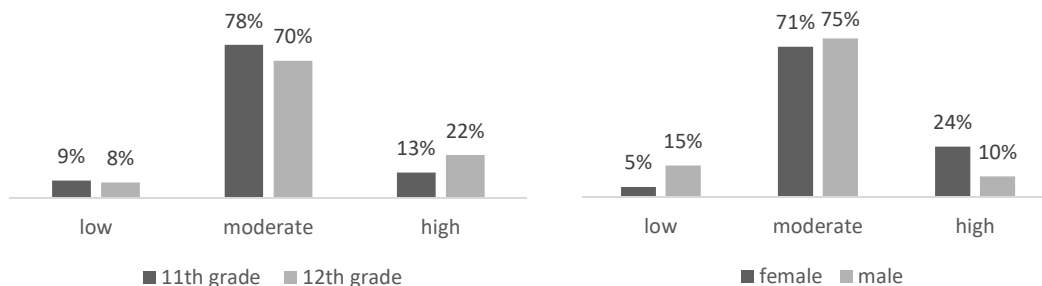
Source: author calculations, based on survey data.

Note: PSS scores 0-13 are considered low stress, 14-26 – moderate stress, 27-40 – high perceived stress.

The majority of young people surveyed (72 percent) had a moderate level of stress, nine percent had a low level of stress, and almost a fifth (19 percent) of adolescents surveyed perceived their life associated with high levels of stress, according to reported Perceived Stress Scale measurements (Figure 2), which is alarming. Rather unfortunately no data from previous years are available, hence results are benchmarked against commonly used PSS division of low, moderate and high stress.

12<sup>th</sup> grade students have a higher level of stress than 11<sup>th</sup> grade students (Figure 2), which can be explained by final exams and expected changes in their lives. It is interesting that high levels of stress are less common among students of minority (primarily Russian) secondary schools than among young people in Latvian schools. This may be explained by a different mentality; however, the data does not allow to explain reasons for the difference. Regarding gender differences in the perception of stress, the results confirm the results of several other previous studies in the field of psychology that girls are more exposed and susceptible to high levels of stress compared to their male peers. One explanation could be the different gender-specific stress management strategies.

**Figure 3. Perceived stress by grade (a) and gender (b), 2021**



Source: author calculations, based on survey data.

These results were confirmed in the one-to-one interviews, hearing people speak about their experiences. Paula tells that *“it is difficult to deal with emotions and stress,”* while Katrina confesses that *“COVID increased my mental health problems”*. Overall, it is not, of course, a new finding. Mental health decline has been a widely recognised consequence of Covid-19 affected school closures and lockdowns.

The emotional state of youngsters differs radically. Some young people feel depressed and anxious about their own and others’ mental health, express anger at the situation, and feel out of control over life and events. Their feelings are expressed as *“everything will become still worse”* (Inga), *“horror and madness”* (Victor) and *“I’m shocked!”* (Rebeka). The scale of their dissatisfaction with the Covid-19 situation is wide too: from extreme *“All bad!”* (Peter) to rather soft *“(I’m) not too worried, (it is) mildly annoying...”* (Irina).

At the same time, a surprisingly large number of respondents show a high level of resilience and cognitive flexibility. They accept the situation, learn to live with it, they are sure that *“everything will be fine”* as a result. Often, the attitude similar to Anna is expressed: *“Well, for me, life goes on without any special problems.”* In general, young adolescents are easier to adapt to new situations than older individuals, and this psychological quality helps them to live through pandemic restrictions.

Jekaterina formulates the opinion heard from many adolescents succinctly:

*“Just yesterday I had a breakdown about the thought of things never being the same. But then I realized that of course things won’t be the same, because we as individuals will*

*have grown so much. We will have survived the global pandemic and learned from it. In my opinion, everything happens for a reason. And this pandemic is our chance to adapt to new ways of studying, working etc. This is our opportunity to finally sit down (in our homes preferably) and think about things we haven't have the chance to think about before, and then we act on them. It will get better, but we have to do something to make it better. (..) Better means you have to learn and find happiness or meaning in everything you do from now on in this new to everyone situation."*

Young age is the transition time to adulthood, new school, employment, independent living and is generally associated with high uncertainty. Covid-19 pandemic has escalated the uncertainty to a yet higher level, adding even more unpredictability that is beyond human control. Dace is concerned about future unpredictability: *"Many great plans if haven't disappeared into a thin air have been postponed to an unclear time in the future, which is sad and disappointing in itself"* and continues associating this unsureness with personal motivation: *"...one of the worst things people have to experience right now is living in uncertainty. Not that life is ever predictable, but if we lose the spirit of dreaming and setting up plans for the future, we might lose our will to do little daily tasks as well"*. Another young woman, Inita states that uncertainty may be the reason for low spirits and poor mental wellbeing: *"... It is extremely difficult to stay positive in a time with such a vast amount of changes."* Perhaps one of the most telling descriptions of a total transition is from Miks, who was interviewed in September 2021. Miks *"could not even imagine the life outside pandemic. It is even hard to reflect how the life was before the pandemic."* Thus, while students saw opportunities and a positive impact of the pandemic, it was undeniably a big change bringing stress and different emotions in their lives. The disbelief about still studying remotely in 2021 is shared by students. Looking back at interviews at the beginning of the pandemic – this is not surprising. In April 2020, students before graduation, did not see the pandemic continuing for years but for months. Aleksandrs said in April 2020: *"I was thinking that it would be good that about the autumn the things will get back to the usual."*

All in all, uncertainty about the future and difficulty planning ahead are also commonly mentioned by young people. Some, like Adeline in 2020 April, describe uncertainty that seems to be overwhelming: *“Now I am confused about Riga, I don’t know even when our school here will end. It is not known yet whether this distant learning will be successful. If not, we’ll have to learn during the summer. And there will be some changes as for the entrance exams. I hope that I will manage to do it all until August and to move to Riga. Now I have to finish the school.”*

At the same time, like in interviews the years before the pandemic, uncertainty is present in the narrative high school graduates use. For example, Miks talked about choosing his path *“I thought I would like to have and it was very hard to choose the right one.”*

What is surprising is that students did not describe uncertainty even. Compared to interviews with previous years, students’ plans were less pronounced. Yet, the uncertainty was not always directly linked to the pandemic either. Instead, there is a sense of being without a clear direction. Katrina, started her studies a month before the interview. She reflected *“Actually, during the entire secondary school I did not know what I would like to study, and even in the summer. I submitted documents to three different fields, but I was admitted in sociology. However, by now I am not sure that it is something I would like to pursue. If I would have to apply for another time, I would go to study medicine.”*

These remarks are closely linked to changes in how time and the passing of time changed during the last two years for many. For some when there was not so much going on during lockdowns, times of isolation, and quarantines, perception of time was slow. They would have described it as time is passing slowly but looking back they wondered how a year went by so quickly. For others, on the other hand, time went by quickly. There was, among participants a divide too- some saw the positives and opportunities in the restrictions and were motivated to grow, and enjoy the life they had. Others retreated and focused on loss.

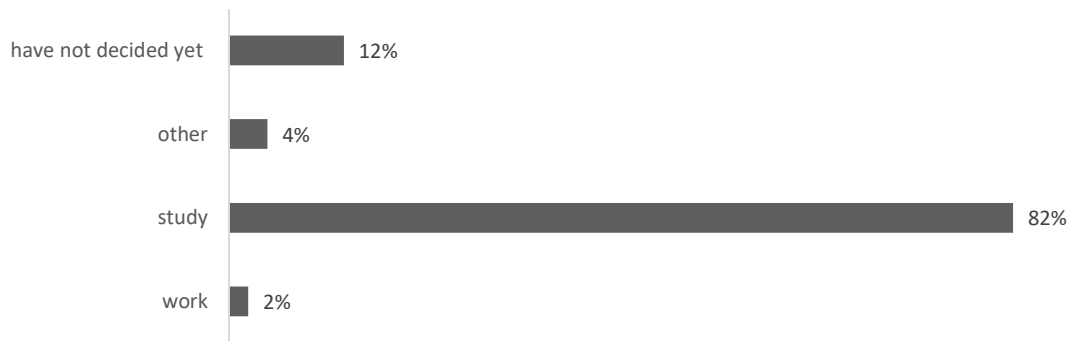
### **4.3 Disruptions to plans**

Despite the overall turmoil and uncertainty, in Latvia Covid-19 allegedly had little effect on young people’s plans to continue their studies. Yet, because of the pandemic, fewer students



went abroad and were less inclined to start a business. Knowing more about the intentions and experiences of higher education clients in such times of change is directly relevant to higher education institutions that will recruit and welcome these students. In the long run, these experiences may have a long-lasting effect on how education, mobility, and knowledge are perceived and sought by students.

**Figure 4. What do you plan to do in the next 12 months after graduating school?**



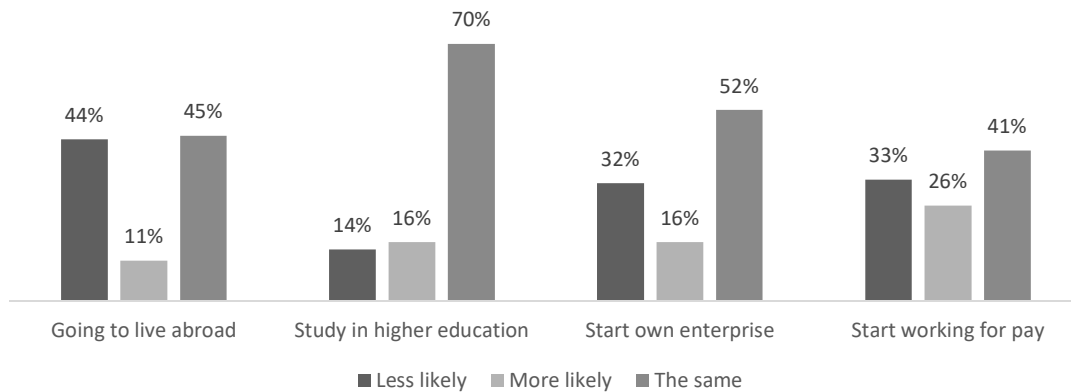
Source: author calculations, based on survey data.

After graduating from high school, 82% of young people plan to continue their studies, a small number (2%) plan to start working, while the rest of the young people had not yet decided what to do. Most of the students plan to continue their studies in Latvia, however, a quarter plan to go abroad to study. No significant differences have been observed between Latvian and minority school leavers in terms of their willingness to study abroad. Popular destinations for people who plan to study abroad include the UK, Ireland, the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, Russia and Germany. About a third of those who plan to study abroad had not yet decided exactly in which country they plan to continue their studies.

The graduates were asked to reflect on how they thought the pandemic has affected their future plans (Figure 5). Students indicate they are less likely are going to live abroad in the next year, less likely to start a business and start working, but plans to continue studies have not been affected. Interestingly though, the graduates express opposite opinions – while 89 percent of

respondents said that pandemic had a negative or no effect on going abroad (for studies or work, or any other reason), a minor 11 percent of respondents expressed it would increase the likelihood.

**Figure 5. How has Covid-19 pandemic affected your plans for the following year?**



Source: author calculations, based on survey data.

Arturs pointed out that although he and his classmates considered going abroad, but the pandemic influenced not only his decision but also how much he knows about others’ plans. *“I have thought about that. I have several classmates, who have also this idea in mind and who are really considering the option to study abroad. Well, I don’t know how many of them will really do so, but this topic appears from time to time... But on the other hand – it is pandemic by now... It changes it all. We can only guess or expect but to be honest, we cannot predict at all the future.”* Even at the beginning of the pandemic (April, 2020), students reflected on what this means for studying abroad. Emilija said: *“In general, those who would like to study in universities from abroad, they all are very stressed and wondering how that will happen.”* But further into crisis year, the one who responded positively to going aboard option and enterprise establishment are likely to be the ones with the growth mindset that saw a lot of opportunities the pandemic has brought, as opposed to Olafs who thinks that *“It (Covid-19) ruined a lot of my plans about studying abroad this year.”*

From the interviews, while most students thought about creating their own enterprise the consensus is not now, not yet. Katrina explained: *“Maybe, in some 10-15 years I could reflect about it, once I will have gained experience, when I would have discovered how it works. How all it works. But I have actually no clue of what I could do in the future. I am even considering quitting university.”* Another reason why interviewees do not opt to start an enterprise is stress: *“I am not sure whether I will run an enterprise since it is very challenging in Latvia, the market is small and you have to work very hard.”* (Irina), and Arturs *“I think that I would not like to encounter the stress one has while running an enterprise.”*

## **5 Discussion and conclusions**

This chapter looked at senior pupils in high schools right before their graduation with the aim to scrutinise how Covid-19 pandemic affected their lives with regards to education and their career plans for the closest years.

Schools moving online was one of the biggest changes that students encountered in their final years of high school due to the pandemic. Understanding how they experienced remote studies, and the impact of online studies can help higher education institutions welcome some of these students to adjust expectations and methods and maximise the learning of this cohort. Beyond this cohort, students’ reflections may help higher educators tailor the university experience for future cohorts experiencing change and welcoming cohorts studying in what may be ‘the new normal’. As HEIs started to welcome a new, digital native generation who have no memories from before the Internet (Gen-Z) in their undergraduate programmes, adaptation was already on the way. The extent to which these cohorts embraced remote learning and online -everything may act as a trigger to speed up this transition process for HEIs. This may be easier as those at HEIs, regardless of their previous attitude and experience with remote teaching too had to embrace remote teaching and increasingly digitalised study environments due to the pandemic. The emotional state differs – some young people feel depressed and anxious, express anger, feel lack of control over life and events. Almost a fifth of young people surveyed are exposed to high levels of stress. Young women are more exposed to high levels of stress than their

peers. Pupils worry about lost opportunities, uncertainty about the future, lack of knowledge, motivation, and communication. What does it mean for higher education institutions to welcome cohorts of students who are so different from previous cohorts not only in how and what they studied but their stress levels also? For students, who spent the last year and a half in higher-than-average stress, the long-term effects could include mental and physical health challenges. These may manifest during their higher education journey, resulting in a struggle to perform and adjust to university life. The consequences for universities are both financial and structural; adequate support to support students and minimise drop-out rate maybe some of the measures to support this cohort.

Lack of motivation, lack of communication with friends, uncertainty about the future and difficulties in planning ahead are often mentioned. Both – the lack of knowledge and lack of motivation are issues that higher education institutions must address when they welcome the new cohorts of students that have acquired secondary education during the pandemic. The implications for admissions, performance, expectations, and mental health reach beyond Covid-19 lockdown periods.

However, a relatively large number of respondents see the positive impact of the pandemic, the opportunity to slow down the daily race, reassess their true desires and values, learn to plan time, gain new experience and use this time for self-development. They accept the situation, learn to live with it, they are sure that everything will be alright. These skills and coping strategies may be useful for students in other transitions, including that to university life or adjustment to different modes of study. Stress, decreased mobility, instability, worsening of families' financial situation, and mental health issues link to the issue of fewer applications for HEIs. Indeed predictions at the beginning of the pandemic forecast a drop in enrolments. As the pandemic goes on, enrolment statistics reveal that the drop is significant in the US, 6.5% fewer students are enrolled in US colleges compared to two years ago (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022). The drop is even more significant for community colleges. In Europe, a small, self-reported survey found that only in Lithuania was there a drop in domestic student enrolments in the first year of the pandemic, but there has been a drop in

international student numbers in many countries (Gaebel & Stoeber, 2021). In Latvia, the number of new entrants to higher education in 2020/21 dropped after an increase in the previous academic year, and total enrolments fell to the lowest number in recent history (CSP, 2021). As the still on-going pandemic already had an impact on enrolments, recruiters and HEIs may need to adapt their strategies to increase enrolments.

Indeed, these students are now used to studying remotely despite disbelief that the pandemic is still going on and life has not returned to what is used to be. While attitudes to remote studies differ, this has implications for higher education institutions for the current and potentially further studies. The cohort has the necessary knowledge and experience to study online. This may allow education institutions to shift resources from introducing students to remote learning to developing their e-learning environments and providing skills training for their staff. Additionally, the cohort may see online education less as a novelty or unusual than previous cohorts, allowing institutions to innovate, develop further programmes or distinguish themselves by offering in-person opportunities.

Uncertainty about the future emerges as a major theme both in the survey data and interviews. When asked about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on their lives, students often mention that they feel as if life was going by and opportunities were missed that would never be there again. Most students found remote studies more difficult than face-to-face learning. Young people are worried about learning outcomes and exams because they feel that the quality of learning and their knowledge suffers. Several students have mentioned that they receive high grades, but there is no real knowledge behind them. This reflects previous research (reference mentioned in introduction) and poses a real question to higher education institutions both in terms of adjusting entrance exams (if any) and tailoring the study process. For the later, the key question is if students can 'catch up' with previous cohorts. Failing to support this 'catching up' process can lead to higher dropout rate. Adjusting the curriculum to accommodate lower experience and knowledge on the other hand would ultimately lead to this cohort entering the workforce even after their higher education studies disadvantaged compared to previous cohorts. The long-term implications could include integration and advancement in the labour

force, financial well-being, health, and even demographic issues such as family planning and migration. These issues reach beyond further studies to life.

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