

YAR Knowledge-Sharing Meeting “Addressing the impact of COVID-19 on Youth” Preliminary Findings¹

Session	Regional Session - Asia-Pacific - Well-being
Date & Time	<p><i>ASPI Knowledge Session</i> 5 October 2021 0600 - 0730 UTC (90 minutes)</p> <p><i>ASPI Research2 Action Session</i> 6 October 2021 0600 - 0730 UTC (90 minutes)</p>

Asia-Pacific Team: Changing Aspirations of Youth in the Asia Pacific: a Closer Look at Coping with Challenges of Virtual Learning and Isolation

Asia-Pacific Youth Team 2: Youth Mental Health and Well-being Asia-Pacific Region

Southeast Asia Team: Career coping strategies of graduates in response to COVID-19 in Southeast Asia

Viet Nam Team 1: Habits and attitudes toward physical activities of Vietnamese youths (15-24 years old) before and during the COVID-19 global pandemic

Viet Nam Team 2: The effect of fear of COVID-19 and adherence to infection prevention and control procedures on life satisfaction of Vietnamese people aged 18-35

Asia-Pacific Team:

Youth-led Research Title: Changing Aspirations of Youth in the Asia Pacific: a Closer Look at Coping with Challenges of Virtual Learning and Isolation

Scope: Asia-Pacific (selected countries: Australia, Bhutan, Fiji, India, Japan, Malaysia, Myanmar)

Methodology: online survey administered via social networking sites complements by semi-structured interviews

Sample size: 126 survey responses from six countries and 13 interviews

Age: 20-24 year old students

Summary:

With the alarming resurgence of infections, the most prominent impact of the pandemic on youth has been the disruption to education (CSIS, 2021). The transition from traditional teaching to online methods of teaching and learning has resulted in new experiences and challenges for

¹ This draft briefing note contains the findings and recommendations prepared by young participants of the YAR programme of the UNESCO Social and Human Sciences Sector. As such, it expresses the views and perspectives of young people who engaged in youth-led research in the context of the YAR and does not constitute an official position of UNESCO.

young people. This shift has also brought about radical changes in their career aspirations and abilities to connect with peers and staff. In early 2021, The Asian Development Bank (ADB) estimated that "learning losses from school closures in developing Asia have added up to \$1.25 trillion as of April 2021, or 5.4 percent of the region's 2020 GDP". The same ADB study also found that the closure of schools "will result in a 2.4 per cent annual decrease in each student's future earnings, placing the entire region's economic recovery and development potential at risk"(CSIS, 2021). White and Wyn (1997) define aspirations as an orientation towards a desired future. Appadurai and Walton (2004) argue that aspirations are not restricted to the individual but are formed in interaction with a social life. Educational institutions specifically play a significant role in shaping youth's aspirations. With the rapid and abrupt changes to this sector due to COVID-19, youth have had to face and overcome various challenges pertaining to this aspect of their lives. This research maps out the above changes and what it means for the youth involved.

Throughout the research, respondents mentioned that the biggest challenges they faced from the pandemic were mental well-being (69.9%), finances (57.7%) and education (52%). The results showed that most setbacks were in areas that could be reduced with support from universities and governments but 62% of participants mentioned that there was no form/delay of support from the university or government. During the survey, 73.3% indicated a change in the mode of education for their higher education institution and this had a significant effect on student motivation to continue their studies. The major challenges identified included time management, interaction with peers and teachers, no access to peer to peer learning, inequities due to heterogeneous learning environments and personal growth from education. Approximately 68 students in the survey indicated that the change in the mode of education decreased their chances succeeding in achieving their desired careers. A contributing factor to this change was the ability to interact with career guidance counsellors about their field of interest.

Draft Recommendations:

- Build state infrastructure for mental healthcare on campus in universities and expand mental health personnel or expertise on campus for one-to-one counselling or group counselling.
- Create channels for information networks to provide and deliver mental health education online.
- Mandate mental health support through free counselling in universities including support from school teachers, lecturers, friends and government support groups.
- Build state capacity for online education to be more inclusive for those from vulnerable communities by:
 - Providing laptops and other requisites to online education.
 - Curriculum development - to ensure offline availability of online lectures for those with hampered/negligible online access to lectures, assignment submissions etc.
 - Training for students to operate online education delivery platforms (such as Zoom).
- Encourage and incentivise university level relief funds for students displaced and stranded due to COVID-19

Asia-Pacific Youth Team 2:

Youth-led Research Title: Youth Mental Health and Well-being Asia-Pacific Region

Scope: Asia-Pacific (open to all with responses from 12 countries)

Methodology: open and close-ended questionnaire disseminated online.

Sample size: 349

Age: 18-25 year old students

Summary:

Young people were already vulnerable to the impact of mental health challenges before the COVID-19 pandemic. Research in the region reveals that with the onset of the pandemic, up to 38% of students in the region experienced mild to moderate depression, anxiety, and stress (Jiang, N., S. Yan-Li, K. Pamanee, and J. Sriyanto, 2020). Despite the situation, a significant number of university students are reluctant to seek professional help. This could emerge due to the behaviour descriptive and injunctive norms and self-efficacy (Shi, Jingyuan, et al. 2020). This remains to be furthered in a possible future study to the researchers within the region. The primary objective of our research was to identify the perceived barriers among the youth (18-25 years old) in the Asia-Pacific region in accessing mental health services and the degree of effect the pandemic has had on their mental health and mental health related infrastructure.

Young people tend to be neglected in global healthcare as they are easily perceived as healthy (Gore, Fiona M et al., 2011). Despite studies which show young people to be physically healthier, the impact of Covid-19, through this research highlights the decreased mental health wellness of 63.7% respondents. Our research shows that perceived stigma is a key barrier in accessing mental health support. The existing cultural barriers due to widespread “mental health illiteracy” can be noted with the responses from South Asia whereby, key words like ‘stigma’, ‘taboo’, ‘ostracization’, ‘lack of awareness’, ‘lack of affordable and professional mental health services’, ‘misconceptions’ and ‘trivialisation of mental health,’ emerged. The top 3 barriers to accessing mental health services emerged as (1) fear of confidentiality and trust, (2) lack of social support systems (3) embarrassment of accessing the services. For those respondents who were previously diagnosed with mental health challenges but could not access it during the pandemic, the top 3 barriers were (1) ‘Fear or stress of the act of seeking help’, (2) ‘Believe that I could overcome by myself’ and (3) ‘Cost of mental health treatment’.”

University-level mental health services were also insufficient for students. For those who mentioned having mental health services at their universities [55% of the respondents], only half of these respondents [27.5% of the total respondents] had “one-on-one counselling available at their university.” Close to 100 respondents [28% of the total respondents] across socio-economic and gender demographics were “unaware” of the mental health services in their university, while respondents reported “not having” mental health services at all (17%). As mentioned before, the mental health services were also generally unequipped to work at an increased capacity.

Draft Recommendations:

- The Ministry of Health can work in coordination with the Ministry of Information Technology to combine technological based advocacy and awareness. These can be supported by non-governmental & civil society organisations and education programs.
- In rural and suburban areas, support community leaders in promoting mental health literacy and prevention of mental health challenges. This can improve knowledge and develop positive attitudes towards accessing mental health services of the public.
- Many respondents can be provided with primary screening at university level through technological applications, and this can be linked to the national healthcare plans.
- Evidence based quality reports by implementing quality assurance and monitoring and evaluation through previous consumers of the services, improve the trust deficit.
- Establish a Ministry for the Mental Health and Research in each country to ensure that developmental and implementation bodies have requisite funds to invest in early detection and quality treatment.
- A minimum of 4% of the National Budget must be allotted to the mental healthcare sector specifically. Greater funding must also be provided for ground research and equitable policy development. This shall provide for scaling up of priority areas for better understanding of community well-being context and support supervisions and manifest long-term sustainability.

Southeast Asia Team

Youth-led Research Title: Career coping strategies of graduates in response to COVID-19 in Southeast Asia

Scope: Southeast Asia (6 countries: Cambodia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam)

Methodology: Semi-structured interviews (either in English or local languages) with fresh graduates (graduated within one year prior to the time of interview) through non-probability sampling.

Sample size: 20 (3-4 per country)

Summary:

With its unrivalled impact across all aspects of life, COVID-19 is undeniably the defining event of the twenty first century thus far. One of the most devastating impacts has been on global employment, with ‘historically unprecedented’ (International Labour Organization, 2021) loss in working hours and jobs in 2020. In this disruption to employment, youth are among the groups most affected, especially those entering the workforce for the first time. Often ‘last-in, first out’ in employment, youth faced severely challenging employment prospects even prior to the pandemic and, without intervention, they could be ‘permanently scarred’ (International Labour Organization, 2020). Fresh graduates in particular, with their lack of experience, face even more

challenging scenarios. The primary objective of this study is to research the career perceptions and coping strategies of tertiary education graduates in six SEA countries entering the professional job market for the first time in the context of COVID-19.

The following key points emerge from the findings:

1. Concern about lack of jobs and career expectations

The overarching commonality is concern about the reduction in employment opportunities for young people. In some of the countries surveyed, there are also concerns about the *mismatch* between the jobs available and their expectations.

2. Digital resources as coping strategies:

To cope with the challenges of limited job opportunities and mobility restriction, fresh graduates are leveraging digital resources to both job-search and improve their employability.

3. Perceived lack of preparedness for the job market:

Unfortunately, the need to upskill and re-skill is related to the perception among fresh graduates that they are not well-prepared for the job market. This is attributed to the lack of educational institutions to equip them with the skills required.

4. Perceived lack of support:

A concerning finding about government support was that fresh graduates from all countries except Singapore were unaware of government programmes/packages targeted and did not receive any kind of support. Even when they were aware of government support, they felt that it was not optimal.

5. Resilience of fresh graduates

Despite the adverse impact of the pandemic on career plans, the findings reveal a broad sense of resilience. This is evidenced both by the general perception that the pandemic's impact will be more short-term in terms of employment, and their efforts to improve their own employability during this period.

Draft Recommendations:

- Leveraging digital capabilities to support youth employment. Specific actions could include government investment on digital connectivity infrastructure (including internet penetration, devices etc). to ensure access to information complemented by improving digital literacy among youth through educational programmes. Governments could also explore expanding opportunities for youth in potential high-growth digital sectors such as e-commerce.
- Policies targeted toward hiring fresh graduates such as incentivizing employers to take on fresh graduates, either through subsidizing costs or creating public-private partnerships for internships or short-term employment programmes.
- Research for improving youth employability/adaptability such as the efficacy of self/e-learning, skills-based education, youth aspirations, government support etc. Governments should also focus on skills assessments of youth in order to align/integrate these with policies relating to jobs of the future.

Viet Nam Team 1:

Youth-led Research Title: Habits and attitudes toward physical activities of Vietnamese youths (15-24 years old) before and during the COVID-19 global pandemic

Scope: Viet Nam

Methodology: online mixed (open and closed) questionnaire using Google forms.

Sample size: 242 (181 females (75%) and 58 males (22.6%) and 3 other (1%))

Age: 15-24 years

Summary:

The COVID-19 global pandemic has considerably affected the normal pace of life and altered all life aspects of Vietnamese people. Specifically, complying with the government's preventive measurements leads people to be in social distances and self-isolation. During the national lockdowns, most people had to stay at home and avoid outdoor physical activities. A number of studies reported a substantial decreasing trend in physical activity of the global youth population in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. UNICEF conducted a rapid poll on the effect of the pandemic on adolescent and youth nutrition and physical activity with the participation of over 13 million people in more than 75 countries. They found physical activities among youngsters have decreased in the COVID-19 pandemic. 52% of participants in the study reported that they were less physically active compared to pre-pandemic times. While 33% reported no physical activity and 25% participated less than one hour per week in physical activity. During our literature review, there is virtually no research, reports, or statistics related to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the physical activities of Vietnamese young people. As a part of the global project *Youth As Researchers* by UNESCO, we designed this study to examine the physical activities of Vietnamese young people in comparison with that of the global young populations.

The results showed significant changes in both attitude and habit of Vietnamese youth toward physical activities before and during the pandemic. The number of people doing exercise increased from 48% to 64% and during the pandemic, most of the respondents believed that physical activities were very and extremely important (40% and 21% respectively, compared to 21% and 8% before the COVID-19). While the pandemic was taking place, many of Vietnamese youth changed their mind about who should work out and their main motivations for physical exercise. There were also shifts in issues of frequency of exercising, how much time spent on exercise, places of practicing, means for practicing, kinds of sports and whom they practiced with. The changes also happened in the youth's neighborhood.

Draft Recommendations:

- The Ministry of Education should organize physical education as important as other subjects like mathematics, sciences, literature, foreign languages, etc in order to encourage students to pay more attention on physical activities in their usual lives.
- Schools and educational institutes should produce online sport or fitness programs that instruct and encourage youth to do different kinds of exercises at home such as gym, work out, yoga, etc. during social-distancing.
- To push habits of physical activities, local governments should create more campaigns or competitions of sports in their areas, including neighborhood campaigns to motivate local residents to exercise.
- National broadcasters should add more exercise programs to public channels to encourage people to exercise at their houses daily.

Viet Nam Team 2:

Youth-led Research Title: The effect of fear of COVID-19 and adherence to infection prevention and control procedures on life satisfaction of Vietnamese people aged 18-35

Scope: Viet Nam

Methodology: Online survey complemented with in-depth interviews of young adults.

Sample size: 203 survey and 10 interviews distributed across 5 cities

Age: 18-24 years

Summary:

In an attempt to control COVID-19 infection rates, most countries, including Vietnam, have been imposing stringent safety measures such as social distancing, wearing face masks, sanitizing hands and disinfecting surfaces. Though these measures are helpful in limiting the spread of the pandemic, they may entail negative economic and mental health consequences for people living in the affected regions. Because COVID-19 is highly infectious, scientists have emphasized its effects on physical health and developing vaccines to protect against the disease; there has been limited research on its impacts on mental health. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate the impacts that fear of COVID-19 and adherence to infection prevention and control procedures have on overall life satisfaction of young adults in Viet Nam.

Of all COVID-19 safety measures reported, wearing a mask; avoiding going to a religious gathering; avoiding going to a restaurant, bar, or club; avoiding using common plates/spoons with strangers, and avoiding travelling outside one's city were the five most adhered measures, with adherence rate ranging from 93% to 98%. In contrast, the five COVID-19 safety measures that were least adhered to include avoiding touching one's face, nose, and mouth; using hand sanitizer, avoiding using common plates/spoons with family; disinfecting one's phone; and checking body temperature at least twice a week. We assessed participants' fear of COVID-19 using the Fear Of COVID-19 Scale devised by Ahorsu, et al (2020). Our analysis shows that participants had a modest level of fear towards COVID-19, and a large proportion of respondents

agreed that they felt uncomfortable when thinking about COVID-19 and that they became anxious or nervous when watching news and stories about COVID-19 on social media. All interviewees expressed fears and anxieties induced by COVID-19. These include fears of getting infected and infecting others, fears of future financial burden, feeling of isolation and possible trouble in centralized isolation areas. One fear that stuck out in the interviews was fear of financial burden, with half of the respondents reporting having experienced it. Although the first waves of pandemic intimidated the interviewed young adults, they said that their level of fear of COVID-19 subsided because the government had taken timely preventive measures to control disease infection and because they had acclimated themselves to new living conditions under the pandemic.

Life satisfaction was measured using the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, et al, 1985). It showed that most people reported a good sense of satisfaction with their lives and only a small number of participants exhibited dissatisfaction with their life. Adherence to COVID-19 safety measures was positively associated with life satisfaction ($r=.550$, $\alpha < 0.001$). Eight out of ten interviewees shared that their lives had not been upset much by the pandemic, thus exhibiting a fairly positive outlook on their lives and/or increased satisfaction with life.

Draft Recommendations:

- *The government* should retain quick, transparent and effective communication to keep citizens informed about COVID-19 in their neighborhood and in the country at large.
- *The government* should raise public health awareness at the grassroots level: disseminating educational visual aids – posters, banners and infographics – in public spaces.
- *Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and non-profit organizations (NPOs)* can help promote safety and wellness among young adults by organizing virtual counselling, training and leisure clubs (e.g. book club, sports club).
- *Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and non-profit organizations (NPOs)* can provide mental health helplines and listening services so that young adults who need emotional support may reach out to feel more heard and less isolated.
- Young adults are encouraged to limit social media consumption and screen time as well as avoid rumors and misinformation by getting news from trusted sources.
- Young adults should partake in activities that give them joy, fulfillment and a sense of control, including workout, meditation, painting and reading.
- Young adults are encouraged to reach out to a trusted adult or professional if they need help.