

## THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AS A CAREER SHOCK: UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE

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### Abstract

The term “career shock” signifies unplanned and unanticipated events that affect a person's career. Akkermans and colleagues defined career shock as an unsettling, unusual and hard to control event that prompts concerns about one's career. The COVID-19 pandemic was an event that has unexpectedly, suddenly and profoundly affected students' lives, especially over the first months of the pandemic. Thus, we wanted to explore whether psychology students in Serbia had experienced the first and most unknown wave of the COVID-19 pandemic as a career shock. The qualitative study involved 64 third-year undergraduate psychology students (87.5% women) from Serbia who were asked to write a short narrative about how they experienced the pandemic, if their experience was a positive or a negative one and why. Additionally, based on a career shock definition they labeled COVID-19 as a (non)shocking experience. Data were collected in spring 2020, during the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic in Serbia. Students' narratives were analyzed using the Gioia method. The majority of participants experienced the pandemic as a career shock (72%). We have identified Covid pandemic both as a positive and a negative career shock. As themes we identified positive and negative aspects of online teaching, positive and negative career consequences. The complex experience of online teaching developed into a two-valence career shock. In addition, there were consequences of online teaching of a more personal nature. On the positive side, students felt safer, had more time to pursue other interests, and more time for family and friends. On the negative side, students felt isolated. The fear of missing out (FOMO) made them anxious about the quality of their studies. Results indicate two broad dimensions of students' experiences of the Covid pandemic: 1. Studies and knowledge, and 2. Employability. Clearly, students experienced the COVID-19 pandemic as a career shock. The shifting valence gives an interesting insight to the still developing theory of career shocks. Findings may offer practical recommendations on how to reorganize curricula and other activities to prepare for developing and implementing educational interventions aimed at preventing and/or alleviating the negative consequences of career shocks, not only during the pandemic and in the post-pandemic period, but also in times of other disruptive and extraordinary events as well.

**Keywords:** *Career shock, COVID-19 pandemic, psychology students, Serbia.*

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### 1. Introduction

The term “career shock” signifies unplanned and unanticipated events that affect a person's career. Akkermans and colleagues (Akkermans, Richardson, & Kraimer, 2020) defined career shock as an unsettling, unusual and hard to control event that prompts concerns about one's career. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 (WHO, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic was an event that has unexpectedly, suddenly and profoundly affected students' lives. Not long before the pandemic, thinking of labor-market changes, and the need for exploring the concept of career shocks in various socio-economic and cultural contexts, Akkermans and colleagues inspired an important tide of research on career shocks (Akkermans & Kubasch, 2017; Akkermans, Seibert, & Mol, 2018).

The COVID storm joined that tide as a set of specific contextual conditions that profoundly affected careers and lives all over the planet. Especially during the first months of the pandemic, when due to the unknown course of the illness and thus unknown consequences, there was a lock down. In Serbia, where this research took place, in the middle of March 2020, the government declared a national state of emergency, that after the first death included the lockdown from 5 pm to 5 am and during the weekends. Covering the closing of the borders and public spaces, the government measures affected the majority of the businesses and organizations, including universities, public transportation and services,

with groceries and pharmacies being excluded (OECD, 2021; Vukelic et al., 2023). The restrictions were lifted in early May 2020. It should be noted that researchers listed uncertainty brought by the Covid-19 pandemic as having the strongest effect on career (Yilmaz, 2020). Thus, under the overall case study approach, we wanted to explore whether psychology students had experienced the COVID-19 pandemic as a career shock, particularly the first wave of the pandemic in Serbia, as being the most unknown and uncertain, it was highly relevant for deepening our knowledge about the construct of career shocks.

## 2. Method

The archival qualitative study involved 64 third-year undergraduate psychology students (87.5% women, age range 21-23 years) from Serbia. As a part of the *Career management* course activities, students were asked to write a short narrative about how they experienced the pandemic, if their experience was a positive or a negative one and why. Additionally, based on a career shock definition they labeled COVID-19 as a (non)shocking experience. Data were collected in April-May 2020.

Analysis of students' narratives was developed inductively using the Gioia method (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012; Vukelić & Petrović, 2021). Qualitative content analysis was carried out in three steps. First, researchers independently coded students' narratives (first level of analysis - developing concepts). Concepts were discussed and collaboratively streamlined and organized into themes and aggregated dimensions.

## 3. Results and discussion

The majority of participants experienced the pandemic as a career shock (72%). Analyzing students' narratives, we have identified Covid pandemic both as a positive and negative career shock. The complex experience of online teaching developed into a two-valence career shock. In academic terms students liked new approaches to learning, new ways of collaborating in teams, new relationships with teachers. As a consequence of online teaching, on the positive side, students felt safer, had more time to pursue other interests, and more time for family and friends. On the negative side, students felt isolated from colleagues, using new tools in an online environment was often challenging, even impossible. Career-wise, on the positive side, some students understood in a very short time that they could use the opportunity of being more at home and having more free time, to learn things and develop skills that would be beneficial for their career (such as learning foreign languages, new software, taking various online courses, reading).

The fear of missing out (FOMO) made them anxious about the quality of their studies. The inability to take the internship led students to consider how the lack of practical experience might affect their future career prospects. In addition, for students that worked before the pandemic, finding a new job or losing one during the pandemic were also recognized as events that triggered career shocks. Primarily, the majority of students perceived the pandemic in relation to their studies, and some 18% of students primarily thought about the effects of the pandemic on their career and future employment. This finding is closely related with the fact that students were in their third year of undergraduate studies, with two more years to study before embarking on a job. Results indicate two broad dimensions of students' experiences of the Covid pandemic as a career shock: 1. Studies and knowledge, and 2. Employability.

However, for a rounded discussion of results, we need to list some of the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research. For those students that have not perceived the pandemic as a career shock, it is most probably related with differences in response activation. Longitudinal research design would enable better understanding of the process. For more complex insights, the sample should have covered persons in different stages of career development, not only students. Future samples should secure better gender balance. Among students, research should entail different fields, not just psychology. However, theory-wise, we were able to grasp the moment hoping to add a new perspective on career shocks. On the practical level, we were able to come up with some recommendations that are relevant for preventing students' career shocks ignited by other factors, not only by the epidemic/pandemic.

## 4. Conclusions

First papers about the possible effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on career in general, and on career shocks in particular, were based on literature reviews (e.g. Akkermans et al., 2020; Yilmaz, 2020). This study offers a still rare empirical insight into the career shocks of students under extreme, pervasive conditions caused by the pandemic.

Clearly, students experienced the COVID-19 pandemic as a career shock. The shifting valence gives an interesting insight to the still developing theory of career shocks. Findings may offer practical recommendations on how to reorganize curricula and other activities to prepare for developing and implementing educational interventions aimed at preventing and/or alleviating the negative consequences of career shocks, and support them to make better use of perceived positive consequences, not only during the pandemic and in the post-pandemic period, but also in times of other disruptive and extraordinary events as well.

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