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Personal Sustainability and Sustainable Employability: Perspective of Vocational Education Students

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Abstract

Sustainability is related to diverse relationships that exist in the world as well as to the attitudes evolving in a person's diverse life activities, including education and work. In the sustainable employability model, there is a pedagogical idea of experience and self-identity and individual values revealing the level of personal sustainability. The present study explores vocational education students' personal sustainability as a predictor to sustainable employability in the future. The study involved 151 vocational education students' self-assessment of valuable (sustainable) personal characteristics, their attitude to being honest, helpful and responsible. The results have shown that the most valuable self-characteristics are being good tempered, helpful and kind. Students' attitudes to being responsible and honest change during school years – 1st and 2nd year students do not consider them important values but senior students acknowledge them. It means that their lived experiences have promoted personal sustainability development ensuring more sustainable employability in the future.

Key words: employability, sustainability, values, vocational education

Introduction

The issue of employability has become relevant in the 21st century and has both global and local features indicating the current unsustainability of employability. Due to global tendencies, the direction of unsustainable development and education towards the multiplication of unsustainable patterns of behavior was recognized in the January 2011 Document of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission "Learning for the Future: Competences in Education for Sustainable Development". Education for sustainable development was intensively addressed on a global scale, started in 2000 during the preparatory phase of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2000–2005), continued in the first Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005–2015), and Sustainable Goals (SGs) in the achievement phase (2015–2020). The topic of sustainability is still relevant as it is currently being addressed in the next phase of the Global Decade through the implementation of Education 2030 for education for

sustainable development. Despite transformations during the past 20 years and the start of Anthropocene era, at the beginning of the second decade of sustainable education, there is a conviction that sustainability makes education and economic relations more successful and of better quality (Fedosejeva et al., 2018). Anthropocene is commonly used as a framework for metaphysical and ontological explanation of unsustainability in society, science, and education (Pipere, 2019).

It has become obvious that sustainability can be linked to diverse relationships that exist in the world and to the attitudes evolving in a person's diverse life activities and experiences. Thus, sustainability competences are related to sustainable employability, which is a complex phenomenon with the nature of wicked problems and can be addressed through action and the interest of participants to improve it and cannot be solved completely and definitively (Salīte et al., 2016).

Employment research uses different perspectives based on different approaches to explaining employment and using research perspectives. Often they have the nature of a 'piecemeal approach', there may be different aims of the study not addressing the perpetrator's attitudes or relationships having employers' goals for competition or different detailed questions. This diversity also exists in the field of education and in the choice of research design, and it also appears in education as differently understood perspectives, which can be seen as unsustainable. Sustainable employability is one of today's complex problems viewed by the pedagogy from a broader perspective of open participation, assessing the real individual experiences, emotions and attitudes of students and the relationship with a degree of sustainability achieved in society. The previously mentioned ideas are revealed in articles of the Journal of Teacher Education for Sustainability (JTES). The Journal aims at facilitating the open discussion, the evaluation, integration and synthesis of participants' experiences in recognizing and conceptualizing practical and theoretical concepts (Salīte et al., 2020). The content of JTES demonstrates the need of all education-related studies to maintain the context of sustainability and the idea of seeking a more holistic perspective in educational research (Salīte et al., 2018).

Today, employers increasingly expect their employees to have general soft skills rather than specific and narrow skills, and this is what enables an individual to successfully adapt to the demands of a changing labor market and implement the idea of sustainable employment. Graduates who after graduation work in their field and are satisfied with their work will make a greater contribution to the country's economic development. One of the reasons why many drop out of school and are unable to get used to their work environment is related to the individual's value system and personality characteristics.

Vocational school graduates should gain employment as they have been equipped with skills that urge them towards work independence and readiness; hence, vocational school is seen as a solution to reduce unemployment (Tentama & Abdillah, 2019). However, the reality in the field shows that vocational school graduates are one of the most significant contributors to unemployment in Latvia despite the fact that they are highly demanded in the national labor market. Data from the Central Statistics Agency in 2020 showed that most unemployed people (30.9 %) have secondary vocational or basic vocational education. There are several possible explanations for this fact: students' professional skills are low and do not correspond to the employers' requirements, people who graduated from vocational secondary education programs several years ago do

not have up-to-date skills and knowledge that correspond to quickly changing require-ments of a definite profession. There are several studies that examined the correlation between different personality characteristics and career success (Stoll et al., 2020). The authors of the paper will study the correlation between sustainability of individual personality characteristics and value system as a predictor of students' sustainable employ-ability in the future.

The aim of the study is to identify and describe the vocational education students' personal sustainability as a predictor to sustainable employability in the future.

Theoretical Background

Personal Sustainability

Personal sustainability is concerned with the human being, the personal, intra-personal, mental and perception patterns, thoughts, emotions, habits, the subjective body and self-conception that are closely related to unsustainable or sustainable develop-ment. Personal sustainability explores the ability to live in a way that is sustainable for oneself and surroundings. It includes a qualitative view of inner situation of a person, the inner conditions shaping their lived experiences, their perception and their scope of actions (Parodi & Tamm, 2018).

Similar ideas are described in the study on emotional competence in the ESD system as one of the main factors of development of professional and personal life of a person. The generalized concept of competence encompasses social meanings that appear and function in society, ensure the normal functioning of a man and the interaction of people with each other in such a society (Suleimenova & Ivanova, 2018).

Sustainable Employability

The concept of sustainable employability has been used in the scientific literature before and it has been studied from the point of view of employer, employee, career education, economics, and health sector (Brouwers et al., 2015; Fleuren et al., 2016; Singhal, 2019). Sustainable employability can be defined as an employee's capability to participate in present and future jobs while preserving good health and well-being as well as the necessary conditions for this to occur (Van der Klink et al., 2016). The proposed study views sustainable employability in the context of pedagogy as an open phenomenon with a dynamic, adaptive evolving nature depending on the relationship between the degree of sustainability achieved in society and the ways in which it is main-tained in diverse real individual activities. Sustainable employability will be defined as a complex phenomenon that also manifests itself in economic, social, cultural and environ-mental activities. At the heart of the sustainable employability model, there will be a pedagogical idea of experience and self-identity, which will be related to the formation of an individual evolving prototype based on one's own and others' life experience. Integration or synthesis of experience and self-identity influences changes in development in order to achieve sustainable employability.

Research Design

Instrument

The authors suppose that personal sustainability can be manifested through an individual's self-assessment of valuable (sustainable) personal characteristics, their attitude to being honest, helpful and responsive as guiding principles to sustainable development, including sustainable employability. Relying on these assumptions, the authors developed a survey consisting of open-ended questions. The self-study of the individual students' experience and self-evaluation ensure the acquisition of quality data. The data collected were analyzed using a content analysis.

Sample

The study involved students of vocational school, because while studying at a vocational institution the individual makes decisions that greatly affect his or her entire future career. It is important for the student to be able to make informed decisions that are in line with his or her inner nature and are not influenced by the views of other people and society. This will ensure the well-being of students and better integration into society.

The research took place in autumn 2020, in the first semester of 2020/2021 academic year and participation in this research was voluntary. The students (N=151) from a vocational education institution in Latvia participated in the study. The information about the sample is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Socio-Demographic Information on the Research Sample of Students

Socio-demographic information		Frequency N (%)
Gender	Boys	70 (46 %)
	Girls	81 (54 %)
Year of study	1st year	44 (30 %)
	2nd year	55 (37 %)
	3rd year	15 (10 %)
	4th year	6 (4 %)
	Part-time student	28 (19 %)

As Table 1 demonstrates, the number of boys and girls is almost evenly distributed. Most of the students who took part in the research were 1st and 2nd year students (16–17-year olds), and part-time students were mostly adults who already had secondary education. Further in the paper, 4th year students and part-time students will be considered respondents of one group because they are adults and most of them have already some work experience. Vocational secondary education in Latvia (4 years of studies) leads to a diploma of vocational secondary education and professional qualification, and a certificate of general secondary education (EQF level 4). The latter document is awarded for passing four state centralized examinations, and it grants access to higher education. The ratio between theory and practice is 50:50. Most of vocational education institutions in Latvia also offer vocational secondary education to acquire professional skills for labor market (duration of studies from 1.5 to 3 years) to individuals who have general secondary education. Upon completing studies, a diploma of vocational secondary education (EQF level 4) is awarded.

Results

The study participants were asked to name three most valuable personal characteristics in their opinion. The authors divided the characteristics into five categories:
1) Personality traits (e.g., good tempered, kind, calm, patient);
2) Relations to others (e.g., helpful, honest, friendly, responsible, communicative);
3) Appearance/abilities (e.g., sporty, creative, hardworking);
4) Cognitive skills (e.g., clever);
5) General (e.g., good).

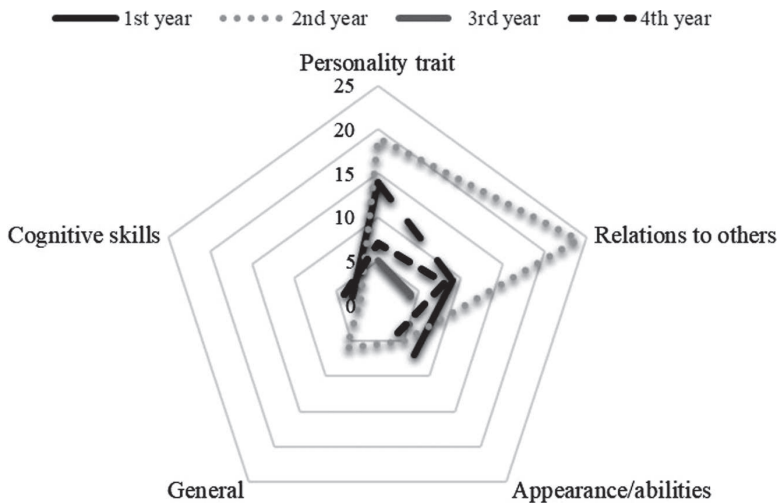The results are summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Students' most valuable personal characteristics

The 1st year students' most valuable personal characteristics were mainly related to personality traits: good tempered (n=7), kind (n=3) and relations with others: helpful (n=4), honest (n=3). Only three students, as their most valuable characteristics, considered being clever. Most of the 2nd year students value characteristics that can help them build good relations with others: honest (n=6), helpful (n=5), understanding (n=4), responsible (n=4). The mentioned valuable personality traits were similar with 1st year students: good tempered (n=8) and kind (n=6). The 3rd year students (only 15 students took part in the study) mentioned characteristics describing their appearance (e.g., sporty), personality trait – being kind and responsive that refer to the category – relations with others. The 4th year students (incl., part-time students) mainly emphasized such characteristics as good-tempered (n=6), honest (n=4), unique (n=4) and clever (n=4). Some students did not answer this question or their answers were not relevant.

The study participants were also asked about keeping their promises; the results are summarized in Table 2.

The results show that 27 % of the students who participated in the study did not keep their promises, almost equal number of students (25 %) answered that it would depend on a situation and 48 % of the students admitted that they kept their promises. It is important to note that most of the students who do not keep their promises are 1st and 2nd year students who mainly associate this question with promises given to their teachers

about doing homework, writing a test, etc. As an excuse for not keeping the promise they often mentioned that they simply forgot it. 3rd and 4th year students were more responsible and they admitted their liability to other people; some of the students wrote that they did not promise anything if they were not sure they would be able to keep it.

Table 2
Students' Answers to the Question: "Do you Always Keep your Promises?"

Study year	Keep promises	Sometimes keep promises	Do not keep promises
1st year	18	13	13
2nd year	12	17	26
3rd year	10	3	1
4th year/part-time	29	5	–

Being helpful was one of the characteristics the students mentioned as their best personality traits and answering the question: "Do you help others?", most of the students (78 %) gave an affirmative answer, while 22 % of the students answered that it would depend on a situation.

Table 3
Students' Answers to the Question: "Do you Help Others?"

Study year	Help	Sometimes help/ depends on a situation	Do not help
1st year	34	10	–
2nd year	43	12	–
3rd year	11	4	–
4th year/part-time	31	3	–

Analyzing the answers, we can also identify the difference according to the study year – 1st and 2nd year students as an example of helping others mentioned helping groupmates with homework, helping parents, teachers but senior students mentioned helping unknown people, helping animal shelters and charity organizations.

Honesty is one of the highly valued characteristics in personal relationship and it is also important in the work environment. The students who participated in the study seemed to understand it because most of them answered that they were honest (73 %) and 27 % of the students tried to be honest but it depended on a situation, e.g., they were lying because they did not want to hurt somebody.

Table 4
Students' Answers to the Question: "Are you Honest?"

Study year	Honest	Depends on a situation	Not honest
1st year	31	13	–
2nd year	40	15	–
3rd year	10	5	–
4th year/part-time	30	4	–

The analysis of the students' answers did not reveal significant differences according to the respondents' study year.

Discussion and Conclusions

The study emphasized the relationship between vocational education students' personal sustainability and sustainable employability in the future. Personal sustainability was explained on the basis of students' self-assessment and attitude towards certain values: honesty, responsibility and helpfulness. As we know, values are imposed from our family in childhood and reinforced through culture and life experiences, incl. education. This means that, indirectly, the research also provides an insight into the work of vocational education teachers and others involved.

The results show that the most valuable self-characteristics are being good tempered, helpful and kind. The students involved in the study emphasize personal qualities that help a person be in harmony with themselves and others. Only a few of the participants of the study emphasized some of their external talents, abilities or appearance characteristics, which would allow them to stand out; in general, students' self-assessments could be assessed as modest.

It is important to emphasize that students' attitudes to being responsible and honest change during school years – 1st and 2nd year students do not consider them as important values but senior students acknowledge them. This means that the life experience gained (incl., education) has led to the reassessment of several things and the improvement of the internal value system, which is more appropriate for sustainable development. In the process of sustainable development, reflection over personal values is important. The youth needs to clarify their own values in the process in order to challenge the prevailing norms leading to unsustainability. Education has to offer opportunities for value discussions among the students in order to clarify different sets of values, ethics and morals (Hofman-Bergholm, 2018). The students' self-assessment method used in the study can be integrated in education because it enhances the ability to adequately evaluate oneself and others, build a strong relationship in which, on the one hand, everyone takes on the responsibilities that are most suitable for him/her, on the other hand, others see an individual's capabilities, entrust him/her with the most appropriate responsibilities (Salīte et al., 2016).

Sustainable personal development, based on the values of sustainable development, ensures the individual's positive relationship with others in the long run, greater satisfaction with his/her life, including work, promoting sustainable employability. We can conclude that promoting a student's sustainable personal development, we ensure successful integration in the labor market, which is one of the basic tasks of vocational education.

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