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STUDY TO EVALUATE THE KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES REGARDING THE HEALTH AND LIFE SKILLS OF STUDENTS IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA (SUMMARY REPORT)

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Introduction

Healthy lifestyles and behaviors are indispensable preconditions for a person to reach their full developmental potential at all stages of life. Equipped with life skills, boys and girls who adopt healthy and safe behaviors are more likely to excel, make a career, and achieve a higher level of material well-being. Young people can acquire these skills through the systematic study in schools of health education based on the development of life skills. According to research¹, health education, adapted to age and cultural context, helps adolescents make informed decisions and avoid risky behaviors. The school has a crucial role in this regard, because it can deliver accurate information to adolescents. In many European countries, health education is compulsory in school and has a positive impact on adolescents and young people.

To encourage students in Vocational Education and Training (VET) institutions (boys and girls, including the vulnerable and disabled one) to practice safe reproductive health behaviors and adopt a healthy lifestyle, the United Nations Population Fund, with the financial support of the Austrian Development Agency from the funds of the Austrian Development Cooperation Program and in partnership with the Ministry of Education, Culture and Research (MoECR), is implementing, between 2020 and 2022, the project „Develop life skills and healthy behaviors of students in Vocational Education & Training for their development and job readiness“. The study to assess the knowledge, attitudes and practices regarding the health and life skills of students in vocational education and training in the Republic of Moldova was conducted as part of the project under overall leadership of the MoECR.



¹ (Standards for sex education in Europe. WHO Regional Office for Europe and the BzgA. German Federal Center for Health Education, BzgA. Köln, 2010.)

About the study

This study was conducted for the first time in Vocational Education and Training (VET) institutions. The aim of the research is to establish what are the health-related knowledge and behaviors among VET girls and boys, as well as the life skills that can help them find employment.

The study was conducted among students aged 15-19 from 4 centres of excellence, 7 colleges and 9 vocational schools, a total of 20 VET institutions (12 institutions - part of the project and 8 control institutions).

The study assessed the level of knowledge, attitudes and practices of 923 students related to their health and life skills. Girls accounted for 63% of respondents, and boys - 37%, given the fact that some educational institutions enrolled in the assessment have mostly girls as enrolled students. This proportion did not influence the study results and corresponds to the research sample criteria.

Research objectives included:



- (1) *assessing young people's knowledge, attitudes and practices related to healthy and risky behaviors;*
- (2) *estimating the social skills of young people, especially those who can develop social welfare;*
- (3) *identifying the life skills of young people in their socio-economic context;*
- (4) *assessment of employment skills which can be developed through life skills health based education.*

At the same time, in order to analyse the impact of the life-skills health based education on the level of knowledge, attitudes and practices of adolescents and young people enrolled in VET, **a comparative analysis was done between the young people who studied the course "Decisions for a healthy lifestyle²" and students who did not study this course.**

² The "Decisions for a healthy lifestyle" is the only course in VET which provides comprehensive information on health and safe behaviors related issues. The course is mandatory for colleges and Centers of Excellence (ISCED IV) and optional for professional schools (ISCED III)



For a complete and in-depth understanding of the study results, 2 focus-group discussions were organized with trainers and teachers from VET institutions and 3 discussions with students, including people with disabilities.

The results of the study will serve as a source of information and basis for identifying evidence-based solutions for MoECR, as well as the development partners and organizations working in the field of VET, for managers of VET institutions and parents of VET students. A similar study will be conducted at the end of the project, which will not only measure the impact of the project, but also the effectiveness of the course "Decisions for a healthy lifestyle" in terms of changing behaviors and developing life skills to help VET students to integrate more easily into the workplace.

The main results

General health and body hygiene

Boys and girls in VET institutions display frequently signs of illness and a poor knowledge regarding symptoms that impede timely access of health care services and other immediately required support. Students also reported a worrying state of mental health that worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic. Internet and mass-media still remain the main informational source for young people, while only half young people know where and how to access youth friendly health services.

Although most students highly evaluated their health, **37.7%** of them reported **two or more signs of illness more frequently than once a week**. The indicator is significantly higher among girls than among boys (44.2% and 26.7%, respectively). This discrepancy can be explained by the limited knowledge of students about the symptoms of illness, which can negatively influence the access to medical services within optimal time and their long-term health.

Students also reported a worrying state of mental health. Thus, weekly, girls and boys face:



- 26,3% - a state of apathy
- 22,9% - irritation / nervousness / bad mood
- 20,4% - anxiety
- 20,7% - increased stress

During the COVID-19 pandemic, 1/4 of all students felt much more stressed. Girls report this condition more frequently (30.8%) than boys (17.6%).



Among the students, **the top sources of information and education** in the field of health is the Internet, followed by the media, courses that include information about a healthy lifestyle, doctors, Youth-Friendly Health Centres, friends, and relatives. **Just over half of the students know about the Youth-Friendly Health Centres**, where they can access information and free and accessible services to young people, and only 1/3 of the total respondents visited a Youth-Friendly Health Centre.

"By and large, we feel very well, but we have to deal with..., for example ... I often get stressed and I have very big headaches. But there are times when we really feel well and do not have these headaches, worries, and stress related to learning and specialization." - a student, Centre of Excellence in Informatics and Information Technologies.



An important aspect in maintaining health is **body hygiene**. Only half (49%) of students in VET institutions brush their teeth more often than once a day, while intimate hygiene is observed daily by the absolute majority (93.3%) of students. However less than half respondents know all hygiene products that can be used during menstruation, with significant difference between girls (46%) and boys (28.7%).

The level of health knowledge in students who studied the course "Decisions for a healthy lifestyle" is higher than in those who did not study it (52.2%, compared to 42.5%). Increased level of knowledge is also attested among students from Centres of Excellence and colleges - 59.5% where the course is mandatory, compared to 43.05% for those in vocational schools where the course is optional.

Health related issues and job readiness

VET students face a series of health and wellbeing related challenges during the internships and at work place, which are mostly linked to their physical adaptation and psychological wellbeing.

From the students' perspective, the health problems faced by young specialists during vocational internship and at work are increased stress levels, due to lack of experience, visual disturbances, overwork, and obesity. **Vocational trainers and teachers completed this list** with backache, hand or foot pain, intellectual fatigue, lack of physical endurance.

"Eye disorders could be a problem because there are many children who wear glasses and there are those who have not yet discovered the health problem in time. They have blurred vision and it bothers them because they cannot make out what is on the board, for example." – a student, Iulia Hasdeu College from Cahul.

Employment skills that can be developed through life skills health based education

According to the study, students in VET institutions, especially in vocational schools, have poor social and employment skills. Study results showed that young people who have knowledge and healthy behaviors develop more often skills that facilitate their smooth integration into labour market.

According to teachers and vocational trainers, a good young specialist has strong theoretical knowledge, understands the profession specificities, is results oriented, **effectively faces the requirements and challenges of the life and at workplace**, has a tolerant and sensitive attitude towards other people, and easily **establishes friendly relationships, communicates effectively** with peers, and **integrates well into a team**.

The vocational trainers also noted that the employers expect and hope that young specialists besides knowledge have more **practical skills**, seriousness, dedication, course, initiative, and responsibility, **critical thinking, creativity**, and **confidence**.

"There has never been perfection, nor shall there be, we all strive towards it. Clearly it is essential that the graduates be first and foremost healthy, then they must have a professional basis and life skills. Every specialist must love, must communicate, must be active, must work. Do the tasks diligently ahead of time. When they have a task to accomplish, they must know how to manage, to act and react, to be able to adapt to different situations they face" - a teacher, Center of Excellence in Informatics and information technologies (CEITI).

As a result of the analysis, it was found that **only 1/5 (20.9%)** of the respondents **have well-developed interpersonal skills** and **only 11.3% have developed skills that can help them get hired**. Thus, about half of the students:



- do not have the ability to work efficiently independently - 43.4%;
- do not have the ability to work as part of a team - 46.8%;
- do not have the ability to listen carefully to learn - 52.5%;
- do not have the ability to work with people with different abilities and in different environments - 55.4%.

Students in colleges and centres of excellence possess 2 times more employment-related skills than students in vocational schools.

Employment skills are more developed in students who have studied the course "Decisions for a healthy lifestyle" (12.75% versus 5.35% - those who have not been taught the course). Social skills also have a higher share among students who have studied the course.

Nutrition and physical activity

A large number of respondents displayed signs of unhealthy eating patterns and lack of physical activity, patterns that can lead to serious health problems in the long term and could hinder their healthy development and physical resilience.



According to the World Health Organization, important health skills include healthy eating and physical activity (at least 60 minutes a day).

Thus, the results reveal that:

- Only 4 out of 10 students eat breakfast daily;
- Less than half of them consume fruit and vegetables daily (44.7%);
- 1 in 3 students consume sweets daily;
- 1 in 5 students consume carbonated beverages daily.





Data on physical activity is very worrying. **Only 1 in 8 students engage in physical activity** daily, and 1 in 4 students - only once a week or not at all. Compared to boys, girls practice physical activities 2 times less often.

- "I would be very happy if there were more conditions for sports and leisure, because with my profession as a programmer, especially since I sit for hours and concentrate in front of a screen, it's very good at least 30 or 40 minutes for you to move outdoors" - a student, Iulia Hasdeu College from Cahul

- "From a technical point of view, everything is to our liking, but the food ... We have a fast food store and a buffet, but at the buffet everything is off the rack. It would be better to have some home cooked food, some healthier food" - a student, Centre of Excellence in Information Technologies

The data show that students who have studied the course "Decisions for a Healthy Lifestyle" eat breakfast much more often and are more physically active than those who have not studied it. This discrepancy is almost double between the students of the institutions that have spaces specially designed for sports (14.5%) and the students of the institutions that do not have such spaces (8.0%).

Substance use (tobacco, alcohol, drugs)

Alcohol consumption and use of various psychoactive substances is a worrying practice among VET students.

The milestones have been the experience throughout life, as well as over the last 30 days which is indicative of the current behaviors. While referring to the last 30 days, a worrying number of students admitted to have consumed alcohol, tobacco, cannabis and some of them confirmed the use of high risk drugs:



- 15.5% of students consumed tobacco-based cigarettes for 1-2 days and more, with a higher incidence in boys of 31.4%, compared to girls - 6.2%. A similar trend is evident in the case of e-cigarette consumption.
- 43.3% consumed alcoholic beverages 1-2 days and more;



- 12.8% of respondents were at least once in a state of pronounced intoxication;
- 2.2% used cannabis;
- 1.1% used synthetic drugs (ethno-botanical - spices, salts, etc.);
- 1.4% used intravenous drugs.

Among students who have studied the course "Decisions for a Healthy Lifestyle" the proportion of those who smoke or use drugs is insignificantly lower than among those who have not been taught this subject. However, the difference is significant among those who consume abusively alcohol (5,6% versus 11,4%).

Sexual behaviour and use of contraception

Risky sexual behaviors have been registered among boys and girls from VET. 25% of sexually active students do not use condom which is the only modern method of contraception that besides the protection against unintended pregnancy offer protection against Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) and HIV. The use of oral contraceptive pills is very low. It is also worrying the high frequency of occasional partners and reported forced first sexual intercourse.

Sexual experience:

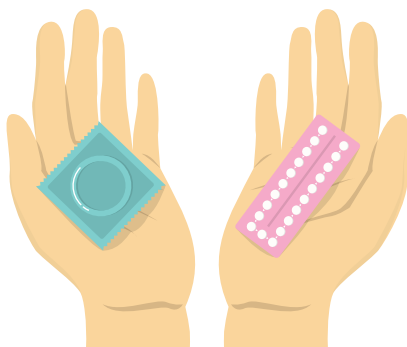


- 36.5% of students (53.4% being boys and 26.6% - girls) reported being sexually active. Most boys had their first sexual contact at the age of 15 (46.2%), and most girls - at 17 (43.9%).
- For 3.6% of young people, the first sexual intercourse was forced, with a higher share among girls (5.8%) than among boys (1.6%).
- The data show that **young people frequently have sex with an occasional partner:**

- **Boys:** 41.8% (on average, 3 occasional partners in the last 12 months). Of the total number of cases, 20% of these sexual acts were performed without the use of a condom;

- **Girls:** 14.2% (on average, 3 occasional partners in the last 12 months), of which 37% being sexual intercourse without using a condom.

Use of contraception:



- Sexually active boys and girls used condoms only in 75.8% of cases at first contact and in 73.3% of cases - at last sexual contact. **Thus, 1 in 4 students is not protected against sexually transmitted infections, including HIV;**
- Oral contraceptive pills are used, on average, in 8% of cases.

The obtained data shows that students who studied the course "Decisions for a Healthy Lifestyle" used condoms and oral contraceptive pills at the first sexual intercourse significantly more frequent, and the use of these modern methods of contraception becomes more frequent over time, compared to those who did not study the course.

Prevention of unplanned pregnancies

The data shows that phenomenon of adolescent pregnancy among student girls in VET institutions is quite present. One in 5 girls who got pregnant dropped out the education because of the pregnancy. Very few of the students are properly informed regarding the contraceptive methods, boys being less informed compare to girls.



According to the data collected from the 20 VET institutions involved in the study, only in one academic year (2019/2020) a total number of 67 pregnancies were registered among students³. It is worrying that **a quarter of pregnant students dropped out of school due to pregnancy**. Consequently, these **girls**, without a profession, involved in raising and caring for the child, are **limited in opportunities for development and professional achievement** compared to their peers. This situation is a consequence of risky sexual behaviors.

³ (Two of the 20 institutions did not submit data: one (from the pilot group), because they do not collect such data, and the second (from the control group), because all students are boys.

Asked about how to prevent an unplanned pregnancy,



- only 18.45% of respondents (21.3% girls and 13.5% boys) correctly indicated all appropriate modern methods to prevent unplanned pregnancy;
- about 85% of students consider that the condom is appropriate to be used;
- on average, 60% consider contraceptive pills suitable;
- almost half (about 45%) mentioned emergency contraceptive pills (second day pill);
- unfortunately, half of students still consider traditional methods to be appropriate, such as interrupted intercourse and the calendar method - methods that offer a low degree of protection against pregnancy and do not provide any protection against STIs and HIV.

Despite the fact that in the Republic of Moldova modern methods of contraception are free of charge for young people in primary health care facilities, including Youth Clinics, just 60% of respondents know where they can benefit from free condoms, with a higher share among boys - 79.8% and 49.7%, respectively - among girls.

Students who studied the course "Decisions for a healthy lifestyle" presented a more advanced level of knowledge in this regard.

Sexually transmitted infections, including HIV

Poor or insufficient knowledge about HIV/AIDS was registered among VET students. It is also worrying that students have a lot of misconceptions about HIV transmission and show discriminatory attitudes towards HIV-positive persons.



- **Only 1 in 10 young people knows comprehensive information about HIV** (5 standard questions), with a higher share among girls - 11.5% and 7.3%, respectively - among boys.



- Thus, 37.2% of students still believe that a person can become infected with HIV / AIDS by being bitten by a mosquito, and 53.70% believe that they can become infected with HIV / AIDS by eating with an HIV-infected person.
- Almost 50% of students do not know that the risk of transmitting HIV / AIDS and other infections can be reduced by having sex only with a faithful uninfected partner (45.70%) and by using a condom (41.80%).
- About 1/3 of respondents have discriminatory attitudes towards people infected with HIV.
- Only 2/3 of the respondents (75.6% girls and 64.8% boys) admit that there is a danger of infection with a sexually transmitted infection during a single unprotected sexual intercourse.

VET students, participants in the discussions in focus groups, mentioned that boys and girls "also face various sexual diseases, so to speak, that there are many persons who suffer from them ..." - a student, "Iulia Hasdeu" College in Cahul.

Among those who studied the course "Decisions for a healthy lifestyle" the level of correct knowledge on this issue is higher than among those who did not study this course (72.9% and 62.3%, respectively).

Knowledge, attitudes and practices on gender-based violence

Almost half students were exposed once or more often to at least one form of gender based violence. It is worrying that sexual harassment and abuse has been reported in high proportion. Knowledge about all forms of violence are limited as well as capacity to address it.

Only 20.6% of the surveyed students **are aware of all forms of gender-based violence**, and this percent is higher among girls (23.7%) than boys (15.2%).

In the last 12 months, 48.3% of respondents were exposed once and more often to at least one form of gender-based violence, the most common being:



- made humiliating and offensive comments to me in public and / or individually about my personality, in 31.4% of cases;
- my email, my phone was checked without my permission - in 21.3%
- I was hit, physically forced by another person - in 15.9%;
- my body was touched in an inappropriate way, with a sexual intention, without my consent - 13.5%.

On average, **20% of respondents** (24.6% boys and 17.3% girls) **reported that they had been subjected to at least one form of sexual abuse in the last year** (touching the body in a sexual way, forced sexual intercourse, made to view pornographic images, sharing personal images of an intimate nature).

Compared to other studies, the results of this research showed that the proportion of boys who report exposure to sexual abuse exceeds that of girls - a phenomenon that requires further research.



1/3 of girls and boys applied at least once on other people at least one form of violence. Among boys this behaviour was insignificantly higher than among girls - in 32.3% and 28.5% of cases, respectively.

Students who studied the course "Decisions for a healthy lifestyle" showed a higher degree of knowledge regarding the forms of gender-based violence compared to those who did not study this course (22,2% and 15,4%, respectively).

Learning and activity context

Unhealthy behaviors of the young people from VET are mostly dictated by the context of their living and studying conditions. The respondents have proved to be quite aware of their needs regarding the improvements that could be made in the VET educational system. This underlines that some of their unhealthy behaviors are generated by the context of their living and studying conditions.

Thus, in order to increase the healthy development of young people in VET institutions, students indicated:



- the need to strengthen emotional support and encouragement from teachers;
- identification by teachers of health problems, including mental health, and referral to the specialist, involvement of parents;
- rational organization of the study process, especially in the context of the pandemic crisis;
- increasing the conditions for healthy eating, hygiene and sports;
- teaching health promotion courses only in an interactive, interesting, age-appropriate way.
- Students with special needs advocated for more intensive medical supervision of health and more active psychological assistance.

Differences based on gender

The results of the study showed disproportionate differences between boys and girls in most of the researched topics. These differences can largely be determined by gender stereotypes, which are quite common among them and expose them to various vulnerabilities.

- **Boys tend to engage more often in casual sex**, to consume more carbonated beverages daily; they experience much **more often and consume various psychoactive substances**.

- **Girls reported** much more frequently the presence of **psychosomatic signs of illness**, especially irritation / nervousness / bad mood more often than once a week during the last 6 months, a **state of increased stress**, including related to the pandemic situation.

Conclusions and recommendations

The study clearly demonstrated the influence of health education on the development of less risky and healthier behaviors among students. Thus, based on the results obtained, a clear positive trend emerged among students who indicated that they had studied the course "Decisions for a healthy lifestyle". They generally showed a more advanced level of health knowledge and safer behaviors. This correlation is not obvious or positive in all cases, which also argues the need to assess the contents and teaching methods of this.



It is necessary to point out at the level of educational policies that the educational performance and employment skills, as well as the abilities of faster adaptation to labour market of graduates depend, to a large extent, on their health, the health education they receive, the environment both psychological and infrastructure support for VET institutions (opportunities for physical activity, healthy eating, hygiene).



There is a clear need for investments in the development of a safe and friendly environment for the healthy development of students both, during theoretical education, vocational practice and later in the workplace. A regulatory framework is needed that would support and motivate VET institutions to implement the approach of health-promoting schools, in line with internationally accepted standards.



Implementation of compulsory health education and the health-promoting school model in gymnasium could make an essential contribution in decreasing the number of health problems among VET students. At the point of graduating high school, students will have already sufficient knowledge on healthy and safe behaviors.



The results revealed the necessity of teaching the course "Decisions for a healthy lifestyle" in an interactive, participatory way and through in-depth analysis of topics, so that it is adapted to the specific needs of different groups of students, depending on their level of knowledge. It was clearly highlighted the need to consider gender sensitivity in the teaching process.



In order to increase the quality of health education and the effective support to students, it is necessary to provide continuous training for teachers and class masters regarding the development particularities and health needs of the adolescents. By being well trained, teachers will be able to identify early students' health and behavioural problems, to offer them prompt support and to refer them to specialized services.



The study evoked the need to strengthen the psychological support of VET students and access to quality medical services in institutions. It is also essential to work with youth-friendly health services, especially for young people with special needs and low incomes.



The worrying results on sexual and reproductive health highlight the need for comprehensive health based education to be taught in a way that is accessible to students. The referral mechanism to sexual and reproductive health services should be strengthened, including access to free contraception.



The high number of reported cases of gender-based violence, including sexual abuse among VET boys, requires a more in-depth study of the determinants. However, it is obvious that topics related to the prevention of sexual harassment and abuse should be discussed as often as possible with students, in a friendly and safe environment. Equally important is to establish a mechanism in order to identify and report cases of sexual abuse.



The study was conducted within the Project “Develop life skills and healthy behaviors of students in Vocational Education & Training for their development and job readiness”, implemented by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) with funding support of Austrian Development Agency (ADA) from funds of Austrian Development Cooperation in partnership with the Ministry of Education, Culture and Research.