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## IMPACT OF INFORMATION ABOUT COVID-19 EPIDEMIC SITUATION AND ATTITUDES OF SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS TOWARDS ONLINE EDUCATION

**Abstract:** The article presents a research for establishing the awareness of social work students in bachelor's degree at the Angel Kanchev University of Ruse about the epidemic situation in the conditions of COVID-19 and its impact on the formation of attitudes to: the need to introduce an online education; restricting access to social services in the social work practical training; the quality and efficiency of education, training and future professional realization; the quality of personal, family and social life. Quantitative and qualitative analysis of the results of the research reveals that the appropriate level of awareness of the epidemic situation in the conditions of COVID-19 and the application of anti-epidemic measures in the implementation of theoretical and practical training of social work students online and in an electronic environment are defined as objective, important and necessary to reduce the impact of coronavirus on the health of students, professors, users and staff of social services and public health. Their role stands out to generate to a certain degree of concern and anxiety in students for the quality and efficiency of the training and their future professional realization, personal and family health and social functioning. The purpose and the hypothesis for the formation positive attitudes towards online learning in the conditions of COVID-19 are confirmed. Proposals are presented to create conditions for universities to: involvement of students in training activities to increase their time management competency; optimization of the daily work regime, personal and family life; providing a range of services to coping with anxiety and stress with anxiety and stress in the conditions of online education and limiting social contacts and interactions.

**Key words:** COVID-19 epidemic, awareness of the epidemic situation, attitudes towards online education, time management, coping with anxiety and stress.

**Language:** English

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### Introduction

The global impact of COVID-19 has affected people in an unprecedented way and has forced universities in Europe and around the world to suspend their education due to anti-epidemic measures and the need to protect personal, community and public health. In the present conditions, many students have significantly changed their models of learning from real to online environment and had to switch to independent preparatory activities, requiring competencies for time management, as well as the organization of personal and family life and social

contacts and interactions. This to some extent affects the educational results and their physical, mental, and social well-being and requires universities to implement preventive, supportive and educational activities and provide supportive services to the students. They must create conditions for raising the awareness of the epidemic situation and the introduced anti-epidemic measures and at the same time contribute to the formation of positive attitudes towards online learning as a component of measures to protect personal, community and public health.

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### The awareness problem in social work students about the COVID-19 epidemic and the challenges to social work education today

Achieving an appropriate level of awareness in social work students about the coronavirus disease and the need for preventive and restrictive measures for its spread, as specialists preparing for first-line work in dynamic social and epidemic conditions, is a factor with significant activating, motivating and supporting importance, which contributes to: building trust in the authorities which introduced anti-epidemic measures and their observance; formation of positive attitudes and satisfaction with online learning, despite some of its limitations in terms of interaction, communication, training and social aspects; compensating for gaps in knowledge and existing perceptions of the COVID-19 epidemic [1; 5; 11].

The need to raise students' awareness of the impact of COVID-19 on education, social functioning and their lives and the formation of positive attitudes towards online learning is determined by some of the negative effects caused by anti-epidemic measures and distance learning. They are mainly related to: difficult transition from conventional practices of teaching, learning and conducting control and examination procedures "face to face" in real and in electronic environment; insufficient or lack of knowledge and skills to use crisis response strategies and deal with challenges, concerns and stress; limited access to devices, technologies and the Internet (digital infrastructure) for students from vulnerable groups (digital poverty and digital exclusion); deficits in the knowledge and skills for time management and organization of participation in activities in an environment other than the university classroom; difficulties in learning new methods of learning engagement and interaction in a virtual environment; limitations in communication and the acquisition of knowledge, skills and experience in distance learning; difficulties in the transition from traditional forms of communication between student and teacher and between students "face to face" and online [2; 4; 7; 8].

Taken together, the mentioned factors cause dissatisfaction, anxiety, worry and stress, which requires the use of a system of preventive and ongoing support activities with a focus on: raising awareness in social work students about the impact of the epidemic situation from COVID-19, both on their work, study and life, and on those of their family members and close people and citizens in the society; creating conditions for positivizing their attitudes towards online learning and removing constructive aspects of distance learning, which would contribute to the improvement, modernization and development of theoretical and practical training and education in social work, the introduction of innovations in them and the development of technological and digital infrastructure in universities [3; 6].

In the research conducted in 2019 and 2020 by the Ministry of Education and Science for the needs of the Rating System of Higher Education Institutions in Bulgaria, it is not addressed the problem of the level of awareness of students in the professional fields and the formation of positive attitudes towards online learning in the conditions of COVID-19 [9; 10]. This determines our research interest, by sharing the view that the positive attitude in social work students about online education, introduced as a result of anti-epidemic measures in the context of COVID-19, is a high level of awareness of specific and dynamic phenomena and processes at local, regional, national, European and global levels. They have a strong impact on personal, community and public health, people's well-being and their active, responsible, motivated and beneficial participation in certain activities.

### Methodology

#### *Purpose of the research*

The purpose of the research is to determine the degree of impact of the information acquired by social work students about the COVID-19 epidemic, the epidemic emergency, the introduced anti-epidemic measures and the related online learning in higher schools on their attitudes to the accepted conditions, organization and implementation of the learning process.

#### *Participants in the research*

The study is conducted with 73 bachelor's students majoring in Social Work in full-time and part-time education at the University of Ruse "Angel Kanchev" in the period February - March 2021. It represents a component (Subscale 1) of a comprehensive study comprising five subscales. The participants include students from: first year, full-time education (31.90%), second year, full-time education (9.70%), third year, full-time education (12.50%), fourth year, full - time education (11.10%), fourth year, part - time education (13.90%) and fifth year, part - time education (20.80%).

#### *Methods*

To implement the research, a questionnaire constructed by the author is used, structured in five subscales with a total of 75 items. The considered Subscale 1. Awareness of the students about the emergency epidemic situation in connection with the infections caused by COVID-19, the implementation of anti-epidemic measures and the introduction of an online regime of education in higher education institutions. The impact of information on students' attitudes towards online learning and the quality of personal, family and social life includes eight items. The Cronbach's Alpha ratio for the subscale is 0.712 and reveals good reliability and consistency of the questions included in it. The data from the respondents' answers to establish their opinion and positions on awareness of the COVID-19 epidemic, the epidemic emergency, the introduced anti-epidemic

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measures, the related online learning in higher education and the degree of impact of the information acquired by them on their attitudes to conduct online training are analysed in accordance with the purpose of the study. The answers are evaluated on a five-point Likert scale. The questionnaire is completed online and the survey is conducted on the basis of informed consent, voluntarily and anonymously.

The research tests the following two hypotheses:

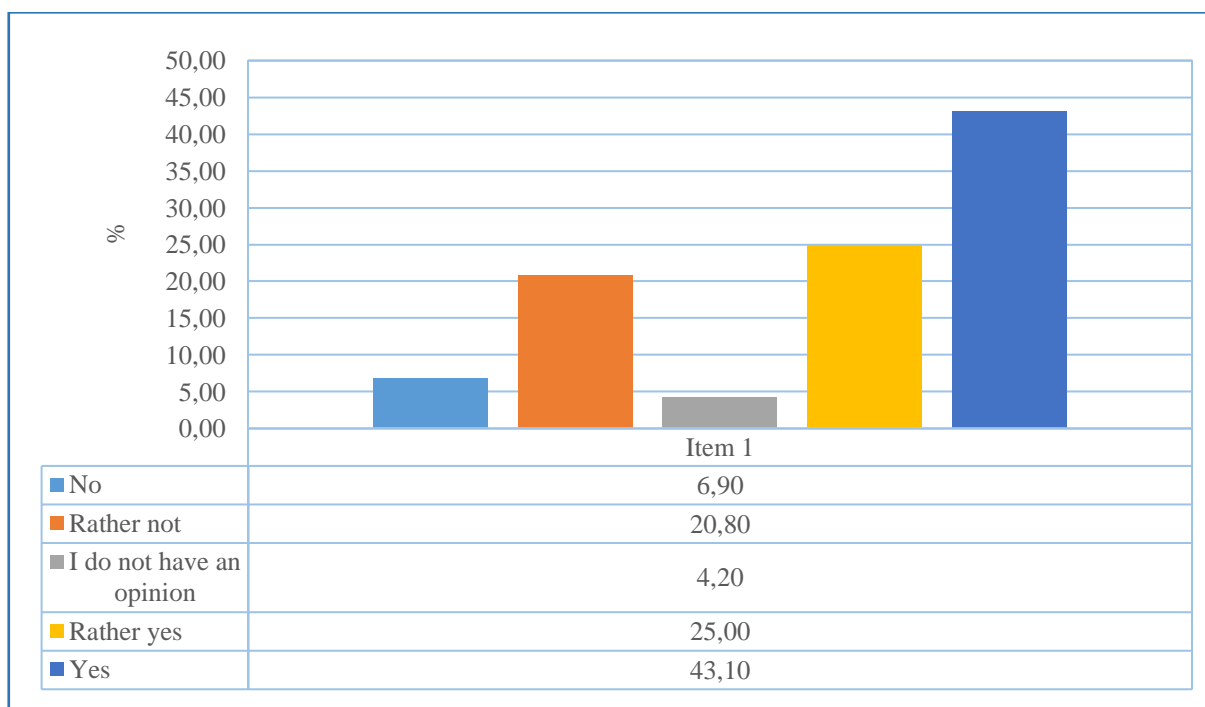
*Hypothesis 1 (H1).* The acquired by social work students certain range of information for the introduction of an emergency epidemic situation in the conditions of COVID-19, anti-epidemic measures and online learning in higher education and the achievement of a high level of awareness contribute to the formation of positive attitudes towards the given conditions of organization and realization of the educational process.

*Hypothesis 2 (H2).* The acquired by social work students certain range of information for the introduction of an emergency epidemic situation in the conditions of COVID-19, anti-epidemic measures and online learning in higher education and the achievement of a high level of awareness do not contribute to the formation of positive attitudes towards the given conditions of organization and realization of the educational process.

**Research results and quantitative and qualitative analysis**

The quantitative and qualitative analysis of the empirical data from the research in Subscale 1 presents through the opinions and positions expressed by the respondents their awareness of the epidemic situation in the conditions of COVID-19, the introduced anti-epidemic measures and online education regime in the higher education and at the same time reveal the impact of the information acquired in certain aspects on their attitudes to conducting in the specific conditions online form of organization and implementation of the learning process.

Affirmative opinion (categorically and with minimal hesitation) for close monitoring and regular information from the media about the epidemic situation in the country in connection with the infections caused by COVID-19 and the implementation of anti-epidemic measures to reduce the impact of the virus (Item 1) present in total 68.10% of the respondents, as 4.20% do not have an opinion on the issue, and 27.70% do not monitor and are not regularly informed about the situation and related measures (Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Careful monitoring of the news on the epidemic situation and anti-epidemic measures in the country in connection with COVID-19 to reduce the impact of the virus**

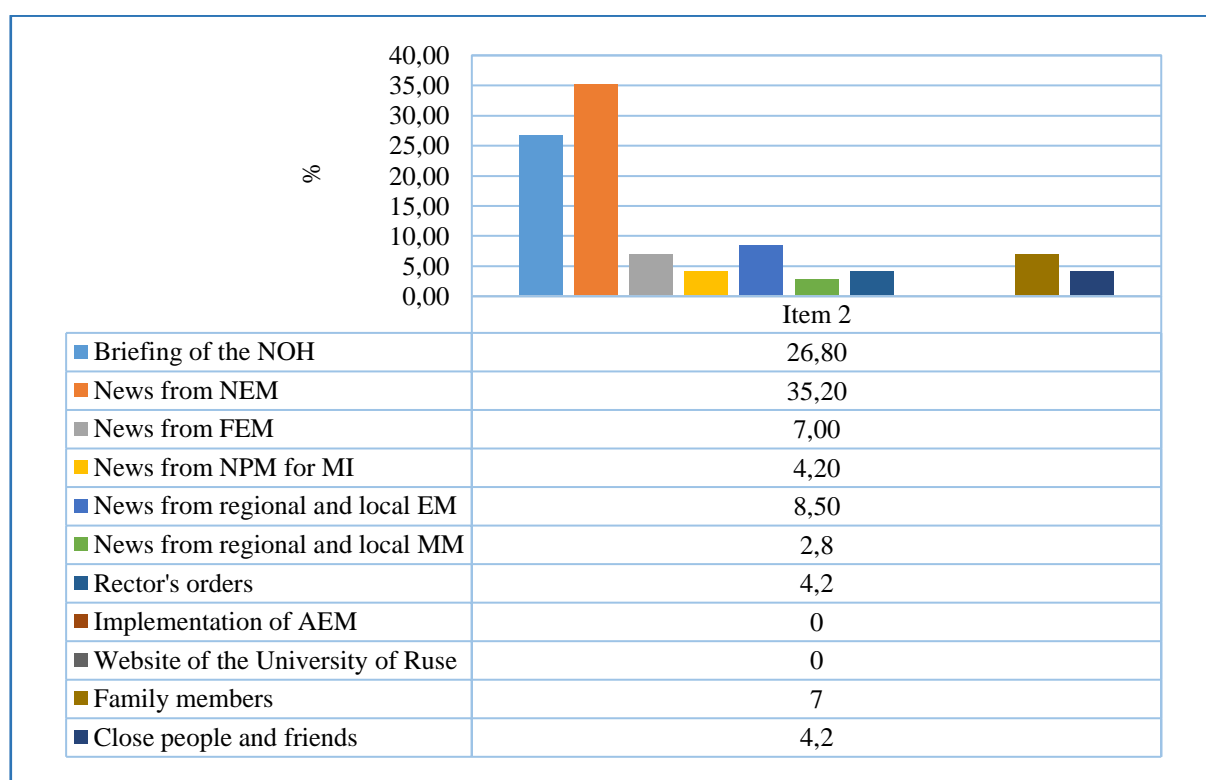
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The predominant share of the respondents (62.00%) indicate as preferred sources of information about the epidemic situation in the country in connection with COVID-19 and the implementation of anti-epidemic measures the news from the national electronic media (35.20%) and the briefing of the National Operational Headquarters, which is also broadcasted on national television (26.80) (Item 2). Significantly smaller share of the participants in the survey receive information from news from regional and local electronic media (8.50%), news from foreign electronic media (7.00%), information from family members (7.00%), news from national print media (4.20%), orders of the rector of the university for compliance with the educational regime with the implementation of the adopted anti-epidemic measures (4.20%), information from close people and

friends (4.20%), news from regional and local mass media (2.90%) (Figure 2).

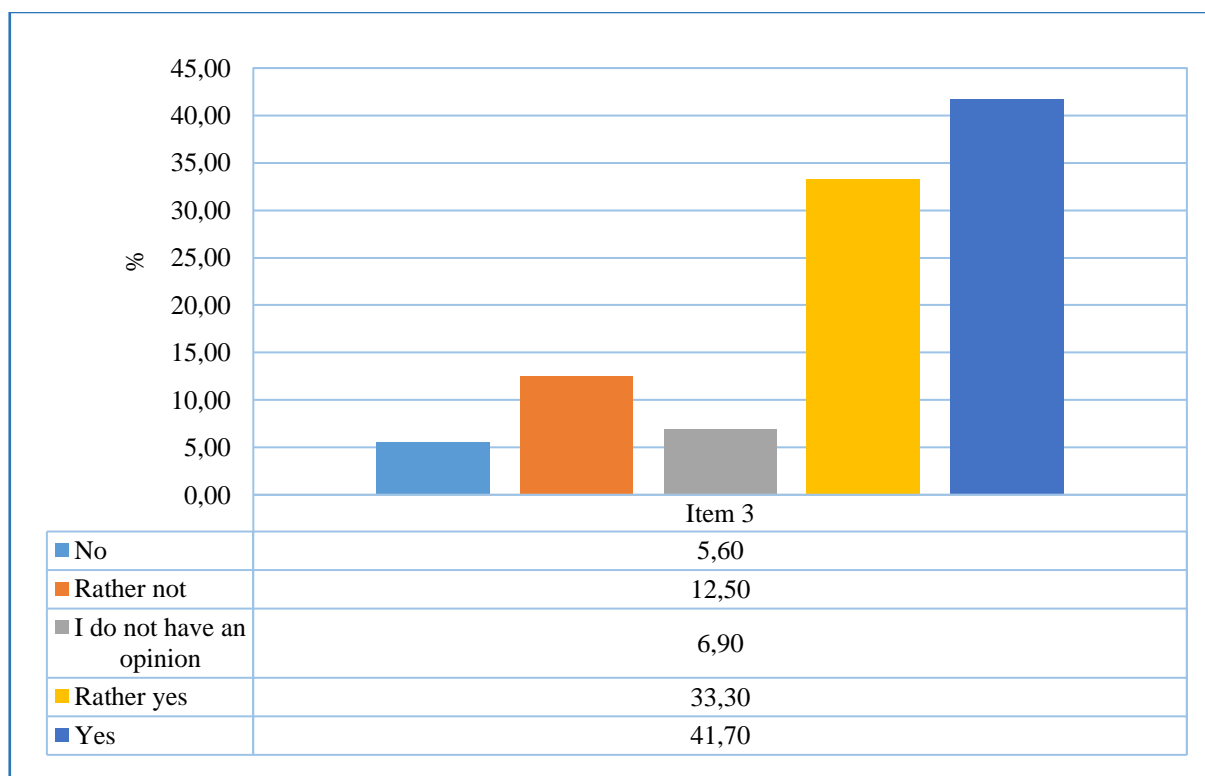
Information about the epidemic situation and the applied anti-epidemic measures in national and European plan in connection with COVID-19 is considered as objective, necessary and important by 75.00% of the respondents, which is one of the highest values of positive answers and the related to them attitudes in an item from the subscale (Item 3). In terms of content, the answers with a definite affirmative opinion dominate (41.70%). Compared to the presented positive answers, the insignificant share of the answers of participants with a stated neutral position (6.90%) and of those who expressed a negative opinion on the issue (18.10%) stands out, as the share of those with hesitation is predominant (12, 50%) (Figure 3).



**Figure 2. Sources of information on the epidemic situation and anti-epidemic measures in the country in connection with COVID-19 to reduce the impact of the virus**

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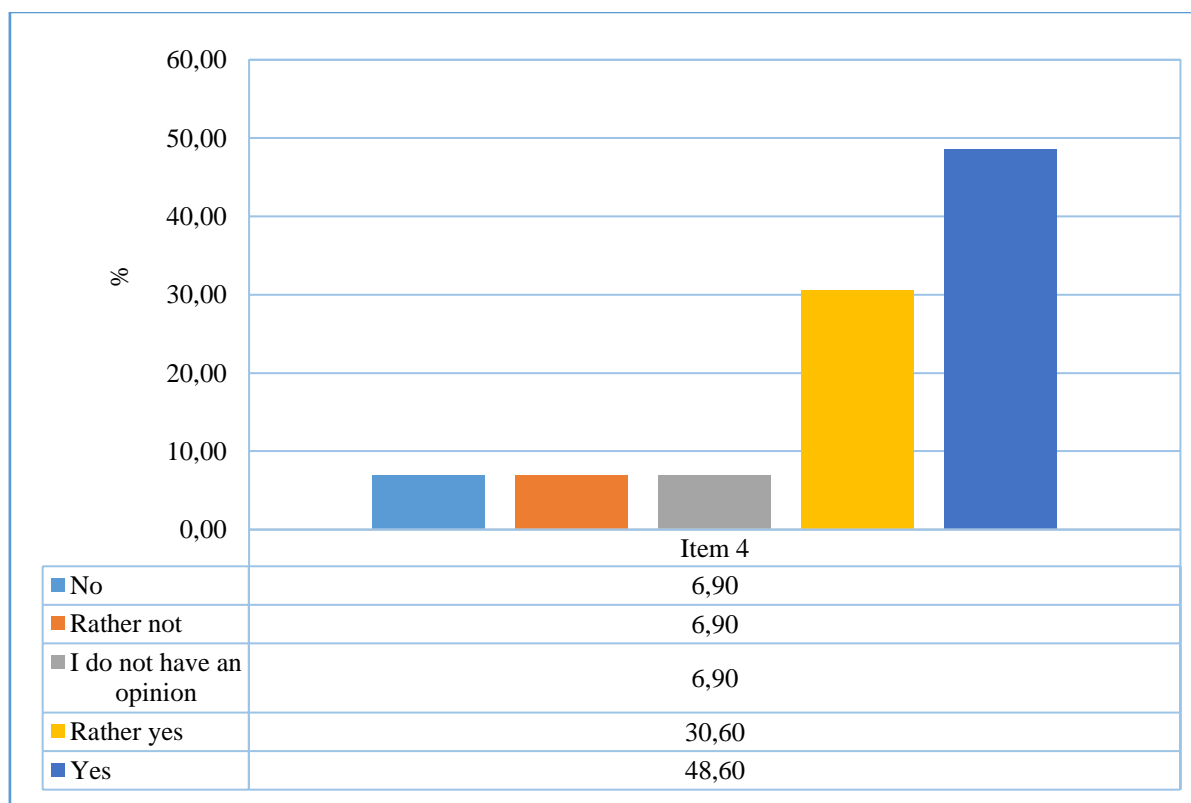
**Figure 3. Acceptance as objective, necessary and important information on the epidemic situation and anti-epidemic measures at national and European level in connection with COVID-19**

The introduction of an online education regime in universities in order to reduce the impact of coronavirus on the health of students and teachers and public health in general (Item 4) is considered as necessary by the predominant share of respondents (79.20%), representing the highest value of expressed positive opinion and related attitudes in an item from the subscale. Along with this, the dominance of the share of categorical affirmative opinion (48.60%)

stands out, which clearly reveals the positive attitudes of students regarding the need for online training in the epidemic situation and the introduced anti-epidemic measures. The share of those who expressed a negative and neutral opinion on the need for online training in the epidemic conditions (a total of 20.70%) is low, as the categorically stated negative opinions (6.90%) and those with hesitation (6.90%) and neutrality (6.90%) have the same values (Figure 4).

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**Figure 4. Acceptance as necessary and important the implementation of anti-epidemic measures in the country by introducing online education in higher education institutions in order to reduce the impact of coronavirus on the health of students and professors and public health**

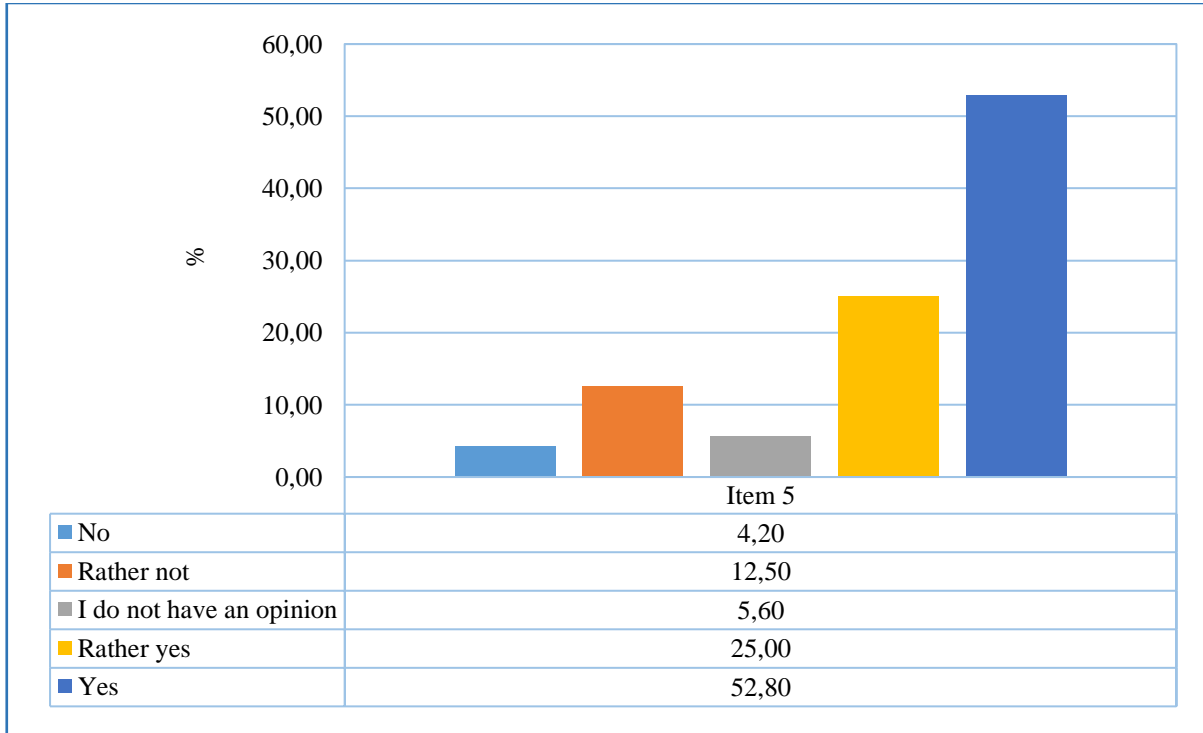
The implementation of anti-epidemic measures resulting in restricted access to social services and departments of the Social Assistance Directorate in order to reduce the impact of coronavirus on the public health and the staff (Item 5) is considered necessary and important by the majority of the respondents (77.80%), which has one of the highest values in the subscale and reveals their positive attitudes. The highest value in the subscale is the strongly expressed affirmative opinion - 52.80%. The values of the share of the participants who expressed a categorically negative opinion (4.20%), a negative opinion with hesitation (12.50%) and a neutral position (5.60%) are relatively low. The data in this sector of the scale reveal a certain dynamics with regard to respondents who are hesitant in not accepting the restriction of access to social services and departments at the Social

Assistance Directorate and do not have a clear position on the issue (Figure 5).

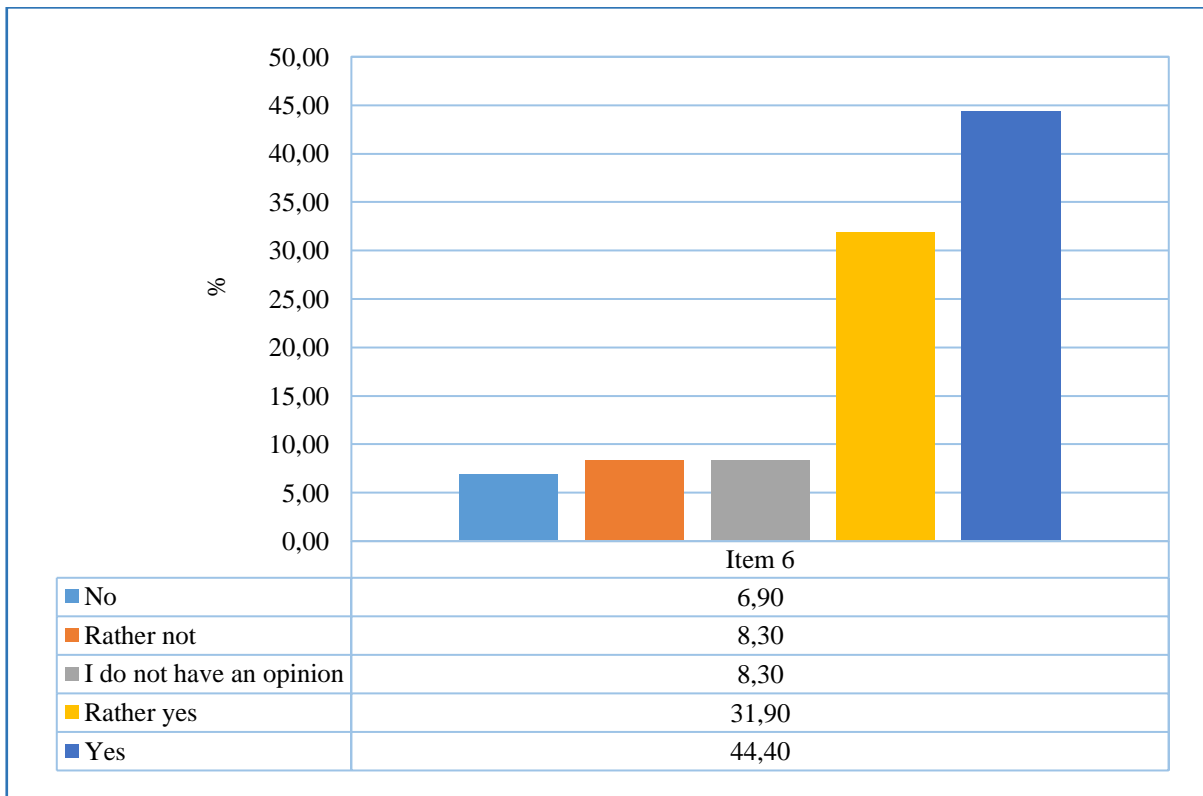
Concerned and worried about information related to the epidemic situation caused by COVID-19 and the likelihood that they and their family members would be personally infected with the coronavirus, a significant proportion of the respondents felt (76.30%) more than half of them have stated this absolutely categorically (44.40%) (Item 6). Resilience and calmness have expressed a minimal share of the students participating in the research (15.20%), as a certain share of them (8.30%) have expressed this position in a definite way. 8.30% of the respondents did not express an opinion on the issue, maintaining neutrality, which can be interpreted as insufficient information about the epidemic situation or non-acceptance of the probability and risk of coronavirus infection (Figure 6).

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**Figure 5. Adoption of anti-epidemic measures in the country as necessary and important by restricting access to social services and social assistance departments in order to reduce the impact of coronavirus on the health of consumers, staff and public health**



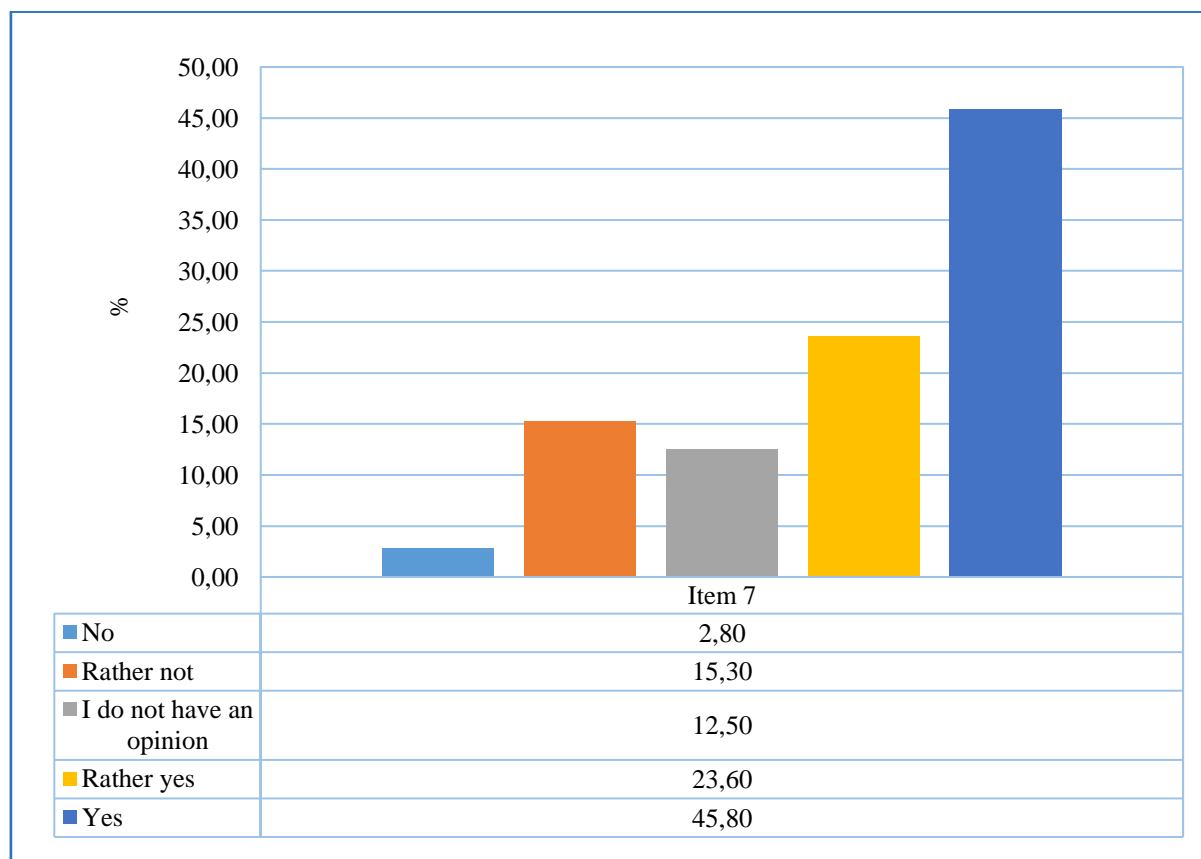
**Figure 6. Experiencing feeling of discomfort and anxious about information about the COVID-19 pandemic and the likelihood that family members will be infected**

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Concerns and worries about the quality of personal, family and social life as a result of the information on the epidemic situation, the introduced anti-epidemic measures and the risks in health, psychological and social aspects experienced a significant share of the respondents (69.40%), two

thirds of them express this in a definite way (45.80%) (Item 7). A minimal share of the students participating in the survey state that they do not feel such feelings and the epidemic situation will not affect the quality of their personal, family and social life, and 12.50% have no opinion on the issue (Figure 7).



**Figure 7. Experiencing Feeling of discomfort and anxious about the information on the COVID-19 pandemic and the anti-epidemic measures for the quality of personal, family and social life (Item 7)**

The existence of concerns regarding the information about the introduction of online education in universities as a result of anti-epidemic measures, regarding the impact of this form of implementation of the educational process on the quality and effectiveness of education, training and future professional realization, show in their answers 47.20% of the respondents (Item 8). The same values of the categorically expressed opinions and those with hesitation are reported - 23.60%. According to 51.40% of the participants in the survey, online learning will not have an impact on the intended characteristics and will not cause them anxiety and worry. The share of respondents who did not express an opinion on the issue is insignificant (1.40%) (Figure 8).

The quantitative and qualitative analysis of the empirical data on items from the subscale reveals the following specific aspects:

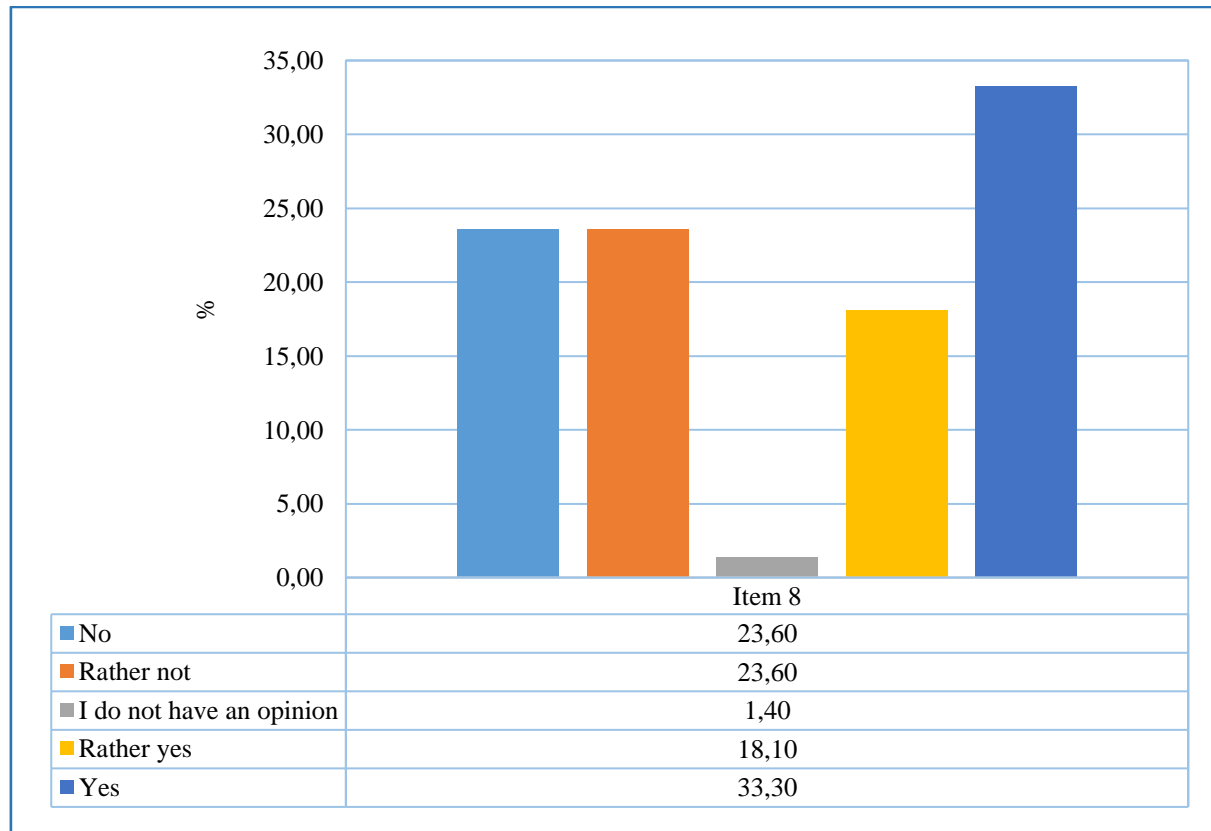
- The majority of students have the necessary level of awareness about the epidemic situation in the country and the anti-epidemic measures applied in connection with it. This allows them, on the basis of good information, to form positive attitudes towards their participation in the online education/learning and to implement their active, responsible and motivated behaviour (Item 1);
- The main sources of information preferred and used by the predominant share of the respondents are characterized by their institutional significance in terms of formativeness, objectivity, prevention and regulation. Together, they contribute to the formation of constructive and positive attitudes towards the introduced anti-epidemic measures, including online training in universities (Item 2);
- The majority of respondents accept the objectivity, necessity and importance of the information about the epidemic situation and the implementation of anti-epidemic measures at national



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and European level, which is one of the main characteristics of good information and an important

factor for impact and positive attitudes towards online learning in higher schools (Item 3);



**Figure 8. Experiencing Feeling of discomfort and anxious about the information about the introduction of online education in universities as a result of the anti-epidemic measures against COVID-19 in terms of impact on the quality and effectiveness of education, training and future professional realization**

- A definite position of the highest share of students participating in the research on the need for online education is presented as a component of anti-epidemic measures in the country, aimed at limiting the impact of coronavirus on student health, public health and implementation of the education process without interrupting it and impairing their training. The affirmative position of the respondents expressed in a categorical way can be considered as a result of the achieved high level of awareness and range of competent sources of information, which in synthesis contribute to the formation of positive attitudes towards online learning. But at the same time, they raise some concerns about the personal health and well-being of family members and loved ones, as well as the health of staff and users of social services, departments of the Social Assistance Directorate and the possibility of conducting practical training in social work (Item 4);

- As a result of certain dynamics, a minimal presence of deficits in the awareness of some of the students has been established, as well as non-adoption of the anti-epidemic measures in the field of social

services. This requires taking action in certain areas, which will be looked at in the discussion section (Item 5);

- The opinion of a significant proportion of the students in the research was strongly expressed about the feeling of anxiety and worry about the likelihood that they or their families and loved ones would become infected with the coronavirus. Such a position can be interpreted as natural for the complex epidemic situation. However, it should be noted that in the given situation it is required: to intensify the activities for informing about the use of protective and hygienic means and distance, in accordance with the instructions of the competent authorities; provision by the higher schools of an appropriate range of activities and services with preventive, supportive and educational orientation, which will be presented in the discussion part (Item 6);

- Stable position of a relatively high share of respondents for feelings of anxiety and concern about the impact of information on the epidemic situation and related restrictive measures on the quality of their personal, family and social life was found (Item 7). As

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in the previous item, here we adhere to our position on the need for universities to provide support and training activities and services for students in the context of the COVID-19 epidemic and online learning regime, which we will justify in the discussion;

- There is a certain dynamics related to the formation of two main groups of respondents, whose opinions on the introduction of online training in its function of anti-epidemic measure are characterized by high values, minimal difference in relative shares and highlighting two opposite positions – as worrying. Measure and bringing anxiety and as such, which does not give rise to such feelings and experiences (Item 8). The targeted dynamics allow to make an assumption both about the objectivity of the information provided by various sources about the epidemic situation, anti-epidemic measures and the online training included in them, and about the stability of students' attitudes towards it under the influence of this information. Empirical data from the given and previous items and their analysis allow to present a vision for the use by universities of a system of activities raising students' awareness, positive attitudes towards online learning and helping them to cope with emerging challenges of organizational, cognitive and emotional nature.

Based on the performed quantitative and qualitative analysis of empirical data on items from Subscale 1, we can conclude that Hypothesis 1 (H1) is confirmed and the purpose of the research is achieved.

### Discussion

The participants in the research acquire information about the epidemic situation and the implementation of anti-epidemic measures at national and European level, including as a component online education in higher schools, which is from competent sources with certain institutional and media significance, which guarantees its normative, objective, preventive and regulatory character. This gives them the opportunity to perceive it as necessary, relevant to the actual situation and important for the quality and effectiveness of education, training and their future professional realization, as well as for the preservation of their own, their families and loved ones physical, mental and social well-being without neglecting public health. In the synthesis, the aim creates conditions for achieving an appropriate level of awareness of students in the study area and contributes to the formation of constructive and positive attitudes to online learning (theoretical and practical) in an epidemic of COVID-19 and strict anti-epidemic measures.

The complex and rapidly changing epidemic situation, the contradictions and the non-acceptance by some of the lecturers and students of the anti-epidemic measures, including in the field of higher education and social work, as necessary and important for dealing with the COVID-19 epidemic, create a

specific and a dynamic educational and social situation and environment. In this context, there is not always in the scope of attention of university management and in the system of higher education the presence of deficits in the awareness of the student community in general and students of individual specialties in particular. This creates conditions to some extent for the emergence of deficits and the need to raise awareness of students in social work and the student community on the epidemic situation, anti-epidemic measures and the preservation of personal, community and public health, as one of the important factors for the formation of positive and constructive attitudes towards online learning and active, responsible and motivated involvement in the learning process. It is also underestimated that many students experience serious difficulties, causing anxiety and stress, affecting their academic commitment and success, the quality and effectiveness of their theoretical and practical training, as well as their physical, mental, and social well-being. Taken together, the reviewed factors have an adverse effect on the objective perception, the understanding of the importance and significance of information about the epidemic situation and anti-epidemic measures by students and do not create conditions for positive attitudes towards online learning.

Our position is related to the vision for the implementation of actions in the following areas, which have the potential and abilities to raise awareness of students in social activities in this area and to contribute to the formation of positive attitudes towards online learning:

- Providing access to online information resources of: national and European portals about COVID-19, epidemiological situation, introduced anti-epidemic measures caused by the coronavirus crisis, vaccination, etc.; websites of foreign universities and professional organizations of social workers with good experience, providing information in various and important aspects, including support of preventive, encouraging and educational nature to students and social workers, as well as the acquisition of competencies for self-care (self-care competency). On the website of the professional field of Social Work at the University of Ruse there is a separate section with links to national and European portals, foreign universities, organizations of social workers and in the field of higher education;

- Building an environment with the necessary technical, technological and digital opportunities for the implementation of supervision and practical training in social work in their function as an important component of the overall preparation of students. A space for supervision and distance learning (2020) with technical and digital equipment and technological support has been established under a project (2015);

## Impact Factor:

ISRA (India) = 6.317  
ISI (Dubai, UAE) = 1.582  
GIF (Australia) = 0.564  
JIF = 1.500

SIS (USA) = 0.912  
PIIHQ (Russia) = 3.939  
ESJI (KZ) = 9.035  
SJIF (Morocco) = 7.184

ICV (Poland) = 6.630  
PIF (India) = 1.940  
IBI (India) = 4.260  
OAJI (USA) = 0.350

- Providing online counselling to students to share difficulties and problems encountered in the process of online learning and everyday life and help them deal with them, acquire knowledge and skills to manage and organize time and deal with anxiety and stress. Weekly online consultations with social work students at the University of Ruse were conducted. A form has been created on the Social Work major website for requesting an individual online consultation;

- Conducting webinars, competitions for presenting projects and writing essays by students in social activities on the topic of online learning in the context of the COVID-19 epidemic, contributing to raising their awareness through independent cognitive, creative and research activities and presentation of own ideas, projects and practices for dealing with difficulties and problems in online learning and highlighting its advantages and disadvantages. Implemented through the Social Worker's Club: Webinar on topic "Social work during the COVID-19 pandemic" with international participation, including the President of IFSW-Europe Assoc. Prof. Ana Radulescu, PhD a representative of the Austrian Association of Social Workers (OBDS) and international expert Herbert Paulishin. Representatives of municipal and national institutions and organizations in the field of social activities, social workers participate; Essay competition on the topic "Distance learning in the conditions of COVID-19 – what gives us and what takes away from us. How to deal with the challenges?"; Also, a discussion on distance learning with first-year students majoring in Social Work was concluded.

## Conclusion

The performed research and the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the results confirm Hypothesis 1 (H1) and prove the achievement of the accepted goal. Deriving the role of awareness of social work students about the epidemic situation at COVID-19 and anti-epidemic measures at local, regional and national level, as one of the important factors for impact and formation of positive and constructive attitudes to online learning, allows to justify the need to: implement a system of activities and services for students with preventive, supportive and educational orientation; promoting their cognitive activity and independence and research activities for the acquisition of objective and detailed information; presenting one's own views and practices and creating projects presenting the advantages and disadvantages of online learning and highlighting opportunities for its improvement and development. In the context of the COVID-19 epidemic, it is essential to create an effectively functioning digital infrastructure and use digital technologies and resources in universities to provide not only quality and effective online education, but to increase students' awareness and competence with a focus on: positive attitudes and active, motivated and responsible involvement in the learning process in an electronic environment; using strategies to manage time and deal with difficulties, problems, anxiety and stress; optimization of the work regime, personal and family life and creation of conditions for preservation of the physical, mental and social well-being.

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