



IC³ INSTITUTE

2020 IC3 Institute Student Quest Survey Report
Staying Resilient, Looking Ahead:
COVID-19's influence on Indian and
Nepalese students' views on education
and careers

Rajika Bhandari, Ph.D.
President & CEO, IC3 Institute

Anna Esaki-Smith
Co-founder and Managing Director, Education Rethink



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About the IC3 Institute

The [IC3 \(International Career & College Counseling\) Institute](#) is a mission-driven nonprofit that brings together high schools, colleges and universities, and industry to ensure early access to career and college counseling, paving the path for students' college readiness, workforce preparedness, and career success. The IC3 Institute's core programming with high schools is supported by a global network of subject matter and industry experts who volunteer their time as faculty members in the IC3 Institute, as well as world-class and innovative higher education institutions who support the IC3 Institute by offering their campuses, faculty, and infrastructure while also guiding the programming and curricula of the Institute. The IC3 Institute also serves as a think tank and thought leader on global higher education and career readiness through convenings of experts and timely research.

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Introduction

A student survey normally captures sentiment during a unique moment in time as responses reflect more than simply an outlook on academics. How students view the world around them—through a lens of economic prospects, political stability, and personal safety—weighs heavily in their decision-making process, especially when considering their educational and professional futures, whether at home or abroad.

Thus, to conduct such a survey during an unprecedented global health crisis serves even greater purpose. We are cognizant of the challenges universities currently face as they continue with largely online curricula, contend with infection spread on campuses that have reopened, or with declining enrollments for those that remain closed. But how is the coronavirus pandemic shaping the decision-making process for students, especially Indian students that represent the world's largest youth population? The global landscape has changed in a matter of months, so undoubtedly the impact on student perceptions has been equally profound.

While there have been several other surveys over the past six months that have attempted to predict international student flows and enrollments, the IC3 Institute's Student Quest Survey is equally focused on Indian and Nepalese students who are viewing both domestic and overseas postsecondary options, not just those who plan to go abroad. As such, the survey offers a deeper and nuanced understanding of how students who are toward the end of high school make decisions about their futures and their level of preparedness for their futures. In South and Southeast Asia alone, there are 433 million students between the ages of 14–19, of whom 350 million are in India. Taken together, these numbers suggest that most of the world's future global talent will come from these regions of the world. Yet, little is known about how well-prepared school-leaving youth are in these countries to pursue future education and careers.

Our findings also come at a time when India has just released a new National Education Policy in 34 years. The policy emphasizes the school-to-work transition and the importance of aligning academics with career and vocational training. As such, our findings will be particularly relevant **for schools**, to assess how well they are preparing their students for future education and careers; **for colleges and universities**, to guide their understanding of student demand and thus inform student outreach, recruitment and admissions practices; **employers and industry** to understand how schools are preparing the future workforce and how to better partner with sector stakeholders so students can develop relevant and timely skills; and, last but not least, for **governments** to gauge whether their education systems are adequately preparing the youth population for entry into an increasingly competitive global marketplace.

Purpose of the Student Quest Survey

Against this backdrop of a surging youth population in South Asia and a global pandemic, the Student Quest survey was launched in June 2020 and offers critical insights from high school (9th – 12th grades) students in India and Nepal in the following areas:

Decision-making process and consideration of different options:

Students' perceptions of different options available to them; key influencers in students' decisions; different economic, educational, and social factors that drive student choice.

Level of preparedness for future education and work:

Knowledge of different educational and career options; the role and amount of counseling and guidance received in school; and the development of key 21st century skills.

The impact of the Coronavirus:

Given the global educational crisis caused by COVID-19, the 2020 survey also includes a special section on the impacts of COVID-19 on students' current and future plans. Future annual Student Quest surveys will include other themes that are emerging.



Methodology

The findings of the survey represent responses from 2,252 high school students from India and Nepal who attend schools primarily in the IC3 Movement network. Because Nepalese students comprised only 20 percent of the respondent pool, caution should be exercised when generalizing these findings to all high school students in Nepal.

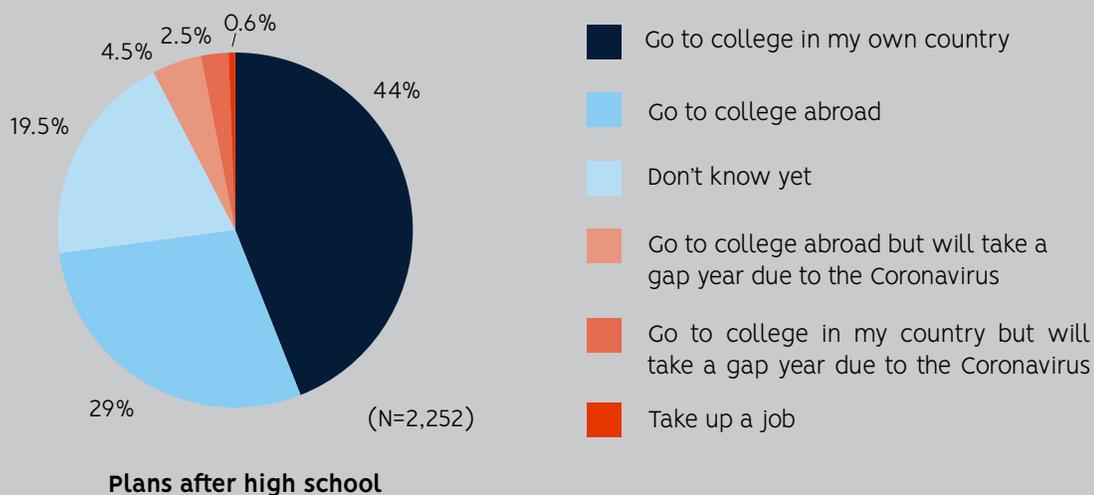
The survey was conducted from June – July 2020. The schools reflected in this survey represent all the major boards in both countries, with the majority following the CBSE board (53 percent). Although the survey covered students in grades 9–12, about 70 percent of the respondents were in the 11th and 12th grades; 57 percent of total respondents were girls.

Findings:

Education beyond high school

Indian and Nepalese students want to pursue college despite the pandemic, with few opting for a gap year

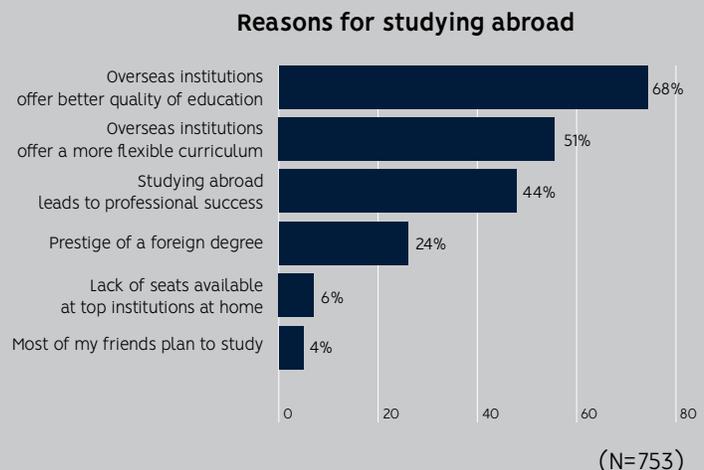
Despite the disruptions caused by the pandemic, a large proportion (73 percent) plan to attend college either within their home country or abroad. There has been speculation about whether many more students will opt for a gap year due to the disruptions caused by the Coronavirus, but our survey shows that only 7 percent of the students plan to do so. Overall, 33 percent of the students plan to study abroad in the immediate future or after a gap year.



Plans after high school

Students drawn by quality of education abroad, but concerns about personal safety and unfavorable immigration policy abound

Prior to the pandemic, due to a declining trend in outbound Chinese student numbers, universities had pivoted to a focus on India, forecast to become the world's most populated country by 2024. Even though the current survey reflects the decision-making of all Indian and Nepalese high school students and not just those who plan to go abroad, for many colleges and universities



(N=753)

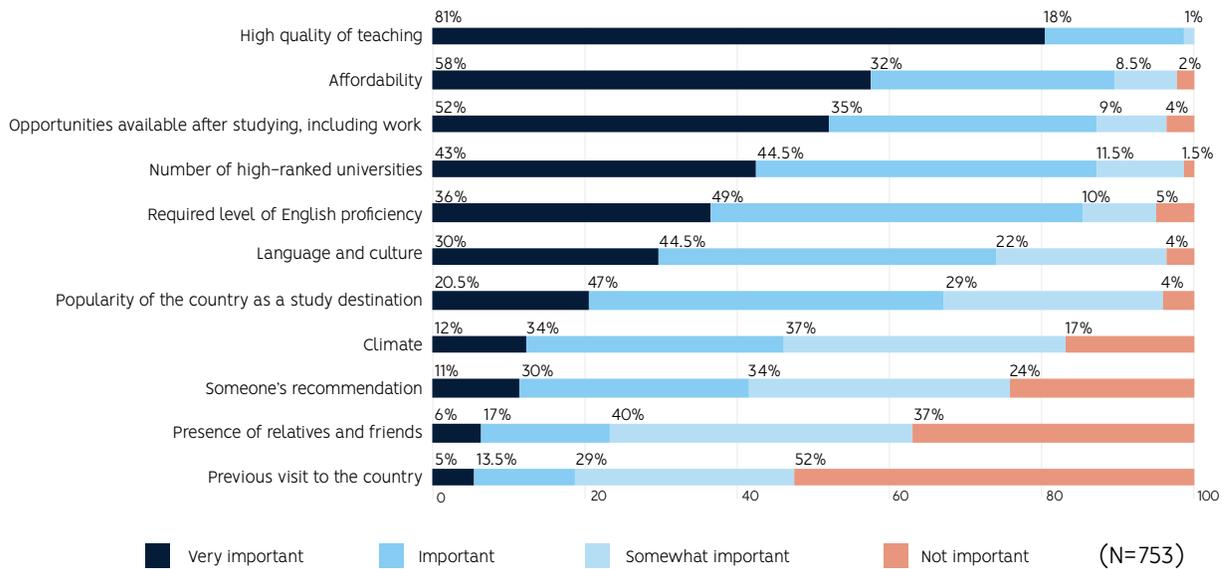
overseas, India in particular presents opportunities with regards to international student recruitment, academic partnerships and research collaborations. Even with the current disruption to global student mobility, there is no reason to believe that spotlight will fade. The country’s growing middle class is currently comprised of 350 million people, a number that is forecast to grow to 500 million in the next decade. More than half of India’s population is below the age of 25. The combination of youth population and increasing disposable income has underscored India’s appeal as a recruitment market. Given this interest, we further analyzed the interest of those students who indicated an interest in studying overseas. Against a backdrop of global turmoil, understanding these nuances will be key to not only addressing the specific needs of Indian students, but fulfilling their study abroad expectations.



When choosing to study in a particular country, what is most important to me?

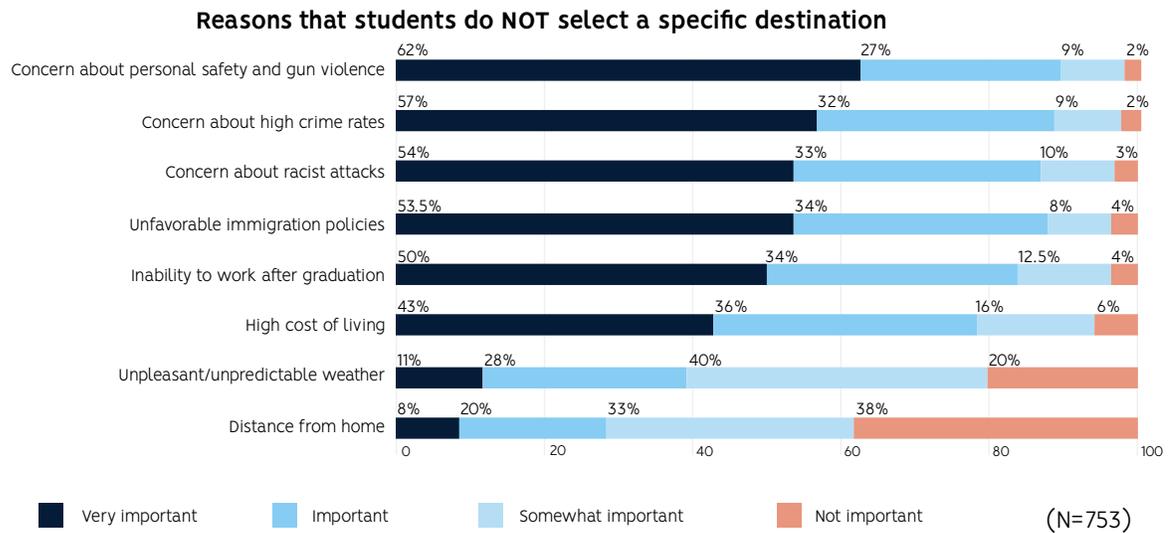
“Work ethic and attitude towards international students are very important”

Factors affecting the choice of a destination



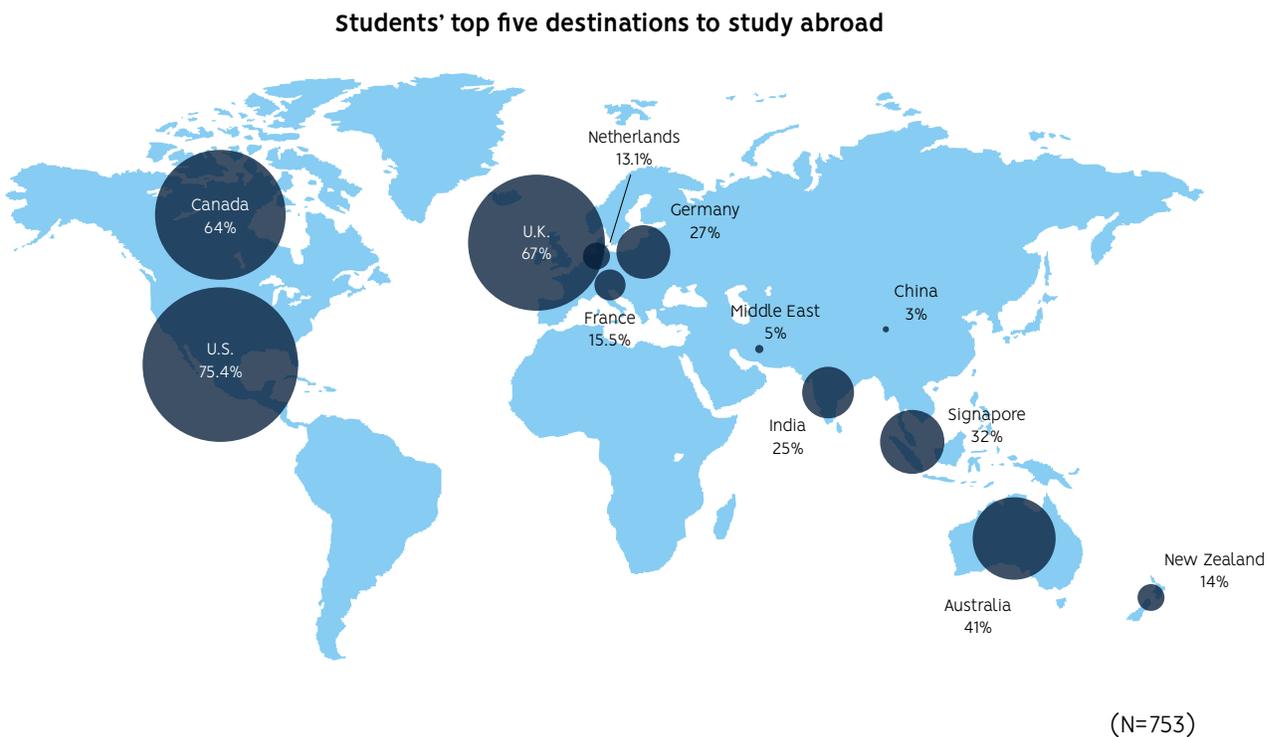
The motivation for studying abroad has less to do with what is not available at home—in other words the “push” factor—and more to do with the perceived opportunities available abroad. When choosing to study abroad vs. at home the quality of institutions abroad was the weightiest factor (68 percent), followed by the availability of a more flexible curriculum abroad (51 percent); and then the perceived positive correlation between obtaining an overseas credential and professional success (44 percent). The importance of quality—both institutional and in teaching—was evident also in how students weigh the appeal of different destination countries once they have decided to study abroad: 99 percent of students responded that teaching quality was critical, with affordability and the availability of work opportunities post-study and beyond also being at the top of the list (89 and 88 percent, respectively).

Conversely, when deciding against a particular study destination, 62 percent of respondents said concern about personal safety and gun violence was the most important factor driving this decision. Unfavorable immigration policies are also a deterrent for students when it comes to considering different destinations.



The US remains top destination for students, but the UK and Canada gain ground

The survey asked students to select their top five destinations for studying abroad (in no particular order). Despite its many recent challenges and a purported drop in appeal for international students, the U.S. was selected by two-thirds of all students as a top destination (75 percent), followed by the U.K. (67 percent), Canada (64 percent), Australia (41 percent), and Singapore (32 percent).

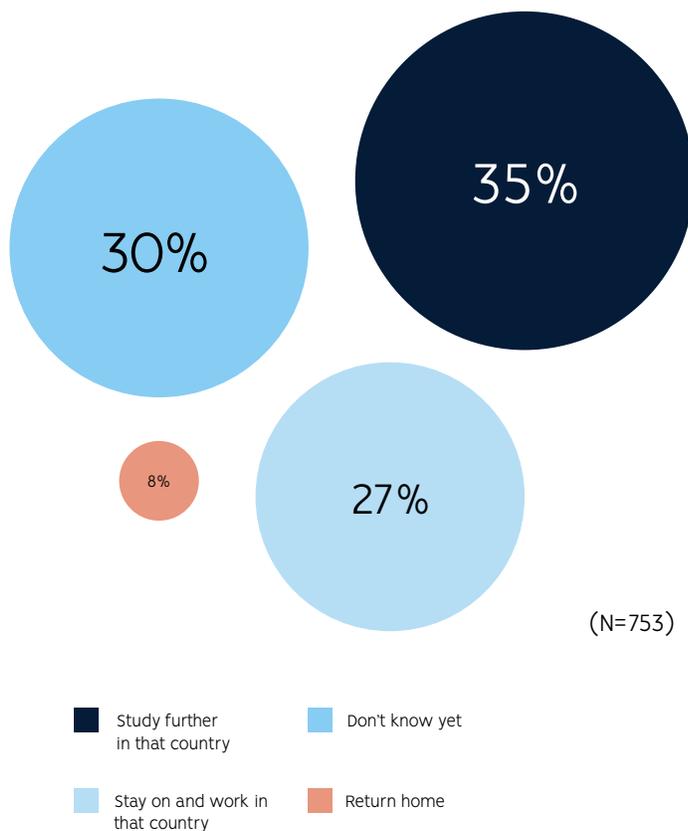


The key factors that attract students to various countries as well as the ones that deter them, did not vary significantly across the top five destinations. We had expected that concerns around personal safety would be more prevalent for the US due to recent developments, but this was not the case.

The ability to gain work experience after graduation has become a significant priority for international students. Indeed, the rescinding of UK post-study work rights in 2012 triggered a steep drop in Indian enrollments at British universities, a clear indication of how important working overseas after graduation is to these students and as supported in our current findings where 88 percent of students reported the importance of such opportunities. It is important to note that the UK reinstated post-study work rights in 2019, with students graduating in the 2020–21 academic year the first to benefit from the policy change.

When asked about their post-study plans after completing their undergraduate degree in their country of choice, the majority reported wanting to stay back in the country either for further education (35 percent), or for future employment (27 percent), once again emphasizing the importance of the post-study options that countries provide their international students. These large proportions notwithstanding, 27 percent indicated that they were uncertain of their plans at the time of the survey. Only eight percent reported that they planned to return home.

Plans after completing undergraduate degree abroad



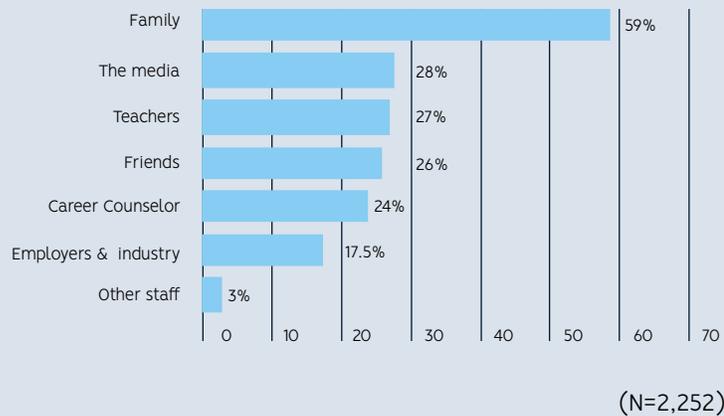
Findings:

The future world of careers

Parents play a key role in students' career decision-making, but media and teachers are also important influencers.

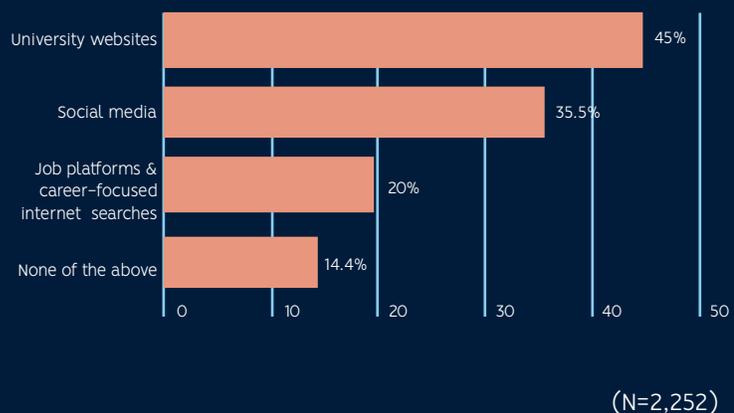
The survey reaffirmed the large and important role that parents play in the decision-making of students in India and Nepal: among seven types of influencers, 59 percent of respondents said family had the biggest impact on their career choices, with the media, teachers and friends being the other key influencers. University websites are the most predominant and frequently used sources of information, followed by social media.

Key influencers regarding career-related decisions



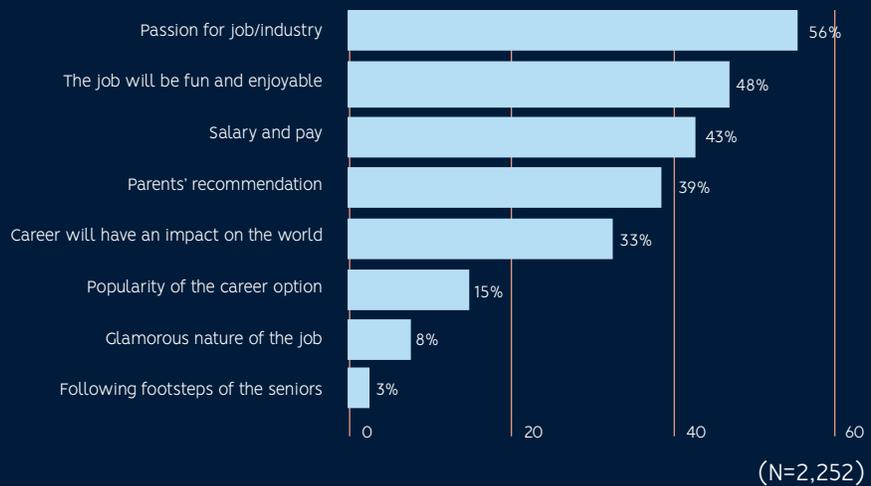
Almost 70 percent of students are already beginning to think about their future employment prospects, with the remainder largely undecided. Two-thirds discuss future careers often with their peers and friends, but the remaining rarely or never do so. A similar proportion indicated that they had engaged in career-related conversations with career advisers, teachers and other professionals. Where such conversations did occur, the majority (84 percent) found them to be helpful.

Types of media that influence students' career and college decisions



Students motivated by passion for and fulfillment in a future career rather than salary

Factors that drive students' career choices



The most important consideration to the student when making career choices is passion for the job/industry (56 percent); the perception that the job will be fun and enjoyable (48 percent), and the compensation for the job (43 percent). A notable finding is that even though parents are key influencers in student decision-making, their recommendations for future careers was not one of the top factors driving career choice.



What is most important to me when making career choices?

“Whether I will be able to serve society and my country.”

“How the job can help others in the future (for example: two of my choices were either being a professor or being a member of the UN to help refugees and people in need/war-stricken countries)”

Career counseling and guidance valued by students, but current provision in schools is inadequate

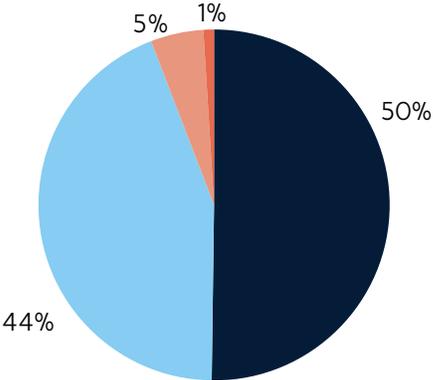
When asked what would be most helpful for them to prepare for their futures, most students report that career counseling sessions and workshops on emerging careers, as well as information sessions by universities would be the most valuable for them (48 percent each). Conversations with industry professionals was a close second, but only 27 percent reported wanting to engage in industry visits. While the majority of students (94 percent) agree or strongly agree that career and college counseling at this stage is very important for them, only 15 percent strongly agreed that the level of counseling currently available to them at school was adequate, with a further 37 percent agreeing.

Even when students are interested in receiving more career and college counseling in schools, only a quarter strongly agreed that they knew who to approach in school for such guidance, and a further 48 percent agreed.

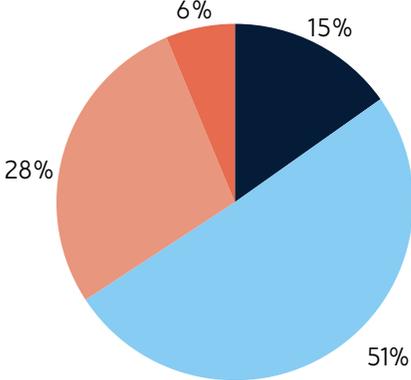
It is reasonable to expect that 12th graders who are on the threshold of life after high school will be better prepared in terms of their knowledge of various career options ahead of them. However, disaggregating the data by grade level does not show significant variations by grade level, which was a surprising finding. For example, we had expected 12th graders to report a greater clarity about their career goals as compared with other students, but this was not found to be the case.

Career guidance in school

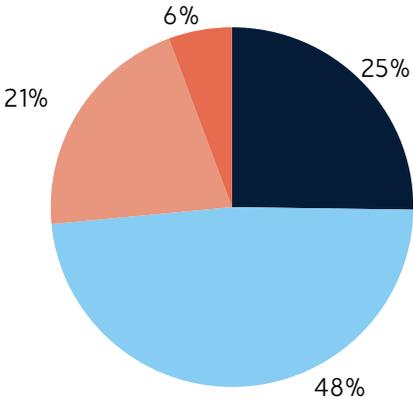
Students' perceptions of the importance of career counseling & guidance



Career guidance provided at school is adequate to make future decisions



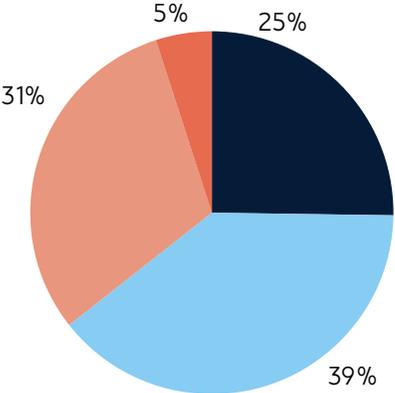
Students know whom to approach in school with questions about future education and careers



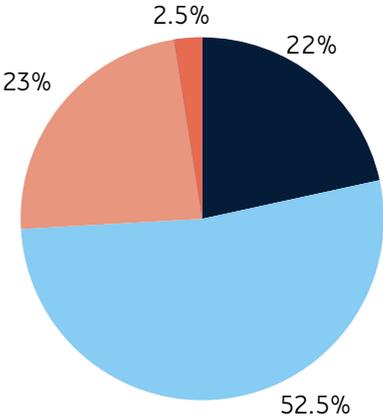
(N=2,252)
 Strongly agree Agree
 Disagree Strongly disagree

How prepared are students for their future careers?

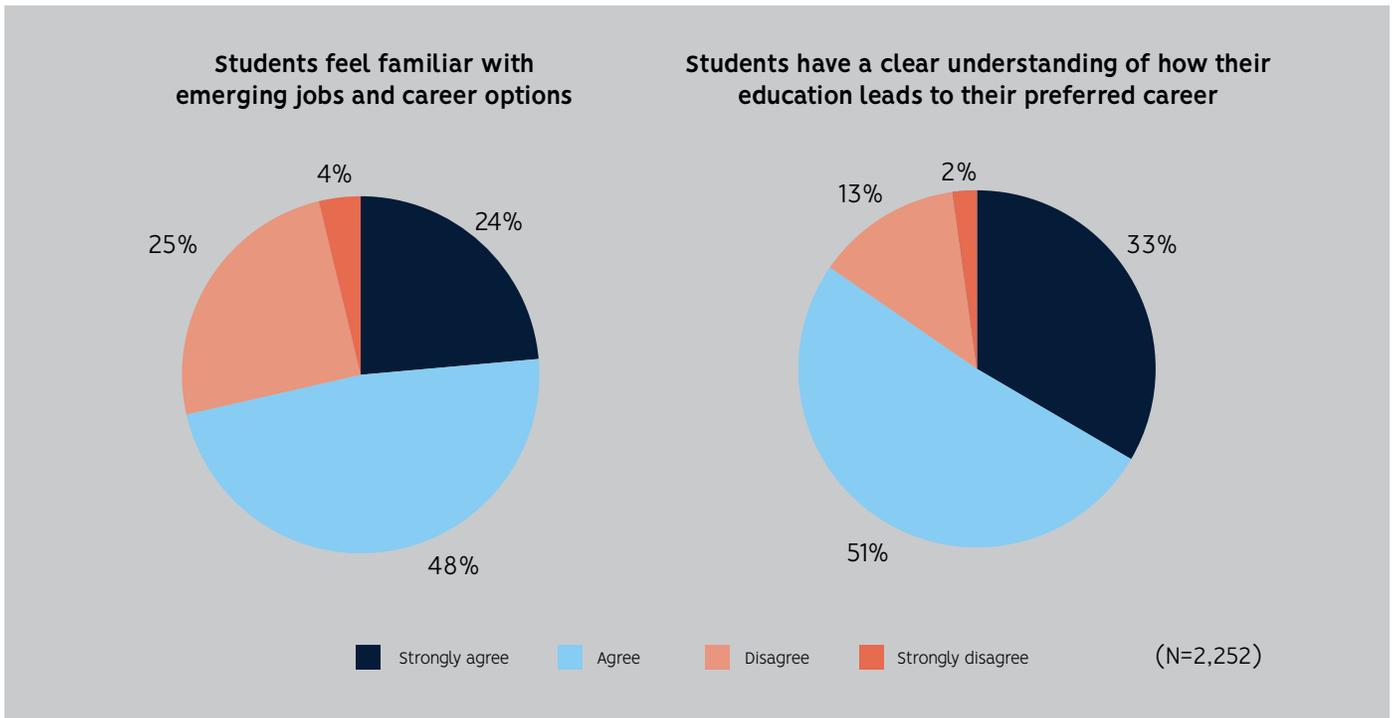
Students feel a sense of clarity about their career goals and objectives



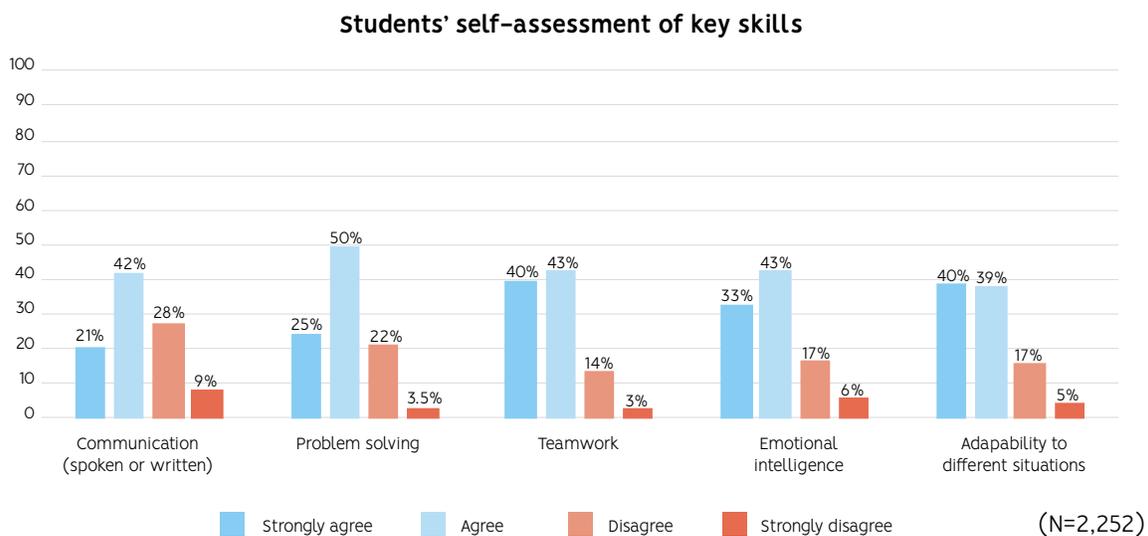
Students feel familiar with a wide range of career options available to them



(N=2,252)
 Strongly agree Agree
 Disagree Strongly disagree



Students see themselves as problem solvers and emotionally intelligent



In recent years there has been a clear consensus in secondary education around the world that the so-called “21st century skills” are essential to a well-rounded education and to developing global citizens. These “soft” skills—applicable to a wide range of disciplines and careers—have become even more important during the current pandemic as schools are now challenged with preparing students for an educational and professional future that has been significantly disrupted.

Students were asked to rate themselves on five key competencies that reflect 21st century learning and life skills: communication (spoken and written); problem-solving; teamwork; emotional intelligence; and adaptability to different situations. The two areas where students were most likely to rate themselves as being excellent were problem solving and emotional intelligence, with adaptability a close third.

The survey also asked students how their schools and teachers support them in acquiring these sorts of critical skills and mindsets. As the table below indicates, the areas where students felt the most supported

include a focus on both academic and extracurriculars; an emphasis on collaboration; and that the school provides adequate technology access to facilitate a range of activities. On the other hand, only 23 percent of students felt strongly that their schools help them how to manage and resolve conflicts.

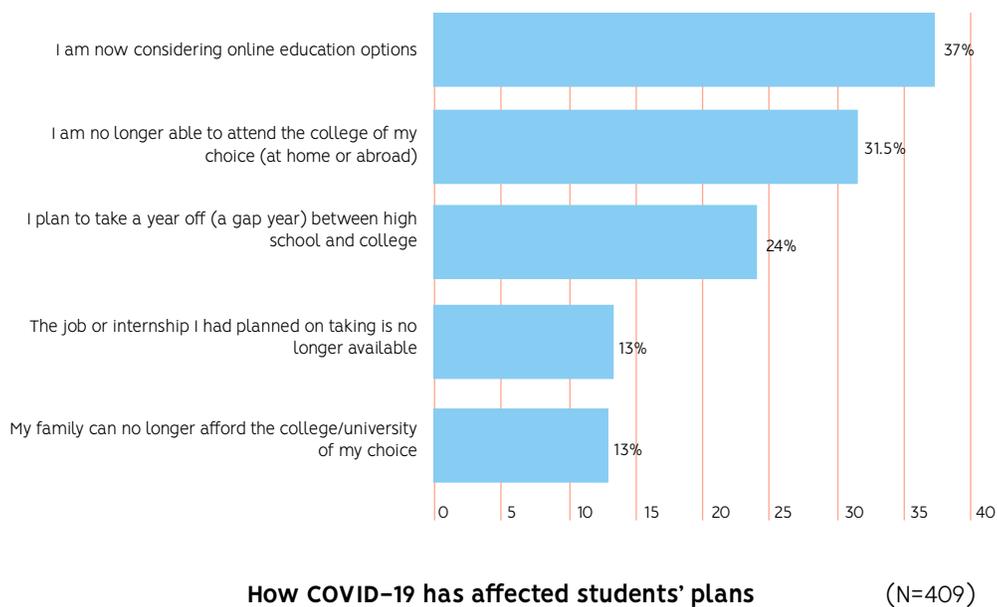
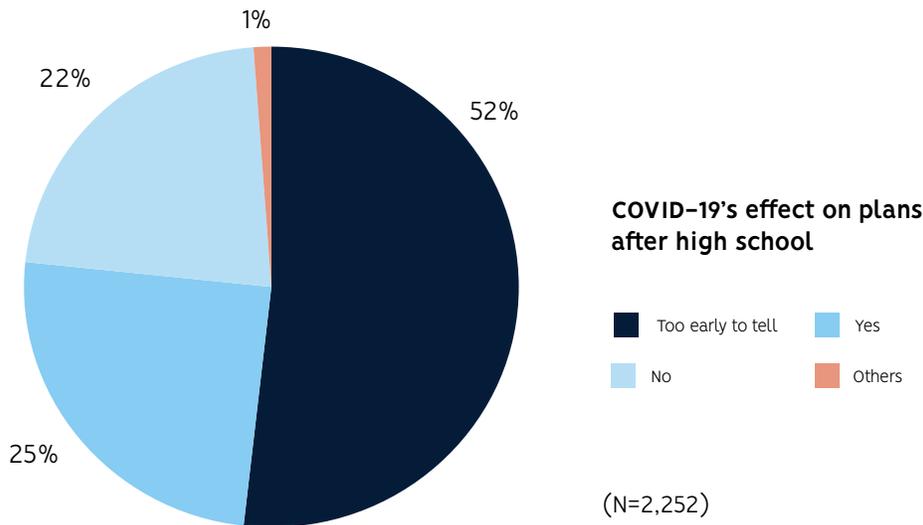
Students' perceptions of how their school supports them in acquiring critical skills (percent responding)	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Encourages both academic and extracurricular activities	48	41	8	3
Encourages me to collaborate with my classmates	43	50	5	1
Is equipped with technology and facilities for a range of extracurricular activities	40	47	10	3
Teaches us that learning outside of the classroom is as important as learning in the classroom	35	46	14	5
Teaches me to form opinions	35	54	8.5	3
Teaches me to understand different perspectives	35	54	9	3
Teaches a diverse range of subjects	34	49	14	3
Values my personal growth as much as academic achievement	33	46	15	6
Helps me learn about different cultures	30	51	15	3.5
Encourages me to keep up with the daily news by reading the newspaper	29	52	15.5	3
Helps me learn how to manage and resolve conflicts	23	58	15	4

(N=2,252)

Findings:

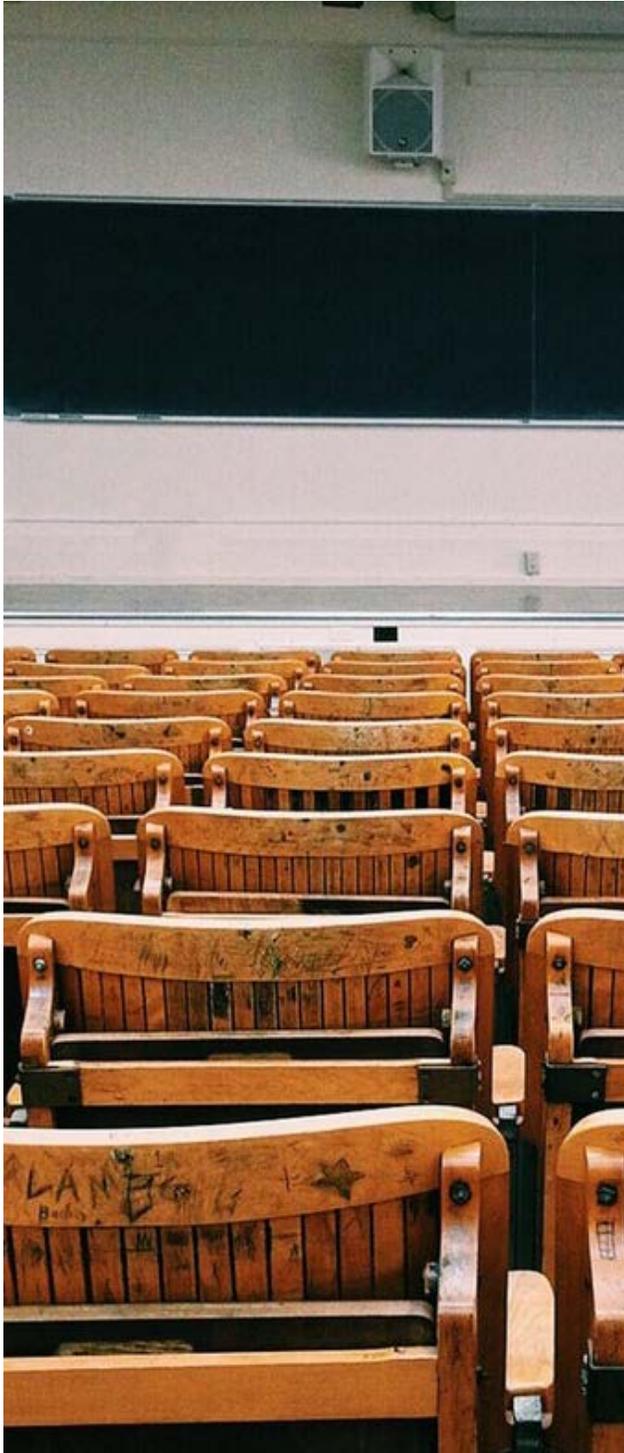
Impact of the Coronavirus on student sentiment

Slightly more than half of the respondents (52 percent) said it was too early to tell whether the Coronavirus would impact their study after high school plans, while a quarter said their plans have been disrupted. And of those who said yes, 37% said they were now exploring online learning options, with 32% saying they would no longer attend their college of choice, either abroad or at home



Despite the pandemic, this generation of students remains largely optimistic and hopeful about the future

What is the mindset of students as they look toward a post-COVID-19 world? While there is a lot of speculation of long-lasting changes in postsecondary education as well as industries, our survey shows that students are eager to return to the way things were prior to the pandemic: 64% of students strongly agreed that they wanted things to go back to the way they were prior to the pandemic, with 35 percent agreeing strongly with the statement that Covid-19 would change what jobs and careers will become important in the future. Overall, 83 percent of students reported that they remain optimistic about the future despite the current challenges.



There has also been much discussion within the secondary and postsecondary sectors that the pandemic will forever displace a traditional in-person learning environment with one that is virtual, but our survey shows that 72 percent of surveyed students disagreed or strongly disagreed that online education would be a good substitute for in-person teaching and learning.

”

How has the coronavirus affected your plans?

“Online education is overburdening, more time consuming, leads to more screen time, and provides less academic and personal security. Other spheres of my life have also been suffering.”

Student perceptions of the future world of work and education post-COVID-19 (percent responding)

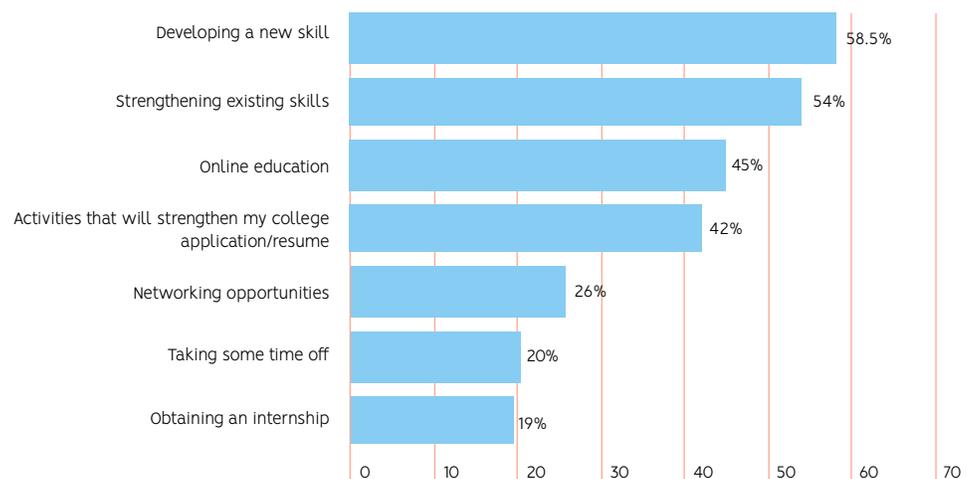
Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
After COVID-19, I am eager for things to go back to the way they were before in my personal and school life	63.5	31	4	1.5
COVID-19 will change which jobs and careers will become important in the future	35	47	16	2
Despite COVID-19, I remain optimistic about the future	31	51	15	2.5
Because of COVID-19, I feel nervous about my future after high school	24	38.5	29.5	8
COVID-19 will permanently change what college looks like	23	49	24.5	3
I feel my school has prepared me well to deal with the uncertainty caused by COVID-19	19	50	24	7
Online education will replace a traditional, in-person classroom	19	41	30.5	10
Online education is a good substitute for a classroom or campus-based experience	8	20	36	35

(N=2,252)

To prepare themselves for a world impacted by the pandemic, students are planning on focusing on skills development, whether it is learning a new skill (59 percent) or strengthening existing skills (54 percent). Additionally, a large proportion also plan to engage in online education and to undertake activities that will strengthen their college applications

Steps that students plan to take to prepare for the post-COVID19 world



(N=2,252)



*To better myself for the post-COVID world,
I will spend more time and effort on:*

“Thinking how to help the society rather than seeing our personal growth in times like these if we do anything it should benefit our society”

Conclusion:

A resilient, more empowered Indian and Nepalese student emerges

While the IC3 Institute's Student Quest survey was wide-ranging and asked a broad variety of questions, a few key findings are apparent when looking at overall responses. Although the impact of the pandemic is undeniable, we can draw a few conclusions about the outlook and priorities of Indian and Nepalese students as they navigate study options during this unprecedented period. And while current events undoubtedly weigh upon them, we can see what appears to be a subtle but fundamental shift in how this population of students views career options and priorities when determining professional trajectories.

Gaining a competitive edge both academically and professionally is one of the biggest reasons why students – not just from India but across the globe – pursue study abroad. Because of that, Indian students value education quality, and with their increasingly wider embrace of Anglophone host countries outside of just the US and UK, they are less encumbered by geography and more driven by institution or program. Various findings across the survey reveal, too, the importance of work-related experiences for international students and that the opportunities provided to them are critical as they consider various destinations.

However, the financial rewards of a particular career path are no longer the biggest driver when determining employment, with that factor falling behind the prospect of being passionate about one's job and feeling enjoyment and fulfillment. This finding highlights the need for more career and college counseling designed to support students in exploring best-fit career interests and potential. In addition, while parents are the biggest influence in career-related decisions, their actual recommendations are,



interestingly, not as important to students as the potential for personal and professional satisfaction. These findings run counter to our perhaps now-outdated vision of a student driven largely by tangible outcomes and societal expectations.

So, with students breaking out of a traditional mold, are we meeting what is likely to be an increased need for steer and guidance? It is in many ways easier to guide a student concerned about salary and pay than one who prioritizes emotional fulfillment. And, as we noted earlier that the older students we surveyed didn't necessarily feel better informed than their younger counterparts about career pathways and options, there is room for improvement in terms of guidance intensity as students move closer to graduation. Messages and information about a wide variety of careers need to appeal to the interest and engagement of students rather than just the pragmatic considerations of job stability and salary.

Undoubtedly, the fallout from the pandemic on colleges and industries will be significant and profound. Understandably, the surveyed students largely wanted things to go back to where they were, prior to the health crisis. But as the pandemic is likely to remain a factor for the foreseeable future, we have much work to do in terms of tracking the subsequent challenges that arise and developing ways to help students address them. However, the shifts we are seeing in how Indian and Nepalese students view their futures appear to be of a more fundamental nature, not a superficial reaction triggered by the pandemic. As a result, we do not need to wait for a therapeutic or a vaccine to begin addressing and appreciating this evolution, and can instead start strategizing how best to guide and counsel students to accommodate these important shifts.