



IC<sup>3</sup> INSTITUTE

SHIV NADAR  
UNIVERSITY  
DELHI NCR

# 2021 IC3 INSTITUTE STUDENT QUEST SURVEY REPORT

(in collaboration with Shiv Nadar University,  
Delhi-NCR)

The dynamics of students'  
decision-making process for  
higher education.



**Dr. Partha Chatterjee**  
Professor and Head - Department of Economics  
Shiv Nadar University, Delhi NCR

**Amrita Ghulati**  
Academic Head  
IC3 Institute

# About IC3 Institute

The IC3 Institute is a mission-driven non-profit 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 convening of experts and timely research.

# About Shiv Nadar University

Shiv Nadar University is a student-centric, multidisciplinary and research-focused University offering a wide range of academic programs at the Undergraduate, Master's and Doctoral levels. The University was set up in 2011 by the Shiv Nadar Foundation, a philanthropic foundation established by Mr. Shiv Nadar, founder of HCL. The University is in the quest to become a globally acclaimed center for learning and innovation in the fields of Engineering, Natural Sciences, Humanities & Social Sciences, and Management. The core of the University consists of a select, world-class faculty with doctoral and postdoctoral experiences from ranked universities all over the world.

Shiv Nadar University has been recognized as one of the ten private '**Institutions of Eminence**' by the Government. In the NIRF (Government's National Institutional Ranking Framework), the University has been the youngest institution in the 'top 100' Overall list, and its score has been rising steadily. In NIRF-2020, it ranked 56 in the 'University' category. Shiv Nadar University has been accredited with Grade 'A' by NAAC (National Assessment and Accreditation Council), valid for a period of five years from 26 November 2019. It is also among a select group of green-field institutions in the country which were awarded the prestigious Atal Incubation Center grant by the NITI Aayog, Government of India, in the very first round in 2017.

## Contributors

1. Arijit Das
2. Harshita Tripathi
3. Saran Bodduluri

**Copyright © IC3 Institute and @Shiv Nadar University, Delhi NCR**

All rights reserved

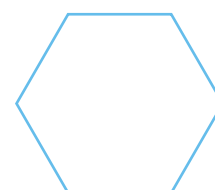
**Suggested Citation:** Chatterjee, Ghulati et. al. (2021) The dynamics of students' decision-making process for higher education

### Disclaimer

The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors

### Acknowledgements:

The authors would like to thank Ganesh Kohli, Swaraj Nandan, Jim McLaughlin, Neha Bahl, Kate Lotz, Garima Dawer, Rupamanjari Ghosh, Nehal Jain, and the Office of Marketing & Communications at Shiv Nadar University, Delhi-NCR, for their support.



# Table of Contents:



Introduction

03

Methodology  
and Data  
Description

04

Findings

A. Factors affecting  
choice of program  
and university

05

B. Location choice

08

C. Decision-making  
process

13

D. Impact of Covid-19

17

Conclusion

18



# Introduction

One of the most important decisions in an individual's life comes right at the cusp of adulthood – the choice of higher education and subsequent building of a career pathway, on completion of school education. This decision, of course, has a profound impact on how the future shapes up for that individual, but it also has great importance for both schools and higher education institutions. This report, based on a survey of students in high school, attempts to develop an understanding of the dynamic decision-making process undertaken by students to make such important choices.

While there are other surveys that focus on certain specific aspects of this choice (such as cross-border mobility), our approach is more holistic in probing multiple facets of this decision-making process. What characteristics of a program or a university are important for students? Do students first choose a program and then a university, or the other way around? These are some of the questions dealt with in the first section.

The next section focuses on location choice. Are students looking to study in their home countries or go abroad? If abroad, where? What factors are important in making this choice?

Finally, attention is turned to the methods used by students to explore their choices, understand themselves and engage with the counselors in school. What motivates students to choose a particular path? What information do students use and where do they get their information? Who influences their decisions? In this section, the role of the counselor is of particular interest.

Of course, these are not ordinary times. The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted practically all aspects of our lives, including thinking about and making education choices in today's changed world. The last section of the report addresses the impact that Covid-19 has had on choices in higher studies. 2021 is the second consecutive year that the pandemic has been a factor in college choice for high school students, and this report investigates whether and how Covid-19 has forced students to change their plans for pursuing a certain subject or enrolling in their preferred university, and the perception surrounding online studies.

Insights drawn from this survey are useful for schools and universities alike. Based on the findings of this survey, there are concrete actions steps that schools and universities can take that will be mutually beneficial, making the decision-making process more student-friendly. The survey is useful both for universities located in India, from where a majority of respondents are, as well as universities outside India where many of these students study abroad. At the school front, the report allows for a deeper consideration of the role of the counselor in the school ecosystem and the students' perception of career and college counseling, as well as tracing the evolution of students' decision-making process. As 2021 marks the second year of the IC3 Student Quest survey, useful comparisons can be drawn to track changes over the past year.

The survey respondents are largely from India, but also include representation from outside India, particularly South Asia. This region is home to one of the largest youth populations in the world. Understanding their higher education choices is immensely important from an academic perspective, and also valuable for policymakers to help design better public policy and programs in education.

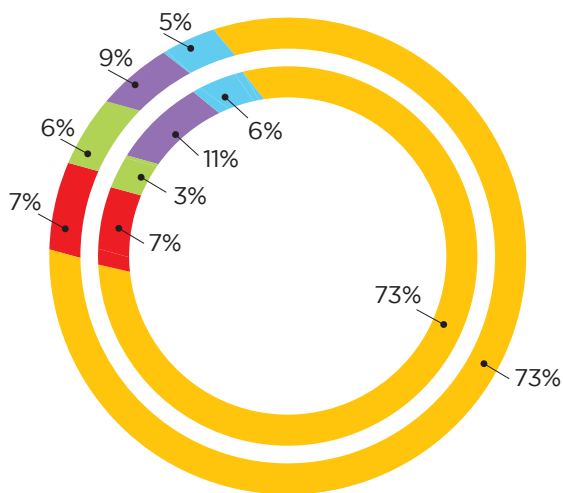


# Methodology and Data Description

The results of this Report are based on an email survey that was sent to 2000 schools across India and other countries in South Asia, seeking response from students in grades 9 through 12 (equivalent). A total of 6608 students participated in the survey. This number is significantly higher than last year, which saw 2252 students participate. This year, our survey witnessed an increase in both domestic and international students, with a total of 621 international students participating, primarily from SAARC countries. While there was an increase in the number of respondents from outside India compared to the last year, it is only about nine percent of the total respondents.

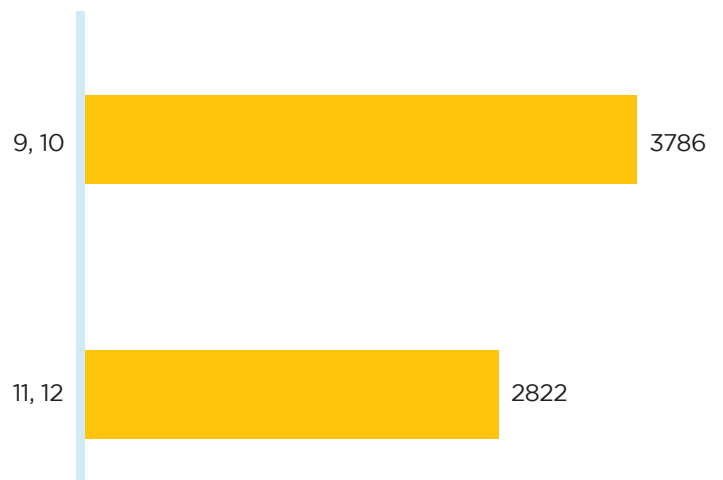
Of the total respondents, 3786 students were from grades 9 and 10, and 2822 were from grades 11 and 12. Specific questions were added for each grade level, as relevant to their stage of decision-making. Like last year, the majority of the respondents (about 73 percent) were from the national boards (CBSE, CISCE), with about 10 percent from the Cambridge Board, seven percent from State Boards and four percent from International Baccalaureate. 56 percent of the total respondents identified themselves as female.

BOARD / CURRICULUM

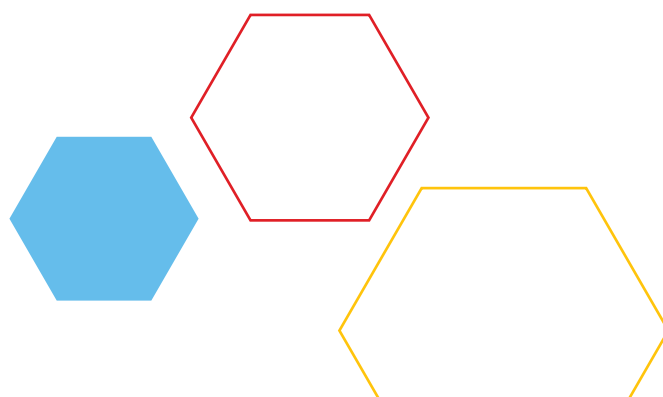


Inner Circle - 9, 10 (N=3786)  
Outer Circle - 11, 12 (N=2822)

NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS



- National Curriculum
- State Board
- International Baccalaureate
- Cambridge
- Other



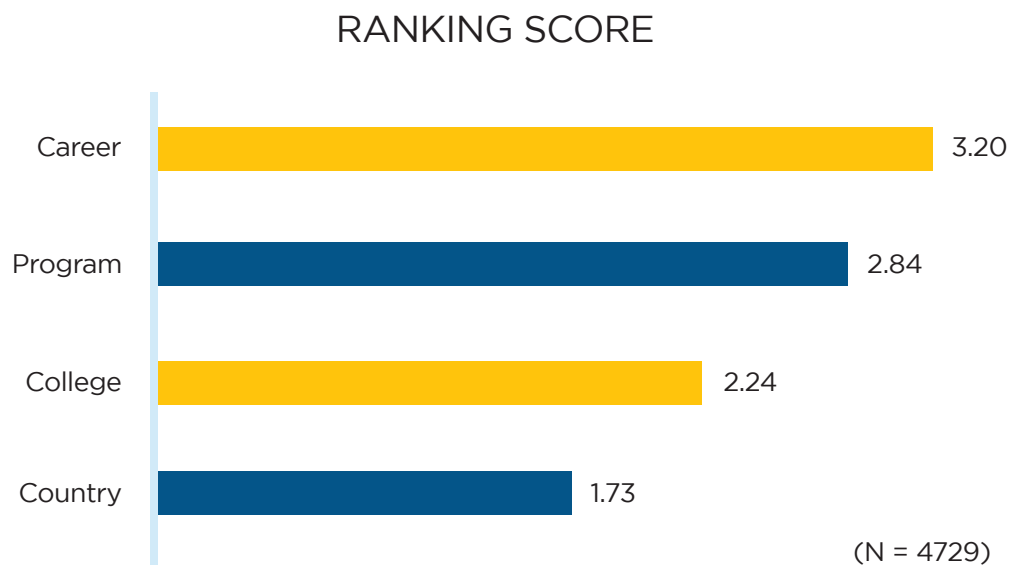
# FINDINGS

## SECTION 1

### Factors affecting choice of program and university

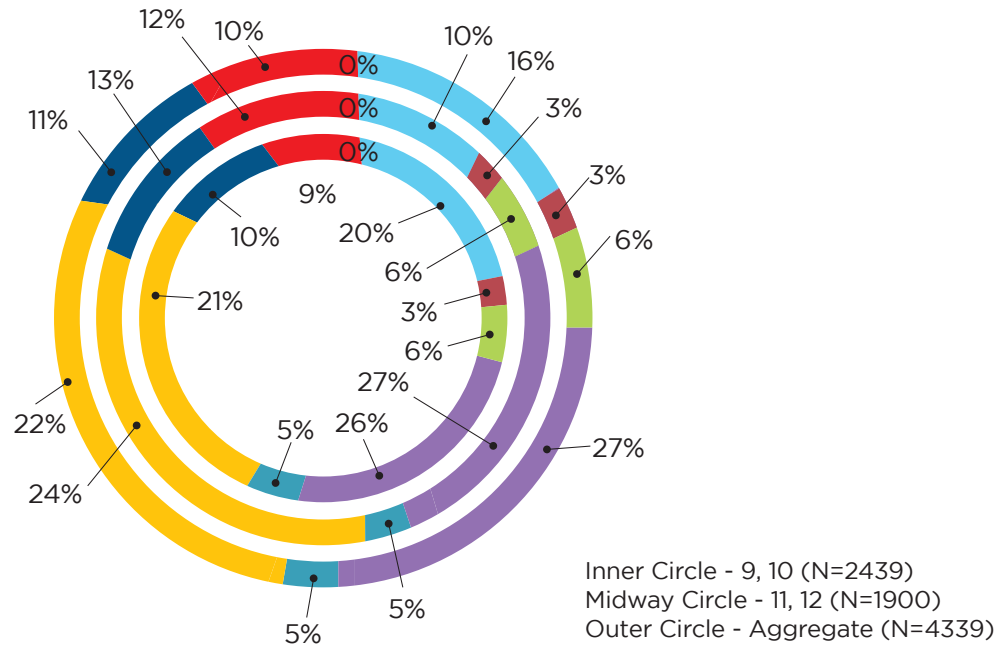
One critical decision students have to make is to choose the program in which they want to enroll, and in which university. What do students look for in programs and universities when they are making this decision? What characteristics of a program or a university are vital in making this choice?

From the responses, it was clear that students prioritize the career prospects of a program choice/option while planning higher education. Our survey suggests that students begin thinking about their career and related job prospects early – in high school itself. In fact, 71 percent of the respondents have already started thinking about their future employment. Given this, it is not surprising that in choosing a higher education program, consideration about career is overwhelmingly the top factor. The cumulative ranking score for career is highest compared to other options, for all groups across grades 9 through 12. The second most important factor is the characteristics of the program on offer, followed by college and location. Cumulative ranking for scores are given in the figure below, with the highest possible score being four and lowest possible being one.



Given that future career prospects is the most important factor in the decision-making process about higher studies for a high school student, it is interesting to look at what influences students in considering potential future career paths. The three most important factors that shape career choice are: passion for that particular career path, parents' recommendation, and expected salary. About one-third of the students want to be in a profession about which they feel passionate. One-fourth of the students want to choose a career based on the expected salary. Finally, one-sixth of the students rely on their parents' advice for future career choices. Interestingly, students in grades 9 and 10 are far more reliant on their parents' advice, whereas those in grades 11 and 12 are more likely to be motivated by expected salary in the future.

## FACTORS AFFECTING CAREER CHOICE

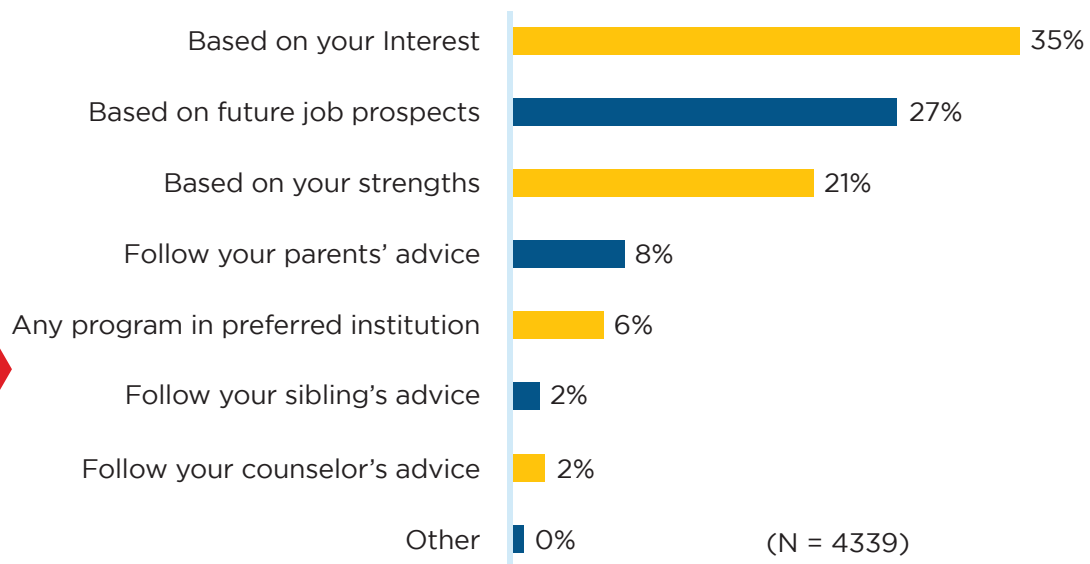


- Parents' recommendations
- Popularity of a career option
- The glamour of the job
- Potential impact of the career on the world
- Other
- Information about what your seniors in school are doing
- Your passion for the career / industry
- Future salary and pay
- The excitement of a career

Making a choice about higher education is a two-layered process. The student must choose a program of study and also a university. As the findings indicate, students tend to prioritize the program over the university. But how do students make these choices?

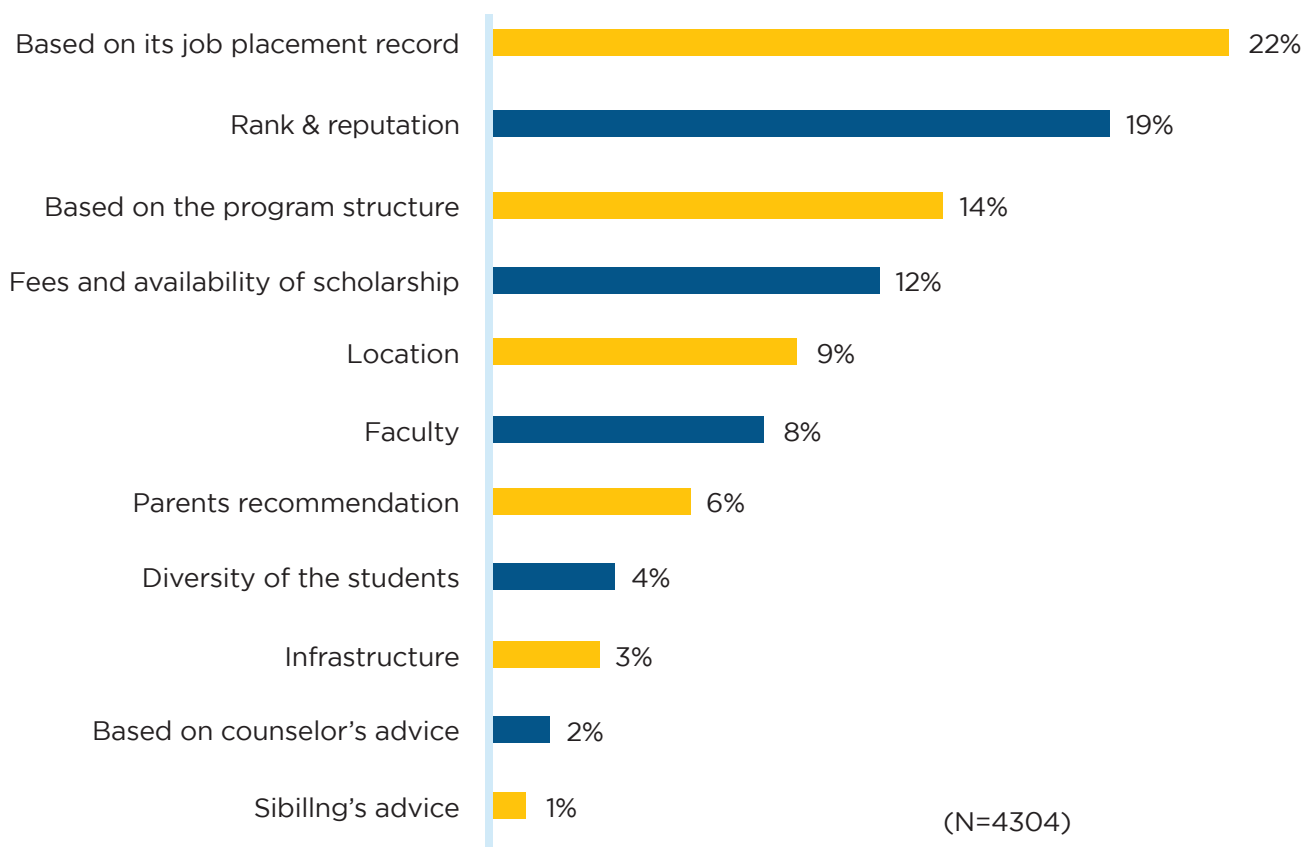
When choosing a particular program, three factors seem to be most significant: about 35 percent of the respondents said that they would choose a program based on their interests, 27 percent favored future job prospects (the potential job outcomes), and 21 percent give the highest importance to their own perceived strength in a particular area of study.

## CHOOSING A PROGRAM TO STUDY



The top three factors in choosing a university include the institution's placement record, rankings, and program design. Ranked fourth were fees, followed by location and the quality of faculty members. Interestingly, quality of faculty as a factor for choosing a university was low-ranked by students in grades 9 and 10 (even lower than parent's recommendation), while students in grades 11 and 12 rank quality of faculty significantly higher (even above location). This illustrates how students' understanding of the higher education space evolves throughout their journey in high school. Also of note, infrastructure was not considered to be significantly important, with only three percent of respondents selecting that as the most important factor.

## UNIVERSITY SELECTION





## SECTION 2



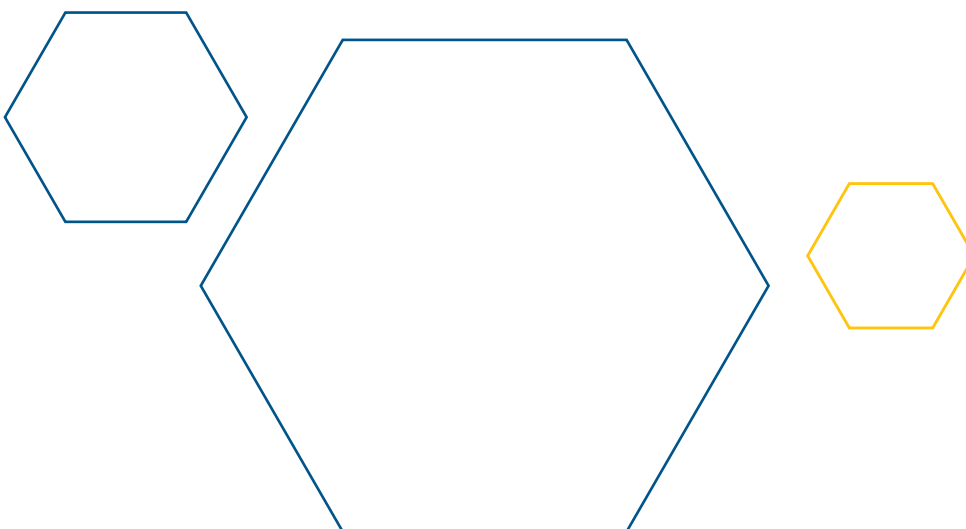
### Location choice

Over the years, studying at a geographical location of one's choice, across the globe, has become more accessible. Practically all universities are keen to attract a diverse cohort of students from all corners of the world. This has immensely increased the choice set for students. Student motivation or reasoning in selecting a study destination are evaluated in this section.

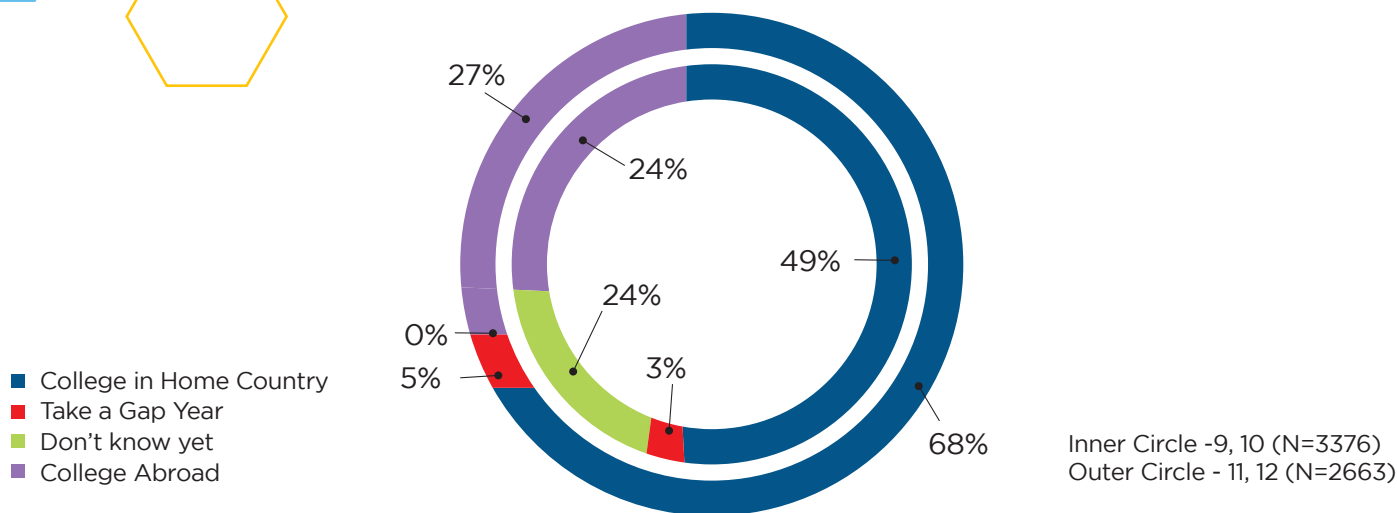
A sizable proportion of students now consider global options when choosing their future college or university. Overall this year, 25 percent of students are planning to go abroad for higher studies, which is four percentage points less than last year. However, an interesting comparison in the responses from students in grades 9 and 10 vs. grades 11 and 12 is that there is a large percentage (about a quarter of all who answered this question) in grades 9 and 10 who are still undecided whether they want to study in their home country or abroad - but those in grades 11 and 12 were sure of their choice. This highlights the importance of counseling in earlier grades, and making the right information available to students when they are still mulling over various options. This may also indicate the natural progression in decisiveness, student maturity, and proximity in terms of timeline of making the final choice.

This year's survey was conducted when India, where many of the respondents reside, was emerging out of a devastating wave of the Covid-19 pandemic (much like last year's survey). What has been observed is that students are slowly adapting to the changing situation, and possibly have a better grip of the situation this year as compared to the last. The share of undecided students has fallen from 19.5 percent last year to 13 percent this year, possibly for this reason.

This is in spite of the fact that the number of respondents from grades 9 and 10 are higher in this year's survey. The undecided students are almost exclusively from these earlier grades. Almost every student in grades 11 and 12 has made up their mind to either stay back in their home country (68 percent) or go abroad (27 percent). A small number of students (about three percent) plan to take a gap year.

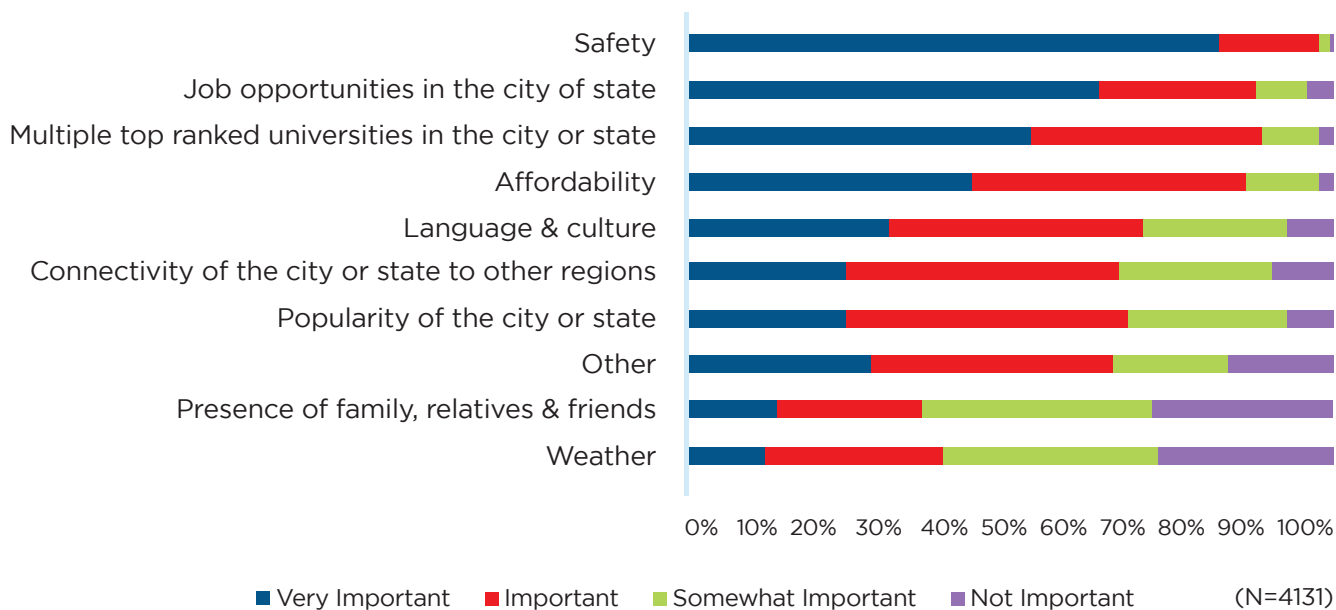


## STAY HOME OR GO ABROAD



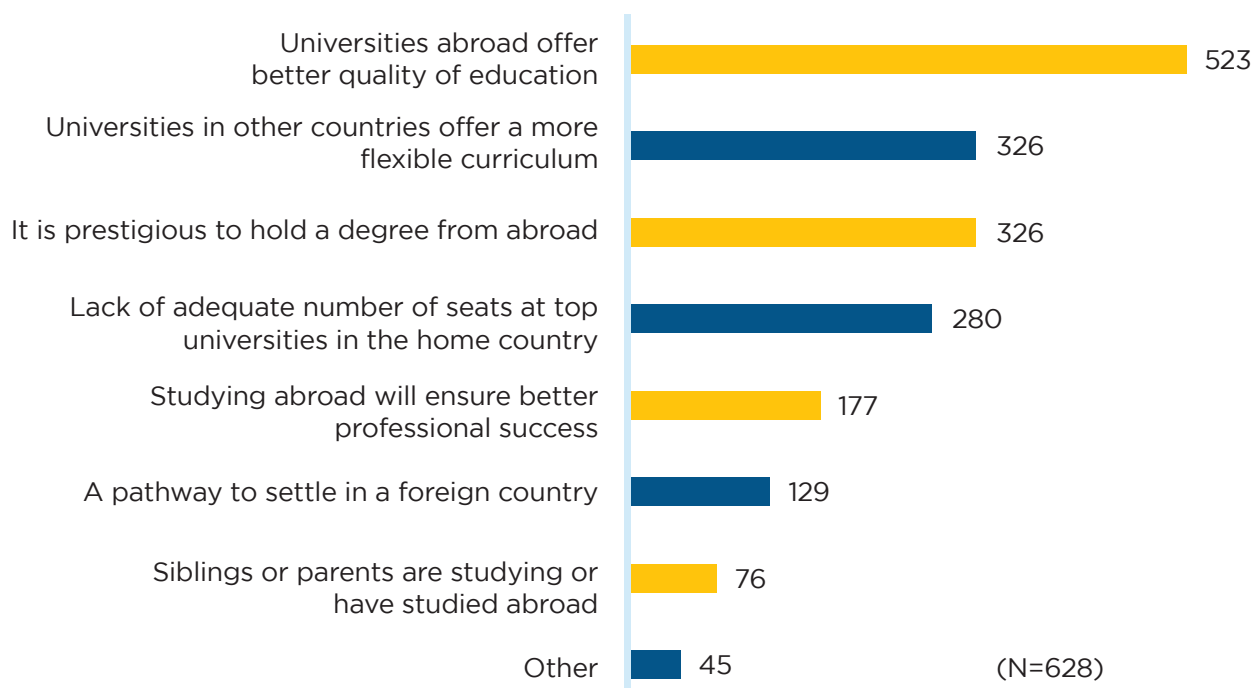
What are some of the most important factors for students when choosing the location for their higher education? Interesting insights come through student responses, including those who want to stay back in their home country and those who want to go abroad. The most important factor in location choice is safety, closely followed by job opportunities in the area where the higher education institution is located. Quite interestingly, the third most important factor is the concentration of high-ranked universities in that location – students seem to prefer locations where multiple high-ranked institutes are situated. This factor is ranked higher even than affordability.

## CHOICE OF A CITY OR STATE



What motivated students to go abroad for their undergraduate education? It seems that students are primarily opting to go abroad because they think that the quality of education abroad is better. Students who want to go abroad were asked to select the top three reasons in support of their decision. A whopping 83 percent chose quality of education. (This is even higher than 76 percent last year.) The second most important reason is a draw: about 51 percent identified studying abroad as providing a path to eventually settle outside their home country, and a similar number consider studying abroad being more. Interestingly for 44 percent of the respondents, one of the top three reasons to go abroad is the flexibility of the curriculum. This is substantially down from 55 percent last year, possibly reflecting how awareness and acceptance of the curriculum of new age universities in India are making an impact.

## REASON BEHIND STUDYING ABROAD

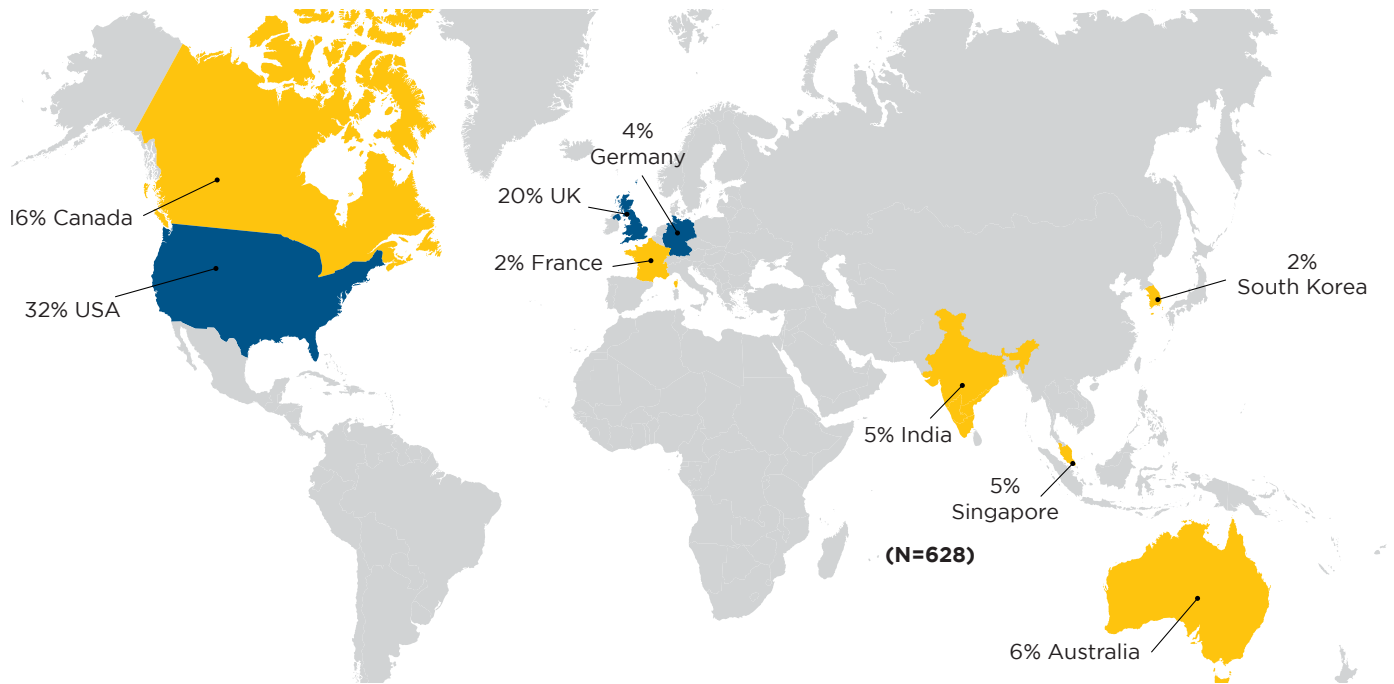


**The USA retains its place as the top destination for students choosing to study abroad, followed by the UK and Canada.**

About half of the students refer to the USA as their first choice study destination. Students ranked three destination choices, and cumulative ranking is calculated by adding respective options with weightage according to their ranking. The final ranking figure shows that 32 percent of the students prefer the USA, followed by the UK and Canada (20 percent and 16 percent, respectively). Following the top three countries, Australia and India are similarly ranked in students' choice of preferred country of study. This year, the number of respondents from outside India is significantly higher than last year. The choice of India as a destination to study abroad may be influenced by this demographic of respondents along with highlighting the growing attractiveness of India as a destination for higher education. In fact, India ranks higher than Singapore or any European country. This year, China does not figure in the students' choice set; no student indicated China as their first choice. Even when looking at the unweighted cumulative number of choices, China is down by about 50 percent compared to last year. This could be due to the Covid-19 pandemic or deteriorating bilateral relations with China.



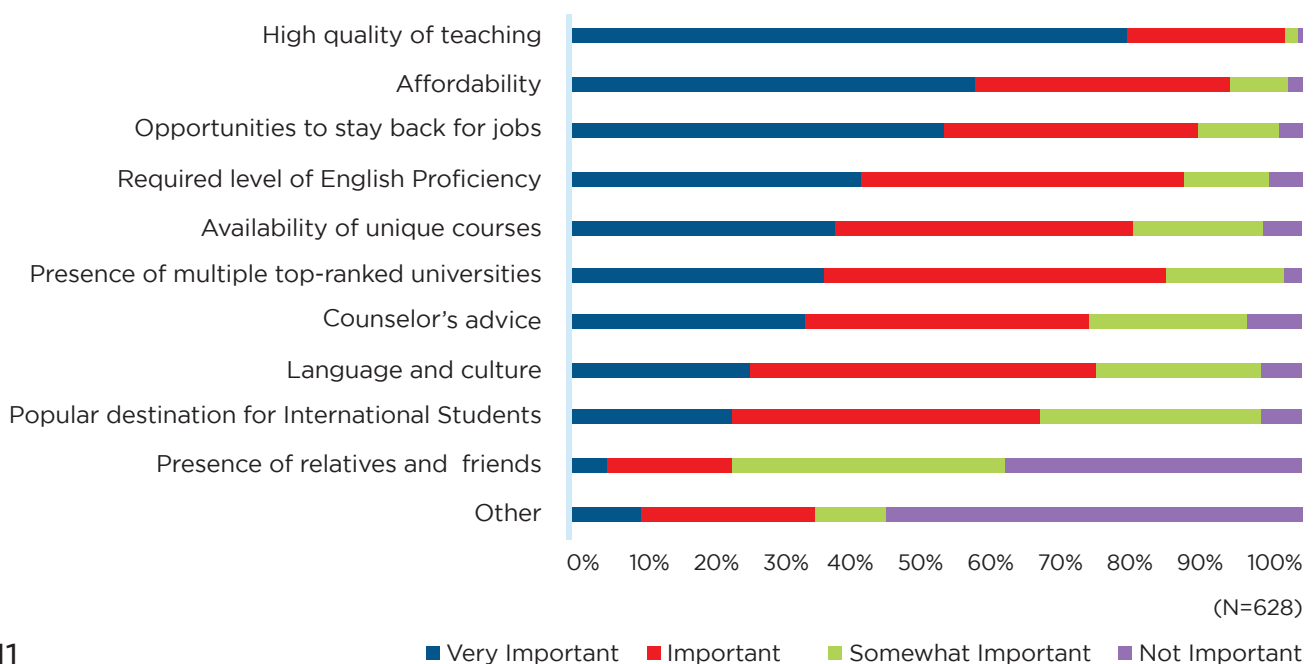
## Order Country Preference (Index)



In choosing a particular country, students focus on three factors: high-quality teaching, affordability, and the opportunity to stay back in that country. This survey shows 98 percent of the students believe that high quality of teaching is a vital reason for choosing a country for higher education. The next most important factor is affordability: about 90 percent of the respondents considered it to be important or very important. It is interesting to note that university fees was not in the three most important factors in determining the choice of university, however, affordability does feature as an important factor while choosing the country as a study destination.

The ability to stay back in the country on completion of undergraduate studies is also quite important: 86 percent of respondents indicated this to be important or very important. Three other significant factors include the required level of English language proficiency, availability of unique courses, and presence of multiple high-ranked universities (a factor that is common both in and outside of the country).

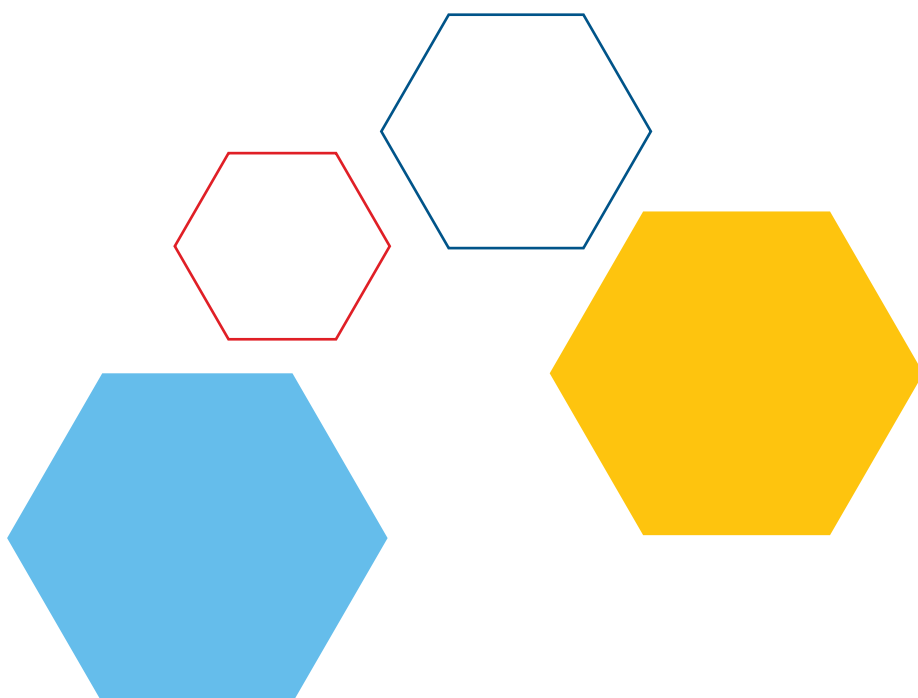
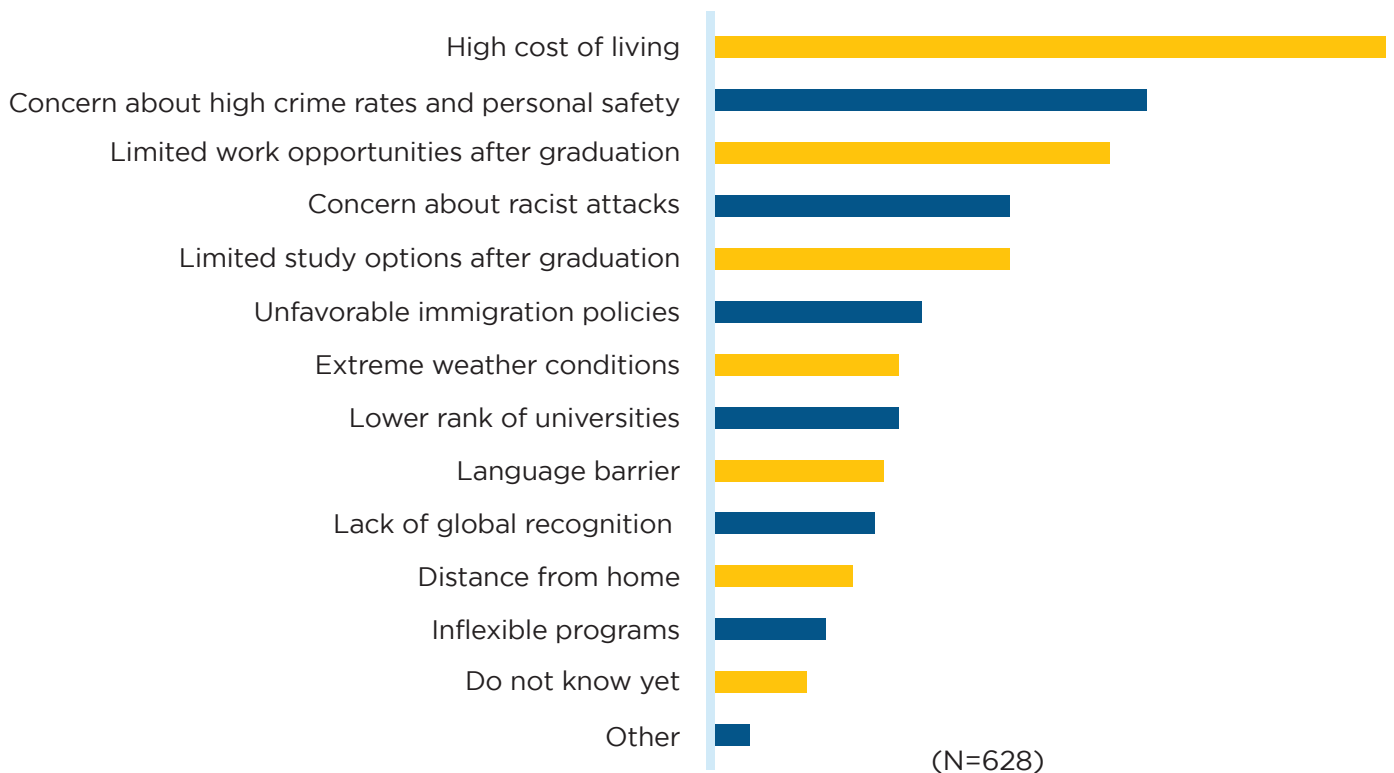
### CHOOSING A COUNTRY



## Obstacles in deciding to go to a country

Nearly half of the students cited high cost of living as a reason for avoiding a country. In addition, a high crime rate or feelings of insecurity are significant for 32 percent of respondents. Limited work and study opportunities after graduation are also major deterrents for students to choose that country.

### REASON FOR NOT CHOOSING A COUNTRY





## Decision-making process

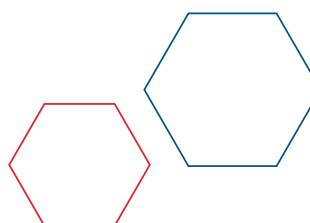
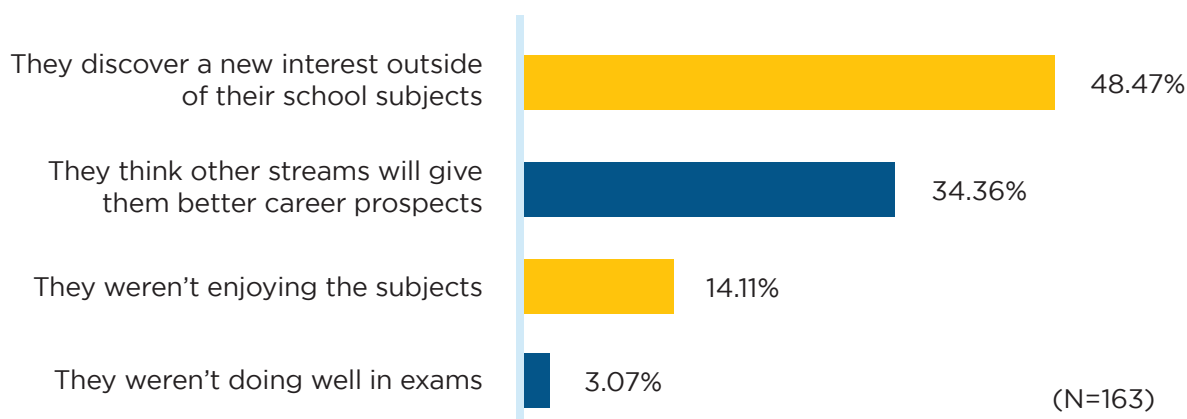
High school students face a plethora of choices. While it is good to have options, the key is in finding a good match for each individual. The levels of decision-making involve choosing the most suitable program, university, and country as the study destination. This requires accessing a large set of information, processing that and then making a decision. Here, the complex decision-making process is looked into, providing insight into how and where students get their information and who influences their decisions.

Counseling services available in schools features in detail in this section. Given the ever-expanding information, dynamic choice set and the complex decision-making process, the role of counselors has become critical. Providing appropriate guidance can help students find the right match, achieve their goals, and alleviate the anxiety experienced in this process.

A large number of students in grades 11 and 12 are undecided about their future area of study, and a significant percentage of students want to change their academic focus (or, stream) from that which they are pursuing in high school. In this survey, 30 percent of the students in grades 11 and 12 are still unsure whether they want to change their stream, while 9 percent are sure that they will change their stream of study. The rest plan to continue in the stream in which they are enrolled at present. This suggests subject choice exploration and decision-making should feature significantly in the counseling provided at schools.

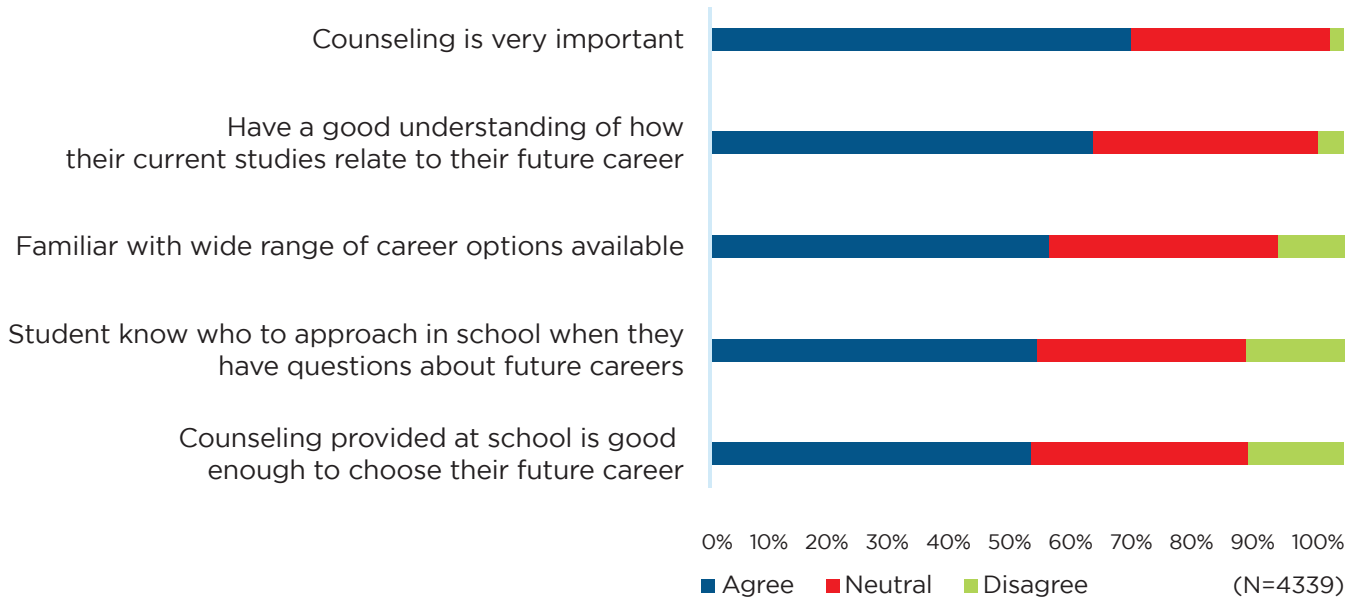
What motivates students to change the stream of their study? Through insight from respondents, many students who have expressed desire to change their stream have discovered a new interest outside of what they have been studying in their school. This indicates that increasing possibilities to explore various diverse subjects and related career pathways in high school can be extremely beneficial for students. When students feel that an alternate stream has better career prospects, they are motivated to change streams.

### WHY STUDENTS WANT TO CHANGE THEIR STREAM



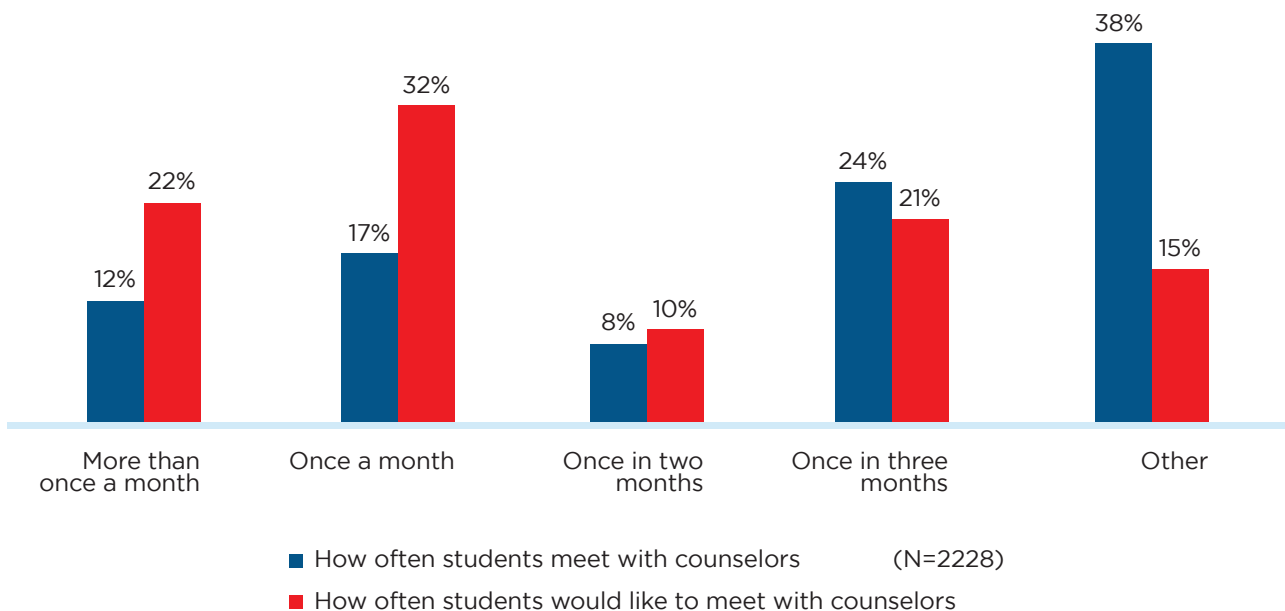
While it is clear that one central aspect of counseling will always be the choice of subjects, there is repeated indication to incorporate advice on careers beyond college and their linkages to current academic choices in high school. This survey finds 82 percent of respondents agree that career consultation is important at this stage. 52 percent of respondents consulted career professionals or teachers or counselors on career-related topics. This indicates a definitive role and increasing influence of counselors in the education system.

### STUDENT'S PERCEPTION



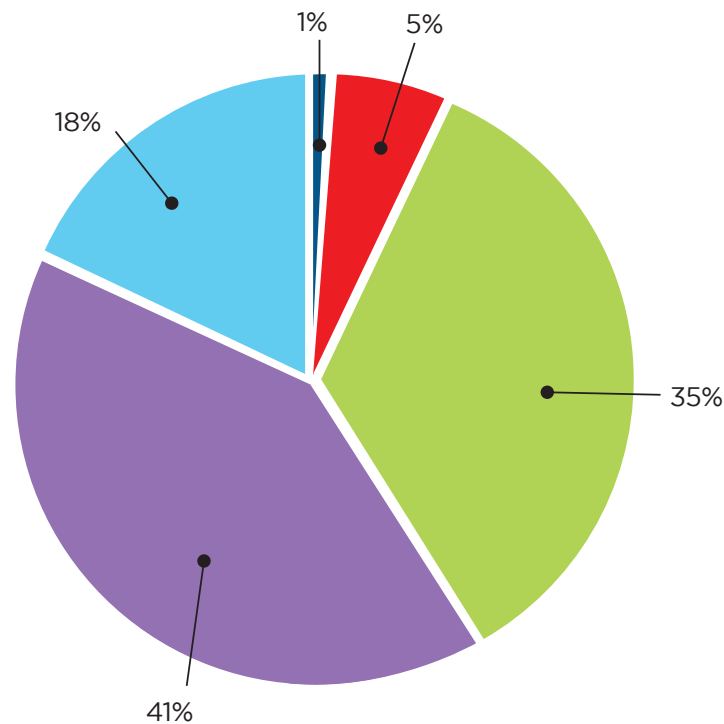
Engagement with the school counselor comes through in this survey. About 29 percent of respondents have met with a counselor at least once a month, and 61 percent of the respondents have met the counselor at least once in three months. However, what is striking is the demand for counselors and the gap between the desired frequency of these meetings by the students to what currently being availed: 54 percent of the students would like to meet the counselor at least once a month, against 29 percent of the respondents who are doing that now. This clearly brings the need for schools to find ways to augment their counseling services.

### FREQUENCY OF INTERACTION WITH THE COUNSELOR



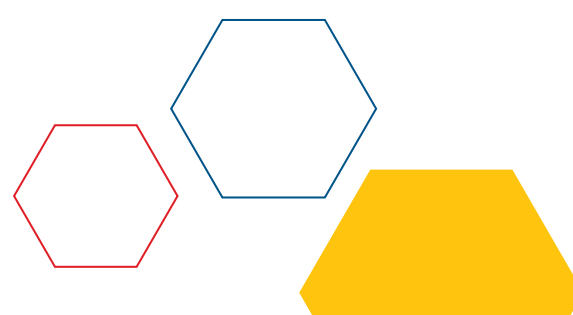
It is good that there is a demand for counselors, but how useful are these conversations to the students? The good news is 18 percent and 41 percent of the respondents answered that they found counseling extremely helpful and helpful, respectively. However, 35 percent found it to be somewhat useful, while only 6 percent did not find the conversations to be useful. This is a promising sign and a vast improvement from last year, when 16 percent of the respondents found conversation with a counselor not very helpful or unhelpful.

### USEFULNESS OF CONVERSATIONS WITH COUNSELORS



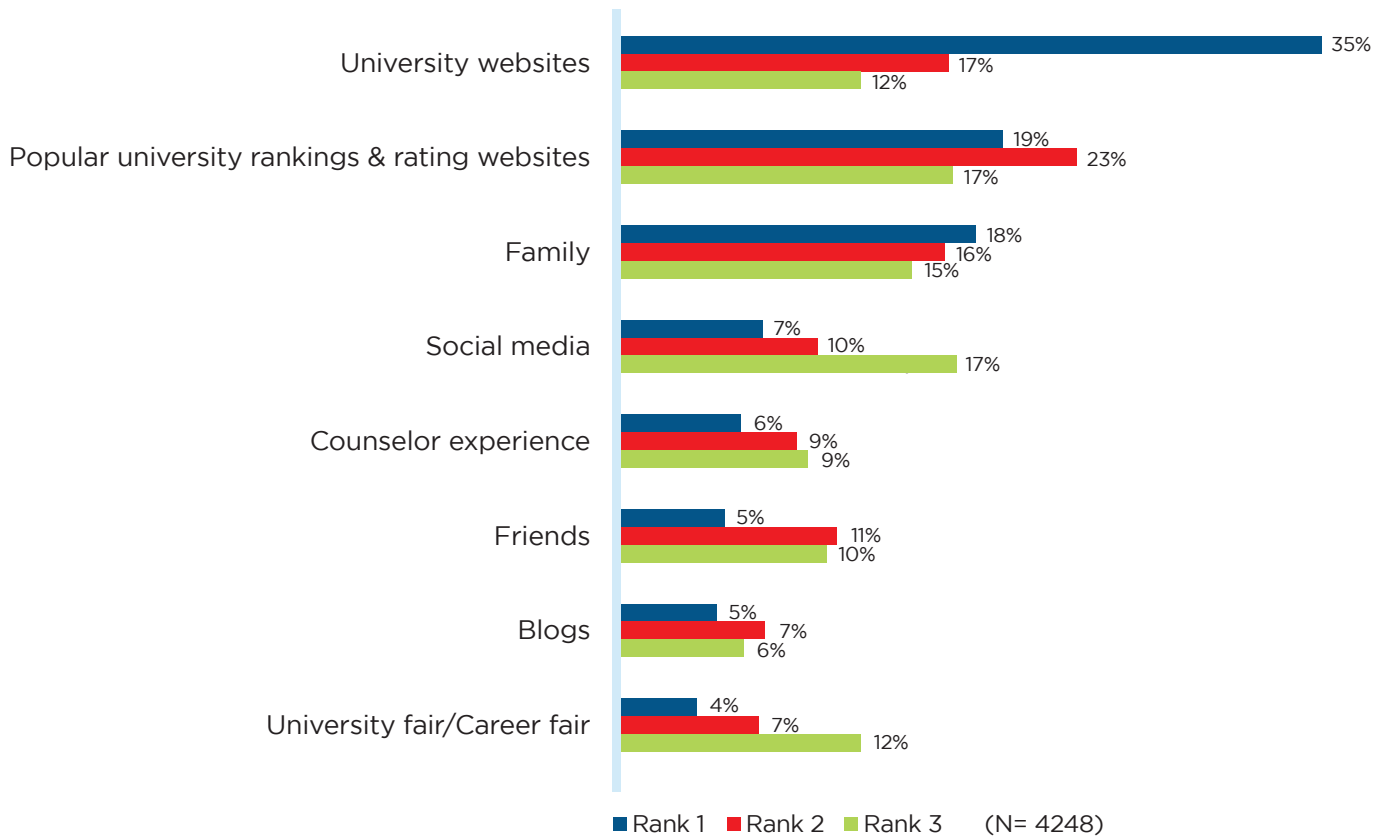
■ Not at all helpful ■ Not so helpful ■ Somewhat helpful ■ Very helpful ■ Extremely helpful (N=2228)

While students value the advice they receive from counselors, they do continue to use multiple sources to gather information. The most popular source for information is university websites. (This is consistent with the results from last year.) For about 65 percent of the respondents, university websites serve as one of the top three sources of information – but what is striking is that for 35 percent, it is the most important source of information (far higher than any other). This year’s survey indicates that websites of ranking and rating bodies stand to be the second-most popular source of information, followed closely by information provided by family and relatives. While social media is one of the top three sources of information for about 34 percent of the students, only seven percent rank it highest. Counselors as a source of information rank on the lower side: though 24 percent of respondents noted it in their top three, but only six percent chose it as the top source. This illustrates that students do value the advice of counselors and the help they receive from them in making sense of the information available, and not merely as a source of information.



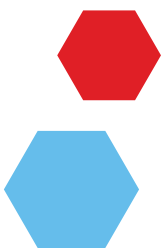
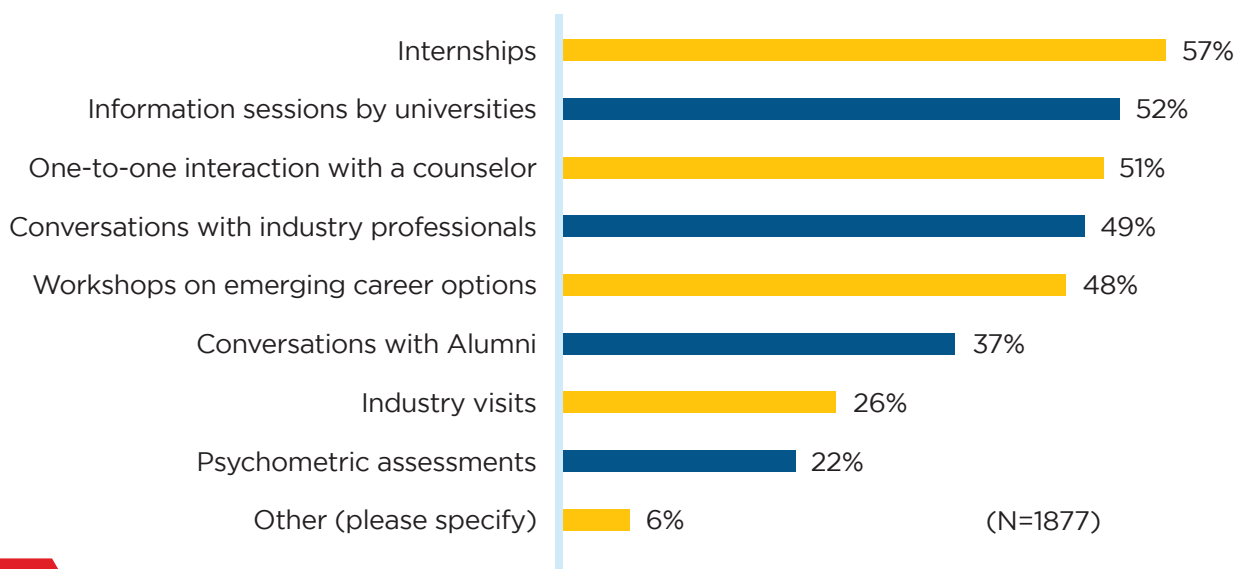


## INFORMATION SOURCE



Finally, what is most helpful for students to make decisions? Conversations with counselors rank third in order of importance, while students found internships to be most helpful in their decision-making. Information sessions conducted by various universities, often as part of their outreach efforts, ranked as second-most important. At least 20 percent of the respondents found conversations with industry professionals, workshops on emerging career options, conversations with alumni, and industry visits to also be helpful.

## ACTIVITIES WHICH MAKE DECISION-MAKING EASY





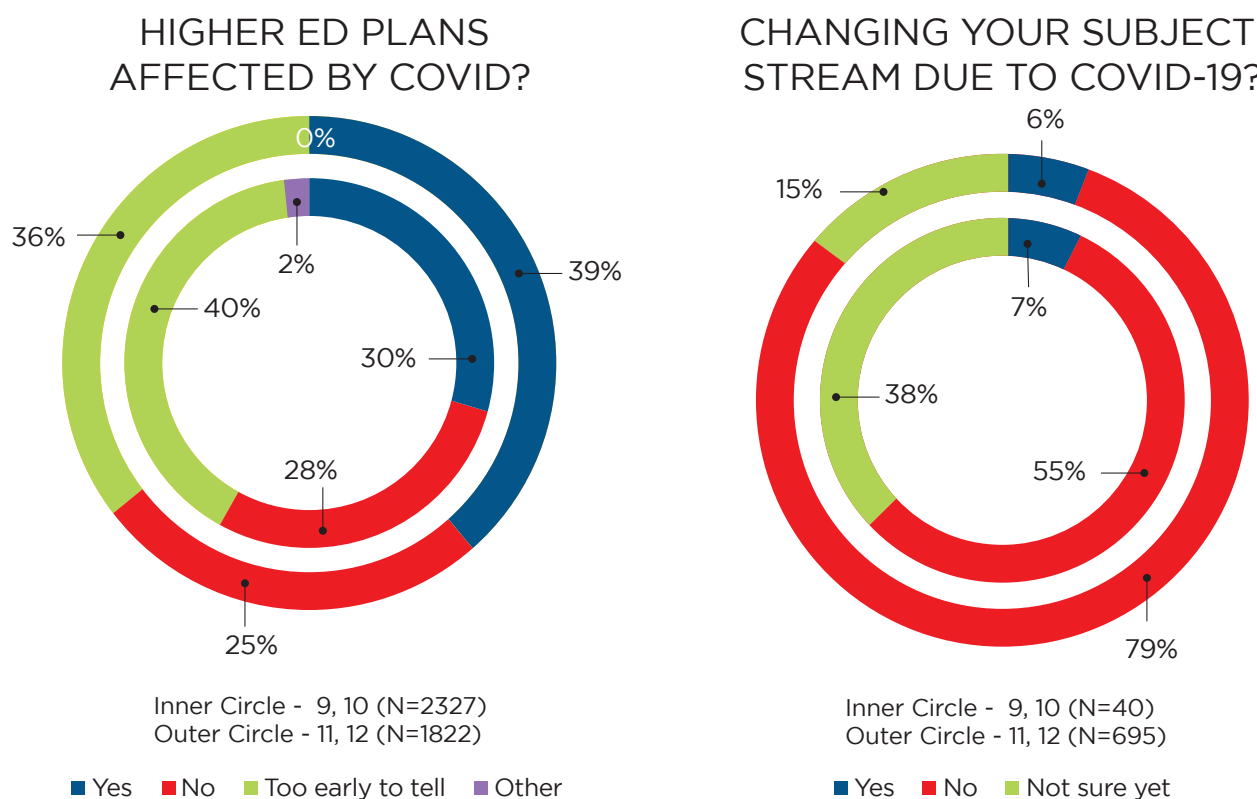
## The impact of Covid-19

Students' higher education plans witnessed a great deal of uncertainty this year due the pandemic and restrictions imposed by different countries abroad. The survey data reveals that more than one-third of the respondents (40 percent of grades 9 and 10, and 36 percent of grades 11 and 12) felt that it was too early to state whether their plans to study abroad have been impacted by the Covid-19 situation globally. Close to another one-third of the respondents, and interestingly more from grades 11 and 12 (39 percent), mentioned that their higher education plans have indeed been impacted by the pandemic.

However, what remains largely unaltered is the impact on choice of subjects in school. Almost 79 percent of grades 11 and 12 stated that their choice of subject remains the same irrespective of the pandemic. This data is quite significant, as it indicates the confidence and certainty of choices made by students regarding their subject options at a school level. The confidence in the choice of subjects for students in grades 9 and 10 is not as high (55 percent) when compared to that of students in grades 11 and 12, indicating some potential influence of the Covid-19 situation for younger students who are yet to make their choices for senior secondary school.

Delving deeper into the ways in which Covid-19 has affected students' plans to study abroad ; it is interesting to observe that a significant percentage of grades 11 and 12 respondents (about 37 percent), are now considering online education options. This is a significant number, and calls for further investigation. It is not clear what students have in mind, whether a fully online degree or starting a program online first, then moving to in-person format later. Nevertheless, one of the most notable changes that the pandemic has brought is the acceptance of online education.

Also significant, 39 percent of respondents indicated that their first-choice college has become unavailable, leading them to consider alternative options. While there is still much getting used to living with the virus (including more ready acceptance of online education), there is no doubt that the pandemic has caused disruptions for the high school students in making choices about their future.



# Conclusion

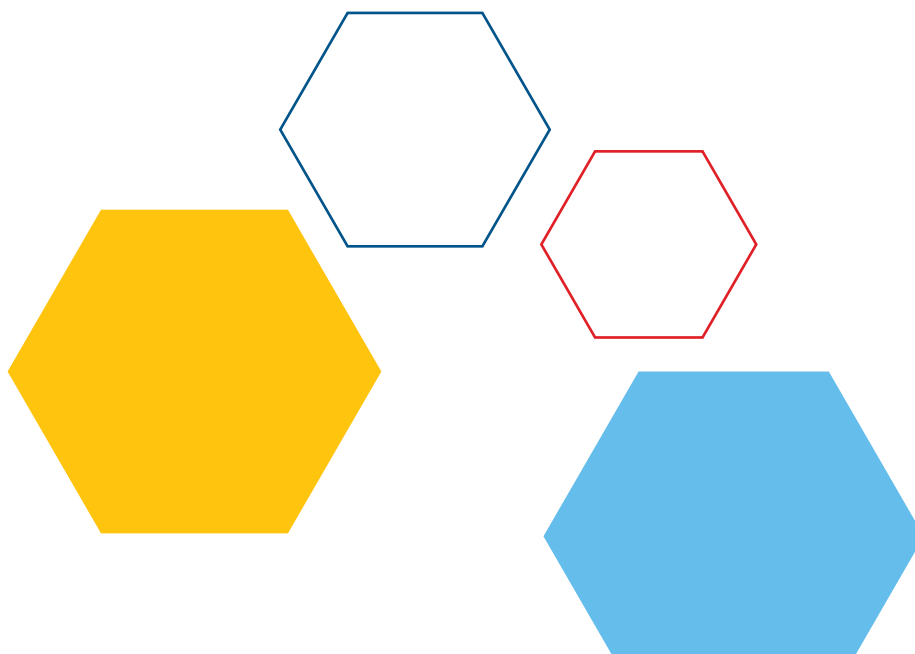
---

The purpose of this year's Student Quest survey was to take a comprehensive look at the decision-making process for a high school student when choosing a path for their future. How students choose, what factors impact that eventual choice, and who influences the decision-making process were our main themes of exploration. What emerges is a complex mosaic: while future career concerns are certainly very important, students are still strongly driven by their passion and interest in the subject. They also show maturity in choosing their sources for information; university websites are far more important than social media. What is also interesting is that reliance on parents in the decision-making process reduces as students move from grades 9 and 10, to 11 and 12.

When it comes to choosing a destination, like last year, the USA remains the most popular choice among students who want to study abroad. The second most popular destination is the UK. This year there were a larger number of respondents from outside India, mainly South Asia; and India emerges as a popular destination for higher studies (nearly on par with the popularity of Australia). A slight reduction in the percentage of students who want to go out of their home country for higher studies, as compared to last year has been noted. Using these two observations, one can cautiously estimate that higher education in India is becoming more attractive, possibly driven by the change in higher education landscape witnessed in India over the last decade or so. Overall, while there are a large number of students in grades 9 and 10 who have not yet made up their mind about where they want to study (home vs. abroad), but almost all respondents from grades 11 and 12 feel certain about their location choice. This suggests that it is important to reach out students in grades 9 and 10 more to help in their decision-making process.

The survey results are a validation of the good work counselors are doing, simultaneously pointing to an unfulfilled demand for counseling. There is a scope to increase both the capacity and intensity of counseling. It is also noteworthy that students look up to their counselors as not only a source of information, but also for substantive advice in their decision-making process. From the perspective of the universities, there is a lot of scope for providing more information and exposure through their websites and outreach programs.

2021 marks the second consecutive year for the Student Quest survey. Last year, the survey was conducted at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. This year while the pandemic is still unfolding, students are becoming accustomed to the changing situation despite massive continued disruption. This phenomenon has been reflected in the survey results. It is evident that dark clouds of uncertainty still hover, increasing the burden of decision-making for many students. Parents, schools, counselors, and universities all have to be cognizant of this challenge and find ways to help ease that burden.





# Contact us

---



**IC<sup>3</sup> INSTITUTE**

[amrita.ghulati@ic3institute.org](mailto:amrita.ghulati@ic3institute.org)

**SHIV NADAR**  
UNIVERSITY  
DELHI NCR

[partha.chatterjee@snu.edu.in](mailto:partha.chatterjee@snu.edu.in)

