



IC³ INSTITUTE®



2022 IC3 INSTITUTE STUDENT QUEST SURVEY REPORT

Higher education decision-making in a post-pandemic world
A 360° global study with high school students and relevant stakeholders

in collaboration with





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Introduction



More than 600 million students¹ across the world face one of the most important challenges in their academic life as they graduate high school. Standing at the threshold of adulthood, the transition from high school to university and eventually to their careers is one that requires them to make numerous critical decisions. One such critical decision is the choice of higher education and subsequent charting of a career pathway, as they complete their school education. For many students, this is the first major financial, educational, social, and vocational decision for which they possess such responsibility and choice. Like most complex decisions, choosing a higher education pathway requires the student to seek out and integrate information from various sources.

This establishes the hypothesis that the process of this decision-making is as important to explore as the decision itself. There have been many studies exploring the factors that play a significant role in directing the decision (Kallio 1995, Gulluce et al. 2016); however, very few studies have explored the nature and impact of the decision process on the academic as well as emotional aspects of the student's life. The COVID-19 pandemic made things a lot more tricky. All relevant stakeholders were forced to innovate to account for the uncertainties that plagued the world during this time. Needless to say that this life decision not only has a monumental impact on how the future shapes up for that individual, but it also holds great importance for families, schools, higher education institutions, and industries at large.

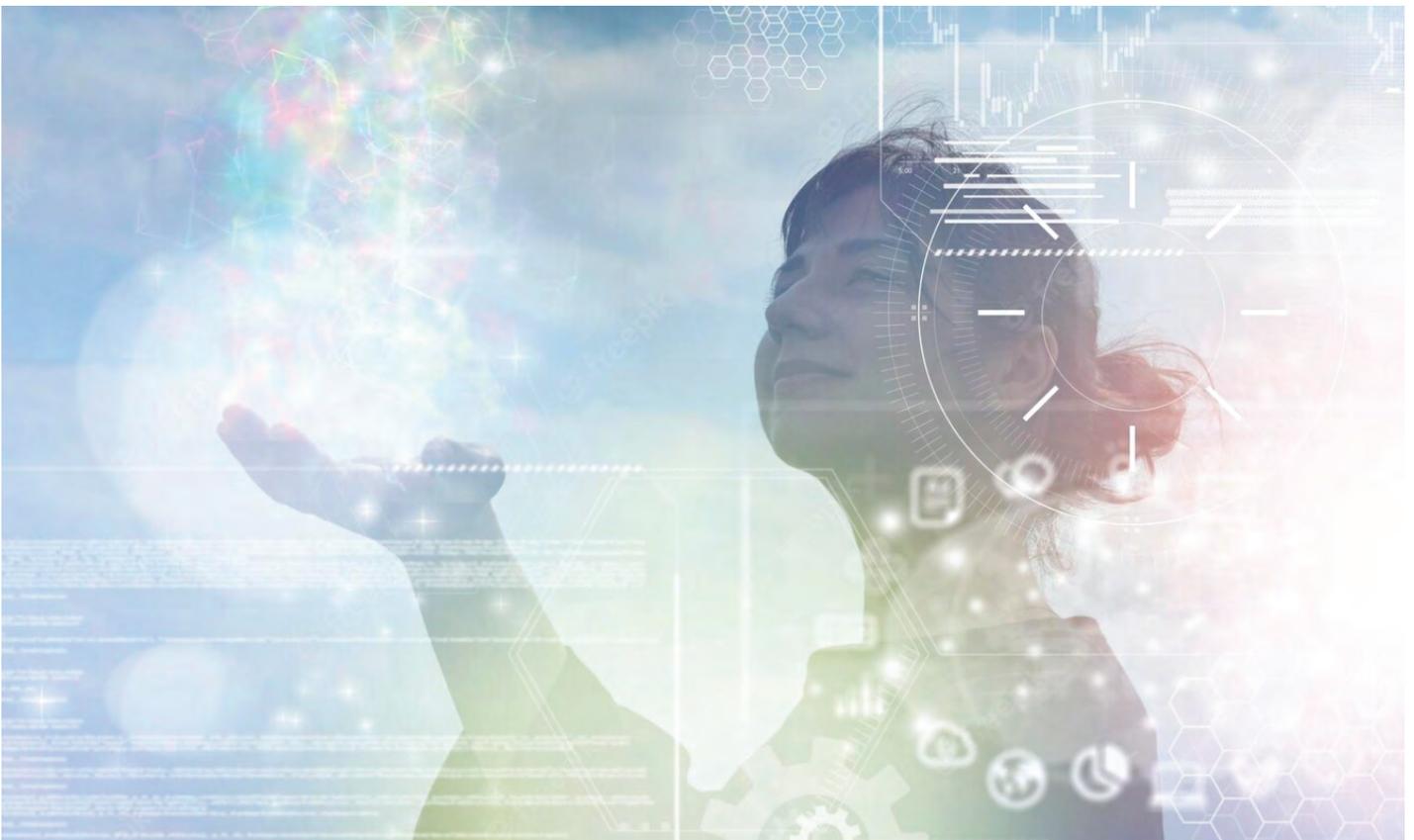
This report is a result of a 360° global study on the challenges and opportunities for high school students and relevant stakeholders in a post-pandemic world concerning higher education choices and decisions. It attempts to provide a holistic convergence of perspectives from high school students (grade 9-12 equivalent), career and college counselors, and universities in the domain of information gathering, dissemination, providing support, and subsequent decision-making in higher education; providing valuable data and insights to assist all stakeholders in making an informed decision concerning life post-high school. Keeping in mind the enormity of the challenge when making an informed choice, it is imperative to investigate multiple layers to understand the nuances. For this purpose, the 2022 IC3 Institute Student Quest Survey included school counselors and universities along with high school students, giving more credibility and corroboration to the findings from the survey. In addition, it dove deeper into understanding the key factors, influencers, perceptions, patterns, trends, and gaps, along with students' preparedness for the transition into post-high school life.



¹UNESCO Institute for Statistics, Secondary education, pupils | Data

The primary objective of the 2022 IC3 Institute Student Quest Survey and report is to ensure that career and college counseling is data-driven and rooted in rigorous scientific research that should address the counselee's critical needs and support the stakeholders involved. The previous years' Student Quest Surveys have done significant service toward understanding what is important for students to make these choices, their preferences, and evolving trends. For example, the 2021 survey unearthed insights that the majority of students prioritize information of careers over country, course, or college as they begin thinking about the choices available and then work backward to make their decisions. However, there isn't much clarity on the level of preparedness of the global student community regarding their transition toward future education and careers. Additionally, the 2022 survey explored the impact this decision-making process has on their life goals, overall well-being, and how they access the support they need to transition into the next phase of their lives.

The first section of the report highlights the primary data insights gathered from each of the three surveys conducted this year. This section essentially focuses on gathering overall trends in the responses and comparisons from previous years. It is followed by a section on thematic insights, subdivided into three broad themes, viz. Access and Visibility, Intents and Impact, and Transitions. While "Access and Visibility" is concerned with the financial aspects of the decision and the counseling support, "Impact and Support" covers the impact of the decision-making process on students as well as the support structures available to them. The theme of "Transitions" focuses on student readiness about transitioning to universities and into a post-pandemic world. The thematic insights are followed by a recommendation section and the conclusion of the report.



Methodology and Data Description

The results of this report are based on a group of three email surveys that were sent to 500+ schools and universities worldwide, seeking responses from students (grades 9 through 12, equivalent). A total of 10,641 students from over 70 countries participated in the student survey, which is 61 percent higher than last year. The counselor survey saw participation from 1,118 counselors, while the institutional survey gathered responses from 111 universities across the globe. The data collection and analysis strictly adhered to the the data protection standards laid down under the General Data Protection Regulation².

Compared to previous years, the 2022 survey witnessed a substantial increase in both in the number of responses and the geographical representation as well. Of the total participants in the student survey, 63 percent were from grades 9 and 10, and the remaining 37 percent were from grades 11 and 12. Grade 11 and 12 students were given a different set of questions compared to grade 9 and 10, depending on the relevance to their stage of decision-making. Similar to previous surveys, the majority of the respondents [about 89 percent] were from the Central Board of Secondary Education [CBSE] or Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations [CISCE], with about 11 percent studied under International Baccalaureate [IB], Cambridge Assessment International Education [CAIE], and different regional boards. 50 percent of the total respondents identified themselves as female, 48.5 percent identified themselves as male, and remaining 1.5 percent represented non-binary, transgender and other gender identities.

Among the participants in the counselor survey, 47 percent of the respondents had at least three years of experience as a professional college or career counselor. 71 percent of counselors identified themselves as female, while 27 percent identified as male. A great sign of encouragement to our efforts was reflected in the fact that more than 80 percent of the counselors indicated their willingness to participate in a focus group interaction to understand the insights from the surveys better.



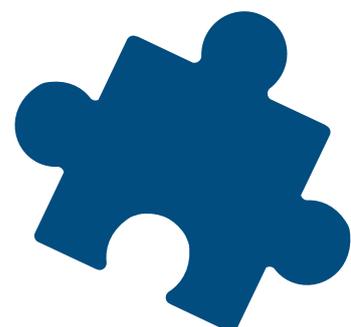
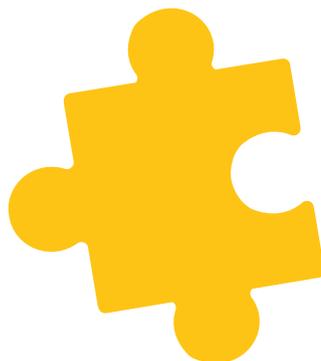
²Regulation (EU) 2016/ 679 of the european parliament and of the council

Surveys at a glance



As mentioned earlier, the Student Quest Survey in 2022 spanned multiple geographies across the globe and covered responses from students, counselors, and institution representatives from 74 different countries. More than 10,000 students, 1,100+ counselors and 100+ institutions make this survey an extensive exercise in understanding the multiple perspectives with regards to making decisions about life post-high school. In this section, this report presents the data highlights and insights from each of the three individual surveys that were conducted.

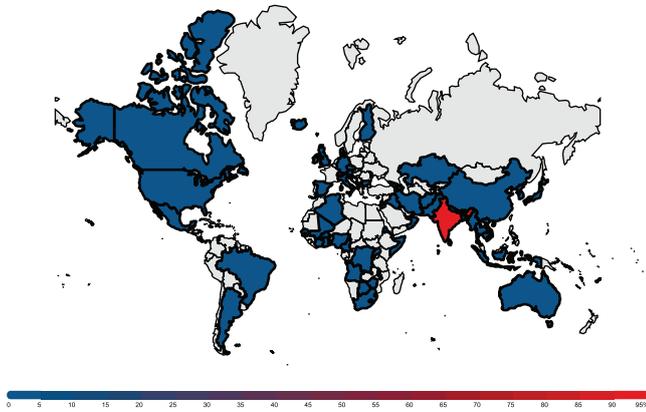
A more detailed analysis of the three surveys has been covered under the thematic insights section, where data regarding overlapping questions in the three surveys has been triangulated to find valuable insights and recommendations.



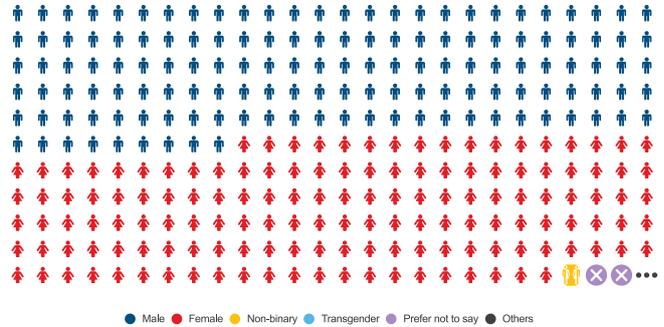
Student Survey



A total of 10,641 students participated in this survey, with highest number of respondents from India.



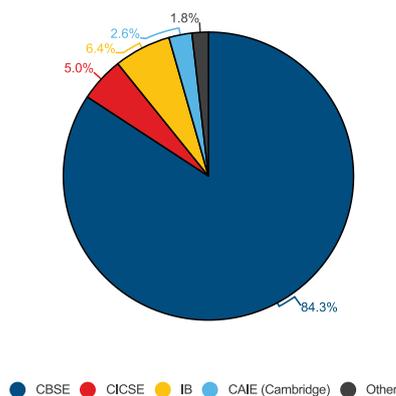
Geographical distribution of the respondents for the Student Survey



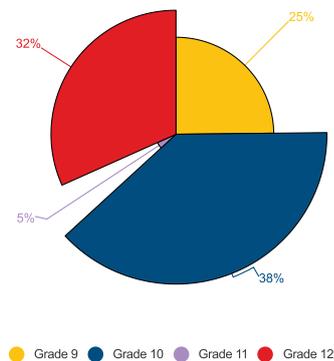
Gender distribution of the respondents for the Student Survey

There is an almost equal split between female [50 percent] and male [48.5 percent] respondents, with some representation from non-binary gender identities. In the 2021 IC3 Institute Student Quest survey, this split has been more in favor of females [56 percent]. In terms of the education boards, roughly 90 percent of the students study under either Central Board of Secondary Education [CBSE] or Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations [CISCE], while about 9 percent of the students study under the international boards like Cambridge Assessment International Education [CAIE] and International Baccalaureate [IB].

Education boards represented in the Student Survey

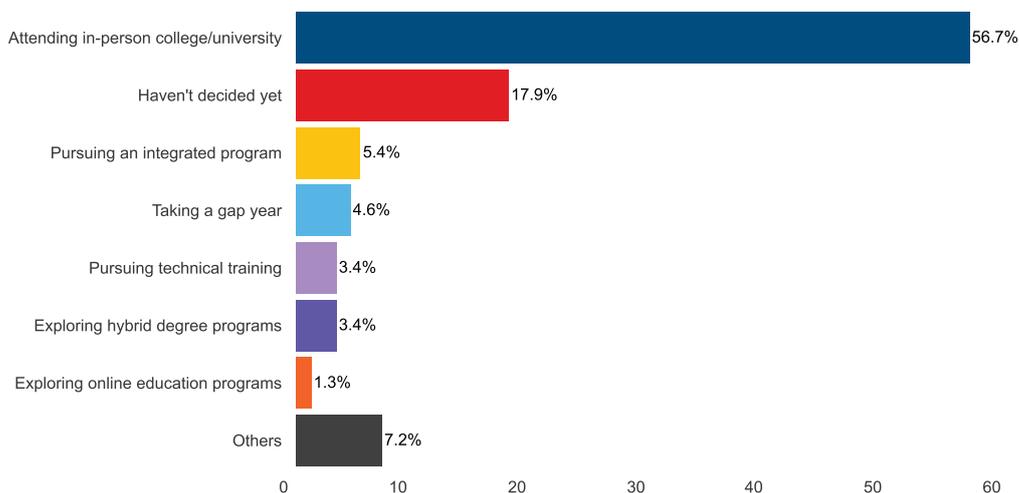


Grade distribution of the respondents for the Student Survey



The survey was disseminated to students from grade 9 to 12 [equivalent], either directly through social media or indirectly through teachers and counselors. It is observed that 70 percent of the students are from grade 10 and 12, with only 5 percent of the students are from grade 11 and remaining 25 percent students from grade 9.

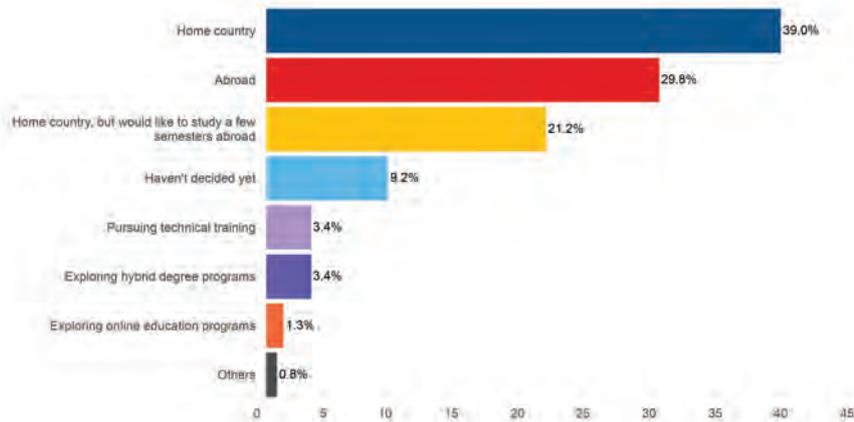
It is hypothesized that this skewed distribution is either due to the fact that most counselors sent the survey to grade 10 and 12 equivalent students on priority as these two grades form the major milestones in multiple schooling systems where students have to make a pivotal decision about their future and career, or that grade 10 and 12 students felt more motivated to respond in comparison to grade 9 and 11. A majority of students [57 percent] indicated that they plan to attend in-person college or university, while only about 5 percent of the students surveyed indicated a preference for online or hybrid education programmes. Most interestingly, 18.5 percent of grade 12 equivalent students said that they have not made up their minds yet. This could either be attributed to a few different reasons, such as that they either haven't consulted anyone (either parents, teachers, or counselors), or that they have been confused between multiple options in front of them and need more guidance, or that they are not committed to one clear choice yet. In either case, it is clear that currently, close to one-fifth of the students, require stronger support in the process of making a decision about their post-schooling options.



Students' plan post high school (Grade 11 and 12)

This year's survey included a unique and exclusive piece that was not covered in any of the previous Student Quest Surveys — the emotions or feelings experienced by the students in this decision making. Students from both groups (grade 9-10 and grade 11-12) responded that the pandemic made them feel anxious and afraid, yet motivated. It was encouraging to observe that the students who have counseling support at school indicated that they are significantly more confident and motivated and less afraid about the decision-making process.

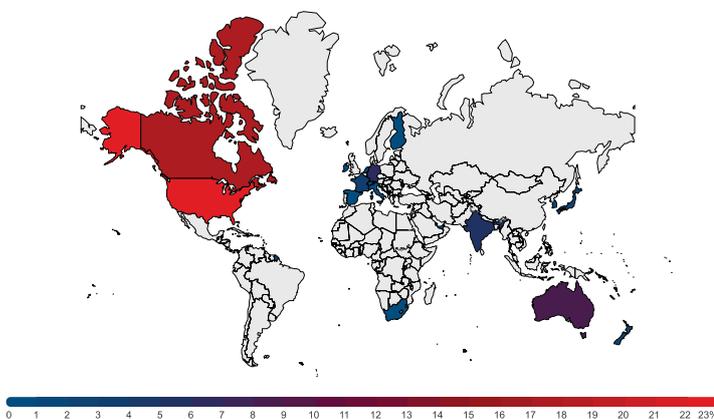
In the importance of post-school life decisions, location is a primary consideration that comes up early in the thought process of a student making this decision. About 39 percent of the students prefer to study in their home countries, while 30 percent want to study abroad. One of the most interesting aspects that came alive through the survey is that 21 percent of students would want to study at home with an option of studying a few semesters abroad. This hadn't been explored in earlier Student Quest Surveys, and indicate that students desire the "best of both worlds" — saving expenses by preferring home countries, yet experiencing international education and culture through brief immersions.



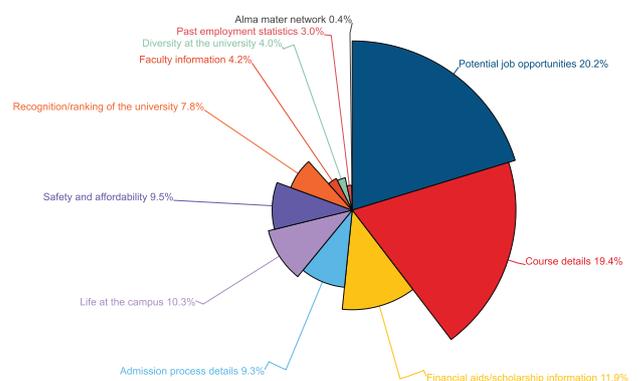
Student preferences if opted to attend in-person college/university option (Grade 11 and 12)

Among those who wish to study abroad, the U.S., U.K., and Canada have retained their spots as the three top choices; however the U.S.'s share has slipped from 32 percent in 2021 to 23 percent this year with both U.K. and Canada benefitting from this decline in preference for the U.S.

Potential job opportunities, course details, financial aid/scholarship information emerged as the top three factors in selection of a university. Ranking and reputation of the university dropped in preference compared to last year, and students chose life at campus, safety, and affordability over institutional ranking, suggesting a welcome broadening in the thought process of the students.

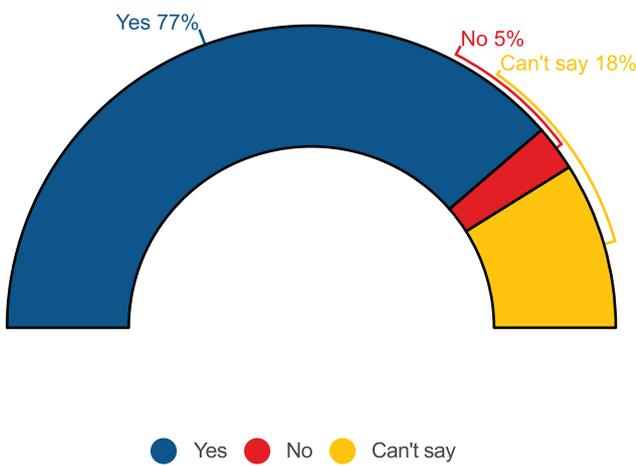


Geographical preference of students for international higher education programs (Grade 11 and 12)

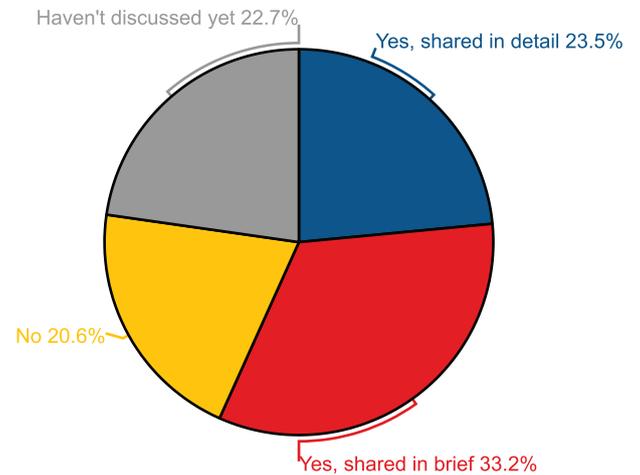


Information points sought by students in a session by universities

Emerging as the most important piece of the decision making in this year's survey is the role of financial accessibility. More than three-fourths of the students (79 percent for grade 11 and 12, 76 percent for grade 9 and 10) agreed that the information about financial budget from their parents is essential in making their decision, however only a fraction of the students (57 percent) have discussed this with their parents in some way. While we expect more of the grade 11 and 12 students to have these financial budgeting conversations, the increase is only marginal — with 59 percent of grade 11 and 12 students talking to their parents as compared to 56 percent students in grade 9 and 10. This evokes the thought of exploring the nuances around sharing financial information within families or with counselors for the purpose of planning and taking decisions. When enquired about the nature of impact that the pandemic has had on their future plans, most students said they didn't see much impact while a third of the students indicated that they faced challenges with respect to financial budgeting.

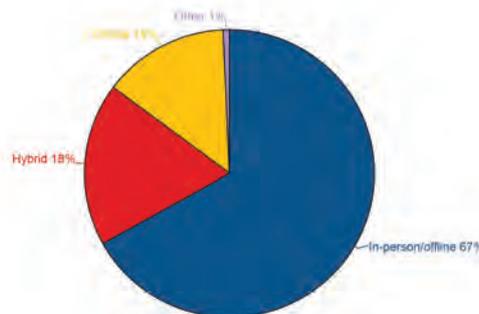


Importance of financial budgeting information necessary in decision making, as per students



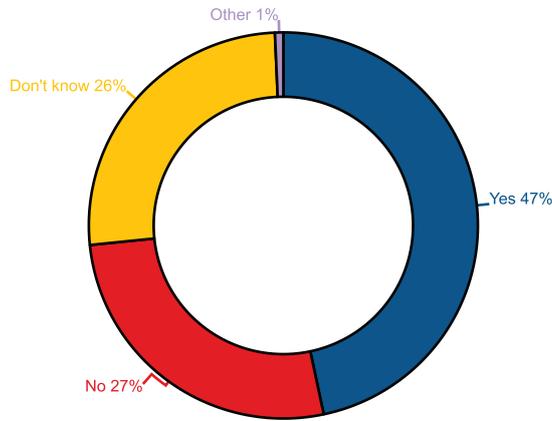
Parents' sharing of financial budgeting information with students

In addition to importance of financial resources, access to quality counseling support has also been explored through the surveys. About two-thirds of the students prefer in-person counseling sessions, followed by hybrid [18 percent], while only 14 percent students prefer online sessions. A clear preference has emerged for face time with counselors among students.

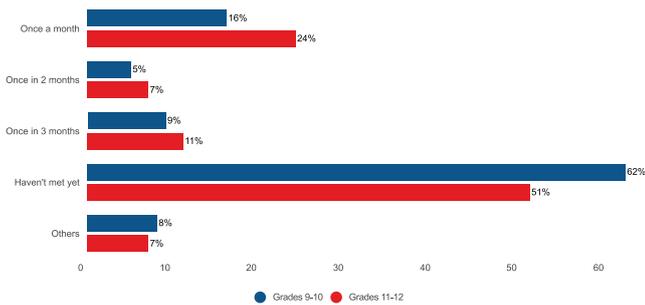


Preference of mode of counseling among students

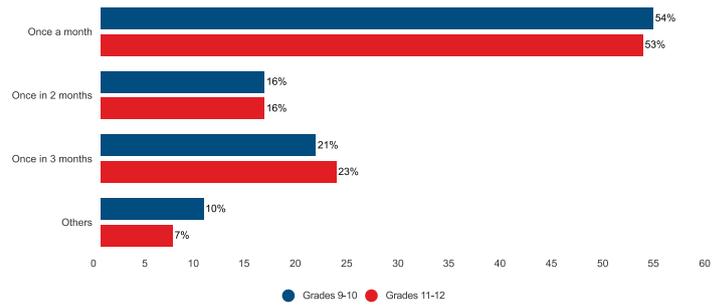
Less than half of the students surveyed indicated that they have a dedicated counselor at their school, but more interestingly about quarter of the students weren't aware of the fact whether they have dedicated counseling support or not.



Students' awareness of counseling support at school

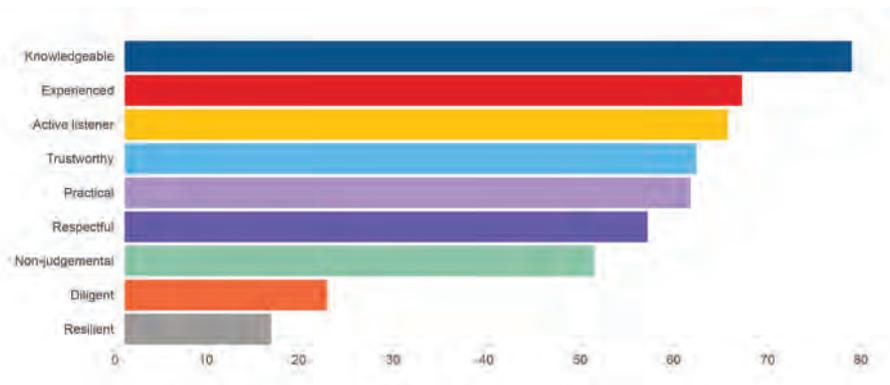


Frequency of conversations with counselors in school



Desired frequency of conversations with counselors in school

Of those who have dedicated counselors, only 61 percent have had conversations. Surprisingly, 51 percent of the students in grade 11 and 12 haven't met the counselors even once. In terms of the desired frequency of meeting with the counselor, once a month is preferred by students [53 percent]. Students indicated that they value counselors who are knowledgeable, experienced, and listen actively. It can be concluded that students seem to value professional skills and experience higher than emotional support-based skills.



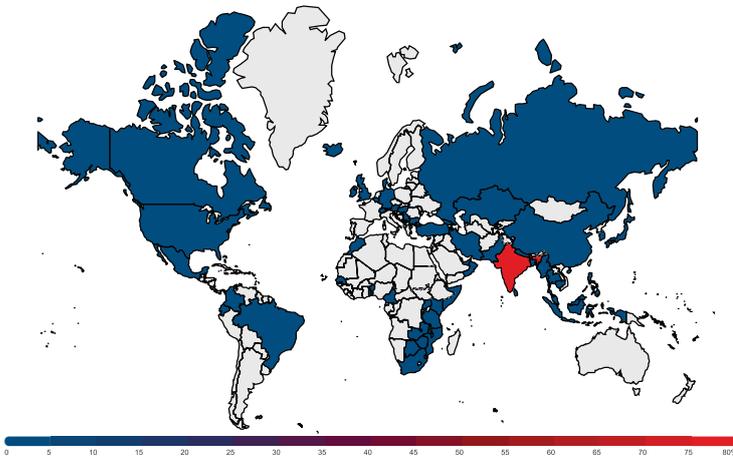
Preferred attributes among counselors, as rated by students

Counselor Survey

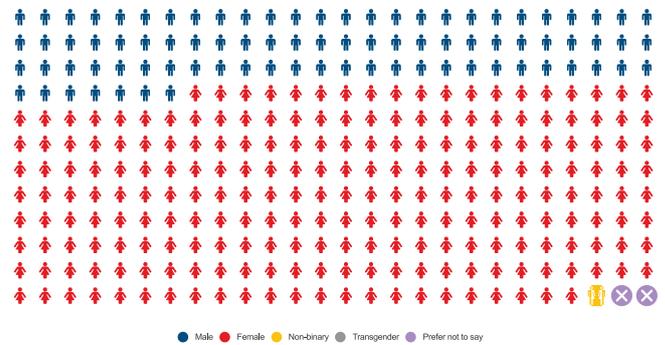


Involving the counselor’s perspective in the survey is one of the key pieces that has been included in this year’s report. The survey was disseminated to counselors within and outside the IC3 network and 1,118 people responded to the survey from across the world, comprising counselors, school staff members, delegates, and other representatives. 87 percent of the responses were from the Indian subcontinent. Indicating a strong gender dominance in the profession, 72 percent of the respondents identified as female, while only 27 percent as male and the remaining 1 percent as non-binary individuals.

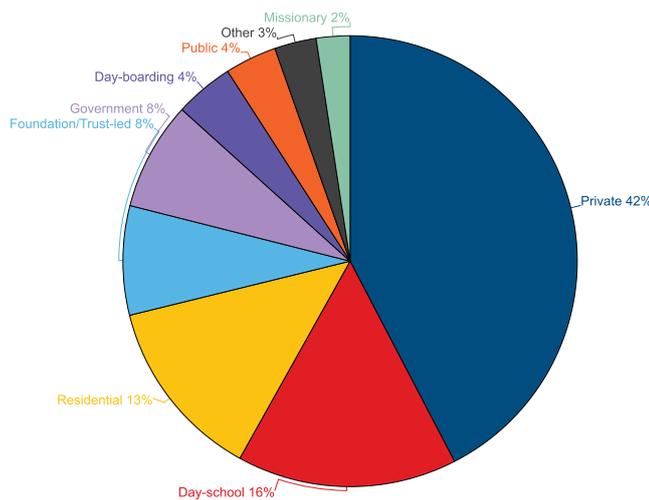
The majority of the respondents represent private institutions (59 percent), followed primarily by day-school (22 percent) and residential (18 percent).



Geographical distribution of the respondents for the Counselor Survey



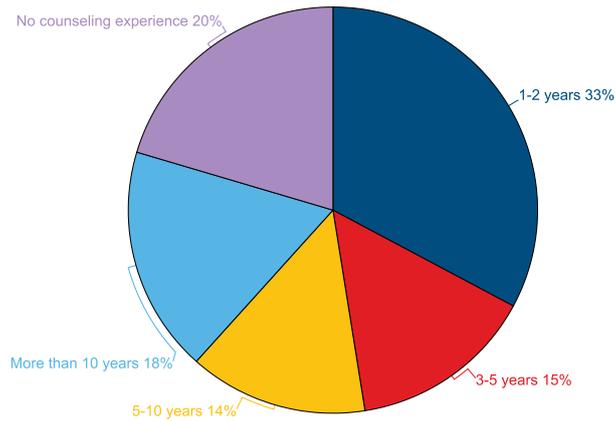
Gender distribution of the respondents for the Counselor Survey



Types of schools represented in the Counselor Survey

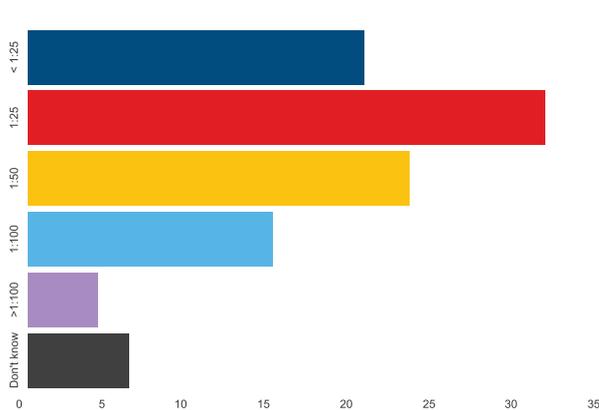
Interesting to note that these three types of institutions tend to be the most expensive on account of the financial requirements to enroll and attend. This evokes an important question on the affordability of dedicated counseling resources and if institutions with limited financial resources have to prioritize other needs over counseling.

It was observed that 66 percent of the counselors have to simultaneously bear the responsibilities of other roles. When exploring the level of experience among the counselors, the majority of them [53 percent] have relatively little experience in the field [less than two years]. A reasonable explanation could be the fact that until recently, career and college counseling was not considered as a formally-recognized and well-organized industry with suitably qualified professionals, with few formal undergraduate/diploma programs available for proper training (especially in South and Southeast Asian countries).

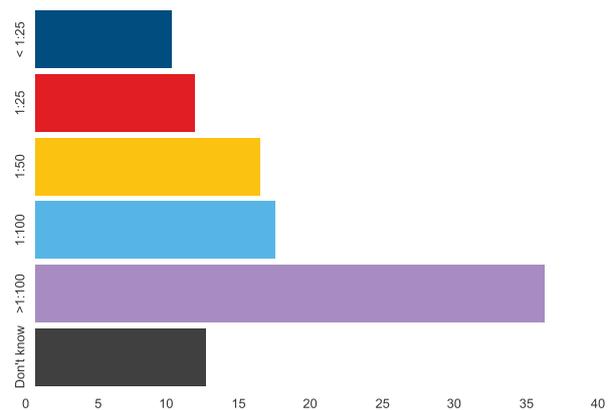


Distribution of experience levels among the counselors

To add to the problem of excess responsibilities and little experience in the field, more than 52 percent of the respondents indicated that the student to counselor ratio in their institution is 100:1 or more, as against the preferred ratio of 50:1 indicated in the survey.

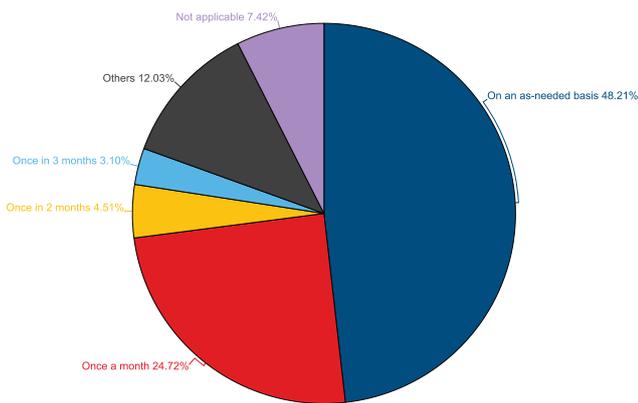


Actual counselor to high-school students ratio (grades 9 to 12)

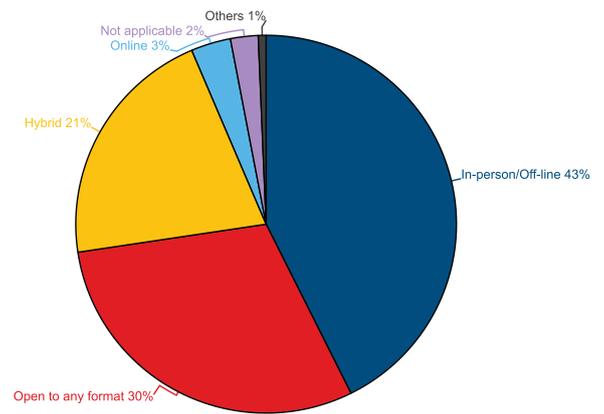


Desired counselor to high-school students ratio (grades 9 to 12)

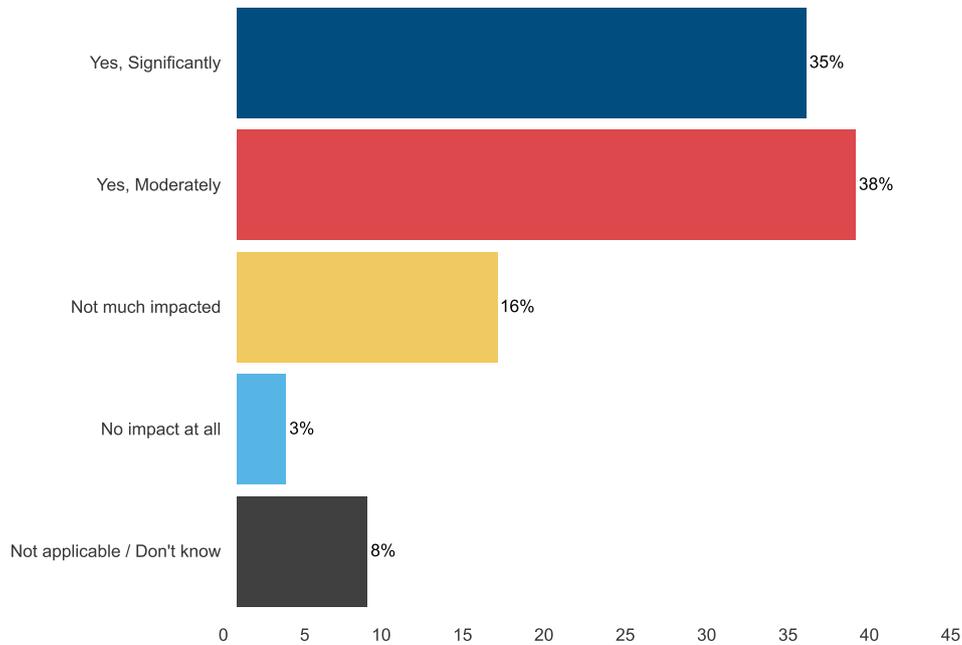
Contrary to the students' preference of a regular once a month counseling conversations, 48 percent of the respondents indicated that they only meet students on an as-needed basis. Much like the students, counselors too prefer to have more face time during conversations, with only about 3 percent preferring online only mode over offline or hybrid mode. They, however, recognize the value of technology in aiding their profession, with 73 percent agreeing that it has improved the frequency and quality of their interactions with the students.



Frequency of conversations by counselors with Students

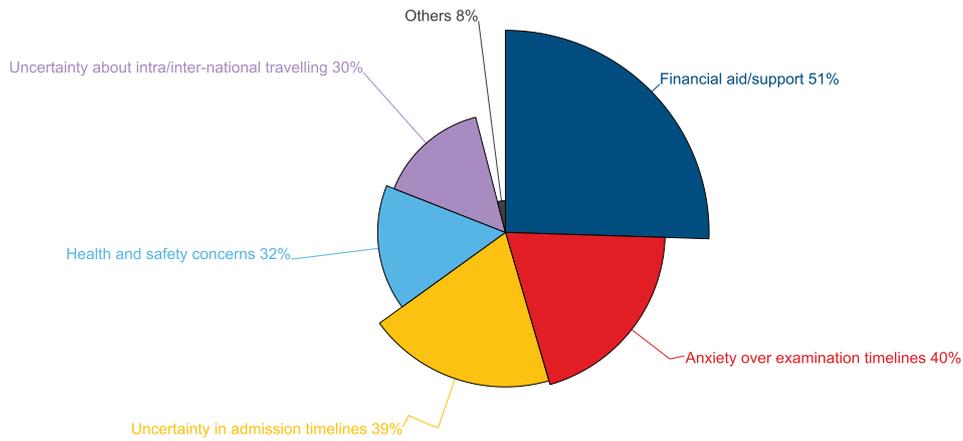


Preference of mode of counseling by counselors



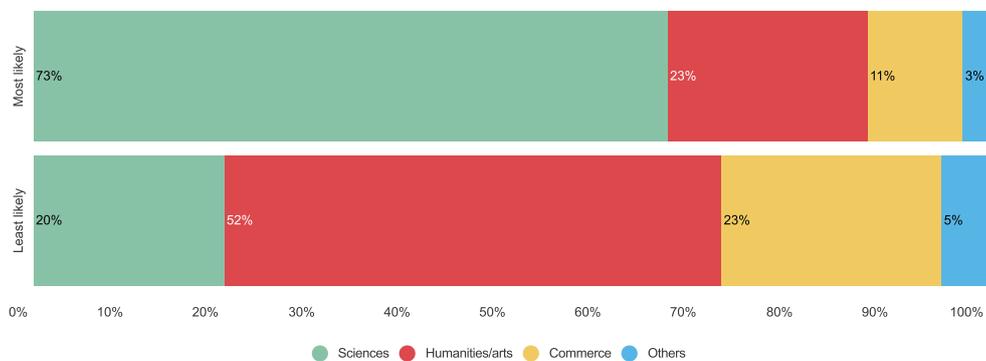
Improvement in Frequency & Quality of Interaction due to Technology

The improvement in access and frequency is not just restricted to students, but to the parents as well. Counselors indicated that 65 percent of parents are at least somewhat involved in counseling conversations. Parents and students have highlighted concerns regarding financial aid/support [51 percent], anxiety over examination timelines [40 percent], and uncertainty in admission timelines [39 percent] as their top three concerns in their interactions with the counselors.



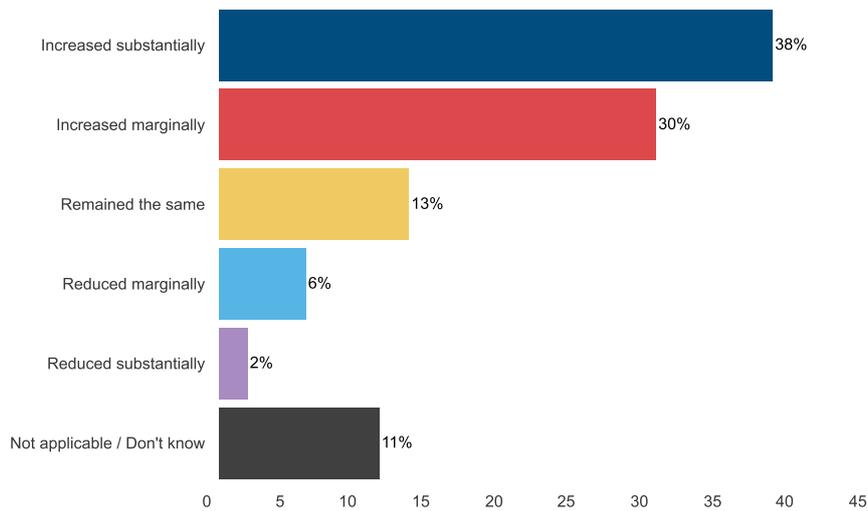
Concerns raised by parents/students to counselors

The surveyed counselors are evenly split on the question of influence of gender on the choice of courses and careers. Many counselors believe that gender-defined roles still play an important part in deciding which course they choose. The most common observations made are indicative of the male students choosing engineering and technology courses, while female students prefer medical, design and humanities. Exploring the trends that emerge in program/course selection, 73 percent of counselors observed that students from the sciences background are more likely to pursue education abroad, while on the other hand 52 percent observed that students from humanities are least likely to do the same.



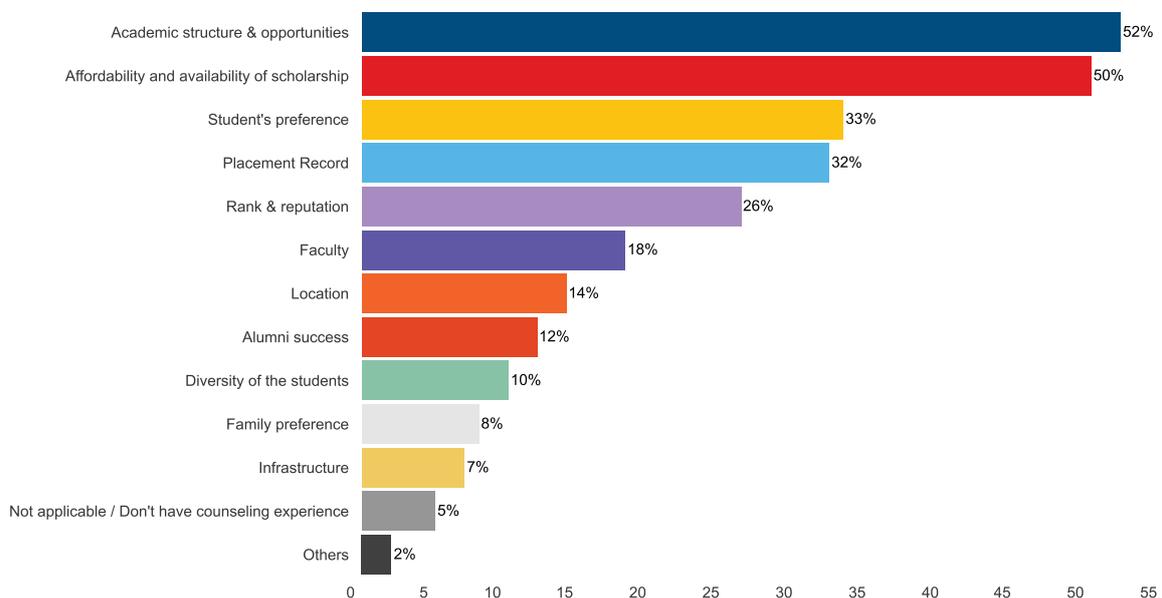
Most likely and least likely subjects to be pursued for higher education outside home country, as per counselors

Counselors also indicated a significant uptick [68 percent] in students pursuing admissions at international colleges or universities. However, when viewed in conjunction with the trend of preferring the home country or a few semesters abroad, it can be hypothesized that this uptick is in response to exploring a lot more options in light of the uncertainty caused by the pandemic and eventually choosing the most reasonable option.



Change in the number of students pursuing admission at international colleges

When it comes to recommending university options to students, counselors said that they highlight potential university options based on their academic structure and opportunities (52 percent), affordability, and availability of scholarship (50 percent), students' own preferences (33 percent), an institution's placement record (32 percent), and their ranking and reputation (26 percent).

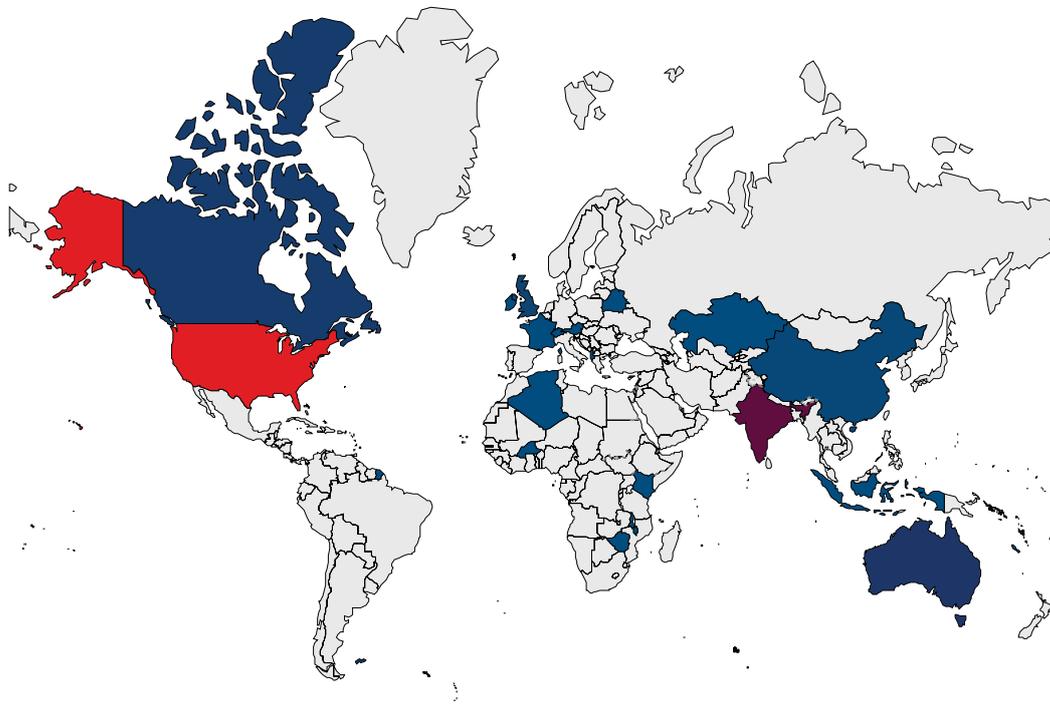


Factors based on which counselors recommend university options to students

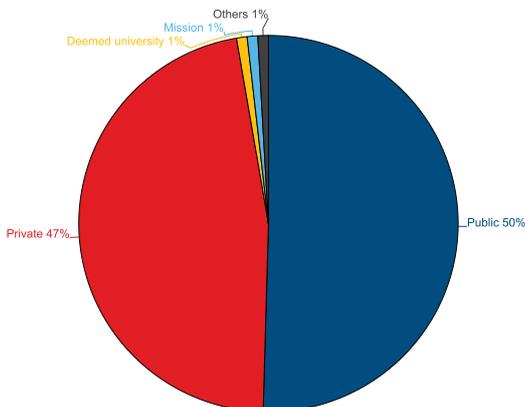
Institution Survey



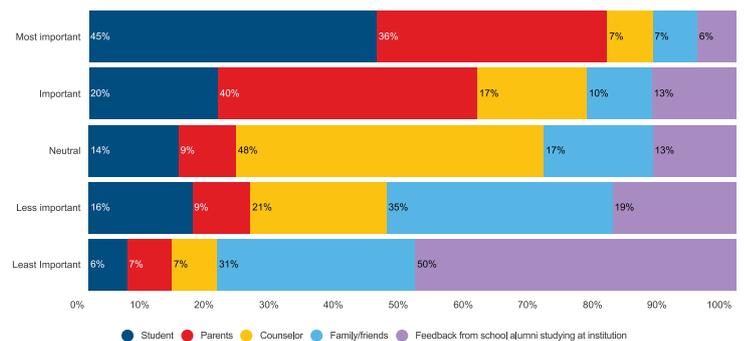
Similar to the counselors' perspective, inclusion of the institutional view on the issues that concern student decision-making is a pivotal addition to the survey in 2022. It seems imperative that all relevant stakeholder opinions are considered to understand the larger picture, completing the loop in this thread. The survey gathered 111 responses from institutions from 21 different countries. The U.S., India, Australia, Canada and the U.K. are most represented. Representation from the public [50 percent] and private [47 percent] institutes is almost the same. At a broad level, institution respondents believed that parents had a greater influence than the student themselves in final choices.



Geographical distribution of the respondents for the Institution Survey

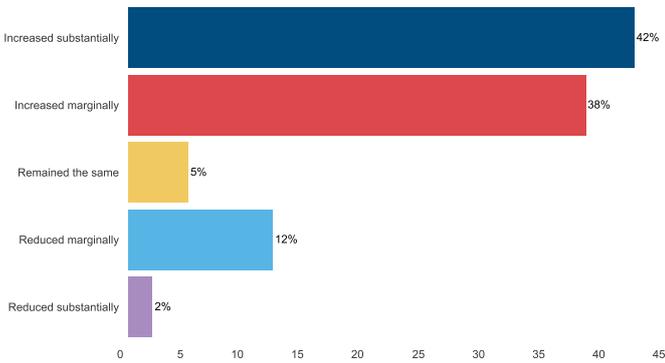


Types of institutions represented in the Institution Survey

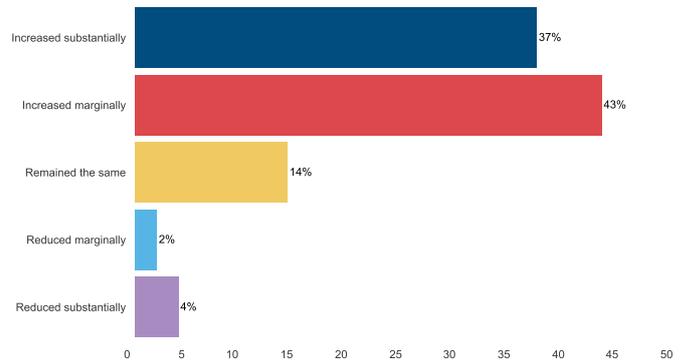


Most influential persons in the decision making process, according to institutions

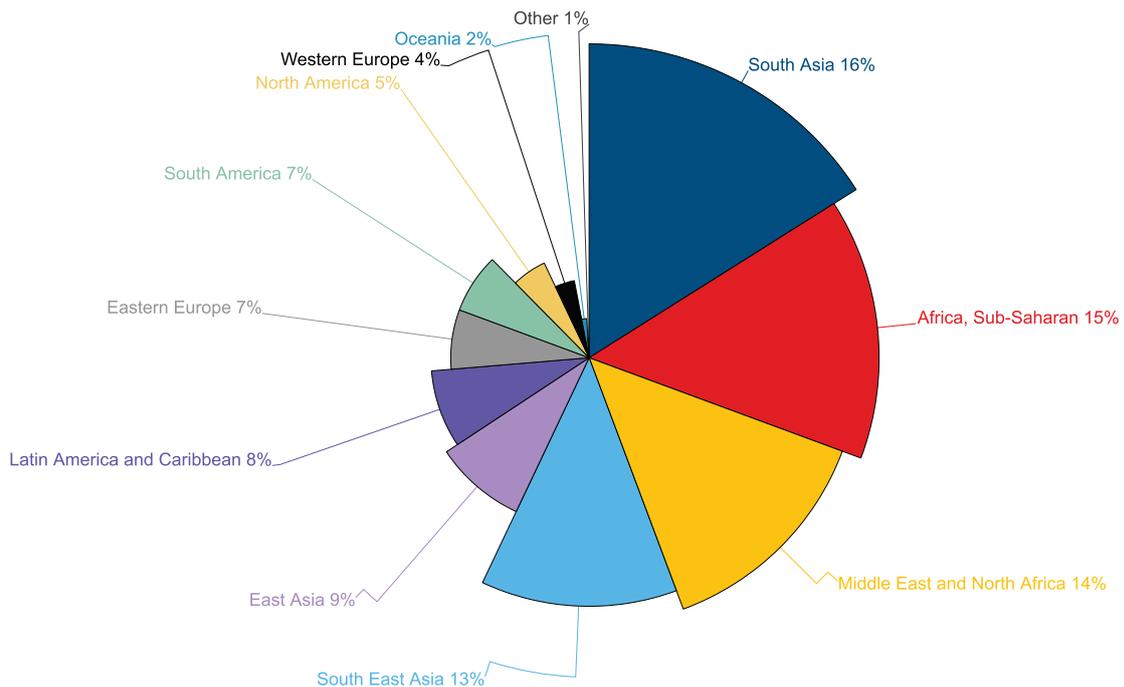
Institutions have seen an increase in applications in the last couple of years. 80 percent of institutions observed an increase in the number of applications received in comparison to pre-COVID. 42 percent report substantial increase and 38 percent report marginal increase in applications. However, only 47 percent of institutions have reported marginal increase in enrollments, suggesting students are applying to more institutions to keep options open for flexibility considering the changing and varying policies across different countries. They have also seen a clear increase in the applications from a diverse international pool. 43 percent of institutions indicate they have seen marginal increase in regional diversity and 37 percent indicated significant increase. Most of the increased interest came from South Asia, Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, and Southeast Asia.



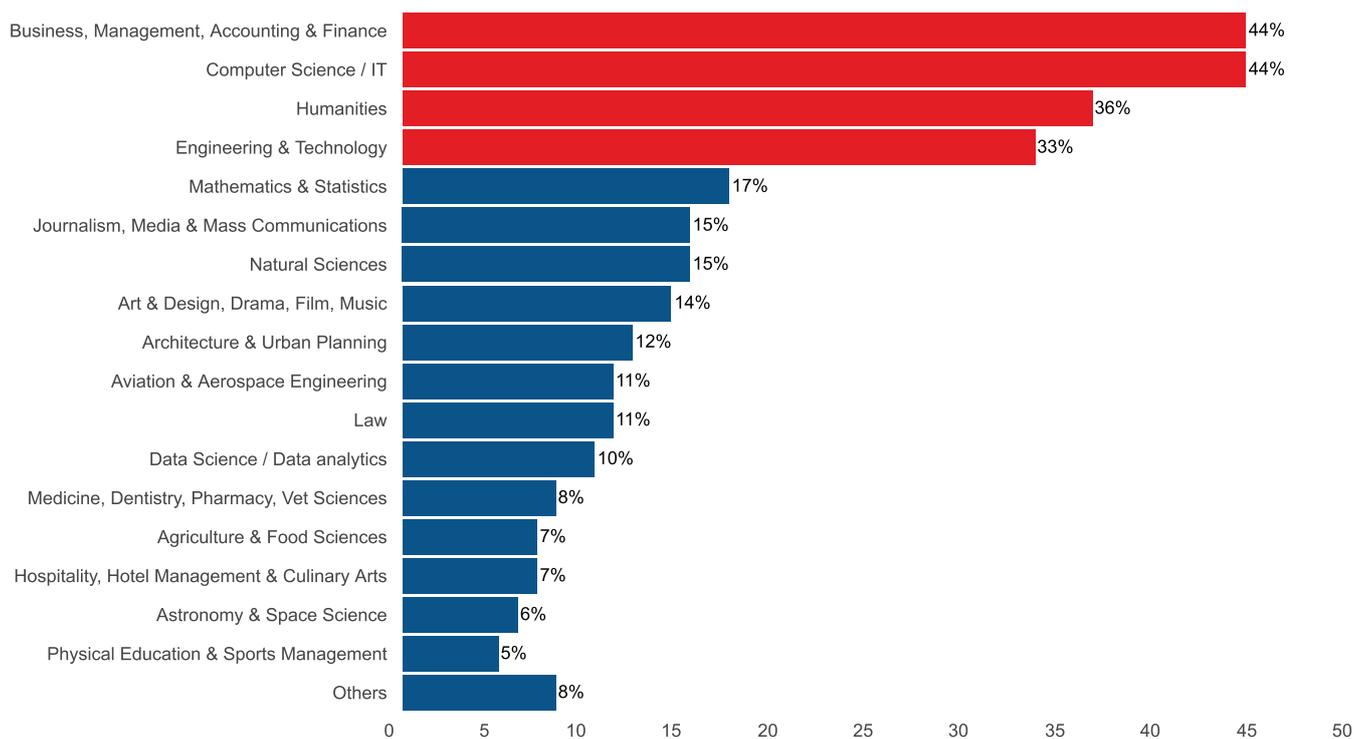
Change in the number of applications received in comparison to pre-COVID



Increase in the regional diversity of applications received in comparison to pre-COVID

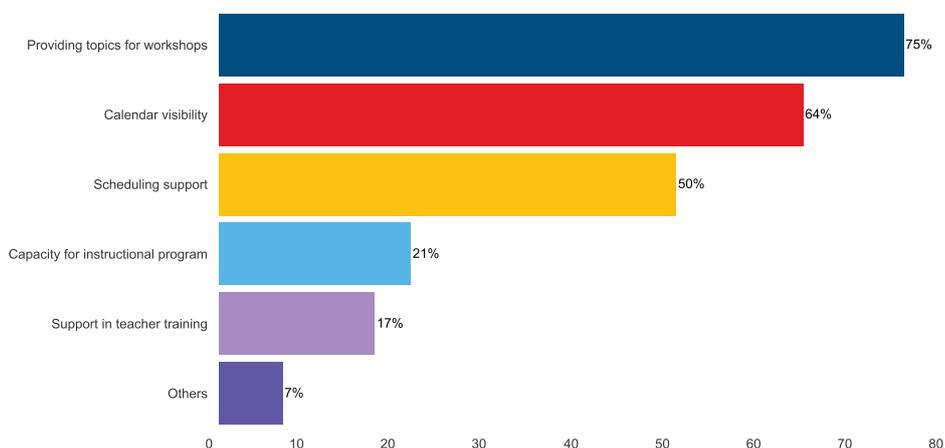


Geographical distribution of the increased regional diversity



Programs with increase in enrollment in the last two years

Along with improved opportunities for the institutions, come pertinent challenges. 72 percent of institutions identified access to students/schools as the biggest challenge engaging with schools post-COVID, leading to explore the question why access to schools and counselors is constrained while applications are increasing. 75 percent of institutions require high schools to assist them better by providing them with workshop topics to be conducted, while 64 percent sought better calendar visibility from high schools, highlighting the need to know the requirements of content and indication of suitable timing in order to provide meaningful support. When speaking/addressing students, overall institutions equally prioritize disseminating information on program details and financial aid/scholarship, followed by potential job opportunities, life on campus, and the admissions process respectively.

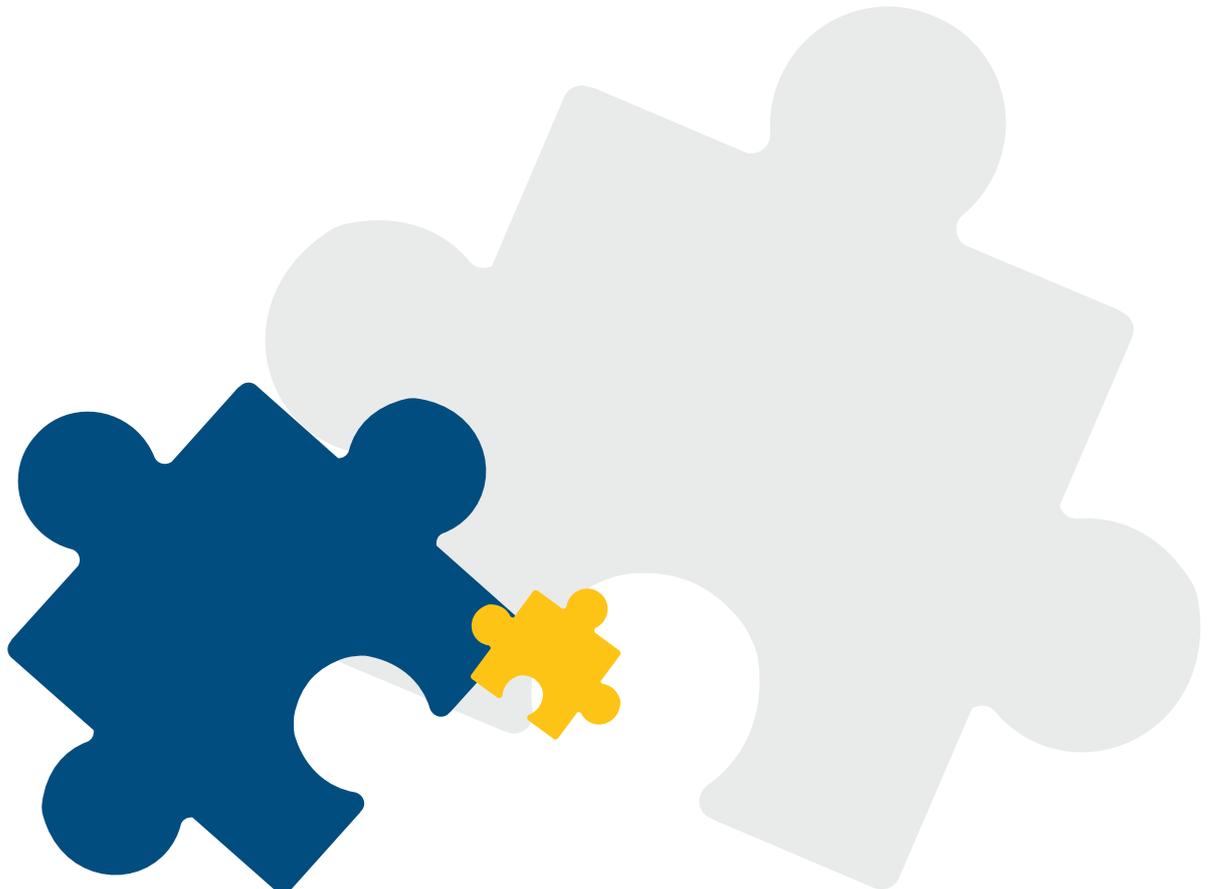


Areas of Support Institutions seek from Schools

Regional variances were observed on priority information disseminated by the institutions are shown in the visualization below.



Information prioritization by institutions as per region





One of the key learnings from previous iterations has been to include a more detailed analysis of the patterns and themes that emerge. The 2022 IC3 Institute Student Quest Survey delves into details of new areas of exploration for this year, like exploring the impact of the decision-making process on students, how both the perception and accessibility for counselors' support varies from different stakeholders' perspectives, and whether students are prepared for the transition out of school into their chosen career, among many others.

This section of the report is divided into three major themes, each of which is further divided into two sub-themes. The insights for each of the themes are a combination of learning and insights from all three surveys conducted in 2022, and hence provides a more comprehensive picture of the dynamic and evolving counseling landscape in a post-pandemic world. It is in essence a triangulation of data and its interpretation to bring out both the commonalities and gaps in perception and reality.



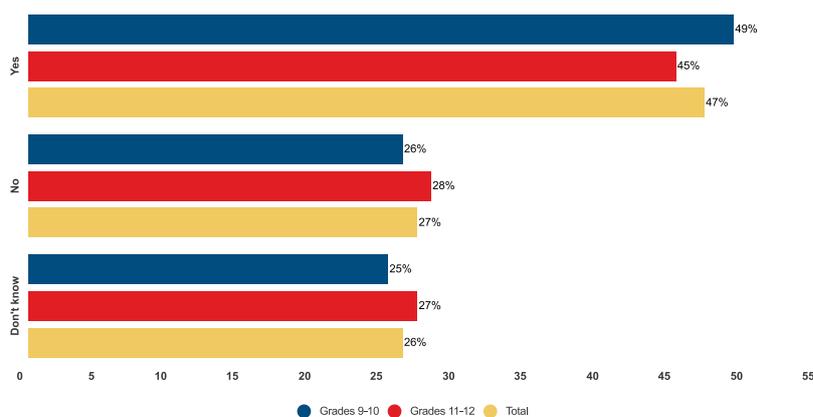
Theme A: Access and Visibility



In light of global restrictions on movement and physical accessibility in the last two years, this subsection deals with understanding the stakeholders' access and visibility of various relevant information, resources, opportunities and tools to facilitate an informed decision for higher education. The insights under this theme are divided into subsections of "Counseling support" and "Financial aspects".

1. Counseling Support

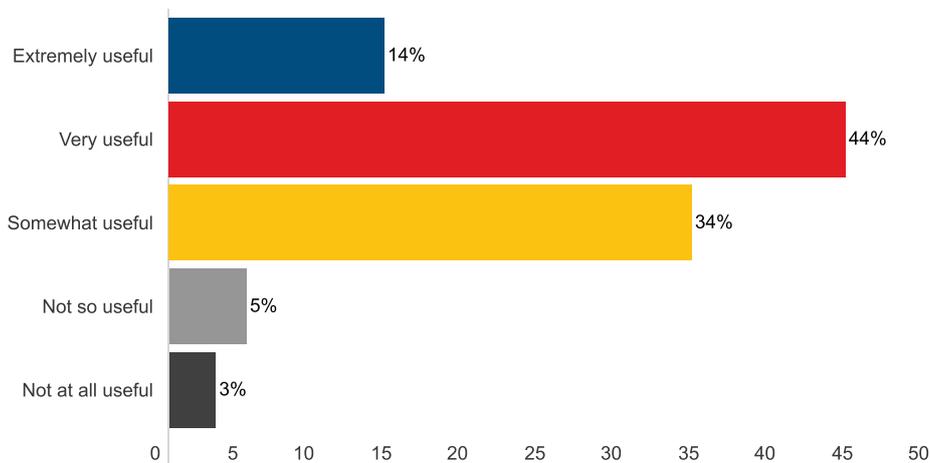
The most fundamental requirement to ensure that counseling helps students in making sound decisions is that students have required access to counseling services and relevant resources. The data from the survey indicates that only 47 percent of students are aware of the dedicated counseling support available to them at schools [49 percent from grades 9 & 10 and 45 percent from grades 11 & 12]. However, it was worrying to note that more than a quarter of the high school students did not know whether they had a counseling support system at the school — leading to the importance of ensuring visibility along with enabling access. Improving counseling services at school would be a moot point, if the students themselves are not aware of its existence.



Grade wise awareness of access to counseling support in schools

Furthermore, among the students who indicated that they have counseling support at school, only 65 percent have had career and college-oriented conversations with them and nearly 92 percent of these students found the conversations helpful. Even though the survey showed a significant increase of 8 percent among students seeking counseling as they moved to grades 11-12 from grades 9-10, the overall lack of coverage is worrying. This observation, when viewed in conjunction with the responses from the counselor survey in which respondents indicated that more than 65 percent of them have additional responsibilities to bear at schools and that 52 percent of schools have counselor-to-students ratio of 1:100 or more, is straightforward to conclude that students have not been able to get more desirable access due to the way this role is constructed and positioned in school.



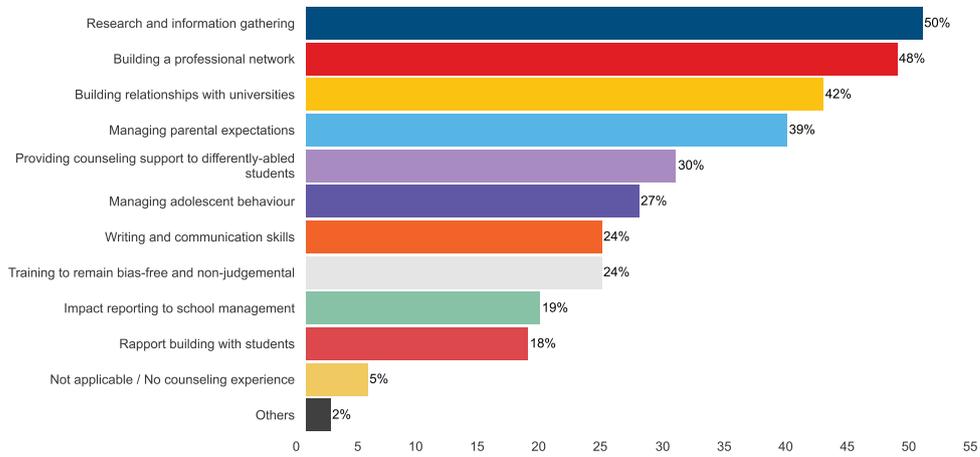


Quality of counseling interactions in schools

This has led to 51 percent of grade 11-12 students not having even the first level of access to counseling services. While the majority of students (53 percent) prefer to meet counselors once a month, counselors have met with students only on an as-needed basis (48 percent).

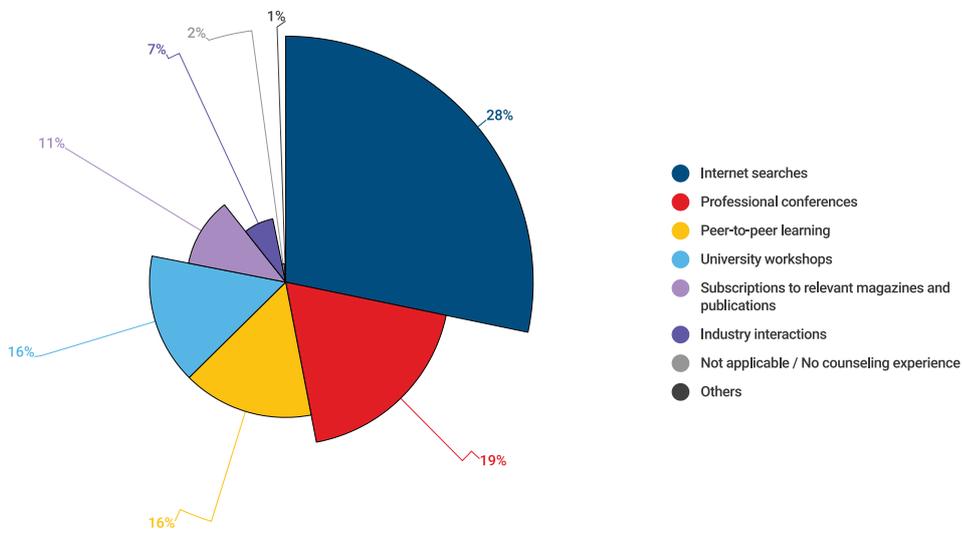
On the topic of preferred mode of counseling interactions, most counselors (43 percent) prefer an in-person mode for career counseling over online or hybrid, while two-thirds of the students prefer in-person counseling. The shift to virtual mode seemed to have kept the continuity in some cases and may have led to disconnect or break in some other cases. Deprivation in the last two years could also be the reason for a higher percentage of students and counselors desiring face time, experiencing a higher quality interaction in person. When it comes to identifying qualities that students admire in counselors, they indicated that counselors who are knowledgeable, experienced, and active listeners are valued higher than others. Students seem to value the counselors for their domain knowledge and expertise, along with the need for listening as they want to be heard. Students have indicated that they want counselors' support in gathering information regarding universities, courses and curriculum, and looking at support for developing self-understanding — indicating a positive outlook from them. Out of the areas mentioned, students have found the input most useful in analyzing their personal strengths and weaknesses, shortlisting universities and courses, and mentorship. Therefore, it would be true to say that students are finding value in their interactions with the counselors and that they have clarity in their requirements.

In order to keep themselves valuable with their support to students, counselors feel that they need most support on skill-building with respect to research and information gathering, creating a professional network, building relationships with universities, and managing parental expectations.



Support and training needs of counselors

80 percent of the counselors use the internet to stay abreast of the latest updates and information relevant to their professional development.



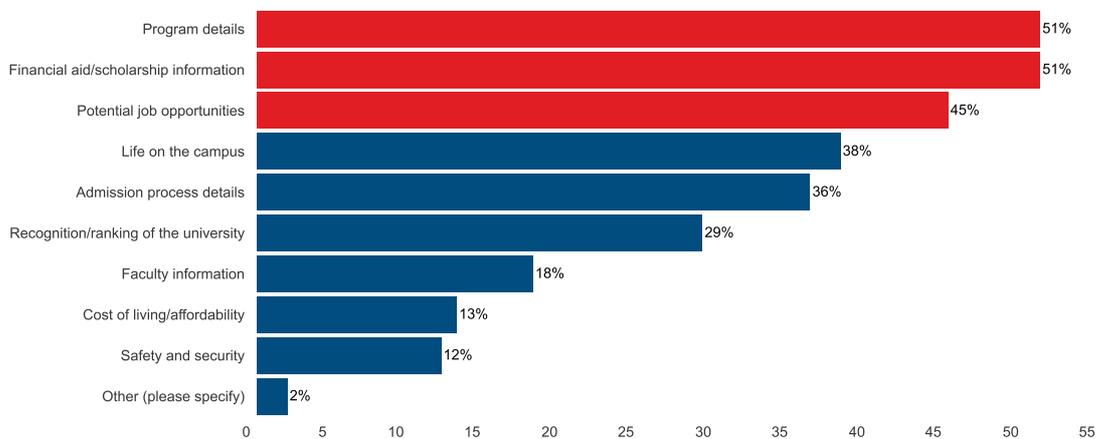
How do counselors keep themselves updated?

It is good to note that a majority of institutions [52 percent] do conduct teacher training or professional development workshops for their high school partners. More needs to be known about these programs and how schools will be able to access and leverage them. With increasing demand for skilled and experienced college and career counselors, there is a tremendous scope for building training programs to meet the needs of skill-building particularly in the areas of soft skills for the counselor-listening, managing expectations, and mentorship models.

2. Visibility of financial budgets for higher education

Higher education comes with its own share of expenses, whether it is the tuition fee, traveling costs, or living expenses. Despite high costs, it is generally viewed as a long-term investment to build relevant skills for employability. Budgeting the costs is one of the key steps that parents and students undertake before making a decision. When asked about the information that students seek from a university in order to make a decision about higher education, potential job opportunities and financial aid/scholarships rank first and third respectively in priority.

This observation is clearly indicative of a preference for understanding the financial requirements, budgets, consequences, and support as offered by the different institutions available. It is also worth noting that the same pattern is corroborated by the counselor survey where respondents have indicated financial aid or support (51 percent) as the most reported concern by parents and students in their conversations with them. Similarly, institutions have taken cognizance of increasing demand for this information, and hence financial aid (51 percent) and potential job opportunities (45 percent) have been reported as the most prioritized information disseminated by them.

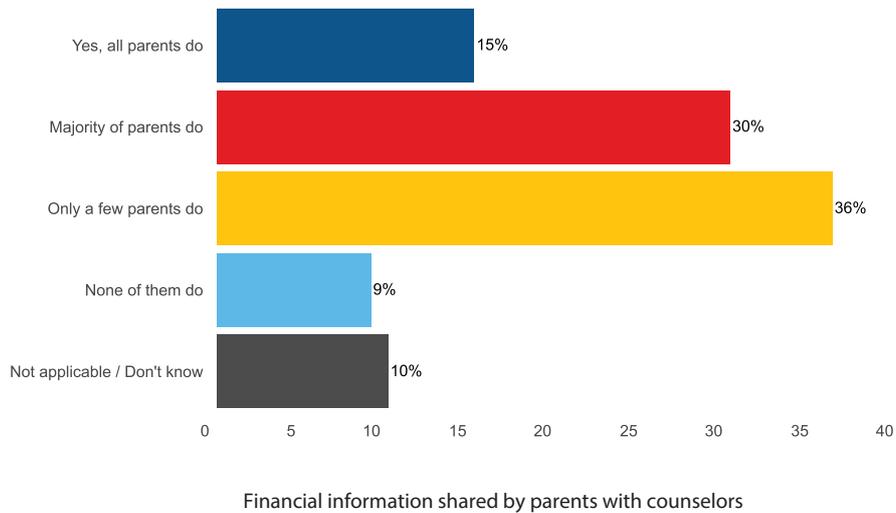


Prioritized information as disseminated by Institutions

When this preference for information is compared to last year's Student Quest Survey, ranking and reputation of the university has seen a decline, and students chose life at campus, safety, and affordability over ranking. It could be argued that apprehensions regarding safety and affordability could be induced due to pandemic-related concerns.

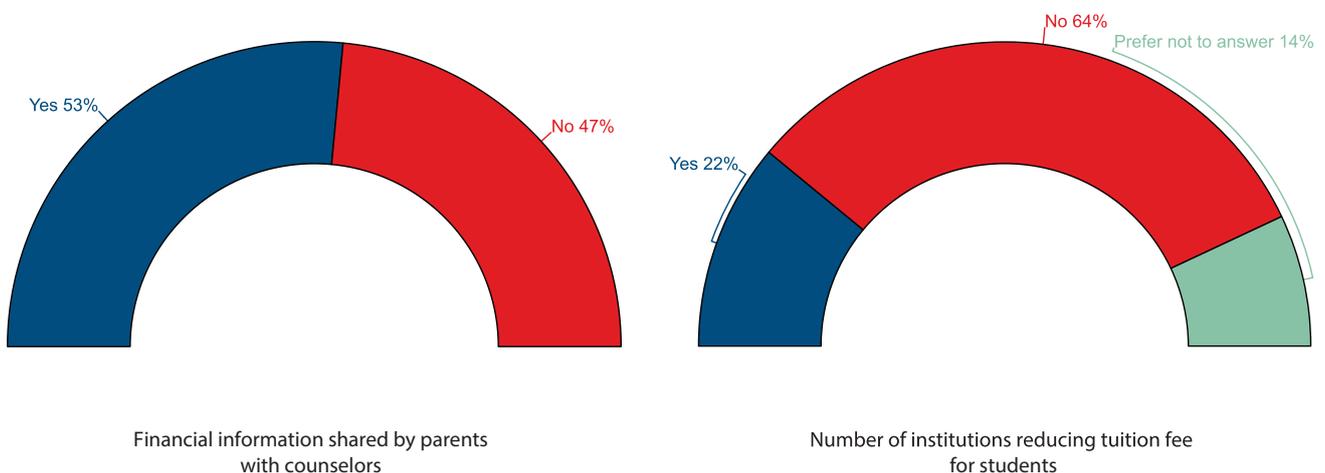
As the survey explored these concerns about finances, more than three-fourths (77 percent) of the students agreed that financial budgeting information is an essential piece of the puzzle. However, only about 23 percent of the parents have shared financial information in detail with the students and about one-thirds have only shared it briefly. While it is encouraging to observe that students are increasingly becoming cognizant of the financial requirements, the gap between the perceived importance and actual conversations is immense.

The counselor survey also highlights this gap, where only 15 percent of the respondents said that all parents share the financial and logistical constraints with them.

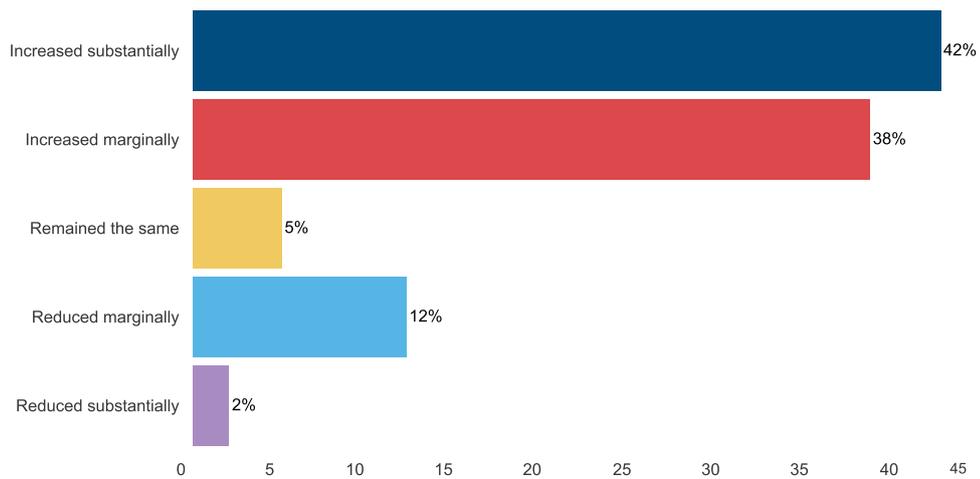


This observed gap can be attributed to a variety of reasons, such as cultural constraints that restrict children from initiating such conversations with parents, or parents' hesitation in burdening the children with issues that are out of their control, or even the uncertainty about the actual total cost over the entire duration of the education.

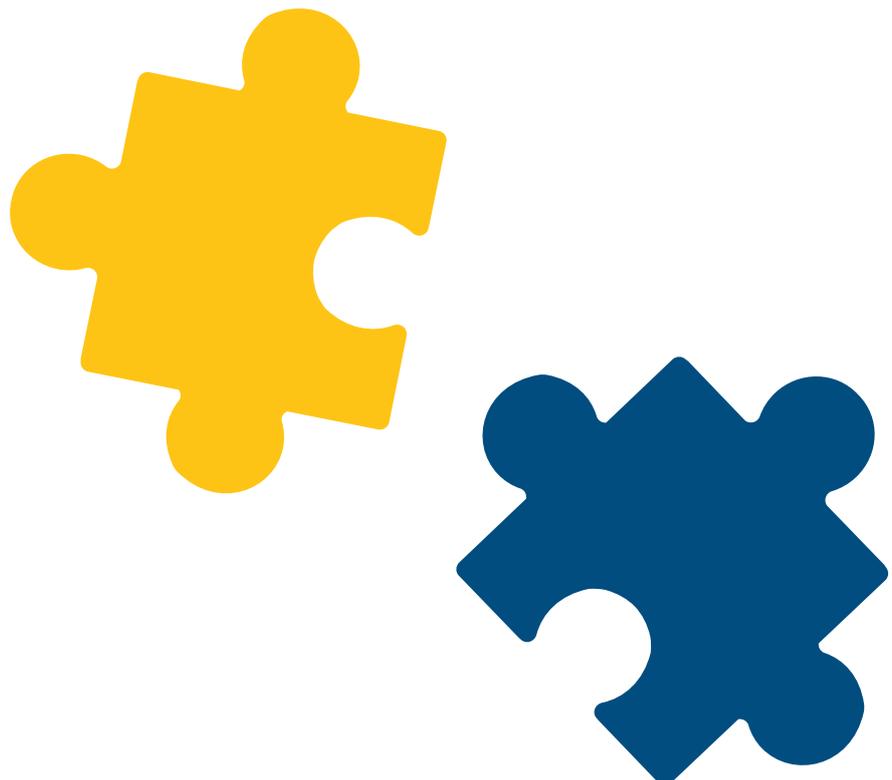
The survey makes it apparent that the information regarding financial budgeting is highly sought after by students, parents, and counselors. This has led to institutions increasing visibility to the financial budgeting information in their sessions and websites. Along with this, 53 percent of the institutions that took part in the survey said that they had to increase the number of scholarships and financial aid or tuition fee reductions to secure students' enrollments over the last year, even though 64 percent of the institutions did not reduce the fees for students attending in a virtual capacity. This appears to be a recent trend and reconfirming COVID-19 as a reason.



While 80 percent of institutions reported that enrollment has increased significantly in the last two years, only 53 percent have increased aid. In Australia, however, 25 percent of institutions said that enrollment has reduced substantially, potentially attributed to visa and immigration issues. Overall, even though institutions have not reduced the fees, the enrollments are on the rise. It seems that students and parents are relying on other sources to ensure that their concerns on finances are taken care of. The concern regarding finance has emerged from all stakeholders, but its impact observed from data is not as strong as perceived through anecdotes.



Increase in the number of enrollments in the last two years



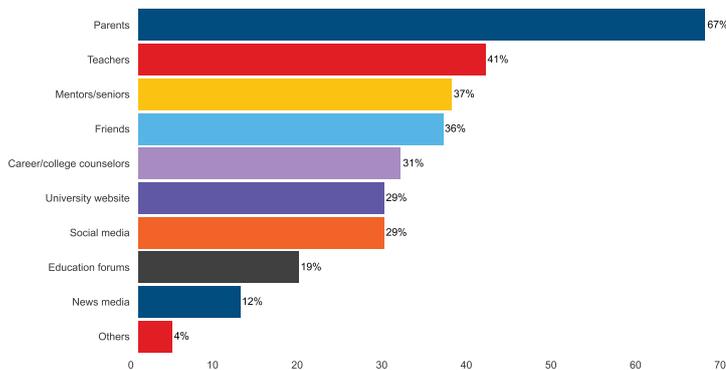
Theme B: Impact and Support Structures



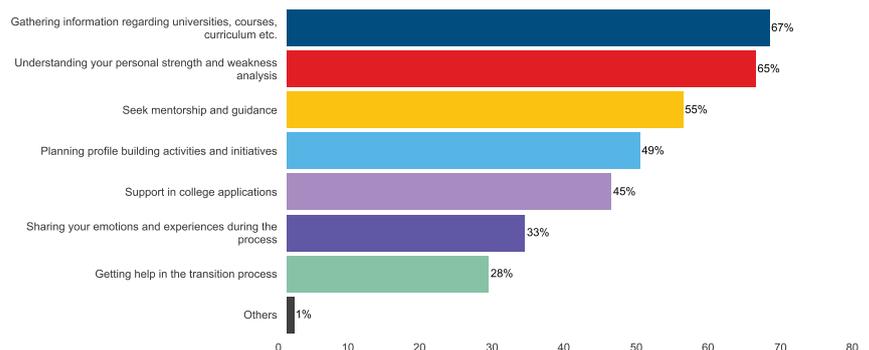
The second major theme emerging from the surveys focuses on the impact that the process involved in making the critical decisions about post-school opportunities has on the students, and the role that counselors and institutions play in addressing these. The insights under this theme are divided into subsections of “Support structures for students and counselors” and “Impact of the decision-making process on students.”

1. Support structures for students and counselors

It is apparent from the observations made through this survey that students find the decision-making process anxiety-laden and overwhelming. Therefore, it is imperative that the report also explores the avenues and extent of the support systems available to them. This will allow us to identify additional improvement opportunities to strengthen the support that students receive. Most students from grades 9-12 reach out to parents, teachers, mentors/seniors and friends for support in gathering information and making decisions. The survey observed that counselors rank lower on the priority list for support. Potential explanations could be that the schools do not have enough counselors, the access to counselors is limited, or the quality of guidance provided — further accentuating the urgent need to improve both the quantity and quality of counseling access to students in their learning environments.

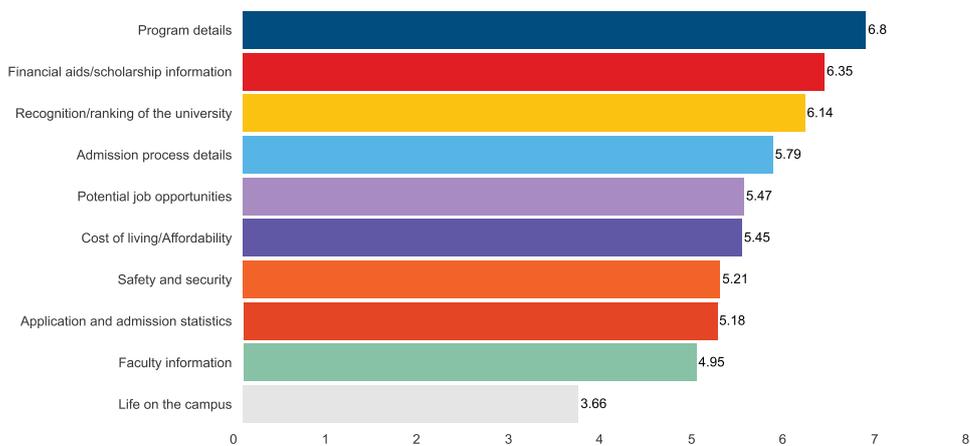


Support system for students during the decision making process



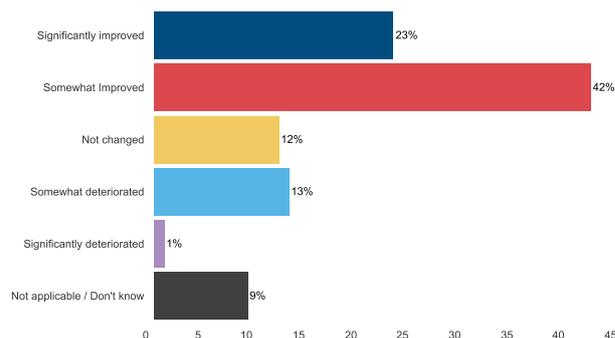
Need of counselors' support in the decision making process, as per students

Even with a lower ranking of counselors in the support priority, students do value input from their counselors in the areas of identifying personal strengths and weaknesses, shortlisting university and course options, and their mentorship. Students also seek out support in terms of critical information from the institutions, with the top three areas being potential job opportunities, program/course details, and financial aid/scholarship information. This is also corroborated by counselor survey responses where the data observed indicates that information from universities regarding program details, financial aid/scholarship, and recognition/ranking of the university are the three most valuable pieces of information for career counseling sessions respectively. Other information (in order) include admission process details, potential job opportunities, cost of living/affordability, safety and security, application and admission statistics, faculty information and life on the campus.



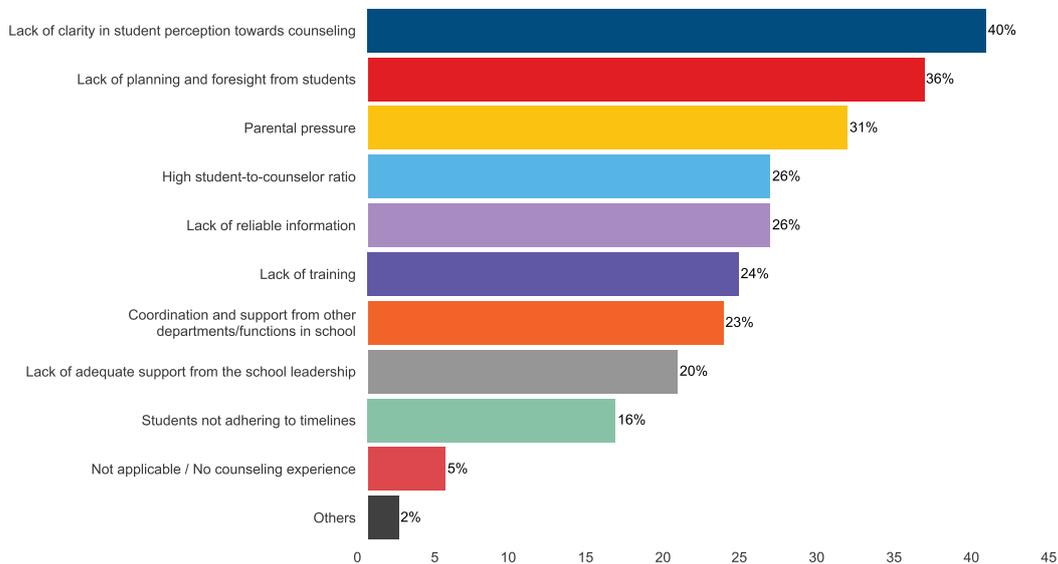
Most valued information/ support area from institutions according to counselors

Assessing the impact of technology’s use in accessing counseling services, the majority of respondents (73 percent) believe that it has impacted the quality and frequency of their interactions with students, and 65 percent believe that it has improved students’ access and perception of counseling. More than 80 percent of the counselors use internet searches to keep themselves updated with the latest trends in career/college guidance and the changing world of work.



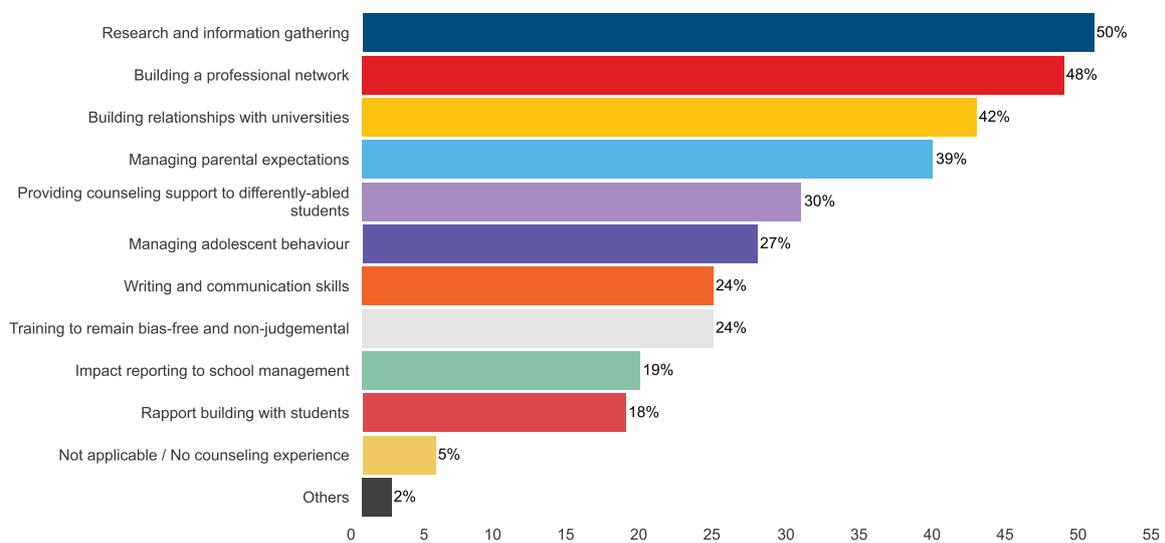
Impact of technology on access and perception of counseling among students

In order to build better support mechanisms for counselors, it is important to identify the challenges that they face. The majority of counselors felt that lack of clarity in student perception toward counseling and lack of planning and foresight from students are the two biggest challenges of counseling as a profession.



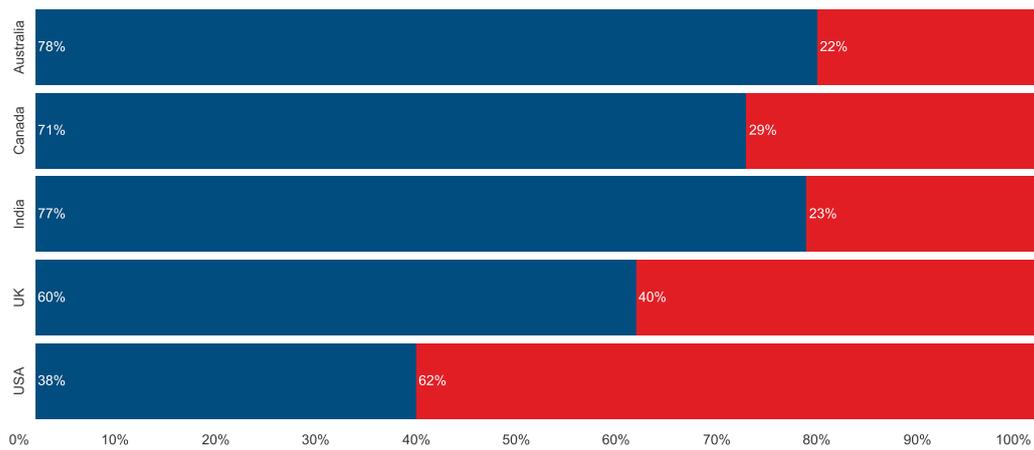
Major challenges in the counseling profession

They indicated a strong requirement for training and support for building relevant skills in research and information gathering, building a professional network, managing relationships with universities, and parental expectations.



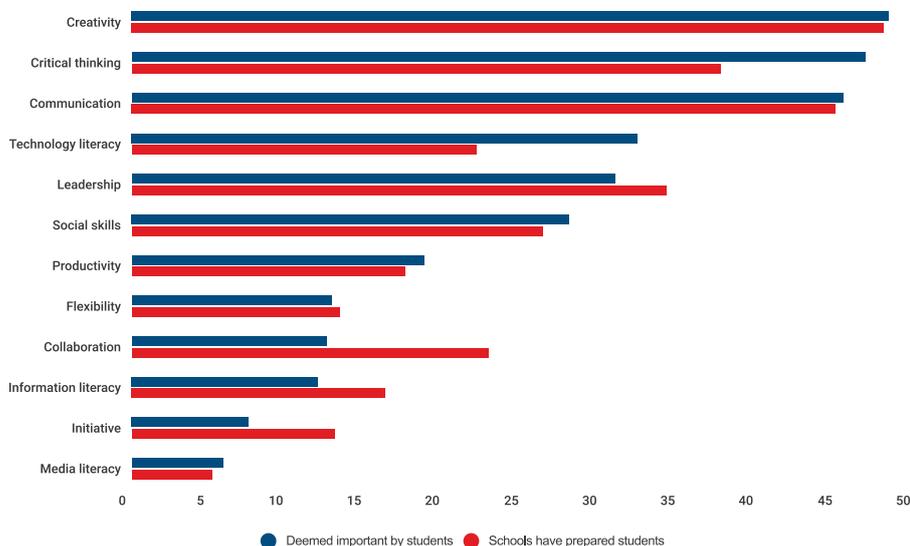
Requirement of training and skill-building among counselors

It was encouraging to observe that 52 percent of the institutions indicated that they conduct training and professional development workshops for their partnering high schools, with Australia, India and Canada leading the way with more than 70 percent conducting training programs, and the U.S.'s efforts moving much slower than global average [38 percent]. They also reported that schools can help them better by providing topics for workshops to be conducted, allowing better calendar visibility, and support for scheduling workshops. There is both demand and supply, however, it needs to be streamlined and a process needs to be developed for this support to be utilized efficiently. The surveyed institutions rated their level of satisfaction regarding the status of school engagement at an average of 63 percent.



Number of institutions providing skill-building and training sessions for counselors

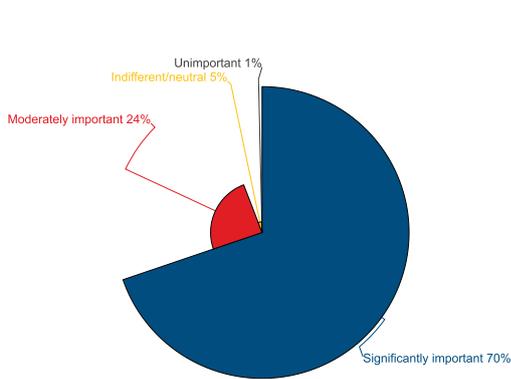
When enquired about the support for relevant skill-building, students ranked creativity (50 percent), critical thinking (47 percent), and communication (45 percent) as the top three 21st-century skills which are most crucial for their growth. They also agreed that their schools have adequately prepared them with these skills.



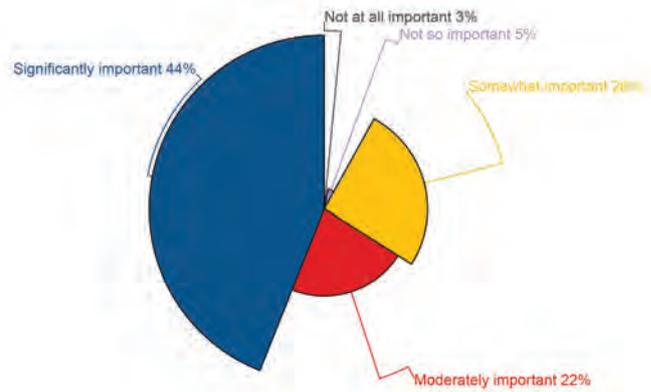
Importance of 21st century skills among students

2. Impact of the decision-making process on students

As mentioned earlier, the Student Quest Survey in 2022 included focused questions to understand the emotional and mental impact of students as they waded through the complex decision-making process. A significant majority of students [70 percent] consider this decision of higher education to be significantly important in the context of their lives, while 44 percent counselors feel the same way about the importance of this decision.

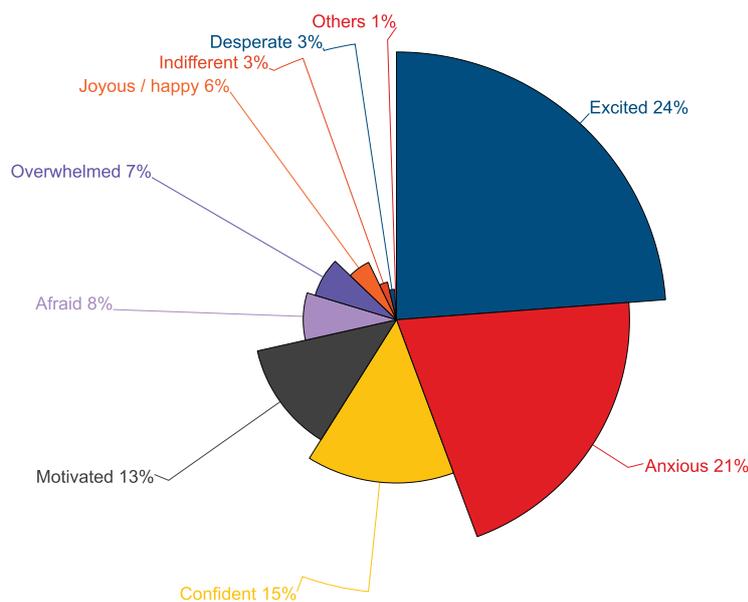


Importance of post-high school decision in students' lives, as per students



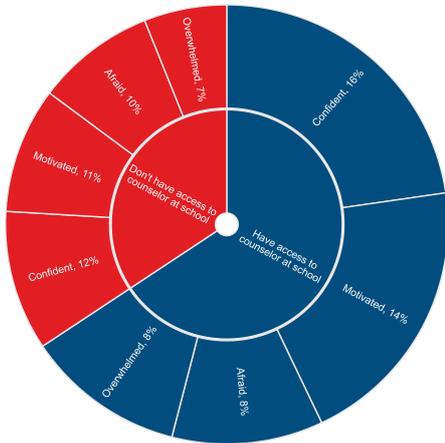
Importance of post-high school decision in students' lives, as per counselors

Through our survey, it was observed that 44 percent of the students feel that going to a college is significantly important in their lives. 24 percent of students felt excited about the prospect of making this decision. More than 21 percent of students felt anxious, while others felt confident [15 percent] and motivated [13 percent].

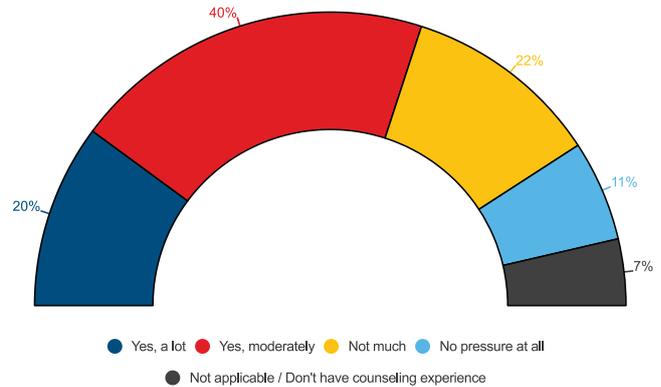


Emotions experienced by students during the decision making process

An interesting insight that emerged from the survey was that the students who have dedicated counseling support at schools felt significantly more confident, more motivated, and less afraid, but slightly more overwhelmed as well, when compared to those who do not have counseling support at school. Despite receiving all the right information, the process itself and the enormity of the decision is overwhelming. The majority of counselors (60 percent) also indicate that they feel pressured to help students find the most suitable path for the students.

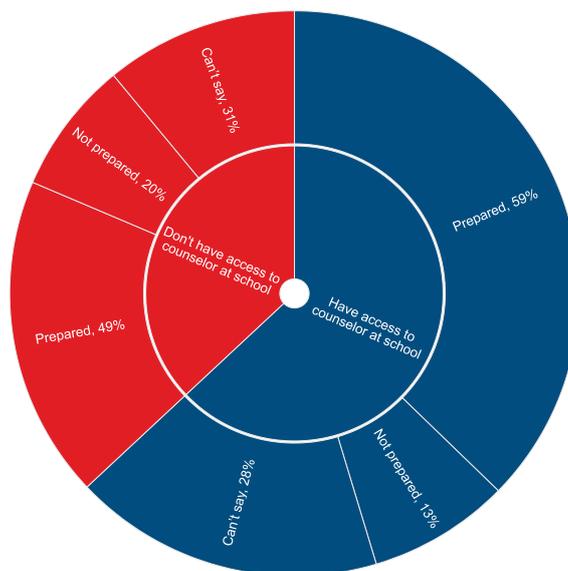


Impact of counseling support on student emotions



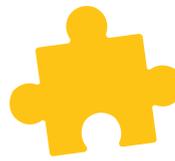
Pressure felt by counselors to make 'most suitable' decision for students

Finally, when questioned if they feel prepared to make an informed decision, only slightly more than half of the students said that they do. Among the students who have counseling support at school felt significantly better equipped and prepared compared to those who did not, with a relative percentage differential of about 19 percent. Therefore, there is clear evidence that equipping schools with skilled and trained counselors makes a significant difference in preparing students for making this critical decision.



Impact of counseling support on students' preparedness to make decisions

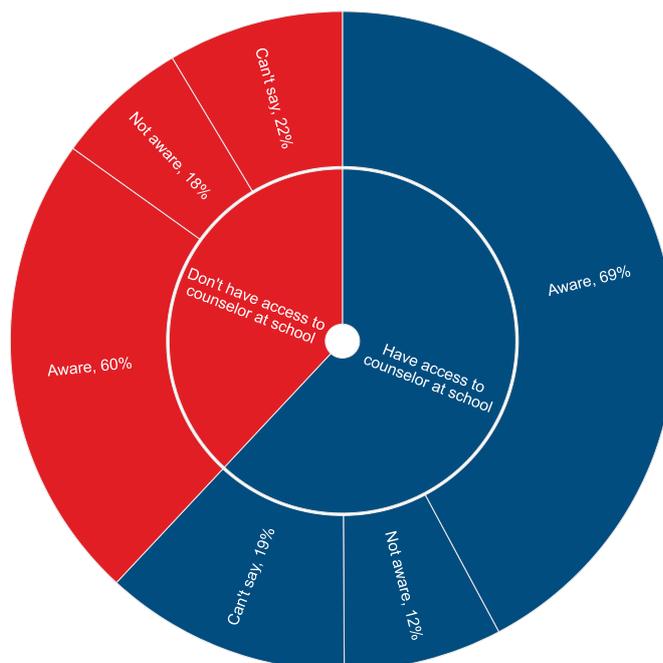
Theme C: Transitions



Finally, the last thematic sub-category is focused on the journey of transition that the students have to embark as they step out of the school system. The next steps toward building a strong career starts with ensuring that students have enough clarity and support from all necessary sources. A critical success at this level instills a great deal of confidence among students. The insights under this theme are divided into subsections of “Transitioning from schools to universities” and “Transitioning into a post-pandemic world”. It should be noted that this section is based on the responses from students in grades 11 or 12 only.

1. Transitioning from schools to universities

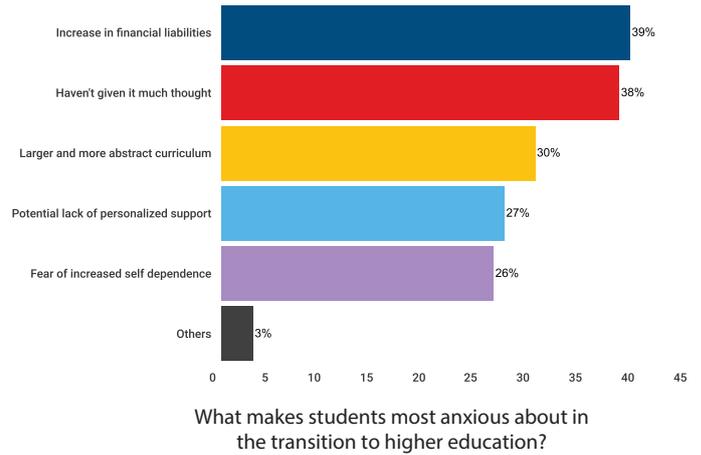
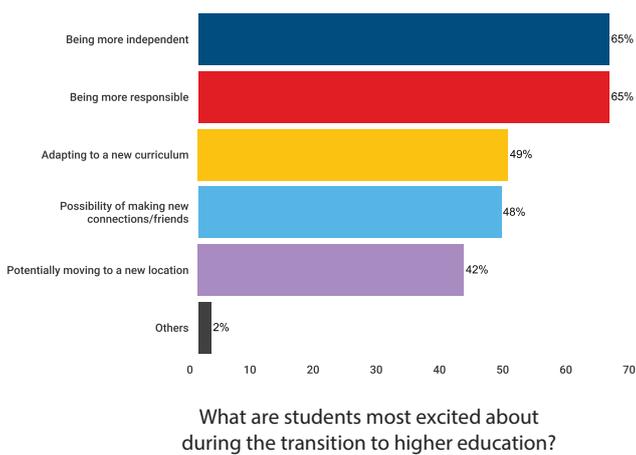
The learning environment at high schools, when compared to a college or university, is drastically different. Whether it be the rigor and coverage of the course work or the shift in the onus of learning from teachers to students themselves, the lives of students change in many ways. 64 percent of the students indicate that they are aware of the changes that they will be facing as they transition out of high school. Supporting the need for dedicated counseling support at schools, the survey observed a significant relative improvement of 15 percent regarding awareness of changes due to transition among students who have counselor access at school as compared to those who do not.



Impact of counseling support on students' awareness of challenges faced during transition

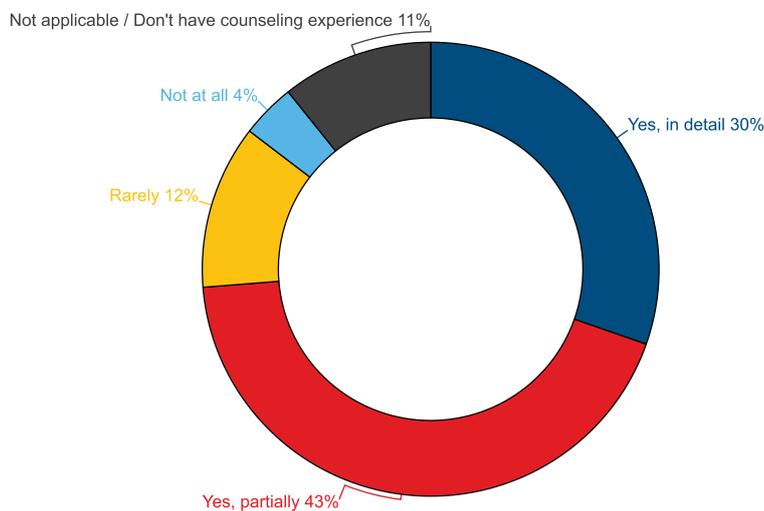


As students think about the transition period, the survey indicates that they feel most excited about being more independent and being more responsible about themselves, showcasing that the students look forward to the independence and freedom that university life brings along. However, the increased financial liabilities due to fees and maintenance is the top cause for anxiety during the transition, aligning with the larger observation of financial concerns that all major stakeholders have indicated at various points in the survey.



Acknowledging the importance of addressing the post-school transition, 73 percent of the counselors cover post-school readiness in their conversations with students. However, only 30 percent of the counselors cover it in detail.

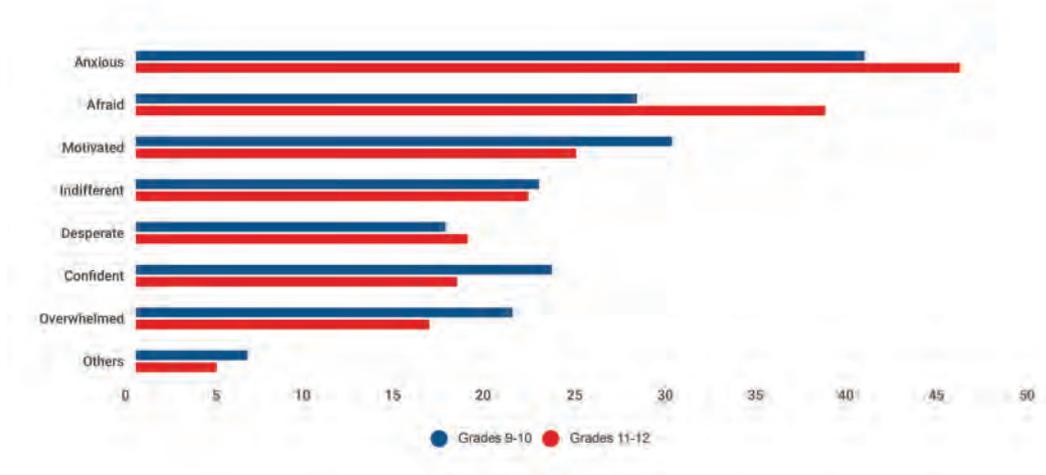
Among the institutions that responded to the survey, slightly more than three-fourths have indicated that they have made significant changes to the onboarding procedures to ensure timely and smooth access for the students, and hence reduce the anxiety that comes with transitioning. Some of these changes include reduced course load, hybrid onboarding sessions, online registration and verification of records, and even allowing late entries in some cases.



Counselor's coverage of post-school transition in counseling interactions

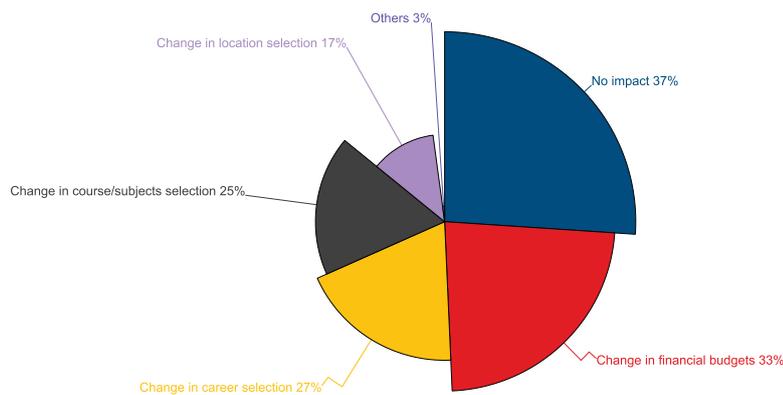
2. Transitioning into a post-pandemic world

The COVID-19 pandemic has redefined the normal in our day-to-day life and led to the world transitioning into a post-pandemic era. In the context of this post-pandemic world, students of grade 11 and 12 felt anxious [46 percent] and afraid [38 percent], yet motivated [24 percent].



Students' emotions during the pandemic period

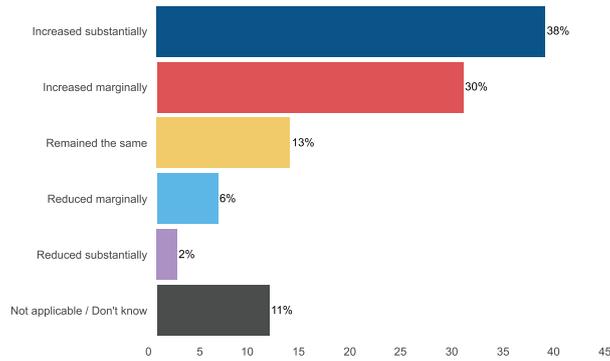
Students primarily faced challenges in financial budgeting and career selection due to the impact of pandemic. This corroborates with the increased demand for scholarship and financial aid, as indicated by both counselors and institutions.



Biggest challenges faced by students during the pandemic period

Undoubtedly, the last two years have been mentally taxing, especially for students who have had to live through a lot of uncertainties and changes in the education system. The counselors who responded to the survey indicated a rise of 83 percent in counseling demand among students. This could be potentially reasoned through attribution of this surge to increased career anxiety and heightened awareness arising from the changing policies around examinations, results, and admission processes.

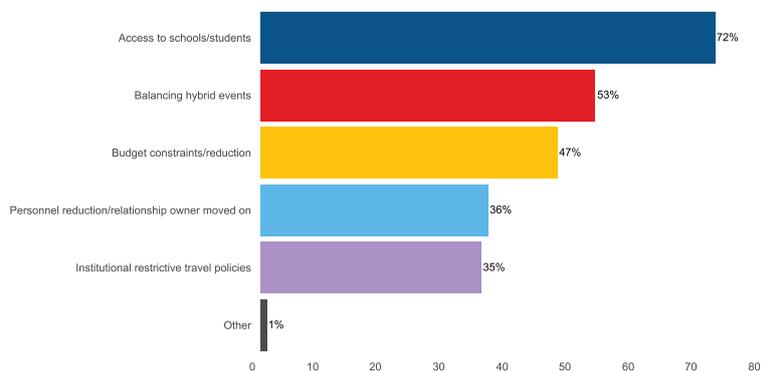
Similarly, a significant surge [68 percent] in demand for studying abroad was noticed by the counselors. Increased connectivity and access through the internet during the pandemic led to a heightened awareness and understanding of global institutions. The majority of the respondents [60 percent] feel that there have been changes in the trend of using technology for counseling post-pandemic. Most counselors [64.5 percent] believe that online counseling has improved access to and perception of counseling offered to students. Online counseling has also made communication with students significantly easier, and sourcing information from the internet has become the leading resource.



Change in the demand for studying abroad, as noticed by counselors

In line with the observations from counselors that more students want to study abroad, institutions who responded to the survey noticed an approximately 80 percent rise in diversity internationally. An increase of roughly 68 percent in domestic diversity has been noticed by the institutions. Institutions wish to support schools better, and believe that they can do so if they have clearer ideas of the workshop topics that are most needed [75 percent], clear timelines [64 percent], and scheduling [50 percent]. This is not surprising to see when there is an evident absence of full-time trained counselors who are generally tasked with coordinating these aspects of partnership with institutions.

Institutions also found it difficult to connect to schools/students [72 percent] and had difficulty with hybrid medium [53 percent]. This indicated a stronger requirement of skill-building in a hybrid communication environment and improved infrastructure to facilitate it.

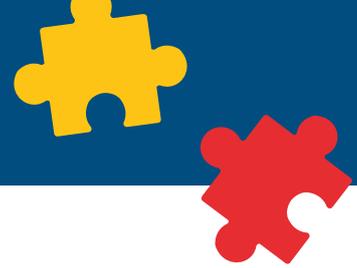


Challenges faced by institutions during the pandemic period

While the majority of respondents from the counselor survey feel that there has been an increase in the number of students pursuing international colleges/universities in the last couple of years, insights from the student survey reveal that 40 percent of students still prefer to study in their home country while 21 percent of students prefer the “best of both worlds” approach — studying at home but also doing a few semesters abroad, in order to save money while at the same time getting international exposure. However, it must be noted that an increase in the applications does not necessarily mean an increase in actual studying abroad.



Recommendations



For counselors/schools

- a. Access and visibility of counselors needs to be planned clearly
 - Access to counselors needs to be a combination of pre-scheduled sessions and drop-in office hours to enable more interactions; timings of the counseling office to complement the school hours for optimization
 - Visibility of counselors needs to be structured for internal and external stakeholders. Calendarized interactions with the parent community in a one-to one and one-to-many setting and streamlined interactions with the school management can make a significant difference to the quality and visibility of process and outcomes

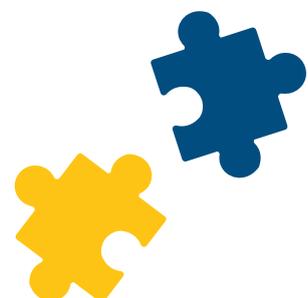
- b. Articulating the roles and responsibilities of a counselor
 - Given that a majority of the respondents serve in more than one role, schools must look at the scope of a counselor's KRAs based particularly on the student : counselor ratio

- c. Making timelines for students for the planning of the college application processes, along with having checkpoints or milestones for students in this journey
 - Provide structure to students that can help alleviate the pressure and anxiety associated with making decisions and the applications processes

- d. Systemic involvement of parents in the counseling and decision-making process to primarily build awareness and rapport, which can facilitate ownership in a meaningful way

- e. Particularly include discussions on budget for higher education in your conversations with parents in a conducive and non-threatening manner

- f. In the counseling curriculum, build topics, lesson plans and classroom discussions that encourage internal exploration of personal strengths, weaknesses, interests, and values — as this is what students seem to derive maximum benefit and value from in the decision-making process

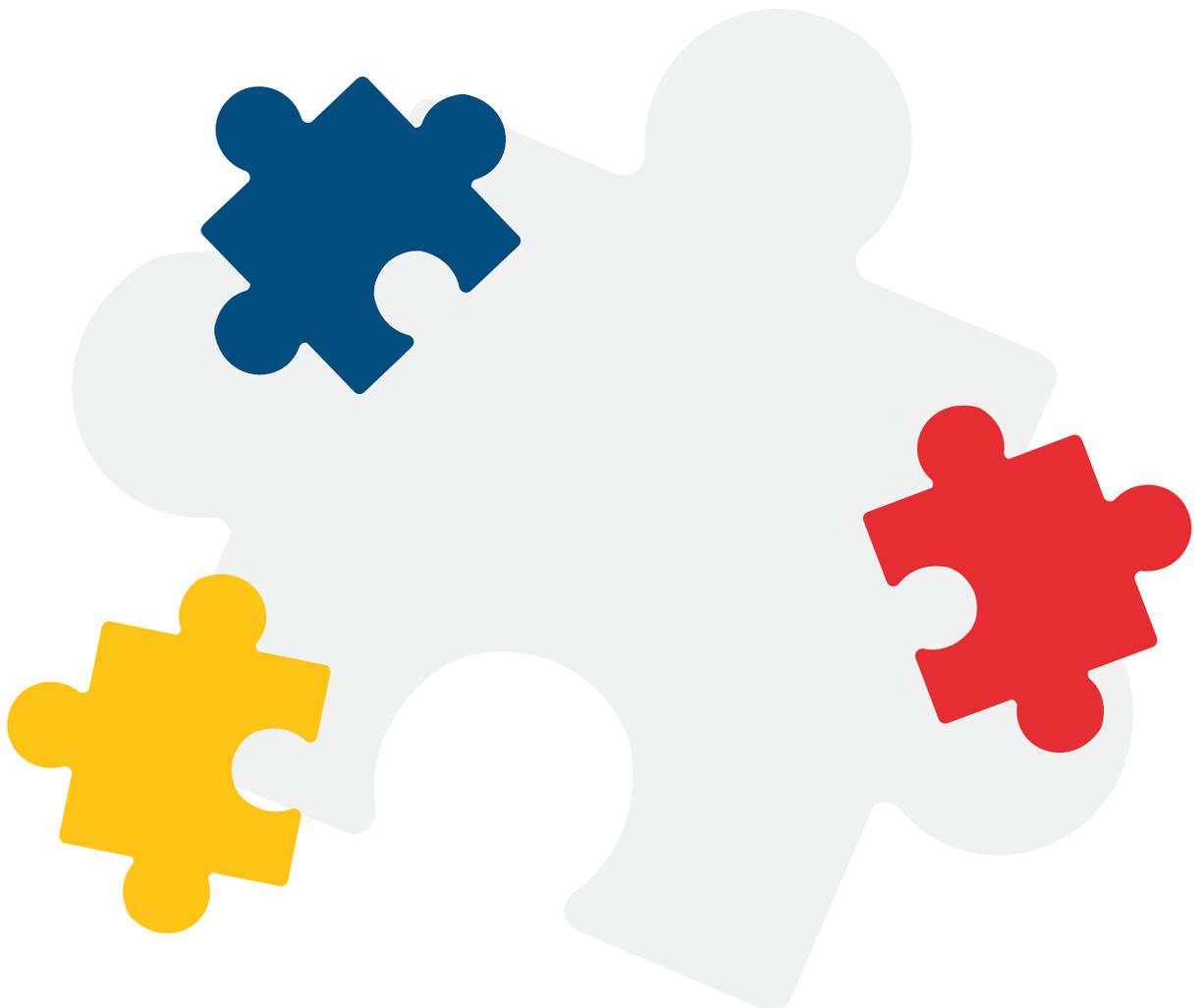


g. Build an engagement plan with universities and expert faculty

- Share an interaction calendar along with a list of desired topics to be covered for workshops or other initiatives with universities at the start of the academic year, to enable more productive and comprehensive interactions and outcomes

h. As a counselor, pay attention to and train oneself for dealing with students' emotions associated in the process of making decisions around higher education and careers, considering the prominent feelings of students being anxiety and fear — both of which may be counter-productive to effective decision-making

i. Involvement of alumni in an organized and graded fashion with different grades to understand and take inspiration from their journey, as well as serve as a support structure for assisting students in transition from school to university



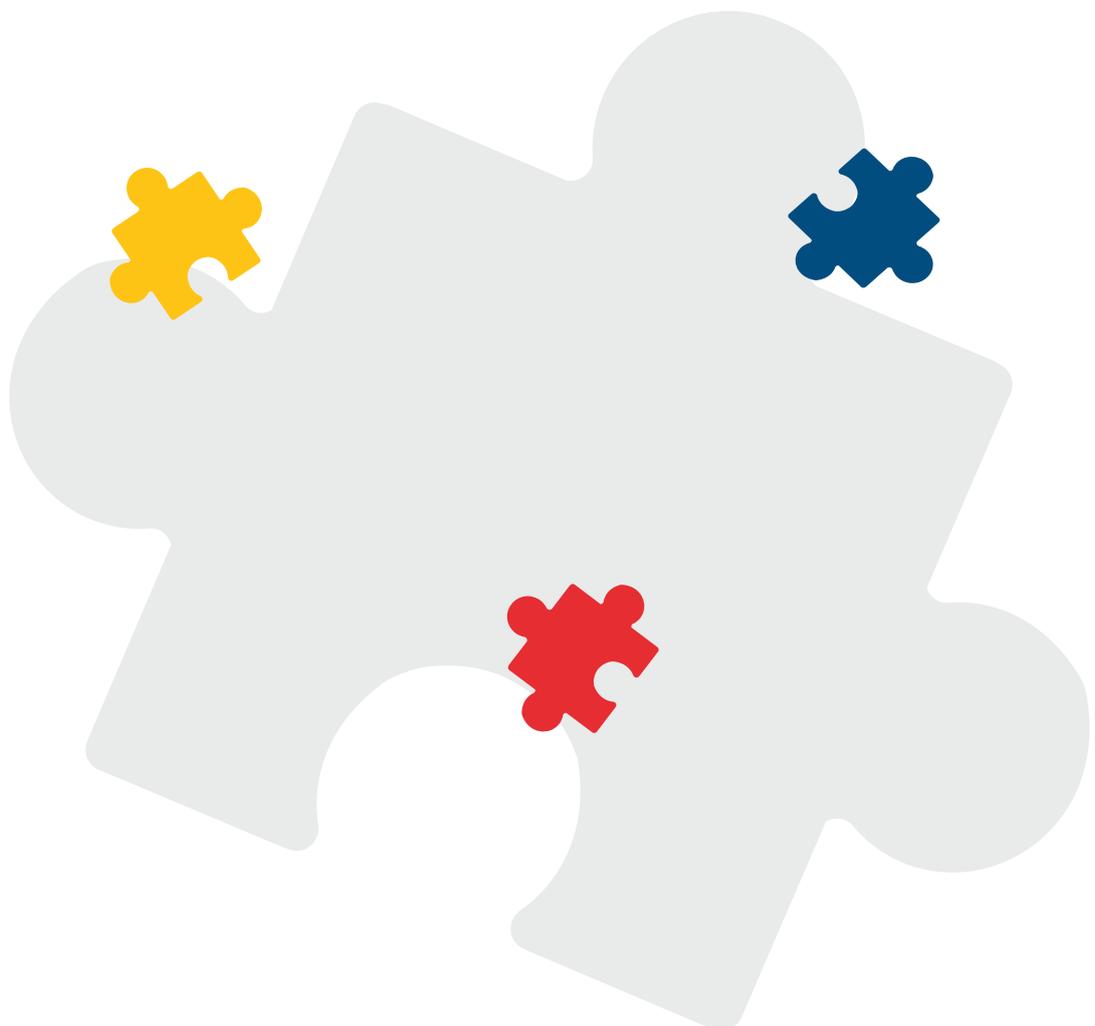
For universities/institutions

- a. Contact schools well in advance of your potential visit dates (three to four months ahead)
- b. Get to know the school, parent body, and alumni trends from the counselor before you interact with the students of the school: consider making a short standardized questionnaire to capture this information and their potential expectation from the visit
- c. Customize your presentations as per the need of the geographical location, and particularly of the school
- d. Consider including the following in your presentations at schools:
 - Diversity of speakers, faculty and staff in the outreach efforts to provide a sneak-peak into the academics, life on campus, scholarships, and job opportunities
 - Recent and most relevant data, such as: alumni from the specific school, region, or school curriculum who are enrolled at the university and broad reasons for their selection, common mistakes in the applications, and statistics around selection rate to make your presentation more relatable for students and families
- e. Develop an effective, non-intrusive follow-up mechanism with the school counselor, students and parents
- f. Facilitate counselor and high school teacher training/enrichment as per the need of the school, collectively adding to the readiness of students for a dynamic and demanding work environment as well as professional development of the counseling/teaching community



For advisory bodies/policy organizations

- a. Provide some broad regulations around student : counselor ratio to be prescribed to schools
- b. Formally recognize career counseling as a role in school, and specify the pay grade for standardization and recognition
- c. Create forums for collaboration between schools, universities and industries to ensure that students/youth are trained for the future world of work and the gap in knowledge and skills felt at each each transition stage is reduced through this collaboration



Conclusion



The primary objectives for this year's IC3 Institute Student Quest Survey were to understand the quantum and quality of the impact that the decision-making process has on the students, and to triangulate the learnings from different perspectives of all relevant stakeholders for a comprehensive view of the process. What is deemed important by students and parents in their decision making, how much impact the pandemic has had on their original plans, to whom do they reach out for support, from where do counselors seek professional development support, what steps have institutions taken to improve visibility and accessibility in the process-this survey sought to answer such questions.

While the pandemic has caused students to consider their home countries more seriously for higher education, the applications from international students have seen a considerable surge across all institutions, indicating a strong bend towards students' intention to hedge their bets with multiple applications and choose the most suitable and possibly economically best-fit option. Students have also shown interest toward exploring a program format or structure that includes an international exchange experience, in a "best of both worlds" approach. The most glaring gap that has emerged is the sheer lack of qualified and dedicated counseling support available to the students. The need for counseling support has been consistently on the rise over the last few years, but the number of counselors have not matched the growing rate, leading to a concerning shortfall, to the extent that either teachers have to fill in for the support, or the counselors have to shoulder extra responsibilities.

The results from these surveys have also raised some essential questions regarding the support structures necessary to build a strong counseling foundation for high-school students across the world. The surveys have provided quantitative and qualitative support for the hypothesis regarding the lack of quality counseling support, in terms of counselor-student ratio and training requirements. Emerging patterns suggest that counselors have been instrumental in providing critical professional help that has been notably appreciated by a large majority of students. Even with pandemic-related uncertainty slowly clearing, students and parents have had to struggle with the aftermath of the global economic fallout. The pandemic, now in its recession, has had a considerable impact in altering their decisions, particularly with regards to finances. However, silver linings have shown clarity in the requisite support by every stakeholder - in students seeking specific information and high-quality professional support from counselors, or counselors indicating a clear need for training and development, or institutions necessitating better communication with students and schools. The surveys indicate that there is significant scope for each stakeholder to work with the other in developing a more effective, reliable and efficient system of exchange of information and ideas to better support the students.



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