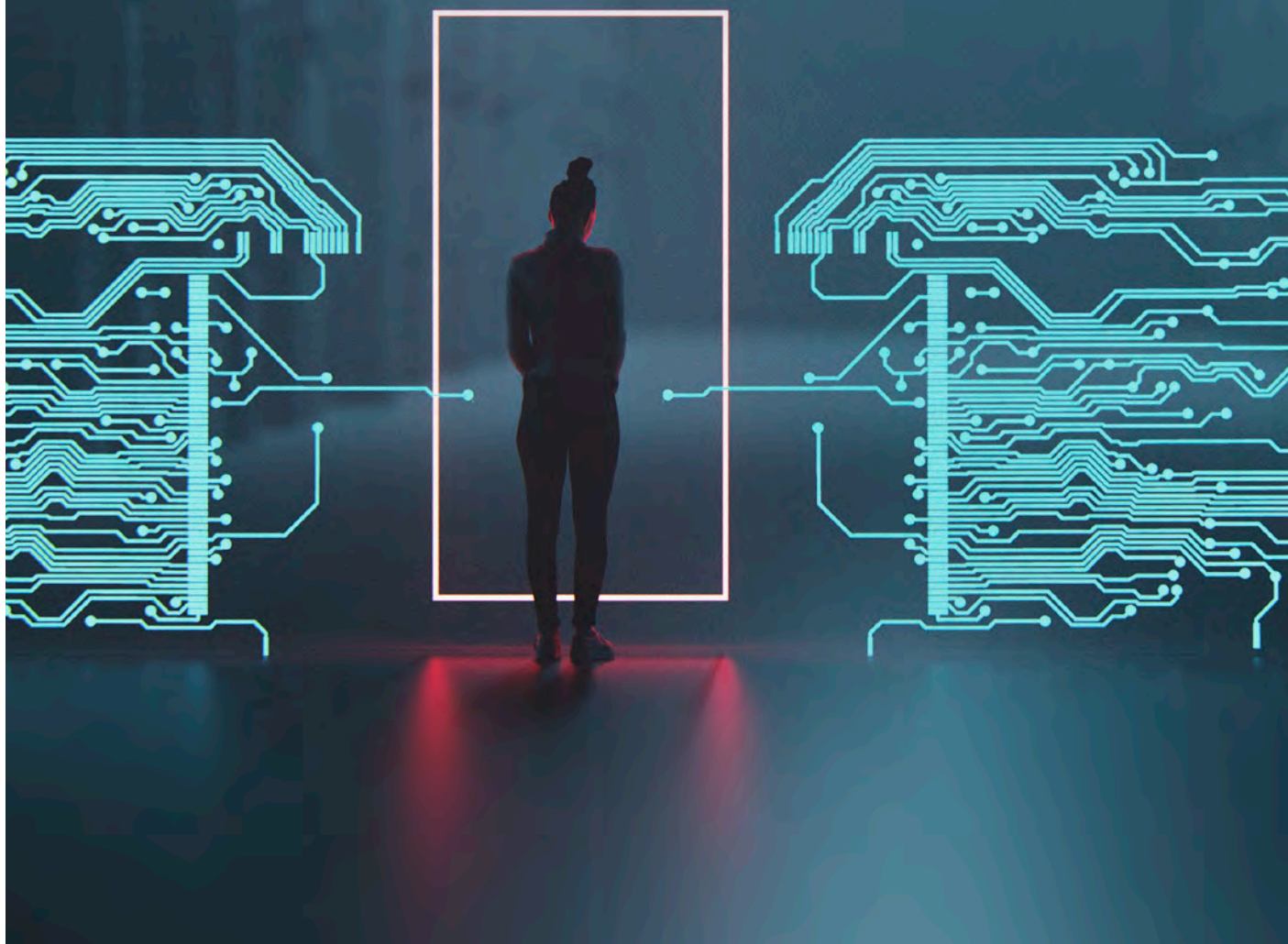


Shifts in student interest before and after the pandemic

Cara Skikne outlines a new report from Studyportals that presents insights into lasting shifts brought on by the pandemic





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The Studyportals report tracks changes in student interest between 2018 and 2021. This analysis is based on real-time student interest collected on Studyportals websites and measured as pageviews. It is representative of a global audience of tens of millions of prospective international students looking for English-taught programmes.

Studyportals data shows a significant increase in interest in Master's programmes over the last two years. This could mean that the search for education accelerated in the post-Covid period, potentially as an outcome of pent-up demand in 2020.

Bachelor's programmes have largely maintained stable levels of student interest. Interestingly, other programmes offered by higher education institutions, such as PhDs, short and preparation courses, have attracted less and less student demand.

Methods of education

Covid-19 had a significant impact on student preference for methods of education.

During the pandemic, there was a 9.6 percent increase in page views for online courses.

This increase was driven largely by student interest in European programmes, particularly those in the United Kingdom, Switzerland, Germany and Spain.

Page views were also up among prospective students in emerging markets such as India, Pakistan, Vietnam, Brazil, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia.

Online and multiple options attracted a stable amount of student interest from March 2018 until the beginning of 2020.

From February 2020, data shows a steady growth of interest for these methods, except for a slight decline in November 2020 as traffic for on-campus options resumed.

The rise continued for the rest of the measurement period until November 2021.

After the Covid-19 breakout, Studyportals recorded a significant drop in interest for on-campus-only programmes.

After the introduction of lockdowns in Europe, Oceania and North America and the closing of borders, interest in on-campus programmes dropped to a three-year low.

From November 2020, campus-only programmes rebounded and the interest for these programmes became less predictable.

For short courses, the large sub-disciplines decreased in relative market share, while the small ones increased. This means an immense amount of subject diversification took place, reflecting the fact that prior to the pandemic, institutions focused on launching their top courses online but as the pandemic progressed, they had to launch a greater range of online courses and demand followed.

Shifts in destination countries

Over the last four years, the biggest players in the education market in terms of student interest have remained in the leading positions. The United States, however, lost two positions, falling to 4th position and making space for Canada. Even before the pandemic, there was a decline in student interest for the US. During the Trump administration, unwelcoming visa policies and anti-immigration rhetoric put a dampener on demand for US programmes.

According to Margaret Cook, Senior Vice President at Studyportals, “The decline of international students to the US is not a temporary change but a trend. Canada makes it very easy to stay in Canada to work, and the US doesn’t”.

Australia’s relative decline accelerated, likely caused by tight Covid-19 restrictions and border closures.





Moreover, there was a rise in interest for education in Poland, Austria and Finland, and a fall in interest for education in Turkey, Denmark, Spain and Sweden.

“Poland is investing more in international recruitment and trying to increase the volume of applicants to international programmes. We see a similar trend from Finland as well.” says Fabrizio Citto, Business Unit Manager for EMEA at Studyportals.

There were also interesting changes in interest for education in Lebanon, which gained 35 positions, and Malta, which gained 32 positions.

Student interest from source countries

In terms of interest from origin countries, there were many significant changes over the last four years. However, we can see that India has remained the largest student origin country for international students.

There was a big drop in interest from the United States and the United Kingdom, both falling from the top three.

DESTINATION COUNTRIES RISING IN POPULARITY



Rank	2021		2018
Poland	15	▲ 4	19
Finland	14	▲ 3	17
Austria	17	▲ 3	20
Canada	2	▲ 2	4
Italy	6	▲ 1	7

DESTINATION COUNTRIES FALLING IN POPULARITY



Rank	2021		2018
Denmark	20	▼ 6	14
Turkey	19	▼ 3	16
United States	14	▼ 2	2
Sweden	12	▲ 2	10
Spain	13	▼ 2	11

Emerging markets are growing in importance

One of the most significant changes was an increased interest in studying abroad in countries like Turkey, which entered the top five. Iran rose five positions into the top three, and Nigeria rose two positions taking over the second position on the leader board.

Turkey, Nigeria and Iran all face critical shortages of university spaces. The demand-supply gap in higher education may well create opportunities for new universities or transnational education (TNE), although other factors should also be considered.

Moreover, new significant players have emerged. Vietnam made the biggest leap, gaining 22 positions, and sits close to the top 10 in the world. Sri Lanka gained 17 positions, rising to 12th position.

This hints at the potential of those countries to become important recruitment markets at a time when geographic diversification is a key strategy, to mitigate risk and improve education quality.

A new skillset for the post-pandemic world

While higher education tries to adapt to a post-pandemic world, it is essential that it provides students with the skillset required to thrive in the near future. This means making sure that programme portfolios are up-to-date and are catering to the needs of a changing context.



RISING SOURCE COUNTRIES



Rank	2021		2018
Vietnam	11	▲ 22	33
Sri Lanka	14	▲ 17	29
Turkey	17	▲ 5	9
Iran	2	▲ 5	8
Nigeria	6	▲ 2	4
Greece	6	▲ 2	15

FALLING SOURCE COUNTRIES



Rank	2021		2018
United Kingdom	8	▼ 5	3
Egypt	17	▼ 5	12
South Africa	18	▼ 5	13
Canada	10	▲ 4	6
United States	5	▼ 3	2
Germany	9	▼ 2	7



**SUBDISCIPLINES RISING
IN POPULARITY**

Rank	2021	2018
Cyber Security	45 ▲ 74	119
Digital Marketing	27 ▲ 66	93
Machine Learning	26 ▲ 55	81
Clinical Psychology	49 ▲ 55	104
Digital Communication	74 ▲ 39	113
Environmental Economics & Policy	120 ▲ 37	83

**SUBDISCIPLINES FALLING
IN POPULARITY**

Rank	2021	2018
Gas, Oil & Mining	161 ▼ 39	122
Dentistry	133 ▼ 37	96
Communication Sciences	73 ▼ 31	42
Water Management	135 ▲ 30	105
Nursing	92 ▼ 27	65
Applied Mathematics	95 ▼ 21	74

With the world changing at lightning speed, it is crucial to determine the direction of student interest over time. The mainstays of English-taught international higher education are still in high demand, with programmes in Business & Management, Social Sciences, and Engineering & Technology capturing historically more than 40 percent of student interest. Nevertheless, major changes emerged over the past few years.

Studyportals ranked individual subdisciplines before and after the outbreak of Covid-19. Taking two snapshots of student interest – one representing 2018 and another representing 2021 – we can take a long-term perspective.

The big picture has been dominated by a sway in student preferences among STEM subjects: Engineering & Technology appears to be on the decline, while students refocus their preferences on Computer Science & IT.

There have also been notable changes in the popularity of subdisciplines, with the biggest move being towards Cyber Security, which is now the 45th most sought-out discipline by students after gaining 74 positions since 2018.

Other digital-related disciplines, such as Digital Marketing, Machine Learning, Digital Communication, and UX design, also increased sharply in popularity. This reflects the emerging trend of the world becoming more digital with an emphasis on a user-centred approach.

As the world rebounds from the outbreak of Covid-19 by transitioning to digital solutions, students seem to be ever more attracted to programmes that provide them with the tools required to take an active role in this

transformation. We expect this upward trend in digital subjects to last as industries focus further on digital transformation.

The other subdisciplines that have gained student interest are Clinical Psychology and Environmental Economics & Policy. The two subdisciplines have risen by 55 and 37 positions respectively since 2018.

The huge rise of Environmental Economics & Policy is contrasted by the fall of Mining, Oil & Gas, which took the biggest fall amongst 200+ subdisciplines, from position 122 to position 161. This trend comes as no surprise considering the increasing urgency to address climate change as one of the biggest challenges facing humanity. Furthermore, Dentistry, Communication Sciences and Water Management have all dropped in popularity by at least 30 positions.

These changes reflect Gen Z's commitment to environmental values, and the growing role of sustainability in student decision-making.



Download the report now: <https://bit.ly/3pyez0p>

**About the Author**

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