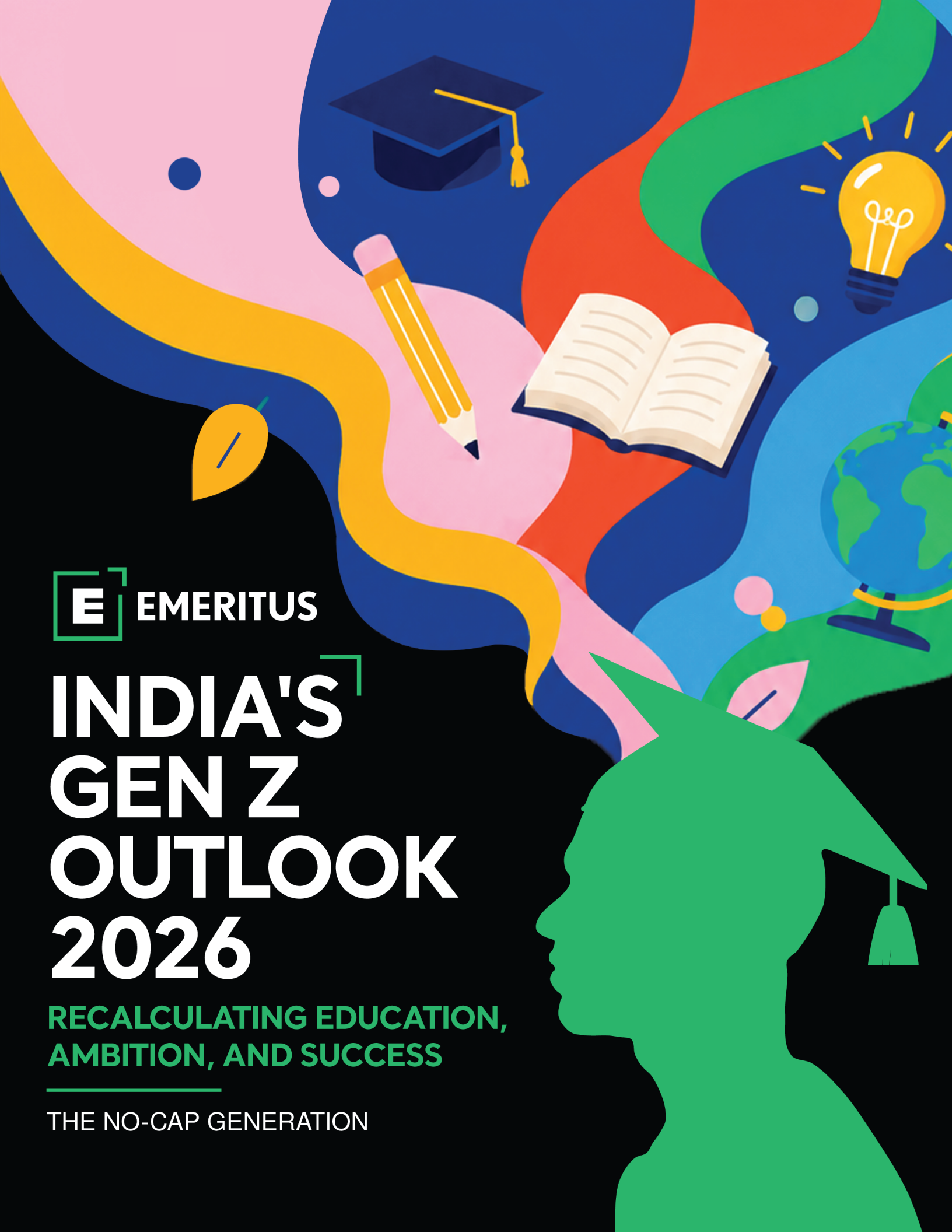




INDIA'S GEN Z OUTLOOK 2026

RECALCULATING EDUCATION,
AMBITION, AND SUCCESS

THE NO-CAP GENERATION



From the Co-Founders

Ashwin Damera & Chaitanya Kalipatnapu

For decades, the path was clear: Good scores. Engineering. Medicine. CA. Government jobs. MBA. Life. That path is experiencing an overhaul, faster than most anticipated. Skills are evolving faster than institutions can respond, and job roles that did not exist 5 years ago are now the most sought-after. In unpredictable times like these, the most valuable thing one could do is stay close to the signals - and that's exactly what this report intends to do.

Gen Z (born between 1997 and 2012) is perhaps one of the most discussed generations today. Celebrated, misunderstood, and underestimated in equal measure. So we decided to engage and understand what they are actually saying: How they are responding to disruption, access to knowledge and tech, and the recalibration of what career capital – intellectual depth, institutional brand, and peer networks – truly means.

India produces the world's largest cohort of globally ambitious young learners, but that's not the story anymore. Times have changed dramatically, and it's become critical for industry stakeholders to understand how this generation chooses to educate itself, how geopolitics influences its decision-making, what skills it wants to acquire, how it plans its career trajectories, and most importantly, what it expects from employers. This research establishes a baseline for that conversation.

Foreword



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The world continues to question how Gen Z operates. Some applaud their straightforward approach, while others see them as entitled and impatient. Our primary data tells a more nuanced story. India's Gen Z is one of the most globally ambitious generations the country has produced - yet they are coming of age while navigating some of the most testing times the world has experienced.

Degrees are no longer sufficient proof of employability. Traditional career ladders are contracting. And yet, this generation is not slowing down. They are finding new routes, building new skills, and rewriting what ambition looks like. Unlike previous generations, they no longer want just a stable job, a corner office, or a linear trajectory. They want education integrated with real work, careers built on roles that do not yet have names, and the freedom to build something rather than simply climb something.



Four Signals define this moment:

01 The destination dilemma:

60% of pre-college students are interested in studying abroad, while **92%** of transitioning students and **85%** respondents who are in early careers are interested in studying in India within 2 years

02 The world is coming to India:

Nearly **3 in 4** believe an India campus provides exposure to global teaching methods and high academic standards. What is missing is awareness to a large extent.

03 The New Learner:

Gen Z is building a wider learning stack, combining formal degrees with online courses & AI tools. **85%** have already completed at least one online short course or certification

04 Generation beyond corner-office aspiration:

A generation that has watched layoffs unfold in real time on their feeds, and seen visa uncertainty reshape plans has drawn a rational conclusion: the traditional career ladder is not a safe structure to climb. **74%** are more interested in work life balance than formal leadership titles.

The tension between ambition and exhaustion is the defining emotional experience of this generation.

Methodology & Demographics

PHASE 1 — QUALITATIVE

In-Depth Interviews (IDIs)

January, 2026

Explored motivations, anxieties, and aspirations in depth. Findings shaped quantitative questionnaire design.

PHASE 2 — QUANTITATIVE

1,010 Survey Responses

March, 2026

Structured survey of 15-28-year-olds across major Indian cities.

(multi-choice questionnaire format; respondents could select more than one option per question)

Across 3 Life Stages of Gen Z



PRE-COLLEGE (248 respondents)

In the last 2 years of higher secondary, or just completed — preparing for higher education.

TRANSITIONING (389 respondents)

Currently enrolled in any UG program or preparing to pursue a PG degree



EARLY CAREER (373 respondents)

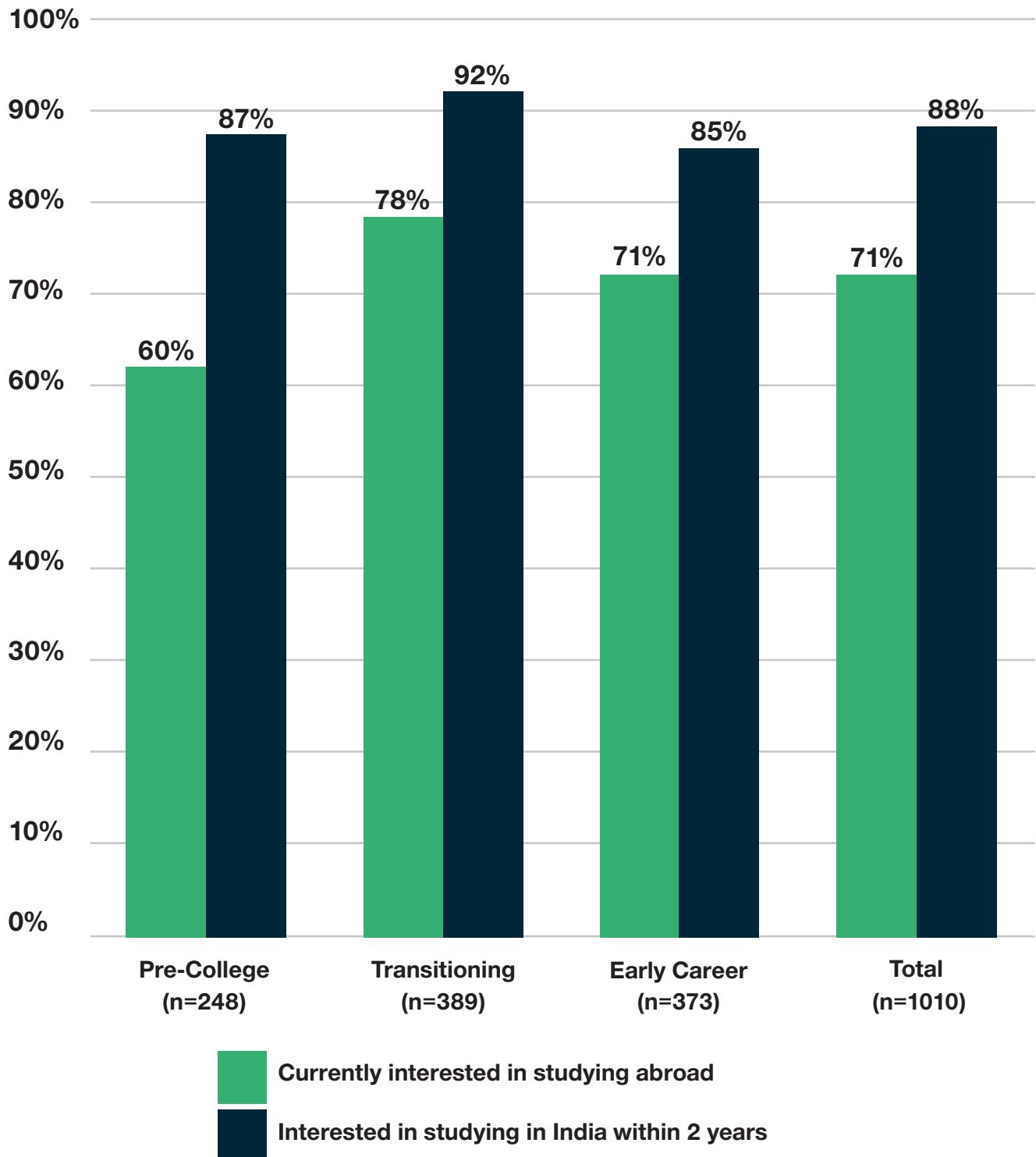
Recent graduates or young professionals building their careers

SIGNAL ONE

The Destination Dilemma



The *3-Bucket Story*:



Pre-College - The Open Map

The youngest cohort. The most open.

Would consider
studying abroad

60%

32%

Would consider it within 12 months
(lowest urgency of any segment)

Interested in studying
in India within 2 years

Not yet committed to any direction — and most likely to see India as a genuine first choice.

Early Career - The Pragmatic Lens

Already in the workforce. Focused on acceleration.

71%

Would consider
studying abroad

85%

Interested in studying
in India within 2 years

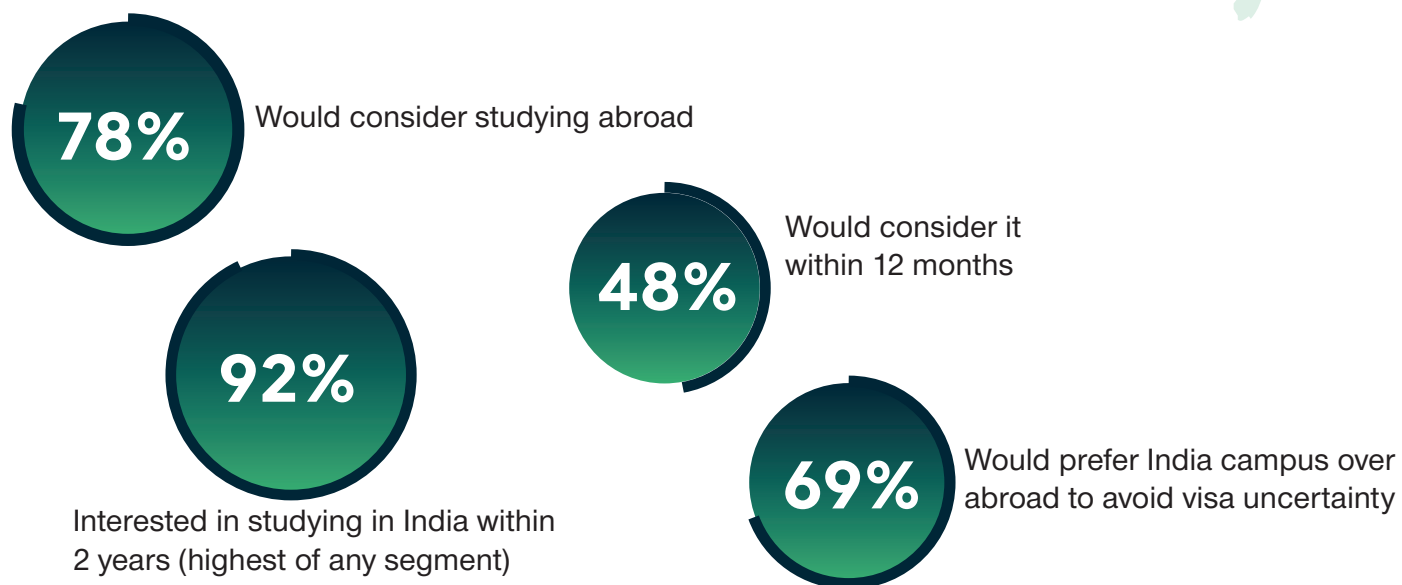
Global education ambition has shifted from aspiration to ROI — postgraduate, upskilling, career capital.





Transitioning - The Pressure Point

The highest ambition. The highest tension.



Actively making decisions. Holding every option simultaneously. The most conversion-ready segment for an India campus.

Why *Abroad Remains In Consideration*

Among respondents who said they would consider studying abroad, the motivations reveal a fundamentally economic calculus. Gen Z views global education as a career investment.

40%

cite higher earning potential as their top expected outcome

37%

cite higher quality of content and knowledge

39%

expect better job opportunities

33%

expect access to a stronger professional or industry network

However, The Calculus Is Changing

48%

of those who would consider studying abroad say their interest has decreased compared to a year ago.

For those still interested but concerned:

40%

cite cost as their primary barrier

32%

cite visa requirements and immigration policies

31%

cite being away from family

For those whose interest has actively declined:

26%

to visa and immigration policies

37%

point to rising costs

24%

to safety and political uncertainty in other countries



The US Is *Losing India's Gen Z*

35% of respondents who would consider studying abroad would consider the United States - but 42% of them say that interest has decreased in the past year.

Among those whose interest in the US has declined:

34%

cite current visa
and immigration
policies

41%

cite cost
of study

31%

cite lack of
family support



“

“At first, I used to think about America a lot, but now I’m shifting more towards Europe or Australia. Basically, getting a visa and then getting a green card in the US is way tougher.”

— **19-year-old male, transitioning, Delhi**

“

“Because I realised it’s really hard to take loan and pay it back in time and everything, it would all be good if I had financial backup, but just in case my plan doesn’t work out, I might have problems paying back student loan”

— **19 year old male, pre-college, Kolkata**

SIGNAL TWO

Plot Twist –

The World Is Coming to India

Across all three life stages and across both - those who would consider studying abroad and those who would not — one finding holds: India has entered the consideration set in a way it never has before.

68%

of total respondents would be likely or extremely likely to study a programme offered in India by an international university.

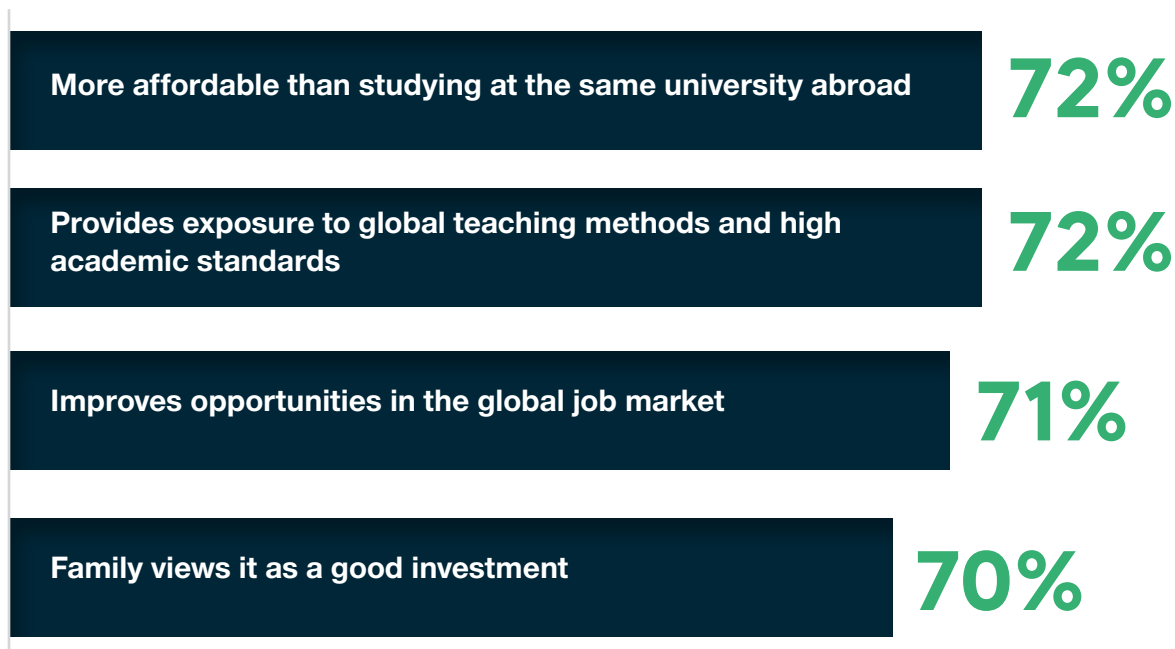
And critically

69%

of transitioning students would prefer an India-based international programme over going abroad specifically to avoid visa uncertainty.

How *Gen Z Perceives* the India Campus Option

The perception data reveals this signal. Across the full sample of 1,010 respondents, Gen Z has already internalised a three-way value proposition for the India campus option:



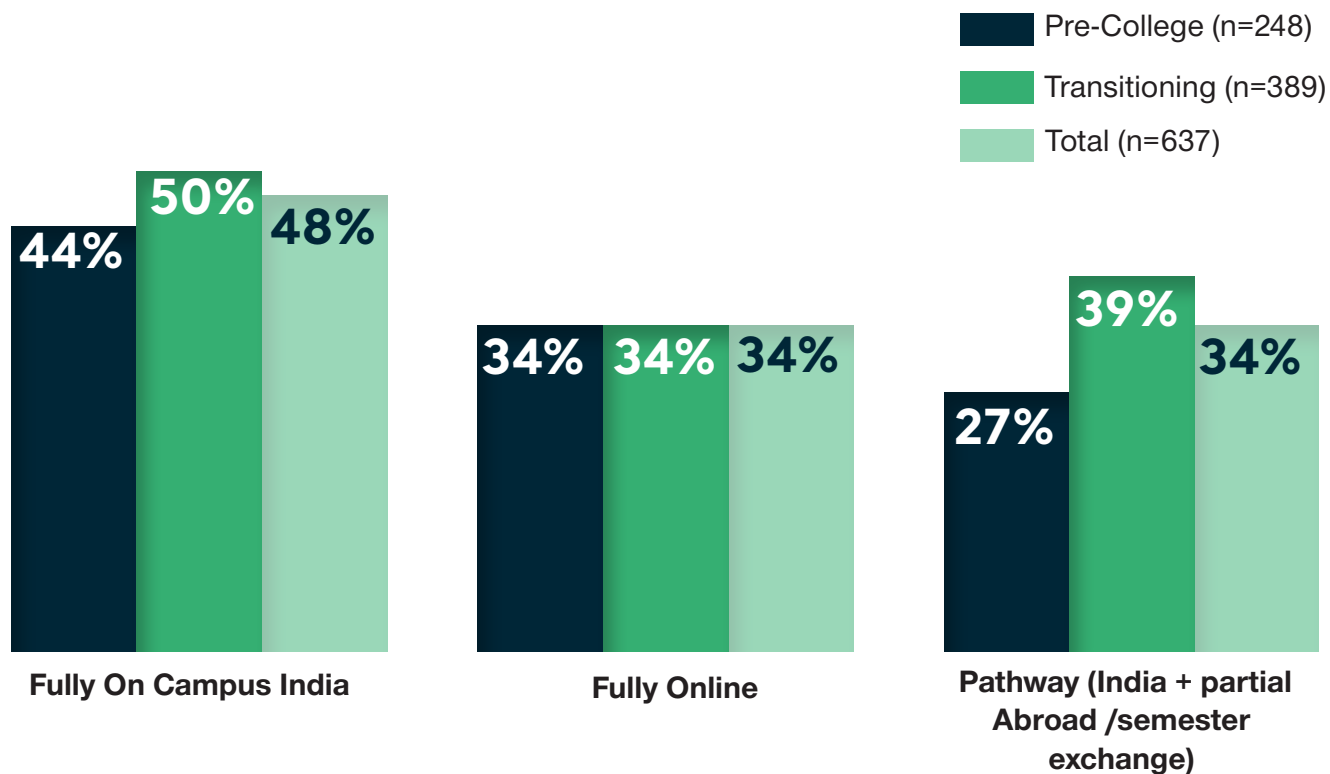
The quality perception gap is not severe. Nearly **3 in 4** believe an India campus provides exposure to global teaching methods and high academic standards.

What is missing is awareness to a large extent.

What Format Do *They Want?*

Among pre-college and transitioning respondents (n=637) — the segments actively considering their next education step — the fully on-campus model is the clear anchor. But the appetite for flexible formats is significant and growing.

Note: Respondents could select more than one format.



The Transitioning Insight — The Pathway Is the Growth Story

The standout finding is the 12-point jump in preference for the Pathway format, from 27% among pre-college to 39% among transitioning students.

As transitioning students move closer to real enrollment decisions, the model becomes significantly more attractive. It offers global education from India with the option of home-campus exposure, while reducing the cost and uncertainty of studying abroad. For university partners, this signals a powerful international



The Postgraduate Signal

Among respondents preparing for postgraduate study specifically:

50% would consider a fully on-campus international programme in India

38% say it would be their first choice — not a consideration, a preference

This is our most conversion-ready segment. Closest to enrolment.

“

“If these programmes offered four semesters in India, and for the final semester you come to the US — that approach would be the best of both worlds.”

— **19-year-old male, transitioning, Delhi**

“

“It’s great — I got denied a visa to go abroad. If the same education is provided here, it is more beneficial. I could stay here, get the same exposure as someone going for foreign education.”

— **23-year-old male, transitioning, Hyderabad**

EXPERT PERSPECTIVE

“As a parent, I believe education earns its worth only when it builds resilience and global citizenship, and hybrid models, part India, part a foreign campus, do this best. As an employer, I have consistently seen globally exposed talent think bigger, communicate better, and engage more deeply. India’s Gen Z is ready. What they need now is more hybrid pathways built with skills at the core.”

— **Chetan Mahajan,**
Founder & CEO, The Mavericks, Gurugram

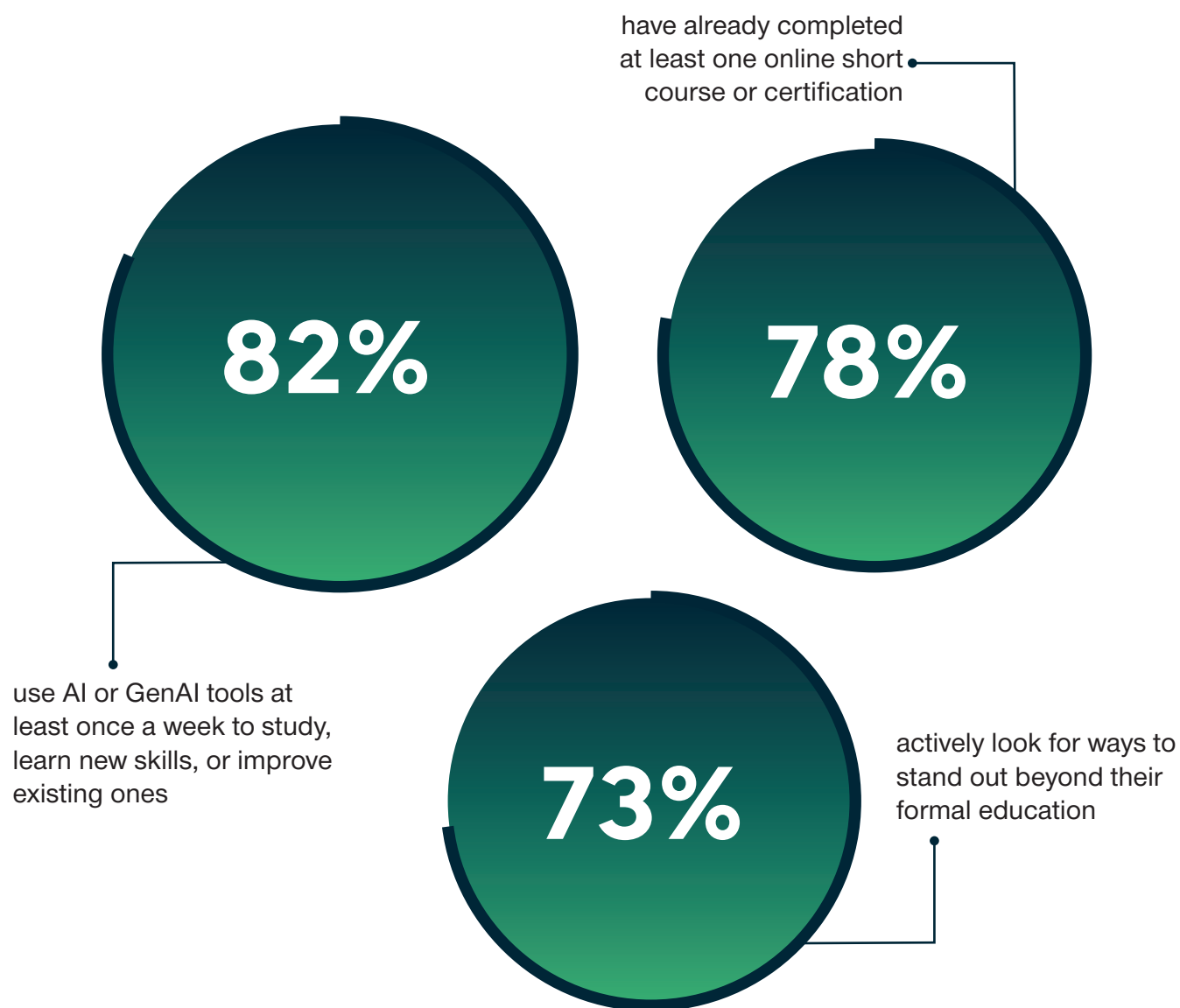


A photograph of students in a classroom setting. In the foreground, a student in a maroon shirt is typing on a laptop. Behind them, a student in a light blue shirt is holding a white pen and looking at a tablet with a yellow case. Another student in a green sweater is visible in the background, also working on a laptop. The scene is slightly blurred, emphasizing the students' activity.

SIGNAL THREE

The New Learner

Beyond the degree — Gen Z is building a wider learning stack, combining formal degrees with online courses, certificates, and AI tools in a self-directed learning format



Early-career respondents use it to understand technical concepts or jargon, create personalised study plans or learning paths, and summarise articles, lectures, or research materials.

AI has achieved platform status alongside YouTube and Google. It is no longer an occasional tool, but increasingly part of how this generation learns.

How They Learn: The New Stack

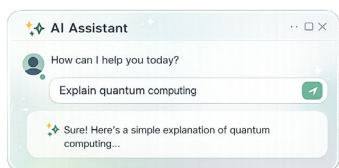
The primary sources Gen Z uses to acquire new skills reveal a self-directed, digitally-native learning culture:



01 YouTube
50% of respondents



02 Google Search
39% of respondents



03 GenAI Tools
34% of respondents

“

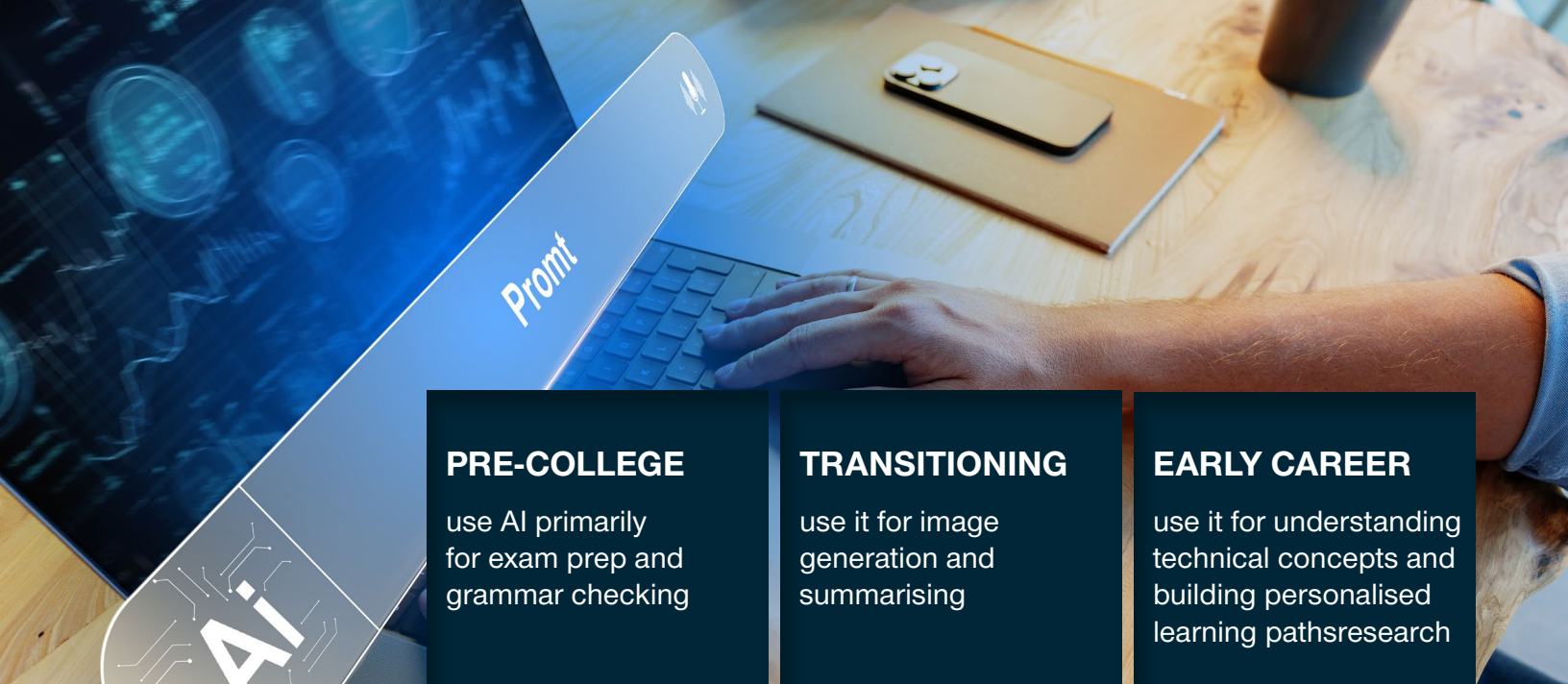
“I used to learn from YouTube a lot, but as AI evolved, there’s become a trade-off... instead of scrolling through 10 YouTube videos, I can simply ask an AI chatbot and it will summarise all of them.”

— **19-year-old male, transitioning, Delhi**

EXPERT PERSPECTIVE

“As an employer, this report felt deeply relatable. Today’s young learners are ambitious, practical and increasingly tool-agnostic. They turn to YouTube, AI and digital platforms with natural curiosity. A degree may open doors, but adaptability, empathy, creativity, communication and lifelong learning are what will help them build meaningful careers.”

— **Mitali Darbari Prakash,**
Business Director & Partner, The Mavericks, Gurugram



PRE-COLLEGE

use AI primarily
for exam prep and
grammar checking

TRANSITIONING

use it for image
generation and
summarising

EARLY CAREER

use it for understanding
technical concepts and
building personalised
learning pathsresearch

Layered learning: Self-directed tools — fast, accessible, and self-paced — are the exploration layer. Globally ranked institutions remain the validation layer: the credential, the peer network, the employer signal. **73% are actively looking to stand out beyond their formal education.**

The Credential Gap — What Experience Reveals

Confidence in a formal degree increases with life stage — but so does the awareness that a degree alone is not enough:

Pre-College **58%** feel their degree will matter



Least anchored — still forming their view

Transitioning **68%** feel their degree will matter



Under pressure from coursework and credential accumulation simultaneously

Early Career **74%** feel confident in the value of their degree



But 65% still feel a degree alone is insufficient to succeed

The takeaway for institutions:

A degree matters more in retrospect than in anticipation. What builds that retrospective confidence is outcomes — placements, networks, and real-world application.

The *Burnout* Paradox

The pressure to keep learning is simultaneously Gen Z's greatest motivator and its greatest source of anxiety.

60%

feel burned out by the pressure to continuously learn new skills

75%

still believe the right skills will help them stay competitive

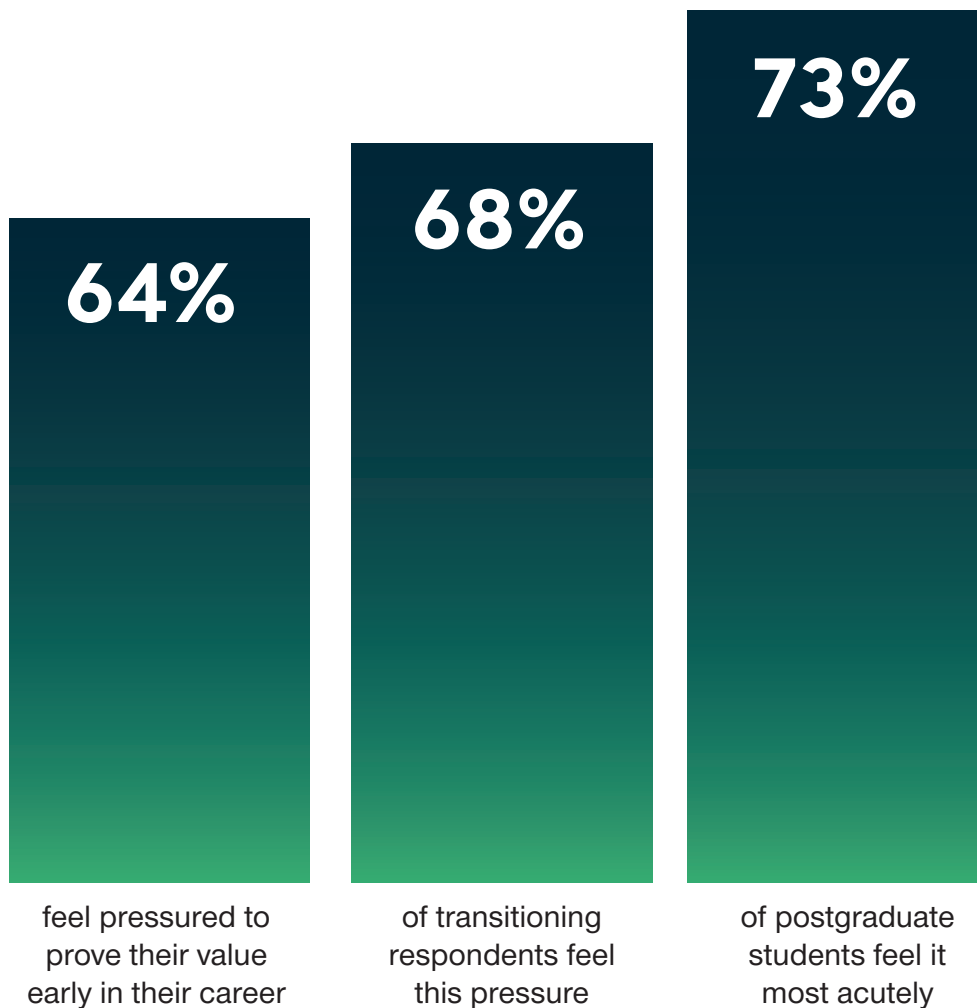
The burnout is highest among transitioning respondents **(68%)**

— those under simultaneous pressure from coursework, career preparation, and the expectation to accumulate credentials in parallel. This is a defining emotional experience of this generation: essential and exhausting at the same time.



For employers, and institutions, this is a design challenge. Gen Z's burnout is not necessarily about a lack of drive; it is also a reflection of learning systems that have not always made continuous learning feel manageable, relevant, or meaningful.

The pressure starts early

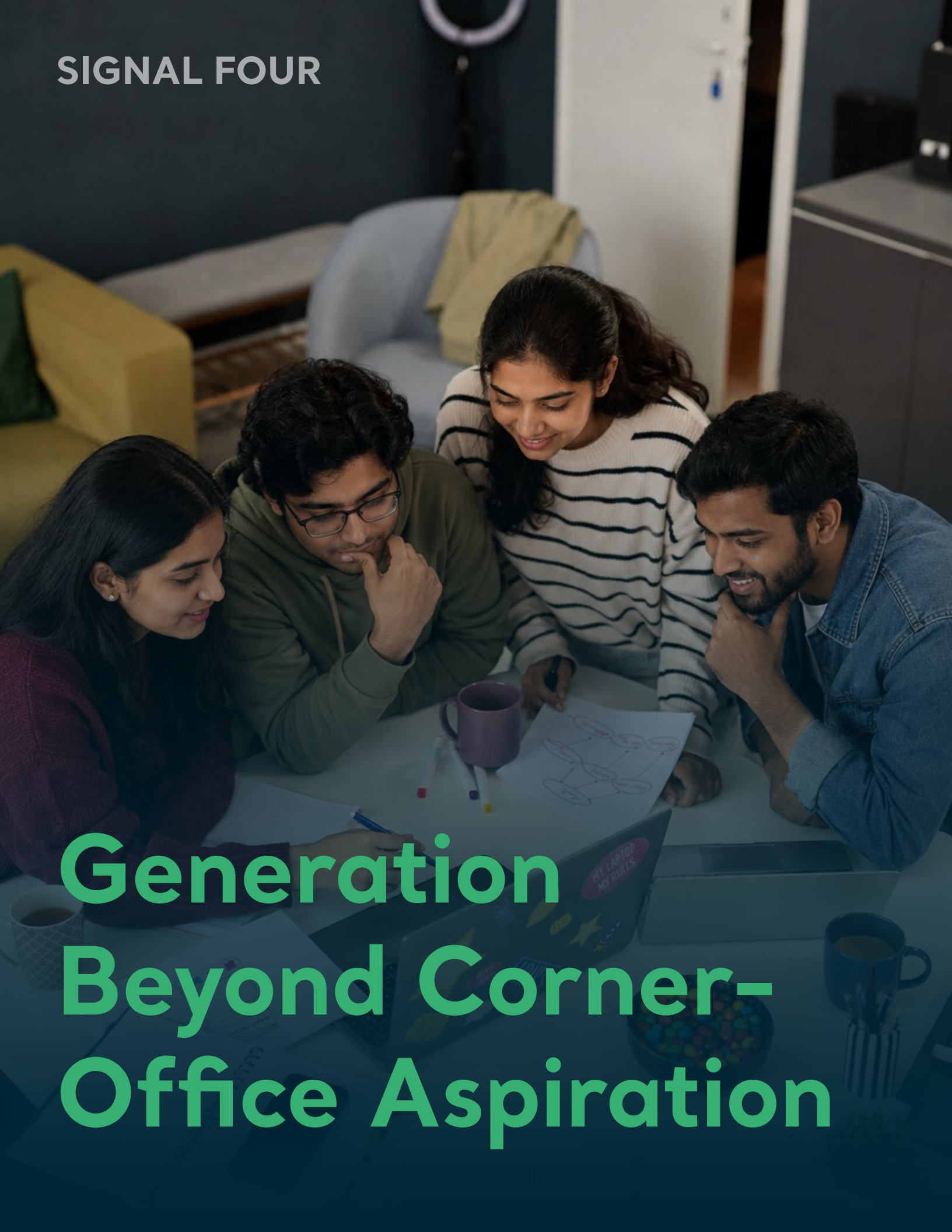


“

“I don’t think my college really prepared me for the job market. Whatever I studied, nothing comes to use in my daily life. It’s not just me — my friends who are working at different positions say the same.”

— 24-year-old female, early career, Bengaluru

SIGNAL FOUR

A group of four young adults (three men and one woman) are gathered around a table, looking at a laptop and a diagram. They appear to be in a collaborative work or study environment. The woman on the left is writing on a notepad. The man next to her is looking at the laptop. The woman on the right is pointing at the diagram. The man on the far right is looking at the laptop. The diagram on the table shows a flowchart with several boxes and arrows. There are also some mugs and a pen on the table.

Generation Beyond Corner- Office Aspiration

Signal three showed that Gen Z is burned out from the pressure to continuously learn, yet cannot stop. Signal four explains why.

The traditional workplace safety net — learning by doing, building skills on the job, growing under guidance — is contracting.

The Cause:

69% feel that opportunities to learn on the job are becoming harder to find

62% worry they do not have enough hands-on experience to compete for good jobs

This is the real engine driving Gen Z to YouTube at midnight and GenAI tools before breakfast.

For employers, this is also the most actionable finding in the report. Gen Z is not arriving disengaged — they are arriving under-supported. Organisations must continue to rebuild structured on-the-job learning to regain the trust of this generation.

The Effect:

72% agree job security feels less predictable today due to constant layoffs

63% do not expect their career to follow a traditional upward path

74% are more interested in work-life balance than formal leadership titles

65% agree a successful career does not require becoming an executive leader

A generation that has watched layoffs unfold in real time on their feeds, and seen visa uncertainty reshape plans has drawn a rational conclusion: the traditional career ladder is not a safe structure to climb.

Titles, hierarchies, corner offices — are losing their pull. What replaces them is meaning, flexibility, and the sense that the organisation is investing in their growth. That is the retention proposition Gen Z is evaluating.

Purpose Is the New Promotion

79%

want their career to contribute positively to the environment

59%

would consider a high-impact sustainability career even at lower salary

72%

agree working on sustainability gives them a sense of purpose

The AI Question: *Threat or Tool?*

On AI, Gen Z holds a nuanced view that defies simple characterisation. **They are concerned — but not paralysed.**

74%

of employed respondents agree that because of AI, they will need to continuously learn new skills

70%

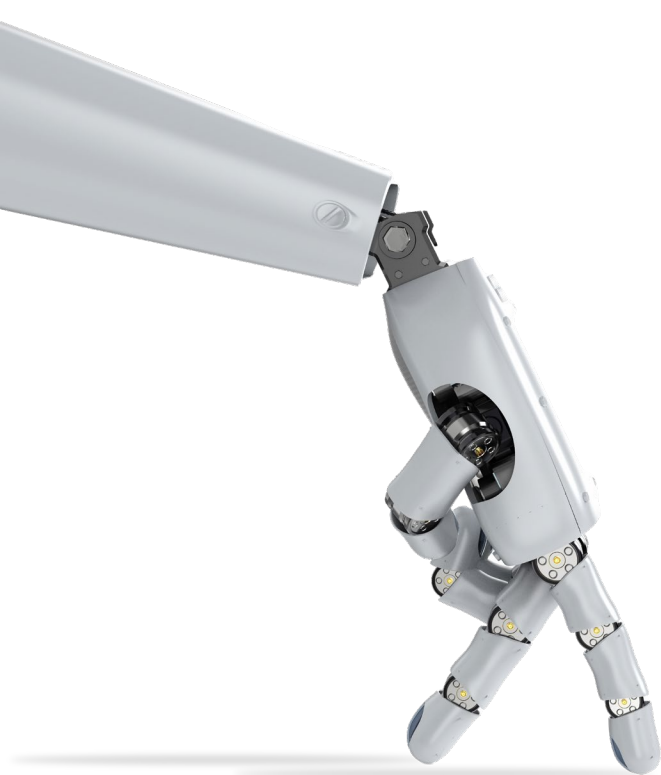
are confident their role will be AUGMENTED rather than replaced by AI

67%

are still concerned that technology will replace them if they stop developing skills

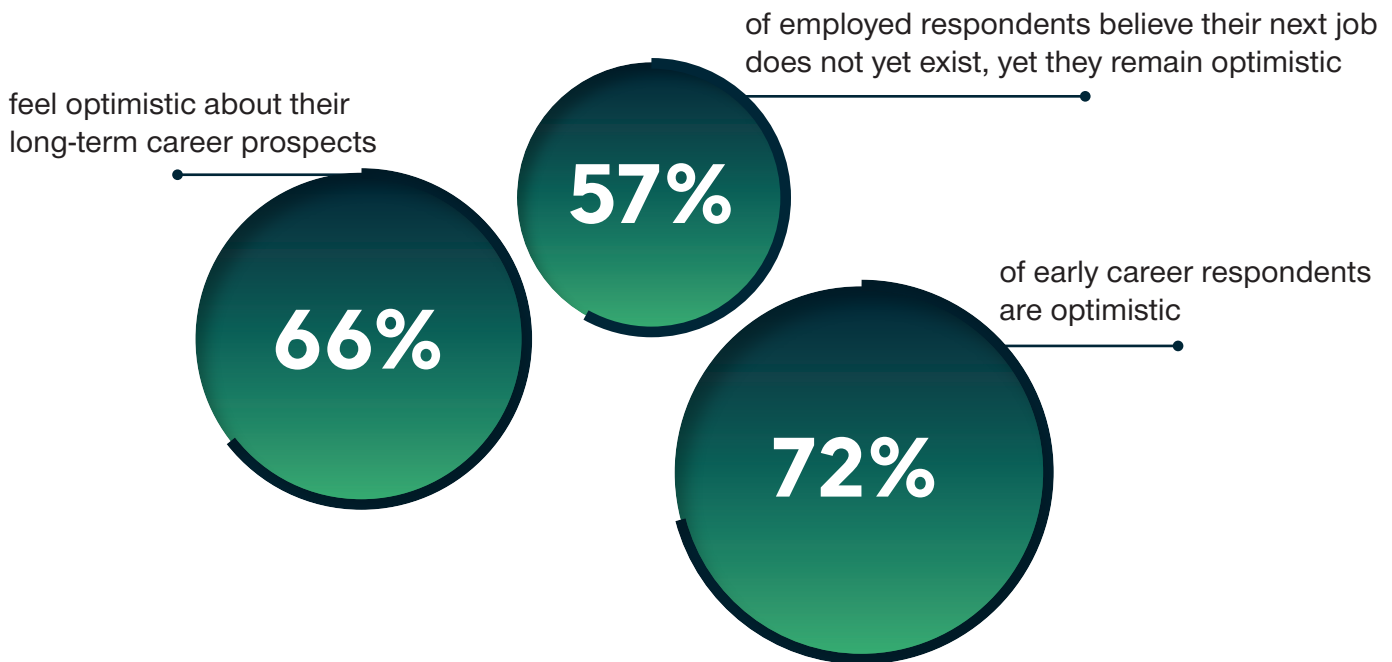
67%

say using AI as a thought partner actively encourages creative thinking and challenges how they approach problems. This generation is using it as a cognitive partner



The tension between confidence and concern is not contradiction — it is nuance. **Gen Z understands that the safety net is active learning, not a static credential.**

Anxious. Aware. *And Still Optimistic:*



The tension between confidence and concern is nuanced. Gen Z understands that the safety net is active learning, and they are not just adapting to AI — they are thinking better because of it.

“

“I feel like I need to learn back-end development as well to evolve even more. I’m thinking that I’m not just a designer anymore, but a design engineer.”
— 22 y.o., male, early career, Hyderabad

“

“Someone who has knowledge in multiple fields will survive — because if you only learn one thing, it can be disrupted by AI. I am continuously wanting to upgrade.”
— 23-year-old male, transitioning, Hyderabad

What They Actually *Want From Work*

The traditional narrative of Gen Z as entitled or disengaged could not be further from what the data shows. This is a generation that is ambitious, purposeful — and willing to work hard, on their own terms.

Work-life balance over leadership titles

74%

Meaningful work over rapid advancement

72%

Individual contributors can be as successful as leaders

72%

Comfortable with career pauses and pivots

71%

Not willing to sacrifice personal life for career

62%

WORK

BALANCE

LIFE

“

“I want to make sure that in my 20s, I’m putting my level best into my work. A job that’s pushing me — I’m completely OK with doing the grind work in the next coming years.”

— 22-year-old female, early career, Mumbai

A close-up photograph of a hand in a dark suit sleeve moving a light-colored wooden chess king piece. The king piece is being lifted from a row of other chess pieces on a dark, textured surface. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light color.

STAKEHOLDER LENS

What This Means *For You*

Targeted implications for every reader of this report

IF YOU ARE A **UNIVERSITY OR EDUCATION INSTITUTION**

- ◇ **68%** would be likely or extremely likely to study with an international university in India. **72%** already believe it delivers global academic standards. The quality perception gap does not exist — the access gap does.
- ◇ The pathway model (India + partial abroad) is the fastest-growing preference among transitioning students (**39%**). Build flexible pathways that offer the best of both.
- ◇ **50%** of postgraduate-bound students would consider a fully on-campus India programme — and **38%** say it would be their first choice

IF YOU ARE AN **EMPLOYER**

- ◇ **65%** of early-career Gen Z feel a degree alone is insufficient to succeed in the job market. Onboarding and foundational skilling programmes are not optional extras — they are essential.
- ◇ **69%** feel on-the-job learning is becoming harder to find. Rebuild structured learning pathways or watch Gen Z upskill their way out.
- ◇ What they consider must-have skills: communication (**72%**), creativity and innovation (**65%**), mental wellbeing (**61%**). Your EVP needs to speak to all three.
- ◇ **74%** prioritise work-life balance over titles. Redesign incentives around meaningful work and visible growth — not hierarchy.

IF YOU ARE A **PARENT**

- ◇ The visa risk is real and rational - **32%** cite it as a top concern. Their hesitation is calculation, not defeatism.
- ◇ The India campus option: same degree, same faculty standards, same employer recognition. At significantly lower cost.

IF YOU ARE A **LEARNING PLATFORM**

- ◇ Gen Z is self-assembling its education. **78%** have completed at least one online course outside their formal degree. So you are not competing with universities, but the talent.
- ◇ AI usage matures with life stage: pre-college use it for exam prep, early career use it to build personalised learning paths. Design for where each segment actually is.
- ◇ **57%** of employed respondents believe their next job does not yet exist. The platform that helps them prepare for roles that have no name yet will win their sustained engagement.

FORWARD NOTE



Building for the Generation *That Won't Wait*

The data in this report is a snapshot of a generation in motion. India's Gen Z is building its future now — with or without the infrastructure designed for them.

What this report makes clear is that the gap between what Gen Z needs and what exists today is wide — and narrowing only slowly. Three imperatives emerge from the findings:

01

Close the Access Gap

68% would be likely or extremely likely to study with an international university in India. The infrastructure to serve this demand — quality on-campus programmes from globally recognised institutions — must scale as fast as the demand curve.

02

Make Skills Development Sustainable

60% of Gen Z already feel burned out by the pressure to keep learning. The answer is better-structured, outcome-linked, time-efficient learning pathways. The institutions that help Gen Z learn smarter, not just more, will earn this generation's sustained trust.

03

Bridge the Employer-Education Gap

65% of early-career Gen Z feel their degree alone is insufficient for the job market. The bridge between education and employment — built through employer-aligned curricula, placement support, and continuous learning partnerships — is a baseline promise that every institution must now deliver.

ABOUT Emeritus

Emeritus (part of Eruditus), is committed to teaching the skills of the future by making high-quality education accessible and affordable to individuals, organisations, and governments worldwide. It partners with more than 90 leading universities across the United States, Europe, Latin America, Southeast Asia, and India to deliver their short courses, degree programs, professional certificates, and senior executive education. Through a distinctive model that combines state-of-the-art technology, curriculum innovation, and hands-on instruction from world-class faculty, mentors, and coaches, Eruditus has educated over one million learners across 90+ countries.

Having transformed how professionals learn through online education, Eruditus is now expanding its impact by enabling global universities to establish and scale their presence in India through innovative delivery models, including world-class campus development and hybrid education offerings. Through these partnerships, universities deliver internationally benchmarked programmes at a fraction of traditional overseas costs - creating transformative opportunities for students while expanding institutional reach and impact. The result is a truly international education experience that opens doors to global careers and fosters diverse, globally connected academic communities.

Eruditus employs more than 2,000 people globally, with offices in Mumbai, New Delhi, Bengaluru, Shanghai, Singapore, Palo Alto, Mexico City, Boston, London, and Dubai. The company is backed by leading global investors, including TPG, the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, Prosus Ventures, Peak XV, Accel, and SoftBank Vision Fund. More details here: <https://emeritus.org/>

This report is the first in an ongoing research series tracking India's talent across education, skills, and career decision-making.