

Factors in Choosing a Field of Study at a University by Russian and French Applicants: a Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

This article is based on an empirical study conducted between February and May 2023, employing methods such as online questionnaire surveys, content analysis of school websites, and secondary analysis of regulatory documents in the field of education in Russia and France. These documents include materials from organizations, centers, and other structures addressing issues related to vocational guidance, employment, training, and the development of student mobility in secondary schools and colleges.

The work highlights the scientific problem of considering students' personal interests, inclinations, and abilities as a critical factor in selecting a university training program. The study revealed differences between Russian and French applicants in terms of the importance attributed to institutional, social, and personal factors when choosing a university course. Both Russian and French applicants place equal emphasis on institutional factors when deciding on a course of study. However, French applicants prioritize personal motives, such as self-realization, self-development, interesting future work, and the potential to build a successful career. Conversely, Russian applicants are more influenced by social factors, including entrance exam results, the prestige of the university, the potential to secure a well-paying job after graduation, and future high earnings. French applicants tend to make more balanced and informed decisions, leveraging their existing abilities to secure fulfilling future employment, achieve self-actualization, and develop successful careers.

Keywords

education, professional orientation, Russian education system, French education system, choice of direction of training at university, self-realization, applicant, school, university, personal interests, inclinations, abilities, institutional factors, social factors, personal factors

JEL codes: I20, I21, I28

Theoretical justification

The emergence of new professions, the imbalance of supply and demand in the educational services market and the labour market in terms of professional qualifications, and the competition among universities for applicants highlight the role of various professional orientation stakeholders—families, schools, supplementary education organizations, and universities—in the decision-making process for young people choosing a university and a field of study. Systemic determinants of professional choice involve interactions between both institutional and personal factors. One of the most significant influences on this choice is the role of reference groups such as family, peers, and schools.

Parental motivation can vary, encompassing aspirations for their child to achieve high social status, obtain a quality education, or fulfill parental ambitions, as well as considerations related to finances or doubts about the child's abilities. This influence can be exerted both directly (through family traditions, professional legacies, education level, and daily communication) and indirectly. According to research by A.E. Golomshtok (1979) and I.V. Dubrovina (2018), the high educational and professional status of parents fosters agreement with their viewpoints in choosing a field of study. Teenagers often accept their parents' decisions, anticipating assistance during the admissions process or fearing disapproval and potential conflict.

Studies by I.S. Kohn (2010) and L.A. Golovey (2023) emphasize that peer influence also plays a crucial role in shaping professional aspirations during adolescence and early adulthood. However, G.G. Tupikina's (2006) research indicated that school teachers often do not feel adequately prepared to address the issue of professional self-determination among older students, revealing gaps in their practical training. This situation has persisted over time. Furthermore, early academic tracking in schools (e.g., the assignment of students to specialized classes and the need to choose OGE and Unified State Exam subjects) does not foster deep, well-considered professional choices aligned with students' personal inclinations and preferences, leaving many unprepared for such decisions.

Research indicates that over 40% of 11th graders lack any clear idea of their desired future profession, while only 30% report having a clear sense of vocation (TASS 2022). This reality is reflected in the dominant motives behind professional choices, which include opportunities for state-funded enrollment, the prestige of the chosen field, the quality of fundamental education, and university rankings (RAEX 2022). Notably, personal professional interests and preferences are often absent from this list.

Thus, there is a contradiction between the need to consider the personal interests, abilities, and preferences of schoolchildren when choosing a university and the reluctance of career guidance entities to engage in such work. This social problem has an institutional nature, as insufficient awareness regarding the choice of a future profession and field of study leads to an imbalance in the labour market. On the one hand, there is a shortage of personnel in the fields of IT, agriculture, and skilled labour (RBC 2021); on the other hand, there is an oversupply of specialists in business, law, and administration, including economists and lawyers (RT 2021). At an individual level, such a situation can result in dissatisfaction with the chosen field of study, future professional activities, and a decrease in work efficiency.

Let us consider the key factors influencing the choice of future higher education paths identified in recent Russian studies. For instance, L.V. Vasilyeva and I.V. Tolstoukhova (2020) found that the most significant factor for applicants when choosing a field of study is salary, which is directly linked to career growth opportunities and the prestige of the profession.

The prestige of a profession, in turn, is determined by the nature of the work (the extent of creativity and interest involved) and the degree of the profession's popularity. According to students, the most prestigious careers are in information systems and technologies, as well as in nanotechnology (Osipova and Enveri 2012). According to a HeadHunter study, in 2022, the most in-demand professions included sales and customer service managers, programmers and developers, doctors, and engineers (RIA 2022).

Research conducted by HSE in 2019–2020 (Prakhov et al. 2021) revealed the most significant factors influencing university choice. The primary aspects identified were: education in the chosen specialty (33%); university reputation (30%); presence of qualified teachers (25%); proximity of the university to home (21%); high ranking positions (18%); ease of admission (18%); and recommendations from parents, friends, or teachers (17%).

First-year students cited key reasons for selecting their field of study: the potential for interesting and varied work (36%); alignment with personal abilities (33%); good earning prospects (26%); the specialty's prestige (23%); and career growth opportunities (22%). Notably, while a third (33%) mentioned that their chosen profession matched their abilities, most factors influencing their decisions were institutional rather than personal.

Additionally, the survey indicated that 58% of respondents altered their plans in the year leading up to university enrollment, highlighting a low degree of certainty and awareness in their decision-making process. The complexity of choosing a specific field of study is exacerbated by the necessity of forgoing other potential interests. High school students need support when selecting a field of study, but this support should avoid suggesting that certain fields are more prestigious, in demand, or lucrative based solely on external opinions (Chechenikhina and Sinko 2020).

In summary, current evidence suggests that applicants' choices are predominantly driven by the prestige of the university and field of study rather than personal preferences and interests. Furthermore, the uncertainty surrounding their choices points to an unstructured and unconscious decision-making process, reflecting an underdeveloped professional identity among many individuals.

In order for such a choice to be conscious and mature, the coordination of activities among all social actors within the career guidance system is required. Noteworthy in this regard is the experience of France, where there is close cooperation between Information and Orientation Centers, students' families, and government agencies. Analysis shows that government regulation, highly qualified specialists, and the availability of professional guidance councils ensure the effectiveness of the French career guidance system (Sargeac 2022; Dementiev 2007).

In France, the vocational orientation of schoolchildren begins in the 6th grade and continues until the end of the lyceum, covering ages 11 to 18. This process is implemented through the "Avenir" ("The Future") project (Ministère de l'éducation 2024a), which facilitates dialogue among students, parents, teachers, educational consultants, school administration, and state educational psychologists. Over an extended period, a collaborative structure involving three main social institutions has been established: the National Bureau of Information on Education and Professions (ONISEP), information and orientation centers (CIO), and the National Employment Agency.

The main methods of career guidance used in French schools can be categorized as follows:

Informational methods (*méthodes d'information*) that include excursions to enterprises, experience exchanges, documentation, and the search and analysis of information.

Diagnostic methods (*méthodes diagnostiques*) that involve testing and questionnaires.

Professional counseling methods (*méthodes de consultation professionnelle*) that encompass informing, diagnosing, providing recommendations, and using the biographical method (Turchina 2013).

Career guidance activities in the regions are currently being implemented by the regional Vocational Guidance Service (SPRO), which operates independently of the center and primarily considers territorial specifics. The SPRO comprises an employment center, local representative offices, and a youth information network. The main functions of the SPRO include assisting students in selecting their educational path at the lyceum and university levels, as well as supporting young professionals in their job search (Rapport 2015). Information and Orientation Centers (CIO), under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of National Education (Ministère de l'éducation 2024b), are spread across the country. These centers offer individual consultations to lyceum students and their parents regarding the next stages and fields of professional training. It is mandatory for psychologists to be employed in these centers.

Structures providing general information and consulting services (SCUIO) have been established at the university level. These structures offer students a wide range of documentation and numerous information services related to university education, along with career guidance recommendations. SCUIO specialists assist students in finding jobs or internships and in preparing resumes and motivation letters. Counseling psychologists conduct individual interviews that may include assessments such as the Howard Gardner intelligence test or the Myers-Briggs personality type test. Based on the results, students receive tailored recommendations for their future professional development (Le SCUIO 2024).

Local structures (*les missions locales*) have been set up to assist young people aged 16 to 25 with employment, education, vocational guidance, mobility, housing, health maintenance, and access to culture, sports, and recreation. Psychologists provide vocational guidance, while specialized consultants help with job search and placement.

France's universal youth information network is accessible to all young people, regardless of their situation. This network includes national, regional, and local Youth Information Centers (CIDJ), which address several key tasks: guiding young people in their professional orientation, assisting in choosing university study paths, helping with job and internship searches, finding part-time work compatible with studies, supporting international mobility, and offering guidance on starting a business (CIDJ 2024). All services are provided free of charge.

Additionally, School Dropout Prevention Missions (MLDS) are available to support teenagers who may have rushed into educational decisions, as well as their parents (Risque... 2024). The primary role of MLDS is to assist young people who have left school at age 16, providing them with opportunities to gain qualifications and complete accelerated professional courses, enabling future employment.

The National Bureau of Information on Education and Professions of France (ONISEP) provides comprehensive information on studies and professions, as well as schools and universities. The ONISEP website includes an extensive list of resources related to university applications, admissions to foreign universities, and questionnaires designed to identify students' interests (Quels métier... 2024). All these structures aim to involve young people in public and professional life and focus on meeting the specific needs of students. They assist lyceum and college students in understanding which professional paths to pursue based

on their abilities, academic performance, interests, and inclinations, as well as current trends in the educational and labour markets.

We also analyzed the significant stakeholders in the Russian vocational guidance system. The Ministry of Education of Russia has developed the national project “Education” (2019–2024), aimed at fostering opportunities for self-realization and talent development. One of the key objectives of this project is to establish an effective system for identifying, supporting, and nurturing the abilities and talents of children and youth. This system is founded on principles of fairness and universality and is designed to support self-determination and professional orientation for all students (Ministry of Education of Russia 2023).

Various programmes aimed at enhancing the professionalization of the learning process exemplify the implementation of the National Project at the regional level. For instance, the Russian Academy of Sciences and several higher education institutions are involved in the Academic Class project, including NRNU MEPhI, RUDN, MSUPE, ARRIAB, Moscow Polytechnic University, and others. The Entrepreneurial Class project features participants such as the G.V. Plekhanov Russian University of Economics, HSE, the Bank of Russia, and the City Methodological Center of the Moscow Department of Education and Science.

The activity of the HSE Lyceum is particularly noteworthy in terms of career guidance for schoolchildren. At the Lyceum, students are granted the freedom to choose their educational trajectory. They design their own curricula by selecting the academic disciplines they wish to study. While there are compulsory subjects, such as Russian and mathematics, students can select the level of study: basic or specialized. This approach allows students to take an active role in shaping their educational paths based on their interests and abilities. During the first month and a half, students have the flexibility to change their selected subjects and attend different classes. The Lyceum’s primary goal is to help students determine their interests, refine their goals, and choose their professional paths.

Career guidance work at the Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation is centralized. The University has signed over 100 cooperation agreements with partner and basic schools in Moscow. At these schools, university faculty from various specialties and training areas conduct career guidance classes for high school students. These sessions take the form of master classes, business games, debates, and other interactive activities, utilizing modern network and Internet technologies while considering the current socio-economic situation.

At the university level, career guidance work is generally multifaceted, encompassing the pre-university, university, and postgraduate stages of education.

To analyze the structural components of the professionalization process at the general education level, a content analysis of ten Moscow school websites was conducted. The analysis revealed that all schools implement pre-professional class programmes for students in grades 10–11 in collaboration with Moscow universities. However, only two out of the ten schools mentioned partnerships with potential employers, and the nature of these interactions with organizations was not specified.

All school websites indicated the presence of a teacher-psychologist, but this information was provided primarily in sections for parents rather than students. Consequently, parents and teachers are identified as the primary beneficiaries of this resource, with students often excluded from direct access. Information about career guidance support was available on only three out of the ten school websites, reflecting an insufficient level of implementa-

tion. In schools where such support was mentioned, access was limited and required a request from parents.

The analysis highlights varying degrees of personalization in the vocational guidance systems of France and Russia. The French system focuses on developing applicants' aptitudes, interests, and abilities, ensuring better prospects for employment and adaptation in the labour market. In contrast, the Russian approach is more eclectic and generalized, with a broad, mass-oriented framework. Consequently, the factors influencing Russian applicants' choice of training direction and university are more likely to lean towards institutional considerations.

Based on these observations, the hypothesis of our study posits that there are significant differences in the priorities guiding applicants' professional choices (areas of study and university selection). French school graduates tend to base their decisions on their abilities, interests, inclinations, and opportunities for self-development, whereas Russian graduates are influenced more heavily by external institutional factors.

Methods

To test the hypothesis, an empirical study was conducted using an online questionnaire survey distributed via social networks through a Google Form. For Russian respondents, the questionnaire was shared on official student pages such as "Overheard at Moscow State University," "Overheard at HSE," "Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation," "MIPT – Phystech," and "Overheard by RTU MIREA (MTU)." It was also shared in student discussion groups and disseminated using the snowball sampling method.

Accessing French respondents proved more challenging. Invitations to participate were sent directly to individuals who met the study's criteria, identified through social networks (e.g., Telegram, Instagram¹) and personal connections. The sample was closely aligned with data from the Monitoring of Admission Quality to Higher Education Institutions conducted by the Higher School of Economics (Admission Quality 2022) and the Ministry of Education and Youth of France (Ministère de l'éducation 2022) regarding the distribution of first-year students across training areas. The sample included first-year bachelor's students (ages 17–22) from Russian and French universities studying in the fields of natural sciences; arts, languages, and humanities; law, political, and social sciences; and economics and management.

In total, 298 students participated in the survey: 223 Russians and 75 French, residing in Moscow, Paris, Strasbourg, Lyon, and Lille (see Table 1). The field phase of the study was conducted from January 16, 2023, to February 12, 2023.

To collect, process, and analyze empirical data, specialized software packages such as Microsoft Office and IBM SPSS Statistics 24 were utilized. These tools enabled calculations using the classification method for the obtained data, descriptive statistics (e.g., frequency distribution calculations and creation of cross-tabulation tables), Spearman correlation analysis, and comparison of means across different groups using the z-test and t-test, with Bonferroni correction applied for multiple comparisons. Additionally, factor analysis was performed to reduce the dimensionality of the study variables.

¹ Instagram is owned by Meta Platforms Inc., recognized as an extremist organization and banned in the Russian Federation.

Table 1. Distribution of respondents' answers by region of residence and socio-demographic characteristics

Socio-demographic characteristics		Region of residence		
		Russia	France	Total
Gender	Male	96 _a (43.0%)	35 _a (46.7%)	131 (44.0%)
	Female	127 _a (57.0%)	40 _a (53.3%)	167 (56.0%)
Age	17 years	13 _a (5.8%)	0 _b (0.0%)	13 (4.4%)
	18 years	142 _a (63.7%)	24 _b (32.0%)	166 (55.7%)
	19 years	44 _a (19.7%)	28 _b (37.3%)	72 (24.2%)
	20 years	24 _a (10.8%)	4 _b (5.3%)	28 (9.4%)
	21 years	0 _a (0.0%)	16 _b (21.3%)	16 (5.4%)
	22 years	0 _a (0.0%)	3 _b (4.0%)	3 (1.0%)
	Marital status	Married	2 _a (0.9%)	0 _a (0.0%)
	In a relationship	85 _a (38.1%)	38 _a (50.7%)	123 (41.3%)
	Engaged	5 _a (2.2%)	0 _a (0.0%)	5 (1.7%)
	Not married	131 _a (58.7%)	37 _a (49.3%)	168 (56.4%)
Family's financial situation	There is enough for food, but buying clothes is difficult for us	3 _a (1.4%)	0 _a (0.0%)	3 (1.0%)
	There is enough for clothes, but buying household appliances is problematic for us	24 _a (10.9%)	0 _b (0.0%)	24 (8.1%)
	There is enough to buy household appliances, but buying a car is difficult for us	110 _a (49.8%)	17 _b (22.7%)	127 (42.9%)
	There is enough money to buy a car, but buying an apartment / dacha is problematic for us	66 _a (29.9%)	24 _b (32.0%)	90 (30.4%)
	Buying an apartment / dacha is not a problem for us	18 _a (8.1%)	34 _b (45.3%)	52 (17.6%)

Statistical significance was determined with an asymptotic significance threshold of $p < 0.05$. Significant differences between the groups are indicated in the tables using letters: identical letters in columns signify no statistically significant differences, while different letters indicate significant differences. The tables display both the frequency of selected responses within each group and the corresponding percentage distribution of responses (shown in parentheses).

The primary research tool was a sociological questionnaire comprising 29 questions, organized into seven thematic blocks:

1. Socio-demographic block: Questions addressed gender, age, marital status, and the family's financial situation.

2. Vocational training block: Focused on the respondent's choice of university, specialty/field of study, form of study, age at which the decision was made, and plans for continuing education in the chosen specialty (Debarbieux 2022).
3. Economic aspects block: Supplemented the vocational training block by assessing how respondents considered future financial well-being and the relevance of their chosen specialty during the decision-making process (Vacheron 2023).
4. Social factors block: Examined the influence of family, social environment, public opinion, and the prestige of the field of study on the respondent's choice (Ausloos 2019).
5. Interests and inclinations block: Investigated whether the choice of study direction was guided by the respondent's personal interests, inclinations, and hobbies (Loubat 2022).
6. Self-assessment block: Enabled respondents to evaluate their abilities, allowing comparisons between their skills and their chosen field of study (Sargeac 2022).
7. Motivational block: Explored the reasons for selecting a university and field of study, such as potential for high earnings, ease of learning, or alignment with personal interests and traits (Loubat 2022).

Results

The analysis of the obtained data enables us to draw the following conclusions. Regarding the choice of professional activity, statistically significant differences were observed for each parameter considered. A higher proportion of Russians have not yet decided on their future profession compared to the French (32.3% in Russia vs. 20.0% in France). The French, on average, choose their direction of training earlier than Russians ($R = -0.330$, $p = 0.004$). Additionally, the proportion of French respondents planning to continue their studies in their chosen specialty at the master's level is higher (69.3% vs. 46.6%). ($X^2(1) = 10.623$, $p = 0.001$).

No significant differences were found between Russians and the French regarding the consideration of the economic factor when choosing a university course of study. Students in humanitarian and socio-political fields of study in both countries do not prioritize the economic factor as the most significant (future material well-being is important to only 27.4% of Russian and 26.7% of French respondents). The material factor was the most important in choosing a field of study only for students in the economic field (30.8% in Russia and 50.0% in France). In Russia, students in natural sciences also have high income expectations for the future (28.4%).

In general, the level of stereotyped perceptions of the most lucrative areas is higher among Russian students: all respondents, regardless of their field of study, consider the IT sector (60.2%) and business (30.8%) to be the most profitable. In France, the boundaries between highly paid professions are less distinct ($X^2(6) = 74.459$, $p < 0.001$). A high salary can be achieved in any field, so this factor is not a leading consideration when choosing a field of study.

Among the French, the proportion of those who consider their chosen field of study to be in demand in the labour market is significantly higher (92.0%) compared to Russians (69.5%) ($X^2(1) = 14.793$, $p < 0.001$). This trend is also observed when considering future demand in 10 years (78.7% among the French vs. 66.8% among Russians) ($X^2(1) = 4.770$, $p = 0.029$) (see tables in Appendices 1 and 2).

Social factors proved significant for both French and Russian respondents when choosing a course of study at a university. The difference between the two groups is that Russians are more likely (47.1%) than the French (11.0%) to rely on social networks and the opinion of friends (39.8% and 26.0%, respectively). In contrast, the French are more likely (56.2%) than Russians (35.7%) to take into account the opinions of teachers and professional specialists at school (25.3% and 12.1%, respectively).

Russians tend to have stereotyped perceptions about the prestige of professions. According to students across all fields, the most prestigious professions are in IT (77.6%) and medicine (55.6%). For the French, the results vary depending on the respondents' field of study.

The professional activity of parents is linked to students' choice of economics faculties in both countries. Economists are most often the children of businesspeople who have decided to follow in their parents' footsteps (44.6% in Russia and 37.5% in France). At the same time, parents of economics students are more likely to consider their children less capable of studying in this specialty (26.2% in Russia vs. 12.5% in France).

When making important life decisions, the French (regardless of their field of study) consult their parents more often than Russians (27.4% and 10.7%, respectively) ($X^2(4) = 13.196$, $p = 0.01$). However, when determining the direction of study at a university, the opposite is true, with French respondents consulting their parents less often than Russians (0.0% and 18.4%, respectively).

In relation to the interests and inclinations of the individual, a small number of statistically significant differences between Russian and French first-year students were identified. Both groups reported being interested in subjects at school that are central to their university studies. Statistically significant differences were not found in natural sciences ($t(296) = 1.970$, $p = 0.050$), social sciences ($t(296) = 0.750$, $p = 0.454$), or language subjects ($t(296) = -0.659$, $p = 0.511$).

However, Russians primarily chose their favourite subjects to prepare more effectively for the Unified State Exam (43.0%), whereas the French selected their favourite subjects based on genuine interest (73.3%). At the same time, the French did not attend additional classes at school as often (49.4%), as they generally felt their level of school knowledge was sufficient for university admission. Conversely, Russians frequently attended additional classes in disciplines necessary for preparing for the Unified State Exam (91.4%).

An analysis of the role of abilities in decisions about university admission revealed no significant differences between the two countries. Russians tend to select Unified State Exam subjects they find easiest, aligning their university training areas with these strengths. Similarly, the French also prefer studying subjects they are talented in, but their motivation differs. For the French, the choice is driven by the prospect of securing an interesting job, self-actualization, and building a successful career (see Table 2).

It can be assumed that the existing multi-level vocational guidance system in France contributes to this outcome. Interestingly, the only area where special abilities are poorly aligned with the choice of training in both countries is economics and management. Future economists in Russia believe they possess communicative abilities (63.5%) and creative abilities (50.8%). Meanwhile, French economists identify communicative abilities (50.0%), mathematical abilities (25.0%), and creative abilities (25.0%). As noted earlier, it is significant that future economists prioritize continuing the work of their parents, regardless of their personal interests and abilities (see Table 3).

Table 2. Distribution of respondents' answers by region of residence and personality abilities

Personality abilities		Region of residence		
		Russia	France	Total
Simplest subject in school	Mathematics	59 _a (27.1%)	18 _a (24.0%)	77 (26.3%)
	Native language	49 _a (22.5%)	8 _b (10.7%)	57 (19.5%)
	Foreign language	35 _a (16.1%)	18 _a (24.0%)	53 (18.1%)
	Reference list	15 _a (6.9%)	0 _b (0.0%)	15 (5.1%)
	Social Studies	20 _a (9.2%)	0 _b (0.0%)	20 (6.8%)
	History	6 _a (2.8%)	6 _b (8.0%)	12 (4.1%)
	Physics	4 _a (1.8%)	0 _a (0.0%)	4 (1.4%)
	Computer science	11 _a (5.0%)	0 _b (0.0%)	11 (3.8%)
	Chemistry	3 _a (1.4%)	0 _a (0.0%)	3 (1.0%)
	Biology	6 _a (2.8%)	8 _b (10.7%)	14 (4.8%)
	Geography	5 _a (2.3%)	2 _a (2.7%)	7 (2.4%)
	Physical Culture	5 _a (2.3%)	15 _b (20.0%)	20 (6.8%)
	Abilities	Learning abilities	151 _a (68.6%)	49 _a (64.0%)
Mathematical		86 _a (39.1%)	22 _a (29.3%)	108 (36.6%)
Technical		45 _a (20.5%)	8 _a (10.7%)	53 (18.0%)
Literary		66 _a (30.0%)	16 _a (21.3%)	82 (27.8%)
Musical		35 _a (15.9%)	4 _b (5.3%)	39 (13.2%)
Creative		88 _a (40.0%)	14 _b (18.7%)	102 (34.6%)
Physical		61 _a (27.7%)	6 _b (8.0%)	67 (22.7%)
Ability to communicate with people		112 _a (50.9%)	43 _a (57.3%)	155 (52.4%)

The most significant differences between the countries were found in terms of learning motives. The majority of French students are guided by personal motives when choosing a course of study at a university, while most Russians are guided by social motives ($t(296) = 7.579$, $p < 0.001$).

The key motives for studying at a particular university in a specific field for Russians included the study of interesting subjects (4.49 out of 5.00) ($t(104.996) = 2.930$, $p = 0.004$), the opportunity to secure a good job in life (4.32 out of 5.00) ($t(113.137) = 4.345$, $p < 0.001$), and the prospect of high earnings after graduation (4.26 out of 5.00) ($t(296) = 2.221$, $p < 0.001$). For the French, the primary motives were self-realization (4.54 out of 5.00) ($t(296) = 2.527$, $p = 0.015$), self-development (4.30 out of 5.00) ($t(296) = 2.224$, $p = 0.023$), and the study of interesting subjects (4.09 out of 5.00) ($t(104.996) = 2.930$, $p = 0.004$).

The main motives for choosing the direction of training for Russians were the results of entrance tests (43.0%), the prestige of the university (42.6%), and future material well-being (27.4%) (see Table 4).

For the French, the key factors influencing their choice were the prospect of an interesting job in the future (73.3%), the possibility of self-realization (61.3%), and the opportunity to build a successful career (46.7%). Additionally, the role of vocational guidance in schools is significantly higher for the French (25.3%) compared to Russians (12.1%).

Table 3. Distribution of respondents' answers by region of residence and personality abilities

	An enlarged group of training areas										Total
	Natural sciences		Arts, languages and Humanities		Law, political and social sciences		Economics and Management				
	Russia	France	Russia	France	Russia	France	Russia	France	Russia	France	
Learning abilities	67 _a (76.1%)	12 _b (60.0%)	29 _a (69.0%)	24 _b (88.9%)	19 _a (70.4%)	4 _b (33.3%)	36 _a (57.1%)	8 _a (50.0%)	77 (26.3%)		
Mathematical	66 _a (75.0%)	8 _b (40.0%)	2 (4.8%)	4 _b (14.8%)	3 (11.1%)	6 _b (50.0%)	15 _a (23.8%)	4 _a (25.0%)	57 (19.5%)		
Technical	40 _a (45.5%)	6 _b (30.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 _a (0.0%)	1 _a (3.7%)	2 _b (16.7%)	4 (6.3%)	0 (0.0%)	53 (18.1%)		
Literary	29 _a (33.0%)	0 _b (0.0%)	24 _a (57.1%)	8 _b (29.6%)	5 _a (18.5%)	6 _b (50.0%)	8 _a (12.7%)	2 _a (12.5%)	15 (5.1%)		
Musical	19 _a (21.6%)	0 _b (0.0%)	2 (4.8%)	0 _b (0.0%)	4 (14.8%)	2 (16.7%)	10 _a (15.9%)	2 (12.5%)	3 (1.0%)		
Creative	33 _a (37.5%)	4 _b (20.0%)	8 _a (19.0%)	4 _a (14.8%)	15 _a (55.6%)	2 _b (16.7%)	32 _a (50.8%)	4 _b (25.0%)	14 (4.8%)		
Physical	28 _a (31.8%)	2 _b (10.0%)	9 (21.4%)	0 _b (0.0%)	10 (37.0%)	2 _b (16.7%)	14 _a (22.2%)	2 _a (12.5%)	7 (2.4%)		
Ability to communicate with people	48 _a (54.5%)	8 _b (40.0%)	11 _a (26.2%)	19 _b (70.4%)	13 _a (48.1%)	8 _b (66.7%)	40 _a (63.5%)	8 _a (50.0%)	20 (6.8%)		

Table 4. Group statistics by region of residence and study motives

Learning Motive	Country	Average estimate of the significance of the motive
Studying interesting subjects	Russia	4.49
	France	4.09
Good teaching staff	Russia	4.35
	France	4.07
Opportunity to get a good job in life	Russia	4.32
	France	3.69
High earnings after graduation	Russia	4.26
	France	3.31
Self-realization	Russia	4.12
	France	4.54
Self-development	Russia	4.00
	France	4.30
Opportunity to get a higher education diploma	Russia	3.86
	France	3.51
I want to master a profession	Russia	3.82
	France	3.87
I like to study	Russia	3.48
	France	3.92
Easy learning process	Russia	3.18
	France	2.28

When selecting a future course of study, none of the French respondents primarily considered the results of entrance tests, family opinions, advice from friends, the opinions of bloggers or successful people, nor did they make a random choice (0.0% for each factor among the French) (see Table 5).

Table 5. Distribution of respondents' answers by region of residence and key factors influencing the choice of training direction

Key selection factors	Region of residence		
	Russia	France	Total
Prestige of the chosen university	95 _a (42.6%)	12 _b (16.0%)	107 (35.9%)
Possibility of self-realization	57 _a (25.6%)	46 _b (61.3%)	103 (34.6%)
Results of entrance tests	96 _a (43.0%)	0 _b (0.0%)	96 (32.2%)
Interesting job	34 _a (15.2%)	55 _b (73.3%)	89 (29.9%)
Future material well-being	61 _a (27.4%)	20 _a (26.7%)	81 (27.2%)

Key selection factors	Region of residence		
	Russia	France	Total
Opportunity to build a successful career	42 _a (18.8%)	35 _b (46.7%)	77 (25.8%)
Making your own independent decision	43 _a (19.3%)	20 _a (26.7%)	63 (21.1%)
Professional orientation	27 _a (12.1%)	19 _b (25.3%)	46 (15.4%)
Random selection	44 _a (19.7%)	0 _b (0.0%)	44 (14.8%)
Family opinion	41 _a (18.4%)	0 _b (0.0%)	41 (13.8%)
Prestige of the chosen direction	35 _a (15.7%)	6 _a (8.0%)	41 (13.8%)
Advice from friends	16 _a (7.2%)	0 _b (0.0%)	16 (5.4%)
Opinion of bloggers, successful people	10 _a (4.5%)	0 _a (0.0%)	10 (3.4%)

Conclusions and discussion

The analysis of the survey has shown that both Russian and French applicants are equally influenced by institutional factors. For both groups, the economic factor and societal stereotypes about professions are significant when choosing a university course of study.

The differences between the samples were most evident in several areas. Among the French, fewer students remain undecided about their future specialty in their first year of university. They also perceive their chosen field of study as more in demand in the current and future labour markets. French schoolchildren tend to choose their higher education direction earlier than their Russian counterparts and show greater intent to pursue further education in their chosen specialty. Additionally, French students place more emphasis on the guidance of teachers and vocational specialists at school when making their decisions.

French applicants also rely more on their existing abilities, aiming to secure an interesting job, achieve self-realization, and build a successful career. This highlights a difference in the motivations behind choosing a field of study: French students are guided more by personal motives (self-realization, self-development, future interesting work, and career-building opportunities), while Russian students are more influenced by social factors (entrance exam results, university prestige, prospects of securing a good job, and high earnings after graduation).

Overall, French applicants make more balanced and informed decisions, with a greater emphasis on personal self-actualization compared to their Russian counterparts. Given that the survey indicates a significantly higher role of career guidance specialists for French students, it can be inferred that the vocational guidance system in France substantially contributes to the quality of these choices.

In conclusion, the hypothesis received partial confirmation: there are notable differences in the professional choice priorities of French and Russian university applicants. French school graduates place greater emphasis on their interests and inclinations, with a stronger focus on personal self-realization. However, the survey did not reveal significant differences between the two groups regarding the role of abilities in the decision-making process for higher education admission.

Limitations of the research results

The limitations of the obtained results are primarily determined by the exploratory nature of the conducted research. The Russian sample of the empirical study consisted exclusively of students from Moscow universities, which tend to have more substantial logistical, human, and managerial resources for career guidance compared to regional educational institutions. The limitations of the French sample arise from objective circumstances. In both countries, the survey was conducted among first-year students because they have already decided on their future specialty and are, therefore, able to analyze the reasons and level of awareness behind their choice of university and field of study. The data obtained provide a foundation for further research into the approaches, structure, and content of career guidance in both countries.

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Appendix

Table A1. Distribution of respondents' answers by region of residence and economic factors

Economic factors		Region of residence		
		Russia	France	Total
Most highly paid specialty	IT-sphere	133 _a (60.2%)	16 _b (21.9%)	149 (50.7%)
	Marketing	1 _a (0.5%)	8 _b (11.0%)	9 (3.1%)
	Business	68 _a (30.8%)	25 _a (34.2%)	93 (31.6%)
	Economy	2 _a (0.9%)	14 _b (19.2%)	16 (5.4%)
	Jurisprudence	3 _a (1.4%)	0 _a (0.0%)	3 (1.0%)
	Engineering and construction sector	7 _a (3.2%)	4 _a (5.5%)	11 (3.7%)
	Medical	7 _a (3.2%)	6 _a (8.2%)	13 (4.4%)
Relevance of the chosen specialty now	Yes	155 _a (69.5%)	69 _b (92.0%)	224 (75.2%)
	No	57 _a (25.6%)	4 _b (5.3%)	61 (20.5%)
	I find it difficult to answer	11 _a (4.9%)	2 _b (2.7%)	13 (4.3%)
Relevance of the chosen specialty in 10 years	Yes	149 _a (66.8%)	59 _b (78.7%)	208 (69.8%)
	No	32 _a (14.4%)	4 _b (5.3%)	36 (12.1%)
	I find it difficult to answer	42 _a (18.8%)	12 _b (16.0%)	54 (18.1%)

Table A2. Distribution of respondents' answers by training area, region of residence and opinion about the highest paid field

	An enlarged group of training areas											
	Natural sciences			Arts, languages and Humanities			Law, political and social sciences			Economics and Management		
	Russia	France		Russia	France		Russia	France		Russia	France	
IT-sphere	58 _a (67.4%)	2 _b (11.1%)	13 _a (31.0%)	8 _a (29.6%)	19 _a (67.9%)	0 _b (0.0%)	43 _a (66.2%)	6 _b (37.5%)	149 (50.7%)			
Marketing	1 _a (1.2%)	4 _b (22.2%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	2 _b (16.7%)	0 (0.0%)	2 _b (12.5%)	9 (3.1%)			
Business	19 _a (22.1%)	8 _b (44.4%)	21 _a (50.0%)	5 _b (18.5%)	8 _a (28.6%)	4 _a (33.3%)	20 (30.8%)	8 _a (50.0%)	93 (31.6%)			
Economy	0 _a (0.0%)	2 _b (11.1%)	2 _a (4.8%)	8 _b (29.6%)	0 (0.0%)	4 _b (33.3%)	0 (0.0%)	0 _a (0.0%)	16 (5.4%)			
Jurisprudence	1 _a (1.2%)	0 (0.0%)	2 _a (4.8%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 _a (0.0%)	3 (1.0%)			
Engineering and construction sector	4 _a (4.7%)	0 _a (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	4 _b (14.8%)	1 _a (3.6%)	0 _a (0.0%)	2 _a (3.1%)	0 _a (0.0%)	11 (3.7%)			
Medical	3 _a (3.5%)	2 _a (11.1%)	4 _a (9.5%)	2 _a (7.4%)	0 (0.0%)	2 _b (16.7%)	0 (0.0%)	0 _a (0.0%)	13 (4.4%)			

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