

QUESTION THE QUO[®]

MAY 2022

Gen Z Teens Want Shorter, More Affordable,
Career-Connected Education Pathways

ECMC
Group

This report reflects data from five national surveys.

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INTRODUCTION

ECMC Group, in partnership with its affiliates ECMC Education and ECMC Foundation, launched the Question The Quo public awareness campaign in 2020 to gather insights from Generation Z high school students about their education and careers and to encourage them to follow the path that is right for them. Grounding the campaign in national survey data, ECMC Group sought to uncover teens' awareness of their many education options.

ECMC Group began surveying high school students in February 2020, before the COVID-19 pandemic, and continued collecting new data as students' lives and education environments were impacted. In total, ECMC Group has conducted five national Question The Quo Education Pulse surveys: February 2020, May 2020, January 2021, September 2021 and January 2022. Each survey has revealed new and telling findings about how Gen Z is thinking about the future of their education and careers.

Despite having their lives continually changed, Gen Z's confidence in themselves only dropped slightly from February 2020 to January 2022, although their confidence in the world was and remained considerably lower. Other areas were impacted more significantly. The number of students considering four-year college dropped 20 percentage points, and there was a nearly 10 percentage-point drop in those who believe any education beyond high school is necessary.

Despite these concerning numbers, several key tenets have continued to ring true and were echoed in the most recent data set:

- More than half of teens are open to something other than four-year college and nearly half believe they can achieve success with education attained in three years or less.
- Nearly one-third of teens would prefer their post-high school education to last two years or less.
- Most teens prefer learning hands-on skills either in a lab/classroom or through on-the-job experiences.
- More than three-quarters of teens feel pressure to pursue a four-year degree, despite many being open to other pathways.
- Most teens understand the importance of gaining marketable skills and learning throughout their lifetime.
- Teens have noted the current workforce shortages and many are already adapting their approach to their future career path.

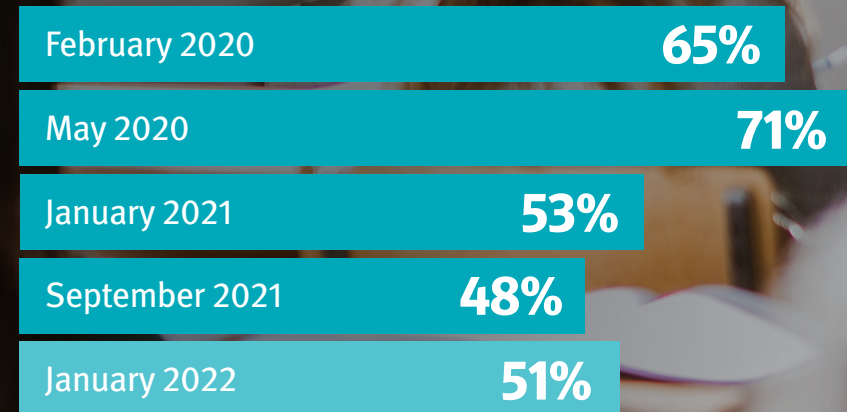
THE FINDINGS POINT TO:

A possible "new normal" for education that requires shorter, less expensive, more direct-to-career pathways in high-demand industries.

GEN Z'S HIGHER EDUCATION OUTLOOK

The likelihood of teens pursuing a four-year degree has diminished substantially since early 2020, with only about half of Gen Z teens still considering it.

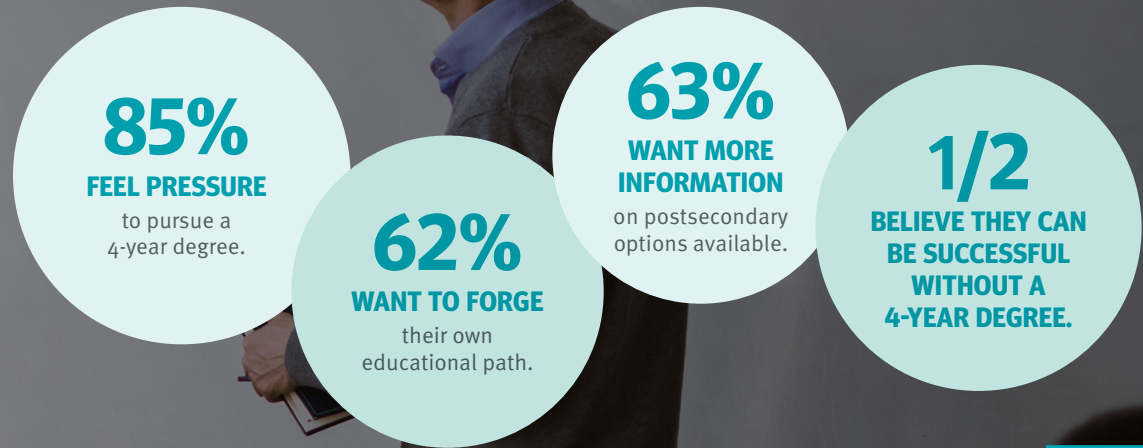
Percentage of Gen Z High School Students Considering a Four-Year Degree



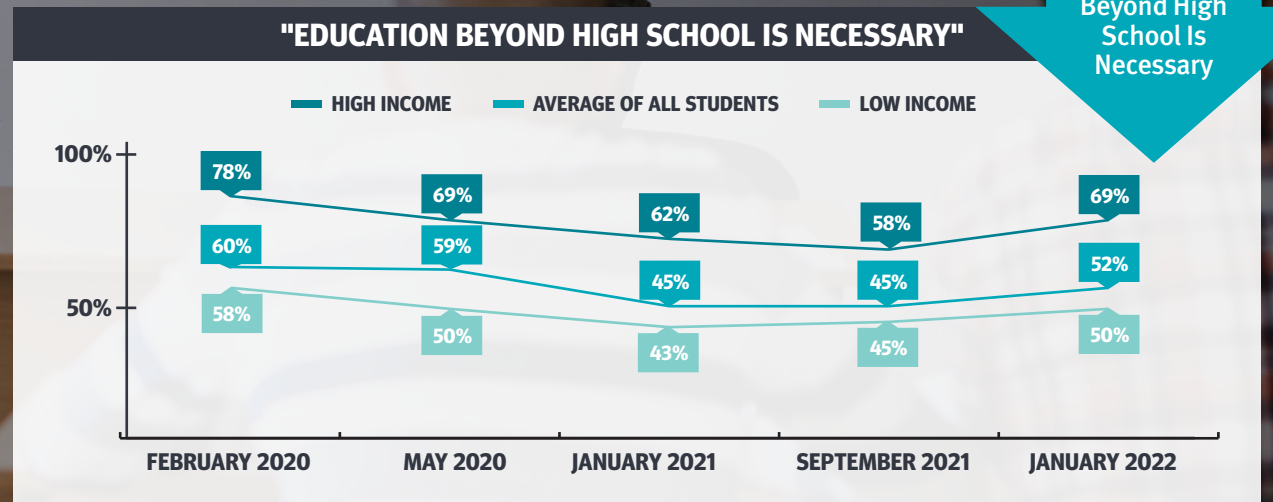
-20 PERCENTAGE POINTS
FROM MAY 2020 TO JANUARY 2022

$$a^2 - b^2 = (a+b) \cdot (a-b)$$

Majority of Teens Feel Pressure



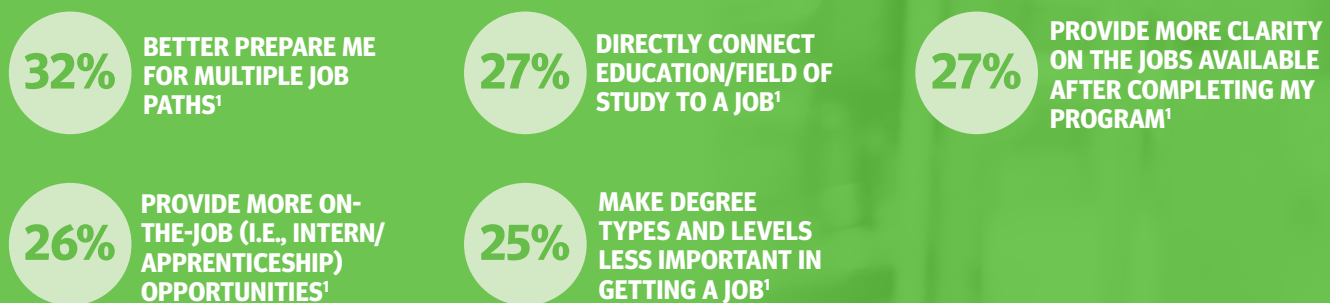
The Percentage Who Believe Education Beyond High School Is Necessary



HIGH SCHOOLERS WANT DIRECT PATHWAYS TO CAREERS

The Question The Quo surveys in September 2021 and January 2022 uncovered that Gen Z teens are very focused on education directly connecting them to a job after graduation and gaining skills throughout their lifetime.

A majority (63%) of teens wish their high school provided more information about the variety of postsecondary opportunities available. Most (89%) say higher education needs to make career preparedness changes. Following cost, the points below were the most common recommended changes:



¹ Data collected from Survey 3 in January 2021



Connecting College to Career



40%

believe building connections to a future career is one of the most important parts of the college experience.

44%

listed not getting a job in their top three concerns.

40%

listed not being prepared for a job after graduation in their top three concerns.

27%

would change the ability to directly connect education/ field of study to a job.

DECISION-MAKING PROCESS FOR GEN Z

Today's high school students are looking to their future education and career paths with a sense of purpose. According to ECMC Group's January 2022 survey, students put skill growth, career focus, wealth potential and debt into their top decision criteria for what's next.

“These factors are important in what I decide to do after high school.”

FUTURE CAREERS

FUTURE EARNINGS

FUTURE DEBT

Top Criteria in Choosing a Path Beyond High School

81%

learning skills I need
to be successful in
the real world

82%

the career I am
interested in
pursuing

66%

how much money I can
make immediately

79%

how much money
I can make over
the long term

68%

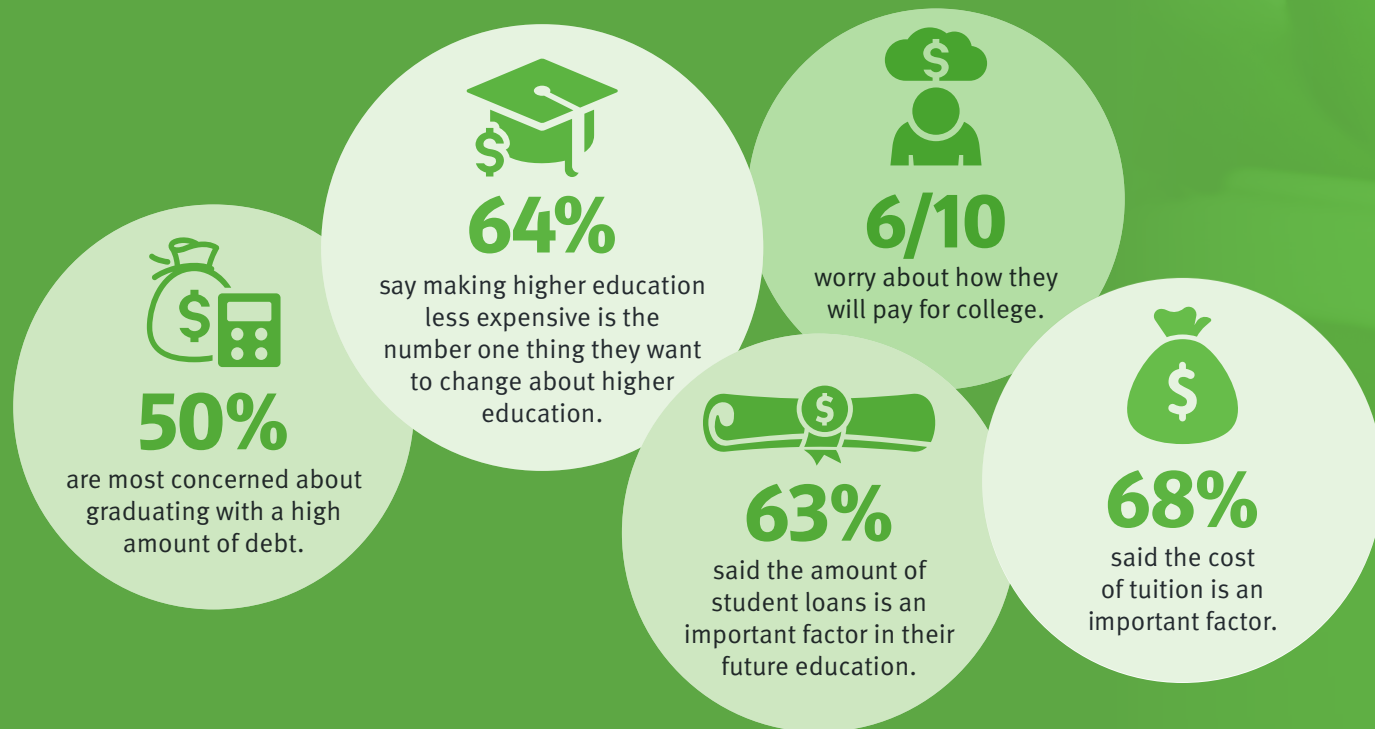
the cost of tuition

63%

the amount of student
loans I would need

COST OF COLLEGE A CONCERN AS TEENS LOOK TO THE FUTURE

The number one thing Gen Z teens would change in higher education is the cost.



Gen Z Teens Believe Government & Employers Should Provide Support

91% BELIEVE THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD HELP BY...

- #1** Providing additional money to pay off students loans
- #2** Subsidizing/paying for education

86% BELIEVE BUSINESSES SHOULD HELP BY...

- #1** Providing formal education
- #2** Providing additional money to pay off student loans

TEENS ARE ALREADY UNDERSTANDING & EXPLORING TODAY'S IN-DEMAND JOBS

Beyond a desire for education that leads directly to a career, teens are thinking about their path beyond high school with surprising frequency. However, most of them are not aware that the careers they want have on-ramps other than a four-year degree. Many jobs teens are considering have career and technical education (CTE) pathways, but only 20% believe CTE can lead to the career they want, illustrating a disconnect in their knowledge about options other than four-year college connecting to jobs¹.

51%

THINK ABOUT THEIR EDUCATION AND CAREER PATH DAILY¹

55%

OF TEENS HAVE ALREADY BEGUN EXPLORING THEIR CAREER OPTIONS DURING HIGH SCHOOL¹

1/3

OF TEENS ARE MORE LIKELY TO PURSUE AN EDUCATION OR CAREER IN AN IMPACTED INDUSTRY¹

39%

HAVE TAKEN CLASSES OR PARTICIPATED IN PROGRAMS TO EXPLORE CAREERS¹

74%

SAY IT'S IMPORTANT TO HAVE A CAREER IN MIND BEFORE THEY GRADUATE FROM HIGH SCHOOL¹

75%

HAVE HEARD ABOUT CURRENT WORKER SHORTAGES¹



60% of Teens Have Careers in Mind¹

THESE ARE THE JOBS THEY'RE CONSIDERING



¹ Question The Quo Education Pulse Survey in January 2022

¹ Based on more than 600 responses from survey participants

CAREER & TECHNICAL EDUCATION MEETS TEENS' NEEDS

Career and technical education (CTE) has gained traction as a viable path for students, but comprehension remains low.

- More than half of students don't understand what CTE is, but most of the career paths they'd like to follow have CTE on-ramps.
- One-third of teens would consider attending a CTE school if it were considered as valuable to employers as a four-year degree, if there was a stronger guarantee of a job after graduation or if there was a guarantee that they would develop stronger career skills.

- Nearly half of teens say their post-high school education should last less than four years, and skills should be taught hands-on in small classes or through on-the-job opportunities.
- Half of students know someone who has enrolled in CTE, and of those, 47% say knowing that person has had a positive impact on their opinion of CTE and 44% are more open to following a CTE pathway.
- 57% said they would be more likely to attend a CTE college if it becomes tuition free.

High Schoolers Don't Just Want a Degree, They Want Skills for What's Next



22%

are more likely to attend a career and technical college because of the pandemic—up 10 points from May 2020.



56%

believe a skills-based education (e.g., trade skills, nursing, STEM, etc.) makes sense in today's world.



47%

agree that a program they can complete in a shorter period of time (within two years) makes sense.



EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON TEENS' EDUCATION JOURNEY

When it comes to their future abilities to learn, most students believe education will suffer because of less time in the classroom.

58%

of students believe education will suffer because of less time in the classroom.

40%

do not feel adequately prepared for the next grade level.

29%

said the pandemic's financial impact makes it less likely they will attend a four-year college.

24%

said the financial impact will make them less likely to pursue any education beyond high school.

27%

say they have or will change post-high school education plans because of COVID-19.



HOWEVER:

Because of the pandemic, nearly one-third of teens say they feel more comfortable following a path other than four-year college.

RECOMMENDATIONS & TAKEAWAYS

Educators, policymakers, employers and stakeholders play an integral role in developing the next generation of workers. Together, we must highlight all of the options available and encourage learners to question the status quo in postsecondary education to make changes for the betterment of our learners and economy.

Collectively We Should:



PROVIDE HOLISTIC SUPPORT

Student success goes beyond the classroom, and learners need supports that address their basic needs, from food and transportation to mental wellbeing and technology—especially given the digital nature of today’s education and workforce.



SUPPORT LEARNERS

Provide affirmation for students who are considering a variety of postsecondary education pathways, and actively disseminate information and resources while connecting students to the help they need to understand and pursue their desired path.



PRIORITIZE SKILLS OVER DEGREES

In an age where four-year degrees have become the status quo, employers must focus on skills rather than degrees, connecting the competencies learners have gained from their education to their future jobs. Businesses also should work directly with education institutions to develop effective curricula.



INVEST IN THE FUTURE

The next generation of workers has made it clear that they expect involvement from employers in their future careers. Employers should consider providing upskilling opportunities, training or education cost reimbursement or assistance with the cost to gain new skills.



PROVIDE INFORMATION

Educators must work to understand pathways other than four-year college and actively provide information to students about their many options, highlighting the benefits of each. The education industry and stakeholders must work together to make this information available to educators and counselors.



LEGITIMIZE CREDENTIALS

Federal- and state-level support for non-four-year pathways can help address Gen Z’s desire for more focused, affordable education by expanding government support for these types of programs and improving public awareness of the middle-skill careers available to graduates.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

ECMC Group, in partnership with VICE Media, conducted five online national surveys to understand high schoolers' perceptions of postsecondary education, the workforce and the impact of COVID-19 on the learning landscape.

5,317

people ages 14-18
were surveyed across
five waves of research.



| | FEBRUARY 2020 | | | MAY 2020 | | | JANUARY 2021 | | | SEPTEMBER 2021 | | | JANUARY 2022 | | | | |
|--|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------|-------|
| SAMPLE SIZE | 1,177 High School Students | | | 1,025 High School Students | | | 1,001 High School Students | | | 1,052 High School Students | | | 1,062 High School Students | | | | |
| GENDER | MALE | FEMALE | NON-BINARY/ NA | MALE | FEMALE | NON-BINARY/ NA | MALE | FEMALE | NON-BINARY/ NA | MALE | FEMALE | NON-BINARY/ NA | MALE | FEMALE | NON-BINARY/ NA | | |
| | 49% | 49% | 2% | 49% | 49% | 2% | 48% | 48% | 4% | 46% | 46% | 7% | 46% | 46% | 8% | | |
| RACE/ETHNICITY | WHITE/ CAUCASIAN | BLACK/ AFRICAN AMERICAN | LATINX/ HISPANIC/ LATINO | WHITE/ CAUCASIAN | BLACK/ AFRICAN AMERICAN | LATINX/ HISPANIC/ LATINO | WHITE/ CAUCASIAN | BLACK/ AFRICAN AMERICAN | LATINX/ HISPANIC/ LATINO | WHITE/ CAUCASIAN | BLACK/ AFRICAN AMERICAN | LATINX/ HISPANIC/ LATINO | WHITE/ CAUCASIAN | BLACK/ AFRICAN AMERICAN | LATINX/ HISPANIC/ LATINO | | |
| | 62% | 18% | 15% | 50% | 16% | 23% | 47% | 28% | 20% | 50% | 30% | 16% | 50% | 30% | 17% | | |
| | ASIAN | NATIVE AMERICAN/ INDIGENOUS | OTHER | ASIAN | NATIVE AMERICAN/ INDIGENOUS | OTHER | ASIAN | NATIVE AMERICAN/ INDIGENOUS | OTHER | ASIAN | NATIVE AMERICAN/ INDIGENOUS | PACIFIC ISLANDER | OTHER | ASIAN | NATIVE AMERICAN/ INDIGENOUS | PACIFIC ISLANDER | OTHER |
| | 11% | 4% | 4% | 15% | 2% | 4% | 11% | 4% | 4% | 10% | 7% | 1% | 3% | 9% | 6% | 2% | 1% |
| LOCATION | URBAN | SUBURBAN | RURAL | URBAN | SUBURBAN | RURAL | URBAN | SUBURBAN | RURAL | URBAN | SUBURBAN | RURAL | URBAN | SUBURBAN | RURAL | | |
| | 28% | 53% | 19% | 28% | 57% | 15% | 28% | 57% | 15% | 30% | 51% | 19% | 30% | 51% | 19% | | |
| REGION | NORTHEAST | SOUTH | MIDWEST/ WEST | NORTHEAST | SOUTH | MIDWEST/ WEST | NORTHEAST | SOUTH | MIDWEST/ WEST | NORTHEAST | SOUTH | MIDWEST/ WEST | NORTHEAST | SOUTH | MIDWEST/ WEST | | |
| | 29% | 33% | 38% | 33% | 31% | 36% | 31% | 31% | 38% | 32% | 32% | 36% | 32% | 32% | 36% | | |
| SOCIOECONOMIC HOUSEHOLD INCOME/YEAR | LESS THAN \$10,000 | \$10,000- \$24,999 | \$25,000- \$49,999 | LESS THAN \$10,000 | \$10,000- \$24,999 | \$25,000- \$49,999 | LESS THAN \$10,000 | \$10,000- \$24,999 | \$25,000- \$49,999 | LESS THAN \$10,000 | \$10,000- \$24,999 | \$25,000- \$49,999 | LESS THAN \$10,000 | \$10,000- \$24,999 | \$25,000- \$49,999 | | |
| | 9% | 11% | 16% | 6% | 6% | 13% | 18% | 11% | 12% | 14% | 15% | 15% | 16% | 14% | 13% | | |
| | \$50,000- \$74,999 | \$75,000+ | DON'T KNOW/ DID NOT ANSWER | \$50,000- \$74,999 | \$75,000+ | DON'T KNOW/ DID NOT ANSWER | \$50,000- \$74,999 | \$75,000+ | DON'T KNOW/ DID NOT ANSWER | \$50,000- \$74,999 | \$75,000+ | DON'T KNOW/ DID NOT ANSWER | \$50,000- \$74,999 | \$75,000+ | DON'T KNOW/ DID NOT ANSWER | | |
| | 13% | 24% | 27% | 11% | 24% | 40% | 9% | 15% | 35% | 9% | 18% | 29% | 9% | 18% | 30% | | |

ABOUT ECMC GROUP & VICE MEDIA

ECMC Group is a nonprofit corporation focused on helping students succeed by creating, providing and investing in innovative educational opportunities. Headquartered in Minneapolis, ECMC Group and its family of companies are focused on advancing educational opportunities through financial tools and services and impactful and mission-aligned funding for innovative programs to help students achieve their academic and professional goals and to address the future of work.

VICE Media is the world's largest independent youth media company. ECMC Group partnered with VICE Media to conduct five national surveys of high school students as they considered their future paths. The online surveys were administered by VICE Media in February 2020, May 2020, January 2021, September 2021 and January 2022. The total sample size across five waves of research was 5,317 people ages 14-18 in the U.S.

ECMC
Group

VICE

ENCOURAGING TEENS TO QUESTION THE QUO

These surveys were conducted as part of ECMC Group's Question The Quo public awareness campaign, which empowers high school students and beyond to take the postsecondary education path that is right for them. ECMC Group developed the Question The Quo campaign to encourage learners to explore the various education options available and to help them understand there are many ways to achieve education and career success. Grounded in the results of these national surveys, Question The Quo encourages teens to evaluate education beyond high school while considering cost, parental and role model influences, and societal norms.

QUESTION
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www.questionthequo.org



www.ecmcgroup.org

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