



**UNIVERSITY OF
LIMERICK**
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

**Cooperative
Education and
Careers Division**



Early Careers Employer Survey 2025

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For a deeper dive into data pertinent to your sector, give the QR Code a quick scan using your mobile or tablet. You'll be steered towards a dedicated website where you can access a variety of downloads – from comprehensive reports to insightful charts and graphs. These resources are designed to give you a clearer picture of the prevailing market trends and potential openings for your enterprise.



Foreword

The University of Limerick is delighted to present the 2025 Early Careers Employer Survey results. The report and its findings reflect the views and experiences of employers who hired graduates or hosted work placements in 2024 and 2025.

We are very grateful to the 318 employers who contributed to this year's survey. Their insights represent a broad and diverse cross-section of sectors, industries, and organisation sizes. We are also pleased to introduce a new dimension to this year's publication—The Voice of the Student—capturing the views of 1,780 students on the graduate recruitment process, their motivations, and expectations.

New to this year's report is an exploration of how employers are beginning to integrate AI into early career recruitment. This emerging theme offers insight into how technology shapes candidate sourcing, screening, and selection.

The report addresses a wide range of early career topics, including:

- Graduate Recruitment Trends
- Recruitment Channels
- Application and Selection
- Remuneration
- Recruitment Challenges
- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
- Work Placement Trends
- Skills in Demand
- The Role of AI in Graduate Recruitment
- Student Perspectives on Graduate Careers

For higher education institutions, this survey plays a vital role in shaping how we prepare our students for the future world of work. For employers, it provides an evidence base to benchmark recruitment practices and navigate the ever-evolving graduate talent landscape.

Many thanks again to everyone who responded to the survey.



Patrice Twomey

Dr Patrice Twomey,
Director, Cooperative Education and Careers Division, University of Limerick

Executive Summary

The Early Careers Employer Survey 2025, led by the University of Limerick, provides a timely overview of graduate and placement recruitment trends across Ireland. With insights from **318 employers** and **1,780 students**, this year's report captures a dual perspective on the evolving early careers landscape.

Key findings reveal stabilising graduate recruitment activity, growing adoption of hybrid working, and rising salary expectations. New additions this year include a focus on **AI in graduate recruitment** and a dedicated exploration of student voices, highlighting what matters most to graduates entering the workforce.

Highlights from the 2025 Report

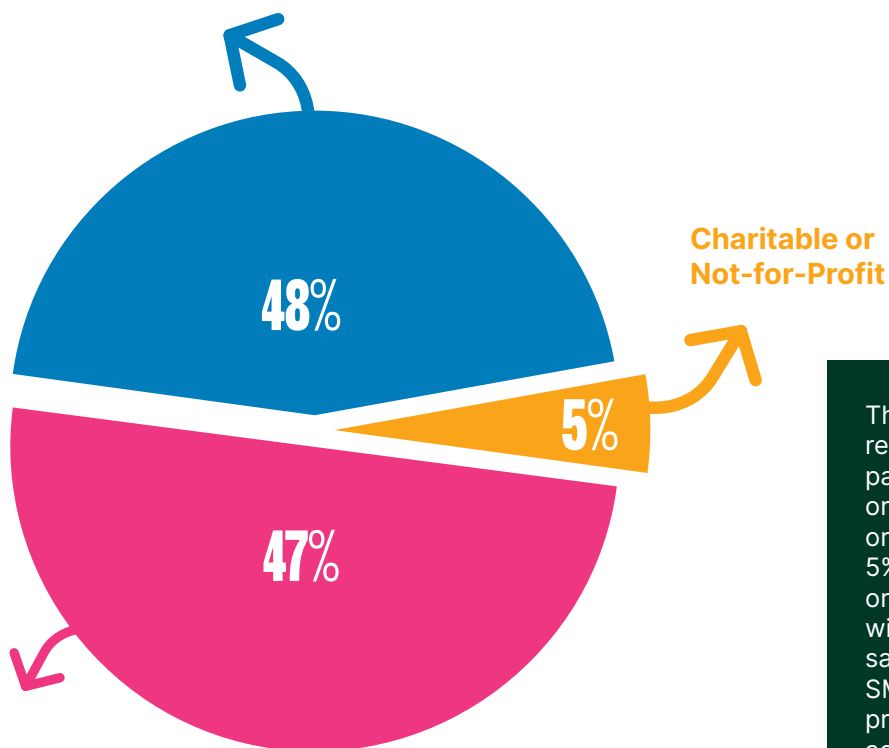
- **Graduate and Placement Hiring Remains Stable.** 88% of employers expect graduate vacancy levels to remain the same or increase in 2025/26.
- **Salary Pressure Continues to Build.** 50% of employers have increased graduate starting salaries. However, only 27% disclose salary in job listings, despite 68% of students saying they would not apply without this detail.
- **Graduate Job Offer Withdrawals Are Increasing.** 73% of employers report graduates accepting and then withdrawing offers, often due to competing salaries, location, or changing personal priorities.
- **AI is Emerging in Recruitment.** Just 7% of employers currently use AI in their recruitment process, but 41% plan to expand use within the next year—particularly in sourcing, screening, and assessments.
- **Mismatch in Benefits and Expectations.** Students prioritise healthcare, hybrid working, and bonuses. Employers lead with pensions, L&D, and cycle-to-work schemes—highlighting the need for better alignment.
- **Top Qualities Employers Seek.** Communication, self motivation, teamwork, problem solving, and attention to detail are the most valued attributes of early talent.
- **Skills and Career Motivators.** Students are driven by recognition, growth, and achievement. Employers, meanwhile, continue to prioritise soft skills like communication and problem-solving alongside digital fluency.

This report is a valuable resource for employers, educators, and policymakers. It offers evidence-based insights to help align recruitment strategies, prepare graduates for a competitive job market, and support a smoother transition into the world of work.

Organisation Type

Small - Medium Enterprises (SME)

Less than 250 employees



Large Organisations

Over 250 employees

This year's Early Careers Survey received 318 responses, with participation spread across various organisation types: 47% from large organisations, 48% from SMEs, and 5% from charitable or not-for-profit organisations. This closely aligns with last year's distribution, which saw 49% large organisations, 45% SMEs, and 6% charitable or not-for-profits. The consistent representation across organisation types reflects the widespread interest in attracting and supporting early career talent, regardless of organisational size or sector. It also reinforces the value placed on engaging with emerging professionals as a key part of workforce development strategies.

Sectors Surveyed

The Early Careers Survey uses the NACE classification system, which is also employed by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) and the Higher Education Authority (HEA) to ensure consistency in classifying economic activities. NACE stands for *Nomenclature générale des Activités économiques dans les Communautés européennes*—French for *General Industrial Classification of Economic Activities within the European Communities*. This standardised system enables accurate statistical analysis of economic sectors across the EU, including areas such as human health and social work activities. For more detailed information on NACE classifications, visit the CSO website.

19%

Industry





16%

**Professional, Scientific
& Technical Activities**



14%

**Financial and Insurance
Activities**



14%

Construction



9%

**Information and
Communication**



8%

Education



4%

**Human Health and
Social Work**



3%

**Agricultural, Forestry
and Fishing**



3%

**Administrative and
Support Service Activities**



3%

Transport and Storage

Work Placement and Summer Internships

Work Placement, a component of academic degrees or training programmes, enables students to apply their academic knowledge and skills in a professional environment relevant to their field of study. This structured experience is based on a tripartite agreement between the employer, the student, and the Higher Education Institution (HEI), typically lasting between 3 to 12 months, and often includes academic credit and remuneration.

This year, 83% of employers surveyed reported offering Work Placement opportunities, up from 81% last year, indicating continued strong support for integrated learning experiences. Summer internships have also increased, with 64% of employers offering these short-term opportunities, compared to 56% in the previous year. These upward trends reflect a growing commitment to providing practical, hands-on experience for students and graduates across sectors.

€ 26,773

**Average annualised salary
paid by your organisation to
work placement students
starting in 2024/25**



Placement Hiring Outlook

When asked about their hiring plans for placement students in the coming year, 62% of employers indicated their recruitment levels would remain the same, compared to 68% in 2024. Meanwhile, 27% expect to increase their placement hiring, up slightly from 24% last year. A smaller proportion of 11% anticipates a decrease, compared to 8% in 2024. These figures suggest a relatively stable outlook overall, with a modest shift towards increased hiring activity for placement roles.

Conversion to Graduate Roles

This year, 31% of employers reported that they convert placement students into graduate hires, down from 39% in 2024. While this marks a decrease, it still highlights the importance of placement as a potential pathway to longer-term employment for students.

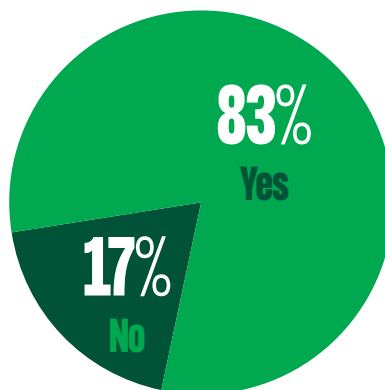
From the employer perspective, converting placement students into graduate hires can bring several advantages — including reduced recruitment costs, shorter onboarding periods, and stronger cultural fit, as returning graduates are already familiar with the organisation's working methods.

Onboarding for Placement Hires

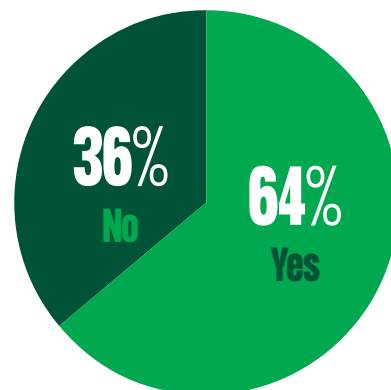
This year, 80% of employers reported onboarding placement hires on-site, a notable increase from 55% in 2024. Hybrid onboarding has remained steady at 25% (26% in 2024), while remote onboarding has slightly decreased to 5%, compared to 6% last year. Encouragingly, only 2% of employers were unsure of their onboarding approach, down from 13% in 2024, suggesting greater clarity and planning around onboarding processes.



Do you offer
Work Placements?
2025



Do you offer
Summer Internships?
2025

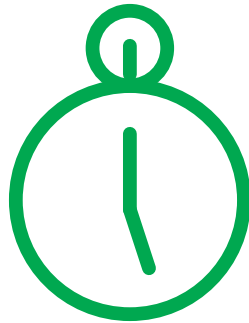


Duration of *Work Placements*



25%

up to 3 Months



44%

3-6 Months



71%

6-12 Months



18%

12 Months+

Duration of *Summer Internships*



13%

1-4 weeks



30%

5-8 weeks



58%

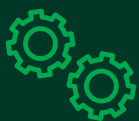
8-12 weeks



31%

12 weeks+

What placement disciplines are in demand?



53%

Engineering



28%

Accountancy



21%

ICT & Electronics



20%

Marketing



20%

HR



19%

Economics/Finance



17%

Science



15%

Data/Consultancy/
Analytics



9%

Law



8%

Insurance & Risk



7%

Education



7%

Health Sciences



5%

Humanities



5%

All Disciplines



2%

Creative



2%

Hospitality

Remain the same

#1

62%

They will be higher

#2

27%

They will be lower

#3

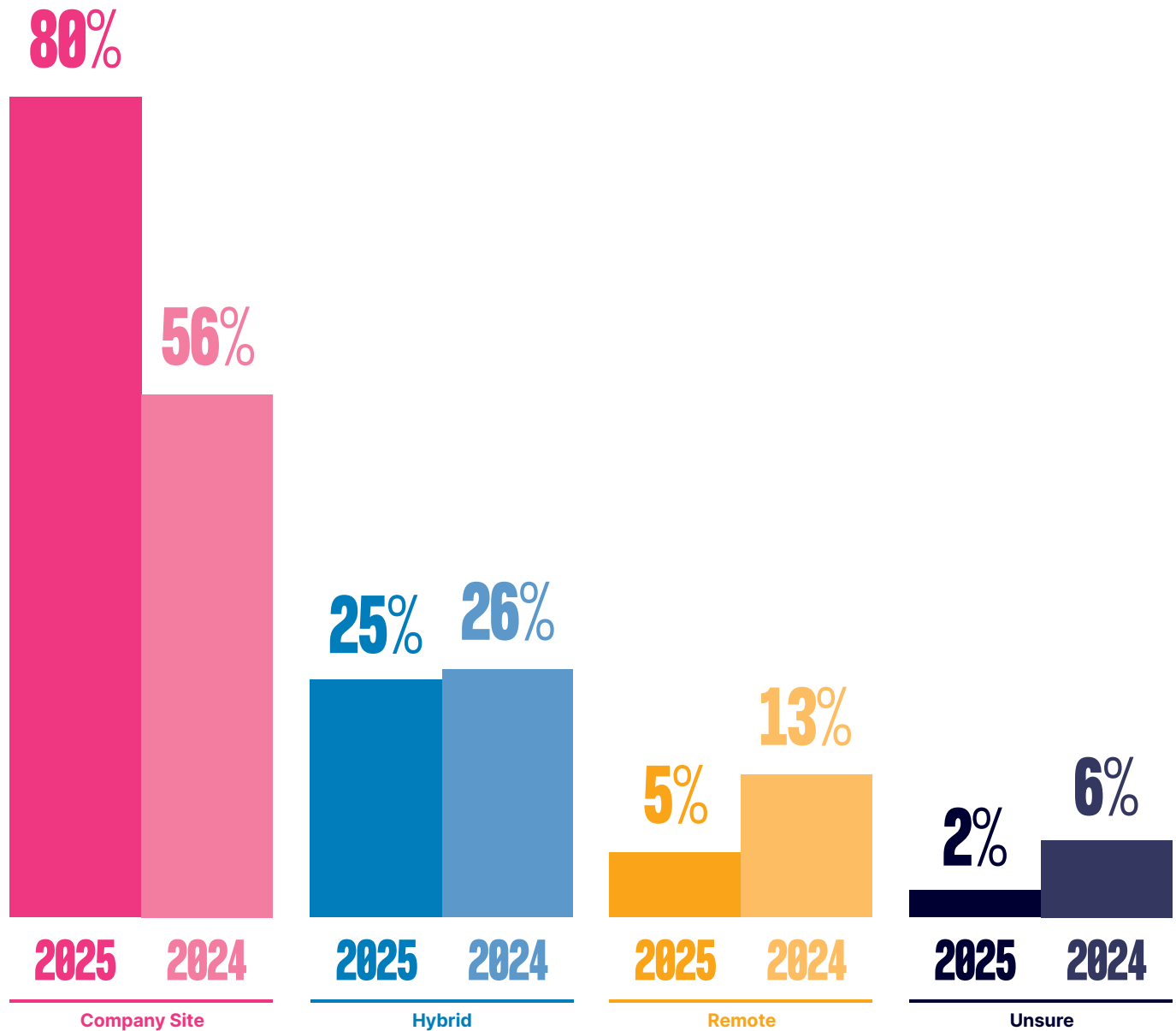
11%

Do you expect your placement requirements to change next year?

Average Graduate Conversion Rate



What are your plans for onboarding new placement hires?



Graduate Recruitment

The Early Careers employment landscape is marked by key trends influenced by the evolving expectations of graduates and employers, alongside wider economic shifts.

There is a growing demand for digital competencies such as data analysis, coding, and digital marketing. These skills are seen as vital for innovation, productivity, and maintaining competitive advantage across industries. Digital fluency is also beginning to include AI literacy, as more employers explore the use of tools like automated assessments, chatbots, and predictive analytics in their early careers hiring.

At the same time, particularly communication, self-motivation, teamwork, problem solving, and attention to detail — remain core to early career success. Employers consistently highlight the value of emotional intelligence, professionalism, and the ability to work well with others. These qualities are seen as foundational to building relationships, learning quickly, and succeeding in cross-functional teams.



Another emerging theme is the rising awareness of sustainability and corporate social responsibility. Employers are increasingly looking for graduates who understand the importance of ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) factors and who are motivated to work for values-led organisations.

The graduate job market is experiencing healthy, sustainable growth, with employers focusing more on high-quality roles and long-term development than short-term headcount increases. This points to a more balanced and purposeful recruitment landscape.

Hybrid working is now a widely accepted norm, offering flexibility and enhancing work-life balance for many graduates. At the same time, there's a noticeable shift towards in-person onboarding, with many employers seeing value in early on-site engagement to support integration and team connection.

Employers also report an increase in graduates accepting offers and subsequently withdrawing — a trend attributed to graduates navigating multiple applications, counteroffers, and delays in decision-making. This places a renewed focus on employer branding, candidate experience, and communication throughout the recruitment process.

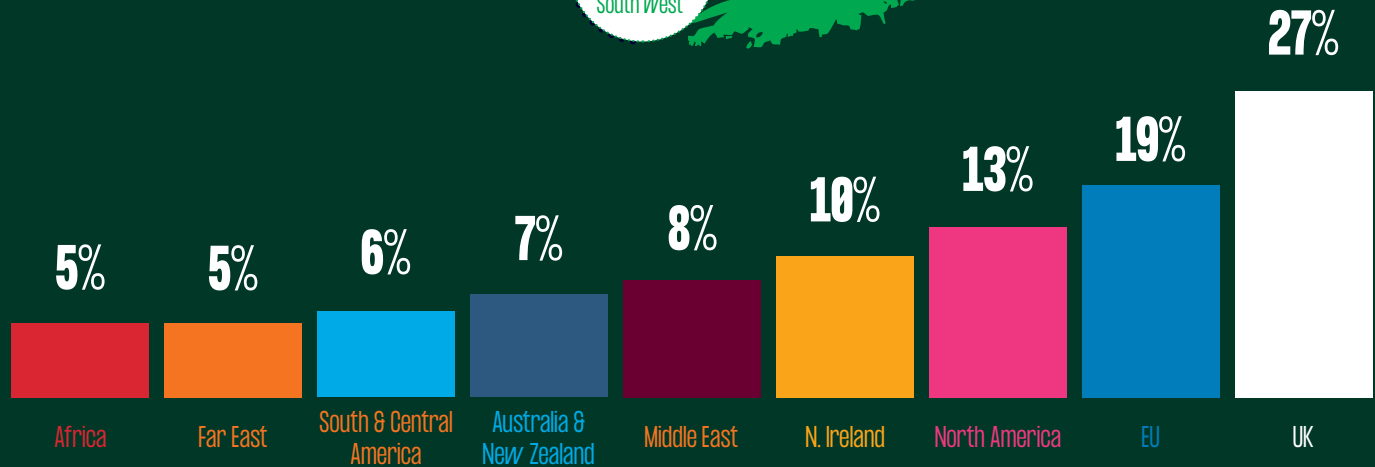
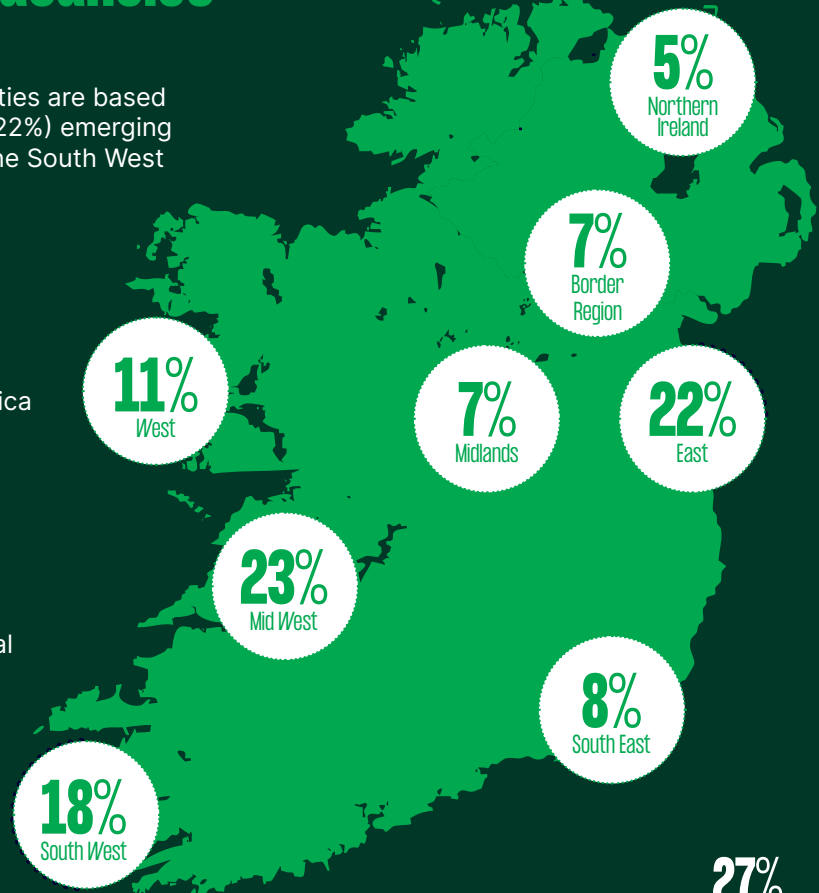
These trends suggest that graduate recruitment in 2025 is not only about filling roles — it's about building future talent pipelines that are agile, inclusive, and aligned with the evolving needs of business and society.

Location of Graduate Vacancies

Seventy percent (70%) of graduate opportunities are based in Ireland, with the MidWest (23%) and East (22%) emerging as the most common locations, followed by the South West (18%). Other regions such as the West (11%), South East (8%), Border (7%), and Midlands (7%) also feature, while Northern Ireland accounts for 5% of roles.

The remaining 30% of graduate opportunities are international, led by the UK (27%) and EU (19%). Other destinations include North America (13%), the Middle East (8%), and Australia & New Zealand (7%), with smaller proportions in South & Central America (6%), the Far East (5%), and Africa (5%).

This distribution highlights both strong regional demand and continued international mobility for graduate talent, as well as regional concentrations linked to industry hubs and employer presence.

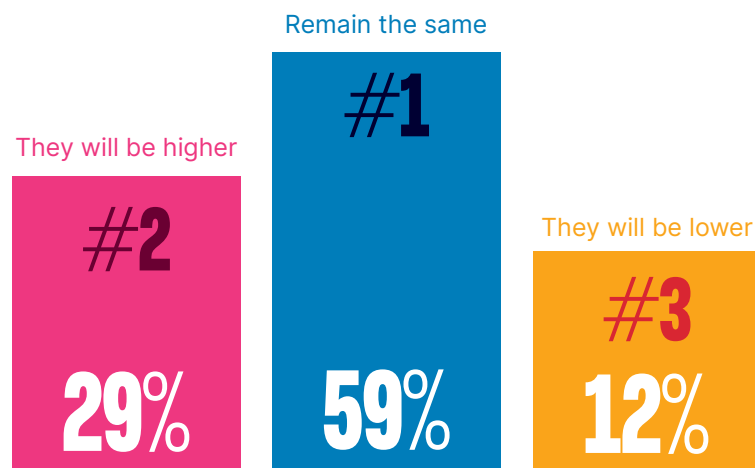


Graduate Vacancies and Hiring Environment 2025/26

Our survey reveals that a strong majority of employers, 88%, expect graduate vacancies in 2025/26 to either increase or remain steady compared to 2024. Specifically, 59% anticipate no change (consistent with last year), while 29% expect an increase (slightly down from 30% in 2024). In contrast, 12% foresee a decrease in graduate opportunities, unchanged from the previous year.

When asked about the anticipated hiring environment over the coming year, 52% of employers expect it to remain the same—up slightly from 49% last year. Meanwhile, 43% believe it will become more challenging, a slight improvement from 46% in 2024. Just 5% anticipate that hiring will become easier, unchanged from last year.

These insights suggest a stable yet competitive graduate employment landscape, where proactive recruitment strategies and strong employer branding will be key to attracting top talent.



Expected Level of Graduate Vacancies over the next 12 months



What graduate disciplines are in demand?



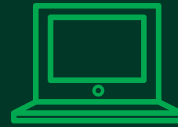
53%

Engineering



24%

Accountancy



18%

ICT & Electronics



16%

Economics/Finance



15%

Data/Consultancy/
Analytics



14%

Marketing



13%

HR



13%

Science



9%

Education



8%

Law



7%

Insurance & Risk



6%

Health Sciences



6%

Humanities



6%

All Disciplines



4%

Creative



2%

Hospitality

The role of AI in grad recruitment

Current Trends and Practices

Use of AI in Early Careers Recruitment

AI adoption in early career recruitment is in its infancy, with only 7% of organisations using AI tools. 26% are considering implementation in the future. Among those that have adopted AI, the most common applications include candidate sourcing (59%), CV and application screening (36%), interview scheduling (27%), assessments and testing (18%), video interview analysis (14%), and onboarding (9%).

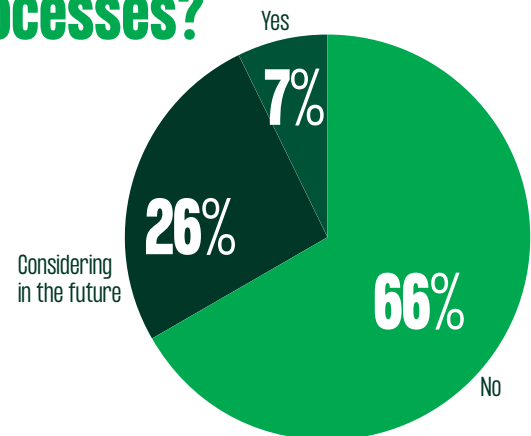
Organisations using AI report various benefits, with 95% highlighting increased efficiency. Other advantages include improved candidate experience (29%), better candidate-job matching (24%), reduced bias (19%), and cost savings (14%). However, challenges persist. Key concerns include potential bias in AI algorithms (43%), data privacy (33%), high implementation costs (29%), lack of transparency in AI-driven decisions (19%), and resistance from candidates or staff (14%).

Looking ahead, 41% of organisations plan to expand their use of AI in recruitment over the next 12 months, 53% remain unsure, and 6% do not plan to adopt AI. The most in-demand tools include AI-driven assessments (47%), predictive analytics for hiring trends (40%), chatbots for candidate queries (35%), and automated video interview analysis (21%).

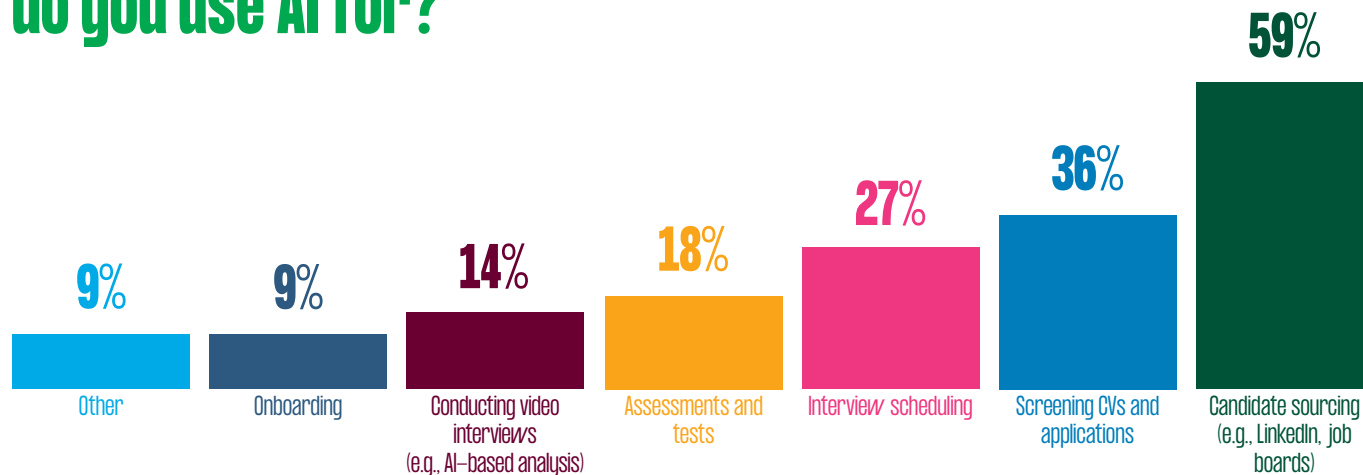
The relatively low current usage of AI reflects a cautious approach among employers, likely influenced by the ethical and practical concerns outlined above. However, growing interest and future intent indicate an openness to exploring AI's potential. While efficiency gains are currently the most realised benefit, more strategic aims—such as improved job matching and bias reduction—are less frequently achieved, suggesting there is still room for development in how AI is deployed.

Overall, the findings suggest that momentum is building while AI is not yet a central feature of early career recruitment. As technology evolves and concerns around fairness, transparency, and cost are addressed, we expect to see broader and more confident adoption across the sector.

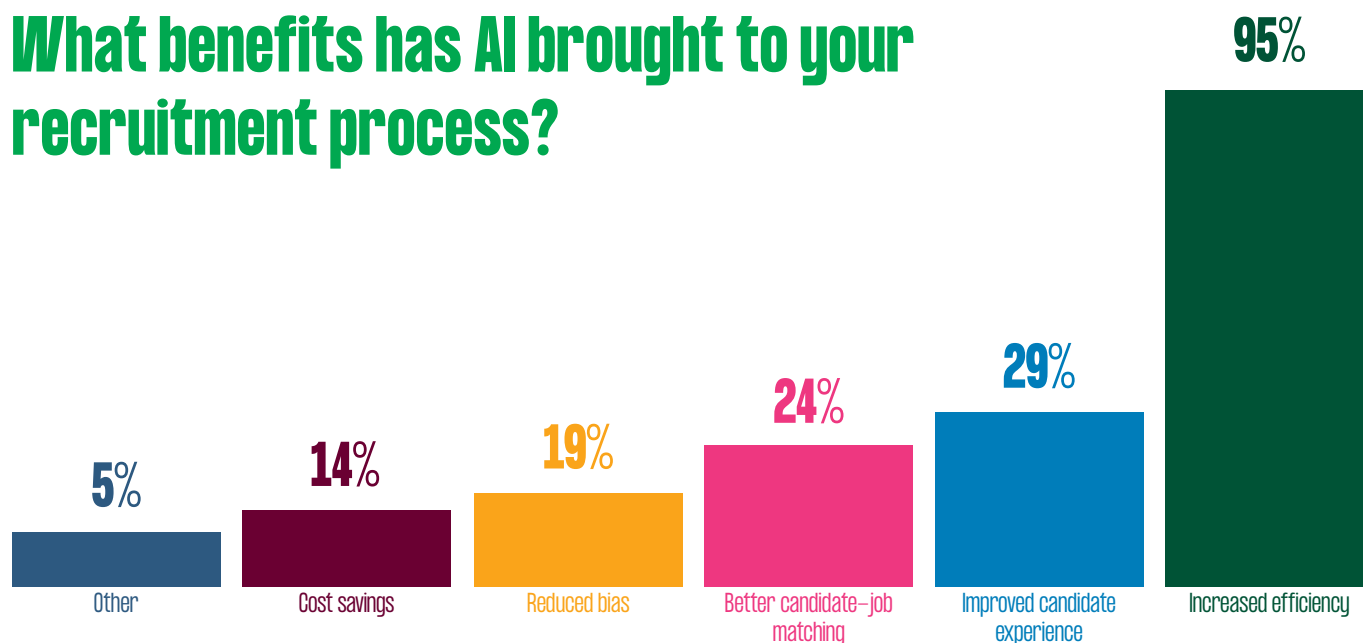
Does your organisation currently use AI in its recruitment and selection processes?



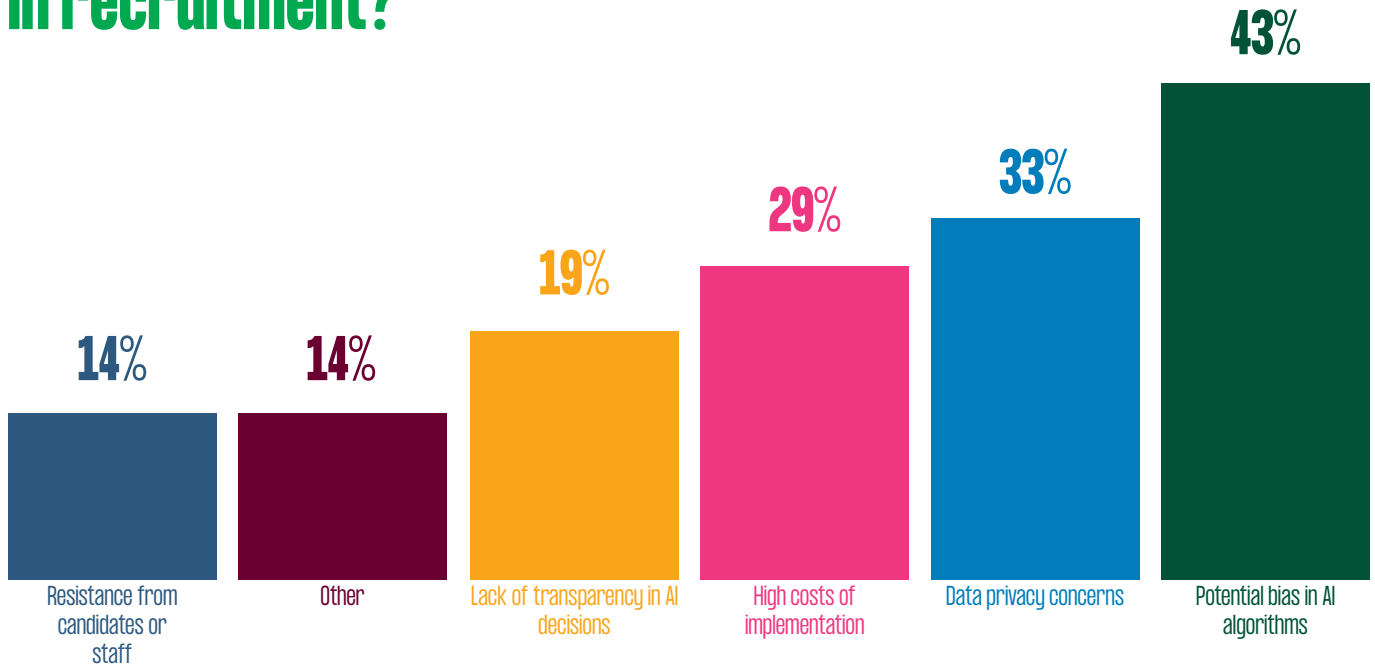
What stages of the recruitment process do you use AI for?



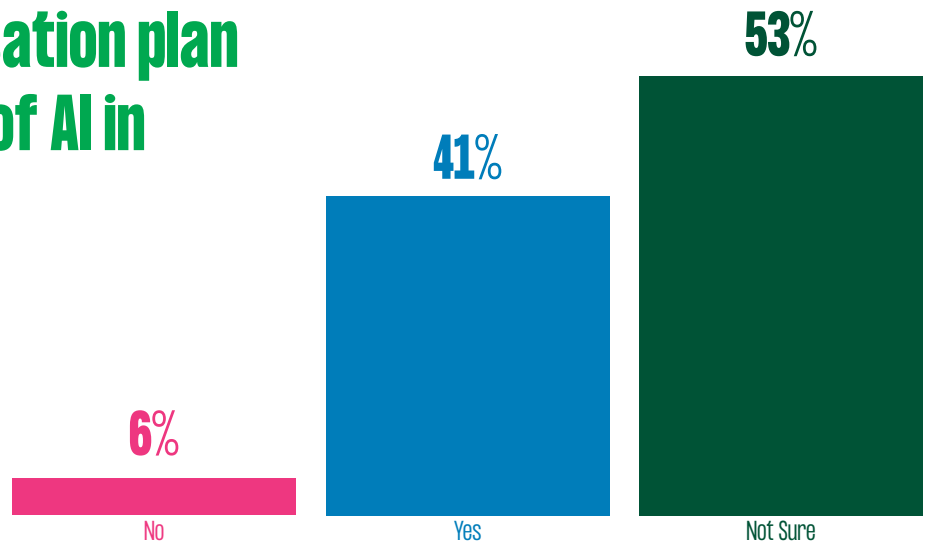
What benefits has AI brought to your recruitment process?



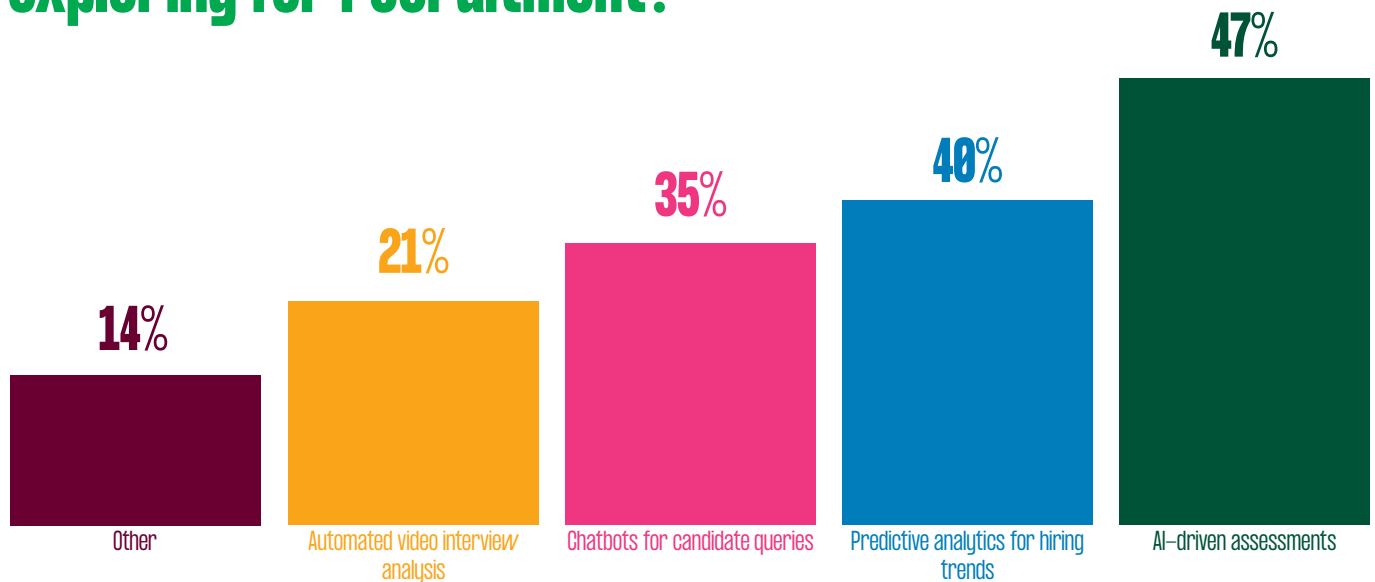
What challenges or concerns do you face when using AI in recruitment?



Does your organisation plan to expand its use of AI in recruitment over the next 12 months?



What types of AI tools are you most interested in exploring for recruitment?



Graduate Recruitment Application Tools



88%

CV &
Covering letter



59%

Pre-screening
questions



37%

Application
form



32%

ATS (Applicant
Tracking System)



21%

Aptitude
tests



16%

Personality
questionnaires



9%

Other



7%

Video
applications

Graduate Recruitment — Application, Selection, and Pre-Offer Processes

The graduate recruitment process continues to be structured and multi-layered, beginning with a strong emphasis on application quality. A significant 88% of employers require a CV and cover letter, while 59% use pre-screening questions to filter applicants early on. Application forms are used by 37% of organisations (down from 42% in 2024), and the use of Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS) has risen to 32%, signalling a growing reliance on digital tools to streamline the early stages. Other methods, such as aptitude tests (21%), personality questionnaires (16%), and video applications (7%), are used to a lesser extent.

Regarding selection, in-person interviews remain the most used tool, cited by 86% of respondents. Online interviews also feature prominently at 77%, reflecting the continued use of hybrid recruitment approaches. 47% of employers employ competency or behavioural-based interviews, while telephone interviews (44%) and video interviews (32%) remain core components of the process. Additional methods include strengths-based interviews (24%), presentations (20%), traditional assessment centres (11%), and online assessment centres (9%). A small number (4%) reported using other organisation-specific approaches.

Pre-offer checks are also a key part of the process. Reference checks are conducted by 85% of employers, while 58% confirm visa status or work permits, and 51% verify academic qualifications. More rigorous checks, such as Garda vetting or police clearance, are used by 26%, and 25% carry out social media screening. A minority (6%) report no pre-offer checks, and 3% use other vetting forms based on their sector's requirements.

Overall, these findings illustrate a well-established and evolving graduate recruitment process—one that blends traditional methods with emerging digital tools while maintaining a clear focus on fairness, efficiency, and compliance.

Graduate Recruitment Selection Tools



86%

Interviews
(in person)



77%

Online
Interviews



47%

Competency
Behavioural-Based
Interviews



44%

Telephone
Interviews



32%

Video
Interviews



24%

Strengths-Based
Interviews



20%

Presentations



11%

Assessment Centres



9%

Online Assessment
Centres



4%

Other



Graduate Recruitment Pre- Offer Tools



85%
References



58%
Confirmation of
Visa Status / Work
Status



51%
Confirmation of
Qualifications



26%
Garda Vetting /
Police Clearance
/ Screening Company



25%
Social Media Checks



6%
None

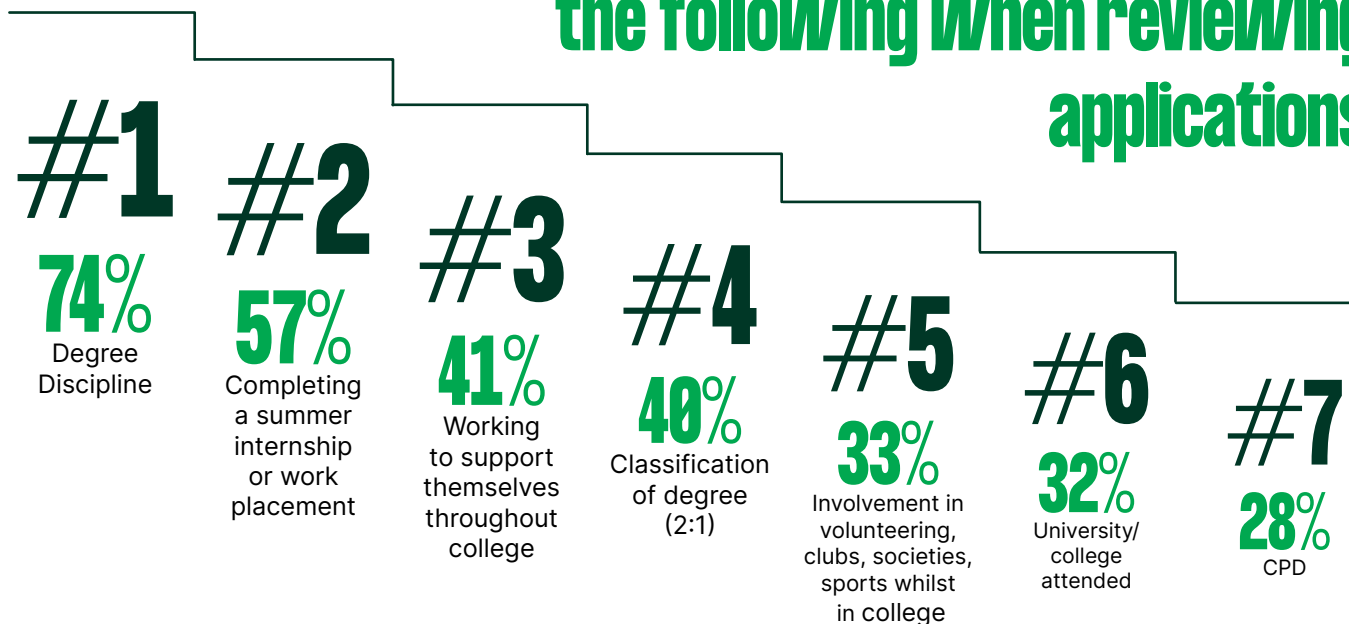


3%
Other

What Employers Value in Graduate Applications

These rankings highlight that while academic fit remains the top priority, employers are also looking for graduates who can demonstrate a well-rounded profile. Practical experience, a willingness to learn, and evidence of core soft skills continue to influence hiring decisions. Encouraging students to build up experience alongside their studies—through placements, part-time work, volunteering, or CPD—can significantly boost their employability.

Please rank how positively you view the following when reviewing applications



Recruitment Channels: Employer Focus vs Student Preferences

While employers and students use many of the same recruitment channels, their preferences reveal important differences in emphasis.

For employers, the **top recruitment channels** are:

1. Company website
2. LinkedIn
3. University vacancy/job portals
4. Career fairs
5. Placement/internship routes

In contrast, students rank their **top job search channels** as:

1. University vacancy/job portals
2. Company website
3. Previous placement/internship
4. Jobs boards (e.g. gradIreland, Indeed, IrishJobs)
5. LinkedIn

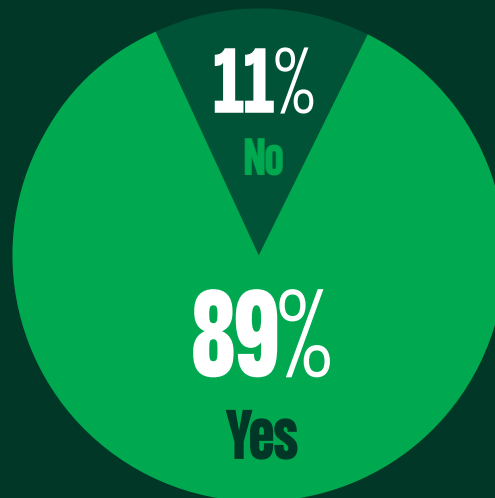
This comparison shows strong alignment in a few key areas—company websites and university portals feature prominently for both groups. However, some key gaps emerge. LinkedIn, while a top choice for employers, ranks only fifth for students, suggesting a need for more support or encouragement for students to engage professionally on the platform. Conversely, students value University vacancy systems and past placement experience more than employers may realise.

Recruitment agencies, campus visits, and career fairs appear further down on both lists, though employers report greater use of these in-person methods than students report engaging with them. This suggests a potential visibility or accessibility gap in on-campus activities.

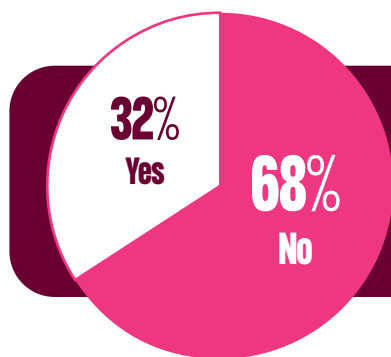
Social media channels such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok remain a low priority for both groups, indicating they may serve better as brand awareness tools rather than core recruitment platforms.

Understanding these preferences can help employers better align their outreach strategies with student behaviours—particularly by maximising visibility on university systems and company websites - while supporting students in building confidence and presence on platforms like LinkedIn.

Do you typically provide a job specification for each new graduate role?



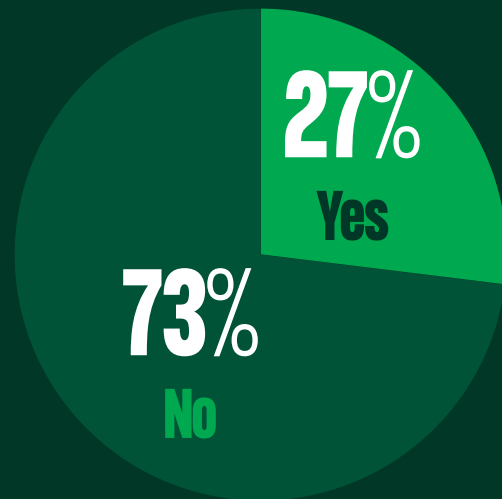
The vast majority of employers (89%) report that they typically provide a job specification for each new graduate role, up slightly from 86% in 2024. However, 11% still do not routinely provide this information. This is particularly significant given that 68% of students say they would not apply for a role if a job specification were unavailable, highlighting the critical role clear, detailed job descriptions play in attracting graduate talent. Ensuring job specs are consistently provided supports transparency and can also help maximise application numbers and engagement from potential candidates.



68% of students would not apply and 32% said they would apply **without job spec**

Student Voice

Do you disclose the salary ranges on your job specification?



Only 27% of employers disclose salary details when advertising graduate roles, down from 34% in 2024. The majority, 73% do not include this information. From the student perspective, salary transparency remains a significant factor, with 50% indicating they would choose not to apply for a role if the salary is not disclosed. This highlights a growing expectation for openness around pay and suggests that including salary details could strengthen employer appeal and encourage more applications from early career candidates.

Employers who choose not to disclose salary provide a wide range of reasons. Many cited variabilities based on candidate experience, their position on a pay scale, or the fact that salaries are reviewed annually—particularly relevant for organisations that hire up to three years in advance. Others stated that salary is set externally (e.g. by the Department of Education) or follows sector norms, such as standardised trainee solicitor salaries.

Regarding the process, some employers prefer to discuss salary at the interview or offer stage or communicate it verbally during screening rather than include it in job ads. A few also noted that salaries are available on external job boards, even if not listed on their company website.

Some respondents highlighted philosophical or strategic reasons, expressing a desire to see candidates apply based on a genuine interest in the role or sector rather than being primarily driven by pay. Others acknowledged that while salary isn't currently disclosed, they aim to improve it in line with evolving pay transparency expectations.

The data and employer feedback suggest a gap between student expectations and current employer practices—one that could impact application rates and perceived transparency. Addressing this gap may become increasingly important as competition for graduate talent grows.

50%
Yes

50%
No

50% of students *would not* apply and 50% said they *would* apply **without salary info**

Student Voice

Graduate Recruitment Timelines

There has been no significant change in the typical timeline for graduate recruitment compared to last year. The process remains both structured and comprehensive, generally taking 7 to 8 weeks from job advertisement to offer. This duration may vary depending on the volume of applications, the complexity of the role, and sector-specific practices.

The process typically includes several key stages: application screening, interviews, skills and competency assessments, and reference checks. These steps are designed to ensure a balanced approach, combining efficiency with a thorough evaluation to identify the best fit for both the role and the organisation.

Encouragingly, this timeline closely aligns with student expectations, providing a structured yet timely process. While some variation may exist across different industries, the overall approach reflects a shared understanding between employers and students of what a fair and efficient recruitment journey should look like.



**Average Predicted Time
Frame for recruiting a
new Graduate: 7.2 Weeks**

Graduate Visa Sponsorship

Employer Barriers and Considerations

While 36% of employers surveyed do sponsor graduate visas, 64% do not, citing a wide range of reasons. These responses reflect both structural limitations and practical concerns, summarised under the following themes:

1. Programme Misalignment & Contract Length

- Many employers noted that graduate programmes are fixed-term (often 2–3 years), which may not align with the 1G visa's two-year limit or Critical Skills Employment Permit requirements.
- Some stated that their roles are not considered permanent, making them ineligible for sponsorship under current visa rules.

2. Salary Thresholds and Cost

- A recurring issue is that graduate starting salaries often fall below the minimum required for visa sponsorship.
- Employers also cited the high financial cost of the sponsorship process, especially challenging for small companies, charities, or start-ups with limited budgets.
- Rising salary expectations tied to visa eligibility were flagged as a concern by some, especially when these differ from internal pay bands.

3. Administrative Burden and Lack of Resources

- Many employers described the process as too complex, time-consuming, or bureaucratic to manage, particularly in volume recruitment contexts.
- Several mentioned a lack of internal HR capacity, especially smaller organisations or those new to graduate recruitment.

4. Policy Restrictions

- Some employers are bound by civil service or sector-specific policies that prohibit visa sponsorship.
- Others cited company policy or historical precedent—*“we’ve never done it”* or *“not something we’ve looked into.”*

5. Low Demand or Previous Negative Experience

- A number of respondents stated they’ve never been asked to sponsor, or that there was no need due to a strong pool of applicants with existing right-to-work status.
- Some shared negative experiences where graduates left the company shortly after securing permanent residency or visas, raising concerns about retention and return on investment.

6. Conditional Willingness & Future Openness

- Encouragingly, some employers said they would consider sponsorship on a case-by-case basis, or are open to exploring it in future, especially if the right candidate emerged.
- Others already offer supportive documentation or informal help with visa applications, even if they don't provide full financial sponsorship.

7. Additional Constraints

- Some noted sector-specific barriers, such as the need for professional registrations (e.g. CORU in healthcare).
- A few mentioned location challenges, travel requirements, or concerns around language proficiency for certain roles.

Conclusion

The data shows that visa sponsorship for graduates remains limited, primarily due to cost, policy, and structural mismatches with visa criteria. However, there is a small but growing openness among some employers to revisit this in the future. Increased clarity on visa processes, streamlined sponsorship options for graduate roles, and stronger institutional support could help expand opportunities for international graduates entering the Irish labour market.



Top Challenges in Graduate Recruitment

Employers continue to face a range of challenges when it comes to attracting and hiring early career talent. The top five issues reported in this year's survey reflect both ongoing trends and emerging pressures:

1. Number of available graduates from specific degrees – 69%

Slightly down from 71% last year, the availability of graduates in key disciplines—particularly in areas like STEM, healthcare, and specialised engineering—remains a major constraint for employers with specific skill needs.

2. Competition for graduate talent from other employers – 68%

Intense competition persists, with employers continuing to compete for a limited pool of skilled graduates. While slightly lower than last year's 72%, this remains a key pressure point, especially in sectors where graduate demand is high.

3. Graduate expectations at entry level – 61%

Although down from 66% in 2024, employer concerns about unrealistic salary, flexibility, and progression expectations are still prominent. Feedback highlights a mismatch between what some graduates hope for and what entry-level roles can realistically offer.

4. Graduates accepting offers and then withdrawing – 60%

Up from 54% last year, this is a growing concern for employers. Increased competition and multiple offers may contribute to higher dropout rates post-offer, adding complexity to recruitment planning and timelines.

5. Work readiness level of graduates – 56%

Also up from 50% last year, this reflects employer concerns around practical preparedness, communication skills, and familiarity with workplace demands—despite strong academic backgrounds.

Conclusion

These challenges underline the importance of attracting graduates, setting clear expectations, improving pre-hire engagement, and supporting smoother transitions into the workforce. Greater collaboration between employers, higher education institutions, and students may help to address these gaps.



Number of available graduates from specific degree skills/sets

69%

Competition for graduate talent from other employers in your sector

68%

Graduate expectations at entry level

61%

Graduates accepting offers and then withdrawing

60%

Work readiness level of graduates

56%



Graduate Expectations — Employer Perspectives

Employers shared a wide range of feedback on the challenges they face when hiring graduates, with several recurring themes emerging across sectors:

1. Unrealistic Salary Expectations

The most frequently mentioned concern was the expectation of high starting salaries, often without relevant experience. Many employers noted that graduates are seeking €40k+ roles, with some citing salary demands more typical of candidates with 2–3 years experience. This can cause internal equity issues and tension with existing staff.

“Graduates are looking for extremely high salaries without having any relevant experience in the field of work.”

“Salary expectations can be higher than those of people in the roles 2-3 years. Expectations of rapid progression that are unrealistic.”

2. Mismatch in Role and Career Progression Expectations

Many graduates are seen to expect rapid promotions, senior-level responsibilities, or leadership titles early on. Employers expressed concern that some graduates are unprepared to start at entry-level and learn the basics first.

“Some graduates may expect to be working on high-level projects from the beginning.”

“They expect to work for 3/6 months and then get promoted or move.”

3. Overemphasis on Remote and Flexible Working

Remote work and flexibility were frequently cited as high on graduate wish lists, even when on-site presence is essential for learning or operational reasons. Employers noted tension between graduate expectations and the practical requirements of the roles—particularly in engineering, healthcare, and SME environments.

“Graduates expected remote working and higher salaries when starting.”

“Expectation to WFH regularly for engineering roles that require onsite presence for learning.”

4. Confidence Without Readiness

Employers noted that many graduates demonstrate confidence or a strong sense of entitlement but lack workplace readiness, particularly in areas like communication, professionalism, and basic software skills.

“High level of confidence but lack competence in social skills, basic MS Office skills, meeting skills, etc.”

“Graduates need to understand that the roles are entry-level, and they need to learn the basics.”

5. Workplace Reality vs College Experience

Graduates are sometimes unprepared for full-time roles' pace, workload, or structure, particularly in demanding sectors. A few employers mentioned a culture shock upon entering the workforce and

a desire for positive-only feedback, which can clash with performance expectations.

“Graduates want feedback but only when it’s positive and not constructive.”

“Candidates are surprised when informed they are not meeting expectations.”

6. Expectation of Perks and Packages

Some employers noted that graduates now expect benefits packages—including bonuses, remote options, wellness perks, and healthcare—previously reserved for more senior staff. This was particularly challenging for SMEs or organisations without the budget to compete with larger firms.

“Salary seems to be a main driver rather than the package of healthcare, pension, annual leave etc.”

“Package expectations incl. healthcare, accommodation, bonus etc.”

Conclusion

While employers welcome graduate ambition and energy, there is a growing gap between graduate expectations and workplace realities—particularly in relation to salary, progression, and flexibility. Managing this expectation gap is crucial. Employers emphasised the importance of realistic communication during recruitment and the need for graduates to value early career learning as much as compensation and benefits.



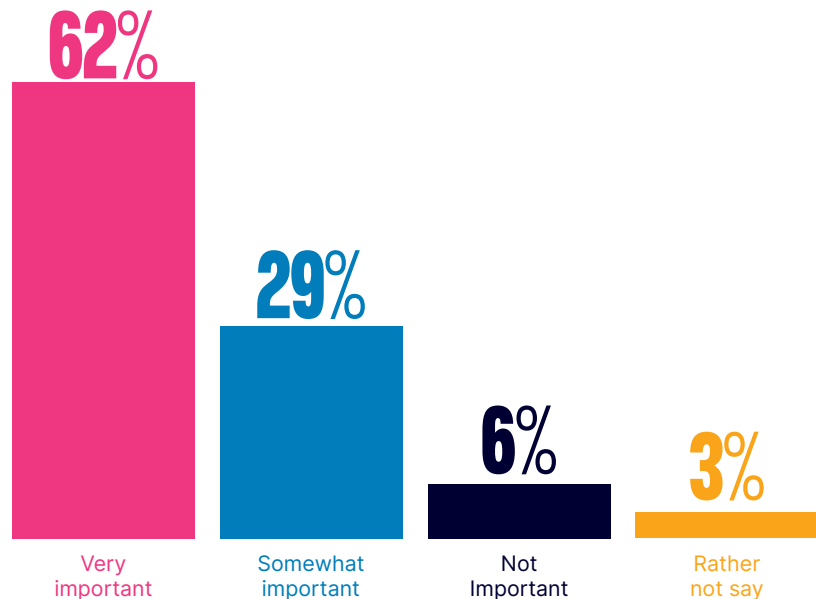
Diversity and Inclusion in Graduate Recruitment

When asked about the importance of diversity and inclusion (D&I) in their recruitment policy, 62% of employers said it is *very important*, down from 75% in 2024. A further 29% consider it somewhat important (up from 19%), while 6% said it is not important, and 3% preferred not to say.

These figures suggest that while D&I remains a clear priority for most organisations, a slight shift in emphasis or a more measured approach may emerge among some employers. The increase in “somewhat important” responses could reflect organisations at earlier stages of implementing structured D&I strategies or recognising the importance but facing challenges in resourcing or operationalising their efforts.

Overall, the data highlights the continued relevance of diversity and inclusion in early career recruitment but also points to the need for sustained focus and support to ensure D&I remains a meaningful and embedded aspect of graduate hiring.

How important is diversity and inclusion to your recruitment policy?



Graduate Salaries & Benefits

The chart compares the initial average earnings for individuals with Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctoral qualifications. The data shows a direct correlation between educational attainment and starting salary, although outcomes vary depending on sector, location, and individual role.

In Ireland, the average starting salary for undergraduate degree holders has increased slightly to €31,590 (up from €31,362 in 2024). However, Master's graduates reported a drop to €34,414, down from €34,779, while PhD graduates now start on an average of €35,197, a decrease from €35,767. These shifts suggest a modest flattening in salary growth at the postgraduate level.

Meanwhile, students' insights indicate an average starting salary of €33,082. This figure offers a useful benchmark when compared to employer-reported data, reflecting graduate perceptions of salary outcomes in the current market.

Although salaries remain relatively strong, the pace of growth has slowed, and expectations may need to be adjusted in line with evolving market conditions.

Increase starting salaries

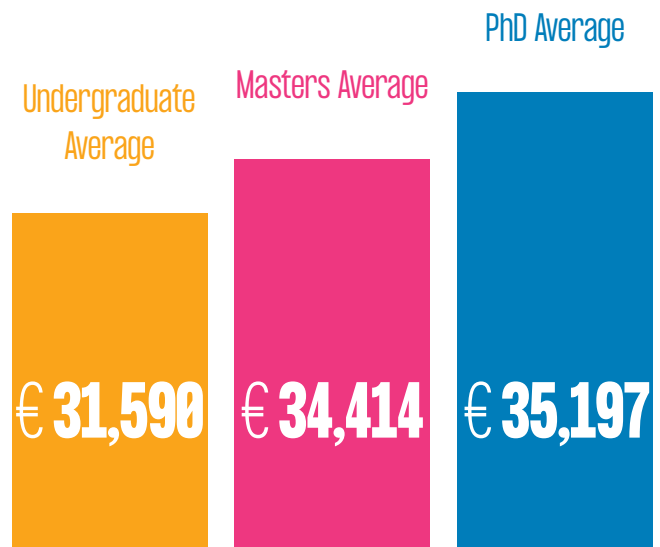
Employers continue to face varying levels of pressure to raise starting salaries for key graduate talent. Half of respondents (50%) reported feeling this pressure and acting on it by increasing salaries, unchanged from last year.

A further 21% acknowledged feeling the pressure but could not respond with salary increases, down

slightly from 25% in 2024. Meanwhile, 28% reported not feeling any pressure to adjust starting salaries, a small rise from 25% last year.

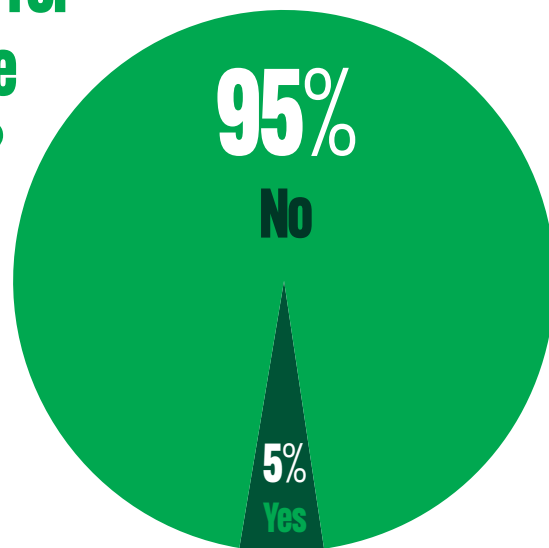
These results reflect a mixed but stable picture, where some employers are adapting to market expectations, while internal pay structures, budgets, or sector-specific limits may constrain others. The data suggests that while pressure remains, responses vary depending on organisational capacity and competitiveness.

Average Salaries 2025



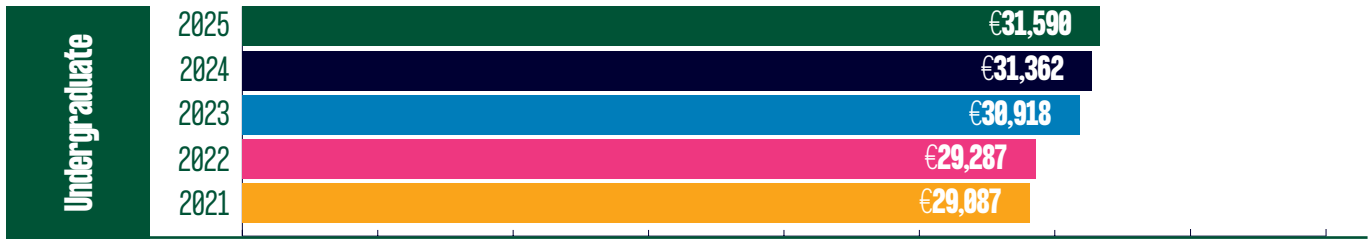


Have you changed the starting salary for remote work?



Students expected average starting salary
€33,802

Student Voice



How much pressure have you been experiencing to increase starting salaries for key target groups?

We have felt the pressure and have increased the salaries

50%

We have felt the pressure but have not been able to increase the salaries

21%

We have not felt the pressure to increase salaries

28%

Graduate Benefits – Employer Offerings vs Student Preferences

Benefit	Employer Offering Rank	Student Preference Rank	Rank Difference	Match Assessment
Pension	1	2	1	High Priority Match
Cycle-To-Work Scheme	2	24	22	Needs Review
Learning & Development Roadmaps / Career Progression Pathways'	3	5	2	High Priority Match
Wellbeing Initiatives	4	7	3	High Priority Match
Further Study Support	5	8	3	High Priority Match
Sports & Social Activities	6	11	5	Partial Alignment
Remote/Hybrid	7	3	4	Partial Alignment
Healthcare (VHI etc.)	8	1	7	Partial Alignment
Graduate Training Programme	9	9	0	High Priority Match
Bonus/Commission	10	6	4	Partial Alignment
Life Cover/Long Term Illness Cover	11	14	3	High Priority Match
Flexi-Time	12	4	8	Needs Review
Volunteering Days	13	22	9	Needs Review
Overtime/Time In Lieu	14	12	2	High Priority Match
Subsidised Canteens	15	20	5	Partial Alignment
Additional Leave above the Statutory Requirement	16	16	0	High Priority Match
Gym	17	15	2	High Priority Match
Home Office Set-up	18	13	5	Partial Alignment
Company Product Discount	19	23	4	Partial Alignment
Travel Allowance	20	10	10	Needs Review
Leap Cards/Travel Discounts	21	17	4	Partial Alignment
Stock/Stock Options	22	19	3	High Priority Match
Other	23	25	2	High Priority Match
Relocation Bonus	24	18	6	Partial Alignment
Car Allowance	25	21	4	Partial Alignment
None	26	26	0	

Alignment and Mismatch Analysis

Where Employers and Students are Closely Matched

Pension

(Employer Rank: 1 | Student Rank: 2)

→ There's strong agreement on the importance of financial security.

Learning & Development / Career Progression

(Employer Rank: 3 | Student Rank: 5)

→ Career growth continues to be a shared priority.

Wellbeing Initiatives

(Employer Rank: 4 | Student Rank: 7)

Further Study Support

(Employer Rank: 5 | Student Rank: 8)

Insight:

Employers are focusing on the key areas that matter most to students – opportunities for development, personal wellbeing, and long-term stability.

Where Perspectives Differ

Cycle-To-Work Scheme

(Employer Rank: 2 | Student Rank: 24)

→ Students currently place less emphasis on lifestyle benefits compared to employers.

Insight:

While initiatives like the Cycle-To-Work Scheme are valued by some, they may not be a deciding factor for many students at this stage. They can still contribute positively to an overall benefits package when presented alongside core offerings.

Key Takeaways

Strong Alignment on Financial and Career Priorities.

Pensions and career development opportunities resonate well with students, reflecting careful employer planning.

Lifestyle Benefits are Appreciated but Less Critical.

Lifestyle schemes are welcome additions, but students appear to prioritise benefits that support their long-term goals first.

Wellbeing and Study Supports are Gaining Importance.

Students are mindful of their personal wellbeing and continued learning, highlighting a positive shift towards holistic career support.

Clear and Balanced Communication is Key.

Emphasising the full range of supports — from financial security to wellbeing initiatives — helps students appreciate the total value offered.

Fresh Insights

Students are Practical and Future-Focused.

Financial stability, learning opportunities, and career pathways are central to their decision-making.

There's Room to Raise Awareness of Lifestyle Benefits.

Employers might benefit from showcasing how lifestyle supports can enhance work-life balance once foundational needs are addressed.

Education Supports are a Positive Differentiator.

Further study support is increasingly valued and could be a unique selling point when attracting early career talent.

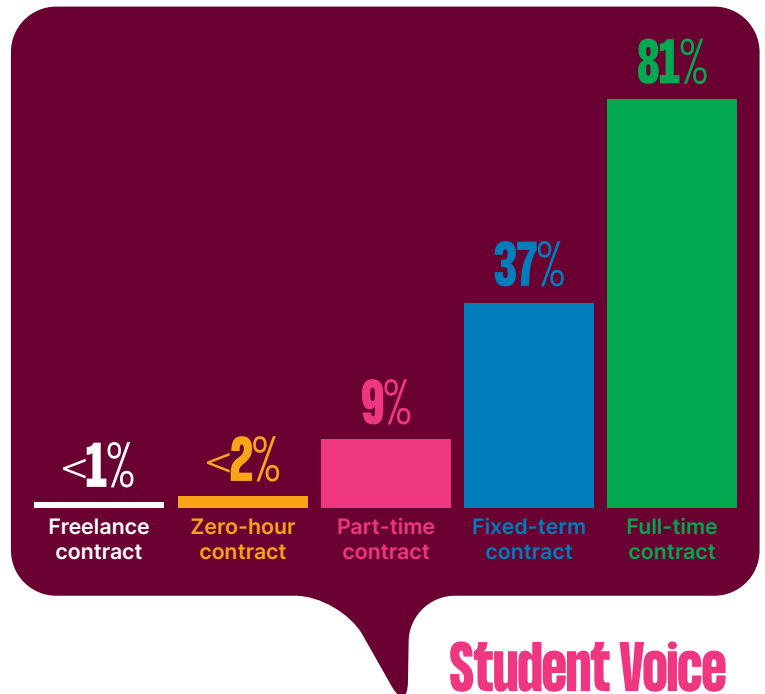
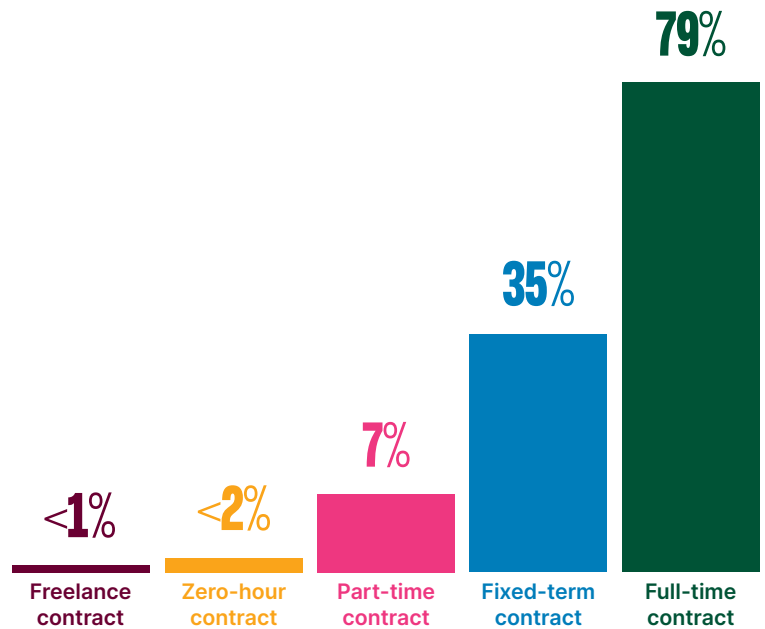
What type of graduate contract do you offer graduates?

There is a strong alignment between employer contract offerings and student expectations regarding early career roles.

- 81% of students say they prefer full-time contracts, which aligns with the 79% of employers offering them.
- Fixed-term contracts are offered by 35% of employers, but only 9% of students indicate this as their preferred arrangement—suggesting that while accepted in structured programmes, they are not the ideal.
- Part-time contracts appeal to 8% of students, with 7% of employers offering them.
- Zero-hour (2%) and freelance contracts (1%) are minimally preferred and minimally offered by both groups, reflecting a shared preference for stability and structure.

Key Insight:

Students are clearly seeking secure, structured employment to launch their careers, and employers are largely meeting this expectation. While fixed-term contracts are common in graduate programmes, ensuring these roles offer clear pathways to progression will help maintain graduate engagement and retention.







Graduate Onboarding

Employer Plans vs Student Preferences

Employers continue to favour on-site onboarding, with 79% planning to welcome new graduate hires on their company site—a significant rise from 56% in 2024. Hybrid onboarding remains consistent at 27%, and fully remote onboarding remains uncommon at just 6%. Notably, only 4% of employers are unsure about their plans, down from 13% last year, suggesting increased clarity and confidence in onboarding processes. However, student preferences present a different picture:

Key Insights:

- There's a clear misalignment in preferences for onboarding format: students are leaning towards hybrid models, whereas employers continue to prioritise on-site onboarding.
- Only 24% of students prefer fully on-site onboarding, while almost 80% of employers plan to deliver it this way.
- Encouragingly, 24% of students are happy to defer to the employer's judgement, suggesting there is flexibility, provided communication is clear and expectations are managed.

Implications:

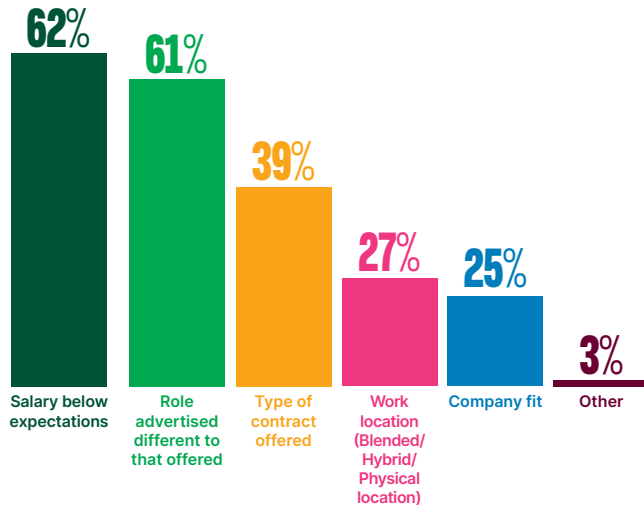
- Employers may benefit from offering some level of flexibility or blended onboarding, especially in the first few weeks, to accommodate student expectations.
- Clear messaging around why on-site onboarding is valuable—for relationship building, learning culture, or technical setup—can help increase student buy-in.
- Where hybrid or remote onboarding isn't feasible, framing on-site onboarding as an investment in graduate success could help bridge the expectation gap.



Onboarding Format	Employer Plan	Student Preference
Company Site	79%	24%
Hybrid	27%	47%
Remote	6%	5%
Happy for the employer to decide	–	24%

Graduate Offer Declines — A Growing Challenge

In 2025, 73% of employers reported that a graduate had accepted a job offer and subsequently declined it—up from 61% in 2024. This marks a growing challenge in securing graduate talent between offer and start date, likely driven by increased competition, shifting expectations, and broader lifestyle or financial pressures.



Top Reasons Graduates Reject Job Offers (After Accepting)

Students were asked why they might turn down a job offer after initially accepting it. The top five reasons, in order of frequency, were:

1. Salary below expectations
2. Role not as advertised
3. Type of contract offered
4. Work location or lack of hybrid options
5. Poor company fit or culture

Student Voice

These insights reflect what many employers are experiencing, highlighting the importance of clear communication around salary, job content, flexibility, and organisational culture throughout the recruitment process.

Employer-Reported Reasons for Offer Declines

From the hundreds of qualitative comments received, several consistent themes emerged:

1. Salary and Counter Offers

- The most commonly cited issue. Graduates often withdraw after receiving a higher salary elsewhere—typically from multinationals or high-paying sectors such as pharma and tech.
- Some employers noted that graduates may initially overlook the full value of the total package, focusing solely on base pay.

“Regardless of the lip service paid to culture and work-life balance, it always comes down to salary.”

“They came back to reapply after realising our offer was above average.”

2. Location and Accommodation

- Relocation difficulties, high living costs, and lack of affordable housing—particularly in Dublin and Cork—frequently prompt graduates to reconsider.
- Long commutes or a desire to stay closer to home also play a role.

“We’ve lost candidates due to the cost of accommodation in Cork.”

“Location of the office, combined with high rents, ruled us out.”

3. Competing Offers and Changing Priorities

- Many graduates accept an offer as a “safety net” while waiting on preferred opportunities.
- Others decide to travel, return to education, or pursue alternative paths—even after signing a contract.

“They accepted and then declined when their preferred employer came through.”

“They decided to go travelling or return to education.”

4. Role Mismatch or Unrealistic Expectations

- Some graduates feel unprepared for the realities of the job, especially in sales, retail, or rotational roles.
- Others feel the role differs from how it was advertised or expect more remote work or early responsibility than is feasible.

“The graduate was surprised by the travel involved—even though it was clearly outlined.”

“Expecting remote work for a hands-on engineering role.”

5. Company Size, Sector, or Brand Appeal

- Graduates may opt for better-known brands or roles with greater perceived prestige.
- SMEs and public sector employers often struggle to compete with the packages and “name value” of larger firms.

“They went with a larger firm for the brand and CV boost.”

“We can’t match the name recognition or starting salaries of Big 4 firms.”

Conclusion & Recommendations

The rise in graduate offer withdrawals reflects both a competitive hiring landscape and evolving graduate priorities. Today’s graduates weigh salary, flexibility, personal fit, and location—often reassessing decisions up to the start date.

To reduce drop-offs, employers could consider:

- Communicating role expectations and benefits clearly throughout the recruitment process
- Engaging early and regularly with graduates post-offer to maintain momentum
- Being transparent about salary, flexibility, and career development opportunities
- Streamlining hiring timelines to reduce the risk of counteroffers





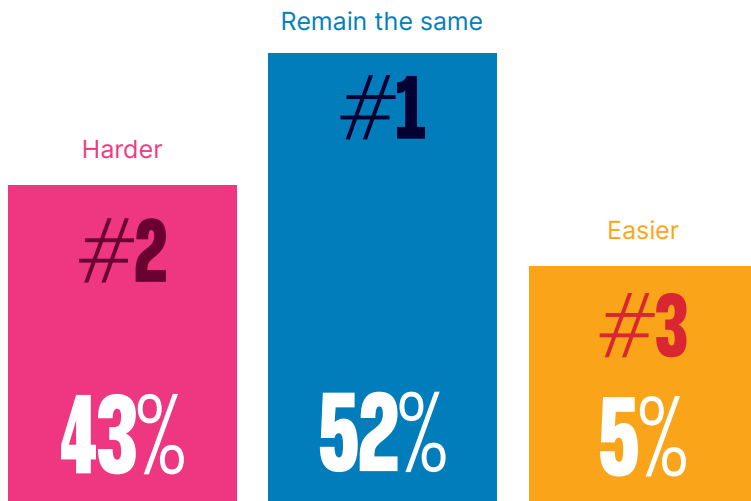
Expected Hiring Environment Over the Next 12 Months

Looking ahead, 52% of employers expect the graduate hiring environment to remain the same—a slight increase from 49% in 2024. Meanwhile, 43% anticipate that it will become more difficult to hire graduates, down slightly from 46% last year. Just 5% believe it will get easier, unchanged from 2024.

These results suggest a broadly stable but cautious outlook, with employers continuing to face pressures such as talent competition, graduate expectations, and salary challenges, but without a marked deterioration in conditions.

Key Insight:

The slight drop in those predicting a more difficult hiring landscape may reflect growing adaptation to graduate expectations or improvements in early engagement strategies. However, with only 5% expecting improvements, the general tone remains one of measured realism rather than optimism.

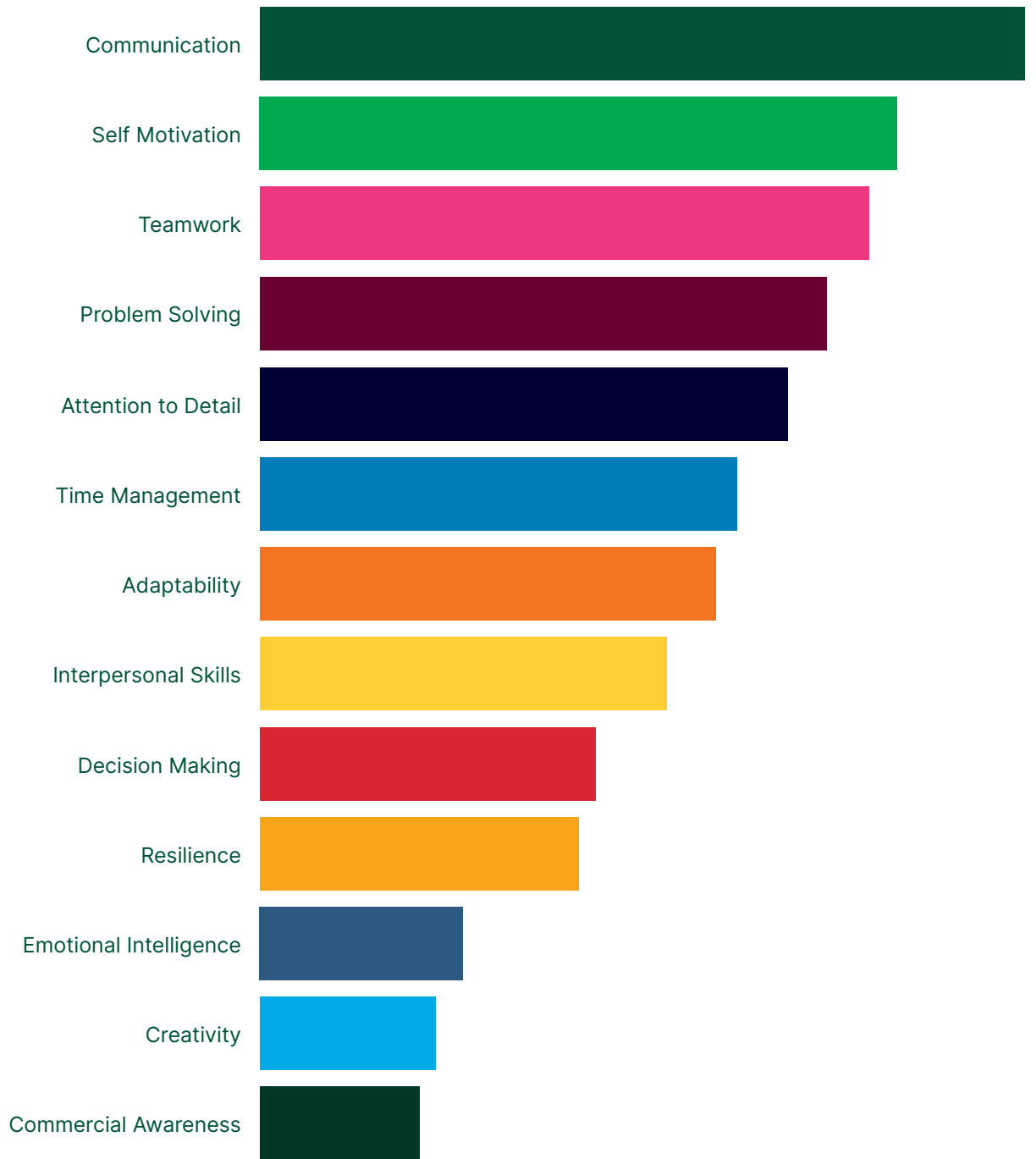




Early Career Skills in Demand Ranked by Employers

Key Insights:

- Core soft skills dominate the top rankings, particularly communication, motivation, and teamwork—all fundamental to early career success.
- Skills like problem-solving, attention to detail, and time management show continued employer focus on productivity and accuracy.
- While still important, attributes like creativity and commercial awareness rank lower—possibly reflecting their development over time or specific relevance to certain roles.
- Emotional intelligence and resilience continue to gain traction, reflecting increased employer awareness of mental wellbeing and interpersonal dynamics in the workplace.



Top Motivational Factors for Students (Ranked)

Student Voice

Key Insights:

- Recognition and achievement are the most important motivators for students entering the workforce. This shows the value placed on feeling valued and having their contributions acknowledged early in their careers.
- Growth ranks highly, indicating strong interest in personal and professional development—aligning well with employer offerings like graduate training programmes and L&D pathways.
- Work-life balance remains a priority, reinforcing the earlier findings on expectations around hybrid working and flexibility.
- Security, often assumed to be a top concern, ranks lower than other factors—suggesting that students may be more driven by development and recognition than long-term job security at this early stage.



#1

Recognition

#2

Achievement

#3

Growth

#4

Work–Life Balance

#5

Responsibilities

#6

Relationships

#7

Security

What Employers Look for in Graduates and Why It Matters

1. Strong Communication Skills & Team Fit

Graduates who can express themselves clearly, listen actively, and engage well with others are consistently rated as top hires.

Why it matters:

Employers say communication underpins success across every role — from client interaction to team collaboration. In fast-paced or cross-functional environments, a good communicator helps projects move forward and maintains a positive team dynamic. A good “team fit” is essential for morale and productivity.

2. Work Ethic & Reliability

Being dependable, showing up prepared, and putting in consistent effort is a standout trait for graduate success.

Why it matters:

Many organisations — especially SMEs and frontline services — rely heavily on graduates to deliver real impact from day one. Employers note that hard work, reliability, and willingness to take ownership reduce the need for micromanagement and build trust quickly.

3. Willingness to Learn & Curiosity

Graduates with an open mindset, genuine curiosity, and a hunger to develop are highly valued.

Why it matters:

Employers widely agree that technical skills can be taught — but mindset can't. A curious graduate who takes feedback well, asks questions, and seeks growth is seen as someone who will thrive long-term and adapt to new challenges as they arise.

4. Adaptability & Resilience

The ability to deal with uncertainty, bounce back from setbacks, and adjust to different environments is a clear priority.

Why it matters:

Whether it's remote work, new systems, or changing client needs, employers say adaptability is essential. Graduates who stay calm under pressure and show resilience in the face of setbacks are far more likely to succeed and stay in the role.



5. Positive Attitude & Emotional Intelligence

A proactive, respectful, and emotionally mature approach sets graduates apart.

Why it matters:

Employers highlight that attitude is often more important than academic achievement. Emotional intelligence helps graduates navigate feedback, manage stress, and contribute positively to the workplace culture — especially in high-pressure or people-facing roles.

In essence, employers are hiring for potential — not perfection. They want to see the right qualities in place that show a graduate is ready to contribute, willing to grow, and able to thrive in a real-world setting. When these personal attributes align with company culture and values, employers are confident they can teach the rest.





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