UNIVERSITY OF LIMERICK
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Cooperative Education and Careers Division



Early Careers Employer Survey 2026

A National Perspective on Graduate Recruitment and Student Expectations

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Scan the QR code to access detailed sector reports, charts and additional insights.

Note on Data Presentation:
Percentages shown throughout this publication may not always total exactly 100% due to rounding. In addition, some charts and figures are based on multi-select questions, where respondents could choose more than one option, meaning totals may exceed or fall below 100%.



Foreword

The University of Limerick's Cooperative Education & Careers Division is delighted to present the findings of the 2026 Early Careers Employer Survey, the largest survey of its kind nationally.

Context is key in building a picture of today's dynamic graduate labour market and its key stakeholders. The survey reflects the views and experiences of 269 employers who hired graduates or student interns in 2025 and 2026. The employers represent a broad range of sectors, organisation types, and regions.

Their responses reveal valuable insights into trends, challenges, and priorities in graduate recruitment and selection. The student voice was captured through a survey of over 1,500 students nationally, focusing on their career-related motivations, expectations, and decision-making. This year, for the first time, we drew on the perspectives of our national higher education careers experts who play such a pivotal role in in preparing graduates for the future world of work, and in supporting employer partners in their graduate recruitment endeavours.

The report's 360° design offers a comprehensive, multi-sourced, and well-evidenced picture of the early careers landscape. I encourage you to use the findings to support decision-making and to drive informed conversations around graduate recruitment + selection and work placement activities. Finally, I would like to extend very sincere thanks to everyone who contributed to the report.





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



Executive Summary

Highlights from the 2026 Report

The early careers labour market remains resilient, with most employers continuing to recruit graduates. Unsurprisingly, given the unpredictable economic climate, employers are showing increasing levels of caution in their hiring activities. At the same time, graduate expectations around salary, flexibility and career progression are shifting upwards, sometimes leading to a misalignment in employer and graduate expectations. Taken together, the findings point to a complex, recalibrating labour market.

Key Insights

- Graduate hiring levels remain reasonably stable, with 66% of employers hiring as planned. 24% of employers report that they are continuing to hire graduates "but with more caution". Overall, graduate recruitment remains a priority, but guided by a tightly controlled approach to workforce planning. Upward pressures on salaries continue, with 42% of employers reporting increases in graduate salaries.

- For graduates, salary details are a key factor in their career decision-making. However, only 27% of employers include details of salary in their graduate job descriptions.

- Work placement continues to act as a key differentiator in graduate recruitment. As such, it is viewed by employers as a proxy for graduate readiness. In many instances, employers use work placements as an instrument to identify pre-graduation talent.

- Offer declines have emerged as a significant structural challenge, with 70% of employers reporting issues with graduates accepting and later declining job offers. This reflects increased competition, changing candidate priorities, and longer recruitment timelines.

- Employers' and graduates' views on flexible working continue to differ. Employers plan for primarily site-based roles whilst students show a strong preference for hybrid working models. In practice, this ongoing gap informs both recruitment decisions and offer acceptances.

- Employer and graduate expectations of benefits appear to be out of kilter. Students tend to prioritise benefits such as healthcare, flexibility, and hybrid working, while employers emphasise pensions, development opportunities, and other long-term benefit offerings.

- The top in-demand skills are unchanged, with teamwork, communication, and self-motivation most highly valued by employers. However, it is noted that employers increasingly expect higher levels of professionalism, adaptability, and work readiness from the outset.

Insights from Higher Education Careers Experts

Careers experts across Irish higher education report an active graduate market, with headline graduate employment outcomes remaining relatively strong. That said, the market has become more selective, competitive and unpredictable.

1. The Graduate Market Is Recalibrating

Across several higher education institutions, career experts report static or declining graduate intake in sectors such as technology and consulting. At the same time, application/hiring windows are shortening, and recruitment cycles are becoming less visible to students. The result is a market that still offers opportunities but calls for earlier engagement, stronger awareness, and more proactive self-navigating on the part of students.

2. AI Literacy Is Becoming a Baseline Expectation

Employers are increasingly expecting graduates to demonstrate a practical understanding of AI tools and their responsible, thoughtful application in the workplace. Career experts report that, in effect, what was previously seen as an additional or specialist skill has come to be viewed by employers as a core capability.

In response, higher education institutions are embedding digital and AI literacy earlier within both academic and careers education programmes, reinforcing AI's role in future graduate employability.

3. Career Pathways Are Becoming Less Linear

Early career pathways are becoming more varied and less structured than in previous years. Graduates are increasingly moving across roles, sectors, and contract types before achieving long-term alignment. Traditional linear career progression is giving way to a more fluid and exploratory career journey.

This represents an important shift for graduates and places greater emphasis on their adaptability, resilience, and ability to make informed career decisions over time.

4. Structural Pressures Are Shaping the Market

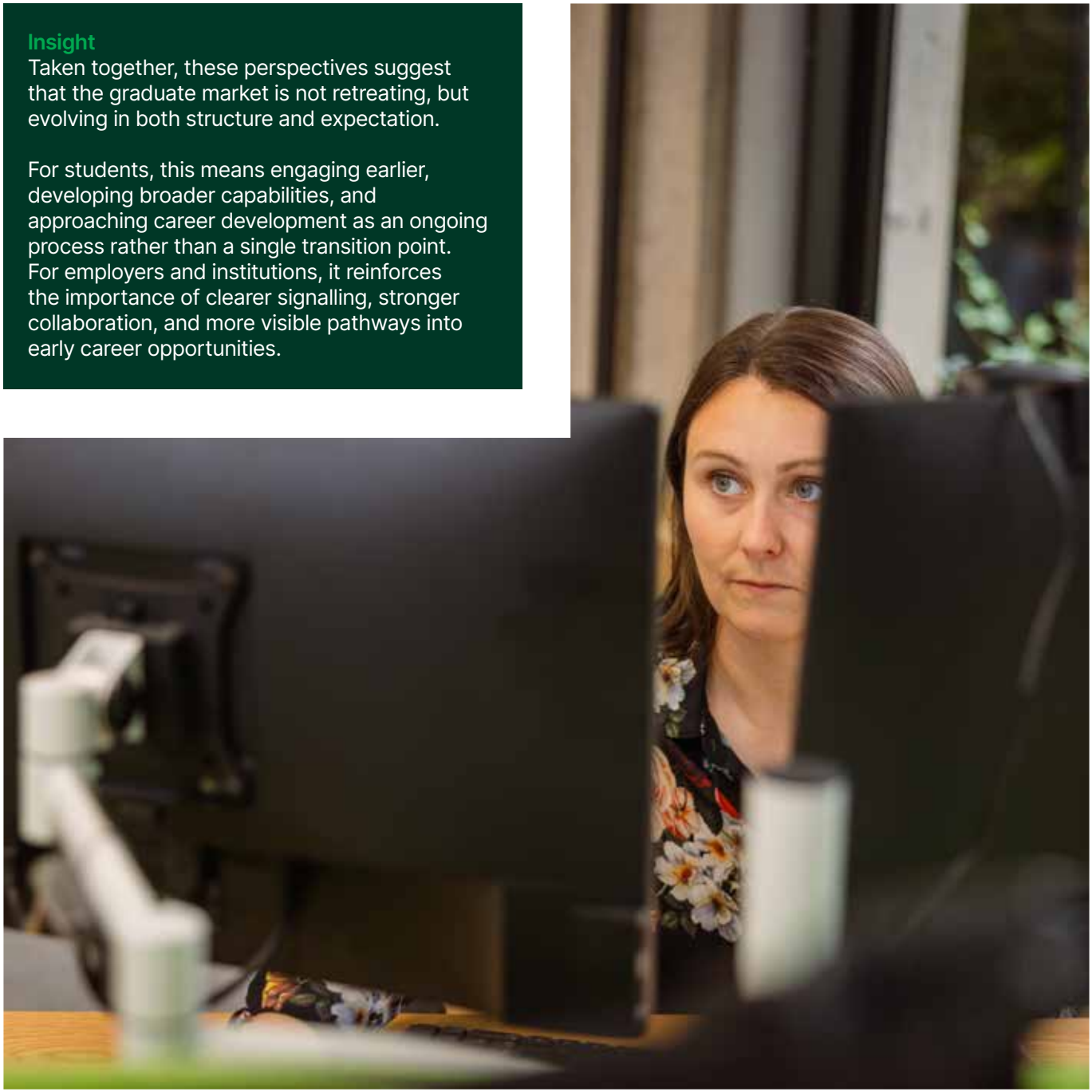
The continued expansion of higher education participation has led to incremental increases in the number of graduates entering the labour market each year.

While this reflects significant progress in widening access, it also contributes to a more competitive and complex graduate employment landscape. In parallel, some sectors are adjusting hiring levels following periods of rapid growth.

Institutions are responding by intervening earlier in the student journey, embedding employability within curricula, strengthening employer partnerships, and expanding access to work-based learning.

Insight
Taken together, these perspectives suggest that the graduate market is not retreating, but evolving in both structure and expectation.

For students, this means engaging earlier, developing broader capabilities, and approaching career development as an ongoing process rather than a single transition point. For employers and institutions, it reinforces the importance of clearer signalling, stronger collaboration, and more visible pathways into early career opportunities.

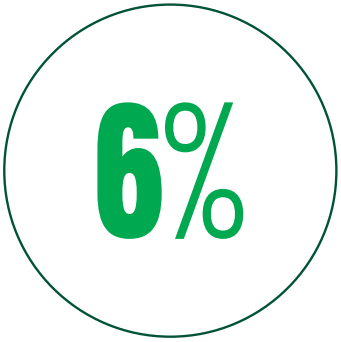


Sectors Surveyed

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.



Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities



Information and Communication



Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing



Education



Arts, Entertainment and Recreation



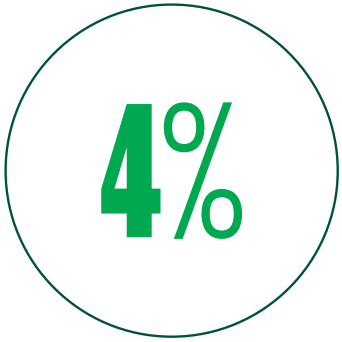
Industry



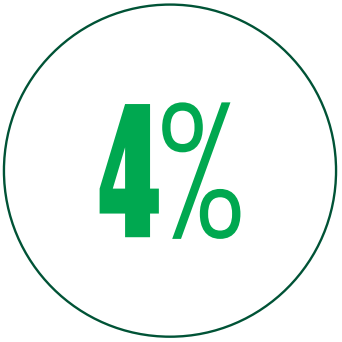
Construction



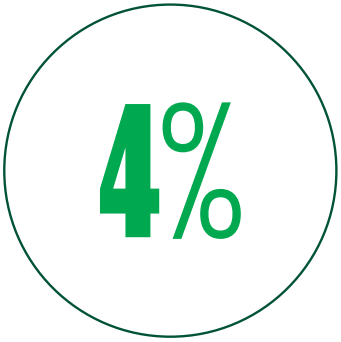
Financial, Insurance and Real Estate Activities



Administrative and Support Service Activities



Wholesale and Retail Trade



Human Health and Social Work Activities



Accommodation and Food Service Activities



Public Administration and Defence



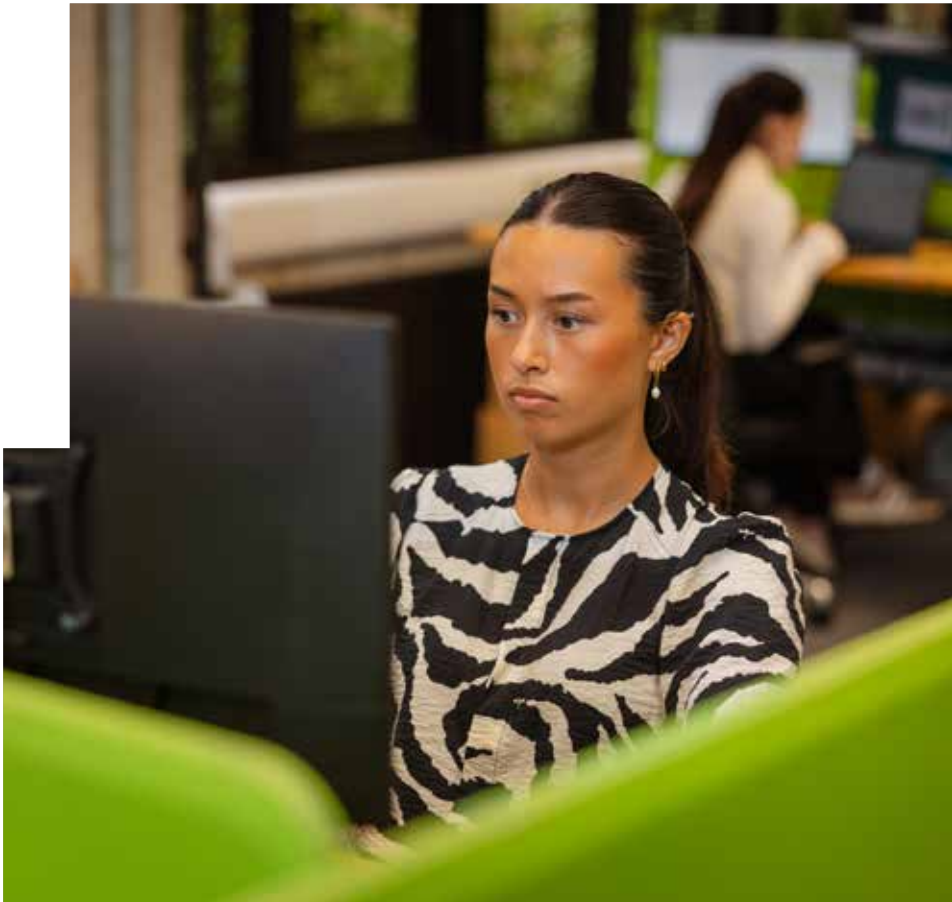
Transportation and Storage

Work Placement and Summer Internships

Work placements and summer internships are now a central component of early career recruitment, acting as a key bridge between higher education and employment.

For employers, these programmes provide an opportunity to engage with emerging talent early, assess future capability in a real-world setting, and build future talent pipelines. For students, they offer practical experience, professional networks, and clearer insight into career pathways.

Participation in placement programmes continues to grow, reinforcing their role as a strategic entry point into graduate employment. In an increasingly competitive market, placements are no longer simply a developmental experience. They are often a direct route to securing a graduate role.



€27,971

Average annualised salary paid by organisations to work placement students starting in 2025/26

Salary

The survey indicates that the average work placement salary has reached €27,971, reflecting the growing recognition of students' contributions during extended placements. In many organisations, placement students are now involved in project work, operational activities and team-based initiatives, gaining meaningful exposure to professional practice.

Onboarding for Placement Hires

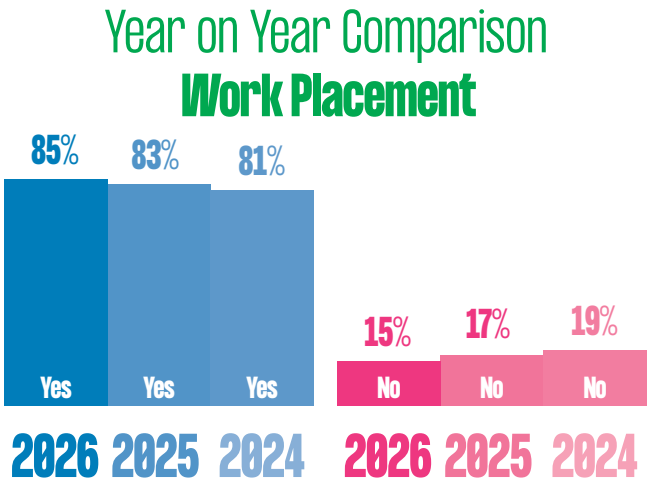
Employers were also asked about how placement students are typically onboarded at the beginning of their roles. The findings suggest that onboarding continues to take place predominantly on-site within the organisation. While hybrid working arrangements are now common across many sectors, employers appear to favour in-person onboarding for students entering the workplace for the first time. Early immersion in workplace culture, systems and team dynamics is seen as an important part of supporting students as they transition into professional environments.

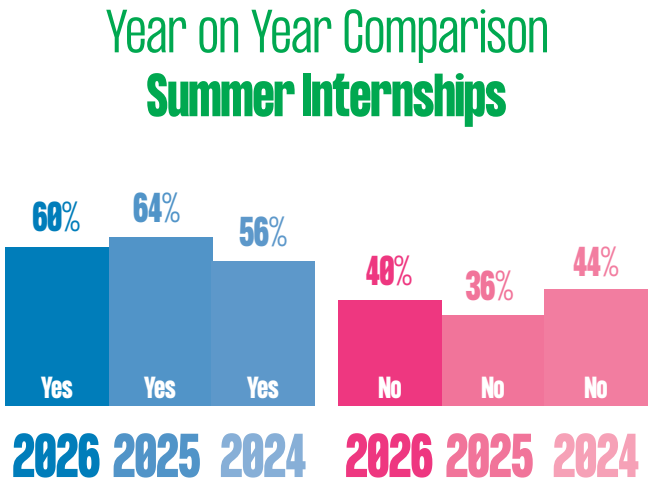
Summer Internships

Summer internship programmes also remain an important element of early talent engagement strategies. Although participation fluctuates slightly year to year, internships provide organisations with a flexible way to engage with students over shorter periods while offering valuable industry insight and experience.

Discipline Demand

Demand for placement students remains strongest in engineering and technical disciplines, alongside a wide range of business-related areas including accountancy, finance, marketing and data analytics. At the same time, opportunities extend across a broad spectrum of disciplines, highlighting the increasingly diverse range of sectors engaging with student placement programmes.





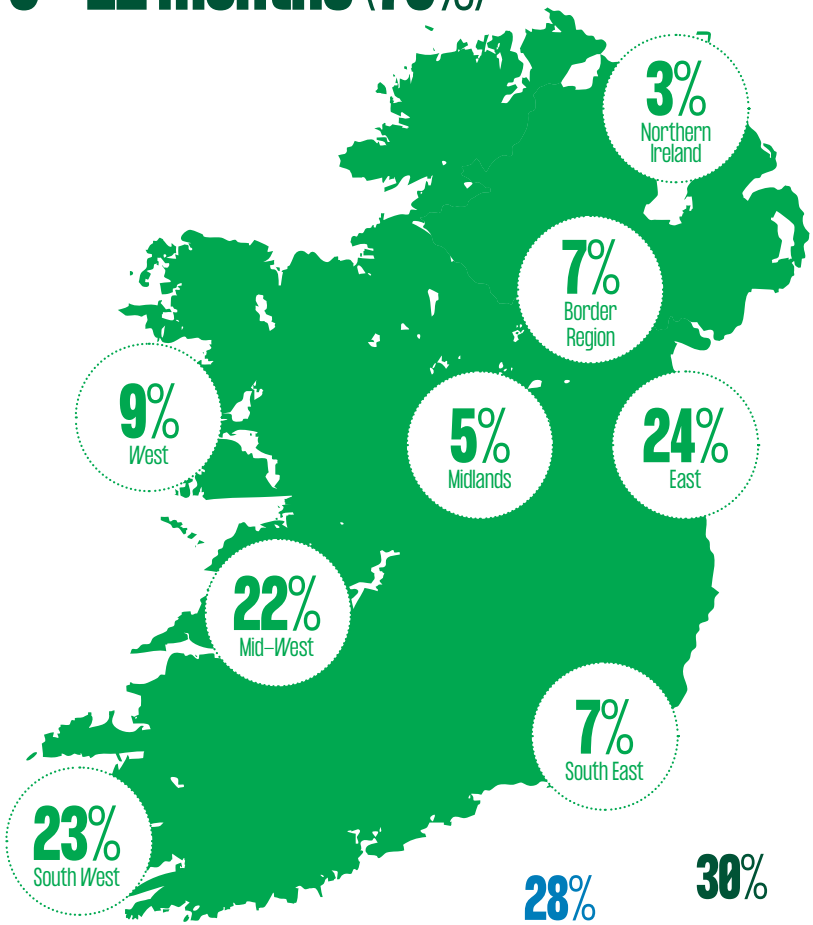
Most placements last 6–12 months (76%)

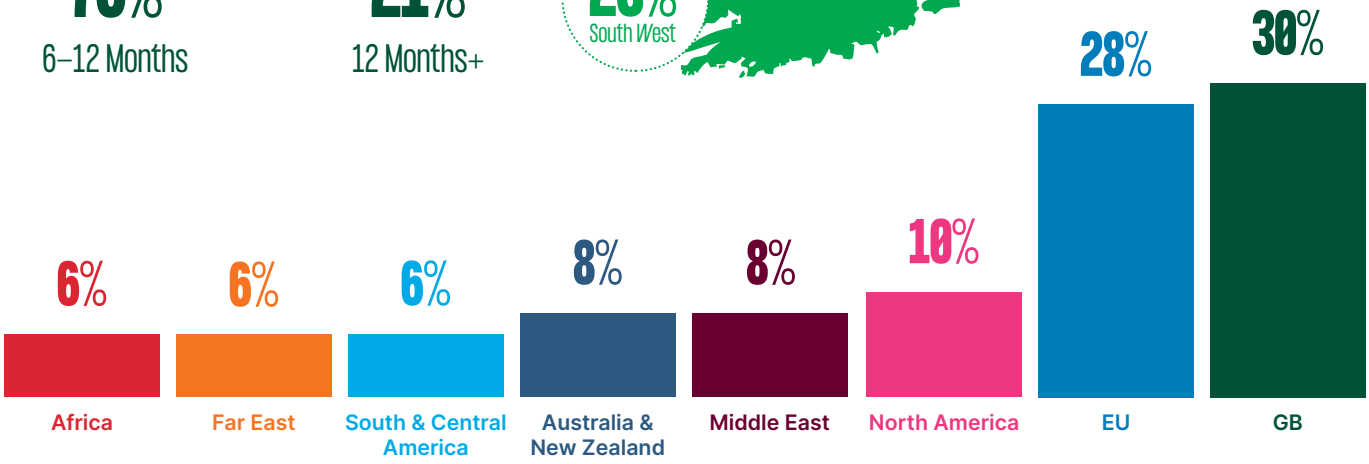
28%
up to 3 Months

50%
3–6 Months

76%
6–12 Months

21%
12 Months+





What placement disciplines are in demand?



51%
Engineering



26%
Accountancy



21%
Economics/Finance



19%
Marketing



18%
ICT & Electronics



17%
Science



16%
Data/Consultancy/
Analytics



15%
HR



7%
Law



7%
Health Sciences



5%
Insurance & Risk



5%
All Disciplines



4%
Humanities



4%
Creative

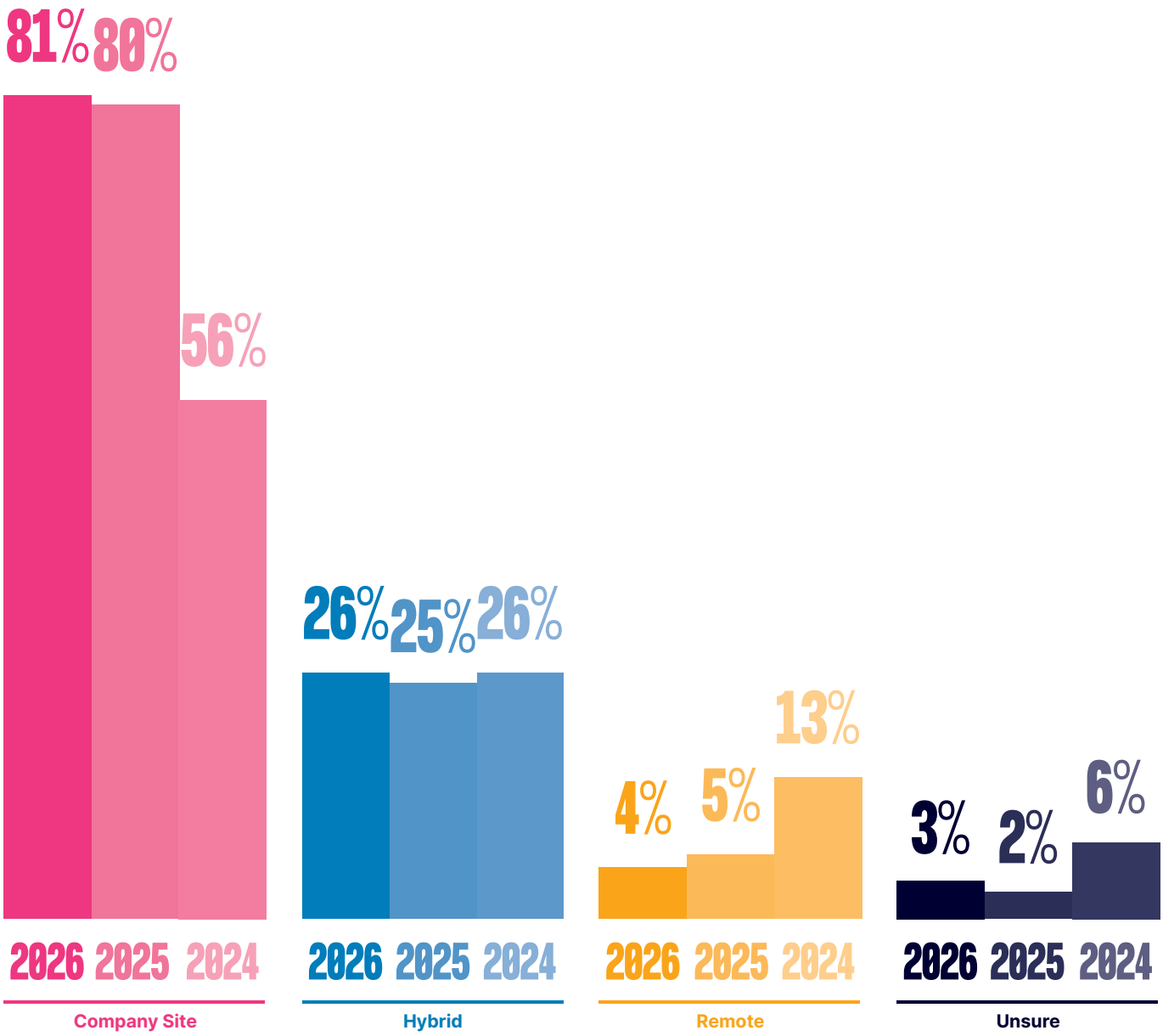


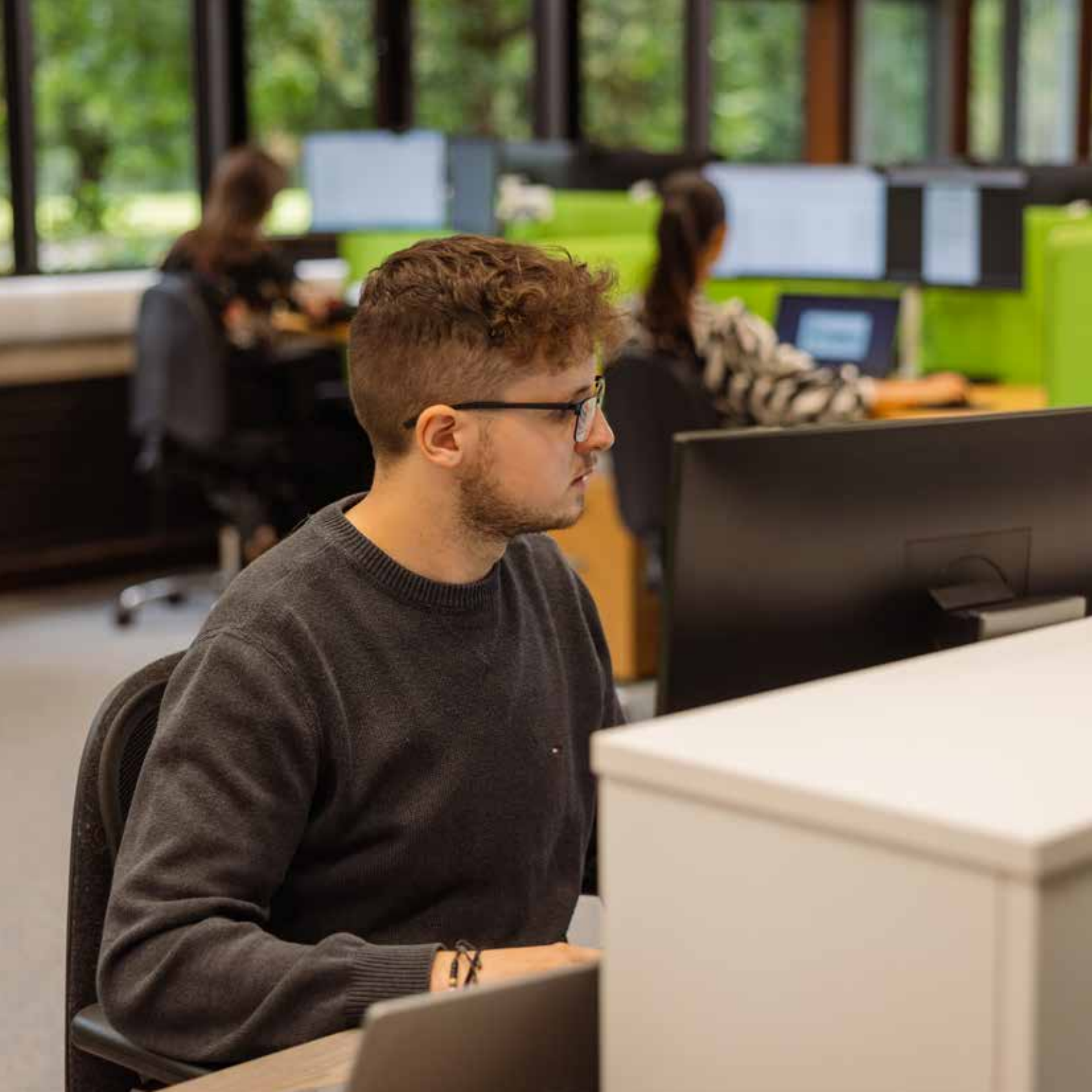
3%
Education



3%
Hospitality

What are your plans for onboarding new placement hires?





Graduate Hiring Confidence and Sentiment

Early Careers Recruitment Outlook

Employer confidence in early career hiring remains relatively high across all time horizons, but with a more measured and cautious tone than in recent years.

In the short term, 76% of employers report feeling confident about early career hiring. This increases slightly to 82% over the 6–12 month period, before softening marginally over the longer-term horizon. Only a small proportion of employers report low confidence at any stage.

This consistency across timelines suggests that graduate recruitment remains an established and necessary part of organisational workforce planning. However, the shift from strong confidence to more moderate confidence indicates that employers are increasingly balancing growth ambitions with cost control, operational constraints, and external uncertainty.

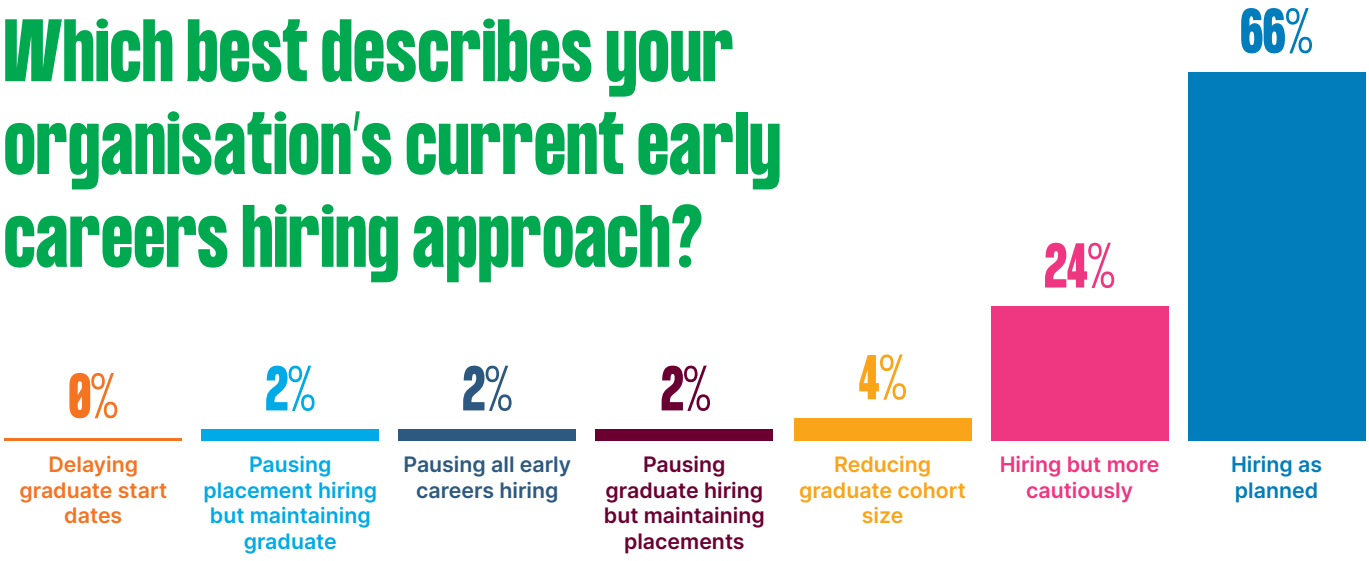
Overall, rather than pulling back from early career hiring, many organisations appear to be proceeding with greater caution, flexibility, and closer monitoring of workforce needs.

Entry-Level Roles Are Evolving

Alongside steady confidence levels, employers report noticeable changes in how entry-level roles are being structured and delivered.

While the majority of organisations (62%) indicate that roles have remained broadly unchanged, a significant proportion report adaptations. These include roles being redesigned to incorporate broader responsibilities, the introduction of automation or AI-supported tasks, and, in some cases, a shift towards more flexible or fixed-term hiring models.

Which best describes your organisation's current early careers hiring approach?



These changes are not driven by a single factor. Employers point to a combination of cost pressures, evolving business strategies, changing client or project demand, and increased productivity through technology as influencing how entry-level roles are defined.

In parallel, some organisations highlight ongoing challenges in sourcing work-ready graduates or ensuring sufficient managerial capacity to support early career hires effectively.

Duration and Nature of These Changes

For most employers, these changes are not short-term reactions but part of a broader adjustment period.

A significant proportion describe these shifts as medium- to long-term in nature, suggesting that changes to entry-level roles are likely to persist rather than reverse quickly. This reflects a labour market that is gradually adapting to new technologies, new ways of working, and evolving organisational priorities.

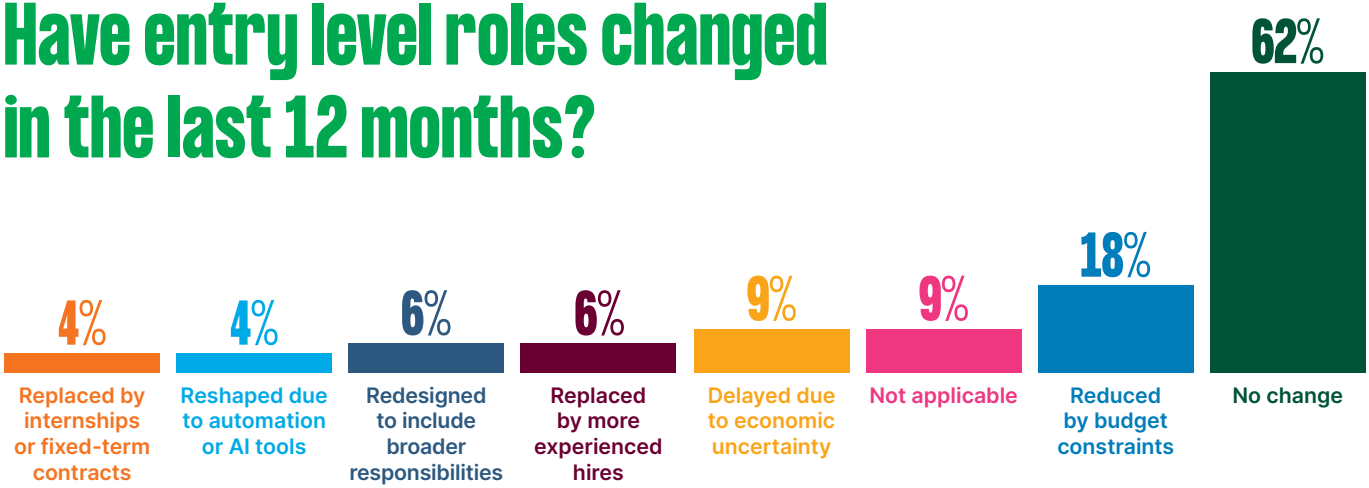
Insight

Taken together, the findings suggest that while employer confidence remains relatively stable, the structure of early career opportunities is gradually evolving.

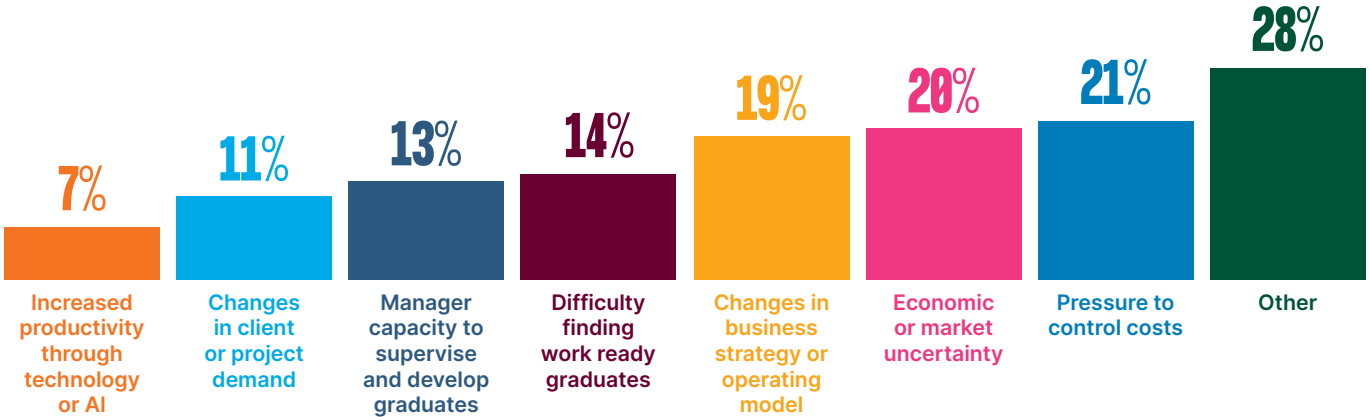
Graduate roles are not disappearing, but they are becoming more fluid, more efficiency-driven, and in some cases more demanding in terms of adaptability and skill.

For students, this reinforces the importance of engaging early with the labour market, building practical experience, and developing a broad set of transferable skills. For employers and institutions, it highlights the need to clearly communicate role expectations and support graduates as they transition into increasingly dynamic working environments.

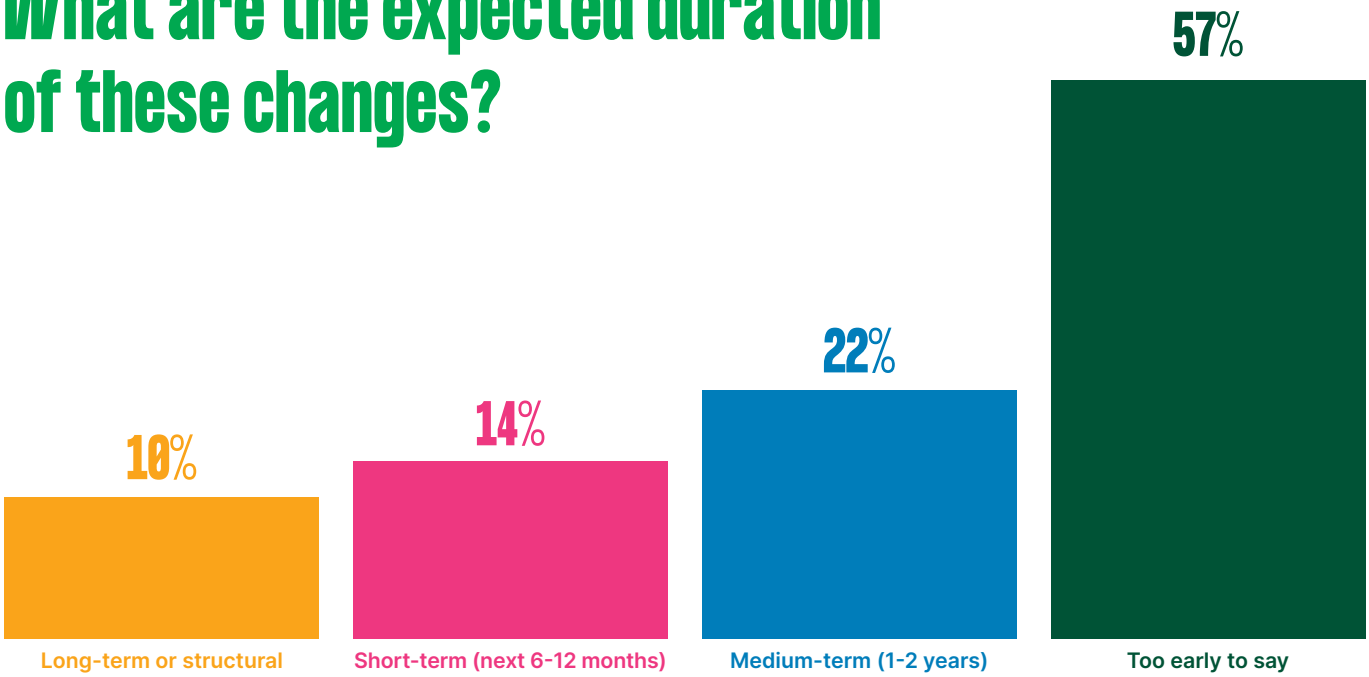
Have entry level roles changed in the last 12 months?



What explains these entry level changes?



What are the expected duration of these changes?





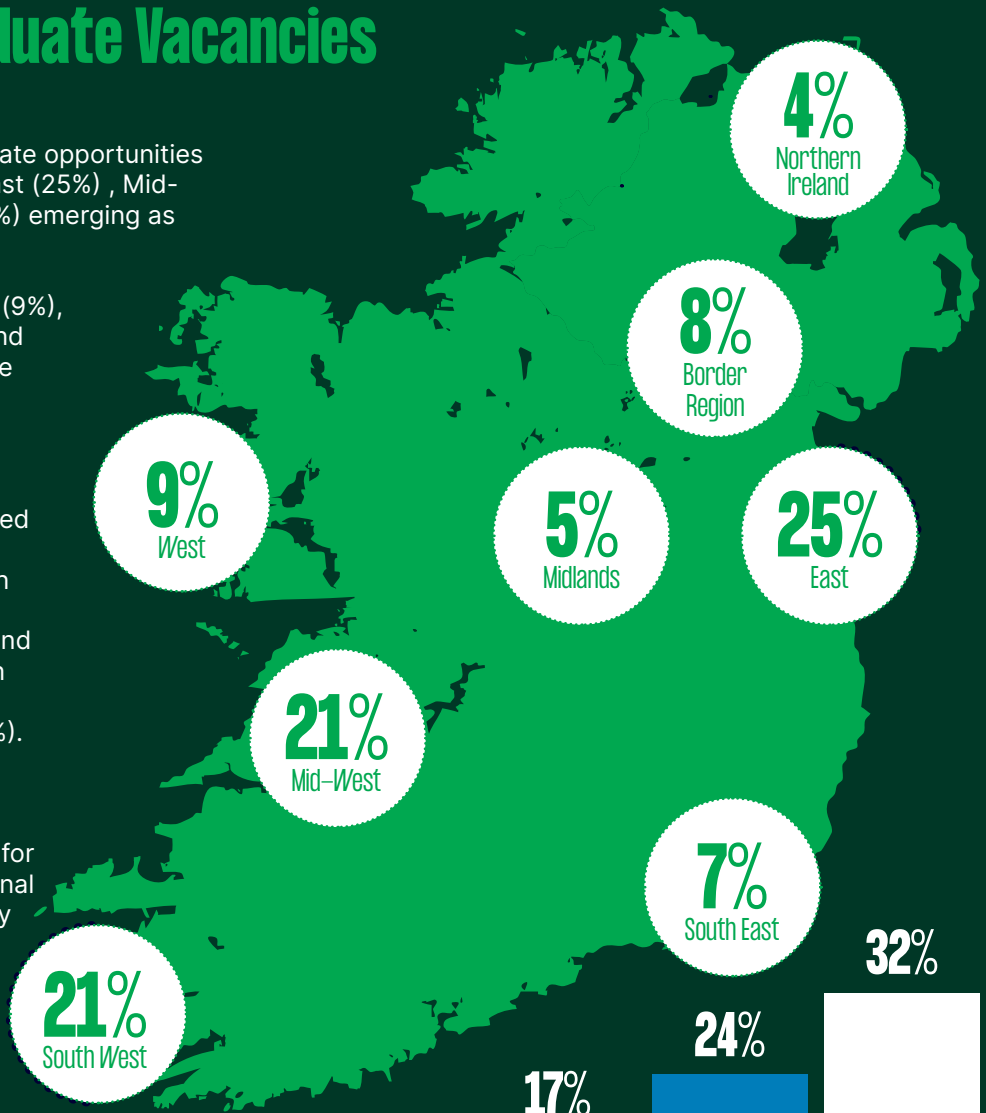
Location of Graduate Vacancies

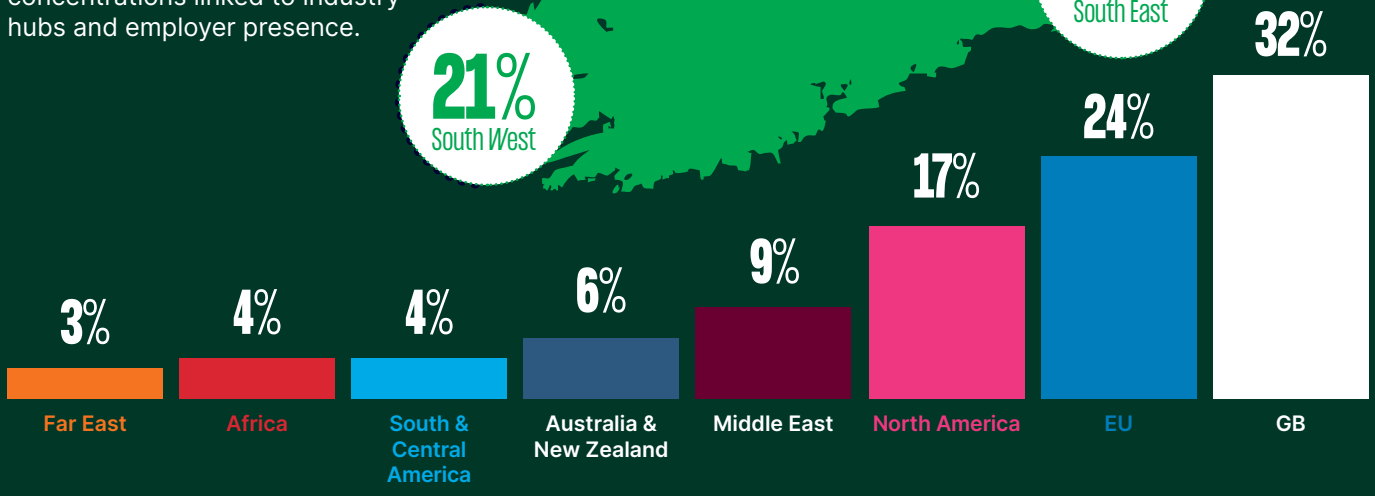
Seventy percent (70%) of graduate opportunities are based in Ireland, with the East (25%) , Mid-West (21%) and South West (21%) emerging as the most common locations.

Other regions such as the West (9%), Border (8%), South East (7%), and Midlands (5%) also feature, while Northern Ireland accounts for 4% of roles.

The remaining 30% of graduate opportunities are international, led by the GB (32%) and EU (24%). Other destinations include North America (17%), the Middle East (9%), and Australia & New Zealand (6%), with smaller proportions in South & Central America (4%), Africa (4%) and the Far East (3%).

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.





What graduate disciplines are in demand?



54%
Engineering



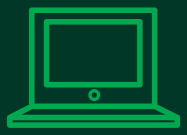
26%
Accountancy



19%
Science



19%
Economics/Finance



18%
ICT & Electronics



17%
Data/Consultancy/
Analytics



14%
Marketing



11%
HR



8%
Law



7%
Insurance & Risk



6%
Health Sciences



4%
Education



4%
Humanities



4%
All Disciplines



4%
Creative



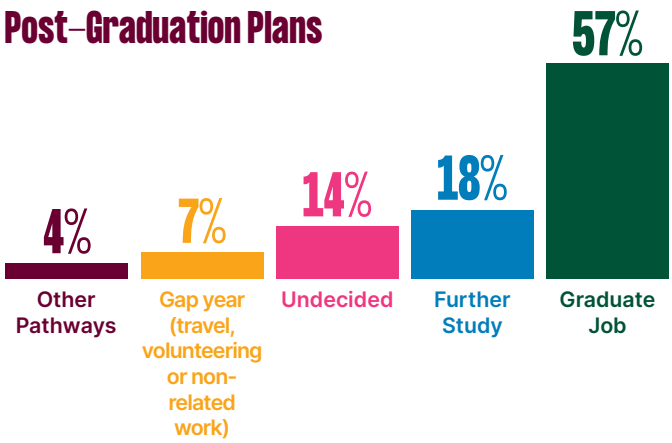
2%
Hospitality

Student Signals from the 2026 Graduate Market

The 2026 Student Attraction and Benefits Survey gathered responses from 1,555 students nationwide across all faculties. The findings provide insight into how students currently view graduate opportunities, their openness to international mobility, and their expectations as they prepare to enter the labour market.

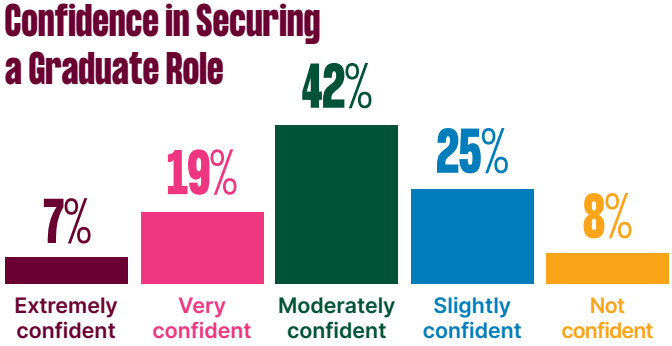
Post-Graduation Plans

Most students expect to move directly into graduate employment after completing their studies, with 57% indicating that they intend to enter a graduate role. A further 18% plan to pursue postgraduate study, while 14% remain undecided about their next step. Smaller groups of students indicated that they may take a gap year (7%) or follow alternative pathways (4%).



Graduate Confidence

Students were also asked how confident they feel about securing a graduate role. The largest group describe themselves as moderately confident (42%), followed by slightly confident (25%). Around one quarter report higher confidence levels, with 19% stating they are very confident and 7% extremely confident. A smaller proportion of students (8%) report that they are not confident about securing a graduate role.



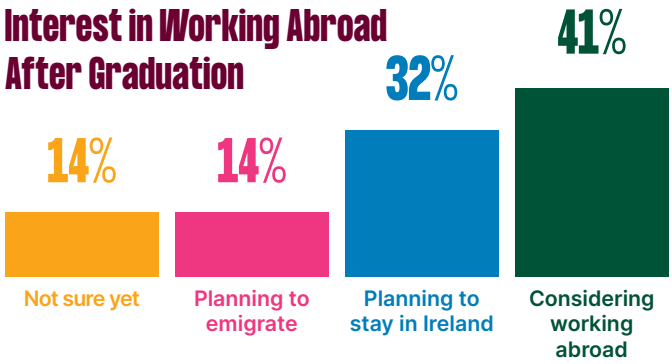
Graduate Mobility

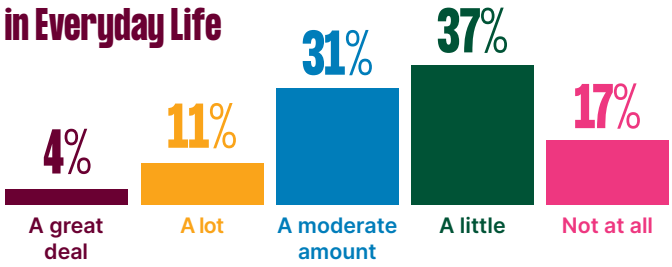
International mobility remains an important consideration for many students entering the labour market. While 32% of students plan to remain in Ireland after graduation, 41% report that they are considering working abroad. A further 14% indicate that they are actively planning to emigrate, while 14% remain unsure.

Student Use of Artificial Intelligence

Students were asked how often they use artificial intelligence tools such as ChatGPT or Microsoft Copilot in their day-to-day lives. The largest group reports using AI tools a little (37%), followed by a moderate amount (31%). A further 17% indicate they do not currently use AI tools, while 11% report using them a lot and 4% report using them a great deal.

Overall, around 83% of students report using AI tools at least occasionally. However, only around 15% report frequent use, suggesting that widespread advanced AI fluency among students should not yet be assumed.





Student Voice

Students were also asked what they would like employers to understand about their experience and expectations as they prepare to enter the workforce. Several consistent themes emerged.

1. Experience still matters, but potential should also be recognised.
2. Many students highlighted the challenge of securing entry-level roles when experience requirements appear high, noting that internships, placements and part-time work are often their primary sources of experience.
3. Transparency in recruitment is important.
4. Students expressed a strong preference for clear salary information, realistic job descriptions and visibility of career progression opportunities.
5. Support in the early years of employment.
6. Graduates value mentoring, structured onboarding and opportunities to learn as they transition from university into the workplace.
7. The transition from university to work can be challenging.
8. Students emphasised that while they are motivated to contribute, they are still developing professional confidence and workplace experience.

Use of AI in Early Careers Recruitment

AI adoption in early career recruitment remains limited but is gradually increasing. In 2026, 12% of organisations report using AI tools in recruitment, up from 7% last year. A further 28% are considering future adoption, while 60% report no current use. This suggests that while AI is still far from mainstream in graduate recruitment, interest is steadily growing as organisations explore where it can deliver practical value.

Among organisations already using AI, the technology is primarily applied to earlier, efficiency-focused stages of recruitment. Candidate sourcing is the most common use (64%), followed by screening CVs and applications (32%) and interview scheduling (29%). More advanced applications remain less widespread, with only 11% using AI for video interview analysis or candidate assessments and 7% applying it in onboarding. Overall, these patterns suggest that employers are currently using AI to streamline administrative tasks rather than to support high-stakes hiring decisions.

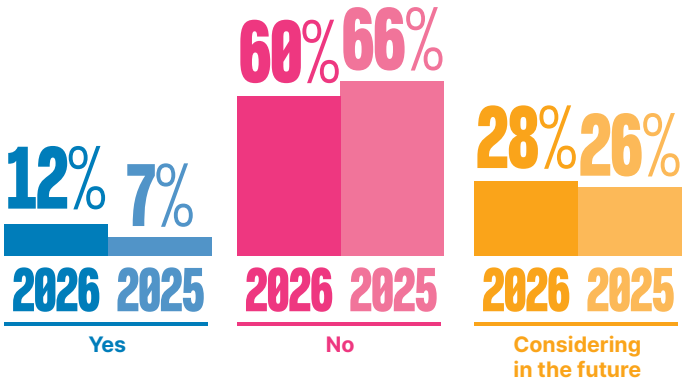
Efficiency remains the most widely reported benefit, cited by 82% of organisations using AI. Additional advantages include improved candidate experience (32%), reduced bias (14%), cost savings (14%), and better candidate–job matching (11%). The relatively modest figures for bias reduction and matching suggest that many employers are still at an early stage in realising the more strategic potential of AI.

Employer sentiment towards AI is broadly positive but cautious. Fourteen percent describe their organisation's attitude as very positive, while 79% report being cautiously positive. Only 7% remain neutral, and none express negative views. This cautious optimism reflects a willingness to explore the technology while recognising the need for careful implementation.

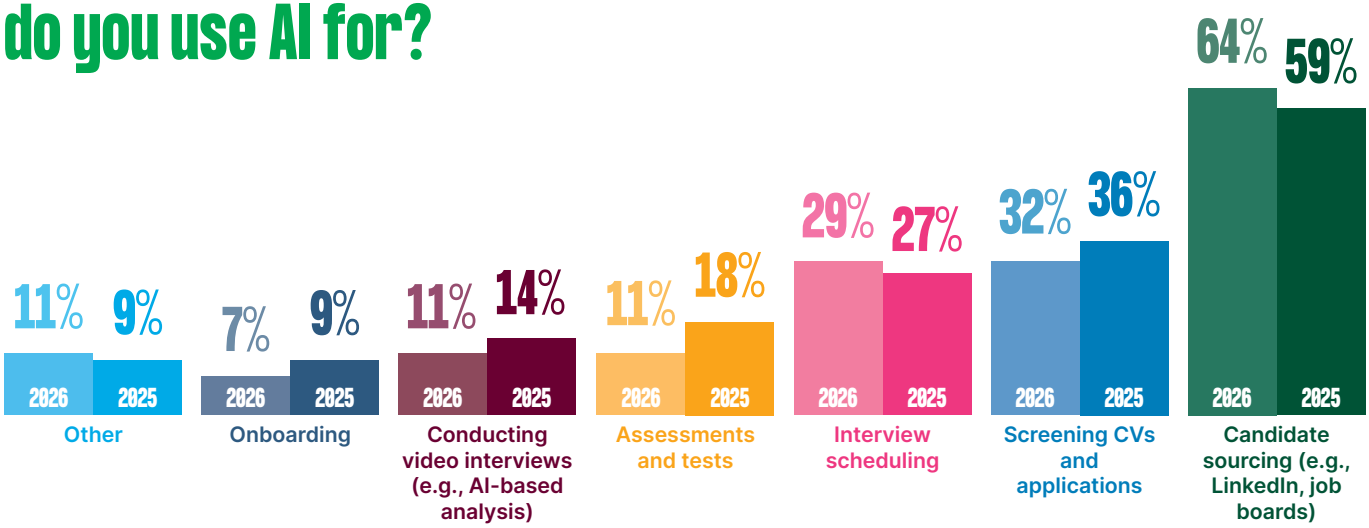
Concerns remain centred on ethical and trust issues. Potential bias in algorithms is the most frequently cited challenge (39%), followed by resistance from candidates or staff (21%) and lack of transparency in AI-driven decisions (18%). Encouragingly, 32% report experiencing no major issues.

Looking ahead, 39% of organisations plan to expand their use of AI in recruitment over the next year. The most anticipated developments include predictive analytics for hiring trends (40%) and AI-driven assessments (38%), suggesting a gradual shift from operational efficiency toward more data-informed recruitment practices.

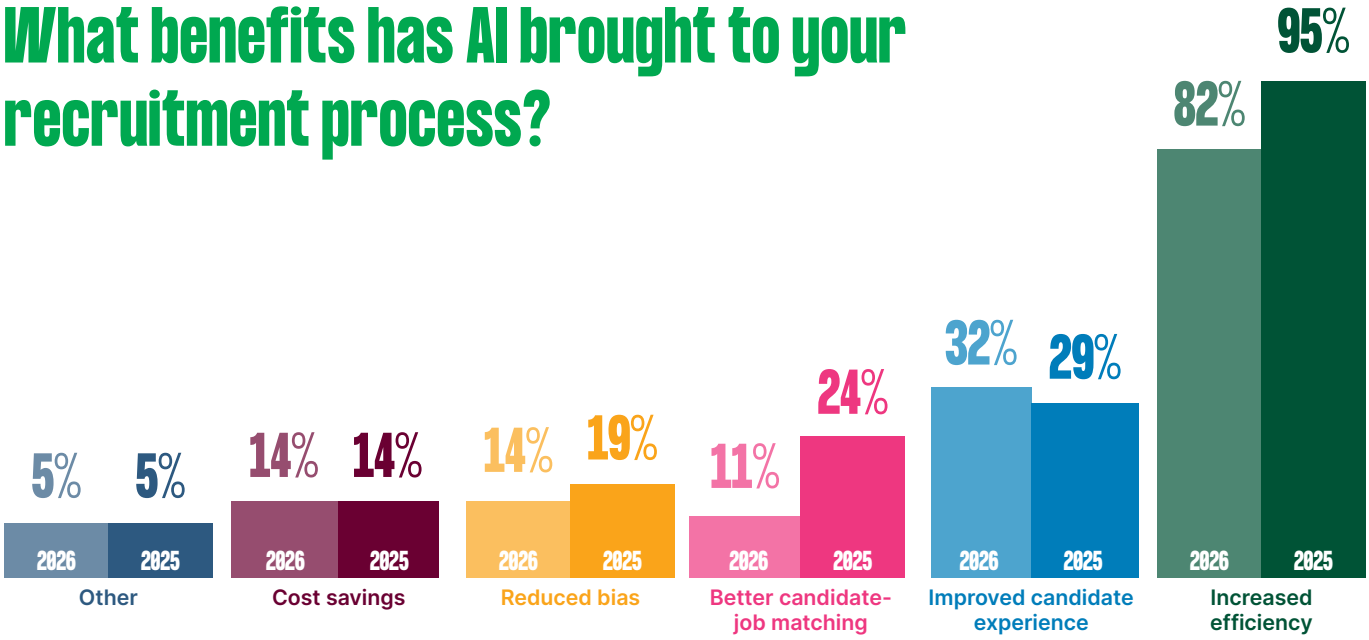
Does your organisation currently use AI in its recruitment and selection processes?



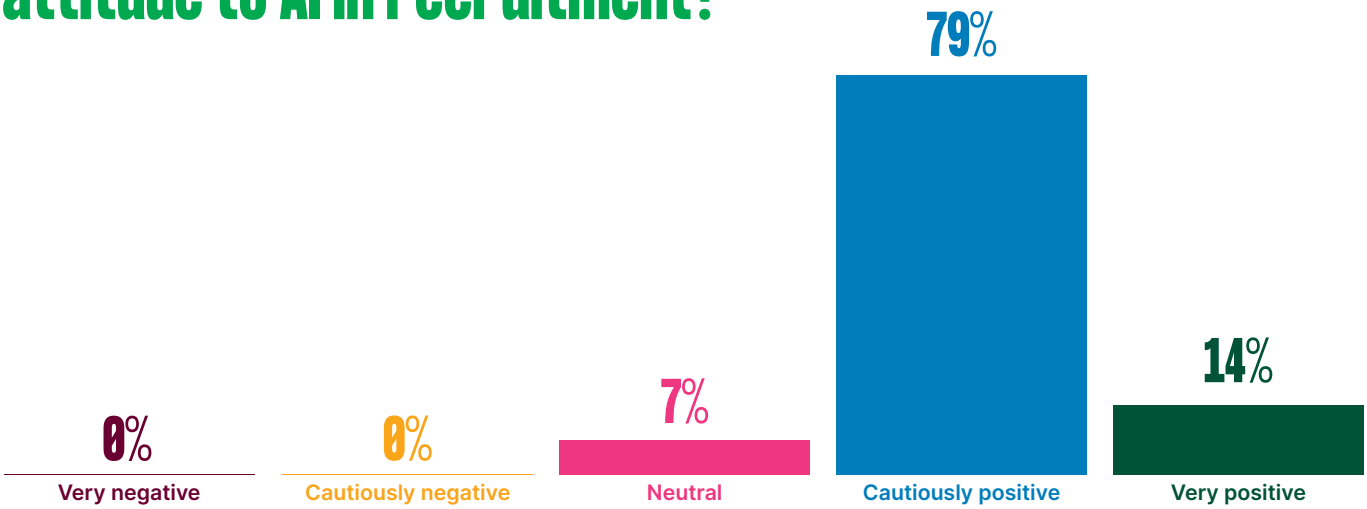
What stages of the recruitment process do you use AI for?



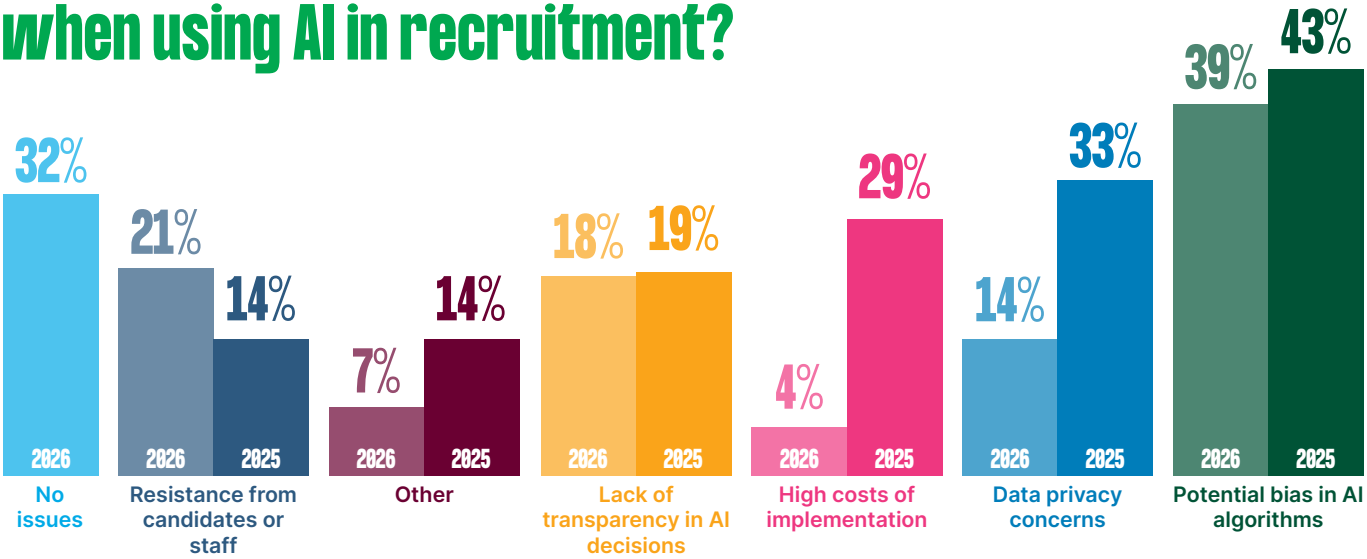
What benefits has AI brought to your recruitment process?



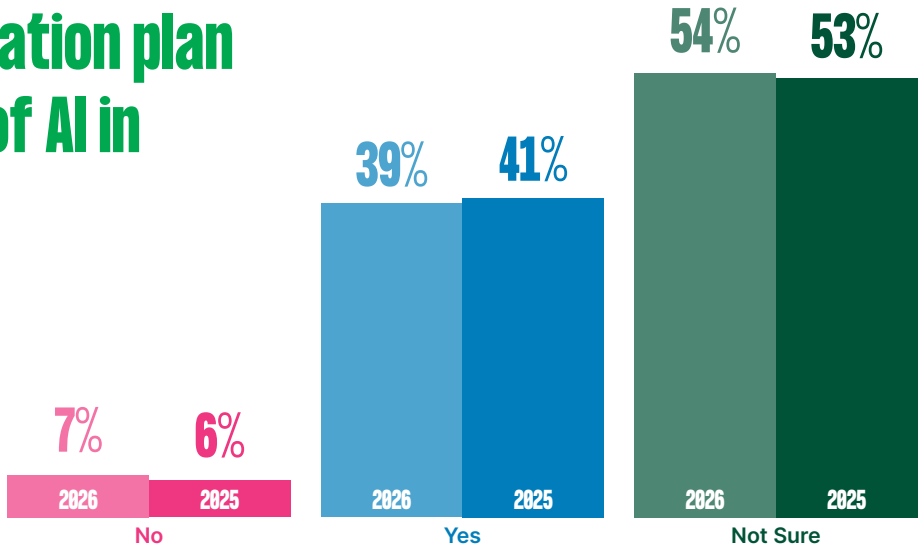
Overall, how would you describe your organisation's attitude to AI in recruitment?



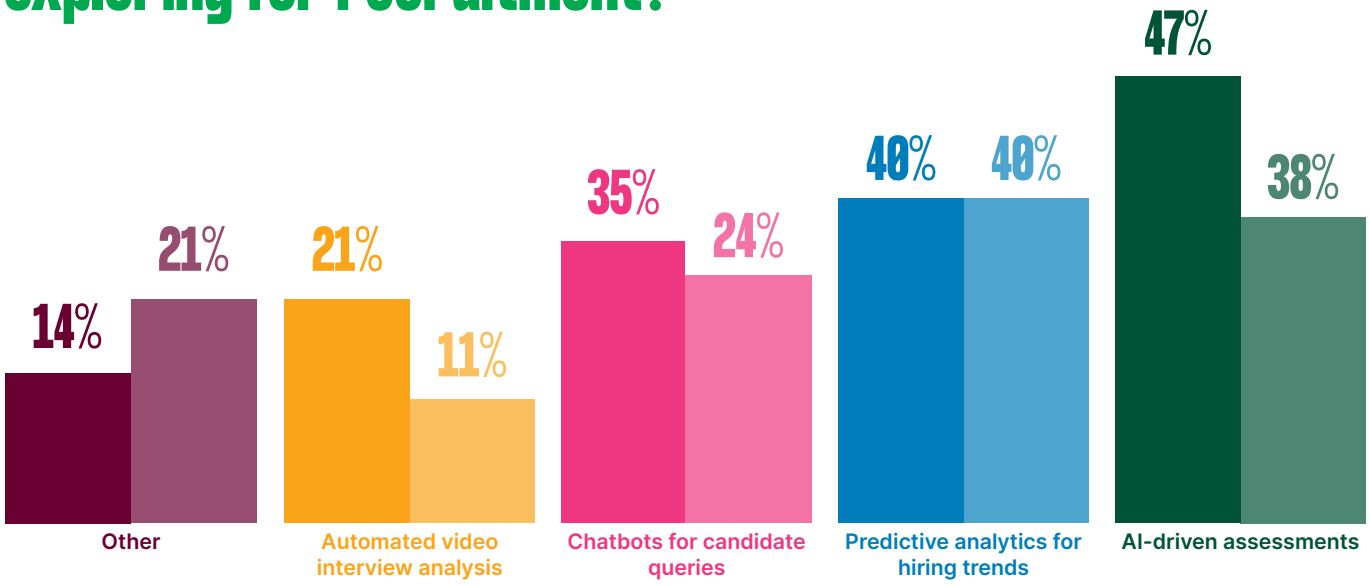
What challenges or concerns do you face when using AI in recruitment?



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



87%
CV & Covering letter



61%
Pre-screening questions



41%
Application form



37%
ATS (Applicant Tracking System)



18%
Aptitude tests



14%
Personality questionnaires



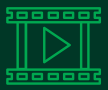
9%
Video applications



7%
Other



6%
Job previews / realistic job simulations



5%
One-way video introductions



3%
AI chatbot for initial queries



2%
Gamified assessments

Graduate Recruitment — Application, Selection and Pre-Offer Processes

Graduate recruitment processes remain structured and familiar, but this year's data reveals a system quietly adapting to rising application volumes and increased efficiency pressures. While the core mechanics of graduate hiring remain stable, employers are gradually introducing earlier screening mechanisms and selective digital tools to manage scale.

The CV and cover letter continue to dominate the application stage, required by 87% of employers, confirming that traditional application formats remain central to graduate hiring. However, the growing use of pre-screening questions, now at 61%, signals a more deliberate effort to filter candidates earlier in the process. With many employers receiving hundreds or even thousands of applications for a small number of roles, early-stage screening has become a practical necessity rather than a preference.

The use of Applicant Tracking Systems has also increased to 37%, reinforcing a steady shift toward automated or semi-automated application management. Rather than replacing human judgment, these systems are increasingly being used to organise large candidate pools and streamline initial screening. Interestingly, more experimental assessment formats remain underused. Aptitude tests (18%) and personality questionnaires (14%) are still used selectively, while newer approaches such as realistic job previews (6%), one-way video introductions (5%), AI chatbots (3%), and gamified assessments (2%) remain on the margins. This suggests that while innovation is occurring, most employers remain cautious about overcomplicating the early stages of recruitment.

At the selection stage, interviews remain the decisive component of graduate hiring. In-person interviews remain widely used at 82%, while virtual interviews are close behind at 77%. The near parity between these two formats highlights the emergence of hybrid recruitment models, where organisations balance efficiency with the perceived value of face-to-face interaction. Competency-based interviews have increased to 55%, reinforcing the importance employers place on structured evaluation of behaviours and real experiences rather than purely academic performance.

Finally, pre-offer checks remain focused on verification and compliance. Reference checks and confirmation of visa status are used by 74% of employers each, while 63% verify academic qualifications. Digital reference checking tools are beginning to appear, used by 12% of organisations, suggesting that automation is gradually extending beyond the application stage into later phases of recruitment.

Insight

Taken together, the findings point to a recruitment process that is evolving incrementally rather than dramatically. Employers are adopting technology cautiously, prioritising efficiency at scale while still relying heavily on interviews and human judgment when making final hiring decisions.

Graduate Recruitment Selection Tools



82%
Interviews (in person)



77%
Virtual interviews – zoom, teams etc



55%
Competency Behavioural–Based Interviews



33%
Telephone Interviews



33%
Video Interviews



23%
Strengths–Based Interviews



19%
Presentations



18%
Assessment Centres



12%
Case studies / group exercises



6%
Other



5%
Work sample tests / take–home assignments



5%
Situational judgement tests (SJTs)



4%
AI tools for screening



3%
Blind recruitment tools



3%
Job trials / short paid project



Graduate Recruitment Pre-Offer Tools

74%
References

74%
Confirmation of Visa Status / Work Status

63%
Confirmation of Qualifications

20%
Garda Vetting / Police Clearance / Screening Company

18%
Social Media Checks

12%
Digital (automated) reference checks

6%
Not Applicable

3%
Other


Product 1
Product 2
Product 3
Jan
Feb
Mar
Apr
May
Jun
Jul
Aug
Sep
Dec
80%
15%
15%
15%
35%
50%
80%
A
B
C
D
AI

What Employers Value in Graduate Applications

#1 Degree discipline

#2 Completing a work placement

#3 Working to support themselves though college

#4 Volunteering

#5 Classification of degree

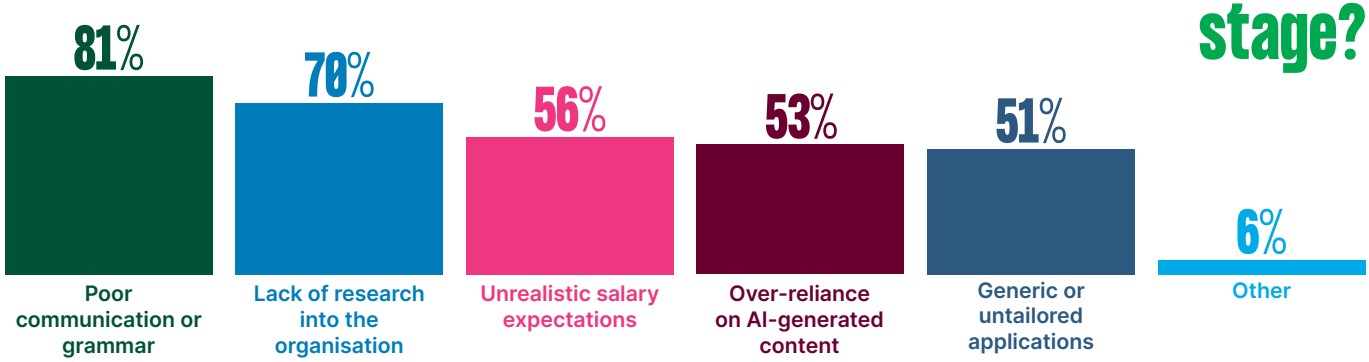
#6 University/ college attended

#7 CPD

Employers continue to look beyond academic results when assessing graduate applications. While degree discipline remains important, particularly in technical roles, it is rarely decisive on its own. Employers place strongest value on evidence of workplace exposure, particularly through structured work placements. Experience of working during university is also viewed positively, signalling resilience, time management and personal responsibility. Volunteering and CPD further strengthen applications by demonstrating initiative, curiosity and broader engagement beyond academic study.

At the same time, employers identified several common red flags at the application stage. These include poor communication or grammar (81%), lack of research into the organisation (70%), unrealistic salary expectations (56%), over-reliance on AI-generated content (53%), and generic or untailored applications (51%). Together, these findings highlight that preparation, authenticity and attention to detail remain critical differentiators.

Are there any common red flags you look out for at this stage?



Recruitment Channels: Employer Focus vs Student Preferences

Employers and students continue to use many of the same recruitment channels, but the order of importance highlights some subtle shifts in behaviour. Company websites and LinkedIn remain central to employer strategies, reflecting a continued focus on direct applications and professional networking. Career fairs also feature strongly, suggesting that employers still value face-to-face engagement with students when building early talent pipelines.

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

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

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

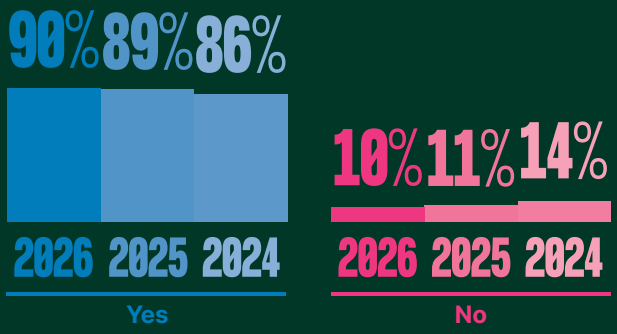
1. LinkedIn
2. Company website
3. University vacancy/jobs portal
4. Career fairs
5. Previous placement/internships

Students, however, appear to be changing how they approach the search process. LinkedIn now ranks as their top channel for job searching, moving ahead of university vacancy portals which previously held the top spot. This shift suggests that students are increasingly engaging with the platform not just for networking, but as an active job discovery tool. Company websites remain a key destination for applications, reinforcing the importance of clear and accessible graduate recruitment pages.

University vacancy systems continue to play a strong role for students, though they rank slightly lower from an employer perspective. Meanwhile, placement and internship routes remain important for both groups, reinforcing the continued value of work-integrated learning as a pathway into graduate employment.

Insight
Overall, the data suggests stronger alignment between how employers advertise roles and how students search for them. For employers, maintaining visibility across company websites, LinkedIn, university platforms and campus events remains critical. For students, developing a professional presence on platforms like LinkedIn is increasingly becoming part of an effective job search strategy.

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

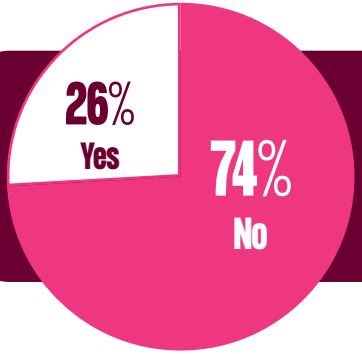


Providing a clear job specification remains standard practice for most employers recruiting graduates. In 2026, 90% of organisations report that they provide a job specification for each new graduate role, continuing a steady upward trend from 86% in 2024 and 89% in 2025. While this indicates strong alignment with good recruitment practice, 10% of employers still do not routinely provide this information.

This gap is notable when considered alongside student behaviour. In our student survey, 74% reported that they would be unlikely to apply for a role if a job specification was not available. For early career candidates, the job specification is often the primary source of information about responsibilities, expectations, and required skills. Without it, students may struggle to assess their suitability or feel confident submitting an application.

Insight

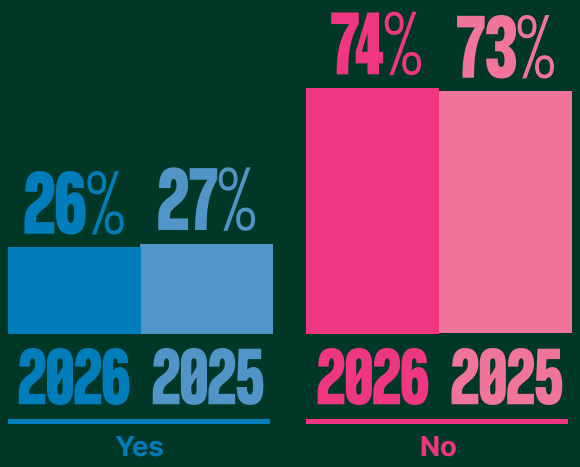
The findings reinforce the importance of clear and accessible job descriptions in early careers recruitment. Providing a well-structured job specification not only improves transparency but also helps organisations attract a broader and more relevant pool of graduate applicants. The consistent upward trend suggests employers increasingly recognise its value, though there remains some scope to ensure this practice becomes universal.



74% of students would not apply and 26% said they would apply **without job spec**

Student Voice

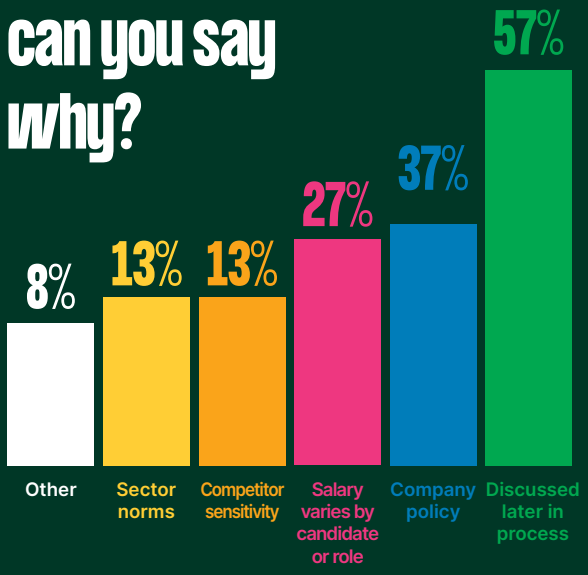
Do you disclose the salary ranges in your job specifications?



Salary transparency remains relatively limited in graduate recruitment. Just 26% of employers report including salary details in graduate job advertisements, while 74% do not. This represents a continued gap between employer practice and student expectations. Previous student data shows that around half of students say they are less likely to apply for roles where salary information is not provided, suggesting transparency can influence application decisions.

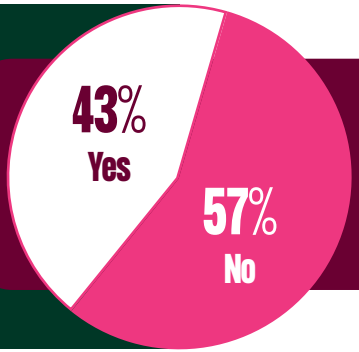
Among employers who do not disclose salaries, the most common reason is that the topic is discussed later in the recruitment process (57%). Many organisations also cite internal company policy (37%) or note that salary varies depending on the candidate or specific role (27%). A smaller number highlight competitive sensitivities (13%) or wider sector norms where salaries are typically not advertised (13%).

If no, can you say why?



Insight

Overall, the findings suggest that while many employers prefer flexibility or discussion later in the process, salary transparency remains an area where employer practices and candidate expectations are not always aligned.



57% of students would not apply and 43% said they would apply **without salary info**

Student Voice

Graduate Recruitment Timelines

There has been little movement in graduate recruitment timelines this year. Most employers report that the process from job advertisement to offer typically takes around seven to eight weeks, broadly unchanged from previous years. While the exact duration can vary depending on application volumes, role complexity, or sector norms, the overall structure of graduate recruitment remains consistent.

In most organisations, the process still follows a familiar sequence: initial application screening, followed by interviews and, in many cases, some form of assessment such as aptitude testing, presentations, or case studies. Reference checks and final approvals usually complete the process before offers are issued.

This suggests that employers continue to favour a balanced approach. There is pressure to move efficiently, particularly in a competitive market, but organisations are also reluctant to shorten processes to the point where decision quality might suffer.

Encouragingly, this timeline broadly aligns with students' expectations. While candidates often express a desire for quicker decisions, the seven-to-eight-week window appears to strike a reasonable balance between speed and fairness. For employers, the key challenge remains keeping candidates engaged and well-informed throughout the process, particularly when multiple assessment stages are involved.



Average Predicted Time Frame for recruiting a new Graduate: 7.36 Weeks

Graduate Visa Sponsorship Employer Barriers and Considerations

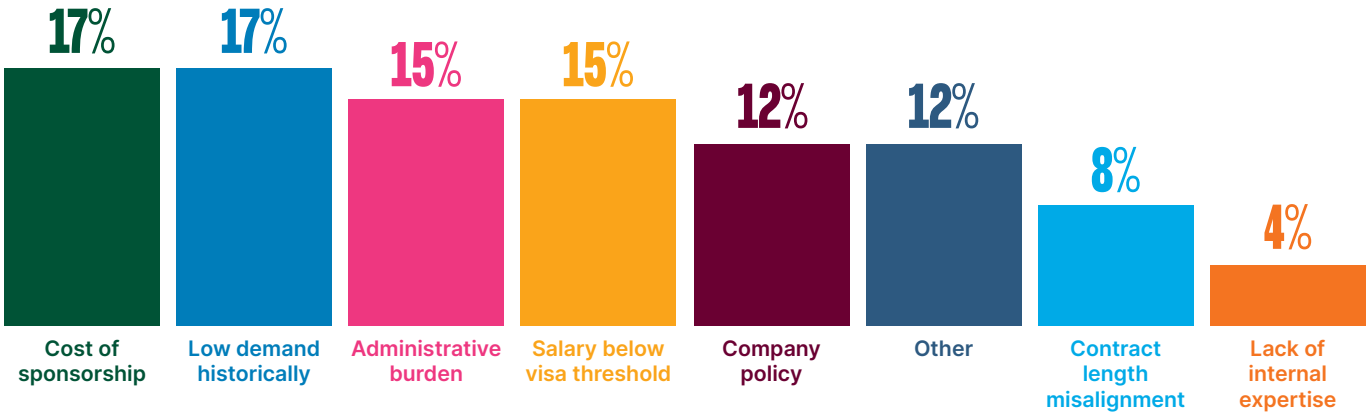
The proportion of employers willing to sponsor graduate visas has increased slightly, rising from 36% in 2025 to 39% in 2026. While this represents modest progress, the majority of organisations (61%) still report not currently offering sponsorship.

Among employers who do not sponsor visas, the barriers are varied. Cost of sponsorship and historically low demand each account for 17% of responses. Administrative burden (15%) and salary thresholds linked to visa requirements (15%) are also significant considerations. Company policy accounts for 12%, with a further 12% citing other organisational factors. Smaller proportions reference contract length misalignment (8%) and lack of internal expertise (4%).

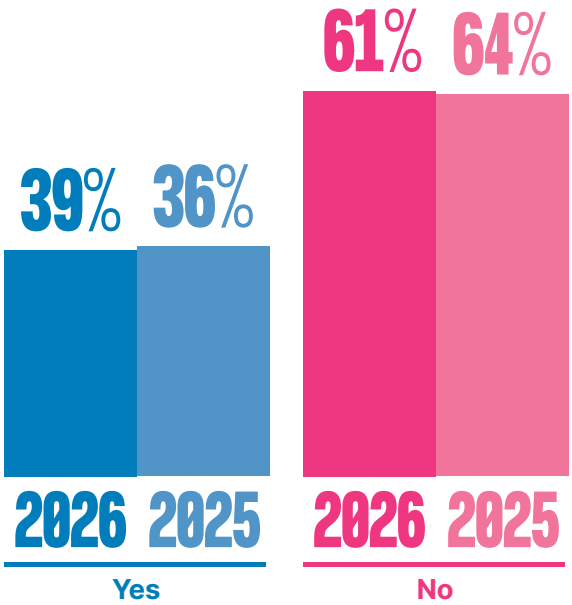
For higher education institutions across Ireland and beyond, these findings highlight an ongoing challenge within the early-career labour market.

Insight
While many international graduates bring valuable skills and global perspectives, employer uncertainty around visa processes, costs, and administrative requirements continues to influence hiring decisions. Improving employer awareness and understanding of sponsorship pathways may help broaden opportunities for international graduate talent.

Reasons Employers Do Not Sponsor Graduate Visas



Do you sponsor graduate visas?



Top Challenges in Graduate Recruitment

The overall pattern of challenges facing employers remains broadly consistent, but the ranking has shifted slightly this year, revealing some interesting changes in employer sentiment. Structural supply issues remain important, but behavioural and expectation-related factors are becoming more prominent.

1. **Number of available graduates from specific degrees – 68%**
   Still the most cited challenge, although slightly down from 69% last year and 71% previously. Employers continue to report shortages in key disciplines such as engineering, technology, and specialist science areas. While the issue remains significant, the gradual decline may reflect some easing of pressure in certain sectors or greater employer flexibility around degree backgrounds.

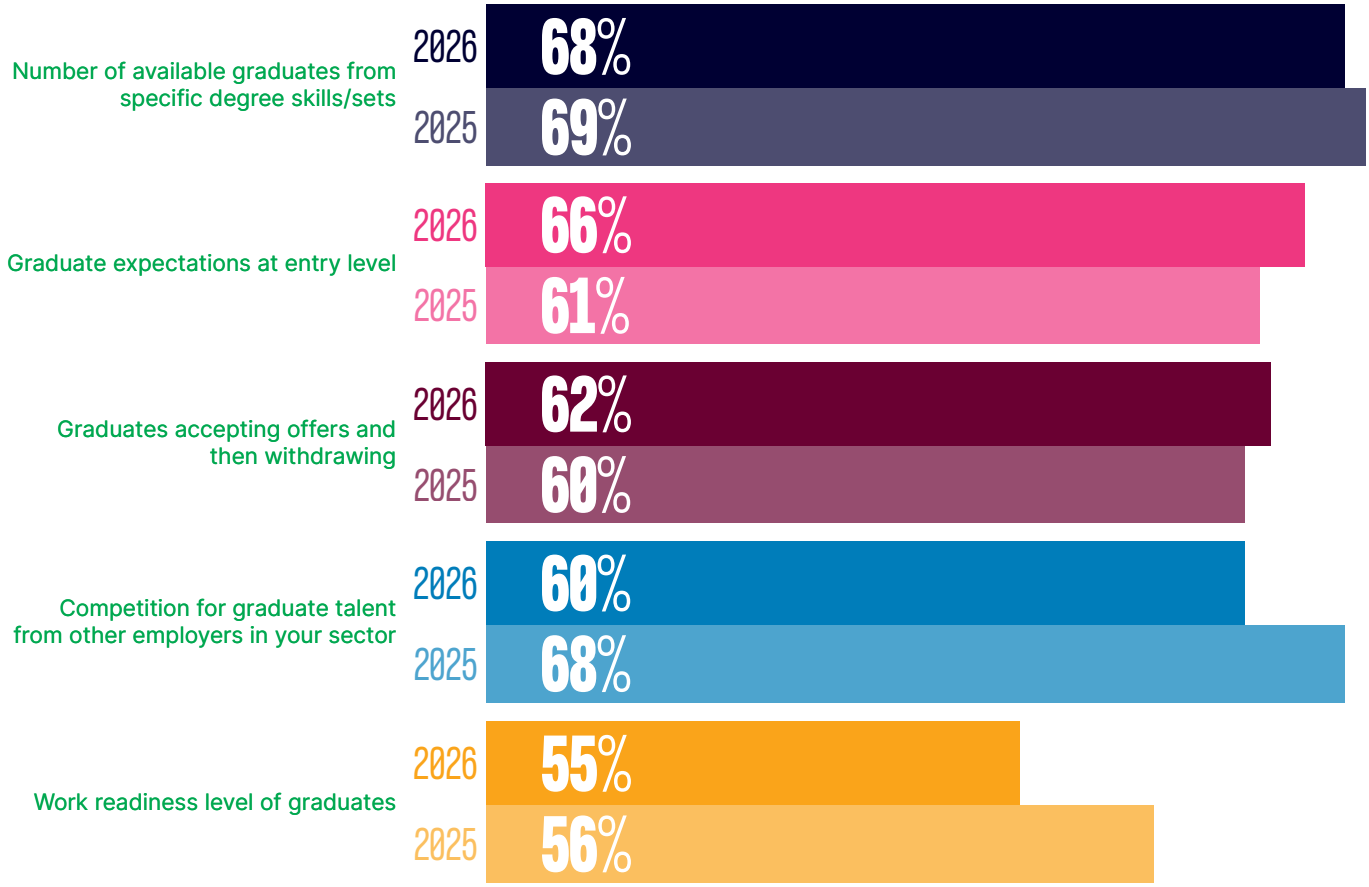
2. **Graduate expectations at entry level – 66%**
   This has become the second-largest concern, rising from 61% last year. Employers increasingly highlight misalignment between graduate expectations and entry-level realities, particularly around salary, hybrid working, speed of progression, and role responsibility. The data suggests that expectation management is becoming a growing feature of early career recruitment conversations.

3. **Graduates accepting offers and then withdrawing – 62%**
   Up again from 60% last year and 54% previously, this trend continues to cause frustration for employers. Multiple offers, extended recruitment timelines, and increased candidate choice appear to be contributing to higher withdrawal rates, making workforce planning more unpredictable.

4. **Competition for graduate talent from other employers – 60%**
   Although still significant, this challenge has eased somewhat, falling from 68% last year and 72% previously. This may indicate that the market is stabilising slightly following the intense hiring activity seen in recent years, though competition remains strong in high-demand disciplines.

5. **Work readiness level of graduates – 55%**
   Concern about graduate preparedness has eased slightly, down from 56% last year. While employers still emphasise the importance of communication skills, professional behaviour, and workplace awareness, the data suggests that initiatives such as placements, internships, and employer engagement may be helping to close the gap.

Insight
Taken together, the data suggests that while structural supply issues remain important, employers are increasingly focused on expectation alignment and candidate commitment. As graduate recruitment processes become more competitive and candidates have more choice, managing expectations and maintaining engagement throughout the recruitment journey is becoming just as important as attracting applicants in the first place.


Number of available graduates from specific degree skills/sets
2026
68%
2025
69%
Graduate expectations at entry level
2026
66%
2025
61%
Graduates accepting offers and then withdrawing
2026
62%
2025
60%
Competition for graduate talent from other employers in your sector
2026
60%
2025
68%
Work readiness level of graduates
2026
55%
2025
56%



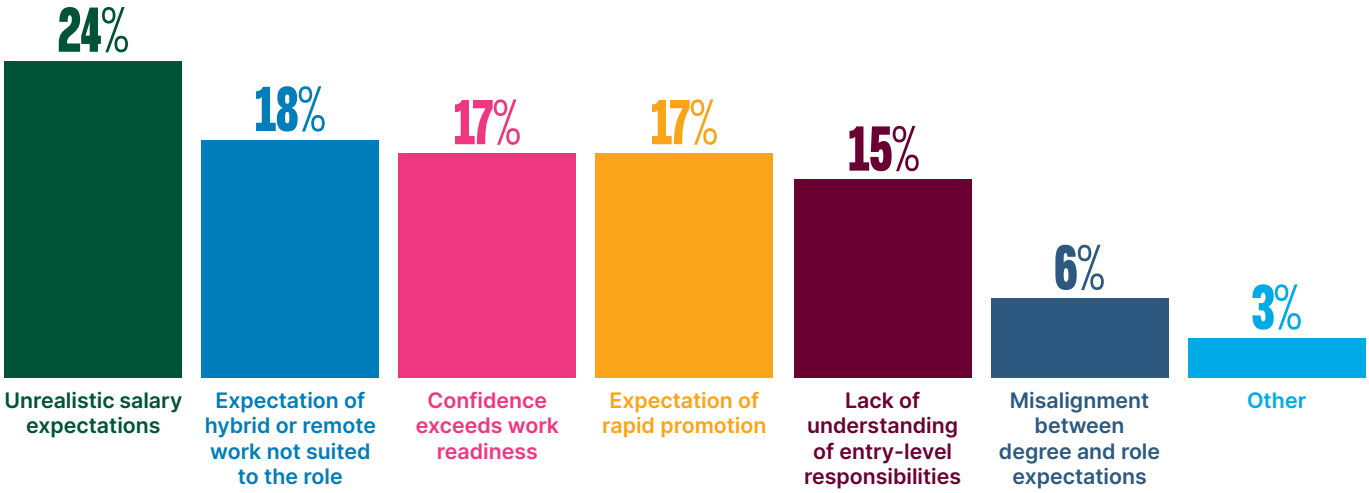
Graduate Expectations at Entry Level — Employer Perspectives

Employers were asked to expand on what they mean when they cite “graduate expectations at entry level” as a challenge. While responses varied across sectors, several consistent themes emerged. The data shows that expectations around salary, flexibility, progression and readiness remain the key areas where employers see a gap between graduate perceptions and workplace realities.

1. **Unrealistic salary expectations**
   The most frequently cited concern relates to starting salary expectations. Employers reported that many graduates expect salaries that are difficult to justify for entry-level roles, particularly when candidates have limited practical experience. Some employers noted that expectations are increasingly influenced by online salary discussions or comparisons with more experienced professionals.

2. **Expectation of hybrid or remote work**
   Flexibility remains a major expectation among graduates. However, many employers noted that entry-level roles often require on-site presence to support learning, supervision, and team integration. This is particularly evident in engineering, healthcare, manufacturing and SME environments where training and collaboration are largely hands-on.

3. **Confidence exceeding work readiness**
   Employers frequently highlighted a gap between confidence levels and practical preparedness. While graduates often present themselves confidently in interviews, employers report that some lack the communication skills, professional awareness, or attention to detail expected in the early stages of employment.

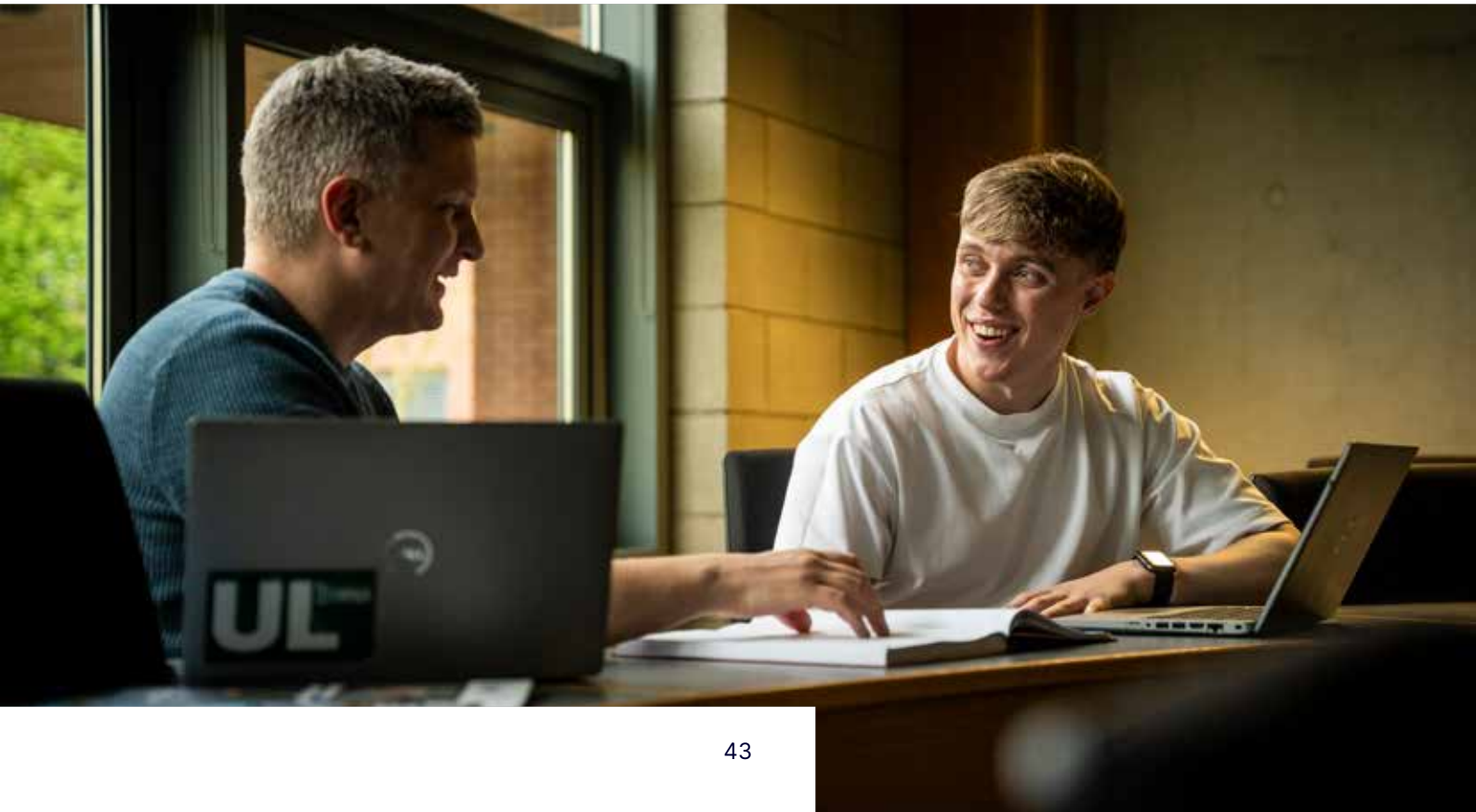


4. **Expectation of rapid promotion**
   Many employers also noted that some graduates anticipate quick progression or leadership opportunities soon after joining. Employers emphasised that early-career roles are designed to build foundational skills and experience before progression.

5. **Understanding of entry-level responsibilities**
   Several employers noted that graduates may underestimate the learning curve of starting professional roles. Entry-level positions often involve routine tasks and structured development, which are essential for building capability over time.

Insight

Taken together, these responses suggest that the challenge is less about graduate ambition and more about alignment. Employers continue to value confident, motivated graduates, but emphasise the importance of realistic expectations around salary, progression, flexibility and the time required to build professional capability. Strengthening communication among employers, universities, and students about the realities of early career development may help bridge this gap.



Diversity and Inclusion in Graduate Recruitment

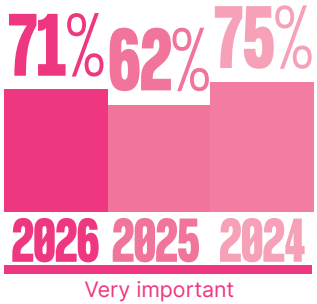
Diversity and inclusion remain a significant consideration in graduate recruitment policies, though the level of emphasis has shifted slightly over the past three years. In 2026, 71% of employers say D&I is very important within their recruitment policy, an increase from 62% in 2025, though still below the 75% reported in 2024. A further 22% consider it somewhat important, while 4% say it is not important and 3% prefer not to say.

The recovery in the "very important" category this year suggests that diversity and inclusion remain firmly embedded in many organisations' recruitment strategies after a temporary softening in 2025. The rise in "somewhat important" in 2025 may have reflected a period in which organisations were reassessing how D&I initiatives are implemented due to geopolitical conversations, particularly amid broader economic pressures, evolving regulatory expectations, and internal resource constraints.

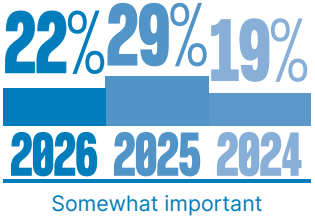
For early career recruitment specifically, D&I often plays a strategic role in widening access to opportunities, improving organisational culture, and strengthening employer reputation among graduates who increasingly value inclusive workplaces. The consistently low proportion of employers who indicate that D&I is not important also underscores a broad consensus that inclusive recruitment practices are now a mainstream expectation rather than a niche initiative.

Insight
Overall, the data suggests that while approaches to D&I may be evolving, the principle itself remains well established across graduate recruitment policies, with most employers continuing to view it as an integral component of attracting and developing early career talent.

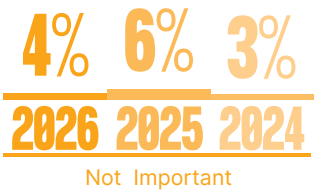
How important is diversity and inclusion to your recruitment policy?



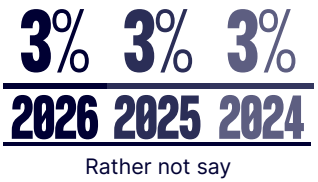
Very important



Somewhat important



Not Important



Rather not say

Graduate Salaries & Benefits

Graduate starting salaries continue to show steady growth, particularly at undergraduate level.

In 2026, the average starting salary for Bachelor's graduates is €33,062, up from €31,590 in 2025 and €31,362 in 2024. This reflects ongoing demand for early career talent and sustained competition in key sectors.

Master's graduates report an average starting salary of €36,385, with PhD graduates at €36,563. While postgraduate qualifications continue to command a salary premium, the relatively narrow gap between qualification levels suggests that outcomes are increasingly shaped by sector, role, and skillset rather than qualification alone.

It is important to note that the number of responses relating to doctoral-level hires remains lower, and salary figures at this level should be interpreted with some caution.

Salary Pressure

Employers continue to experience pressure to increase starting salaries, though the intensity of this pressure has stabilised.

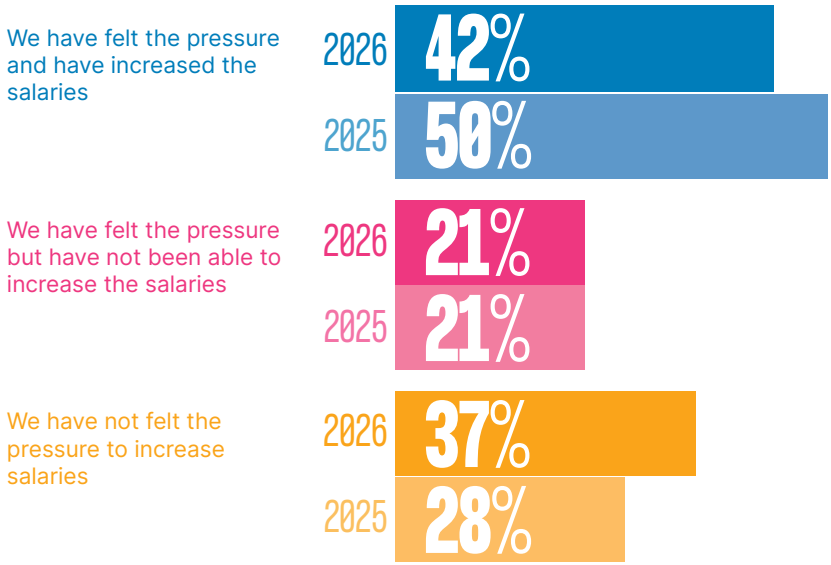
In 2026, 42% of organisations report increasing graduate salaries in response to market conditions. A further 21% indicate that they feel pressure but have been unable to increase salaries due to internal constraints such as pay structures or budget limitations. Meanwhile, 37% report no significant pressure to increase salaries.

This suggests a market that remains competitive, but is beginning to stabilise after a period of more rapid salary growth.

Average Salaries 2026

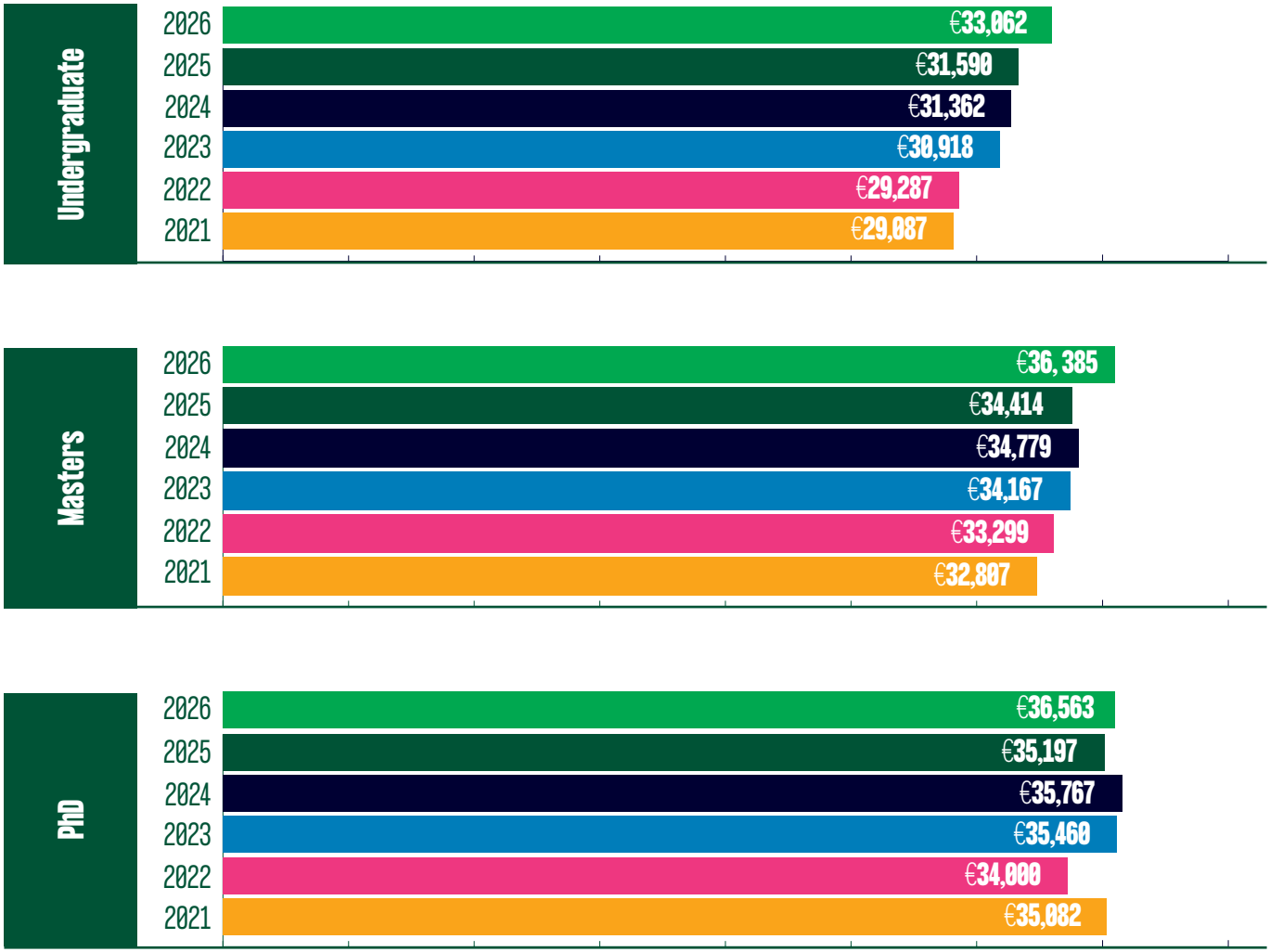


How much pressure have you been experiencing to increase starting salaries for key target groups?

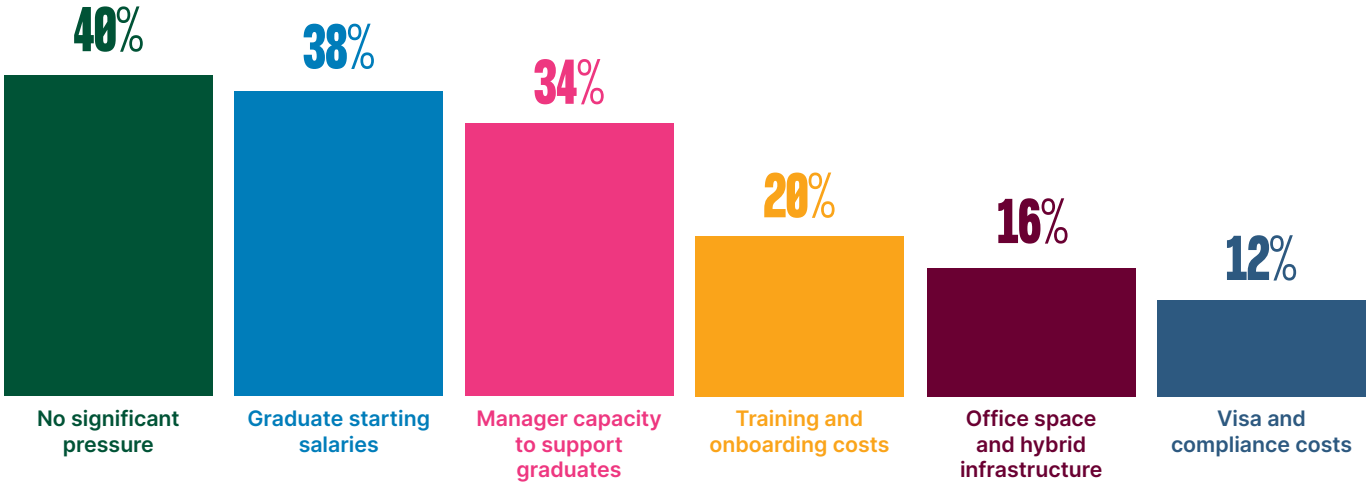




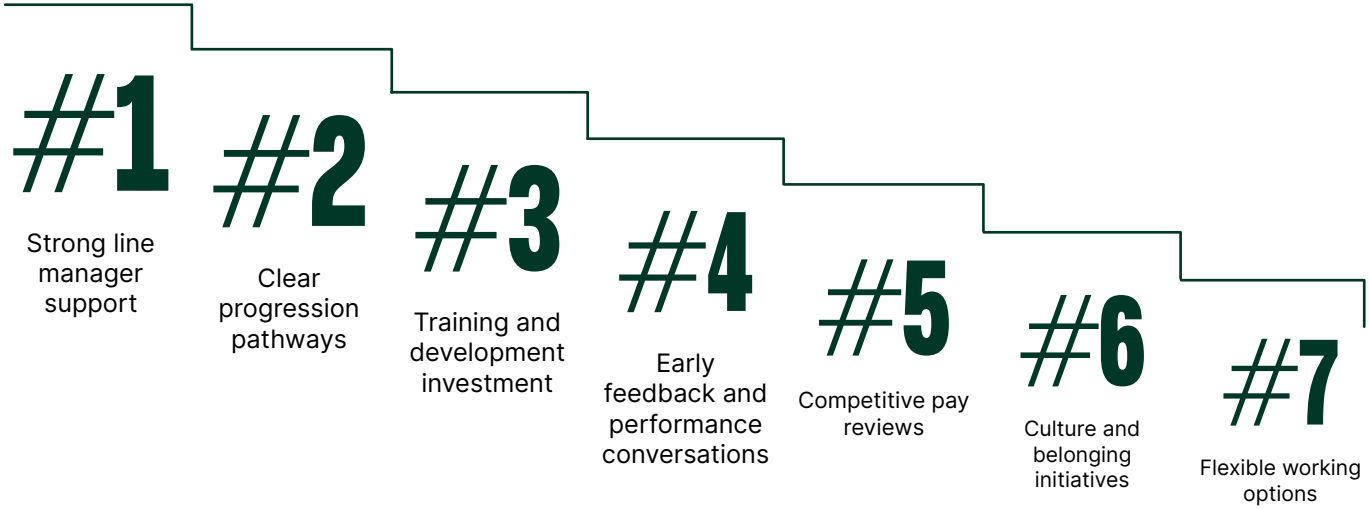
Early Career Salary Trends



What cost pressures are currently most affecting your early careers hiring?



Practices Found to be Most Useful in Graduate Retention



Graduate Benefits – Employer Offerings vs Student Preferences

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

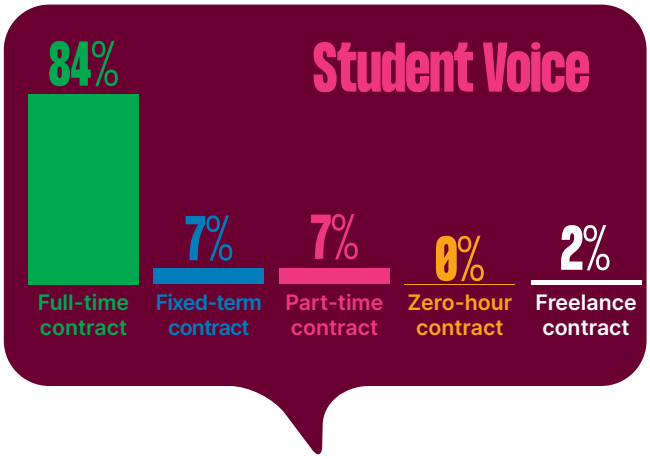
What type of graduate contract do you offer graduates?

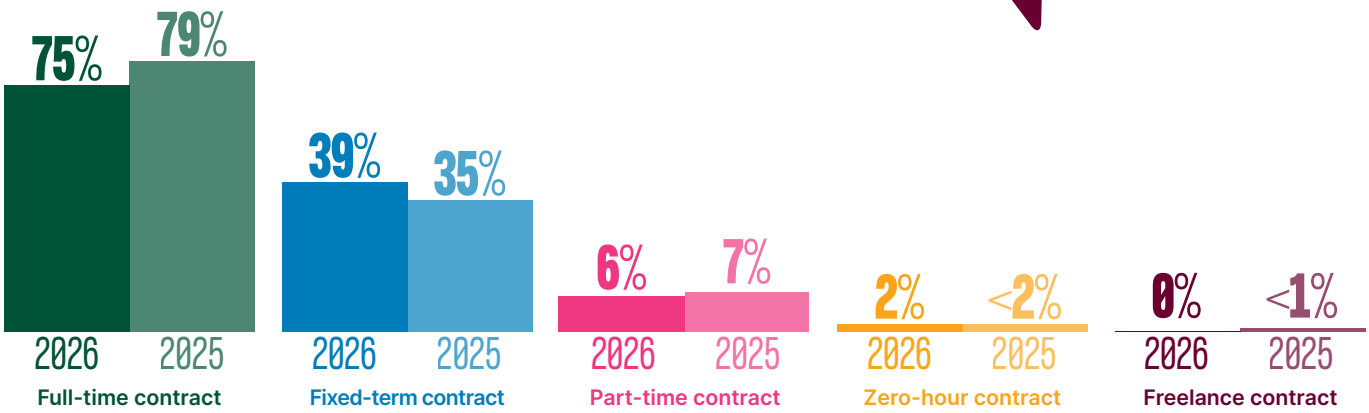
There continues to be strong overall alignment between what employers offer and what students want, with full-time employment remaining the clear preference on both sides. In 2026, 84% of students said they want a full-time graduate role, compared with 75% of employers offering one. This gap suggests that while full-time roles still dominate the market, student demand for permanency and stability is even stronger than employer provision.

Fixed-term contracts remain the second most common option, offered by 39% of employers, but preferred by just 7% of students. This points to a clear mismatch. While fixed-term roles may suit some graduate programmes or organisational models, they are not the arrangement most students hope for when starting out.

Part-time roles show close alignment, with 7% of students interested and 6% of employers offering them. Zero-hour and freelance contracts remain very limited in both preference and provision, reinforcing the importance graduates place on structure, security, and clarity.

Insight
Graduates are sending a very clear message: they want stable, full-time opportunities at the start of their careers. Employers are still broadly aligned with this, but the rise in fixed-term provision compared with much lower student interest suggests some tension in the market. Where fixed-term contracts are used, employers may need to work harder to communicate progression, development, and longer-term potential.





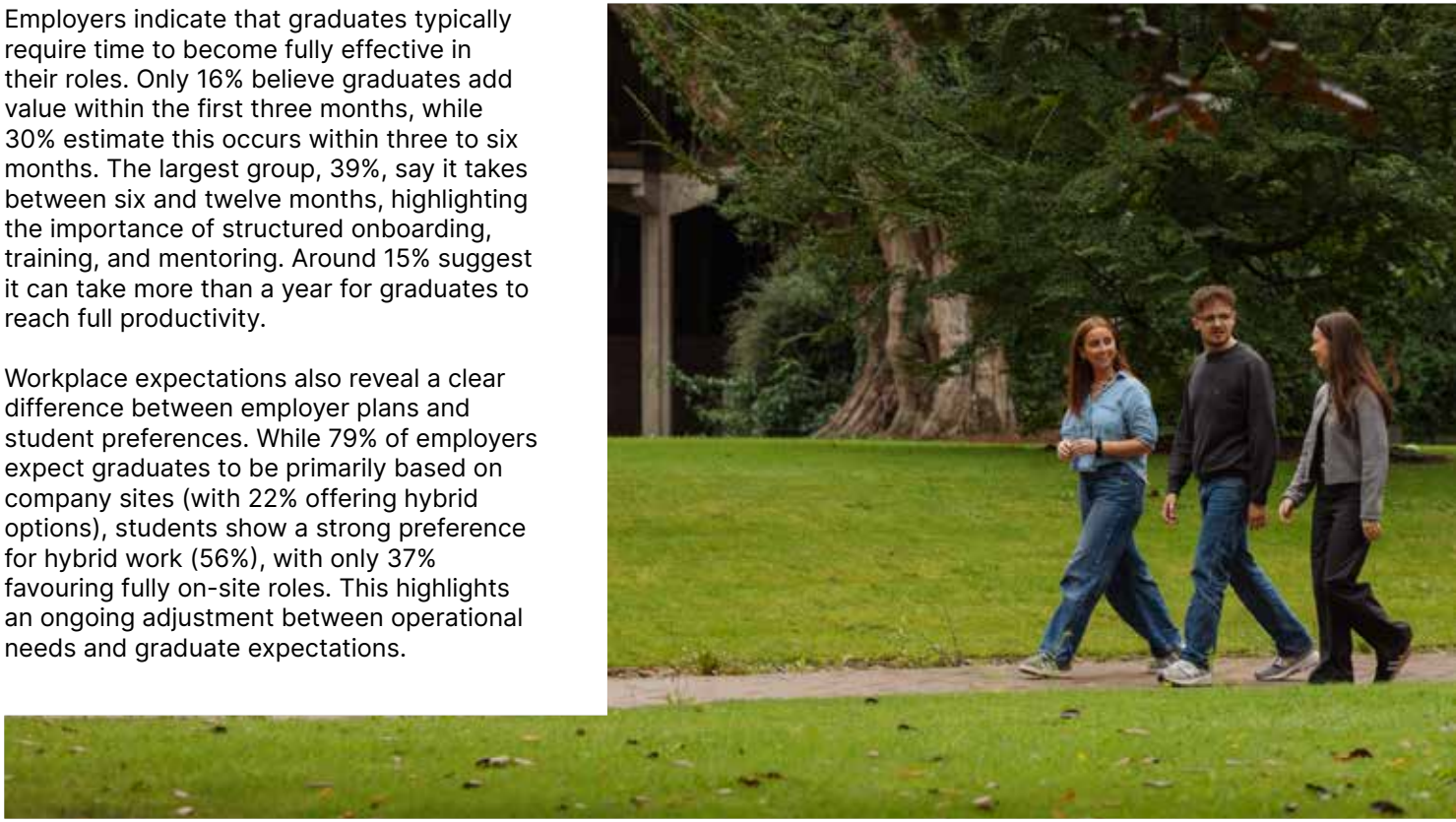


Graduate Integration and Workplace Expectations

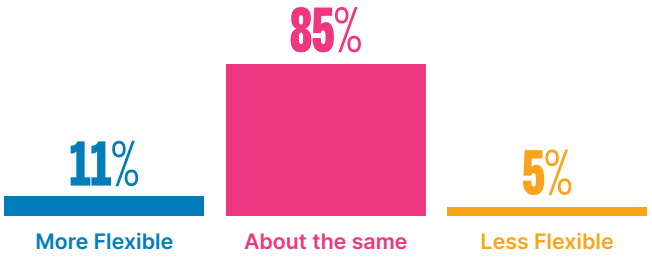
Employer Plans vs Student Preferences

Employers indicate that graduates typically require time to become fully effective in their roles. Only 16% believe graduates add value within the first three months, while 30% estimate this occurs within three to six months. The largest group, 39%, say it takes between six and twelve months, highlighting the importance of structured onboarding, training, and mentoring. Around 15% suggest it can take more than a year for graduates to reach full productivity.

Workplace expectations also reveal a clear difference between employer plans and student preferences. While 79% of employers expect graduates to be primarily based on company sites (with 22% offering hybrid options), students show a strong preference for hybrid work (56%), with only 37% favouring fully on-site roles. This highlights an ongoing adjustment between operational needs and graduate expectations.

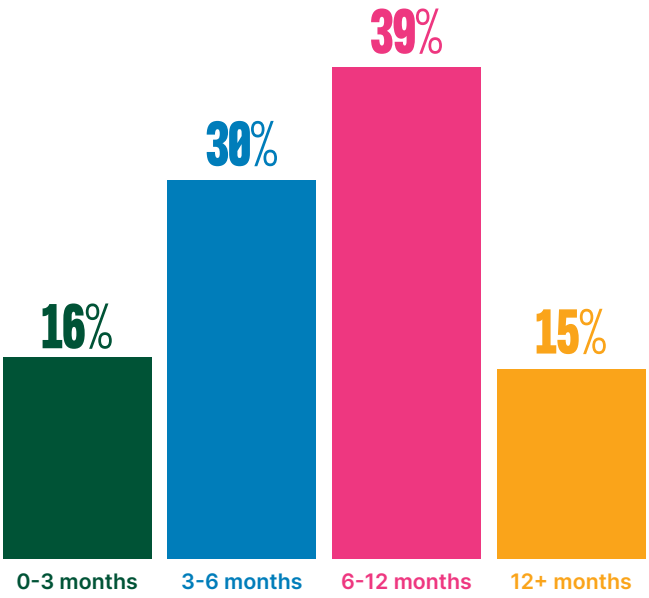


Compared to 12 months ago, your organisation's flexibility towards graduates.





How long does it typically take for a graduate to add value to the organisation?

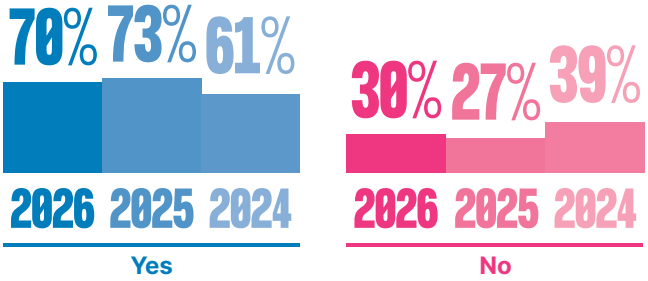


Onboarding Format	Employer Plan	Student Preference
Company Site	79%	37%
Hybrid	22%	56%
Remote	4%	7%
Unsure	4%	

Graduate Offer Declines — A Continuing Challenge

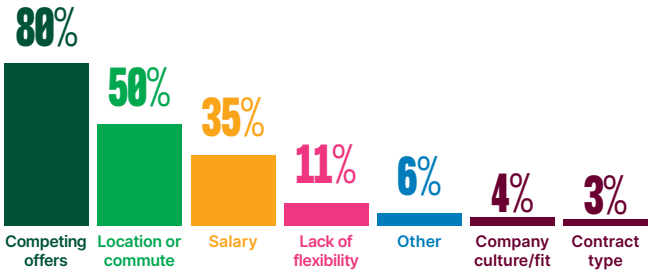
Graduate offer declines remain a persistent challenge for employers. In 2026, 70% of organisations reported that a graduate had accepted a role and later declined it before starting. While this is slightly lower than the 73% reported in 2025, it remains significantly higher than the 61% recorded in 2024, suggesting the issue is no longer a short-term fluctuation but an ongoing feature of the graduate recruitment landscape.

Competing job offers remain by far the most common reason, cited by 80% of employers. Many graduates continue to secure multiple opportunities and may initially accept one role while waiting for a preferred option to materialise. Location and commuting considerations were also a major factor, highlighted by 50% of employers, reflecting the continued influence of housing availability, travel time, and the desire for geographic flexibility early in a career.



Salary was cited by 35% of organisations, reinforcing the importance of competitive starting pay and clear communication around the full reward package. A smaller proportion of employers pointed to lack of flexibility (11%), company culture or organisational fit (4%), and contract type (3%) as reasons for withdrawals.

Taken together, the findings suggest that graduates are making increasingly considered decisions about where and how they begin their careers. For employers, maintaining engagement after an offer is accepted, clearly communicating expectations, and highlighting long-term development opportunities may help reduce the likelihood of late-stage declines.



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.

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

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."

Insights

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

Early Career Skills in Demand

Ranked by Employers

There is very little movement in the overall hierarchy of employability skills compared with last year, which reinforces a fairly consistent message from employers about what really matters when graduates enter the workplace.

Teamwork now ranks as the most valued attribute, followed closely by communication and self-motivation. Together, these skills highlight the importance employers place on graduates who can collaborate effectively, contribute positively to teams, and take initiative without constant supervision. Attention to detail and problem solving remain highly ranked, reflecting the expectation that graduates can work accurately while also navigating challenges and learning quickly in professional environments.

Interpersonal skills and adaptability also appear strongly in the rankings. This suggests employers continue to prioritise graduates who can work well with others, manage change, and integrate into organisational culture.

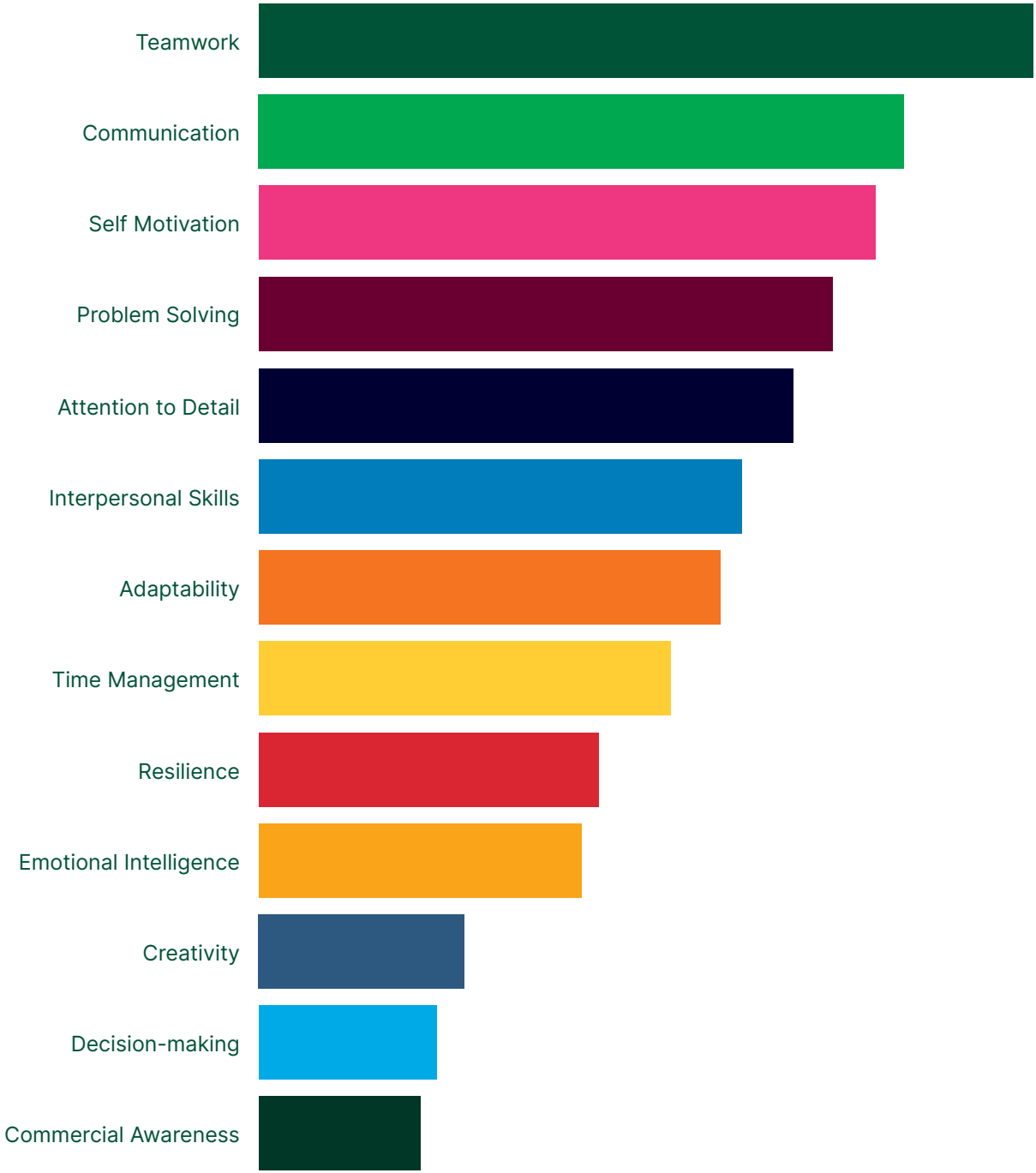
Time management and resilience sit in the middle of the table, indicating that reliability and the ability to handle pressure remain essential qualities for early career success.

Towards the lower end of the ranking are emotional intelligence, creativity, decision making and commercial awareness. These skills are still valued but are often expected to develop further once graduates gain workplace experience or move into a more specialised role.



Insight
Overall, the results reinforce a clear message: employers continue to prioritise strong foundational workplace behaviours over highly specialised capabilities when recruiting graduates.




Teamwork
Communication
Self Motivation
Problem Solving
Attention to Detail
Interpersonal Skills
Adaptability
Time Management
Resilience
Emotional Intelligence
Creativity
Decision-making
Commercial Awareness

Top **Motivational Factors** for Students (Ranked)

Student Voice

Key Insights:

- Student motivations entering the workforce show a subtle but meaningful shift in 2026. Work–life balance now ranks as the most important factor, suggesting that graduates are increasingly seeking roles that support wellbeing and sustainable working patterns alongside career development.
- Growth and development remain key motivators, reinforcing a strong interest in learning opportunities, mentoring, and clear progression pathways. Employers offering structured graduate programmes and ongoing professional development are therefore likely to remain attractive to early career talent.
- The emergence of relationships as the third most important factor highlights the value students place on workplace culture, supportive colleagues, and a sense of belonging. This underlines the importance of inclusive environments and strong team dynamics in attracting and retaining graduates.
- While achievement and recognition remain important, they rank slightly lower this year. Security and responsibility sit further down the list, suggesting that early career professionals may prioritise development, balance, and positive workplace experiences over long-term stability in the early stages of their careers.


#1
Work–Life Balance
#2
Growth
#3
Relationships
#4
Achievement
#5
Recognition
#6
Security
#7
Responsibility

What Employers Look for in Graduates

and Why It Matters

The qualities employers value in graduates remain remarkably consistent in 2026, reinforcing a clear message: organisations continue to prioritise core professional behaviours and attitudes over purely technical ability. Teamwork and communication remain the most valued attributes, highlighting the importance of graduates who can collaborate effectively, engage with colleagues and clients, and contribute positively to team environments.

Self-motivation and problem-solving also feature prominently, reflecting employer expectations that graduates take initiative, show ownership of their work, and approach challenges with a practical mindset. Notably, attention to detail ranks highly this year, suggesting an increasing emphasis on accuracy and reliability in fast-paced, digitally supported workplaces.

Adaptability, time management, and resilience remain important, particularly as organisations navigate changing technologies, new working patterns, and evolving business needs. While creativity and commercial awareness appear further down the ranking, employers often view these as capabilities that develop with experience.

Overall, the findings reinforce that employers are hiring for potential, mindset, and professionalism—qualities that enable graduates to learn quickly, integrate into teams, and grow within the organisation.

Communication Skills and Team Collaboration

Graduates who communicate clearly and work well with others remain the most frequently cited qualities. Employers repeatedly highlighted the importance of explaining ideas, listening actively, and collaborating effectively within teams.

Why it matters:
Modern workplaces rely heavily on collaboration across teams, departments, and clients. Strong communicators help projects run smoothly, reduce misunderstandings, and contribute to a positive working environment.

Work Ethic and Reliability

A strong work ethic continues to stand out as a key indicator of graduate potential. Employers emphasise dependability, commitment, and a consistent willingness to contribute.

Why it matters:
Employers want graduates they can rely on. Showing initiative, meeting deadlines, and taking responsibility help build trust quickly and demonstrate professionalism early in a career.



Willingness to Learn and Curiosity

Curiosity, openness to feedback, and a growth mindset are consistently highlighted by employers.

Why it matters:
Many employers believe technical skills can be developed over time, but a genuine desire to learn is what drives long-term success and adaptability.

Adaptability and Resilience

Employers frequently mentioned adaptability, flexibility, and resilience as essential graduate attributes.

Why it matters:
Workplaces continue to evolve rapidly. Graduates who can adjust to new systems, challenges, and environments are far more likely to succeed and progress.

Attention to Detail and Initiative

Compared to previous years, employers placed greater emphasis on attention to detail and personal initiative.

Why it matters:
Accuracy, careful work, and the confidence to take initiative help graduates contribute more effectively and reduce the need for constant supervision in busy working environments.

Insight

Overall, employers continue to hire for mindset and potential as much as academic achievement. Graduates who combine strong interpersonal skills, curiosity, and professionalism are seen as the most likely to thrive.



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