

**Graduate
Employer
Survey Report
2022/23**

**TALENT
RECRUITMENT
PLACEMENTS
PARTNERSHIPS
INCLUSIVITY
SALARIES**

ulster.ac.uk/talent



Acknowledgements from the Author

I would like to thank all of the individuals who participated in the survey. The time and insights provided are greatly appreciated. Thanks also to all those who informed the scoping of the research, contributed to the design and dissemination of the survey, and supported the review of this report.

For any research related queries about this report or wider project please contact Rachel Shannon r.shannon@ulster.ac.uk



Dr Rachel Shannon
Strategic Project Officer

*Being a key partner for industry:
because our research, skills,
and talent development give us
and employers a competitive edge*



Foreword

from Professor Angela Scanlon

I am delighted to share our Ulster University Graduate Employer Survey 2022/23. The significant increase in responses has exceeded well over 200 thanks to engagement from our employer partners. This demonstrates a response increase of over 100% since the launch of the first survey in 2021.

As part of Ulster University's new strategy, People, Place and Partnerships – Delivering Sustainable Futures for All, we are committed to being a key partner for industry because our research, skills, and talent development give us and employers a competitive edge. The University supports a growing number of employer partners through a well-established network which includes over 40 Employability Advisory Boards, stretching across all Faculties and subject areas.

We would like to acknowledge the increased employer and sectoral support from across the NI region, which is enabling us to increase access to opportunities for students and graduates. Each year over 2,000 students and graduates engage in work-based and placement learning which provides a fantastic opportunity for employers to connect with student talent before graduation. We know from HESA's 2019/2020 Graduate Outcomes Survey, that 94% of UU students were in work or further study and over 80% of our graduates chose to remain working and living in Northern Ireland.

Some of the innovative projects recently launched have enabled a focus on building the skills pipeline for the economy and wider society. Examples include:

- The Graduate Boost Programme, focusing on inclusive recruitment and onboarding which will support access to the hidden labour market and give opportunities for graduates with disabilities to progress into graduate employment.
- Enterprise Placement Year for our students, which has supported 35 new business start-ups since 2021.

This report examines employer responses to a range of topics including current graduate recruitment practices, workforce skills needs, and the benefit of continued partnership working. Dissemination will be through several channels including NI Employers and distributed regional partnerships. Within the University the information has been welcomed by everyone who contributes to learning enhancement and the design of curriculum provision.

Ulster University remains committed to working in partnership with employers through a range of mechanisms including:

- Creation of placements, graduate internships, and work experience opportunities.
- Designing curriculum and real-world projects for students and graduates.
- Development of higher-level degree apprenticeships.
- Engagement in sector focused Employer Advisory Boards.

We welcome the opportunity to connect and explore further.

Contact the team at futureskills@ulster.ac.uk



Professor Angela Scanlon
Director of Student and
Graduate Success

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Executive Summary

Following on from the success of the 2021 Graduate Employer Survey, Ulster University launched its second version of the survey in June 2022. Findings from the 2021 report were widely disseminated and readily received amongst the teaching, learning, employability, and academic communities at Ulster, providing up-to-date information on industry trends, plans, practices, experiences, and needs. This information is vital to ensure Ulster remains responsive to the labour market and continues to provide a wealth of student and graduate talent necessary to meet the skills requirements to support the growth of the local economy. The 2022 survey provides an update on topics covered in the 2021 survey, such as skills, salaries, graduate recruitment and selection, undergraduate recruitment, and higher education-industry collaboration. Following consultation, some additions have been made with questions on inclusion and diversity and emerging work-based learning pathways such as Higher-Level Apprenticeships.

The 2022 survey targeted employers active in the Northern Ireland graduate labour market (c.= 850). It was disseminated through a wide range of channels and remained open throughout July and August 2022. The responses received (n=216) marked a significant increase from the 2021 survey which indicates a strong appetite amongst the graduate employer community to share their voice with Ulster University.

Key findings from the survey shed light on several themes including the value employers place on work-based learning programmes such as the yearlong placement model. For example, over three-quarters of respondents recruited placement students and many re-recruited these students into graduate roles. 93% stated placement was an important criterion in the selection of graduate recruits. Notably many employers identified the promotion and development of work-based learning opportunities such as placement as key to resolving the graduate skills gap. In addition, findings indicate that there is clear appetite for emerging work-based learning pathways such as Higher-Level Apprenticeships. Despite the current economic outlook, the findings provide optimism for the graduate labour market, with close to two-thirds of respondents stating that their graduate intake will increase over the incoming year. There are concerns however, with a significant increase in the proportion of respondents stating they have recently experienced recruitment challenges such as a shortage of candidates.

The findings also shed light on the nature of emerging hybrid recruitment practices. For example, while online methods are prominent across the recruitment cycle, the findings indicate that employers are keen for face-to-face contact with students and graduates through activities such as careers fairs, interviews, and workshops. In addition, the findings highlight the wide range of factors that recruiters take into consideration when selecting graduates, how this varies by sector, and underlines the importance of tracking the prominence of these over time.

Similar to findings from the 2021 survey, the soft skills in most demand were verbal and written communication skills. Notably, the Healthcare sector was most likely to emphasise the importance of these skills. Technical skills in most demand were related to the IT/Computing sector. Job roles in the Healthcare and IT/Computing sectors are expected to increase significantly through to 2030, and markedly both sectors alongside Construction/Engineering were most likely to state there is an undersupply of graduate skills. It is therefore essential that to support economic growth of the region and to sustain key public services, any highlighted skills gaps are addressed. In light of Northern Ireland's poor employment outcomes for those with disabilities, the survey explored respondents' appetite for support in developing inclusive and diverse workforces. Just one-quarter of respondents stated that they required support, indicating that there is significant scope to raise awareness amongst the graduate employer community of their role in tackling the disability employment gap.

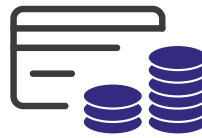
All findings from the survey are presented and explored in further depth throughout the report, including sector analysis. The report concludes with a discussion of some of the key findings and implications of these for Ulster University, the higher education sector, and the economy.

To complement this report, the findings will be widely disseminated across the Ulster University community and further afield to ensure those responsible for shaping and delivering the curriculum and supporting the employability of students and graduates have access to up-to-date and relevant information on the plans, experiences, and needs of industry partners.

Key Findings



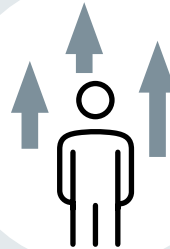
62%
expect an increase
in graduate intake



72%
reported an
average graduate
starting salary of
£21,000+.



31%
recruit from all
subject areas



39%
stated there is an
undersupply of
graduate skills



94%
stated that work
experience is
important in
the selection of
graduate recruits



58%
experienced
recruitment
challenges



26%
require support
in developing
inclusive, diverse,
and confident
workforces



64%
stated that 'too
few candidates'
was their main
recruitment
challenge



IT/Computing skills
top technical skills
identified



Verbal and written
communication top
soft skills identified

Setting the Scene

Ulster University published its first Graduate Employer Survey report in October 2021. Acquiring the employer voice through the survey was considered timely in light of the period of flux experienced by the economy and the wider labour market as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the intervening 12-months the Northern Ireland economy and wider society have faced sustained economic and political pressures including, but not limited to, rampant inflation triggering a cost-of-living crisis, contraction in business activity, threat of recession, collapse of power-sharing, and the situation surrounding the Northern Ireland Protocol creating uncertainty for local businesses. However, one of the most significant challenges facing the economy is not new: low productivity. Northern Ireland's productivity has consistently lagged behind the rest of the UK¹. This is largely due to an economy characterised by several large, low value-added sectors, low levels of innovation, underinvestment in infrastructure, a skills deficit, and a legacy of underinvestment in skills in both the private and public sectors². This skills deficit is likely to have become more pronounced due to technological developments and a shift towards digitalisation accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic³.

In March 2022, a new Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland was launched which sets a strategic framework for the development of the skills system to 2030. Through its goals, it aims to boost innovation, provide better jobs for more people, develop a robust skills base, and open educational pathways, empowering everyone in society to reach their potential⁴. As outlined in the strategy, higher education institutions have a vital role to play in the realisation of these goals, particularly around increasing the proportion of individuals achieving first degrees and postgraduate qualifications in technical subject areas and expanding educational pathways. However, commentators have noted the traditional university system has struggled to keep abreast with changes in the economy. Furthermore, research suggests that many talent leaders are not optimistic about the ability of universities to produce graduates with the skills needed to meet industry demands⁵. As such there are calls for universities to rethink their approach to employer engagement, with an emphasis on speed, scale, agility, and flexibility⁶.

Ulster University's Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC) forecasts that by 2030, close to 50,000 new jobs will be created in Northern Ireland, with most pronounced growth in the health and social care, professional and scientific, ICT, and construction sectors⁷. Driving innovation and supporting the development of a skills pipeline for the economy and wider society are key commitments of Ulster University as laid out in the recently launched institutional strategy, People, Place and Partnership: Delivering Sustainable Futures For All⁸. The strategy recognises that partnering with industry is central to the delivery of these commitments. As a multi-campus university in Northern Ireland, Ulster places a strong emphasis on collaborating with employers to understand the skills and attributes they require and strives to connect Ulster talent to the labour market. Engagement with employers takes a variety of forms at Ulster, including collaboration in the design and delivery of the curriculum and work-based learning opportunities, research and innovation, and Employer Advisory Boards. It has been refreshing to welcome employer partners back to Ulster's campuses for guest lectures, mock-interviews, seminars, and careers fairs following a shift to virtual events during the previous two years. Over 260 employers engaged in campus careers events in Semester 1 of the 2022/2023 academic year, with employers, students, and university staff relishing in the opportunity for in-person networking and connectedness.



The strength and sustainability of Ulster's partnerships with employers however, relies on the institution being aware and responsive to their needs and keeping abreast of recruitment changes to support agile and flexible practice. Recent years have evidenced that changes in the demands and practices of the graduate labour market have been fast paced, and it has been noted that the ways in which employers are engaging with careers services 'are in flux'⁹. As such, it is more important than ever for Ulster to listen and respond to the employer voice to ensure that new and existing partners have access to student and graduate talent with relevant skills, and to support the employability outcomes of students. To reinforce existing employer engagement activities, Ulster launched its second Graduate Employer Survey in June 2022 and worked extensively to expand the reach of the survey resulting in 216 responses. The survey blends topics from the 2021 survey such as skills demands, recruitment practices, and collaboration, alongside new topics including inclusivity and emerging

work experience pathways. This report presents findings from the survey and makes several conclusions and discusses the implications of these. The findings are particularly pertinent as the labour market and higher education institutions continue to adjust to the challenges and changes brought about by a post-pandemic economy compounded by additional societal and political pressures.

¹ <https://www.pwc.co.uk/press-room/press-releases/regions/northern-ireland/northern-ireland-economic-outlook-september-2022.html>

² <https://www.agendani.com/northern-irelands-productivity-gap/>

³ <https://luminare.prospects.ac.uk/the-future-of-work-skills-for-the-future>

⁴ <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/Skills-Strategy-for-Northern-Ireland-Skills-for-a-10x-economy.pdf>

⁵ <https://luminare.prospects.ac.uk/digital-skills-must-go-hand-in-hand-with-human-skills>

⁶ <https://www.thehrdirector.com/features/recruitment/the-case-for-more-diverse-formats-of-employer-university-collaboration/>

⁷ https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/1470435/UUEPC-Winter-Outlook-2022.pdf

⁸ <https://www.ulster.ac.uk/people-place-and-partnership>

⁹ https://issuu.com/agcas_00/docs/phoenix_issue_166_november_2022



Methodology

To capture trends, experiences, plans, practices, and needs on graduate recruitment¹⁰ from employers that are active in the Northern Ireland graduate labour market, an online survey was developed in the JISC survey platform. The survey included questions on the following topics:



Graduate recruitment uptake



Skills



Salaries



Recruitment processes and development



Recruitment challenges



Inclusion and diversity



Undergraduate recruitment



Collaborative opportunities

The questions were developed in collaboration with key university stakeholders including committees and working groups. The majority of questions were mandatory and incorporated a mixture of open and closed-ended formats, the latter including multiple choice questions, Likert and rating scales. The survey was rigorously tested and piloted prior to launch.

The survey was launched on 21st June 2022 and was live throughout the summer, closing on 31st August. It was disseminated through the following Ulster University channels:

- Employer Advisory Boards
- Employability and Careers Department representatives
- Employer Experience Working Group
- Ulster University Business School Business Forum
- Graduate Internship and Graduate Leadership Programme distribution lists
- Ulster University Economic Policy Centre
- Social media platforms

In addition, the survey was disseminated through external channels including sector body websites and newsletters such as the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Manufacturing NI, and the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA).

To boost the response rate, all of those that completed the survey were entered into a draw to win a free place at Ulster University's Graduate and Placement Fair.

A total of 223 respondents completed the survey, however several duplicates were identified and following cleaning, the final respondent count was 216. Due to the scale, complexity, and nature of employer engagement across Ulster University it is difficult to determine the survey's target population. However, a valuable indicator is Ulster's vacancy handling management system Handshake. In the 12 months prior to the survey launch, 829 separate organisations had advertised opportunities, which indicates a robust response rate.

All data collected through the survey was exported from the JISC survey platform into a secure institutional server. The data was managed through Excel which facilitated cleaning, coding, and analysis activities. Sector analysis was undertaken for the sectors with highest representation in the survey. These included IT/Computing (n=27), Business/Management/Finance (n=27), Construction/Engineering (n=26), Manufacturing (n=26), and Healthcare (n=21).

¹⁰For the purposes of the survey, graduates were defined as those who have obtained a university degree within the last two years.

Profile of Respondents

Respondents were asked to indicate the regional location of their organisation's offices. As illustrated in Figure 1, the majority of respondents had offices in Northern Ireland (88%) while a significant proportion had offices in England (27.3%) and the Republic of Ireland (22.7%). Most respondents that selected 'other' stated that their organisation operated globally.

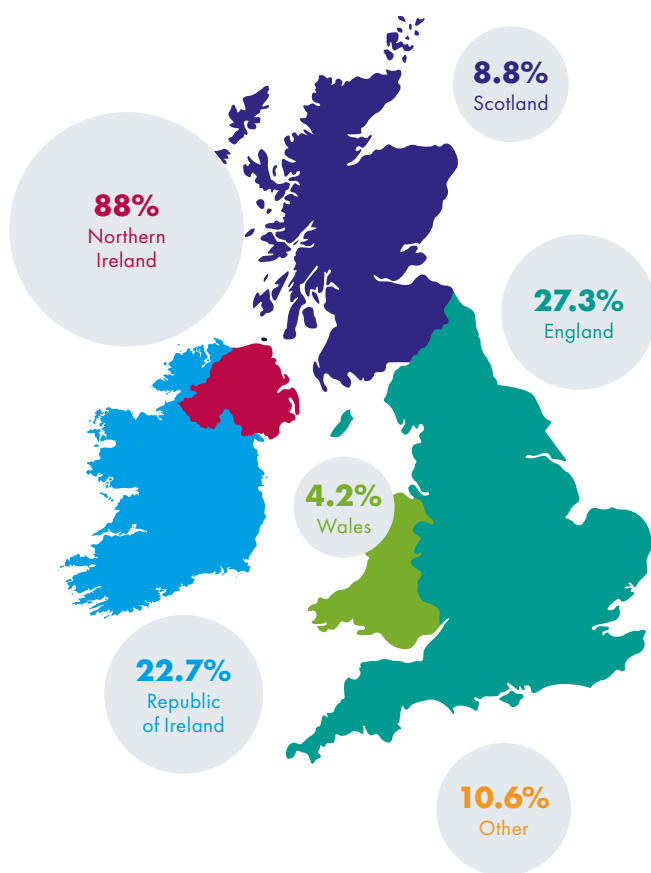


Figure 1: Geographic spread of respondents (n=216/multiple choice question)

As illustrated in Figure 2, survey respondents emanated from a broad range of sectors, with IT/Computing (12.5%), Business/Management/Finance (12.5%), Construction/Engineering (12%), Manufacturing (12%) and Healthcare (9.7%) the sectors with highest representation.

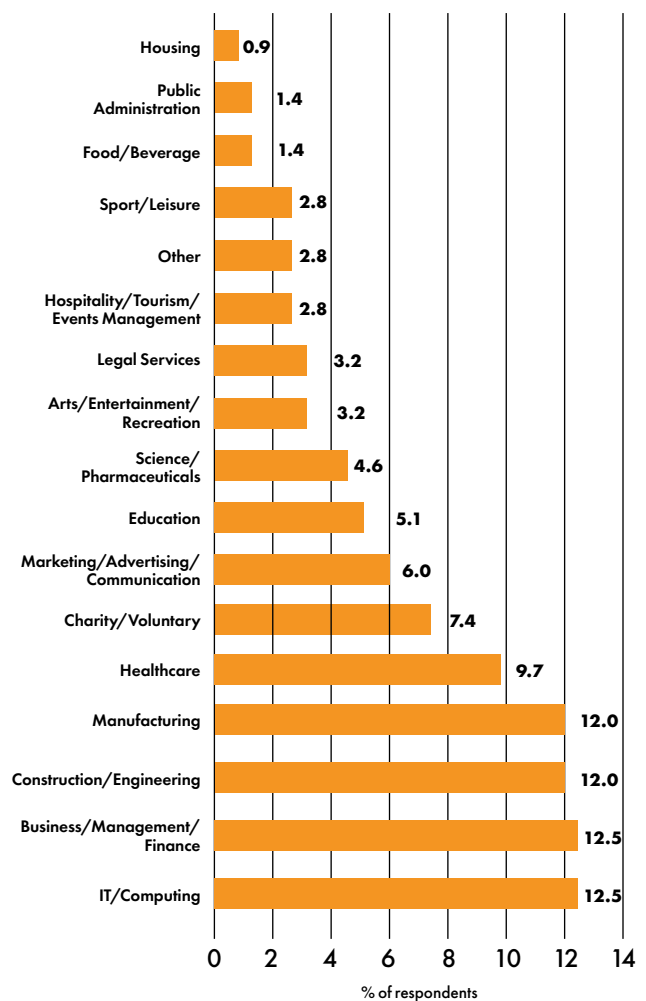


Figure 2: Primary industry sector breakdown of survey respondents (n=216)



Two-thirds of respondents (66.2%) were from small-medium sized organisations with 250 employees or less, while 26.9% of respondents were from larger organisations with 500+ employees (see Figure 3). This profile is similar to the respondent profile captured in the 2021 Ulster Graduate Employer Survey, while the 2022 AHECS Graduate Employer Survey reported a smaller sample of SME respondents (54%)¹¹. Notably of the 78,885 businesses operating in Northern Ireland in 2022¹², 89% were micro-businesses with less than 10 employees and just over 2% had 50+ employees, thus indicating that organisations active in the graduate labour market in Northern Ireland have a markedly different profile to the wider NI business community.

¹¹<https://ahecs.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/AHECS-Graduate-Employers-Survey-2022-Presentation-for-Web.pdf>

¹²https://www.nisra.gov.uk/system/files/statistics/IDBR-Publication-2022_0.pdf

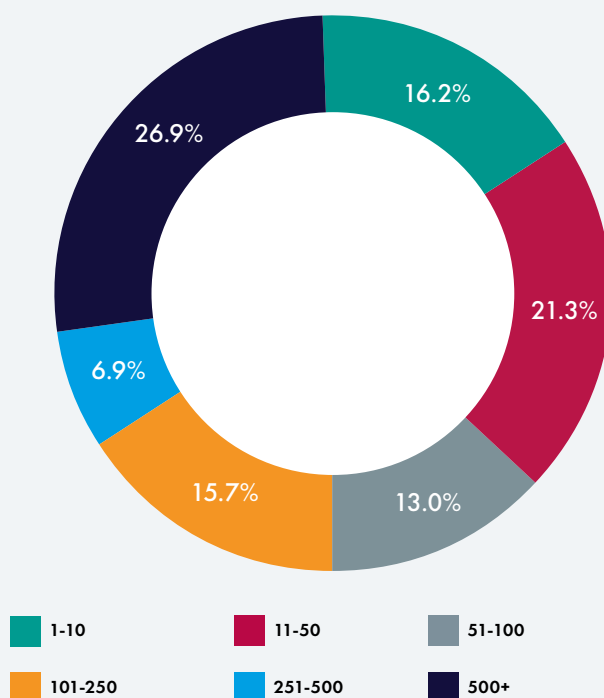


Figure 3: Number of staff employed by respondents (n=216)



Findings

This section presents findings from the survey, which have been organised under the following headings:



Graduate Employees



Graduate Recruitment and Selection



Skills



Graduate Recruitment Challenges, Development Interventions, and Inclusivity



Undergraduate Recruitment



Collaboration with Higher Education Institutions

Graduate Employees

A significant proportion of respondents (61.7%) stated that in the next 12 months their graduate intake is likely to increase (Figure 4). Notably, in the 12 months prior to the survey, 18.4% stated that their graduate intake had decreased, while this figure fell to 4.1% for the incoming 12-month period.

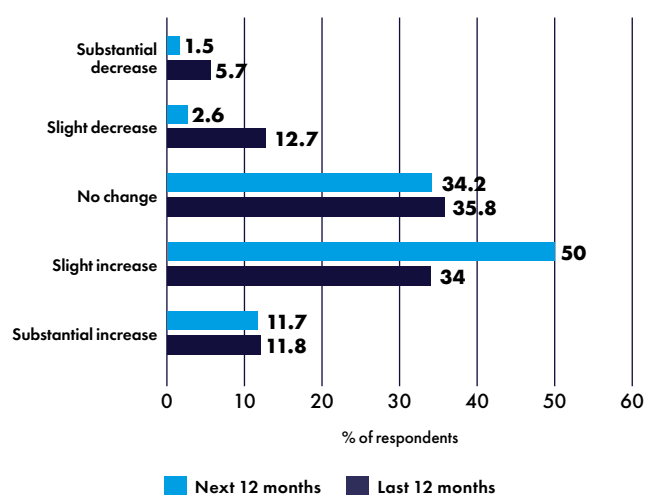


Figure 4: Changes in graduate intake over previous and next 12-month period (n=216)

Headline Findings



61.7%

reported that graduate intake will increase over the next 12 months.



Respondents were most likely to recruit from Engineering (22.2%) and Computing and Intelligent Systems (21.8%) degree subject areas.



30.6%

recruit from all subject areas.



72.2%

reported the average starting salary of their graduates was £21,000+.



The IT/Computing sector was most likely to pay their graduates a starting salary of £26k+.

Over two-thirds of respondents (68.1%) stated that they recruited graduates from specific degree subject areas (Figure 5) while 30.6% of respondents stated that they did not, indicating that their graduate roles are open to applicants from a range of subject areas.

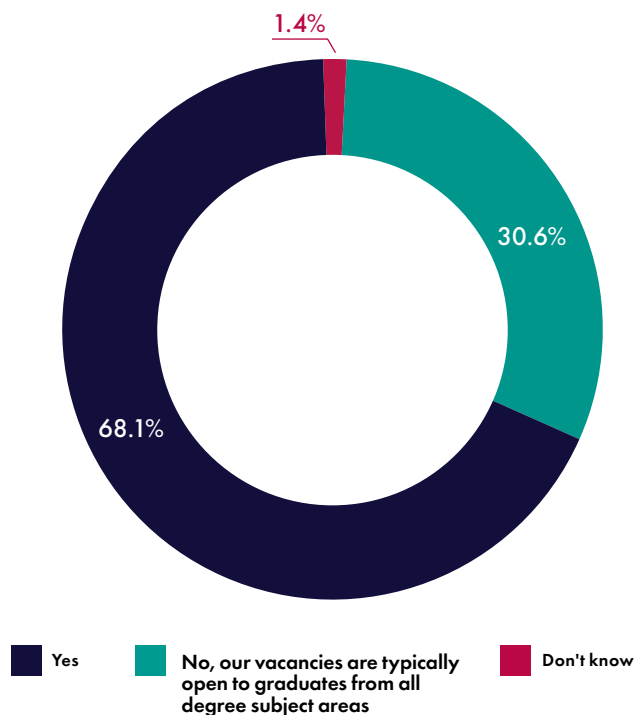


Figure 5: Do you recruit graduate employees from specific degree subject areas? (n=216)

Sector analysis revealed that two-thirds (66.7%) of respondents from the Business/Management/Finance sector stated that vacancies were open to applicants from all degree disciplines (Figure 6). This was considerably more than the other main sectors, namely IT/Computing, Construction/Engineering, Manufacturing and Healthcare, which were less likely than the overall population to recruit graduates from any degree discipline. The Healthcare (4.8%) sector was least likely to state that their vacancies were open to applicants from any degree discipline.

As displayed in Figure 7, the two subject areas that respondents were most likely to recruit from were Engineering (22.2%) and Computing and intelligent systems (21.8%). This is perhaps unsurprising as IT/Computing and Construction/Engineering were in the top three sectors represented by respondents. The third most popular subject area was Management, Leadership and Marketing (15.3%), followed by Communication and Media (13%) and Accounting, Finance and Economics (10.6%).

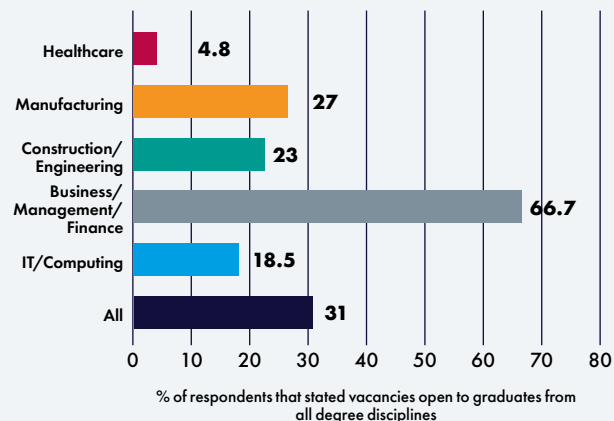


Figure 6: Respondents by sector that stated their vacancies are typically open to graduates from all degree subject areas

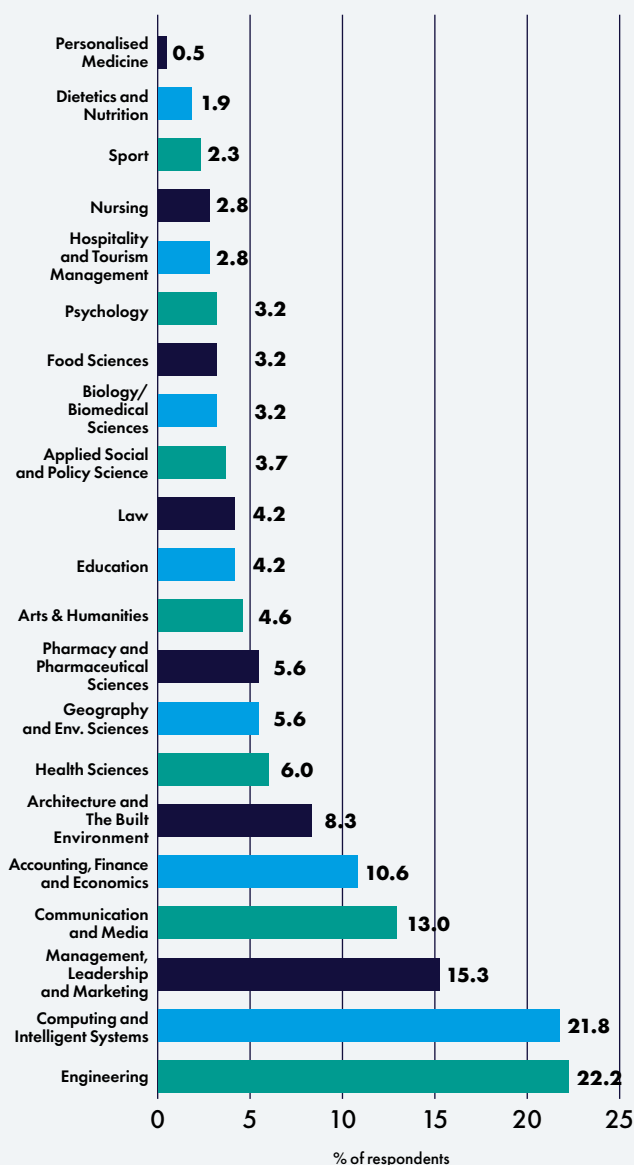


Figure 7: Subject area respondents recruit from (n=216/multiple choice question)

As illustrated in Figure 8, the average starting salary of graduate recruits was most likely to fall into the 21-25k band. This aligns with the latest Graduate Outcomes data from HESA which reports the average starting salary of graduates in Northern Ireland is £22,866¹³. Close to three-quarters (72.2%) of respondents stated that the average starting salary of their graduates was £21,000 or more, which marks a significant increase of 19.2 percentage points from the 2021 survey. Just 4.2% of respondents stated that their graduate recruits had an average starting salary of less than £18K, marking a significant decrease from the 2021

survey (13.8 percentage points). Sector analysis revealed that the IT/Computing sector was most likely to pay their graduates a starting salary of £26k+ (51.8%), followed by the Construction/Engineering sector (38.4%). Notably, the Manufacturing sector was most likely to pay its graduates a starting salary of £25k or less (92.3%), followed by the Healthcare sector (71%).

¹³<https://luminate.prospects.ac.uk/graduate-salaries-in-the-uk>

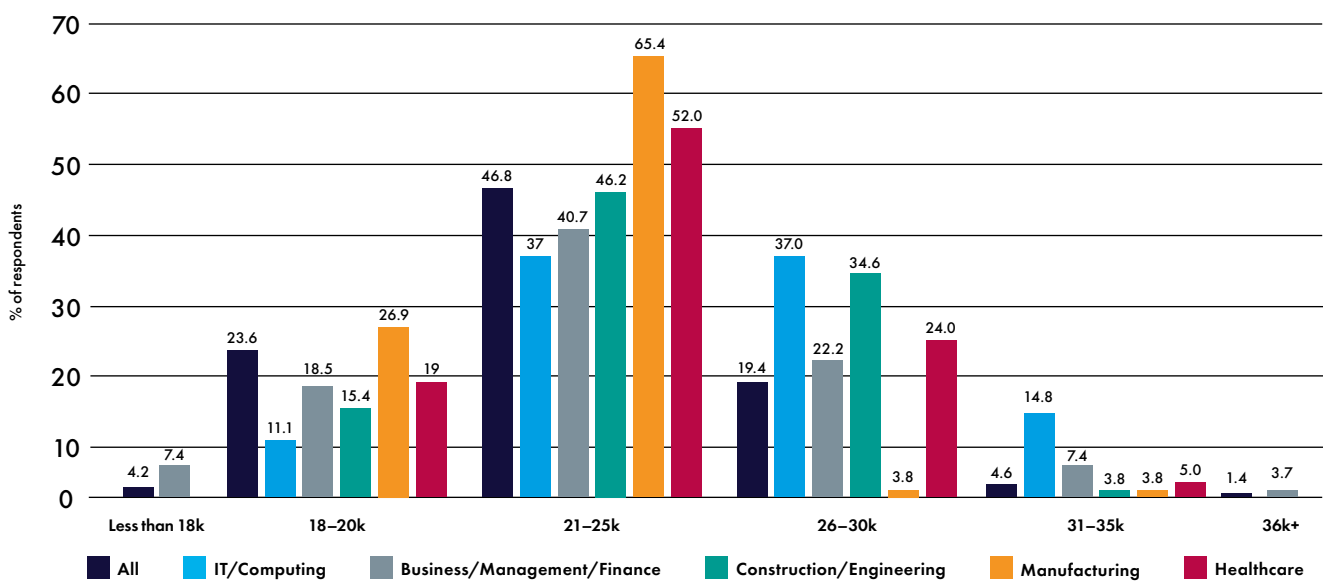


Figure 8: Average starting salary of graduates by sector



Graduate Recruitment and Selection

Figure 9 lists the graduate recruitment marketing and attraction activities that respondents plan to use over the next year. There was a clear preference for online activities with 'social media' the most popular option (70.8%), followed by 'company website' (67.6%) and 'other online vacancy platform' (58.3%). Notably respondents were more likely to opt for 'in-person university recruitment fairs' and 'in-person university skills workshop/guest lecture/information session', than their online counterparts. 'Company hosted events' proved less popular, with just 19.4% of respondents selecting this option.

Respondents were subsequently asked which selection activities they planned to use with graduate recruits over the next 12 months (Figure 10). 'Face-to-face interviews' were identified as the most popular activity (80.6%). Notably, 'online interviews' were less popular with 57.9% selecting this option. Respondents indicated that 'CVs' (73.6%) were a more popular selection method than 'application forms' (61.1%). 'Virtual reality' and 'gamification' were the least popular activities with just 0.5% and 1.4% of respondents selecting these options respectively.

Headline Findings



Respondents were most likely to use 'social media' and their 'company's website' to promote graduate vacancies.



'Face-to-face interviews' were most likely to be used for graduate selection.



Respondents were more likely to use 'CVs' (73.6%) than 'application forms' (61.1%) in their selection activities.



'Gamification' and 'virtual reality' proved very unpopular amongst respondents.



'Relevant work experience' was rated as being the most important factor in the selection of graduate recruits, closely followed by 'work placement', 'additional independent learning', and 'degree classification'.

Figure 9: Recruitment marketing and attraction activities respondents plan to use over the next 12 months (n=216/multiple choice question)

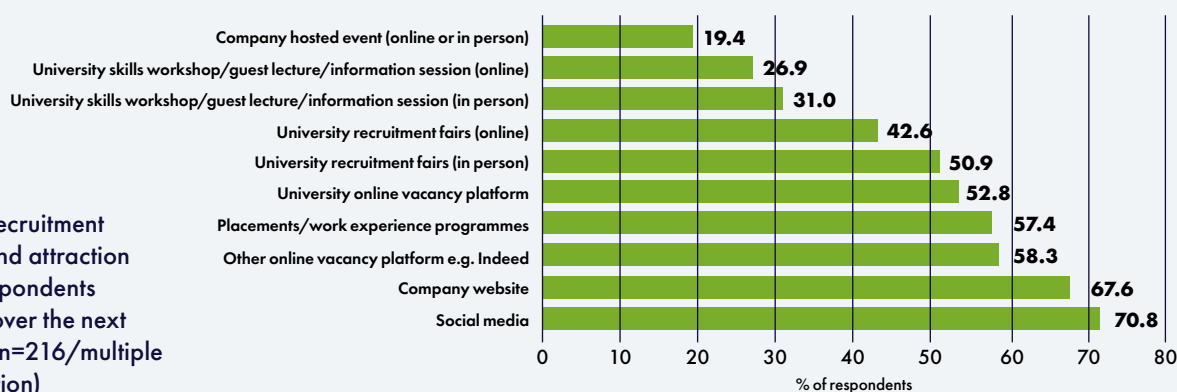
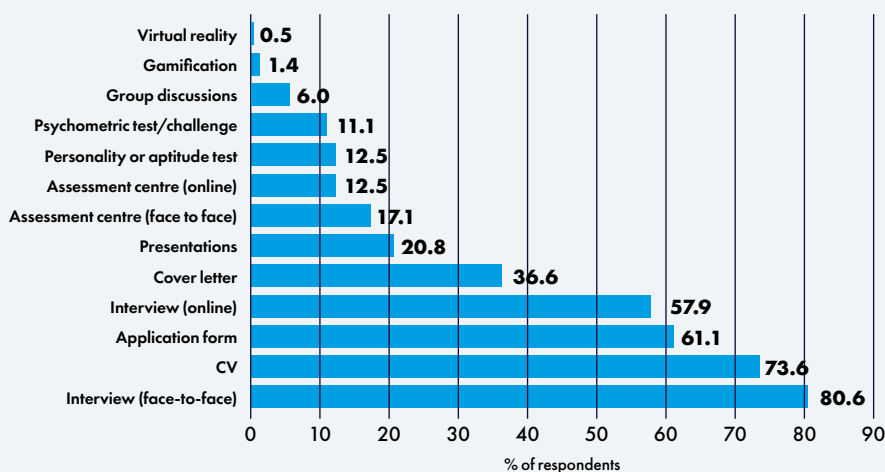


Figure 10: Selection activities respondents plan to use over the next 12 months (n=216/ multiple choice question)



Respondents were asked to indicate the level of importance of a range of factors in the selection of graduates. As presented in Figure 11, 'work placements' and 'other relevant work experience' ranked highly, with over 92% of respondents identifying these options as important. 'Additional independent learning' (88.9%) and 'degree classification' (87.5%) also ranked highly. Similar to last year's findings, 'professional body registration' and 'master's degree/other postgraduate qualification' ranked least important with 54.6% and 62.5% of respondents choosing these options respectively.

Sector analysis revealed that 'work placement experience' and 'professional body registration' ranked highest for the Healthcare sector, however, this sector was least likely to indicate that 'other relevant work experience' was important in the selection of graduates. The Healthcare sector was also least likely to state that 'degree classification', 'involvement in extra-curricular activities' and 'masters degree/other postgraduate qualification' were important in graduate selection. Similarly, the Business/Management/Finance sector was least likely to indicate that 'professional body registration' and 'additional independent learning' were important in the selection of graduates. All respondents from the Manufacturing and Business/Management/Finance sectors stated that 'other relevant work experience' was important in the selection of graduate recruits.

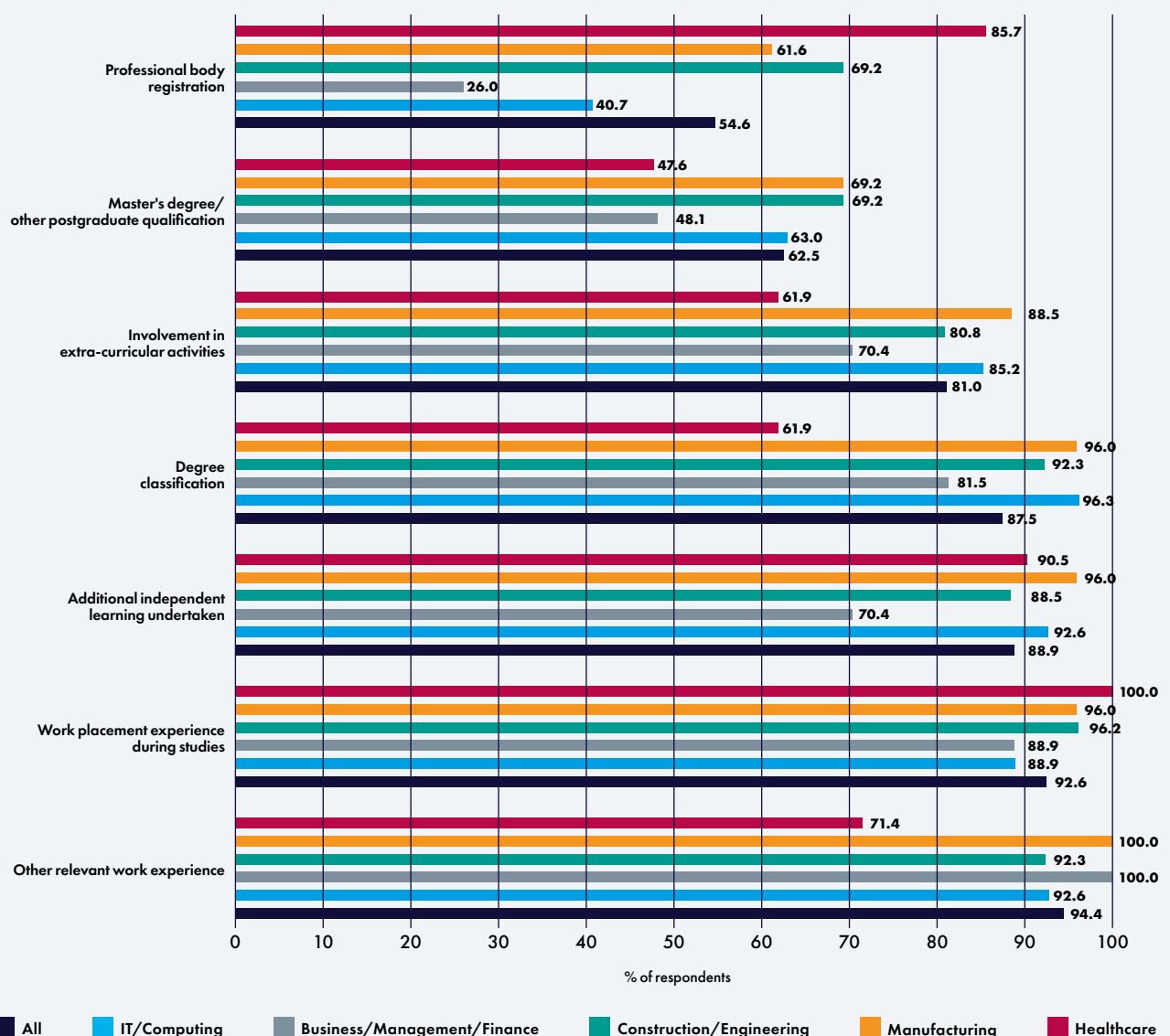


Figure 11: Importance of selection criteria in graduate recruitment

Skills

Respondents rated the importance of eleven soft skills in the selection of graduates on a scale of 1-10 (10 being most important), with the mean score for each skill presented in Figure 12. 'Verbal communication' received the highest average score (9) which mirrors findings from the 2021 Ulster Graduate Employer Survey. 'Written communication' was the second highest scoring skill with a mean score of 8.7, which closely aligns with the score recorded in the 2021 survey (8.8). 'Problem solving' was a newly added skill to the question and received the third highest score (8.6). The mean score for 'digital literacy' dropped slightly from 8.5 in 2021 to 8.1. The three skills with the lowest scores included 'leadership' (6.5), 'commercial awareness' (6.2) and 'enterprise and entrepreneurial skills' (5.8).

Sector analysis revealed that the Healthcare sector recorded the highest average score for 'verbal communication' (9.7), 'written communication' (9.4), 'resilience' (9.1) and 'leadership' (7.4). The Healthcare sector recorded the lowest score for 'commercial awareness' (3.9). The IT/Computing sector recorded the highest score for 'critical thinking' (8.7), 'digital literacy' (9), and 'creativity/innovation' (8.1). The Manufacturing sector recorded the highest score for 'managing ambiguity' (7.2), while the Construction/Engineering sector recorded the highest score for 'commercial awareness' (7.2).

Headline Findings



'Verbal' and 'written communication' skills received the highest soft skill importance rating by graduate employers, closely followed by 'problem solving' and 'resilience'.



The degree specific/technical skills areas prioritised by employers were most likely to relate to IT/Computing.



A significant proportion of respondents (39.4%) stated there is an undersupply of graduate skills, and this view was most likely to be held by respondents in the IT/Computing, Construction/Engineering and Healthcare sectors.



The Business/Management/Finance sector was least likely to state there was an undersupply of skills.



Employers suggested that skills deficits can be addressed through the 'promotion and development of work-based learning and extra-curricular activities', 'applied learning opportunities', 'promotion of industry/sectors' and 'recruitment/employability support'.

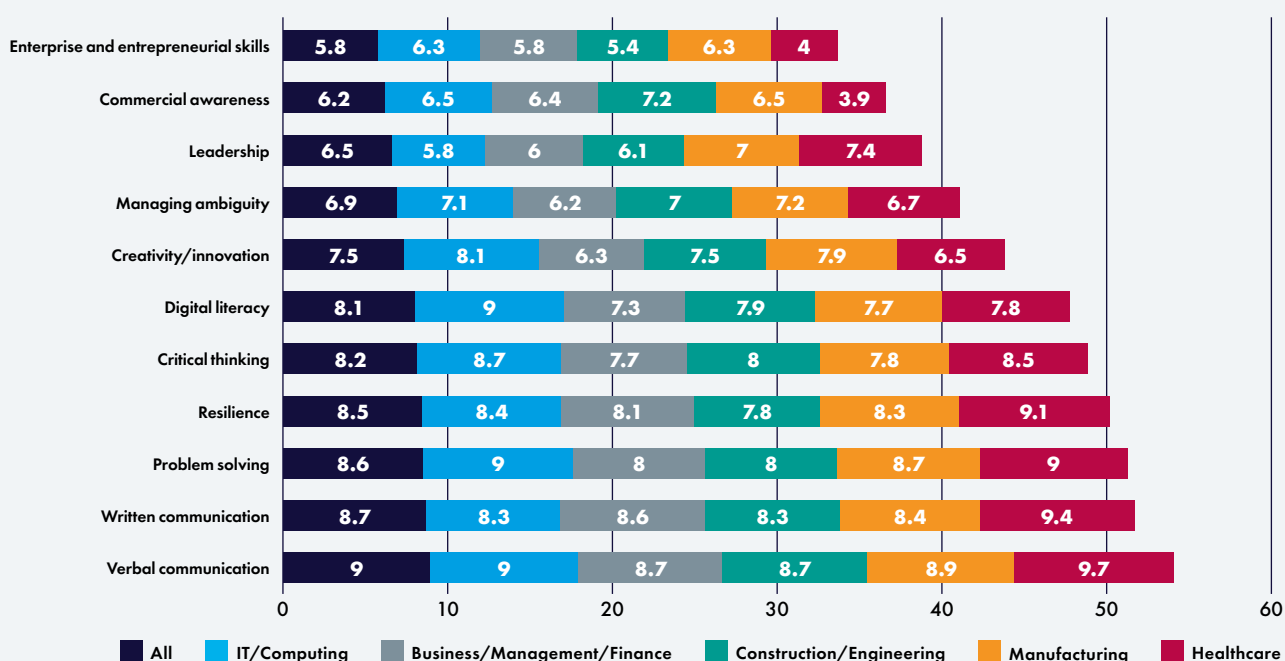


Figure 12: Importance of graduate skills in selection of graduate recruits (mean scores)

Respondents were asked to provide the three skills priority areas for their organisation. This was presented as an open-ended question and a total of 610 separate skills were entered. Following review of the survey data, the skills were coded into two broad categories, Soft Skills (n=186) and Discipline Specific/Technical Skill areas (n=424) before being further sub-divided into specific skill areas. Figure 13 illustrates that the most popular soft skill by a significant margin was 'communication' (24.2%), followed by 'problem solving/analytical' skills (11.3%) and 'teamwork/collaboration' (9.1%).

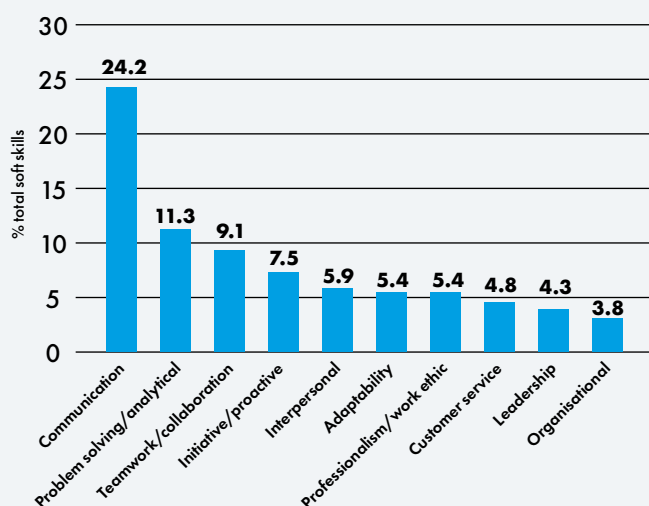


Figure 13: Top 10 soft skill priority areas identified by respondents (n=186 soft skills)

Figure 14 illustrates the eleven most popular discipline specific/ technical skill areas identified by respondents. The most popular technical skills related to 'IT/Computing' (21.9%) with this category comprising responses such as software engineering, CAD, embedded software, coding, systems engineering and no-code web development. 'Sales/Marketing/Digital Marketing' was the second most popular discipline specific/ technical skill area (10.1%). The third most popular area was 'Engineering' (8.7%) which included responses such as civil engineering, electrical engineering, and structural engineering, followed by 'Business' (7.5%) with respondents listing skills such as business development, income generation, management and administration. The Health and Social Care field represents those respondents that listed broad skill/employment areas such as social care, occupational therapy, nursing, pharmacy and mental health support.

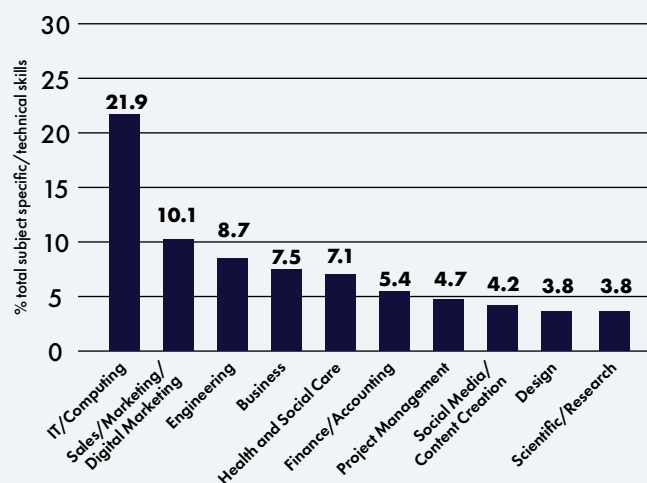


Figure 14: Top 10 discipline specific/technical skill areas identified by respondents (n=424 discipline specific skills)



A significant proportion of respondents (39.4%) felt that there was an undersupply of graduate skills, and this figure aligns with findings from the 2021 Graduate Employer Survey (Figure 15). Sector analysis revealed that the IT/Computing, Construction/Engineering, and the Healthcare sectors were more likely to state that there was an undersupply of skills than the overall population, while the Business/Management/Finance sector was least likely to state this was the case.

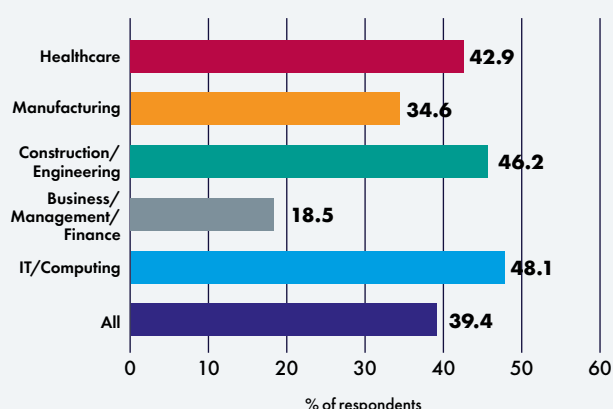


Figure 15: Respondents that stated there was an undersupply of graduate skills (n=216).

Respondents who stated there was an undersupply of graduate skills were asked how the higher education sector can better support the development of these skills. This question was open-ended, and responses were grouped into the categories presented in Figure 16. 'Promotion/development of work-based learning and extra-curricular activities' was the most common suggestion which aligns with findings from the 2021 Graduate Employer Survey. Within this category, many respondents pointed towards the importance of the yearlong placement model with one respondent stating that universities should 'encourage students to take a year in industry as part of their degree programme', while another commented that 'more/extended placement opportunities' were required. One respondent offered that 'mandatory placements/ internships, should be embedded into the majority of degrees', while another noted that placements should provide 'hands-on experience, not just shadowing'. Others pointed towards the importance of students gaining extra-curricular experience while also stressing the value of work-based learning in providing students with the opportunity to 'see how classroom skills can transfer into hands-on work'.

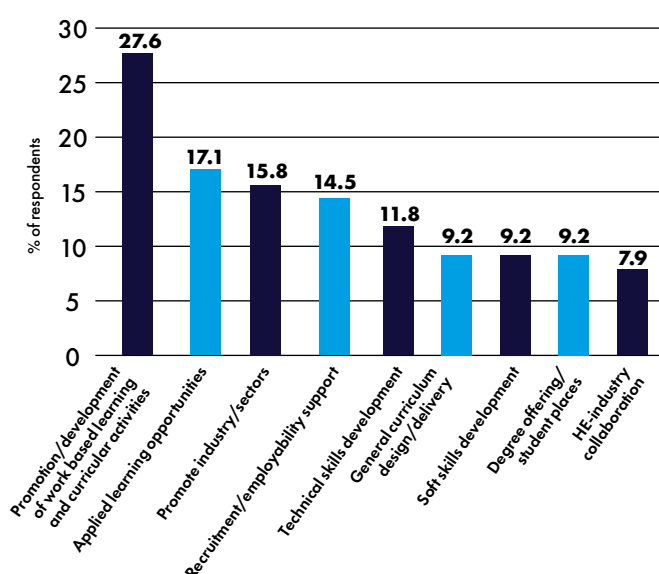
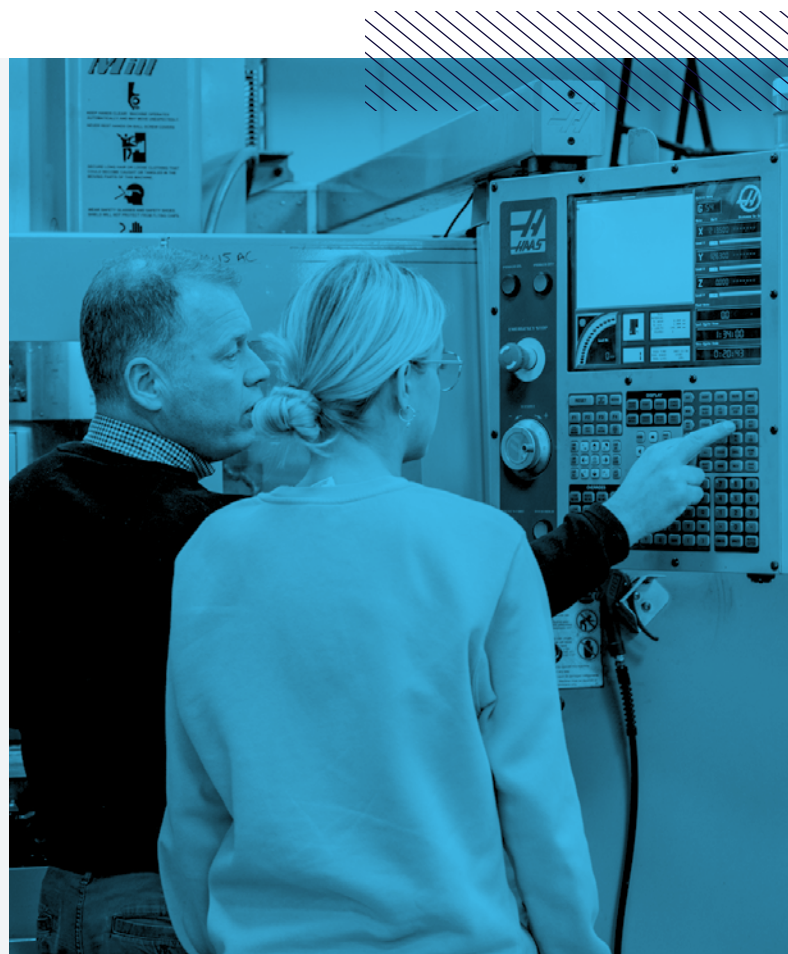


Figure 16: How universities can support the development of undersupplied skills (n=76/multiple choice)



A significant proportion of respondents emphasised the importance of students having access to *'applied learning opportunities'* within the curriculum with comments including *'more focus on practical workplace skills within university'* and *'exposure to "real world" scenarios to improve confidence and interpersonal and communication skills'*. Respondents provided recommendations on how this could be achieved, with suggestions including *'get students on site, teach, and examine real-life construction matters'*, *'ask for suggestions for dissertations relevant to industry'*, *'adapt course content and coursework to mirror work tasks in real employment'* and *'problem solving scenario-based tests'*.

Many employers stated that universities can help alleviate the skills deficit by promoting industries/subject areas. The responses included reference to STEM subject areas, graphic design, food and beverage, financial, construction

and health and social care sectors. Others noted that they required support in attracting females to their industry sectors such as engineering and construction, with comments including *'We suffer from a lack of female engineers. Make the courses more attractive to females'* and *'Attracting more students into construction related disciplines particularly females'*.

Respondents stated that students should receive more *'recruitability/employability support'* such as help with job applications, interviews, and online communication, with comments including *'Classes which help students prepare for the world of work i.e. CV workshops, how to conduct yourself in an interview, how to dress for an interview, how to communicate formally in emails'*. Some mentioned that there is scope to manage graduate job expectations, particularly around salaries.



Graduate Recruitment Challenges, Development Interventions, and Inclusivity

Headline Findings



Over half of respondents had experienced graduate recruitment challenges, which marked a significant increase from the 2021 Graduate Employer Survey.



'Too few candidates' and a 'shortage of candidates from specific degree disciplines' were the challenges most commonly experienced.



'Work readiness level of graduates' and a 'shortage of candidates with relevant work-related experiences' were other notable challenges.



Respondents were most likely to have used graduate programmes to support the recruitment and development of employees.



19% had utilised Higher-Level Apprenticeships.



Close to two-thirds of respondents (63.4%) stated that Higher-Level Apprenticeships were important in developing the skills and talent of their organisation.



25.9% of respondents stated that they required support from Ulster in developing an inclusive, diverse, and confident workforce.

Over half of respondents (58.1%) stated that they had experienced graduate recruitment challenges in the last 24 months (Figure 17). This marked an increase of 27.4 percentage points from the 2021 Graduate Employer Survey.

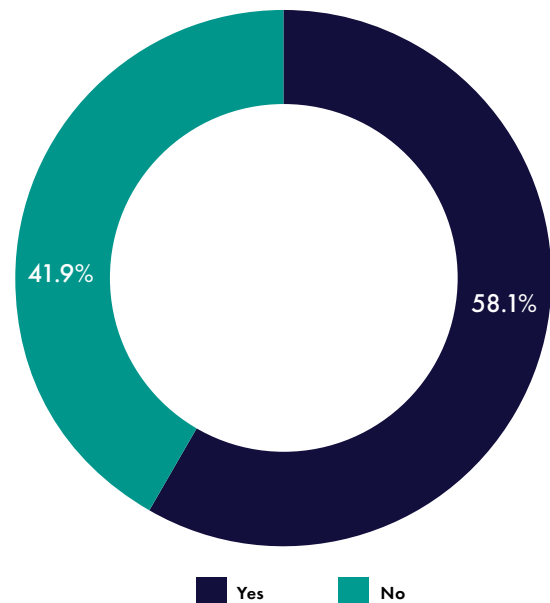


Figure 17: Have you experienced any graduate recruitment challenges in the last 24 months (n=216)



As displayed in Figure 18, 'too few candidates' (63.6%) was the most common challenge identified followed by 'a shortage of candidates from specific degree disciplines' (54.2%). Notably 'work readiness of graduates' was also identified

as a challenge by a significant proportion of respondents (37.3%), followed by a 'shortage of candidates with relevant work-related experience' (36.4%).

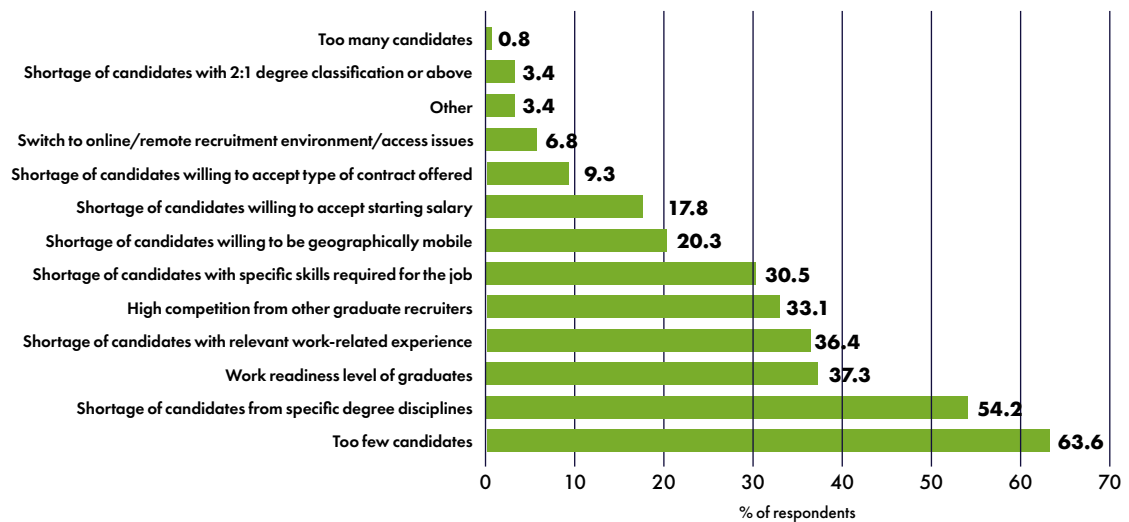


Figure 18: Nature of graduate recruitment challenges encountered over the last 24 months (n=118/ multiple choice question)

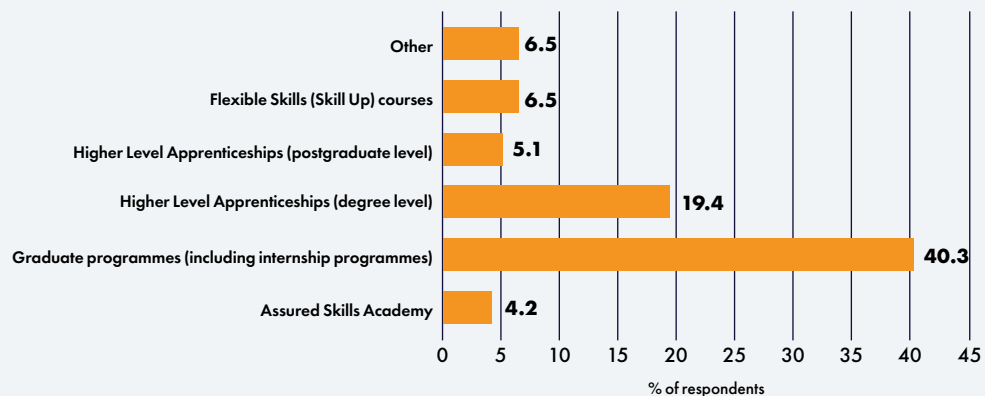


Figure 19: Interventions used to support the recruitment and/or development of employees (n=216/multiple choice question)

Respondents were asked to indicate the interventions that they used to support the recruitment and development of employees. As presented in Figure 19, 'graduate programmes' (40.3%) were the most popular intervention identified by

respondents. 'Higher Level Apprenticeships (degree level)' had been used by 19.4% of respondents while just 5.1% had used 'Higher Level Apprenticeships (postgraduate level)'. Skill up courses had been used by 6.5% of respondents.

A significant proportion of respondents stated that they had not used any of the interventions listed in Figure 19, and reasons for not engaging included:

- Lack of knowledge
- Time constraints
- Lack of resources
- Not currently recruiting
- Experienced too many issues with Higher Level Apprenticeships
- Do not have infrastructure to implement
- Cost
- Not suitable
- Not required
- Used alternative recruitment methods, e.g. recruitment agency
- Use in-house processes
- Not applicable to sector (e.g. education)

Respondents were subsequently asked to indicate how important Higher-Level Apprenticeships are in developing the skills and talent of their organisation (Figure 20). Close to two-thirds (63.4%) of respondents stated that they were important, while just 15.7% stated they were of no importance. A significant proportion (20.8%) stated that they were unsure, indicating a lack of knowledge about Higher Level Apprenticeships.

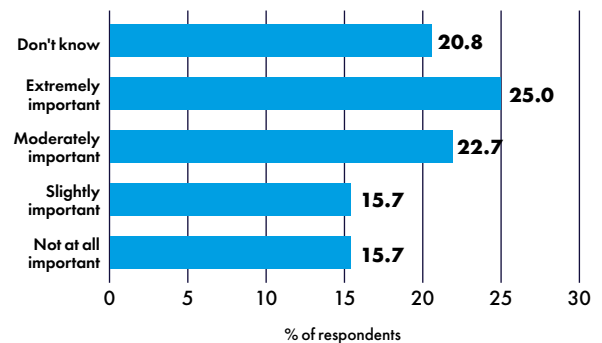
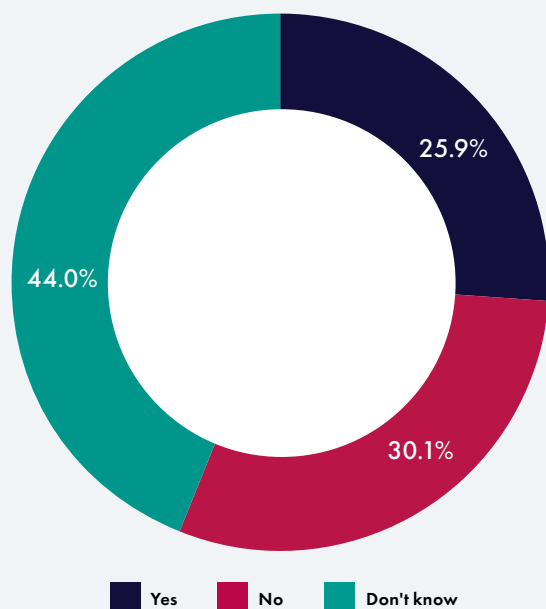


Figure 20: Level of importance of Higher-Level Apprenticeships in developing skills and talent (n=216)



Respondents were asked if and how Ulster University can support them in developing an inclusive, diverse, and confident workforce. Approximately one-quarter of respondents (25.9%) stated that they did require support in this area while close to half (44%) were unsure, while 30.1% stated 'no' (Figure 21). When asked to expand on the type of support needed, respondents stated that they required assistance in promoting roles to students and graduates, particularly females and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

Figure 21: Ulster University is committed to supporting employers develop inclusive, diverse, and confident workforces. In terms of your journey in this area, is there any way that Ulster University can support your organisation? (n=215/1 missing)

Undergraduate Recruitment

The majority of the sample (77.3%) had offered placement¹⁴ opportunities in the last 24 months (Figure 22), and this figure is largely consistent with findings from the 2021 Graduate Employer Survey.

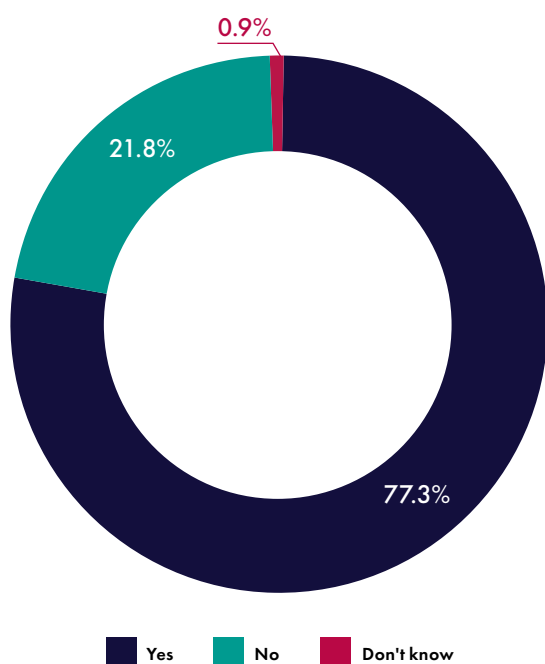


Figure 22: Within the last 24 months, have you offered placement opportunities within your organisation? (n=216)

¹⁴The following definition of placement was provided to survey respondents: placements form a partnership between organisations and universities. They are typically undertaken by a student in the penultimate year of study and entail full-time supervised work of between 6 and 12 months. They are often referred to as a sandwich placement.

Headline Findings



A high proportion of respondents recruited placement students (77.3%).



Respondents typically recruit placement students into longer-term paid roles following the culmination of their placement.



Lack of time/resources was the most common reason cited for not engaging in placement.



A traditional 12-month full-time placement was identified as the respondents' preferred placement model.



September was identified as the most suitable time of year for recruiters to commence a placement role.

As illustrated in Figure 23, the majority of respondents that recruit placement students typically re-recruit these students into longer-term paid roles, either immediately after their placement contract terminates or after the students have completed their degree programme (67.7%). Those respondents that stated that they did not re-recruit placement students were asked to indicate why. A number noted that they had no vacancies, while some stated that students were either uninterested or unavailable to remain in the organisation on a longer-term basis or were unsuitable for roles. Others noted that the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted their re-recruitment of placement students.

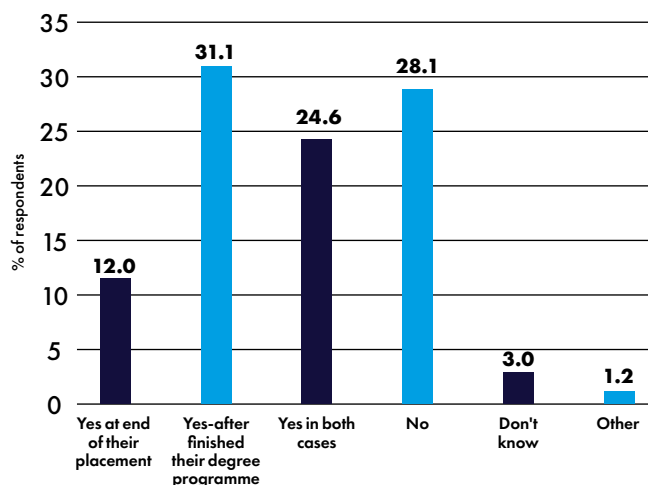


Figure 23: Have you recruited any placement students into long term roles? (n=167)



Respondents that stated they had not offered any placement opportunities in the last 24 months (n=47), were asked why they did not engage in this model. As displayed in Figure 24, the most common response cited was 'do not have the time/resources to manage it' (42.6%), followed by 'we have no

suitable roles' (34%). A significant proportion stated that they had not been approached about the possibility of offering placement opportunities (21.3%). Many of those that selected 'other' stated that they had not hired placement students due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

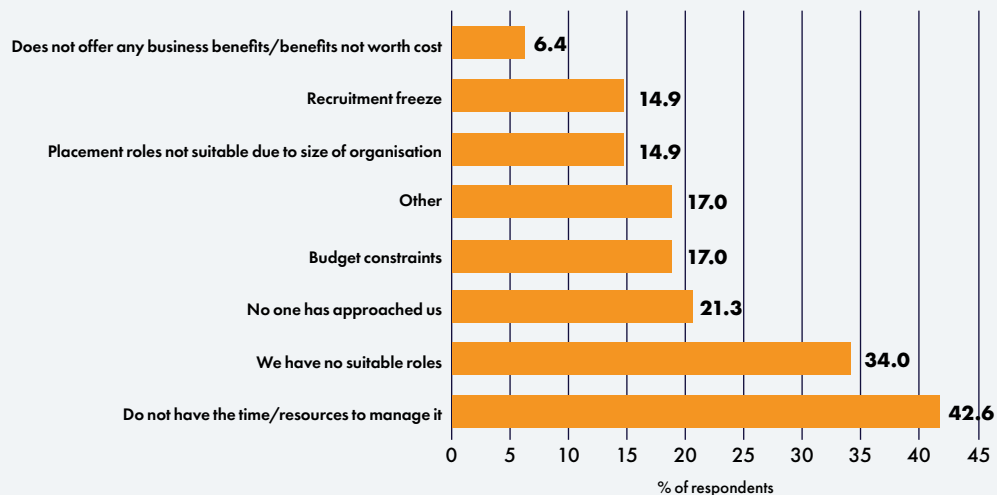


Figure 24: Why organisations have not engaged in placements (n=47/multiple choice question)

All respondents were asked which type of placement model would best suit their needs. As presented in Figure 25, many respondents indicated a strong preference for the traditional 12-month full-time model (68.5%). Sub-group analysis revealed that the majority of respondents in the Construction/Engineering (92.3%), Manufacturing (85%) and IT/Computing (77.8%) sectors showed a strong preference for the 12-month full-time placement contract.

Just over one-quarter of respondents (26.4%) indicated a preference towards the 6-month full-time contract. The most popular start date for placement student contracts was September (26.4%), followed by May (16.7%). Just 10.6% of respondents indicated that they would prefer students to work on a short-term contract (less than 6 months) on a defined project. Respondents expressed limited appetite for part-time placement student contracts.

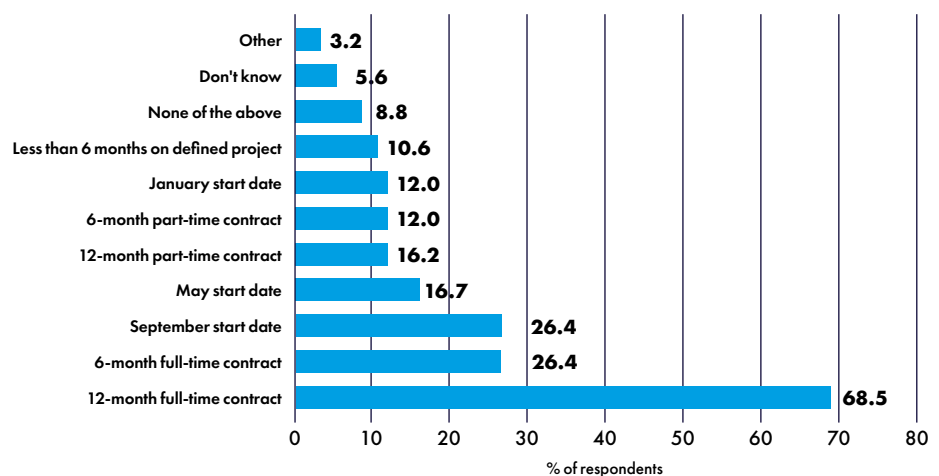


Figure 25: Placement model options preferred by organisations (n=216/multiple choice question)

Collaboration with Higher Education Institutions

The survey explored the current level of engagement that respondents have with higher education institutions across a range of teaching and learning and work-based learning activities (aside from placement), and their attitudes towards engaging in these activities. Results for this question are presented in Figure 26. 'Internships' (i.e. shorter work experience opportunities, typically less than 6 months), had the highest level of engagement amongst respondents (43.1%), and this aligns with findings from the 2021 Graduate Employer Survey. 'Projects with students' was the next most common activity (34%). One-quarter of respondents had contributed to the delivery of teaching and learning activities, including assessments. The activities that respondents were least likely to have participated in included the 'design of the degree curriculum' (16.9%) and the 'quality approval of degree programmes' (12.3%). Respondents were most likely to express a desire to participate in the delivery of teaching and learning' (55.1%), 'design of the degree curriculum' (51.1%), 'projects with students' (43.3%) and 'quality approval of degree programmes' (40.7%).

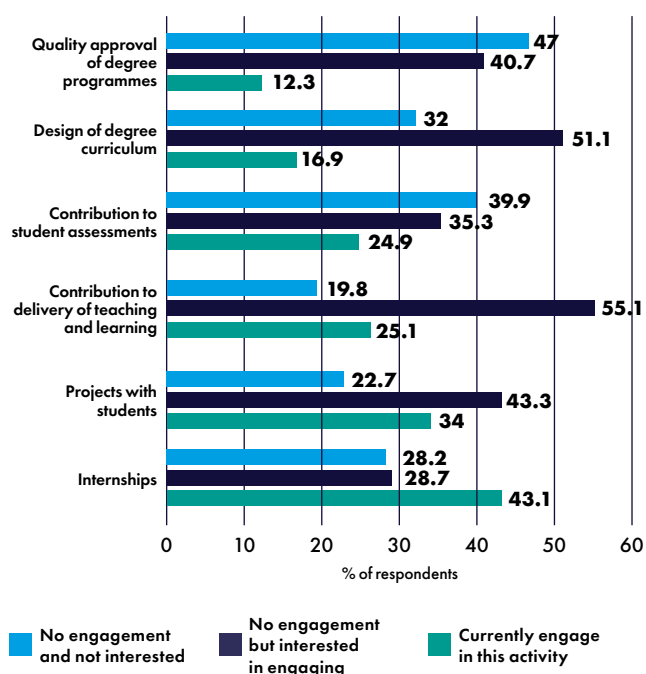


Figure 26: Current levels of engagement in collaborative activities with higher education institutions (n=216)

Headline Findings



Respondents were most likely to have engaged in internships.



Respondents were least likely to have participated in activities linked to degree quality approval and curriculum design.



Respondents were most likely to express a desire to engage with and contribute to the delivery of teaching and learning, the design of degree curriculum, projects with students, and the quality approval of degree programmes.

Respondents were subsequently asked to share any collaborative activities that they would like to explore with Ulster University to support their talent management programmes. A number stated that they were willing and keen to engage with students on campus either in the co-curriculum or through extra-curricular activities to promote their sector, to raise the profile of their company, to raise awareness of opportunities in their company, and to provide recruitment advice. Notably, several respondents stated there should be more opportunities to support the talent management activities of smaller companies:

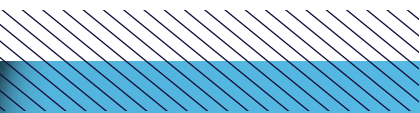
"...more involvement between the NI tech scene and universities so that talent doesn't just go to the big employers. More skilled students could support the start-ups and scaleups in NI if given the right training, support, and guidance. More exposure to these as an opportunity would be useful."

Some respondents stated that they were keen to explore opportunities to collaborate with students on specific company projects and others expressed a desire for enhanced access to Ulster's graduate talent pool:

"Engagement in any communities with graduates who left university in recent years and have a couple of years experience"

Summary of Key Findings

- 61.7% reported that graduate intake will increase over the next 12 months.
- Respondents were most likely to recruit from Engineering (22.2%) and Computing and Intelligent Systems (21.8%) degree subject areas.
- 30.6% recruit from all subject areas.
- 72.2% reported the average starting salary of their graduates was £21,000+.
- The IT/Computing sector was most likely to pay their graduates a starting salary of £26k+.
- Respondents were most likely to use 'social media' and their 'company's website' to promote graduate vacancies.
- 'Face-to-face interviews' were most likely to be used for graduate selection.
- Respondents were more likely to use 'CVs' (73.6%) than 'application forms' (61.1%) in their selection activities.
- 'Gamification' and 'virtual reality' proved very unpopular selection activities amongst respondents.
- 'Relevant work experience' was rated as being the most important factor in the selection of graduate recruits, closely followed by 'work placement', 'additional independent learning' and 'degree classification'.
- 'Verbal' and 'written communication' skills received the highest soft skill importance rating by respondents, closely followed by 'problem solving' and 'resilience'.
- The degree specific/technical skills areas prioritised by employers were most likely to relate to IT/Computing.
- A significant proportion of respondents (39.4%) stated there is an undersupply of graduate skills, and this view was most likely to be held by respondents in the IT/Computing, Construction/Engineering and Healthcare sectors.
- The Business/Management/Finance sector was least likely to state there was an undersupply of skills.
- Employers suggested that skills deficits can be addressed through the 'promotion and development of work-based learning and extra-curricular activities', 'applied learning opportunities', 'promotion of industry sectors', and 'recruitment/ employability support'.
- Over half of respondents had experienced graduate recruitment challenges, which marked a significant increase from the 2021 Graduate Employer Survey.
- 'Too few candidates' and a 'shortage of candidates' from specific degree disciplines were the challenges most commonly experienced.
- 'Work readiness' levels of graduates and a 'shortage of candidates with relevant work-related experiences' were other notable challenges.



- Respondents were most likely to have used graduate programmes to support the recruitment and development of employees.
- 19.4% had utilised Higher-Level Apprenticeships.
- Close to two-thirds of respondents (63.4%) stated that Higher-Level Apprenticeships were important in developing the skills and talent of their organisation.
- 25.9% of respondents stated that they required support from Ulster University in developing an inclusive, diverse, and confident workforce.
- A high proportion of respondents recruited placement students (77.3%).
- Respondents typically recruit placement students into longer term paid roles following the culmination of their placement.
- Lack of time/resources was the most common reason cited for not engaging in placement.
- A traditional 12-month full-time placement was the preferred placement model.
- September was identified as the most suitable time of year for commencing placement.
- The survey explored the current level of engagement that respondents have with higher education institutions across a range of teaching, learning and work-based learning activities (excluding placement).
- Respondents were most likely to have engaged in internships.
- Respondents were least likely to have participated in activities linked to degree quality approval and curriculum design.
- Respondents were most likely to express a desire to engage with and contribute to the delivery of teaching and learning, the design of degree curriculum, projects with students, and the quality approval of degree programmes.



Conclusions and Implications

Placement and Work-Based Learning

Results from this study evidence the popularity and value of the yearlong placement model amongst the graduate employer community. For example, over 90% of respondents stated that placement experience is a key criterion in the recruitment of graduates and over two-thirds stated they typically re-recruit placement students into graduate positions. Notably, respondents identified work-based learning opportunities such as placement as key to resolving the current graduate skills gap and a considerable proportion (68.5%) stated they preferred the 12-month full-time placement option over other model types. These results mirror findings from the 2021 Graduate Employer Survey.

Support for the yearlong placement model is also strong amongst the student community with 87.6% of respondents to Ulster's 2022 Placement Student Survey stating they would recommend placement to others. The key benefits of placement identified by students included an opportunity for applied learning, professional network development, social interaction and connectedness, transition into the world of work, technical and soft skills development, industry insights, and confirming career choices. The respondents suggested improvements to the yearlong placement model based on their experiences. These included more office working, increased variation in workload, more interaction with placement peers, and improvements in pay. It is important that Ulster and employers alike are cognisant of this feedback as student engagement and their attitudes towards placement are not only central to the sustainability of the model but are key drivers of student success.

While the yearlong placement model is clearly valued amongst the graduate employer and student communities, there are signs that the importance of other work-based learning pathways such as graduate programmes and Higher-Level Apprenticeships are gaining traction amongst employers. For example, 43.1% of survey respondents had engaged in internships, and while uptake of Higher-Level Apprenticeships was relatively low, 63.4% stated these pathways would be important in developing the skills and talent of their organisations in the future.

It is noteworthy that a significant proportion of employers stated that work readiness of candidates and a shortage of candidates with relevant work experience were significant graduate recruitment challenges. As such, there is clearly scope to ensure that new and existing work experience pathways are scaled across the institution to support the recruitability and employability outcomes of students and to meet the needs of employers. However, any such development activity should be mindful of the barriers preventing employers from engaging in work-based learning and development programmes, which include lack of resources, no suitable roles, and lack of awareness.

While work-based learning programmes such as placements are popular amongst the student population at Ulster, it is important that the benefits of emerging career pathways such as Higher-Level Apprenticeships are promoted amongst prospective students. Ulster University is the largest provider of Higher-Level Apprenticeships (degree level) in Northern Ireland, with 600 degree apprentices enrolled in 2022. Today many careers across industries including Law, Business, Marketing, and IT have viable routes through the apprenticeship system, and apprenticeship pay is currently increasing at a faster rate than graduate pay¹⁵, however evidence suggests stigma exists around apprenticeships. For example, the Prospects Early Careers Survey 2022 found that just 12% of young people would like to do an apprenticeship¹⁶. A considerable proportion of the sample stated that a degree has a better reputation than an apprenticeship and one in ten stated that their parents were against the apprenticeship pathway. The research highlights the influence family members can have on the career decisions of young people, with school students much more likely to seek advice from family members than careers professionals.

¹⁵<https://hrnews.co.uk/graduate-salaries-rise-at-fastest-rate-in-20-years-yet-apprentice-pay-grows-faster/>

¹⁶<https://luminate.prospects.ac.uk/stigma-surrounding-apprenticeships-is-impacting-students-career-choices>

Strength of the Graduate Labour Market

It is encouraging that a significant proportion of respondents (61.7%) stated that in the next 12 months, their graduate intake is likely to experience an increase. These findings may seem surprising considering the current economic outlook. However as outlined in the most recent What Do Graduates Do research report¹⁷, those graduates that entered the job market during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 had very positive employability outcomes (74% in professional-level employment). In addition, trends from the last recession show that the graduate labour market was least affected, and currently the largest increase in online job advertisements is within the graduate market¹⁸. These insights evidence the quality, resilience, and adaptability of UK graduates and demonstrate that employers have a need to recruit and retain graduates. Indeed, as noted by Chris Rea, Head of Commercial Services at Prospects, the demand for professional level candidates is largely constant regardless of the state of the economy.

It is concerning however that findings from this research also show that the proportion of respondents reporting challenges in graduate recruitment has significantly increased (+27.4 percentage points) from the 2021 survey, with too few candidates, shortage of candidates from specific degree disciplines, work readiness, and lack of relevant work experience amongst the main challenges cited. This trend seems to be mirrored across the sector with the latest research from High Fliers purporting that graduate vacancy applications

have decreased by 7% year-on-year¹⁹. The Institute of Student Employers (ISE) notes that these recruitment difficulties may be due to students' and graduates' misconceptions around the realities of the graduate labour market and students prioritising missed social experiences over the development of their career pathways²⁰. This suggests that there is scope to educate students and graduates about the realities of the graduate labour market, particularly during a recession, and to connect student and graduate talent to jobs and work experience opportunities. Notably, Prospect's research found that many students do not actively engage with employers until their final year of study, when opportunities to complete many work experience pathways such as placements have passed²¹. They go on to provide a number of recommendations for employers around engaging first and second year students including working with student societies, raising awareness and the profile of the SME sector, increasing campus presence, sharing values, and using inclusive language.

¹⁷https://graduatemarkettrends.cdn.prismic.io/graduatemarkettrends/71145492-99f4-4134-9e6f-8e694edb398f_what-do-graduates-do-2023.pdf

¹⁸<https://luminate.prospects.ac.uk/recession-but-not-as-we-know-it>

¹⁹https://www.highfliers.co.uk/download/2022/graduate_market/GM22-report.pdf

²⁰https://graduatemarkettrends.cdn.prismic.io/graduatemarkettrends/71145492-99f4-4134-9e6f-8e694edb398f_what-do-graduates-do-2023.pdf

²¹<https://luminate.prospects.ac.uk/how-employers-can-engage-with-first-and-second-year-students>



Widening Access to Opportunities

Research conducted by UUEPC notes that Northern Ireland has the lowest disability employment rate in the UK and has the largest employment gap between graduates with disabilities and those without²². The report purports that increasing the participation of people with disabilities in the labour market will help employers access a larger pool of diverse talent and is key to tackling labour and skills shortages within the region. In terms of graduate employment, Ulster's Graduate Outcomes data (n=6,491²³) also shows that the professional level employment rate of graduates with disabilities lags behind those without disabilities. Elsewhere, research has found that a lack of work experience is one of the major barriers preventing people with disabilities from becoming economically active, particularly graduate cohorts²⁴. Employers also face barriers when attempting to recruit graduates with disabilities, including a lack of awareness of the support available to effectively transition students and graduates into the workplace²⁵.

Ulster University's Graduate Outcomes data reveals that students with disabilities are less likely to complete placement than their non-disabled counterparts. Considering the strong emphasis graduate recruiters place on relevant work experience as part of their recruitment activities, non-placement uptake is likely to be a factor in the poorer graduate employment outcomes experienced by students with disabilities. It is also concerning that this data reveals that those students with disabilities that do placement are significantly less likely to secure professional employment post-graduation than their non-disabled counterparts, which indicates that even those students with relevant work experience are struggling to access the graduate labour market.

Ulster University is implementing interventions, such as the Graduate Boost Programme²⁶, to support the transition into the labour market of graduates with disabilities, and is working alongside employers to develop and enhance inclusive recruitment practice. However, alongside graduate interventions, it is also vital that students with disabilities have access to work experience opportunities such as placements and internships from the outset of their learning journeys and receive effective support when they secure these roles. Notably, just 25.9% of respondents to the 2022 Graduate Employer Survey stated that they required support in developing inclusive, diverse, and confident workforces. Perhaps more tellingly 44% stated they were 'unsure' while 30.1% stated 'no'. In light of Northern Ireland's ongoing challenges in tackling employability outcomes for people

with disabilities, there is clearly significant scope to raise awareness amongst graduate employers of their role in reducing the disability employment gap in Northern Ireland and the benefits this can offer around increasing access to talent pools.

Several survey respondents stated they require support around attracting students and graduates from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to their roles. Notably, Ulster University's Graduate Outcomes data shows that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to do placement than those from more affluent backgrounds. While there is likely to be a range of barriers preventing these groups from accessing work experience opportunities, an article from Prospects discusses the implications of unpaid work experience opportunities on students from less affluent backgrounds²⁷. Unpaid work experience has been a longstanding challenge within the higher education careers sector, and the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the issue²⁸. AGCAS has developed a new Work Experience Standard²⁹, which sets out the preferred requirements for work experience opportunities that universities expect to be met before roles are advertised, and a Good Practice Guide to support employers in ensuring that opportunities are not only of a high standard but are fair and accessible to all³⁰. It is important that those within the higher education sector in Northern Ireland endorse, adopt, and promote these resources to tackle those barriers faced by less affluent and more marginalised students and graduates when accessing work experience and job opportunities.

²²<https://www.ulster.ac.uk/epc/publications/2022>

²³Based on sample of full-time undergraduate students that fully completed the Graduate Outcomes Survey in 2017/2018, 2018/2019, and 2019/2020.

²⁴<https://www.policyconnect.org.uk/research/arriving-thriving-learning-disabled-students-ensure-access-all>

²⁵<https://www.leonardcheshire.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/reimagining-the-workplace-disability-inclusive-employment.pdf>

²⁶<https://www.ulster.ac.uk/graduateboost>

²⁷<https://www.prospects.ac.uk/prospects-press-office/pandemic-internships-more-likely-to-be-unpaid-and-face-to-face>

²⁸https://graduatemarkettrends.cdn.prismic.io/graduatemarkettrends/bf3409a0-b8d2-406e-b56b-a4720cf327a7_early-careers-survey-2021-work-experience-during-a-crisis.pdf

²⁹<https://www.agcas.org.uk/AGCAS-Work-Experience-Standard>

³⁰<https://www.agcas.org.uk/The-Good-Practice-Guide>



Recruitment Practices

Findings from the survey reveal that the top three activities respondents plan to use for marketing and attraction activities were through online channels, including 'social media', 'company website' and 'other online vacancy platforms'. Findings from this research also indicate a re-emergence of face-to-face activity. For example, when provided with dual options for involvement in online and in-person activities such as recruitment fairs, interviews and workshops, respondents were more likely to select the in-person options. This is noteworthy in light of the complete transition to virtual environments for many of these types of recruitment activities over the last two years. As documented earlier in this report, Ulster University has received significant demand from employers to engage with students through on-campus events such as careers fairs. This demand aligns with recent research from the ISE which revealed that employers find that face-to-face activities leads to better engagement and is currently in demand from students³¹. In addition, there is a growing evidence base across the sector which suggests that employers have been dissatisfied with virtual careers fairs³².

Novel approaches to graduate recruitment including virtual reality and gamification proved to be very unpopular amongst respondents. Elsewhere, however, the ISE purports that the use of artificial intelligence is gaining traction, with reports that one in ten employers are using it in their selection activities³³. It will be important to track any increases in engagement in these approaches over the coming years and prepare students accordingly.

While this research shows a shift in emphasis towards face-to-face activities for some aspects of graduate recruitment such as careers fairs and interviews, it will be important to assess employer and student satisfaction with these and monitor to what extent they re-emerge over the coming years. Inclusivity was one of the main benefits of virtual recruitment brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic with, for example, students able to progress applications without the need to travel. It is important that employers are mindful of these benefits when planning the nature of recruitment practices going forward, particularly as widening and diversifying talent pools will play a key role in reducing skills gaps in the region.



A notable finding from this survey is that 30.6% of employers recruit graduates from any degree subject area. This figure more than doubled for those respondents from the Business/Management/Finance sector (66.7%) and was lowest for respondents from the Healthcare sector (4.8%). Across the UK, the ISE purports that the importance of a specific degree subject area is declining in prominence amongst graduate recruiters³⁴.

Findings from this research indicate that degree classification remains important for employers, however, it is notable that the figure drops significantly for the Healthcare sector. Elsewhere the importance of degree classification has been found to be in decline amongst the graduate employer community, with the ISE reporting that between 2021 and 2022 the proportion of employers stipulating a 2:1 degree as a minimum entry criteria fell by 9 percentage points to 48%³⁵. Notably, PwC, one of the UK's largest graduate employers, announced in 2022 that it would be removing the 2:1 degree classification for all its undergraduate, placement, and graduate roles³⁶. It will be important to monitor and track the importance of both degree subject area and degree classification over the coming years amongst recruiters active in Northern Ireland's graduate labour market.

Degree classification and degree subject area may be declining in prominence amongst graduate recruiters, however it is important not to overlook the range of other factors employers emphasise on in selection activities. As mentioned previously in the report, employers place unanimous significance on work experience gained through work-based learning opportunities embedded into programmes of study and other types of relevant work experience. Additional independent learning and extra-curricular experience are also clearly valued by employers. While postgraduate qualifications and professional body registration were less popular amongst respondents, it would be remiss to overlook these criteria particularly for specific industry sectors. It is important that students are made aware of the variety and combination of factors that influence graduate recruiters during selection, and employability professionals have a vital role to play in raising this awareness.

³¹<https://luminate.prospects.ac.uk/how-are-employers-working-with-educators-this-year>

³²https://www.highfliers.co.uk/download/2022/graduate_market/GM22-report.pdf

³³<https://luminate.prospects.ac.uk/how-graduate-recruitment-has-changed-in-2022>

³⁴<https://www.fenews.co.uk/education/less-than-half-of-graduate-employers-stipulate-21-degree-for-first-time-institute-of-student-employers/>

³⁵<https://www.fenews.co.uk/education/less-than-half-of-graduate-employers-stipulate-21-degree-for-first-time-institute-of-student-employers/>

³⁶<https://www.pwc.co.uk/press-room/press-releases/pwc-removes-2-1-criteria-for-undergraduate-and-graduate-roles-to.html>



Skills

Of the eleven soft skills that employers were asked to rate for importance, verbal communication skills received the highest score followed by written communication skills. These findings align with those published in the 2021 Graduate Employer Survey Report. The Healthcare sector was most likely to rank communication skills highly in comparison to the other sectors analysed. The Ulster Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC) forecasts that of the 49,400 jobs expected to be created by 2030, the health and social care sector will see the largest growth (+9,330 jobs)³⁷. This emphasises the importance of embedding soft skills development, particularly around communication, within the content of Ulster's programmes that are likely to supply the talent required to fill these roles over the coming years.

Each year Ulster University surveys all students at the onset of the academic year through online registration across a range of employability related topics. One of the questions pertains to skills, with students asked, 'what skills are most important to your future career'. For the 2022/2023 final year full-time undergraduate cohort (n=21,236), the skill with the highest rating was commercial awareness (19.4%), followed by self-confidence (17.6%) and digital literacy (16.2%). Notably, this research found that commercial awareness was one of the least popular skills amongst employers. Just over one-tenth (10.6%) of students stated that communicating professionally is important to their future career, which again is at odds with the level of importance employers place on this skill. These findings indicate a misalignment between the level of importance graduate employers and students place on key soft skills and suggests there is room to raise students' awareness of the top skills required by the graduate labour market.

When employers were presented with an open-ended question on their organisation's skill priority areas, technical/degree related skills proved most popular, and many of those identified related to skills utilised by the IT/Computing sector. The UUEPC expects significant growth in job roles in this sector by 2030 (+7,480), which ties in with the Department for the Economy's timeframe to redevelop the skills system of the region. It is worrying however that the IT/Computing sector was most likely to state there was an undersupply of graduate skills, and it will be important to monitor this finding over coming years. Employers provided suggestions around how the higher education sector can alleviate the graduate skills gap. Alongside calls for more work-based learning and applied learning opportunities, a number stated that they required support in promoting their sectors, particularly amongst a more diverse range of students. The IT sector has enjoyed considerable growth in recent years in Northern Ireland, and the sector has huge economic significance in terms of improving Northern Ireland's productivity performance. It is vital that the higher education sector, employers, and policy makers alike work together to respond to the recruitment demands and challenges currently faced by the sector to ensure a sustainable and inclusive supply of talent.

³⁷https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/1470435/UUEPC-Winter-Outlook-2022.pdf





ulster.ac.uk/talent