Graduate Employer Survey Report 2025

Ulster University

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SKILLS
TALENT
RECRUITMENT
PLACEMENTS
SALARIES
ARTIFICIAL
INTELLIGENCE

Acknowledgements from the Author

I would like to thank all 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 this research, contributed to the design and dissemination of the survey, and supported the review of this report.

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Strategic Project Officer

> **"** *Feedback from our employer partners has enabled us to provide a comprehensive overview of current practices in graduate employment, offering insights and actionable recommendations for higher education institutions, employers, and policymakers alike.*

Foreword
from Professor Angela Scanlon

The 2025 Ulster University Graduate Employer Survey continues to demonstrate the strength and added value of partnership between Northern Ireland employers and Higher Education (HE). Thanks to our partners, we have seen a significant year-on-year increase in our survey response rate. This publication shares the voice of well over 300 NI employers. We acknowledge the ongoing support from our partners as we continue to work together to strengthen our economy regionally and globally.

The global landscape of graduate employment continues to be influenced by advances in technology, economic shifts, and evolving societal expectations. The 2025 publication of our Graduate Employer Survey Report considers critical aspects necessary to meet the needs of a diverse and increasingly interconnected workforce. Evolutions such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), increasing costs and the needs of a changing and diverse workforce bring both challenge and opportunity. As universities and employers navigate a range of labour market changes, it's crucial to understand how to cultivate the skills and mindset that will enable graduates to thrive in the 21st century.

Feedback from our employer partners has enabled us to provide a comprehensive overview of current practices in graduate employment, offering insights and actionable recommendations for HE institutions, employers, and policymakers alike. By fostering a collaborative approach, we can ensure that graduates are well-prepared to contribute meaningfully to the global workforce and shape a more inclusive and equitable future for Northern Ireland.

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

- Creation of placements, graduate internships and work experience
- Designing curriculum and real-world projects for students and graduates
- Development of degree apprenticeships
- Workforce development and upskilling through flexible part-time provision
- Engagement in sector focused Employer Advisory Boards
- Research and innovation

We welcome the opportunity to connect and work together.

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Professor Angela Scanlon
Director of Student and Graduate Success

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Executive Summary

The 2025 Ulster University Graduate Employer Survey marks the third iteration of the survey. Since it was launched in 2021, the survey has cemented its status as a key pillar of employer engagement at Ulster University, whereby the voice of industry partners active in the Northern Ireland graduate labour market, is captured on a range of topics. The survey's focus is graduate recruitment, with questions on core topics including intake, starting salaries, skills, recruitment and selection methods, degree apprenticeships and placement. The three iterations of the survey have resulted in the development of a rich dataset, which has facilitated the tracking of trends and changes over time. Survey design has remained purposefully agile to facilitate the addition of new, one-off topics that reflect emerging trends in graduate recruitment, with the 2025 survey including questions on Artificial Intelligence (AI) and international student recruitment. Over the last four years, the information acquired through the survey has been disseminated to key institutional stakeholders, including those responsible for shaping and delivering teaching and learning content at Ulster. This process of dissemination, coupled with up-to-date relevant information from employers, has ensured that the talent and skills pipeline from Ulster University remains responsive to industry needs.

The 2025 respondent count is the largest to date, with 314 separate organisations completing the survey, marking a 45.4% increase on the 2022 respondent total. This is a testament to the excellent networks and partnerships that exist between Ulster University staff and industry partners. In addition, the 2025 methodology introduced a hybrid approach, blending both online and paper copy survey distribution. This marked a shift from the purely online dissemination approach that was utilised in previous versions of the survey. Paper copy distribution was channelled through the 2024 Ulster University Autumn Careers Fair series. Approximately 200 individual organisations attended these events, which were held across Ulster's three campuses throughout October and November 2024. Completed surveys were returned for 50% of Fair attendees, and as such, it is likely this blended methodological approach will be incorporated into future iterations of the survey.

Findings from the survey indicate a recruitment slowdown in the local graduate labour market, with a significant decline from the 2022 survey in the proportion of respondents stating that their intake is likely to increase and more respondents stating that there is likely to be 'no change' in their graduate intake. This finding largely corresponds with trends emerging across the wider UK graduate labour market, with a reduction in professional services hiring attributed to economic contraction and government policies[1,2]. Student competition in the graduate labour market has been cited as the stiffest on record, largely due to the slowdown in hiring coupled with the widespread usage of AI amongst candidates, making it easier to apply for roles[3].

The average starting salary of graduate recruits was most likely to fall into the 21-25K salary band, which mirrors findings from the 2022 survey and the latest data from the Graduate Outcomes Survey. However, there has been a notable shift towards the higher salary bands, with the £26-£30K and £31-£35K bands both recording significant increases since 2022. Meanwhile, there has been a continued decline in those organisations stating that they paid their graduates less than £18K.

The survey findings indicate that traditional activities and methods associated with the graduate recruitment process have withstood the significant disruption that was brought about by the Covid pandemic. For example, since 2022, marketing and attraction activities such as online recruitment fairs and online workshops and information sessions have decreased in popularity, while respondents were more likely to have engaged with in-person versions of these activities. In addition, the use of face-to-face interviews has remained the most popular selection method utilised by many recruiters, while the prevalence of online interviews has decreased. The use of technologies such as virtual reality and gamification has remained very unpopular amongst respondents, with little to no uptake reported.

One technology that has rapidly emerged in recruitment since the 2022 survey is AI. AI has become a pressing and important trend, and as such, it was considered imperative to capture employer views and practices surrounding this topic. Findings point to a local recruitment market that is not using AI and has concerns about the usage of AI amongst candidates. For example, respondents were more likely to emphasise the risks that AI can present to graduate recruitment than the benefits, with many noting that candidates are using AI tools to exaggerate and misrepresent their skills and abilities. In addition, a notable theme that emerged was the significant proportion of respondents who stated they were 'unsure' when presented with questions about AI and graduate recruitment, signalling either mixed feelings or limited knowledge about the technology.

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 emerging trends since the launch of the survey in 2021. Deep dives into two significant trends impacting recruitment, namely skills-based hiring and AI, are also included.

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 views, practices, experiences, and needs of industry partners.

1 https://luminate.prospects.ac.uk/5-predictions-for-graduate-recruitment-in-2025
2 https://luminate.prospects.ac.uk/whats-the-state-of-graduate-recruitment-in-2024
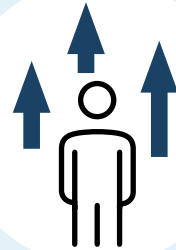3 https://www.ft.com/content/99435752-ac15-44de-8dd6-79467c277611

Key Findings

45%
reported graduate intake will increase over the next year

46%
reported an average graduate starting salary of £26,000+

80%
re-recruit placement students

90%
stated degree classification is important in graduate selection

90%
stated work experience (including placement) is important in graduate selection

32%
recruited international students into graduate roles

21%
experienced retention challenges

35%
reported an undersupply of graduate skills

4%
adopted AI into recruitment processes

Teamwork/collaboration and verbal communication rated top employability skills

Methodology

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

Graduate recruitment intake

Salaries

Organisational priorities

Recruitment and selection

Skills

Recruitment challenges

Retention

Placement

International student recruitment

Artificial intelligence

To facilitate trend analysis, the survey revisited several questions featured in previous iterations of the survey. In addition, new topics were included, namely international student recruitment and artificial intelligence.

Questions on these topics were developed in collaboration with key university stakeholders including representatives from committees and working groups. Most 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 30th October 2024 and closed on 20th December 2024, and the target sample included hiring specialists based in companies active in the Northern Ireland graduate labour market[4].

The survey was disseminated through the following Ulster University channels:

- 2024 Autumn Careers Fairs
- Employer Advisory Boards
- Faculty Employability Sub-Committees
- Placement Tutors
- Employability and Graduate Futures Department representatives
- Graduate Internship and Graduate Leadership Programme distribution lists
- Ulster University Economic Policy Centre
- Social media platforms

Survey dissemination through the Ulster University Autumn Careers Fairs was the most significant addition to the methodology. This involved disseminating paper copies to Fair attendees. Approximately 200 individual organisations attended the Careers Fairs, and 101 surveys were returned through this channel. Data was entered into the JISC survey platform.

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

The survey was also disseminated through external channels including sector body websites and newsletters such as the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA).

A total of 338 respondents completed the survey, however several duplicates were identified and following cleaning, the final respondent count was 314. This marks a 45.4% increase on the 2022 survey respondent count (n=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, 849 separate organisations had advertised opportunities, indicating 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 Microsoft Excel, which facilitated cleaning, coding, and recoding activities.

Excel was also used for data analysis. Analysis was conducted for the sectors with the highest respondent share. These included Construction/ Engineering (n=66), Business/ Management/ Finance (n=46), IT/Computing (n=36), Manufacturing (n=30), and Healthcare (n=21).

The 2025 respondent profile marks a change from previous years, with the Construction/ Engineering sector occupying the largest respondent share, overtaking IT/ Computing by some margin and more larger organisations (500+ employees) completing the survey. This profile change may partly be a result of targeting respondents at the Autumn Careers Fairs, where a high proportion of attendees were from the Construction/ Engineering sector. The Fairs also typically tend to attract larger organisations with dedicated early career hiring teams. Nonetheless, those who participate in the Fairs do so because they are actively recruiting graduates, and as such, the representativeness of the respondent profile is not considered to be detrimentally impacted by this methodological approach.

Profile of Respondents

Profile Summary

89.8%
of respondents had offices in Northern Ireland.

The sectors with the highest share of respondents were Construction / Engineering, Business / Management / Finance, IT / Computing, Manufacturing, and Healthcare.
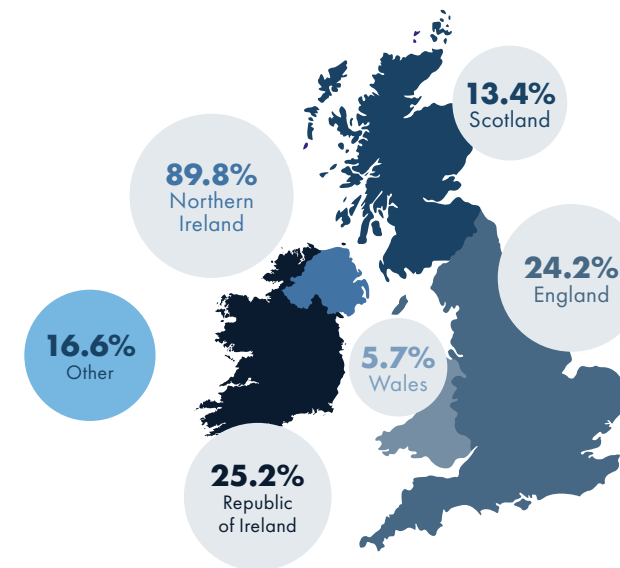
53.5%
of respondents were from small-medium sized organisations, while 36.9% were from larger organisations (500+ employees).
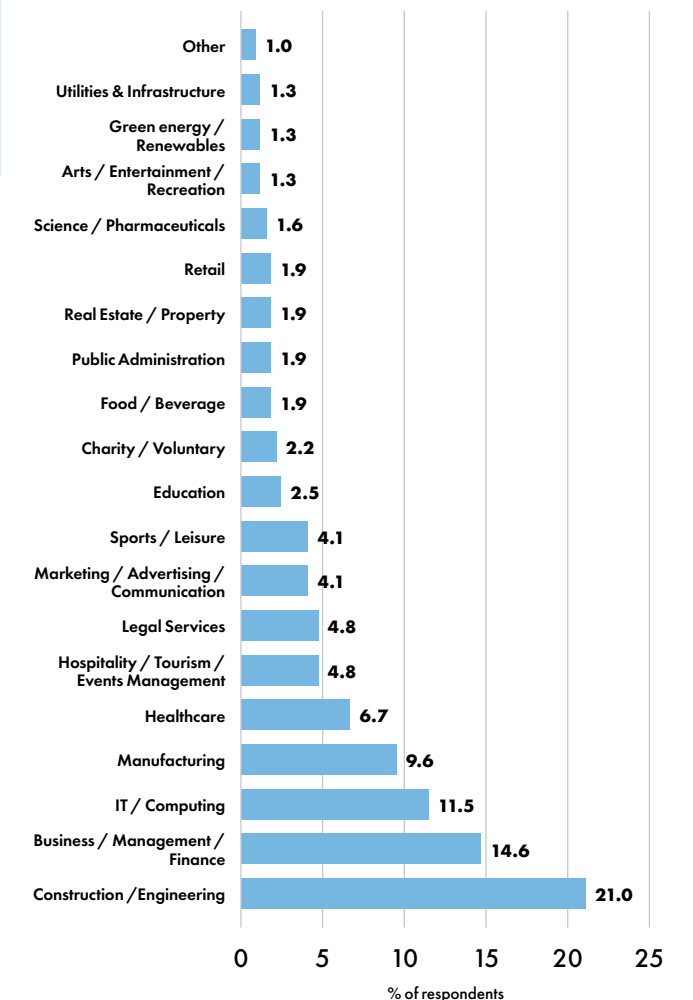
The top three priorities for organisations were 'company culture', 'employee well-being', and 'cost reduction and efficiency improvements'.
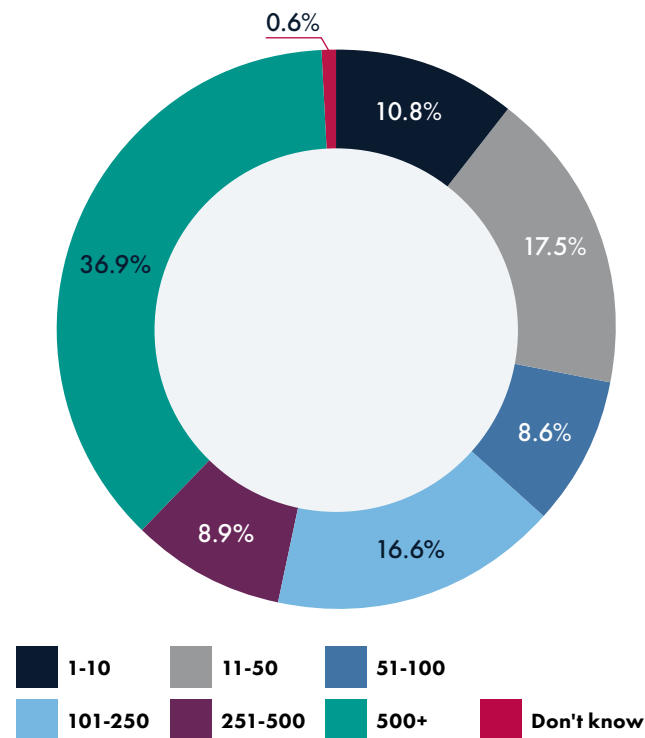
As illustrated in Figure 2, respondents came from a broad range of sectors. Construction/ Engineering had the highest representation, with 21% of respondents. Notably, this marks a shift from the 2022 survey, where Construction/ Engineering had the third-highest sector representation share. This is likely the result of a significant change to the survey methodology which involved paper copies of the survey being disseminated to employers at the 2024 Autumn series of Ulster University Careers Fairs. Of the 220 organisations that attended these fairs, the Construction/ Engineering sector had the highest representation and this likely accounts for the survey respondent profile. Other sectors with strong representation across the survey included Business/ Management/ Finance (14.6%), IT/ Computing (11.5%), Manufacturing (9.6%) and Healthcare (6.7%). Notably, the five sectors with the highest representation in this version of the survey mirror the top five from the 2022 survey.

Respondents were asked to indicate the regional location of their organisation's offices. As illustrated in Figure 1, the majority had offices in Northern Ireland (89.8%), while a significant proportion had offices in the Republic of Ireland (25.2%) and England (24.2%). Most who selected 'other' stated that they had offices located globally.

13.4% Scotland

89.8% Northern Ireland

24.2% England

16.6% Other

5.7% Wales

25.2% Republic of Ireland

Figure 1: Geographic spread of respondents (n=314/ multiple choice question)

Sector	% of respondents
Other	1.0
Utilities & Infrastructure	1.3
Green energy / Renewables	1.3
Arts / Entertainment / Recreation	1.3
Science / Pharmaceuticals	1.6
Retail	1.9
Real Estate / Property	1.9
Public Administration	1.9
Food / Beverage	1.9
Charity / Voluntary	2.2
Education	2.5
Sports / Leisure	4.1
Marketing / Advertising / Communication	4.1
Legal Services	4.8
Hospitality / Tourism / Events Management	4.8
Healthcare	6.7
Manufacturing	9.6
IT / Computing	11.5
Business / Management / Finance	14.6
Construction / Engineering	21.0

% of respondents

Figure 2: Primary industry sector breakdown of survey respondents (n=314)

Two-thirds of respondents (53.5%) were from small-medium sized organisations with 250 employees or less, while 36.9% of respondents were from larger organisations with 500+ employees (see Figure 3). In comparison to the 2022 survey, this profile marks a shift towards larger companies, with an increase of 10 percentage points in the 500+ employee band. This profile is similar to the proportion of SMEs that responded to the 2022 AHECS Graduate Employer Survey (54%)[5]. Notably, of the 80,045 businesses operating in Northern Ireland in 2024[6], 89% were micro-businesses with less than 10 employees, and just over 2% had 500+ employees, thus indicating that organisations active in the graduate labour market in Northern Ireland have a markedly different profile from the wider NI business community.
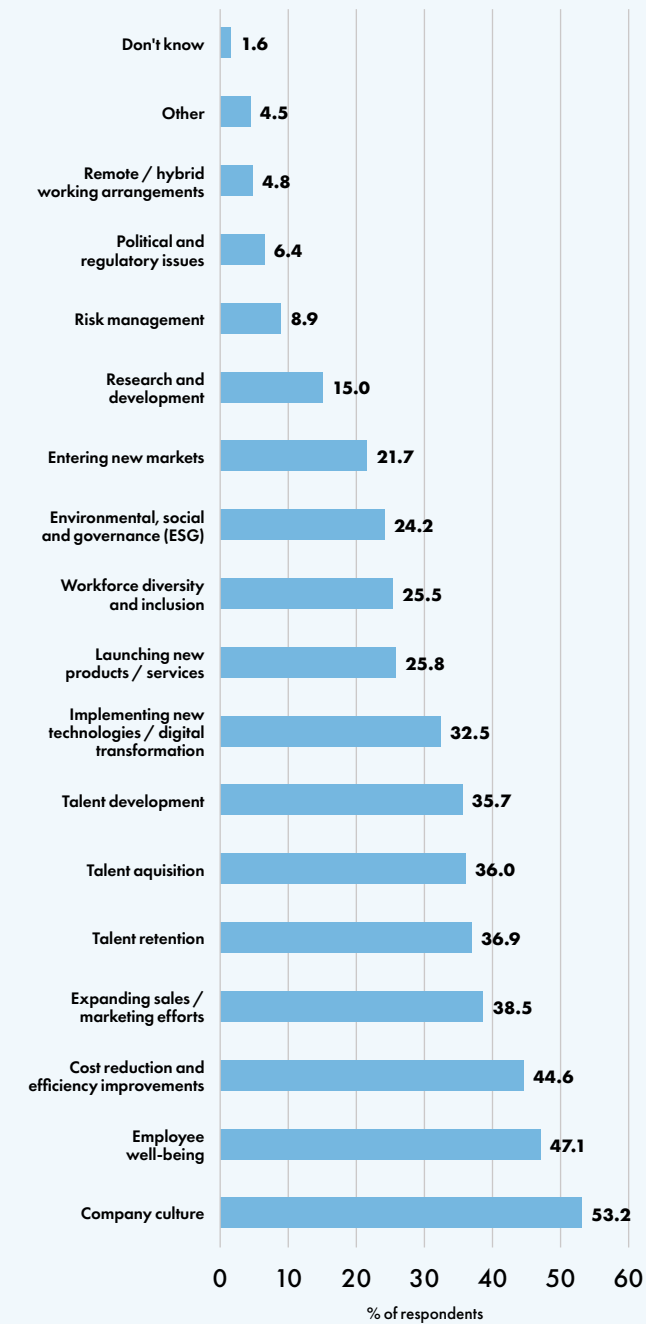
5 https://ahecs.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/AHECS-Graduate-Employers-Survey-2022-Presentation-for-Web.pdf
6 https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/news/northern-ireland-inter-departmental-business-register-statistics-2024

Legend:
- 1-10
- 11-50
- 51-100
- 101-250
- 251-500
- 500+
- Don't know

Figure 3: Number of staff employed by respondents (n=314)

Respondents were asked to select up to five organisational priorities (Figure 4), with the most popular being 'company culture' (53.2%), followed by 'employee well-being' (47.1%) and 'cost reduction and efficiency improvements' (44.6%).

Priority	% of respondents
Don't know	1.6
Other	4.5
Remote / hybrid working arrangements	4.8
Political and regulatory issues	6.4
Risk management	8.9
Research and development	15.0
Entering new markets	21.7
Environmental, social and governance (ESG)	24.2
Workforce diversity and inclusion	25.5
Launching new products / services	25.8
Implementing new technologies / digital transformation	32.5
Talent development	35.7
Talent aquisition	36.0
Talent retention	36.9
Expanding sales / marketing efforts	38.5
Cost reduction and efficiency improvements	44.6
Employee well-being	47.1
Company culture	53.2

Figure 4: Organisational priorities (n=314/ multiple choice question)

Findings

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

Graduate Intake and Salaries

Graduate Recruitment and Selection

Skills

Graduate Recruitment Challenges

Undergraduate Recruitment - Placement

International Student Recruits

AI and Graduate Recruitment

Graduate Intake and Salaries

45.1% of respondents stated that their graduate intake is likely to increase over the next 12 months. This marks a significant decrease of 16.6 percentage points since the 2022 survey (Figure 5). 42.1% stated that there was likely to be 'no change' in their graduate intake, which marks an increase of 7.9 percentage points from the previous survey. A higher proportion of respondents stated that there will be a decrease in their graduate intake in comparison to the 2022 survey (+8.8pp)'.
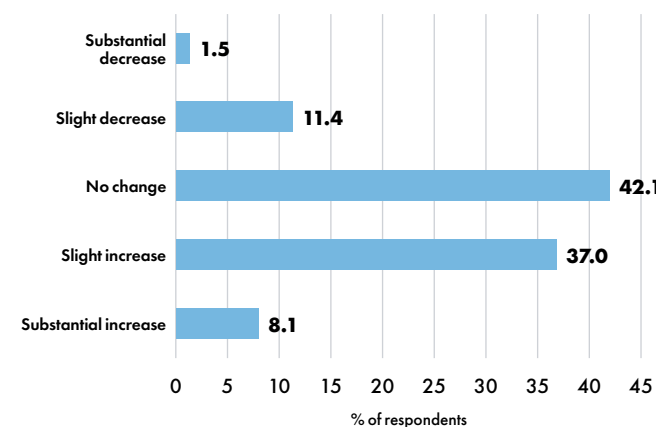
Figure 5: Expected changes in graduate intake over next 12-month period (n=273) following extraction of 'don't know' responses to facilitate comparison with 2022 survey data

Headline Findings

45.1%
reported that graduate intake will increase over the next 12 months which represents a 16.6 percentage point decrease since the 2022 survey.

The Construction / Engineering sector was most likely to indicate an increase in graduate intake over the next 12 months, while the Manufacturing sector was most likely to stipulate a decrease.

24.5%
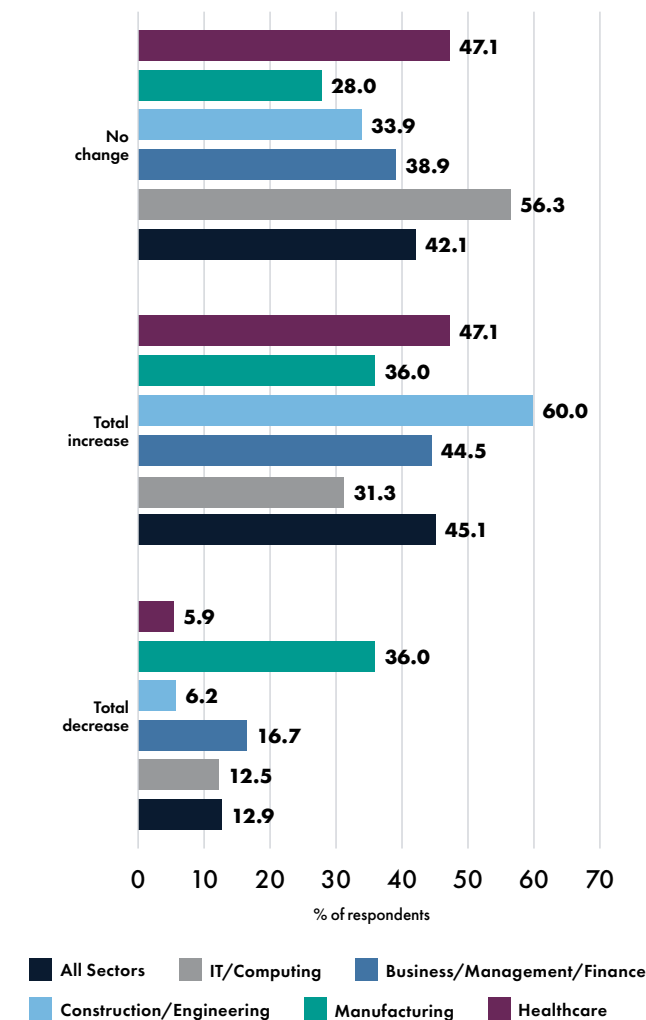recruited graduates from all subject areas.

The Business/ Management/ Finance sector was most likely to state that vacancies were open to applicants from all degree subject areas.

The average starting salary of graduate recruits was most likely to fall into the 21-25K band.

46.3%
reported that the average starting salary of their graduates was £26K+.

The Construction/ Engineering sector was most likely to pay their graduates a starting salary of £26K+.

Sector analysis (Figure 6) combined with aggregating the 'increase' and 'decrease' responses to the graduate intake question reveals that the IT/ Computing sector was most likely to report 'no change' in their graduate intake over the next 12 months, followed by the Healthcare sector. The Construction/ Engineering sector was most likely to indicate an increase in graduate intake over the next 12 months, while the Manufacturing sector was most likely to point towards a decrease.

Figure 6: Expected changes in graduate intake over the next 12 months by sector.

Close to three-quarters (72.9%) stated that they recruited graduates from specific degree subject areas (Figure 7) while 24.5% of respondents stated that they did not, indicating that their graduate roles are open to applicants from a range of disciplines.
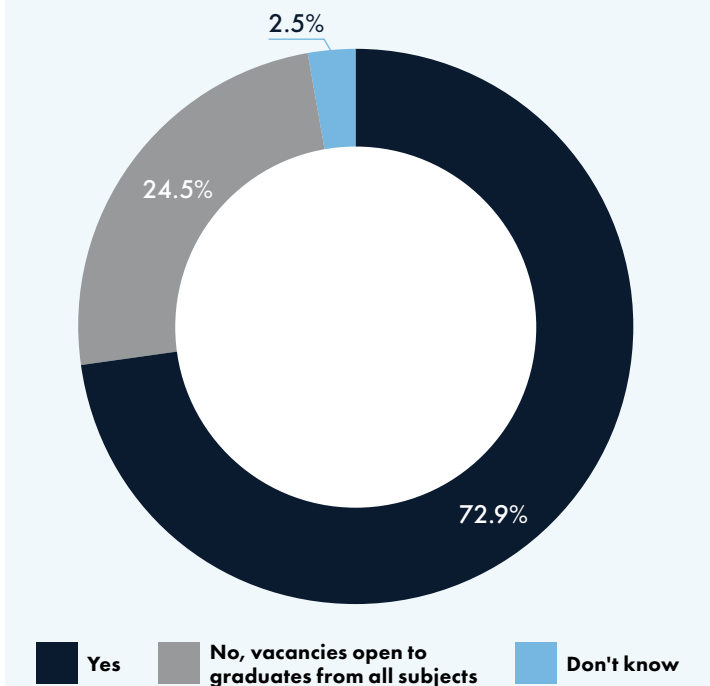
Figure 7: Do you recruit graduate employees from specific degree subject areas? (n=314)

Sector analysis revealed that over half (56.5%) of respondents from the Business / Management / Finance sector stated that their vacancies were open to applicants from all degree disciplines (Figure 8). This was considerably more than the other sectors analysed, particularly the IT / Computing sector (2.8%).
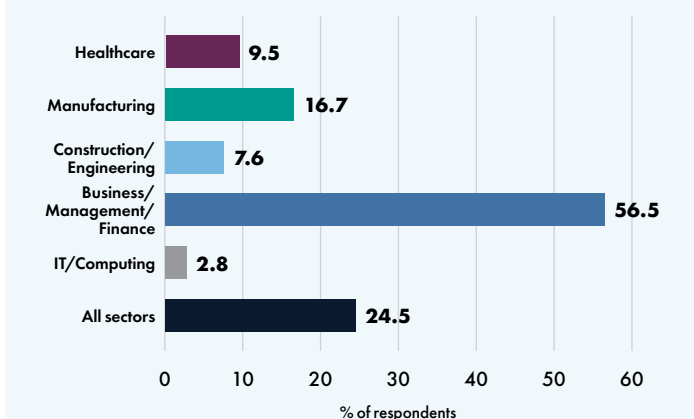
Figure 8: Respondents by sector who stated their vacancies are typically open to graduates from all subject areas

As illustrated in Figure 9, 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 that the average starting salary of graduates in Northern Ireland is £24,904. Notably, the £26-£30K and £31-£35K salary bands recorded significant increases of 11.7 and 5.9 percentage points, respectively, from the 2022 survey.

For the third consecutive year, respondents stating that their graduate recruits earn less than £18K has declined, with just 1% selecting this salary band compared to 4.2% in 2022. The proportion of respondents (46.3%) who stated that the average starting salary of their graduates was £26K+ increased by 21 percentage points from the 2022 survey. Sector analysis revealed that the Construction/ Engineering sector was most likely to pay their graduates a starting salary of £26K+ (67.1%), followed by the Manufacturing (60%) and Healthcare (57.9%) sectors.
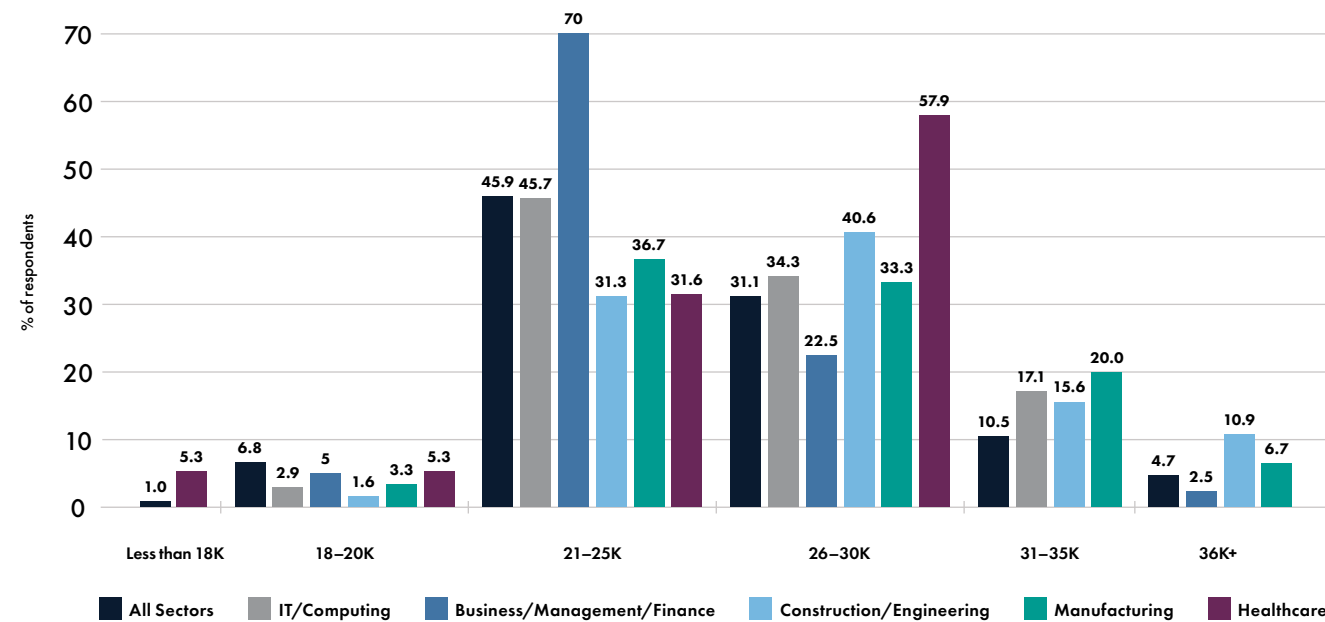

Figure 9: Average starting salary of graduates by sector

Graduate Recruitment and Selection

Figure 10 lists the graduate recruitment promotional activities that organisations plan to use over the next 12 months. Similar to findings from the previous survey, online channels were the most popular with 'social media' (70.7%) and 'company website' (68.5%) selected by a significant proportion of respondents.

Notably, the popularity of in-person 'university recruitment fairs' increased, moving from the sixth to the third most popular promotional method, with 64% selecting this option. Just 25.1% stated that they planned to use online 'university recruitment fairs', marking a decrease of 17.5 percentage points from the 2022 survey.

For the second consecutive year, 'face-to-face interviews' were identified as the most popular selection method (82.2%), followed by CVs (76.4%). 'Online interviews' decreased in popularity, with 49.4% selecting this option compared to 57.9% in 2022. The use of assessment centres (both in-person and online) and psychometric tests is not widespread amongst respondents, while 'virtual reality' and 'gamification' have remained unpopular methods, with little to no take-up indicated (Figure 11).

Headline Findings

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

- A 'face-to-face interview' was the most popular graduate selection method.

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

- Skills tests were most likely to be used in conjunction with interviews, closely followed by presentations.

- **90%** of respondents rated 'work placements', 'other relevant work experience' and 'degree classification' as important in the selection of graduates.
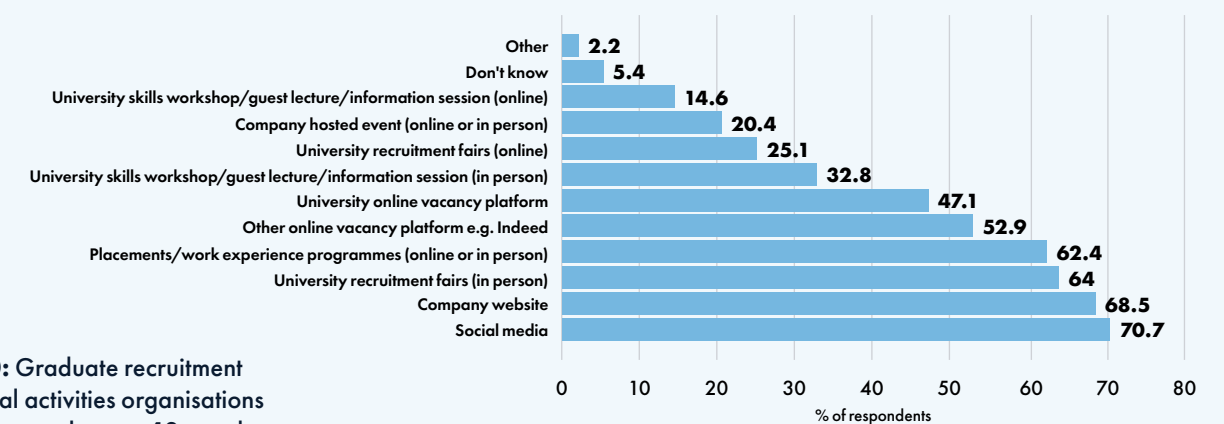

Figure 10: Graduate recruitment promotional activities organisations plan to use over the next 12 months (n=314/ multiple choice question)
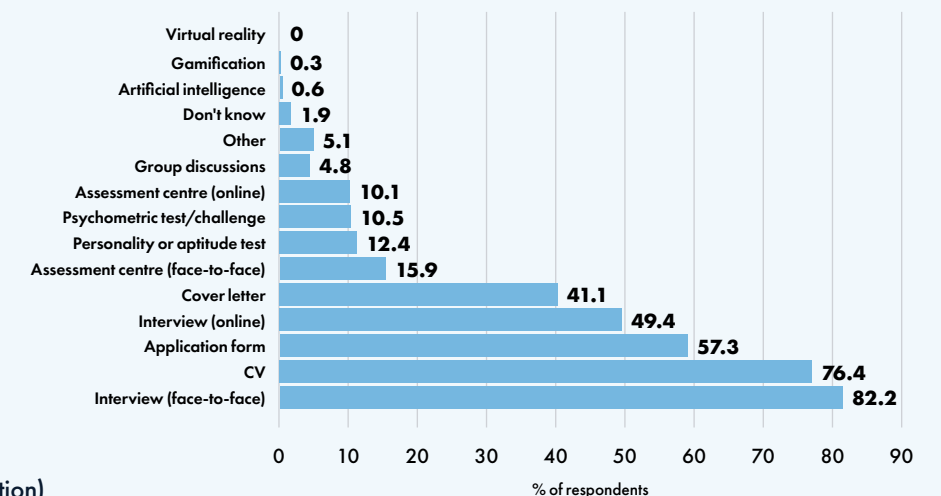

Figure 11: Selection activities respondents plan to use over next 12 months (n=314/ multiple choice question)

Respondents were asked to indicate the methods they use in conjunction with interviews (Figure 12). 'Skills tests' (30.4%) were the most popular method selected, followed by presentations whereby candidates can prepare in advance of the interview (27.6%). Unseen presentations were a less popular option (13.2%), alongside 'written tests' (13.2%) and 'group activity' (12.6%). A significant proportion stated that they did not use any selection methods in conjunction with interviews (40.6%).

Respondents were asked to indicate the level of importance of a range of criteria in the selection of graduates (Figure 13). 'Other relevant work experience', 'work placements', and 'degree classification' all received the highest rating amongst respondents. 'Additional independent learning' (83.4%) and 'involvement in extra-curricular activities' (80.6%) were also rated as important by the majority of respondents. Notably, the importance ratings given to these criteria are largely consistent with findings from the 2022 survey. Similar to findings from the previous two surveys, 'professional body registration' (59.6%) and 'master's degree/ other postgraduate qualification' (61.5%) ranked as the least important criteria in the selection of graduate recruits.

Sector analysis revealed that the Construction/ Engineering sector recorded the highest importance rating for the 'work placement', 'other relevant work experience', 'degree classification', 'masters degree/ postgraduate qualification' and 'professional body

registration' criteria. Notably, the IT/ Computing sector recorded the highest importance rating for 'additional independent learning' and 'involvement in extra-curricular activities'. The Healthcare sector was least likely to state that 'other relevant work experience', 'additional independent learning', 'degree classification', and 'involvement in extra-curricular activities' were important in the selection of graduates.
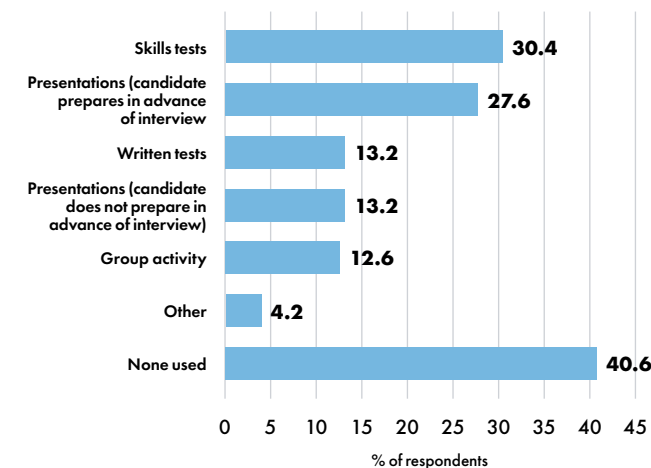

Figure 12: Selection methods used in conjunction with interviews (n=286/ multiple choice question)
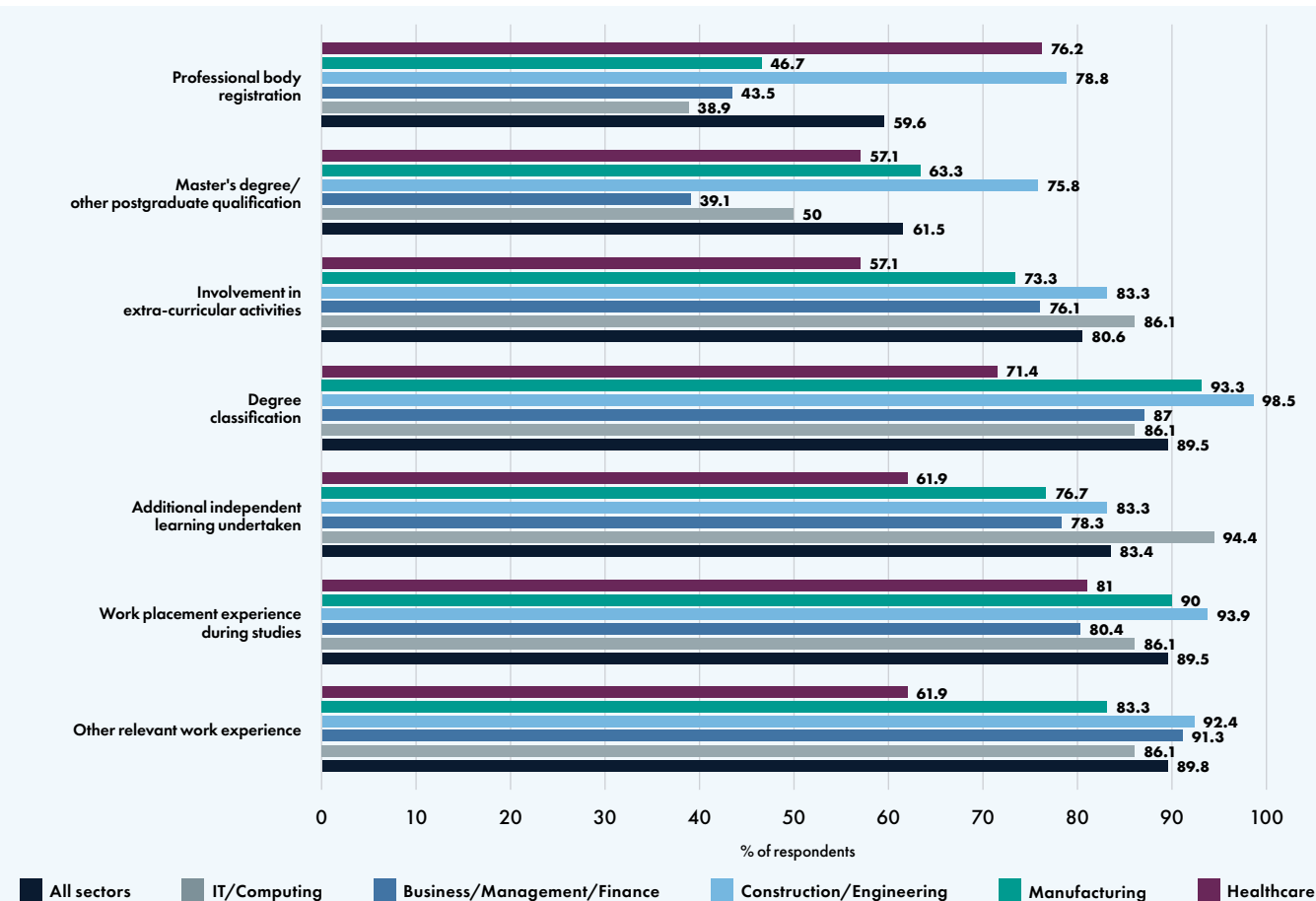

Figure 13: Importance of selection criteria in graduate recruitment

Skills

On a scale of 1-10, respondents rated the importance of fourteen employability skills in the selection of graduates (10 being the most important), with the mean score for each skill presented in Figure 14. Three new skills were added to the list from the previous survey including 'teamwork/ collaboration', 'self-confidence', and 'green skills'.

Of the fourteen skills, 'teamwork/collaboration' recorded the highest mean score of 8.6, overtaking 'verbal communication' (8.4) which had recorded the highest score in the previous two surveys. 'Written communication' and 'problem-solving' also scored highly with mean scores of 8.1. The score for 'digital literacy' dropped for the second year running, from 8.1 to 7.6. The three skills with the lowest scores included 'commercial awareness' (5.9), 'green skills' (5.8) and 'enterprise and entrepreneurial skills' (5.6).

Sector analysis revealed that the Healthcare sector recorded the highest mean score for the majority of the fourteen skills, including 'teamwork/ collaboration', 'verbal communication', 'written communication', 'problem-solving', 'resilience' and 'digital literacy'. The Manufacturing sector recorded the highest mean score for 'creativity/ innovation' (7.5) while Construction/ Engineering recorded the highest score for 'green skills' (6.5).

When asked to identify any other skills that are important in the selection of graduate recruits, the most common skills stipulated were a willingness to learn, time management, interpersonal skills, and professional etiquette.
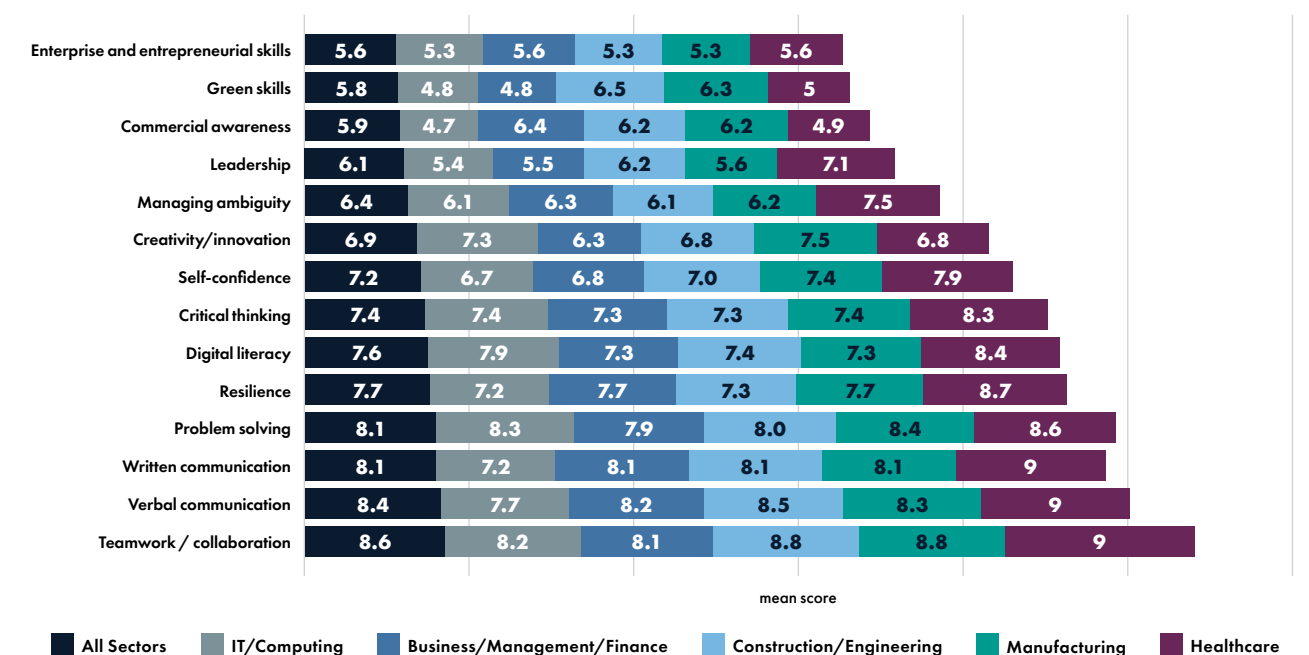
Headline Findings

'Teamwork/ collaboration' was the highest rated employability skill, followed by 'verbal communication'. 'Written communication' and 'problem-solving' also received high ratings.

34.7% felt that there was an undersupply of graduate skills, with the Healthcare, Construction / Engineering, and IT / Computing sectors most likely to state this was the case.

The Manufacturing sector was least likely to state there was an undersupply of graduate skills.
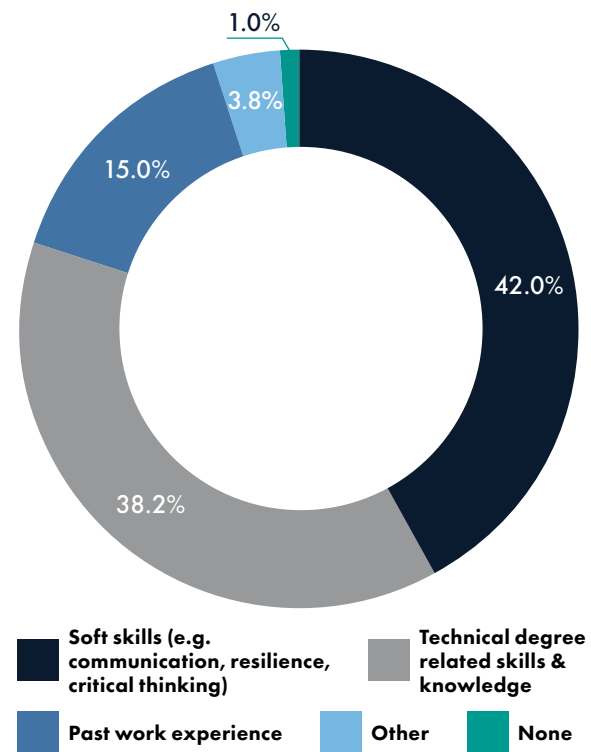
76.2% stated that degree apprenticeships are important in developing the skills and talent of their organisation, marking an increase of 12.8 percentage points from 2022.

Figure 14: Importance of graduate skills in selection of graduate recruits (mean scores)
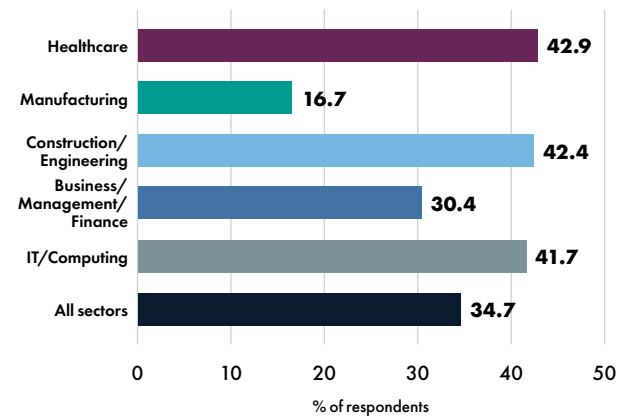
In response to skills-based hiring, a key recruitment trend in recent years, a new survey question explored the most important factor when evaluating candidates for graduate positions, with respondents limited to selecting one response. 'Soft skills' (42%) were identified as the most important, closely followed by 'technical degree-related skills and knowledge' (38.2%). 'Past work experience' was less popular with just 15% of respondents selecting this option (Figure 15).

A significant proportion of respondents (34.7%) felt that there was an undersupply of graduate skills, and this figure marks a small decrease of 4.7 percentage points from 2022 (Figure 16). The Healthcare (42.9%), Construction/ Engineering (42.4%), and IT/ Computing (41.7%) sectors were most likely to state that this was the case, while the Manufacturing sector was least likely to state there was an undersupply of graduate skills. When asked to specify which skills are in short supply, the most common areas identified related to communication skills and software, electrical, and civil engineering-related skills. Problem-solving and resilience were also identified.

Respondents were asked to indicate how important degree apprenticeships are in developing the skills and talent of their organisations (Figure 17). Over three-quarters (76.2%) stated that degree apprenticeships are important, marking an increase of 12.8 percentage points from 2022. The proportion of respondents stating that degree apprenticeships are 'not at all important' has almost halved, from 15.7% in 2022 to 9.2%. The proportion of respondents stating they were unsure is still sizable (14.6%), albeit it has decreased by 6.2 percentage points from 2022.

Figure 15: Most important factor when evaluating candidates (n=314)

Figure 16: All respondents (n=314) and respondents by sector who stated there was an undersupply of graduate skills.
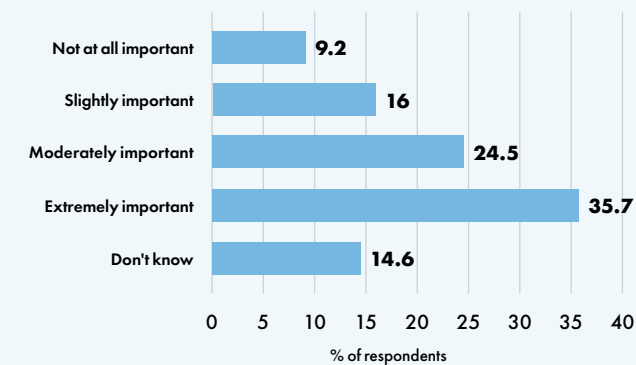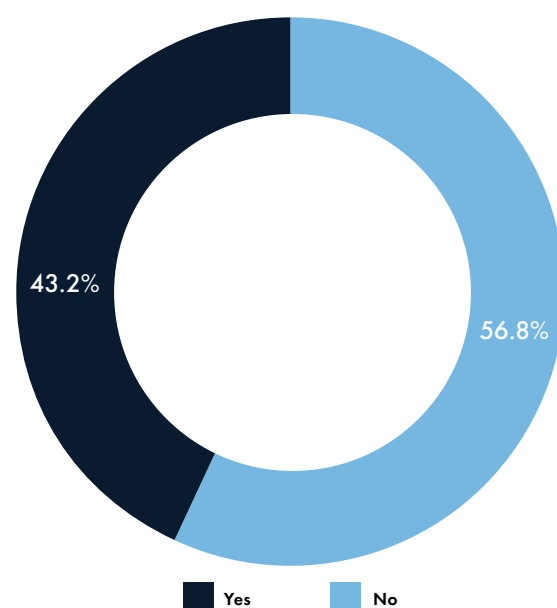
Figure 17: Importance of degree apprenticeships in developing skills and talent (n=314)
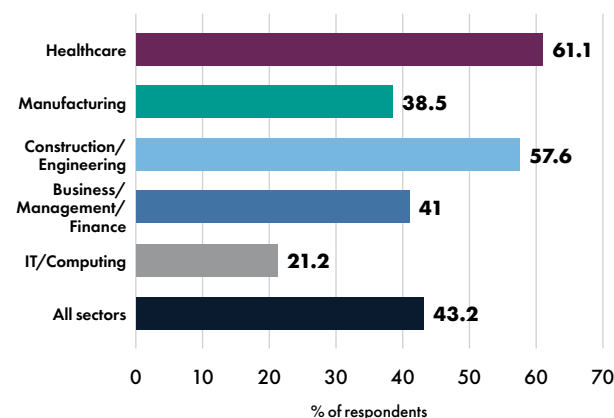
Graduate Recruitment Challenges

43.2% of respondents stated they had experienced challenges in the recruitment of graduates, which marks a decrease of 14.9 percentage points from the previous survey (Figure 18).

Figure 18: Have you experienced any graduate recruitment challenges in the last 24 months (n=278/ excluding 36 don't know values)

Sector analysis (Figure 19) reveals that the Healthcare sector was most likely to experience graduate recruitment challenges (61.1%), followed by the Construction/ Engineering sector (57.6%). The IT/ Computing sector was least likely to have experienced graduate recruitment challenges (21.2%).

Figure 19: Sector analysis of respondents who have experienced graduate recruitment challenges in the last 24 months.

Headline Findings

43.2%
of respondents had experienced graduate recruitment challenges, which marked a significant decrease from the 2022 Graduate Employer Survey.

The Healthcare and Construction/ Engineering sectors were most likely to have experienced graduate recruitment challenges.

Competition from other recruiters was the most prominent challenge.

'Work readiness level of graduates' and a 'shortage of candidates from specific degree disciplines' were other notable challenges.

21.3%
had experienced challenges in the retention of graduates, mainly due to issues around pay.

There has been a shift in the nature of graduate recruitment challenges experienced by employers, with 'high competition from other recruiters' now identified as the most common challenge, moving up four places from the 2022 survey (Figure 20).

A 'shortage of candidates from specific degree disciplines' (38.3%) and 'work readiness' (38.3%) have maintained their positions in the top three most common challenges. Notably, the proportion of respondents identifying 'too few candidates' has decreased dramatically, from 63.6% in 2022 to 27.5%. Overall, most challenges experienced a decline in prevalence compared to findings from the 2022 survey.

Sector analysis of the top three graduate recruitment challenges revealed some variation in experiences (Figure 21). For example, the IT/ Computing sector was most likely to identify 'high competition from other graduate recruiters' as a challenge, while the Construction/ Engineering sector was most likely to identify 'shortage of candidates from specific degree disciplines'. Issues around the work readiness of graduates were most likely to be experienced by the Business/ Management/ Finance sector.
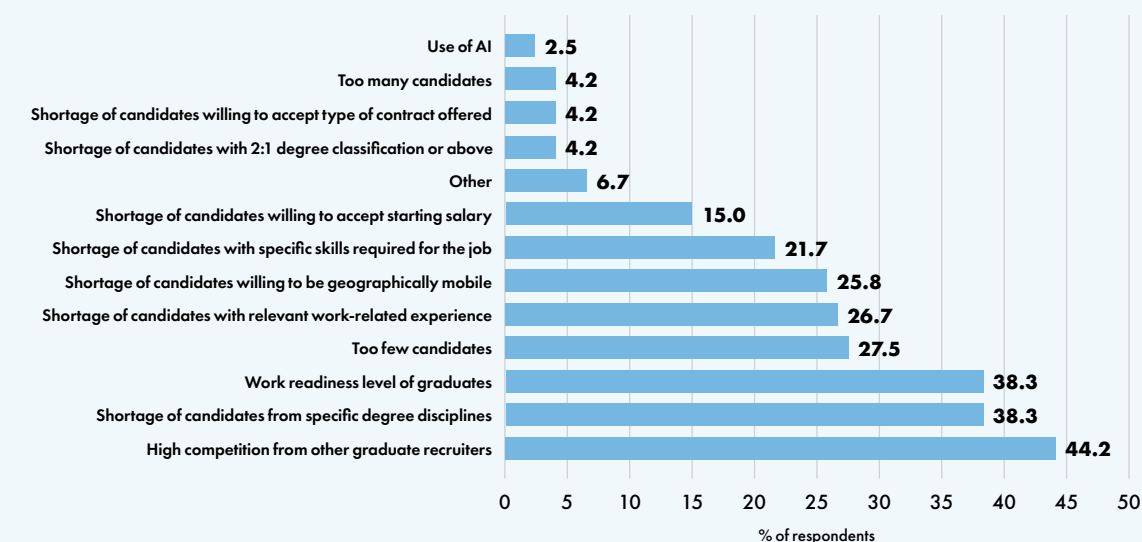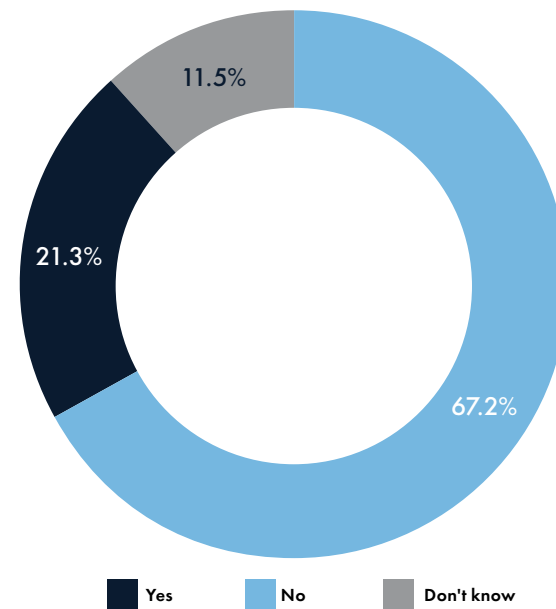

Figure 20: Graduate recruitment challenges encountered over the last 24 months (n=120/ multiple choice question)
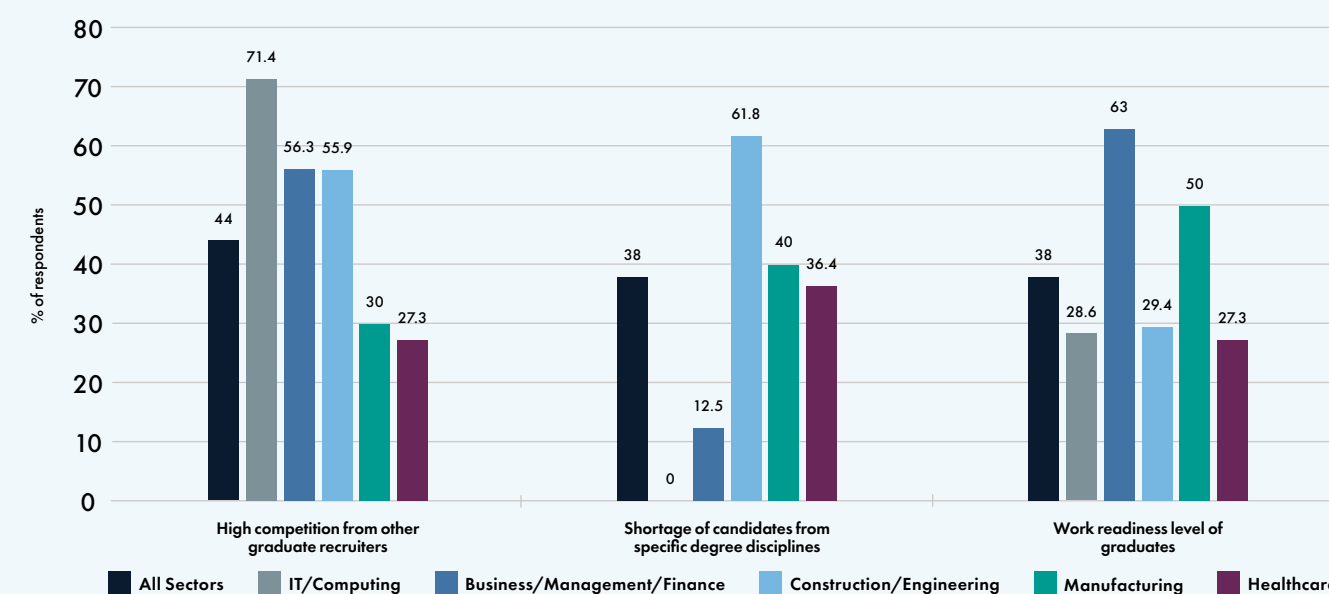
Figure 21: Prevalence of top three graduate recruitment challenges by sector

All respondents were asked if they had experienced any challenges in the retention of graduates (Figure 22). Just over one-fifth (21.3%) stated that they had. When elaborating on the nature of these challenges, the most common theme that emerged related to competition from other employers, particularly around salaries, and graduates leaving their roles to travel abroad. Other notable themes related to geographical issues and graduates' unrealistic job/ career expectations with one respondent noting '*lack of understanding that career progression takes time and comes with experience.*'

11.5%

21.3%

67.2%

Yes   No   Don't know

Figure 22: Have you experienced challenges/ issues in the retention of graduates? (n=314)

Undergraduate Recruitment - Placement

The majority of the sample (83.1%) had offered placement[7] opportunities in the last 24 months (Figure 23), and this figure marks an increase of 5.8 percentage points from the 2022 survey.

As illustrated in Figure 24, 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 (80%), marking an increase of 12.3 percentage points from 2022.

7 The 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 their study and entail full-time supervised work of between 6 and 12 months. They are often referred to as a sandwich placement.
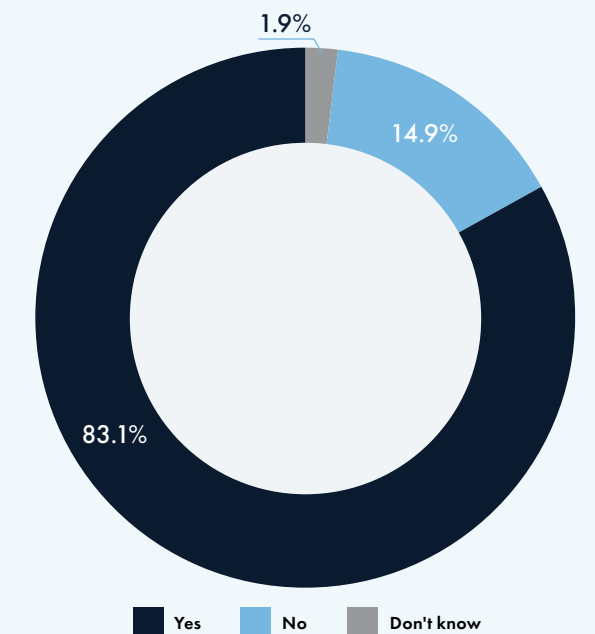
Headline Findings

83.1%
A high proportion of respondents recruited placement students.

80%
of these respondents typically recruit placement students into longer term paid roles following the culmination of their placement.

1.9%

14.9%

83.1%

Yes   No   Don't know

Figure 23: Within the last 24 months, have you offered placement opportunities within your organisation? (n=314)

35.6	29.5	14.9	15.7	4.2
Yes - after they finished their education / course / degree	Yes - in both cases	Yes - at the end of their placement	No	Don't know
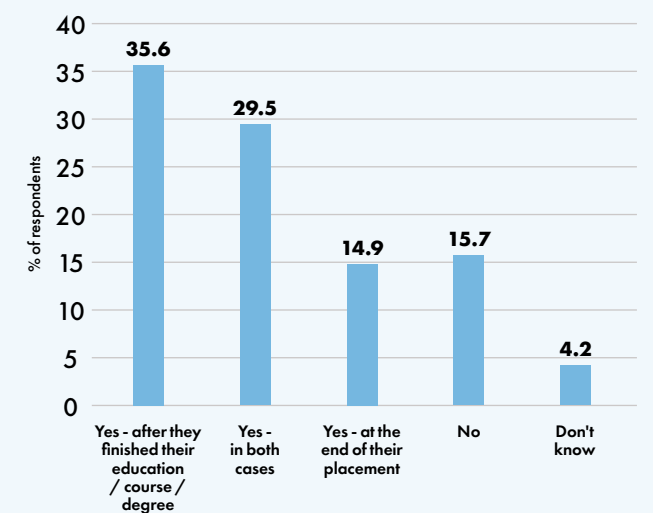
% of respondents

Figure 24: Have you recruited anyone into a permanent or long-term paid role after being on a placement with your organisation, in the last 24 months? (n=261)

International Student Recruits

Approximately one-third of respondents (32.2%) had recruited international students into graduate roles in the last 24 months (Figure 25). When asked to comment on the benefits that these recruits bring to their organisations, the most common theme that emerged was diversity, resulting from the introduction of new skills, perspectives, and ways of working.

Others highlighted the knowledge and experience that international student recruits bring, while a number pointed towards their work ethic and willingness to learn.

When asked to identify the main barriers around the recruitment of international students into graduate roles, 47% (n=147) of the sample provided a response. The majority highlighted issues around the acquisition of visas. For many, these issues linked to the cost of sponsorship, with one respondent noting '*Purely the cost! It is very expensive, and not possible for us as a business to sponsor at graduate grade.*' Others discussed the high salary thresholds with one respondent commenting, '*New rules around minimum going rates and salary thresholds. Even with concessions made for New Entrants, following the four years, the salaries required are far above what the salaries would be in NI and Scotland for our employees at that level.*'

Headline Findings

32.2%
of respondents had recruited international students into graduate roles in the last 24 months.

The introduction of new skills, perspectives and ways of working were identified as the main benefits that international student recruits bring to organisations.
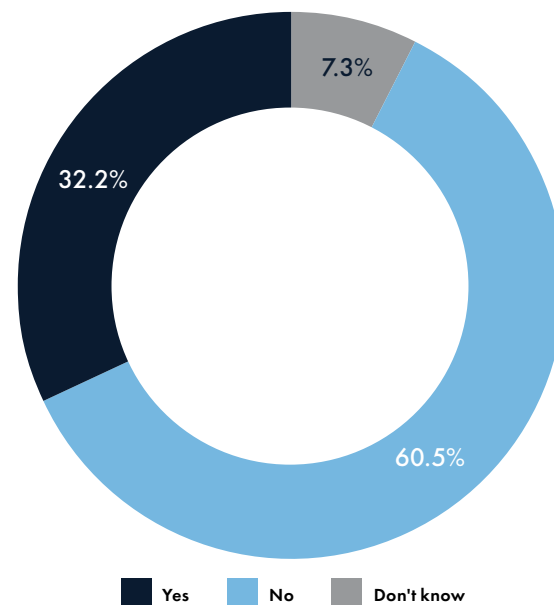
The acquisition of visas was identified as the main barrier associated with the recruitment of international students into graduate roles.

7.6%
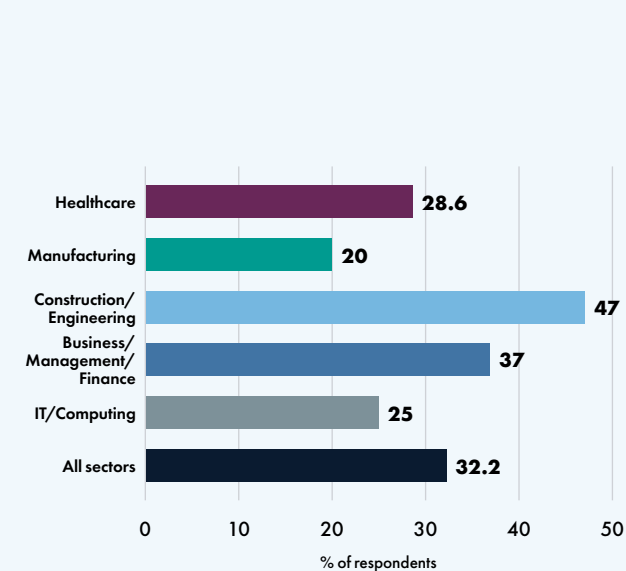would like support in the recruitment of international students into graduate roles.

Some respondents highlighted issues around the visa application process, and the prolonged processing time. Others noted that the timeframe of the graduate visas and their graduate training programmes conflicted: '*(our) graduate visas are 24 months and contracts for training programmes last 42 (months)*'.
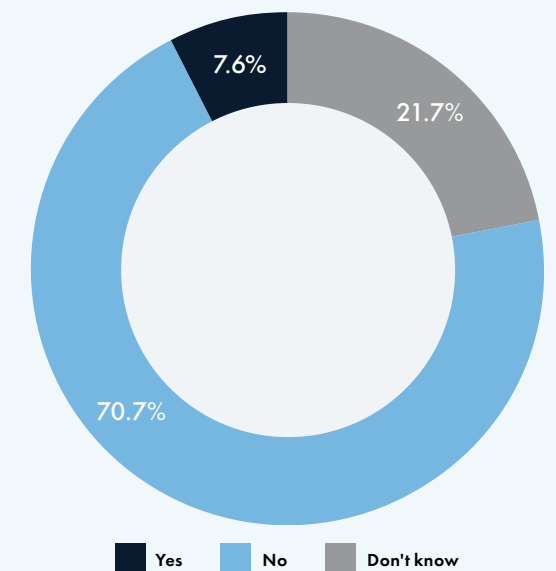
Sector analysis (Figure 26) revealed that the Construction / Engineering sector was most likely to recruit international students, followed by the Business / Management/ Finance sector.

Just 7.6% of respondents stated that they would like to receive support in the recruitment of international students (Figure 27).

When asked to expand on the type of support required, a number stipulated that they would like assistance with the visa application and sponsorship process, while one noted '*Any support or information is always welcome. Case studies from others who have recruited international graduates.*'

Figure 26: Recruitment of international students into graduate roles by sector

Figure 27: Do you require support in the recruitment of international students (n=314)

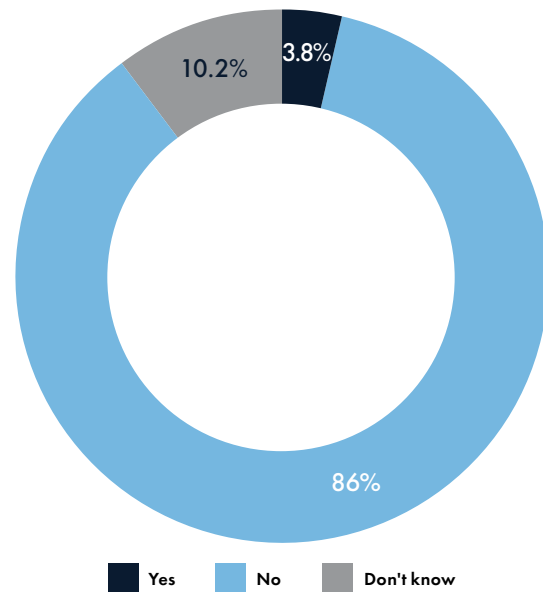**Figure 25:** Have you recruited any international students into graduate roles in the last 24 months (n=314)

AI and Graduate Recruitment

A new topic on AI and graduate recruitment was introduced to the survey. The majority of respondents (86%) had not incorporated AI into their graduate recruitment processes, while just 3.8% stated that they had (see Figure 28).

Figure 28: Have you incorporated AI into your graduate recruitment processes? (n=314)

Legend: Yes | No | Don't know

Headline Findings

3.8%
had incorporated AI into their graduate recruitment processes.

49.6%
of respondents suspect that candidates are using AI during the graduate recruitment process.

63.7%
have not considered using AI detection tools during the graduate recruitment process.

31.2%
stated that AI presents risks to graduate recruitment.

Misrepresentation of candidates' skills and experiences was identified as the main risk associated with AI and graduate recruitment.

24.8%
stated that AI can provide benefits to the graduate recruitment process.

Efficiency was identified as the main benefit associated with AI and graduate recruitment.
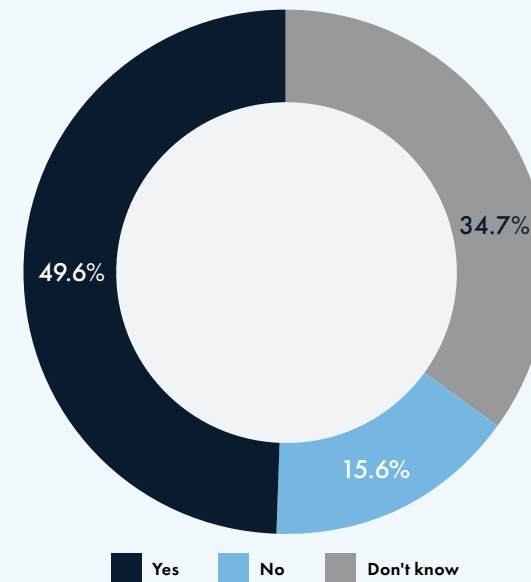
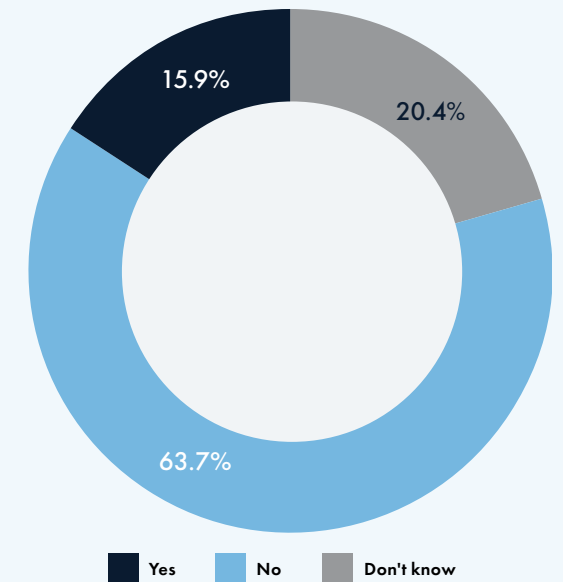The most popular AI tool being used within organisations was Chat GPT followed by Co-Pilot.

76.4%
of respondents stated that they did not have any processes in place to train new recruits to use AI tools effectively.

Figure 29: Do you suspect that candidates are using AI in the graduate recruitment process? (n=314)

Legend: Yes | No | Don't know

Figure 30: Have you considered using AI detection tools during the application review process? (n=314)

Legend: Yes | No | Don't know

As illustrated in Figure 29, half of respondents suspect that candidates are using AI in the graduate recruitment process, while 34.7% stated that they were unsure.

The majority of respondents (63.7%) stated that they had not considered using AI detection tools during the application review process, while 15.9% stated that they had (Figure 30). Just under one-third (31.2%) of respondents stated that they felt that AI presents risks to the graduate recruitment process (Figure 31), while a significant proportion stated that they were unsure (38.2%). When asked to expand on the risks, many respondents pointed to issues around candidates' lack of authenticity arising from misrepresentation of their skills and experiences in CVs, cover letters and application forms. For example, one respondent noted: '(AI) can allow students to provide a false narrative that is maybe not directly linked to their own experiences, but rather, exaggerated to make their profile appear better than it is'. The findings also indicate that candidates are using AI during online interviews, with one respondent observing that: 'during video interviews, we have seen candidates clearly reading (eyes are moving side to side) from an AI-prompted tool on their second monitor'. Other respondents emphasised how the use of AI can result in generic applications that are difficult to differentiate as candidates' uniqueness and authenticity are not evident. A number highlighted issues around diversity, with some noting that certain groups are less likely to utilise AI, particularly those programmes with a cost attached.

Many discussed how usage of AI by candidates becomes apparent during interviews with candidates unable to substantiate what was written in their CVs and application forms. Linked to this, some emphasised the importance of face-to-face interviews as a candidate screening tool: 'Written applications become well written by all submitters leading to the face-to-face being a must. CV/Covering letters reviews will cease to exist. The process will be longer as more candidates will be screened by interview on Teams than face-to-face'. Others noted how the usage of AI has resulted in candidates failing to demonstrate key skills in their graduate roles: 'I have noticed that application forms are generally excellently written (likely with the assistance of AI). However, when successful candidates start in their role it quickly becomes clear that the quality of their written communication is poorer than demonstrated in the application process'. Linked to this, the long-term impact of candidates' lack of authenticity in the recruitment process was highlighted: 'The students/graduates should not overuse generative AI as it sets them up for failure in the long run. Probation period will show their skills and attitudes and if they do not meet the requirements, the process of being removed from the role can be detrimental for mental health and future employability'.
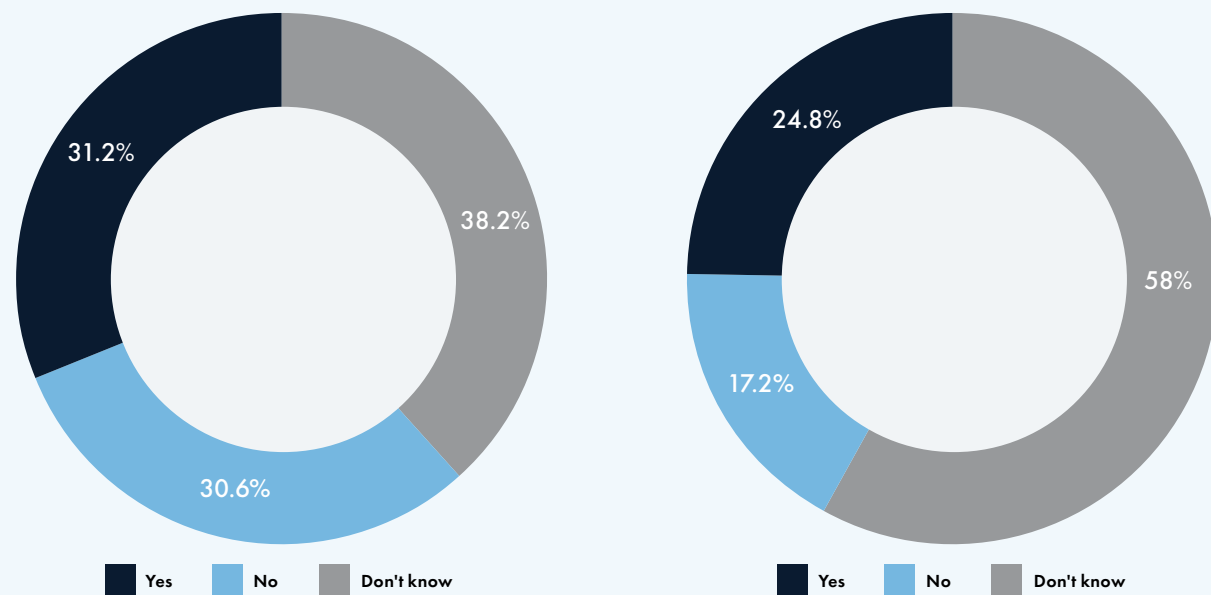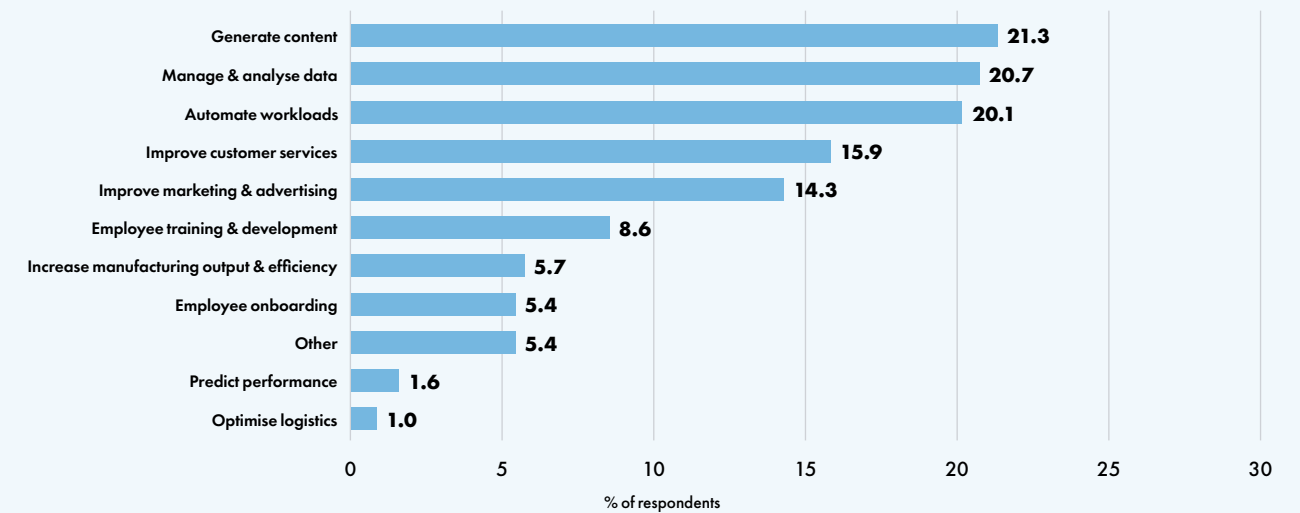
Figure 31: Do you feel that AI presents risks to the graduate recruitment process? (n=314)

31.2% Yes
30.6% No
38.2% Don't know

Figure 32: Do you feel that AI can provide benefits to the graduate recruitment process? (n=314)

24.8% Yes
17.2% No
58% Don't know

Workplace activity	% of respondents
Generate content	21.3
Manage & analyse data	20.7
Automate workloads	20.1
Improve customer services	15.9
Improve marketing & advertising	14.3
Employee training & development	8.6
Increase manufacturing output & efficiency	5.7
Employee onboarding	5.4
Other	5.4
Predict performance	1.6
Optimise logistics	1.0

Figure 33: Workplace activities that AI is being used for (n=314/ multiple choice question)

One-quarter of respondents stated that AI can provide benefits to the graduate recruitment process (Figure 32). When expanding on the benefits, many commented on how AI can offer efficiencies, for example, when screening and shortlisting applicants. A number stated that AI can break down barriers for students who struggle to communicate effectively and can be a useful tool in supporting those students to enhance the quality of their application content. For example, one respondent stated that: '*It can help stimulate the graduate to help present themselves when experiencing difficulties trying to complete applications, cover letters, CV's and presentations*'.

A number stressed the importance of AI being used in moderation as a tool to enhance content, rather than replace candidates' own agency- '*We don't have a problem with people using AI to 'improve' or make a start on their application. If you have dyslexia, it can be great to help with spelling and grammar. But AI should be used as a tool to improve, tweak, gain inspiration - not to do the whole job for you*'. Others noted how competency in AI is a requirement in their workplace and thus conveyed an expectation that candidates should be using it as a supportive tool in the recruitment process, with one respondent observing that '*GenAI is used in the workplace. As long as the students know why they're using it, we are happy. Use it to advance rather than replace*'. Similar to a number of previous responses to questions on this topic, a significant proportion of respondents stated that they were unsure (58%) when asked about the benefits AI can offer to the recruitment process.

Moving away from the topic of graduate recruitment, the survey included a series of questions on AI and the workplace more generally. As illustrated in Figure 33, the findings indicate that AI is most likely being used for content generation (21.3%), data management and analysis (20.7%), and to automate workloads (20.1%). The most popular AI tool being used within organisations was ChatGPT followed by Co-Pilot. Several respondents stated that their company had designed bespoke AI tools.

Over three-quarters of respondents stated that they did not have any processes in place to train new recruits to use AI tools effectively (Figure 34).

9.5% Yes
76.4% No
14% Don't know
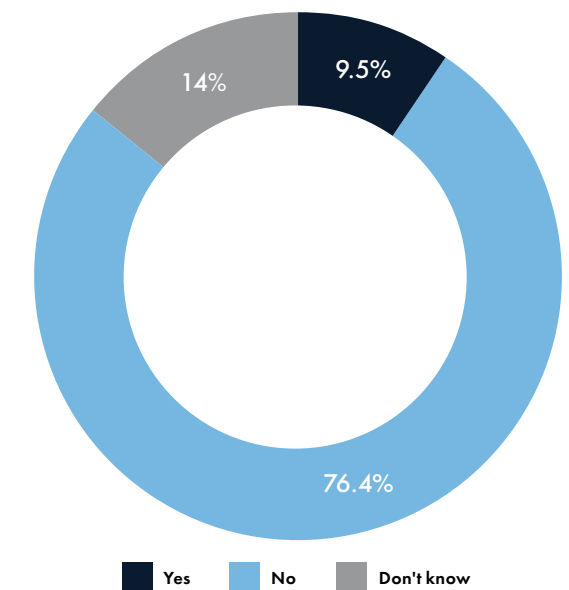
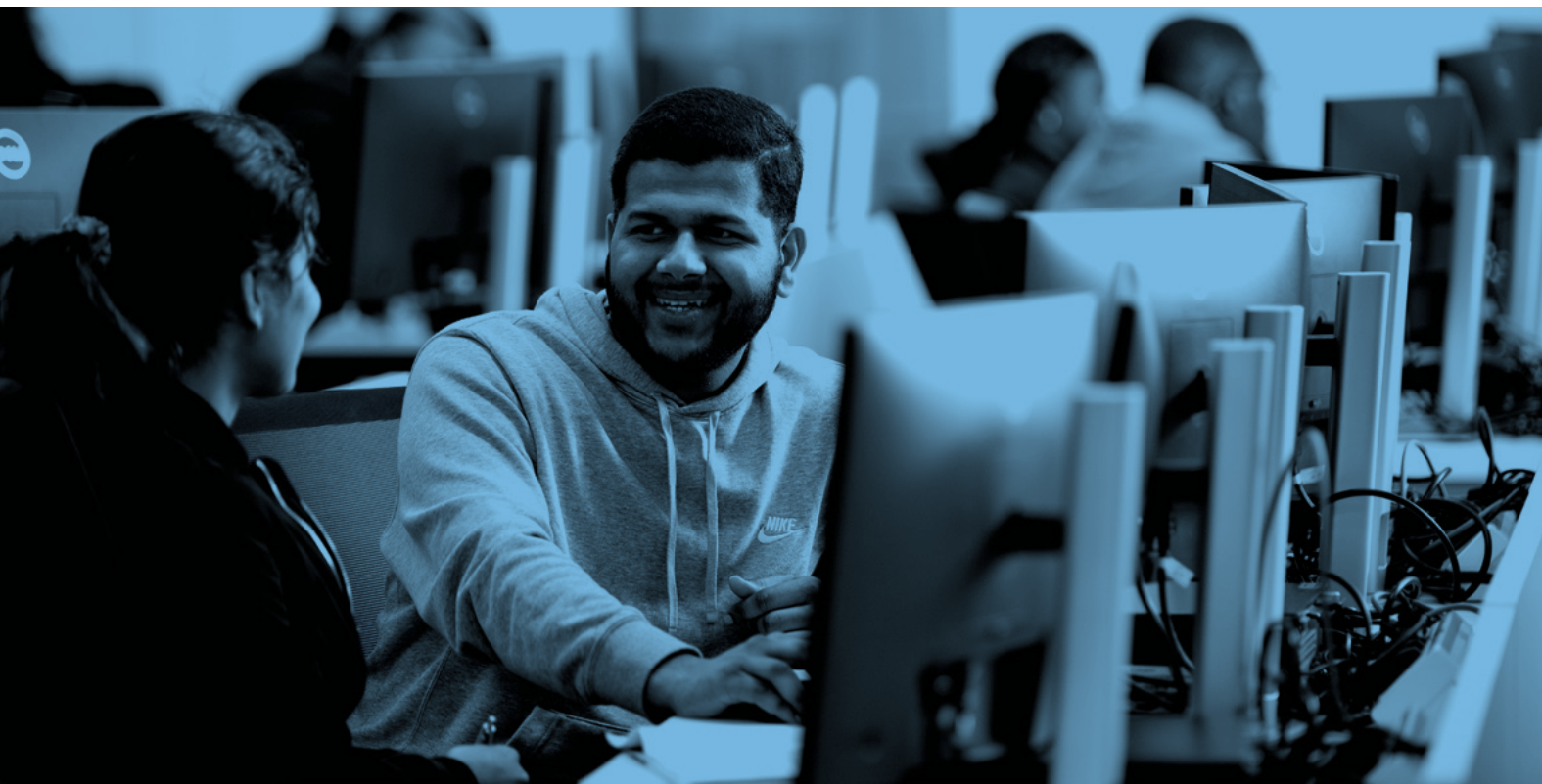**Figure 34:** Do you have processes in place to train new recruits to use AI tools effectively? (n=314)

Summary of Key Findings

- 45.1% reported that graduate intake will increase over the next 12 months.

- The Construction/ Engineering sector was most likely to indicate an increase in graduate intake over the next 12 months, while the Manufacturing sector was most likely to stipulate a decrease.

- 24.5% recruited from all subject areas.

- The Business/ Management/ Finance sector was most likely to state that vacancies were open to applicants from all degree subject areas.

- The average starting salary of graduate recruits was most likely to fall into the 21-25K band.

- 46.3% reported that the average starting salary of their graduates was £26K+.

- The Construction/ Engineering 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.

- A 'face-to-face interview' was the most popular graduate selection method.

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

- Skills tests were most likely to be used in conjunction with interviews, closely followed by presentations.

- 90% of respondents rated 'work placements', 'other relevant work experience' and 'degree classification' as important in the selection of graduates.

- 'Teamwork/ collaboration' was the highest rated employability skill, followed by 'verbal communication'. 'Written communication' and 'problem-solving' also received high ratings.

- 34.7% felt that there was an undersupply of graduate skills, with the Healthcare, Construction/ Engineering, and IT/ Computing sectors most likely to state this was the case.

- The Manufacturing sector was least likely to state that there was an undersupply of graduate skills.

- 76.2% stated that degree apprenticeships are important in developing the skills and talent of their organisation, marking an increase of 12.8 percentage points from 2022.

- 43.2% of respondents had experienced graduate recruitment challenges, which marked a significant decrease from the 2022 Graduate Employer Survey.

- The Healthcare and Construction/ Engineering sectors were most likely to have experienced graduate recruitment challenges.

- Competition from other recruiters was the most prominent challenge.

- 'Work readiness level of graduates' and a 'shortage of candidates from specific degree disciplines' were other notable challenges.

- 21.3% had experienced challenges in the retention of graduates, mainly due to issues around pay.

- A high proportion of respondents recruited placement students (83.1%).

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

- 32.2% of respondents had recruited international students into graduate roles in the last 24 months.

- The introduction of new skills, perspectives and ways of working were identified as the main benefits that international student recruits bring to organisations.

- The acquisition of visas was identified as the main barrier associated with the recruitment of international students into graduate roles.

- 7.6% would like support in the recruitment of international students into graduate roles.

- 3.8% had incorporated AI into their graduate recruitment processes.

- 49.6% of respondents suspect that candidates are using AI during the graduate recruitment process.

- 63.7% have not considered using AI detection tools during the graduate recruitment process.

- 31.2% stated that AI presents risks to graduate recruitment.

- Misrepresentation of candidates' skills and experiences was identified as the main risk associated with AI and graduate recruitment.

- 24.8% stated that AI can provide benefits to the graduate recruitment process.

- Efficiency was identified as the main benefit associated with AI and graduate recruitment.

- The most popular AI tool being used within organisations was ChatGPT followed by Co-Pilot.

- 76.4% of respondents stated that they did not have any processes in place to train new recruits to use AI tools effectively.

Discussion of Key Findings

This section provides a discussion of the key findings from the 2025 survey and trends that have emerged since the Ulster University Graduate Employer Survey was first launched in 2021.

The section also includes deeper dives into two significant trends impacting graduate recruitment, namely skills-based hiring and AI.

2025 Survey Insights and the Emergence of Trends

Much commentary on the UK graduate labour market points towards a slowdown in hiring due to sluggish economic growth and the introduction of government policies leading to business tax rises, and findings from this survey generally align with this. For example, fewer respondents expected an increase in graduate intake and a higher proportion stated that their graduate intake was unlikely to change. However, sector discrepancies were evident, with a significant proportion of respondents within the Construction/ Engineering, Healthcare, and Business/ Management/ Finance sectors reporting anticipated increases in intake, while the Manufacturing sector was least likely to anticipate growth. Sector variations in graduate hiring and job growth rates have been reported elsewhere and have been largely attributed to government priorities and subsequent investments such as additional spending on the National Health Service[8][9].

The three iterations of the survey have revealed some key characteristics of the Northern Ireland graduate recruitment market. One of which is the enduring importance of yearlong placement, with survey findings since 2021 showing sustained high employer participation in this model. In addition, respondents have consistently emphasised the importance of placement in the selection of graduate recruits, and many point to placement playing a fundamental role in their graduate hiring processes. For example, across the three iterations of the survey, an average of 72.5% of respondents stated that they re-recruit placement students into graduate roles.

Graduate employer support for the degree apprenticeship model is another notable theme emerging since 2021, with a significant increase in the proportion of respondents stating they felt degree apprenticeships were important in developing the skills and talent of their organisations. Flexible learning pathways such as those offered through degree apprenticeships have been identified as key to creating a more flexible and dynamic labour market needed to tackle the UK's productivity gap[10]. Notably, the NI government's commitment to the apprenticeship space has been highlighted in the latest Programme for Government[11].

Following on from the pivot to hybrid and online approaches brought about by the Covid pandemic, the 2022 survey highlighted the return of face-to-face graduate recruitment activities, and findings from the 2025 survey confirm the reemergence of these approaches. For example, engagement in on-campus recruitment fairs has increased, and face-to-face interviews were being used by most respondents. Commentators note that widespread AI usage by candidates may result in recruiters becoming more reliant on face-to-face interviews as they aim to corroborate information provided in CVs, cover letters and application forms[12]. Furthermore, hiring teams have been urged to adopt new methods of assessment into their screening processes that are resistant to AI, such as psychometric tests and gamification. However, findings from the 2022 and 2025 surveys show that the uptake of these approaches is stubbornly low, while methods that rely on writing skills, such as CVs and cover letters, remain widespread. As employers navigate extensive AI usage amongst candidates, it will be important to continue to monitor their use of various screening and selection methods and prepare students accordingly.

Positively, the 2025 survey highlighted a significant decrease in the proportion of respondents reporting that they had experienced graduate recruitment challenges. A shift in the types of challenges experienced was also identified. For example, in the 2022 survey, the most prominent challenge was that 'too few candidates' were applying for roles. However, in the latest iteration of the survey, this challenge had dropped by three places, possibly because of the hiring slowdown in the local graduate labour market. The most common challenge cited was 'high competition from other graduate recruiters', followed by a 'shortage of candidates from specific degree disciplines' and 'work readiness of graduates'. Sector analysis revealed variation in the challenges experienced by employers, indicating that any steps taken to alleviate these from a Higher Education (HE) perspective must be targeted and sector specific.

It is refreshing that 'company culture' and 'employee wellbeing' were the top organisational priorities identified by respondents. There have been some concerns that with the tightening of budgets, businesses may reduce spending and investment in these areas. However, for now, it seems that the well-being and experiences of employees are very much to the fore within organisations active in the NI graduate labour market. It is also noteworthy that there has been a shift towards the higher salary bands for new recruits, with the £26-£30K and £31-£35K bands both recording significant increases since the 2022 survey. Meanwhile, there has been a continued decline in those organisations stating that they paid their graduates less than £18K. This positive outlook comes with caution however, as in their latest research, the Institute of Student Employers (ISE) reports that while graduate salaries are increasing, they are not keeping pace with rises in the cost of living[13].

There have been recent reports of an increase in challenges around the retention of graduates, and subsequently, new questions on this topic were included in the 2025 survey. Just over one-fifth (21.3%) of respondents stated that they had experienced challenges around retention, with graduates leaving their roles to secure better pay from competitors. Research from elsewhere attributes a surge in graduate demand for higher salaries to the cost-of-living crisis[14].

A new section of questions was included on international student recruitment. Approximately one-third of respondents stated that they had recruited international students into graduate roles in the last 24 months, with the Construction/ Engineering sector most likely to do so. When commenting on the benefits that these recruits bring, many pointed to the introduction of new skills, perspectives and ways of working. Almost half of the respondents identified barriers around the recruitment of international students, and a high proportion of these challenges pertained to visas, particularly around the cost of sponsorship. The ISE notes that since the changes to the skilled worker visa in April 2024, there has been an increase in businesses withdrawing sponsorship for international students into graduate roles. The retention of international students in the labour market is considered important towards plugging the NI skills deficit, and some have noted that employers require support in navigating the challenges brought about by visa changes and other government policies. Just 7.6% of survey respondents, however, stated that they required assistance in this area. Moving forward, it will be important for HE institutions to support employers in addressing the barriers they face around the recruitment of international students to ensure these individuals can continue to make vital contributions to the local economy.

8 https://luminate.prospects.ac.uk/5-predictions-for-graduate-recruitment-in-2025
9 https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/publications/skills-barometer-2023-2033

10 https://www.essupport.com/news/why-degree-apprenticeships-help-employers-the-economy-and-society
11 https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/articles/programme-government-2024-2027-our-plan-doing-what-matters-most
12 https://luminate.prospects.ac.uk/3-questions-for-early-careers-employers-in-2025

13 https://luminate.prospects.ac.uk/whats-the-state-of-graduate-recruitment-in-2024

14 https://ise.org.uk/knowledge/insights/194/more_graduates_and_apprentices_leave_jobs_for_better_pay#:~:text=Declining%20retention,women%20particularly%20hard%20to%20retain

Deep Dive - Skills-Based Hiring

Skills-based hiring has been identified as key to plugging the UK's skills deficit, which has been brought about by demographic changes and technological advancements driving demand for highly skilled workforces[15]. This skills deficit is expected to widen as the widespread adoption of transformative technologies such as AI accelerates changes in skills demands[16]. Skills-based hiring involves recruiting based on candidates' skills, capabilities and aptitudes, rather than education or employment history[17], with commentators purporting that having a degree is no longer an advantage. Increasing talent pools, improved retention and diversity, and reduction in mis-hire rates are some of the key benefits linked to the approach[18][19]. In addition, skills-based hiring is reported to be five times more predictive of job performance than education[20]. Research from the ISE found that 68% of employers have adopted or partially adopted a skills-based strategy into their recruitment processes[21].

Findings from this survey suggest skills, particularly employability/soft skills are a priority amongst many recruiters active in the local graduate labour market. For example, when respondents were asked to identify the most important factor in candidate selection, 42% selected 'soft skills', closely followed by 'technical degree-related skills' and just 15% selected past work experience. The importance employers place on specific soft skills has been assessed since the first iteration of the survey, and in the 2025 survey, three new skills were included in the core skills question. These skills included 'teamwork/collaboration', 'self-confidence', and 'green skills'. Notably, 'teamwork/ collaboration' recorded the highest mean score. This was followed by 'verbal communication' and 'written communication', which held the highest mean scores in the two previous surveys. 'Problem-solving' and 'resilience' also scored highly. The Healthcare sector consistently recorded the highest mean scores for the majority of the fourteen employability skills listed. Notably, many survey respondents were using skills tests in their recruitment activities. Research from elsewhere indicates that the importance of employability skills will endure despite rapid technological change, and that these skills will remain some of the most sought-after skills in the economy[22].

Commentators have pointed to several ways in which HE can prepare students for skills-based hiring, one of which includes embedding essential workplace skills, such as those discussed above, into the curriculum[23]. Ulster University has demonstrated a major commitment to this area by deliberately building skill and attribute development into the curriculum through the Graduate Attributes Framework[24]. While many universities across the UK, Ireland and beyond develop and implement their graduate attributes, it will be important to review and update these to respond to everchanging shifts in skill priorities[25]. It will also be crucial to address skills gaps, with 34.7% of respondents stating there was an undersupply of graduate skills, and this most prominent in the Healthcare, Construction/ Engineering and IT/ Computing sectors.

Research from elsewhere points to significant variations in the pace of skills change/demands across sectors. For example, the IT sector has been identified as most likely to have experienced, and will continue to experience, a high turnover of skills requirements[26]. To remain agile to the fluid skills landscape and prepare students accordingly, HE providers have been urged to take an imaginative approach to curriculum design and embrace flexible programmes that promote skills development[27]. In addition, there are calls for curriculum content that explicitly emphasises the importance of the skills being learned and provides students with opportunities to articulate their career readiness[28]. Linked to this, micro credentials, micro-certificates and digital badges have been highlighted as important tools that can support student articulation around skills and help employers make connections between learning outcomes and skills[29]. The importance of continuous learning and independent learning to facilitate reskilling and upskilling must also be stressed to students, as this mindset and associated behaviours will ensure they remain agile to fluctuations in skill demands throughout their careers.

Deep Dive - AI and Graduate Recruitment

AI has been identified as one of the most significant trends impacting recruitment in 2025 and beyond[30], with the potential to reshape hiring and transform the role of recruiters. Findings from this survey indicate that the adoption of AI amongst recruiters in the NI graduate labour market is low, with just 3.8% stating they had incorporated AI into their graduate recruitment processes. This finding is not dissimilar from those emerging elsewhere. For example, a recent survey by LinkedIn[31] reported that just 11% of recruiters had integrated AI into their processes. The latest ISE Student Recruitment Survey reported higher uptake, with 21% of employers incorporating AI into selection and assessment. However, it should be noted that this research targets the UK's largest graduate employers who have the resources available to be early adopters of this technology.

Just 50% of survey respondents stated that they suspected candidates were using AI in graduate recruitment. This figure seems modest in light of research which points to the widespread usage of AI amongst students. For example, a recent survey of over 1,000 students from the HE Policy Institute and Kortext, found that almost all (92%) were using AI tools for their assessments, marking an increase of 26 percentage points in 12 months[32]. Cibyl research from 2023 found that 70% of students were using ChatGPT to support their job applications[33], and this figure is likely to have significantly increased since. Widespread use of AI tools by students has been linked to a surge in applications for graduate jobs, with AI making it easier to apply for jobs, pushing the volume of applications up. Many have noted the subsequent decline in the quality of these applications, resulting in students receiving more rejections[34]. Research focusing on the student perspective of AI, reveals that many believe that it is their right to use it and that they would not work for an employer who told them they could not use the technology[35].

On balance, there was an element of concern amongst survey respondents on AI usage by candidates, with a higher proportion highlighting the risks AI can present to the graduate recruitment process than the benefits.

Issues around authenticity emerged, linked to candidate misrepresentation of skills, experience and abilities. The prevalence of good quality but generic applications was another notable challenge, with face-to-face interviews highlighted as an important tool in substantiating the content provided by candidates. When expanding on the benefits that AI can offer, many respondents pointed to efficiencies in screening and shortlisting candidates. Others noted that it can serve as an important tool for those students who struggle to articulate their skills and strengths. Recent ISE research sheds further light on employers' attitudes towards AI, with almost half in favour of candidates using it, with some noting it is an important business skill, while a third recommended that candidates should not use it[36]. A key theme running through the survey findings was the high proportion of respondents stating 'don't know' when responding to the AI questions, signalling perhaps mixed feelings or a lack of understanding on the issue. The low proportion of employers (9.5%) planning to train new recruits in using AI tools was another notable finding, signalling perhaps an expectation for employees to upskill independently.

Overall, the survey findings point towards a local graduate recruitment sector that is not using AI in its recruitment processes. While many appear to be undecided or unsure about the impacts of AI, those highlighting challenges associated with the technology outweigh those who identified benefits. Research and commentary from elsewhere stress that AI usage is unlikely to abate, and the impacts of AI are likely to be felt most strongly by those in recruitment. While challenges such as candidate authenticity are commonly cited, many note that AI can transform hiring teams for the better, not only through greater efficiencies but also through securing better-quality hires, expanding talent pools, and enhancing the candidate experience[37][38]. As awareness of these benefits increases, it seems likely that more employers in the local recruitment market will adopt this technology at pace in the near future[39].

There are numerous sets of guidelines advising employers on how best to harness AI in their recruitment practices. As hiring teams embark on or continue their AI adoption journeys, AGCAS has identified HE careers and employability teams as key partners to advise on the delivery of clear, consistent guidelines on AI usage to support students[40]. Similarly, there are calls for high-quality guidance to be delivered to students on the effective use of AI in recruitment, with a particular focus on authenticity. The evolution of this guidance cannot be developed in isolation from the employer perspective. As such, the longstanding partnerships between HE employability professionals and graduate recruiters will become more important than ever as all parties navigate this transformative new technology.

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