

Graduate Employer Survey Report 2021

PLACEMENTS
RECRUITMENT
COLLABORATION
ENGAGEMENT
SKILLS

Foreword

from Angela Scanlon



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In March 2021 the first Ulster University Graduate Employer Survey was launched. Completed responses were received from 99 employers across Northern Ireland, Ireland and the UK. The strength of this employer voice is informing campus based and digital learning experiences that will improve student and graduate success enabling sustainable growth and economic recovery across the NI region and beyond.

Employability and Careers at Ulster has a growing network of employers to support the development of graduate talent and economic recovery, established through a partnership approach, which is critical to success as we rebuild, recover and grow following the recent global pandemic. The strength of this powerful employer and higher education network will inform a new and transforming approach to collaboration, curriculum solutions and real world connected experiences for students and graduates. In doing this we are aiming to understand the business and talent management needs of employers including recruitment practice and skills. Working together we can bring forward new solutions that respect the changing labour market and respond to the workforce needs of the future.

This report examines employer responses including the need for real world learning through projects, work experience, placement and the call for increased outreach with employers.

Employability and Careers at Ulster is committed to working with employers through a range of mechanisms including:

- Placements, graduate internships, and work experience opportunities.
- Employers contributing to real world projects for students and graduates.
- Employer membership of sector focused Employer Advisory Boards.

We welcome the opportunity to connect and explore further.

Contact the team at futureskills@ulster.ac.uk

Acknowledgements

The authors of this report would like to thank all of the individuals who participated in the research. The time and the insights they provided are very much appreciated. Thank you also to all of those who informed the scoping of this research, contributed to the design and dissemination of the online survey, and supported the development and review of this report.

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Executive Summary

The Northern Ireland economy and labour market have suffered considerable strain as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Many of the longstanding structural challenges persist and, in some cases, these have been intensified such as the substantial skills gap between Northern Ireland and the UK as a whole, Republic of Ireland and other developed nations. This skills gap risks holding back opportunity, growth and social inclusion and the forthcoming Northern Ireland Skills Strategy is set to highlight the Higher Education sector as a key player in tackling the deficit. Ulster University recognises the centrality of employer engagement and places it at the heart of curriculum activities to ensure that students are equipped with the necessary skills to meet local and national demand. The Institution has continued to engage closely with employers to support their talent management activities throughout the pandemic across a range of areas from curriculum development to the expansion of flexible work experience and placement opportunities.

In light of the significant challenges experienced by many employers since the beginning of the pandemic and the changes in recruitment practices influenced by remote working, the Employability and Careers Department disseminated an online survey to organisations that typically employ Northern Ireland graduates. The survey aimed to assess graduate recruitment uptake, skills, marketing, attraction and selection activities, graduate recruitment challenges, undergraduate recruitment and collaboration opportunities. The survey was launched on 10 March 2021 and was live for five weeks. A total of 99 organisations responded to the survey.

Key findings from the survey shed light on several themes including the importance of work experience with many respondents stating that this is a predominant criterion in the selection of their graduate recruits. It was also revealed that communication, digital soft skills and technical Information Technology (IT) related skills are in high demand amongst graduate employers. Many also noted that these skills are in short supply and pointed towards the importance of work experience, targeted curriculum interventions and collaboration with the Higher Education (HE) sector in addressing skills gaps. As society emerges from the pandemic, most respondents stated that they planned to use hybrid

approaches to graduate recruitment that incorporate a mixture of online and face-to-face activities. Notably those respondents that engaged in the yearlong placement model stated that they typically recruit placement students into longer term paid roles following the culmination of their placement. Finally, respondents revealed a strong appetite towards engagement with the Higher Education sector to support their talent management solutions and other aspects of business development, with many pointing towards a desire for face-to-face engagement at their business premises and in university campus spaces.

All findings from the survey are presented and explored in further depth throughout the report, including sub-sector analyses. The report concludes with a discussion around some of the key findings and implications of these for Ulster University, the Higher Education sector, and the economy more widely.



Key Findings



Communication, digital soft skills and technical information technology related skills consistently ranked highly in terms of importance.



85%+ stated that **work experience** was important in the selection of graduate recruits.



74%+ stated that post-pandemic they anticipate that their graduate recruitment activities will be offered through a mixture of online and face-to-face platforms.



64% identified a **12-month full-time contract** as the preferred model for offering placement.



38% stated that there is an undersupply of graduate skills.



18% stated that more than half of their jobs were open to graduates from any degree discipline.



70% typically recruit placement students into longer term paid roles following the culmination of their placement.



48% are keen to engage with Ulster's campus spaces.

¹ Employer Skills Survey 2019: Summary report (publishing.service.gov.uk)

² <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/quarterly-labour-force-survey-tables-may-2021>

³ Key insights and recommendations for Northern Ireland | OECD Skills Strategy Northern Ireland (United Kingdom) : Assessment and Recommendations | OECD iLibrary (oecd-ilibrary.org)

⁴ https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/830969/Nl-Labour-Market-Briefing_FINAL.pdf

⁵ [file:///C:/Users/e16002674/Downloads/Back-to-the-start-up-Summary-Report%20\(3\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/e16002674/Downloads/Back-to-the-start-up-Summary-Report%20(3).pdf)

⁶ <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/sites/nisra.gov.uk/files/publications/Economic%20Inactivity%20in%20Northern%20Ireland.pdf>

⁷ https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/830969/Nl-Labour-Market-Briefing_FINAL.pdf

⁸ https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/849177/DBEC-Revised.pdf

Setting the Scene

Higher Education (HE) leavers comprise a significant proportion of new recruits entering into the Northern Ireland labour market each year.^{1,2} Prior to Covid-19, these leavers entered a relatively strong labour market, with economic output steadily increasing and unemployment at a record low of 2.4%.³ Ulster University (Ulster) graduates that progressed into professional roles at this time typically gained employment in the education, information technology, and health care sectors. Since then, the economy and shape of the labour market have been significantly altered, largely due to the considerable and unprecedented strains brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. While the current challenges that the Northern Ireland economy and labour market faces are not all recent developments, many have been intensified because of the pandemic. These challenges include high rates of economic inactivity, a high proportion of low-wage jobs, high proportions of individuals with low or no qualifications, an ageing population, low business start-up rates, a skills deficit and an economy characterised by several large, low value-added sectors.^{3,4,5,6}

As the Department for the Economy works towards finalising a new Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland, there are, however, significant reasons for optimism. These include a strong pipeline of inward investment jobs in recent years, the presence of a young and relatively well educated population, the City and Growth Deals programme which will see close to £1.5 billion of investment, employment in professional occupations and associate professional occupations recording strong growth throughout the pandemic, and new job opportunities brought about by the green economy, digitalisation and automation^{3,7,8}.

Now more than ever it is imperative that those entering the labour market from HE settings are equipped with the required skills to support economic growth and recovery of the region.

Graduate employment and enhancing graduate skills remain key strategic priorities for Ulster. Central to the development of positive graduate employability outcomes is effective employer engagement to ensure that programmes of study align with labour market demand. Employer engagement at Ulster takes a variety of forms, from curriculum design and delivery,

Employer Advisory Boards to the collaborative development and implementation of work based and/or work-related learning opportunities. This engagement is organised and implemented both centrally through the Employability and Careers Department and at faculty level. While Ulster has traditionally commanded an innovative and distinctive approach to employer engagement, there is also consensus around the need to further increase the level and quality of coordinated engagement with local, national and international employers as the institution moves towards finalising its new Institutional Strategy.

The need for increased engagement between HE institutions and employers is also emphasised by The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in findings from their Skills Strategy project in Northern Ireland³, which highlights the importance of increasing alignment between education providers and the labour market, and sets out how to improve interaction between these stakeholders. A key component of this alignment is understanding the needs of the labour market, particularly around skills, and understanding how best to support students through a competitive graduate recruitment process. In light of megatrends such as digitalisation, demographic change, climate change, globalisation and the impact of Covid-19, employer needs around skills and their graduate recruitment practices are undergoing significant and constant change, and as such, there is a heightened need for HE institutions to have access to up-to-date graduate labour market information to support business decisions that will yield positive graduate employability outcomes for students.

Ulster already takes a lead role in producing and disseminating up-to-date information on labour market activity and trends through the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre. To support the development of knowledge and information in this area, particularly in the context of graduate labour market recruitment, Ulster's Employability and Careers Department disseminated a survey to graduate recruiters in March 2021 which explored skills needs, graduate and undergraduate recruitment uptake and practices, and collaboration opportunities. This report presents findings from the survey and also makes a number of conclusions and discusses the implications of these. These findings are particularly pertinent in light of the forthcoming launch of the Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland and as society emerges and recovers from the Covid-19 pandemic.

Methodology

To capture trends and perceptions around graduate recruitment from employers that typically hire in Northern Ireland, an online survey was developed in the JISC survey platform. The survey included questions on the following topics:



Graduate recruitment uptake



Skills



Marketing and attraction activities



Selection activities



Graduate recruitment challenges



Undergraduate recruitment



Collaboration opportunities with higher education bodies

The questions were developed in collaboration with key stakeholders across Ulster including the Employer Experience Working Group and members of the Employability and Careers Department. The majority of questions were mandatory and incorporated a mixture of open and closed formats, the latter including multiple choice questions, Likert and rating scales. Prior to the launch of the survey, it was rigorously tested and piloted by Employability and Careers staff and graduate recruiters. A copy of the survey is available in Appendix 1.

The survey was launched on 10th March 2021 and was live for 5 weeks. Dissemination activities were supported by a communication campaign which consisted of emails through Handshake (Ulster's career management platform), personalised emails from Ulster staff, a follow-up telephone campaign, verbal promotion at key meetings and events, and a social media campaign which was mobilised through

the Institution's key platforms including Twitter and LinkedIn. 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 Autumn Recruitment Fair.

Approximately 700 graduate recruiters were targeted through the dissemination activities and 99 responses were received. 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 recoding activities. Analysis was conducted through Excel and SPSS. Sub-sector analysis was conducted for the sectors with highest representation in the survey. These sectors included Accountancy, Banking and Finance (n=10), and Business, Consulting and Management (n=11), Engineering and Manufacturing (n=13), and Information Technology (n=19).

⁹ For the purposes of this survey, graduates are defined as those who have obtained a University degree within the last two years. Respondents were provided with this definition at the beginning of Section B of the survey, as can be viewed in Appendix 2.
¹⁰ 101 responses were initially received through the survey. However during the data cleaning process two duplicates were identified and these were subsequently removed from the database prior to further processing.

Profile of Respondents

Figure 1 illustrates the geographical breakdown of respondents, with the majority (83.8%) operating in Northern Ireland, 20.2% operating in the Republic of Ireland and 18.1% in the United Kingdom. The majority of respondents who selected 'other' stated that their organisation operated globally.

As illustrated in Figure 2, survey respondents emanated from a broad range of sectors, with IT (19.2%), Engineering, Manufacturing (13.1%), Business Consulting and Management (11.1%) and Accountancy, Banking and Finance (10.1%) the sectors with highest representation across the survey respondents.

Figure 1: Geographic spread of respondents (n=99/multiple choice question)

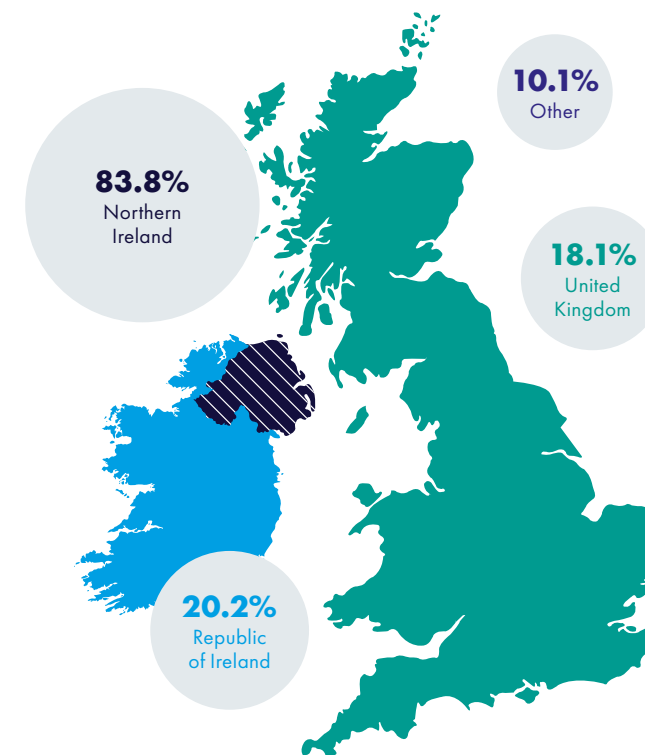


Figure 2: Industry sector breakdown of survey respondents (n=99)

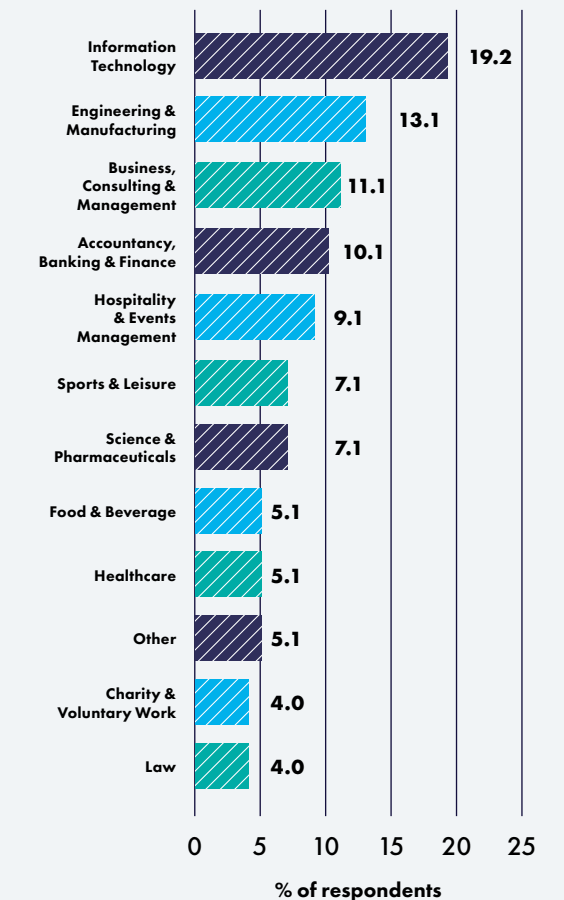
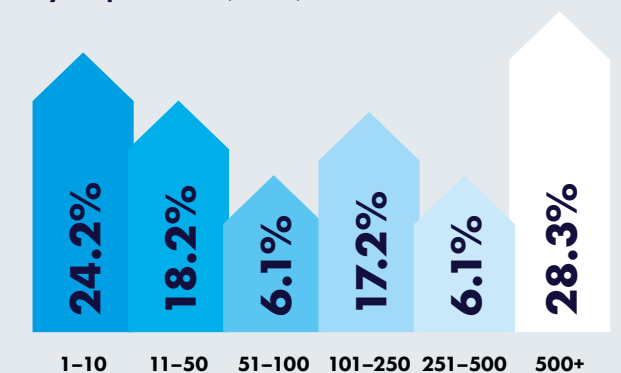


Figure 3: Number of staff employed by respondents (n=99)



As illustrated in Figure 3, the majority of respondents were from small-medium sized organisations with **250 employees or less (65.7%)**. Notably **28.3%** of respondents were from organisations with **500 or more employees**.

¹¹ Survey respondents were presented with a list of 52 industry sectors that mirrored the industry classification utilised in the Handshake platform. During the data cleaning and recoding phase, these sectors were recoded broadly in line with the AGCAS industry sectors utilised in the Focus on Graduate Skills Research Report to support data analysis and sector comparison.

Findings

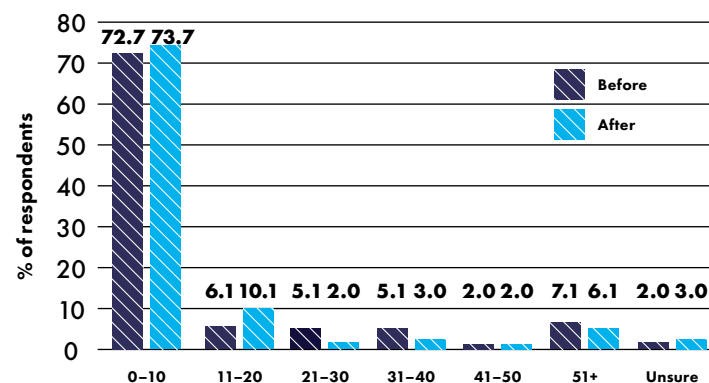
This section presents findings from the survey, which have been organised under the following headings:



Graduate Employees

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic the majority of respondents (72.7%) recruited 0-10 graduates annually (see Figure 4). Respondents were asked how many graduates they expected to hire through remaining 2020/21 recruiting activities. Those that expected to hire 0-10 graduates rose slightly to 73.7%, while the proportion of respondents hiring 11-20 graduates also rose by 4 percentage points. However for all remaining categories that represent larger intakes of graduates, there was either no change or a reduction in recruitment. The overall average of new graduate hires did fall from 17.6 to 11.5, suggesting the pandemic has impacted graduate recruitment for this sample.

Figure 4: Number of graduates recruited annually before and after Covid-19 (n=99)



Headline Findings

- Graduate recruitment forecasted to fall from pre-Covid levels for respondents, from an average of 17.6 new graduate recruits per organisation to 11.5.
- Graduate employees most likely to hold a degree in a business discipline.
- Significant proportion of graduate starting salaries above £21,000.



Graduate Employees

Respondents were asked how the Covid-19 pandemic had impacted the number of graduates they expect to hire. The majority of organisations (59.6%) responded 'No Change', 15.2% stated there was an increase and 21.2% stated there was a decrease in the graduates they planned to hire (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on number of graduates that respondents plan to hire (n=99)

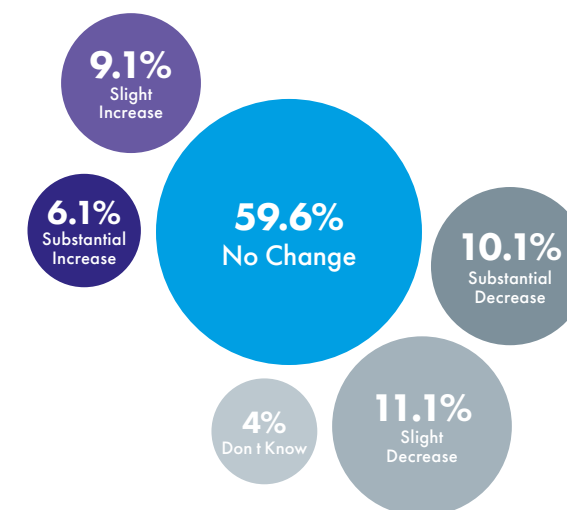
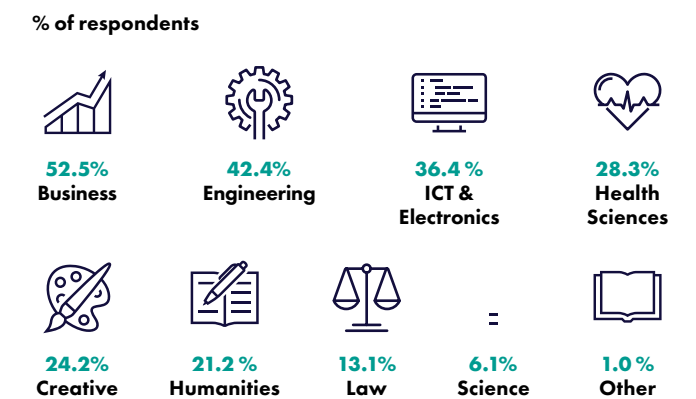


Figure 7: Average starting salary of graduates by subsectors

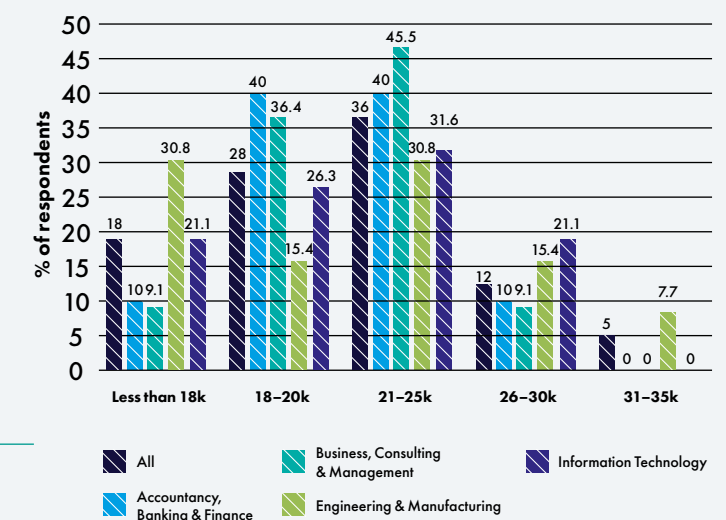
Over half (53%) of respondents stated that the starting salary of their graduates was more than £21,000 per year (Figure 7), with the £21-25k salary category the most popular option amongst all respondents (36%). Sub-sector analysis revealed that the Engineering and Manufacturing sector (30.8%) was more likely to pay their graduates a starting salary of less than £18k. Conversely, Engineering and Manufacturing also had highest representation in the £31-35k category, suggesting a high degree of variance across starting salaries in this sector.

¹² In the survey, respondents were presented with a list of 21 subject areas. During the data cleaning and recoding phase, these sectors were recoded using the AHECS subject areas from the Graduate Market Survey report, to support data analysis and sub-group comparison.

Figure 6: Subject area graduate employees typically hold degrees in (n=99/ multiple choice question)



The most common subject area that graduates from the responding organisations typically held degrees in was Business (52.5%), followed by Engineering (42.4%) and ICT & Electronics (36.4%) (see Figure 6). Sector analysis revealed that, perhaps unsurprisingly, the Accountancy, Banking and Finance sector was most likely to recruit graduates from a business discipline (90%). Notably close to half of respondents from the IT sector (47.4%), and 38.3% of respondents from the Engineering and Manufacturing sector stated they recruited graduates that held degrees in business disciplines.





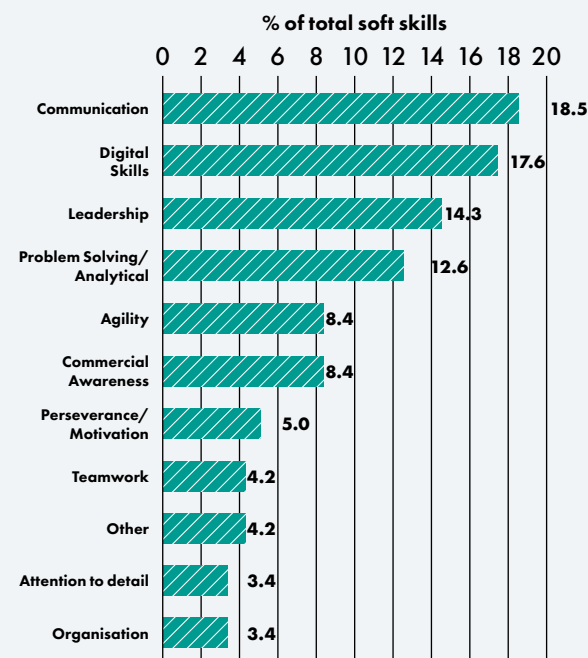
Skills

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 320 separate skills were provided. Following review of the survey data, the skills were coded into two broad categories, Soft Skills (n=119) and Discipline Specific Skills (n=201) before being further sub-divided into specific skill areas.

Figure 8 illustrates that the most popular soft skill identified by graduate recruiters was communication (18.5%), followed by digital skills (17.6%) with some respondents noting that they wanted employees who were 'tech savvy' and to be proficient in utilising social media.

The third most popular soft skill identified was leadership (14.3%) with these respondents stating that 'coaching', 'management' and 'mentoring' were priority areas.

Figure 8: Soft skill priority areas identified by respondents (n=119 soft skills)



Headline Findings



Communication, digital soft skills and technical IT related skills consistently ranked highly in terms of importance amongst graduate employers.



A significant proportion of respondents stated that there is an undersupply of graduate skills, and this view was most likely to be held by respondents in the IT sector.



Employers purported that skills deficits can be addressed through the promotion and development of work-based learning and extra-curricular opportunities, targeted curriculum interventions, and collaboration with the higher education sector.

As illustrated in Figure 9, the most popular discipline specific skill area was IT (27.9%) with this category comprising responses such as CAD, Machine Learning, Java, Python and Data Engineering. Marketing was the second most popular discipline specific skill area (12.9%) with a number of respondents specifically mentioning that sales was a key priority area. Just over one-tenth of respondents identified business subject related skills (11.9%) as a priority area, with this category comprising comments such as 'business development' and 'business/project management'.

Figure 9: Discipline specific priority areas identified by respondents (n=201 discipline specific skills)

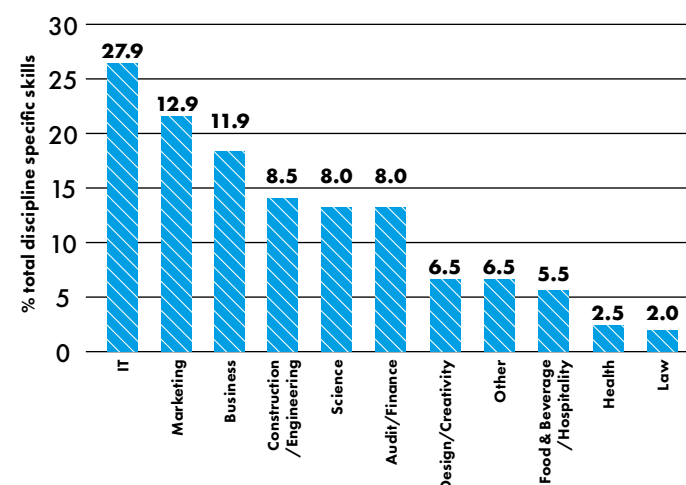


Figure 10: Average scores for level of importance of graduate skills for all sectors (n=99) and for selected sub-sectors

Respondents rated the importance of various skills and qualities around the selection of graduates on a scale from 0-10 (10 being most important), with the average score for each skill or quality presented in Figure 10. Verbal Communication received the highest average score of 9, Written Communication and Digital Literacy followed with scores of 8.8 and 8.5 respectively. Notably resilience also scored highly with an average score of 8.2.

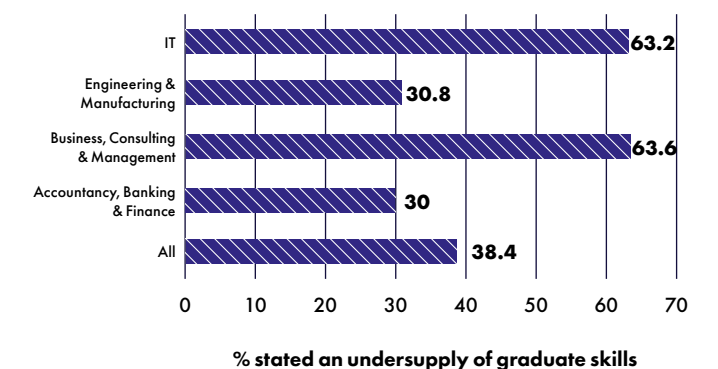
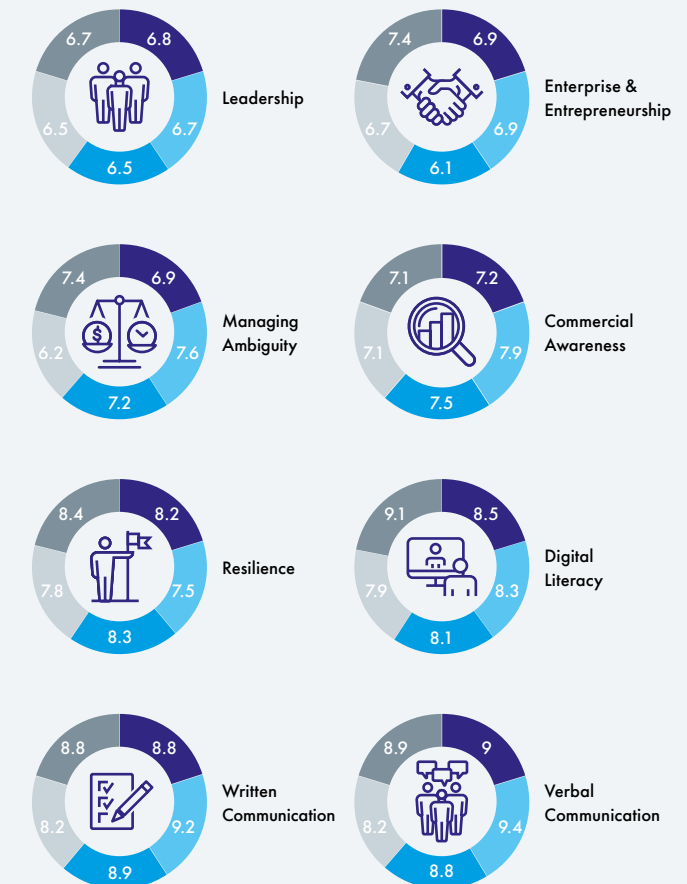
Sub-group analysis revealed that, notably, the Accountancy, Banking and Finance sector recorded the highest average score for Verbal (9.4) and Written Communication (9.2). Unsurprisingly, the IT sector recorded the highest score for Digital Literacy (9.1). The Accountancy, Banking and Finance, IT and Business, Consulting and Management sectors all scored above average for Managing Ambiguity with scores of 7.6, 7.4 and 7.2 respectively. Notably the IT sector had the highest average score (7.4) for enterprise and entrepreneurial skills.



Figure 11: All respondents (n=99) and sub-sector respondents that stated there was an undersupply of graduate skills

A significant proportion of respondents (38.4%) felt that there was an undersupply of graduate skills, however as presented in Figure 11, sub-sector analysis revealed that this figure increased substantially for the IT (63.2%) and Business, Consulting and Management (63.6) sectors. Perhaps unsurprisingly, IT sector respondents were most likely to state that there was an undersupply of IT/Digital skills, while others noted that Communication and Commercial Awareness were also in short supply.

% Respondents



¹³ The Soft Skills were coded in line with the top graduate skills identified by Target Jobs



Skills

Respondents were asked how the Higher Education sector can better support the development of graduate skills that are in undersupply. This question was open-ended, and responses were grouped into the categories presented in Figure 12. Promotion/development of Work Based Learning and Extra-curricular Activities was the most common suggestion alongside Curriculum Design and Delivery (19.2%). In the former category, respondents noted that it is important to 'encourage students to take on industry experience', and to 'encourage volunteering', while one respondent purported for 'short placements throughout university degrees' to be expanded into more programmes. Many respondents that discussed curriculum design and delivery noted the importance of embedding soft skills development into the curriculum, such as communication and commercial awareness, for example: 'Mandate public speaking and presentations as part of (university) work, while encouraging participation in local conference and knowledge dissemination events as a presenter' while another respondent suggested 'Guest lecture series, work

commercial awareness into curriculums, and encourage them (students) to begin reading the news, podcast, etc. more often relating to a certain industry'.

A number of respondents also proposed for employers to have a greater role in the design and delivery process 'Co-design (and co-delivery) of courses...'. Linked to this, a significant proportion (15.1%) talked of the importance of fostering closer links between industry and the HE sector to better understand needs, with one noting that universities should 'engage with employers across private and public sectors to learn about skills they find difficult to recruit for'. Respondents (13.7%) also relayed the importance of universities developing students specific technical skills, many of which related to the IT sector, while others mentioned the importance of developing soft skills such as career readiness, for example: 'preparing graduates to work in an agile work environment would be helpful'. A full list of responses received for this question is presented in Appendix 2.

Figure 12: How universities can support the development of undersupplied skills (n=73)

% of respondents

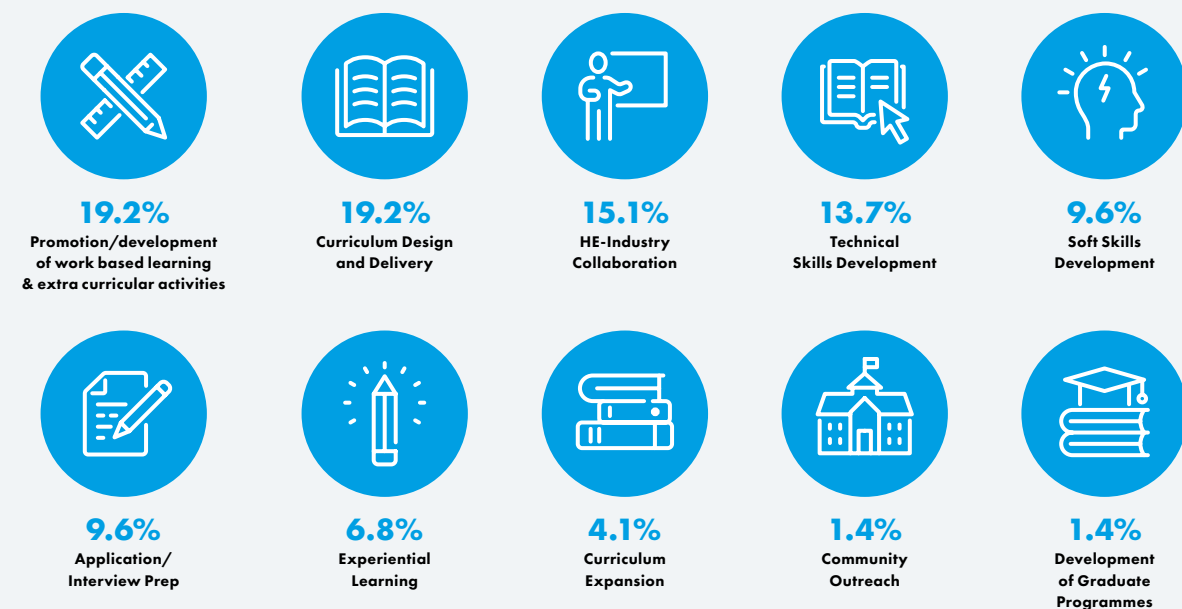
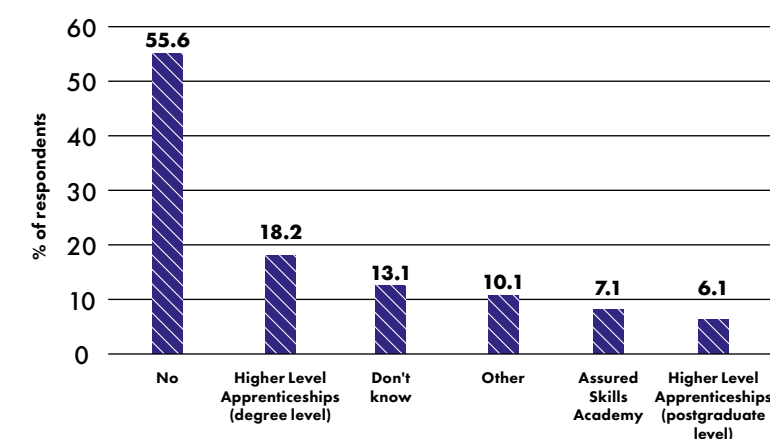


Figure 13: Interventions respondents have used to support the development of graduate employees job related skills (n=99)

The survey explored whether respondents had used interventions to support graduate employees job related skills. Over half 55.6% of respondents had not used those listed in Figure 13, while 18.2% had engaged in degree Higher Level Apprenticeships. A minority of respondents had engaged in the Assured Skills Academy (7.1%) and postgraduate Higher Level Apprenticeships (6.1%). Those that selected other (10.1%) commented that they provided inhouse and/or externally provided training/CPD sessions, and provided staff with the opportunity to complete additional qualifications.

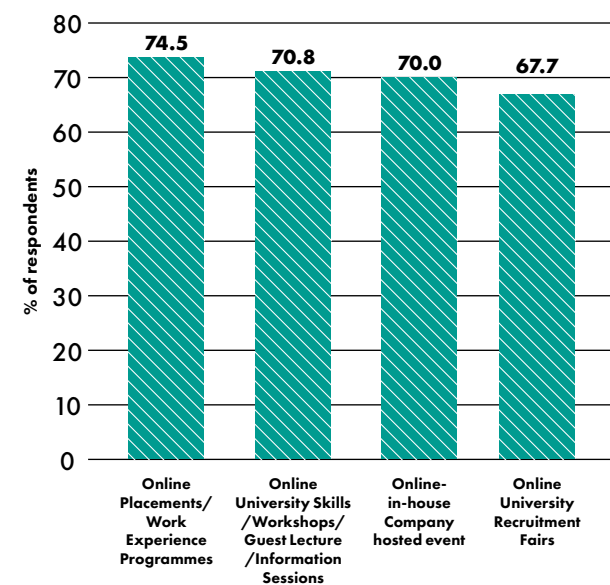




Marketing & Attraction Activities

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, many graduate recruitment marketing and attraction activities moved online. Respondents that engaged with these activities indicated strong levels of satisfaction, as illustrated in Figure 14, with three-quarters (74.5%) of respondents stating they were satisfied with online placements/work experience programmes. Similar proportions of respondents stated they were satisfied with online skills workshops (70.8%) and in-house company hosted events (70%), and 67.7% stated they were satisfied with online university recruitment fairs.

Figure 14: Respondents' satisfaction with online graduate marketing and attraction activities (n=99)



Respondents were asked to rank on a scale of 0-10 how effective they felt a range of marketing and attraction activities would be to their overall graduate recruitment practices over the next 12 months. As presented in Figure 15, all of the activities were deemed to be an important part of the respondents' future graduate recruitment activities, with placement/work experience rated as the most effective (8.12).

¹⁴ Respondents that selected 'Don't know' or 'Did not engage' were removed from the analysis of these questions.

Headline Findings



Employers indicated strong levels of satisfaction with online graduate recruitment marketing and attraction activities that had been used throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.



Placements/Work experience programmes were deemed to be the most important marketing and attraction activity going forward.



The vast majority of respondents stated that post-pandemic, they anticipate that their graduate recruitment marketing and attraction activities will be offered through a mixture of online and face-to-face platforms.

Figure 15: Level of effectiveness of marketing and attraction activities (on a scale of 0-10) (n=99)

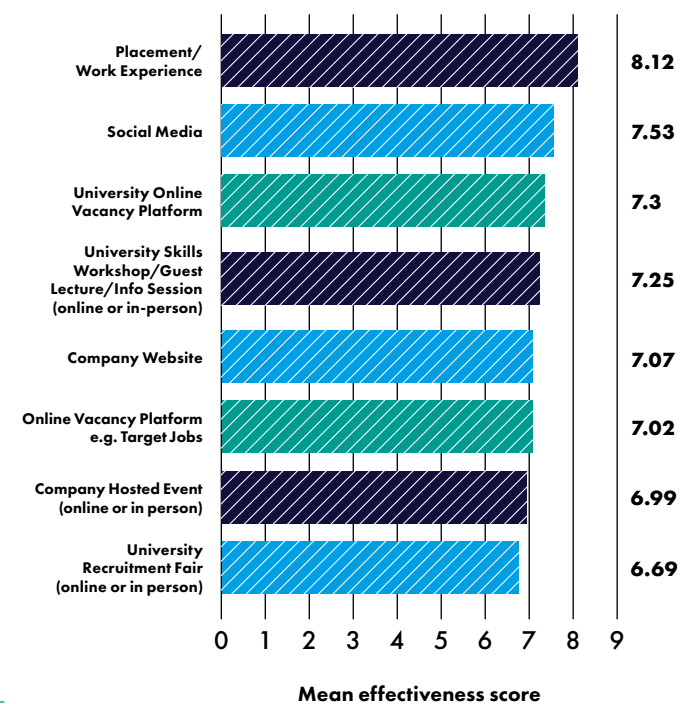
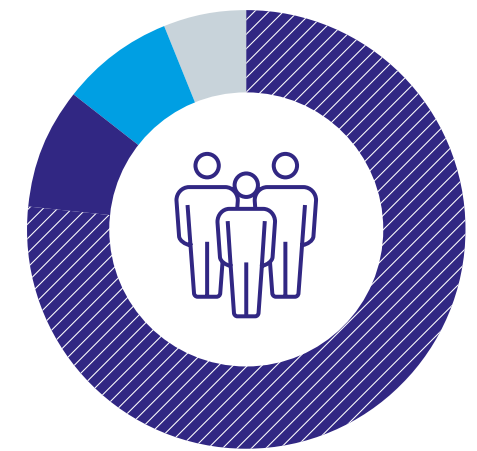
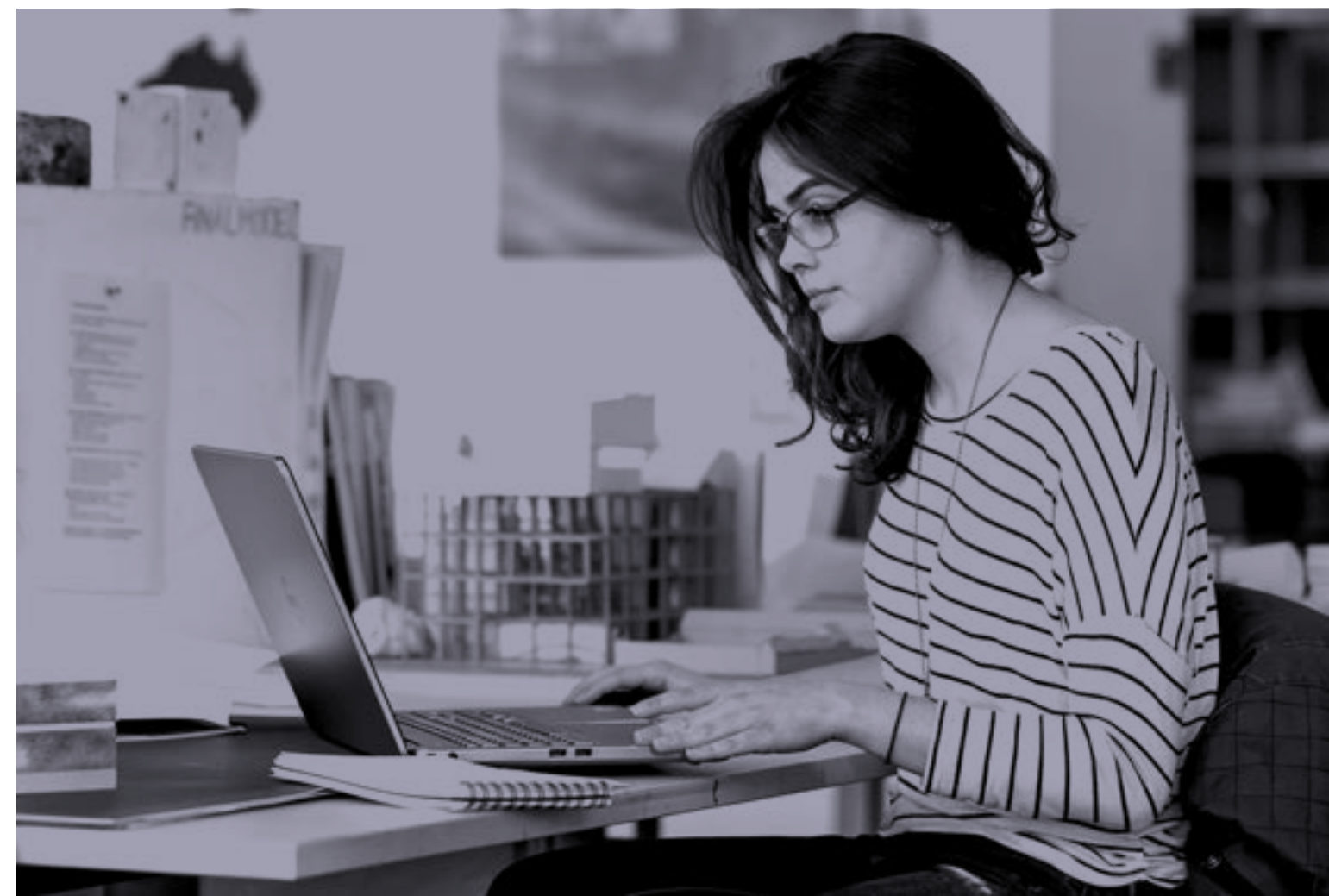


Figure 16: How respondents plan to offer graduate recruitment marketing and attraction activities post pandemic (n=99)

Over three-quarters (76.8%) of respondents stated that post-pandemic they anticipate that their graduate recruitment marketing and attraction activities will be offered through a mixture of online and face-to-face platforms (Figure 16). Just 6.1% stated these activities would be predominantly face-to-face and 9.1% stated predominately online. Those that specified online, were asked to indicate which online platforms they typically use, with a number noting that they used platforms such as LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter. Notably 8.1% responded 'Don't know' to this question which perhaps reflects the uncertainty that exists around working practices post-pandemic.



Mixture of face-to-face and online: 76.8%
Online: 9.1% Don't Know: 8.1% Face-to-face: 6.1%



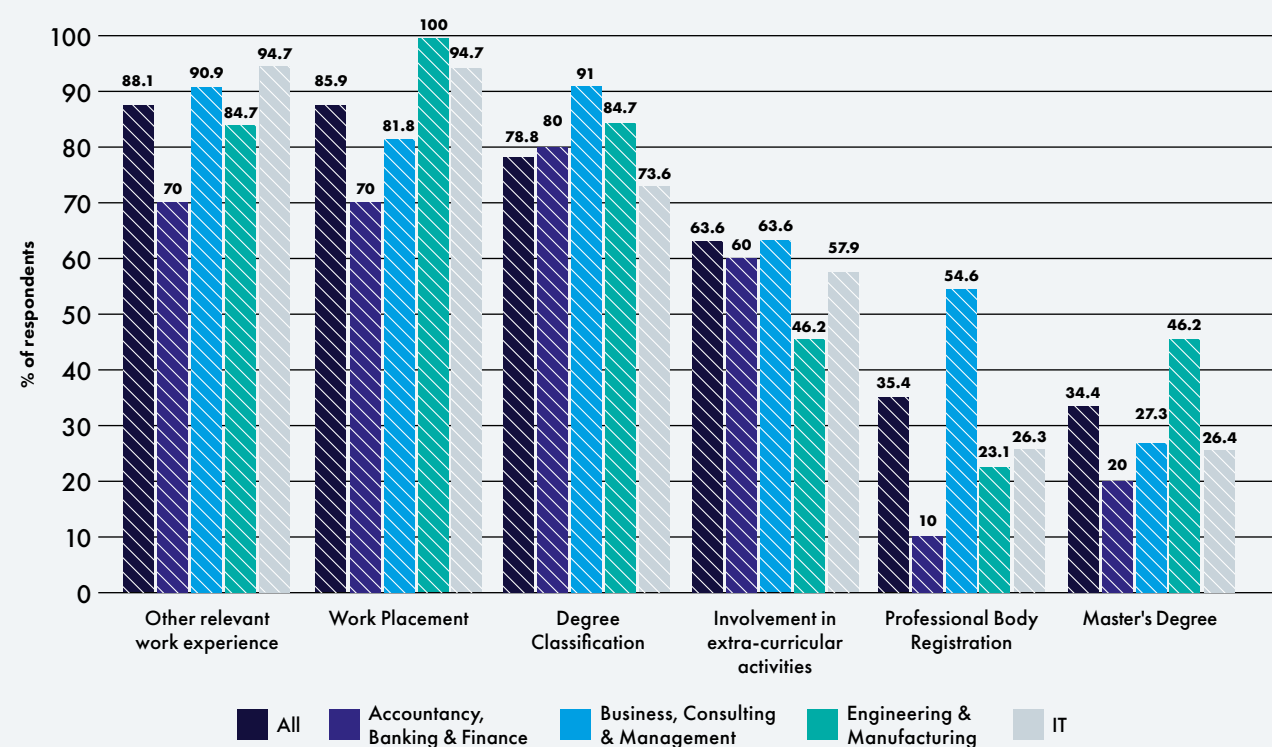


Selection Activities

Respondents were asked to indicate the level of importance of a range of factors, such as degree classification and work experience, in the selection of graduates. As presented in Figure 17, Work Placements and Other Relevant Work experience ranked highly, with over 85% of all respondents selecting these options. Degree Classification also ranked highly (78.8%), while Professional Body Registration and Master's Degrees ranked least important with 35.4% and 34.4% respondents choosing these options respectively.

Sub-sector analysis revealed that the IT and Engineering and Manufacturing sectors were most likely to rate all types of work experience as important. The Business, Consulting and Management sector was most likely to value Degree Classification (91%) and Professional Body Registration (54.6%), while the Engineering and Manufacturing sector was most likely to state that a Master's Degree was an important factor in the recruitment of graduates.

Figure 17: Level of importance in the selection of graduates (n=99)



Headline Findings

- Work experience was rated as being the most important factor in the selection of graduate recruits, closely followed by degree classification.
- There was variance across the sub-sectors on the importance of Professional Body Registration and the achievement of a Master's Degree when selecting graduates.
- 18% of respondents stated that more than half of their jobs were open to graduates from any degree discipline.
- Online interviews and face-to-face interviews are expected to be integral to graduate recruitment selection activities over the next 12 months.
- Vast majority of respondents stated that post-pandemic they anticipate that their graduate recruitment selection activities will be offered through a mixture of online and face-to-face platforms.

Figure 18: Graduate vacancies open to applicants from any degree discipline (n=99)

Notably, just 18.2% of respondents stated that more than half of their graduate jobs were open to graduates from any degree discipline, while just over half stated that less than 10% of their jobs were open to applicants from any degree discipline (Figure 18).

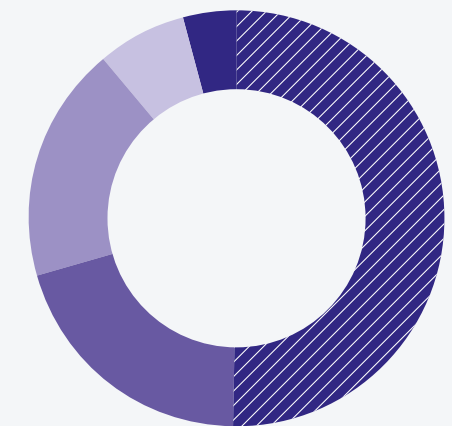
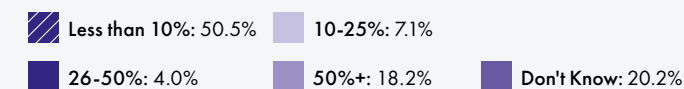


Figure 19: Sub-sector analysis of the sectors that stated over half of their vacancies are typically open to applicants from any degree discipline.

Sub-sector analysis reveals some variation however, with the Accountancy, Banking and Finance and Engineering and Manufacturing sectors most likely to hire graduates from any degree discipline, while IT was the least likely sector (Figure 19).

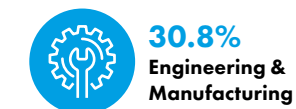
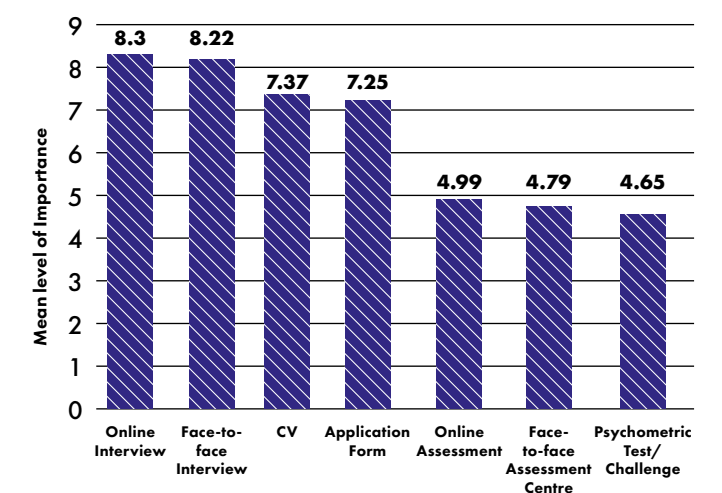


Figure 20: Level of Effectiveness of Various Activities in Graduate Selection (n=99)

Respondents indicated, on a scale of 0-10, how effective they felt a range of selection activities would be to their recruitment practices over the next 12 months. Figure 20 illustrates the mean score recorded for each of these activities. Interviews (online and face-to-face) were rated the most effective methods for selecting graduates, while CVs and application forms also rated highly with average scores of 7.37 and 7.25 respectively. Assessment centres both online and in-person and psychometric tests/challenges were less popular, with these activities all rated below 5. Notably, online interviews and assessment centres rated slightly higher than their face-to-face equivalents.





Selection Activities

The popularity of selection methods used in conjunction with interviews was explored through the survey, with respondents stating that presentations were most likely to be used in combination with interviews (Figure 21). Other methods such as personality/aptitude tests and group discussions were less popular. Notably 16.2% of respondents stated they did not plan to use any other methods in combination with interviews. Methods provided in the 'other' category included practical exercises and assessments used to test skills or knowledge.

As illustrated in Figure 22 post-pandemic, just 4% of respondents expect selection activities to be predominately online, while close to three-quarters (73.7%) expect these activities to be operated through a mixture of face-to-face and online methods. Notably 17.2% expect selection activities to operate face-to-face, which is considerably higher than the proportion of respondents that stated marketing and attraction activities will be predominately face-to-face post-pandemic (6.1%).

Figure 21: Selection methods likely to be used alongside interviews in the next 24 months (multiple choice question/n=99)

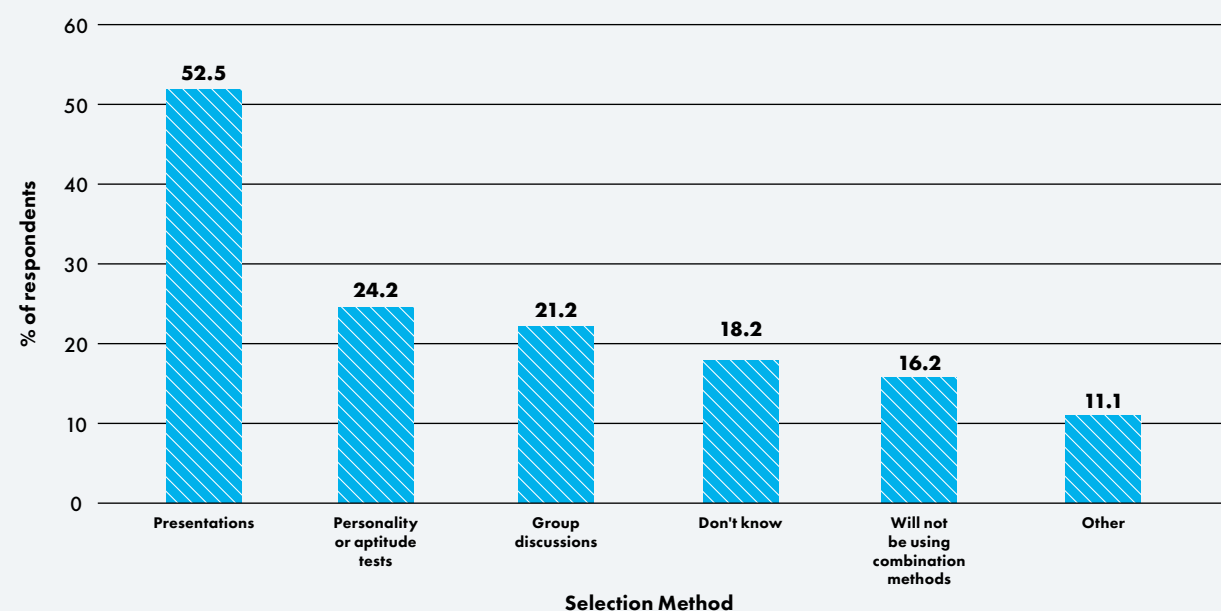
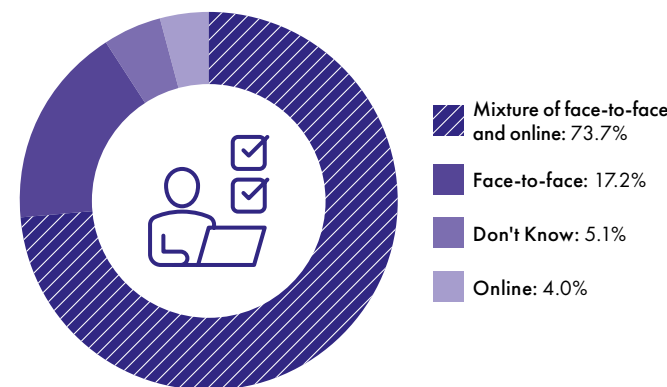


Figure 22: How selection activities will predominantly be offered after the pandemic (n=99)



Graduate Recruitment Challenges

Just over one-quarter of respondents (28.3%) stated that they had faced graduate recruitment challenges in the last 24 months (see Figure 23). The Accountancy, Banking and Finance (40%) and Engineering and Manufacturing (38.5%) sectors were most likely to state that they had experienced recruitment challenges.

Figure 23: Have you experienced any challenges around graduate recruitment in the last 24 months (n=99)



Of those respondents that had experienced recruitment challenges in the last 24 months, close to one-third (32.1%) stated that these challenges had been exacerbated by Covid-19, while surprisingly a significant proportion (39.3%) stated there had been no impact. Notably 28.6% were unsure (see Figure 25). Respondents were asked to provide more details on how these challenges had been exacerbated by Covid-19 with many noting that online interaction was not as effective for their recruitment and onboarding practices, while others mentioned that the pandemic had brought about delays to the recruitment process.

Figure 25: Has Covid-19 Exacerbated Graduate Recruitment Challenges? (n=28)



Headline Findings

- A relatively small proportion of respondents had experienced challenges around graduate recruitment in the last 24 months.
- A shortage of candidates with specific skills and a shortage of candidates from specific degree disciplines were the challenges most commonly experienced by respondents.
- Too few candidates and competition from other graduate recruiters were other notable challenges.

Respondents were probed on the nature of these challenges and the two most commonly identified were a 'shortage of candidates with specific skills required for the job' and 'shortage of candidates from specific degree disciplines' (32.1%), as illustrated in Figure 24. This was closely followed by 'too few candidates' and 'high competition from other graduate recruiters' (28.6%). One quarter of respondents stated their graduate recruitment challenges stemmed from a 'shortage of candidates with relevant work experience' and 'the switch to an online recruitment environment' (25%).

Figure 24: Nature of graduate recruitment challenges encountered over the last 24 months (multiple choice question/ n=28)

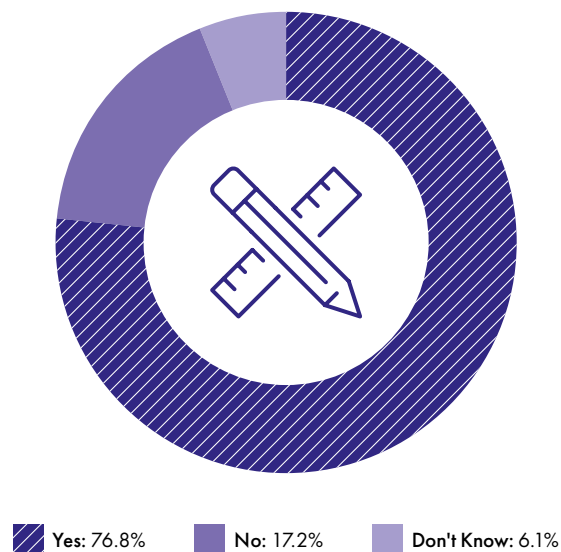




Undergraduate Recruitment

The majority of the sample (76.8%) had offered placement opportunities in the last 24 months (Figure 26).

Figure 26: Within the last 24 months, have you offered placement opportunities within your organisation? (n=99)

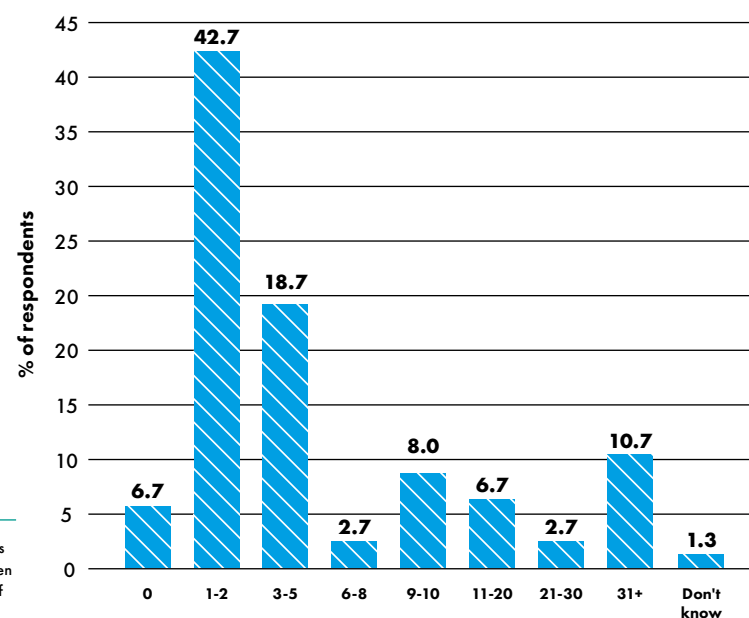


Headline Findings

- The majority of respondents recruited placement students.
- The main reason for recruiting placement students was altruistic in nature, i.e. to provide students with work experience.
- Respondents typically recruit placement students into longer term paid roles following the culmination of their placement.
- The most common reason for not recruiting placement students was because organisations did not have suitable roles.
- A traditional 12-month full-time placement was identified as respondents' preferred model for offering placement.
- There was less consensus around the most suitable time of year for recruiters to commence a placement position.

Figure 27: Number of placement students currently employed by respondents (n=75)

Of this, almost two-thirds (61.4%) of organisations had 1-5 placement students currently employed in their organisation, while just over one-tenth (10.7%) of respondents had 31+ placement students employed (see Figure 27). The average number of placement students calculated was 7.8.



¹⁵ 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.

Figure 28: Reasons for engaging in placement schemes (multiple choice question/n=76)

The reasons why graduate recruiters employ placement students are illustrated in Figure 28. Notably, the majority of respondents stated that their reasons were altruistic in nature, with 90.8% selecting 'Provide students with experience'. The next most popular response was 'Value the skills and knowledge that students bring to the organisation' (78.9%), while just over two-thirds (67.1%) employ placement students because of the organisation's 'existing links/ partnerships with higher education institutions'. Notably just under half (48.7%) of respondents employ placement students to support their graduate recruitment practices.

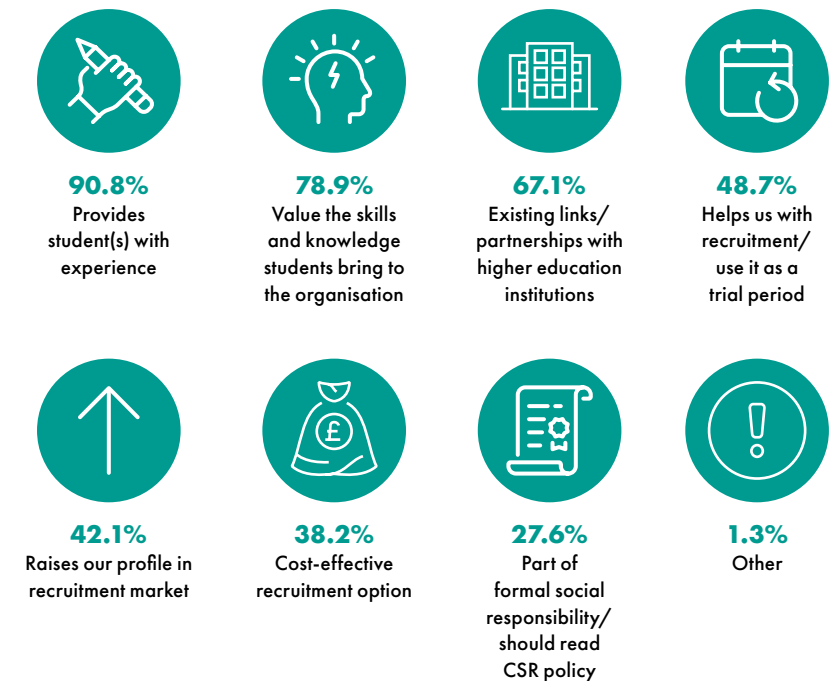
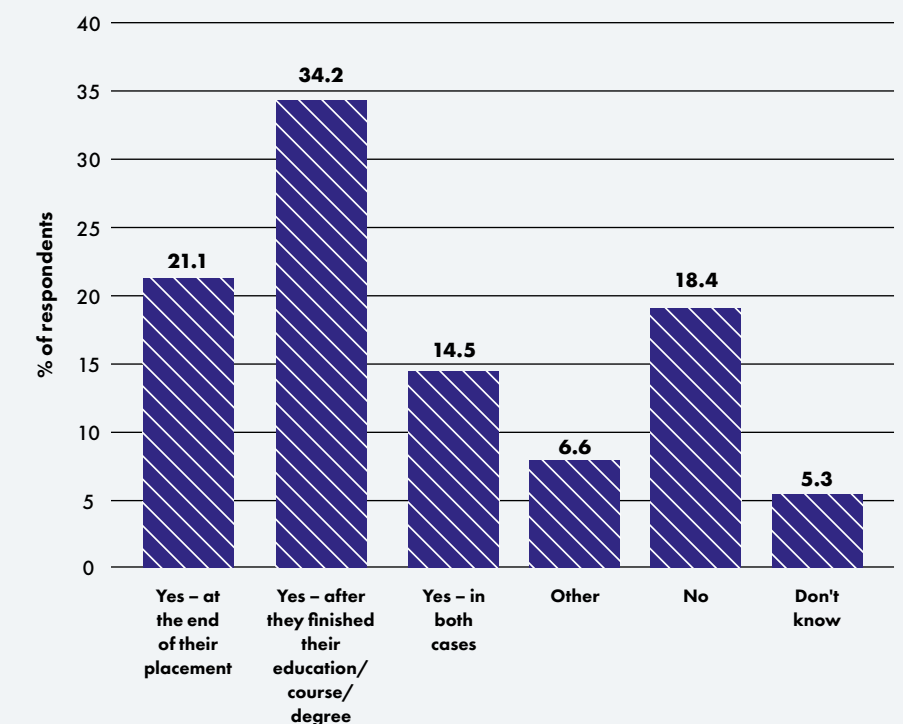


Figure 29: Have you recruited any placement students into long term roles? (n=76)

As illustrated in Figure 29, the vast majority of respondents that recruit placement students typically recruit these students into longer-term paid roles, either immediately after their placement contract terminates or after the students have completed their degree programme (69.8%).





Undergraduate Recruitment

Figure 30: Reasons organisations have not engaged in placements (multiple choice question/ n=17)

Respondents that did not typically employ placement students (n=17), were asked why they did not engage in this model. As illustrated in Figure 30, the most common response was around the lack of suitable roles (41.2%), followed by budget constraints (29.4%) and a lack of time to manage placement students (23.5%).

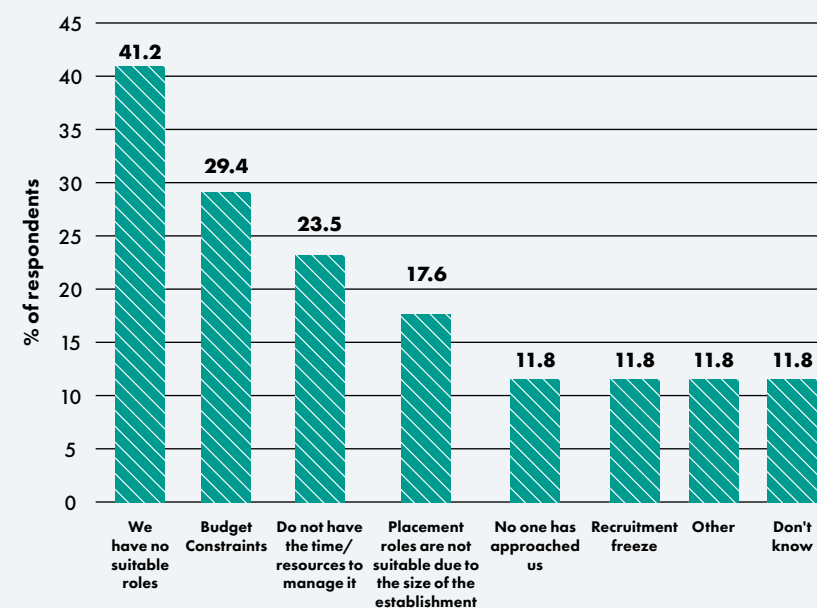
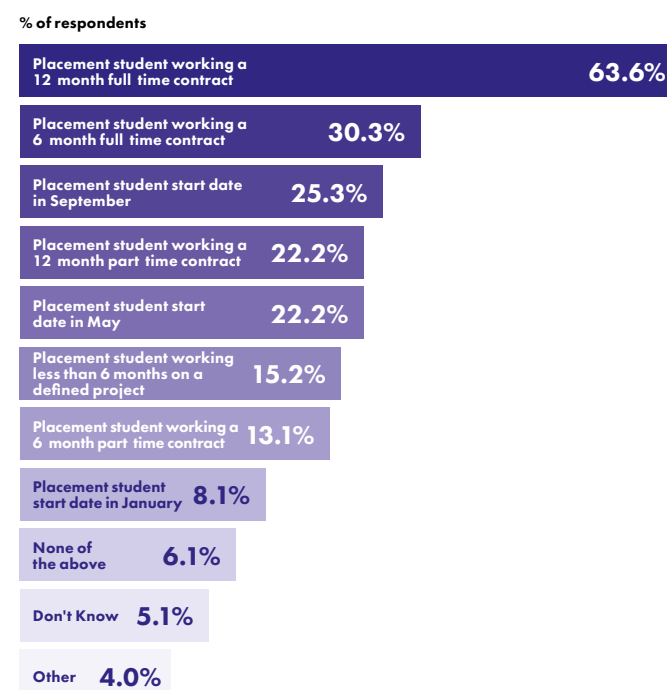


Figure 31: Placement model options preferred by organisations (multiple choice question/n=99)

All respondents were asked which type of placement model would best suit their needs. As presented in Figure 31, the vast majority of respondents indicated a strong preference for the traditional 12-month full-time model (63.6%). Further back, just under one-third of respondents (30.3%), indicated their preference for placement students to be employed on a 6 month full-time contract. The most popular start date for placement students contracts was September (25.3%), closely followed by May (22.2%). Just 15.2% of respondents indicated that they would prefer students to work on a short term contract (less than 6 months) on a defined project. Sub-group analysis revealed that the Accountancy, Banking and Finance (80%) and Engineering and Manufacturing (76.9%) sectors were considerably more likely to display preference for the 12-month full-time contract than the other sectors surveyed. Notably smaller organisations, i.e. those with 50 staff or less, were less likely to show preference for the 12-month full-time placement contract.



Collaborative Opportunities

The survey explored the level of engagement that respondents have with higher education institutions across a range of recruitment activities, and their attitudes towards engaging with these activities. Results for this question are presented in Table 1. Internships (i.e. shorter work experience opportunities, typically less than 6 months), had the highest level of engagement amongst respondents (42.4%), with Contribution to the Delivery of Teaching and Learning (30.3%) and Consultation Projects with Students (25.3%) the next most common activities. Respondents expressed a strong interest towards Contributing to the Delivery of Teaching and Learning (32.3%), engaging in Enterprise Projects (30.3%), and Curriculum Design (29.3%).

Headline Findings



Respondents expressed a strong interest towards engaging in Enterprise Projects, Curriculum Design and the Delivery of Teaching and Learning.



Post-pandemic, close to half of respondents stated that they would like to engage with Ulster's campus spaces.



28% of respondents felt that Ulster should do more outreach activities.



The types of outreach activities proposed by respondents included 'site visits' by staff from Ulster University, to develop a better understanding of companies and how Ulster can support their respective talent management and business needs.

Table 1: Level of Engagement with Collaborative Recruitment Activities (n=99)

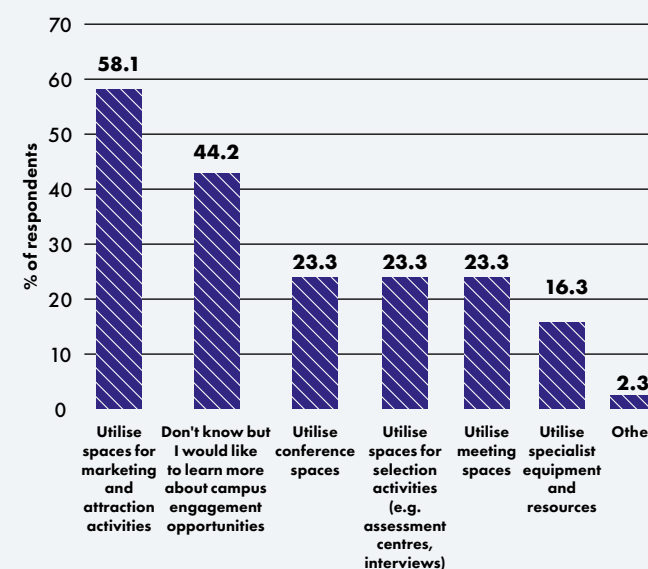
Collaborative Recruitment Activities	NO engagement & NOT interested in engaging in this activity	NO engagement, BUT INTERESTED in engaging in this activity	SOME level of engagement in this activity	Don't know
Internships	22.2	22.2	42.4	13.1
Consultation Project with Students	21.2	27.3	25.3	25.3
Enterprise Project with Students	27.3	30.3	14.1	28.3
Design of Curriculum	25.3	29.3	10.1	35.4
Programme Approval & Validation	26.3	20.2	7.1	46.5
Contribution to the Development of Student Assessment	28.7	27.3	10.1	34.3
Contribution to the delivery of teaching and learning (e.g. classroom talks)	15.2	32.3	30.3	22.2



Collaborative Opportunities

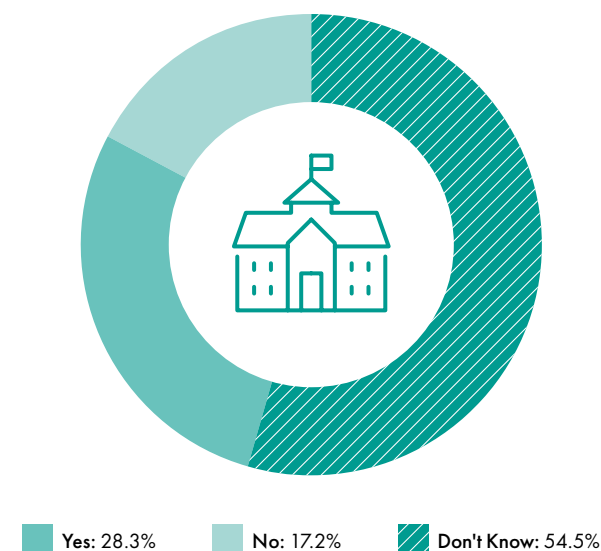
Post-pandemic, close to half of respondents (48%) stated that they would like to engage with Ulster's campus spaces. Respondents were subsequently asked how they would like to engage with these spaces, with the most common response 'Utilise spaces for marketing and attraction activities' (58.1%). Notably, a significant proportion (44.2%) stated that they would like to learn more about campus space engagement opportunities (see Figure 32).

Figure 32: How organisations would like to engage with Ulster (multiple choice question/ n=43)



Just over one-quarter of respondents (28%) felt that Ulster should conduct more outreach activities with employers while over half were unsure (Figure 33). Respondents were subsequently asked to elaborate on what these activities might look like. A number expressed a desire for representatives from the University to conduct 'site visits' or 'facility tours' to develop a better understanding of the company and how Ulster can support their talent management needs. For example, one respondent purported for 'facility tours, to see what companies are working on, to help identify areas the university could support' while another commented 'scheduled time to come onsite, get a feel for the work happening and exchange of ideas on how we can drive success in the NW together'. Others talked about the importance of bringing students onsite, with one noting the importance of 'site visits for students looking at placements or graduate roles from specific/ related courses'.

Figure 33: Should Ulster conduct more outreach activities with organisations (n=99)



Summary of Key Findings

Key findings from the survey include:

- Communication, digital soft skills and technical Information Technology (IT) related skills consistently ranked highly in terms of importance amongst graduate employers.
- A significant proportion of respondents stated that there is an undersupply of graduate skills, and this view was most likely to be held by respondents in the IT sector.
- Employers purported that skills deficits can be addressed through the promotion and development of work based learning and extra curricular opportunities, targeted curriculum interventions, and collaboration with the higher education sector.
- Employers indicated strong levels of satisfaction with online graduate recruitment marketing and attraction activities that had been used throughout the Covid 19 pandemic.
- Work experience was rated as being the most important factor in the selection of graduate recruits, closely followed by degree classification.
- 18% of respondents stated that more than half of their jobs were open to graduates from any degree discipline.
- The vast majority of respondents stated that post pandemic they anticipate that their graduate recruitment activities will be offered through a mixture of online and face to face platforms.
- The main reason for recruiting placement students was altruistic in nature, i.e. to provide students with work experience.
- Respondents typically recruit placement students into longer term paid roles following the culmination of their placement.
- A traditional 12 month full time placement was identified as respondents preferred model for offering placement.
- Respondents expressed a strong interest towards engaging in Enterprise Projects, Curriculum Design and the Delivery of Teaching and Learning.
- Post pandemic, close to half of respondents (48%) stated that they would like to engage with Ulster's campus spaces.



Conclusions & Implications

Importance of Work Experience

The findings from this research strongly suggest that graduate recruiters highly value relevant work experience. For example, all types of work experience (i.e. work experience that is part of an HE programme or other types of relevant work experience) were ranked as the most important factors in the selection of graduates. These findings perhaps come as no surprise as numerous research studies, such as the annual UK Graduate Market survey¹⁶, have repeatedly warned that graduates with no previous work experience are unlikely to be successful during the graduate recruitment selection process. The findings do however add to a compelling body of evidence on the value of work experience, and the localised nature of the findings will resonate with many stakeholders, particularly students and those staff committed to developing students' employability.

Conversely, and somewhat alarmingly, a recent study from Prospects found that less than a fifth (17%) of students had undertaken work experience in 2020, mainly as a result of fewer opportunities being available to young people during the Covid-19 pandemic¹⁷. In addition, other studies have shown that currently the biggest barrier facing university students when searching for a job is having the required work experience¹⁸. However, as the economy emerges from the pandemic, there is optimism that employers are keen to re-establish existing and develop new work experience schemes with the HE sector¹⁹. Ulster currently has one of the largest work-based learning programmes in the UK, and while findings from this study signal that many employers favour traditional models such as the full-time year-long placement offering, there is significant appetite for other models including shorter more flexible schemes and project-based approaches. This emphasises the need for HE institutions to continue to develop a portfolio of meaningful and impactful work experience programmes to meet employers' talent management needs and to support students' graduate employability outcomes. It is also vital that students and graduates, particularly the class of 2020, are made aware of the existence and importance of these work experience opportunities and are supported through the recruitment process.

With a shift towards home-working significantly accelerated by the pandemic, new and existing work-based learning programmes are likely to incorporate varying degrees of remote working. It is encouraging that findings from this study show high levels of engagement and satisfaction with remote work experience during the pandemic. To ensure that the benefits and opportunities that remote working models present are maximised, it will be important to take stock of the challenges and enablers employers and students alike have experienced over the last 18 months and to draw on these insights to inform future initiatives and encourage uptake. From a student perspective, the benefits of remote working include not being restricted by cost or location which dramatically increases their accessibility to high quality positions which can in turn improve the skills base of regional economies. Employers in turn benefit from having access to a wider pool of talent. This breakdown in geographical barriers will likely see HE careers services engage with a much larger pool of employers and a substantial increase in the number of work experience opportunities outside of Northern Ireland that are applicable to local students.

Finally, while many graduate recruiters employ placement students for altruistic reasons, findings from this study show that work experience schemes such as placements have become an integral part of building talent pipelines. This is because they provide employers with an opportunity to assess individuals over an extended period and can subsequently lead to the recruitment of candidates for their graduate programmes. These findings shed light on the benefits of engaging in placement models from an employer perspective and should be emphasised by HE staff who seek to promote employer engagement in work based learning programmes.

¹⁶ https://www.highfliers.co.uk/download/2018/graduate_market/GMReport18.pdf

¹⁷ https://graduatemarkettrends.cdn.prismic.io/graduatemarkettrends/bf3409a0-b8d2-406e-b56b-a4720cf327a7_early-careers-survey-2021-work-experience-during-a-crisis.pdf

¹⁸ <https://luminare.prospects.ac.uk/uk-graduate-labour-market-update-6-july>

¹⁹ <https://insights.ise.org.uk/attraction-and-marketing/blog-inside-he-impact-of-covid-19-on-students-and-work-placements/>

Skills Gaps & Employer Engagement

Communication (written and verbal), digital soft skills and technical IT related skills were consistently ranked highly in terms of importance by graduate recruiters throughout the survey. In addition, many recruiters stated that there was an undersupply of these skills. Again, these findings perhaps come as no surprise as graduate recruiters' concerns over a lack of necessary soft and IT skills are commonly publicised.^{20,21} Notably, this skills gap is likely to increase further as the demand for both hard and soft IT skills intensify in response to the accelerated digital transformation brought about by Covid-19.²²

This graduate skills gap has contributed to the current and projected skills imbalance facing Northern Ireland, and it is essential that this imbalance is addressed so that the region can socially and economically recover from Covid-19.²³ OECD has identified the HE sector as a key player in strengthening the region's skills and economic performance, and central to this is meaningful employer engagement to understand skills priorities and needs. Ulster has already committed to embedding employer engagement into the curriculum to enhance student employability and respond to the skills agenda through their Integrated Curriculum Design Framework. However, findings from this research suggest that there is space for further and enhanced engagement, with the majority of survey respondents indicating that they had not engaged in activities such as curriculum design and programme approval and validation. These trends have been mirrored elsewhere with a 2018 Bloomberg report indicating that just 38% of respondents had actively collaborated with the HE sector to shape the curriculum.²⁴ When asked how the skills deficit could be tackled, many respondents in this study pointed towards embedded curricular activities, indicating that there is a clear appetite for collaboration in this space.

While embedding employer engagement into the curriculum is key to addressing the skills imbalance, some studies have suggested that students' perceptions of graduate soft skills requirements demonstrate that levels of awareness and engagement are often low, even when the acquisition of specific skills is made explicit in curricular learning outcomes. For example, a recent study from a group of peer researchers at Leeds University, revealed that students perceived that many soft skills such as communication were not valued highly by graduate employers, which is contrary to recruiters' viewpoints captured in this study and elsewhere.²⁵ For example, according to LinkedIn research, leadership, problem solving and communication were identified as the most in demand skills listed in job postings.²⁶ This indicates that while embedding soft skills through the curriculum is a key component of developing students' career readiness for the graduate labour market, it is vital that students can identify their acquisition of these skills, understand the importance of soft skills for their professional success and can articulate their skills to employers through the recruitment process. It is also important that students and graduates recognise that upskilling to respond to the needs of an ever-changing workplace is a continuous process, that will stretch far beyond the completion of their degree programmes, and that they must avail of various skills pathways and opportunities to remain professionally competitive. The HE sector is an obvious source to offer a range of upskilling programmes to those students and graduates who have missed out on the development of key soft skills and work-related learning experiences during the pandemic and Ulster has already played an active role in providing support and opportunities to recent graduates through a range of initiatives including internships organised through the Graduate Leadership Programme.

²⁰ <https://luminare.prospects.ac.uk/taking-responsibility-for-the-graduate-skills-gap>

²¹ <https://luminare.prospects.ac.uk/a-mixed-bag-employer-perspectives-on-graduate-skills>

²² <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/03/covid-19-accelerated-digital-transformation-how-companies-can-adapt/>

²³ <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/1857c8af-en/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/1857c8af-en>

²⁴ <https://luminare.prospects.ac.uk/collaboration-is-key-to-addressing-digital-skills-gap>

²⁵ <https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/career-planning/273051-the-top-10-skills-thatll-get-you-a-job-when-you-graduate>

²⁶ <https://blog.linkedin.com/2020/may/june/2/linkedin-2020-grad-s-guide-to-getting-hired>

²⁷ <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/economy/skills-strategy-10x-economy-consultation.pdf>

Conclusions & Implications

Skills Gaps & Employer Engagement

The promotion and development of work-based learning opportunities was identified by respondents as equally important alongside curriculum delivery and design in addressing skills gaps. This has been echoed in the draft Northern Ireland Skills Strategy which outlines that work-based learning is the most effective means for students, at any level, to improve employability skills. As mentioned in the previous section it is essential that Ulster develops a range of meaningful and impactful work experience programmes, and part of this will involve continuing to work with employers to develop higher level apprenticeships. A well-functioning

apprenticeship system is critical to ensure that employers have access to the skills they need to operate effectively, and it is encouraging that close to one-fifth of respondents had engaged in this space. Investment in apprenticeships has already been brought forward by the Department for the Economy as a result of Covid-19, with a focus on sectors where there is potential for growth in higher paid jobs, thus it is likely the HE sector will continue to be active in this space and it will be important to continue to raise awareness of the benefits of higher level apprenticeships from both a student and employer perspective.



Blended Recruitment Practices & Collaboration

The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated a process of digitalisation across many business areas, including recruitment, with graduate employers forced to pivot and embrace a fully online approach at speed for much of 2020. Findings from this study show that over the course of the next 12 months, employers expect their graduate recruitment practices to encompass a blended model of both face-to-face and online methods. It is unclear however if this is through preference or necessity resulting from the physical restrictions imposed by government policy, and whether the shift is long term. Research across the sector suggests that online approaches are here to stay for certain stages of the graduate recruitment process, particularly around marketing and attractions activities, with many employers finding company websites, external jobs boards and social media marketing very effective during the pandemic.²⁸ However, there appears to be less appetite for graduate selection activities to permanently switch to an online environment, with employers keen to have face-to-face interaction with candidates in interview and assessment centre settings.²²

While a switch to an online environment for certain stages of the graduate recruitment process may yield benefits for HE institutions and employers alike, it is worth noting that a recent study from Handshake warns that this pivot may come to the detriment of student inclusivity and access.²⁹ More explicitly, the research found that throughout the pandemic employers were increasingly using online professional networks such as LinkedIn and word-of-mouth to recruit staff. Conversely, a significant proportion of students surveyed through the study expressed uncertainty and a lack of confidence around online professional networking. In addition, many students were found to have inadequate access to appropriate technology to engage with the virtual recruitment process, with internet reliability and limited space cited as the most common challenges. More recently the Institute of Student Employers highlighted a disconnect between student and employer expectations around online recruitment with students likely to underestimate the extent to which recruitment practices will be online in the future.

These findings shed light on the importance of understanding students' experiences and perceptions around online recruitment, and drawing upon this information to mitigate any risks and barriers faced, and making them aware that blended recruitment practices are here to stay.

This study revealed that a significant proportion of graduate recruiters found online company hosted events useful towards their graduate recruitment marketing and attraction activities during the pandemic. As this was not a longitudinal study, it is unclear to what extent companies relied on these platforms prior to 2020. However, across the sector there is some discussion around whether employers may have become less reliant on university career services for their recruitment practices as a result of the pandemic, and what the implications of this are for student access and the rapidly changing nature of HE careers services. This perhaps highlights the timely importance of careers services engaging closely with recruiters to understand how they can best support their talent management needs in the post-pandemic era, and this may involve some adjustment and realignment of existing practices. What this might look like is unclear, however the survey findings point towards a desire for face-to-face contact, with many employers keen for university staff to visit their premises to better understand business needs. The planned reopening of Ulster's campuses provides an excellent opportunity to discuss, explore and develop these new arrangements, and results from the survey evidence that there is a strong appetite from recruiters for collaboration in these spaces.

²⁸ <https://luminate.prospects.ac.uk/graduate-recruitment-is-changing-heres-how>

²⁹ <https://joinhandshake.co.uk/netpotism>

³⁰ <https://insights.ise.org.uk/selection-and-assessment/blog-are-students-and-graduates-prepared-for-online-recruitment/>

