What do graduates want? 2024/25

Unleashing insights into the Gen Z mindset
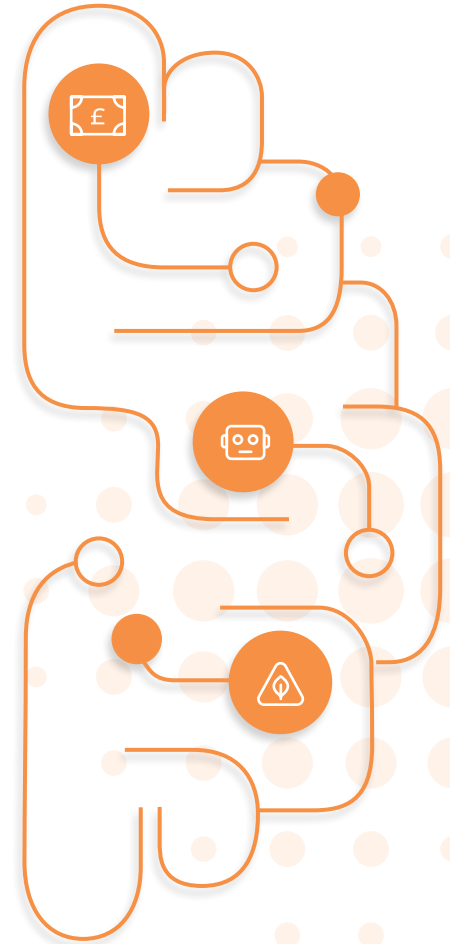
BRIGHT
NETWORK

Contents

Foreword

Since our last annual research report, we've celebrated 10 years of Bright Network and a decade of connecting the next generation with the opportunities, insights and advice to succeed as the workforce of tomorrow. It's been fantastic to reflect on the impact we've made, working with leading employers to equip our members with the tools they need to accelerate their careers and secure dream roles.

Our annual research gains a deep understanding of student sentiment and the motivations driving the career decisions of Gen Z. Now in its ninth year, we're pleased to share invaluable insights and provide advice to leading employers who want to attract and retain the best and most diverse emerging talent.

We've seen some significant shifts in sentiment this year, alongside some big changes in the market. The economic environment is in a less stable position and students are feeling worried about the effect this could have on their futures. Application behaviours are changing, with the surging prominence in generative AI usage and attitudes towards reneging introducing fresh challenges for employers. For the first year since the pandemic, confidence has dipped and students have new expectations when it comes to workplace flexibility, location and remuneration.

Throughout this year's report, you'll find tailored and focused advice to apply to your graduate recruitment strategies, now and in the future. We've introduced neurodiversity data and we dive deeper than ever before into the impact that intersectionality has on student expectations and experiences. As always, we explore what you should be focusing on to strengthen your employer brand and align it to what matters most to students, so that you can attract and retain top talent.

I hope you enjoy the report and find useful takeaways. We welcome follow-up conversations on any areas you'd like to hear more about.

Kirsten Barnes
Chief Executive Officer (Platform)
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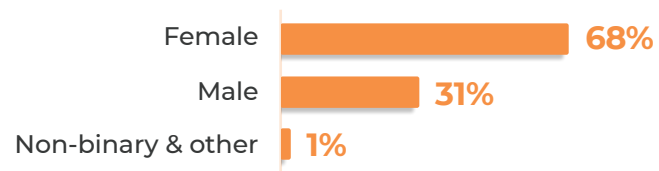
About the respondents

Our ninth annual *What do graduates want?* research report uncovers the sentiments of current students and recent graduates towards their careers, their motivations and their concerns for the future. The report focuses on themes such as confidence and skills, attitudes towards generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) and Gen Z expectations of the working world.

The results from over 14,000 Bright Network members were collected through an online survey between November 2023 and January 2024.

New for this year, we've collected additional social mobility and neurodiversity data, as well as providing deep dives into the sentiments of students from intersectional backgrounds. Throughout, you'll find more tailored advice on how to apply these findings in your current and future strategies.

Gender

Q. Which of the following best describes your gender?

Female	68%
Male	31%
Non-binary & other	1%

Ethnicity

Q. Which of the following best describes your ethnic group?

Arab	2%
Asian/Asian British	31%
Black/African/Caribbean/Black British	22%
Mixed/multiple ethnic background	5%
White/white other	35%
Other	3%
Prefer not to say	2%
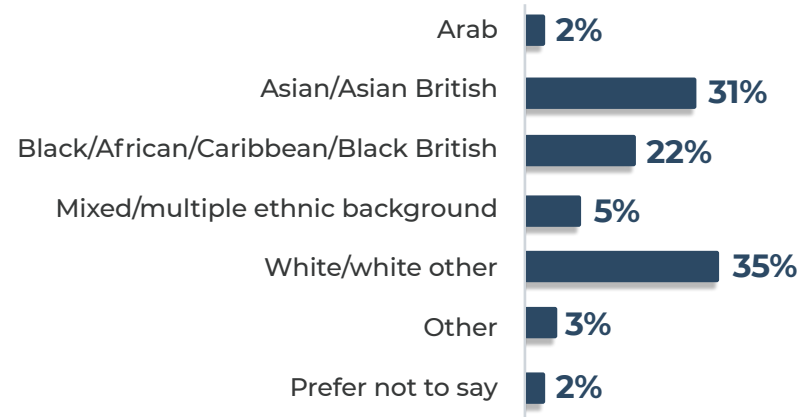
Sexuality

Q. Which of the following best describes your sexuality?

- Heterosexual/straight **73%**
- Bisexual **10%**
- Gay **2%**
- Lesbian **2%**
- Other **2%**
- Prefer not to say **11%**
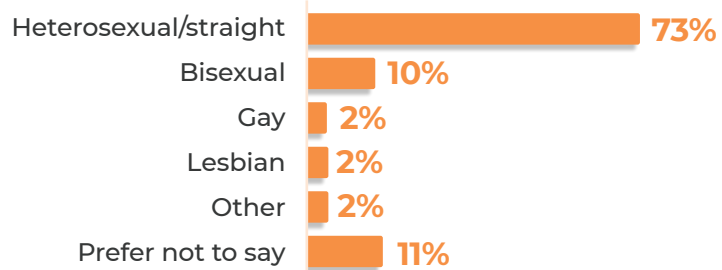
Disability

Q. Do you consider yourself to have a disability?

84% No **11%** Yes **5%** Prefer not to say

- Physical **18%**
- Neurological **68%**
- Both **14%**
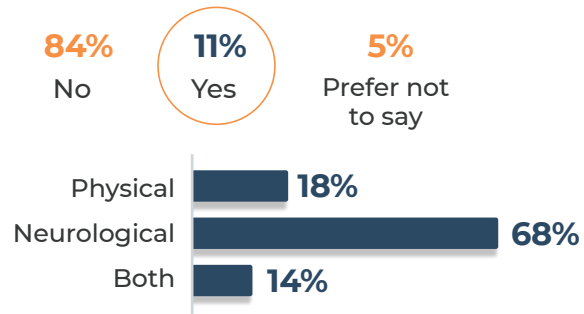
Free school meals

Q. Were you eligible for free school meals at any point during your school years?

- No **66%**
- Yes **24%**
- I don't know **7%**
- Prefer not to say **3%**
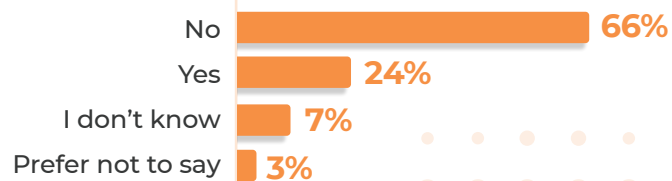
School

Q. Which type of school did you attend?

- State school **85%**
- Private school **15%**
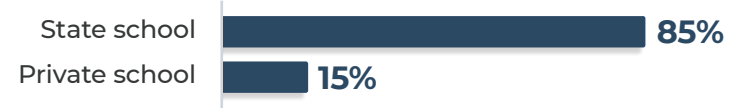
Graduation year

Q. What is your graduation year?

48% Already graduated **26%** 2024 **13%** 2025 **13%** 2026 & beyond
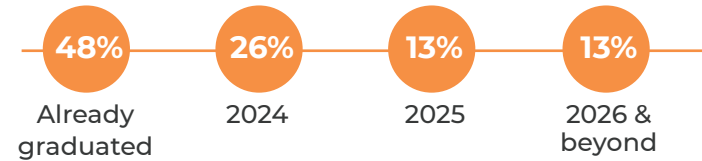
Future plans

Q. What stage are you at in your career?

- Applying for graduate jobs **35%**
- I've secured a graduate job **23%**
- Applying for internships/industrial placement/work experience **22%**
- Researching & considering my options **9%**
- Applying to further study **5%**
- I have no idea what I want to do **4%**
- I'm planning on taking time out after university **2%**

5
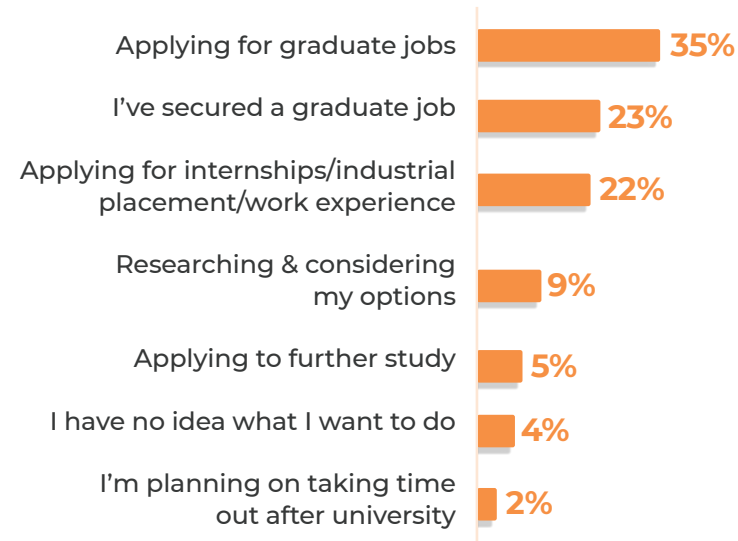
About Bright Network

Our members

427,000 students and recent graduates in our network

1,000,000
Members

14%
Black heritage

54%
Female

27%
STEM

84%
State school educated

42%
First generation to attend university
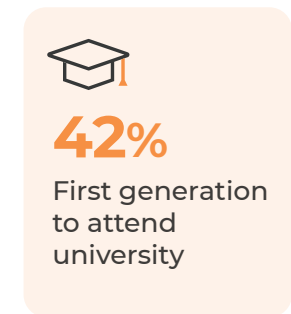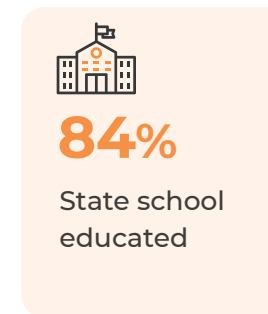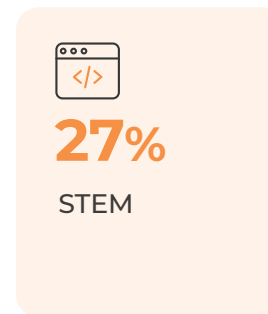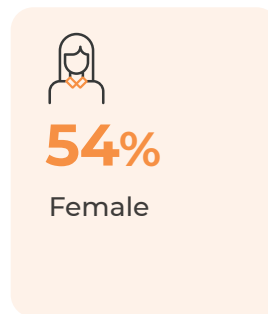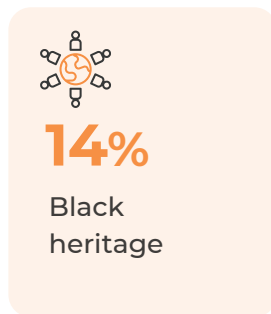
Growth of our student and recent graduate network over time

29%
average annual growth

55%
average annual growth of **Black heritage members**

60%
average annual growth of **social mobility members***

2.8M
applications to jobs and internships on our platform in the last 12 months
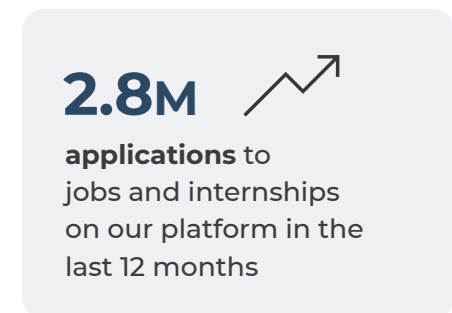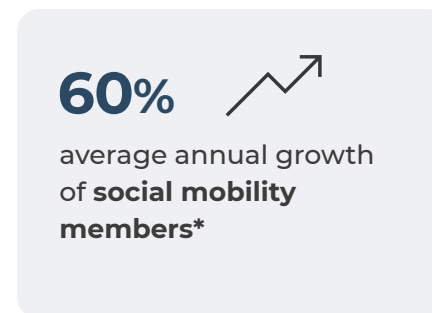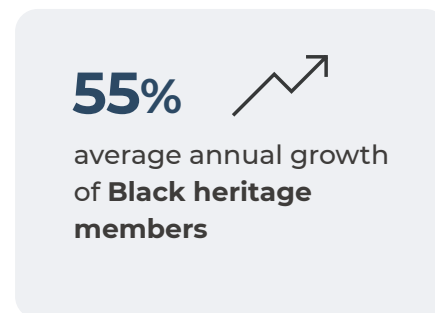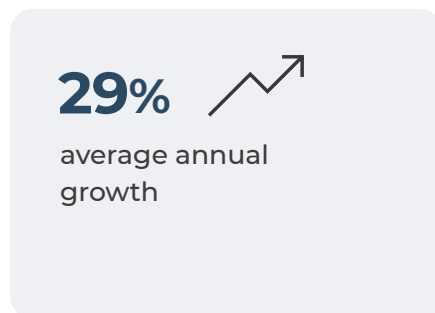
* Members who attended state school and received free school meals or first generation to attend university

1 Confidence

- Confidence in securing a role

- Social mobility and confidence

- Intersectionality and confidence

- Challenges students face

- The impact of neurodiversity

Confidence in securing a role

i. Are you confident about securing a graduate role after university?

Yes responses from all students

Key findings

This year, confidence has taken the first dip since the 2020 pandemic.

	January 2018	January 2019	January 2020	April 2020	October 2020	January 2021	October 2021	January 2022	January 2023	January 2024
%	57%	57%	49%	33%	37%	39%	50%	55%	57%	54%

Pre-pandemic
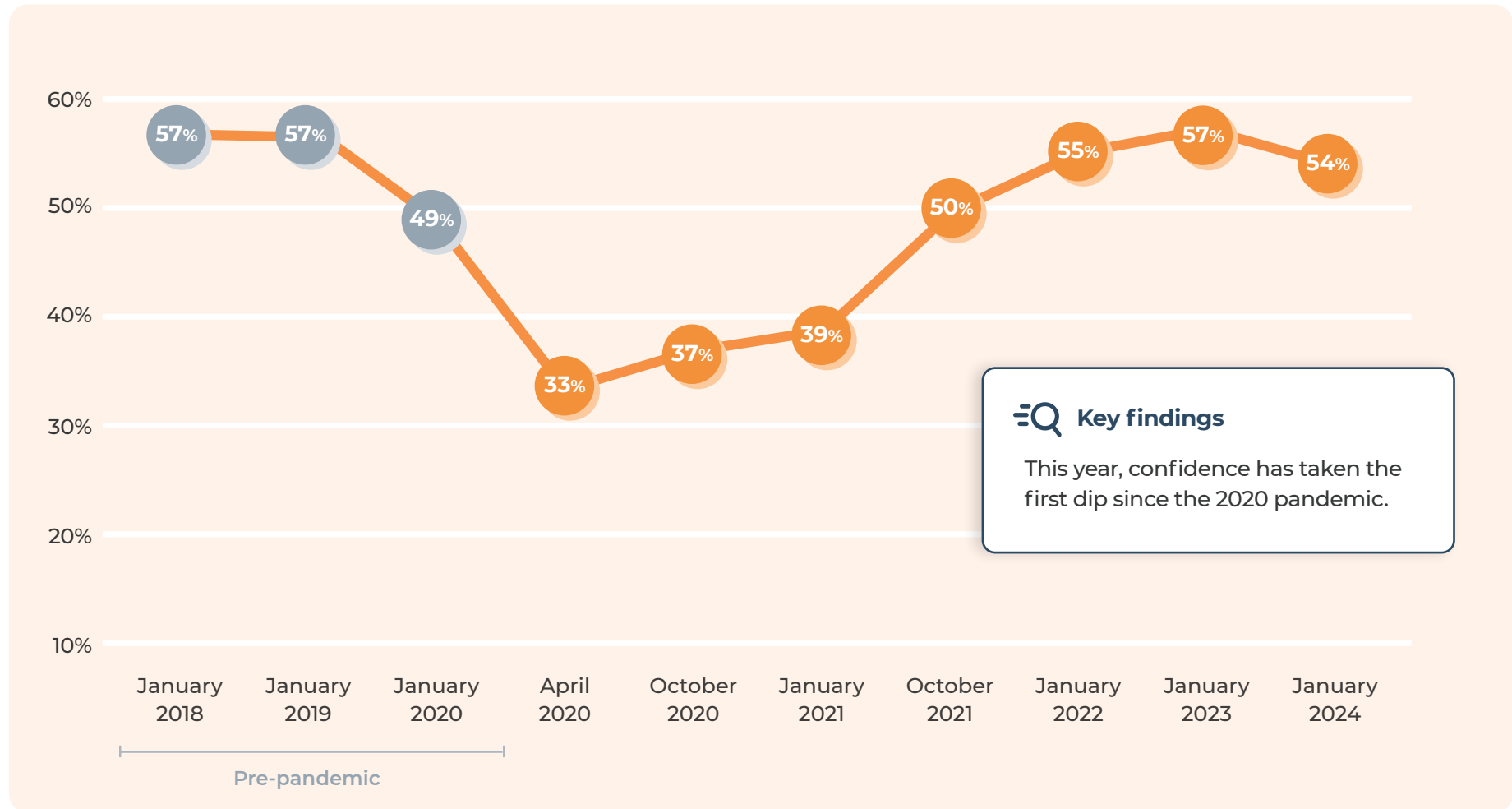
Q. **What is the main reason making you feel less confident about securing a graduate job after university?**

I've not managed to secure internships or placements during my time at university **29%**

I'm not confident about passing the assessment processes for graduate roles **26%**

There doesn't seem to be many roles out there that I want to apply for **18%**

I feel like I have skills gaps that I've not been able to fill while at university **11%**

I've not completed part time and/or casual work to develop transferable skills **4%**

I don't think the degree that I'm studying for is relevant for the career I want to go into **3%**

Other **9%**

Key findings

Comments from students tell us that they're experiencing a lot of rejection which has affected their confidence. They've also indicated a lack of useful feedback from employers when they do get rejected.

What members are saying

"The assessment process is very lengthy, different and irrelevant to the role and rejections are sent without feedback."

Anonymous respondent, 2024

Key findings

The link between lacking internship or placement experience and confidence is especially interesting as students ranked existing industry experience as the number one thing they think employers value in candidates. You disagreed. See **page 18**.

Our advice

Do more to **underline** that students don't need industry experience to apply to your roles. Promote the percentage of last year's graduate pool who joined without this, or offer relevant experience yourself, such as a virtual programme.

Q. Are you confident about securing a graduate role after university?

Yes responses

■ 2023 data ■ This year's data

All	Male	Female	Black heritage	State school	Private school	Free school meals	LGBTQIA+	Disability – physical	Disability – neurological
57% / 54%	66% / 64%	49% / 49%	70% / 71%	47% / 44%	60% / 51%	49% (New)	46% / 44%	45% (New)	41% (New)
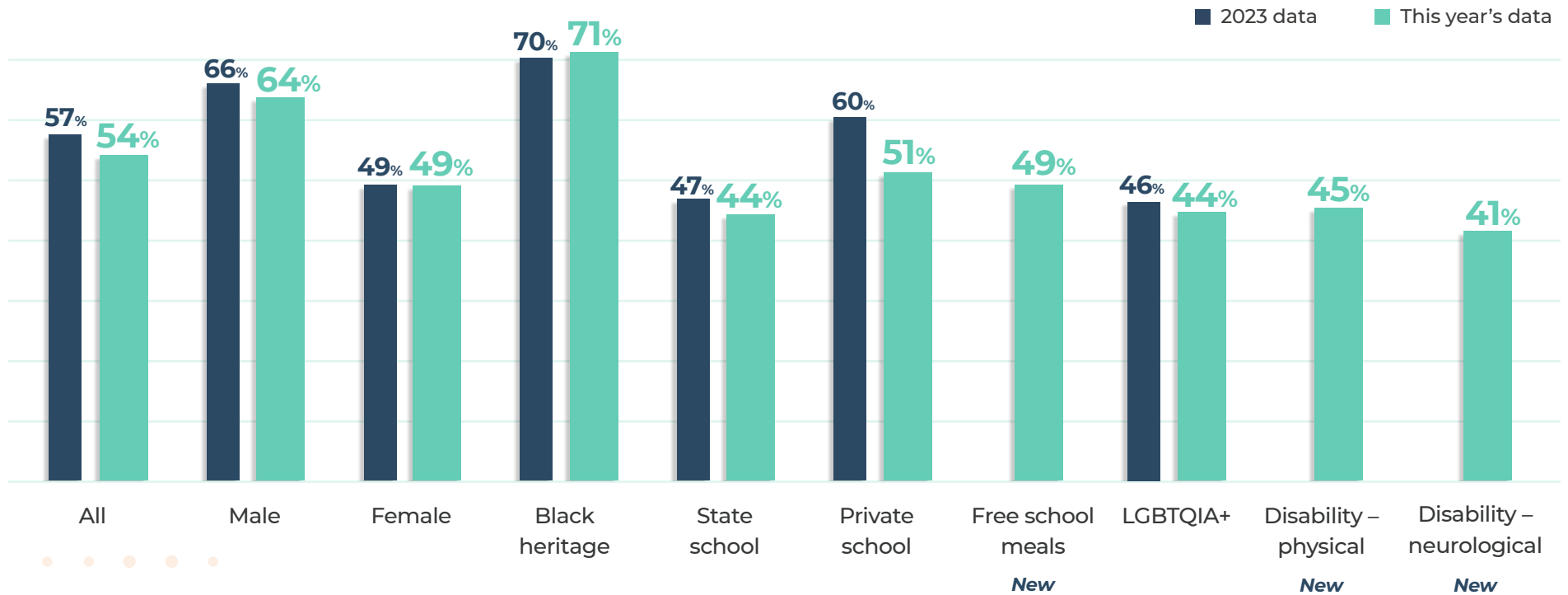
Key findings

Confidence in Black heritage students has increased since last year and remains significantly higher than the overall student population.

Females are just as confident as they were last year, with males still feeling more confident than them, but dropping year-on-year.

Last year, the gap between private and state school confidence was **13%**. This year it has reduced to **7%**. Regardless of school type, confidence has dropped year-on-year, but more significantly for those who attended private school.

Neurodiverse students are less confident in securing a graduate role than physically disabled students and both are significantly less confident than the overall student population.

Social mobility and confidence

This year, to deepen our understanding of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, we collected additional background information. When social mobility indicators are combined, confidence in securing a graduate role drops significantly.

44% State school

37% **45%**

39%

Low income background

45% **40%** **49%** Free school meals
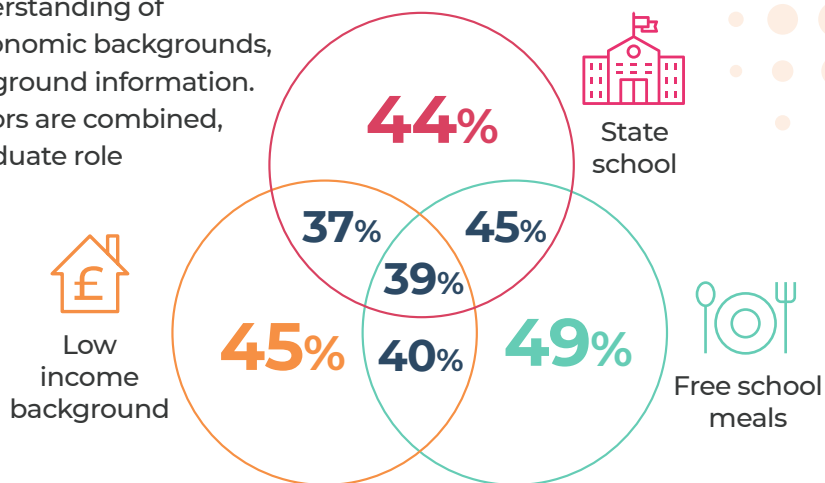
Key findings

Considering the experiences and challenges of candidates who intersect these multiple demographics is essential if you want to support them into your organisation.

Our advice

We've seen a shift away from tailored coaching programmes – consider reintroducing these into your processes to support confidence in the students who need it most. Be mindful of the different experiences of individuals when building the support.

Intersectionality and confidence

When you layer on gender and Black heritage backgrounds, confidence is impacted.

49% Female

36% **68%**

46%

Social mobility*

39% **50%** **71%** Black heritage

64% Male

37% **78%**

52%

Social mobility*

39% **50%** **71%** Black heritage
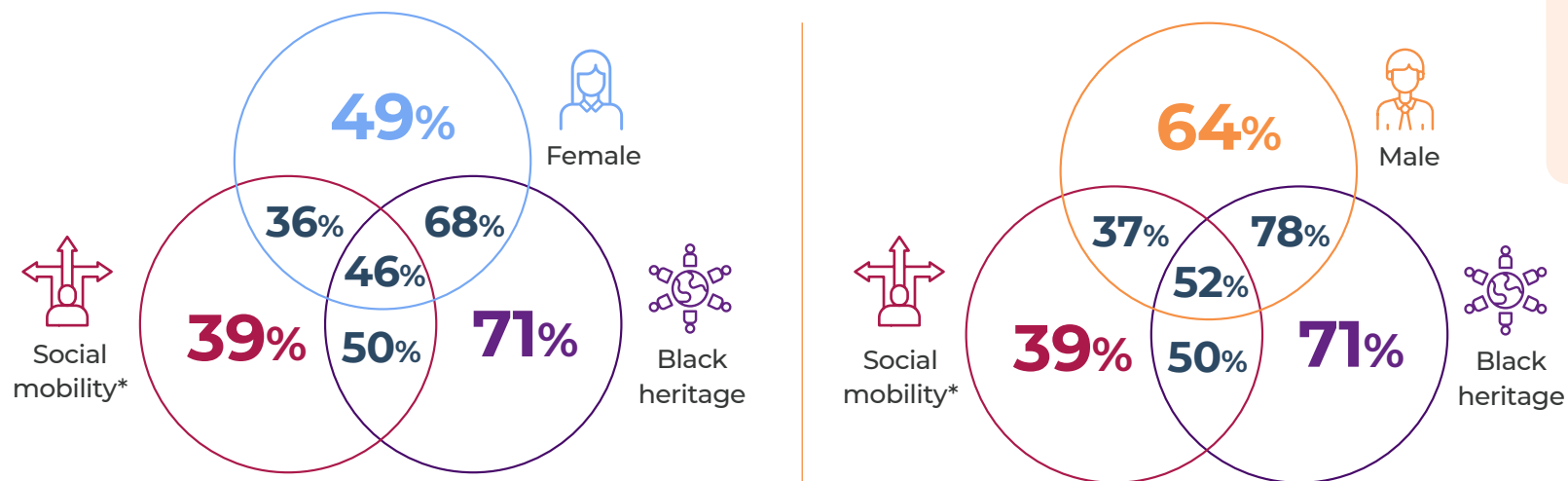
* All three social mobility indicators

Challenges students face

Q. Have you ever felt your background has hindered you in an application process for work or academic study?

50%
Yes

50%
No

Key findings

50% of students feel they've been hindered by their background in an application for work or study. For those who selected gender as a reason, **69%** are female. Of people who selected ethnicity, **35%** identify as Black heritage.

Q. For what reason do you think your background has hindered you in an application for work or academic study?

We asked students to select all that apply

Ethnicity	Socioeconomic background	Gender	Age	Neurodiversity	Sexuality	Physical disability	Other
61%	45%	29%	24%	15%	6%	4%	10%

The impact of neurodiversity

A new question in the survey this year has seen a large response from students telling us they have a neurological condition and when looking at what condition, ADHD, Dyslexia and Autism are the most common. Regardless of the type of condition, these students voted their neurodivergence as the biggest barrier in their journey so far.

Our advice

Get training in place for your hiring and line managers. Build knowledge of what it means to be neurodiverse and the added value these graduates will bring to the workplace. Communicate clearly where adjustments can be made and seek support from experts in the sector where needed. Most importantly, take the time to understand the individual behind the condition.

2 Preparedness and skills

- Preparedness

- Barriers to success

- The need for upskilling

- Skills valued most

Q. Do you feel prepared to enter the world of work?

Yes responses

Legend: ■ 2023 data ■ This year's data

Category	2023 data	This year's data
All	59%	71%
Male	70%	81%
Female	51%	61%
Black heritage	66%	79%
State school	50%	63%
Private school	63%	73%
Free school meals *New*		65%
LGBTQIA+	61%	64%
Disability – physical *New*		68%
Disability – neurological *New*		58%
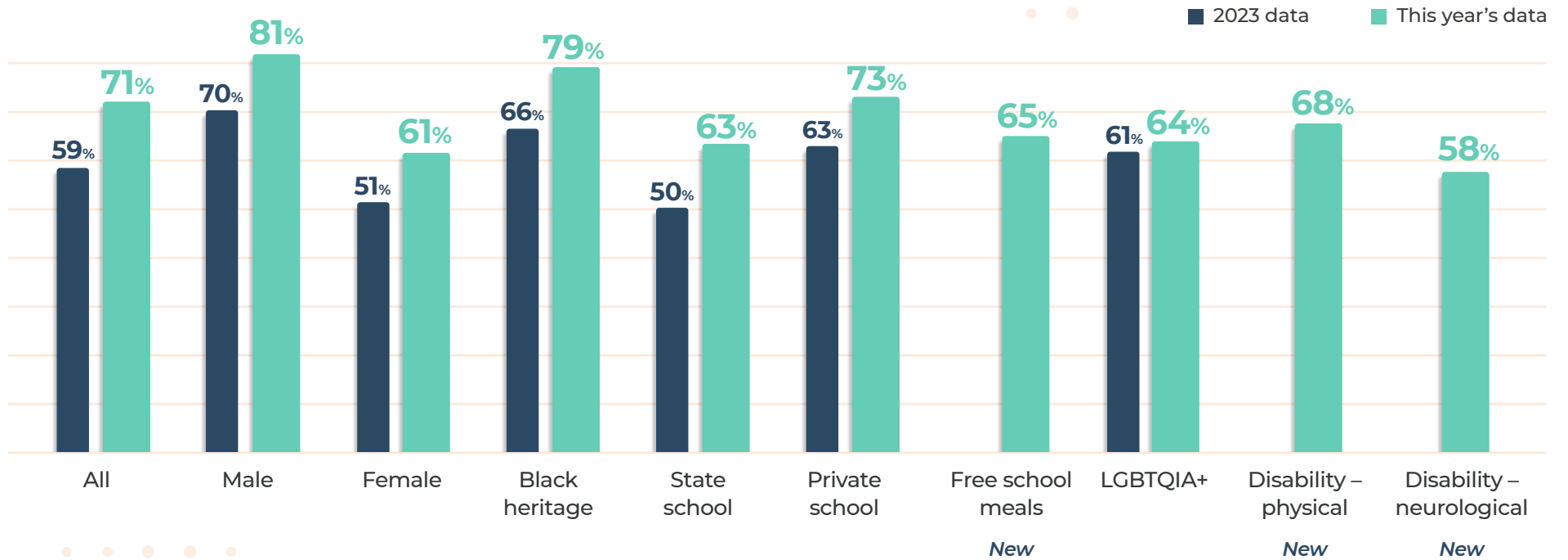
Key findings

Despite confidence in actually securing a role being down, preparedness is high and up significantly year-on-year. Students feel like they are doing all they can to prepare for entering the job market, but the competitiveness of the current employer-led market and fear of rejection is making them feel that whether they are prepared or not, it's out of their control.

Our advice

We're hearing that preparedness is lower than expected in graduates joining your teams. There's a clear disconnect here. Employers must clarify what their expectations are of graduates entering their organisations.
Get your message across in every aspect of your recruitment campaigns.

Q. **Are you worried about how the current economic climate will affect your graduate job prospects?**

I'm **not concerned** at all

I think it will have a **small impact** on my job prospects

I think it will have **some impact** on my job prospects

I think it will **significantly impact** my job prospects

11%

14%

43%

32%
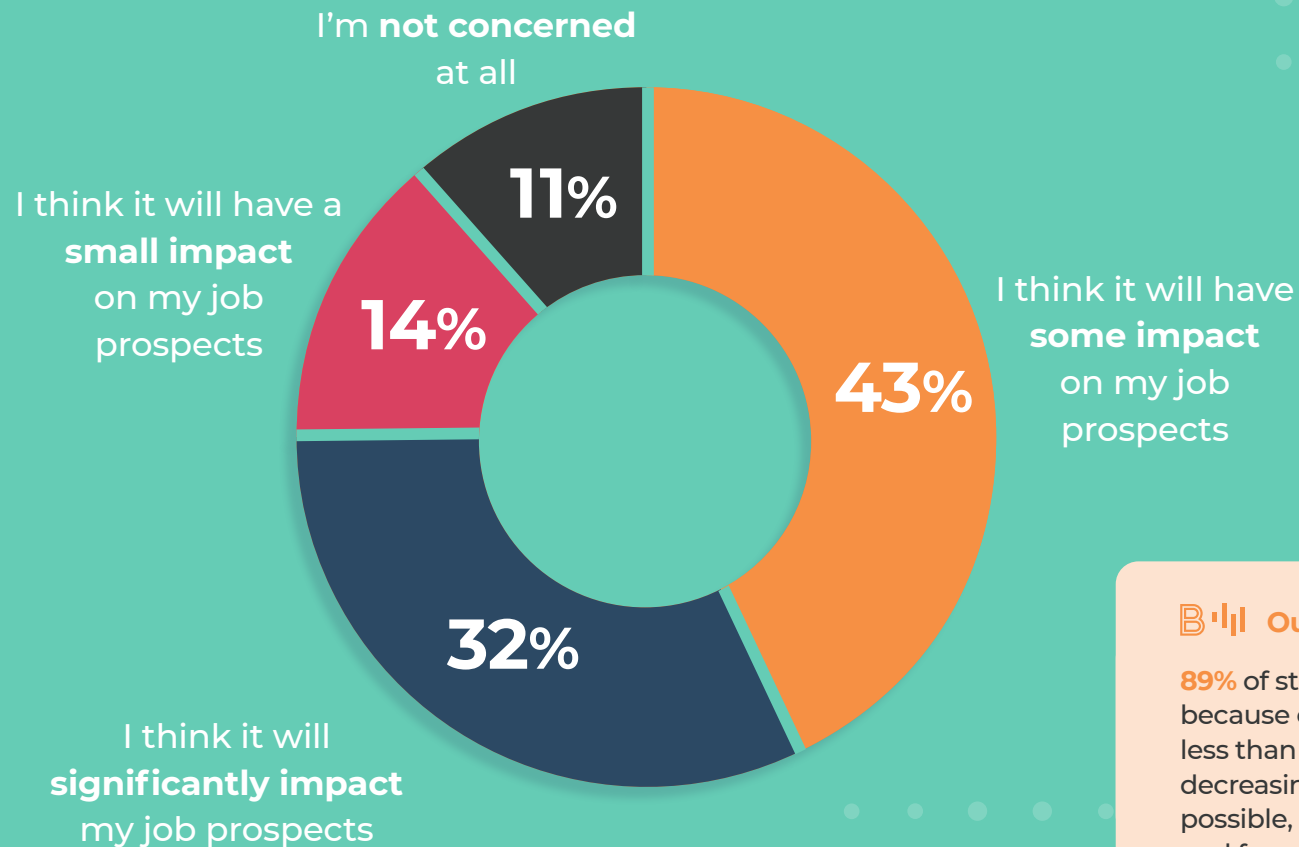
Our advice

89% of students are worrying about their future because of the economic climate. However, less than **25%** of employers told us that they're decreasing hiring numbers this year. Where possible, emphasise your positive hiring outlook and focus your messaging on why your roles are essential to business needs.

15

Q. **What is the biggest barrier to you pursuing the career path you wish?**

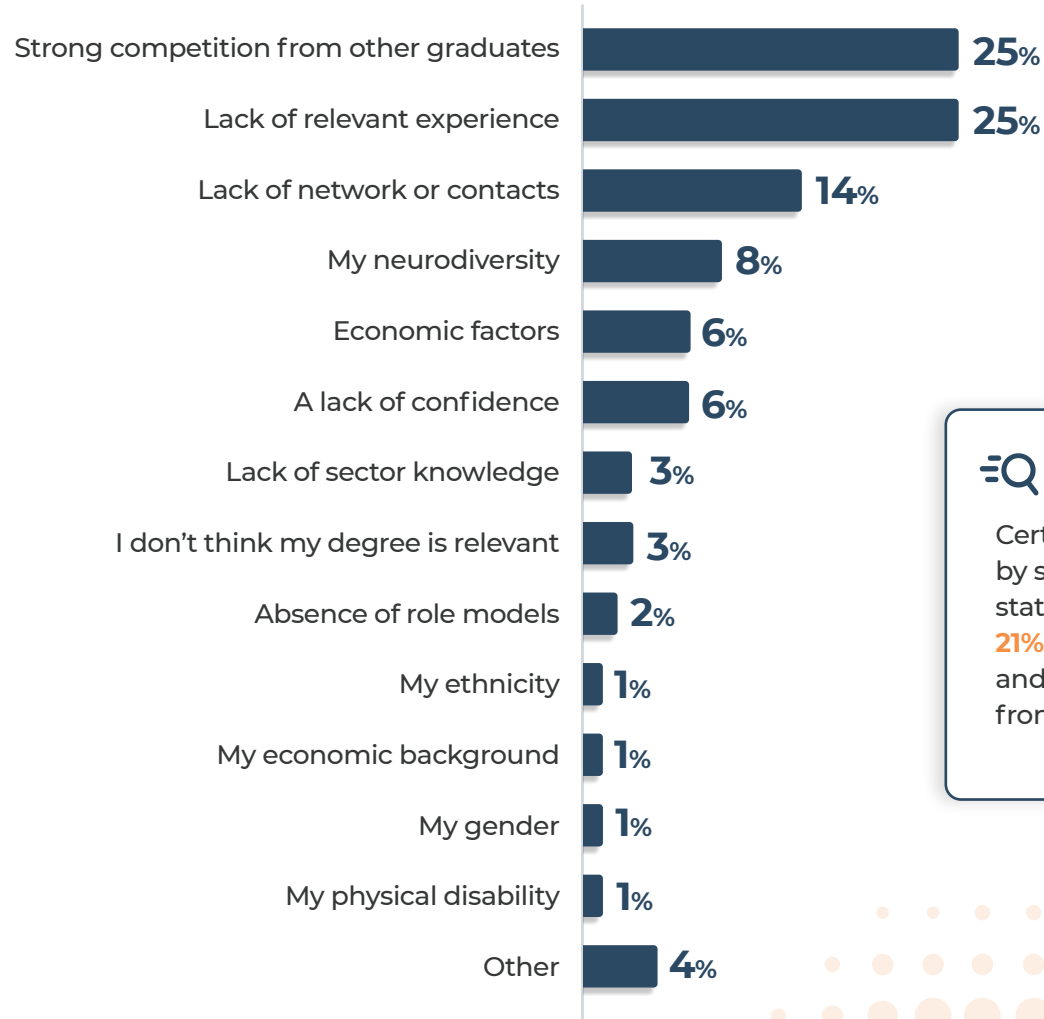| Barrier	%
Strong competition from other graduates	25%
Lack of relevant experience	25%
Lack of network or contacts	14%
My neurodiversity	8%
Economic factors	6%
A lack of confidence	6%
Lack of sector knowledge	3%
I don't think my degree is relevant	3%
Absence of role models	2%
My ethnicity	1%
My economic background	1%
My gender	1%
My physical disability	1%
Other	4%

Key findings

Strong competition from other graduates has jumped up from **15%** to **25%** year-on-year.

Our advice

Ease student concern about competition from other graduates by offering coaching programmes for candidates in your recruitment process. In your attraction campaigns, explain how your assessment stages are fair and equal for all, making sure there is clear guidance and support so students can reach their potential.

Key findings

Certain barriers are being experienced more strongly by students from intersectional demographics. **35%** of state school educated males said lack of experience, **21%** of Black heritage males chose lack of network and **30%** of Black heritage females said competition from other graduates.

Our advice

Despite there being progress, students from underrepresented groups are facing these barriers to a higher degree than the overall student population. Create communities in your organisations to connect students with role models who can share honest insights. Showcase these networks and make them easily accessible to students, at application stage and beyond.

The need for upskilling

Q. **Outside of your university course, what do you feel you most need to learn or upskill in before entering work?**

Skill	Percentage
Networking	18%
Coding	13%
Core IT skills (e.g. Excel)	12%
Commercial awareness	11%
Leadership or management skills	10%
Negotiation & persuasion	8%
Presentation skills	7%
Expectations in a professional environment	7%
Organisation/time management	4%
Problem solving	4%
Resilience	4%
Teamwork	2%

Key findings

Networking continues to grow as the number one skill needed and coding has jumped from third to second place year-on-year.

Our advice

Students need support in learning the networking basics. Help them by communicating what it means to build a network and play an active role by providing opportunities for students to network at events, both in-person and virtually.

Only **20%** of students see coding as a very accessible skill to learn but **over 50%** would attend a coding course or summer bootcamp if it was an option. Find out more about students' attitudes towards the Technology sector in our Technology Academy Research Report.

◀ **Download the report here**

TECHNOLOGY ACADEMY
by BRIGHT NETWORK

Skills valued most

Insights from students

Q. **What do you think employers value most in graduates joining their scheme(s)?**

Skill	Rank
Existing industry experience	1
Problem-solving skills	2
Passion for the business	3
Communication skills	4
Confidence	5
A 2.1 or above	6
Commercial awareness	7
Resilience	8
Organisation & team management skills	9
Teamwork	10
Digital skills	11
Leadership skills	12

Insights from employers

Q. **What do you value most in graduates joining your scheme(s)?**

Skill	Rank
Passion for the business	1
Resilience	2
Problem-solving skills	3
Commercial awareness	4
Communication skills	5
Digital skills	6
Teamwork	7
Leadership skills	8
Organisation & team management skills	9
A 2.1 or above	10
Confidence	11
Existing industry experience	12

Key findings

Students and employers have become more aligned on **passion for the business** this year, which has remained employers' top pick and jumped up one place for students.

Once again, however, the biggest discrepancy is the perceived importance of **existing industry experience**.

And, although students have ranked **resilience** higher than last year, they're still not placing anywhere near as much value in it as employers are.

Our advice

We're hearing that the resilience needed from graduates joining you is lacking in areas such as taking constructive feedback and dealing with setbacks. Signpost what resilience means in your organisation and offer guidance on your website. As well as this, build focused resilience training into your onboarding processes.

To align on industry experience, it's more important than ever that you communicate clearly that students don't need this when applying to your roles.

# 3 Generative artificial intelligence

- How students are using GenAI
- Assisting the application process
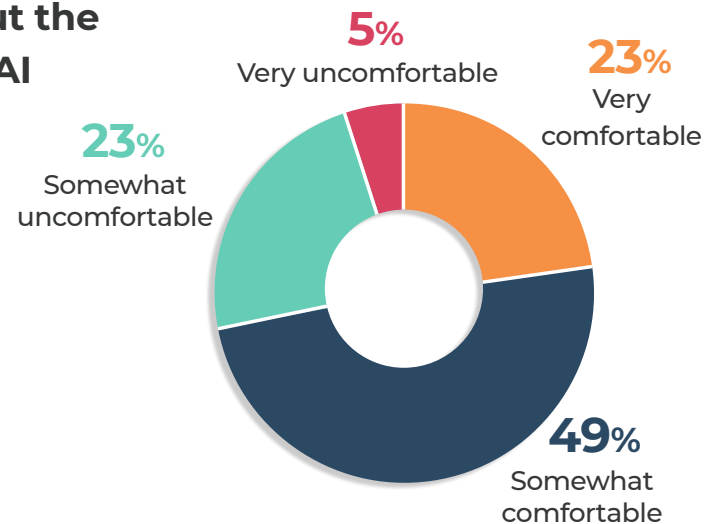- Demographic impact

How students are using GenAI

With generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools being used more commonly, we asked students about their thoughts towards the introduction of it into their everyday lives and in relation to their job applications.

Q. How often do you use GenAI tools in everyday life?

Category	Percentage
Daily	**19**%
Weekly	**33**%
Monthly	**15**%
Rarely	**22**%
Never	**11**%
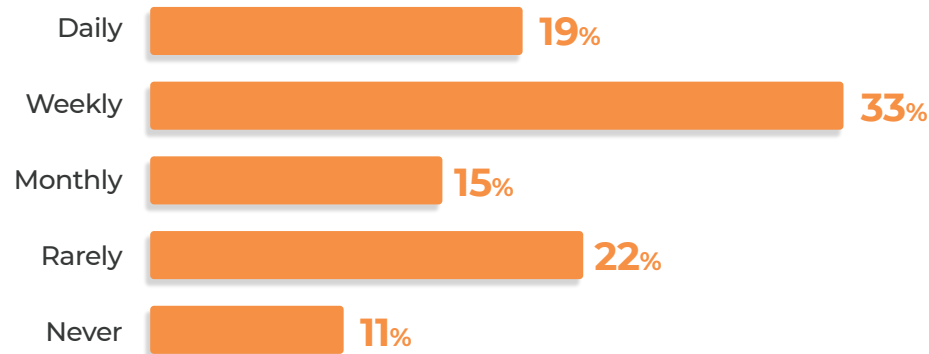
Q. How do you feel about the increased use of GenAI in everyday life?

5%
Very uncomfortable

23%
Very comfortable

23%
Somewhat uncomfortable

49%
Somewhat comfortable

Key findings

Overall, students seem comfortable with the increased use of GenAI in everyday life, with most seeing it as a positive thing.

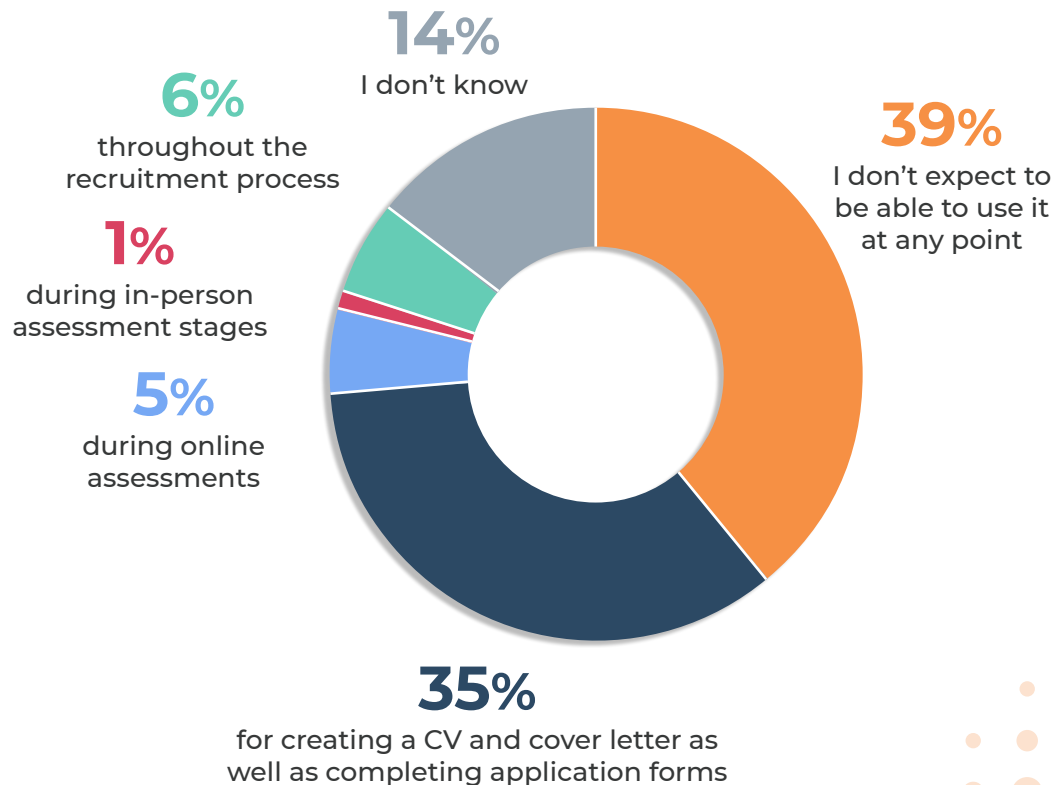When it comes to regularity, **just over half** of respondents are **using GenAI weekly or daily**.

In terms of why it's being used, the biggest purpose for students has been **just for fun**. However, when you segment the data for the most regular users (daily and weekly), the most popular reason is for **applying to jobs**. This indicates that it's proving a **useful tool** for those job hunting.

Assisting the application process

Q. How much do you expect to be allowed to use GenAI when going through recruitment processes?

Q. Have you already used GenAI when making job applications?

14%
I don't know

6%
throughout the recruitment process

1%
during in-person assessment stages

5%
during online assessments

39%
I don't expect to be able to use it at any point

35%
for creating a CV and cover letter as well as completing application forms

38%
Yes

62%
No

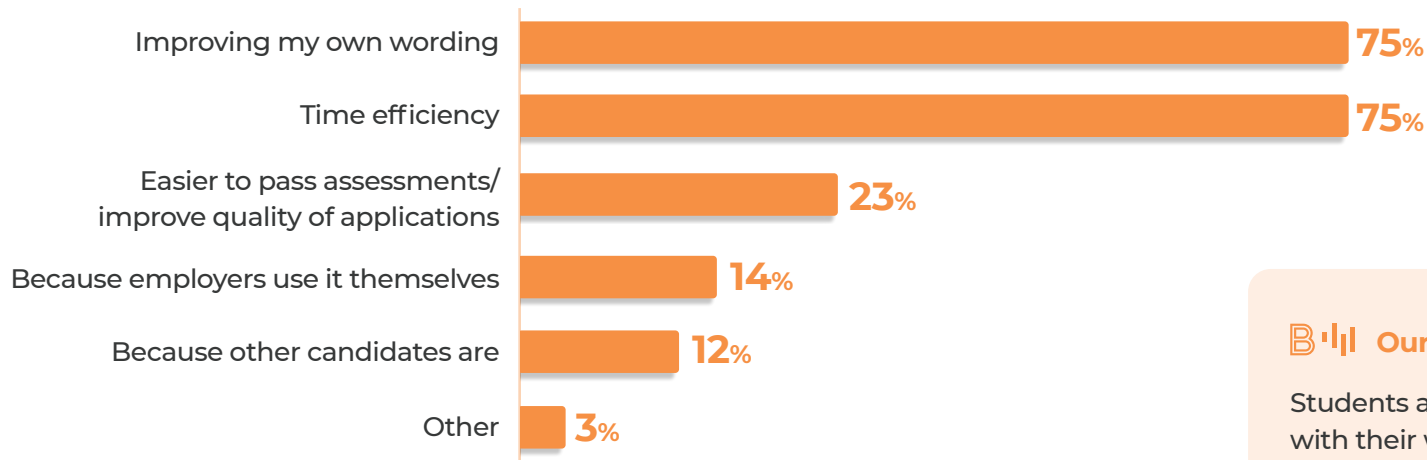**Key findings**

Somewhat surprisingly, only **38%** of students have already used GenAI when making job applications. When looking at expectations for the recruitment process, **47%** of students expect to use GenAI, and for those who do, most expect to be able to use it for **help with CVs, cover letters and application forms**, rather than later on at online assessment or interview stage.

Q. **When making job applications, what are the reasons you use GenAI?**

We asked students to select all that apply

Reason	Percentage
Improving my own wording	75%
Time efficiency	75%
Easier to pass assessments/ improve quality of applications	23%
Because employers use it themselves	14%
Because other candidates are	12%
Other	3%

Q. **Are you making more applications than last year and/or than you originally planned to because of the use of GenAI?**

7%
No, I am making fewer

48%
About the same

45%
Yes, I am making more
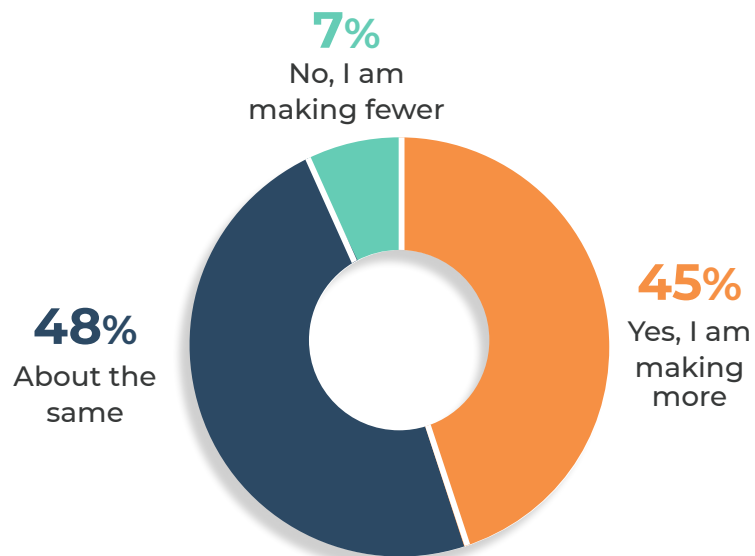
Our advice

Students are telling us GenAI is helping with their wording and time efficiency when applying to your roles. On your side, GenAI usage is often translating as similar-sounding answers and seemingly strong candidates that disappoint at interview stage. Make sure students know what's expected by giving examples of poor GenAI usage so they can avoid it.

Key findings

We know that application numbers are up this year for a large number of employers. There is a clear link between this and the use of GenAI and this poses challenges for employers when it comes to long-term engagement and risk of reneges.

Q. **Would you use GenAI during a recruitment process if an employer said you weren't supposed to?**

8%
Yes

79%
No

13%
Maybe
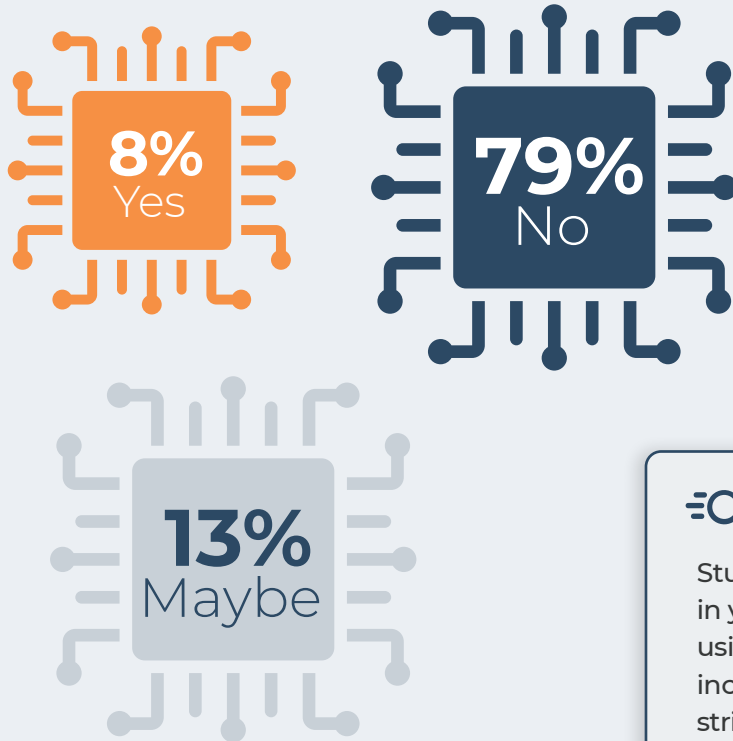
What members are saying

"If it is detected when they've clearly stated that I cannot use it, then that would be setting myself up for an instant rejection, and my application would have been a waste of time."

Anonymous respondent, 2024

Key findings

Students are telling us they won't use GenAI in your process if you ask them not to, but using these tools will become increasingly common. To strike the right balance, you need to be clear on your boundaries. GenAI usage can be mutually beneficial as long as students and your teams are aligned on how it can be used with good intentions.

Our advice

Clear guidance on using GenAI in your processes is key – **53%** of you said you haven't set guidelines yet. Review your assessment stages and decipher where GenAI shouldn't be used and make this clear.

You can support students on the correct use of GenAI by providing guidance on how it can used as a helpful tool, such as to structure and proof thoughts for a CV, to get advice on how to prepare for the different assessment stages and to support with refining and articulating their own ideas for an interview.

Demographic impact

Key findings

We found that Black heritage students have used GenAI to apply to jobs more than white students, with **43%** telling us they had, compared to **30%** white students.

GenAI can be a great tool for neurodiverse students, helping level the playing field when it comes to application processes.

What members are saying

"[GenAI] Helps with my disability, I use it as a reading comprehension tool. Saying you're not allowed to use it is like saying you cannot use Google. It's great at structuring thoughts so neurotypicals can understand you."

Anonymous respondent, 2024

Our advice

GenAI is being used by diverse candidates to help support them through your application process. Taking a vague stance or not allowing it will lead to an adverse effect on diverse groups, who may end up being disproportionately penalised because of their higher usage rates. Don't let GenAI mean a backward step in your work to create a more diverse and inclusive process.
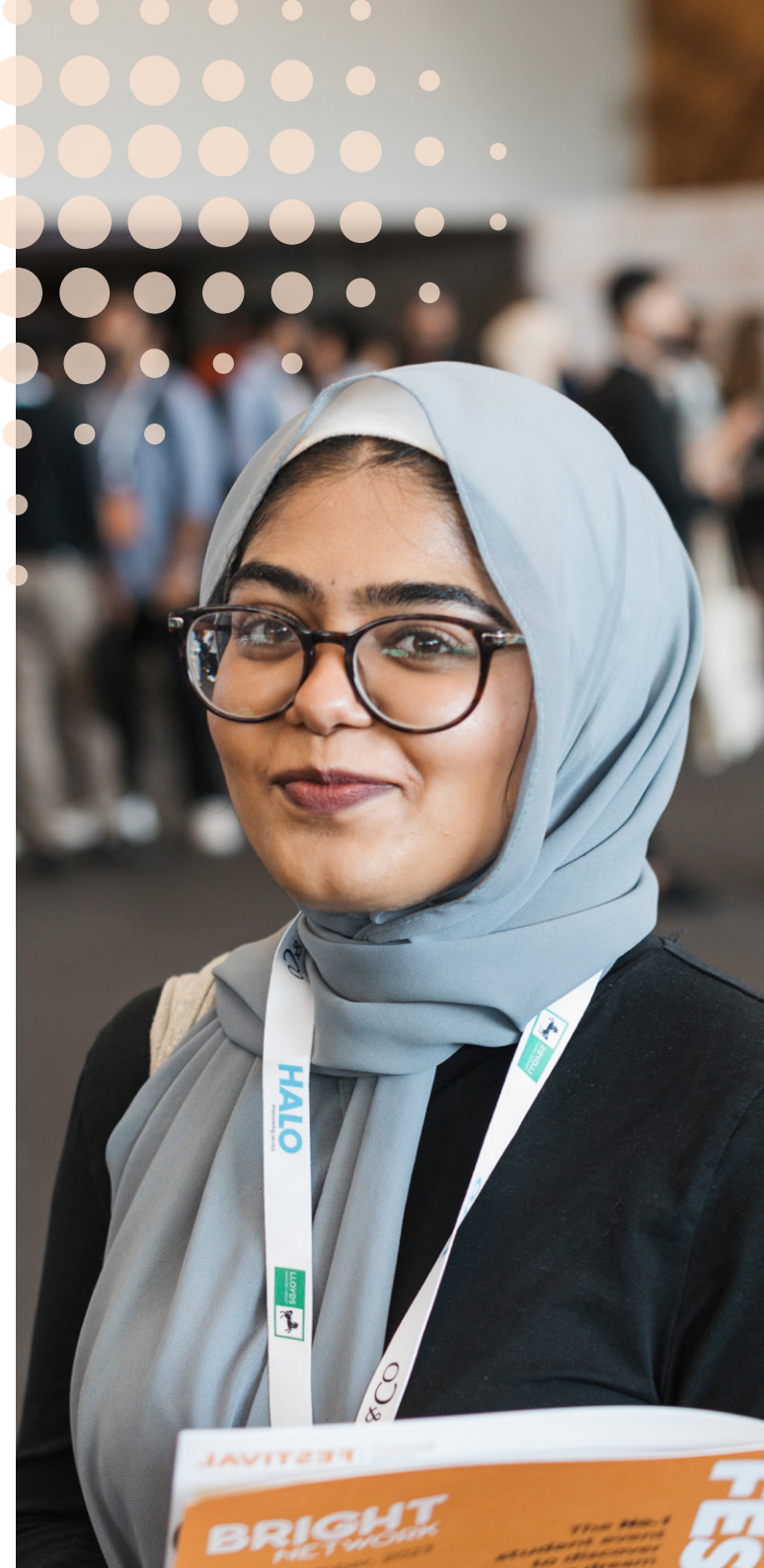
4 Career preferences and application behaviours

- Location preferences
- Industry interests
- Application behaviours

Location preferences

Q. **In which region would you most like to work in for your first graduate job?**
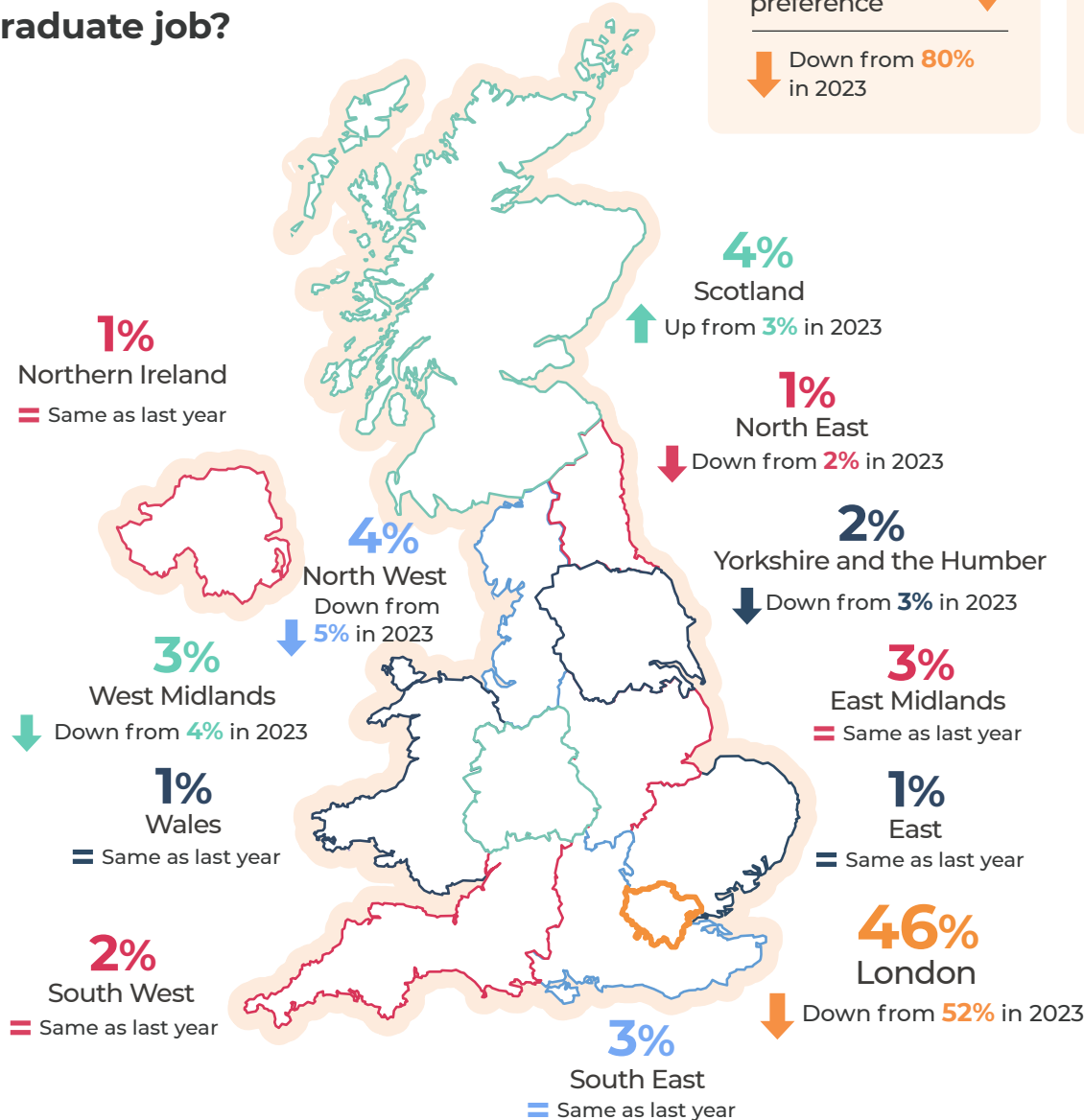
71%
With a location preference
↓ Down from **80%** in 2023

21%
I don't mind where I work
↑ Up from **14%** in 2023

8%
I'd like to work abroad
↑ Up from **6%** in 2023

4%
Scotland
↑ Up from **3%** in 2023

1%
Northern Ireland
= Same as last year

1%
North East
↓ Down from **2%** in 2023

4%
North West
↓ Down from **5%** in 2023

2%
Yorkshire and the Humber
↓ Down from **3%** in 2023

3%
West Midlands
↓ Down from **4%** in 2023

3%
East Midlands
= Same as last year

1%
Wales
= Same as last year

1%
East
= Same as last year

2%
South West
= Same as last year

46%
London
↓ Down from **52%** in 2023

3%
South East
= Same as last year

Key findings

Preference for working in a specific region is down this year with more students telling us they don't mind what location they work in. With confidence in securing a graduate role down this year, students are more willing to relocate for a good opportunity.

For those who want to work in London, it's **career progression opportunities** and **salary** sending them there. For those who picked another region, the primary reason is to be **near family or where they grew up**, followed closely by staying near their **university region**, and a **reduced cost-of-living**.

Industry interests

Q. Which sector are you most interested in?

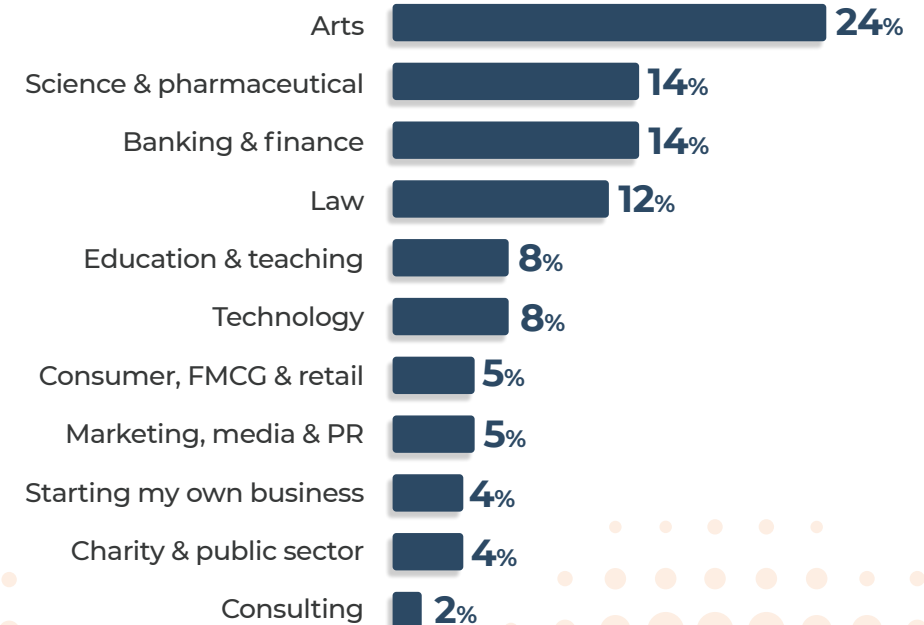| Sector	%
Banking & finance	19%
Technology	18%
Law	12%
Consulting	10%
Marketing, media & PR	10%
Science & pharmaceutical	8%
Charity & public sector	8%
Arts	3%
Education & teaching	3%
Consumer, FMCG & retail	2%
Starting my own business	2%
I'm not sure	5%

Q. Which sector are you least interested in?

Sector	%
Arts	24%
Science & pharmaceutical	14%
Banking & finance	14%
Law	12%
Education & teaching	8%
Technology	8%
Consumer, FMCG & retail	5%
Marketing, media & PR	5%
Starting my own business	4%
Charity & public sector	4%
Consulting	2%

Key findings

Those who selected Banking & finance are attracted to the sector for its **salary and benefits**, and for those who chose Technology or Law, it's the **interesting work** that attracted them there.

Key findings

Those who picked Arts or Science & pharmaceuticals as their least favourite dislike it because it **doesn't fit their skillset or degree**. The same goes for Banking & finance, but a close second reason was because it feels like an **unhealthy culture**.

When asked about a Technology career specifically, **64%** told us they were interested, with the main reason being the interesting nature of the work. However, **over half** felt held back from the sector due to a lack of skills or their degree subject. At Bright Network, we're removing this barrier to Tech through our Technology Academy.

◀ Find out how we're supporting students from all backgrounds, by transforming their potential into real capability.

TECHNOLOGY ACADEMY
by BRIGHT NETWORK

Q. **How many job applications have you started this year?**

We asked current undergraduates who told us they are actively applying

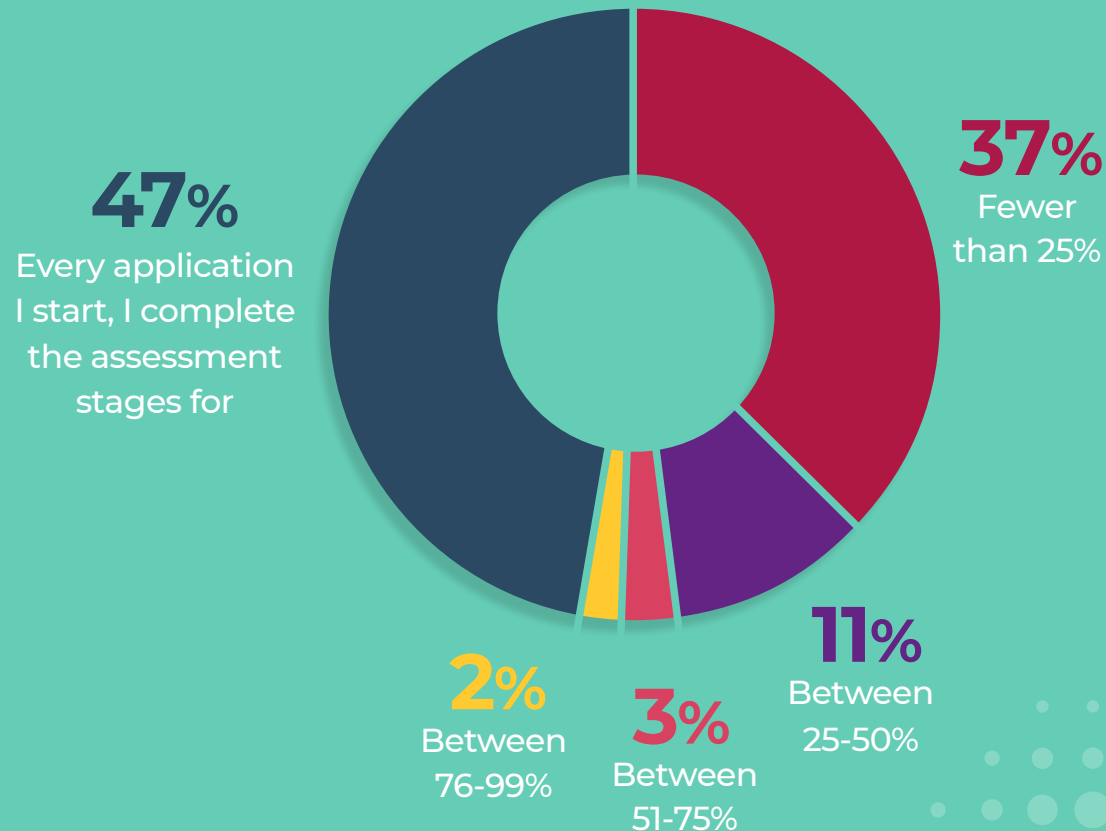| Applications	%
0	12%
1-5	32%
6-10	19%
11-20	14%
21-30	9%
31-40	4%
41-50	3%
51+	7%
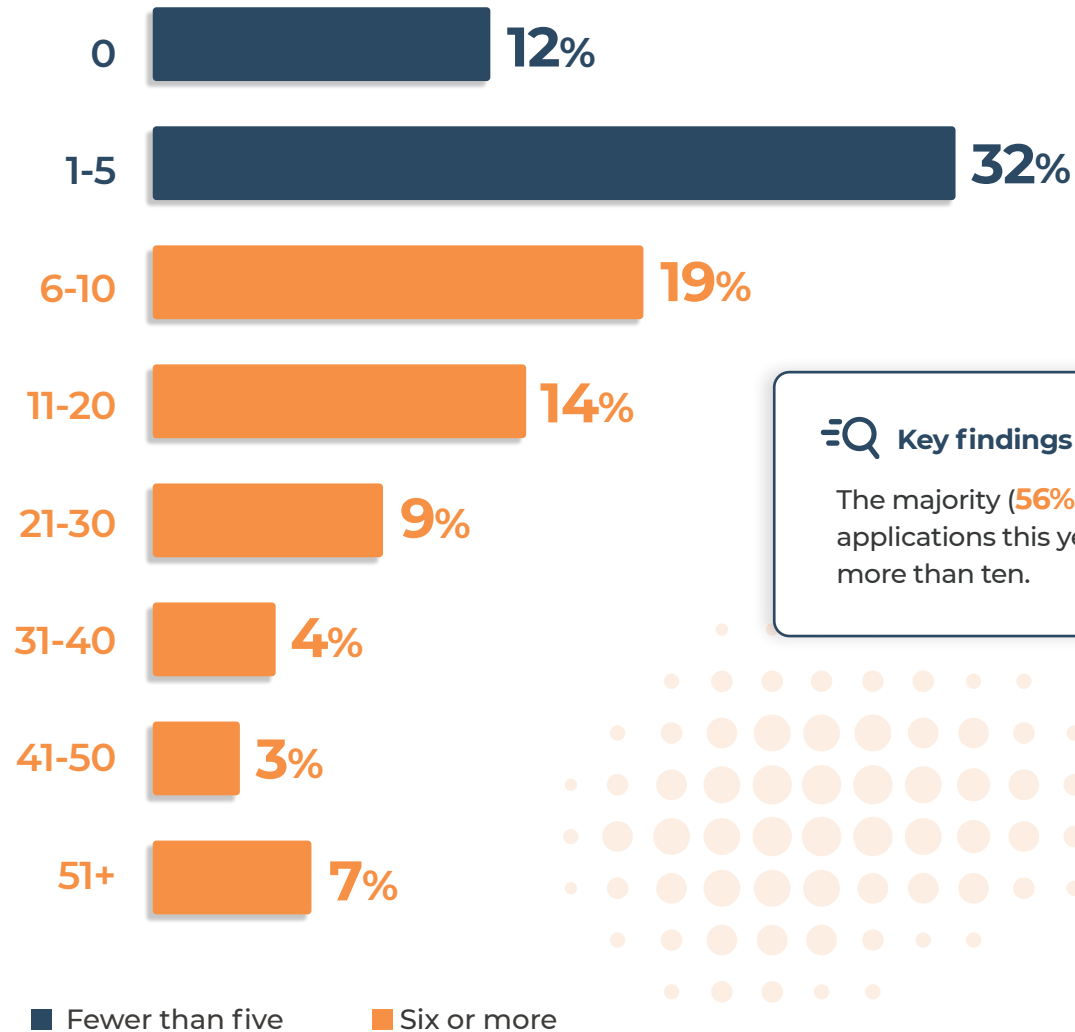
Key findings

The majority (**56%**) have started six or more applications this year. **37%** have started more than ten.

■ Fewer than five ■ Six or more

Q. **How many successful applications that you submit do you decide not to complete the next stage of the recruitment process for?**

We asked current undergraduates who told us they are actively applying

47%
Every application I start, I complete the assessment stages for

37%
Fewer than 25%

2%
Between 76-99%

3%
Between 51-75%

11%
Between 25-50%

What members are saying

"It tends to be time consuming so I'm unable to devote as much time as needed."
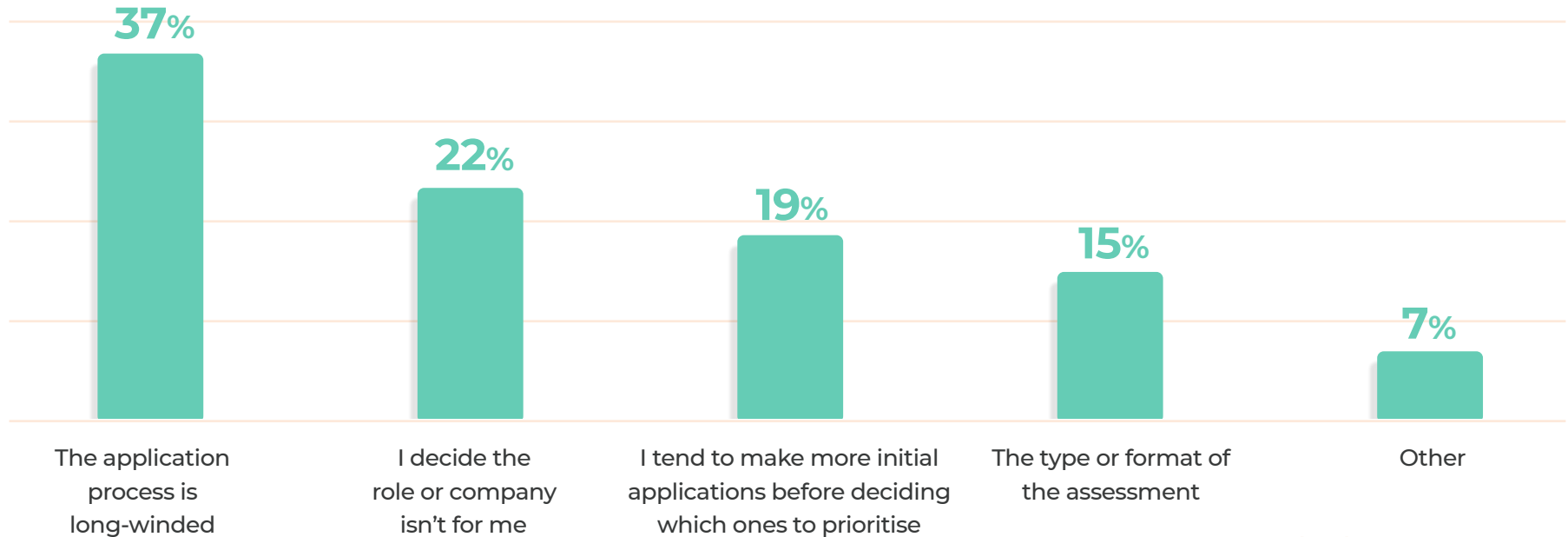
Anonymous respondent, 2024

Our advice

The data indicates that you shouldn't be too reliant on the number of top of funnel applications you receive. To increase the likelihood of students continuing their application, clearly communicate the different stages of your process from the start. Develop a powerful employer brand so that students feel a sense of loyalty and connection with you.

Q. **Why do you decide not to complete all the stages after submitting an application?**

We asked current undergraduates who told us they are actively applying

Category	Percentage
The application process is long-winded	37%
I decide the role or company isn't for me	22%
I tend to make more initial applications before deciding which ones to prioritise	19%
The type or format of the assessment	15%
Other	7%

💬 **What members are saying**

"Long-winded processes, video interviews and not enough time given on tests. Many companies say they are about D&I but then make the application process incredibly inaccessible."

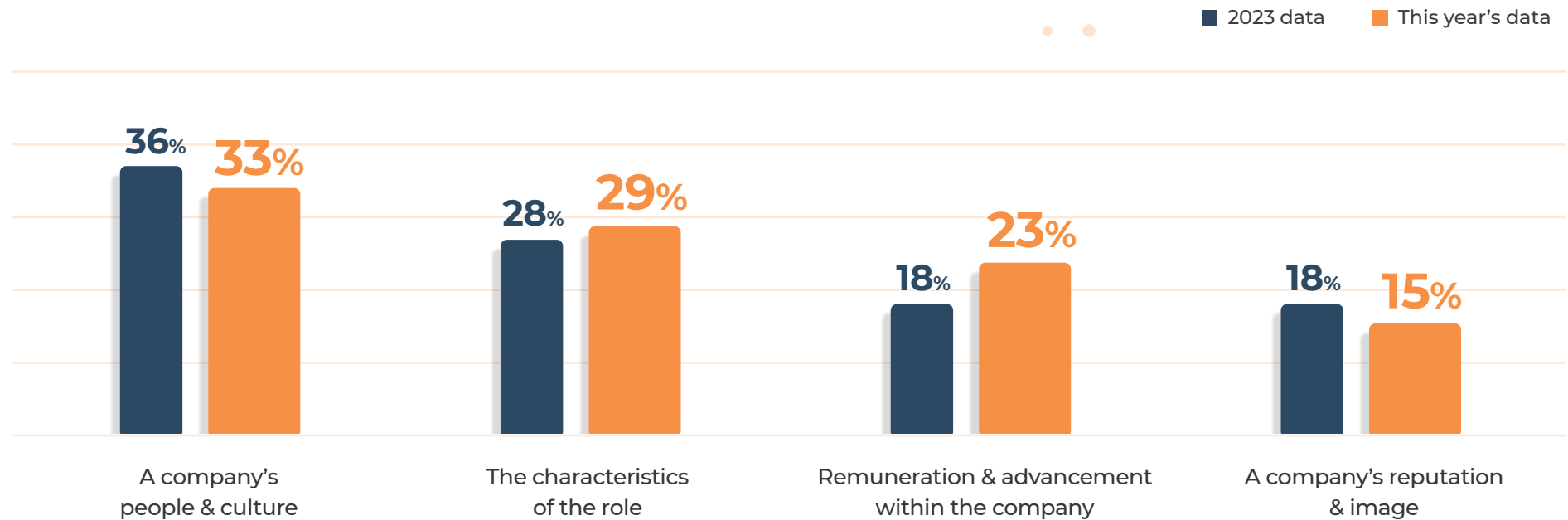Anonymous respondent, 2024

Our advice

Review your assessment and selection stages and ensure all elements are essential to finding top talent. Explain clearly the purpose of each stage of the process to candidates. Also, consider if it's accessible to students from all backgrounds.

5 Aligning to motivations, values and background

- Motivations

- Commitment to causes that matter

- Inclusivity in early careers

- Sector perception

Q. What's most important when choosing a graduate role?

Legend: ■ 2023 data ■ This year's data

A company's people & culture
- 36% (2023 data)
- 33% (This year's data)

The characteristics of the role
- 28% (2023 data)
- 29% (This year's data)

Remuneration & advancement within the company
- 18% (2023 data)
- 23% (This year's data)

A company's reputation & image
- 18% (2023 data)
- 15% (This year's data)

≡Q Key findings

There have been modest dips in student interest in a company's people & culture and reputation & image this year.

Emphasis on remuneration & advancement has increased significantly. This is in line with worries around the economic climate and the hunt for stability.

Focus on remuneration & advancement jumps up to **28%** when it comes to Black heritage students and up again to **32%** when looking at responses from Black heritage students who also have all three social mobility indicators.

Females are placing most emphasis on people & culture, at **37%**, and least on remuneration & advancement, at **22%**. Black heritage females value people & culture most too at **36%**, but they place remuneration & advancement next at **28%**.

Here's what students want to see from employers to demonstrate a strong company culture
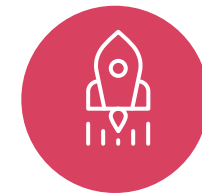
Authentically practicing D&I

Support for mental health and wellbeing

Storytelling from real employees

Honesty and transparency

Opportunities for growth and development

What members are saying

"I dropped out of a process because the company's goals turned out to contradict with my beliefs. I found out only after some of the recruitment stages were already complete."

Anonymous respondent, 2024

Our advice

There's a clear link between background and motivations for choosing which company to work for. It's essential you consider this and create personalised and multi-faceted strategies.

Here's what factors students are considering when determining a company's reputation and image

Their ethics & values, social responsibilities and commitment to the environment
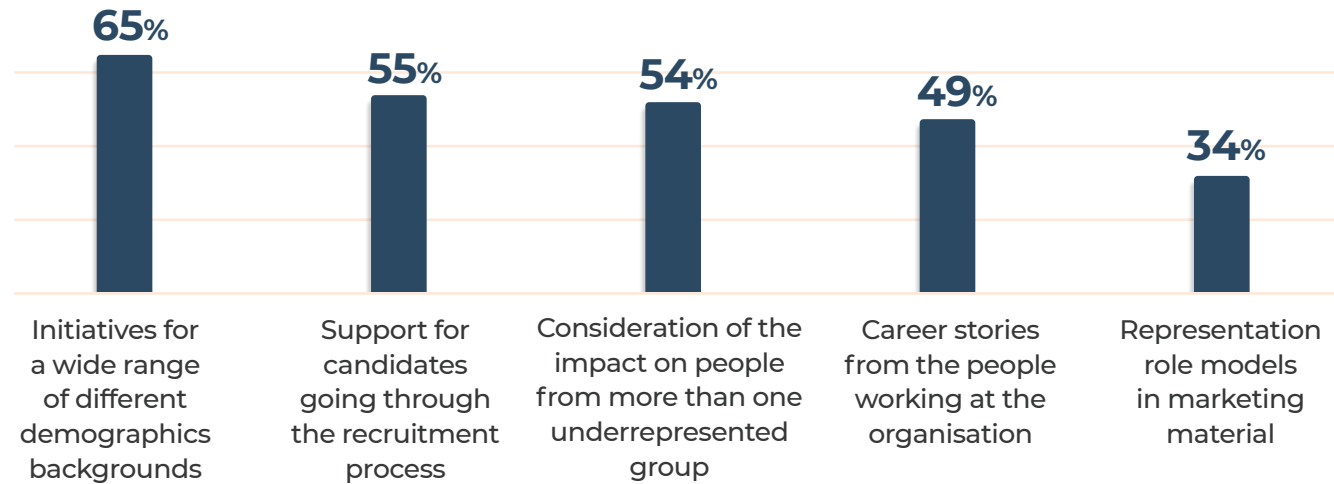
Glassdoor reviews

Global impact, recognition and ranking

History, awards and prestige

Commitment to causes that matter

Q. **What things have you seen employers do, in terms of diversity and inclusion, that you particularly like?**

We asked students to select all that apply

65% — Initiatives for a wide range of different demographics backgrounds

55% — Support for candidates going through the recruitment process

54% — Consideration of the impact on people from more than one underrepresented group

49% — Career stories from the people working at the organisation

34% — Representation role models in marketing material

What members are saying

"Be super loud about it, not just on recruitment materials but every single day."

Anonymous respondent, 2024

Key findings

As we examine further layers of intersectionality, the need for employers to demonstrate that they are considering the barriers faced by those from more than one underrepresented background increases to **63%** for Black heritage students who received free school meals and to **68%** for Black heritage students who identify as LGBTQIA+.

Our advice

Mentoring programmes can offer tailored guidance, especially if your mentors are representative role models. This will showcase your authentic commitment to creating a culture that takes into account the individual, especially those who've faced barriers in their journey so far.

Key findings

Sustainability is clearly an important consideration for students with almost all (**92%**) saying that they think it's important that employers have, or are working towards, **net zero status.**

Our advice

Gen Z want it all. That is, more synchronicity between their work and their life than previous generations. Where they work connects to their holistic view of their world, so it's important to highlight where your organisation aligns with their values in your messaging.
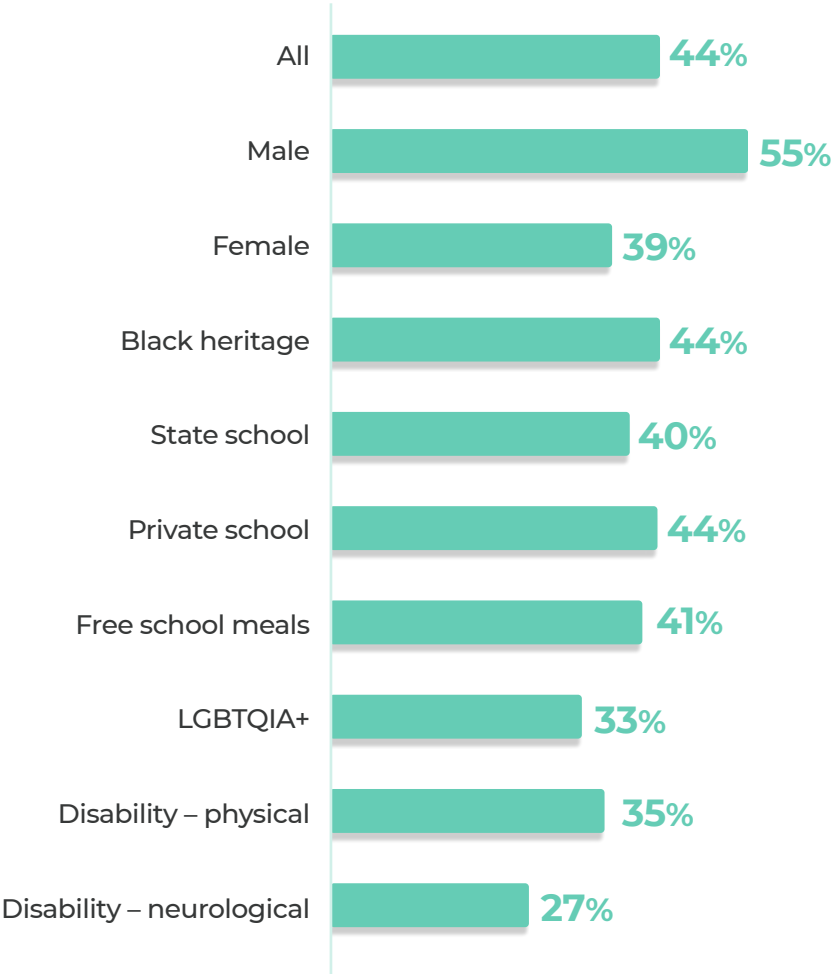
Inclusivity in early careers

44% of students think the graduate recruitment space is inclusive of all people entering the world of work, which represents a positive increase in perceptions (up from **40%** last year) but with a long way to go still.

Q. Do you think the graduate marketplace is inclusive?

Yes responses

Category	%
All	44%
Male	55%
Female	39%
Black heritage	44%
State school	40%
Private school	44%
Free school meals	41%
LGBTQIA+	33%
Disability – physical	35%
Disability – neurological	27%

Key findings

Despite Black heritage respondents being the most confident about securing a graduate role, their views on inclusivity mirrors the overall population. This indicates an awareness of the support in place for diverse talent at entry stage, but that a lack of trust around inclusion once working in an organisation is still a barrier.

Our advice

The strides made to build more inclusive processes over the last decade by early careers teams have been positive, but there are still gaps when it comes to offering an inclusive and truly diverse place to work. A collective and joined up approach to inclusivity is needed across your organisation.
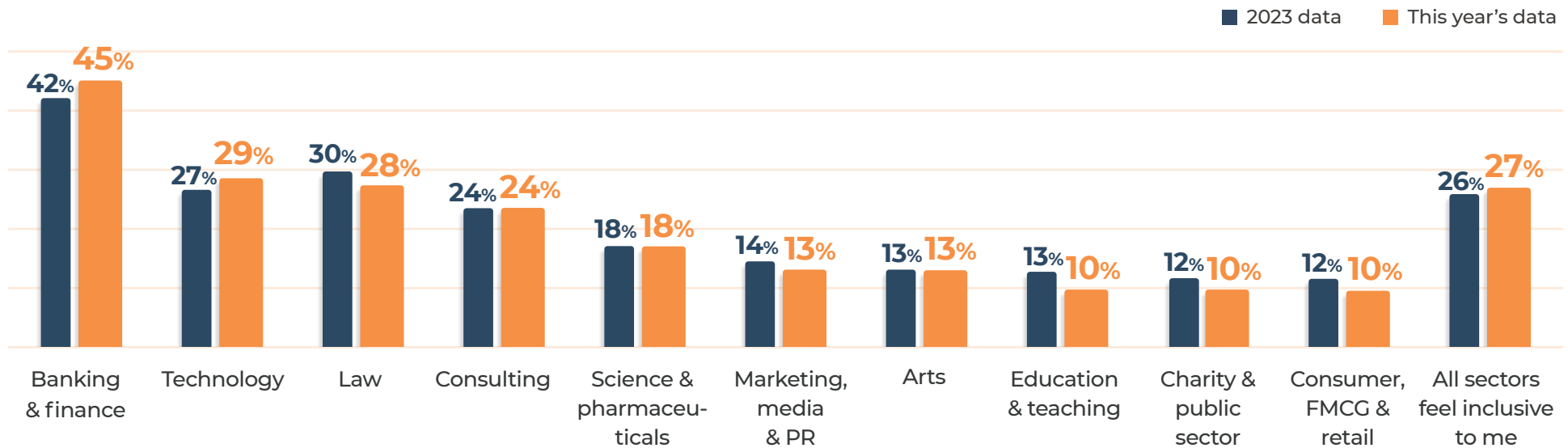
Our advice

To make your processes more inclusive, students want to see **CV-blind interviews and assessments, unconscious bias training** and **coaching programmes for candidates**. When budgets are tighter and internal expectations remain the same, it's vital for you to **partner smarter** to have the best impact with diverse students and graduates.

Key findings

A significant lack of inclusion in the graduate marketplace is felt by those who are neurodiverse. As something still at the discovery phase for many employers, the work being done here is yet to be felt by neurodiverse students.

Q. **Are there any sectors which you perceive as lacking diversity and inclusivity?**

We asked students to select all that apply

■ 2023 data ■ This year's data

Banking & finance: 42%, 45%
Technology: 27%, 29%
Law: 30%, 28%
Consulting: 24%, 24%
Science & pharmaceuticals: 18%, 18%
Marketing, media & PR: 14%, 13%
Arts: 13%, 13%
Education & teaching: 13%, 10%
Charity & public sector: 12%, 10%
Consumer, FMCG & retail: 12%, 10%
All sectors feel inclusive to me: 26%, 27%

Key findings

Banking & finance is still considered the least inclusive sector and sentiment for this has risen year-on-year. The Technology sector has overtaken the Law sector this year and is now perceived as second least inclusive.

81% of Black heritage members want to work in Technology vs. **64%** of the overall population. Despite this, the sector is just **2%** Black heritage. Students suggested this is often down to a lack of diversity in Technology teams. One member said:

"When I look at technology company pages sometimes I come across an all white or male-dominated team, which can seem daunting as a woman from an ethnic background". Anonymous respondent, 2024

◄ Download our Technology Academy Research Report to find out how you can engage with graduates from all backgrounds.
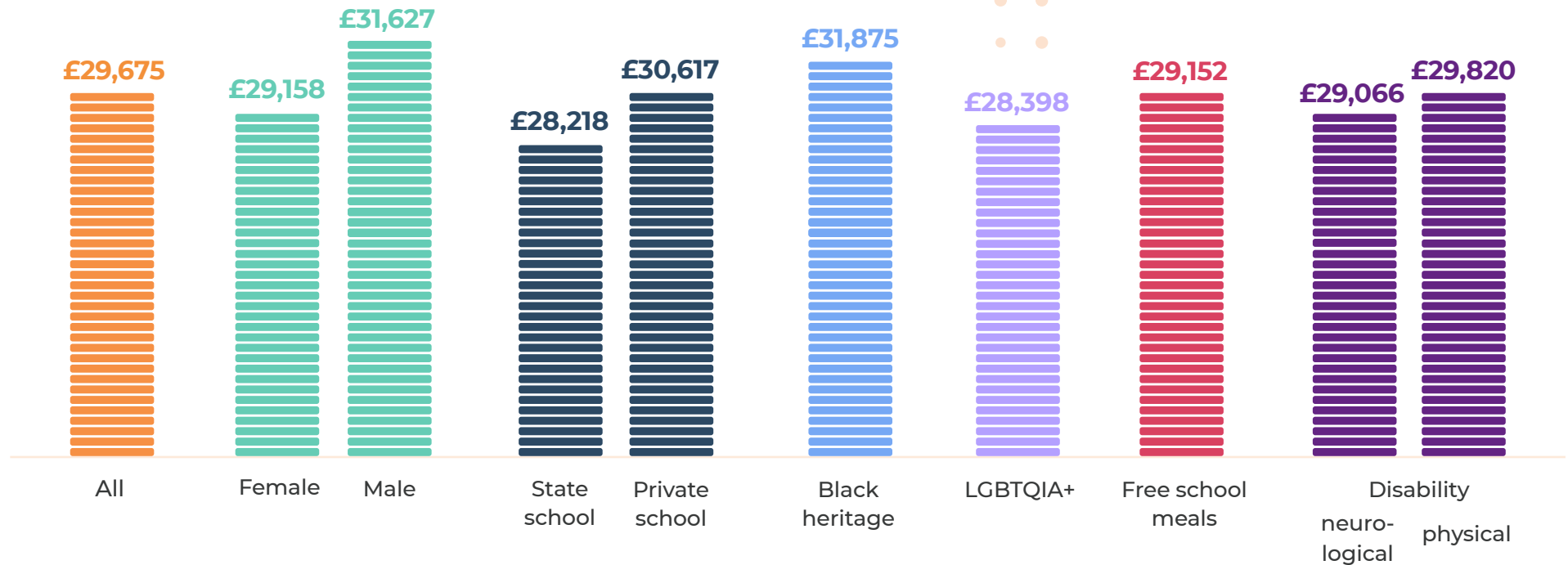
TECHNOLOGY ACADEMY by BRIGHT NETWORK

6 Expectations and flexibility

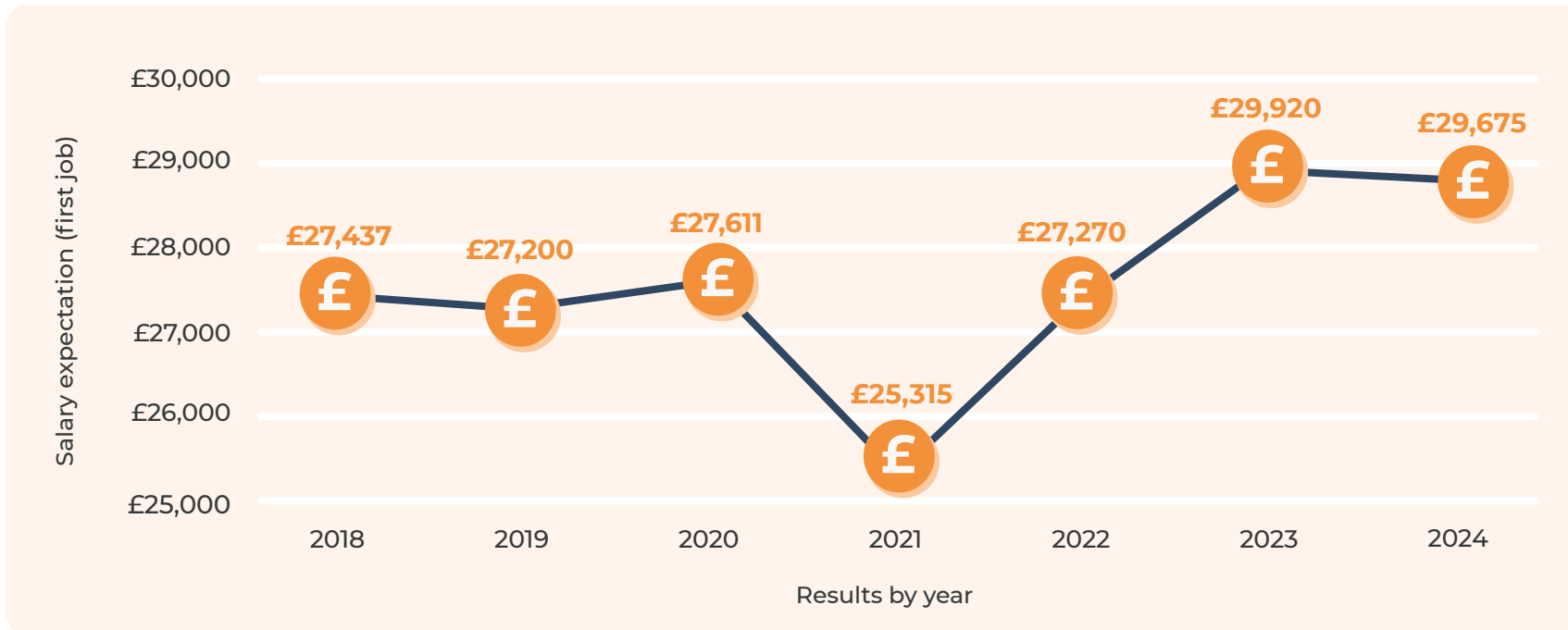- Expected salary

- Flexibility and in-person engagement

Q. What is your expected salary?

Category	Expected salary
All	£29,675
Female	£29,158
Male	£31,627
State school	£28,218
Private school	£30,617
Black heritage	£31,875
LGBTQIA+	£28,398
Free school meals	£29,152
Disability neuro-logical	£29,066
Disability physical	£29,820

🔍 **Key findings**

Although there are still gaps between them, there's been positive movement year-on-year between the expectations of males and females and between state school and private school students. Last year the difference in salary expectation for male and female students was **10%** – this year it has decreased to **8%**. The difference between private and state school educated students was **14%** – this year it has decreased to **9%**.

i. Salary expectation over time

Salary expectation (first job) — Results by year

| Year	Salary expectation
2018	£27,437
2019	£27,200
2020	£27,611
2021	£25,315
2022	£27,270
2023	£29,920
2024	£29,675

£49,373

Average salary expectation after five years is down by 5% year-on-year
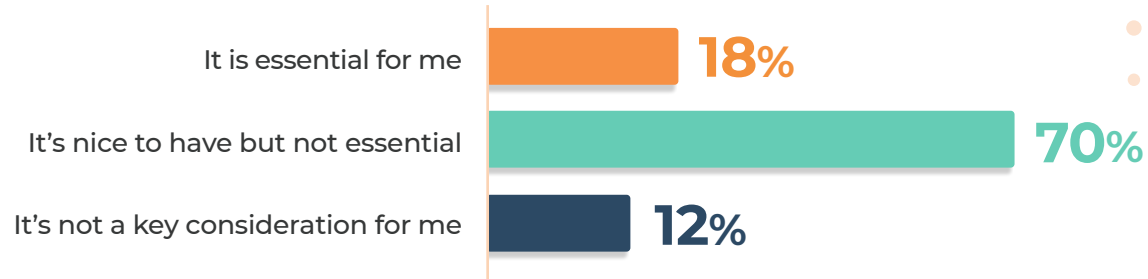
Key findings

There has been a small drop in expected first job salary this year, which is in line with the current challenging economic climate and student expectations that this will affect their futures.
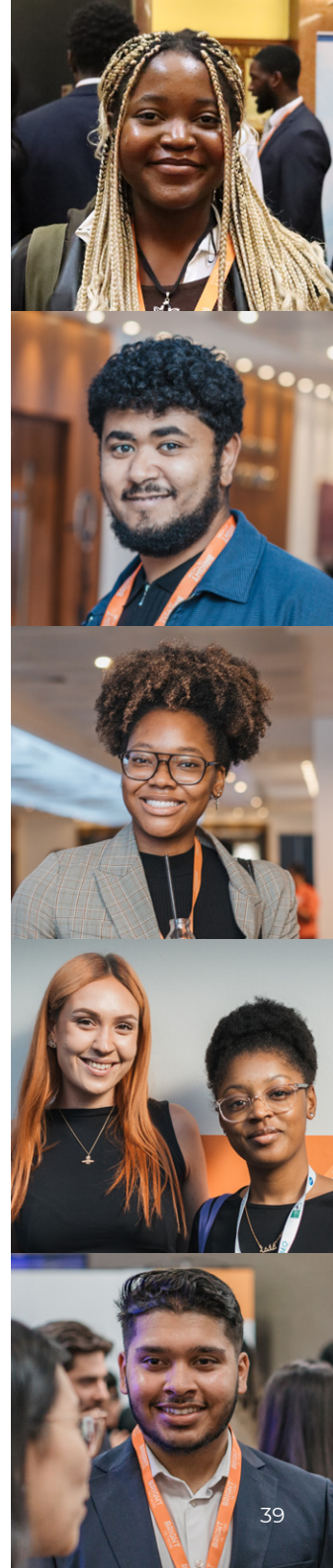
Flexibility and in-person engagement

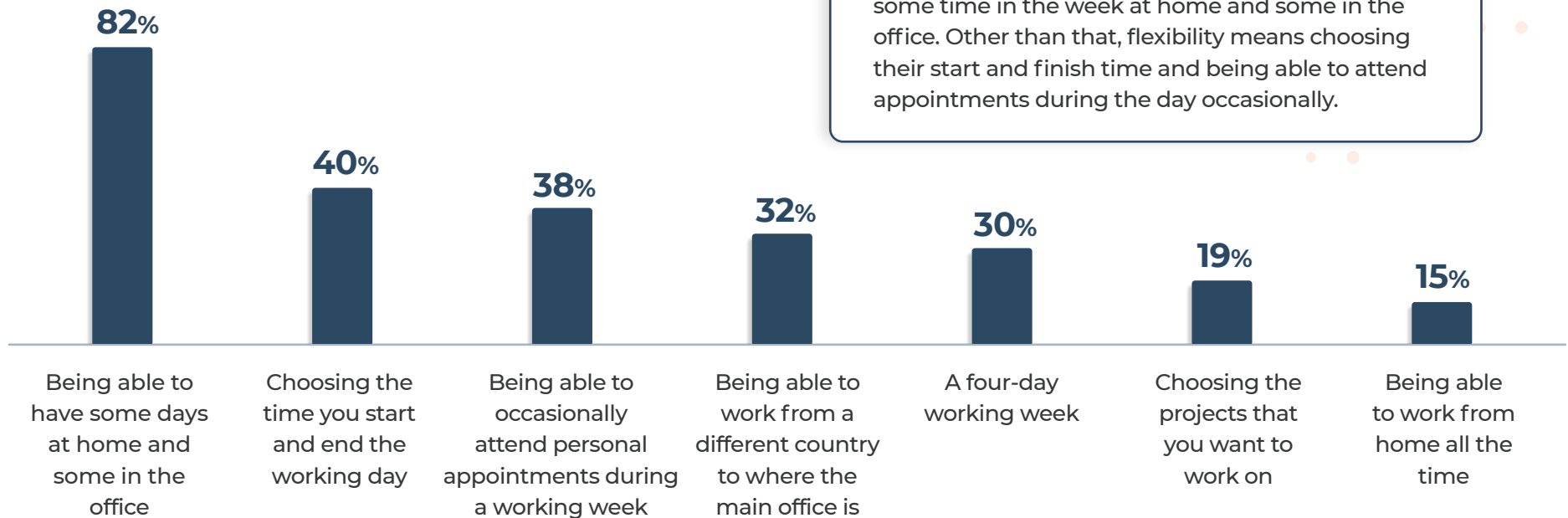**Q.** **How important is flexible working for your first job?**

- It is essential for me — **18%**
- It's nice to have but not essential — **70%**
- It's not a key consideration for me — **12%**

Key findings

Only **18%** of students see flexibility as essential in their first job, a drop down from **26%** last year.

Q. **What does flexible working mean for you?**
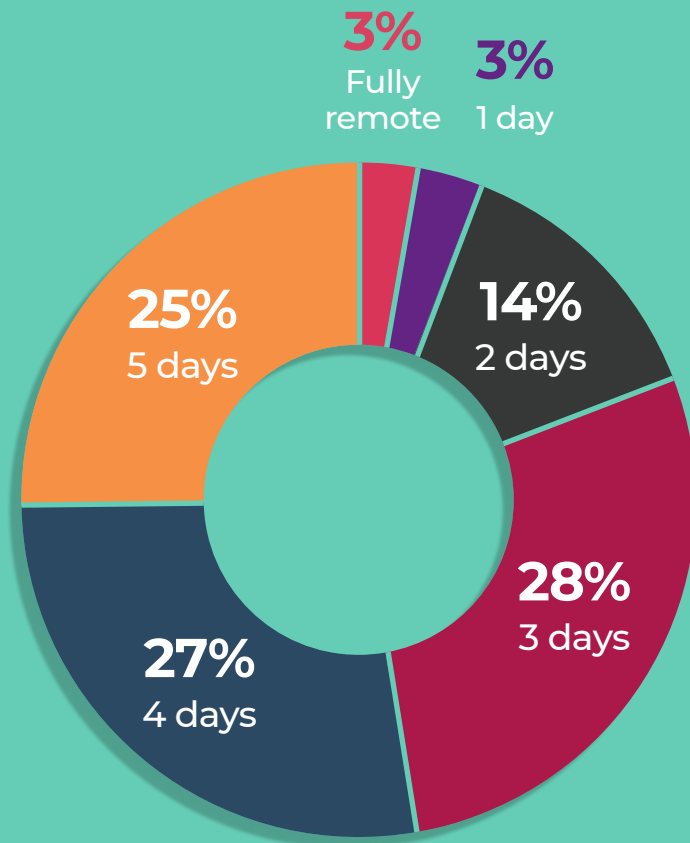
We asked students to select all that apply

Key findings

Most members consider flexibility to be having some time in the week at home and some in the office. Other than that, flexibility means choosing their start and finish time and being able to attend appointments during the day occasionally.

- **82%** — Being able to have some days at home and some in the office
- **40%** — Choosing the time you start and end the working day
- **38%** — Being able to occasionally attend personal appointments during a working week
- **32%** — Being able to work from a different country to where the main office is
- **30%** — A four-day working week
- **19%** — Choosing the projects that you want to work on
- **15%** — Being able to work from home all the time

Q. **How many days per week do you want to be in the office/place of work?**

3%
Fully remote

3%
1 day

25%
5 days

14%
2 days

27%
4 days

28%
3 days

What members are saying

"It's healthy to have a mix of working from home and the office as it's good for your mental well-being to get out of the house. To work at home sometimes can reduce long commuting time and cost."
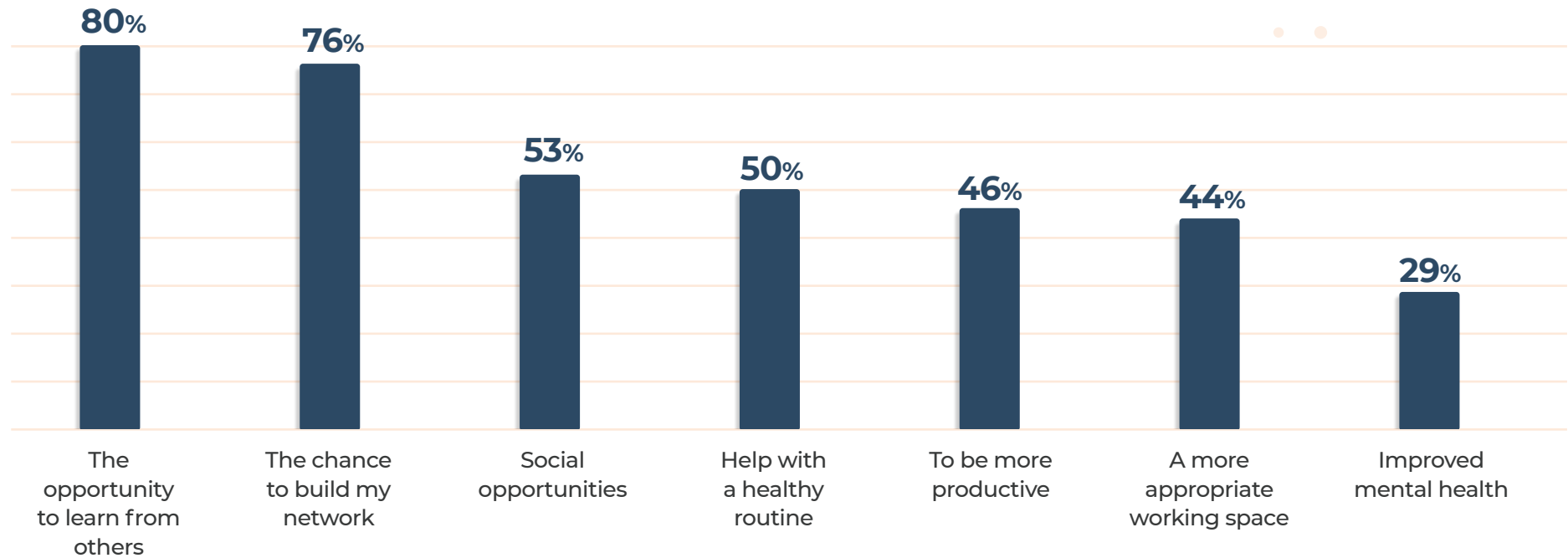
Anonymous respondent, 2024

Key findings

94% of students want to work two days or more in the office and **more than half** want to work there four to five days.

B **Our advice**

Your flexible working policy can support people from different backgrounds. Ensure you showcase positive stories from those working at your organisation that might be impacted, like neurodiverse talent or those with caring responsibilities.

Q. What do you want to get out of your time spent in the office?

We asked students to select all that apply

80%	**76**%	**53**%	**50**%	**46**%	**44**%	**29**%
The opportunity to learn from others	The chance to build my network	Social opportunities	Help with a healthy routine	To be more productive	A more appropriate working space	Improved mental health

≡Q Key findings

Attitudes to flexibility have shifted significantly this year. Students want their jobs to work more flexibly around their other responsibilities, but they're not expecting to make the rules. As early careers teams, it should be easier to meet them in the middle now.

≡Q Key findings

When they're in their place of work, they want to **learn from others, network across the organisation, socialise** and use it to build a **positive routine**.

Ⓑ Our advice

If you're able to, consider implementing the types of flexible working students are looking for. When you do, be clear with the guidelines and support them to perform effectively within them. A little bit of trust will go a long way.
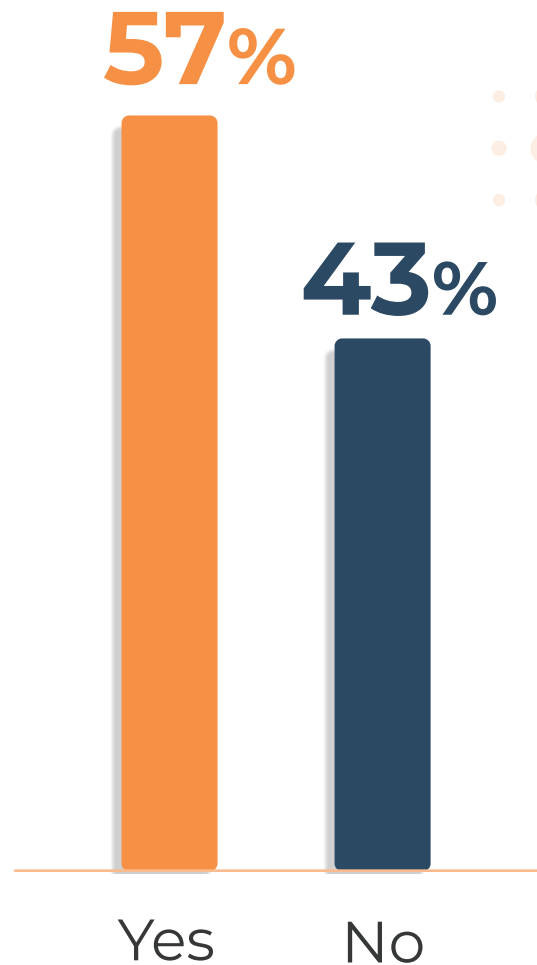
7 Reneges and long-term engagement

- Feelings towards reneging
- Considerations for retaining top talent

Q. **If you had already accepted an internship or graduate role offer, would you reject it for another?**

57%

43%

Yes   No

Key findings

Knowing that students are making more applications and using GenAI to help with this, it's not a surprise that students are more comfortable to renege on a graduate job offer. Be prepared, your renege rates are likely to increase.

The main reasons that would make students pick a new offer over one already on the table were a more exciting role (**33%**), a bigger salary (**24%**), a more prestigious company (**16%**) and a better experience through the recruitment process (**13%**).

Key findings

Openness to reneging is up from **50%** to **57%** year-on-year. This shows that despite it being an employer-led market and a challenging time economically, students won't necessarily be loyal to your brand, so building a strong connection post-offer is key.

Our advice

We can't predict what will happen, but our insights show that reneges look likely to be a big challenge for employers this year. Get it right at attraction stage and build loyalty in early year groups through upskilling support and guidance.

Post-offer, use role models in your teams to keep candidates warm with personal connections and a sense of belonging.

Considerations for retaining top talent
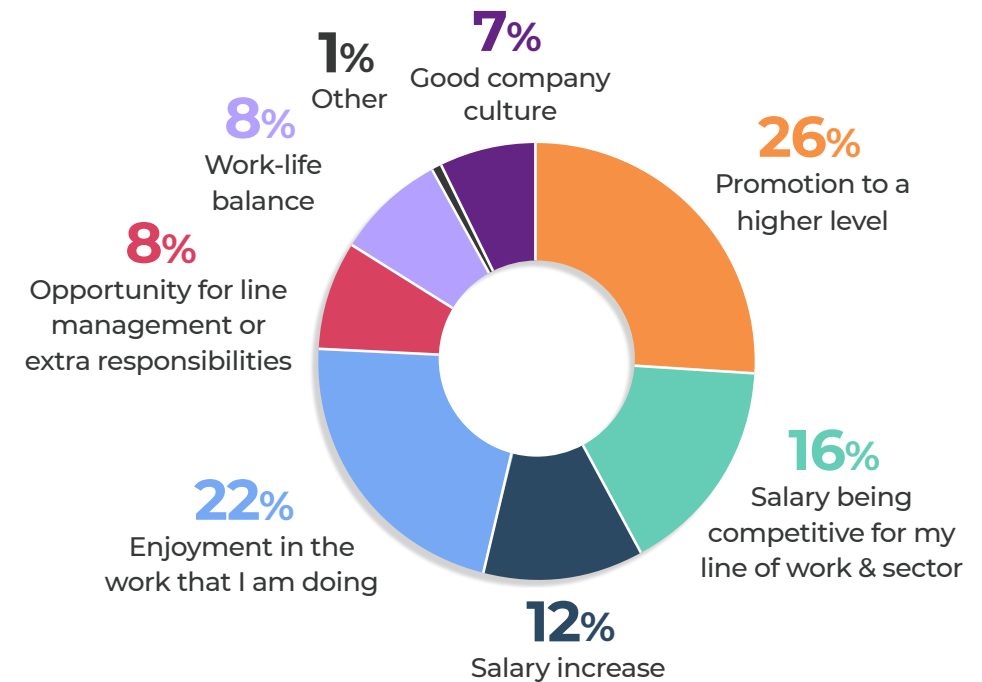
Q. Will you stay on your graduate scheme?

We asked graduates who told us they were on a graduate scheme

- I will definitely leave — **13%**
- I would consider leaving — **23%**
- I have no plans to leave but I would be open to options & offers — **49%**
- I'll almost certainly stay — **15%**

Key findings

Of all students who had already graduated and were on a graduate scheme, a shockingly low **15%** said they were fully committed to staying at their current employer beyond the scheme. **49%** said they have no plans to leave at the moment, but they're open to other offers. When asked what would make them stay with their graduate employer, their top motivations were a **promotion**, **enjoyment in the work** and the **salary** becoming more competitive.

Q. What is the main reason that would influence your decision to stay?

- **1%** Other
- **7%** Good company culture
- **8%** Work-life balance
- **8%** Opportunity for line management or extra responsibilities
- **26%** Promotion to a higher level
- **16%** Salary being competitive for my line of work & sector
- **22%** Enjoyment in the work that I am doing
- **12%** Salary increase

Our advice

Promote top talent and make it clear what progression will look like as the graduate scheme progresses and beyond. To remain competitive, understand what other employers in your sector are offering graduates. Decipher where you have a competitive advantage and lean into your strengths.

Key advice

from this year's research findings

1 Candidate loyalty to employers is strikingly low. **Invest in early engagement** to build meaningful relationships and improve candidate commitment.

2 Students from multiple underrepresented backgrounds are facing barriers in their careers – **prioritise intersectionality and understanding your audience** to create effective campaigns for these students.

3 Neurodiverse candidates will bring a positive impact into your organisation if supported correctly – **build processes and make adjustments** that allow them to thrive.

4 GenAI is here to stay and with candidate usage high and increasing, you must make a decision now to avoid confusing students and having an adverse effect on those from diverse backgrounds. **Have a definitive stance on the use of generative artificial intelligence** in your processes and communicate it clearly in your recruitment campaigns.

5 Students are looking for face-to-face connection, stability and balance. **Meet students in the middle when it comes to flexible working** and support them to perform effectively working both at home and in the office.

6 Reneges look set to be a big challenge this year. **Prepare for this by building off-cycle engagement plans**, including post-offer keep warm activity, to solidify your approach and be ready to run some targeted top-up campaigns to diverse groups.

Improving business by building stronger connections and a deeper understanding of Gen Z.

Insights that make an impact.

Talk to us about your 2024/25 graduate recruitment strategy

employers@brightnetwork.co.uk