

**darogantalent**

**North Wales  
Graduate  
Programme and  
Destinations  
Research:**

**Final Report**

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## Context

**There is an established trend of youth migration from North Wales, and particularly graduate outward migration. As a result, there have long been concerns about 'brain drain' from the region and the impact of this on the local economy and on local communities.**

Between 2001 and 2022, 25,000 more people aged 15-29 left North Wales than moved into the region,<sup>1</sup> representing a significant net loss. It has also long been established that graduates are more mobile than non-graduates. According to the Institute of Fiscal Studies, 'graduates are 10 percentage points more likely to have moved by age 27 than non-graduates'.<sup>2</sup> This means that graduates comprise a disproportionate number of those who leave North Wales for work.

**As young, educated people leave the region, there is also an impact on local businesses and their ability to fill skills gaps and access graduate talent.**

Darogan Talent has been commissioned by the North Wales Regional Skills Partnership to explore the migration trends of graduates and assess the needs of local businesses in terms of graduate recruitment, and particularly whether there is a demand for an intervention, such as a regional graduate programme, to support employers in North Wales to hire graduates.

This research aims to meet the following objectives as set out in the invitation to tender:

### **Graduate Mobility and Destinations**

- Investigate the university choices and fields of study of students from North Wales.
- Analyse post-graduation destinations to ascertain whether graduates return to North Wales, remain in their place of study, or relocate elsewhere.
- Identify key factors influencing graduates' decisions whether to return to North Wales or not after completing their studies.

### **Assessment of Employer Needs:**

- Determine the demand for a graduate programme among employers in North Wales, particularly focusing on recruitment needs and learning and development support.
- Identify the specific skills and qualifications that are in high demand by these employers when recruiting graduates.
- Evaluate current and future employment trends and how a graduate programme could address skill shortages.

## Structure

The findings of the research will be presented in two parts. Firstly, we will consider graduate mobility and destinations in relation to North Wales. This will help establish the context for the graduate recruitment landscape within which employers in North Wales are currently operating.

We will then assess the graduate recruitment needs of employers. This has been the primary focus of the research so that it can be determined whether there is a demand for a graduate recruitment intervention for the region.

To conclude, we will suggest options for actions moving forward.

## Methodology

A mixture of research methods was utilised for the purposes of this research.

### **Desk-based research**

A range of existing data and analysis was considered:

- Data provided by the North Wales RSP, such as Employer Survey Findings.
- Statistics by HESA, UCAS and Stats Cymru.
- Academic publications, such as Elen Bonner's work on migration.
- Available data on equivalent regional graduate programmes, such as RISE Sheffield, the Liverpool City Region Graduate Scheme, and the CCR's Venture Graduate Programme.
- Wider online publications about graduate destinations and mobility.

### **Surveys**

The following were asked to complete surveys:

- Employers in North Wales
- Students and graduates with a connection to North Wales

### **Research interviews**

One-on-one interviews were conducted with employers of different sizes and sectors from across North Wales.

Informal meetings were also held with the North Wales RSP team as well as individuals involved in the running of Liverpool City Region Graduate Programme and Venture Graduate Programme (Cardiff Capital Region).

### **Follow-up workshops**

Finally, online sessions were held with both the North Wales RSP and a representative group of employers to gather feedback about the options for future interventions.

# Graduate Mobility and Destinations

## Wider context

Higher education in Wales is facing a period of significant uncertainty, from both the perspectives of students and of Higher Education Institutions.

Welsh Higher Education Institutions are facing a significant deficit, primarily due to rising costs and a decrease in enrolments from international students.<sup>3</sup> The Welsh Government have raised the tuition fee cap to £9,250 for universities in Wales—in line with what is already in place in England—and will rise further still in September 2025 to £9,535 a year.<sup>4</sup> Despite these increases to the tuition fees, universities are reporting that the increase to Employer National Insurance will not be covered.<sup>5</sup> Cardiff University recently announced their intention to cut 400 jobs, reduce courses and merge departments,<sup>6</sup> a further indicator of the difficulties Higher Education Institutions face in Wales.

There has also been a significant decrease in the number of applications by 18-year-olds from Wales for university places. Despite a record-high number of applications in 2022, with 38.1% of 18-year-olds from Wales applying, this number dropped to 33.8% in 2024 - the lowest rate in 15 years.<sup>7</sup> Apprenticeships and degree apprenticeships are also offering alternative routes for young people to train and develop professionally.

**Nevertheless, a third of 18-year-olds are still choosing to attend university, and it remains the most common next step for those who sit their A-Levels in Wales.**

It is also worth noting that both studying and working in Wales has become less attractive for international students. As of January 1, 2024, most students on non-research postgraduate courses can no longer bring dependents with them, resulting in a significant drop in applications from international students at Higher Education Institutions across the UK. Simultaneously, it has become more difficult for international students to remain in the UK after graduating. Among other changes, the baseline minimum salary to be sponsored for a Skilled Worker Visa increased in 2024 from £26,200 to £38,700. Since salaries are lower in North Wales than in other parts of the UK, this makes it more difficult for local employers to hire international talent and makes North Wales a less desirable location to study and work for future international students.

## Higher education trends for North Wales

Using bespoke data provided by HESA, we can identify the most popular university destinations for students from North Wales. As Figure 1 illustrates, the two universities in North Wales are the two most popular destinations, followed closely by The Open University.<sup>8</sup> The rest of the most popular destinations are located either in Wales or in North West England. The cities of Liverpool, Manchester and Cardiff are represented multiple times in this list.

**(Figure 1) Where students from North Wales study: Academic year 2022/23<sup>9</sup>**

Ranking	Higher Education Provider	Total
1	Wrexham University	3,627
2	Bangor University	3,374
3	The Open University	2,925
4	Liverpool John Moores University	1,526
5	University of Chester	1,444
6	Grŵp Llandrillo Menai	839
7	Cardiff University	706
8	The University of Liverpool	581
9	The Manchester Metropolitan University	557
10	Aberystwyth University	535
11	The University of Manchester	440
12	Edge Hill University	291
13	The University of Salford	257
= 14	Swansea University	239
= 14	Cardiff Metropolitan University	239
= 15	University of Wales Trinity Saint David	231
= 15	The University of Lancaster	231

Using the same dataset from HESA, we can also identify which subjects students from North Wales are studying. With this data, we can map the popularity of certain subjects against the region's priority sectors to consider whether the choices made by students from North Wales are supporting the region's strengths, as well as industries where there are skills shortages. Encouraging young people from the region to pursue subjects that would allow them to work in North Wales after graduating would remove one possible barrier for working in the region after study, namely skills mismatch. For instance, are regional employment demands being met by the high rates studying 'Sociology, social policy and anthropology' and 'Law', or will students from the region studying these subjects look elsewhere for employment after graduating?

**(Figure 2) What students from North Wales study: Academic year 2022/23**<sup>10</sup>

<b>Subject (CAH2) Sciences</b>	<b>Total</b>
Medicine and dentistry	508
Pharmacology, toxicology and pharmacy	230
Nursing and midwifery	2,315
Medical sciences	399
Allied health	995
Biosciences	573
Sport and exercise sciences	709
Psychology	1,526
Veterinary sciences	140
Agriculture, food and related studies	313
Physics and astronomy	219
Chemistry	134
General, applied and forensic sciences	195
Mathematical sciences	264
Engineering	1,099

<b>Subject (CAH2) Non-Sciences</b>	<b>Total</b>
Architecture, building and planning	325
Sociology, social policy and anthropology	1,035
Economics	135
Politics	180
Health and social care	1,316
Law	1,006
Business and management	1,988
English studies	476
Celtic studies	131
Languages and area studies	196
History and archaeology	474
Philosophy and religious studies	137
Education and teaching	1,891
Combined and general studies	792
Media, journalism and communications	397

Materials and technology	128
Computing	959
Geography, earth and environmental studies (natural sciences)	353

Creative arts and design	1,061
Performing arts	496
Geography, earth and environmental studies (social sciences)	59

In addition to the students who are from North Wales, it is also important to consider those who choose to study in the region. Figures 3-5 highlight the regions from where students at Bangor University and Wrexham University came in the 2022/23 academic year.

For Bangor University, the top six local authorities in Wales for enrolments were the six local authorities in North Wales. Gwynedd, where Bangor University is located, had the most enrolments, followed by the neighbouring local authorities of Conwy and the Isle of Anglesey. Wrexham University follows a similar pattern. The top six local authorities in Wales for enrolments include the five closest local authorities in North Wales, and Powys which borders Wrexham.

There is a strong correlation between the proximity of Welsh local authorities to the university and rates of enrolments, as well as a pattern of movement from east to west (and vice versa). This is further highlighted by the rates of enrolments from English local authorities. For both Bangor University and Wrexham University, enrolments most commonly came from the mid and north-west of England (with the exception of Greater London).

Although typically associated with college courses, Grŵp Llandrillo Menai also offers university level courses, whose enrolments come almost exclusively from the local authorities in North Wales and Powys. Coleg Cambria, too, offers university level courses, and although these statistics are not available through HESA, the statistics for Figure 3 were provided directly.

**(Figure 3) HE student enrolments by HE provider and permanent address: Academic year 2022/23<sup>11</sup>**

University	Wales	England	Scotland	Northern Ireland	Other UK	EU	Non-EU	Total
<b>Bangor University</b>	3,810	3,805	40	75	50	290	2,715	10,825
<b>Wrexham University</b>	4,115	2,395	40	35	20	225	1,715	8,545
<b>Grŵp Llandrillo Menai</b>	865	10	0	0	0	0	0	875
<b>Coleg Cambria</b>	346	136	0	0	0	0	0	482



**(Figure 4) Where do students at Bangor University come from: Academic year 2022/23**<sup>12</sup>

Ranking	Welsh Local Authorities		English Local Authorities / Local Government District Level		Countries outside of the UK	
	1	Gwynedd	1,070	Greater Manchester	340	India
2	Conwy	705	Greater London	260	Pakistan	490
3	Isle of Anglesey	630	Merseyside	230	Nigeria	445
4	Denbighshire	365	West Midlands	170	Bangladesh	245
5	Flintshire	340	Cheshire West and Chester; Lancashire	145	China	195
6	Wrexham	265	West Yorkshire	145	USA	115

**(Figure 5) Where do students at Wrexham University come from: Academic year 2022/23**<sup>13</sup>

Ranking	Welsh Local Authorities		English Local Authorities / Local Government District Level		Countries outside of the UK	
	1	Wrexham	1,690	Cheshire West and Chester	340	India
2	Flintshire	950	Shropshire	330	Germany	105
3	Denbighshire	490	Greater London	265	France	85
4	Conwy	270	Merseyside	200	Nigeria	75
5	Powys	185	Greater Manchester	125	Sri Lanka	35
6	Gwynedd	165	West Midlands	95	Bangladesh	25

**Another important consideration is the subjects that are studied at Higher Education level in North Wales** (figure 6), as it presents the opportunity to create pathways into local employment opportunities. It is particularly worth considering whether what is currently studied in the region supports the North Wales RSP's 9 priority sectors. For instance, while Food and Farming is a priority sector, only 420 enrolled to study agriculture, food and related studies across North Wales, a similar number to those who opted for historical, philosophical and religious studies. It is possible to consider the subjects studied in the region by specific courses, which may be useful for any future research which seeks to analyse the availability of specific skills and qualifications for a sector within the region.

**(Figure 6) What is studied in North Wales at degree level: Academic year 2022/23**<sup>14</sup>

<b>CAH Level 1 Subject</b>	<b>Bangor University</b>	<b>Wrexham University</b>	<b>Grŵp Llandrillo Menai</b>	<b>Coleg Cambria</b>	<b>Total</b>
Medicine and dentistry	170	0	0	0	<b>170</b>
Subjects allied to medicine	1,700	1,235	205	12	<b>3,152</b>
Biological and sport sciences	1,705	105	30	7	<b>1,847</b>
Psychology	1,210	280	0	0	<b>1,490</b>
Veterinary sciences	0	55	0	0	<b>55</b>
Agriculture, food and related studies	295	105	20	21	<b>441</b>
Physical sciences	0	110	0	0	<b>110</b>
Mathematical sciences	0	50	0	0	<b>50</b>
Engineering and technology	215	570	55	193	<b>1033</b>
Computing	345	900	45	20	<b>1,310</b>
Architecture, building and planning	0	75	30	97	<b>202</b>
Geography, earth and environmental studies (natural sciences)	395	0	0	0	<b>395</b>
Social sciences	730	800	80	13	<b>1,623</b>
Law	505	70	0	0	<b>575</b>
Business and management	1,765	2,255	45	35	<b>4,100</b>
Language and area studies	510	145	5	0	<b>660</b>
Historical, philosophical and religious studies	340	40	0	0	<b>380</b>
Education and teaching	470	1,130	70	84	<b>1,754</b>
Combined and general studies	0	60	205	0	<b>265</b>
Media, journalism and communications	160	85	25	0	<b>270</b>
Design, and creative and performing arts	200	480	55	0	<b>735</b>
Geography, earth and environmental studies (social sciences)	115	0	0	0	<b>115</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>10,825</b>	<b>8,545</b>	<b>875</b>	<b>482</b>	<b>20,727</b>

## Graduate Destinations

To definitively answer whether graduates from North Wales stay or return is difficult. According to data from Stats Wales, across the years 2001-2022, significantly more people aged 15-29 left North Wales than moved into the region.<sup>15</sup> Many of these are likely to be students and graduates from the region who have left. However, from those aged 30 and above, there is net inward migration into North Wales. Figure 7 shows that, overall, there is net migration into the region for those of working age (Wrexham is the exception).

**(Figure 7) Net Migration for North Wales by age group from 2001-2022**<sup>16</sup>

	15-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-64	Total
<b>Isle of Anglesey</b>	-4307	1123	-430	135	411	474	4587	<b>1993</b>
<b>Gwynedd</b>	15155	-13998	-3976	-861	41	288	5459	<b>2108</b>
<b>Conwy</b>	-7986	1841	164	984	1550	1652	9993	<b>8198</b>
<b>Denbighshire</b>	-5703	1032	290	657	1439	1207	7217	<b>6139</b>
<b>Flintshire</b>	-9349	3302	1267	1868	988	805	1827	<b>708</b>
<b>Wrexham</b>	-4864	1716	-406	424	110	129	1270	<b>-1621</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>-17054</b>	<b>-4984</b>	<b>-3091</b>	<b>3207</b>	<b>4539</b>	<b>4555</b>	<b>30353</b>	<b>17525</b>

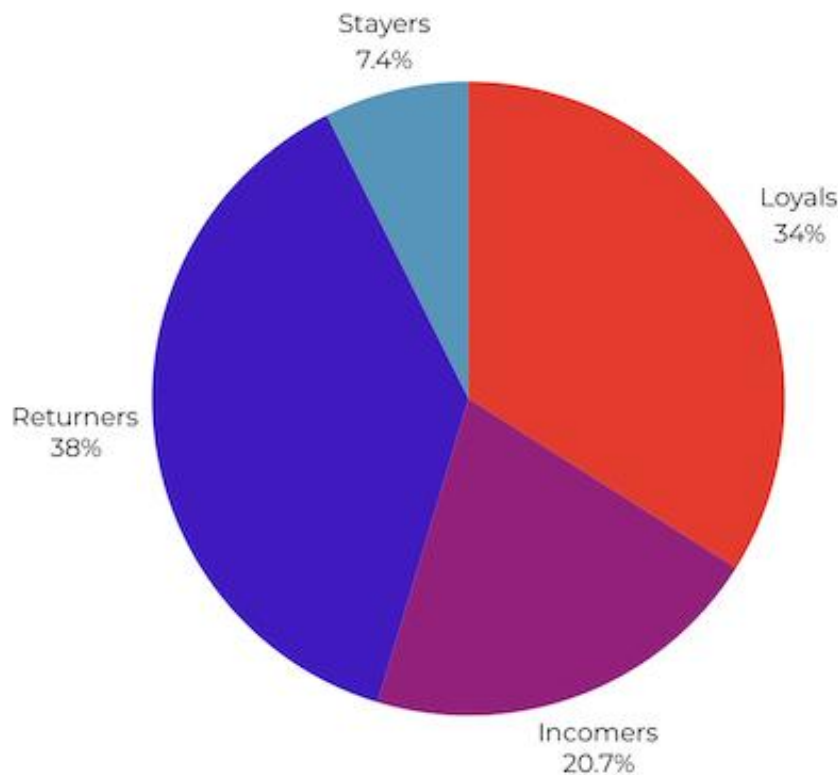
We cannot know from the data provided whether these are individuals from the region returning, or individuals migrating from elsewhere. However, it seems plausible that many are returning to the area later in life.

However, we can form a more accurate snapshot of graduate destinations 15 months after graduating using the Graduate Outcomes Survey produced by HESA. By requesting a bespoke dataset from HESA, we have been able to identify where graduates from each of North Wales's six local authorities are working after completing their studies. The full statistics, by local authority, can be found in **Appendix A**.

It's worth noting that each local authority follows a similar pattern. While the local authority of origin is generally the most popular destination, the main 'competition' for each local authority as a destination after graduating is 'Elsewhere in North Wales' and the 'North West of England'. **Initiatives aimed at attracting returning talent to the region should, therefore, focus on the North West of England.** Additionally, London is a more popular destination for graduates from the region than Mid, West and South Wales combined. The English capital is a greater magnet for graduate talent from North Wales than the Welsh capital.

Figure 8 provides a breakdown of who is working in the region 15 months after graduating. 'Loyals' represents those who were originally from the region and who also studied in the region for university and then stayed in the region for work. 'Returners' represents those who are from North Wales, left the region for study, but then returned to the region for work. 'Stayers' are those who are not from the region but moved to the region for study and stayed for work. 'Incomers' are those with no prior connection with the region before moving there to work after graduating.

**(Figure 8) Migration groups of graduates from 2020/21 working in North Wales 15 months after graduation** <sup>17</sup>

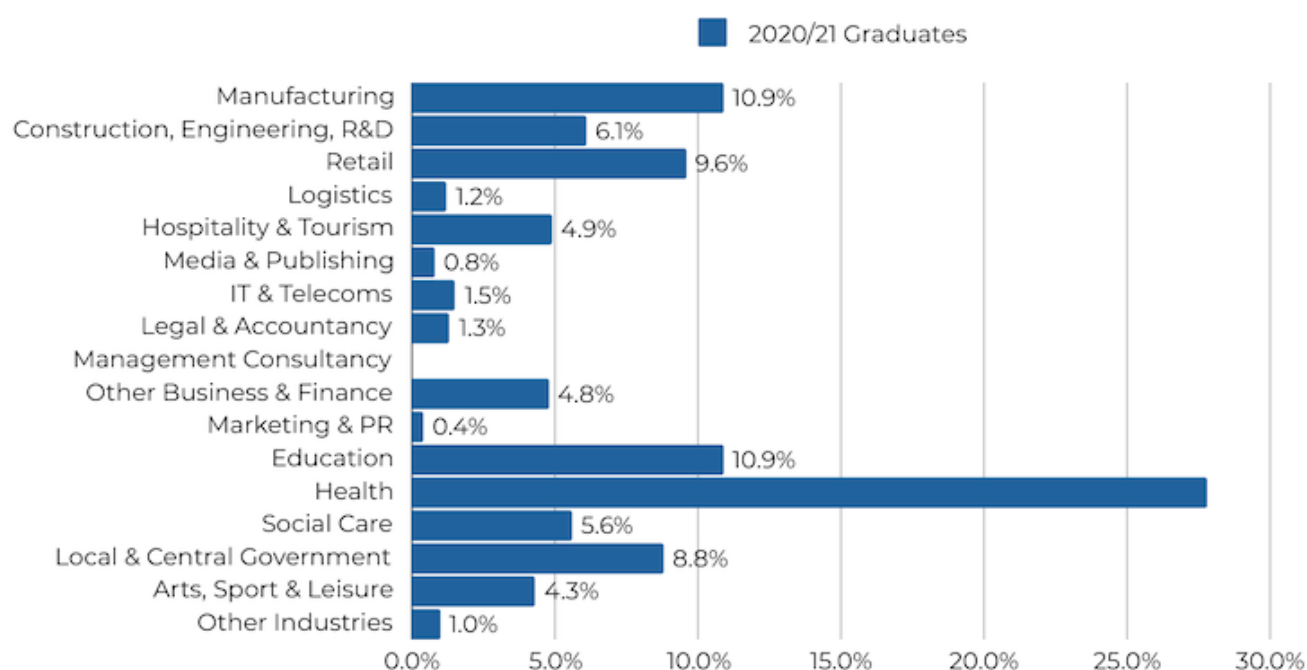


This data shows that the vast majority of people who work in the region after graduating are from the region originally. Interestingly, the largest group working in the region after graduating are those who left for study but then returned. It is also noteworthy that there are three times more people who have moved to the region for the first time than those who had studied in North Wales but were from elsewhere. This means that most graduates working in the region 15 months after graduating have studied outside of North Wales. This reflects the fact that high rates of people from North Wales leave the region to study, but may also suggest that local Higher Education Institutions are not meeting the needs of local employers as effectively as providers outside of the region.

In terms of the industries that graduates in North Wales are working in 15 months after graduating:

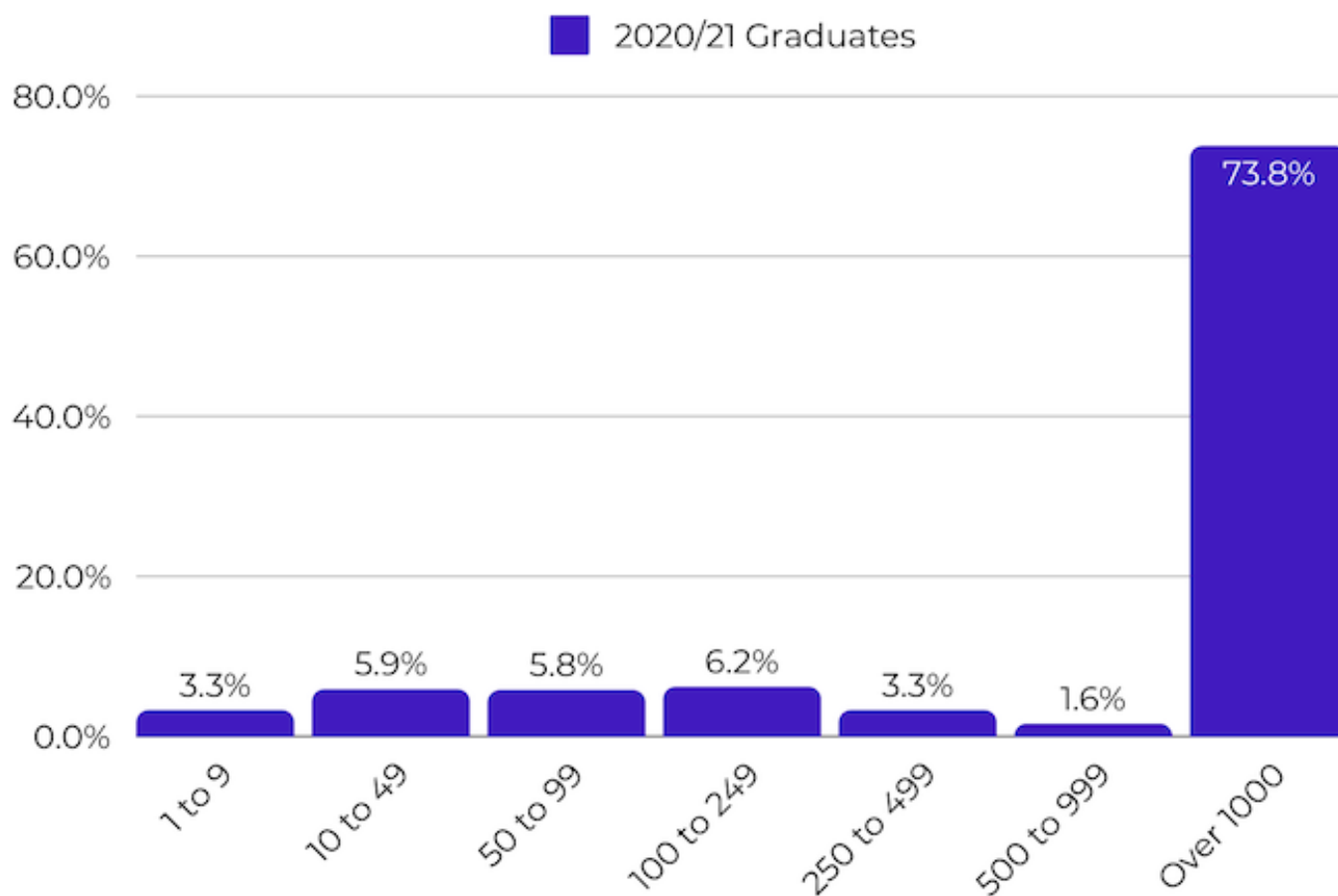
- Over 50% are working in industries primarily associated with the public sector (namely, 'Local & Central Government', 'Social Care', 'Health' and 'Education').
- 'Manufacturing' also performs very well with more than 10% employed in this industry (a higher rate than in South East Wales).
- However, North Wales has low rates of graduates working in 'Other Business & Finance', 'Management Consultancy', and 'IT & Telecoms' when compared with other regions of Wales and the rest of the UK.

**(Figure 9) Industry or employment of graduates from 2020/21 working in North Wales 15 months after graduation** <sup>18</sup>



The high rates of graduates employed by the public sector links with the statistics found in figure 10. Around 80% of graduates in North Wales work in large organisations with more than 250 employees and 73.8% work in larger organisations with more than 1000 employees. **While this is comparable to other regions of Wales it suggests an opportunity for intervention by connecting SMEs with graduate talent.** In 2022, SMEs (0-249 employees), accounted for 99.3% of total enterprises in Wales, and accounted for 62.9% of employment. Recent graduates working in North Wales are currently not entering the SME labour market at a comparable rate, which may present a missed opportunity.

**(Figure 10) Size of employer of graduates from 2020/21 working in North Wales 15 months after graduation** <sup>19</sup>



# Stay, leave or return? The factors influencing graduate destinations in North Wales

## Existing research

In November 2024, Global Welsh released a report of the findings of their survey with the Welsh diaspora, which attracted over 1,700 participants.<sup>20</sup> While their sample size for those from North Wales aged 25 or under is small, the research suggests that:

- The Welsh diaspora is highly educated, with 45% of respondents holding a Master's degree or higher
- Those who emigrated recently are more open to the prospect of returning. For instance, of those who emigrated between 2021-2024, 54% were open to returning, compared with 49% of those who emigrated between 2016-2020. **This suggests that targeting those who have recently left Wales to return may be more effective than those who have left for some time.**

The report also highlights the barriers to returning that emerged from the survey, which included:

- Overall economic conditions (54%)
- Healthcare quality (47%)
- Education standards (47%)
- Employment opportunities (41%)
- Public services (24%)
- Family integration (24%)
- Partner employment (24%)
- Housing accessibility (18%)
- Cultural readjustment (15%)

Although some factors, such as 'Family Integration', seem more applicable for those in an older age bracket, many of the barriers listed are consistent with the barriers younger people experience, as we shall explore below.

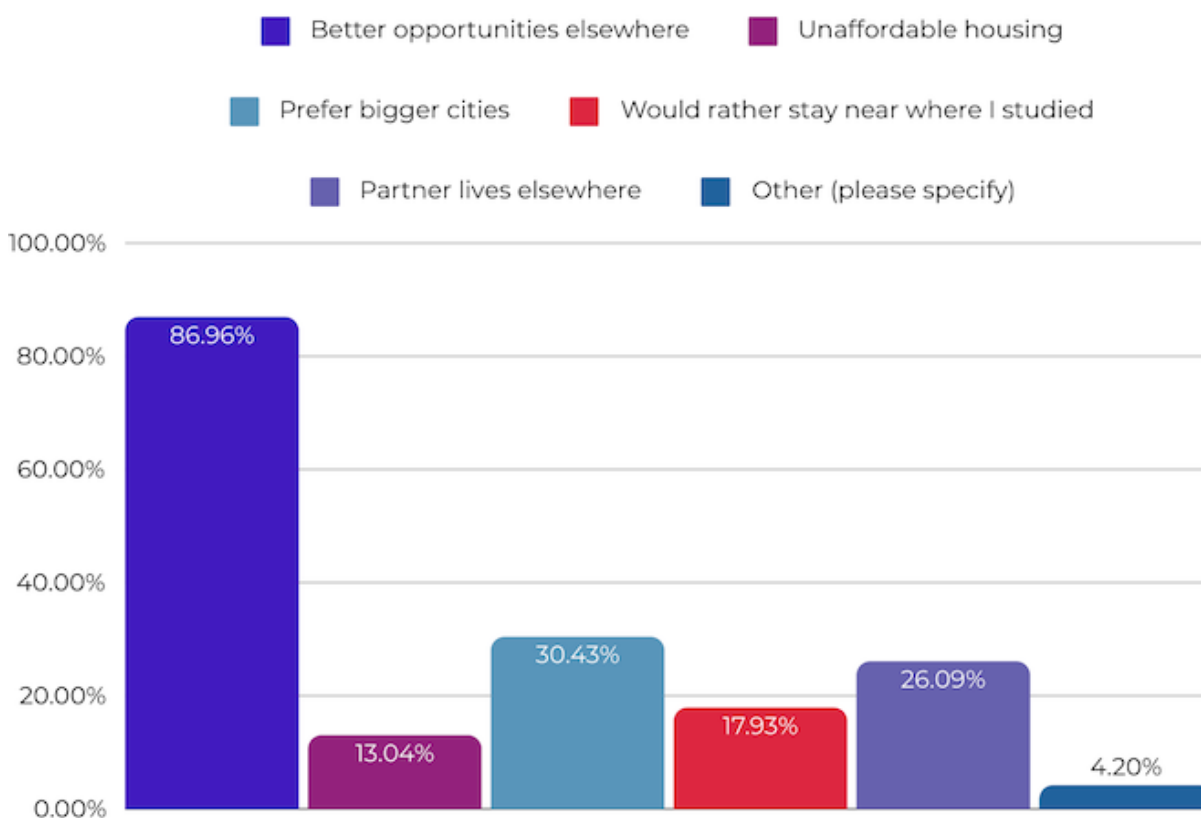
## Previous research by Darogan Talent

Darogan Talent has also conducted its own research into this area, primarily targeting those 29 years or younger, to understand the motivations to stay, leave or return.

A 2024 survey targeting students and graduates from Wales received 27 responses from those who said they were from a local authority area in North Wales. The average age of these respondents was 24, and each respondent was either attending or had previously attended university.

When asked what the main barriers were for returning to their local area (Figure 11), by far the most common answer was 'Better opportunities elsewhere'. More than a quarter also chose 'Prefer bigger cities' and 'Partner lives elsewhere'.

**(Figure 11) What are the biggest barriers for you to return to the part of Wales you're originally from?**






When asked 'At which age do you feel you're most likely to return home?' 31-40 was the most common age bracket (34.78%) followed by 26-30 (30.43%). None chose the 'never' option.

The two most popular factors in terms of influencing people's decision to return to their local area was 'Family health' and 'Children'. This suggests that family considerations are among the most important factors in influencing the decisions of young people to return.

Through the ARFOR challenge fund,<sup>21</sup> Darogan Talent has also conducted research interviews with young Welsh speakers from the ARFOR region (which includes Gwynedd and Anglesey) who left Wales for study, exploring the factors that influence young people to leave and return.

These were the most common push and pull factors for the ARFOR region and for the area they had moved to outside of Wales.

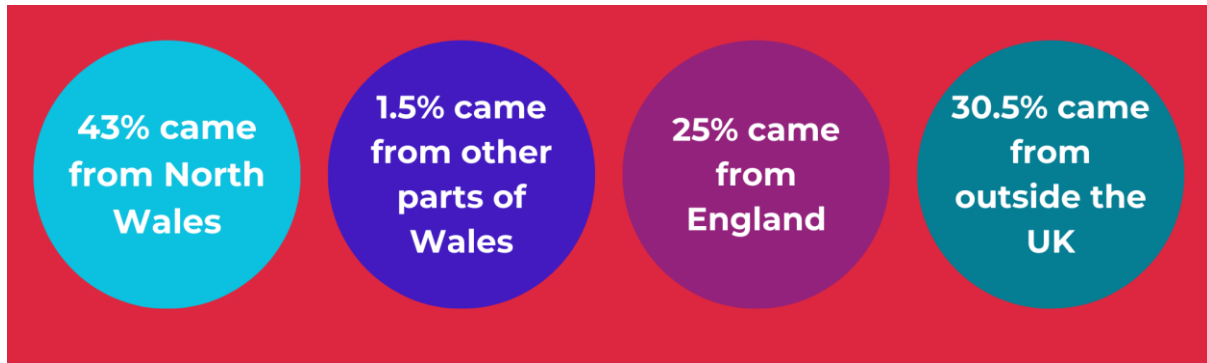


ARFOR Area	Areas outside of Wales
 <b>Pull</b>	 <b>Pull</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being close to family <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Living with family while looking for jobs and over the holiday period</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Being close to friends from Wales</li> <li>• The natural beauty of the area <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ The sea was mentioned most often, followed by mountains</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Being able live and work through the Welsh language</li> <li>• A great place to raise children <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ And especially to raise children through the medium of Welsh</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Unique, friendly local community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leaving initially for a university with a good reputation, or a specific course</li> <li>• More things to do (in terms of leisure)</li> <li>• More work opportunities and higher wages</li> <li>• Better transport (both internally and with other parts of the UK)</li> <li>• Most things needed are in walking distance</li> <li>• Wanted to experience something new and exciting</li> <li>• Partner lives here (and usually doesn't have a connection to their part of Wales)</li> <li>• Meeting people from all over the world and from different backgrounds</li> </ul>
 <b>Push</b>	 <b>Push</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of leisure activities to do</li> <li>• Lack of jobs in the area (especially for certain sectors)</li> <li>• Larger cities in other parts of Wales</li> <li>• Failings of public transport</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Takes a long time to go 'home' to the ARFOR area</li> <li>• Less things to do in the outdoors</li> <li>• Less opportunities to speak Welsh <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Worried about their Welsh getting worse</li> </ul> </li> <li>• High rent and cost of living</li> <li>• Not safe and can have more social problems</li> <li>• Lots of noise and can be less clean</li> </ul>

## North Wales Student and Graduate Survey

For the purposes of this research, Darogan Talent conducted a survey targeting students and graduates with a connection to North Wales (either they were from the area and/or studied in North Wales) to better understand motivations behind staying, leaving or returning. It was a detailed survey with results worth revisiting in more detail if interventions are being designed for the region.

**207 people took part in the survey. Of these participants:**



**Of those responding who were from England or from outside of the UK:**

- 68.7% were currently looking for a role in North Wales
- Of those who were currently based in the region, a significant majority felt like they were likely to stay in North Wales for the next 5 years. Of those who had already left, a majority expected to return in the next 5 years.
- For those who were currently living in the region, the two most common advantages of staying in North Wales were around its nature and scenery, followed by the sense of community and the people. Conversely, the greatest barriers for staying were the lack of career opportunities in the region; that the Welsh language was a barrier (both for career and social integration); and the housing market.
- 78.8% [of those applicable] said they would be interested in completing an internship or placement in North Wales.
- 68.18% [of those applicable] chose 'work experience' as being more valuable for preparing them for work after graduating than the alternative option of 'further training'

We will consider the respondents to the survey from North Wales in more detail.

### Key facts about the sample:

**69% speak Welsh and another 17% are learning**

**70% were still at university, while the rest had already graduated**

**55% had studied in the region, 8% studied in another part of Wales, and 37% had studied elsewhere in the UK. A broad range of degree disciplines were also represented**

**81% were currently living in North Wales**

**Generally, there seems to be an appetite from those who responded to live and work in the region.**

- **60%** noted that they were **looking for a role or opportunity in North Wales** .
- Of those still studying, **70% also noted that they would be interested in completing an internship or year in industry in North Wales**.
- When asked 'How do you feel about the idea of living and working in North Wales?' with 1 representing 'not very positive' and 10 representing 'very positive', **the average score was 7.73**.
- For those who were still in the region, when 'Not Sure' answers were removed, **85% answered either 'Highly Likely' or 'Likely' to the question 'How likely are you to stay in North Wales (for employment or study)?'**. A majority also thought they would be in North Wales in 5 and 10 years' time.
- For those who had left the region, when 'Not Sure' answers were removed, **71% answered either 'Highly Likely' or 'Likely' to the question 'How likely are you to return to North Wales (for employment or study)?'**. A majority also thought they would be in North Wales in 5 and 10 years' time.



**The survey also provided insights into how students and graduates perceived North Wales and industry in the region.**

- For those who were still in the region, respondents were asked to state, in their own words, **'What are the advantages of staying in North Wales after graduating?'**. The most common clusters of answers were around the benefits of the **community and people** in the area, praise for the region's **nature and scenery**, and the ability **to live and work in Welsh**.
- For those who were still in the region, respondents were asked to state, **'In your own words, what are the advantages of leaving North Wales after graduating?'**. The most common clusters of answers were around accessing **better job opportunities, broadening horizons** and gaining **new experiences**, and having a **better social and professional life**. Those who had already left the region gave similar advantages for not returning.
- Respondents were then asked, **'What are the barriers to staying in North Wales that you've experienced?'**. The most common clusters of answers were around a **lack of job opportunities; unaffordable housing; and poor public transport**. Those who had already left region gave similar barriers for not returning. However, for those who had left the region, simultaneously, **many perceived the cost of living (including housing) as being one the region's chief advantages** (in addition to being close to family and friends, the Welsh language and culture, and the region's beautiful nature and scenery). This suggests that perceptions are mixed in terms of whether the cost of living is better in North Wales or elsewhere.
- The survey also asked **'Which sectors do you perceive as offering the most graduate opportunities in North Wales?'**
  - **63%** chose **'Health and Social Care'**
  - **54%** chose **'Hospitality and Retail'** as well as **'Education'**
  - **42%** chose **'Construction'** as well as **'Public Sector'**
- When asked which **'Which sectors do you perceive as offering the least graduate opportunities in North Wales?'**
  - **40%** chose **'Media (Film, TV & Radio)'**
  - **34%** chose **'Technology'** as well as **'Arts & Creative'**
  - **33%** chose **'Finance and Professional'**



**The survey also offered insight about the readiness of those still studying for the world of work, and where they may need further support.**

- When asked '**How prepared do you feel for the workplace?** With 1 representing 'completely unprepared' and 10 representing 'completely prepared', **the average score was 6.64.**
- Of those currently studying, **almost half stated they have had no work experience** while completing their degree, and another 25% said they have had a month or less of work experience.
- This is further supported by how respondents answered the question, 'What barriers have you experienced, or do you envisage you will experience, when it comes to employment?'. **57% chose 'my lack of work experience', and 43% chose 'my lack of confidence'.**
- Barriers noted for gaining work experience was a perception that there was a lack of opportunities, or that there was a lot of competition, and that finding time to balance work alongside studies was difficult.
- When asked '**In which of these areas would you most value support in order to live and work in North Wales?**'
  - **66%** chose '**support to find permanent roles**'
  - **57%** chose '**support to find internships and placement opportunities**'
  - **54%** chose '**training to work in a specific role**'
  - **34%** chose '**CV/job application advice**'
- By contrast, few chose 'Support to find suitable housing or accommodation' and 'Welsh language lessons'
- **When asked, 'Do you think you will need to retrain or gain additional training to work in your ideal role after graduating?', 55% responded yes.**
- Additionally, respondents were asked 'When would be the best time to take part in a training course for a sector you want to work in after graduating?'. 43% answered 'Training on the job after getting the role', 34% chose 'During the summer vacation of a degree' and 23% chose 'After graduating, but before getting the role'. This shows a preference for learning on the job, although more than half also saw an opportunity to train further before starting a role.
- However, while there seems to be a recognition that there may be a need for further training, when asked '**On the whole, which do you believe would be most helpful to prepare you for work after graduating - work experience or further training?**', **83% chose 'work experience'**. This shows, from the perspective of current students from the region, an intervention around providing work experience may be more beneficial than providing further training.

# Assessment of Employer Needs

## Wider context

As for higher education, it is also an uncertain time for employers. Since the announcement of the latest Autumn budget, most employers in North Wales, as across the UK, are facing significant increases to Employer National Insurance contributions.

This increase will make it more costly for businesses to hire staff, which may lead to recruitment freezes and redundancies across sectors. **New entrants to the labour market, such as recent graduates, will likely be disproportionately impacted by a stagnating job market.**

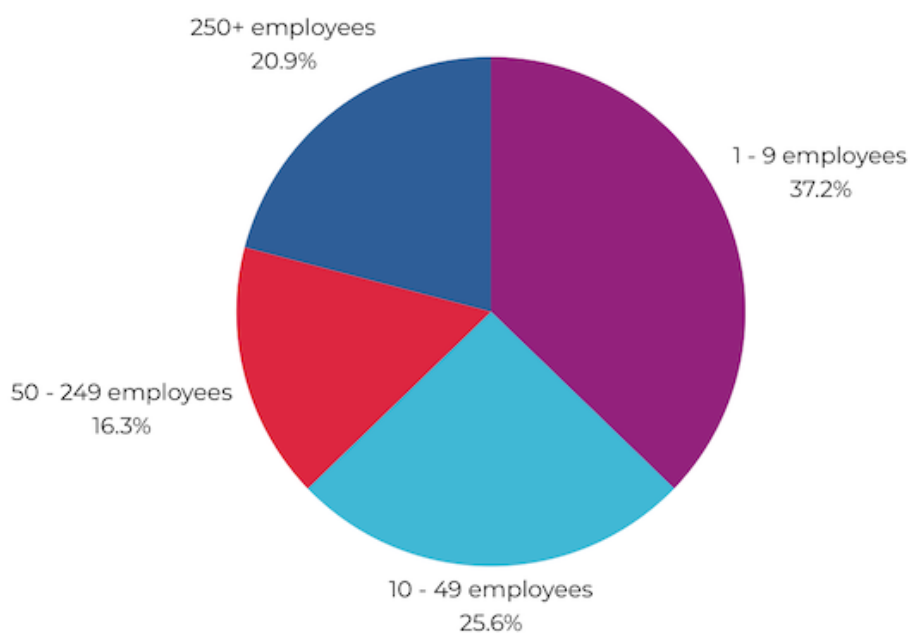
Nevertheless, according to the North Wales RSP's own research, 71% of employers from North Wales who took part in their survey were experiencing skills shortages. Some of these skills shortages have been identified by the RSP's survey findings.<sup>22</sup> An intervention which helps employers to recruit or develop graduates may provide opportunities to fill these skills gaps.

## Employer Survey

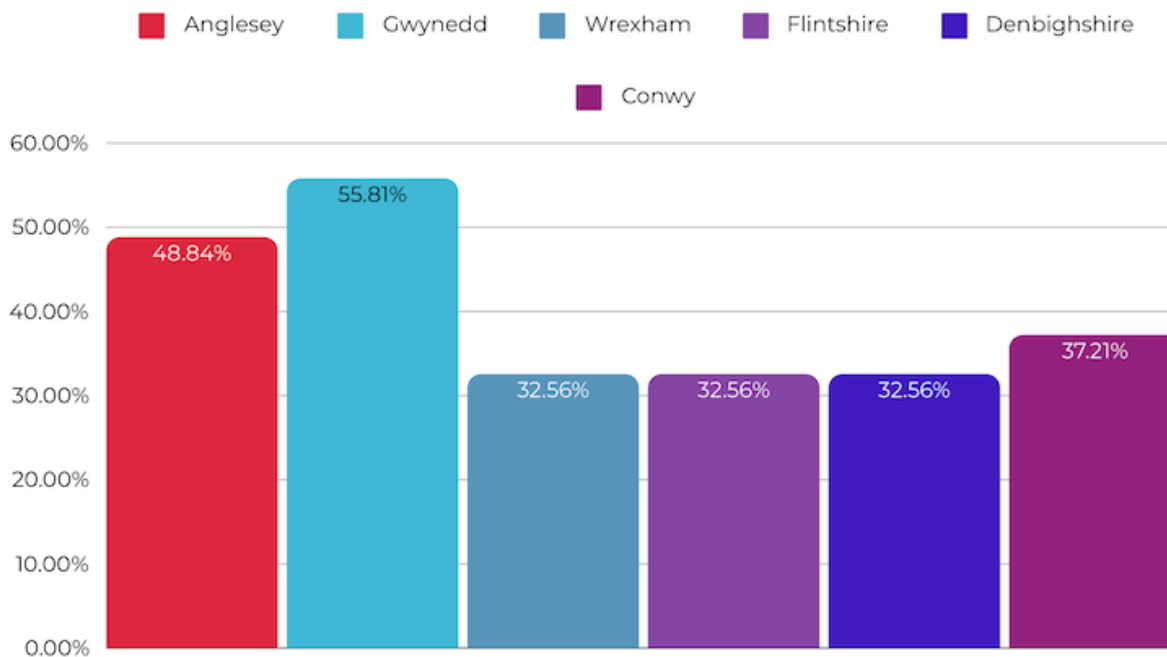
To better understand the needs of employers in terms of graduate recruitment and further training and development, Darogan Talent conducted a survey targeting employers in North Wales.

43 different employers in North Wales took part in the survey. As figures 12 and 13 illustrates, a range of sizes and locations were represented, and each of North Wales RSP's priority sectors were represented by the respondents.

**(Figure 12) How many people do you employ in North Wales specifically?**



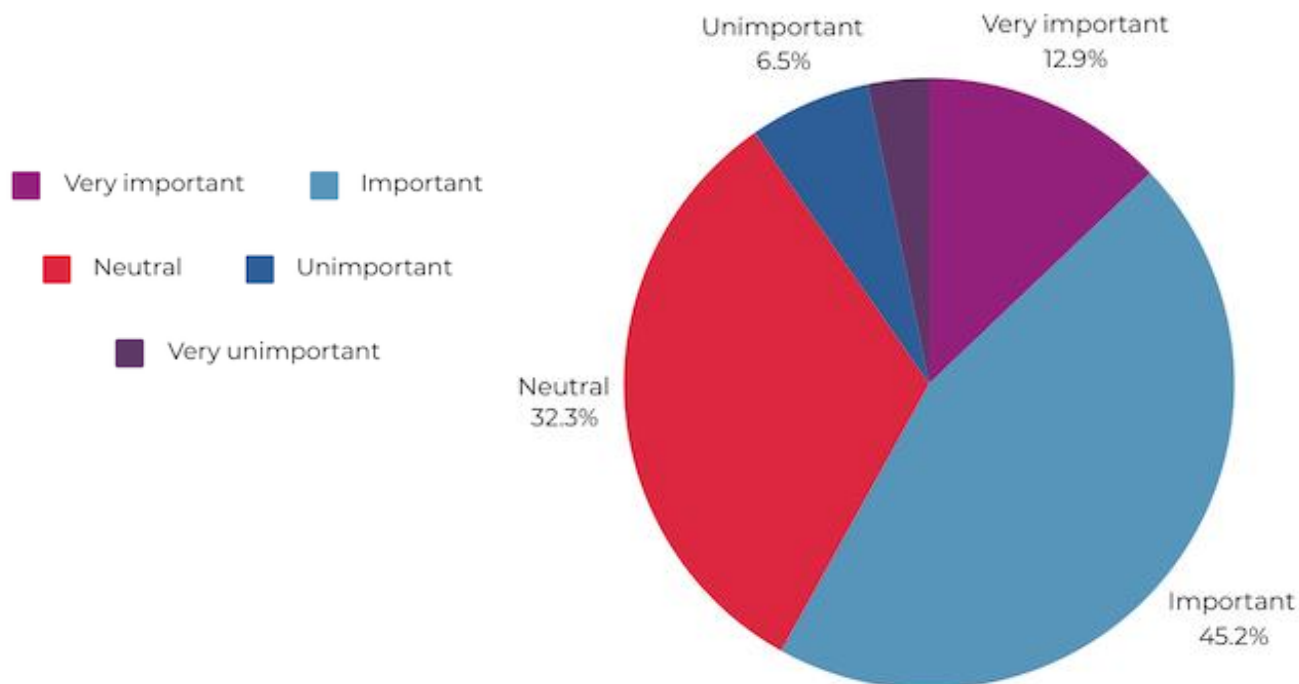
**(Figure 13) Where in North Wales are you located?**



The survey findings suggest there is a demand for graduate recruitment amongst these employers.

- 77% had employed a recent graduate in the past.
- **94% intended to hire a recent graduate in the future.**
- Of those who have hired graduates, 92% had hired in the last two years. The average amount of graduates hired in the last two years by these organisations was 4.
- 72% planned on hiring recent graduates in the next 2 years, and 24% were not sure.
- Of those who intended to hire in the next two years, the average amounts of graduates anticipated to be hired was 3. **This is a full graduate less on average than the previous two years, which may suggest that there is increasing uncertainty around hiring graduates.**
- Survey respondents noted they would be looking to hire 30+ different types of roles, (e.g. Social Workers, Software Developers, Engineers, Podiatrists, Quantity Surveyors, Marketers, Solicitors), and as a result were looking for a wide range of degree types.

**(Figure 14) How important is hiring recent graduates for your organisation's recruitment strategy?**



However, employers also noted barriers to hiring recent graduates. **The most common barriers noted in the survey were that recent graduates lacked relevant skills and experience; that budget constraints had made hiring graduates more difficult; and that the location of the company in North Wales created challenges for recruiting graduates.**

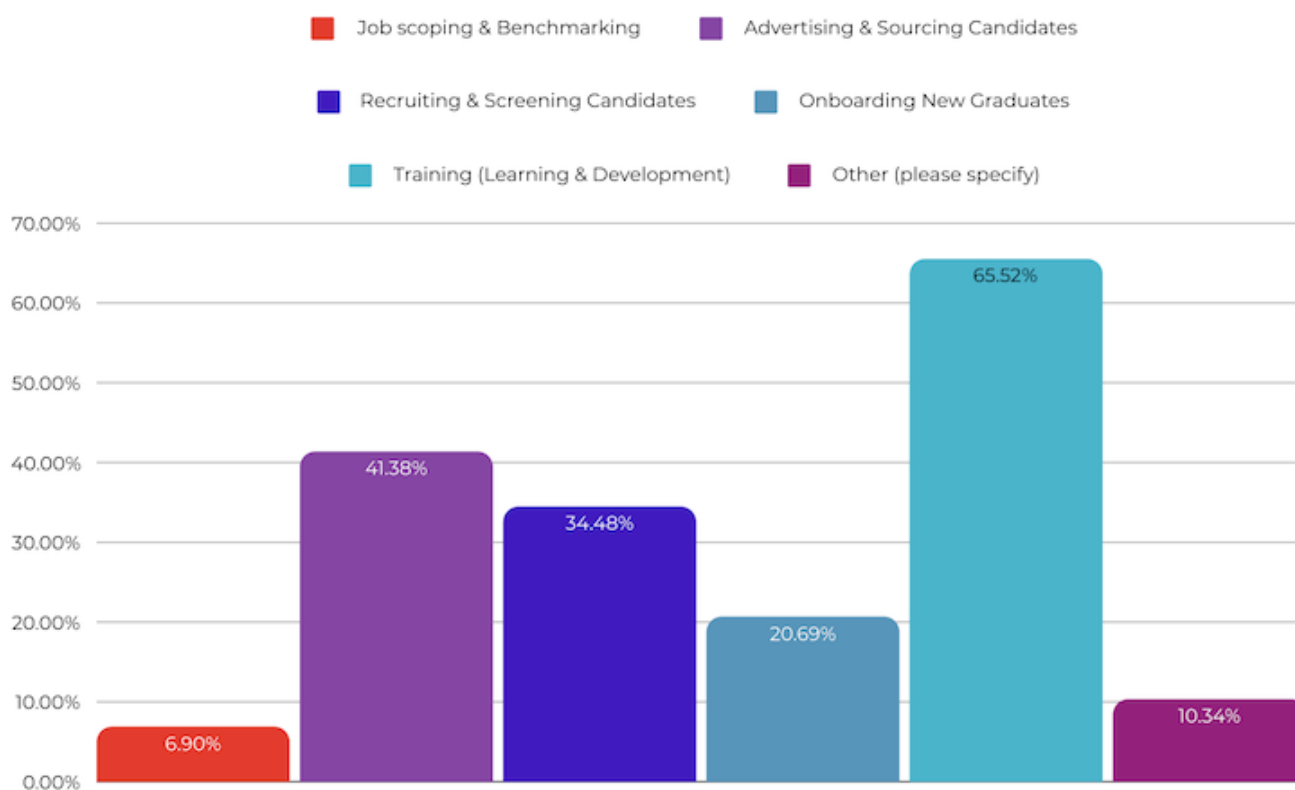
Employers were also asked 'On a scale of 1 to 10, how prepared are recent graduates for the workplace based on your experience?', giving an average score of 5.66. **This is a full point lower than how students scored themselves in their equivalent survey, which may suggest that students are overestimating their readiness for the workplace.**

When asked 'Which skills (technical or soft) do you believe that recent graduates tend to lack the most from your organisation's perspective?' a range of different skills were noted. While specific technical skills were mentioned most, many were not sector specific (such as 'Project Management Basics' and 'Microsoft Excel'). Additionally, a range of soft skills, applicable across sectors, were noted – the most common being communication, organisation and time management, confidence, and adaptability. **Although the question was about skills, a number of answers noted that recent graduates lacked work experience, suggesting this is a major concern for employers.**



To better understand the opportunities for intervention, employers were also asked which areas they would most value support with when hiring recent graduates. The most common answers, in order, was: 1. Training (Learning & Development); 2. Advertising & Sourcing Candidates; and 3. Recruiting & Screening Candidates.

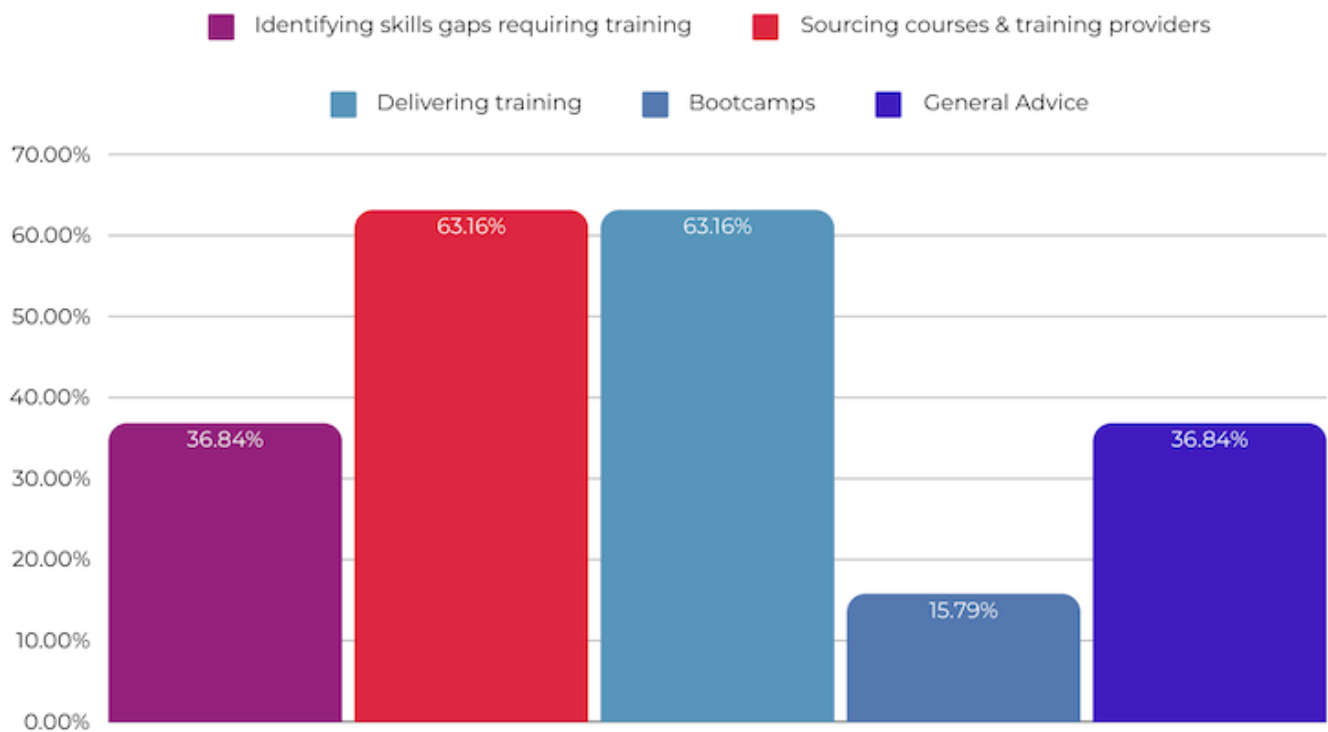
**(Figure 15) Which of the following areas would you most value support with when it comes to recruiting graduates?**



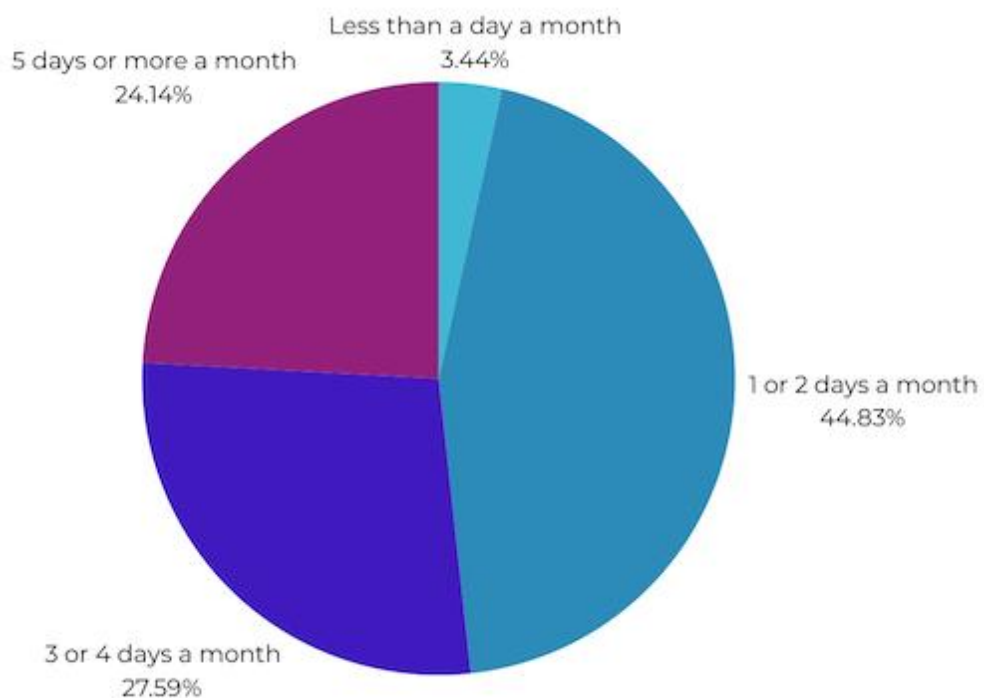
Those who answered 'Training (Learning & Development)' were asked which types of support within this category they would value (Figure 16). The most common answers were 'Sourcing courses & training providers' and 'Delivering training', although advisory support to identify skills gaps and general advisory support were also common choices.

However, while employers seem to value support in terms of the learning and development of recent graduates, it is important that this support fits within how much time employers are willing to allocate for a graduate's development (Figure 17). Almost 50% of respondents would allocate fewer than 2 days a month for a graduate's training and development, so any future intervention would need to consider this constraint.

**(Figure 16) What type of support within 'Training (Learning & Development)' would you value?**

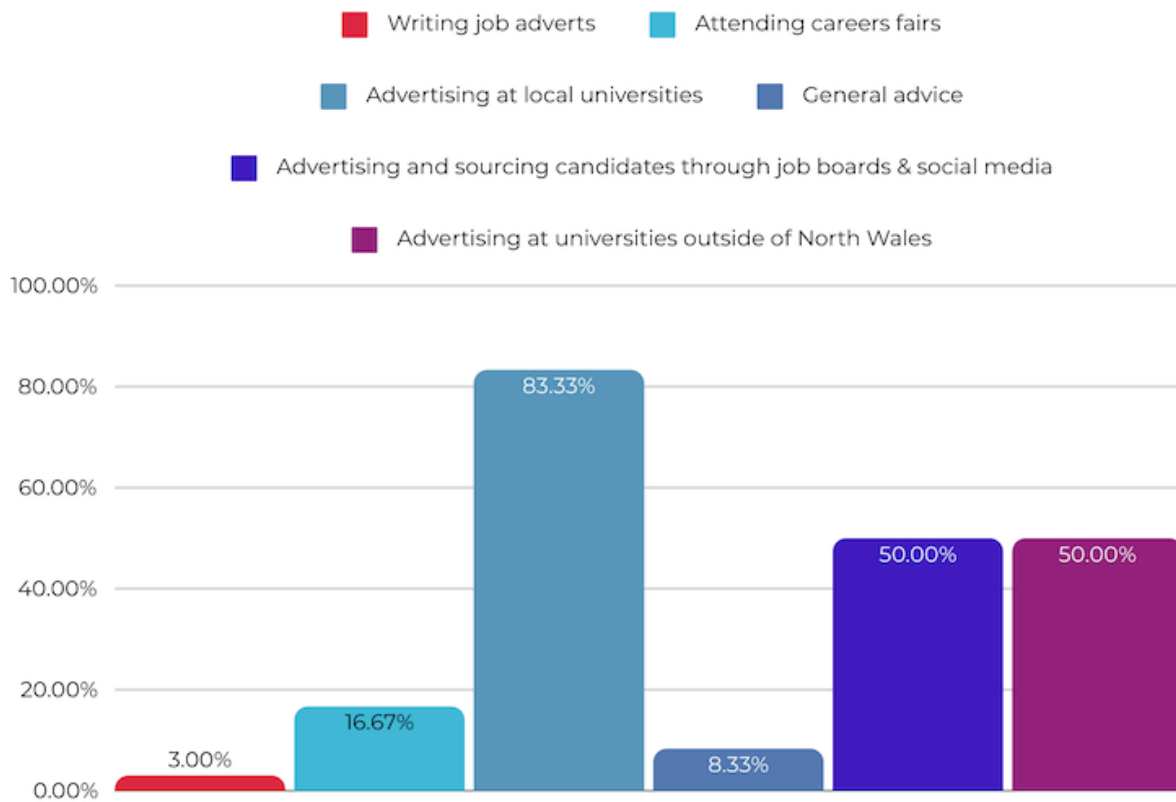


**(Figure 17) How much time are you willing to allocate for a graduate's development?**

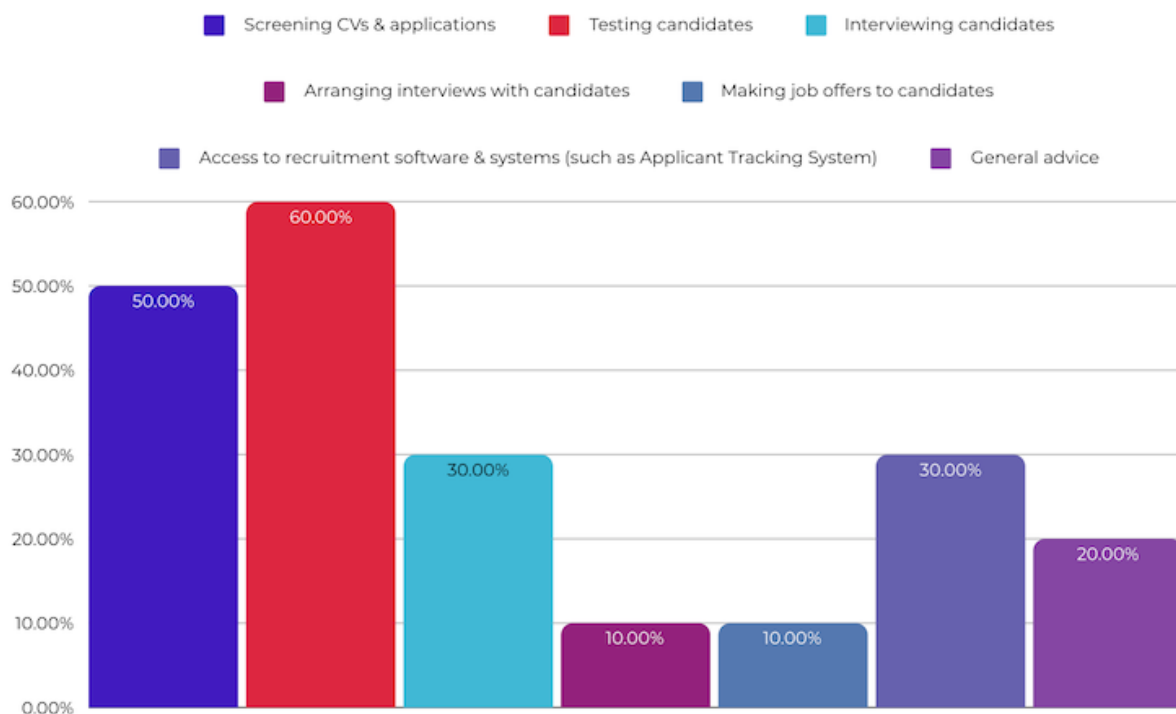


Figures 18 and 19 highlight which type of support was most valued within the categories of 'Advertising & Sourcing Candidates' and 'Recruiting & Screening Candidates'.

**(Figure 18) Which of the following areas would you most value support with when it comes to advertising and sourcing candidates?**



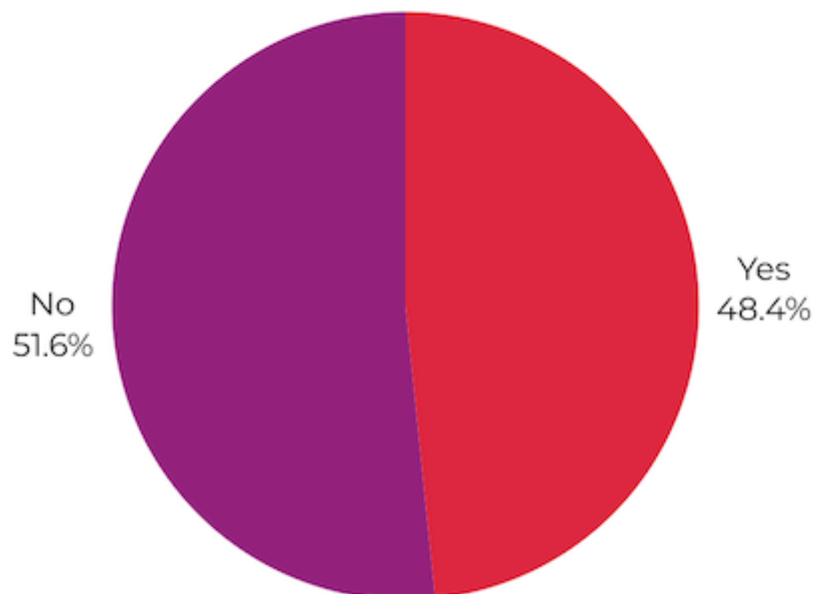
**(Figure 19) Which of the following areas would you most value support with when it comes to recruiting and screening candidates?**



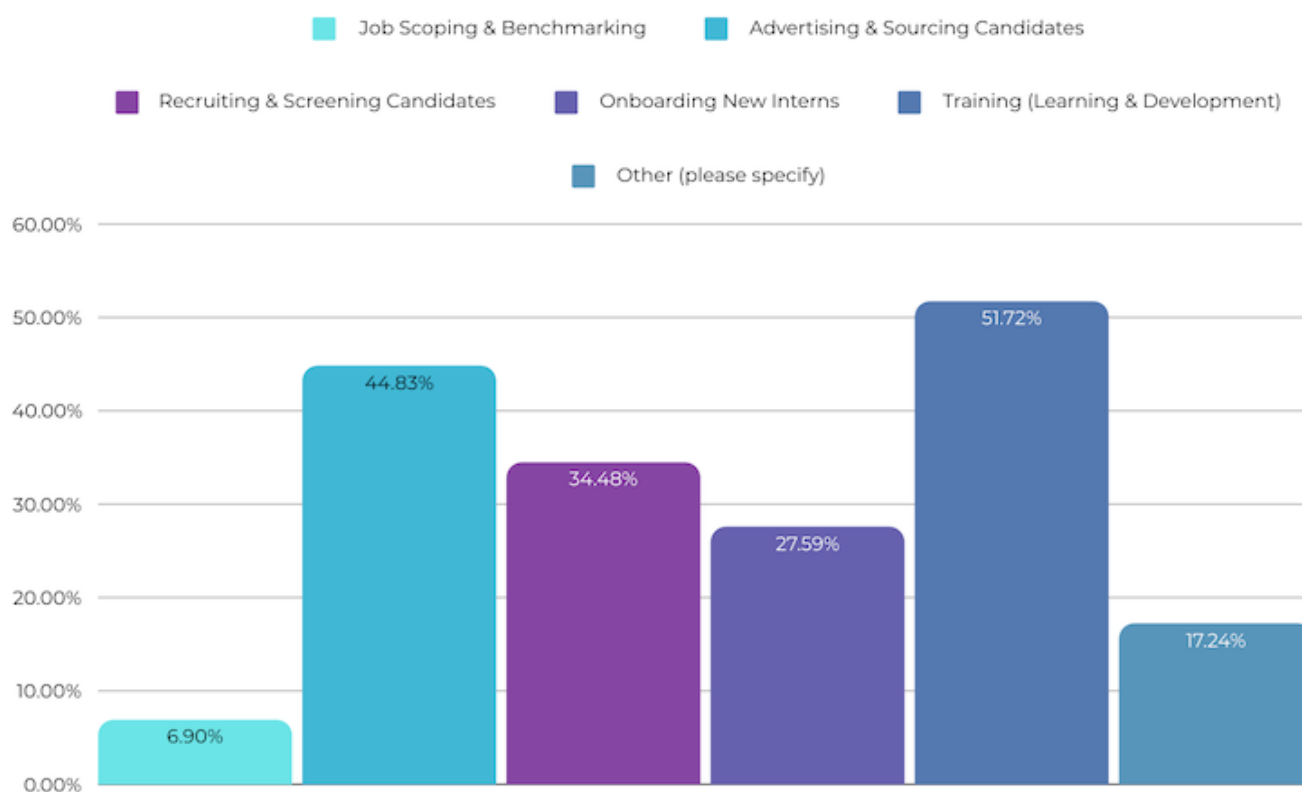
Employers were also asked about providing internships and placements for university students.

- **52% had not previously hired a university student on an internship or placement**
- However, **65% said that they would like to in the future** (a further 29% responded, 'not sure').
- The greatest barriers for hiring interns and providing placements for the respondent were around budgeting for these roles, a lack of resource to train and mentor these roles, and the added logistical challenge of hiring for these roles.
- When asked which support they would value most, similarly to the section on recruiting graduates, the most common answers, in order, were: 1. Training (Learning & Development); 2. Advertising & Sourcing Candidates; 3. Recruiting & Screening Candidates. More than a quarter also noted they would value support 'Onboarding New Interns'.
- Many of the types of support that would be valued within these categories remained the same as for recruiting graduates. For instance, for 'Advertising & Sourcing Candidates', the majority chose 'Advertising at local universities' once again. However, support that provided advice saw a noticeable increase across different categories. For instance, the second and third most popular answers for support valued under Training (Learning & Development) was now 'Identifying skills gaps requiring training' and 'General advice'. This, coupled with an increase in those valuing support for onboarding, suggests that employers in the region are less confident hiring university students on internships or placements than when hiring recent graduates for full-time roles.

**(Figure 20) Have you previously hired a university student on an internship or placement?**



**(Figure 21) Which of the following areas would you most value support with when it comes to recruiting current students on an internship or placement?**



Finally, the survey asked about using short courses such as bootcamps as a recruitment strategy. A skills bootcamp is a type of short training course which is used to upskill participants for a certain role or industry. The length of these bootcamps can vary from a few days to several weeks, and they often collaborate with employers to offer participants job interviews upon completion. Bootcamps have been gaining in popularity, with other regions such as the CCR funding them through Shared Prosperity Funding.

**None of the respondents had previously used a bootcamp or short course to recruit before.**

When asked **'On a scale of 1 to 10, how effective do you feel bootcamps / short courses are as a recruitment strategy?'**, the average score was **5.33**.

When asked **'On a scale of 1-10, how effective do you feel a bootcamp / short course would be for improving a recent graduate's 'technical' job-specific skills?'** the average score was **5.64**.

When asked **'On a scale of 1-10, how effective do you feel a bootcamp / short course would be for improving a recent graduate's 'employability' skills?'** the average score was **6.33**.

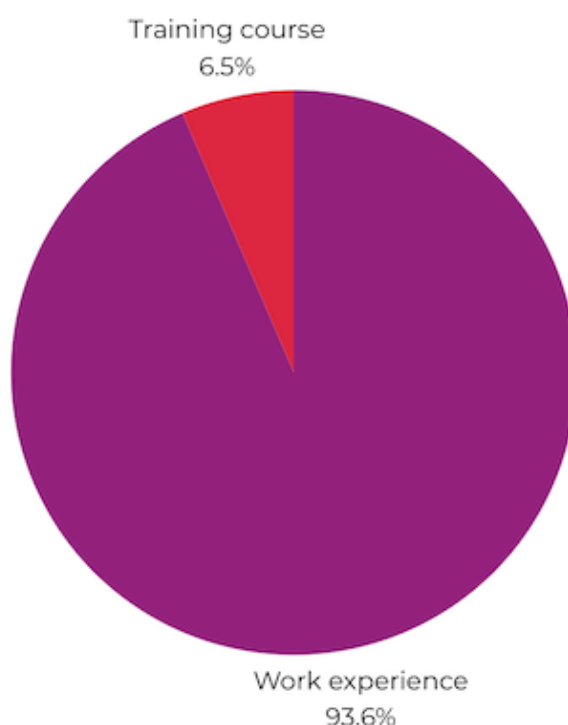
Respondents, therefore, seemed neutral about the prospect of bootcamps and short courses as both a recruitment strategy and for training and development, although employers seemed more positive about its potential efficacy in preparing graduates in terms of softer 'employability' skills.

When asked 'What skills or areas would need to be covered within a bootcamp or short course for a recent graduate to make it relevant for your organisation?' a vast range of technical skills were mentioned. This highlights how difficult a one-size-fits all approach would be for running effective bootcamps. However, many common softer skills were mentioned across sectors, such as communication skills.

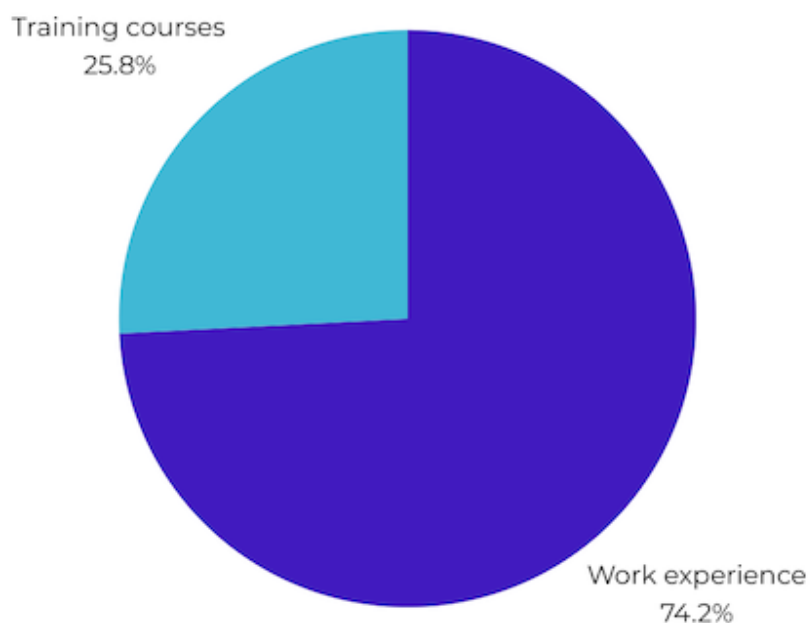
55% also noted that they thought that a short course would be more effective 'Post-appointment (after starting a graduate role)'. The current model for bootcamps typically upskills candidates before starting their graduate roles.

***However, overall, employers were clear that they valued work experience more than short courses, as figures 22 and 23 illustrate.***

**(Figure 22) On the whole, which do you believe is more effective for developing a graduate's 'employability' skills - work experience or training courses (such as bootcamps)?**



**(Figure 23) On the whole, which do you believe is more effective for developing a graduate's 'technical' job-specific skills - work experience or training courses (such as bootcamps)?**



## **Research Interviews with employers**

Research interviews were conducted with 12 employers from across the region's priority sectors to delve deeper into the demand for hiring students and graduate, and the barriers when recruiting from this group. Employers also made suggestions about support that might benefit them, which have been captured in the section 'Options Moving Forward'. The main themes from the interviews are as follows:

### **There is demand for support with 'Advertising & Sourcing Candidates' and 'Training (Learning & Development)' when it comes to hiring graduate talent**

In line with the findings of the employer survey, where 'Advertising & Sourcing Candidates' and 'Training (Learning & Development)' were the most popular categories for support, the employers participating in the research interviews also noted these were the two areas where they experienced the greatest barriers in terms of hiring graduates and where support would be most valued. While some companies also noted the time-saving value of support with sifting candidates (particularly the prospect of an initial sift against basic criteria), overall, this was not seen as an area where external support was necessary. Most employers viewed the screening process as an area where they valued having control in the recruitment process.

## **Struggling to get the right candidates to apply**

Employers noted the difficulty in getting the right candidates to apply for roles within their organisation. Smaller companies in particular (but also some larger organisations with niche roles) described similar experiences of receiving a dearth of applications when advertising roles. Larger companies, with an established reputation, received more applications, but noted that these candidates were often of low quality or did not match the criteria at all. Frustration was expressed at the careers portals of local universities, where it was felt that very few students used this service (however, some employers mentioned occasions where students were emailed directly about roles through the university, which had been effective). Conversely, larger careers platforms, such as Indeed and LinkedIn, were criticised for attracting unwanted, low-quality applications. Many employers noted that they would like to be better connected with the universities in the region, but also wanted to connect with universities outside of the region.

## **Retention is a challenge for many organisations**

Even in cases where attracting and placing qualified candidates was less of a challenge, many organisations noted their difficulty in retaining talent. There was a perception that many people moved to the region for work without intending to stay there in the long term. Some noted examples of employees relocating for higher salaries, but for the most part employers felt that young people found the rural character of the area unappealing, and noted that difficulties in finding adequate housing, a lack things to do, and the deficiencies of public transport made life difficult for young people. Employers expressed that they had been 'burnt' by qualified employees leaving the organisation shortly after gaining the experience they needed to move elsewhere, which is why many employers preferred hiring local candidates whom they believed were more likely to stay in the long term.

## **The perception that graduates were not ready for the world of work**

Many employers believed that graduates lacked work experience, nor had they developed the soft skills required to thrive in their organisation after graduating. Although some noted that certain sector specific skills were lacking, and that universities had failed to prepare candidates for industry, employers overall believed that graduates had the requisite technical skills. The lack of softer skills, such as communication skills, were of greater concern for employers.

“

**Softer skills are just as important as  
technical skills as an employer.**

”

**- Employer in Flintshire**



The research interviews with employers highlighted how recruitment challenges varied by the size of the organisation and its sector. Micro businesses found the process of hiring and onboarding daunting which was a barrier for hiring graduates, whereas larger organisations had developed established processes and procedures and did not find this difficult. Larger private sector organisations found retention to be a challenge, whereas large public sector organisations seemed to have a high rate of retention. Instead, public sector bodies were concerned with their aging workforce and a lack of funding to run graduate programmes effectively (or at all). Any future intervention should consider support that is tailored towards these varying needs, since a one-size-fits-all approach will not effectively address these different demands.

## **Existing initiatives in North Wales**

The focus of this research has primarily been to establish whether there are gaps in support for employers in the region when hiring graduate talent, and how these needs can be addressed. However, it is also worth acknowledging there are already initiatives in the region that are seeking to address some of these needs. While it has been beyond the scope of this research to assess and evaluate the efficacy of past or current schemes, employers during research interviews noted the value of initiatives such as GO Wales and M-Sparc's 'Skills Academy' that have provided financial support to fund internships and long-term placements with students and graduates. Similar initiatives are ongoing, such as Bangor University's 'Talent Voucher' scheme, funded through UK Shared Prosperity Funding, and for which there are positive testimonials online.<sup>23</sup> It is worth considering whether there is an opportunity to continue and expand existing schemes so that students and graduates from the region, but studying elsewhere, can benefit.

## Comparing regional graduate initiatives

Before proceeding to recommendations, it is worth briefly considering how other regional graduate programmes have worked, and how they have performed.

### **RISE Sheffield**

RISE Sheffield ran from 2013 until March 2023, and was part-funded by the European Regional Development Fund. The scheme aimed to support SMEs in the Sheffield City Region to access and employ graduate talent, and was delivered in partnership by Sheffield City Council, Sheffield Hallam University and the University of Sheffield. The scheme primarily provided recruitment support for SMEs in the region, which included: supporting SMEs to develop graduate job roles and advertisements; promoting these roles to graduates; assessing and sifting candidates on behalf of SMEs; and providing additional support post-appointment, including a grant for businesses who took part.

The scheme did not provide a learning and development offer for graduates.

Little data has been made available on the performance of the scheme, despite requests.

### **Liverpool City Region Graduate Scheme**

The Liverpool City Region Graduate Scheme ran from 2019 to February 2023. Information about the scheme was provided by an informal call with one of the programme managers.

The scheme followed a similar model to RISE Sheffield, providing similar recruitment support for smaller businesses in the Liverpool region, and was primarily delivered by staff within the University of Liverpool's careers team. However, unlike RISE Sheffield, the Liverpool City Region Graduate Scheme offered a training and development programme for graduates once they started their role, instead of offering a grant for businesses for taking part in the scheme.

This training and development offer was outsourced and took place over 3 months, once a fortnight, and focused on softer skills. Some of the recruitment was also outsourced, although the project delivery team did most of the sifting.

In terms of impact, the scheme placed 75 graduates over the entire project with a budget of £3.2 million. This equates to £42,667 per hire, which is an extremely high rate, although this also included training and development costs.

## The Cardiff Capital Region's Venture Graduate Programme

The Venture Graduate Programme has been running since 2019 and is set to continue until March 2025, although the possibility of an extension is being explored.

*Darogan Talent provided an evaluation of the programme in March 2023, and since April 2024 recruitment for the programme has been outsourced to Darogan Talent. As a result, a more detailed description of activity can be provided, although a conflict of interest must also be declared.*

The scheme has changed and developed significantly over its lifetime, but for the most part the scheme followed a similar structure to the Liverpool City Region Graduate Scheme in that it provided a learning and development offer as well as recruitment support for businesses in the region but did not provide a grant.

The majority of the recruitment offer was delivered internally, whereas the learning and development offer was mostly delivered externally.

The learning and development offer changed over the course of the scheme, and started with an ILM qualification, before later partnering the University of South Wales and the Open University to provide a more bespoke 'Career Accelerator Programme', which roughly equated to a day a month of learning and development over a period of a year. However, engagement with the learning and development offer from employers and graduates was mixed across the lifetime of the scheme, and delivering relevant training to cohorts of graduates from a range of sectors was challenging.

From April 2023 to March 2024, when delivering recruitment internally and providing the learning and development offer, this is how the scheme performed:

- **50 graduates** were **placed in 12 months**.
- The **cost per hire** (and to train) was around **£8,250**.
- By taking each graduate's yearly starting salary, and adding 30% for on costs, **£1,524,000 private sector investment** was calculated.
- This means that for **every £1 spent by the CCR**, they saw a **return of around £4** in terms of private sector investment.

However, since April 2024, the programme has been streamlined so that the training and development aspects were removed, and recruitment was outsourced on a performance-based contract to Darogan Talent. **In the first 6 months:**

- **46 graduates** were placed.
- The **cost per hire** was around **£2,250**.
- By taking their yearly starting salary, and adding 30% for on costs, **£1,700,000 private sector investment** was calculated.
- This means that for **every £1 spent by the CCR**, they saw a **return of around £21** in terms of private sector investment.

In addition to the Venture Graduate programme, skills bootcamps have been delivered in the Cardiff Capital Region over the last two years with the aim of upskilling participants and providing an opportunity for them to interview with employers at the end of the bootcamp. Most recently, Cardiff and Vale College have been delivering bootcamps, funded by the UK Government Shared Prosperity Fund, to develop participants in Data Analytics, Cybersecurity, and Digital Skills.

Little data is currently available about how the most recent iterations of the bootcamps have performed. Bootcamps with 15 days of training typically cost around £35,000 to run and can include as many as 25 participants. However, we are aware that there have been challenges in placing the participants into roles after the bootcamps, raising questions about the efficacy of these schemes as a recruitment strategy. In the first iteration of these bootcamps ran by the Cardiff Capital Region, 45 participants took part over the three bootcamps, with around 10 later securing full-time jobs through the intervention. This equates to around £10,500 cost per hire.

## Options moving forward

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Six options have been developed around the barriers noted by employers, as well from ideas suggested by employers directly. These options were then presented to members of the North Wales RSP team and to a diverse group of employers to validate the ideas and gather feedback (this feedback can be found in Appendix B). However, this list of options is not exhaustive. We have not suggested interventions that directly address issues such as housing and public transport, because this appeared to be beyond the remit of this research. Nevertheless, it is clear from the research that the 'desirability' of the area and lack of key infrastructure is creating attraction and retention challenges. In particular, the rural character of North Wales, the lack of things to do, housing challenges and poor public transport connectivity are factors why somebody wouldn't choose to work in the area after graduating. The options outlined below do not address these challenges directly.

Here are six options of interventions to consider:

### Option 1: A Regional Graduate Programme

There is the option of creating a Regional Graduate Programme, perhaps under the branding of Ambition North Wales, to support graduates into full-time roles after completing their studies. There are various types of support that could be offered within this option.

- **Advertising support:** This could include promoting the graduate roles of employers in the region by bringing them together in one place online, using local universities to promote the opportunities, and targeting universities outside of the region where high rates of students from North Wales go.
- **Recruitment support:** There is an opportunity to save SMEs time and money by providing recruit support to assess and sift candidates. Whether delivered internally, or externally, we would recommend learning from other regional graduate schemes and using recruiters with commercial experience to deliver this support. Alternative support could include providing access to an Applicant Tracking System to support SMEs to recruit more effectively.
- **Grant funding:** Perhaps for the very smallest businesses who may be hesitant to hire a graduate there is an opportunity to provide a grant to encourage participation. Even a small grant (e.g. £1000) may encourage a business to hire a graduate.
- **Learning and development:** Learning and development is a costly and difficult type of support to deliver effectively. However, for many graduates this is seen as part and parcel of a 'graduate scheme'. Since sectors across the region will have vastly different technical upskilling needs (and even within sectors this will vary a lot), we would

recommend either a) providing a uniform training programme for softer skills delivered in cohorts across sectors or b) offering a grant for businesses to provide learning and development that is bespoke to the needs of the graduate and their role, working closely with local providers to deliver this. Again, a small grant (e.g. £1000) may suffice to encourage employers to participate in the programme to support the upskilling of graduates.

- **Advisory support:** This could include job advert creation support and HR advice (especially for SMEs). Additionally, the long-term goal of the scheme should be to help employers in the region to grow and gradually encouraging them to develop their own graduate scheme in North Wales instead of relying on the regional graduate programme. Advisory support could be provided to help organisations to develop their own bespoke graduate scheme in the region.

Since larger organisations disproportionately hire recent graduates, most of the support should be allocated for the region's SMEs. Support for large organisations should be primarily on an advisory basis to further develop their offer for graduates. There is a risk if large organisations were to use the regional graduate programme instead of developing their own that this would disincentivise private sector investment in the region and reduce the variety of graduate schemes in the North Wales. Another consideration is the potential impact of this intervention on recruiters within the region, who may lose business.

If the objective is primarily to place graduates into roles, it would be most cost-effective to not provide a learning and development offer as part of this intervention.

It may also be worth exploring if there is an opportunity to pool resources with other initiatives, such as the Venture Graduate Programme, to create a Wales-wide graduate scheme. This may be more cost-effective than creating a scheme that is bespoke for North Wales, although the drawback would be the inability to tailor the scheme to the specific needs of employers in North Wales.

## **Option 2: A Regional Internship or Placement Programme**

There is also an opportunity to create a regional internship programme, which could provide similar types of support to what is noted above for the proposed regional graduate programme.

This would fill an existing gap since many employers that do provide opportunities for recent graduates are currently *not* providing internship opportunities. This intervention

provides students with work experience, which both students and employers noted was lacking in their respective surveys, and which employers valued more than further training. From conversations with students who have left the region for study, we know that there is an appetite to gain work experience locally to their permanent address to save money. Instead, many are currently finding work experience with employers that are local to their universities, outside of region, which can lead to offers of full-time employment after graduating.

The internship would likely be over the summer vacation and last around 8-12 weeks. However, different types of internships and placements could be explored. For instance, regular work experience (such as a day a week) over the course of a year alongside their studies, or a full year in industry.

### **Option 3: Support for Training and Development**

The type of support that would be most valued according to the employer survey was around training and development. However, from what we have learnt from other schemes, we know that different organisations—even within the same sector—will require different training courses, and securing sustained buy-in from employers and graduates over the period of a training programme can be difficult.

One option would be to provide employers with a regional, cross-sector course that develops a recent graduate's softer, employability skills, such as communication and time management skills. This could be delivered online or in person, and before or after commencing the role.

However, a better option might be to fund or part-fund specific, existing courses for employers in the region to develop recent graduates, partnering with local education providers where possible. For example, this funding could be used to part-fund a relevant part-time master's degree. This encourages employers to hire recent graduates to take advantage of the offer and allows young people in the region to develop further according to the specific needs of their new role. Even a small contribution of £1000 may be enough to encourage employers to take on a graduate that they know will need further development. Local education and training providers would also benefit from this intervention.

#### **Option 4: New careers events**

A suggestion which emerged from research interviews was the idea of running careers events in the region targeting students and graduates. These could be to promote careers in a specific local authority, or within a sector. While universities in the region already host careers events, these usually target their own students. As a result, students studying outside of the region, including those studying courses not taught in the region, are excluded from such careers events. This means there may be a missed opportunity to fill skills gaps for local employers, as well as a missed opportunity to help those who have left the region to return.

Darogan Talent has recently been experimenting with careers events over the vacation period that target local students, which has included running events in Gwynedd and Anglesey. However, for employers to include these events as part of their recruitment strategy, such events would need to occur at predictable, regular intervals (that is, at least annually). There is an opportunity to run these events in local authorities in North Wales that do not usually host careers events to support local employers to hire graduate talent. There is also an opportunity to host events during term time in locations outside of the region where high rates of students go to study (e.g. Liverpool, Manchester, Cardiff and Chester) to promote careers in North Wales.

#### **Option 5: Engaging with young people earlier (a 'broker' between employers and schools)**

Based on comments from research interviews, some employers saw value in engaging with young people before they left for university to raise awareness about opportunities in the region. There was a feeling, in many different industries, that young people weren't aware about the different career paths available to them, and that currently their engagement with schools as an employer was on an ad-hoc basis.

One option would be to develop a programme that connects employers with schools in North Wales, a type of 'broker' between the two groups. There could be an emphasis on promoting the region's priority sectors, to raise awareness about these sectors in the long term. Research interview participants also noted that they had benefitted from direct results from their ad-hoc engagement with schools to date, such as providing work placements to interested attendees. The proposed programme could follow a similar model to Cardiff Commitment, funded by Cardiff Council, which has been very popular with



employers. Employers through the scheme offer mentoring opportunities; literacy and numeracy support in class; career talks; school visits; mock interviews with employee volunteers; work experience placements; apprenticeships; and volunteering opportunities, but Cardiff Commitment facilitates the connection between the employer and learners. If something similar was delivered in North Wales, there is the question of whether this coordination would be most effective at a local authority level or at a regional level.

Regardless, this is an opportunity to promote key sectors for North Wales at an early stage, so that even when people leave for university, they know that there are opportunities for them back in North Wales.

### **Option 6: Integrating industry with the university curriculum through workshops and projects**

This option emerged from the workshop with employers since some felt the lack of work experience and important soft skills should be addressed while students were still at university. Instead of students going to an employer for work experience, the employer would bring the work experience to them through workshops and setting projects for students to work on as a part of their course. This would provide industry experience for those still studying and help students to better understand the expectations of employers. It was also seen as an opportunity to develop the soft skills of graduates prior to graduating. The project work may prove valuable for the employer and provide an opportunity for them to connect with prospective candidates.

This option is like option 5 and would also likely require a broker to mediate between employers and the local higher education providers in North Wales to provide these workshops and project opportunities.

## Conclusions and Next Steps

The findings of this research highlight the significant challenges and opportunities related to graduate retention and recruitment in North Wales. The longstanding trend of graduate outward migration has resulted in a talent drain that affects local businesses and economic growth. While there is evidence that some graduates return later in life, the region struggles to attract and retain young graduates immediately after completing their studies.

Key barriers to retention include limited job opportunities, perceptions of better prospects elsewhere, and inadequate infrastructure such as housing and public transport. Furthermore, a significant proportion of graduates working in North Wales are employed in public sector roles, with comparatively low representation in business, finance, and technology sectors. Employer engagement revealed that while there is demand for graduate recruitment, businesses—particularly SMEs—face challenges in sourcing, training, and retaining graduates.

Employers expressed concerns about graduate readiness for the workplace, particularly in terms of work experience and soft skills. This suggests that better alignment between higher education institutions and regional industry needs is required. Additionally, while graduate recruitment schemes in other UK regions have demonstrated potential benefits, cost-effectiveness and employer buy-in are critical factors in determining the success of such interventions in North Wales.

### Next Steps

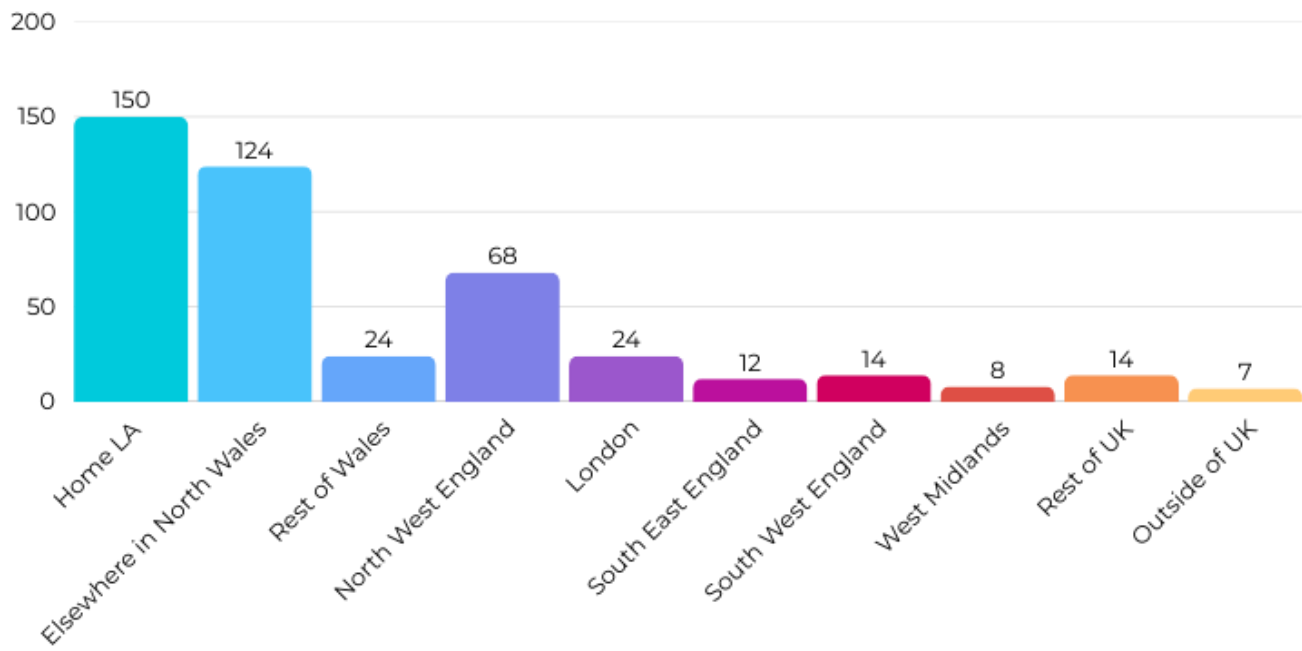
The research underscores the need for coordinated efforts to address graduate retention and employer recruitment needs in North Wales. The next steps should include:

- Taking the six options to the RSP Board to decide which, if any, should be pursued.
- Engaging key stakeholders (e.g. local universities and local authorities) to assess feasibility and funding options for proposed interventions.
- Piloting initiatives with early feedback loops and direct input from service users (employers and graduates) to refine the interventions further.
- Leveraging existing resources to support these initiatives, such as the North Wales Skills Portal.

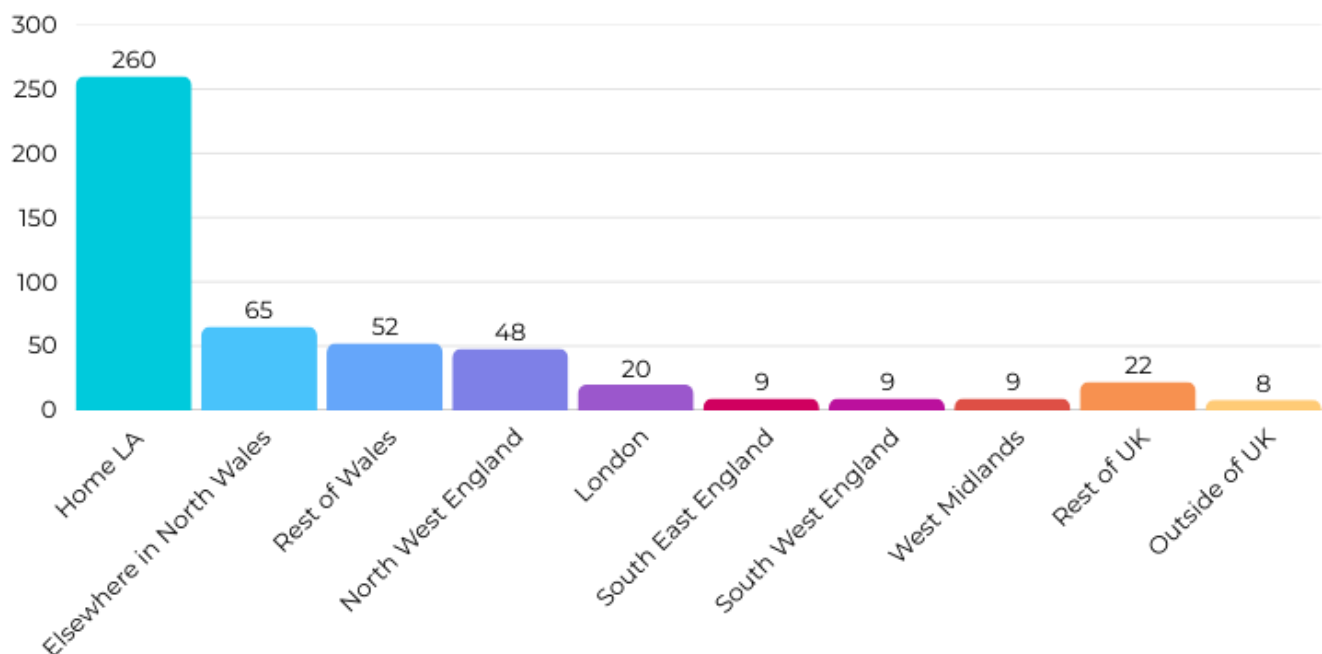
By implementing these recommendations, North Wales can build a more robust graduate retention strategy, strengthen its local talent pipeline, and create a thriving regional economy driven by skilled graduates.

## Appendix A: Breakdown of graduate destinations by Local Authority (HESA: 2021/22 Academic Year)

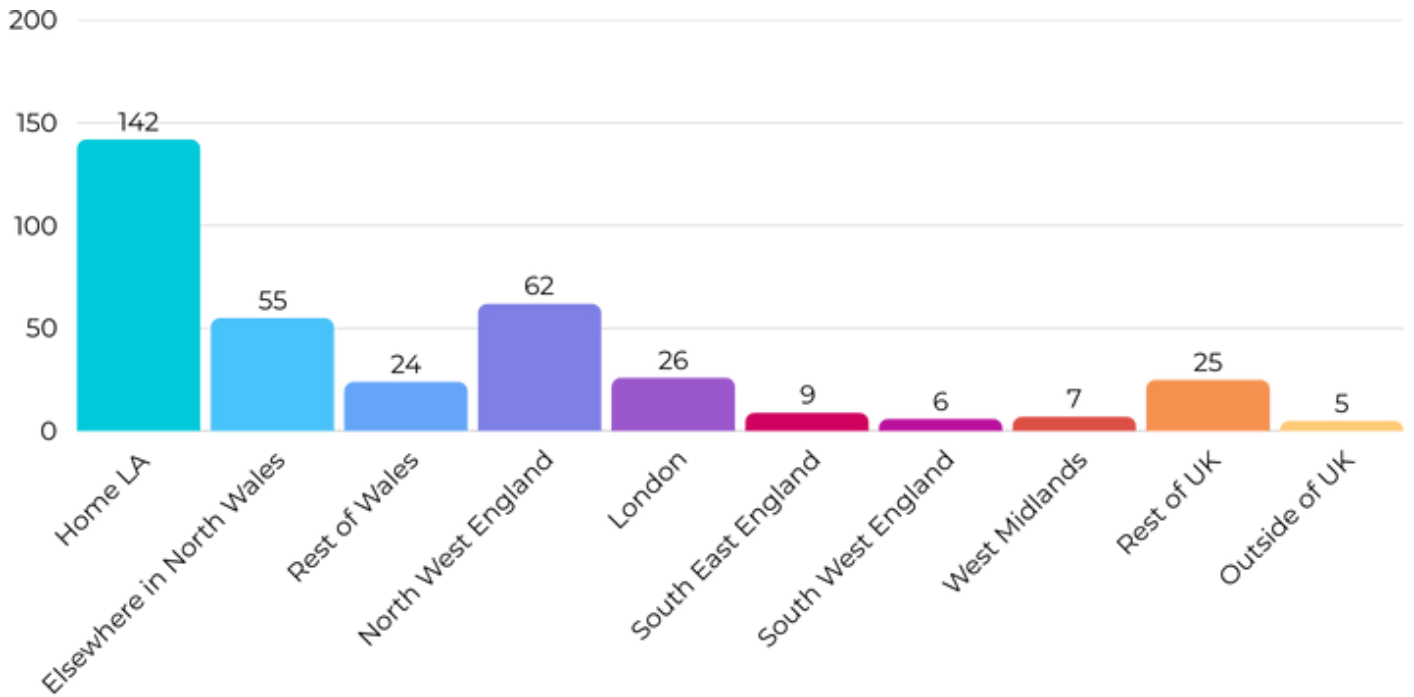
### Where graduates from Conwy are working 15 months after graduating



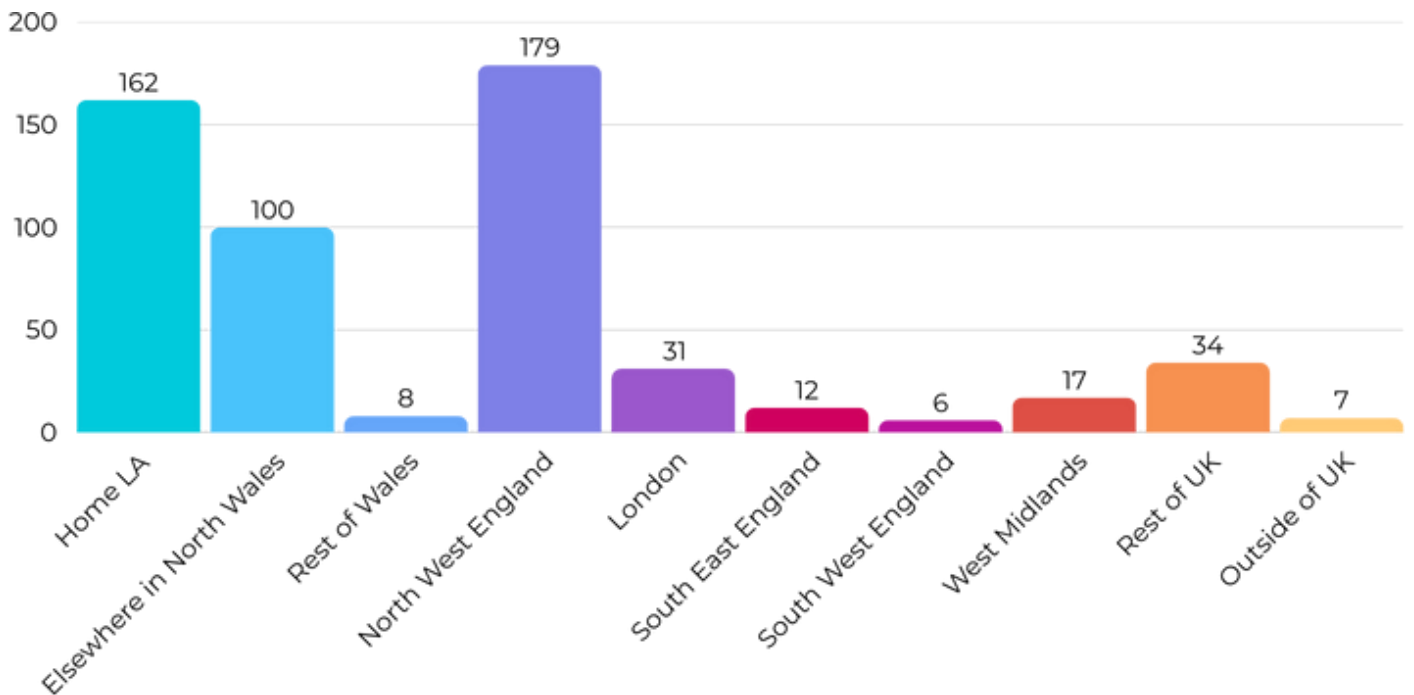
### Where graduates from Gwynedd are working 15 months after graduating



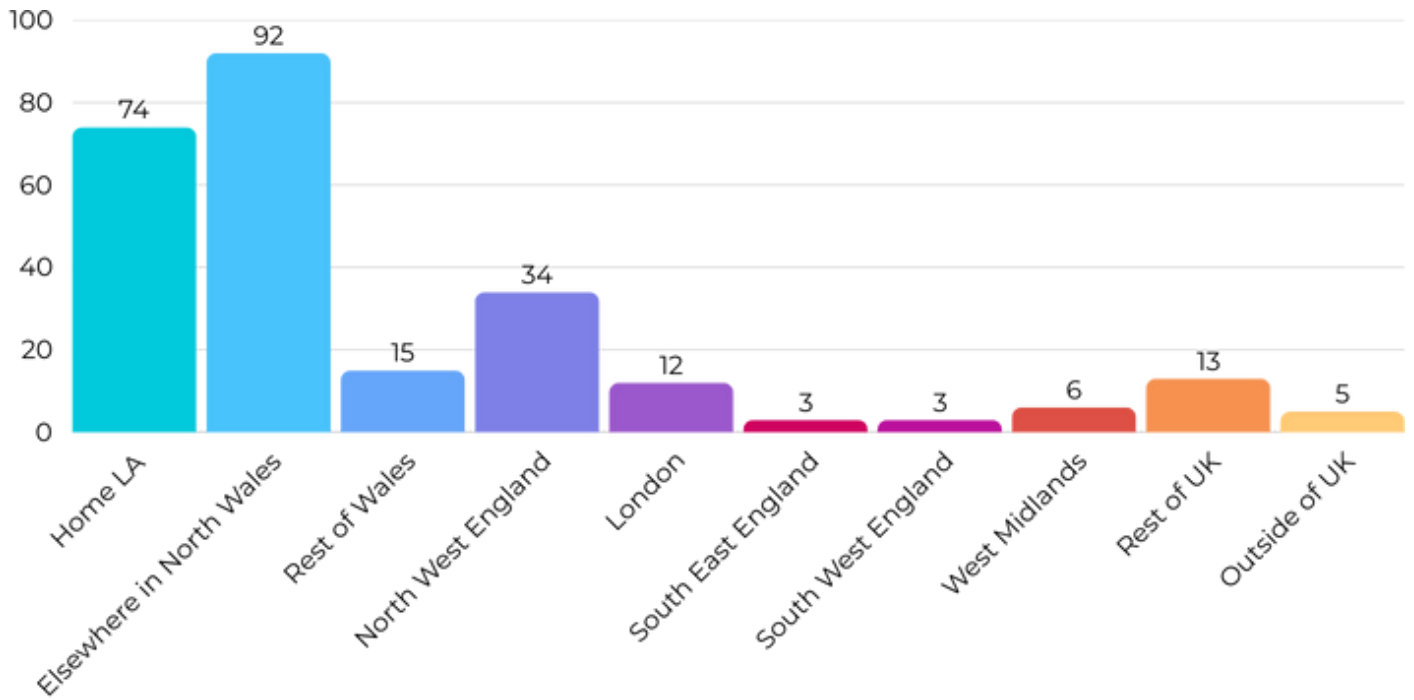
### Where graduates from Denbighshire are working 15 months after graduating



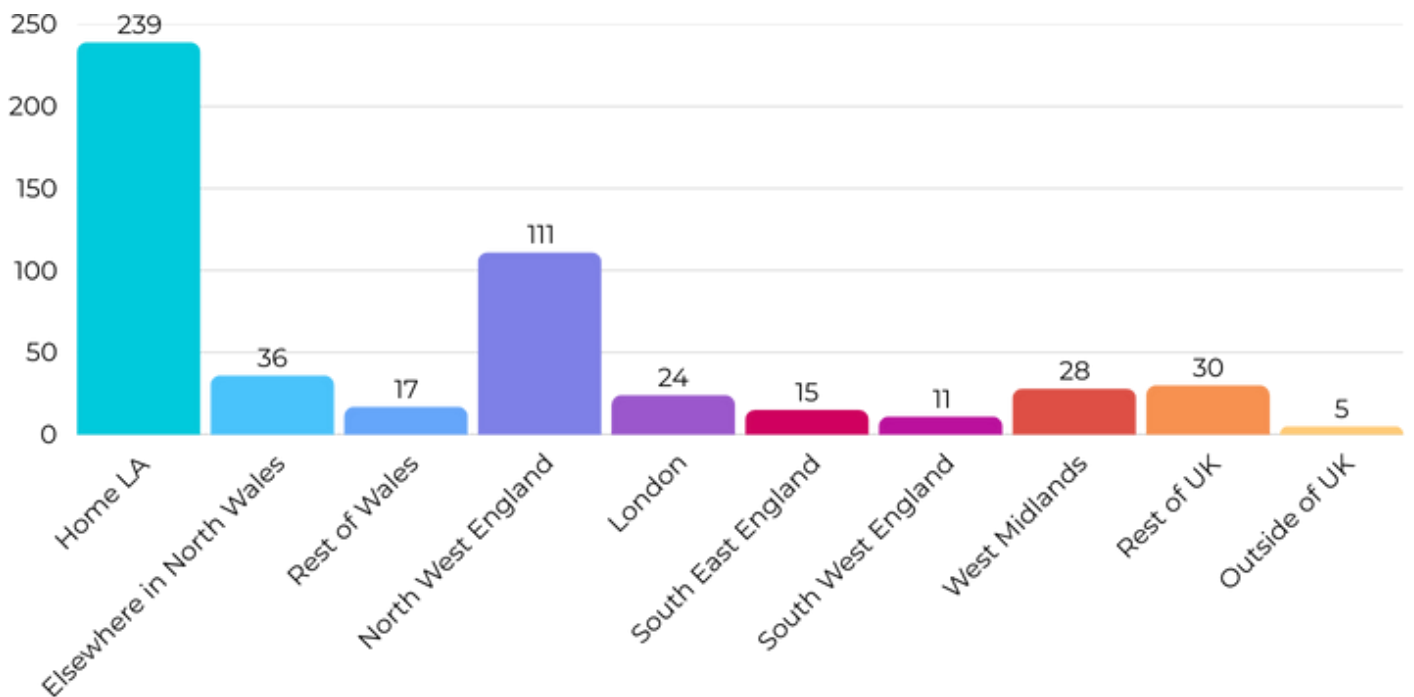
### Where graduates from Flintshire are working 15 months after graduating



**Where graduates from the Isle of Anglesey are working 15 months after graduating**



**Where graduates from Wrexham are working 15 months after graduating**



## **Appendix B: Feedback from members of the RSP Team and employers to the options presented.**

### **General feedback**

On the whole, each option was received positively by the North Wales RSP team and the group of employers. Employers were asked to prioritise options 1 to 5 (since option 6 emerged from the discussion with employers). Options 3 and 4 received the most votes, followed closely by 2 and 5. Only one employer chose option 1, which perhaps indicates that greater attention should be given to the other options. However, all of the ideas seemed popular, with one employer commenting 'please don't ask us to prioritise!' and another 'they could also all form under one programme'.

In terms of general suggestions to improve upon these options, members of the RSP team noted there was an opportunity to integrate the recently launched North Wales Skills Portal with the various options. For instance, a dedicated place for graduate careers on the portal could be used to support employers in the region to showcase their graduate opportunities.

As general feedback, employers noted the challenge of communicating interventions to SMEs, and the importance of marketing effectively if any of these options were to eventually be taken forward. Questions were also raised about whether these options could be delivered at a national level.

### **Feedback on Option 1: A Regional Graduate Programme**

The RSP team noted that they saw this option as addressing a major challenge for graduates, by providing a 'broker' that had the connections with industry that young people have not yet formed. It gives students a clear 'go to' when looking for job opportunities after graduating. However, a major challenge noted for this option was the likely cost of running such a programme, and questions were raised around how this could be funded. One suggestion was to ask larger employers to fund the scheme.

Employers were generally positive about this option and each of the various types of support seemed to have merit. Some questioned whether a small grant of £1000 would be enough to incentivise SMEs to take part and hire a full-time, permanent graduate role. Examples were given of how SMEs had taken part in schemes where grant funding was initially provided to hire a graduate, and in most cases the graduate had been kept on after the funding had come to an end. Another contributor also noted that, if this is called a 'graduate scheme', it needs to be more than a recruitment service, and should include a learning element (which could include developing lacking soft skills). The potential for this scheme to help graduates who had left the area for study to return for work was also noted as a positive.

### **Feedback on Option 2: A Regional Internship or Placement Programme**

The RSP team saw this as an opportunity to develop the employability skills of students. However, there were concerns about measuring the impact of this intervention, since it was not offering a full-time role for students. There was also concern that 'buy-in' from employers might be

limited for an 8-week internship programme that would take time and resource to implement with a limited return on investment for that company.

Employers commented that this is a useful recruitment technique to 'try before you buy' but that they have found it difficult to recruit for such placements in the past, and saw this intervention as possibly addressing this challenge. They noted the importance of getting into universities at the right time of year to promote careers opportunities over summer. Employers felt that a 6-week placement wouldn't be enough for an organisation to get value from the internship, especially an SME, and suggested that these internships should be as long as possible. Again, employers also saw an opportunity for this option to support those studying outside of the region to find local employment opportunities. There was the suggestion that option 1 and 2 could integrate, providing work experience for students over summer that leads to a full-time role after graduating. Finally, the importance of 'demand' was discussed, and that there needs to be interest in a scheme like this for it to be successful, but also that demand can be generated by encouraging the use of social value clauses among employers.

### **Feedback on Option 3: Support for Training and Development**

The RSP team noted that concern around young people lacking soft skills was a common theme from their engagement with employers. They also noted that employers sometimes aren't sure themselves about the skills they need, which suggest that advisory support to identify the right training for employees might be valuable.

Employers agreed that soft skills are important to develop, but that this should ideally be developed during university, prior to employment, to avoid the need for an intervention such as this.

### **Feedback on Option 4: New Careers Events**

The RSP team noted that employers may be willing to fund or part fund events, which could overcome funding challenges. The team also stressed the importance of choosing the right time(s) and location(s) in North Wales for such events, and to keep events short for busy SME employers. It was also suggested that there could be opportunities to collaborate with events that are already taking place to avoid duplication.

Employers were interested in new opportunities to reach talent in different universities and on different courses, and were positive about the prospect of reaching local talent studying in universities outside of the region.

### **Feedback on Option 5: Engaging with young people earlier (a 'broker' between employers and schools)**

The RSP team agreed that there was a need for coordination in this area and that employers find it difficult to connect with schools. It was noted that there are currently pilot schemes addressing this issue on Anglesey, and that other councils in North Wales have been encouraged to roll out similar schemes.

Employers who have taken part in the pilots on Anglesey were positive about the scheme and its potential; others had also used Cardiff Commitment and were impressed with this service and thought a similar model could be adopted in North Wales. It was queried whether there was an opportunity to also educate parents about careers in the region as a part of the activity, as a key 'influencer' in the lives and decisions of young people.

### **Feedback on Option 6: Integrating industry with the university curriculum through workshops and projects**

This suggestion emerged during the workshop with employers, and was positively received by the group, which is why it has been included as an option moving forward. It was noted that similar schemes are already taking place in schools (such as for the food and drink sector) that have been effective and have generated interest in work experience from participants.



## References

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- <sup>1</sup> ONS (Stats Wales), [‘Migration between Wales and the rest of the UK by local authority, flow and period of change’](#)
- <sup>2</sup> Institute for Fiscal Studies, [‘London calling? Higher education, geographical mobility and early-career earnings’](#), September 2021
- <sup>3</sup> Wales Online, [‘The huge financial crisis facing Welsh universities’](#), 26 October 2024
- <sup>4</sup> BBC, [‘Welsh tuition fees to rise by nearly £300 a year’](#), 4 December 2024
- <sup>5</sup> Western Mail, ‘Uni says increase in fees would not offset £7m NI hit’, 23 November 2024
- <sup>6</sup> BBC, [‘Cardiff University plans to cut 400 jobs and axe courses’](#), 28 January 2025
- <sup>7</sup> Nation.Cymru, [‘Alarming drop in university applications from 18 year olds in Wales’](#), 18 July 2024; BBC, [‘Welsh sixth-form uni applications lowest in UK’](#), 11 August 2024.
- <sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that The Open University’s enrolments are primarily those studying part-time, and are often in employment already.
- <sup>9</sup> Adapted from bespoke data provided by HESA.
- <sup>10</sup> Adapted from bespoke data provided by HESA.
- <sup>11</sup> Data from HESA, [‘Where do HE students come from?’](#); The figures for Coleg Cambria were provided directly by the provider.
- <sup>12</sup> Data from HESA, [‘Where do HE students come from?’](#)
- <sup>13</sup> Data from HESA, [‘Where do HE students come from?’](#)
- <sup>14</sup> Data from HESA, [‘What do HE students study?’](#); The figures for Coleg Cambria were provided directly by the provider.
- <sup>15</sup> ONS (Stats Wales), [‘Migration between Wales and the rest of the UK by local authority, flow and period of change’](#)
- <sup>16</sup> Adapted using data from ONS (Stats Wales), [‘Migration between Wales and the rest of the UK by local authority, flow and period of change’](#)
- <sup>17</sup> Adapted from Luminare, [‘What do graduates do? Wales’](#) (using data from HESA)
- <sup>18</sup> Adapted from Luminare, [‘What do graduates do? Wales’](#) (using data from HESA)
- <sup>19</sup> Adapted from Luminare, [‘What do graduates do? Wales’](#) (using data from HESA)
- <sup>20</sup> Global Welsh, [‘Brain drain to brain gain’](#), November 2024
- <sup>21</sup> ARFOR is a joint venture by Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion, Gwynedd and Anglesey Councils which seeks to use entrepreneurship and economic development to support the heartlands of the Welsh language and, thus, maintain the language. The purpose of the ARFOR Challenge Fund was to pilot new and innovative solutions to real challenges that exist in the ARFOR area to strengthen the relationship between the economy and the Welsh language.

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<sup>22</sup> North Wales RSP, 'Employer Survey Findings (Nov 2023)'

<sup>23</sup> Bangor University, '[From Afghanistan to Anglesey: Masi makes an impact through graduate skills-matching internship](#)' 14 May 2024