

# An SME's guide to Recruiting Students and Graduates

AHECS | Association for Higher Education Careers Services

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## Inside front cover

AHECS is the Association for Higher Education Careers Services across the 26 Universities and Institutes of Technology in Ireland north and south who support 180,000 students studying in the higher education sector - 60,000 of whom are preparing for graduation.

Publication by Marielle Kelly with the AHECS Labour Market Task Group. April 2018

AHECS Labour Market Task Group

Angela Collins, Waterford IT | Bridie Killoran, Galway Mayo IT | Caroline Kennedy, National College of Ireland | Catherine Lyster, Letterkenny IT | Paula Murray, Maynooth University | Treasa Morgan, Cork Institute of Technology

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Twitter – AHECSHEcareers

[www.ahecs.ie](http://www.ahecs.ie)

Email: [Admin@ahecs.ie](mailto:Admin@ahecs.ie)

PHOTOS <https://www.flickr.com/photos/ahecs/albums>

# Overview

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Every year in Ireland over 60,000 new graduates leave third level education ready to enter the workforce. Of those, 45,000 have an undergraduate degree, and a further 19,000 have a masters' degree. With qualifications in wide range of subjects including languages, engineering, history, natural sciences and computing, these new entrants to the labour market are looking for career opportunities and come equipped with knowledge, experience and skills.

You may be under the impression that a small company you can't compete with large companies for talent, but the truth is that close to 70% of under 25-year-olds would rather work for an SME or startup company.

There can be challenges for SMEs interested in employing new graduates, however SMEs have a lot to offer graduates. This guide will outline the main obstacles an SME might encounter in its recruitment drive, and will offer solutions to an SME become an employer of choice for a job-seeking graduate, as well as outlining supports to help with this process.

## Advantages SMEs offer graduates

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SMEs offer a wide range of advantages to graduate jobseekers which can counteract the challenges and ultimately make them a very attractive option. Consider the following strengths your company has to offer:

- The hiring timeline will usually be short in comparison to that of larger companies
- Interviews processes tend to be less onerous and intimidating
- A flexible structure with opportunities for employees to get involved and take responsibility for a variety of projects and functional areas in the business
- Accessible senior management
- You might be less concerned with degree grades or content and more focused on hiring someone enthusiastic who is ready to work hard than someone who has the best qualification
- A smaller, friendlier working environment than some large corporations
- Employee successes can be more visible in smaller companies

## Pros of hiring a graduate

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Graduates generally have a lot to offer SME employers, and the advantages of hiring a graduate include:

- Help you to build a talent pipeline for longer term business growth
- Bring specific knowledge from their studies and internship experience
- Fill existing or future skills gaps, for example bringing language skills and social media know-how to your business
- More affordable than an experienced hire
- Enthusiastic and highly motivated to succeed
- A fresh pair of eyes and innovative perspectives
- They won't bring ingrained bad habits established at a previous workplace
- They will be eager to make a positive impact on your business

## Challenges for SMEs targeting graduates

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There are a few things which can make it challenging for an SME to attract graduate talent. These include:

- Lower starting salaries than established graduate programmes in large companies
- Brand may have less prestige than better-known employers
- There is likely to be no established graduate training pathway
- Less obvious career progression pathway
- There may be less information easily available about what it's like to work there

- Fewer in-house training options
- Can be a career path with higher risk
- Smaller budget to advertise

## How to attract graduates

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### ***Make the most of Career Services***

The first place to turn if you would like to hire a graduate is to the careers services of higher education institutions (HEIs). The first place many graduates look for opportunities is on their career services' jobs board, making this a key place for you to advertise your opportunity. Career services are keen to expose their students and soon-to-be-graduates to as wide a range of opportunities as possible, and you will find them very happy to advertise your vacancy for free on their website. Get in touch with them to get their advice on how best to get your vacancy in front of their students. You can find their details on individual HEIs' websites, or you can go to <http://www.ahecs.ie/> for a full listing of careers services nationwide.

If you're interested in hiring a graduate, don't just look at your local university, IT or college. There will be graduates from your local area studying all over the country, so consider widening your search. If degree subject is not an important factor in your future employee, consider posting your job advertisement on a number of HEIs' jobs boards to reach a larger number of potential employees. If you need to hire a graduate with specific skills or knowledge, take a look at the different HEIs' admissions and course pages to help you identify which universities to target.

Working with gradireland.com to reach and target specific cohorts of students nationally is another option to consider.

### ***Let them know what you have to offer***

Research consistently points to a few key factors that matter to new graduates looking for their first professional role. These include:

- having real responsibility
- being able to make an impact
- training and development opportunities
- mentoring support
- access to senior management

These are all potential advantages that you as an SME employer have to offer. However, as there might not be a vast amount of information available to jobseekers about what it's like to work at your company, graduates may not be aware of all of these factors. Your job description is the first place where you can start to build a competitive advantage on jobs boards. You can make your vacancy much more attractive to a graduate if you invest some time explicitly stating what you have to offer as an employer.

Next time you are hiring, clearly state how the role will impact on the company, outline that there are opportunities for growth, what training will be provided, and any other benefits you can offer, such as mentoring by a senior staff member, flexible hours, or discounted health insurance. Graduates place a great importance on doing meaningful work and many want to work for ethical organisations, so if your company raises money for local charities or encourages staff to volunteer in some way, it would be useful to share that information. Taking the time to make these things clear can make a big difference in your recruiting success.

### ***Go Mobile***

Around half of jobseekers use mobile devices to search for jobs, and this includes a large proportion of students and graduates. Make sure your company website is optimised for mobile to make it easier for

graduates to find your vacancy information online, and to help them to easily find out more about your business.

### **Be Social**

Students and graduates are very active on social media, and if they're researching your company they will look at your website and at any social media channels you have. If your company has a Facebook page, Twitter or Instagram account, use these channels to share posts that give a sense of the work that you do, of your company culture and of the perks of working there. Graduates love to hear from employees already working within your organisation.

## **Key Supports**

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There are a range of supports available to you to help you provide training to your new graduate employee, and in some cases there are grants available to support job creation which could help you to employ a new staff member. You'll find an extensive list of available supports on the governments Supporting SMEs tool available at [www.supportingsmes.ie](http://www.supportingsmes.ie). Some of the options most relevant to recruiting graduates to your business and retaining them through training provision are outlined below.

### **Free or Subsidised Training Provision**

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Training is high on graduates' wish list, but it can be expensive to provide. Some options to provide free or lower cost to your staff, including any graduates you employ, include:

**Skillnet Ireland.** Skillnet Ireland provides training through 63 learning networks in a range of regions and sectors. Every learning network funded by Skillnet Ireland is a cluster of companies from the same sector, geographical location, or a combination of both. Participating companies provide up to 50% in match funding to the grants approved by Skillnet Ireland. [www.skillnetireland.ie](http://www.skillnetireland.ie)

**Local Enterprise Office (LEOs)** There are 31 LEOs around the country provide a range of training events throughout the year, go to your local LEO website to find out what's available in your area <https://www.localenterprise.ie>

**Small Firms Association (SFA)** The SFA offers training for members and non-members, see a schedule of upcoming training at [www.sfa.ie](http://www.sfa.ie)

### **Financial Supports to help SMEs Expand Staffing**

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**Ibec Global Graduates:** For companies looking to increase their presence in Ireland and in overseas markets with highly motivated graduates, Ibec Global Graduates offers funding and access to a talent pool of high performing graduates for a 12, 18 or 24 month placement. Ibec source funding for the programmes to provide assistance to companies looking to take on a graduate

**InterTradeIreland** InterTradeIreland's Fusion programme assists with funding recruitment for a high calibre science, engineering or technology graduate, and partners you with a third level institution with specific expertise. The graduate is employed by you and is based in your company throughout the project (12 - 18 months) with mentoring from the academic partner and InterTradeIreland FUSION consultant. [www.intertradeireland.com](http://www.intertradeireland.com)

**Department of Social Protection:** The Department of Social Protection has cash incentives available to employers who recruit from the Live Register and provide a range of workplace supports for employees with disabilities. <http://www.welfare.ie/en/downloads/employerpack.pdf>

### **Enterprise Ireland Client Company Supports**

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**Graduate Business Growth Initiative** Supports Enterprise Ireland SME client companies to hire up to two graduates per year, across all disciplines and sectors. [www.gradhub.ie](http://www.gradhub.ie)

***Job Expansion Fund*** This fund assists Enterprise Ireland client companies to grow through increasing headcount, and provides a grant towards the recruitment of new employees [www.enterpriseireland.com](http://www.enterpriseireland.com)