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CIBYL INSIGHT · UK EARLY CAREERS 2026

The early talent paradox

Why students and employers see a different jobs market

The employer view (ISE Student Recruitment Survey 2026) set against the student view (Cibyl UK Graduate Research 2026 and School Leaver Research 2026)

INTRODUCTION

Two sets of data. One jobs market, seen from opposite sides.

With the launch of the ISE Student Recruitment Survey 2026 last month, we decided to compare this employer view with the student view, courtesy of Cibyl's UK Graduate Research 2026 and School Leaver Research 2026.

Here's what we found.

AT A GLANCE

STUDENTS

74%

of students believe it will be difficult to secure a graduate role

EMPLOYERS

141

applications per graduate vacancy, on average

EMPLOYERS

94%

can usually recruit graduates of the quality they need

STUDENTS

37% vs 5%

of school students want an internship, versus those who have done one

STUDENTS

7 in 10

students use AI when researching careers, employers or opportunities

EMPLOYERS

77%

are reviewing or redesigning recruitment because of candidate use of generative AI

STUDENTS Cibyl research

EMPLOYERS ISE Student Recruitment Survey 2026

01

Students are investing more in their careers, yet confidence is falling

Despite having access to more career information, employer content and digital tools than any previous generation, students are becoming less confident about their prospects.

STUDENTS

74%

of students believe it will be difficult to secure a graduate role

Cibyl UK Graduate Research 2026

GRADUATES

72%

of employed graduates say finding their first graduate job was difficult

Cibyl UK Graduate Research 2026

EMPLOYERS

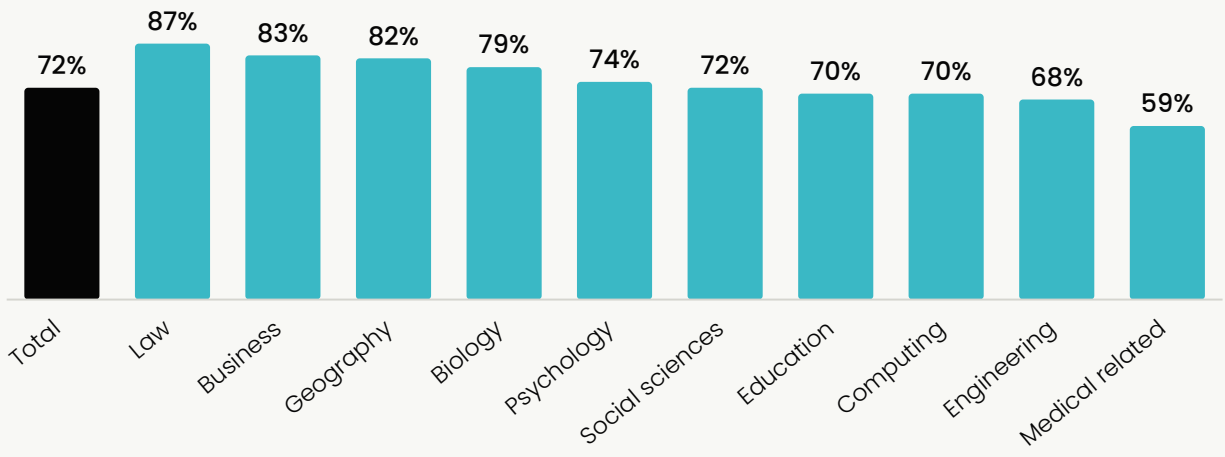
141

applications per graduate vacancy, on average

ISE Student Recruitment Survey 2026

"It was tough getting a graduate job"

Employed graduates who agree, by degree subject. 72% overall, up from 66% in 2025.



Source: Cibyl UK Graduate Research 2026. Base: employed graduates, % agree.

The ISE Student Recruitment Survey 2026 helps explain why. Employers now receive an average of **141 applications per graduate vacancy**, creating an increasingly competitive market for candidates.

THE PARADOX

Students are arguably becoming more informed and career-focused, yet many feel less confident about achieving their career goals.

02

Employers are satisfied with talent quality, while candidates feel they cannot stand out

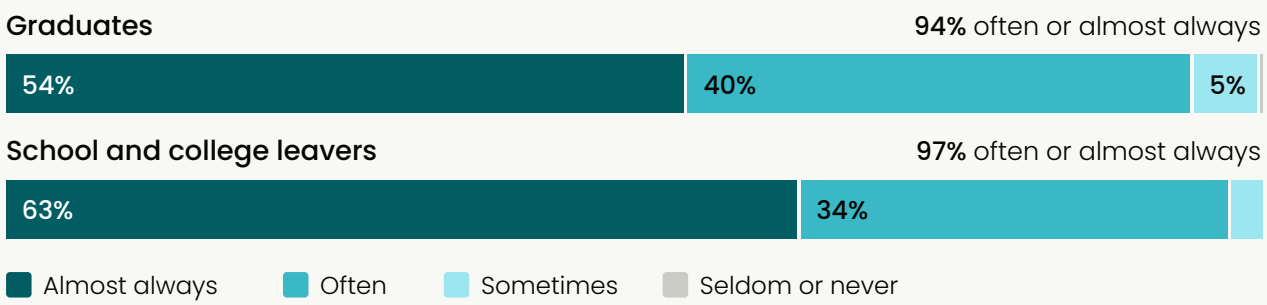
Many discussions about early careers focus on talent shortages and skills gaps. The data paints a more nuanced picture.

EMPLOYERS

The ISE survey found that **94% of employers can usually recruit graduates of the quality they need**, while **97% say the same for school and college leavers**.

Ability to recruit the quality of hires they need

All sectors, % of organisations



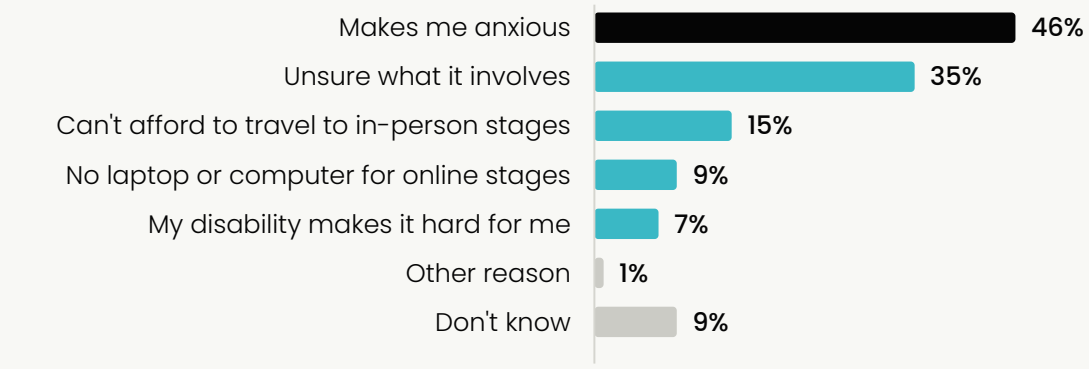
Source: ISE Student Recruitment Survey 2026 (graduates: 109 organisations; school and college leavers: 70 organisations). Seldom and never combined.

STUDENTS

At the same time, Cibyl research shows growing anxiety among students about securing opportunities and differentiating themselves in large applicant pools.

Why school students drop out of recruitment processes

Reasons for dropping out, overall



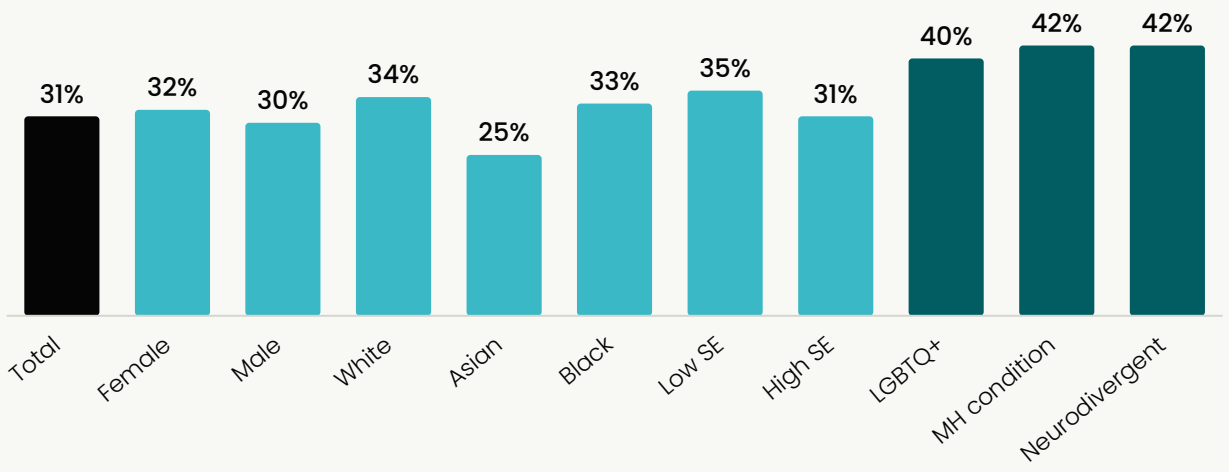
Source: Cibyl School Leaver Research 2026.

02 CONTINUED

Graduates are dropping out too, and some groups far more than others

Graduates who dropped out of an assessment process

31% overall, up from 26% in 2025



Source: Cibyl UK Graduate Research 2026. SE: socio-economic background. MH: mental health.

> *"The entire process was so long I just realised that I don't want to work for a company that thinks it is acceptable to have applicants complete what was almost 4 hours of work for stage two of an assessment."*
>
> GRADUATE RESPONDENT, CIBYL 2026

> *"They took almost 6 months to reach back despite continuous follow up and stating 'we will get back to you', and had accepted an offer one week before their final call."*
>
> GRADUATE RESPONDENT, CIBYL 2026

46% of school students who drop out of recruitment processes say it is because the process **makes them anxious**. A further 35% are unsure what it involves.

WHAT IT MEANS

The challenge is about helping talent navigate increasingly complex recruitment processes.

03

Everyone agrees work experience matters, but opportunities are becoming harder to access

Rarely do student and employer data align so closely.

EMPLOYERS

+27%
increase in internship applications

+15%
increase in placement applications

-8%
fall in internship and placement opportunities

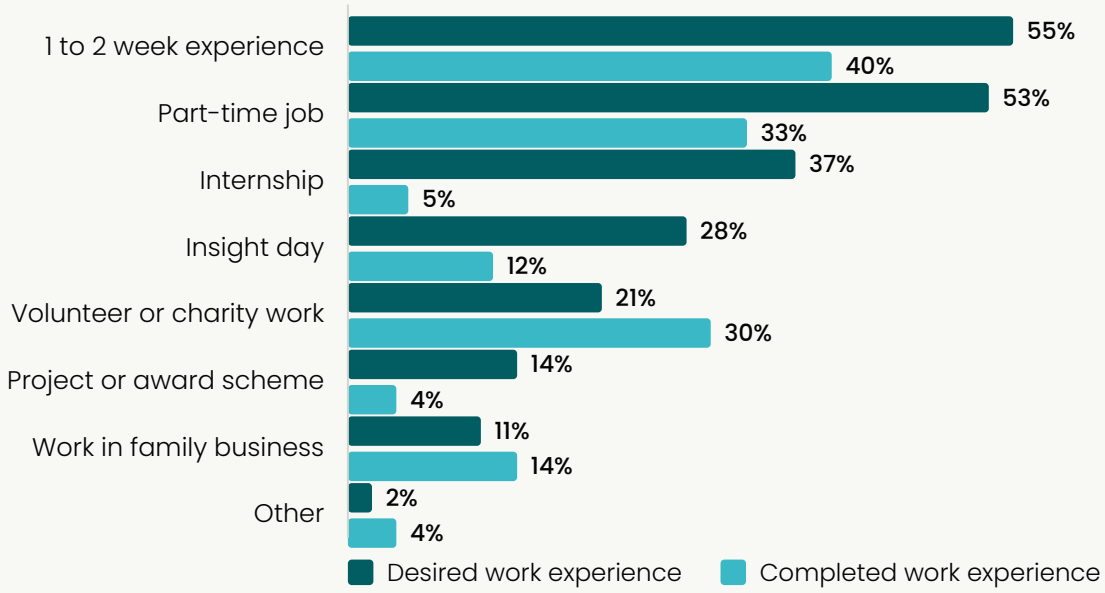
Source: ISE Student Recruitment Survey 2026.

STUDENTS

Similarly, the school leaver research shows that **37% of students would like to take part in an internship, but only 5% have done so**.

The work experience school students want, versus what they have done

% of school students



Source: Cibyl School Leaver Research 2026.

WHAT IT MEANS

As employers increasingly seek evidence of workplace readiness, practical experience is becoming more valuable at precisely the moment it is becoming more difficult to obtain.

04

Students are embracing AI while employers are redesigning recruitment around it

Few developments are reshaping the early careers landscape as quickly as artificial intelligence.

STUDENTS

7 in 10

use AI when researching careers, employers or opportunities

58%

use AI tools for their studies, such as coursework, essays and dissertations

Top use

CV and cover letter writing and interview preparation are the most common uses of AI during recruitment

3 in 10

graduates are encouraged to use AI at work, but only 15% have received training

Source: Cibyl AI & I: The Student Voice Research, UK & IRE 2025, reported in Cibyl UK Graduate Research 2026.

EMPLOYERS

77%

are reviewing or redesigning recruitment processes because of candidate use of generative AI

64%

are comfortable with candidates using AI for some parts of recruitment (up from 46% last year)

92%

have suspected or identified cheating (up from 85% in 2025)

16%

use AI in their own recruitment today

Source: ISE Student Recruitment Survey 2026.

WHAT IT MEANS

AI is no longer an emerging trend; it is already a routine part of the student journey. The challenge now is determining how hiring processes evolve without compromising assessment quality and fairness.

05

Interest in apprenticeships is growing, but demand continues to outpace supply

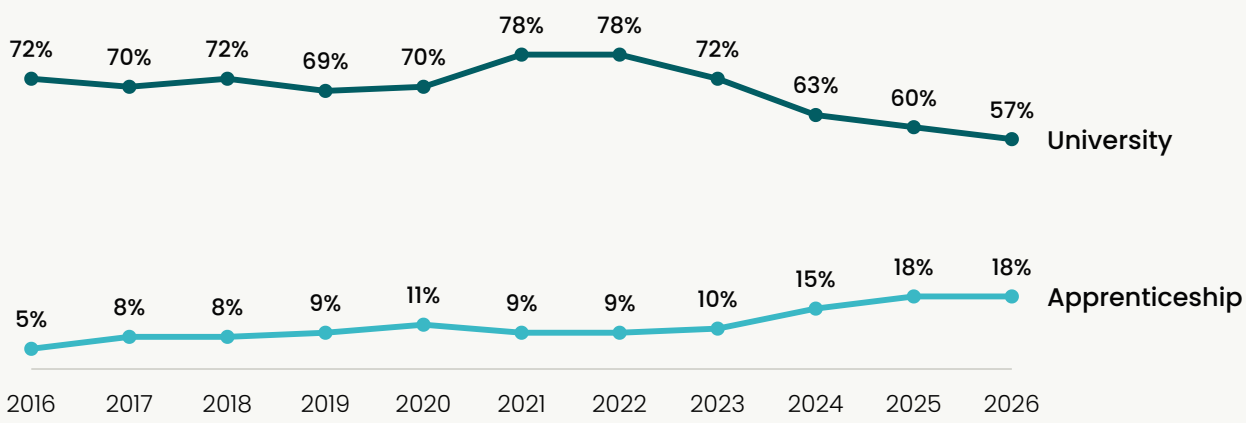
The school leaver data highlights a significant shift in career preferences.

STUDENTS

Apprenticeships continue to grow in popularity among school students, with many actively considering them alongside traditional university routes.

Changing aspirations: university versus apprenticeship

% of school students, 2016 to 2026



Source: Cibyl School Leaver Research 2026.

EMPLOYERS

96

applications per school and college leaver vacancy, on average

ISE Student Recruitment Survey 2026

However, employer demand and student interest are not always aligned. The ISE survey found that applications for school and college leaver opportunities continue to rise, with employers receiving an average of **96 applications per vacancy**.

WHAT IT MEANS

The increasing appeal of alternative pathways is encouraging, but it also raises questions about whether enough opportunities exist to meet student demand.

06

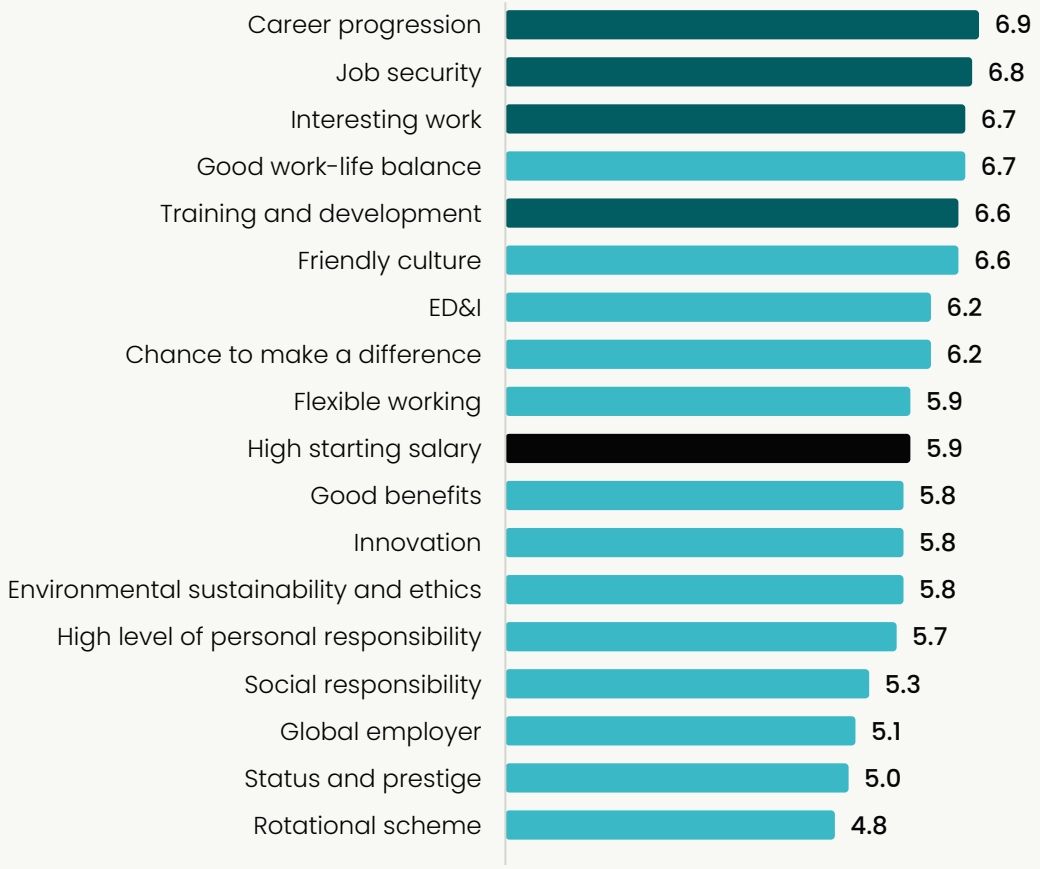
Students prioritise progression, while employers often focus on attraction

The graduate research reveals that students are increasingly focused on long-term career outcomes.

Factors such as **career progression, job security, interesting work and training opportunities rank ahead of salary** when evaluating employers.

What students expect from employers

Average importance, scale of 1 (not at all important) to 8 (very important)



Source: Cibyl UK Graduate Research 2026. High starting salary highlighted in black for comparison.

Yet much employer branding activity continues to focus on attraction messaging, culture and benefits.

WHAT IT MEANS

The implication is not that employer branding is ineffective. Rather, students may increasingly want evidence of where a career could take them, not simply what the organisation looks like today.

CLOSING OBSERVATION

The UK's early talent challenge is not primarily one of attraction.

Students remain ambitious. Employers continue to invest. Applications continue to rise.

The bigger challenge is addressing the growing gaps between three things:

Expectation gap

Between candidate expectations and employer experiences

Access gap

Between demand for experience and access to it

Assessment gap

Between the rapid adoption of new technologies and the systems designed to assess talent

Those gaps, rather than application volumes alone, may prove to be the defining issue facing employers and educators over the coming years.



SOURCES

Institute of Student Employers, Student Recruitment Survey 2026
Cibyl, UK Graduate Research 2026
Cibyl, School Leaver Research 2026
Cibyl, AI & I: The Student Voice Research, UK & IRE 2025

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