



## An investigation of employer perceptions of Irish nutrition graduate competencies

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Undergraduate nutrition education and training programmes are evaluated regularly to ensure graduates are developing the knowledge and skills needed to be a nutrition professional. Current nutrition education in Ireland prepares nutrition graduates for a wide range of employment opportunities<sup>(1)</sup>. However, the labour market has seen many changes over the last decade to meet the evolving needs of economy and society in this digital era<sup>(2)</sup>. Little is known about how employers perceive current nutrition education practices in Ireland and how well this prepares graduates for the realities of today's workforce. The objective of this study was to explore employers' perspectives of nutrition graduate preparedness for the workforce and current nutrition education and training in Ireland. In depth semi-structured audio-recorded interviews were conducted with 12 nutrition employers across Ireland and the UK who currently employ, or have recently employed, Irish nutrition graduates. This study was grounded in interpretivism whereby researchers sought to co-construct meaning of experiences between themselves and the research participants. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and a reflexive thematic analysis approach was implemented whereby the data was transcribed, coded, and emerging themes identified and discussed by all authors. 'Employers' expectations of nutrition graduates' and 'identified gaps in current nutrition education and training' were the two main themes emerging from the analysis. Nutrition employers agreed that nutrition graduates are well prepared overall to meet workforce expectations and role responsibilities in recent years. Within employers' perceptions of Irish nutrition graduates, subthemes included previous experience with graduates, graduate expectations and graduate characteristics. Many employers felt nutrition graduates had received quality education with graduate knowledge, skills and attitudes meeting expectations. From an employers' perspective, nutrition graduates are adaptable, willing to learn and professional. Nutrition graduates are often a valuable asset to a team but can lack confidence in their knowledge and ability. Differences between nutrition courses proved to be a challenge in the comparison of graduate preparedness with the desire for an increase in standardisation. Employers remarked that graduates who had undergone placements/work-integrated learning were better prepared for a professional work environment. However, some gaps were identified by participants as employers felt nutrition curricula are lacking training in areas such as business skills and digital competencies. Subthemes included the addition of business knowledge and digital literacy to nutrition curricula, both contributing to integral aspects of many roles in which nutrition graduates are employed. Their addition to nutrition curricula would create a great advantage for nutrition graduates entering the workforce in helping to meet modern day labour market needs. Overall, the twelve employers agreed that current nutrition education and training in Ireland is of a high quality, however, employers would like to see curricula being informed by labour market needs to boost graduate's employment prospects.

### References

1. Croxford S, Stirling E, McLeod S, *et al.* (2020) *J Dietitians Australia* **11**, 63–80
2. Falloon G (2020) *J Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability* **68**, 2449–72449-72