PGR StudentSurvey.ie: Academic Career Aspirations and Employment Outcomes

Introduction

Postgraduate research (PGR) students play a central role in Ireland's research, innovation and higher education systems. While many enter doctoral and research master's programmes with aspirations for academic careers, the number of permanent academic opportunities available is limited.

This report examines the relationship between career aspirations during postgraduate research study and actual employment outcomes after graduation, using a combination of data from the PGR StudentSurvey.ie, the Graduate Outcomes Survey, and the Central Statistics Office's Higher Education Outcomes dataset.

By comparing intentions expressed during study with short- and long-term graduate outcomes, the analysis highlights a mismatch between ambition and opportunity, while also demonstrating the wide range of high-skilled sectors in which research graduates ultimately build their careers.

Understanding the PGR Cohort: A Brief Profile

This section provides a profile of respondents to the 2025 PGR StudentSurvey.ie to contextualise subsequent analysis of career aspirations.

In 2025, 4,225 postgraduate research students responded to the survey, representing a response rate of 37%. The vast majority (91%) were enrolled in NFQ Level 10 doctoral programmes, with the remaining 9% studying research master's degrees (NFQ Level 9). Most respondents were studying full-time (88%).

Female students were more likely to respond than males, accounting for 58% of respondents, compared with 41% identifying as male. In terms of age, nearly half of respondents (45%) were under 30, while one-fifth (22%) were aged over 40, reflecting the diverse life stages at which individuals engage in postgraduate research.

Respondents were predominantly based in universities (77%), with 19% in technological higher education institutions. Over half (55%) were Irish-domiciled, while 45% were internationally domiciled.

The largest shares of respondents were concentrated in Natural Sciences, Mathematics and Statistics, Health and Welfare, Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction, and Arts and Humanities, broadly consistent with previous PGR surveys.

Data sources used in this report

This report considers data from the PGR StudentSurvey.ie 2025 and combines it with findings from the HEA's Graduate Outcomes Survey and the CSO's Higher Education Outcomes longitudinal database.

Readers can access detailed information on these three data sources here:

- PGR StudentSurvey.ie Data Hub and 2025 PGR National Report here
- Graduate Outcomes Survey here: This is Ireland's national survey of graduates conducted nine months post-graduation.
- Central Statistics Office (CSO) Higher Education Outcomes here: This is a longitudinal database housed in the CSO and links HEA graduation records with Revenue and Social Welfare data.

Career Aspirations: PGR StudentSurvey.ie Results

First, we consider the results of the 2025 PGR StudentSurvey.ie. The survey asks students to *"select the top three types of career you have in mind for when you finish your research degree, and prioritise these by writing 1, 2 or 3 (1=highest, 3=lowest priority"*. Students can select from a range of options which include:

- Academic career in higher education (either research and teaching, or teaching only)
- Research career in higher education
- Other career in higher education
- Research career outside higher education (e.g., in a private research organisation, a charity or in an industrial environment)
- Teaching (at a level below higher education)
- Returning to, or remaining with, employer who is sponsoring your degree
- Returning to, or remaining with, employer who is not sponsoring your degree
- Self-employment (including setting up your own business)
- Any other professional career
- Not sure or not decided yet
- Other (Please specify)

Overall Career Priorities

The three most frequently prioritised career options were all located within higher education:

- An academic career in higher education, selected as a priority by 60% of respondents, with 35% ranking it as their first priority.
- Other career in higher education, selected as a priority by 48%, with 15% ranking it first.
- A research career in higher education, selected as a priority by 45%, with 11% ranking it first.

Given the prominence of academic careers as a first-choice outcome, the remainder of this section focuses on respondents who ranked an academic career in higher education as their top priority.

Next, we consider those who selected an academic career as a top priority in more detail.

Gender
Among those who selected an academic career in higher education as highest priority, there was a strong consistency by gender. 36% of male respondents and 34% of female respondents ranked an academic career as their number one priority.

Field of Study
The field of study that most put an academic career in higher education as highest priority were those studying Services at 53%. Next was Business, Law and Administration (48%) followed by Arts and Humanities (45%).

Age
Those who ranked an academic career in higher education as highest priority generally increased with age with those aged 35/39 being most likely to select as a top priority, at 39%.

Institution Type
There was relatively little variation by institution type. 40% of respondents based in technical higher education institutions ranked an academic career as their highest priority, compared with 34% of those based in universities.

Domicile
34% of Irish domiciled students selected an academic career in higher education as their highest priority compared with 36% of internationally-domiciled students.

NFQ level
36% of Doctoral Degree (Level 10) students selected an academic career in higher education compared with Masters Degree (Level 9) students at 24%.

Where Do Research Graduates Go? Insights from the Graduate Outcomes Survey

Introduction
In 2025 a total of 2,124 Postgraduate Research graduates (Masters Research and PhD students, class of 2024) were surveyed nine months after graduation, with a response rate of 53.2% response rate (compared to 50.09% overall).

89.8% of respondents stated they were in employment nine months after graduation with 3.2% continuing with education. A further 4.4% were seeking employment and 2.5% were engaged in other activities (such as childcare/domestic responsibilities, retired from employment, not able to work due to sickness or disability, travelling, volunteering etc).

Table 1 – Postgraduate Research Graduates: Main Destination (by Domicile Group)

	Irish-domiciled	Internationally-domiciled	Total
In employment	90.6%	87.9%	89.8%
In further study	2.8%	4.4%	3.3%
Other Activity	2.9%	1.6%	2.5%
Unemployed	3.7%	6.2%	4.4%

Occupations

Graduates who stated they were in employment were asked to give the occupations and sectors in which they were employed.

Of those who responded to the question on Occupation (response options based on SOC coding), 18.6% gave their occupation as Postdoctoral Researcher. A further 72.6% were in one of the High Skilled Occupation categories (Associate professional and technical occupations, Managers, directors and senior officials, Professional occupations). Readers should note that "I don't know/unknown" is a response option, not a non-response.

Table 2 – Postgraduate Researchers in employment: Occupations

Occupations	% of total responses
Administrative and secretarial occupations	1.9%
Associate professional and technical occupations	5.5%
Caring, leisure and other service occupations	1.2%
Elementary occupations	0.3%
Managers, directors and senior officials	7.9%
Postdoctoral researchers	18.6%
Process, plant and machine operatives	0.4%
Professional occupations	59.2%
Sales and customer service occupations	0.9%
Skilled trades occupations	0.5%
I don't know/unknown	3.6%

Sectors

Graduates in employment are also asked to provide the Sectors (NACE) in which they are employed. The following is the breakdown of responses provided by postgraduate research graduates in employment who provided a response to this question:

Table 3 – Postgraduate Research Graduates - Sectors of employment

Sector of employment (NACE)	**% of Responses**
Accommodation and food service activities	0.7%
Administrative and support service activities	0.6%
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	1.8%
Construction	2.1%
Education	37.3%
Financial, insurance and real estate activities	3.2%
Human health and social work activities	15.2%
Industry	10.5%
Information and communication	2.0%
Professional, scientific and technical activities	17.7%
Public administration and defense	2.7%
Transportation and storage	0.4%
Wholesale and retail trade	0.4%
I don't know	1.1%
Other	4.4%

Of those who gave their occupation, as post-doctoral researcher, the following is the breakdown of sectors they said they were working in:

Table 4 – Postdoctoral Researchers: Sectors of employment (NACE)

Sector of employment (NACE)	% of Responses
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	1.6%
Education	59.7%
Human health and social work activities	9.6%
Industry	1.4%
Professional, scientific and technical activities	25.7%
Public administration and defense	0.7%
I don't know	0.5%
Other	0.9%

Note the "I don't know" is a response option, not a non-response

Table 5 - Postgraduate Research Graduates – Occupations (High-skilled vs Other)

	High-skilled Occupations					
	Professional occupations	Associate professional and technical occupations	Managers, directors and senior officials	Post-doctoral researchers	Other Occupations	Total
Education	55%	6%	3%	30%	7%	100%
Financial, insurance and real estate activities	77%	3%	8%	0%	11%	100%
Human health and social work activities	74%	1%	8%	12%	5%	100%
Industry	64%	5%	18%	2%	10%	100%
Information and communication	70%	9%	21%	0%	0%	100%
Professional, scientific and technical activities	59%	6%	6%	27%	3%	100%
Public administration and defence	43%	8%	10%	5%	34%	100%

Long-Term Outcomes for Research Graduates: A CSO Data Perspective

Introduction

The Central Statistics Office houses a longitudinal database on graduates of higher education, which links HEA graduate records with social welfare and earnings data. Up to 10 years of post-graduation outcomes are available on level 10 graduates (doctorate only) and the data covers main outcomes (such as employment or further study), sectors of employment and salaries.

It should be noted that CSO data is reliant on the presence of PPSNs to track graduates. Nearly half of all research students are domiciled overseas, and therefore the PPSN coverage of level 10 graduates is reasonably low. The overall coverage of level 10 graduates is approximately 250 graduates per annum, and that should be borne in mind when considering the statistics which follow.

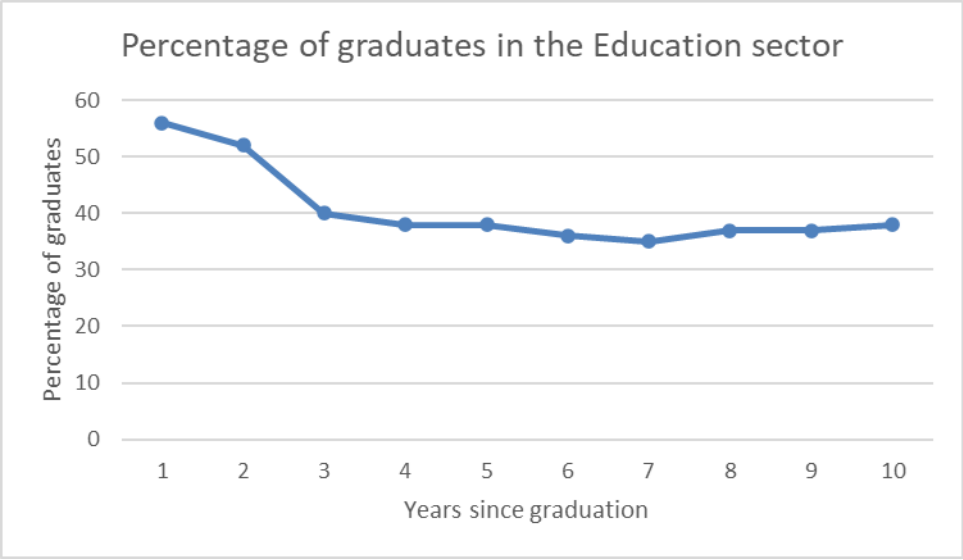
Across the ten-year period which data was recorded, Education consistently represents the largest share of respondents, accounting for between 35% and 56% each year. Although its proportion decreases from a high of 56% in Year 1 to around 38%-40% in later years, it remains the dominant sector throughout.

Table 6 - Longitudinal Employment Outcomes of Research Graduate Student (Up to 10 Years Post-Graduation)

Year	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Education	56%	52%	40%	38%	38%	36%	35%	37%	37%	38%
Industry	16%	17%	20%	19%	23%	24%	23%	22%	22%	23%
Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities	8%	9%	12%	12%	12%	8%	12%	11%	11%	15%
Human Health and Social Work Activities	8%	9%	8%	8%	8%	8%	8%	7%	7%	8%
Public Administration and Defense	4%	4%	4%	8%	4%	4%	8%	7%	7%	8%
Information and communication	4%	4%	4%	4%	4%	8%	8%	7%	7%	4%
Wholesale and Retail Trade	0%	0%	4%	4%	4%	4%	4%	4%	4%	4%
Financial & Real Estate	0%	0%	4%	4%	4%	4%	4%	4%	4%	0%
Administrative and Support Service Activities	4%	4%	4%	4%	4%	4%	0%	0%	0%	0%

Education

Table 7 - the percentage of graduates employed in the Education sector since graduation year 2010



Industry

The second-largest sector is Industry, which shows a gradual rise over time from 16% in Year 1 to 23% by Year 10. This steady growth suggests strengthening representation from manufacturing and related industrial fields.

Human Health and Social Work Activities

Human Health and Social Work Activities remain remarkably stable across all years, maintaining a steady 7-9%. This consistency indicates a reliably represented workforce in health and social care roles.

Career supports for research students

There are several initiatives in place to support research students in exploring non-academic careers. Take, for example the HEA funded Odyssey Programme. As Academic jobs are limited, and many PhD graduates look for opportunities in other sectors. Odyssey gives students the tools and confidence to use the transferable skills they've gained during their studies to build fulfilling careers outside the traditional academic route. It is estimated that 14 HEIs have completed the pilot program for this initiative.

Additionally, Enterprise Ireland (EI) run PhDStart a grant hiring scheme for PHD students where Employers can hire a PhD graduate on a full-time, 24-month contract under a co-funded arrangement with Enterprise Ireland (EI). EI provides 50% of eligible salary costs, up to a maximum contribution of €62,000 over two years, based on Irish University Association PD1 researcher salary scales. Employers may choose to pay a higher salary if desired. In addition, eligible R&D expenditure including the cost of employing a PhD graduate may qualify for the 30% R&D corporation tax credit, subject to company-specific tax advice. Enterprise Ireland also offers match-making support to connect companies with PhD graduates whose expertise aligns with business needs.

For further reading and a European perspective, The Research and Innovation Careers Observatory (ReICO) is a joint OECD - European Commission initiative that provides comparable international data on careers in research and innovation. It brings together indicators on skills, employment, and mobility to support evidence-based policy across EU and OECD countries. Readers can explore the ReICO dashboards and related resources on the OECD and ERA Talent Platform website. An OECD-EU Survey on Research and Development Careers is planned for 2026, and a live test version is currently available here.

Summary

Across the PGR StudentSurvey.ie and the Graduate Outcomes Survey, a substantial proportion of postgraduate research students identify an academic career as their preferred pathway.

Over one-third of respondents (35%) selected an academic career in higher education as their first-choice career option, while a further 15% prioritised other career within higher education and 11% prioritised a research career in higher education. Taken together, this indicates that the majority of PGR students express a primary interest in careers located within the higher education sector while still in study.

Analysis of short-term outcomes from the Graduate Outcomes Survey shows that a notable share of research graduates initially enter research-related roles after graduation. Nine months after graduation, 18.6% of postgraduate research graduates reported their occupation as Postdoctoral Researcher.

However, longitudinal analysis using CSO Higher Education Outcomes data demonstrates that most research graduates do not remain in academic research roles over time. While the Education sector remains the single largest sector of employment in the years following graduation accounting for between 35% and 56% of observed outcomes depending on years since graduation this category encompasses a wide range of roles and does not correspond exclusively to permanent academic positions.

Beyond Education, research graduates are increasingly represented across other high-skilled sectors. Employment in Industry grows steadily from 16% in Year 1 after graduation to 23% by Year 10, while Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities account for around 8-15% of outcomes over time. Human Health and Social Work Activities remain consistently represented at approximately 7-9% across all observed years.

These findings highlight a persistent gap between the strong aspiration for academic careers expressed during postgraduate research study and the longer-term employment outcomes experienced by graduates. While many PGR students begin their careers in research-oriented roles, the majority ultimately build careers across a diverse range of sectors beyond academia, underlining the importance of supporting research students to prepare for multiple high-skilled career pathways.