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A qualitative investigation into the digital competencies and food sustainability knowledge employers require of graduates in the food industry across Europe

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The food industry is experiencing a profound shift toward sustainability, defined by a growing emphasis on responsible sourcing, reducing environmental impact, and promoting social and economic well-being⁽¹⁾. This shift impacts food and nutrition graduate employability and the diverse skillsets required for success in this evolving industry. Skills including digital literacy and the ability to leverage technology for sustainable practices are increasingly valuable in the food industry. Food companies need graduates with the knowledge, abilities, and mindset to support these objectives as they work to incorporate sustainable practices into their operations. Graduates entering the food industry job market must be equipped with a solid understanding of sustainability principles and the ability to apply them in practical contexts⁽²⁾. The aim of this study was to investigate the digital competencies and food sustainability knowledge, employers require of graduates in the food industry.

This study was part of a joint Erasmus KA2 European-funded project (2022-1-IE01-KA220-VET000087508 Digitalisation of Sustainable Health Education). In-depth semi-structured, audiorecorded focus groups were conducted with 24 employers in the food industry across project partner countries in Poland (n = 10), Ireland (n = 6), and Lithuania (n = 8). Interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed, using the Braun and Clarke method^(3,4) whereby the data were coded, and themes identified.

Three main themes were identified across the compiled data, these included: (1) perception of graduate preparedness for employability, (2) digital competence of graduates, and (3) food sustainability. The first theme highlighted that graduates from food and nutrition programmes are generally well prepared for employment in the food industry. There are a diverse array of industry roles on offer for graduates with employers reporting 'on-the-job' training as an integral part of graduates onboarding experience and career progression. The vast majority of participants felt graduates are currently meeting digital competency expectations when first entering the workforce however as digital competency is ever evolving it is essential to stay up to date. All employers highlighted sustainability as a key priority of their business however, there was no single common understanding for the term sustainability identified within the data. This finding emphasises the complexity of developing food and nutrition curricula that align to industry needs.

This study has highlighted the complex nature of the food industry and the need for graduates to possess a diverse skill set. It is evident that employment in the food industry requires a combination of technical expertise, digital competencies, and an understanding of sustainability practices. To ensure that food and nutrition graduates have the skills needed to succeed in this changing sector, collaboration between educational institutions and industry stakeholders, is a priority to ensure sector specific training and continuous professional development.

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