

State of Start-Ups Survey 2026

ScaleIreland

Paul Moore Photography

Scale Ireland's *State of Start-Ups Survey 2026* offers an important snapshot of Ireland's start-up landscape, with responses from 209 Founders and CEOs of start-up and scaling businesses across a range of sectors and stages of development. For the 5th successive year, access to funding remains by far the biggest concern.

Uptake and simplification of state supports are also major concerns yet again. The significant deployment of AI and the level of preparedness for the EU's new AI act are also key themes. The findings show some improvements in the diversity of the sector, but more work needs to be done. In addition, there is huge recognition for the significant contribution of immigrants/foreign workers to our sector and the economy. While the increase to the R&D tax credit rate has been welcomed, more needs to be done to win the confidence of founders.

1 Funding Challenges

Securing funding remains the top concern, with more than half of start-ups identifying it as the biggest challenge, and 74.6% finding it difficult or very difficult to raise private capital - a slight decrease on previous years, though still high. It is however notable that the vast majority (74.5%) of respondents believe that Ireland should introduce policies to incentivise pension fund savings into indigenous companies via VC & private funds.

2 State support

Uptake and simplification of state supports remains a challenge. In relation to KEEF, 88.5% of start-ups have not used it to retain or attract staff and 45% believe the scheme needs to be reformed. 66.1% are not confident that Ireland is moving in the right direction to support start-up and scaling companies to become global leaders while 30.6% are confident or very confident.

3 AI

Almost all (94.2%) of start-ups are either deploying or considering deploying AI as part of their solution - a 6.5% increase on last year. 85% believe AI will add value to their company's performance. 35.4% of founders are not aware of the new AI Act and 36.8% don't know how the AI Act will impact their company. In addition, almost half (49.2%) of start-ups believe that the AI Act will have some impact on their business.

4 Diversity and Immigration

61.7% of start-ups have a female founder or senior (C-level reporting to CEO) staff member that is female, up 3.8% on 2025. 89.5% believe that non EU immigrants make a very significant or significant contribution to the sector and overall economy.

5 R&D Tax Credit Scheme

48.3% of start-ups say the 5% rate increase for the R&D Tax Credit scheme is positive or very positive, while only 13.8% believe it will have no impact. Interestingly, 56.4% have not availed of the R&D Tax Credit scheme.

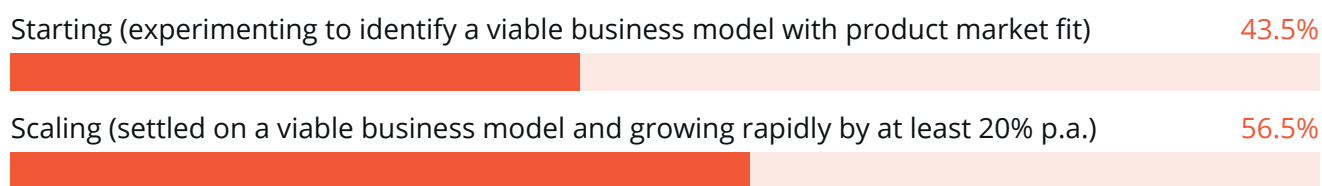
6 Sustainability

44.9% of companies believe they contribute to local or global sustainability (UN SDGs). This is a slight decrease (3.6%) from the previous year. Meanwhile 39.2% of start-ups have a sustainability or climate action plan - a slight decrease again on 2025 (41.3%).

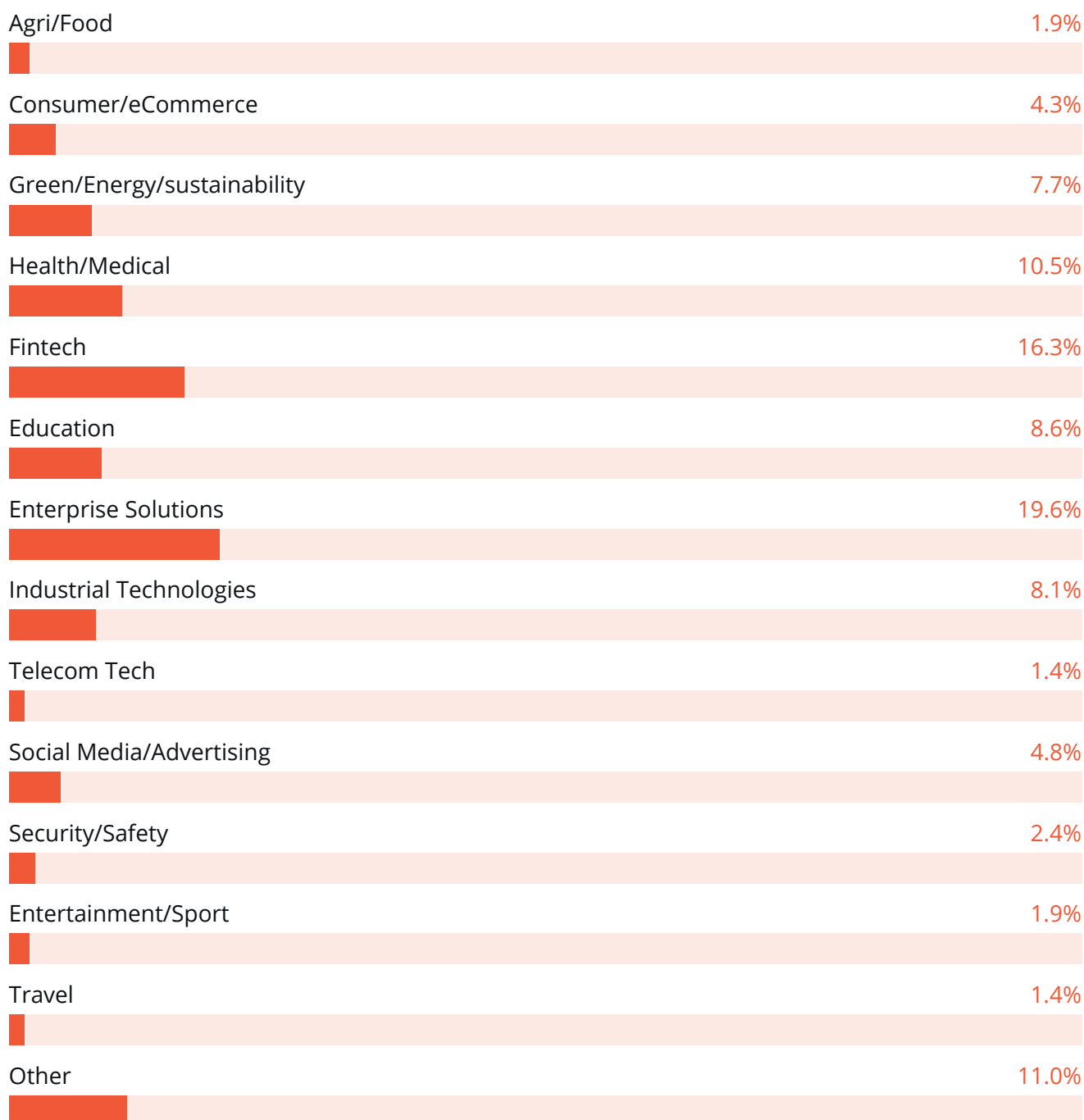


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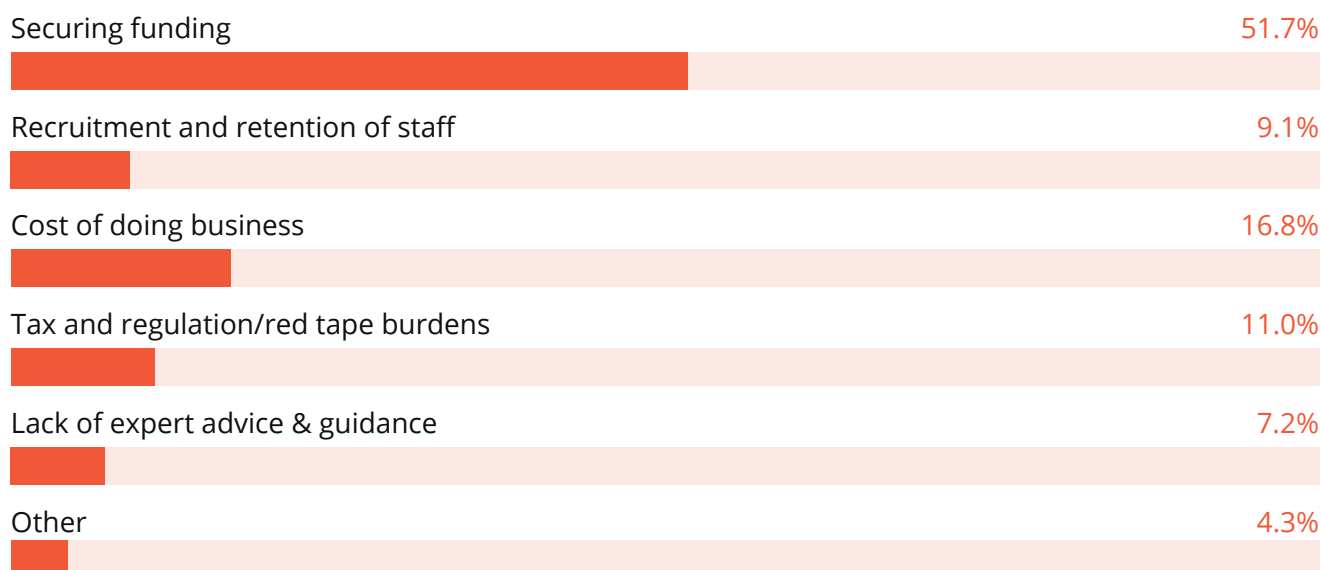
Q1 What best describes your business?



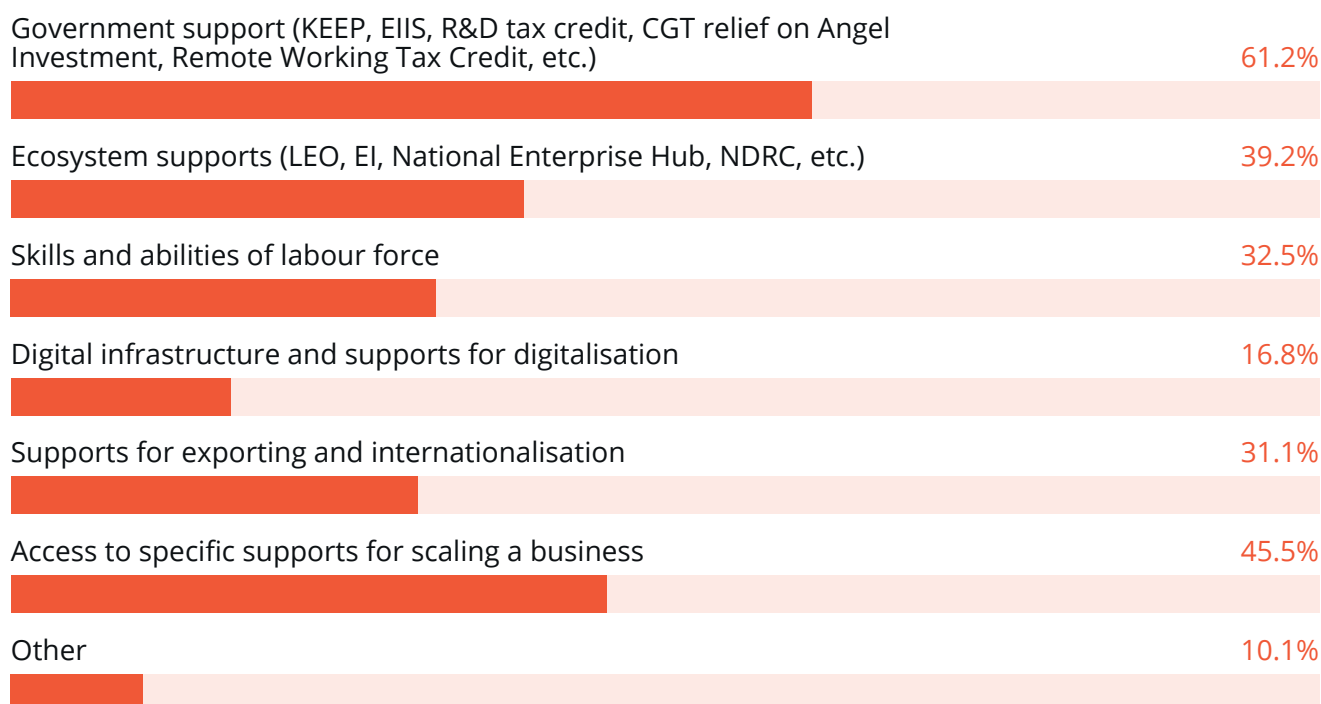
Q2 What sector is your company in?



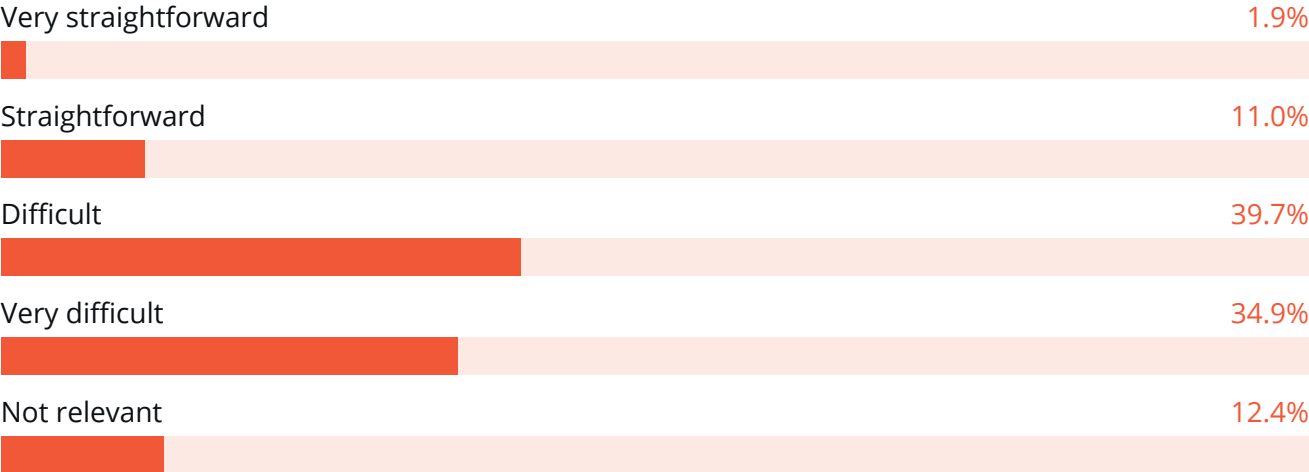
Q3 What do you think is the biggest challenge facing Irish start-ups? (select one)



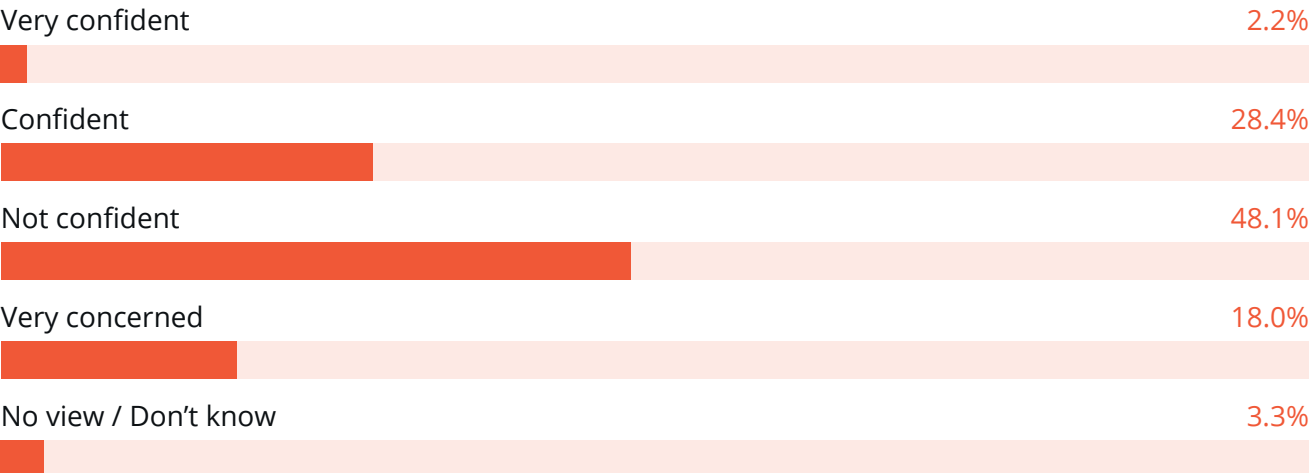
Q4 Which of the following external factors are the most critical to successfully scaling a business on the island of Ireland? (multiple choice question)



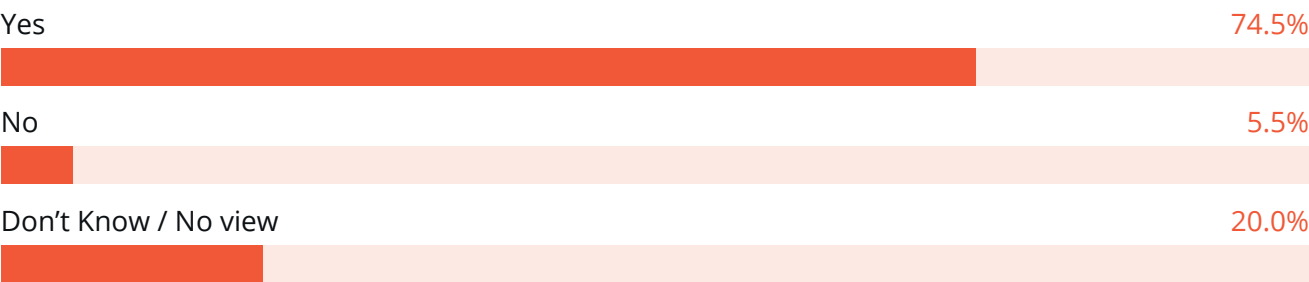
Q5 How difficult is it to attract private capital?



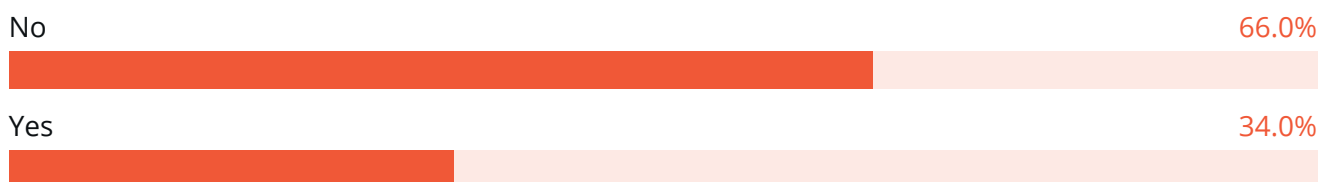
Q6 How confident are you that Ireland is moving in the right direction to support start-up and scaling companies to become global leaders?



Q7 Should Ireland follow some European countries and introduce policies to incentivise pension fund savings into indigenous companies via VC and private funds?



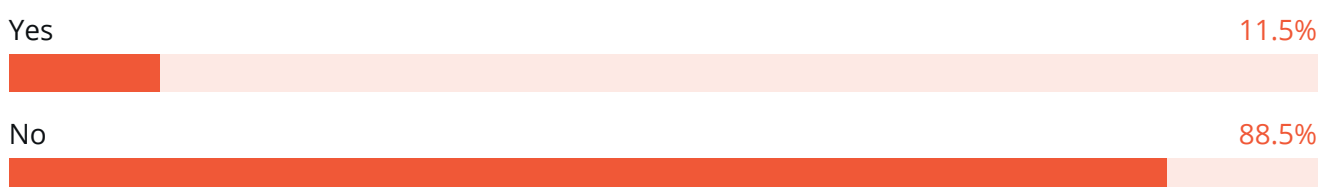
Q8 Have you lost staff in the last year?



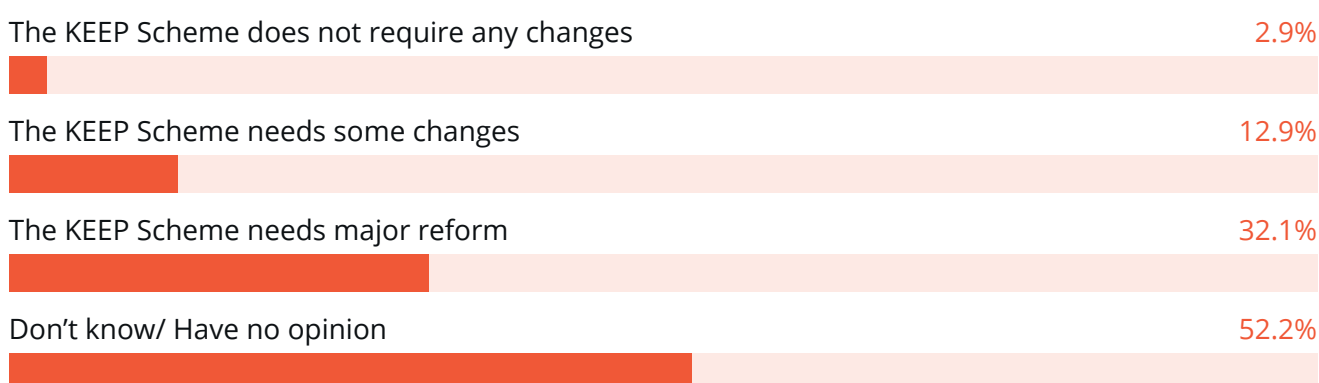
Q9 Have you let go of staff in the last year?



Q10 Have you used the Key Employee Engagement Programme scheme / KEEP share options as a means of attracting/retaining staff?



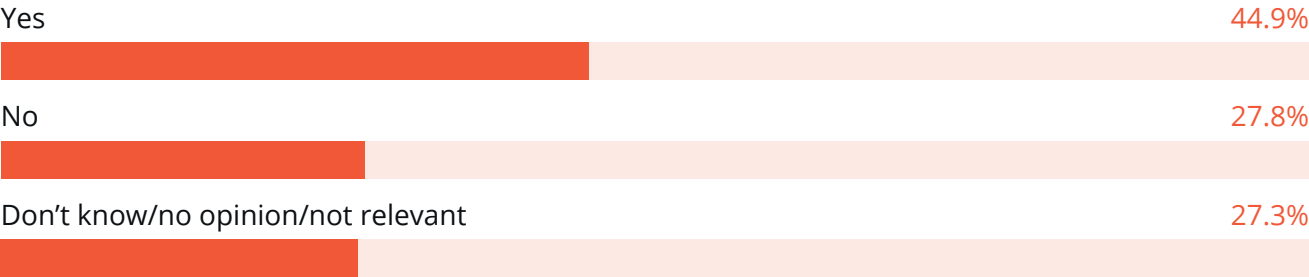
Q11 Do you agree with the following statements regarding the Key Employee Engagement Programme scheme / KEEP share options?



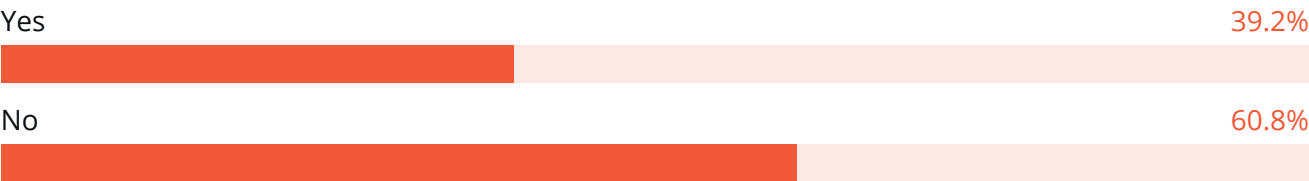
Q12 If you have availed of the Employment Investment Incentive Scheme (EIS) or have considered availing of it, how easy or difficult did you find the process?



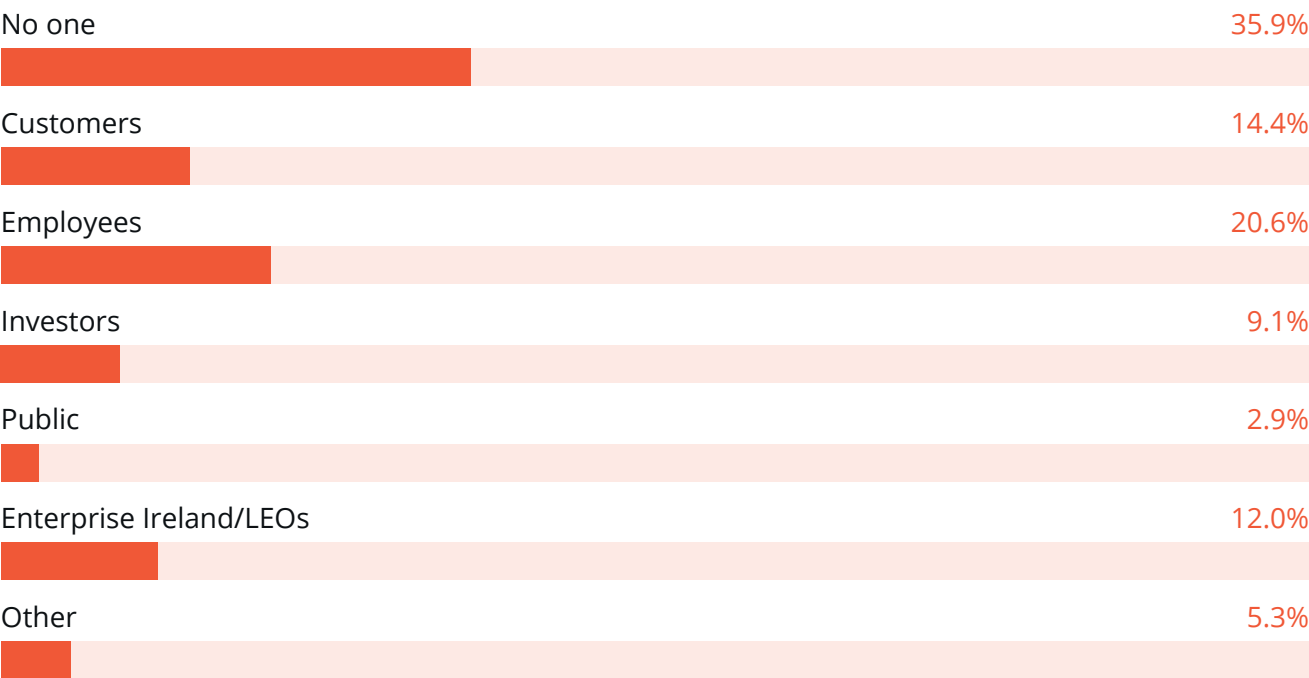
Q13 Does your start-up contribute to local or global sustainability (i.e. one of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs))?



Q14 Does your company have a Sustainability/Climate Action plan?



Q15 Which of your stakeholders are most encouraging/supportive of your organisation having a sustainability plan?



Q16 Has your company sought to avail of the R&D Tax Credit?



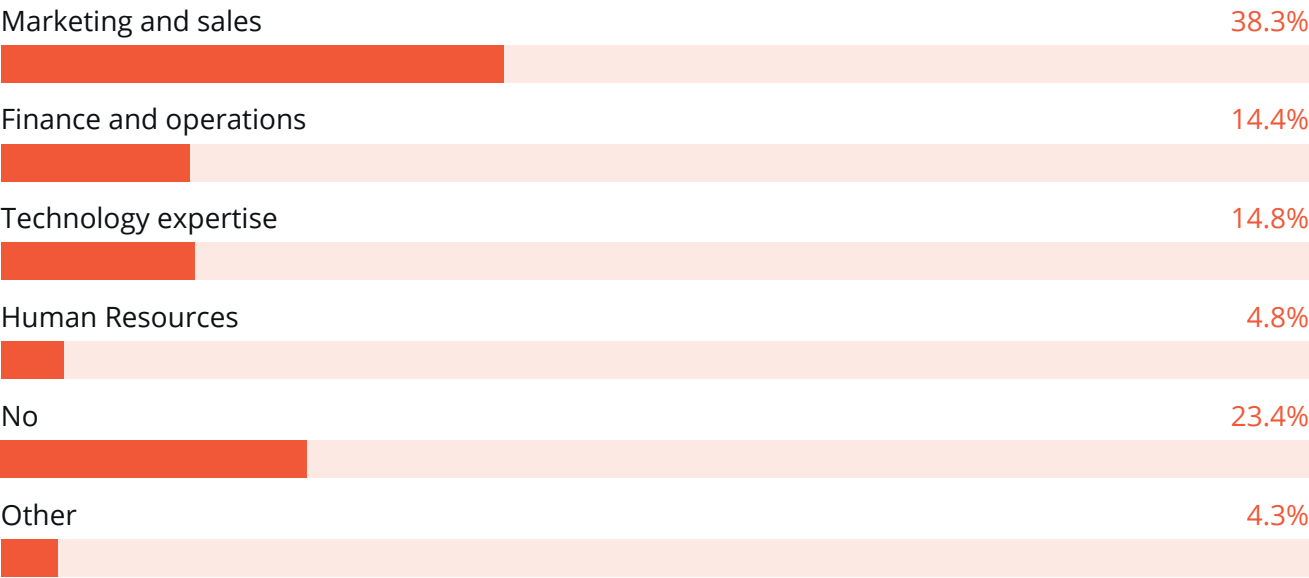
Q17 How have you found the application process for the R&D Tax Credit?



Q18 What impact will the 5% rate increase for the R&D Tax Credit scheme have ?



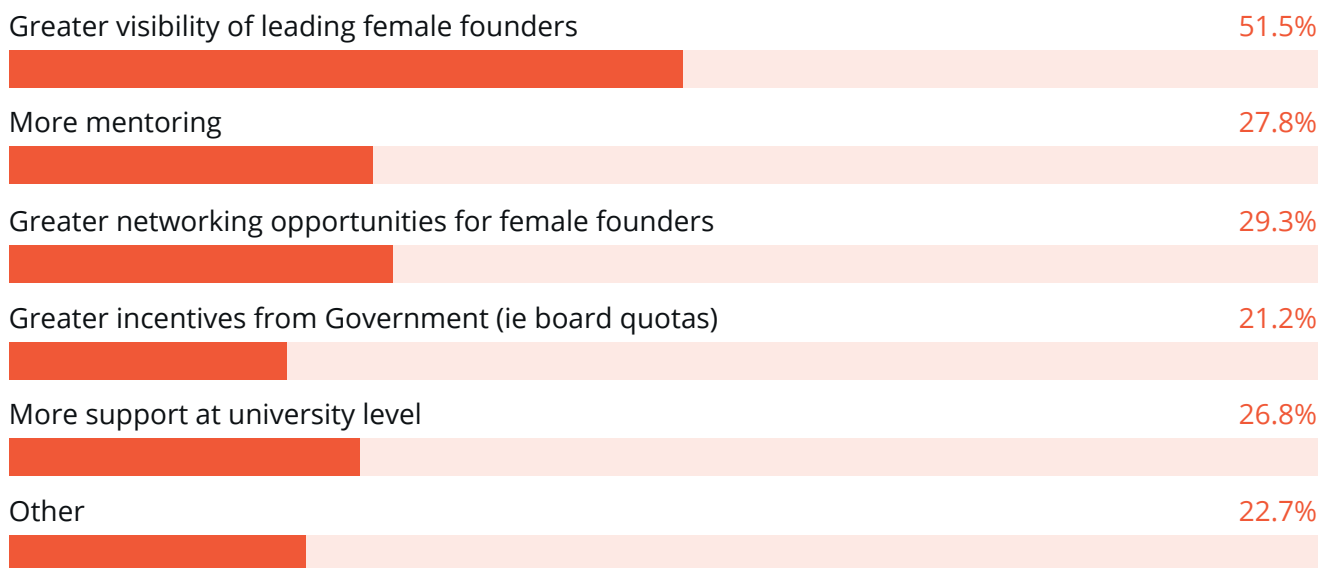
Q19 Does your company lack certain skill sets or experience?



Q20 Does your company have a female founder or senior (c-level reporting to CEO) staff that are female? (i.e. CTO, CFO)



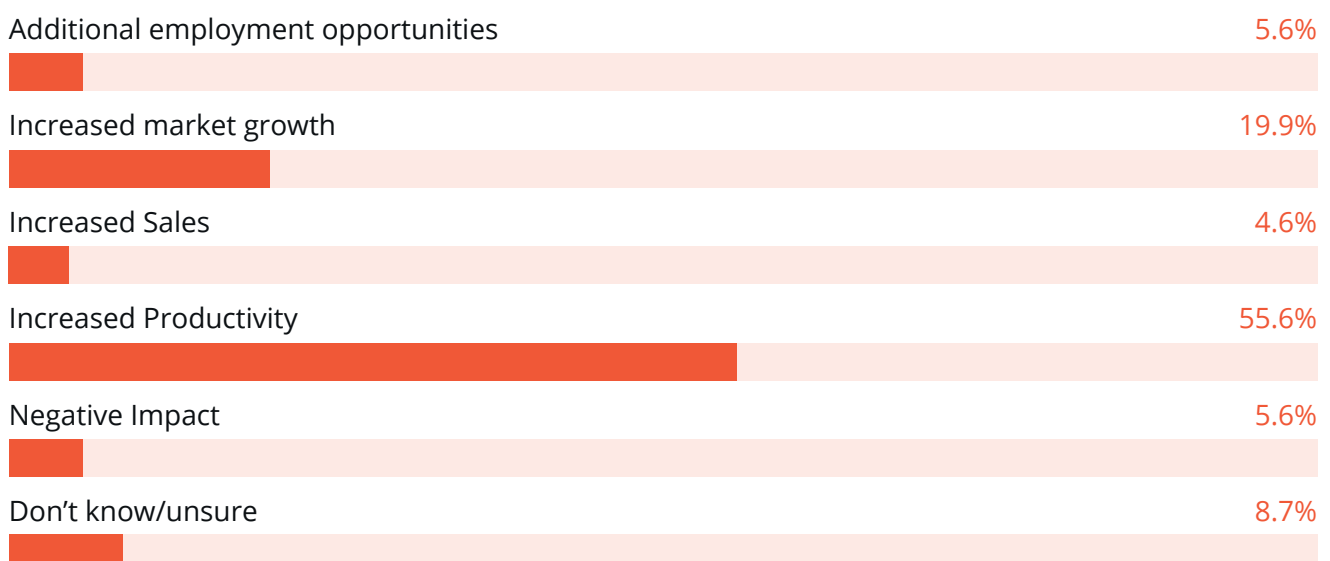
Q21 What do you think would help increase the number of female founders in Ireland? (Multiple choice answers)



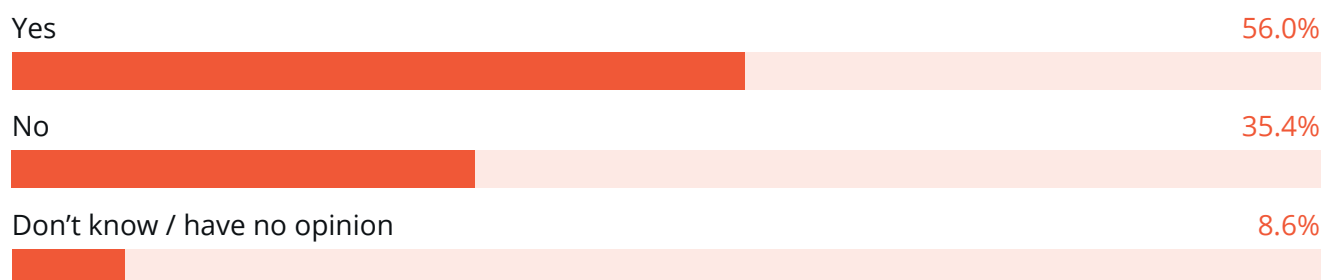
Q22 As a Founder/CEO, is your company deploying AI as part of its solution?



Q23 How will AI impact Irish businesses?



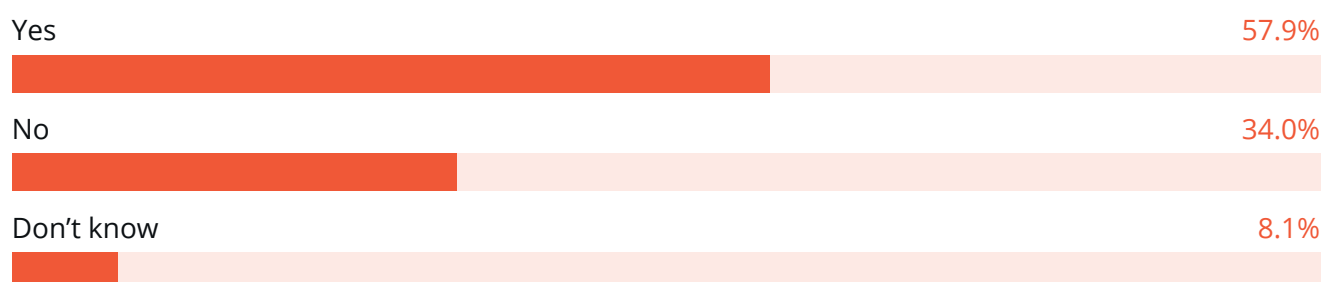
Q24 Are you aware of the new AI Act?



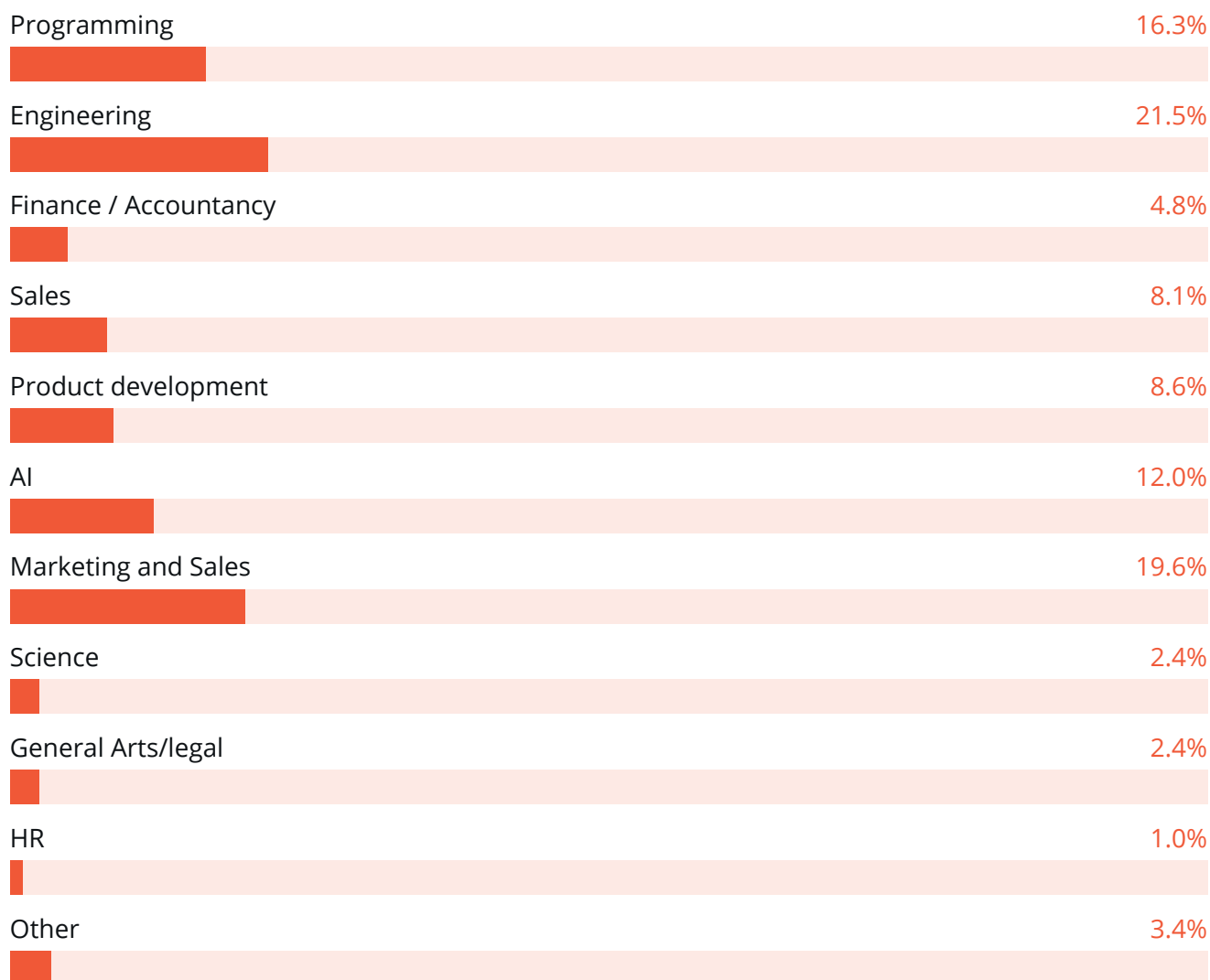
Q25 What impact do you think the AI Act will have on your company?



Q26 Do you engage or have access to students or graduates for internship or graduate programmes?



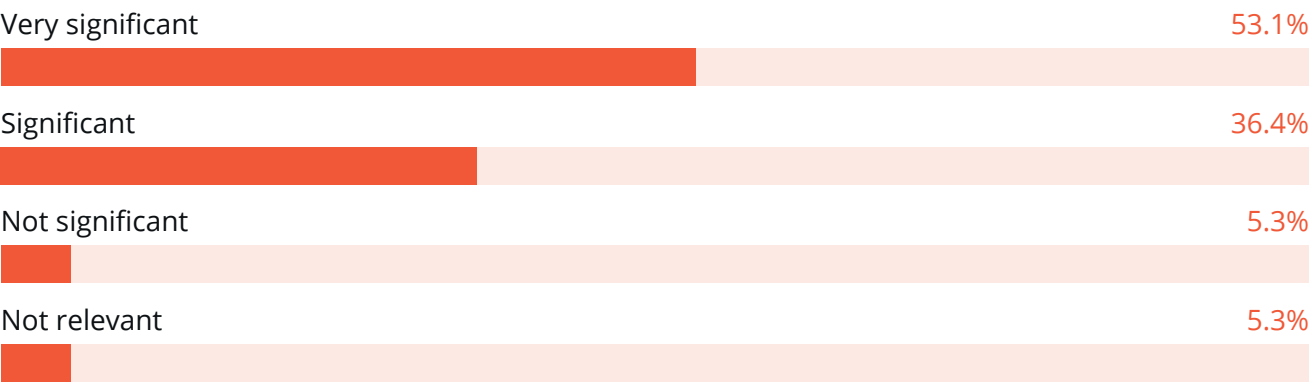
Q27 Which disciplines/educational backgrounds would be most suitable/valuable to a founder in relation to a student or graduate taking an internship in a start-up / scaling company?



Q28 Has your company employed immigrants/overseas workers (from outside the EU) entitled to work here through the work permit system or directly as is the case with the Ukrainian community?



Q29 How important a contribution do you think immigrants/ foreign workers (outside of the EU) make to the indigenous tech sector and the overall economy?



For answers with percentages, the general rule is to round to one decimal place in line with standard statistical practice

