

UUK Future Jobs roundtable

Wednesday 22 April 2026, Royal Holloway, University of London

Summary of discussion topics

1. Skills, recruitment and graduate preparedness

Recruitment challenges were understood less in terms of subject knowledge alone and more about human and transferable skills — including creative and critical thinking, communication, and adaptability.

There was strong agreement that:

- Students need better support to understand, articulate and translate their skills into recruitment processes.
- Expectations of early-career progression and salary are often misaligned with workplace reality.
- Job descriptions and recruitment processes themselves can be a barrier and may need reform.
- Mentoring or coaching at university, and experiential learning, are critical to developing work-ready graduates.

The importance of career satisfaction, realistic expectations and understanding what different sectors and roles actually involve was repeatedly highlighted.

Participants also challenged assumptions about students' willingness to engage in person, noting that many graduates actively want more in-person support and interpersonal development once in the workplace.

2. Artificial Intelligence (AI)

The opportunities attached to AI were understood to be significant but dependent on clear understanding, solid skills and knowledge base, and human thinking. Key points included:

- A lack of shared understanding of what AI actually is, and the distinction between AI and automation or basic digital tools.
- Concern about AI being framed (or badly used) as a short-cut, a cheat, or a job-replacement solution
- Agreement that critical thinking, judgement and foundational knowledge are what enable effective use of AI.

The need to demystify AI, focus on what it practically enables individuals to do better at work, and rethink assessment practices so that learning processes are valued as well as – and arguably more – than outcomes was central.

3. Derisking graduate recruitment

Employers described the risks and costs inherent in hiring. Models that successfully derisk hiring were seen to carry enormous value for graduates and universities seeking to demonstrate excellent employability. These included:

- Short, structured internships or placements in long-term partnership with employers.
- Rolling placement models that allow employers to identify high performers.
- Strong relationships with universities and academics at programme level as a form of quality assurance.

Inclusion and access to opportunities was raised as an important challenge here – how do we enable students who do not join us with the cultural capital they would need to navigate this space effectively?

Employers also raised concerns around scalability, particularly in SMEs, and limited managerial capacity to support placements during periods of pressure. However, there was clear agreement that sustained engagement with universities significantly improves recruitment and retention outcomes.

4. The future of degrees and lifelong learning

Lifelong learning, reskilling and regulatory flexibility were identified as critical challenges for the coming decade.

Participants questioned the relevance of rigid, traditional degree models in fast-changing fields, arguing for:

- More adaptable, flexible and modular approaches.
- Clearer emphasis on what students have done and learned, not simply the possession of a degree.
- Better alignment between employers and universities on skills needs.

It was however recognised that different universities serve different purposes and take different approaches – and that this diversity across the HE sector is a strength.

There was also recognition that universities serve broader purposes than simply ‘skilling’ future employees, including critical and intellectual development, independence and personal growth.

Questions arising: How can we...

Providing clarity on the current and future use of AI within industry

- How can we define how AI is practically being used at different employers?
- How can we then identify the types of skills required of graduates to succeed in workplaces which are adopting AI?
- Are these technical skills, or should the focus actually be geared towards the required human/soft skills needed to work alongside AI?
- How can assessments be reshaped to ensure that the skills associated with using AI, rather than just the outputs, are formally recognised?

Supporting students and graduates to articulate their skills

- How can students/graduates be better supported with articulating the skills they have developed at university (both academic/technical and soft/human skills)?
- How can we better map the skills needs of employers to the language used by universities to make the pipeline clearer for all stakeholders?
- How do we support young people with articulating the transferable skills that they've learnt in non-course elements of university (E.g. part-time or voluntary work)?

Articulating to young people what jobs actually entail and the possibilities associated with different careers / industries

- How do we support students/graduates to better understand the expectations of the workplace (behaviours, etc.)?
- How do we explain the variety of opportunities/roles which exist within different industries which may appear 'limited' on the surface?

Supporting young people with work experience

- How can we work towards better placements and internships for young people and embed greater understanding of what 'good work experience' looks like to ensure these opportunities are maximised?
- How do we better articulate the mutual benefits of employers taking on students for work experience and establish more effective university/employer partnerships? How can this process be 'de-risked'?
- How can SMEs be better supported to take on young people into work experience and entry level roles?