

At the Crossroads: Developing local strategies to support pathways into employment for young people

Phase 2 Report on the Cross-Sectoral Project run by Royal Holloway University of London seeking to improve employment outcomes in our regional area

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this project is to support stronger partnerships and knowledge exchange between Royal Holloway, University of London and local organisations and industries with a view to address regional skills gaps and support employment opportunities for young people in the area. A key objective is to inspire new thinking and evidence-led approaches to develop local career progression.

The project is divided into three key areas; firstly, a roundtable conference at educational charity Cumberland Lodge, to facilitate discussion between local skills providers, educators and employers. Following the conference, this report of initial recommendations was developed through consolidating current research into local skill development programmes and the recommendations from the conference discussions to produce practical recommendations for use across and between sectors. The third stage of the project involves developing and evaluating two innovation pilots to test new approaches to building skills and supporting career progression. Each phase of the project is discussed in further detail below and on page 4 of this report.



1. ONE-DAY CONFERENCE



2. REPORT



3. PILOT PROJECTS

► Phase I: Conference

Phase One of the project involved a one-day conference that took place at educational charity, Cumberland Lodge, in May 2024. 40 delegates were invited from across the Berkshire and Surrey region, from education, industry and policy. Young people working or attending university in the local area were also invited, with two young people speaking as part of a panel to discuss their own lived experiences. Structured presentations were separated into three key sessions focusing on addressing inequalities, regional skills gaps and developing systems of support to address these gaps. Breakout sessions were arranged for the afternoon, allowing groups to bring together insights from the day's discussions to answer the following key questions:

1. How can we create long-lasting structures to increase collaboration between education and industry?
2. Are there new ways of systematically incorporating varied perspectives into recruitment and promotion initiatives in priority skills areas where there are skills gaps?
3. How can skills and education sectors be more responsive to employers needs to better prepare students for professional success in key priority areas in our region?
4. What can we learn from other sectors or locations within and outside our region to improve our approach to upskilling and cross-skilling employees?

You can see more information about the conference, including the conference programme and delegate list, on our project [website](#)ⁱ.

▶ Phase II: Report

Analysing the conference proceedings and questions fielded by participants resulted in six key themes for future development and actions.



Visible Options

Schools and careers hubs can embed employment options from a young age. Bootcamps, flexible working arrangements, visible pathways, examples of job descriptions, alumni profiles and clear advocating for a variety of job pathways can help to develop an engaged and active workforce. This needs more than just signposting, however – hearing the voices of young people, using case studies, and really engaging with students to get an experience of what their career could look like will help to broaden horizons and increase employment opportunities.

Collaborative Signalling

Employers, educators, parents and employees generally share a common goal – a productive and fulfilled workforce – but each individual’s approach does not necessarily collaborate to draw these goals together. Collaborative signalling from schools to recruiters to jobs can help to draw those linkages and show students and employees where their skills can contribute to a fulfilling and fruitful career.

Alternative Pathways

A variety of pathways post-16 exist, but emphasis on university can lead to learners feeling disenfranchised or forgotten. Meaningful and productive routes including apprenticeships, work experience, modular degree programmes and the National Apprenticeship Services are valuable routes into employment but too often forgotten in favour of university education. Valuing and advocating for alternative pathways to employment is a crucial step in ensuring broad career support.

Role Models and Mentors

Mentoring is a crucial tool for improving outcomes for those entering the workforce. Work readiness is a concept which can help us to prepare our young people for their employment journeys. Seeing yourself in a workplace is a valuable step in that journey. Mentors and role models for young people can help to bridge the gap between education and employment as seamlessly as possible.

Valuing Diversity

Young people’s perspectives are valuable in designing and engaging with supports and ensuring that a range of perspectives are represented and considered in designing supports and structures. Supporting the development of skills identified in the Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) and related material can take different structures for those with different needs. Diverse voices face diverse challenges, but also provide a valuable range of insights which can be leveraged to improve provisions and outcomes across many barriers.

Active Voices

Individuals – no matter whether in education, employment, entrepreneurship or existing – need to be empowered to engage their voice in their own development and that of others. Oracy skills are vital in all forms of life, and identifying and teaching those skills are key components of developing our young people. Embedding oracy into our education frameworks and identifying oracy as a key employment skill will assist in naming and identifying a need for development.

► Phase III: Pilot Projects

Project I: Empowering Employment Journeys: Mentoring and Role Modelling

This first pilot project will collaborate with the existing student peer mentoring scheme at Royal Holloway, University of London, and regional career hubs to strengthen the connection between peer mentoring and career development support.

Project II: Active Voices: Developing Oracy Skills in Young People

Working with Voice 21, the national charity that works with schools to build speaking and listening into the curriculum, this second project aims to identify how we can acknowledge and embed oracy as a key employability skill for young people in further education.

► Phase IV: Future Actions

The project leads² are actively seeking partners to take forward our two pilot projects and would also be delighted to engage with anyone who seeks to develop initiatives around any of our six key themes. Please do get in touch with the report authors, as listed on the final page of the report.



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INTRODUCTION

► Local Area Skills Mapping

This project looked specifically at the priorities that arose from the Berkshire and Surrey Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) to address the skills gaps in these regions. The LSIPs are employer-led and research-driven plans to support training provision and match skillsets to the needs of local employers. LSIPs were introduced by the Department for Education to better support employers and the wider economy through an actionable set of priorities that local employers, educators and training providers can help enforce to build positive change.

The Berkshire and Surrey LSIP Reports identified the following priorities:

- **Partnership:** strengthening the existing structures for enhanced and purposeful collaboration between skills and education providers and industry
- **Inclusivity:** designing and incorporating inclusive training routes into work
- **Aspiration:** promote positive progression to higher levels of study and aspirational career routes
- **Careers training:** Embedding digital and technical skills where possible
- **Support businesses:** Produce a more responsive skill system in order to better recruit, retain and develop staff
- **Support people:** support local resident access to career education and guidance to provide better access to learning, work and training pathways, as well as the promotion of good quality jobs within the local area
- **Future proofing:** Improve the labour market information about future and priority skills to meet employer demand. Establish cross sector vocational pathways.

► Royal Holloway's Social Science Expertise

The funding for this project was made possible following Royal Holloway University's award of a £2M Impact Acceleration Account (IAA) grant from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). This funding enabled the University to set up the Social Science Impact Accelerator Programme (2023 – 2028), which is designed to offer funding, training and support for academics and partner organisations to enable greater impact from social science research in our region, the UK and internationally. By 'our region' in this instance we refer to the area around Royal Holloway's Egham campus encompassing Surrey, West London, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and along the M4 corridor.

► Key Areas for Investigation

In developing our themes for this project, we were guided by several key questions, which arose from our experience as social scientists, the pre-existing literature and the goals of the Social Science Impact Accelerator:

- How can we create long-lasting structures to increase collaboration between education and industry?
- Are there new ways of systematically incorporating youth perspectives into recruitment and promotion initiatives in priority skills areas where there are skills gaps?
- How can skills and education sectors be more responsive to employers' needs to better prepare students for professional success in key priority areas in our region?

Further to this, the publication of the LSIP reports for Berkshire and Surrey emphasised three key areas as particularly significant to the regional skills gap:

- lack of functional and language skills,
- limited digital and creative skills
- high demand for health and social care jobs but a shortage of workers within this field.

To support this, the final discussion session of the day consisted of three break-out groups, focusing on these three areas.

PROJECT WORKFLOW



PHASE 1: CONFERENCE



Phase One of the project involved a one-day conference that took place at Cumberland Lodge in May 2024. 40 delegates were invited from across the Berkshire and Surrey region, from the areas of education, industry and policy. The conference involved structured presentations separated into three key sessions focusing on addressing inequalities, regional skills gaps and developing systems of support to address these gaps. Presentations were given from employers, educators and local council members, as well as several young people who discussed their lived experience with apprenticeships and employment. A breakout session was arranged for the afternoon, allowing smaller groups to bring together insights from the day's discussions to answer the following key questions:

1. How can we create long-lasting structures to increase collaboration between education and industry?
2. Are there new ways of systematically incorporating varied perspectives into recruitment and promotion initiatives in priority skills areas where there are skills gaps?
3. How can skills and education sectors be more responsive to employers needs to better prepare students for professional success in key priority areas in our region?
4. What can we learn from other sectors or locations within and outside our region to improve our approach to upskilling and cross-skilling employees?

SESSION 1: ADDRESSING INEQUALITIES

The first presentation session focused on addressing inequalities that can act as barriers to those individuals trying to enter, re-enter or progress through the workforce. The topic of apprenticeships was discussed by a young person based on their experience of the transition from full time schooling to a working environment. It was commented that having access to traineeships and internship opportunities was an immensely helpful way to support this transition. The significance of collaboration between education providers and employers was highlighted as being particularly valuable in nurturing and retaining young talent.

During this session, internships were also raised as a significant means to address the difficulties young people face when entering employment. The film industry was identified as a particularly challenging field for young people in which to gain experience and employment, given that many jobs in this area are considered to be dependent on work experience. Following the presentations there was a whole-group discussion about the benefits of work experience opportunities for young people in terms of learning about different careers and developing their interests and passions. There was also a recognition of the issues of a 'one size fits all' recruitment process that can create further barriers for those seeking employment.

SESSION 2: KEY REGIONAL SKILLS GAPS

The second set of presentations and discussions considered the key regional skills gaps that might impact pathways into employment. This session sought to explore the areas where there are employment opportunities, and the type of skills employers are seeking in filling those vacancies. Presentations focused on the need for enhancing oracy education and outlining the areas where skill development was needed, as well as the kind of skill set required by employers. It was noted that whilst many young people aspire to achieve a good degree and secure employment, there is a possible disconnect between the education they receive and its alignment with the skill requirements of various industries. Teaching transferrable skills was regarded as difficult given the narrow scope of the school curriculum and time pressures of teaching.

A need for better development of cross-sector skills was highlighted as a particular regional skill gap, with young people requiring more support on developing digital, green, leadership and management skill sets. As raised in the Local Skills Improvement Plans, a lack of relevant skill sets coming out of education and training has resulted in an inability to meet rising demands for labour.

SESSION 3: DEVELOPING SYSTEMS AND DIRECTIONS TO SUPPORT

The final presentations of the conference brought into focus the different forms of support that could be crucial in contributing to young adult progression. This session focused on the levers of support and systems of development that are available to individuals at key points of transition, such as finishing mandatory schooling, graduating from university and returning to work. Helping to ensure progression is crucial, and without adequate language skills, amongst other competencies, young people are in danger of remaining stagnant. Although most organisations already have policies in place to recruit, retain, and develop employees, evidence of real progression is lacking.

One of the points that was raised during group discussions was the need for a clearer explanation of how young people can access career support, particularly for those aged 16-18, who often struggle with limited support available to them. Making better use of career leaders in schools to encourage collaboration between education and industry, and the importance of encouraging young people to secure employment in their local areas, were noted as key areas to focus on.

BREAKOUT GROUPS: KEY PRIORITIES FOR THE LOCAL AREA

▶ 1. Supporting Language Skills

- The needs of young people whose first language is not English are not currently addressed in relation to supporting employment and skills building, there appears to be a lack of resources for this group after leaving school. A suggested solution was to bring employers together with potential employees who have the skillset to work, and then provide support with building language skills whilst working.
- Employers need to understand the impact of the language used in recruitment information.

▶ 2. Digital and Creative Skills

- Much of the current support available for promoting skills and employment in this area is not well promoted; ScreenSkills or the Discover Creative Careers website are useful initiatives that are not well known.
- There is a need to 'break down' jobs in creative industries; within the film industry often it is only 'headline' roles (such as actor/director) that are known about.

▶ 3. Health and Social Care Jobs

- Surrey has approximately 32,000 individuals working in adult social care³ in this region alone, a number which is set to continue to increase. It is therefore imperative that young people are encouraged to enter into this area of work.
- There is also a need to perhaps 'reframe' health and social care as a career choice as this pathway may often seem unappealing. Highlighting success stories and progression rates to emphasise the positive aspects of this field would help to demonstrate that this career path is also aspirational and meaningful.

³ Skills for Care (2023) 'A summary of the adult social care sector and workforce in Surrey 2022/2023'
<https://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/Adult-Social-Care-Workforce-Data/Workforce-intelligence/documents/Local-authority-area-summary-reports/South-East/2023/Surrey-Summary.pdf>

PHASE 2: REPORT



After a fruitful conference which resulted in substantial discussion and insights, Phase 2 of the project consists of synthesising the insights into a practical report. This report document supports the needs and priorities of the conference discussion to create a set of priorities for future development of employment strategies for the local area. It further serves as a stepping-off point for the pilot projects which Royal Holloway will run in Phase 3 of this project.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to maximise participant involvement, the conference was structured in a roundtable setting to facilitate engagement and group discussion. Each table was given a set of sticky notes to use to note any significant points, key words or questions that were relevant to the topic of discussion. Following the conference, the sticky notes were collected and organised to develop key categories and themes from the day. During the conference, in-depth field notes were taken and synthesised to capture an accurate account of the conference discussion. These notes and the data gathered from the sticky note exercises were used to provide the basis for this report (Phase 2). The following overarching themes were identified:

- Visible Options
- Collaborative Signalling
- Alternative Pathways
- Role Models and Mentors
- Valuing Diversity
- Active Voices

Of these themes, Role Models and Mentors and Active Voices, were identified for developing into two pilot project schemes (Phase 3). These two themes were chosen as they most strongly aligned with the expertise and research backgrounds of our group members.

DEVELOPMENT THEMES

► Theme 1: Visible Options

A wide range of support is needed to allow for informed decisions about career options

The first theme identified was 'visible options', which encompassed the idea that career choices are more than simply deciding a career path and require wide-ranging support to help make informed decisions about future career prospects. During the conference there was much discussion about the way in which school support and school-based policies could be enhanced to demonstrate wider ranging career choices, alongside hearing from the experiences of school alumni or career ambassadors, to demonstrate the variety of options available for school leavers. Embedding this support at an earlier stage during schooling was regarded as critical to making a significant impact in terms of guidance and preparation.

A key objective of this project was to find a way to systematically incorporate youth perspectives into recruitment and the initiatives implemented to support improving skills gaps. Having insight from young people, and alumni especially, with recent experience in navigating placements and internships, was considered a more meaningful way to incorporate youth voices. Their input would allow for better support of these initiatives in providing enhanced opportunities for developing multiple skill sets. Providing a more substantial range of placement opportunities in multiple working environments was also regarded as a way for young people to gain a better idea of what their interests might be. This objective will be taken forward as part of the first pilot project (Phase 3) by including the input of young people in terms of what kind of information and support would be most productive to support progression and skills building.

► Theme 2: Collaborative Signalling

Encouraging active partnerships between industry and education

Another intended outcome from this project was to enhance collaboration between education and industry, particularly to allow education sectors to be more responsive to the needs of employers and more effectively prepare young people for successful employment. Improving collaborative efforts and partnerships can help to successfully demonstrate to young people how educational achievements and experiences are linked to different career paths. The theme of 'collaborative signalling' highlighted the need for shared understanding across education and industry, allowing for a coordinated approach to preparing young people for different working environments and the skills they will require. Strong partnerships are of mutual benefit to help better engage and equip young people to acquire their desired role and perform in it successfully.

When discussing challenges to supporting routes into employment, it was crucial to highlight the need to incorporate youth perspectives on what kind of initiatives would best facilitate bridging the skills gap and supporting recruitment initiatives. A point was raised that young people are unable to make 'good decisions without good information' (Conference, 2024), and that there is a need for schools to enhance their careers provision and one-to-one support but often these kinds of programmes are under-funded and overlooked.

One way in which this collaboration is already evidenced is the development of Career Hubs across schools and colleges in England. There have been significant changes related to education and careers support in England over the last decade. The 2011 Education Act marked a significant policy shift by transferring the responsibility for delivering career guidance for secondary school students in England from local authorities to schools and colleges (Andrews, 2011). Following this change, the publication of the Gatsby Benchmarks of good career guidance in 2014 offered schools and colleges an evidence-based framework designed to enhance career guidance outcomes. This framework aims to improve transitions between education and employment and help students make better-informed choices about their education and career pathways. These key benchmarks state that career guidance must include; learning from career and labour market information, be tailored to individual pupil needs, link the curriculum to careers, include experiences with employers, workplaces and education, and personalised guidance. To help support these benchmarks, Careers Hubs have been implemented across England since 2018 to ensure adequate career guidance across secondary schools (Percy and Tanner, 2022). During the conference a representative from the Berkshire Career Hub discussed how the hub is organised, and raised the need for using careers leaders in schools to help build a stronger team of careers support, and to act as ambassadors of different career pathways. Although there are obvious benefits of these Career Hubs, it was also raised during the group discussion that they do face several challenges; such as incorporating time to focus on career-related activities around the set curriculum and limited school budgets to support one-to-one guidance.

Strengthening alumni networks and connecting young people to them was also raised as an important way to support this transition and limit feelings of anxiety. Young people want tangible and recent anecdotes from alumni who are close in age. It was discussed during the conference that using alumni speakers in education settings, who are early in their career and often have less clearly established pathways makes them much easier to relate to. Collaborative signalling, with a focus on building on the Career Hub strategy, is one of the pilot projects that will be taken forward to help support skills development for young people (Phase 3).

Theme 3: Alternative Pathways

Demonstrating the importance of different routes into employment

Despite there being a multitude of pathways for young people after school, attending university is often the route most focused on by schools. Informing young people about wider opportunities outside of further education will help to support a wider range of interest and skillset and is an important step in demonstrating alternative pathways into employment. This is especially significant for those young people who may feel further education is not financially viable or who may have other responsibilities or barriers that prevent them from applying to university.

Meaningful work experience was discussed during the conference by a young person who reflected on their position at a production company with a specific focus on developing under-represented individuals in the film, television and creative industries. One of the highlights of this experience was the value in working outside of an office environment as well as the networking opportunities that were available which ultimately led to her securing a full-time role.

Not every young person is ready for the stage that they are often pushed towards from education, which is typically a university or career path. In order to provide more well-rounded support, it is important that there is more flexibility for young people, especially those who are unsure what type of work they want to do. During the group discussions it was suggested that every local authority has a duty to provide an offer of support for school leavers.

Apprenticeships were regarded as a significant system of support for young people in transitioning from university or school into early employment, allowing them to gain experience and build knowledge in their field of interest. Despite the clear benefits of apprenticeship schemes these were still regarded as a potential challenge to implement widely for a number of reasons. There are only limited sectors that use apprenticeships, it is not typically standard practice across a wide range of industries. There was a question as to how to best support the growth of apprenticeship schemes and how to generate more funding opportunities for these kinds of schemes, particularly for individuals from marginalised backgrounds. Funding for apprenticeships was often found to be a short-term option rather than a long-term programme.

► Theme 4: Role Models and Mentors

Supporting skill development through mentoring partnerships and role modelling

The fourth theme emerging from the conference discussion was the type of practical and emotional support that could be provided for young people in a transition stage, with the concept of mentoring and role modelling raised in several discussions. Mentoring can be regarded as a crucial tool for improving outcomes for those entering the workforce. Mentoring in higher education serves various purposes, such as assisting with career planning, providing relevant knowledge, offering a role model to emulate, and delivering psychological, social, and emotional support. These functions are particularly beneficial for students' career development, helping them make informed career choices and easing their transition from education to employment (Crisp and Cruz 2009). Consequently, mentoring is closely linked to career and psychosocial support, which can significantly influence student career development outcomes. Work readiness is a concept which can help us to prepare our young people for their employment journeys; seeing yourself in a workplace is a valuable step in that journey. Mentors and role models for young people can therefore help to bridge the gap between education and employment as seamlessly as possible.

Mentoring at university level is commonly established to help support young people's transitions from higher education to further education, as well as supporting career interests. It was therefore suggested during conference discussion sessions that mentors and role models should have contact with current students at an earlier stage in their education, such as the start of secondary schooling, rather than waiting until their final few years of education.

Another form of support that was regarded as having the dual impact of enhancing the local economy as well as supporting transitions and skills-building, was the suggestion to encourage local organisations to 'grow your own'; cultivating talented individuals in the local area in order to enhance career prospects and skill sets. Having employers from different local industries acting in a mentoring role for young people in schools in the surrounding area would help to enhance their interest in these areas as well as supporting the development of local employment. It was commented on that a large number of young people secure employment in the area they live in and then eventually leave the area to work elsewhere or work remotely. Providing targeted training and investing in the development of current local employees helps to support upskilling and foster commitment.

► Theme 5: Valuing Diversity

Highlighting the importance of diverse and distinct experiences in education

The theme of 'valuing diversity' was one that was repeatedly brought out in discussion about multiple barriers to building skills and entering the workplace. There was a question as to how to amplify opportunities for young people who do not have the necessary qualifications or meet certain compulsory requirements to continue traditional routes to employment. Rather than solely focusing on anything 'lacking', there was a suggestion that more action was needed to support young people to value the qualities they have, such as interpersonal skills, rather than giving too much focus to educational qualifications. During the conference discussion it was also commented that there was often a difficulty with parents of young people in schools in their understanding of the benefits of 'soft skills' if they have not heard this directly from an employer. These could be defined as problem solving skills, creativity, resilience, leadership skills, social skills and a range of other practical and interpersonal skills that are highly valued within a workplace (Succi and Canovi, 2019). The Enterprise M3 LSIP report highlighted these missing skill sets, citing that gaps in areas such as communication, teamwork, customer service and employee motivation were consistently reported by employers (EM3 LSIP, 2023).

T Levels represent the UK Government's latest effort to reform vocational education by introducing this new qualification in 2020. Unlike previous reforms, this qualification is claimed to address the issue of low-quality vocational qualifications that offer a significant policy shift aimed at enhancing the status of vocational education (Terry and Orr, 2024). It is intended to provide a valuable pathway for 16-year-olds deciding on their post-compulsory education or training, with potential implications for vocational education and training (VET) systems globally.

The strong emphasis on employer involvement and job placements, seen as the primary indicator of T Levels' quality, is jeopardised by the challenge of securing enough industry placements (DfE, 2023). Ofsted, England's education and skills inspection body, also highlights employers' poor understanding of what students are expected to gain from their placements. Additionally, the goal of T Levels to provide a direct route to employment is weakened by the limited demand for level 3 qualified employees in certain fields, often resulting in students progressing to higher education rather than entering the workforce (Terry and Orr, 2024).

For those young people who have additional difficulties relating to education or learning, progressing into employment can be even more challenging. Individuals who are in PRU (Pupil Referral Unit) education are those who are unable to attend school due to illness or permanent exclusion from mainstream education. PRU's are typically intended to be a short-term solution to support young people to manage their behaviour enough to reintegrate back into regular schooling (Ofsted, 2007). Young people who are in a PRU are therefore 'further away' from moving into employment than peers and require even more specialist support to help encourage other important qualities and skill sets to develop.

Class inequalities are also still highly evident when thinking about barriers in education and the workplace. It was commented on during the group discussions that those young people from a lower socio-economic or more marginalised backgrounds may have limited experience with the kinds of communication that other young people have been involved with due to private education or wealthier economic backgrounds.

It was also raised that the previous Conservative government priorities for the education sector have served to exacerbate inequalities; young people are expected to meet restrictive standards, even if they have potential in other areas. A 'one size fits all' recruitment process can therefore create additional barriers. Additionally, irregular and demonising messaging around claiming benefits undermines the potential of talented individuals due to negative stereotyping.

Cultural background was also argued as influencing the type of roles or industries that young people applied for. Parental involvement and understanding of different job roles were regarded as a significant factor in this. It was recommended that there was a need to help inform parents about how the world of work has changed; for example, creative jobs can be well paid and stable. Creating opportunities at school level where parents can attend careers events with their children would be highly beneficial.

There was also discussion about the continued impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people and their skill development. Many young people have struggled with developing communication skills and have reported feelings of anxiety and apprehension about entering the workplace. A lack of self-confidence is also evident for some young people when thinking about future careers; often young people 'deselect' themselves from jobs due to low self-esteem about their abilities. This issue was seen as particularly prevalent for young people from marginalised backgrounds.

Experiences of neurodiversity present another challenge for some young people. During the conference there was much discussion about the need for workplaces to have a greater understanding of how individuals manage these needs and what structural barriers are often in place, for example in terms of recruitment processes. There is a need for more discussion around learning disabilities and how these can be better supported within the workplace. For those young people with special educational needs or those who are neurodivergent, transferable skills are potentially even more significant. Employers are often reluctant to hire individuals who do not immediately demonstrate soft skills, despite the fact that these individuals would make successful employees when invested in.

Student motivation was also discussed in relation to encouraging student involvement in tasks or learning that was not assessed, and how to effectively emphasise the broader purpose of education; 'how are we preparing young people for the wider purpose, not just the world of work, but also equipping them to be prepared for life and finding joy in learning?' (Conference, 2024).

Another significant barrier that was acknowledged during the whole group discussion in relation to skill-building was the increased demand for more high-level technical skills alongside the growth of the digital sector. A factor that is particularly significant given it accounts for a quarter of Berkshire's economic output (Berkshire LEP Report, 2023). The persistent growth of Artificial Intelligence has had a significant impact at university level, reshaping both the academic and industry landscapes. Industries are increasingly engaging with AI to enhance efficiency and innovation, particularly in areas of health and social care, where AI is used for rapid data processing and online assessments. Tools leveraging AI can streamline repetitive tasks, such as recording information, allowing professionals to focus on more complex activities. To stay current and relevant, it was recognised during the discussion that universities and schools need to integrate AI into their curriculum, focusing on researching and teaching with AI applications. This would ensure students are well-versed in AI technologies, preparing them for a future where AI plays a crucial role across various sectors.

Theme 6: Active Voices

Emphasising the significance of language and communication skills for employability

The importance of spoken language skills in a young person's learning has long been recognised as a significant way to ensure greater opportunities for success in the workplace. Oracy education is defined as 'the skills involved in using talk to communicate effectively across a range of social contexts' (Mercer and Dawes, 2018: 2). More recently, talking skills are also regarded as a key learning strategy; aiding to improve academic outcomes and increase engagement in learning (Voice 21, 2022).

During the conference the importance of oracy was highlighted as a 'key employability skill' (Conference, 2024), citing its significance for job interviews in particular; 'presenting well in an interview is a gateway into employment' (Conference, 2024). Oracy skills are also one of the skills employers are most likely to cite as lacking from applicants. Charity organisation Voice 21 works to increase high-quality oracy across 900 schools in the UK, supporting teachers and school leaders in embedding deliberate oracy education practices within the curriculum (Voice 21, 2022).

As part of this education, children are given opportunities to engage with audiences in different contexts and develop speaking skills by participating in presentations and school assemblies. During the conference it was noted that public speaking was something that the majority of students at university level struggled with as well, suggesting the need for oracy education to be more definitively embedded into the national curriculum for secondary school pupils and at further education level. However, despite the clear benefits discussed, implementing oracy skills can be much more challenging in practice. Often oracy tends to get left out of school curriculums due to a need to focus on other areas, such as exam building, instead seen as an 'add on' to other content. Certain subjects, such as English, are much more likely to incorporate oracy skill development into teaching than that of Maths or Geography, emphasising a need to support specialist training in oracy across multiple disciplines.

Following the presentation there was much group discussion about the importance of including oracy education as a fundamental component of the curriculum for children across primary and secondary schooling. This was regarded as being highly significant for not just work but also their social skills and ability to adequately express their identities and beliefs, so that all children would be able to 'find their voice' (Conference, 2024).

Alongside oracy, other transferrable skills were a key area of focus. It is crucial to clarify how the skills that young people acquire during their studies are transferable and directly applicable to a wide range of industry needs. This gap in understanding of what transferrable skills look like is particularly evident in the lack of connection between the assessments young people undertake and the employability skills required by industries. Many students misunderstand this link, viewing their education and degrees as merely transactional. By making these connections more explicit, we can better prepare students for their future careers and enhance the value of their educational experience. It was suggested that at school level there is a need to 'think creatively' about how to best embed transferable skills desired by employers into the curriculum.

In terms of education being a stepping stone to employment, other forms of transferable skills, such as how you present yourself, how you articulate your thoughts and communication with others, should all be included as part of school-level education. It was argued that there is a need to think about 'whole person development' rather than just education as a gateway to work (Conference, 2024). A young person's core experience with education tends to focus on grades and the outcome of a degree rather than obtaining a wide-ranging skillset. Encouraging parental responsibility with these kinds of soft skills was suggested as one way that this could be embedded early on as valuable life skills. It was remarked from those conference members who worked in schools that often emphasising the importance of these kinds of skills to parents was difficult unless they heard it directly from employers.

PHASE 3: PILOT PROJECTS



The third phase of the research project involved the development of two innovation pilot schemes based on the recommendations from the conference. It was decided the two key themes brought out from the conference would be mentoring and role modelling and developing oracy skills. These themes were chosen as the primary focus for the pilots given the expertise and research backgrounds of our project members ⁴.

⁴ Professor Jessie Ricketts is a professor in psychology who has extensive experience working with educational practitioners and a research background in reading and spoken language development in young people.

Dr Melissa Henderson is a lecturer in criminology and sociology who specialises in research relating to the use of peer mentoring practices for supporting positive development.

PROJECT I:

Empowering Employment Journeys: Mentoring and Role Modelling

Mentoring has a longstanding history of being an effective strategy help build skills and foster personal development in the workplace. This innovative pilot project will collaborate with the existing student peer mentoring scheme at Royal Holloway, University of London, and regional career hubs to strengthen the connection between peer mentoring and career development support. The project aims to increase student participation in the peer mentoring program while empowering mentors with key employability skills. Through targeted training, peer mentors will be equipped to share these skills with their mentees, thereby enhancing career readiness and allowing young people the opportunity to both learn and impart skills.

PROJECT II:

Active Voices: Developing Oracy Skills in Young People

Oracy skills are a key, but under-acknowledged, component of job readiness. Working with Voice 21, the national charity that works with schools to build speaking and listening into the curriculum, this second project aims to identify how we can acknowledge and embed oracy as a key employability skill for young people in further education. The project aims to build an oracy toolkit as an education resource for further education (FE) level students to help support the development of oracy skills for successfully entering and progressing in the workplace.

PHASE 4: FUTURE ACTIONS

One core focus emerging from the conference, and which underpins our work going forward, is that of co-creation. At numerous points through the conference, it was clear that disparate groups were attempting to resolve the same issue, but not aware of each other. With that in mind, our pilot project ideas are deliberately broad and nebulous, in order to facilitate co-creation and ensure that we take advantage of the existing experience and expertise which we had available to us at the conference, and going forward in developing employment initiatives in our local area.

Our broadly defined pilot project ideas are actively seeking collaborators with experience, interest or ideas. We aim to ensure that we imbue in our pilot projects the key values which have emerged through the thematic analysis of collaboration, integrating youth voices, ensuring we account for a variety of backgrounds and experiences, and sharing successful initiatives to amplify and expand on successes already in our area. Thus, the project group are actively seeking partners to take forward our two pilot projects, particularly those who have an interest or desire to advance the project objectives.

We would also be delighted to engage with anyone who seeks to develop initiatives around any of our six key themes.

The report authors, Dr Melissa Henderson and Dr Aislinn O'Connell, will collate expressions of interest in the pilot projects and establish the pilot projects. Please do get in contact with them via email or through our website if you wish to be involved.

PROJECT PARTNERS

Royal Holloway University of London Social Science Impact Accelerator

Royal Holloway's Social Science Impact Accelerator programme offers funding, training and support for academics and partner organisations to maximise the real-world impact of our world-leading social science research. Our wide-ranging portfolio includes expertise relevant to the challenges in sustainability, education, health, justice, communities, economic development, inequalities, civic participation, and many others.

This programme is funded by an Impact Acceleration Account (IAA) grant from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) from 2023-28.

Programme activities include:

- Funding impact and engagement projects
- Residencies, both outward (researchers spending time at a partner organisation) and inward (partner staff spending time at Royal Holloway)
- Training and networking events
- Public engagement bursaries for Early Career Researchers and PhD students
- Impact-focused PhD studentships, with regional partner organisations

We are particularly interested in hearing from prospective partners in our region – as defined by our campuses in Egham and London, and including Surrey, West London, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and the M4 corridor. Please email socialscienceimpact@rhul.ac.uk to find out more about opportunities.

The authors would particularly like to thank Emily Gow, Research Impact Manager at Royal Holloway, for her enthusiastic support and advice at all stages of the project.

Cumberland Lodge

Cumberland Lodge is an educational charity and social enterprise that exists to empower young people to lead the conversation around social division. Providing them with the skills, perspective and confidence to question, challenge and understand some of the most complex social issues of our time.

Set in the heart of Windsor Great Park, Cumberland Lodge has been home to the educational charity since 1947. They provide a tranquil and safe environment for meaningful discussions. Over the years, generations of young people have benefitted from the transformative experience of being at Cumberland Lodge.

Day-to-day, the buildings and facilities operate as a social enterprise, hosting multi-day residential retreats, workshops, conferences and similar events on a commercial basis for groups of up to 100 delegates. Regular clients include university departments, legal and medical training bodies, and many other public sector, private sector, and not-for-profit organisations.

Project Steering Group Members

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