

# Talent and Skills Conference

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October 2024



# An ecosystem comes together with the objective to build the skills sector we need

The UK's fragmented talent and skills sector must work together to build the talent pipeline the UK needs and develop brilliant career opportunities for the next generation. That's the idea behind Talent & Skills Connect (T&SC), the community where industry and training providers come together to share knowledge, insights, and ideas.

On the 9th September 2024, over 60 T&SC organisations came together for a Talent & Skills celebration event hosted by Digital Catapult in London. It was a big step forward for T&SC and its organiser, Innovate UK, as the T&SC community came together to learn more about each other and kick-start the process of collaboration.

The event began with a scene-setting talk from Innovate UK's departing CEO, Indro Mukerjee. He was followed by three more speakers, Laura Giddings formerly of Enginuity, Matt Butcher from Swindon and Wiltshire Institute of Technology, and Dr Ashmita Randhawa from Digital Catapult, who each set the delegate audience a series of questions or provocations.

The provocations were a great way to get the community thinking and collaborating – and, most of all, getting to know each other. Community discussions, each supported by an Innovate UK facilitator, took place in cabaret style and to foster the widest range of connections, participants switched tables for each new set of provocations. The outcome was a lively and consciousness-raising review of what works, what doesn't, and what the country needs to build a training and skills sector that enables the UK to forge ahead in a fast-changing world.



**Laura Giddings**

Former Solutions and Innovation Impact Manager, Enginuity

# Fundamental reforms needed to upskill the UK



In answer to a provocation set by Laura Giddings, Enginuity's former Solutions and Innovation Impact Manager, the T&SC community challenged some of the fundamentals of UK education.

Laura asked three questions:

- How do we address the skills mismatch in the UK?
- How do we better align education and training with industry needs?
- How do we realise inclusive career pathways?

... and the community responded in characteristic manner with knowledge and pioneering enthusiasm.

Some of the issues that delegates mentioned came from the top. Government can set a strategy, but how does that translate to actual grassroots action? And is there enough room within that strategy for the regions or industry sectors to manage the varying skills issues that they face? Detail and flexibility are often missing.

## **Speed and flexibility required**

The inflexibility of systems and cultures was a recurrent theme of conversations. For example, a lack of academic attainment demotivates able young people and prevents them from acquiring the skills they need to thrive.

**“Some of the issues that delegates mentioned came from the top. Government can set a strategy, but how does that translate to actual grassroots action?”**

Schools educate for academic success, not for applied business skills; and universities educate for what fee-paying students want, not for the skills the country needs. Even the concept of linear progression from school to university to a glittering career can blind young people and employers to the possibility of other routes. However, there were plenty of suggestions for improvement.

In Scotland, where university tuition is free, industry plays a more active part, including funding the skills they need. In addition, it was proposed we could speed up knowledge-acquisition through bite-size training that enables students and employees to dip in and out of courses that fill the skills gaps of the moment.





For innovation, speed is vital. As one delegate put it: “If you need a workforce to have skills now, you’re a bit late.” Worse, if an employer is looking for skills that really are innovative, there’s unlikely to be an off-the-shelf training programme in place. So, there’s a need for more forward-thinking, for working with early adopters to spread their knowledge and to do it in parallel with the detailed work that develops apprenticeships and university courses.

There’s risk, of course, in developing training courses. Forecasting an industry’s skills needs beyond a couple of years is fraught with problems. By the time an apprenticeship is in place, the world may have moved on, which is another argument for short, sharp training that meets needs now.

### **Employers need to spend more**

According to one delegate, “Employers rarely put their hands in their pockets.” Another noted that their reluctance to train was putting the UK at a disadvantage. At the same time, there was sympathy for employer reluctance to fund training. Some are on such tight margins, they can’t spare the funds, while SMEs tend to be so involved in the day-to-day business of making a profit, they lack the time or resources to think ahead.

However, there were plenty of suggestions for cutting through employer resistance. One delegate’s project included a rule that no form directed at SMEs should take more than ten minutes to complete. In some Scandinavian models, it is obligatory for businesses to give their teams days off for training. Elsewhere in Europe, employer organisations do much more to organise a collective training effort.

Work experience is also in decline. One solution was to replace the hard-to-fill, two-week slot with something simpler: online engagement followed by work in class followed by a day onsite to shadow a worker.

### **Motivating harder-to-reach communities**

For many young people, an apprenticeship is out of reach because they don’t meet entry requirements. Others live in places where public transport is limited, or they are beyond the catchment area for a training scheme. One delegate noted that funding for training tends to go to people who are already educated. We are failing people with low skills and those who had a bad experience at school or college.

Removing the barriers to training would do a lot to improve diversity in the workforce. We also need to do much more to communicate what’s available, allowing communities to experience success and see the benefits that investment can bring to them.

### **Fixing regional imbalances**

Delegates wanted to see far more joined-up thinking about regional skills needs. Hinkley Point in Somerset was just one example of several regional mismatches. Not enough was being done to engage with local education providers to generate the skills needed. For example, instead of re-training employees lost to the steel industry in South Wales, contractors were importing skills from as far away as Scotland. Employees were flying up and down the country – impacting our environment – at the beginning and end of each week.

Having the labour and skills in the right place at the right time is essential. We should be creating a local training infrastructure that people can tap into at any time of their lives.



**Matthew Butcher**  
Vice Principal – Swindon & Wiltshire Institute of Technology

# More communication, more joined-up thinking

In a thriving economy, the ambitions of business and education should be aligned. However things don't often work out that way, which prompted Matt Butcher, Vice Principal of Swindon and Wiltshire Institute of Technology to set the T&SC community a second set of provocations.

Matt asked two questions:

- How do we work with business to create confidence to invest in skills and training?
- How do we create more opportunities for people to gain the skills needed for the high value jobs the UK needs?

His questions stimulated conversations about communication and motivation, and how fresh thinking might bring the two sectors closer together.

## **Skills and training need a higher corporate profile**

For many businesses, the biggest barrier to training is the feeling that their investment will be wasted. They think that the most likely outcome of training an employee or running an apprenticeship is that, when qualified, the employee will move elsewhere to another employer offering a higher salary. This will always be a problem if some companies invest in training, while others don't. So, maybe a solution is for the costs of training to be borne collectively, for example, by an industry or a local chamber of commerce.

A problem in larger businesses is that senior leaders rarely earn brownie points for showing an interest in training. Talking to younger people about training and industry opportunities is not a driver for promotion. So, for instance, when a representative is needed for an industry event about apprenticeships, they'll send a more junior executive – possibly someone who has quite recently been through an apprenticeship themselves. As a result, potential industry recruits don't get to hear top-level insights into the excitement and opportunities that might persuade them to join that industry.

## **Employers are unaware of what training is available**

Some delegates felt that employers struggle because they don't know what training is available. One thought that the Government had been keen to promote options to educators but had neglected to reach out to employers or learners.

Sector fragmentation made it harder to find training because there was no one authoritative source of information, which one delegate described as 'the gospel'. Perhaps this is what has spurred the growth of intermediaries to bridge the gap between employers and colleges.



### More speed, simpler qualifications

Technology moves at such speed that it often outpaces the qualifications that we create to teach it. By the time a learner has reached the end of a course, the technology they need has moved on. One delegate – a fan of apprenticeships – thought that businesses needed something shorter. We need to change the model to offer flexible, modular courses that employees could dip in and out of to suit their needs.

Another delegate described a practical example of this problem in a company that installed heat pump systems. However, the company's installers were unable to disconnect existing equipment because only technicians with gas-safe qualifications were permitted to perform that task. The company didn't need its teams to have the full qualification, just a standalone certification to make a safe disconnection.

Communicating these needs to colleges and universities is tricky. Some larger organisations have managed it by working collaboratively on course content. They provide their own skilled staff to teach the courses that they then send their own teams on.

### More consistency

Finally, there was a request to stop renaming things and reinventing the wheel. It's hard enough getting small businesses to engage without a constant reworking of schemes, organisations, and qualifications. It's a turn-off because industry can't keep up.

Much of this probably derives from the fact that there are so many disparate voices – all well-intentioned – but coming from different backgrounds with different agendas. Far too many of those voices are new to skills and training. They're unaware of what's already available because the sector is so fragmented. So, they see a void and create a scheme to fill it. Which just creates more fragmentation.





**Dr Ashmita Randhawa**  
Director of R&D, Digital Catapult

# Time to loosen the straitjacket of UK education



Dr Ashmita Randhawa, Director of R&D at Digital Catapult wanted to know how collaboration might help the UK build the workforce of the future. So, she put two questions – or provocations – to the T&SC community:

- How do we create our future workforce?
- How does collaboration support the greatest impact?

Ashmita's questions sparked ideas, discussion, and plenty of suggestions for tearing up the rule book.

## **The UK education system can be a straitjacket**

One issue that attracted a lot of comment was the idea that schools, and the national curriculum, are not helping to produce the workforce the nation needs. As one delegate put it “[the curriculum] just doesn’t allow freedom for schools and even colleges to explore the possibilities of work with employers on a more meaningful basis.”

This is not the schools’ fault; they are locked into a system that focuses on literacy and numeracy. There’s no flexibility because Ofsted marks them according to a fixed set of standards imposed from above.

**“The more I’m hearing, the more I’m feeling like we really, really need DfE in the room.”**

Several delegates argued for more support for school leavers. One wanted schools to do more to help students with job interviews, with more handholding as they take their first steps into the world of work. Others were unimpressed by the approach that schools take to careers advice. One delegate, a former school governor, had offered to talk to students about careers and bring in local employers to develop hands-on activities. They were rebuffed because the school “didn’t have time for career shopping.”

It was perceived that Academy trusts can be particularly limiting for students because their careers advisers are not independent, they are employed by the trusts. Consequently, they have no incentive to show students options that involve leaving the academy before they’re 18.

The reaction from one delegate after hearing these stories: “The more I’m hearing, the more I’m feeling like we really, really need DfE [Department for Education] in the room.”

### **Business leaders warm to innovation and efficiency, less so to training**

Attendees were broadly in agreement that most businesses aren’t aware of a skills shortage until it hits them in the face. For some – SMEs especially – the idea of Industry 4.0 means very little, which makes it so much harder to persuade them to plan for the future. Much better to show them what the latest technology can do because the benefits are tangible. When a business leader understands that, that’s the lightbulb moment when they realise they’ll have to train someone up if they want to adopt this time or cost-saving technology.

There was a counter-argument that smaller businesses – SMEs and micros – tend to be the disruptors in any sector. They create new products or adopt different ways of working, and then the bigger organisations follow in their wake.

### **Plenty of training, but more collaboration needed to exploit it**

As the conversation moved on to the availability of training, the view of delegates was that it could be hard to find. Businesses tell delegates that courses don’t exist, but “when you look and you look carefully, it does exist.” The need was for a single, central source of information.

For larger organisations, availability or otherwise was less of a problem. The largest companies have the muscle to persuade a college to set up a course for a few people. For everyone else, it’s a numbers game. If smaller businesses tell colleges or universities that they need a new master’s course, the first question is invariably: ‘How many people will want it?’ So, not much happens till the volumes build, by which time we’ve already fallen behind our competitors.

One delegate described how a major international engineering company was getting things right. It had developed its own curriculum and embedded it in several universities. Integration ran deep: the company provided lecturers, took students on placements, and offered its own staff for university placements. Its approach was in complete contrast to the typical one of attending careers festivals in the hope of finding the best students and describing this minimal interaction as engagement.

### **From empowerment to shared apprenticeships**

International players rarely lack skills. If they’re missing skills in one part of their business, they ship skilled workers over from another part, possibly from the other side of the world. Everyone else must be a bit more inventive.

For one delegate, the answer was simple: “I ... say, just go and learn it, YouTube it, it’s there, you can work it out,” which, for some young people, can be a bit of a shock. For more high-end skills, they bring in contractors or reach out to overseas businesses to collaborate.

None of these approaches solves the pipeline problem, which is most acute in smaller companies. As in earlier sessions, delegates brought up the thorny question of taking on apprentices or graduates, only to lose them to a competitor as soon as they have sufficient skills and experience.

Shared apprenticeships could be a solution for areas containing a cluster of related businesses of various sizes. Instead of those businesses taking on the individual responsibility for running a full apprenticeship programme, they collectively farm out that task to an independent company. Their commitment is smaller: to take on apprentices for shorter periods or for specific projects. This approach works well for all parties. The apprentices experience a wider range of businesses and ways of working; the employers are building a shared pool of local talent.

Another way to boost skills is to let older people start apprenticeships, which happens overseas. It’s one way to bring in people later in life who would have failed to get an apprenticeship in their teens because they didn’t have the qualifications.

### **Getting recruiters involved**

Finally, there was one novel suggestion for gathering information about skills shortages: ask recruitment agencies. They, more than anyone, would be able to say what skills employers are looking for. They see the broader picture and would be able to summarise what’s missing locally, regionally, and nationally.





# Much work to be done – and plenty of enthusiasm for the task

The first Talent & Skills Connect celebration event ended with a chance for everyone to say whatever else was on their mind and to raise topics that hadn't already been aired.

## **A fresh narrative filled with hope and enthusiasm**

After a day of sharing, the T&SC community was ready to face the challenges ahead. Many said how much they enjoyed the chance to hear how professionals from other backgrounds shared their dreams and their concerns. Positivity prompted one delegate to call for a change of narrative, to drop the idea that the skills landscape is tough and fraught with problems, and replace it with a message of hope and enthusiasm. They wanted all of us who work in the sector to communicate the excitement that encourages employers to engage and be curious about the opportunities out there.

Another delegate hoped to go further. They argued for a change of culture across the whole training and educational sector. They wanted everyone to recognise that the world is changing and that they, too, must change to take advantage of the opportunities that lie ahead.

Other ideas for fresh ways of looking at things included giving engineers the same status as doctors (as happens elsewhere in the world), providing more support for the kind of teacher whose enthusiasm draws children into the excitement of STEM subjects, and thinking more broadly in terms of tertiary education (everything that comes beyond school). One change-of-culture idea would involve the whole sector: thinking about skills and talent in relation to people of every age – “from cradle to grave” – with far more emphasis on people who are already in work.



### Evidence for new skills and a call for soft skills

One topic that had not been discussed during the day was consideration of the ways of proving that someone had acquired skills that they previously lacked. If we were to provide the sort of fast, on-demand training that had been talked about earlier, and which would sit outside formal qualifications, we would need to provide evidence for those skills.

Another gap in the conversation related to soft skills. Since we've largely replaced face-to-face meetings with online interactions, we should work to improve the skills needed to make those remote interactions more engaging, efficient, and successful.

### Statistics that should get us all thinking

One delegate asked whether anyone had seen the OECD [Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development] skills-at-a-glance. They were taken aback by the size of the UK's three primary and early-years classes compared to the rest of the world. Many

countries had a ratio of one adult to two or three children; in the UK the ratio was one adult to 28 children. The UK wasn't just slightly adrift, it was a massive outlier. Could this difference explain some of the problems that were discussed earlier in the day?

The same delegate had read another recent report about youth unemployment which listed all the reasons why under-24s were struggling in the workplace, the main reason being that they didn't have any clear direction of travel, and they weren't sure where it was all heading. On the plus side, it turned out that apprentices were generally happier than their peers.

### A Talent and Skills Connect LinkedIn group is here

The Talent & Skills event was just the start of a process of connection and collaboration. To build on the progress made, Talent & Skills Connect has set up a LinkedIn group, a lively, always-on forum for discussing challenges and opportunities.

