

# Talent and Skills Conference

---

2025



# Introduction

The 2025 Innovate UK Talent & Skills Connect Conference opened with an atmosphere of energy and optimism as delegates from across industry, education and government joined together to explore how the UK can build a world-class innovation workforce.

Over coffee and early conversation, there was a shared sense of purpose: to reflect on progress, acknowledge the lessons of the past year and chart a clear direction for the future.

Debbie Johnson, Head of Innovation, Talent and Skills at Innovate UK, welcomed participants and set the tone for the day. She reflected on how far the Talent & Skills Connect programme – designed to align the UK's skills ecosystem with its innovation ambitions – has come since its inception, evolving from a network of shared interests into a national platform for collaboration.

Debbie emphasised that the UK's innovation potential rests on its people: "Our ability to innovate, to transform, to lead, depends on the talent we attract, the skills we develop and the opportunities we create for every individual to thrive," she said.

She highlighted the strong partnerships already forged through Innovate UK's Talent & Skills initiatives, spanning Catapults, further education providers and employers large and small. She also acknowledged that the challenge ahead is not just about scale, but coherence – ensuring that the many strands of work taking place across regions, sectors and policy domains connect into a clear, inclusive system that works for everyone.

As Debbie put it: "We have made real progress – but the real opportunity lies in joining the dots. Innovation happens when ideas, people and purpose come together."

After lunch, the conference shifted gears from reflection to co-creation.

Debbie introduced three workshop sessions, which invited delegates to engage directly with a series of provocations – short, focused presentations designed to spark discussion and challenge assumptions about how the UK can build a resilient, future-ready workforce. The provocations came from leaders deeply embedded in the UK's skills ecosystem, each presenting a unique perspective on how innovation, education and business must evolve together.

As the afternoon drew to a close, delegates came back together with a sense of renewed purpose. The day had covered a wide spectrum of themes – from policy alignment and foresight to practical solutions for SMEs and the future of tech talent – yet all pointed toward a shared conclusion: the UK's innovation success depends on its people.



# Innovation and skills are two halves of the same story

## In Conversation

**Tom Adeyoola**  
Executive Chair, Innovate UK

**Phil Smith**  
Chair, Skills England

The first discussion of the morning, 'The Value of Getting It Right', brought together Tom Adeyoola, Executive Chair at Innovate UK, and Phil Smith, Chair of Skills England, for a thought-provoking dialogue on the strategic importance of talent in driving innovation-led growth.

Both leaders agreed that the UK stands at a pivotal moment. Global competition, rapid technological change and new economic pressures are transforming how industries operate and what skills they need. Tom Adeyoola framed it as both a challenge and an opportunity: "If we want to lead in frontier technologies, we must lead in frontier skills," he said. "That means anticipating change, not reacting to it."

Phil Smith reflected on the essential link between skills policy and industrial strategy. He stressed that, while the UK produces outstanding research and innovation, it often struggles to translate that excellence into productivity and economic impact. "The system needs to join up," he said. "We can't have innovation on one side and skills on the other – they are two halves of the same story."

The conversation turned to the role of leadership, not just in policy but in culture. Adeyoola argued that organisations must invest in their people with the same focus they give to technology: "When we invest in people, we build resilience," he said. "When we neglect skills, we build fragility."

Smith agreed, adding that success depends on long-term thinking: Skills are infrastructure – as vital as roads and power lines. If we get them right, the benefits last for generations.

Both concluded that success will depend on creating a system that is agile, connected and inclusive – one that values learning as an ongoing process, not a phase of life.

As the morning progressed, the conversation set a clear tone for the day: the UK's innovation future is as much about people as it is about technology – and the task now is to ensure the system around them supports, enables and empowers.



UKRI Innovate UK is creating a better future by inspiring, involving and investing in businesses developing life-changing innovations.

We provide targeted sectors with expertise, facilities and funding to test, demonstrate and evolve their ideas, driving UK productivity and economic growth. Join our network and communities of innovators to realise the potential of your ideas and accelerate business growth.

# Continued growth requires collaboration and connection

## Panel 1

### Rosie Peacock (Chair)

Lead Specialist for Innovation Skills, Innovate UK

### Alex Leadley

Skills Academy Manager, CSA Catapult

### Richard Caulfield

Policy Advisor, GMColleges

### Steve Meader

Director – Talent & Skills, UKRI

### Hari Markides

Innovation Lead, Transforming Medicines Manufacturing, Innovate UK

The first panel of the day, chaired by Rosie Peacock, Lead Specialist for Innovation Skills at Innovate UK, explored the progress and potential of Talent & Skills Connect.

Rosie opened by acknowledging the programme's evolution from a fledgling collaboration into a coordinated platform linking Catapults, industry bodies and regional skills partners. "We've built the foundations," she said, "but our next step is about maintaining momentum and ensuring that what we've built continues to make a difference."

The panel brought together contributors from the Compound Semiconductors Applications (CSA) Catapult, Greater Manchester Colleges, and UKRI. Innovate UK shared insights on collaboration and connection within the skills ecosystem.

### Breaking down barriers

Discussion began with a recognition that, while innovation is thriving across the UK, the system supporting skills remains fragmented and difficult to navigate. Alex Leadley spoke about the need for clear, joined-up pathways between education and industry: "We need to make it easier for people – learners, educators and employers – to see where opportunities exist and how to get there," she said.

Richard Caulfield emphasised the importance of local engagement, particularly through colleges that act as anchors within their communities. He noted that regional networks are uniquely positioned to understand employer demand and respond quickly to emerging skills gaps – but they need flexibility, funding certainty and recognition of their strategic role.

For Innovate UK and UKRI, collaboration across the research and innovation landscape is key. Steve Meader described Talent & Skills Connect as a bridge between programmes that have traditionally operated in isolation: "We are seeing stronger alignment between funding, innovation and people development," he said. "That's how we move from good intentions to real impact."

**"We need to make it easier for learners, educators and employers to see where opportunities exist and how to get there."**

Alex Leadley, Skills Academy Manager, CSA Catapult



### Creating value through connection

The discussion turned to how Talent & Skills Connect can continue to evolve. Hari Markides highlighted the potential of cross-sector collaboration, noting that many innovation challenges – from manufacturing decarbonisation to health technology – require shared solutions and transferable skills. No single organisation or sector can solve these challenges alone. By connecting industries, we create opportunities for shared growth.

Rosie guided the conversation toward the human side of innovation – the networks, mentors and communities that enable progress. She emphasised that the success of the programme depends not only on data and strategy but on relationships: “It’s the people who connect ideas that drive innovation forward,” she said.

The panel concluded with a sense of shared optimism. The foundations have been laid – what’s needed now is persistence, alignment and a commitment to keeping people at the heart of innovation.

**“It’s the people who connect ideas that drive innovation forward.”**

**Rosie Peacock, Lead Specialist for Innovation Skills, Innovate UK**



# We need to ensure that the skills pipeline will meet future demand

## Panel 2

### **Jennifer Postles (Chair)**

Lead Specialist – Innovation Talent,  
Innovate UK

### **Gary Cutts**

Exec Director – Digital & Technologies,  
Innovate UK

### **Clare Porter**

Director for Strategic Engagement  
– Workforce & Skills, High Value  
Manufacturing Catapult

### **Dr Kate Barclay**

Skills Strategy Consultant, BioIndustry  
Association (BIA)

Following a short break, delegates reconvened for the second morning panel, chaired by Jen Postles, Lead Specialist for Innovation Talent at Innovate UK. The session invited representatives from Innovate UK, the High Value Manufacturing Catapult and the Bioindustry Association, to discuss future priorities and the policy landscape for innovation talent in the UK.

Jennifer opened by framing the discussion: “Our challenge is not a lack of talent or ideas – it’s how we align, scale and sustain them,” she said.

#### **Aligning industrial strategy and skills**

Gary Cutts began by outlining the ambition behind Innovate UK’s Digital & Technologies domain. The UK’s growth in frontier sectors – AI, quantum, cybersecurity and advanced materials – depends on a robust, adaptable workforce capable of translating research into real-world value. Yet, as Gary noted, the complexity of the system can slow us down. Businesses need clearer entry points, consistent frameworks, and confidence that the skills pipeline will meet future demand.

Dr Kate Barclay spoke from the perspective of life sciences, a sector that has seen extraordinary innovation but faces ongoing pressure to retain talent and compete globally. She highlighted that, while universities remain strong at generating scientific excellence, they often lack the mechanisms to connect that talent with the growing base of start-ups and SMEs. “The UK has incredible ingenuity,” she said. “But we need to nurture the skills to scale – not just to invent.”

Clare Porter brought an industrial lens to the conversation, drawing on her work across the High Value Manufacturing Catapult network. She emphasised the need for long-term, mission-led thinking: “Workforce change doesn’t happen overnight. If we want to deliver on the ambitions of the UK’s industrial strategy, we need to embed skills development into every part of it – from early education through to advanced manufacturing.”



#### **Collaboration, coherence and confidence**

The discussion returned repeatedly to a single word: coherence. Delegates agreed that while the UK has many successful programmes, they often operate in isolation. Creating synergy across regions, sectors, and funding mechanisms will be critical.

Jen summarised this sentiment: "We're not short of innovation or enthusiasm – we're short of visibility and coordination," she said. "The answer lies in connecting our efforts, sharing our successes and learning from one another."

As the morning session ended, the conversation looked to the future – one where lifelong learning, foresight and inclusivity define the UK's skills strategy. As Clare Porter reflected: "The technologies that will transform our world are already here. The question is whether our people and systems are ready to make the most of them."

**"We're not short of innovation or enthusiasm – we're short of visibility and coordination. The answer lies in connecting our efforts, sharing our successes and learning from one another."**

**Jennifer Postles, Lead Specialist – Innovation Talent, Innovate UK**

# Flexing training and support to meet the needs of today's SMEs

Workshop session, with provocation by **Ann Watson**, Chief Executive of Enginuity



Ann Watson, Chief Executive of Enginuity, challenged delegates to confront a hard truth: that the UK's skills system still struggles to serve the very businesses that drive its economy.

SMEs account for over 99% of UK companies, yet many remain disconnected from the training and support infrastructure designed to help them grow. Ann described this as a paradox – one rooted not in lack of goodwill but in complexity, inconsistency and competing demands.

A delegate leading the Space Placements in Industry Network (SPIN) programme, expanded on these themes in her group discussions. Drawing on her experience managing the Space Placements in Industry Network (SPIN), she described how targeted, fully supported internship programmes had allowed small firms in the space sector to host students without financial risk. “The appetite among SMEs is there,” she explained. “But without practical support – funding, mentoring and simple guidance – they can't sustain engagement.”

When funding for SPIN ended, participation from SMEs fell dramatically, from 73 companies one year to just 14 the next. It was a stark illustration of how fragile the system can be when external support disappears.

Across the workshop tables, participants echoed similar challenges: SMEs lack the time, capacity and confidence to navigate apprenticeship rules or manage trainees. Several called for a return to hands-on, personalised brokerage models – individuals or organisations that act as interpreters between policy and practice.

Discussions also highlighted the success of shared or cohort apprenticeship schemes, where small businesses combine resources to support learners collectively. Models like these, said one delegate, turn competition into collaboration – allowing even the smallest firms to play a role in building talent pipelines.

As Ann summarised: “If we keep waiting for SMEs to fit into the system, we'll be waiting forever. The system needs to flex to fit them.”

# Innovation thrives in environments where people feel safe to experiment and fail

Workshop session, with provocation by **Justine Fosh**, Chief Executive of Cogent Skills

"Innovation isn't a department," said Justine Fosh, as she took to the stage. "It's a behaviour – and behaviours can be learned."

Justine opened the session by ... opened her session by illustrating how workforce planning in high-growth sectors can be both strategic and collaborative. Through initiatives like the Skills Demand Survey and the Advanced Therapies Apprenticeship Community (ATAC), employers, providers, and industry bodies are working together to anticipate skills needs years in advance. It's not about guessing the future, she explained, but about building the capacity to adapt to it.

Clare Porter, from the High Value Manufacturing Catapult, reinforced the importance of foresight. "Every technology roadmap should come with a people roadmap," she said, arguing that many organisations still underestimate the human element of transformation.

Ian from EngineeringUK shared Clare's view, emphasising that innovation isn't confined to laboratories or R&D teams. "It emerges wherever people are encouraged to question, test and improve," he said, arguing that education must move beyond rigid structures to embrace experimentation: Innovation is a mindset, not a module.

Jen, representing Greater Manchester Combined Authority, added that while technical skills are essential, the ability to communicate, collaborate and think critically remains the true driver of progress. Her region's pilot programmes on innovation literacy have shown that when people are empowered to take creative risks, productivity and confidence rise across all sectors.

The workshop's discussions circled around one recurring theme – the need for long-term stability. Participants agreed that innovation thrives in environments where people feel safe to experiment and fail. Yet short funding cycles, inspection pressures and risk aversion make that difficult.

Several groups proposed practical solutions:

- Extend funding horizons to five or ten years to allow meaningful innovation in training.
- Embed learning through doing at all levels of education.
- Recognise and reward risk-taking, not just results.

As one participant concluded: "We don't need to teach innovation – we need to create the conditions where it can flourish."

# Carving out new technology-enabled pathways

Workshop session, with provocation by **Lorna Willis**, Chief Executive of Tech Skills

The final provocation, delivered by Lorna Willis, Chief Executive of Tech Skills, turned the spotlight on the UK's digital and technology landscape – a sector that underpins almost every part of modern industry, yet continues to face severe skills shortages.

Lorna opened with a stark observation: while demand for digital skills grows exponentially, the pathways to acquire them remain uneven and, for many, inaccessible. "We've built incredible technologies," she said. "But the system to feed the talent is still catching up."

The discussion explored how schools, employers and training providers can work more effectively to close the gap between potential and opportunity.

Participants identified a series of interlinked challenges:

- Complexity and fragmentation of technical pathways, especially apprenticeships.
- Cultural bias toward university routes, reinforced by school funding models.
- Employer recruitment practices that unintentionally exclude young or diverse candidates.

Teachers and parents were seen as critical influencers who often lack the time or information to promote alternatives. Delegates discussed ways to engage them through industry immersion, regional partnerships and real-world case studies that show the value of vocational careers.

Clare reflected on the challenge of perception, stressing the importance of making technical education aspirational once again. She argued that these roles should not be viewed as second-tier careers, but rather as the foundation of the future economy.

Ian contributed by examining generational attitudes toward innovation, noting that many young people already demonstrate creative and collaborative skills through gaming, content creation or online communities. "The challenge is helping them recognise and articulate these as employable strengths," he said.

Discussions also focused on the importance of employer-endorsed qualifications that reflect real industry needs. By aligning curricula with local business activity, learners can see a clear, tangible link between their education and their future career.

Finally, participants explored how technology could be used to support inclusivity – from AI-driven career guidance tools to virtual work experience that brings opportunities to those who might otherwise be excluded by geography or circumstance.

The workshop closed on a note of optimism. As Lorna summed up: "The talent is out there – our job is to make the pathways visible and accessible."

# The UK's innovation success depends on its people

**Dave Wilkes**, Director of the Innovation Ecosystem at Innovate UK

Dave Wilkes took to the stage to deliver the day's closing remarks. He thanked speakers, panellists, and participants for their openness and candour, noting that the strength of the conference lay not only in its content but in its honesty. "What makes today valuable is that it hasn't just been a showcase – it's been a conversation," he said. "We've identified challenges, but also opportunities to act."

Dave reflected on how Talent & Skills Connect had matured over the past year into a credible national platform – one that brings coherence to a previously fragmented landscape. "When we talk about innovation, we often focus on technology," he observed. "But technology only moves forward when people do. Our role is to make sure every individual, at every stage of their journey, has the chance to participate and contribute."

Throughout the day, several key themes emerged consistently across sessions, workshops, and panels.



## 1. Collaboration and connection

From the morning panels to the closing discussions, participants repeatedly highlighted the need for greater alignment across sectors, regions and government initiatives. The UK's skills ecosystem is rich in activity but often lacks the visibility and coordination needed for system-wide impact. Delegates agreed that Talent & Skills Connect is uniquely placed to provide that connective tissue – turning good practice into shared practice.

## 2. Empowering SMEs

SMEs were at the heart of every conversation. As Ann Watson emphasised earlier in the day, small businesses are the lifeblood of innovation, yet too often the systems designed to support them are complex or inaccessible. The call to action was clear: simplify, support, and sustain engagement through long-term funding, shared apprenticeship models, and local brokerage.

## 3. Anticipating future skills

Speakers drew attention to the growing importance of foresight – not as a one-off exercise but as a continuous discipline. By combining horizon scanning with on-the-ground intelligence from industry, the UK can ensure that training systems evolve in step with technology. As Clare Porter put it: "We can't predict everything, but we can prepare for anything."



#### 4. Lifelong learning and adaptability

Several contributions highlighted the need for a culture where learning is constant. The pace of change in digital, biotech and manufacturing means that today's skills may be obsolete tomorrow. Embedding flexibility into the education system – through modular learning, professional reskilling and accessible progression routes – will be key to resilience.

#### 5. Diversity and inclusion as drivers of innovation

Across all sessions, participants stressed that diversity – in backgrounds, perspectives and abilities – is fundamental to innovation. Neurodiverse talent, cross-disciplinary teams and non-traditional routes into work all enrich the creative process. Alnnovation thrives where people feel safe to experiment, fail, and try again.

#### 6. Coherence, confidence and clarity

Ultimately, the recurring theme was coherence: connecting the moving parts of the UK's innovation system so that individuals and businesses can navigate it with confidence. This means aligning funding cycles, policies, and partnerships around shared goals – and communicating those goals clearly to everyone involved.

#### Looking ahead

At the end of the day, when discussions ended, the atmosphere in the room was one of optimism and collective resolve. The challenges are complex, but the commitment to addressing them is real and growing. Talent & Skills Connect has become more than a forum; it is now a living network – one that can influence policy, shape practice and amplify the voices of those driving change from the ground up.

Dave Wilkes concluded with a call to action: "What we've heard today is that innovation doesn't happen in isolation. It happens in teams, in communities, in classrooms, in small businesses and global labs alike," he said. "Our task now is to connect those people, support their journeys and make the UK the best place in the world to turn talent into impact."

**"What makes today valuable is that it hasn't just been a showcase it's been a conversation, we've identified challenges, but also opportunities to act."**

**Dave Wilkes, Director, the Innovation Ecosystem, Innovate UK**

# Key takeaways

## 1. Innovation starts with people

Every discussion, panel and workshop reinforced the same truth: technology may drive progress, but people sustain it. Building a thriving innovation ecosystem depends on developing the talent, confidence, and creativity of individuals at every stage of their journey – from early learners to seasoned professionals.

## 2. Collaboration is the catalyst

Across all sectors and regions, delegates agreed that collaboration is the key to unlocking impact. Talent & Skills Connect is uniquely positioned to bridge gaps between education, industry and policy – transforming fragmented initiatives into a coherent, connected system.

## 3. SMEs are central to the skills agenda

SMEs are not just participants in the innovation landscape – they are its foundation. The UK's skills system must work for them, with simpler processes, shared apprenticeship models and long-term support structures that recognise their role as both employers and innovators.

## 4. Foresight builds resilience

Future-readiness is not about prediction, but preparation. Long-term workforce foresighting – combining horizon scanning with real-time labour market intelligence – will be vital in shaping the adaptable, multidisciplinary skills that tomorrow's industries demand.

## 5. Lifelong learning must be the norm

Innovation cannot thrive in a static system. Modular, flexible learning pathways – accessible at all career stages – will ensure that individuals can evolve with technology and continue contributing to the UK's growth.

## 6. Diversity fuels creativity

Innovation flourishes when teams reflect the diversity of the world they serve. Embracing neurodiverse talent, varied career routes and cross-disciplinary collaboration not only broadens opportunity but strengthens problem-solving and creativity across the board.

## 7. Coherence and confidence go hand in hand

The UK already has the ingredients for success: strong institutions, world-class research and committed partners. What it needs now is clarity and connection – a system that is easy to navigate, consistent in its message and confident in its purpose.