



Future-Proofed or Left Behind:

Young People's Views on AI, Skills
and Careers

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The AI Readiness Question

Young people are already using AI extensively across both their academic and personal lives, and for many it has become embedded in how they think, create, communicate, solve problems, and make decisions. There are clear signs that AI is reshaping not only how students engage with learning, supporting idea generation, productivity, research, and revision, but also how they navigate everyday life more broadly. At the same time, AI is already altering the structure of the labour market, changing the types of roles available, the skills in demand, and the pathways into employment. Yet it remains unclear whether the education system is responding with consistent, structured preparation, or adapting coherently to the pace and scale of rapid technological change.

We surveyed and interviewed 1000+ students in London and Bradford to understand their views on how ready they feel for an AI integrated labour market. What we found was:

- **Widespread but self-moderated AI use:** Most students report using AI regularly for schoolwork and everyday tasks, but this use is accompanied by clear concerns about over-reliance and the potential erosion of critical thinking and independent learning. As a result, many describe consciously attempting to self-regulate their use, setting personal boundaries to avoid becoming dependent.
- **Inconsistent school approaches:** Policies vary widely within and across schools, and many students report unclear or contradictory guidance.
- **Career uncertainty:** Students expect AI to transform work but lack structured education on how this affects specific sectors; Year 12 students in particular show a need for more awareness since they are approaching key decisions.
- **Desire for industry input:** Students report greater confidence in insights from industry experts than in current school-based AI guidance, reflecting a perception that the education system does not yet have the structures, coherence, or up-to-date expertise in place to respond effectively to rapid technological change.
- **Ethical and cognitive concerns:** Students worry about misinformation, environmental impact, and the erosion of critical thinking.

If unaddressed, the current landscape presents several risks:

- Growing inequality in AI literacy between schools
- Increased student anxiety or misinformed career decisions
- Over-reliance on AI without cognitive safeguards
- Insufficient preparation for an AI-integrated labour market.

Policy recommendations

1. Establish a National AI Literacy Framework

A national AI literacy framework should be developed and embedded across all phases of secondary and post-16 education. This framework must move beyond general digital skills and explicitly address AI-specific competencies, including the critical evaluation of AI outputs, responsible academic use, understanding ethical and societal implications, and awareness of data privacy and synthetic media.

2. Embed AI and Labour Market Foresight into Statutory Careers Education

AI transformation should be integrated more explicitly into Gatsby-aligned careers guidance, beginning earlier in secondary education. Students need structured exposure to sector-specific case studies illustrating how AI is reshaping industries, alongside clearer explanations of the difference between job transformation and job replacement. Education should also highlight emerging AI-enabled career pathways. Embedding this content before key post-16 and university decisions would reduce uncertainty, prevent reactive decision-making, and support more informed career planning.

3. Expand Structured Industry Engagement

Partnerships between schools and industries actively deploying AI should be strengthened and systematised. Increased exposure to real-world AI applications would provide students with realistic insight into workforce transformation, reduce misinformation, and help counter speculative anxiety about job displacement.

4. Prioritise “Human Advantage” Skills in Curriculum Reform

Curriculum reform should explicitly elevate the skills students themselves identify as enduringly valuable in an AI-integrated future. Critical thinking, creativity, adaptability, and interpersonal competence should be made more visible within curriculum design and assessment frameworks rather than remaining implicit outcomes.

5. Support Teacher Confidence and System Consistency

Greater national coordination is needed to reduce variation in how AI is addressed across schools and subjects. The Department for Education should provide clear national guidance on AI use in education, alongside funded and ongoing professional development to build teacher confidence in both the technical and pedagogical dimensions of AI.

Participants



1,228 Student Surveys

100 Student Interviews/Focus Groups

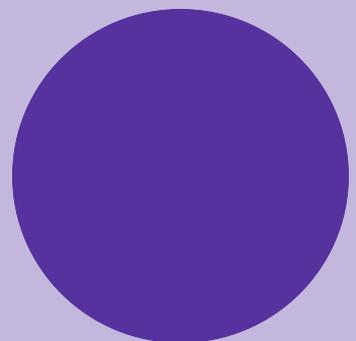
3 Schools

Location of schools:
Bradford
South East London
East London

Surveys:
566 Year 12
662 Year 13

Interviews:
58 Year 12
42 Year 13

Interviews and focus groups



Key findings

1

The majority of students use AI for school work but try to regulate their use, with many expressing concerns about its impact on their work quality and cognitive abilities.

2

Students are acutely aware of AI's limitations, including errors, hallucinations and formulaic outputs.

3

There is wide variation within and across schools in how AI is used or allowed; however, students think it is short-sighted to not integrate it meaningfully and want clear guidance on responsible and effective use.

4

Students' personal use of AI varies widely, with most using it occasionally for practical tasks, such as planning days out, while a smaller group avoids it due to privacy concerns and a desire to retain independent decision-making.

5

There is a mismatch between how students define "personal use" and their actual behaviour, as some who claim not to use AI personally still share photos or personal information for tailored advice.

6

Attitudes toward privacy reflect a generation accustomed to sharing aspects of their lives online, for whom a certain level of personal disclosure does not readily register as a privacy concern.

7

Students' views on AI and employment are mixed: while most are not highly anxious about job replacement, there is underlying uncertainty, particularly around entry-level and automatable roles.

8

Many believe their chosen professions will remain viable and see AI as more likely to transform work than fully replace it.

9

Overwhelmingly, students believe uniquely human traits, such as empathy and emotional intelligence, will remain indispensable, with AI viewed as a complementary tool in one's career rather than a replacement.

10

A key concern among students is over-reliance on AI, with many fearing it could weaken critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, and intellectual independence over time.

AI and employment

Students' views on AI and employment were mixed. While most were not highly anxious about AI replacing jobs outright, many expressed underlying uncertainty. Entry-level and automated roles, such as tasks in data analysis or certain computer science functions, were seen as the most vulnerable. Some students reported delaying decisions about future study or career paths due to uncertainty about how AI might impact their chosen fields, suggesting that rapid technological change is already influencing university decision-making.

Those pursuing traditional professions, such as law, medicine, and dentistry, expressed less concern. They believed that uniquely human traits, such as empathy, moral judgement, and the ability to understand others' perspectives, would remain indispensable and as such their roles would be safe even as AI becomes more advanced. AI was viewed as a complementary tool to reduce administrative burdens, take notes, or assist with routine tasks, rather than as a replacement for professional expertise. Many emphasised that AI cannot replicate human emotion or interaction, and that jobs requiring empathy, understanding, and human judgement will continue to rely on human skills.

Even in creative fields such as art and film, students felt human creativity and originality would remain central. They noted that AI is based on prompts and existing knowledge; it cannot independently discover, research, or generate genuinely new ideas. While AI can assist with tasks or problem-solving, it lacks emotional intelligence, imagination and the ability to innovate, and art requires a human perspective to be truly authentic. Another example came from the field of journalism: although AI might generate articles, students believed audiences will continue to value human opinion, lived experience, and perspective. More broadly, many students argued that what makes humans distinctive is their life experience and their ability to interpret situations through emotion and personal understanding, qualities they felt AI cannot authentically reproduce.

At the same time, some responses revealed partial misunderstandings about AI's capabilities and future development. A number of students equated current factual errors or hallucinations with an inability to function in complex domains such as medical diagnostics, suggesting that present limitations were being projected onto long-term potential. This points to the need for clearer education about both the capabilities and constraints of AI systems.

Some students also reflected on the broader implications of over-reliance on AI and how this might impact their own skillset. They worried that easy access to ready-made answers could reduce creative thinking, problem-solving skills, and the intrinsic drive for research and discovery. They highlighted the importance of developing human skills that AI cannot replicate: adaptability across different workplace situations, compassion, emotional intelligence and the ability to provide reassurance or comfort. Such qualities were seen not only as inherently human, but as potential differentiators in an AI-integrated labour market.

AI and employment

Students also emphasised the importance of being well-rounded beyond academics. Enrichment activities, hobbies, travel, and learning new skills, such as sign language, as one student noted, were viewed as ways to cultivate individuality, creativity, and personal distinctiveness. This suggests an emerging awareness that future employability may depend as much on uniquely human attributes as on academic achievement.

Interestingly, there were noticeable differences between Year 12 and Year 13 students. Year 13 students, who were closer to university applications and career decisions, tended to demonstrate greater awareness of AI's potential impact on their chosen professions. In contrast, many Year 12 students appeared less reflective about how AI might shape their future fields, which is somewhat concerning given that they will soon be making university and career decisions. This difference may reflect maturity, proximity to high-stakes decisions, or greater exposure to discussions about employability. Overall, many students anticipated a "half human, half AI" future, in which collaboration with AI will be a core professional skill. Their responses suggest not a belief in total displacement, but in transformation: a future in which human judgement, creativity, emotional intelligence, and adaptability remain central, but must increasingly operate alongside advanced technological systems.

Use of AI in school

Students reported varied use of AI in school settings and for homework and revision. In their majority, they used AI for specific things such as clarifying concepts, summarising, or for generating questions for revision. Many suggested that initially they embraced tools such as ChatGPT enthusiastically, particularly when the hype first emerged. They were intrigued by the speed and efficiency with which AI could generate explanations, revision materials, and practice questions and they saw it as an easy way to complete tasks. It was commonly used to summarise content, clarify difficult concepts, and support coursework planning.

However, many of them noticed that this excessive use was not beneficial for them. Several students reflected that overuse negatively affected the quality of their work and their own learning. Some noticed a decline in comprehension and focus, reporting difficulty understanding texts without AI assistance. This led them to consciously moderate their usage.

Students also quickly recognised AI's limitations. They noticed factual errors, hallucinations, and incorrect links, which reduced blind trust in the technology. Nevertheless, they acknowledged its efficiency for quick clarification and for performing specific tasks successfully. Given this, they did not want to outright stop using AI. There was only a small minority of students who said they never use AI for schoolwork.

There was significant variation between schools – and even within schools – in teacher attitudes towards the use of AI. If the schools had policies, students were not always aware of them. There was also much variation within subjects: in some subjects, teachers strongly discouraged or even penalised AI use. We did not notice any trends with regards to subjects promoting (or not) the use of AI. This was school-specific, and perhaps even teacher specific. Students often viewed outright bans as short-sighted. Many argued that AI is “here to stay,” and that blocking it merely delays inevitable integration. They also believed that students continue to use AI regardless of formal prohibitions, suggesting that teaching responsible use would be more beneficial than discouragement.

A strong theme was the lack of formal instruction. They believed schools treated AI in the same way that they viewed their generation as ‘digitally natives’ and as such did not need any training. However, they expressed a desire for structured guidance: how to use AI productively, how to avoid simply copying answers, how to verify information, and how to maintain independent thinking.

A particular concern for students was how AI could create a homogenised approach in how essays or long written responses are produced. Students noted that AI writing often follows detectable patterns, and at present they believe it is still possible to distinguish AI-generated essays from human work. An example came from personal statements for university applications, where students recognised a risk of homogenisation. If hundreds of applicants use ChatGPT to draft statements, vocabulary and phrasing may become repetitive and less distinctive. Many felt that independently crafting ideas produces more authentic and unique work and that is something they wished to retain as a core skill.

Personal use of AI

There was wide variation in how students used AI for personal purposes. Most reported occasional use for practical or everyday tasks, such as planning outings, seeking recommendations for restaurants or activities, or organising schedules. A smaller group avoided AI entirely, mainly due to privacy concerns, particularly regarding the sharing of personal information. They also felt decision making is something they wanted to retain entirely for themselves rather than trust AI to do it for them.

Interestingly, some students initially claimed they did not use AI for anything personal, but later described activities such as uploading photos of themselves for gym workout suggestions or photos of their room for decoration advice. This revealed a mismatch between how they define “personal use” and the ways they actually engage with AI platforms. It suggests that while they may not consider these interactions as “personal,” they are nonetheless sharing information about themselves.

After probing further, it became obvious that for many students, “personal use” was understood more in terms of emotional or social interaction: sharing experiences, discussing relationships, or even using AI for therapy-like conversations. However, only a small number actually used AI in this way. Most preferred human interaction with friends or family for emotional support, believing that AI lacks the ability to truly know them, understand context, or provide personalised guidance comparable to friends or family.

Some students expressed that sharing personal stories felt safe and did not encroach on their privacy as long as sensitive information, like passwords or addresses, was not included. This indicates a partial awareness of privacy concerns, but a limited understanding of broader data security and how AI platforms handle personal data. This may also reflect a generation accustomed to sharing aspects of their lives online, for whom a certain level of personal disclosure feels normal and does not necessarily register as a privacy risk.

Concerns about AI

Over-reliance and Intellectual Decline

A major concern among students was the potential for over-reliance on AI and the impact this could have on their cognitive abilities. Many feared that constant access to AI could erode critical thinking skills, problem-solving abilities, and intellectual independence. Some described the risk as “dumbing down” their generation, as the ready availability of AI reduces the need to engage deeply with tasks or think creatively.

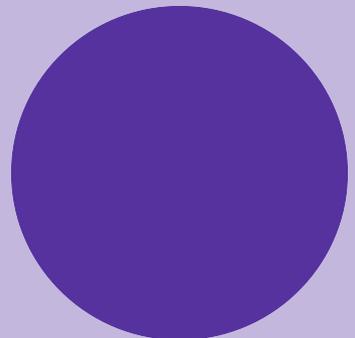
Students often contrasted themselves with older generations who developed reasoning skills without AI support. They expressed anxiety that future generations, growing up entirely alongside AI, may not develop the same capacity for independent thought or the mental resilience required to solve complex problems. Several students emphasised that AI should be used only as a support tool or last resort, rather than as a replacement for thinking, and were wary of shortcuts that could diminish their own intellectual growth.

Ethical and Environmental Concerns

Students also raised ethical and environmental considerations. Some highlighted AI’s environmental impact, particularly its energy consumption and the broader implications of large-scale AI deployment. Ethically, many felt AI is currently over-hyped and glorified, while the potential downsides, such as bias, misinformation, and the erosion of critical thinking, are rarely discussed in schools. They argued that education should combine technical instruction with opportunities to critically evaluate AI’s limitations.

A recurring concern was over-trust. Students observed that many peers assume AI outputs are correct simply because they are technologically produced, revealing gaps in critical evaluation skills. They suggested that developing the ability to question and verify AI outputs is essential to avoid misuse or misinformation. The tendency to trust information presented online reflects broader issues with believing content on social media. Some students felt this was concerning because, while it is currently often possible to identify deepfakes or AI-generated content, advancing AI technology may make this increasingly difficult in the future.

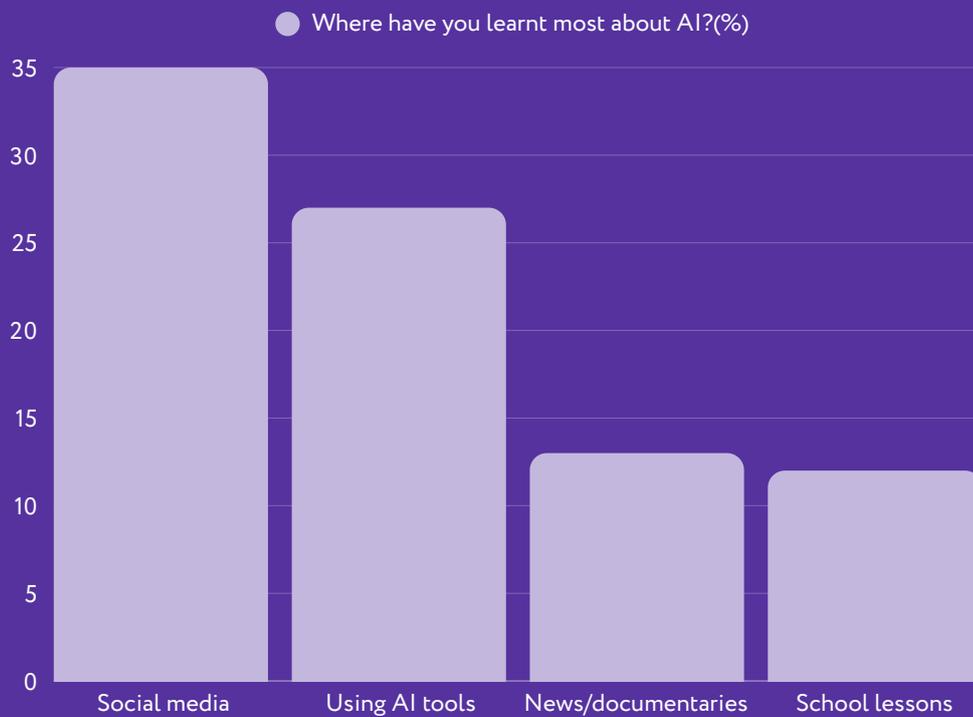
Surveys



Awareness of and exposure to AI

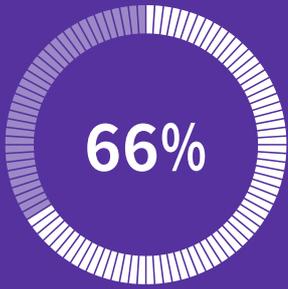


students, on average, felt quite or very familiar with AI.



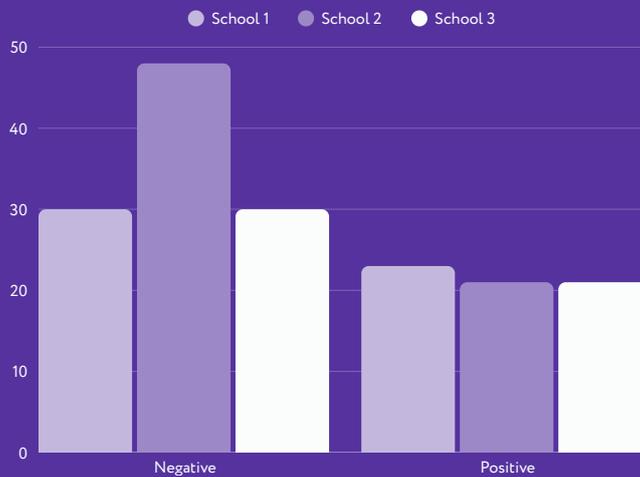
12% of students, on average, said they had learnt about AI through school lessons. The most commonly cited source of information (35%) was social media.

AI and careers

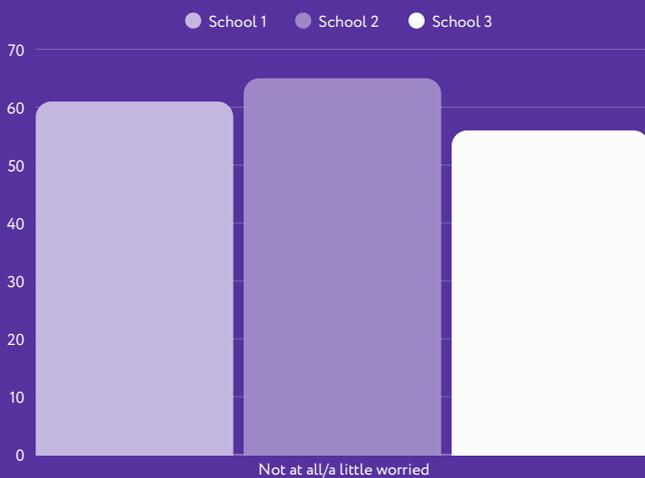


students, on average, believed AI will affect job opportunities in the future.

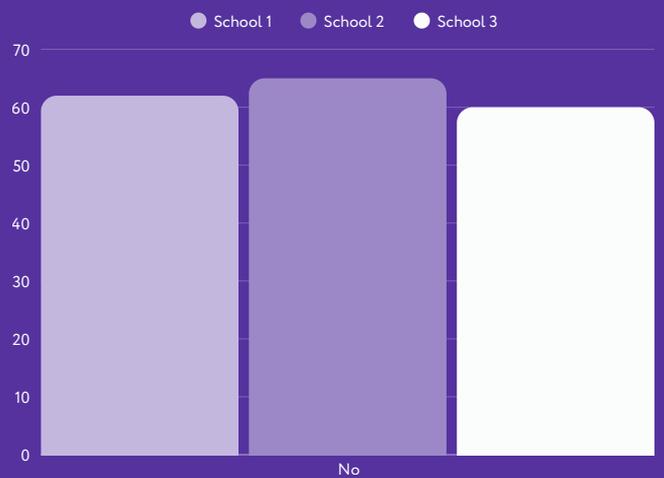
What impact will AI have on your future career? (%)



How worried do you feel about AI replacing jobs you might want to do? (%)



Has AI influenced what you are considering studying or doing as a career? (%)

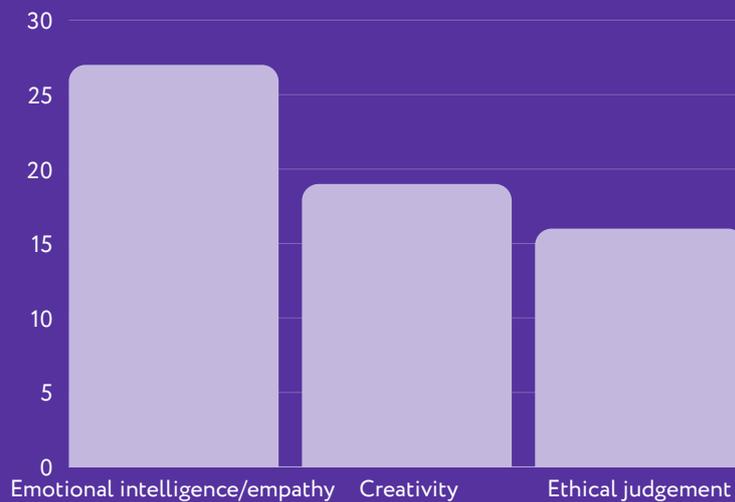


Skills and human advantage



students, on average, believed their college prepared them well for the skills they identified as important.

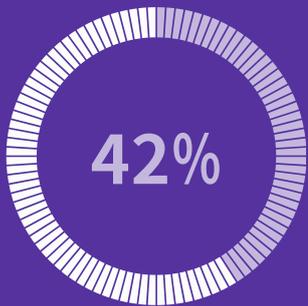
Which skills do you believe humans will continue to be better at than AI? (top 3)



How confident do you feel that you personally have skills that will be valuable in an AI-driven future? (%)



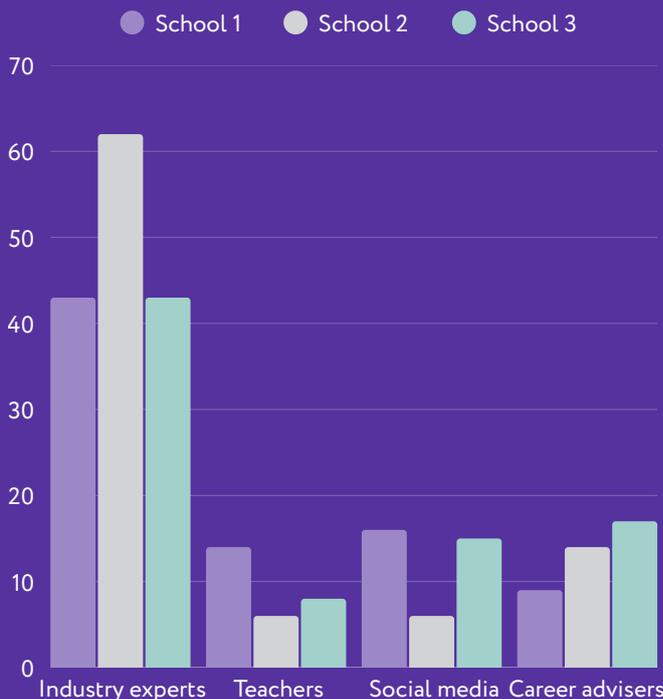
College support and guidance



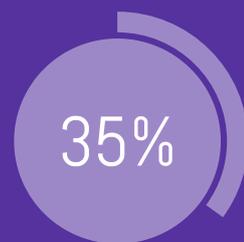
students, on average, believed the adults around them understand how AI is changing careers and jobs.



How confident are you in the career advice you receive when it comes to AI-related changes? (%)



Who do you feel is best equipped to advise you about AI and your future? (%)



students, on average, believed their education is preparing them for a future where AI is widely used at work.

Concerns and opportunities

Across all three schools, students' concerns about AI are remarkably consistent and centre primarily on employment insecurity and the future of human skills. The dominant narrative reflects anxiety about job displacement, reduced entry-level opportunities, and long-term career instability, accompanied by widespread concern that over-reliance on AI may erode critical thinking, creativity, and intellectual independence. Environmental impact, misinformation, and ethical misuse also feature prominently, indicating a cohort that is not only economically anxious but socially and environmentally aware. While a minority express little concern, the overall picture is one of cautious engagement combined with underlying uncertainty about how AI will reshape work, society, and human identity.

The main themes we uncovered are:

- Job displacement and career uncertainty
- Over-reliance and decline of critical thinking
- Environmental impact
- Loss of creativity, human identity and authenticity
- Misinformation, deepfakes and ethical misuse
- Economic and societal instability
- Loss of human interaction and emotional erosion
- Privacy and data security concerns
- Adaptation anxiety and skills gap
- Minority with low or no concern



The current lack of concern for the monumental social impacts of AI use.



My biggest concern about AI is a future where people are overly reliant on generative AI in particular. There seems to be an epidemic of people using generative AI (such as ChatGPT) for minute tasks, removing certain critical thinking and problem solving characteristics in a myriad of people.



That I will be unable to use AI effectively so I am at a level playing field with peers.

Concerns and opportunities

Across the three schools, a consistent sense of cautious optimism emerges regarding AI's potential. Students recognise numerous conditions that must be met for AI to play a meaningful role in future careers and society at large. While they acknowledge practical benefits, these are almost always caveated by concerns about control, ethics, sustainability, and maintaining human control. Rather than the excitement one might expect from young people embracing a cutting-edge technology, the prevailing tone is measured; students view AI as a powerful tool that requires careful oversight.

The main themes we uncovered are:

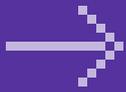
- Efficiency and productivity gains
- Healthcare innovation and medical research
- Scientific and technological advancement
- AI as an assistive tool (not replacement)
- Regulation, sustainability, and ethical governance
- Human-AI collaboration
- Job creation in AI-related sectors
- Education and learning support
- Economic growth and workflow optimisation
- Conditional optimism (benefits if controlled)
- No perceived hope / opposition to AI

“ My biggest hope is that AI, mainly generative, becomes regulated enough (especially in the entertainment industry) that companies can no longer try to abuse it for their backhanded means. Once that's done, we can then focus on working on how AI can actually be used for the benefit of the common person as a tool instead of a replacement or final product.

I hope it will result in mundane jobs being automated to free more human hours for more fulfilling activities.

”

“ Becoming advanced enough to problem solve world issues and potentially discover new scientific discoveries.



Thank you!

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