

April 2026

## Skills Blueprint

Sharing best practice from Cambridge Ahead members

# Leading by example: Employer investment in skills





## Cambridge in focus

# How are Cambridge firms navigating the changing world to attract and retain talent?

Skills development and securing the talent pipeline are fundamental to unlocking the potential of the UK economy. As the government continues to prioritise economic growth, addressing skills gaps is essential to tackle the UK's longstanding productivity challenges and accelerate growth across sectors and regions.

However, considerable policy churn and fragmentation in recent times have created a complex system for employers, training providers and learners. The past year alone has seen the establishment of a Department for Education executive agency, Skills England, tasked with bringing the skills system together to address skills needs across the UK, signs of an intention for greater local leadership on skills policy, and changes in funding provision – notably the removal of funding for level 7 apprenticeships. These developments have been met with a mixed response from the sector and demonstrate the need for a strong employer voice in the skills system.

This is particularly important in Cambridge, where employers are fuelling the economic growth that makes a significant contribution to UK Plc. With Greater Cambridge's employment growth<sup>1</sup>, and its crucial role in the national economy as a net contributor to the Exchequer and as part of the OxCam Growth Corridor, Cambridge's success is

pivotal in delivering on economic growth and supporting UK prosperity.

Cambridge Ahead has convened representatives across the Cambridge skills system for over a decade to understand their perspectives, identify challenges and co-create solutions through the CA Skills Group.

The Skills Group is a forum for gathering best practice on employers' skills priorities including recruitment, retention and widening access to the good jobs created in Cambridge. It advocates for a more secure and inclusive pipeline in the city region to drive social mobility. The Group often shares specific examples of interventions that leading employers have carried out to open up access to new pools of talent, adapt to their employees' needs and attract historically underrepresented groups.

This paper brings together these examples for the first time – and couches them in their particular policy context. It is intended as a resource for our members,



other employers, providers and our public sector partners who all share the aim of supporting inclusive growth in the city region.

These insights have never been more important, with significant growth plans for Cambridge alongside the rapid pace of technological advancement, changing

industry demands, evolving workforce needs, and declining investment in skills, all creating an uncertain landscape for employers.

The examples in this paper embody a response to these challenges, and by sharing them we hope to embed, scale and iterate on these approaches.





## CHAPTER ONE

# How do we break down barriers for hard-to-reach groups?

Diversity of the workforce has many benefits – from providing new perspectives and approaches to problem solving and fostering innovation, to social cohesion, improved company culture and real impacts on long-term market valuation<sup>2</sup>.

Many employers are keen to take steps to achieve greater diversity of their staff – but find it difficult to attract and retain diverse talent.

### ADDRESSING THE “LEAKY PIPELINE” IN ACADEMIC RESEARCH

While there are difficulties with attracting and retaining talent locally which can be associated with Cambridge’s well known infrastructure constraints – in particular housing pressures and affordability issues<sup>3,4</sup> – broader systemic challenges exist which hamper recruitment, representation and progression. These systemic challenges are particularly acute in research and academia and can disproportionately affect the careers of some groups including Black heritage scientists and women at the early- to mid-career stage.

The Wellcome Sanger Institute – a world leader in genome research – has experienced firsthand these challenges.

Sanger has recognised that there is a significant underrepresentation of people of Black heritage at nearly every level across the academic STEM sector in the UK and that this is particularly prominent as seniority increases. This not only

disproportionately affects the careers of Black heritage scientists, but also reduces the diversity of perspectives, ideas and approaches within the scientific community and leadership.

Alongside this, Sanger has also identified a steady loss of talented researchers in progression through the academic pipeline, noting that this is particularly prominent among those who have had a career break and disproportionately affects women at the early- to mid-career stage. This so-called “leaky pipeline” can ultimately lead to lower levels of female representation in academic leadership positions despite gender parity at the undergraduate and postgraduate stage.

Returning to academic research following a career break is challenging, with returners often facing substantial barriers to re-entry such as:

- Outdated skills (particularly in fast-evolving research fields)
- Weakened research networks
- ‘Gapped’ publication and grant records

Competitive funding and fellowship opportunities often disadvantage talented researchers who have taken a career break, and this subsequently contributes to the “leaky pipeline” and loss of expertise in academia that Sanger experiences. This loss of expertise is increasingly critical as life sciences is positioned as a growth-driving sector in the government’s recently published Industrial Strategy<sup>5</sup> and Life Sciences Sector Plan<sup>6</sup>.



Further, the growing **skills shortfall in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) industries is estimated to cost the UK economy £1.5 billion a year<sup>7</sup>**, demonstrating the need to address these challenges.

Ensuring that diverse talent is supported into the sector in the first place, and that experienced researchers are supported back into academia following a career break will be essential to support the wider growth ambitions and maintain the sector’s strength.

### **PRACTICAL STEPS TO ADDRESSING SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES TO DRIVE SCIENTIFIC PROGRESS**

In response to these challenges, Sanger has launched two Fellowships, each aimed at breaking down barriers and addressing the leaky pipelines.

Firstly, in 2015 Sanger launched the Janet Thornton Fellowship – a three-year postdoctoral opportunity designed to support individuals returning after a career break of 12 months or more. The Fellowship allows individuals to undertake their research full-time, part-time, or flexibly and fellows have access to Sanger’s world-class sequencing and research facilities, as well as a range of other benefits.

Secondly, in 2021 Sanger launched the Sanger Excellence Fellowship– a pioneering initiative supporting the training and career development of postdoctoral fellows who self-identify as being from a Black heritage background. This three-year fellowship was created as a positive action initiative to address the pipeline gap in genomics research.

Sanger has also taken steps to embed inclusivity into the recruitment process for the Excellence Fellowship through a novel approach which includes:

- Advertising via targeted channels and working with a specialist recruitment agency and Black-led community network to attract high-calibre candidates from diverse backgrounds
- Hosting webinars and one-to-one question and answer sessions – giving applicants the chance to ask questions before applying
- Hosting a candidate information day allowing candidates to meet prospective Principal Investigators



and their research teams, and attend an interview skills workshop

- Incorporating narrative CVs (based on the UK Research and Innovation template) to recognise broader research contributions
- Anonymising applications to help mitigate bias.

### **MAKING AN IMPACT AND STRENGTHENING INCLUSIVITY**

To date the Janet Thornton Fellowship has supported 12 individuals to return to academic research careers. The Fellowship has provided a structured and supported re-entry to academic research. The initial two Janet Thornton Fellows from 2015 and 2016 respectively completed their fellowship and immediately embarked upon their first group leader position.

Similarly, the Sanger Excellence Fellowship has also been successful. It has gathered significant interest from research funders, with some funders involved in the interview process, allowing candidates to have greater exposure and visibility beyond solely Sanger. In the inaugural year, Cancer Research UK were so impressed with one candidate that they offered to co-fund an additional Fellowship. Further, from 2024 onwards, the Medical Research Council (MRC) provided co-funding for the Excellence Fellowships, enabling the cohort to double in size from 2 Fellows to 4 Fellows per year.

Since 2022, the Wellcome Sanger Institute have welcomed 11 Sanger Excellence Fellows who are now undertaking research in different areas - from the nasal microbiome to autoimmune disease, highlighting the value in employer-driven inclusivity interventions.

**The experiences of Sanger Excellence Fellows are available to read – hear from [Ore Francis](#), [Oumie Kuyateh](#), [Onalenna Neo](#), and [Samantha Jembe](#).**

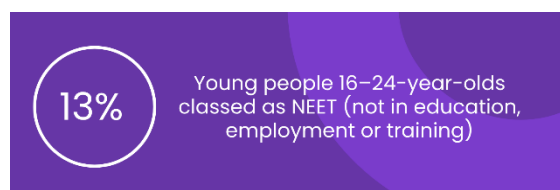
**The experiences of Janet Thornton Fellows are available to read [here](#)**

## TARGETING SUPPORT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE TO TACKLE ECONOMIC INACTIVITY AND FUEL ECONOMIC GROWTH

As part of the government's growth mission, it has committed to a long-term ambition to achieve an 80% employment rate and build an 'inclusive and thriving' labour market<sup>8</sup>.

Economic inactivity has been increasing, with a reported over 9 million people now classed as 'economically inactive'<sup>9</sup> – meaning they are not employed or actively seeking employment.

Of particular concern, there has been an increase in economic inactivity in younger people, with 13% of young people (16-to-24-year-olds) classed as NEET – meaning they are not in education, employment or training<sup>10</sup>.



In Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, economic inactivity has risen to a 4-year high and is now close to 20%<sup>11</sup>.

While it is important to note that this is driven in large part by an increase in student numbers, this presents a major challenge. Local and sectoral disparities persist across the place.

Local authorities in the wider region are taking steps to address these issues, including the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority's (CPCA) Connect to Work programme – which seeks to support those with disabilities, long term health conditions or complex barriers to secure work through

connecting local work, health and skills support.

The CPCA has also been chosen as one of only eight Mayoral Combined Authorities to trial the Youth Trailblazer initiative, which aims to support young people to overcome barriers to education, training and employment.

**CPCA Youth Trailblazer** – The Youth Trailblazer Scheme includes a number of initiatives to support young people, these include:

- Apprenticeship grants for employers up to £2,000 per apprenticeship between the ages of 16-18
- Opportunities for grants to support upskilling staff
- 100 new internship opportunities
- Match funding for employers for 12 weeks
- Subsidy to support employers with onboarding, training and equipment costs for new employees 16-18

## SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE THROUGH ENGAGEMENT AND WORK EXPERIENCE

Research indicates that young adults who recall four or more contacts with employers are five times less likely to be not in education, employment or training (NEET) than those who have had no involvement with employers<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, employer investment into engaging with young people is an important but often under-recognised area.

MAG London Stansted Airport has an Aerozone – an education centre for school children which offers a glimpse of working in aviation and aims to enthuse



Image credit: Photo by London Stansted Airport

young people about the opportunities that the sector can offer them in the future. The centres are free to visit for schools and colleges and offer a range of tailored interactive experiences and activities. The Aerozone has just celebrated its 10-year anniversary and 25,000th visitor – demonstrating the scale of its reach

This investment from employers in interacting with the workforce of the future has wider societal benefits, it extends beyond the young people themselves with 83% of employers report that their engagement with education helps them to develop new talent pipelines<sup>13</sup>.

Another employer focused on the future talent pipeline is Cambridge Consultants – the deep tech powerhouse of Capgemini which works to solve the toughest scientific and engineering challenges.

### REDUCING BARRIERS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WITH SEND

Cambridge Consultants were already running a successful Technology Development Scheme work experience programme for local students but looked

to go further in terms of increasing the diversity of its talent pool. In 2024, they launched a pilot work experience scheme for those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). The purpose of this was to eliminate the barriers that SEND students can experience in accessing STEM work opportunities, and in turn remove barriers to work.

To deliver the work experience pilot, Cambridge Consultants partnered with a local school and invited year 12 students on the SEN register, with or without an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), to participate. The company provided access to SEND training for its employees, empowering team members to participate, and develop a full programme of tailored STEM activities and workshops.

Cambridge Consultants also took practical steps to support the work experience students and ensure the success of the scheme; this included providing transport from the school to the office, recognising the socioeconomic barrier, and having a consistent driver for the duration of the work experience, recognising the needs of the students.



Alongside the time investment, these were small and simple actions that the company took which had significant impact. The work experience pilot was a success, with the scheme running again in 2025. It received great feedback from parents and students, as well as employees. Parents and students highlighted how the experience had empowered them to ask for reasonable adjustments in other places and raised their technical career aspirations. Employees have expressed how rewarding they found the scheme and much they enjoyed being involved.

### **LEVERAGING EMPLOYER-LED WORK EXPERIENCE TO SUPPORT YOUNG PEOPLE FROM DISADVANTAGED SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUNDS**

Cambridge Consultants reported that the SEND work experience pilot scheme has been such a success that they will seek accreditation through the Education Development Trust moving forwards.

The pilot scheme has also led to the development of an Upskilling Work Experience Scheme, aiming to remove barriers that individuals from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds face in accessing the workforce by building confidence and employability skills. This work experience scheme is focused on supporting social mobility and levelling the playing field for local young people.

In 2025 Cambridge Consultants welcomed further education students on a bursary who were either interested in business service roles or were unsure about what career they wanted to pursue.

The five-week programme included one day a week in the office with the Cambridge Consultants team – learning

about email etiquette, digital literacy skills and LinkedIn profiles, and taking part in interview workshops and upskilling sessions on communication and presentation skills.

Many of these students had part-time jobs and/or caring responsibilities, and so the company worked with the students to select work experience days that would not impact these commitments. The company also covered travel costs to remove another barrier the students might face in accessing these opportunities.

Most recently, Cambridge Consultants has begun collaborating with Cambridge 2030, an organisation with the mission of tackling economic inequality in Cambridge. They are targeting the Arbury and Kings Hedges area of Cambridge, which is amongst the 20% most deprived neighbourhoods in the Country, according to the English Indices of Deprivation. Cambridge Consultants will welcome 10 students from this area for their second Upskilling Work Experience Scheme in March 2026.

The impact of this approach to improving inclusivity and accessibility has already been seen anecdotally as Cambridge Consultants have had applications from candidates with special educational needs and disabilities that have highlighted that awareness of this work had increased their confidence in applying for roles at Cambridge Consultants.

These changes have also had a wider impact on ways of working for the company, with adjustments made to support employees based on learnings from the recruitment changes, such as a quiet room in the Cambridge office for all staff.

## CHAPTER TWO

# How do training providers understand employer skills needs in a changing landscape?

Cambridge's growth is underpinned by the talent and skills that support its innovation economy, driven in large part by knowledge-intensive sectors<sup>14</sup>. The need to develop a secure pipeline to support growing businesses is an important area of focus

Employers often highlight recruitment challenges, with one third of vacancies hard to fill for employers<sup>15</sup>.

These challenges are particularly acute in some jobs, such as those in high-tech sectors, which require different and more specialist technical skills and training.

This is particularly important in the context of Government's ambition for the OxCam Growth Corridor, and the significant contribution its growth could make to the UK. Growth of the Corridor is expected to be driven in large part by high-tech jobs.

However, with the rapid pace of technological advancement, it can be difficult for the skills system to keep pace with the newest developments and reflect these in education and training to meet employer requirements.

One such example is the semiconductor industry which has been impacted by a growing skills gap, which affects the supply of talent, particularly in highly technical engineering roles. This talent gap has been recognised by national and regional semiconductor strategies,

including the recent Digital and Technologies Sector Plan which outlines the Government's commitment to a £35 million UK-wide skills programme to improve the semiconductor talent pipeline<sup>16</sup>.

As a major player in the semiconductor industry, Arm, the company building the future of computing, delivering the

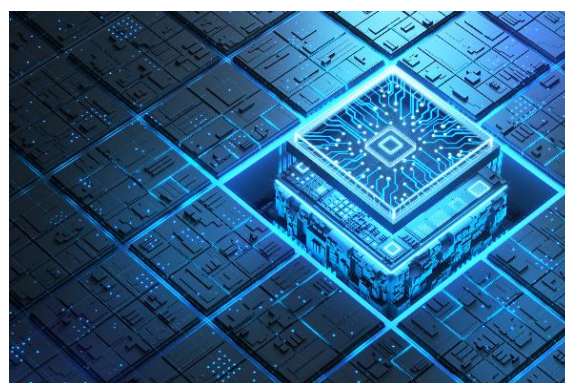


Image credit: photo by Arm

industry's highest-performing and most power-efficient compute platform, experiences these challenges.



## ARTICULATING SKILLS NEEDS – DEVELOPING THE SEMICONDUCTOR EDUCATION ALLIANCE AND KSA FRAMEWORK

In responding to these challenges, Arm established the Semiconductor Education Alliance<sup>17</sup> which brings together the semiconductor industry with academia.

Members of the Alliance are committed to working together on educational initiatives to address the supply and development of talent in the sector. As part of this effort, Arm also developed the Arm KSA Framework<sup>18</sup> – an evolving, comprehensive record of the knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) that the semiconductor industry needs from entry-level engineers.

The Framework, based on detailed research and developed in collaboration with professional engineers, aims to utilise the experience of the existing workforce to understand the skills gap. Arm notes that this helps to ensure that the KSA Framework is credible and current, as well as supporting with its implementation.

### THE KSA FRAMEWORK IN ACTION

Arm explained that education providers can use the Framework to inform the development of learner pathways into the industry, such as university courses in computer science, and computer engineering and informatics. The Framework can also be used by educational institutions to review existing curricula to help identify outdated content and new content that could be added to align with industry practice. It also offers Alliance members opportunities to collaborate on gap-filling.

The KSA Framework has been published

and made available for sector-wide use and adaptation under a permissive license, sharing learnings with other organisations.

Alliance members have leveraged the KSA Framework in various ways, for example:

- A US university used it to support the development of a new course in Cyber Physical Systems;
- A regional training provider in the US developed a vocational standard for chip design;
- A UK university developed a PhD studentship that uses the Framework to explore effective practices in skills acquisition and development in the technology sector.

**The KSA Framework is available to  
access [here](#).**

## PRACTICAL LEARNINGS – THE IMPORTANCE OF COLLABORATION

Arm outlined that learning from existing research was critical in developing the Framework –the initial research stage for example included studying competency frameworks and their taxonomies, particularly in the areas of software and hardware engineering.

The Semiconductor Education Alliance has also been important in supporting the development and implementation of the Framework, providing a channel through which collective skills and workforce development issues can be addressed.

This provides an important example of industry involvement in supporting the development of learner pathways for employability; through partnership and leadership, the Semiconductor Education



Alliance and the resulting KSA Framework support workforce development initiatives aimed at growing the talent pipeline into the semiconductor industry. Cambridge Ahead champions this kind of collaboration – utilising the expertise of key players across the system to provide solutions to wider challenges.

*"The Arm KSA Framework highlights the power of a coordinated approach to addressing the semiconductor skills gap. Collaborative action, across industry and education partners is essential, and we look forward to continuing to find creative, practical ways to helping solve this ongoing challenge"*

**- Nick Sample, Senior Manager,  
Education Engagements, Arm**

### **COLLABORATION ON THE NATIONAL STAGE**

Skills England are seeking to take a similar approach to addressing skills gaps nationally through the development of a skills taxonomy. The aim is to provide a standard skills classification detailing the skills and associated knowledge that is required to carry out job-related tasks.

This would enable a more consistent and common approach to discussing skills and skills needs, as well as increasing awareness and supporting people to understand their existing skills and gaps that can be addressed through education or training – supporting employers, jobseekers and other agencies

responsible for workforce analysis and identifying future needs.

There are strong examples of this practice internationally, such as the European Union's European Skills Competences, Qualifications and Occupations Framework (ESCO), the Australia and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (ANZSCO) and the Skills Frameworks in Singapore.

### **UTILISING PARTNERSHIP TO TACKLE NATIONAL CHALLENGES**

Another major employer working in this way is London Stansted Airport, who, in partnership with Harlow College, runs an Employment and Skills Academy. The Academy helps adult jobseekers from the local area access employment opportunities at the airport.

It offers a free two-week course to help jobseekers understand the many different job opportunities at London Stansted Airport, as well as match their skills and experience to roles. It also supports jobseekers build confidence through CV workshops and mock interviews, as well as successfully apply for jobs.

To support jobseekers to access the course, the Academy offers free travel by public transport to the airport throughout the programme, removing socioeconomic barriers – an example of the practical steps employers can take to ensure outreach and participation programmes are as effective as possible.

The Academy also provides additional support for jobseekers with language difficulties, physical and non-physical disabilities, as well as other challenges.

To target those who might benefit from the programme, the Academy works closely with Jobcentres in Essex, London,



and local counties to enrol jobseekers. It has recently expanded to double the number of jobseekers it supports and as London Stansted Airport grows, the number will continue to rise.

Importantly this targeted support is achieving success in its outcomes due to the targeted support it provides, with **roughly 53% of those who currently complete the course going on to secure employment at the airport**<sup>19</sup>.

### DEVELOPING THE PARTNERSHIP FURTHER – NOVEL SOLUTIONS TO OLD PROBLEMS

As well as the Employment and Skills Academy, London Stansted Airport also has its own on-site further education establishment, which is operated in partnership with Harlow College. The Stansted Airport College is the only further education college co-located at an airport in the UK.

Stansted Airport College specialises in providing pathways into the aviation sector, with courses in aircraft maintenance, aviation operations, aeronautical engineering, hospitality and events management. This demonstrates a particularly innovative approach to employers investing in skills and

education to secure the future talent pipeline.

Stansted Airport College has around 600 students and apprentices, with plans to double the size of the College in the coming years.

In terms of success, Stansted Airport College sees 85% of students and apprentices finding employment at London Stansted Airport following completion of their studies, and a further 10% going into higher education.



Similarly to other employers highlighted, London Stansted Airport seeks to break down barriers for its future workforce; this includes targeted support to help students, in particular girls, from under-represented backgrounds into careers like engineering, which are often male dominated.



Image credit: Photo by MAG Stansted Airport

The College has also opened up broader opportunities – with MAG providing funding for 15 young people to complete the first ground-based modules of initial pilot training. This is particularly important in terms of breaking down barriers and future planning for the workforce as typically the cost of initial pilot training is prohibitive for many students.



Image credit: London Stansted Airport



## CONCLUSION

The present tranche of reforms, nationally and locally, in skills present a crossroads for employers, providers and policymakers. It is only through joined up thinking between each of these actors that places like Cambridge can fulfil their potential as critical engines of growth for the UK economy.

The case studies presented here are examples of employers innovating to access talent against a complex backdrop of policy interventions. It is ever clearer that a key role for Skills England will be to bring clarity to this landscape: to hide the wiring of skills programmes and lay out a clear pathway for employers, providers and the workforce to access the available support. This clarity must also apply to avoiding unintended consequences of skills reforms, for example in apprenticeships, which may harm the long-term prospects of growth sectors in the UK.

These case studies are also presented against a decline in employer and public investment in skills. But the employers showcased here are making an investment in their future: not just committing to skills programmes as the right thing to do, but also to secure their talent pipeline.

This is a living document, and we will continue to source case studies from our employer membership base, feed into policy change in the skills system, and advocate for a secure talent pipeline in Cambridge which offers opportunity across our city region's demographics.

In sharing best practice and opportunities for peer learning we hope that this paper will encourage dialogue between business, providers and Government to the benefit of all.

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