What is it for? Exploring Young People's Perceptions of AI Skills Requirements

Subrahmaniam Krishnan-Harihara[1,2], Imogen Forster[1], Irza Naeem Kahloon[1,2], Maria Kutar[2] and Marie Griffiths[2]

[1]Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce, Manchester, UK
[2]University of Salford, Salford, UK

Subrahmaniam.KrishnanHarihara@gmchamber.co.uk
Imogen.Forster@gmchamber.co.uk
IrzaNaeem.Kahloon@gmchamber.co.uk
M.Kutar@salford.ac.uk
M.Griffiths@salford.ac.uk

Abstract: This research examines how young learners perceive and struggle to articulate artificial intelligence (AI) skills. Although employer demand for AI skills is growing, existing literature indicates ambiguity around what 'AI skills' are. This creates a gap between supposed employer demand for AI skills and how young learners themselves interpret and evidence AI skills. This research addresses this gap. Using an interpretive, exploratory qualitative design, the study draws on 14 roundtable discussions with 67 participants across six educational pathways: A-level students, T-level students, apprentices, further education learners, undergraduates and postgraduates. The research was conducted within the auspices of the Greater Manchester Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP). Data was thematically analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step process, with two researchers independently coding transcripts against a shared codebook. The results showed that participants are competent in using AI tools and have competence in prompt engineering and critical evaluation of AI outputs. Participants critically engage with AI, routinely fact checking AI outputs and expressing anxiety about overreliance and skills erosion. They also recognised the value of human skills, such as communication, alongside AI use. Yet, participants consistently declined to identify these practices as an employable skillset. To enable learners to improve their employability, the study also recommends that employers specify their AI skills requirements in job advertisements. Another important finding is that young people lack institutional support and are disadvantaged by current educational practices, which discourage AI use. Therefore, this study recommends that educational institutions embed AI literacy and responsible use of AI within curricula.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence, AI skills, Young learners, Employability, Perceptions of AI

1. Introduction and Background Literature

Available literature on AI skills remains fragmented, with no agreed definition of "AI skills". Some researchers have concluded that there is significant employer demand for AI skills. Alekseeva et al. (2021) conducted an analysis of online job postings from 2010 to 2019 and concluded that there was a "dramatic increase" in the demand for AI skills. They attributed this increase to a growth in the number of AI-related technical roles and the use of AI across occupations. However, ambiguity remains because job postings rarely specify what employers mean by AI skills. This study therefore aims to answer the research question: how do young people in UK education perceive, develop, and articulate AI skills in relation to employability?

Researchers have sought to clarify the definition of AI skills. In their survey of 450 professionals, Wang and Huang (2025) treat AI literacy as multidimensional with application and responsible use built on foundational knowledge and technical capability. They found that applied use and ethical awareness were reliable predictors of career advancement. In addition, Lee, Oh and Hong's (2024) study involving Korean university students found a conflation between exposure to AI tools and genuine understanding of their application whereas Ebert and Kramarczuk (2025) report a discrepancy between undergraduate learners' competency in using AI tools and their understanding of underlying principles.

Research indicates that young learners have a mature understanding of AI. Marrone, Taddeo and Hill (2022) found that students were reflective of their AI use and doubted whether AI could match human creativity. Marrone et al. (2025) and Yarovenko et al. (2024) also showed that students held nuanced views on labour market implications, the need for continuous adaptation, and support for retraining to improve employability. Likewise, ethical awareness features prominently in Gazulla et al. (2025) and Walan (2024). Young participants expressed concerns about the digital inequality, privacy risks and the pace of AI development.

The literature also suggests that AI competency is frequently developed through self-learning without formal instruction. Wood, Ange and Miller (2021) found only a small proportion of both medical school students and

teachers were aware of AI applications in their field, with most being self-taught and therefore reporting limited AI literacy. Interestingly, Nazir and Nazir (2026) concluded that whilst self-learning contributed to a positive attitude towards AI and facilitated better engagement with AI tools, institutional AI policies need clarifying. Other researchers have also identified the need for institutional policies that go beyond AI literacy to foster informed AI usage (Dai et al., 2020; Vandenberg and Mott, 2023).

Nonetheless, AI skills development has been linked with improved employability. Arooje et al.'s (2025) survey of 500 learners found that AI adoption improved employability prospects. Likewise, Portocarrero Ramos et al. (2025) whose study covered 148 graduates, found that although greater AI knowledge corresponded with better employment, there was a gap between educational preparation and workplace expectations. Importantly, Arooje et al. (2025) pointed to the unequal access to AI, putting those in under-resourced settings at a significant disadvantage.

Across this literature, some points of convergence emerge. First, ambiguity surrounding AI skills creates challenges for learners, educators and policymakers (Wang and Huang, 2025; Lee, Oh and Hong, 2024; Ebert and Kramarczuk, 2025). Second, the employability value of AI skills depends on employer expectations, technology readiness, human skills and institutional support (Arooje et al., 2025; Portocarrero Ramos et al., 2025; Testa, Apuzzo and Pittaway, 2026). Finally, young people develop AI competence largely through self-learning rather than formal instruction (Dai et al., 2020; Wood, Ange and Miller, 2021). Whilst this literature explores how young people perceive and use AI tools, less is known about how young people perceive, develop and articulate AI skills in relation to employability. This research seeks to address this gap, as this can have tangible implications of how they articulate these skills to potential employers.

2. Methodology

The interpretive paradigm is considered appropriate for this research as it explores perceptions of AI skills, where common meaning and shared understanding is often assumed but varies significantly and in some cases is non-existent. This study does not seek to quantify these perceptions. The motivation was less to draw generalisable findings and more to obtain insights through deeper engagement with young learners. As this study seeks to develop an in-depth understanding of an emerging phenomenon, the research design is qualitative and exploratory, with data gathered via roundtable discussions with learners across different further education and higher education pathways.

The research was undertaken within the auspices of the Greater Manchester Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP), a UK government-commissioned initiative to ensure that local education and training provision is aligned with the skills needs of employers and led by Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce.

2.1 Participants

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit 67 participants across six different educational pathways: A-Level students from a sixth form college (n=2), T-Level students undertaking industry placements (n=4), apprentices in workplace-based learning (n=13), further education college learners (n=36), undergraduate students (n=4) and postgraduate students (n=8).

Of the 36 further education learners, 12 were enrolled on digital courses at one college. The remaining 24 were drawn from a second college. Of the 24, five each were from construction, engineering, digital and health courses, while four were from business courses. All further education sessions and one apprentice session were facilitated by teachers. In these sessions, participants were together in a single video conferencing-enabled meeting room. The discussions were transcribed under a generic meeting room label, thus precluding individual attribution. The other sessions permitted individual speaker attribution.

Participants were assigned an identifier reflecting their pathway and, where individual attribution was possible, their position within it: TL (T-Level), AL (A-Level), AP (apprentice), UG (undergraduate) and PG (postgraduate), each followed by a participant number (for e.g., TL-P1). Where individual attribution was not possible, participants were instead coded by subject or occupational area: FE-ENG, FE-H, FE-C, FE-B, FE-D (further education) and AP-ENG (engineering apprentices).

2.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative data was collected through 14 roundtable discussions conducted between March and July 2026. Each session was approximately 60 minutes and held via Microsoft Teams, with audio recorded and automatically

transcribed. The sessions were distributed as follows: T-Level (1), apprentices (4), A-Level (1), undergraduate (1), postgraduate (1) and further education (6). A semi-structured approach was used: a core set of questions guided each discussion, adapted in response to participant contributions. Discussions covered participants' understanding of AI skills, their use of generative AI tools, and how they reconcile employer demand for AI skills against institutional AI policy.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach was used to analyse the data. Transcripts of the discussions were coded by two researchers, maintaining a shared codebook. Recordings were analysed alongside transcripts to correct any transcription errors. Coding was inductive and semantic, remaining close to the explicit content of participants' accounts. After assigning initial semantic codes, broader themes were derived and reviewed against the dataset. For example, the code "Interpersonal skills cited as critical by every group" was grouped under the theme 'Human Skills'. These themes were then compared between coders, and there was broad agreement between coders, with minor discrepancies resolved through discussion. Although the sample of 67 participants does not allow generalisation of the findings, it is

2.3 Limitations

Two limitations of the data collection process are acknowledged. First, findings from the sessions conducted in a shared room were reported at the level of the subject or occupational group rather than the individual. Second, the presence of teaching staff facilitating some sessions may have prevented participants from criticising their institution. Nonetheless, participants offered observations about discrepancies between AI use in the college and workplace expectations, suggesting some frankness despite staff presence.

3. Thematic Analysis

The findings of this research can be divided into two categories: current context of AI and perception of AI.

3.1 Current Context of AI Skills

3.1.1 Conceptual Ambiguity of 'AI skills'

A lack of clarity around the term 'AI skills' left participants uncertain which AI-related competencies employers value. Most could name specific practices, including prompt engineering and using AI for research, but rarely treated these as evidence of a skillset; some instead framed AI use as a commodity rather than a distinct competency, describing it as something "everyone uses" (AL-P1; AL-P2) given how widely accessible it is. This produced a recurring contradiction: participants engaged in AI-related practice while declining to claim AI skills for themselves. Several had not previously encountered the term at all, and one likened it to computer literacy, a capability now assumed rather than named. Participants were also uncertain how AI would affect their specific sector, and it was unclear whether clarifying this was the responsibility of educators or employers.

One A-Level student described AI skills as "being able to effectively use AI and implement it to produce something or for quality prompts, research, [and to] pick out the important information," yet also stated they "would never go to someone and be like, 'I am AI qualified'". The same participant described employer AI requirements as vague and rarely communicated (AL-P1). "You've got to be clear with what you're saying " (FE-ENG), said one learner, showing awareness of AI-related competencies without naming them as such. When asked directly what 'AI skills' meant, all T-Level participants reported the term as unfamiliar: "To be honest, no" (TL-P1); "No, not me." (TL-P2). This has real consequences: where employers list AI skills as desirable, applicants may struggle even to recognise what they already do, let alone articulate it.

The ambiguity of 'AI skills' is reflected in participants inability to articulate these skills to employers. Without formal assessment, several felt they could not legitimately claim AI competency to employers, and suggested certificates, modules or digital badges as a remedy. "There is no certificate on AI. [...] You can't prove that you're better than anyone else at using AI" (TL-P3), one participant noted, while another argued "there needs to be something where you can prove 'I've done this with AI' [...], because anyone can say they can use AI" (TL-P1). Not all participants saw this as a gap that credentialing should fill. Digital-course FE learners argued AI use itself is a poor signal precisely because it is so widely accessible: "[...] anyone can pick [AI] up [...] So, it's not really showing your understanding of the subject you're trying to apply for" (FE-D). For this group, existing signals, such as grades and experience, remained more credible than AI-specific credentials would be. This divergence suggests the demand for AI credentialing is concentrated among participants who feel their AI-related practice is otherwise invisible to employers.

3.1.2 Fragmented implementation of AI

Uncertainty around AI skills feeds into a broader disconnect between educational approaches and workplace expectations. Several participants noted that AI use received little or no structured teaching within the curriculum and was even discouraged. Given this absence of formal instruction, participants' evident fluency with generative AI tools is the result of informal, self-learning. Participants described institutions framing AI use primarily as a cheating risk (TL-P1), and, in some cases, sending inconsistent messages, with teachers appearing to contradict each other on the subject (TL-P1; AL-P1) and no subject-specific guidance offered (AL-P1). Several argued that teachers themselves needed AI training before students could reasonably be expected to use it well (AL-P1; TL-P1), and that workplaces needed structured induction rather than assuming AI-readiness (TL-P1; TL-P3).

> *"[AI is] not really allowed in school, so I don't want to get in trouble" (FE-ENG), one participant explained, while another described confusion transferring into employment: "We don't really understand how the workplace wants us to respond with AI and interact with it" (AL-P2). "Obviously in college it's a bit of a no. So is it a no in a workplace?" (TL-P1).*

Another challenge reported by participants was the unequal access to AI tools, especially amongst learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. One further learner in digital explained: "some people don't have access to AI, then you are kind of behind on the market" (FE-D). This suggests that unequal access to AI may itself become a source of disadvantage for some learners entering the workforce.

3.2 Perception of AI

3.2.1 Increasing importance of human skills

Interpersonal skills were raised as important across every participant group, most often communication, critical thinking, adaptability and emotional intelligence. One postgraduate described critical thinking as paramount, particularly in safety-critical contexts (PG-P2), while another highlighted data interpretation specifically as an irreplaceable human role (UG-P2). Several participants went further, arguing AI's outputs are themselves detectable because they lack authenticity (TL-P2; TL-P3), and one described how suspected covert AI use had damaged trust within a student team (TL-P2).

> *"[The] ability to learn quick or adapt to different situations" (FE-ENG) was identified as increasingly important, and "communication will always be a skill that will be needed" (UG-P2). Construction-course FE learners were especially emphatic on this point, tying human skills directly to commercial survival: "If you're too scared to talk to a customer [...] AI can't do that because AI has to talk to you" (FE-C), and "AI can't understand the attitude [...] if your attitude towards that isn't the best or it's rude or it's disrespectful" (FE-C). In health and social care, one participant explained that "one of the ways of working effectively is communication and that approach is person-centred care where you take into consideration a person's preferences and dislikes to give that empathy" (FE-H). One participant even went as far as to say that "There are some skills, like there are things that we humans do and we have, that AI can never have." (PG-P4).*

3.2.2 Perceived erosion of skills and how to prevent this

Participants worried that persistent AI use would erode their ability to perform tasks unaided, creating overreliance. One postgraduate compared AI to a calculator, arguing it prevents the brain from being properly challenged, and suggested that foundation skills need to be built before AI becomes genuinely useful, since it can refine existing skills but does not create new ones (PG-P4; PG-P6). Others described the risk in starker terms, as a "rabbit hole" resembling addiction (TL-P1; TL-P2), and one A-Level student reported that students had failed exams after relying on AI to write their essays (AL-P1).

> *"It will affect your research skills. You know, you're not going to be researching anymore; you just type it in and it gives you an answer" (FE-ENG), explained one participant, adding that overreliance "could essentially make you like lazy" (FE-ENG). Some participants viewed the restrictions against AI taken by educational institutions as mitigation against overreliance. Business-course FE learners were broadly supportive of their college's restriction on AI: "It's good for us" (FE-B). Several participants described their personal active countermeasures: one explained that they use AI only "to learn the basic skills [...] put it in your own words [...] if I was to copy and paste it, I'm not doing anything" (FE-H), echoing a digital course peer's observation that "you'll remember it more because you've typed it" (FE-D), rather than copying and pasting AI outputs. One participant noted that the reasoning behind these*

preventative measures was "more so because I've adapted to understanding that there are limitations of it [AI] and I can't just fully rely on it." (AL-P1).

3.2.3 Anxiety and trust in AI

Participants expressed anxiety about AI's trajectory, driven partly by fear of being left behind and partly by fears of job loss. Environmental concerns were also raised: worries about data centres' water and electricity use and lithium extraction, recurred across T-Level, A-Level and apprentice participants alike (TL-P3; AL-P1; AP-P2). "You do also then have to think again about the environmental effects if it is used more, [...] that's going to be tons and tons of water" (AP-P2).

Some participants had substituted AI for search engines, and a few discussed using it for advice on personal matters such as diet or relationships. This sat alongside real scepticism: many participants fact-checked AI's output rather than trusting it outright, aware that "the information [that AI gives] could be incorrect" (FE-ENG) and that "AI [...] tells you what you want to hear" (FE-ENG). This scepticism was frequently something participants had learned through their own experience of being misled by inaccurate output (AL-P2; AP-P2), which might explain why many participants displayed trust in using AI while nonetheless feeling the need to verify AI outputs. Several participants noted that they fact check AI's outputs and make sure that they do not blindly trust the information that AI gives. This factchecking is evidence of mitigating the pitfalls of AI tools and shows a good level of awareness of (generative) AI. The acknowledgment of AI's faults is particularly interesting as it creates a contradiction; with people double-checking information provided by AI and claiming it makes mistakes but also using it to provide personal advice. This brings into question whether those using AI for efficiency are double-checking this information each time. This would seemingly defeat the purpose of using AI to save time.

4. Discussion

These themes suggest that the challenge facing young people is not necessarily a lack of AI competency, but rather a lack of recognition and validation of AI-related skills. Many participants described practices commonly associated with effective generative AI use, including the importance of prompt engineering and critical evaluation of outputs, yet remained reluctant to identify themselves as possessing AI skills. This study adds to existing literature by gaining insight into a range of UK learner perspectives and unveiling how they perceive, develop, and articulate AI skills in relation to employability. The research confirms existing literature which shows that AI skills are ambiguous, largely self-taught, and impacted by institutional support. Adding onto this, this study challenges the idea that there is a lack of AI skill amongst young people, but rather a lack of recognition and evidencing of these skills.

This indicates that AI competency has not been clearly articulated to young people as a professional skillset, creating challenges when individuals are required to communicate these capabilities to employers, for example through job applications. Furthermore, the negative attitude towards AI within educational institutions may discourage young people from engaging with these tools, limiting their AI skills development. Arooje et al. (2025) argues that "institutional support" is a key determinant of an individual's technological readiness. Consequently, young people's experiences of technology within the education system may significantly influence their willingness to engage with technologies in the workplace. Portocarrero Ramos et al. (2025) also found that there is a "worrying gap" between the labour market and the education system in terms of AI skills, further highlighting the need for a coherent approach to AI education and clarity from employers.

Despite the potential implications for workforce readiness, educational institutions are yet to embrace AI skills While educational institutions often discourage AI use, young people appear to be showing initiative to acquire these skills independently. Portocarrero Ramos et al. (2025, p.10) found that there is a "predominance of self-learning" AI skills, rather than through educational institutions. Despite this, Testa, Apuzzo and Pittaway (2026) find that institutional support is vital to aid this development. Furthermore, reliance on self-teaching raises crucial questions around digital poverty, concerns of which were evident amongst the participants of this study. Unequal access to digital tools may result in disparities in AI skills. This matches the findings of Gazulla et al. (2025), who reported that young people raised concerns around how digital poverty might widen existing socioeconomic inequalities in both digital skills and future employment opportunities.

The findings further show that young people are not including AI skills within job applications and CVs despite demonstrating these competencies in other aspects of their lives. Given the growing demand for AI literacy across the labour market, the lack of recognition of these skills could negatively impact young people's

ability to demonstrate their suitability for certain roles. This is supported by Wang and Huang (2025), who found that young people who fail to communicate this application of AI skills may be overlooked by recruiters. Bondarenko et al. (2025) similarly note that that these skills hold currency in recruitment only when evidenced. The lack of credentialing may constitute a barrier to employment for some young people, particularly where employers label AI skills as desirable or required. However, this demand for formal recognition was not universal, with some participants arguing that AI use is too widely accessible to meaningfully differentiate candidates, instead preferring to rely on grades and demonstrable experience.

Importantly, this research shows that young learners have a nuanced understanding of the potential benefits, such as increased efficiencies, and risks, including issues of inaccuracies and bias. associated with AI use. This nuanced awareness extended to the risk of overreliance, with participants likening excessive AI use to using calculators rather than developing underlying ability. Young people are not merely passive users of AI; they demonstrate active and critical engagement. This mirrors Yarovenko et al.'s (2024) finding that young people's engagement with AI rarely falls into simple positive or negative but reflects reasoning about risk and benefit. They possess capacity for critical reflection that education systems could better harness. This is significant as it highlights the importance of involving young people in AI discourse and using their perspectives to shape policy.

The perceived erosion of certain skills raises important questions regarding the value of competencies in the modern workplace. Participants were convinced that human skills, particularly communication, adaptability and emotional intelligence, are becoming more valuable as AI adoption increases. Rather than viewing skills erosion as inherently negative, it may be necessary to distinguish between routine skills that can be effectively performed by AI and skills which are harder to replicate, such as critical thinking and judgement. This finding is corroborated by Marrone et al. (2025), Yarovenko et al. (2024) and Bondarenko et al. (2025), who underscore the ongoing need for critical AI literacy education.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study explored how young learners from different education pathways perceive, develop and articulate AI skills. The results reveal that while participants are adept in generative AI use, they consistently declined to recognise these practices as a distinct, employable skillset. Young people are developing AI competencies informally rather than through institutional support. Addressing the disconnect between educational practice and employer expectations will ensure that young learners' AI competencies do not go unrecognised.

A key recommendation derived from this research would be for educational institutions to integrate AI literacy and responsible AI use into courses, addressing several key issues identified in this paper. This would even the playing field in terms of access to AI tools and resources, reducing disparities between individuals. Furthermore, this recommendation would improve clarity on what AI skills are and it would better prepare young people given employers are increasingly identifying AI skills as desirable. This is supported by Portocarrero Ramos et al. (2025), who argue universities should embed AI skills within the curricula and Testa, Apuzzo and Pittaway (2026), who found that institutional support was vital in developing students' career adaptability in AI-related fields.

In addition, in job advertisements employers should specify the AI skills required. This could encourage applicants to evidence these skills. As participants did not necessarily identify AI skills as valuable to employers, careers services should ensure that young people understand when to articulate AI skills to employers so that competencies acquired informally can be repositioned as evidenced strengths.

Ethics Declaration: This research was undertaken under the auspices of the Greater Manchester Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP), which is developed by Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce (GMCC). Subrahmaniam Krishnan-Harihara and Imogen Forster are employed full time by GMCC. Irza Naeem Kahloon is an intern at GMCC. The data collection process complied with the guidelines for the development of the LSIP and GMCC's code of conduct. Other institutional ethical approval was not considered necessary.

AI Declaration: Elicit AI tool was used to identify relevant academic papers for this research. The literature review was prepared by the authors themselves. Likewise, analysis of data was conducted by two researchers manually. AI tools were not used for idea generation or proof reading. The authors take responsibility for the contents of this paper.

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