

Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee

Inquiry: Post-pandemic economic growth: UK labour markets

A submission from UCL and the British
Academy

July 2022

Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) and technology in the workplace

This submission is a summary of a six-month knowledge exchange project conducted by UCL and the British Academy to bring together a broad range of stakeholders to share ideas and discuss current knowledge, trends and knowledge gaps on the topic of **AI and the future of work in the UK**. The project comprised a series of roundtable discussions and one-to-one interviews held under the Chatham House Rule, and convened a wide range of participants from academic, policy, business and civil society groups.

As such, this submission does not constitute a formal policy position of the British Academy nor its Fellows, UCL Public Policy, UCL Grand Challenges or any of the individual attendees of the event, and we do not intend it to represent comprehensive coverage of the issues.

Rather, in this submission we synthesise the salient points from across the project to directly respond to the inquiry's questions on AI in the workplace. Our findings provide valuable insight into the inquiry's question '**How should the Government protect workers and prepare them for this new future?**', and may also address the following questions posed in the call for evidence:

- How is AI currently being used in the workplace? Is it more prevalent in some sectors than others?
- Is AI improving productivity in the workplace?
- Will well-paid skilled jobs be lost to AI, as well as routine manual tasks that already have?
- How will workers be supported to adapt to the changing skills that growing use of AI will require of them?

Further detail of the AI and the Future of Work project, and its full suite of outputs can be found at <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/public-policy/home/collaborate/ai-and-future-work-ucl-and-british-academy-collaboration>

Discussion

AI in the post-pandemic workplace

1. The pandemic has both accelerated the way in which we use AI and technology in the workplace and raised public awareness of the use of AI and its implications for quality and equity in work. While digital technologies have allowed employees to work remotely, and automation of some tasks has supported businesses through the turbulent times of the pandemic, they have also surfaced concerns around their impact on the labour market and the uneven distribution of these impacts across different types of work and geographies, as well as the ability of employers and employees to re-skill to meet the changing work environment¹. As society emerges from the pandemic, it is important therefore to consider how to foster working in ways that do not exacerbate these issues, so as to avoid a future productivity crisis like that which took place after the 2008 recession. Rather, this juncture could be an opportunity for government to work towards ensuring good quality work for all as a public policy objective.
2. How AI continues to develop in the world of work is not inevitable, and can be shaped by developers, workers, businesses, and government. It is essential that democratic

¹ Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology, [How technology is accelerating changes in the way we work](#), April 2021

accountability around the impacts of AI adoption in work is retained, which means raising public awareness, asking questions, and developing appropriate governance structures. AI can have far ranging impacts on workers, businesses, and society, posing both challenges and creating potential benefits.

3. Major challenges include:
 - **Job replacement:** the extent to which automation is replacing jobs is not well understood and may be masked by the job market impacts of COVID-19 and Brexit.
 - **Work intensification:** When AI sets work schedules, tracks progress, and sets targets, work becomes more intense and pressurised.
 - **Changing employment relationships:** new types of work driven by AI-based technologies are often outside of the 'traditional' employer-employee relationship, and therefore lack regulation, potentially setting new norms.
4. There are also benefits to be leveraged:
 - **Productivity gains:** AI could be leveraged to improve working conditions, reduce menial and uninteresting tasks, and increase flexibility, allowing employees to work at their best.
5. From a business perspective, AI is a tool that UK businesses, large and small, can use to improve operations and increase productivity. Many UK businesses already use AI-based products and services, e.g., voice-to-text features or 'smart' personal assistants. Despite the potential benefits of these technologies, there are barriers to wider AI adoption especially for smaller organisations. For example, competing for access to skilled workers as well as integrating workers with technical expertise/AI skills into existing teams/practices can be particularly challenging for smaller and comparatively less well-resourced organisations. It is also important to identify the challenges and barriers to integrating AI within existing business practice models. Lessons learned from early adopters can help UK businesses from different sizes, geographies and sectors to adopt AI-driven technologies sustainably and responsibly.

How should the Government protect workers and prepare them for this new future?

6. Promote a Diverse and Inclusive Business Environment which promotes diversity of talent, opinion, and decision making in workplaces. Workers with different experiences and points of view add tremendous value to businesses.

Potential Impacts of AI on Work

7. While there is good understanding of the types of technology and AI that can be deployed in the workplace, and how this can have a material effect on employment and employees, there is still relatively little understanding of the impact this may have on the quality and equity of work across the UK².
8. The current market can appear to be a 'Wild West' of unregulated and unpredictable technologies. These can be brought into organisations without a proper understanding of their impacts on work experiences. Guidance is needed to support organisations to evaluate technologies and make informed choices on their deployment. Further research would also be valuable in identifying which sectors and regions are more or less engaged with AI technology post-pandemic, and have better or poorer worker outcomes, to identify examples of best practice that could serve as a guide for others.
9. It should also be noted that AI technologies brought into workplaces can both highlight existing inequities and dis-empowerment and create new forms of disenfranchisement. The

² The British Academy and the Royal Society, [AI at Work](#)

power imbalance between any worker and the companies developing and deploying AI systems for surveillance and management means that these issues cannot be addressed by individual workers through existing systems (e.g., tribunals).

10. Some groups are more vulnerable to disenfranchisement in work when AI is brought in. This is typically because of existing discrimination and biases. These groups would likely include³:
 - **Women:** often more likely to work in precarious roles in impacted sectors e.g., retail
 - **Ethnic minorities:** can face algorithmically reproduced discrimination
 - **People with disabilities:** can be locked out of work with new technologies
 - **Gig / platform workers:** can face unfair algorithmic decision making
 - **Migrant workers:** are vulnerable to poor employment practices
 - **Socio-economically disadvantaged:** can lack meaningful choice in work.
11. This disenfranchisement or inequity can be further exacerbated by underlying biases created by the disparities between the demographic makeup of those designing and making decisions about AI use in work, and those workers who are tracked and managed through AI systems. One way of working towards more equitable decision making in the design and implementation of AI technologies would be to increase participation by diverse workers in those design and implementation processes.

How should the Government protect workers and prepare them for this new future?

12. Make 'Good Work' integral to the Government's vision: The creation of a government funded 'Good Work' body to facilitate research and engage experts and the public in a national conversation about the future of work could help address the impact of AI on the quality and equity of work across the UK⁴.
13. Strengthening and enforcing legislation could help in:
 - Establishing red lines in workplace technology use, including bans on technologies
 - Enforcement of existing employment legislation is also critical and currently insufficient
 - Exploring whether worker consultation should be made mandatory before AI technologies are introduced into workplaces
 - Placing a moratorium on the uses of certain technologies in work (e.g., facial recognition)
 - Requiring a named holder of accountability in every organisation for using algorithmic technologies to make decisions that affect workers and clients/citizens.
14. Increasing funding for positive AI initiatives, such as:
 - AI technologies aiming to increase worker safety and wellbeing
 - AI driven identification of companies that violate workers' rights: i.e., monitoring and scrutinising employment practices
 - Technologies and initiatives that facilitate data reciprocity and worker control of data.

What skills are needed to adapt to an AI enabled workforce?

15. There has been a strong emphasis on skills training as a solution for the changing landscape of jobs in the UK, with re-skilling advocated as the primary avenue for protecting workers whose current jobs are vulnerable to automation. However, this is not a good solution for everyone. Vulnerable groups may be locked out of many approaches to re-skilling, while re-skilling is more feasible for those who have higher education, or in professions with a high

³ For further examples see our [AI and the Future of Work case study cards](#)

⁴ Institute for the Future of Work; [The Good Work Monitor](#)

level of continuing professional development as the norm. Disparities in access to re-skilling can amplify existing inequalities, and focusing solely on skills places the onus on the individual and risks ignoring broader issues with AI technologies in work, such as surveillance and algorithmic decision making (e.g., automated penalties for taking breaks).

16. The current UK National AI Strategy narrowly focuses on technical sectors and highly specialised skills and employees. This is important for making the UK an international leader in the field of AI, yet this strategy risks missing the opportunity to develop the wider workforce and its diverse needs and capabilities to adopt new AI skills. It is important to provide resources to a broader portfolio of fields across sectors to make sure all employees can benefit from government programmes.
17. There is also a need for education and training that develops an understanding of AI and related technologies across organisations, from workers through to senior management. This is not necessarily a need for coding skills; working with, and living with AI, requires different skillsets from developing AI. Employers need proficient understanding of linkages between data use and equality issues with AI technologies. Workers need opportunities to develop understanding of how AI technologies work, as a means of empowering them to have input into technology implementation.

How should the Government protect workers and prepare them for this new future?

18. Promote a Culture of Skills:
 - Invest in more flexible routes, including apprenticeships, boot camps and other diverse routes, that allow existing workers to continuously train in digital skills.
 - Encourage businesses to conduct skills-based hiring.

Further information

We would be very pleased to speak with you further about any element of our response.

About UCL Public Policy and Grand Challenges

UCL Public Policy supports engagement between a diverse range of researchers and policy professionals in order to enhance the use of evidence and expertise in policy and decision making.

UCL's Grand Challenges of Transformative Technology and Justice & Equality convene and foster cross-disciplinary research, partnerships, and initiatives across UCL and with external partners. GCTT explores the social impacts of new technology and how data can be used for good. GCJE examines the barriers people face to justice and how societal structures perpetuate and sustain inequalities.

About the British Academy

The British Academy is the UK's national body for the humanities and social sciences – the study of peoples, cultures and societies, past, present and future. We have three principal roles: as an independent fellowship of world-leading scholars and researchers; a funding body that supports new research in the humanities and social sciences, national and internationally; and a forum for debate and engagement – a voice that champions the humanities and social sciences.

The humanities and social sciences have a rich and unique contribution to make to the world we live in. The British Academy's fellowship represents breadth and excellence across these disciplines, and the Academy's policy work is dedicated to applying that insight to policy issues for public benefit and societal wellbeing. We bring independence, authority and objectivity to complex issues to enlighten the context, meaning and practicalities of challenges in public policy.

We have an ongoing programme of work on Data and AI. This programme asks how big data, data-driven technologies and artificial intelligence (AI) are changing the way that people live, and how we can harness this change for good.

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Webpages

AI and the Future of Work, UCL Public Policy
<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/public-policy/home/collaborate/ai-and-future-work-ucl-and-british-academy-collaboration>

Data and AI, The British Academy

<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/programmes/data-artificial-intelligence/>

UCL Grand Challenges

<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/grand-challenges/>

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