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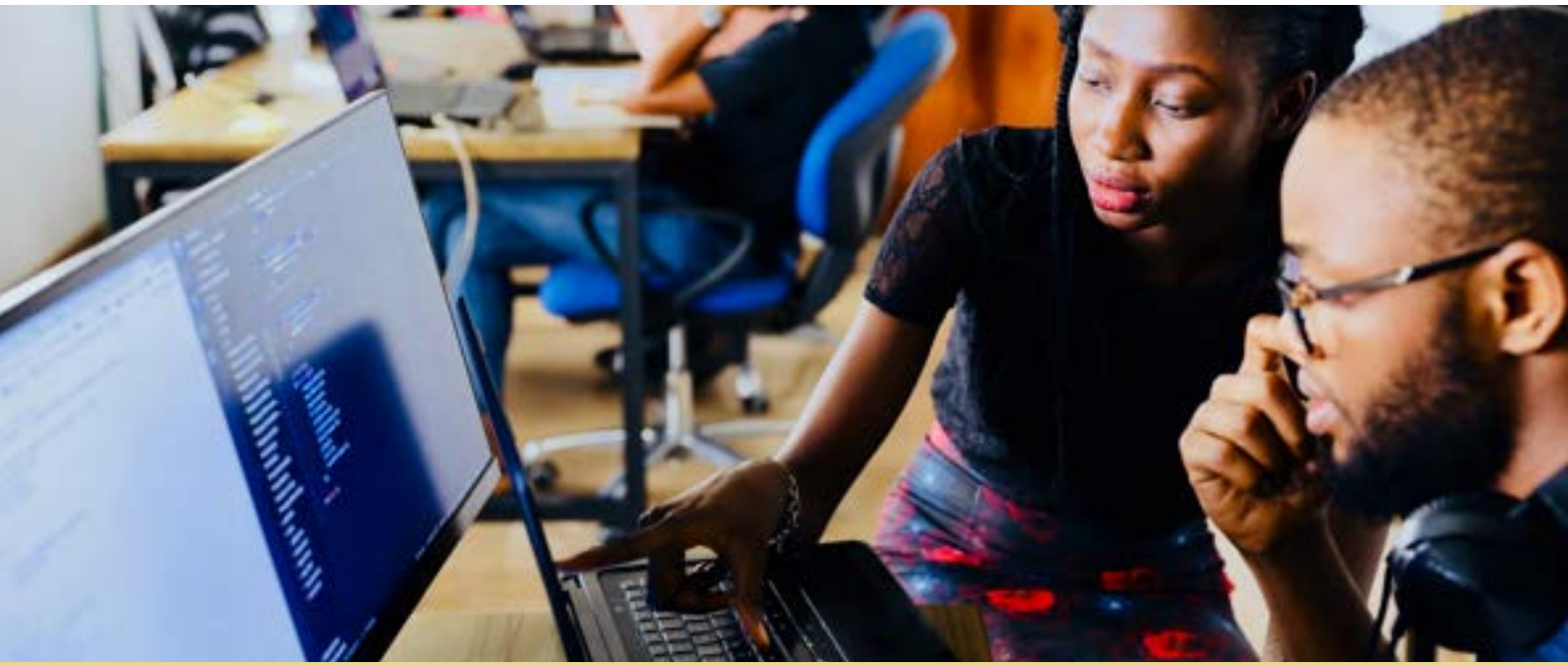

Reskilling for 2035:

The Future of Work and Learning

ARDEN UNIVERSITY
10th ANNIVERSARY

Contents

Preparing for the next decade of work and learning

The world of work and learning is undergoing a seismic transformation. The pace of change has accelerated exponentially in recent years, reshaping careers, skills and education systems in ways that were unimaginable just a decade ago. What was once a predictable path – linear careers, long-lasting skills and traditional degrees – has given way to a dynamic, fragmented and fast-evolving landscape.

In light of its 10th Anniversary, Arden University conducted a report into how the higher education sector has changed and what's yet to come. The report explores the forces driving this shift and their profound implications, not only for businesses and the economy, but also for the educational institutions that are responsible for shaping the skills of future generations.

From the rapid obsolescence of skills and the rise of portfolio careers, to the normalisation of hybrid working and the growing demand for flexible learning solutions, the trends are clear. Adaptability is no longer optional... it's essential.

Yet, this transformation isn't without its challenges. Inequalities risk widening, generational divides are deepening, and the gap between innovation and readiness is growing.

This is a moment of both opportunity and urgency. The choices we make today – whether as employers, educators, policymakers or individuals – will determine whether these changes become engines of resilience and opportunity or fault lines of inequality.

This report is not just a reflection on what's changing, but a call to action for both work and learning: to build systems that are flexible, inclusive and designed for continual reinvention. The clock is ticking, and the future of work and learning is being written now. Let's ensure it's a future that works for everyone.

Professor Carl Lygo
Chief Executive Officer and Vice Chancellor

Methodology

The findings in this report combine:

- **Arden University research and foresight, including The 2030 Workforce Report (2022) and Employer Perspectives on the Future of Work (2024).**

- **Survey data from UK employees (Arden University, 2025; n=2,000), capturing attitudes around upskilling, career confidence and future threats.**

- **Secondary research from major international studies: OECD (Skills for 2030), UNESCO (Reimagining our Futures Together), WEF (Future of Jobs Report 2025), LinkedIn (Workplace Learning Report 2025), PwC (Hopes and Fears 2024), Gallup (State of the Global Workplace 2025), CIPD (Good Work Index 2024) and others.**

- **Foresight scanning across policy, technology and workforce trends, including demographic and environmental drivers.**

This mixed evidence base provides a credible, future-facing lens on the role of flexible learning in navigating disruption.

Executive summary

What's changing?

Skills are expiring faster than ever

The average half-life of skills has shortened to under five years, with some skills now becoming outdated in under a year. This is driving increased demand for continuous upskilling and skill refreshers.

Careers are increasingly fragmented

The traditional 'job for life' is becoming obsolete, giving way to portfolio careers with multiple pivots. As a result, lifelong learning has shifted from a 'nice to have' to a necessity.

Technology adoption is in overdrive

Technology adoption has accelerated dramatically, with tools that once took years to diffuse now reaching mass adoption in a matter of months. This shift was turbo-charged by COVID-19, which compressed digital transformation timelines by years.

'Traditional' learning is changing

Micro-credentials, modular pathways and stackable qualifications are gaining legitimacy and challenging the dominance of more rigid, traditional qualification structures.

The rise of the two-speed workplace

Younger workers are embracing reskilling as an opportunity, while many older workers experience it as a burden. This generational divide is creating a two-speed workforce.

What this means:

Flexibility is now the baseline

Remote work, hybrid models and on-demand learning have made flexibility a baseline expectation across both work and education.

Adaptability is the new superpower

Demand for 'human' skills, including creativity, resilience and empathy, alongside digital and green capabilities, is rising, reshaping hiring and retention priorities.

Inequalities risk widening

While flexibility expands opportunities, it also risks leaving people behind, as divides persist across age, gender, religion and digital literacy.

Better collaboration is essential

Employers, educators and policymakers can't tackle the reskilling challenge alone. It's time to build co-ordinated ecosystems that work together to meet the scale of the challenge.

The clock is ticking

Whether flexible learning becomes an engine of resilience and opportunity – or a fault line of inequality – depends on how quickly systems adapt now.

Chapter one:

The past decade – how work and learning have changed

The last 10 years have been marked by disruption on every front.

The pandemic accelerated forces already underway – automation, shifting career paths and generational differences – blurring the boundary between work and learning.

What was once a linear career, punctuated by occasional training, is now an expectation of continual development. For employees, resilience and adaptability became survival skills; for universities and training providers, hybrid and digital-first models moved from experiment to necessity.

Remote and hybrid work made flexibility a baseline

What began as an emergency measure during the pandemic has since become an established expectation. Remote and hybrid working patterns have reshaped not only the workplace but also learning, with digital tools normalising access ‘anytime, anywhere.’ Alongside this shift, microlearning and on-demand content have grown rapidly, embedding flexibility as the new norm.

> **Remote and hybrid working has reshaped learning, with digital tools normalising access ‘anytime, anywhere.’**

From jobs for life to portfolio careers

Over the past decade, permanent, single-track careers have become the exception, rather than the rule. Instead, freelancing, gig work and portfolio careers are increasingly common, requiring people to reskill and adapt multiple times across their working lives. This has driven greater demand for modular and flexible education that can be slotted into busy and changing schedules, shifting lifelong learning from an ambition into a necessity.

Automation and AI redefined skills

Technology has redrawn the map of skills in demand in recent years. Employers increasingly seek both technical expertise – particularly in AI and data-driven roles – and enduring human strengths, such as creativity, adaptability and resilience.

The rise of ‘hybrid roles’, where technical know-how is combined with interpersonal and leadership skills, shows how jobs are evolving, rather than being replaced outright.

Employers expect lifelong learning

Employers now see learning as central to performance and retention. In fact, 90% of L&D leaders say human skills are now a top priority, with many employers shifting from productivity metrics towards measuring broader ‘human performance’.

Arden University’s 2025 research reflects this shift at the employee level: more than half of UK workers are actively upskilling, with two-thirds driven by the need to stay relevant.

90%

of L&D leaders say human skills are now a top priority

Universities and training providers adapted – unevenly

The last decade has seen many higher education institutions move towards hybrid and digital-first provisions, with some institutions, such as Arden University, pioneering flexible models, with 24/7 access. Yet progress has been uneven.

UNESCO warns affordability remains a barrier, while Gallup notes that engagement has lagged, despite expanded access. At the same time, enrolment patterns are shifting: postgraduate taught qualifications recently overtook first degrees for the first time, and subjects linked to employability – such as business, computing and medicine – are growing, while areas like languages and education continue to decline.

These changes show a sector adapting out of both necessity and opportunity, but with stark contrasts between those leading in flexible provision and those struggling to keep pace.

Technology and tools enabling learning

As digital access and connectivity has expanded over the past decade, the question has shifted from whether technology is used to how it's used. However, there are ongoing challenges around teacher preparedness and integration, echoing UNESCO's warning that uptake of technology is often faster than the support structures needed to make it effective.

Technology has also changed how learning is evaluated. Dashboards, analytics and assessment data are increasingly shaping teaching decisions. Yet many educators say they face 'evidence overload' and lack the training needed to use this data effectively, creating a new gap between the promise of technology and the capacity to make it work.

1/3

of UK university courses were taught in hybrid formats

2022/23

Hybrid and online learning normalised

Almost a third of UK university courses were taught in hybrid formats in 2022/23, up from just 4% pre-pandemic. Many students have welcomed the flexibility and inclusivity this shift has offered.

However, while many learners have access to online or hybrid courses, the digital skills, financial support, pastoral care and institutional infrastructure that make flexible learning genuinely effective are lacking.

Online universities are here to stay

The pandemic forced a rapid pivot online, and many institutions are retaining digital-first delivery as part of their long-term strategy. Surveys show students are increasingly open to vocational and shorter programmes, especially online, and UK universities are competing with a growing ecosystem of bootcamps and industry micro-credentials. This demonstrates how higher education has had to adapt not just to a temporary emergency but to a permanent cultural shift in how learning is expected to be delivered.

Summary

The past decade – how work and learning have changed

Taken together, the past decade has seen flexibility become the baseline, careers grow more fragmented and technology redefine both the skills required and the methods used to teach them.

At the same time, student choices have shifted towards courses and qualifications with clearer links to employability, reshaping higher education's role. Yet these advances have brought new pressures: access is still uneven, institutions often struggle to adapt at speed, and employees are caught between opportunity and overload.

The story of the last decade is one of progress shadowed by imbalance – a tension that sets the stage for the next part of this report, which explores not just what's changed, but the accelerating pace of that change.

Chapter two:

The present – the pace of change... now vs 10 years ago

Nearly **six in 10** UK workers say their industry is changing faster than a decade ago.

10 years ago, industries evolved over years, giving businesses and individuals time to adapt. Technology rolled out in phases, and skills stayed relevant for longer. The world moved at a manageable pace.

Fast forward to today, and the game has completely changed. Innovation is happening at breakneck speed. Tools that once took years to gain traction now reach mass adoption in just months. Entire industries are being disrupted seemingly overnight, and workers who once retrained every few years now expect to reskill annually. The gap between innovation and readiness has narrowed, leaving many feeling unprepared. Comparing today with a decade ago, it's clear that the speed of transformation is redefining how both work and learning are experienced.

So, what exactly has changed?

Technology adoption timelines have collapsed

The pandemic compressed years of digital adoption into mere months. Gartner reports that new technologies now move from pilot to scaled deployment in under eight months, compared to years in the 2010s.

This collapse means employees are expected to adapt almost immediately to new technologies, often before training, regulation or support systems are in place. For universities and employers alike, the challenge isn't just about adopting new tools but building the capacity for people to use them effectively and sustainably.

Skills are expiring faster than ever

The half-life of skills (the time before a refresher is needed) is shrinking at an alarming rate. Technical knowledge that once lasted for a decade now risks becoming obsolete in just a few years. In fast-evolving fields like AI and coding, skills can now become outdated in under 12 months.

Recent research from Arden University found that this acceleration is forcing workers to reskill more frequently, with reskilling cycles now averaging at just under a year. Worryingly, however, only 51% of employees are currently upskilling, despite over half (58%) feeling their industry is moving at a much faster pace than ever before. And while younger cohorts anticipate this turnover, many older workers underestimate how quickly skills erode, widening generational gaps in preparedness.

> **Skills can now become outdated in under 12 months**

Learning formats have transformed rapidly

Education is transforming to meet the pace of change. Micro-credentials, once niche, have reached mainstream acceptance far faster than massive open online courses (MOOCs) ever did.

There's also a growing demand for flexible, on-demand learning pathways, while employers increasingly recognise non-traditional credentials and the need for skills-based hiring.

This has resulted in the definition of being 'qualified' shifting. Shorter, stackable and skills-focused formats are no longer optional: they're becoming the core routes to employment and career progression.

Workplace change feels faster and more disruptive

Many workers feel their industry is changing at a faster pace, with 60% of employees saying they experienced more workplace change last year than the year before, and almost half admitting to 'change fatigue' – the sense of being worn down by constant upheaval.

This lived experience highlights how the speed of transformation isn't just an external trend but a daily reality for many workers, underscoring the need for learning systems that can support resilience as well as skills.

Having said that, even though many employees expect technology to reshape their roles, very few feel adequately prepared.
Additionally, there's evidence that traditional education systems tend to adapt much slower than the technologies transforming work, risking a mismatch between the pace of innovation and the readiness of workers and institutions to respond.

The speed of workplace disruption has exposed the limitations of traditional degree structures. More than half of UK graduates now say they regret their choice of degree subject, with many wishing they had pursued more flexible, skills-focused pathways. All in all, this reinforces the OECD's and UNESCO's warnings that systems designed for stability cannot keep pace with the accelerated turnover of skills.

Summary

The present – the pace of change... now vs 10 years ago

Change no longer moves in steady steps; it's a sprint. Technologies spread in months, and skills expire in the same amount of time it takes to upskill.

While learning formats are diversifying, many workers feel unprepared, and systems built for slower times are struggling to keep up. The result is a widening gap between the speed of innovation and society's ability to adapt – a gap that raises urgent questions about what the next decade will bring.

Chapter three:

The future – what's coming in the next decade?

The next decade promises to be disruptive. However, it won't be shaped by one single disruption, but instead by a series of overlapping shifts: AI moving from specialist expertise to an everyday workplace tool, careers breaking into repeated cycles of reskilling, and the demand for human, digital and green skills rising in parallel.

These forces will not only transform the labour market but also redefine how individuals approach learning, with careers increasingly shaped by cycles of reskilling and reinvention.

Flexibility will no longer be a perk but an expectation, while success will be judged as much by wellbeing, equity and sustainability as by productivity. At the same time, education will grow more global, modular and competitive, challenging long-held assumptions about traditional degrees and credentials.

Below are the core shifts expected to disrupt the next decade of work and learning:

Shift 1:

AI becomes a core competency

AI will move from specialist expertise to a universal workplace tool.

Workers will collaborate with AI in analysis, content creation and decision-making. There will be a need for ethical and interpretive skills, while GoStudent and Arden University argue that AI literacy must be embedded across curricula.

Shift 2:

Lifelong, modular learning becomes the norm

Careers will be defined by cycles of reskilling, supported by stackable pathways.

Stackable credentials are growing and will continue to do so due to careers needing constant upskilling. UK workers echo this expectation, with 34% anticipating personalised, AI-driven learning, and 24% expecting VR/AR-based training in the next decade, according to Arden University research.

Shift 3:

Demand for human, digital and green skills intensifies

Technical, sustainable and interpersonal capabilities will all rise in value.

The future workforce will need a blend of technical, sustainable and interpersonal skills. Millions of green jobs are on the horizon, while digital capabilities continue to surge in demand. At the same time, skills like adaptability and resilience rank among the fastest growing in demand, with Arden University arguing these skills should now be recognised as essential 'human' skills, not dismissed as 'soft' skills.

Shift 4:

Flexibility becomes the standard

Hybrid, distributed work will normalise demand for flexible learning formats.

While the remote vs in-office debate is still ongoing, in the next decade it's expected that hybrid and distributed work will fully normalise.

Additionally, Arden University research shows workers now prefer on-the-job learning (45%), blended models (40%) and self-paced study (37%) – meaning education systems must shorten and adapt delivery models accordingly, whether through blended learning or offering stronger, and just as reputable, online courses.

Below are the core shifts expected to disrupt the next decade of work and learning:

Shift 5:

Success will be measured beyond productivity

Organisations will value wellbeing, innovation and inclusivity alongside efficiency.

Businesses are already slowly pivoting towards using success metrics of innovation, wellbeing, inclusivity and sustainability, which will sit alongside productivity. As a result, universities will be expected to prepare graduates who can contribute not just technically but also culturally and socially.

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Shift 6:

Education becomes global and competitive

Borderless universities and employer-led learning will challenge traditional degrees.

Competition will not only be about pedagogy and assessment, but also about institutional survival. Financial pressures – with projections showing many UK universities could face deficits by the mid-2020s – are accelerating the search for new revenue streams, from international online programmes to deeper industry partnerships.

At the same time, the Future of Education Report predicts a shift from high-stakes, standardised testing towards mastery-based progression, digital transcripts and credentialing systems that travel with learners across borders.

As such, modular and stackable formats are becoming the new global standard.

Shift 7:

Degrees move to block teaching and multiple start dates

Flexible calendars and modular teaching are replacing rigid academic timetables.

Rigid academic calendars are beginning to give way to more flexible learning structures. Increasingly, degrees are being offered in shorter teaching blocks, with multiple entry points throughout the year.

This shift allows learners to accelerate, pause or re-enter their studies at different times, aligning education more closely with the rhythms of modern careers and personal commitments. Such models reflect the growing demand for modular, stackable formats that provide flexibility without sacrificing progression.

Shift 8:

Pathways designed around life and workforce needs

Learning is being tailored to fit around personal commitments and workforce priorities.

Flexibility is increasingly being built into course design to expand access. In areas such as healthcare, for example, degrees are being restructured so study weeks align with school calendars, timetables are condensed, and placements are adapted to fit around personal responsibilities.

For those entering higher education at a later date, whether that's due to personal reasons or financial pressures making it too difficult post-school, flexibility will allow them to progress alongside their career.

Paired with online and blended modules, this will allow parents or those with caregiving responsibilities to still gain the education they need – levelling out the playing field.

Summary

The future – what's coming in the next decade?

Together, these forces point to a future where learning is inseparable from work – the driving engine of employability itself.

Yet how these shifts play out will depend on the realities faced by workers today: their confidence in their skills, their appetite for reskilling and the support they receive from employers.

Chapter four:

Employee insights - voices from the workforce

It’s not just reports and forecasts. Workers themselves are feeling the impact of disruption, in real time.

A 2025 survey by Arden University, across 2,000 UK employees, highlights some striking differences: generational divides, gender gaps and regional inequalities, in how people approach learning, their confidence in the future and the support they expect from employers. The findings reveal a mix of optimism for reinvention and the very real barriers that risk leaving people behind.

Who’s upskilling?

What emerges is a picture of a two-speed workforce – with one group actively preparing for disruption, while another risks ageing out of learning systems just as technological change accelerates.

More than half (51%) of UK employees say they’re currently upskilling, but beneath that average lies a striking generational fault line. Younger workers are overwhelmingly invested in reskilling, with almost three-quarters (73%) of 25-34-year-olds engaged in learning.

However, among over-55s, the figure falls below a third (28%).

Gender also plays a role: nearly six in 10 men (59%) report active upskilling, compared with just over four in 10 women (43%).

Are they motivated?

For most employees, the central driver behind upskilling is the need to remain relevant, but the younger generation also see it as a route to career mobility. More than a quarter (26%) of 25–34-year-olds say they’re learning to start an entirely new career, underscoring how precarious entry into the labour market feels.

By contrast, older workers tend to frame learning as compliance or obligation, and many say they lack the time, energy or inclination to take it on. For those approaching retirement, reskilling is simply not seen as a worthwhile investment.

The tension here is clear: many younger workers view learning as an opportunity, while older workers often experience it as a burden.

26%

of 25–34-year-olds say they’re learning to start a new career

How are they learning?

Learning preferences also reveal generational contrasts. On-the-job training is the most preferred format overall, but younger employees show greater openness to blended and immersive methods, such as VR and microlearning. While older employees continue to lean towards more traditional part-time or in-person study.

These differences point to a challenge for providers: designing systems that serve both those who want flexible, technology-enabled pathways and those who still rely on established formats.

Are employers doing enough?

When it comes to preparing for the future, workers have mixed feelings towards their employers. While 72% say their company is doing enough, more than one in five (22%) feel their organisation is falling short.

Employees also know exactly what they want. Dedicated time for learning, funding for training and clear career pathways top the list. This reflects a bigger trend: investing in learning isn't just a nice-to-have anymore. It's become a key factor in whether people see a company as a place they want to grow and stay long term.

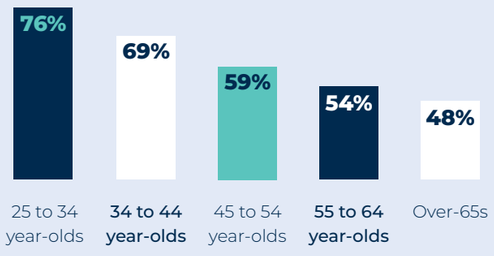
Do workers feel confident?

Confidence in skills varies sharply across age groups.

While more than three-quarters (76%) of 25-34-year-olds believe their skills will remain relevant in ten years, fewer than half (48%) of over-65s share that optimism. The mid-career group (35-44-year-olds) occupy a more uncertain middle ground, balancing the need to reskill with the demands of family and career progression.

This unevenness suggests that while younger workers may feel equipped to adapt, many older workers are not only disengaged from learning but also doubtful of their ability to keep pace.

Age groups: Believe their skills will remain relevant in ten years



Hopes and fears for the future

When asked about the future, employees articulate a blend of anxiety and ambition.

Technology disruption is the most widely cited threat to job relevance, followed by economic instability and skills gaps. At the same time, workers want to future-proof adaptability and technical fluency above all.

Interest in AI learning is particularly pronounced – nearly one in four (24%) say they want to learn how to use AI tools in the coming year.

24% **of workers want to learn how to use AI tools**

What stands out is the tension between the fear of being left behind by automation and the eagerness to harness the very tools driving that disruption.

Summary

Employee insights - voices from the workforce

The survey shows disruption is being lived very differently across the workforce. For younger employees, learning is an opportunity – a means to progress, pivot careers and build confidence. For many older workers, however, it's experienced as a burden, constrained by time, energy or a sense the effort may not pay off. These divides – reinforced by gender and regional differences – risk entrenching a workforce divided between learners and laggards, where some accelerate into the future, while others fall behind.

What cuts across these differences is a shared expectation that employers must do more: providing time, funding and clearer routes for development. The findings underline the central challenge for the decade ahead – creating learning systems that are flexible enough to meet diverse needs but robust enough to close widening gaps. How this challenge can be met is the focus of the next section, which considers the implications for universities, businesses and policymakers.

Chapter five:

How learning needs to adapt

The implications are clear: if education systems, employers and policymakers do not adapt, workers and students risk falling behind.

The next decade will demand not only new skills, but new models of delivery, new approaches to funding and new metrics for success. Flexible learning is no longer optional; it's the infrastructure that will support resilience and opportunity in a rapidly shifting world.

Universities like Arden University are already pioneering models that combine digital-first learning, workplace integration and inclusive design, but scaling these innovations requires systemic change.

Meeting evolving skill demands

As skill cycles shorten, traditional multi-year qualifications are no longer enough on their own. Education and training systems must deliver faster, modular interventions that allow workers to continually update their capabilities.

For sectors at high risk of automation, particularly retail, transport and manufacturing, short-cycle retraining and clear pathways into growth areas such as healthcare, renewable energy and advanced manufacturing will be essential.

Flexibility and accessibility

Even as access expands, the digital divide persists – shifting from connectivity alone to questions of digital literacy, confidence and readiness to engage with AI-enabled tools. Unless these barriers are actively addressed, the benefits of flexible learning may not be equally shared.

Universities that fail to embed strong support structures alongside such learning models – such as digital skills training, pastoral care and inclusive design – risk turning flexibility into another barrier, rather than a bridge.

Role of technology

Technology will not just support content delivery but increasingly drive pedagogy and assessment. The Future of Education Report points to AI-powered adaptive assessment, real-time feedback systems and teacher dashboards as key enablers of personalised learning. This aligns with other forecasts around the importance of personalised pathways and immersive learning formats.

Systemic and policy implications

Accreditation reform must go further than recognising micro-credentials: systems will need to validate alternative evidence of skills such as badges, portfolios and digital transcripts. Without this, learners risk accumulating credentials that employers fail to recognise.

Employers to have more of a voice in education

Employers are no longer passive consumers of graduate talent; they're becoming active partners in shaping learning. The World Economic Forum argues that co-created curricula between businesses and universities will be essential to ensure alignment with real-world needs.

Corporate learning is also evolving. Nearly half of employees consider access to skill-building as a key factor in deciding whether to stay with an employer, making investment in learning not just a development issue but a retention strategy.

Deloitte also added that corporate training is moving away from compliance-driven programmes towards cultivating adaptability, resilience and 'human performance'.

This positions **employers as central actors** in national and global learning ecosystems.

Avoiding learning fatigue

Flexible formats alone aren't enough; learning also needs to be motivating and sustainable. As such, workers increasingly prefer short, practical courses that fit into their busy schedules alongside work and personal commitments.

Gamification, simulation-based assessments and social learning are also powerful tools to boost engagement and improve outcomes.

However, motivation can quickly fade if learners feel overwhelmed. Many UK workers are already experiencing change fatigue, highlighting the importance of learning programmes that prioritise wellbeing, manageable pacing and psychological support, as without these elements, even the best-designed programmes risk high attrition.

Funding flexibility and research excellence

Flexible funding systems are essential for universities to adapt and thrive. Performance-based block grants (QR funding) provide the autonomy and stability needed to balance long-term discovery research with applied innovation.

Without this balance, there's a risk of undermining not only research excellence but also the financial foundation that enables universities to experiment with new teaching models and lifelong learning initiatives.

Flexibility's double-edged nature

The paradox of flexibility is evident in the labour market. Zero-hour contracts, for example, often attract more applicants, despite offering lower wages and higher turnover, showing how much people value flexibility, even when it comes with insecurity. Higher education faces a similar challenge: students increasingly seek flexible learning formats but often question the quality or value for money. The key will be designing systems that provide flexibility without compromising on quality, a critical priority for the decade ahead.

Summary

How learning needs to adapt

Preparing for the future of work requires more than equipping people with new skills. It demands a fundamental rethink of how learning is designed, delivered and valued. Embedding AI and green skills alongside human adaptability, creating modular and inclusive pathways and reforming accreditation so that flexible learning carries real weight are all part of this shift.

Crucially, no single actor can deliver this alone. Employers, universities and policymakers must work together to build an ecosystem where learning is motivating, accessible and responsive to change. The question for the next decade is whether we treat flexible learning as a strategic priority or as a patchwork of disconnected initiatives. That choice will determine whether disruption becomes an engine of resilience and opportunity – or a fault line that leaves too many behind.

Conclusion and recommendations

The evidence across this report shows the future of work and learning is no longer about isolated shifts but about interconnected pressures: faster technology adoption, shorter skill lifecycles, rising expectations for flexibility and widening gaps in access and confidence.

Over the past decade, disruption has blurred the boundaries between work and education, turning learning into a lifelong requirement, rather than a stage of life. Yet this expectation is lived very differently across generations, risking creating a two-speed workforce, where some surge ahead, while others fall behind.

The next decade will test whether institutions, employers and governments can keep pace.

The challenge is not just to add more courses or tools, but to build a system that's resilient, inclusive and designed for continual reinvention.

To achieve this, three priorities stand out:

1

Build resilience through skills

Workers need a mix of skills that combine digital fluency, AI literacy and green capabilities with human strengths like adaptability, creativity and resilience. These skills shouldn't be limited to specialist tracks; they need to be embedded across all learning pathways.

The pace of learning also needs to speed up to match the reality of 12-month skill cycles. Without this shift, both workers and employers risk falling behind as industries evolve.

2

Design flexible and inclusive systems

Learning systems need to be modular, stackable and asynchronous, allowing people to build recognised qualifications over time. Accreditation reforms are also essential to ensure these credentials hold real value with employers.

Accessibility must be a priority too, addressing the digital divide with better infrastructure, digital literacy support and inclusive models that serve diverse groups.

3

Create partnerships for shared responsibility

Lifelong learning can't fall solely on individuals. Employers and universities need to work together to create learning ecosystems. Businesses should integrate training into their workforce strategies, offering time, funding and clear career pathways. Universities, in turn, must shift their focus from simply delivering content to developing skills, embedding both digital and human capabilities into every course.

Closing note

Taken together, these priorities form a roadmap for action. If realised, flexible learning will become not just a response to disruption but the foundation of resilience, innovation and opportunity in the decade ahead. If ignored, the risk is clear: widening divides, exhausted workers and institutions left playing catch-up.

The choice now is whether to lead this transformation or be led by it.

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