



Perspectives on life and learning in further education



Since 2022, the *Pearson School Report* has offered an annual snapshot of what's shaping education today – bringing together the voices of thousands of teachers and students across the country. It's become a touchpoint for educators, policymakers and employers who want to understand how learners experience change and where the system can better support them.

Here, in this college-focused digest, we shine a light on how colleges are adapting to new expectations, technologies and pathways to work. Colleges play a vital role in equipping young people and adults with the skills, confidence and opportunities to thrive – and their ability to innovate will be central to the success of the UK's skills system.

Across the findings, we see evidence of that innovation – from the growing use of digital tools to the renewed emphasis on transferable skills and partnerships with industry. The challenges are real, but so is the sector's determination to evolve and deliver learning that's relevant, inclusive and life-changing.

The insights in this report point to what comes next – a further education system that is both practical and ambitious, preparing learners for jobs that don't yet exist and industries still taking shape. Together, we can turn today's momentum into lasting progress for every learner.

Freya Thomas Monk

Managing Director, Pearson Qualifications



Part one

Challenges and barriers



Foreword

These findings show that some of the biggest factors impacting students' success relate to worries about finances and job prospects, which in turn affect their mental health and ultimately their academic performance.

With college students almost three times more likely to be worried about money than school students, there is a clear challenge for colleges across the country to address the factors affecting students' mental health.

This report comes as the skills and apprenticeships portfolio moves to the Department for Work and Pensions, a pledge that two-thirds of young people will achieve higher-level skills, either through university, further education or a gold-standard apprenticeship by age 25, and nearly £800m in extra funding for 16–19 education next year. Skills policy is central to the growth story and to a fairer labour market.

– Angela Joyce, CEO, Capital City College

What are the top challenges?

Since the first *Pearson School Report* in 2022, we've been asking schools about the top barriers and challenges they expect to manage over the next 12 months. This year, to support a richer picture of the challenges in education, we asked the same question to colleges.

Nearly a quarter of college tutors expect the top challenges and barriers for their college to manage in the next 12 months to be:



Student mental health and wellbeing



Digital safety and wellbeing



Budget pressures



Teacher/tutor and college leader workload



The increasing use of AI in teaching, learning and assessment













What are the barriers to student learning?

Beyond these pressures, tutors and students alike pointed to factors that directly affect learning in the classroom and beyond.

“Trying to balance college work with my part-time job is the hardest part. Sometimes it feels like there aren’t enough hours in the day to keep up with everything.”

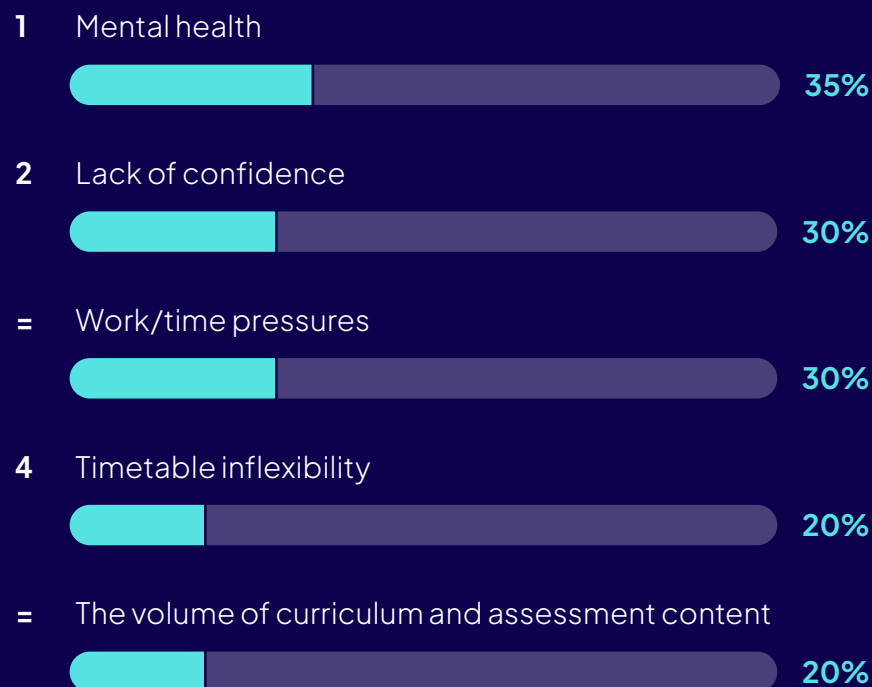
– College student

Around one in five tutors identified the top factors they think will be a barrier to learning for students in college in the next six months as:

16 to 18-year-old learners	Adult learners
<div></div> <div>Timetable inflexibility</div>	<div></div> <div>Work/time pressures</div>
<div></div> <div>The volume of curriculum and assessment content</div>	<div></div> <div>Timetable inflexibility</div>
<div></div> <div>Work/time pressures</div>	<div></div> <div>External pressures impacting their ability to attend classes (e.g. work)</div>
<div></div> <div>Access to special educational needs and/or disabilities provision</div>	<div></div> <div>Access to special educational needs and/or disabilities provision</div>
<div></div> <div>Lack of confidence</div>	<div></div> <div>The volume of curriculum and assessment content</div>

In addition, students revealed that some anxieties stretch beyond the classroom walls.

Students themselves told us what impacts their learning:



Students report being worried about:



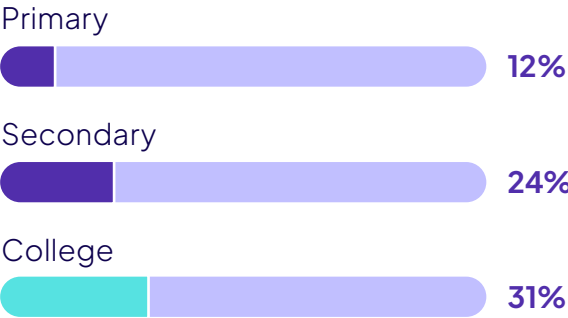
A closer look: across the phases

“What am I currently worried about?
Financial issues with the cost of living.”
– College student

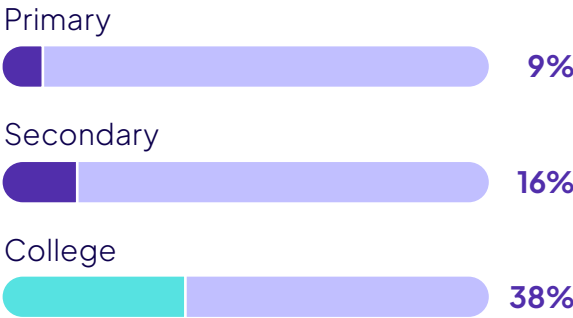
As noted in the *Pearson School Report 2025*, these concerns are shared across all ages and stages of education, but increase as students progress into their college years.



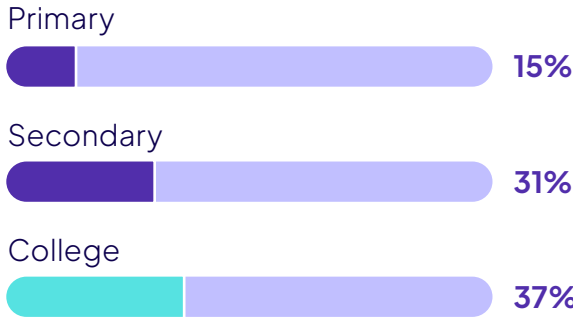
Being worried about uncertainty over their future is an issue for **12%** of primary students, doubling to **24%** at secondary and increasing to **31%** in college.



Perhaps unsurprisingly, college students are **more than twice** as likely to worry about money as their younger peers, with **38%** saying they’re concerned, compared to **16%** of secondary students and **9%** of primary students.



15% of primary students are worried about getting a job in future, doubling to **31%** at secondary. At college, **37%** of students are worried about getting a job or progressing in their role.



Part two

The student learning experience today

What's working, what isn't and how students feel about learning.



Foreword

Doing an apprenticeship is an amazing experience, but it doesn't come without its challenges. One of the hardest parts can be balancing the demands of work and study. At times, project deadlines pile up, and it feels like there's little space left for focused learning.

But the positives shine through. When I started my apprenticeship at 16, I knew very little about engineering. Studying for a BTEC alongside my day-to-day role gave me a strong foundation, and that learning quickly translated into confidence. I felt more capable when tackling projects and more comfortable stepping into new situations.

And it isn't just about confidence: it's about curiosity too. These findings show that a third of college students enjoy learning new things, and that's been true for me as well. Going to college meant I could get hands-on with practicals, like surveying, while also discovering the commercial side of the industry that I hadn't seen in the workplace. Every new skill has taken me a step closer to the career I want, and even now each day feels like another chance to learn something new.

– Santana, former BTEC student



Engagement and enjoyment

Despite the challenges shared, students' resilience and motivation to learn shine through.



- **More than half** (54%) of students agree that students at their college are **interested in learning**
- **47%** of them agree that students **enjoy learning**
- **47%** agree that all students get **the support they need** for their learning

How do college students feel about learning?



- **More than 1 in 4** (27%) feel **confident** in their learning
- For **26%** of students, learning **makes them feel confident**
- The same number (**27%**) sometimes feel **anxious** about learning
- **18%** of students say they **struggle to engage** with learning
- **Less than 1 in 4** (23%) feel **in control of their learning**



Many college students report enjoying aspects of learning, but the level of engagement often depends on context.



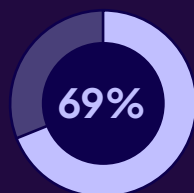
- **A third** (33%) say that they like learning **new things**
- **29%** like **applying** what they learn
- **1 in 5** (21%) students see how what they are learning is **relevant to their everyday life**
- **1 in 4** (24%) students say they find what they are learning **interesting**
- **31%** say it depends on the **subject**

Confidence and support

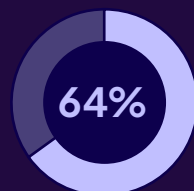
Overall, confidence in learning is high.

Most students feel able to understand what they're learning, use the right technology to support it, and access the help they need.

Students show the highest levels of confidence in:



Understanding what they are learning/studying



Getting the right support for their learning needs

Snapshot of digital confidence

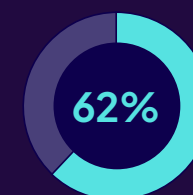
For students



When it comes to tech, **3 in 4** students are confident using it to support their learning.

Similarly, more than **7 in 10** are confident using tech effectively (72%) and safely (70%).

For tutors



Are confident in their own digital skills

Similarly, more than **6 in 10** (61%) tutors are confident in their abilities to help students develop digital skills for the workplace.

Taking steps towards change: tutor views

Tutors offered clear views on what would make the biggest difference to student progress, highlighting flexibility, accessibility, and life skills as the most important levers for improvement.

In an ideal world, which of the following would you focus on to improve student learning?



Flexibility in curriculum development or delivery

30%



Improving accessibility in learning materials

29%



Greater focus on life skills

29%



Digital learning

27%



Improving digital infrastructure (e.g. broadband, Wi-Fi, devices)

27%



Part three

AI use in colleges



Foreword

Artificial intelligence is already shaping the way we live, learn and work, and its impact will only grow. For colleges, this isn't a distant horizon; it's a shift happening now in classrooms and workplaces across the country.

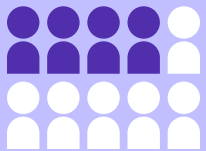
These findings show a sector that recognises both the promise and the challenges of AI. Tutors are eager to build their confidence and skills. Students are curious and motivated to learn how to use AI well. And employers are looking for graduates who can apply these tools in real-world settings.

That's why embedding AI isn't simply about access to technology: it's about investing in people. It's about equipping educators with the training and support they need, weaving AI skills into the curriculum, and forging strong partnerships with employers to make learning meaningful and future-focused.

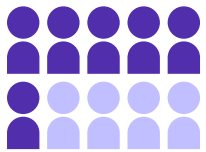
– Les Hopper, Digital and Product Director, Pearson

The AI confidence and skills gap

AI is filtering into classrooms and workplaces, but many tutors still feel underprepared.



More than **4 in 10** (43%) of college tutors **lack confidence in using AI**.

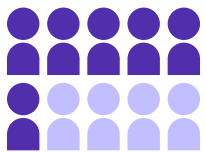


More than **6 in 10** (62%) tutors believe they can choose **educationally appropriate** AI tools and solutions.

“Our job is to get students ready for what’s next. That means giving them the confidence and understanding to make smart, ethical choices with AI – now, and in the future.”

– Anthony Bravo OBE, Principal of Basingstoke College of Technology

It’s no longer just about whether AI is present in education, but about building tutor confidence and embedding AI through meaningful training.



Nearly **6 in 10** (59%) agree that college tutors **need more AI training** to support student upskilling. Less than **1 in 5** (18%) disagree.

Curriculum and workforce readiness

If staff confidence is one piece of the puzzle, curriculum design is another.

Connecting to the world of work



58% of college tutors think that **AI will have a positive impact on vocational job prospects.**

The same number agree that employers are **engaged in AI topics.**

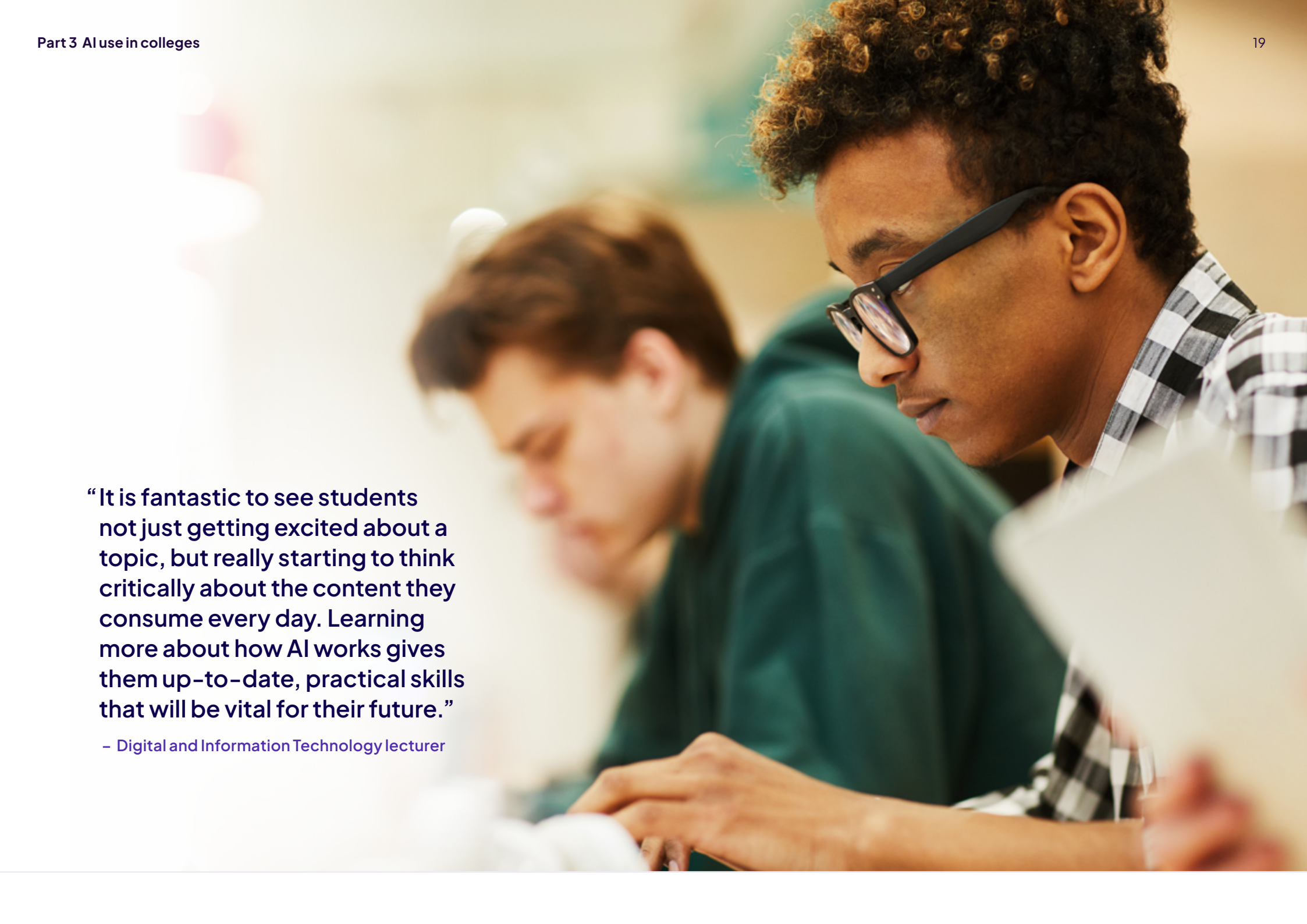
However, to support this, college tutors agree that we **need more partnerships for hands-on AI learning** (58%).

Both tutors and learners are increasingly conscious of a future AI-driven workforce which leaves them weighing up what AI means for learning today.



6 in 10 tutors told us:

- **Vocational courses prepare students well for AI-driven careers** (59%)
- **The curriculum should be reformed to embed digital/AI skills.** Just 15% of tutors disagree

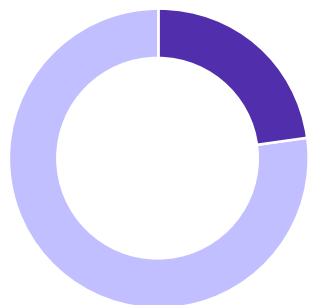
A photograph of two students in a classroom setting. In the foreground, a young man with dark, curly hair and glasses is looking down at a laptop. He is wearing a black and white checkered shirt. In the background, another student with brown hair is also looking down at a laptop. The background is blurred, showing other students and classroom lights.

“It is fantastic to see students not just getting excited about a topic, but really starting to think critically about the content they consume every day. Learning more about how AI works gives them up-to-date, practical skills that will be vital for their future.”

– Digital and Information Technology lecturer

Students' views

Much like college tutors, students have differing levels of confidence in using AI.



1 in 4 (23%) of students say that **AI helps them with their learning.**

Around **6 in 10** students are confident with:

- **Using AI** to support their learning, 31% are not
- **Choosing appropriate AI tools** to support their learning, 34% are not
- **Using AI tools accurately and fairly** in their college work, 32% are not

“I definitely use AI to help me if I am struggling on some problems.”

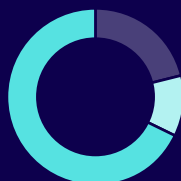
– Santina, former BTEC student



To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

"I understand the risks of using AI."

68% agree, 11% disagree



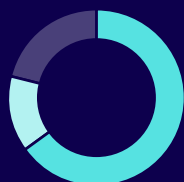
"I can judge the quality of AI-generated content."

60% agree, 15% disagree



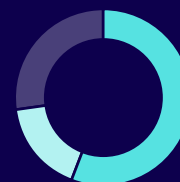
"I understand the benefits of using AI."

65% agree, 14% disagree



"I have the skills I need to use AI effectively."

56% agree, 17% disagree



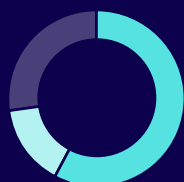
"I understand the limitations of AI."

58% agree, 16% disagree



"I know how to use AI ethically."

58% agree, 15% disagree



"I know how to use AI responsibly."

64% agree, 12% disagree



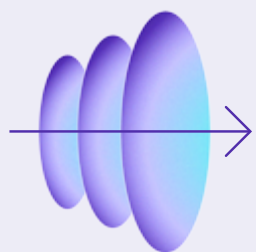
What could help?

1 in 5 say students should **learn about AI and how to use it** at college.

19% of students say they would like to **learn about AI and how to use it accurately**. **16%** say they would like to **learn how to use it fairly**.

Priorities for the future

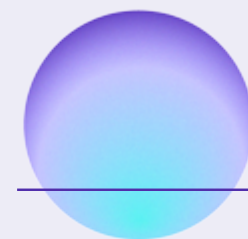
These staff and student perspectives highlight both the opportunities and the gaps, and signal what colleges need to do next. Taken together, the findings point to three priorities.



First, both **staff and students need targeted training** to move from awareness to confident, effective use.



Second, **embedding AI skills in the curriculum**, in partnership with employers, is vital to ensure vocational learning stays future-ready.



Finally, colleges have an opportunity to **bridge the gap between interest and application**, turning AI from a source of uncertainty into a tool to support equity, innovation, and employability.

Support smarter, safer use of AI in the classroom

AI Essentials is a future-facing, fully resourced short course built to equip students aged 14+ with a foundational understanding of Artificial Intelligence.

Designed in partnership with Basingstoke College of Technology, developed by Pearson and powered by ActiveHub.

Part four

Student skills and readiness



Foreword

As an employer, I see every day how the skills young people develop at college determine their success in the workplace. Tutors are rightly prioritising problem-solving, confidence, communication, adaptability, and resilience – skills that go beyond grades and are essential for life and work. These findings show that students recognise this too, with 38% saying the main reason they learn is to develop skills for everyday life, closely followed by preparing for a future job (37%).

Yet there is a gap. While nearly two-thirds of students feel ready to progress, tutors are less confident that their learners are academically and emotionally prepared. Barriers such as critical thinking, digital wellbeing, literacy, motivation, and adaptability continue to hold many students back.

By listening to students and tutors, and working together across education and industry, we can ensure learners leave college not just with qualifications, but with the confidence, skills, and mindset to thrive in work and in life.

– David Abrahams, Key Account Director, Schneider Electric






Prioritising student skills

Beyond subject attainment, tutors are focused on developing broader skills that will equip learners for work and life.

“It’s important that students recognise the importance of transferable skills. In particular, ‘soft skills’ as these are the glue between qualifications and success in the working world.”

– David Abrahams, Schneider Electric

The top skills or qualities tutors think 16 to 18-year-olds should develop at college:

	Solving problems (e.g. creativity, critical thinking)	26%
	Confidence in their own abilities	26%
	Interpersonal skills (e.g. communication, teamwork, cultural and social intelligence)	25%
	Growth mindset	25%
	Managing yourself (e.g. responsibility, resilience and career planning)	24%

Students echo this emphasis on skills, but with slightly different priorities:

Students think that the most important reason for learning is to **develop skills they can use in everyday life** (38%), closely followed by **to get a job in the future** (37%).

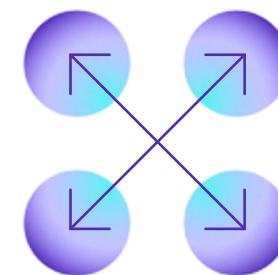
Student readiness to progress

The 2025 *Pearson School Report* showed that at least 1.9 million students across schools and colleges in England are not thought to be both academically and emotionally ready to move on to their next stage of education.

For colleges, this represents over 230,000 16 to 18-year-olds.

Note: These figures were calculated by apportioning the highest possible number of students thought to be 'ready' within each of the ranges provided and then subtracting the combined 'ready' total from the total number of students in each phase.

College readiness



The perceptions of readiness between tutors and students, however, show a striking difference.

While **two-thirds** (65%) of college students feel ready to move on to their next stage, tutors are less confident.

When tutors who teach students were asked what proportion of 16 to 18-year-old students from their last class will be **both at the expected level and emotionally ready** to move on by the end of their course:

- Around half (**45%**) think that **between 26% and 50%** of their students will be ready to move on by the end of their course
- 1 in 8 (**12%**) think that **less than a quarter** of their students will be ready
- Just **10%** think that **more than 75%** of their class will be ready

A deeper look: readiness

Tutors highlight a mix of academic, capability, and external factors that they believe are impacting students' readiness.

Overall, the top 10 things holding them back are *

1	Digital wellbeing	30%
=	Critical thinking	30%
3	Struggles with writing	28%
=	Digital skills	28%
5	Accessibility needs	27%
6	Adaptability	26%
=	Struggles with reading	26%
=	Self-motivation	26%
9	Assessment underperformance	25%
=	Problem solving	25%



* According to tutors who teach students and say they will not be 100% at the expected level and emotionally ready to move on by the end of their course.

Conversations about equipping young people for their futures will spread far beyond these pages.

To support them, here’s a more detailed look at the 'readiness factors' that tutors listed.

The top five academic, capability, and external factors, that tutors believe are holding back 16 to 18-year-old college students:

Academic	
Critical thinking	30%
Struggles with writing	28%
Digital skills	28%
Accessibility needs	27%
Struggles with reading	26%

Capability	
Adaptability	26%
Self-motivation	26%
Problem solving	25%
Emotional literacy	24%
Working with others	24%

“I feel like others around me are more certain about exactly what they want to do and how to get there, whereas I'm still unsure. I can only focus on the next step rather than thinking about my whole future.”

– College student

External	
Digital wellbeing	30%
Availability of suitable pathways/ routes for them	24%
Availability of jobs or apprenticeships	24%
Prior learning experience	22%
Physical health	21%

Part five

Work placements and industry alignment



Foreword

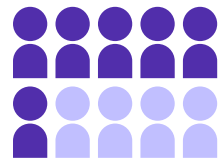
High-quality work placements are the bridge between technical vocational education and industry. They ensure our learners don't just gain qualifications – they gain real-world insight, confidence, and the skills employers need now and in the future.

Embedding industry-aligned placements into vocational programmes is not just good practice – it's essential for driving economic growth and social mobility. Embracing this through co-production with learners, employers, stakeholders and awarding organisations, we can address the barriers faced to gain valuable experiences; together we can make a positive difference for a sustainable future.

– Vicki Illingworth, Executive Principal, Chichester College Group



Colleges play a critical role in preparing students for work



6 in 10 tutors agree that current vocational qualifications are **well-aligned with industry**.
16% disagree.

Tutors told us about the alignment between vocational qualifications and industry, and the barriers they face in delivering work placements.

Over a **quarter** of college tutors identified the **biggest challenges** as:

Limited placement availability in the local area

Lack of employer engagement

Student readiness for workplace environments

Lack of clarity around local workforce planning skills gaps

Limited placement availability in the relevant industry

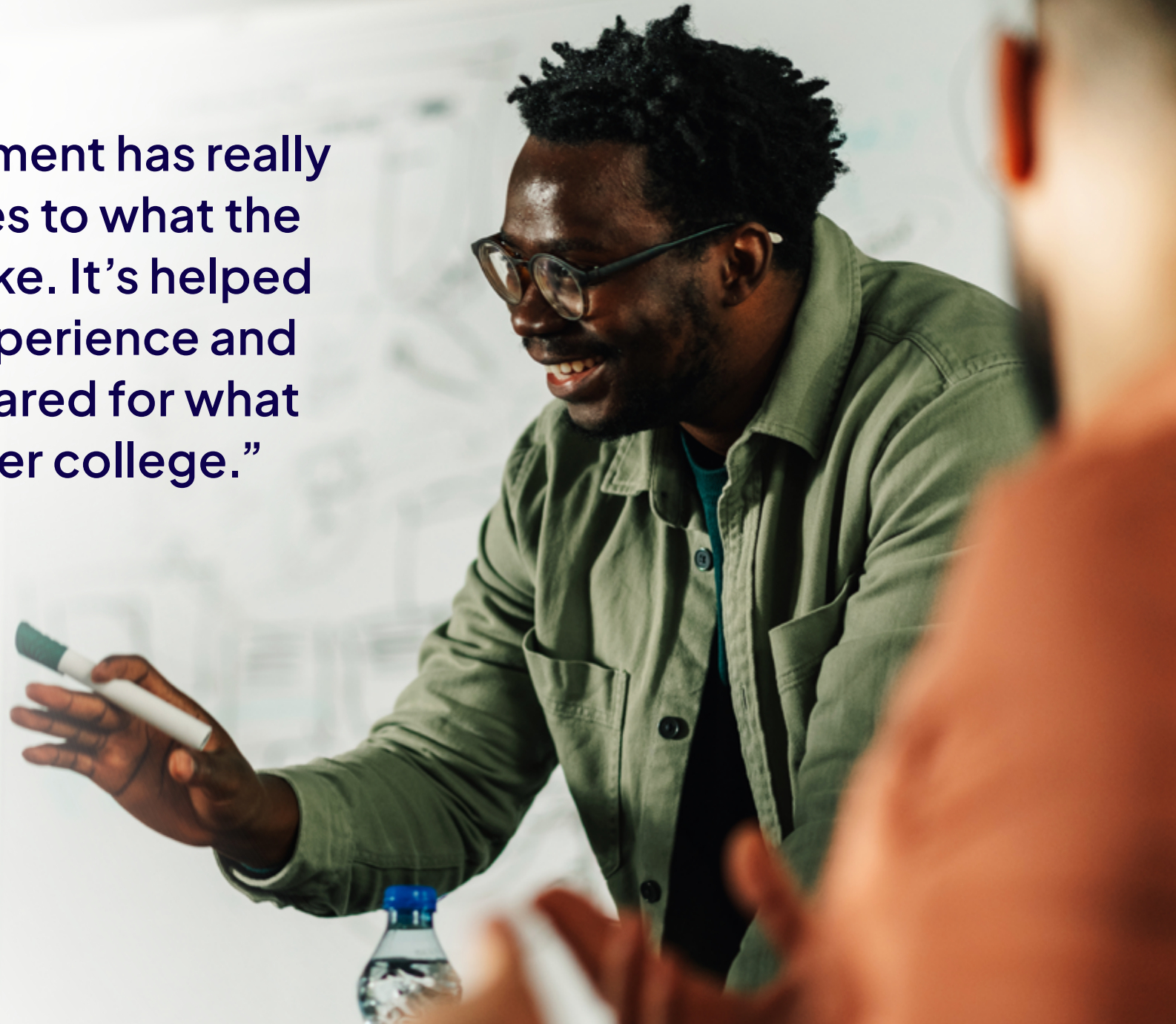
Employer knowledge gaps around T Levels

Mismatch between course content and industry needs

Matching with engaged employers

“My work placement has really opened my eyes to what the job’s actually like. It’s helped me gain real experience and feel more prepared for what comes next after college.”

– College student



Part six

The future of vocational education



Foreword

Jobs and careers will evolve over the coming years, and so must vocational qualifications. To truly support the UK's skills strategies and economic growth, it is imperative that vocational education is well-funded and flexible, with a genuine focus on relevant skills for employment.

My hope for the next five to ten years is that together, the further education sector, awarding organisations and the government will have achieved this.

– Gerry McDonald CBE, CEO & Group Principal, New City College



How do tutors see vocational education evolving over the next five to ten years?

Looking ahead, tutors are **optimistic** about the future of vocational education.

Hundreds of tutors shared their perspectives with an overall expectation that vocational education will become more tech-driven, flexible, and industry-aligned, offering learners recognised, adaptable qualifications while embedding both technical and soft skills.

Collectively, they believe vocational qualifications will achieve greater parity with academic routes. They'll support lifelong learning and play a central role in preparing students for a fast-changing, tech-rich, and sustainability-focused workforce.



“Students will be able to mix and match small course units to create custom qualifications that fit their exact career goals.”

– College tutor

“In order to guarantee that the curriculum content is directly in line with the demands of the labour market both now and in the future, vocational education will increasingly be co-designed with business partners.”

– College tutor

“Vocational education is set to progressively integrate artificial intelligence, virtual reality, augmented reality, simulations, and Internet of Things technologies to provide practical, immersive training in fields such as welding, automotive repair, and healthcare.”

– College tutor

“Alongside traditional academic pathways, vocational education is expected to become more widely acknowledged as a worthwhile and equal means of achieving success.”

– College tutor

“Communications, teamwork and adaptability training will be incorporated into vocational curriculums as standard soft skills.”

– College tutor

Continuing the conversation

The findings in Pearson's first dedicated college digest underline both the strengths of the further education sector and the weight of the challenges it faces. Tutors and students alike are clear about what matters most: accessible and flexible learning, stronger links with industry, better support for wellbeing, and qualifications that prepare learners for both work and life.

Addressing these priorities calls for collective effort. Colleges, employers, policymakers, and awarding bodies each have an important role in shaping a system that gives every learner the skills and confidence to succeed.

Our goal is to share the perspectives of students and tutors and encourage deeper collaboration across the sector. We hope this report can help spark an ongoing dialogue that builds on evidence, listens to those at the heart of education, and focuses on practical solutions.

We welcome the chance to continue this conversation, drawing on the insights in this report to inform action, shape policy, and strengthen the role of colleges in supporting both students and the industries they go on to serve.

About the research



The research was conducted by Censuswide, among a sample of 1000 college teachers/tutors and SLT. The data was collected between 24.04.2025 - 06.05.2025. A separate study was conducted amongst 1,000 College students (16+) between 24.04.2025 - 08.05.2025. Censuswide abides by and employs members of the Market Research Society and follows the MRS code of conduct and ESOMAR principles. Censuswide is also a member of the British Polling Council.

'Tutors' reflects the views of those working in colleges. We use 'colleges' as an overarching term for all colleges, including sixth-form colleges.

For this report, 'agree' represents a combination of 'strongly agree' and 'somewhat agree' responses, and 'disagree' represents a combination of 'strongly disagree' and 'somewhat disagree' responses.

Similarly, 'confident' represents a combination of 'very confident' and 'somewhat confident' responses, 'not confident' represents a combination of 'not at all confident' and 'not very confident' responses, and 'ready' represents a combination of 'very ready' and 'somewhat ready' responses.



“As a parent, I see college as the place where my child can shape their own future and explore whatever path they choose. It’s up to us to give them the support, guidance, and opportunities they need so they can step out into the world feeling ready.”

– Parent of college student

Learning is an action that sparks a reaction...

Add **your voice**

Real change happens when everyone gets involved.

We want to hear from educators, employers and learners to shape what comes next for schools and colleges.

Join the conversation

#PearsonCollegeReport

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At Pearson, our purpose is simple: to help people realise the life they imagine through learning. We believe that every learning opportunity is a chance for a personal breakthrough. That's why our c. 18,000 Pearson employees are committed to creating vibrant and enriching learning experiences designed for real-life impact. We are the world's lifelong learning company, serving customers in nearly 200 countries with digital content, assessments, qualifications, and data. For us, learning isn't just what we do. It's who we are.

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