FUTURE FWD
ENABLING NEXTGEN

REVIEW AND NEXT STEPS

Warwick Schools Foundation

Enabling transformation through the power of education

FUTURE FWD 2024 WAS A CONFERENCE FILLED WITH INNOVATION, INSPIRATION, AND COLLABORATION.

HERE'S A REMINDER OF WHAT HAPPENED...

WATCH THIS YEAR'S HIGHLIGHTS VIDEO

INTRODUCTION

Future Fwd 2024, our third annual conference, was the most insightful yet.

Building on the strong foundations of previous years, Future Fwd 2024 focused on maximising opportunities for collaboration, incorporating as wide a variety of perspectives as possible in our mission of enabling a better education for all.

The conference serves as a platform for like-minded professionals from diverse educational spheres to think big and think differently. We were therefore delighted to welcome more speakers and delegates than ever before, and to witness the strong determination to ensure that positive educational change becomes a reality.

In response to the needs identified last year, Future Fwd 2024 featured skills-based workshops led by industry experts, a new stream – 'Singing and Wellbeing for Children & Young People' – and the Ignite coaching project for students, led by Nyman Coaching Associates.

The key takeaways from the conference are detailed in this report. These include powerful student testimonies about their concerns with exam-dominated learning; insights from those in the arts sector, who remain concerned that arts-related subjects are devalued in the current curriculum; perspectives from AI specialists, whose expertise dispelled some myths about AI use in education, and outlined how it can drive innovation in the coming years; and data-driven insights from parents and employers.

I would like to thank everyone who made the conference such a success:

- Our partners, whose vital support made the conference possible;
- Our speakers, who shared truly impactful insights; and of course,
- The delegates, whose passion for educational improvement continues to inspire me.

I hope you enjoy reading this report and, more importantly, that the findings within provide further impetus for transformative change. Ultimately, what unites everyone involved in Future Fwd is a shared mission: to equip young people with the tools they need to succeed through an improved, future-ready education. Our commitment to this extends beyond the conference—365 days a year.

Richard Nicholson
Principal, Warwick Schools Foundation

noble eaton

CASTLE RECEPTION HOSTS

Future Fwd is an exceptional conference that looks forward by taking inspiration from history, arts, and innovation. It is a conference that brings together those who want to make a difference in all areas across a school, from the most advanced generative AI to the most basic of pleasures, such as singing.

Warwick Castle is one of England's finest Norman Strongholds, helping to shape England's course. It was an honour to bring our learning design experience to the castle and show what is possible.

Intentional environmental design offers an opportunity to frame a personalised educational model for any school. We call this architectural alchemy. This new approach is learning made visible, one where learner agency takes precedence, academic excellence is a given, and potential is exponential.

Our methodology aligns people, pedagogy, and place using research into neuroscience and human behaviour. This aligns with all the messages from the speakers and the delegates at the conference; we can design a curriculum for the future, an essential skills framework, rethink the 'sage on the stage' approach, and blend AI with our most effective teaching and learning strategies.

But how?

We consider a learning-for-life approach; our lens on 'schools' reframes what is possible rather than the barriers that might seem to be in place. It looks at a school's cultural alignment with its demographic. It looks towards 'Society 5', bringing schools, universities, businesses, and industry together for a holistic approach to education that is fast-paced and inspirational.

Using the environment as a driver for change allows a school to take control of its narrative. If you consider ingenuity rather than innovation, you have a collective, efficient solution designed specifically for the change you wish to embrace.

Thank you to Future Fwd for hosting us at this year's conference – it was a pleasure to participate.

FOREWORD

For the third consecutive year, The University of Warwick proudly returned as Future Fwd's Lead Partner; reflecting our shared strategic priority of educational innovation and improvement.

Empowering our young people to develop key skills – those that will enable them to succeed along whatever path they choose – should be at the heart of our mission as educationalists. Future Fwd is a conference that recognises that necessity, and I was proud to once again be involved this year.

Future Fwd 2024 came a few days after Labour's electoral victory, and I spoke of the new government's commitment to 'break down barriers to opportunity' through reforming our education systems, and to ensure that 'there is no glass ceiling on the ambition of young people in Britain'. This sentiment also underpinned much of the rhetoric during discussions at this year's conference, and I was reminded of how powerful it is to have similarly passionate educationalists come together, working towards the same goal, within a collaborative environment such as this.

As in the previous two years, Future Fwd provided a platform that encouraged dialogue in order to create a tangible difference to the way in which education is designed and delivered for the next generation. With insights shared regarding the potentiality of AI to transform the way in which we learn; opportunities to reduce the barrier to entry to industry for education leavers; and how we can all take steps to embrace a more inclusive education, the conference reinforced the importance of adopting a malleable approach to education delivery so that we can equip all young people with the skills that they need; not just for now, but in a rapidly-changing educational landscape.

This year's conference once again promoted the adoption of such a mindset; through shared experience and expertise, but also through challenging one another, and reinforcing the need for nuance in the face of several complex challenges that still remain within the sector.

Certainly, a cross-sector approach is required if we are to achieve the positive change that we are championing. The following report details many of the key insights from this year's conference, but importantly, outlines the required next steps if we are to succeed with this approach, and effectively enable young people to develop the skills of the future.

Rachel Sandby-Thomas CB
Registrar, University of Warwick

the business of education

2024 SURVEY CONCLUSIONS

This year's survey asserts that both parents and business leaders have increased confidence in the preparedness of school leavers compared to the previous year. However, there is a shared desire – between them and school leavers – to further develop skills and experiences that increase future-readiness and employability.

Two salient aspects arose:

Communication skills

The report asserts a shared belief in the importance of improved communication skills. From the parents who were surveyed, 71% of respondents said that they would like to see the teaching of communication skills developed further as part of their child's education.

Business leaders agreed. When asked what skills they think that schools should focus on, nearly three-quarters (73%) of the 124 respondents said communication skills – assuming a dissonance between the current and desired levels of delivery.

The importance of communication skills was also underpinned by school leavers; when they were asked which skill they learned at school was most valuable, the most frequent answer was communication skills.

The importance of developing communication skills, then, is clear.

However, whose responsibility it is to teach these communication skills is perhaps more complex. 35% of business leaders, for example, felt as if families are responsible. This suggests that one of the weak points within the education system is not only schools' effectiveness in teaching communication skills, but also families' understanding of their role within their child's education, or how they can assist in delivering and reinforcing these skills to their children.

Work experience

When asked how businesses rank applicants, 83% of respondents considered experience in the workplace to be important – even more so than level of education (80%). In fact, it was deemed to be the single most important education outcome that they look for.

Further, while the survey highlighted a 15% increase in the number of business leaders who felt confident that young people were appropriately prepared for the world of work, this figure is still only around half (51%).

Therefore, while schools are perhaps doing a better job to prepare their young people for their life beyond school, there is still room for improvement.

In order to further increase business leaders' confidence, and to improve the extent to which these skills are delivered through education, businesses suggested that they should have a closer relationship with education.

It can be concluded that closer integration through enhanced work experience would support both increase employability and dialogue between education and business, whilst reducing the dissonance between what employers want and what the education system currently delivers.

Future Fwd clearly has a role to play in continuing to bridge these gaps between schools, families, and businesses.

The full survey may be found **here**.

James Leggett
Managing Director at MTM Consulting

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

It was a delight to once again partner with Future Fwd – a 'must attend' conference that truly places conversations around inclusive education at the forefront.

Both Chatsworth Schools and Blenheim Schools were founded on the belief in non-selective, inclusive, high-quality education, and the mission of enabling outstanding futures for every child. After attending this year's conference, it is clear that the current educational environment is one that, perhaps more than ever before, is filled with similarly passionate educationalists who not only share these beliefs but are committed to making a positive difference.

Truly effective delivery of inclusive education is something that we should all strive for; we must work together to ensure that our school environments are places in which all young people feel safe, valued, and supported to learn and develop.

Future Fwd once again provided a platform to share experiences and expertise as we continue to work towards these shared objectives. The conversations that I was a part of, and the willingness to collaborate that I witnessed, makes me feel truly positive about the future of inclusive education for the benefit of children of all abilities.

Anita Gleave
CEO and Founder, Blenheim Schools International

A CONFERENCE DEDICATED TO ENABLING COLLABORATIVE DIALOGUE ON THE NEED FOR CHANGE IN EDUCATION...

...AND TO IGNITING ACTION THAT CREATES A TANGIBLE DIFFERENCE.

WHAT WAS THE SCOPE AND FOCUS OF FUTURE FWD 2024?

Now in its third year, Future Fwd has established itself as a cross-sector meeting-place, a vibrant locus for discussion, dialogue, and creative exploration, centered on the pressing need to re-focus school education in England more strategically and effectively for the future.

If school education is about preparing young people to take up their place in society with purpose, efficacy, and fulfilment, then it should of its very nature be future-facing. The current reality, however, is that education – particularly school education – is still cyclical in its operations, and thus is given to entrenched practices. This means that there is a deep disconnect between the institutional structures and cyclical routines of established education, and the creative impulse which many educators instinctively feel towards a rapidly changing future.

Delegates at Future Fwd 2024 were united in comprehending the pace and depth of change in society and the wider world. The conference met a few days after the election of a new government in the United Kingdom, and this fact underlined the extent of systemic, wide-ranging change in the world, and thus highlighted the opportunity to explore new ways of developing education.

The sense of a societal 're-set' can stimulate focus on the idea of new beginnings. In the education sector, an impulse towards renewal – the focus of this and the previous two Future Fwd conferences – means a fresh opportunity to formulate and marshal ideas in the service of rejuvenation, creativity, and a clarified sense of purpose.

Over the first day of the conference, a comprehensive series of talks and presentations took place, focused on the six streams; Curriculum & Learning; Arts & Culture; Industry & Enterprise; AI, Tech & Gaming; Special Education – Inclusion, Neurodivergence & Employability; and Singing and Wellbeing for Children & Young People.

On the second day, roundtable groups convened to formulate and explore action points going forward, through reflecting on and discussing the previous day's talks, as well as making specific recommendations.

This report presents the main focus of each themed discussion, and the action points arising; their varied and diverse nature reflects the creative energy of the conference and the multifarious contributions of speakers and delegates.

Overall, the conference emphasised that whilst the desire to change remains strong and ambitious, momentum is already established in terms of change being in motion. Student representation from Warwick Schools Foundation, for example, pointed to significant progress in changing education.

The first Future Fwd conference in 2022 set a process of discussion in motion; this July 2024 conference evidenced that things are moving forward.

From this 2024 conference, the discussion points and key action points to drive change are a reminder that much still remains to be done, and that we are still at the beginning of a dynamic and significant journey.

ONGOING POINTS OF REFLECTION, DIALOGUE, AND IMPROVEMENT...

...CONCERNING

CURRICULUM & LEARNING

Educators shared what they believe is exciting and energising about teaching, and what drives the work of education professionals in looking to the future.

The inspiration that teachers derive from students is energising, rejuvenating, and resourceful. A dynamic culture of learning embodies the adventure of exploring academic specialisms, and the creative buzz of designing new courses. Teachers and senior leaders emphasised how professional development and training opportunities are crucial, and are what nurtures professionals who are committed to constantly evolving practice.

Students had clear things to say about the current curriculum and its limitations...

They asserted that exam-dominated learning is not beneficial, especially at KS4 (GCSE), as it crushes enthusiasm and shuts down the possibility of exploring topics of individual interest in detail.

Students value active, collaborative learning, rather than cramming, revision, and regurgitation. They are disappointed when the whole process of GCSE ends with 'finishing' subjects, a process which goes against the principle of education as a lifelong process.

Students expressed the need for an innovative curriculum which allows them to pursue passions and individual interests at a level beyond that required by the syllabus.

...CONCERNING

ARTS & CULTURE

Delegates in the Arts & Culture stream talked about why the arts and culture need to be re-affirmed and strengthened as a central element of school education.

The arts and culture are a fundamental part of human experience, and of central importance to everyday life.

They form the backdrop to the whole of life; enabling people to understand and contextualise their experiences.

They bring about self-knowledge as well as multiple ways of understanding other people.

They are liberating, develop self-esteem, positive mental health, teamwork, communal activity, and can break down barriers between groups of people.

They support lifelong learning, can support oracy, and foster active creativity as well as creative ways of thinking.

What needs to be improved in the current school arts and culture curriculum?

Music is often seen as a one-to-one contact point, involving set lessons with structured objectives. It is often constrictive, and many children in school have little experience of music.

The arts are often overshadowed by other subjects which are felt to be more 'useful' in relation to the 'real world'.

Curricula that value interdisciplinary thinking and cross-curricular links, spark individuality, and creative and critical thinking, should be created.

'Spaces' should be created in school – both physical and in the curriculum – that embed arts and culture into each school day.

...CONCERNING

INDUSTRY & ENTERPRISE

Delegates discussed the disconnect between school education and industry and enterprise, and what to do about it.

'Positive disruptors' are making a strong impact on the school experience, implementing different ways of learning to good effect. However, excessive focus on grades in public exams is not valued by many employers, who feel that schools place too much emphasis on those results, and too little emphasis on the right skill sets needed for success in the world of work.

Industry leaders emphasised that confidence, communication, and behavioural skills are what secure good job offers, and the ways in which schools should focus more on nurturing these skills was discussed.

Students were certain on the importance of their crucial soft skills, however felt that the school setting was not appropriately structured to help them develop these. Students felt more confident about the relevance of high grades in exams, with exam grades being measurable, tangible, and incentivising. They suggested that this is a prominent mindset in the education sector, which employers emphasised should be reversed.

It was agreed by all that connections between schools and businesses can be useful in developing insight and awareness in students, but that such schemes have suffered post-pandemic and are in need of renewal.

...CONCERNING

AI, TECH & GAMING

Through the discussions that delegates took part in, opinions on the use of AI and its future within education were varied; some shared concerns that AI will compromise academic work, whilst others look towards AI with intrigue and optimism.

Students stated that they appreciate training in the latest technological developments, understanding that AI output is only as consistent as the input.

"Does AI use in school homework and assessments amount to cheating?" – this question was explored, with some delegates feeling yes, it does, but other delegates sensing that AI will bring about a positive paradigm shift in how homework is done.

There is a need for educators to move on from the idea that AI is categorically a negative influence in an academic context; instead, educators and students need to explore how to use it correctly and creatively.

In order to better understand student sentiment towards AI and its relationship with their education, questions such as "if AI can do it, why am I paying for a degree to learn that same thing?" will need to be explored thoroughly.

It was also noted that current academic assessment doesn't reflect the workplace; employees can use AI in their work, but students cannot use it in assessments and exams.

Further, conversations uncovered that there is a stigma around AI, especially from teachers, and this means that its use is sometimes blocked when it could be of genuine use to students.

Other salient themes and questions that arose following discussions include:

Philosophical barriers to AI adoption exist, with people seeing AI as either a hero or a villain, instead of just a tool.

Digital poverty is a problem, with lack of access to interaction with AI.

Should AI be part of the academic assessment process? It could be used for marking in certain subjects, though moderation would still be required. It shouldn't be allowed to assess exams because it might create imbalances in discerning student capabilities.

Concerns were voiced that some of the lessons of social media – such as around regulation, moderation, and it's double-edged nature – might not be learned or applied in relation to AI.

There was a general sense amongst delegates that education is not yet ready to handle AI, nor to integrate AI into its systems.

...CONCERNING

SPECIAL EDUCATION

– INCLUSION, NEURODIVERGENCE & EMPLOYABILITY

Amongst their discussions, delegates discussed the journey towards proper recognition of neurodivergence and the cultivation of wellbeing in education and employment. As part of this, they reflected on the progress made so far whilst looking forward to the progress that can still be made.

Training and CPD for school staff on autism, neurodivergence, and the broad spectrum is useful, particularly as female presentation can differ from male (often not as visible and so can lead to frustration).

When considering autism and ADHD, the pathway to a diagnosis is often long and difficult, with support being put in place usually only after diagnosis. Individuals need support throughout the process of diagnosis, and not just at the end of it.

Wellbeing should be integral to school organisation and systems. There is a higher risk of suffering mental illness if neurodivergent. As such, there is a need to provide extra care for neurodivergent students.

The importance of accommodating neurodivergent candidates in the jobs market to fill vacancies was discussed:

There are 900,000 gaps in employment; at the same time, 850,000 young people are seeking work – how many of these young people are neurodivergent? Schools need to invite local business leads to raise awareness of neurodivergence; building networks and links in the process.

Key questions to consider: is an employer opening the recruitment process to everyone? Are employers enabling candidates during recruitment to express what they need from the employer?

Interviews are daunting for most people; take greater care to make opportunities work for neurodivergent candidates.

Behaviour policies in schools need to be appropriately worded in order to effectively support the needs of neurodivergent students.

The importance of relational and restorative practice should be remembered – Evergreen School's Behaviour Policy Change, for example. Write it into policy and hold to account all within the organisation, giving mechanisms to young people through which they can raise concerns.

Every discussion of student behaviour should be restorative and relational – talk about natural consequences, and what is safe and unsafe.

HOW CAN WE BEST SUPPORT THE FUTURE GENERATIONS?

KEY THOUGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION GROUPS...

CURRICULUM & LEARNING

Chair: Dr Phil Seal

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Make time for teachers and students to re-focus on the raison d'être of education: ensuring that broad, idealistic, and philosophical ideas act to underpin education and will bring about a more effective and pragmatic application of learning to real-life situations and the world of work.
- Reduce the focus on examined curriculum and terminal assessments. Instead, focus on project-based learning, problem solving, critical and creative thinking, and collaborative study.
- Shift assessment off paper and replace with the live dynamic of dialogue; ensure that the curriculum develops future-proof skills such as presentational skills, teamwork, empathy, and an appropriate use of information technology, including AI.
- Empower teachers to nurture the academic enthusiasms and passions of students, rather than compelling them to focus on 'final grades' at the expense of all else.
- Whenever possible, focus at KS4 on a smaller quantity of GCSEs. This should free up time in the school day to provide innovative and interactive courses which stretch and inspire students, and enable academic adventure, self-realisation, and interdisciplinary understanding.
- Reflect creatively on developing an assessed qualification in empathy; consider replacing the term 'soft skills' with 'essential skills'.

Key takeaway message from this roundtable discussion group:

There should be an active engagement in reformatting the current curriculum in order to reflect the need for project-based rather than exam-centric learning. Also look at refining the way in which the curriculum is designed – such as at GCSE-level - which currently leads students to 'finish' subjects and neglects the principle of lifelong learning which can be so beneficial.

ARTS & CULTURE

Chair: Adam Whittaker

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Celebrate and advocate the arts to ensure their rightful, central place in the curriculum and in wider educational provision.
- Ensure that arts educators talk outside of their circle to advocate for the importance of the arts and culture.
- Rich and varied cultural education needs to be valued and placed high on the educational agenda.
- Create physical spaces and time in the school day to enable arts and culture to be appropriately embedded within schools and their curriculum.
- Educate families and key stakeholders concerning the importance of the arts in society and the economy.
- Develop a creative, exploratory curriculum which nurtures young people appropriately for the future.

Key takeaway message from this roundtable discussion group:

The arts are key to developing people as individuals; a re-alignment of their value within the educational curriculum is therefore necessary. Certainly, this includes a reform of musical structures and contact points within education in order to increase accessibility to sustained development opportunities.

INDUSTRY & ENTERPRISE

Chair: Stephanie Kerr

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Ensure that the school curriculum is future-ready and relevant to a wide range of businesses and economic activity, rather than focused only on multinational corporations and tech giants. For example, the curriculum should also be relevant to small businesses and start-ups.
- Businesses must be more vocal about what they are looking for in terms of soft skills, so that there is greater clarity for schools and students.
- Schools must have an awareness of the soft skills which are cultivated alongside the teaching of subject knowledge, so that students recognise the practical experiences that they are gaining as well as the real-world value of their curricular studies.
- Schools must incorporate more project-based learning and problem solving into the curriculum in order to encourage the development of communication, problem solving, and collaborative skills.
- Schools must promote socratic and metacognitive learning, thus encouraging students to think critically and to cultivate curiosity.
- Schools must contribute to devising new GCSE or equivalent subjects which focus on innovation and enterprise, in which students develop presentational skills, self-directed learning, research, and collaboration.
- Teachers and school leaders should feel confident in pursuing systemic changes to create a new curriculum and new ways of learning which focus more effectively on softer, behavioural skills.
- The curriculum should develop systems to accredit soft, behavioural skills, similar to GCSE/A-Level grades, so that pupils have something tangible to validate their experience gained at school.

Key takeaway message from this roundtable discussion group:

Schools need to adjust their curriculum in order to more effectively equip their pupils with the right skillset for the future and reduce the barrier to entry for those pupils who want to go straight into industry post-school. This includes reducing the focus simply on exam results, but also to actively develop confidence, communication, and behavioural skills.

AI, TECH & GAMING

Chair: Andrew Flowerdew

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Educators must re-evaluate how they educate in the age of AI.
- A paradigm shift in education is necessary if the benefits of AI are to be realised.
- Educators should be accepting of change led by AI (though it was acknowledged that such change can be unsettling and create vulnerabilities).
- Education and assessment must be re-designed from the ground up in order to accommodate and leverage AI. Factual knowledge from students will need to be de-emphasised, whilst students' critical skills and their ability to analyse will need to be strengthened.
- The ability to effectively communicate with AI will be a crucial skill in the near future; students will need to be provided with the requisite knowledge and analytical skills in order to do this successfully.
- Educators must keep an open mind concerning the various uses of AI as an academic tool.

Key takeaway message from this roundtable discussion group:

In order to maximise the impact of AI within education in the coming years, the binary mindset from which it is often currently viewed – as either wholly good or wholly bad – must be changed. Its usage must be considered with nuance; if this is done, it can be a true innovator for the future of education.

SPECIAL EDUCATION – INCLUSION, NEURODIVERGENCE & EMPLOYABILITY

Chair: Nick Evans

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Focus on embracing change and diversity, ensure an awareness of different needs, and foster meaningful and deep interactions with individuals.
- Explore the importance of the school environment: it's a powerful force. For example, are the lights too bright for some students?
- Schools should comprehend student experiences: are they child-centered?
- In recruitment and employment, there is a need to adjust how recruitment and interview processes work so that neurodivergent candidates can be supported, both during the recruitment process and upon taking up roles.
- Flexibility over working from home is necessary; it is an effective way to support those who are neurodivergent.
- Neurodivergent employers may be equally in need of support and should not be overlooked.
- Don't wait for a student to be diagnosed before there is a dialogue about their needs.
- The language of school behavior policies should reflect the needs of neurodivergent students, as re-phrasing can have significant, positive effects.

Key takeaway message from this roundtable discussion group:

Truly effective SEN provision should not be left to specialist schools. Rather, a platform should be provided for ALL schools to become more inclusive. Every school should make a concerted effort to more effectively understand how the language that they use and the spaces that they provide can impact their neurodivergent pupils. Schools must ensure that they have an awareness of the needs that all young people in their care have, so that more meaningful interactions and experiences can be fostered.

THANK YOU TO ALL OF THIS YEAR'S PARTNERS

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