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Travel & Tourism
FUTURE YOU

AI: Bridging the skills gap between academia and industry

WHITE PAPER

AI: Bridging the skills gap between academia and industry

This white paper is the first in a series of papers produced by the Institute of Travel and Tourism Education and Training Committee. The purpose of the ITT Future You White Papers is to explore the challenges academia and industry face, whilst understanding the needs of the next generation. The White Papers are guided by the discussions and debate at the annual Institute of Travel and Tourism conference, and the ITT Future You session at World Travel Market. The ITT Education and Training Committee, with collaboration with academia and industry, will take those discussions to task to explore solutions and expand the discussion for positive change.

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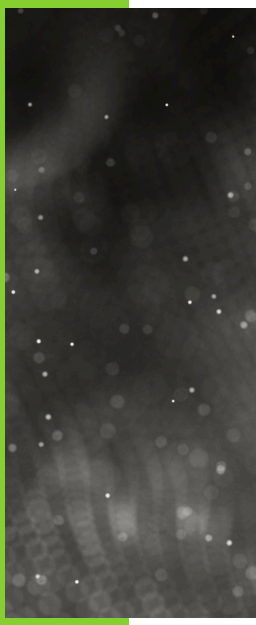


Executive summary

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is rapidly transforming both education and industry, yet a significant gap exists between formative experiences of AI in education, and how it is applied in the workplace. This paper, developed by academics and practitioners, addresses an identified gap between academia and industry in relation to AI knowledge, skill, and responsible use.

In education, **AI use is almost universal**, with students using generative AI tools to support their learning and assessment. Although there is a high engagement rate with AI tools, students are engaging in mostly transactional ways with a lack of critical approach, using the tools to process tasks for ease and time saving. While there is evidence of progress **there is a significant AI skill and literacy gap in education that the industry demands**.

From an industry perspective, AI is already reshaping the travel industry, from operations to customer experiences. Both generative and agentic AI tools are in current operation across the sector, supporting efficiencies through automating routine tasks.

KEY INSIGHT

The main risk is not that AI will replace key roles in the industry, it is whether graduates are entering the workforce equipped with the skills required for a technology driven and people intensive industry.

The findings suggest that lack of guidance, institutional policy, and AI literacy, are all contributors to the knowledge gap between academia and industry. Additionally, industry need to provide sufficient AI support and guidance once graduates are entering the workforce. An overarching theme is the ethical and responsible use of AI in both academia and industry, which is underpinned by the **need for clear, robust AI policies to be in place**.

Graduates need to be prepared with both digital literacy, as well as developed soft skills to be able to thrive in the travel industry. This **balance of tech and touch is a central theme to the paper**, and one that requires urgent attention from both academia and industry to ensure the future generation of talent are primed for success.

Education and industry must work together, urgently and collaboratively, to develop that talent.

Introduction

The ITT Future You Panel session at the ITT Conference 2025 presented a key challenge; in a people intensive industry, are we becoming less people-centric? The session was billed as 'The Great Con-tradiction', the panel explored the growth and application of AI, what that means for the future workforce entering the industry, and whether the industry is still providing opportunities for the next generation.

The discussion focused on the technical capability of AI and its impact on the travel industry, however the debate tackled the tech-touch balance that needs to be addressed to ensure the focus remains on people. The following challenges were evident after the panel session and debate;

There is a knowledge gap in relation to AI, particularly around understanding, trust and operation

Expectations vs reality; what do industry need from the next generation of talent with regards to AI, and how can education institutions help?

With a focus on tech innovation, soft skill development is vital, and the balance of tech and touch needs to be addressed

Formative experiences of AI within education is a different experience of using AI in industry; how can we address this to bridge the gap between academia and industry?

Following the conference, a team of academics and practitioners began work on addressing some of the challenges with an aim to provide recommendations on how to bridge the gap between academia and industry in the form of a white paper. The key objectives of the white paper are to:

Explore the AI skills gap; what challenges exist in academia and industry

Present a travel industry focus; this will be the first white paper to address issues of AI specifically in the tourism industry

Provide academia-industry solutions; practical calls to action, to bridge the gap between academia and industry

The paper will consider first the challenges in academia. The rise in generative AI tools, particularly in assessment of learning, poses challenges for both educators and students in terms of AI readiness, AI literacy, responsible use of AI, and governance. From an industry perspective, industry viewpoints are presented, where it is clear businesses stand ready in the face of AI innovation, adapting ways of working to stay competitive. Industry is expecting the new generation coming through are competent and literate in both generative and agentic AI, equipped with the appropriate skills and knowledge.

This therefore presents a gap between academia and industry, whereby the perceptions and expectations are not aligned. A review of industry reports, academic research, and practitioner commentary will provide the basis for the paper, presenting the current challenges and considerations for academia and industry. Three case studies are presented to demonstrate how AI can be used effectively in partnership with students, educators, and industry. There will also be recommendations and calls to action to conclude the paper, addressing the challenges to bridge the skills gap.

AI in education

Emerging technologies such as AI and robotics in the travel and hospitality industries are reshaping the skills required of the future workforce. In an industry context, there are resource constraints such as lack of knowledge, training, and budget, which add to the complexity of managing the skills gap. While there have been steps to address the more general digital skills gap, such as the DfE Skills Fund (DfE, 2022), there is a lack of focus on AI skills, and travel and hospitality industry focus.

From an education perspective, education institutions are navigating rapid AI transformation with mixed results. Although student and educator AI use is at an all-time high of 95% (Coursera, 2026), there are concerns of unpreparedness and skills gaps. 52% of educators believe their education system is unprepared for AI, while only 26% believe they have the skills to use AI to their advantage. However, student perceptions of staff readiness have improved, with 42% of students observing that staff are “well equipped” to work with from 18% in the previous year (Freeman, 2025). The data presents a mixed response to AI readiness in education. Perceptions of AI readiness are mixed, with a recent Cengage Group Graduate Employability Report stating 48% of student feel unprepared for AI, however 89% of educators think students are prepared (Cengage, 2025). Further, only 51% of students feel confident in their AI skills when job hunting. This perception gap is concerning, given the impact AI has on education and industry.

Although we understand that most students are comfortable using AI for tasks and assessed work, there is still an academic lag that exists. Only 36% of students feel encouraged to use AI, with only 38% provided with AI tools. There is therefore a disconnect between student behaviour, and institutional response. While there are signs of progress at an institutional level, readiness gaps still exist that require attention with regards to skills and preparedness.

Skills gap; AI adoption and literacy

AI is not a new phenomenon, however the rapid development of generative and agentic AI in recent years has prompted businesses to rethink their operations given the advanced capabilities. In addition, it has also caused academic institutions to react to the rise in AI adoption, raising particular concerns regarding rigour and criticality.

95% of students are now using generative AI, with 94% using generative AI for assessments. In contrast however, only 48% feel they are supported with necessary skills development (HEPI, 2026). Although students may feel comfortable with consumer AI tools such as ChatGPT and Claude, they lack the practical experience of industry-critical systems, which require specific knowledge and skill. This skills gap highlights a difference between personal use, and applied use. For example, one third of students report familiarity with common AI platforms, however almost two thirds of workers report lack of skills for effective and safe generative AI use (Salesforce, 2024).

The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report (2025) confirms that skills rooted in human interaction, including empathy and active listening, currently show no substitution potential by generative AI. In addition, an AI sector study found that 26% of respondents indicated that a lack of technical skills affected their ability to meet their business goals, attributing this to the highly competitive market for AI talent as a key contributor to technical skills gaps (Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, 2024).

Creative thinking, resilience, and curiosity are identified alongside AI literacy as the fastest-growing skills demanded by employers. Notably, Daniela Amodei, co-founder and president of Anthropic, the company behind the AI assistant Claude, and herself a literature graduate, stated in February 2026 that when her company hires, they look for people who are great communicators, who have excellent emotional intelligence and people skills, who are kind and compassionate and curious (Amodei, 2026, cited in Ma, 2026).

If the company building one of the world's most advanced AI systems is hiring for humanities skills, we should pay attention.

Meanwhile, some higher education institutions appear to be moving in the opposite direction. In February 2026, UCL announced the closure of its Institute of Advanced Studies, an interdisciplinary research centre that championed scholarship across arts, humanities, and social sciences (UCL, 2026). This is part of a broader pattern in which universities are deprioritising humanities at precisely the moment when the AI industry is recognising their value. Education should not follow this path. The future does not belong to those who can merely operate AI tools. It belongs to those who bring the human judgement, criticality, and cultural intelligence that AI cannot replicate.

The central argument of this white paper, that a gap exists between academic preparation and industry expectation, is powerfully illustrated by the experiences described above. Universities are increasingly embedding AI literacy into curricula. Meanwhile, industry practitioners describe a working environment where AI use remains basic and inconsistent. This means there are misaligned expectations, whereby industry leaders assume graduates arrive with sophisticated AI competencies that universities may not yet be delivering. Simultaneously, graduates may arrive expecting to use advanced AI tools in workplaces still relying on basic systems, or none at all. Minor, McLoughlin and Carlisle (2024) identified precisely this pattern in UK tourism and hospitality, noting that the needs of the sector are often misaligned with the skills being developed in higher education. The mismatch is compounded by sector variation: a graduate entering a global luxury hotel chain may encounter sophisticated AI-driven systems, while one joining a regional independent hotel may find the most advanced technology in use is a basic property management system.

If the most valuable skills in an AI-augmented workplace are creativity, empathy, cultural sensitivity, and the ability to navigate ambiguity, then tourism education should not be narrowing its focus to technical AI training, it should be broadening it.

Jaiswal, Kuzminykh and Modgil (2024) reinforce this point, noting that bridging the AI skills gap requires not just technical upskilling but a fundamental rethinking of how higher education prepares graduates for an AI-integrated workforce.

AI use and institutional AI policy

In higher education, students are more than ever questioning the value of their degrees. However, the value is based on whether they are more employable, rather than the experience of the overall journey of higher education. If the purpose of education is therefore to enrich and fulfil the lives of students, the main focus should not be the end result of the degree. The focus should be on providing innovative and experiential teaching and learning, further improving the overall student journey.

This is where the inclusion of AI in education is the most contested. There tends to be a focus on the path of least resistance, where students use AI as a processing tool to complete tasks. Particularly for assessments, AI tools are used as a means to process information and find quicker ways of getting to the finish line. This means that students are developing a more transactional relationship with AI, with generic interactions based on processes rather than exploring a more specialist and personalised experience of using AI. This relates to the 'black box problem', where there is no metacognitive awareness of how AI, in particular large language models, work. More specifically, the problem infers that there is a lack of understanding of how these tools arrive at a particular outcome following prompts or requests. Where there is a lack of transparency of how the systems work, people are less likely to use it (Martens & Goethals, 2024). Trust in the systems that are being used is important to consider and is built through a critical approach to the systems. This is where critical evaluation skills are important to develop, particularly when using AI as a collaborative tool to complete assessments.

It could be argued there are aspects of education that have become too easy. Templates, model answers, exemplar materials are now commonplace, and now the addition of AI tools that help process assessment briefs. This can therefore lead to a reliance on provision of information, rather than taking a proactive critical approach to learning. In practical terms, this can lead to friction when students work in industry, where graduates are expected to be proactive and take the lead without prompts.

Academics therefore should be encouraging critical engagement with AI, and to use it as a tool for co-creation to collaboratively construct information, rather than being the tool that produces the information solely. Some student reflections of using AI include;

- They are aware of keeping usage to a minimum to avoid feeling guilty about using AI for assessments

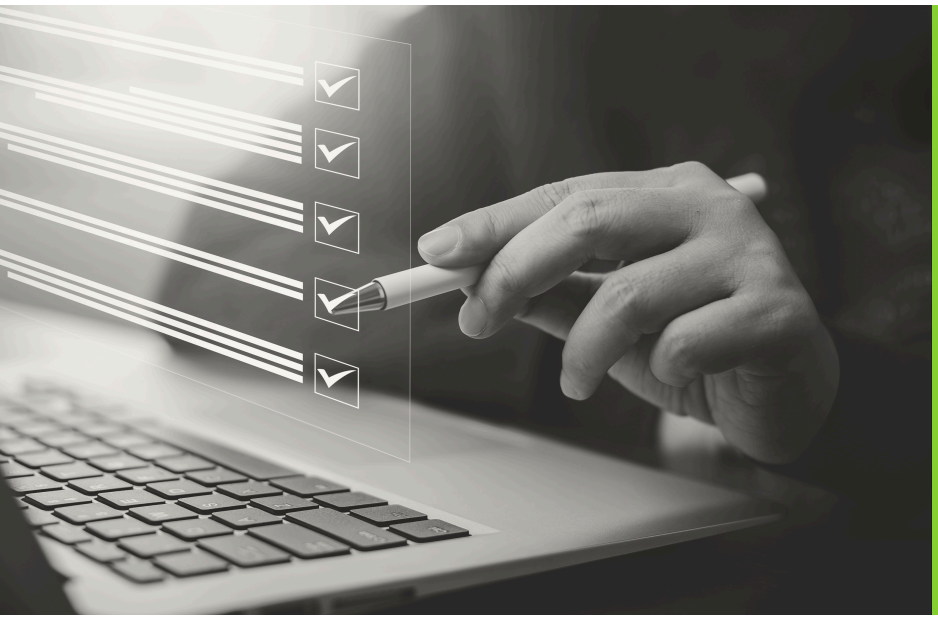
- AI discourse on social media can be quite negative in the context of quality of work/output, which makes them wary of using AI to write assignments
- Ethical concerns are well documented online, which is a concern for using certain AI tools
- It is good to use AI to digest lecture notes and assessment briefs
- AI tools in general feel rushed and moving too fast without any solid regulation, and the bigger picture is not yet known, so it is hard to fully trust the systems
- There is uncertainly around what is allowed and what is not
- Declaring AI use feels like cheating

It is estimated that 41% of UK institutions have no AI policy that is accessible to students or staff (Illingworth, 2026). AI policies that are in place, cover general guidance and have a tendency to be vague with inconsistent information. AI declaration sheets are commonplace, with students required to detail their AI use specifically in relation to their assessed work. However, this relies on trust between the student and the institution, and whether the AI policy supports the purpose of the declaration.

Given the mixed feelings around AI use and the lack of clear AI policy for students, there is a need to address the formative experiences of AI within education. It requires both students and staff to be comfortable using AI, as well as being transparent on how AI is used in written work. This also requires structured and detailed policies to be in place, to allow the freedom to use AI tools and reduce AI anxiety. A clear, robust AI policy should allow for fairness and consistency across the teaching and learning journey.

"Although students may feel comfortable with consumer AI tools such as ChatGPT and Claude, they lack the practical experience of industry-critical systems, which require specific knowledge and skill"

Ethical and responsible use of AI



Artificial intelligence (AI), including generative AI (GenAI), is rapidly reshaping tourism, hospitality, events and leisure systems. From personalised trip planning and dynamic pricing to automated guest communication and AI-assisted content creation, AI is increasingly embedded across the visitor journey. At the same time, it is transforming higher education, influencing how students research, write, reflect and engage with knowledge.

Industry analyses consistently describe AI as a strategic enabler of innovation and competitiveness in travel and tourism (WTTC, 2024; Amadeus, 2024; Deloitte, 2026). Academic research similarly frames AI as a structural force influencing operations, service experience and organisational practice (Kim et al., 2024; Dogru et al., 2023). However, as adoption accelerates, questions of ethics, governance, quality and educational integrity become increasingly urgent.

The issue is not whether AI will shape tourism and education as it already does. The question is how this transformation can be guided responsibly.

Ethical Governance and Data Responsibility

Tourism is fundamentally a trust-based industry. Visitors share personal data, payment information, travel histories and preferences with service providers. AI systems amplify the volume and complexity of this data processing. According to UN Tourism (2024), responsible AI adoption in tourism must be accompanied by robust data governance and careful consideration of privacy and cross-border data risks. Generative AI introduces additional concerns. Many platforms operate with opaque training data practices, unclear storage policies and evolving terms of service. This creates uncertainty around:

- Data security and cyber vulnerabilities
- Cross-border transfer of sensitive information
- Retention and reuse of personal data
- Vendor dependency and platform lock-in

In education, students may upload coursework, unpublished research, or personal reflections into AI systems without clarity about data retention or reuse. Dogru et al. (2024) highlight that generative AI in higher education introduces ambiguity around authorship and intellectual property. Questions such as “who owns AI-generated content?” and “can providers reuse input data?” remain insufficiently resolved.

Beyond privacy and ownership, ethical governance must also address bias and representation. AI systems may reflect and reproduce inequalities embedded in training data. In tourism, this may influence which destinations are promoted, whose voices are amplified, or which communities are marginalised. Dogru et al. (2023) argue that AI can both co-create and co-destroy stakeholder value.

Responsible governance therefore requires:

- Transparent disclosure of AI use
- Clear accountability for decisions informed by AI
- Vendor due diligence and contractual safeguards
- Alignment with data protection and sustainability commitments

Ethical stewardship is not an optional add-on; it is central to maintaining public trust in tourism systems.

Academic Integrity and Responsible Educational Practice

Generative AI has disrupted established models of assessment and authorship. In tourism and hospitality education, where written case analyses, strategic reports and reflective essays are common, AI tools can generate fluent, structured responses that appear sophisticated but may lack critical depth.

Research demonstrates that AI-generated assignments can be plausible yet contain factual inaccuracies or fabricated references (Xie, 2025). At the same time, AI literacy among educators is uneven, and institutional policies are often still evolving (Fathy et al., 2025).

Prohibition alone is unlikely to be effective. Students are already using AI tools; what matters is how they use them. Responsible educational practice therefore requires:

- Clear guidance on acceptable and unacceptable AI use
- Explicit disclosure requirements
- Emphasis on verification and critical evaluation
- Assessment design that foregrounds reasoning, reflection and applied judgement

Academic integrity should be reframed not only as preventing misconduct, but as cultivating professional standards. In tourism and hospitality, inaccurate information can affect safety, compliance and destination reputation. Graduates must therefore learn to engage with AI critically and transparently.

Workforce, Organisational and Professional Implications

AI adoption is also reshaping workforce structures and organisational practices.

Industry outlooks highlight AI's role in automating routine tasks, augmenting managerial decision-making and enabling personalised guest experiences (WTTC, 2024; Deloitte, 2026). Kim et al. (2024) emphasise that AI applications in hospitality require contextual managerial oversight rather than blind reliance.

While automation may enhance efficiency, it also raises concerns about workforce displacement, skill erosion and changes to emotional labour. Hospitality is traditionally defined by human-centred service, empathy and relational care. The integration of AI into guest interaction challenges organisations to reconsider where human engagement remains essential.

Graduates entering the tourism sector must therefore understand:

- How AI may augment rather than replace service roles
- The limits of automation in care-based industries
- The organisational and cultural implications of AI integration
- The ethical trade-offs between efficiency and authenticity

AI should be positioned as a tool within a broader professional ecosystem, not as a substitute for human judgement and relational expertise.

Quality Assurance and Human Oversight

Generative AI systems are probabilistic models; they do not “know” facts but predict plausible language patterns. As a result, they may produce hallucinated citations, outdated regulatory information or culturally insensitive outputs. In tourism contexts, inaccurate recommendations can mislead travellers or damage destination credibility. In education, fabricated references undermine academic standards. Academic and industry research alike emphasise the need for human oversight (Kim et al., 2024; Dogru et al., 2023). Quality assurance mechanisms should include:

- Systematic cross-verification with authoritative sources
- Clear documentation of AI involvement in high-stakes decisions
- Continuous monitoring of AI tool performance
- Training in critical evaluation of AI outputs

AI should be treated as assistive infrastructure rather than authoritative expertise. Human judgement, contextual knowledge and ethical reasoning remain indispensable.

Overall, artificial intelligence presents substantial opportunities for innovation, efficiency and enhanced visitor experience in tourism and hospitality. It also introduces complex challenges relating to data governance, ownership, academic integrity, workforce transformation and quality assurance. Responsible AI adoption requires coordinated action across industry and education. This includes:

- Robust data protection and transparent governance frameworks
- Clear institutional guidance on responsible use
- Reinforced academic integrity principles
- Pedagogical redesign focused on critical AI literacy
- Ongoing quality assurance and human oversight

The future of AI in tourism will not be determined solely by technological capability, but by the sector’s commitment to ethical stewardship, trust, sustainability and human-centred values.

"AI should be positioned as a tool within a broader professional ecosystem, not as a substitute for human judgement and relational expertise"

Industry viewpoint

AI is posing both opportunities and challenges for education provision, however we must consider the impact of AI on the tourism industry. It is very evident that various forms of AI innovation are impacting and reshaping the future of the travel industry, however there are still issues that need to be addressed.

The travel industry is centred around the customer experience, however the main benefit of AI within travel operations is efficiencies and savings. **The challenge is to balance the efficiencies with the experience, and ensure the customer is still at the heart of the industry. It is clear the industry still relies on people to provide that experience.** Therefore, soft skills and the passion for the industry is still very much a key requirement for the next generation of talent entering the industry.

Presented below are commentaries from the travel industry, which presents a complex predicament. While there is a wealth of opportunity from the rapid development of AI, there is still uncertainty and fear around the unknown unless the industry reacts.

Simon Powell

Chairman, Systems X and
CEO, Inspiretec

AI will fundamentally reshape the travel industry, and that change is already well underway. The question is no longer whether AI will transform how travel businesses operate, but how quickly organisations adapt to it.

The most immediate impact is on the contact centre, which remains the heartbeat of most travel businesses. AI is now capable of analysing every customer interaction, not just a sample, providing managers with genuine visibility across their teams for the first time. That shift alone changes how performance is managed, how coaching is delivered, and how decisions are made. The businesses embracing this are already seeing measurable improvements in conversion, consistency, and customer experience.

On job security, I am optimistic but realistic. AI will not replace the travel adviser; it will redefine the role. Advisers supported by AI will be more productive, better informed, and able to focus on the complex, high-value conversations that genuinely require human expertise and empathy. What will decline are the repetitive, low-value tasks that currently consume too much of their time.

The skills gap is real and needs addressing urgently. The industry must invest in helping its people understand and work alongside AI, not fear it. Leaders who treat AI as a threat to their workforce will fall behind. Those who treat it as a tool to elevate their people will win.

"The opportunity is enormous. The risk is in moving too slowly"

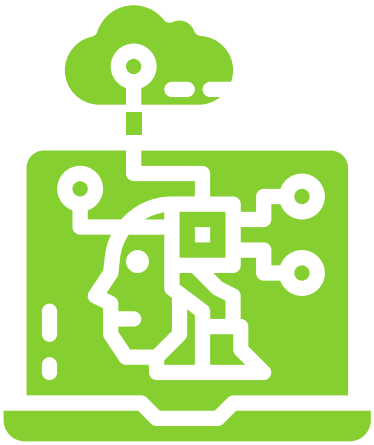
Steve Endacott

Chairman, Neural River

AI will transform the travel industry over the next decade, but not in the simplistic way many people predict. Humans will still want to buy holidays from humans, especially when spending thousands of pounds on important family experiences. The reassurance, empathy and trust provided by experienced travel agents, homeworkers and high street shops will still matter. However, there will almost certainly be fewer of them because AI copilots will remove a huge amount of administrative, quotation-building, itinerary-management, and booking work. The best salespeople will become dramatically more productive and capable of handling far more customers than today.

At the same time, AI will democratise travel selling. New distribution channels, such as TikTok GO and AI-powered creator commerce, will emerge, allowing almost anyone with an audience to become a travel agent. The complicated system knowledge and booking processes that once required years of training will increasingly be handled by AI assistants behind the scenes.

The biggest disruption, however, may hit online OTAs. Consumers are rapidly moving away from traditional website form-filling towards conversational AI search. Instead of typing dates and destinations into booking engines, customers will simply ask AI assistants for “the best luxury family holiday in Spain under £5,000 leaving in August”. AI search engines will then use machine-to-machine conversations via MCP connectors to query suppliers directly and return the ten best personalised recommendations instantly, so less will become more, with recommendations reflecting what users want rather than thousands of hotels to choose from.



Helen Doyle

Managing Director, Perfect Weddings Abroad

AI is changing the way the travel industry works. From research, to trip planning, booking and beyond. Travel businesses are integrating AI tools, with the aim of delivering a better customer experience; whilst bringing about efficiencies and ultimately a better margin.

To make the most of the opportunities that AI brings, we must ensure the next generation are equipped with the soft skills that excellent service in the travel industry relies heavily on, along with adaptability, awareness of technology and a can-do attitude.

As a business that operates internationally, embracing technology has always been at the heart of what we do, and AI is the next phase on that journey. Couples planning weddings abroad expect a high level of service, including hand holding, reassurance, guidance and advice. AI can help enhance the planning experience, when combined with human weddings abroad specialists.

The future of travel is extremely exciting!

Mark Smith

Managing Director, Simplexity Travel Management

AI is reshaping the travel industry by automating routine processes such as search, booking, pricing, and disruption management, making operations faster, more consistent and increasingly data driven. This creates clear benefits, such as improved personalisation, better fraud detection and more proactive service, but also raises expectations, with clients demanding instant, tailored, always on support. The impact on jobs is more evolutionary than eliminative. Transactional roles will decline, while consultative, service led roles grow in importance. Human expertise, particularly in managing complexity, risk, and customer experience remains a key differentiator in a tech enabled environment. However, the industry faces a widening skills gap. Success will depend on digital fluency, data literacy, and the ability to critically assess AI outputs, particularly in regulated environments.

Ultimately, AI will elevate service standards, but the travel businesses that succeed will be those combining technology with high quality human judgement and relationship management. However, the impact of AI is here but it can't beat human connection and AI is a lot more than Chat GPT. What we have to consider which will be a game changer is Agentic AI that will make AI work for you rather than be a tool for you.

Daniel Hyman

Marcus Whitefield Consultancy and Blue Den Travel

My background pre-travel began studying Mathematics at University, specialising in Numerical Methods. My observation remains that AI is ultimately a probability model, that requires the right inputs to generate meaningful outputs.

In selling Travel, UK Tour Operators take on a Performance responsibility under the Package Travel Regulations requiring the seller to take responsibility for these outputs. Taking this Performance risk requires close to 100% accuracy in execution. One of many risks to consider as an example: can AI access as input all new building work starting in the proximity of hotels that may lead to compensation claims?
In contrast, repeat tasks, systems and processes are ready for the application of AI. This can make existing businesses on their existing revenue more efficient. This is an opportunity and while there may be a skill gap to implement new AI systems for repeat tasks, getting outside support to improve specific processes may generate a high return on investment.

With a greater impact, the industry is impacted by AI developments around it to win new and retain existing customers. From ChatGPT to Claude, there is an arms race in digital search that has seen the discovery phase of travel completely disrupted.

The rate of change leads to a skill gap in marketing: as cost of acquisition changes, how long will a specific marketing channel that a marketing team has skills in remain effective?

Ironically, in an era of digital noise, this may see the cost of acquisition being most predictable via trusted Travel Agents. Travel Agents have a loyal base because for what is often the largest purchase of the year, the customer can look someone in the eyes and know they take responsibilities for what they book for you.

Case studies

While there are challenges in both academia and industry with regards to the rapid development and implementation of AI tools, there are some excellent examples of how AI tools can be used to support teaching, learning and industry projects. Below are three examples of how AI has had a positive impact through partnerships between students, academics, and industry.

Case Study 1: Addressing digital poverty and providing equitable access
Northumbria University provides all students and staff with Claude for Education

Equity concerns are emerging regarding AI adoption. There is a growing digital divide, with male students, STEM students, and socio-economically advantaged students more likely to use AI effectively. 53% of students expect their institutions should provide full access to AI systems (HEPI, 2025), and given the growth in the divide it is likely this could increase. To address concerns over digital poverty, Northumbria University has invested in their digital portfolio to provide free universal access to Claude for Education, positively impacting approximately 30,000 students and staff. Since launching in September 2025, there have been 10,000,000 interactions with Claude for Education, demonstrating high engagement.

“Generative AI is now ubiquitous we believe that we must support our students to understand how to use AI responsibly, appreciate its ethical and societal impacts, and make informed choices about how and when to use different AI systems. To ensure that all our students have equitable access to high-end generative AI for learning, we provide the enterprise version of Claude by Anthropic.”

Professor Nic Whitton, Dean of AI in Education

Industry now expects graduates to be fluent with AI. Claude for Education allows students to engage with an AI platform for other purposes than a generative tool. When purposefully used to enhance teaching and learning, it can provide opportunities for educators to embed tasks that simulate industry tasks to give students a more experiential approach to teaching and learning.

The worry inside education is that students will lean on generative tools as a shortcut and hollow out the thinking a degree is meant to build. The useful question isn’t whether to allow AI in the classroom, but how to use it so it sharpens judgement instead of replacing it. Northumbria University’s rollout of Claude to students and staff created the room to test that directly.

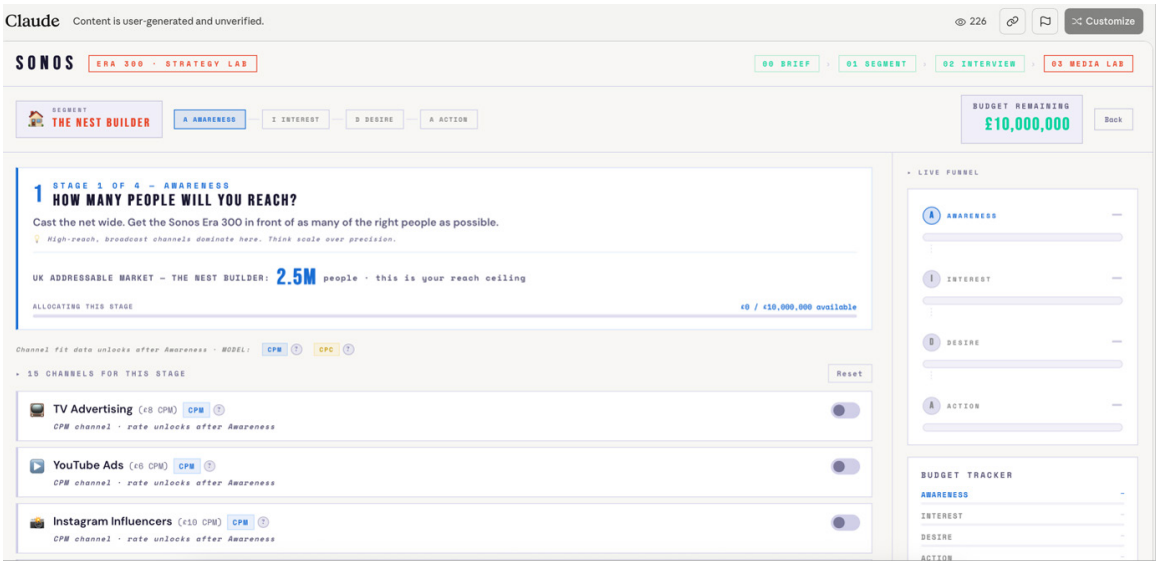
In the Digital and Data Driven Marketing module, student groups became a marketing team with a £10 million budget to launch the Sonos Era 300, a £449 premium speaker. They plan across the AIDA funnel (Awareness, Interest, Desire, Action) using 20 real advertising channels, each carrying genuine 2024–25 UK benchmarks for cost, engagement and conversion (Thinkbox, DCM, IAB UK, WordStream).

The design is deliberately consequential: budget spent at one stage is gone by the next, so decisions compound. Real market ceilings, a hidden channel-fit model, a random mid-campaign event and a gross-margin ROI all force genuine trade-offs, not box-filling. This is where the tool goes beyond Claude as a writing aid, and becomes and interactive tool to allow students to gain valuable insight and experience of the process.

Interviewing the customer: Before planning anything, each group interviews their target customer, one of five data-rich personas, played in character by Claude. Students ask their own questions and then have to act on what they hear. They're using AI to interrogate a stakeholder and pressure-test their own assumptions, which is far closer to how a strategist works than asking a model to hand over an answer.

A real-time strategy critic: After each stage, groups can spend part of their budget on an AI-generated A/B test. Claude weighs their actual channel choices against the chosen persona and returns a sharp, specific critique, with a full consultant-style debrief at the end. A whole room of groups gets tailored feedback at once, faster than any single tutor could manage.

Built with Claude: The simulation itself was designed and built by the module lead using Claude, with no development team and no software budget: a working, data-driven application with live AI features, made by one academic.



For students, the exercise is repeated practice at the skill industry actually hires for: using AI with judgement, under real constraints, to interrogate, pressure-test and decide. The model is a thinking partner and a sparring opponent, never a stand-in for the work. It also shows the staff side of the same gap closing. Access to Claude does more than speed up admin; it lets academics build the kind of bespoke, industry-grade teaching tools that used to need a budget and a development team.

Case Study 2: Successful academia-industry partnerships; using SystemsX to develop applied AI capability in tourism education

At the University of Plymouth, SystemsX was integrated into a Level 5 service marketing session to help students connect customer interaction data with service improvement and marketing strategy in tourism education. The platform was introduced as an AI-driven tool that analyses customer service interactions to identify behavioural patterns, recurring concerns, customer expectations, emotional tone, and service performance issues. In this teaching context, SystemsX was not presented as a stand-alone technical tool, but as a practical mechanism for helping students interpret customer behaviour and translate it into service marketing insight. The session learning objectives focused on conducting role-play customer interactions, identifying behavioural signals, interpreting those signals into customer insights, and reflecting on how such insights can inform service improvement.

The classroom intervention took the form of a service marketing role-play workshop centred on recorded customer service calls. Students worked in pairs and selected scenarios from hotel, cruise, and visitor attraction contexts, taking turns to act as the customer and the call-centre agent. The scenarios reflected realistic tourism and hospitality enquiries and concerns. Hotel scenarios included issues such as late check-in, breakfast provision, family-friendly facilities, price comparison, and accessibility needs. Cruise scenarios included WiFi reliability, family suitability, value for money, online booking, and crowd management. Visitor attraction scenarios extended the exercise into attraction-based customer experience concerns. Students were expected to conduct natural and professional conversations, with customers explaining situations, asking realistic questions, and expressing concerns, while agents listened carefully, provided clear information, addressed issues politely, and supported customer decision-making. In this delivery, three groups comprising six students recorded their calls, generating a focused set of realistic interaction data for AI-supported analysis.

Student reflection:
"From writing the scripts based on the given scenarios to making phone calls and discussing my concerns or answering customer concerns, the experience was fun. It was brilliant to get feedback from the team and SystemsX. It was very detailed and very useful. AI is everywhere in practice. I need to learn more."

Following the calls, SystemsX-generated insights were shared with students as personal development insights. This added a reflective and professional dimension to the activity. Rather than relying only on tutor feedback or peer observation, students were able to see how an AI-enabled platform interpreted their interactions in terms of customer needs, concerns, expectations, emotional signals, and service issues. The session design first asked students to listen back to their own calls and identify common questions, customer expectations, and possible service weaknesses before comparing their observations with the SystemsX analysis. Students were then guided to interpret behavioural signals through four dimensions: motivation, expectations, emotional experience, and service behaviour. This helped them move beyond surface description and engage in deeper interpretation of what customer conversations reveal for service marketing. The activity strengthened students' understanding of how classroom concepts connect with operational and strategic realities in tourism and hospitality. It enabled them to experience how customer conversations can be analysed as data, how behavioural signals can reveal patterns in expectations and dissatisfaction, and how these insights can support service improvement. In doing so, the session developed not only subject knowledge in service marketing, but also students' awareness of how AI is being used in contemporary customer experience and service management practice.

Student reflection:
"I am glad to have done this exercise, as we never had such an experience back home in Nepal. The detailed feedback received from the lecturer and SystemsX was amazing. The feedback makes me want to perform even better."

A particular strength of the session was the explicit connection between AI-enabled analysis and service marketing decision-making. In the final stage of the workshop, students were encouraged to connect insights from the calls to the 7Ps of services marketing, helping them identify which aspects of the service might require improvement, such as people, process, physical evidence, product, or price-related communication. This created a clear progression from customer interaction to behavioural insight, and to strategic interpretation.

This case demonstrates that AI can enrich tourism education when it is used in ways that are applied, reflective, and professionally relevant. Rather than teaching AI as an abstract concept, the SystemsX activity enabled students to work with realistic service encounters, generate their own interaction data, and interpret AI-supported outputs in relation to customer behaviour and marketing action.

Case Study 3: Use of AI for immersive training and innovative travel and tourism projects

At University of Wales Trinity Saint David, AI is already being utilised to create innovative experiential learning experiences for education and industry. This includes using AI to develop Immersive Training for students and to support project work.

AI is currently being used within UWTSD'S Immersive Learning Facilities to enhance learning and development but also to support specific new developments within the Travel and Tourism industry. This includes designing and developing immersive and simulated interactive learning and developing Visitor Experiences. This allows students to use AI to develop Immersive Visitor Experiences as part of their learning and assessments but also working with industry to support AI enhanced Visitor Experiences. UWTSD'S Immersive Learning Rooms on both Swansea and Carmarthen Campuses are the only educational facilities of this kind in Wales. 3 of the walls in the rooms are floor to ceiling digital screens enabling the rooms to play Immersive 360 content or be used for presentations with 3 separate screens.

The teaching approach embraces both Experiential and Action Centred Learning with AI and Digital Technology being used to create a simulated environment where students can experience operational Travel and Tourism Management scenarios to apply their academic learning. This has already helped develop students' professional employability skills in preparation for graduation. Projects have involved partnerships and engagement with industry to support student development. This also provides opportunities for industry to benefit from using the high-tech learning facility to simulate operational industry experiences.

"Since speaking on the ITT Panel in Sardinia I stand by my belief that AI should be there to serve not replace. Use of AI in the Immersive Learning Room at UWTSD brought studying Attraction Management to life, helping us develop our industry skills as we showcased our own attraction management projects through immersive visuals, sound and storytelling. A standout was when a fellow student was able to use AI to create an entire theme park simulation, a concept he brought alive in the Immersive Room. This demonstrated how AI enhances creativity, and supports learning and destination management strategies in a truly engaging way."
Ethan Scriven, Graduate

Within the Level 6 Crisis Management module AI is now being used as part of UWTSD's Digital Experience and Engagement Learning and further develop industry-based training. This scenario-based model was first introduced in 2020 as tabletop exercises and then redeveloped using digital footage when the Immersive Room was launched in 2022. The Immersive Crisis Management simulations were developed for students to experience managing crisis situations in real time providing them with Live Experiences.

This provides them with a safe learning environment but a deep appreciation of the impacts that their Crisis decision making can have. A Mock Control Room was developed, featuring interactive digital walls with a live feed screen looking into the stadium, and interactive CCTV screens on both side walls. This simulates a real events control room so that AI generated crisis simulations can be shown with users having access to AI content on the CCTV screens to help them manage the Live Scenarios. Bronze, Silver and Gold Control Rooms are developed with each command being able to communicate with each other to manage a series of incidents. These can include Terrorist Attacks, Crowd Control and Natural Disasters and in future Destination Crises will be created as virtual simulations.

Prior to engaging in the training as part of learning and assessments, students are required to apply their academic learning and risk models to prepare detailed Emergency Plans. The scenarios then take place as a full day of emergency exercises, so all groups experience each command after which the academic team facilitate a crisis review and debrief. Following the event each student is required to use their academic learning and crisis management models to prepare a critical review as part of their module assessment. The Digital Experience and Engagement Team are now working on Version 4 of the Immersive Control Room which will include generating detailed AI content to develop a range of new simulations. This will bring more purposeful interactions built around improving the understanding and retention of learning outcomes. It will also have a stronger focus on developing new incidents (which may include airports, destinations, hotels) on the screens whilst emulating real-world control and communications outcomes.

"The use of AI in the Immersive Learning Room at UWTSD for Crisis Management was vital to my professional development. Training using realistic, high-pressure scenarios gave me genuine operational experience that directly prepared me for my current role as Civil Contingencies and Force Planning Officer in the police. I wouldn't be as confident or capable in critical incidents without that foundation"
Sinead Edwards, Graduate

Not surprisingly, this development has generated strong industry interest, especially as it can change from a Control Room to other AI generated Crisis simulation specifically designed for Travel and Tourism at the touch of a button. This is not the only use of AI to support student learning and developments in the Tourism industry. Since 2024 the Immersive Room and VR headsets have been used for Attraction Management learning. Students have been able to experience how AI, Virtual and Augmented Reality can be used to develop Tourist Attractions and to recreate Visitor Experiences using the Immersive technology. As part of authentic Attraction Management assessments, the students have even used AI to develop their own Visitor Attractions. The UWTSD Tourism and Events Team have since secured funding to enable the students under the guidance and support of specialist academic staff and the Digital Engagement and Experience Team to use Digital Story Telling to create an AI generated Heritage Travel Experience for use in the Immersive Room, with a Mobile Wayfinding App and VR heads. This is an ongoing project which is growing and providing valuable opportunities for industry as well as education. The use of AI to develop content and enhance simulations within the immersive experience is attracting funding enabling industry engagement.

Key challenges

Building on earlier sections of this white paper, AI in tourism should be understood as both an education challenge and an industry transformation challenge. The issue is no longer only whether students use Gen-AI tools, or whether businesses adopt AI systems. The wider challenge is how tourism education and industry can develop responsible AI capability that supports employability, productivity, service quality, trust and sustainable tourism development. A central theme across both education and industry is the need to balance technology and touch: using AI to enhance efficiency, insight and innovation while protecting the human qualities that define tourism and hospitality, including empathy, cultural understanding, creativity, emotional intelligence and service judgement.

AI in tourism education: key challenges

Building on earlier discussions of AI literacy, access and skills gaps, the key challenges concerning AI in education are;

Moving from basic AI awareness to AI-enabled employability

Assessment redesign

Discipline-specific AI judgement

Academic resistance and uneven staff capability

Protecting human capabilities

Moving from basic AI awareness to AI-enabled employability

Students need to understand AI as a workplace capability, not only as an academic tool. This includes using and evaluating AI in itinerary design, review analysis, destination marketing, customer-service simulations, tourism data interpretation and crisis communication. This responds to wider concerns about the gap between education and employment (Cengage Group, 2025).

Assessment redesign

Detection-led approaches are unreliable and potentially unfair. Tourism education may therefore need more authentic, applied and process-based assessments, such as oral defence, reflective AI-use declarations, work-integrated learning, local tourism case analysis and industry-style consultancy tasks (QAA, 2023; Foltynek et al., 2023; Open University and NCFE, 2024).

Discipline-specific AI judgement

Generic prompt-writing is insufficient. Tourism students need to judge AI outputs for accuracy, bias, cultural sensitivity, customer privacy, sustainability, service ethics and data security (Ng et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2024; Xie, 2025). This requires students to move beyond simply producing AI-supported content towards explaining, critically evaluating and improving AI outputs.

Academic resistance and uneven staff capability

Some resistance is understandable, given concerns about integrity, workload, quality assurance and the pace of technological change. However, without staff development and clear institutional guidance, students may receive inconsistent messages about what AI use is acceptable or valuable.

Protecting human capabilities

As AI becomes more embedded in education and industry, tourism graduates will still need communication, empathy, creativity, ethical reasoning, cultural interpretation and professional judgement. These human capabilities are not secondary to AI literacy; they are essential to responsible and high-quality tourism practice.

AI in the tourism industry: key challenges

Reflecting on earlier practitioner concerns around change, skills gaps, job security and expectations, the industry challenge is not simply adopting AI but adopting it responsibly and effectively. AI is increasingly being used in travel planning, personalisation, guest communication, content generation, business intelligence, revenue optimisation and service recovery (Amadeus, 2024; WTTC, 2024). The key challenges faced in industry concerning AI are:

Responsible operationalisation: Organisations need to move beyond experimentation and ensure that AI tools are aligned with business strategy, customer experience, data governance and ethical practice. Poorly implemented AI may create mistrust, generic customer experiences or reputational risk.

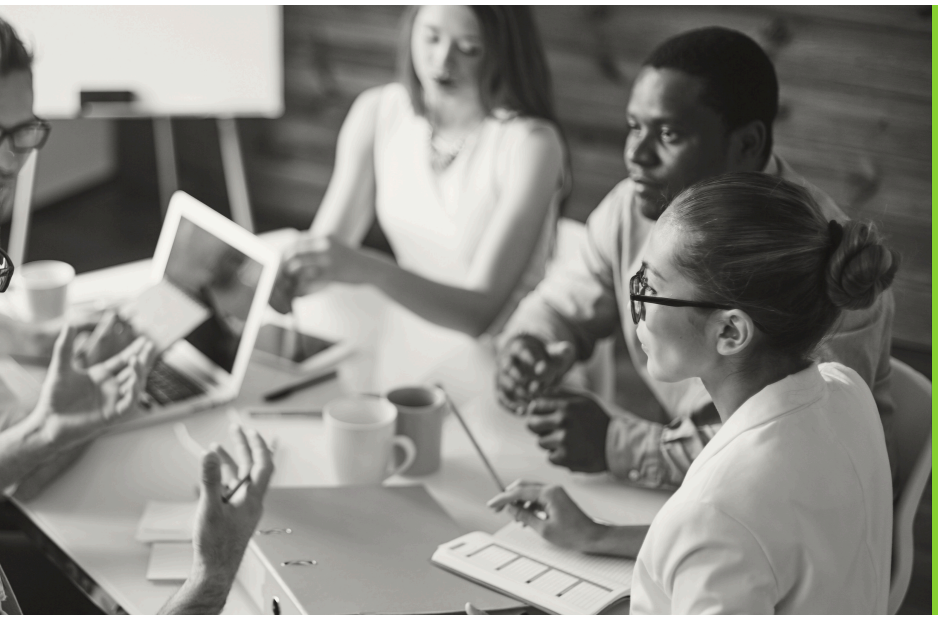
Workforce redesign and talent management: AI will reshape job roles, recruitment, training, supervision and performance management. Tourism and hospitality organisations need staff who can work alongside AI, interpret AI outputs and maintain service quality (El Hajal and Yeoman, 2025; Minor, McLoughlin and Carlisle, 2024).

Data governance and trust: Tourism businesses handle sensitive customer data. AI adoption therefore depends on trusted data, cybersecurity, privacy, transparency and accountability. Without these, AI can damage customer confidence and brand reputation (Salesforce, 2023; UN Tourism, 2024).

SME readiness: Many tourism and hospitality SMEs lack the infrastructure, staff capability and investment capacity required for effective AI adoption. This creates a risk that larger firms benefit from AI while smaller businesses fall further behind (DfE, 2021; DSIT, 2024).

Maintaining the balance between technology and touch: AI can improve efficiency, personalisation and decision-making, but tourism is still based on emotion, care, culture, place and human connection. AI should enhance hospitality experiences rather than make them generic, impersonal or purely automated.

Key actions



The response to AI may be most effective when framed as a shared education–industry transformation agenda, rather than as separate academic and business responses.

The following actions are not intended as mandatory requirements, but as a practical menu of options that institutions, tourism businesses and sector bodies may adapt according to their context, resources and AI maturity.

Actions for tourism education

- Tourism programmes may consider curriculum review and redesign to embed AI capability across modules, including destination marketing, itinerary design, customer-service simulations, review analysis, revenue management, sustainability and crisis communication.
- Universities could develop AI skills development programmes for students and staff, covering responsible prompting, verification of AI outputs, data privacy, bias, hallucination, copyright, sustainability, customer ethics and professional judgement.
- Assessment teams may wish to prioritise authentic and applied assessment, including oral defence, reflective AI-use statements, live case studies, consultancy reports, local tourism data analysis and work-integrated projects.
- Institutions are encouraged to provide clear and fair AI guidance, distinguishing acceptable, limited, declared and unacceptable AI use at programme, module and assessment level.
- Students could be engaged as partners in AI governance, helping to co-create guidance, examples of good practice, peer support resources and assessment expectations.
- Tourism education may also benefit from explicitly developing the technology and touch balance, ensuring that AI capability is taught alongside communication, empathy, cultural intelligence, ethical reasoning and service judgement.

Actions for the travel industry

- Tourism and hospitality organisations may benefit from conducting AI readiness audits covering data quality, digital infrastructure, staff capability, cybersecurity, customer privacy and priority use cases.
- Businesses could begin with high-value, lower-risk AI applications, such as customer query support, review analysis, internal knowledge management, basic content drafting, staff training materials and sustainability reporting.
- Organisations may consider developing AI workforce plans, including reskilling, role redesign, manager training and protection of human-centred hospitality skills such as empathy, service recovery and cultural sensitivity.
- Industry stakeholders are encouraged to strengthen responsible AI governance, including transparency, human oversight, customer consent, bias checking, data protection and accountability.
- SMEs may require additional support through shared AI resources, short courses, sector toolkits, university clinics, destination management organisations and local authority initiatives.

Joint academia-industry actions

- **Universities and industry partners could strengthen strategic partnerships through guest lectures, employer panels, live consultancy briefs, AI innovation challenges, student placements, CPD workshops and joint curriculum design.**
- **There is value in developing industry–academia AI mentorship networks connecting students, lecturers, tourism SMEs, technology providers, DMOs and hospitality managers.**
- **Joint research projects may focus on practical sector challenges, including visitor experience, productivity, food waste reduction, sustainability, workforce planning, customer trust, smart destinations and SME digital transformation.**
- **A longer-term approach could involve collaborative spaces for experimentation and knowledge exchange, where students, academics and businesses test AI tools, evaluate risks, produce case studies, develop training resources and share emerging practice.**

Overall, stakeholders may wish to work towards a tourism AI ecosystem in which universities develop responsible AI-capable graduates, while industry partners contribute real problems, tools, data, mentoring and employment pathways.

Concluding discussion

When the market overemphasises AI and spreads the fear that it will replace human workers, the responsible reaction is not panic but perspective. The question we should be asking is not whether AI will replace tourism professionals, it is whether service can be delivered by AI. The answer supported by industry data, practitioner experience, and the fundamental nature of human service, is no. This does not mean AI is irrelevant. It means that education and industry need to reshape their approach. Hospitality and tourism programmes must develop AI literacy alongside, not instead of, the humanistic, cultural, and experiential capabilities that give graduates their irreplaceable value.

In addition, industry must invest in people who can critically evaluate and reflect, as well as have the interpersonal skills to deliver service that AI cannot. AI is no longer a future issue for tourism and hospitality, it is already changing how people learn and work.

The key question is not simply whether AI should be used, but how education, training and industry can work together to prepare people to use it well, safely and responsibly.

This white paper shows that the skills gap cannot be addressed by education and training providers alone. Employers need graduates and staff who are ready for AI-supported workplaces, but many organisations are also still working out what AI means for their own services, teams and customers. Closer collaboration is therefore essential, including shared curriculum design, live projects, placements, mentoring, guest input, staff development and joint research.

The call to action is clear: education and training providers, employers, technology partners and sector bodies need to work together, not in parallel.

Students and future talent should leave education not only able to use AI tools, but able to critically evaluate outputs, protect customer trust, apply ethical judgement and keep the human touch at the heart of tourism and hospitality. The future strength of the sector will depend on people who can combine AI competence with service, creativity, responsibility and care.

In summary, the sector does not need education and industry to respond to AI separately; it needs a shared approach to developing AI-confident, ethically aware and people-centred talent.

Links to further resources

AI Sector Study:
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/artificial-intelligence-sector-study-2023/artificial-intelligence-sector-study-2023

The Conversation, Articles on AI in Education:
https://theconversation.com/topics/ai-in-education-114252

AI and the Future of Universities:
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About ITT Future You

Established in 1956, the Institute of Travel & Tourism (ITT) is the only membership organisation for travel and tourism professionals, suppliers, educators, and students across all sectors of the industry. One of the ITT's principal objectives is to raise and maintain professional standards in the industry and encourage and inspire the next generation of talent. Through initiatives such as ITT Future You, the Education and Training Committee work hard to promote educational partnerships and recognise good practice.

For more information, or to be involved in future publications from the ITT Future You White Paper series, please contact Dr Kate Harland; kate.d.harland@northumbria.ac.uk, or visit https://www.ittfutureyou.com