Royal Academy of Engineering

Google DeepMind

The Hg Foundation

Google DeepMind Research Ready Programme

Formative Evaluation Summary

May 2026

This paper summarises findings from an evaluation of the Google DeepMind Research Ready Programme ('Research Ready'). Research Ready, delivered by the Royal Academy of Engineering ('the Academy') with funding from Google DeepMind and the Hg Foundation, provided artificial intelligence (AI) research placements for 132 undergraduates in the summer of 2025, hosted by 12 UK universities. The evaluation, conducted by ImpactEd, explored outcomes and provided formative feedback on the programme's theory of change to inform programme improvements and delivery in 2026.

The Academy is grateful to Google DeepMind and Hg Foundation, Founding Partners of Google DeepMind Research Ready.

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Executive Summary

The programme

Research Ready, delivered by the Royal Academy of Engineering ('the Academy') with funding from Google DeepMind and the Hg Foundation, provided artificial intelligence (AI) research placements for 132 undergraduates in the summer of 2025, hosted by 12 UK universities. The programme provided hands-on AI research project experience, skills development, community building activities, industry exposure, financial support and accommodation, with the aim of supporting more students into post-graduate AI research and careers.

The evaluation

The evaluation, conducted by ImpactEd, explored outcomes and provided formative feedback on Research Ready's theory of change (see Appendix A) to inform programme improvements and delivery in 2026. Methods included a student survey before and after the programme, qualitative interviews and focus groups with programme participants, applicants and staff.

Results

How well does the programme target economically disadvantaged student groups?

- **All students stated they met at least one economic disadvantage criteria set by the Academy, yet it is hard to say how well targeted Research Ready was.** This is because verification checks were not mandatory and full data was not collected on the criteria across the programme. Student household occupation status reflects the general population.

How well is the programme implemented across universities?

- **The core programme was generally well delivered and received by students**, **with more than 85% of students saying they gained valuable, hands-on and practical experience of AI research methods and careers**, that their mentor provided them with genuine support and encouragement, that they gained relevant skills and that the stipend removed financial barriers. Slightly fewer were positive about the community building activities, with 69% saying these helped their sense of belonging, and accommodation, with 77% agreeing it supported participation in the programme.

How does programme deliver vary between universities?

- **Universities were given flexibility to adapt the core model, and these adaptations were viewed positively by students.** Adaptations included assigning participants with PhD buddies, having a communal 'hub' where students could interact, providing a strong industry focus, enabling project choice and facilitating inter-disciplinary projects.

What other opportunities are available for students who do not participate?

- **Research Ready is unique in its strong focus on AI, multiple geographic locations and generous financial support targeted at economically disadvantaged students.** While there are some other tech-related programmes available to students, most are in London, with less financial support. Applicants who did not participate took up alternative placements, self-direct projects, paid jobs, volunteering or personal hobbies.

How effective is the programme in achieving its aims, including building participant networks, understanding of career paths, skills, experience and employability in AI?

- **There was evidence from the survey that the programme successfully improved participants' professional networks, AI research skills, employability, awareness of, and preparedness for, AI careers and postgraduate study pathways.** These findings were supported by qualitative data from students and staff who noted how the programme was well-delivered and helped many participants realise their career ambitions.
- **There was less evidence for intermediate outcomes relating to improvements in broader communication skills, sense of belonging, being able to overcome barriers and belief they bring a valuable perspective.** Many programme participants had high baseline scores indicating the programme attracted a skilled, motivated and confident group.
- **When looking at specific goals, there was an increase in students wanting to pursue a Masters (from 33% to 41%) and a career in AI (from 81% to 87%).** The number interested in a PhD remained the same (32%), suggesting the programme clarified goals for some, with many already interested in AI study and careers.
- **Students' likelihood of pursuing work or post-graduate study in AI increased slightly between baseline and endline, with the programme attracting motivated students.** Matched survey results should be treated with caution as they from are a self-selecting subgroup of half the students who attended and exclude four universities.

How could the programme be improved?

- **Recruitment and eligibility:** Faster and clearer communications from the Academy on award notices, advertising earlier and more widely, removing the requirement to include an Academy Fellow in the selection process, collecting consistent data on eligibility (e.g. postcode) and providing feedback to applicants, would be welcomed.
- **Financial support and accommodation:** Ensuring the stipend meets the minimum living wage, transparent and regular payment schedules, guidance on expenses (e.g. materials, travel) and consistent accommodation quality would further support participation.

- **Community building:** Would be strengthened by requiring shared workspaces or communal 'hubs', more social activities, and cross-university events.
- **Industry involvement:** The Academy could require strong industry links of all university placements. Students would welcome this and more exposure to Google Deepmind.
- **Project choice and type:** The Academy could consider requiring universities to offer project choice as standard, as this was linked to positive views and outcomes. Interdisciplinary projects can be encouraged but will depend on university capacity.
- **PhD buddies:** Were welcomed by participants and performed a variety of roles. Where PhD students are involved, formalising and remunerating their role is likely to increase impact.

Next steps

Research Ready will be delivered again in 2026, with adaptations to delivery based on the results of this study. A robust evaluation of the programme, with a comparison group and tracking long term education and employment outcomes, is being explored for a future year of the programme.

1. Background and context

The AI sector is one of the fastest-growing research and career areas. To ensure AI-enabled systems truly act in the service of society they must be robust, accessible and fair for all users. Yet in the UK there are limited opportunities for undergraduates to develop their AI research skills outside of computer science degrees. Groups who might benefit from support in accessing the AI workforce include economically disadvantaged students who can face financial and structural barriers to participation (OECD, 2024).

To address this gap and widen participation in AI research, the Academy, with support from Google DeepMind and the Hg Foundation, have funded Research Ready summer placements at 12 UK universities for 132 undergraduate students from economically disadvantaged groups. These placements aim to provide students with hands-on AI research experience, skills, industry exposure, networking and opportunities to progress into research and careers in AI and adjacent fields. The programme was originally launched by Google DeepMind and Oxford University in summer 2023, expanding to six universities in 2024, and a further six in 2025, with the Academy taking on coordination and leadership. This report summarises the findings of an evaluation of the 2025 cohort, to inform future delivery.

2. The programme

The programme is targeted at students who have completed or are in the penultimate year of a computer science or related degree (e.g. maths or neuroscience) and meet at least one indicator of economic disadvantage.[1] Each research placement is paid-for and lasts six to eight weeks, hosted by 12 selected UK universities.

Core components

The core components of the programme, delivered across all participating universities are:

1. **AI research experience:** students work on an AI research project for six to eight weeks supported by a mentor from the faculty, and in some cases PhD students.
2. **Skills development:** universities provide workshops and other opportunities to develop relevant skills, including writing research, data analysis, coding and employability skills.

[1] Having received free school meals at school, living in an area of the lowest two deciles according to postcode indices of deprivation, have been in local authority care, or in full state support or maintenance on their course.

3. **Community building:** networking opportunities between students, experts and with corporate and industry partners, to build a sense of belonging and knowledge of careers.
4. **A stipend and accommodation:** provided by the host university, to mitigate financial barriers to participation.

Each university that successfully bid to deliver Research Ready was provided with £80k of funding to host placements for up to 12 students. All universities managed the student application process and delivered the four core programme components, but there was some variation between universities in the way that projects were allocated (e.g. by choice or allocation), project focus, how universities deployed PhD students, and approaches to community building.

Outcomes

The aim of the programme is to ***support more economically disadvantaged students into post-graduate AI research and AI careers***. It aims to do this by providing students with:

- **Knowledge and awareness** of AI research and careers in AI, and the pathways into them.
- **Research experience** in leading AI labs alongside top academics and experts.
- **Skills and networks** that will make AI research and careers more accessible to them.
- **Confidence and a sense of belonging**, through activities to promote a positive research culture and dispel misconceptions around AI post-graduate research and careers.

Theory of change

The theory of change for the programme is in Appendix A. This summarises the core components and variables aspects of delivery, alongside associated assumptions, risks, and intended outcomes.[2] The theory of change was developed by ImpactEd in partnership with the Academy, participating universities, and co-funders. A full intervention description can be found in Appendix B.

Evaluation aims and objectives

The purpose of the evaluation was to test the theory of change and related research questions and provide formative feedback on implementation to inform future delivery. The research questions, how they relate to the theory of change and report structure are in provided in Table 1.

[2] A more detailed description of the intended causal pathways to outcomes is available upon request.

Table 1: Research questions

Research question	Theory of change element	Report section
1. How effective is the programme in achieving its overall aims and objectives? *1a) How effective is the programme is building networks and enhancing understanding of career paths?* *1b) How effective is the programme in developing participants skills, experience and employability in AI?*	Outcomes and aims	Section 8
2. How does the programme target economically disadvantaged student groups? What facilitators or barriers were there?	Target population	Section 4
3. How well are the programme core components implemented across universities? *3a) What strategies support high quality implementation?* *3b) What could be improved?*	Core components and relevant assumptions / risks	Section 5
4. How does programme delivery vary between universities and how does this affect implementation?	Variables	Section 6
5. What other opportunities are available for students who do not participate?	Drivers and assumptions	Section 7

3. Research methods

The formative mixed-methods evaluation was delivered by ImpactEd and included a student survey and semi-structured focus group discussions and interviews with key stakeholders.

Student survey

The 22-question survey was adapted from a survey developed by GoogleDeep Mind's previous research partner, Exponential Talent. It was designed to capture student demographic data, perceptions of programme implementation and outcomes in Research Ready's theory of change.

Students were asked to complete the survey before and after the Research Ready programme. Most universities shared the survey in the first week of delivery, although Queen Mary shared it in the third week. Four universities were excluded from the baseline because their programme started earlier than anticipated (Cardiff Metropolitan, Edinburgh, Manchester and Swansea). Endline surveys were collected within two weeks of completion. Participants were incentivised with a £5 voucher for completing the endline survey and entry into a £25 prize draw for completing both surveys. Of 132 participants, 129 engaged with one or both surveys: 71 (54%) submitted baseline data, 129 (98%) endline data, and 66 (50%) completed both (see Table 2).

Analysis of outcomes focuses on the matched sample, to understand within-participant change over time. The matched sample is broadly similar to overall group demographics but omits participants from four universities, so outcome data should be interpreted cautiously.

Table 2: Number of responses to participant surveys by university

University	All participants N	Baseline N (%)	Endline N (%)	Surveyed N (%)	Matched N (%)
Birmingham	11	11 (100%)	9 (82%)	11 (100%)	9 (82%)
Cambridge	10	9 (90%)	9 (90%)	10 (100%)	8 (80%)
Cardiff Met	10	-	10 (100%)	10 (100%)	-
Edinburgh	12	-	12 (100%)	12 (100%)	-
Exeter	9	6 (67%)	9 (100%)	9 (100%)	6 (67%)
Liverpool	12	7 (58%)	12 (100%)	12 (100%)	7 (58%)
Manchester	12	-	12 (100%)	12 (100%)	-
Nottingham	12	12 (100%)	11 (92%)	12 (100%)	11 (92%)
Oxford	10	6 (60%)	8 (80%)	8 (80%)	6 (60%)
Queen Mary	12	9 (75%)	11 (92%)	11 (92%)	9 (75%)
Swansea	10	-	10 (100%)	10 (100%)	-
York	12	11 (92%)	11 (92%)	12 (100%)	10 (83%)
Total	**132**	**71 (54%)**	**124 (94%)**	**129 (98%)**	**66 (50%)**

Data (not presented) showed that 27% of programme participants were female or non-binary, compared to 24% in the matched sample. 48% of participants

reported they were from working class backgrounds, compared to 47% in the matched sample. And 16% declared they had a disability or health condition, which was 14% in the matched sample.

Qualitative data

Qualitative data was gathered from four stakeholder groups: participants, university staff, applicants, and PhD student buddies. Methods included online focus groups, in-person site visits, and written submissions (see Table 4) using topic guides[3] to explore experiences, implementation and outcomes. Fourteen remote focus groups were held with participants, staff, and applicants, each lasting ~90 minutes with up to five participants. Two site visits took place at Cardiff Metropolitan University and Queen Mary University of London, including in-person focus groups with participants, staff, and PhD mentors. All data was collected by one researcher. In-person visits were selected purposively to represent a range of delivery approaches.

All participating students received a £25 voucher for their input. The qualitative focus groups were recorded, and data was transcribed, cleaned, and coded. The findings were informed by both thematic and narrative analysis.

Table 4: Qualitative focus group data

Method	University	Students	Staff	PhD
In person focus groups	Cardiff Met	7	5	-
	QMUL	4	2	2
Remote focus groups	Birmingham	4	Written submission	-
	Cambridge	4	1	-
	Edinburgh	4	Written submission	
	Exeter	5	1	-
	Liverpool	4	1	-
	Manchester	4	1	-
	Nottingham	5	1	-
	Oxford	4	1	-
	Swansea	5	1	-
	York	5	1	-
Applicant interviews	Mixed	9	-	-

[3] Available upon request.

Limitations

This evaluation has the following key limitations.

- The matched sample includes half of the 132 participants due to missed baseline responses, with four universities completely omitted, and one (Queen Mary) having a delayed baseline. Although broadly representative according to observable characteristics the matched sample may be biased in other ways and should be interpreted with caution.
- The survey lacks a parallel comparison group that did not receive the intervention, so it is hard to say what change may have occurred anyway.
- Qualitative data was collected from around half of the participants. Stakeholders and staff in universities were purposively sampled to cover all universities. However, the findings may not represent the views of all stakeholders. Data was collected by one researcher.

4. Student population, eligibility and application process

How does the programme target disadvantaged student groups? What facilitating factors and barriers were there?

Key findings:

- ***"All students stated they met at least one economic disadvantage criteria set by the Academy, yet it is hard to say how well targeted Research Ready was.".*** *This is because verification checks were not mandatory and full data was not collected on the criteria across the programme. Student household occupation status (a proxy for disadvantage) reflects the general population.*
- ***The programme attracted women in line with the population of computer science undergraduates*** *more broadly.*
- ***The simple application process received positive feedback from some participants, with suggestions for boosting applications and streamlining the process*** *including faster and clearer communications from the Academy, advertising earlier and more widely, removing the requirement to include an Academy Fellow in the selection process, using postcode to verify eligibility, and providing application feedback to applicants.*

Student eligibility

Four key eligibility criteria were provided by the Academy as indicators of economic disadvantage:

1. Free school meals received during school.

2. Was in local authority care.
3. Receiving full state support or maintenance for their degree.
4. Living in an area of deprivation according to the index of multiple deprivation or POLAR (participation of local areas).

All students stated that they fulfilled at least one of these criteria, but verification processes varied by university and document checks were not mandatory. Additionally, full programme-level data on eligibility was not collected, making it hard to assess how well targeted the programme was.

For those universities that did require document verification, challenges included slow responses from students, high administrative burden and unreliable data. Post-code was the easiest criteria to use and sped up processing yet may be the least reliable of the four indicators.

Parental occupation was collected in the survey as a proxy for economic disadvantage with just under a half of students coming from intermediate or working-class households, a quarter from professional households and the rest unknown. This somewhat reflects the UK population with 23% from professional and 77% from intermediate or working-class households (ONS, 2021). Women and non-binary students made up 27% of participants, which reflects the overall gender makeup of computer science students.

Experiences and formative feedback

Key motivators for students applying to the programme included developing AI academic and research interests, gaining research experience to inform postgraduate decisions, clarifying career paths, improving CVs and employability, networking with employers, experts and peers, and the provision of funding to cover costs (in line with the programme's theory of change).

Many students found the application process simple and straightforward, particularly where eligibility checks were not required. Where verification was required, this could be time-consuming and discouraged some applicants. Formative suggestions from universities and applicants were:

- **Faster and clearer communication from the Academy** on award notices and requirements would support earlier advertising and planning the application process.
- **Advertising the programme earlier and more widely** would boost interest.
- **Removing the requirement to have an Academy Fellow** as part of the student selection process, would reduce burden for departments without one and indicate trust.
- **Using postcode to verify economic disadvantage** would speed up processing.

- **Providing specific application feedback** would be welcomed by students, yet only some universities provided this.
- **Ensuring AI is accessible to all** could be addressed with a similar programme using different criteria to target students.

5. Programme implementation

How well is the programme implemented across universities? What strategies support high quality implementation? What could be improved?

Key findings

- ***The four core programme components were generally well delivered and received by students, with more than 85% if students saying they gained valuable, hands-on and practical experience of AI research methods and careers,*** *that their mentor provided them with genuine support and encouragement, that they gained relevant skills and that the stipend removed financial barriers. Slightly fewer were positive about the community building activities, with 69% saying these helped their sense of belonging, and 77% saying their accommodation supported participation in the programme.*
- ***Community building activities and industry involvement could have been strengthened and delivered more consistently across the universities.*** *Suggestions include setting clear expectations around shared workspaces, industry involvement and social activities, more cross-university events and exposure to Google Deepmind.*
- ***Ensuring the stipend meets the minimum living wage, transparent payment schedules and consistent accommodation quality would support participation****. Clear guidance on expenses (e.g. materials, travel), avoiding high up-front costs and regular payments to students, would also help.*

Core components

Figure 1 shows how many participants agreed with statements on the four core programme components and associated assumptions in the theory of change (see Appendix A). Students surveyed at the end of the programme were overwhelmingly positive about their experiences, with slightly fewer reporting positively on the community building and accommodation elements.

- **AI research experience:** 86% of participants agreed they gained valuable hands-on experience in AI research methods, 85% said the project gave them practical experience relevant to AI careers and 80% said they were able to contribute meaningfully to an AI research project. Also, 90% of participants agreed that their mentor provided them with genuine support, motivation and encouragement.

- **Skills development:** 89% of participants reported that the skills development opportunities provided were relevant to their research and career goals.
- **Community building:** 69% agreed that community building activities helped them feel part of the AI research community, with 17% being neutral, and 12% disagreeing.
- **Stipend and accommodation:** 87% of participants agree that the stipend removed financial barriers to participation and 77% said that the accommodation supported their participation in the programme, with 12% neutral and 8% disagreeing.

Survey responses show the core programme components were well-delivered and received by participants. It also supports many of the underlying assumptions such as the projects being engaging, content appropriately pitched, and mentors providing quality support. The following four sections go through each component in turn, exploring qualitative feedback to provide context to these findings and suggestions for improvement.

Figure 1: Participant survey responses to implementation question (N=124)

AI research experience and mentorship

Qualitative evidence reflected the survey findings, with many interviewed saying their experience exceeded or met their expectations. Many participants who saw

a project list during application, were attracted by the variety and relevance of projects and applied because a project or supervisor matched their interest. Projects were mostly considered well-designed, challenging but manageable, with many offering a steep yet rewarding learning curve.

Most participants interviewed reported that project mentors were helpful, approachable, and responsive, assisting with technical challenges, career advice, and team integration. Many participants reported supervisors being patient, supportive, and treating participants as important contributors, boosting confidence and a sense of belonging. Supervisors also frequently offered guidance and encouragement around postgraduate study opportunities and careers.

However, a minority did struggle with supervision quality and reported the following challenges:

- **Mentor access:** Several participants lacked regular access to their mentors or were left without support when a mentor had to depart during the project.
- **Inconsistent communication** on timelines and expectations meant some participants struggled with the deadlines for research reports and posters.
- **Lack of role models:** Some participants noted the mentor researchers were not necessarily relatable role models because of differences in background.

Skills development

Participants reporting being given opportunities to develop research, academic, technical, and soft skills through both project work and workshops. All universities incorporated skills development into projects. Many also provided technical workshops and training, and drop-in sessions often led by staff or PhD students, for example around specific research concepts, how to read research papers, debugging codes to conduct experiments. Participants really valued these experiences with no key challenges reported.

Community building

Community building was a central aspect of the programme, with universities organising different activities to foster participants' sense of belonging. Many offered guest lectures from experts and industry professionals (see also next section). Some universities invited alumni to connect, share their experiences and even inspired start-up collaborations. Speakers were encouraged to share contact details and participants to use LinkedIn, to build their professional networks.

Many participants reported their sense of belonging was dependent on lab culture and a strong working relationship with their supervisor. Being included in team meetings, external collaborations and supervisors seeing them as genuine

contributors supported integration. Many universities organised social events for participants, PhD students and staff which built a sense of community. Participants reported that shared workspaces fostered a sense of belonging.

However, a minority of participants reported feeling isolated, due to limited supervisor guidance, peer support and a lack of shared workspaces. The following suggestions were made:

- **Community building principles of good practice:** including shared workspaces, industry involvement, and provision of social events would support belonging.
- **Cross-university connections:** Many participants wanted more chances to interact with peers from other universities. The Academy-led event in September 2025 was seen as a good way to connect, but participants wanted earlier notice and more events like this. There was also interest in more cross-lab collaboration, where project topics overlapped.
- **Google DeepMind engagement:** Participants felt disconnected from Google DeepMind despite it being the developer and a funder and would have liked more involvement.

Stipend and accommodation

Consistent with survey findings, participants reported that financial support, including stipends, accommodation and travel expenses, were vital for participation and engagement, particularly for those relocating to new cities. Most found the stipend generous and sufficient, without additional part-time work. Participants strongly preferred weekly, bi-weekly or upfront payments.

However, some participants observed challenges including stipends being insufficient to meet costs in some cases, poor accommodation quality, payment delays, tax code confusion and unclear information on stipends. The following suggestions were made:

- **Stipends should meet the minimum living wage with consistent payment schedules** across all locations. Some universities required additional funds to cover costs.
- **Accommodation quality** and catering should be more consistent across universities, and campus access provided. High up-front costs should be avoided and covered.
- **Clearer guidance on expenses** and flexible funding to cover unexpected costs such as travel, materials and software.

6. Programme variation

How does programme deliver vary between universities and how does this affect implementation?

Key findings

- ***Universities were given flexibility to adapt the core model, and many adaptations were viewed positively by participants.*** *These adaptations included assigning participants with PhD buddies, having a communal living or work 'hub' where students could interact, a strong industry focus, enabling project choice and facilitating inter-disciplinary projects.*
- ***The Academy could consider requiring universities to offer a communal hub, strong industry links and project choice as standard,*** *as they were viewed positively by participants, supported high quality implementation and are linked to key mechanisms and outcomes in Research Ready's theory of change.*
- ***Provision of PhD buddies or interdisciplinary projects can be encouraged, but feasibility will depend upon university context and staff capacity.*** *Where PhD students are involved, formalising and remunerating their role is likely to increase impact.*

Adaptation

Universities were given some flexibility to adapt the core model. The main ways that universities chose to vary implementation were captured during focus groups to inform the theory of change (see Appendix A). These variable aspects of implementation are explored further below:

- **Buddy systems:** Six out of 12 universities assign students with PhD student 'buddies'.
- **Hub model:** All but two universities provided a participant 'hub' where students could interact with others from the programme or other placements.
- **Entrepreneurial or industry focus:** Five universities programmes focused on entrepreneurial work, rather than academic AI, including industry speakers.
- **Project choice:** All but one university allowed students to choose their project.
- **Interdisciplinary content:** Seven of 12 universities offered interdisciplinary projects that sat across departments.

Buddy systems

At six universities PhD students played a key role for participants. Their responsibilities included mentorship, providing pastoral care, technical support on projects, informal guidance on post-graduate study, running workshops and

setting up social and networking events. Three universities paid participants (e.g. for workshops or mentorship) and at others they were volunteers.

Many students reported that they formed positive relationships with their PhD buddies, who provided valuable support, guidance and fostered their sense of belonging. However, relationship quality varied depending upon shared interests, project compatibility, and PhD student capacity. Qualitative data suggests that when paid, PhD student roles become more formalised which leads to higher engagement and impact. **The Academy could consider guidance to universities on formalising and remunerating these roles, providing training and preparation time, and matching PhD buddies to student projects and interests.**

Hub model

The availability of shared physical living or workspaces was critical in fostering a sense of community among participants. All but two participating universities offered participants shared spaces, such as communal offices, labs or living arrangements. Where these shared spaces existed, participants reported deeper connections and a stronger sense of belonging.

Participants in universities that lacked a communal hub often reported a sense of isolation and fewer positive experiences. **It is recommended that universities provide communal hubs to foster participants' sense of belonging as this is a key outcome in Research Ready's theory of change.**

Entrepreneurship and industry focus

In addition to the core programme's focus on skills development and networking with academics, many universities provided more formal links to the AI industry. This included guest speakers, Dragon's Den-style showcase events and in one university a 'venture studio' model.

- **Guest speakers:** Many universities included talks and networking with industry experts, which bridge the perceived gap between academia and industry. Industry engagement was highlighted as a strength by participants, with one noting that the "*best part*" was weekly seminars featuring former academics who had founded startups. Where universities did not include industry speakers participants felt this was a missed opportunity.
- **Showcase events and venture studio model:** Two universities hosted Dragons' Den style showcase events with industry judges providing valuable insights into AI research applications. One university, Cardiff Met, used a 'venture studio' model, combining AI research with start-up models to show the link between research and business.

Many participants applied for Research Ready to make more informed choices about their careers. Given this and the positive feedback from participants, **it is recommended that industry links are required from all universities as part of the Research Ready programme going forwards.**

Project choice

Most universities let participants choose from a project list, which increased engagement and satisfaction. In one university projects were assigned via supervisor choice, some participants reported lower levels of satisfaction and occasional misalignment with interests. **Sharing project lists early and enabling choice was valued by both participants and applicants, so the Academy could consider making this a requirement in future.**

Interdisciplinary projects

Seven out of twelve universities had interdisciplinary projects that developed naturally, spanning AI in health, business, education, weather, space, robotics, and chemistry. Supervisors from different departments collaborated, reinforcing AI's broad applicability and strengthening university-wide cooperation, which was appreciated by participants and staff. In universities without interdisciplinary projects, research still covered various AI and engineering subfields, but without cross-departmental collaboration. This was mainly due to the nature of the projects, supervisor capacity and the short time frame for the programme. **It is recommended that universities are allowed flexibility to determine whether to develop interdisciplinary projects.**

7. Alternatives to Research Ready

What other opportunities are available for target students who do not participate?

Key findings

- ***Research Ready is unique in its strong focus on AI, multiple geographic locations and generous financial support targeted at economically disadvantaged students.*** *While there are some other tech-related programmes available to students, most are in London, with less financial support. Applicants who did not participate took up alternative placements, self-direct projects, paid jobs, volunteering or personal hobbies.*

To understand alternative summer opportunities for students, ImpactEd conducted interviews with nine students that applied but did not participate in the Research Ready programme, to understand their plans. These included:

- **Alternative formal tech or science-related placements** with universities and businesses in fields including civil engineering, technology, oceanography, insect robotics, and data science.
- **Self-directed projects**, including publishing their dissertation, independent research, competitions, self-study and personal coding projects.
- **Paid jobs** including two in in tech and two non-tech summer jobs.
- **Other personal development** including job applications, volunteering and personal hobbies.

A few participants said that they considered other placements or internship programmes in addition to Research Ready. Those with an AI focus that were mentioned included Google Deepmind, INSAIT, Mastercard and Real Group opportunities. Tech-related opportunities outside of AI included Blackrock, Bloomburg, and Deloitte (tech finance), Lloyds bank (cybersecurity), health data science and data analytics internships. Almost all of these would have been based in London and none targeted economically disadvantaged groups.

While there are other tech-related programmes available to students, there are few with such as strong focus on AI, and none with such generous financial support, available in universities across the UK and targeted at disadvantaged students.

8. Outcomes and impact

How effective is the programme in achieving its overall aims and objectives? How effective is the programme is building participants networks, understanding of career paths, skills, experience and employability in AI?

Key findings

- ***There was evidence from the survey that the programme successfully improved participants' professional networks, AI research skills, employability, awareness of, preparedness for, AI careers and postgraduate study pathways.*** *These findings were supported by qualitative data from students and staff who noted how the programme well-delivered and helped many participants realise their career ambitions.*
- ***There was less evidence for intermediate outcomes relating to broader communication skills, sense of belonging, being able to overcome barriers and belief they bring a valuable perspective.*** *Many participants had high baseline scores indicating the programme attracted a skilled, motivated and confident group.*
- ***When looking at specific goals, there was an increase in students wanting to pursue a Masters (from 33% to 41%) and a career in AI (from 81% to 87%).*** *The number interested in a PhD remained the same (32%),*

suggesting the programme clarified goals for some with many already motivated by postgraduate study and AI careers.

- ***Students' likelihood of pursuing work or post-graduate study in AI increased slightly between baseline and endline, with the programme attracting motivated students.*** *Matched survey results should be treated with caution as they are from a self-selecting subgroup of half the students and excluded four universities. In future postgraduate study and employment outcomes may be tracked via higher education datasets.*

Survey data

This report section summarizes outcomes based on the matched survey sample, supplemented by qualitative insights from students and staff. Survey results should be treated with caution as they are from a self-selecting subgroup of half the students who attended and the sample excludes four universities without a baseline. Results on individual questions related to short-term outcomes in the theory of change are referred to throughout and included in Appendix C.

Practical experience of AI, research skills, employability and preparedness

The practical, hands-on nature of the projects was an attractive feature of the programme and viewed positively by participants (see Figure 1 and programme implementation). As a result, students' perceptions of their own AI research skills improved, with those agreeing they could identify appropriate methods rising from 35% to 73%, and those saying they could analyse and interpret AI data rising from 53% to 85%. There were smaller increases in participants being able to relate AI research to real-world applications, with many already feeling they could do this (Figure 5, Appendix C).

Some students reported improvements in communicating effectively via written papers (from 75% to 86%), and through presentations (from 67% to 83%, Figure 6). Qualitative data suggests that collaboration fostered crucial interpersonal skills, including explaining complex ideas simply, problem-solving, time-management, teamwork and independent learning.

As a result of gaining research skills, many participants also felt more well-prepared for AI research (Figure 7). More participants felt they understood AI concepts well enough to contribute to research after the programme (rising from 39% to 75%) and felt prepared for AI research or careers (rising from 36% to 77%). Many students felt they could already succeed in an AI career at baseline (67%) reflecting the highly motivated nature of applicants, but this rose 94% at endline. **Staff supported these findings, noting this was a motivated cohort of participants but that the programme demystified academia, boosted research confidence, developed skills and clarified career ambitions for many.**

Role models, support, and access to networks and sense of belonging

Key short-term outcomes in Research Ready's theory of change are access to relatable role models and a network of individuals working AI, supporting sense of belonging and knowledge of career paths. Participants agreeing they had relatable role models in AI rose from 34% to 49% (see Figure 8, Appendix C). Many participants interviewed identified supervisors and PhD mentors as key role models, admiring their passion and expertise. Participants were also inspired by peers, external speakers, and alumni sharing their career journey.

Many participants reported stronger networks, with more agreeing they had access to advice on AI research and careers (from 56% to 85%) and a network that could support their career development (from 34% to 70%). Participants feeling they had peer and mentorship support in AI rose from 59% to 68%, and 33% to 52% respectively (see Figure 9). Interestingly, there was little improvement in sense of belonging (from 72% to 76%, see Figure 10) with many participants already feeling motivated and that they belonged in AI.

Qualitative feedback from participants was that guest lectures, weekly meetings, social events, communal hubs, project showcases and sharing contacts, were particularly valuable. **Research Ready enabled participants to build a network that would support their future careers, helping them to act on their ambitions and intentions.**

Knowledge of career and study paths

A vital part of Research Ready's theory of change was to provide information on career and study paths in AI, via networks experience and industry links. Students' awareness of postgraduate study paths increased from baseline to endline (see Figure 11). Those agreeing they had the knowledge to apply for an AI Masters rose from 60% to 83%, and for a PhD rose from 32% to 58%. Participants saying they understood the different pathways for postgraduate study rose from 44% to 73%. However, many (42%) were still unsure about how to apply for a PhD by the end, so this part of the programme could be strengthened.

Similarly, participants agreeing they are familiar with AI career paths rose from 53% to 79% during the programme (Figure 12). Those saying they understand the skills and qualifications required for AI jobs rose slightly less from 51% to 67%. This was reflected in qualitative findings; **many participants reported that the programme raised awareness of AI research and application, and, although not provided by all universities, industry involvement really helped in understanding career routes.**

Self-belief and overcoming barriers

The Research Ready theory of change (Appendix A) proposes that the above outcomes will result in participants having greater self-belief and being more likely to see AI as attractive and accessible, leading to more taking up postgraduate research and careers. Interestingly there was less evidence of changes in this area, with many participants already believing they could overcome potential barriers to AI study or careers (85% at baseline, rising to 89%) and could bring valuable perspectives to the field of AI (90% at baseline, rising to 97% at endline), reflecting the highly motivated and confident nature of the cohort. However, the programme did dispel the notion for some that AI careers might not be accessible for people of their background, with 43% agreeing AI was accessible, rising to 68% at endline (Figure 13).

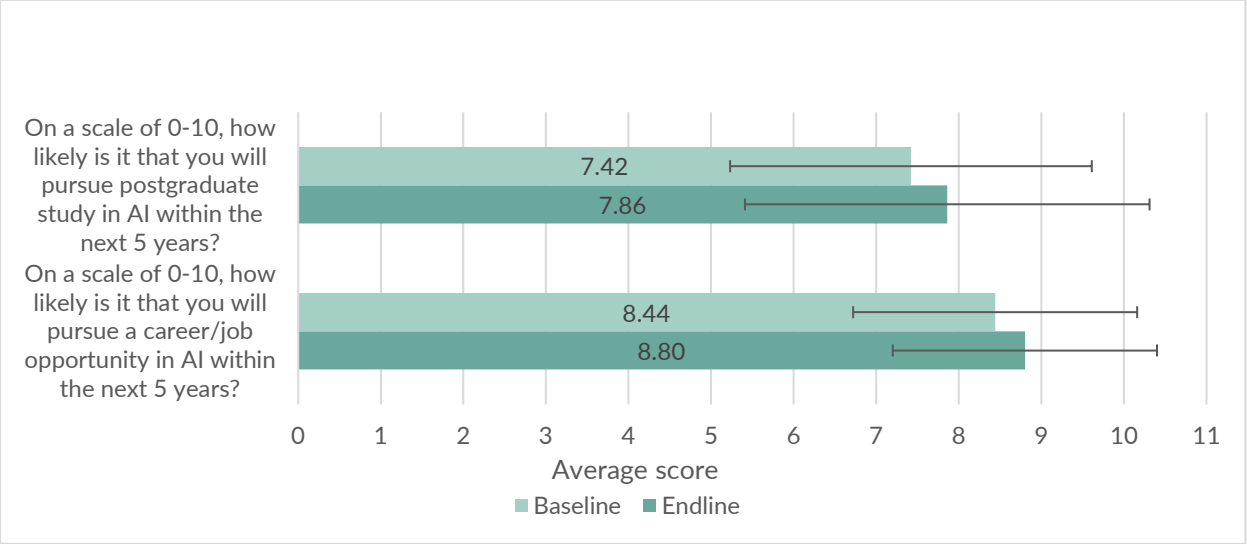
Qualitative feedback supported this with many students saying they were motivated and had belief, but that the programme taught them what they needed to know to realise a career in AI. As one student noted: *"Coming from a background of economics... **This has taught me everything, like knowing how AI is formed, the technical aspects and more... It has opened my eyes a lot and made me more interested in AI for the future."***

Impact on education and career aspirations

The ultimate aim of Research Ready is to increase the number of students pursing postgraduate study and careers in AI. When asked to rate out of ten how likely students were to *pursue postgraduate study in AI within the next 5 years,* average scores increased slightly from 7.42 to 7.86 out of 10 between baseline and endline. Similarly, when asked how likely they were to *pursue carer or job within AI in the next five years*, the average score increased slightly from 8.44 to 8.80 (Figure 2).

Students' reported likelihood of pursuing work or post-graduate study in AI increased slightly between baseline and endline, which may be expected given motivated students applied to the programme. It is hard to know what would have happened anyway. In future cohorts, actual postgraduate study and employment outcomes may be tracked via higher education datasets which would provide more robust evidence of impact on careers.

Figure 2: Mean and standard deviation of student responses on likelihood of pursuing postgraduate study or a career in AI at baseline and endline (N=66)



Survey data on specific goals revealed which were most impacted by the placement. About a third of participants had already decided to do a PhD in AI, before starting Research Ready and this did not change at endline. However, there was an increase in participants interested in pursuing a master's degree in AI from 33% to 41% (Figure 3). There was also an increase in students wanting a career in an AI industry setting (from 52% to 61%) and small decreases in those undecided about their career or wanting to pursue an academic career in AI (Figure 4). **Qualitative data supports these findings, suggesting the programme helped many, if not all, participants clarify study and career goals and transition to a more concrete plan.**

Figure 3: Academic goals of students at baseline and endline (N=66)

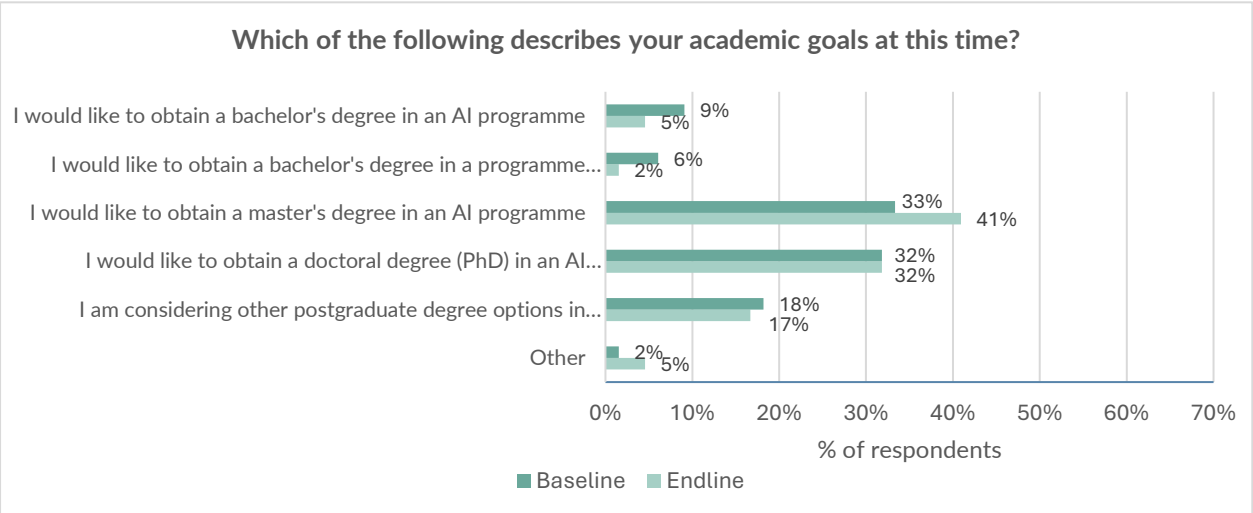
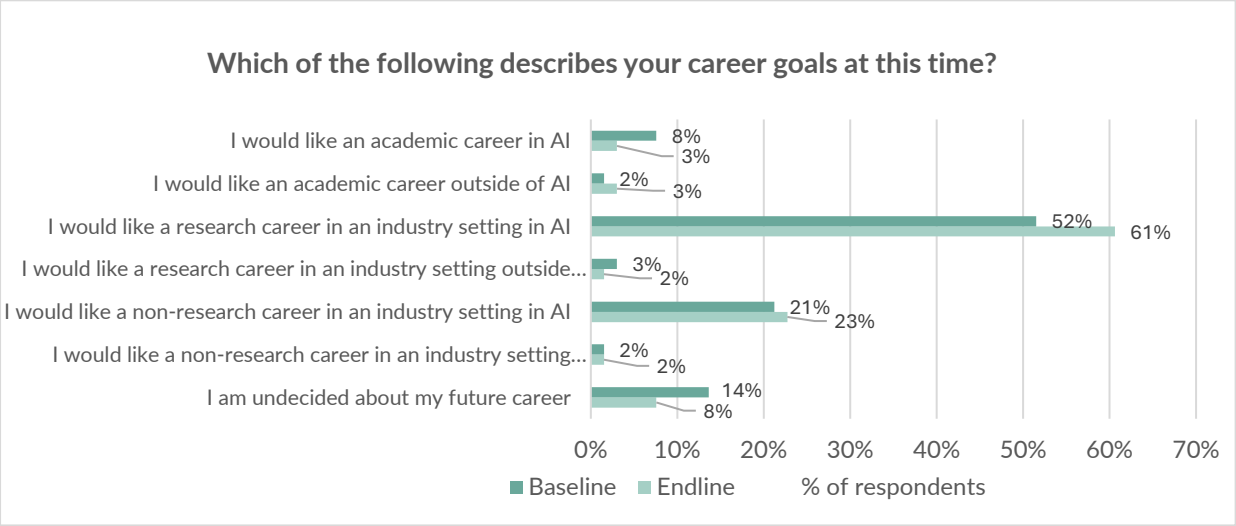


Figure 4: Career goals of students at baseline and endline (N=66)



9. Conclusions

Findings summary

Based on feedback from the stakeholders, this evaluation found evidence that Research Ready helped students to build professional networks, develop AI research skills, raise awareness of career pathways, clarify and realise career goals for many participants. There was more limited evidence of impact on students' reported likelihood of pursuing a career or post-graduate study in AI, with the programme attracting mainly motivated students with high levels of baseline interest in AI. Future evaluations of Research Ready should aim to track actual post-graduate study and employment to more robustly evaluate the impact of the programme.

The programme explicitly targeted students from lower economic groups but it is hard to say how well targeted it was because full eligibility data was not required or collected across the programme.

Participants said they gained valuable research, technical, and soft skills through hands-on experience, and high-quality supervision. Programme strengths included a straightforward application process, generous financial support, geographic reach, skills development, and community building activities. Participants in universities that allowed project selection, provided communal hubs, and strong industry links had more positive experiences and outcomes.

Recommendations

Recommendations to improve the programme include:

- **Recruitment and eligibility:** Faster and clearer communications from the Academy on award notices, advertising earlier and more widely, removing the requirement to include an Academy Fellow in the selection process, collecting consistent data on eligibility (e.g. postcode) and providing feedback to applicants, would be welcomed.
- **Financial support and accommodation:** Ensuring the stipend meets the minimum living wage, transparent and regular payment schedules, guidance on expenses (e.g. materials, travel) and consistent accommodation quality would support participation.
- **Community building:** Would be strengthened by requiring shared workspaces or communal 'hubs', more social activities, and cross-university events.
- **Industry involvement:** The Academy could require strong industry involvement in all university placements. Students would welcome this and more exposure to Google Deepmind.
- **Project choice and type:** The Academy could consider requiring universities to offer project choice as standard, as this was linked to positive views and outcomes. Interdisciplinary projects can be encouraged but will depend on university capacity.
- **PhD buddies:** Were welcomed by participants and performed a variety of roles. Where PhD students are involved, formalising and remunerating their role is likely to increase impact.

Next steps and future research

Study limitations are covered in the methods section. The Academy plans to adapt Research Ready based on the findings of this study, for delivery at a smaller scale in summer of 2026. ImpactEd has conducted a feasibility study[4] exploring potential designs for a more robust impact evaluation (e.g. randomised controlled trial or matched comparison), that could be conducted in a future year of delivery to understand impact on postgraduate study and employment outcomes against a comparison group of students that did not receive the programme.

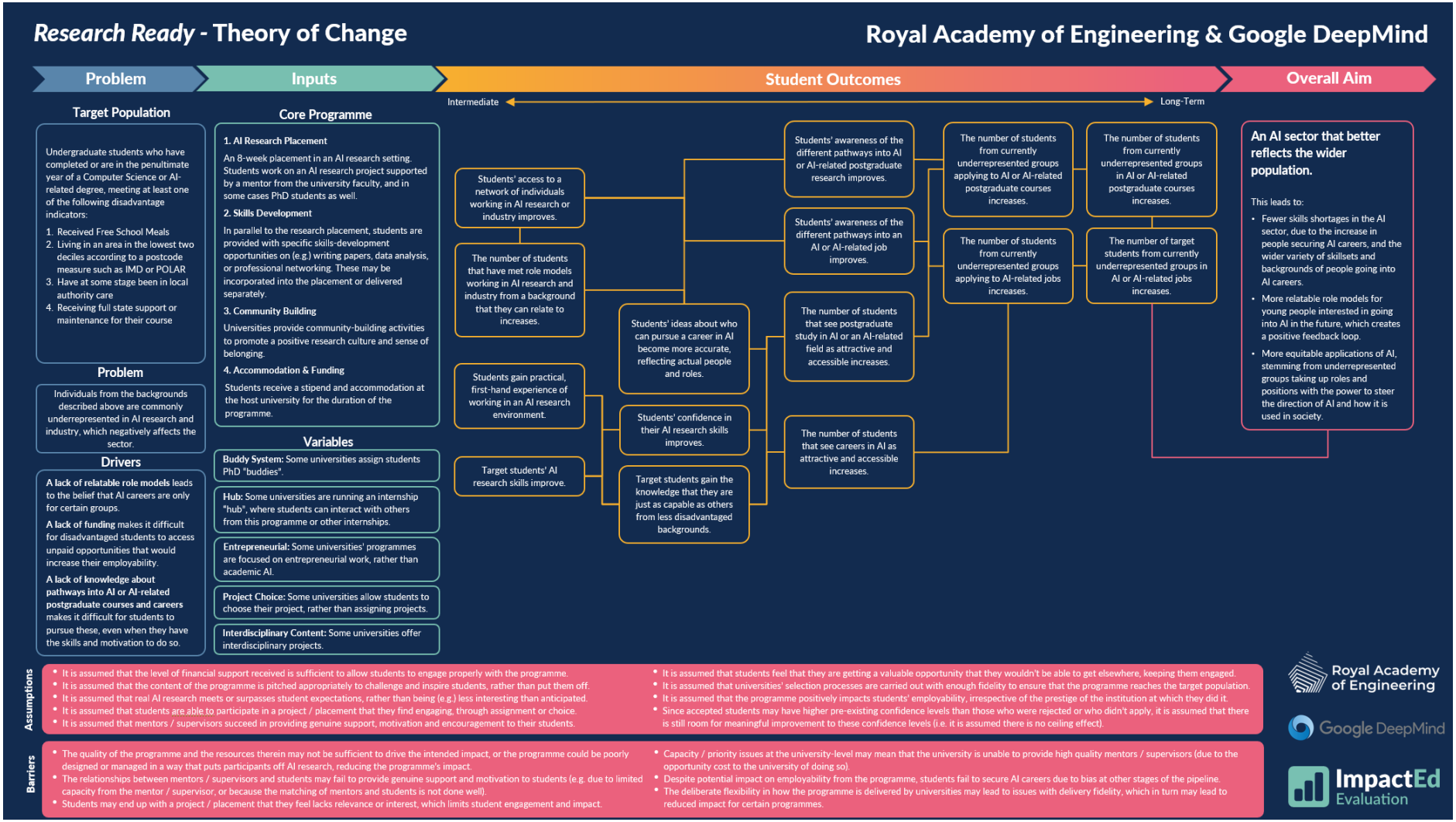
Future evaluations should aim to embed a single survey across participating universities, incentivise survey participation to boost responses, and collect high quality student participation and eligibility data that can be linked to surveys and higher education administrative datasets.

The Academy is also exploring partnering with other funders and organisations to deliver a similar programme across a wider range of subject areas. It will use

[4] Available upon request.

lessons learned from this study to assist in the design and evaluation of those programmes, when they go ahead.

Appendix A: Theory of change



Appendix B: Template for Intervention Description and Replication (TIDieR)

1. Brief name

Google DeepMind Research Ready Scheme (Research Ready)

2. Why

There is huge growth in opportunities in artificial intelligence (AI), but the sector is not harnessing the talents of all, driven in part by inequalities in access to postgraduate education. For example:

- A 40% growth in AI and Machine Learning jobs over five years.
- Less than two-thirds of the UK's top scientists and scholars are from state schools, which educate 93% of the population.

This results in an AI sector that does not reflect the wider population and is weaker as a result. The Research Ready Programme addresses these disparities by giving students from low-income backgrounds experience in top university AI labs, encouraging progression to postgraduate study and high-impact careers. It addresses key barriers:

- A lack of AI research experience.
- Limited knowledge of postgraduate degrees.
- Inadequate career pathway information.
- Research culture challenges and a lack of belonging.

3. What materials

- Programme guidance notes and funding breakdown.
- Student application forms and placement agreements.
- Workshop, training, and community-building activity resources (university developed).
- Recruitment and promotional materials for student and supervisor outreach.

4. What procedures

The Academy opened a call for proposals in August 2025 for 12 weeks. Application guidance notes were available on its website and applicants

submitted their application via the Academy's online grant management system. Host university proposals contained details of their undergraduate research placement summer programme in AI.

All proposals were reviewed by a panel of experts including at least two individuals and one Academy Fellow. Applications were scored and ranked based on how well they meet the criteria before the selection panel. The selection panel then shortlisted the successful applicants. Scores were moderated and applications re-ranked based on discussions. A decision was made on how many awards could be made based on the budget available. Applicants were then informed and agreements were sent out for signature by the Academy and the university.

Once awarded, successful university hosts began supervisor and student recruitment. The scheme provided up to £80,923.50 per university to deliver a six to eight-week AI placement programme for up to 12 students.

Each university must:

- Design and deliver an AI-focused placement programme.
- Incorporate skill development (e.g., data analysis, networking, teamwork).
- Organise community-building and wellbeing activities.
- Recruit and train research supervisors from the faculty and/or graduate student body.
- Manage their outreach and selection campaigns, with oversight from an Academy Fellow.
- Ensure compliance with the Academy's requirements via a grant agreement.

Programmes can vary in how the intervention is delivered, but must include:

- A structured research placement (individual or group-based).
- Workshops and possibly end-of-programme presentations.
- Dedicated community-building efforts.

5. Who provided

The programme was funded by the Royal Academy of Engineering, with support from Google DeepMind and the Hg Foundation. Delivery is fully delegated to host universities, which:

- Recruit and manage supervisors.
- Administer student recruitment, placements, and training.
- Shape the structure (e.g., 1-week workshops + 7-week project, or group-based research).
- Supervise delivery and ensure programme quality.

6. How

- Delivered in-person at awarded UK universities.
- Application and coordination are partly online (via grants system), and partly in-person.
- Outreach, training, research placements, end-of-programme activities are face-to-face.
- Mixed delivery methods may apply for some workshops or guest lectures.

7. Where

Intervention takes place at eligible UK universities with a computer science or equivalent department capable of hosting AI placements.

8. When and how much

- Duration: 6–8 weeks in Summer 2025.
- Timing: Starts no earlier than June 2025, ends before 2 September 2025.
- Weekly commitment: Full-time (up to 35–40 hours).
- Funding: £400/week stipend + travel, accommodation, and activities funded per student.

9. Tailoring

Universities are free to customise:

- Research project design and allocation.
- Supervisor-student ratios and approach.
- Types of skills workshops and wellbeing initiatives.
- Whether projects are individual, in pairs, or group-based.
- Outreach methods.

10. How well planned

Universities must:

- Monitor attendance and engagement.
- Collect and share aggregate participant data.
- Involve an Academy Fellow in final student selection.
- Create structures that support productive learning for all participants.
- Encourage community-building through workshops and events.

Appendix C: Results of survey questions on intermediate outcomes

Figure 5: Percentage of students agreeing with statements on AI research skills (N=66)

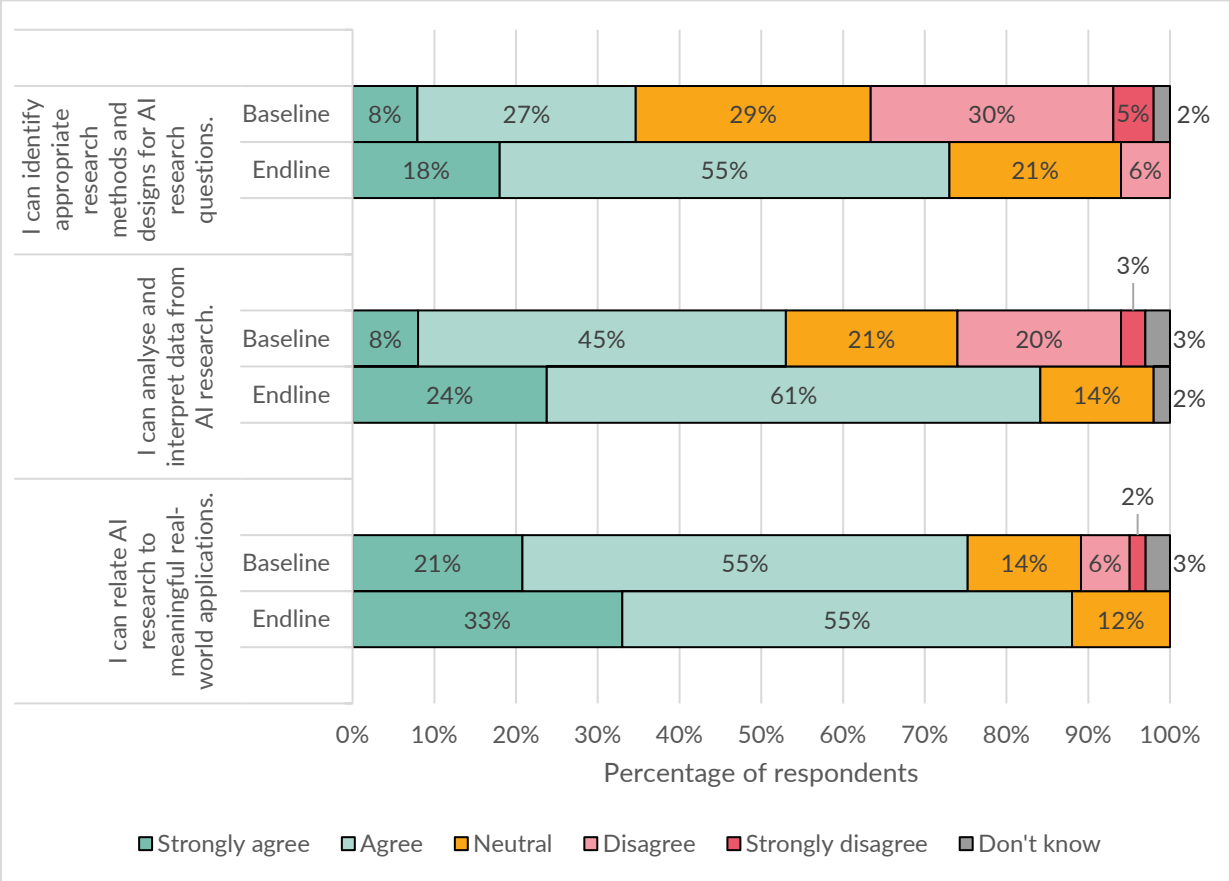


Figure 6: Percentage of students agreeing with statements on communication skills (N=66)

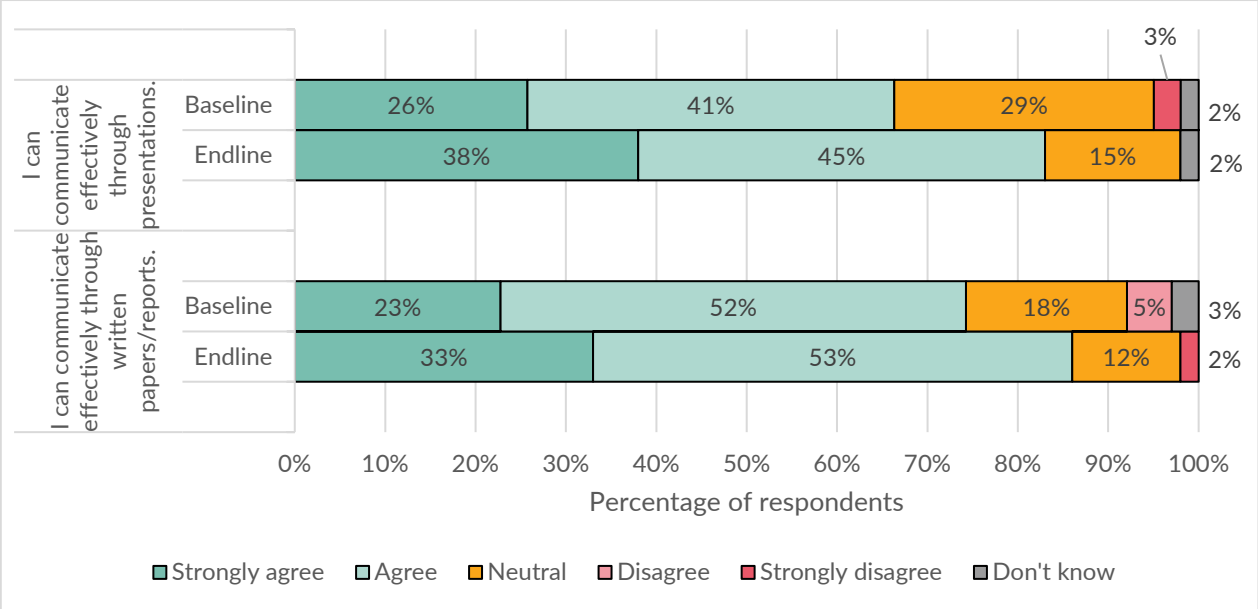


Figure 7: Percentage of students agreeing with statements on preparedness (N=66)

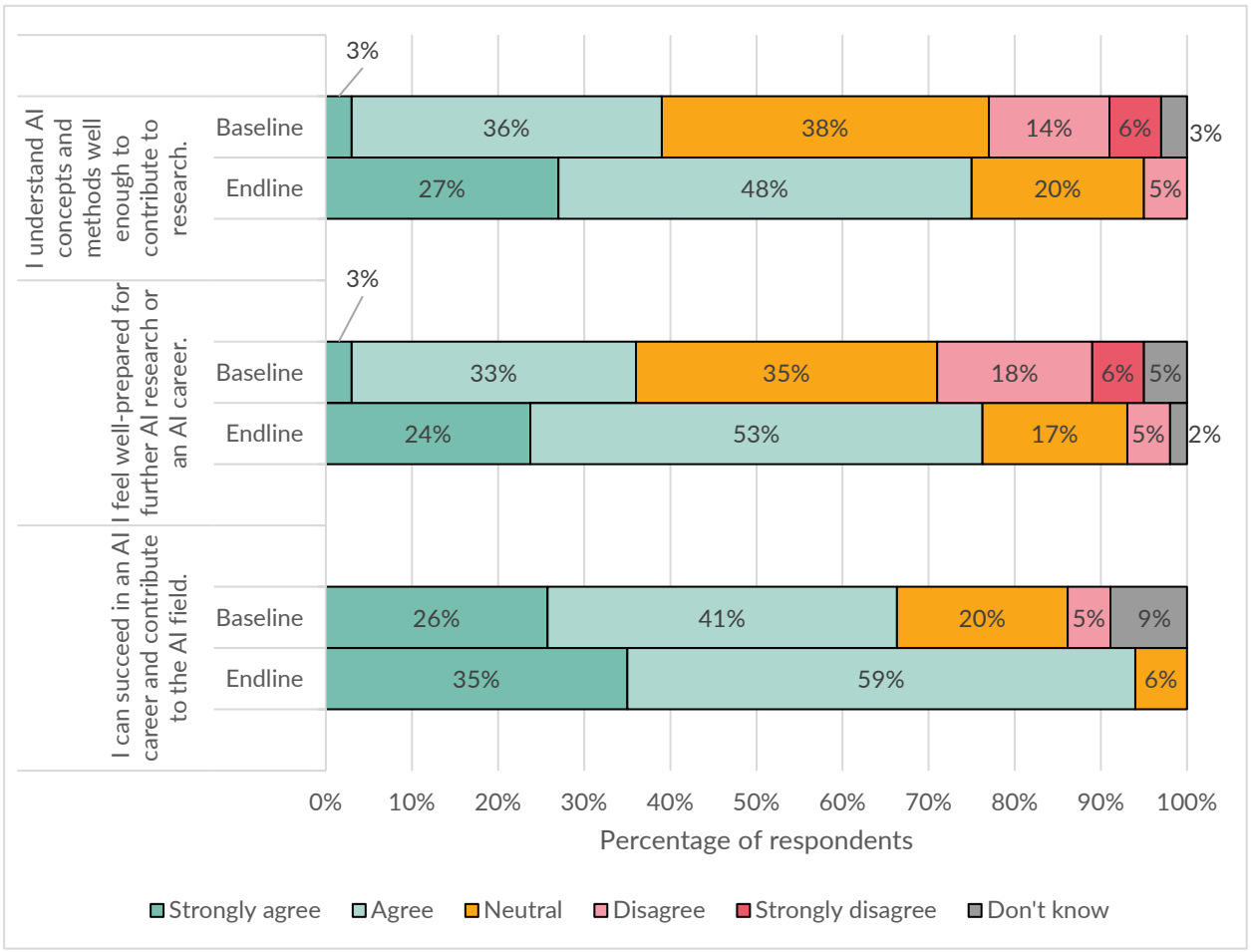


Figure 8: Percentage of students agreeing they a relatable role model (N=66)

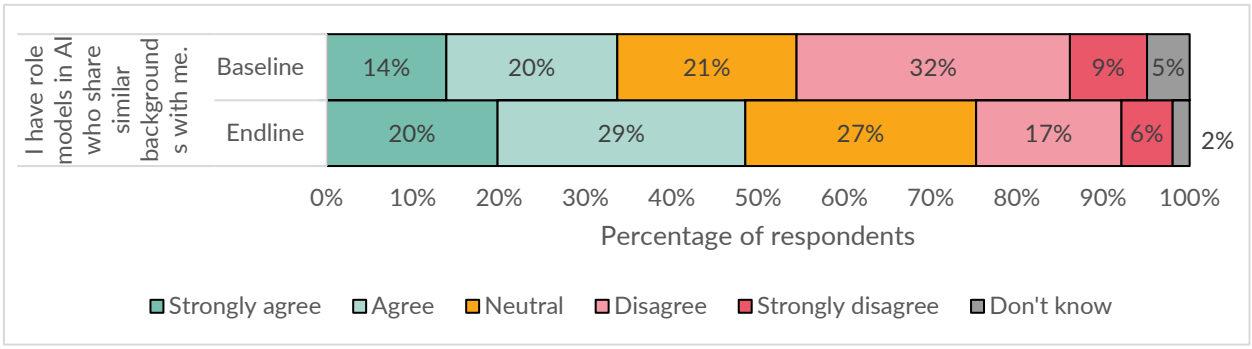


Figure 9: Percentage of students with support and access to AI network (N=66)

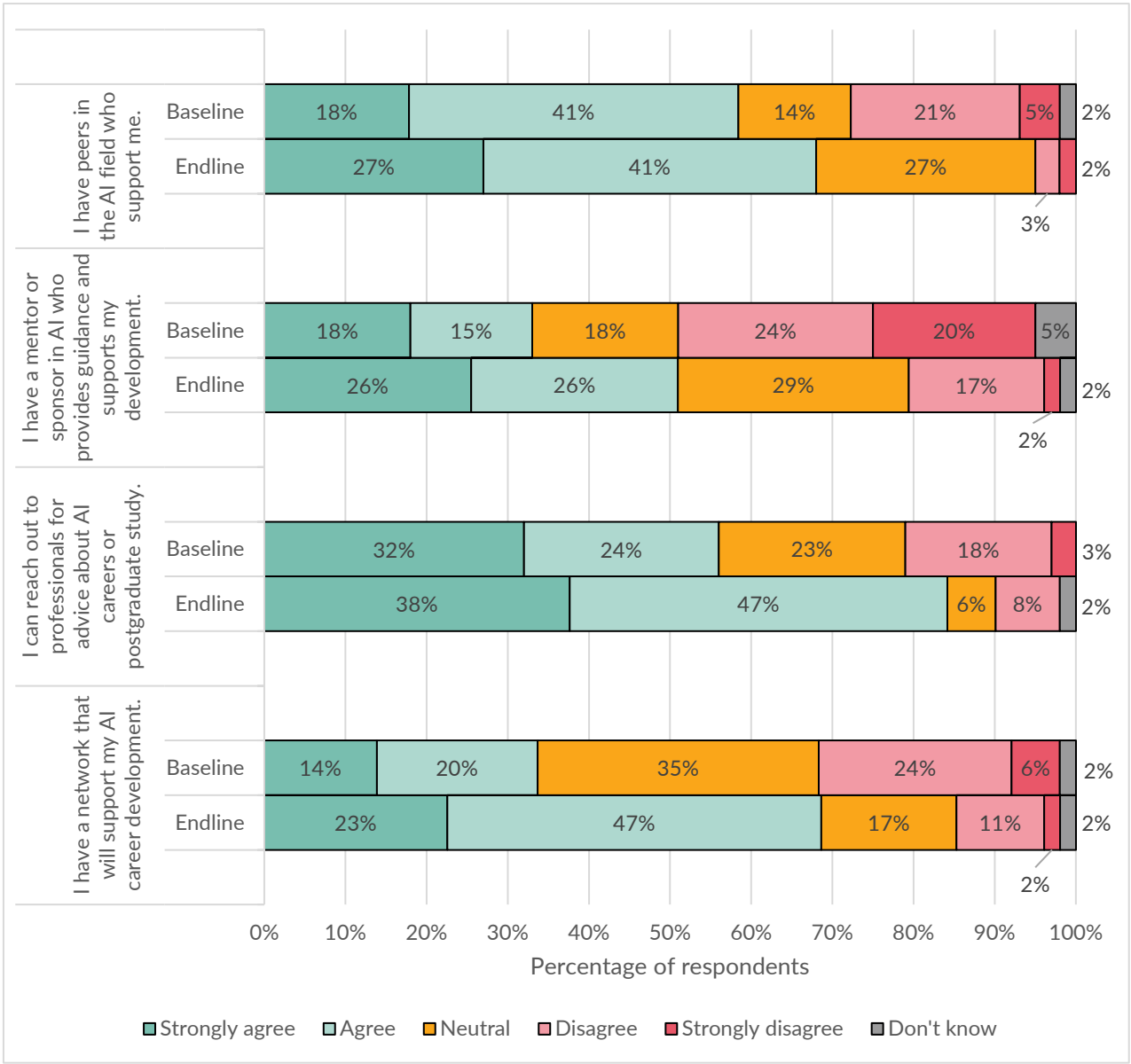


Figure 10: Percentage of students agreeing that they feel a sense of belonging (N=66)

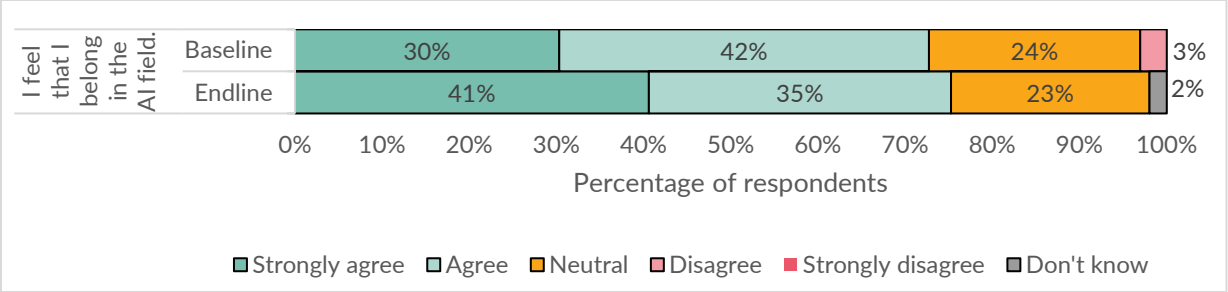


Figure 11: Students agreeing with statements on awareness of AI study paths (N=66)

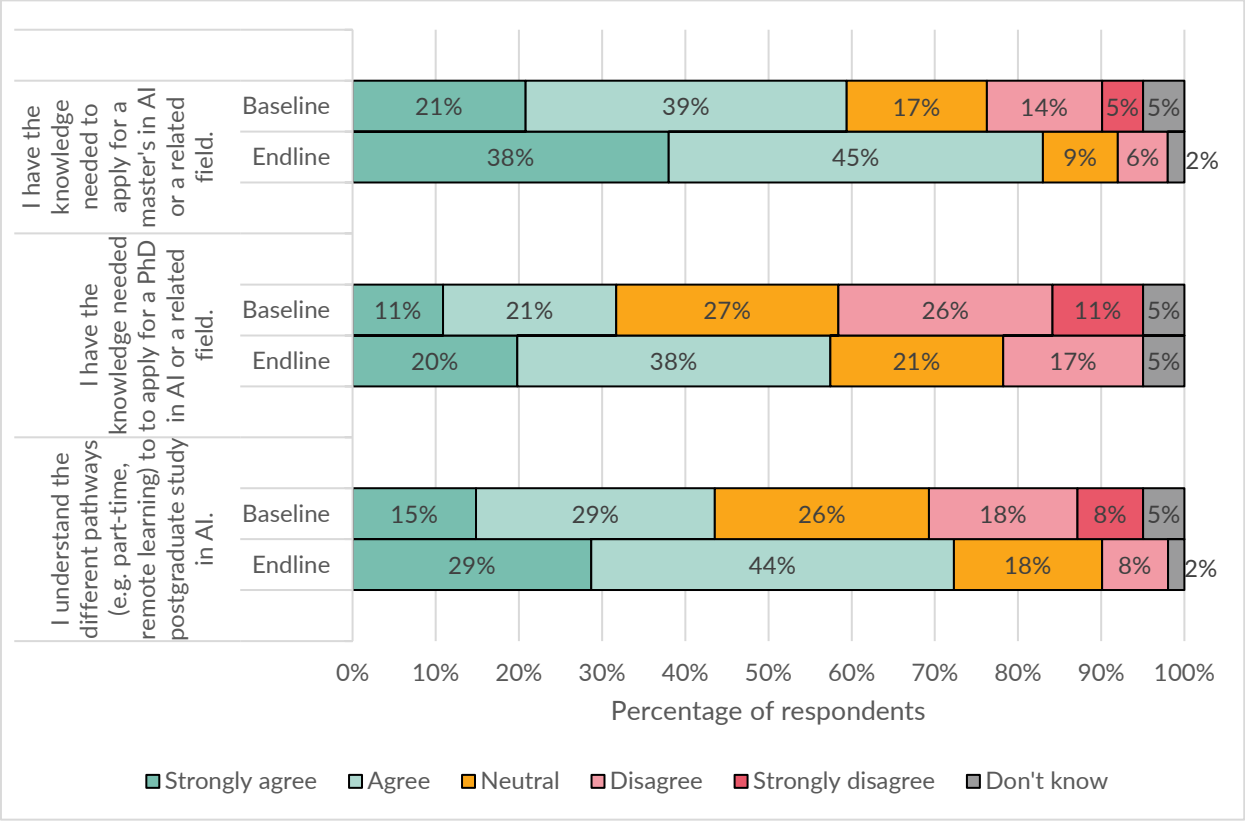


Figure 12: Students agreeing with statements on awareness of AI career paths (N=66)

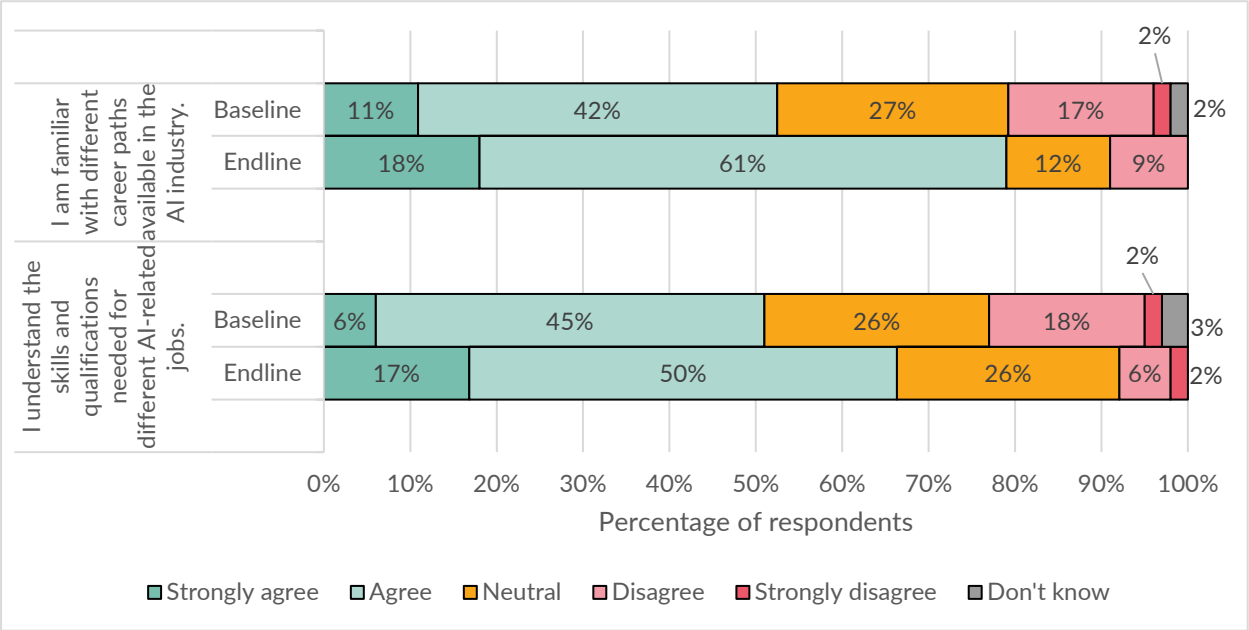
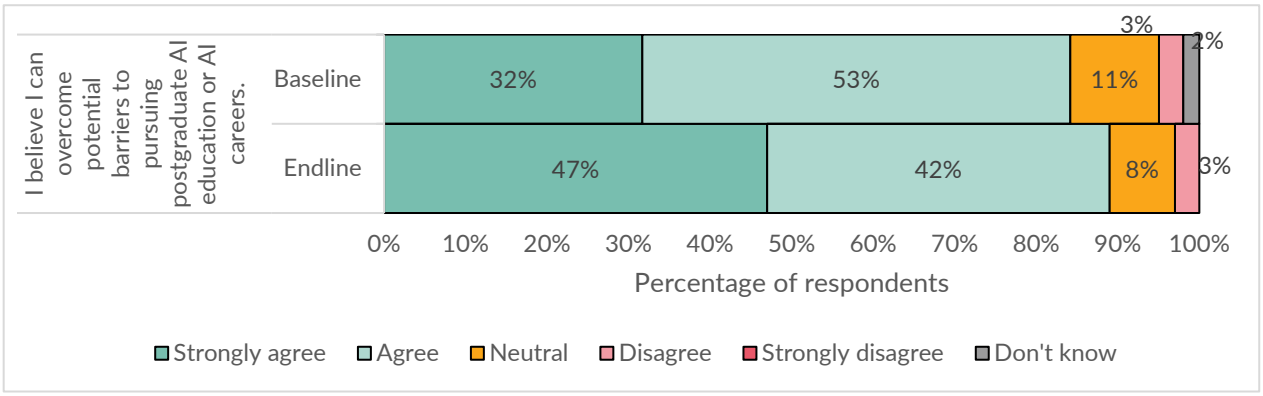
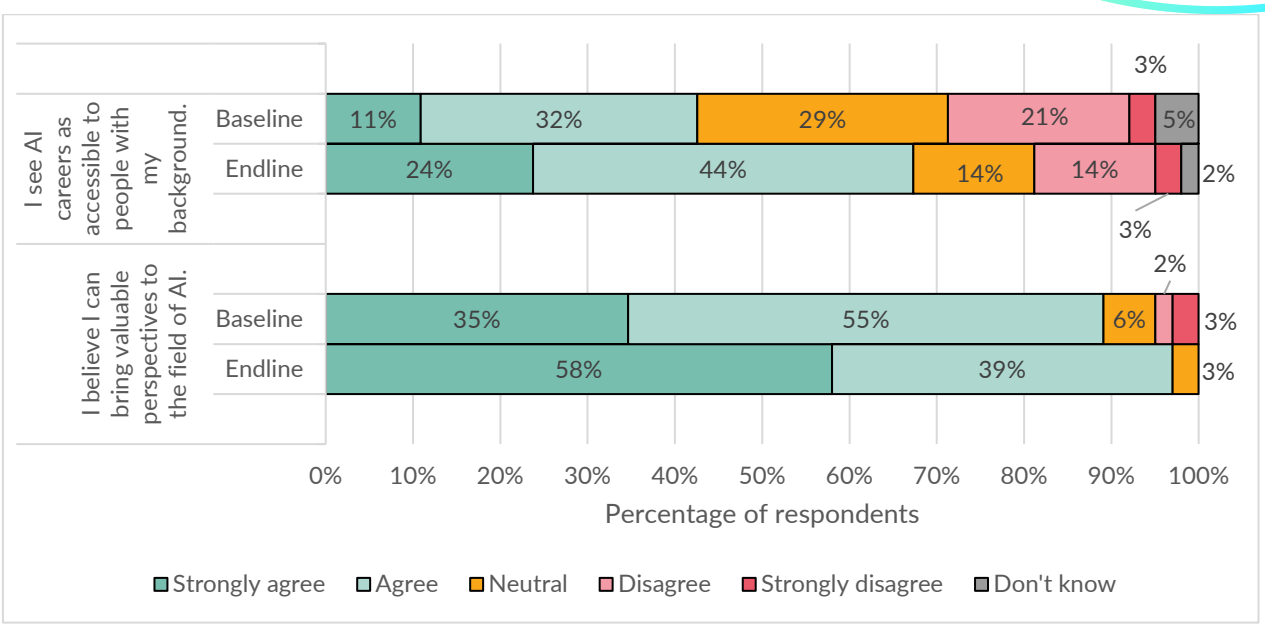


Figure 13: Students agreeing with statements on overcoming barriers and self-belief (N=66)




I see AI careers as accessible to people with my background.
Baseline
Endline
11%
32%
29%
21%
3%
5%
24%
44%
14%
14%
3%
2%
I believe I can bring valuable perspectives to the field of AI.
Baseline
Endline
35%
55%
6%
2%
3%
58%
39%
3%
0%
10%
20%
30%
40%
50%
60%
70%
80%
90%
100%
Percentage of respondents
Strongly agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly disagree
Don't know

Royal Academy of Engineering

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Our work is enabled by funding from the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, corporate and university partners, charitable trusts and foundations, and individual donors

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