

IChemE Partner Networking Lunch – June 2026

Date: 26 June 2026

Time: 10:15am – 12:15pm (BST)

Venue: Edinburgh International Conference Centre, Edinburgh

Executive Summary

The June 2026 IChemE Employer Partner Networking Lunch brought together employers, students, graduates, researchers and senior leaders to explore how the profession can better support the next generation of chemical engineers. Held alongside the Young Engineers Awards for Innovation and Sustainability (YEAIS), the meeting gave Employer Partners the opportunity to hear directly from emerging engineers and discuss the experiences, expectations and challenges facing the next generation of chemical engineers.

Unlike previous Employer Partner meetings, undergraduate students, a recent graduate and a PhD researcher formed the centre of the discussion, providing first-hand perspectives on entering, establishing and developing within the profession.

Three themes emerged consistently throughout the meeting: the importance of industrial placements, growing challenges in maintaining strong links between academia and industry, and the need to support graduates beyond technical competence through professional skills, confidence and workplace experience.

Attendees also recognised IChemE's role in bringing employers, universities and emerging professionals together to strengthen talent pools and improve visibility of career pathways.

Background

The June meeting formed part of IChemE's Employer Partner engagement programme, bringing employers together to discuss shared workforce challenges and help shape IChemE activity. Unlike previous meetings, the June session centred on the experiences of emerging engineers, with employers hearing directly from students, graduates and researchers before discussing how organisations and IChemE could respond.

The session was structured around three facilitated discussions:

- Entering the Profession
- Establishing Yourself in Industry
- Growing and Thriving in the Profession

Employer Partners heard directly from Lewis Phillips (University of Strathclyde), Jorja Karmen Watt (Teesside University), Harry Talbot (Veolia) and James Alexander, a PhD researcher (Heriot-Watt University) working alongside industry.

Throughout the session, attendees compared the speakers' experiences with those in their own organisations and discussed how both employers and IChemE can help support the next generation of chemical engineers.

Entering the Profession

Students consistently identified placements, site visits and employer engagement as the experiences that best prepared them for industry, helping them understand how academic knowledge is applied in practice.

However, universities reported increasing difficulty securing placement opportunities, while employers commented that they are rarely approached directly. Attendees recognised that changes in the structure of UK industry, particularly the growth of SMEs and fewer large employers, have made engagement more fragmented.

Students also questioned the apparent contradiction between engineering skills shortages and the challenges many graduates face securing employment, citing competitive recruitment processes and increasing use of AI screening. Attendees agreed that students need greater visibility of career pathways and that employers have an important role in helping them understand what working in industry actually involves. Purpose, sustainability and societal impact were also recognised as increasingly important considerations for future engineers.

Establishing Yourself in Industry

The second discussion focused on the transition from university into professional practice.

Harry Talbot (Veolia) reflected on his experiences of moving into industry, describing how placements, early responsibility and support from colleagues helped him build confidence during his first years in the profession. He also spoke about the value of networking and exposure to operational environments in developing both technical understanding and professional confidence.

Employers agreed that graduate success depends on effective onboarding, mentoring and professional development as much as technical knowledge. Professional and behavioural skills, including communication, emotional intelligence, influencing, negotiation and people management, were repeatedly identified as capabilities that continue to develop after graduation. Attendees also discussed the importance of maintaining critical thinking as AI becomes increasingly embedded in engineering practice.

Growing and Thriving in the Profession

The final discussion explored how engineers continue to develop and thrive beyond the graduate stage.

James Alexander shared his experiences of undertaking doctoral research while working alongside industry, prompting discussion about the opportunities and challenges of working across academia and industry. Attendees reflected on the contribution postgraduate researchers can make through multidisciplinary thinking, innovation and problem solving, while recognising the need for clearer career pathways and greater visibility of opportunities between research and industry.

The discussion also explored how closer collaboration could better align research with industrial challenges. Attendees highlighted the value of industrial PhDs, Engineering Doctorates, Knowledge

Transfer Partnerships and innovation ecosystems in strengthening connections between academia and industry. There was also recognition that career journeys are becoming increasingly varied, with engineers moving between sectors, roles and organisations throughout their careers, requiring employers and professional institutions to support a wider range of career paths.

Key themes from the discussions

- Industrial placements remain one of the most valuable mechanisms for preparing graduates for professional practice.
- Stronger and more sustained collaboration between universities and employers is required.
- Graduate readiness extends beyond technical competence to include communication, confidence and professional behaviours.
- Recruitment processes should continue to evolve to ensure engineering potential is recognised and developed.
- Career pathways are becoming increasingly diverse and require greater visibility and flexibility.
- Research, innovation and industry should be more closely connected to strengthen long-term talent pools.
- Collaboration between employers, universities and professional institutions is essential to supporting future workforce needs.

Next steps

IChemE will use the insights from the meeting to inform future Employer Partner activity, strengthen engagement with universities, explore opportunities to support industrial placements and improve visibility of career pathways. The discussions will also shape future student engagement and support for emerging professionals.

Building on these themes, the next Employer Partner meeting will take place in September 2026, bringing together Employer Partners and Education Partners to explore how industry and academia can strengthen pathways into the profession.

Next Employer Partner meeting

Supporting the Next Generation of Chemical Engineers

Date & Time: Wednesday 9 September 2026, 11:00–14:00

Location: Imperial College London

Join Employer Partners from across the chemical and process industries as we continue the conversation, this time bringing employers together with Education Partners to explore how industry and academia can strengthen pathways into the profession.

Find out more and register: <https://www.icheme.org/employer-partner-networking-lunch>

IChemE, June 2026