

IChemE Partner Networking Lunch – September 2026

Date: 09 September 2026

Time: 10:30am – 13:00pm (BST)

Venue: Imperial College London, South Kensington Campus

Executive Summary

The September 2026 Employer and Education Partner Networking Lunch brought together representatives from industry, academia and the profession to explore how chemical engineering can attract, develop and retain future talent.

A central theme throughout the discussions was that chemical engineering already offers a range of routes into and through the profession, including university education, apprenticeships, operator progression and professional registration. However, participants highlighted that awareness and understanding of these pathways remain inconsistent, making it difficult for potential entrants and early-career professionals to navigate their development and career progression.

Participants consistently identified industrial experience as one of the most effective ways of helping individuals understand the profession and develop workplace readiness. Placements, internships, mentoring, site visits and employer engagement activities were all seen as valuable opportunities to connect academic learning with professional practice. However, concerns were also raised about employers' ability to provide these opportunities at scale, given increasing resource and capacity pressures.

The discussions highlighted a shared ambition to strengthen collaboration across industry, academia and the profession. Participants identified a clear role for IChemE in helping to improve the visibility of pathways, showcase successful collaborations and bring together employers, universities and practitioners to support talent development throughout the chemical engineering career journey.

Background

The networking lunch brought together Employer Partners, Education Partners and representatives from across the profession to explore how industry, academia and professional bodies can work together to strengthen pathways into chemical engineering.

Discussions were structured around three themes:

- Building Better Pathways into Chemical Engineering
- Preparing Engineers for Professional Practice
- Connecting Industry, Academia and the Profession

Participants worked in mixed discussion groups, each exploring the challenges from a different perspective including access, industrial experience, professional identity and barriers to participation.

Building better pathways into chemical engineering

Participants discussed the increasing diversity of routes into chemical engineering, including traditional degree programmes, apprenticeships, operator progression routes and opportunities for those seeking to upskill or reskill during their careers. While these routes offer opportunities to broaden participation, awareness and understanding remain limited. Many participants felt that students often have little understanding of chemical engineering careers until they encounter the profession directly through placements, work experience or employment.

There was strong support for earlier exposure to chemical engineering through industry engagement, site visits, mentoring, employer speakers and work experience opportunities. Participants also highlighted the importance of making progression pathways more visible, including routes towards professional registration and longer-term career development.

Preparing engineers for professional practice

A recurring theme throughout the discussions was the distinction between academic knowledge and professional capability. Participants agreed that graduate success depends not only on technical fundamentals but on the ability to apply knowledge in real-world situations, demonstrate professional judgement and work effectively within teams and organisations.

Industrial placements, mentoring and workplace experience were consistently identified as some of the most effective ways of helping students develop confidence, commercial awareness and professional behaviours. However, employers highlighted growing challenges in providing these opportunities because of resource constraints, utilisation pressures and reduced capacity for supervision and development activity.

Participants also emphasised that professional development continues beyond graduation, with structured development programmes, mentoring and chartered support all playing an important role in building long-term capability.

Connecting industry, academia and the profession

The discussions highlighted broad agreement that stronger and more consistent collaboration is required across the profession. Participants identified university advisory boards, alumni networks, regional engagement activity and industry-academia forums as existing mechanisms that could be used more effectively to strengthen relationships and improve outcomes for students and employers.

There was particular interest in creating more regular opportunities for employers and universities to engage locally, including regional networking events and business breakfast-style forums. Participants also encouraged greater sharing of successful partnership models and examples of effective collaboration.

Across all discussions, participants recognised IChemE's role as a convenor and facilitator, helping bring together employers, universities and professionals while supporting the exchange of knowledge, good practice and opportunities.

Key themes from the discussions

- Earlier awareness and understanding of chemical engineering careers is needed.

- Industrial experience remains one of the most valuable mechanisms for developing graduate readiness.
- Professional capability depends on the application of technical knowledge alongside professional skills and behaviours.
- Alternative pathways, including apprenticeships and progression from operational roles, provide opportunities to broaden participation.
- Employers face increasing challenges in providing placements and development opportunities at scale.
- Stronger collaboration between employers, universities and IChemE is essential to supporting future talent needs.

Next steps

IChemE will use the discussions to inform future Employer and Education Partner engagement activity and explore opportunities to strengthen collaboration between industry, academia and the profession. Areas of interest include improving awareness of pathways into chemical engineering, expanding access to industry experience, supporting employers with engagement activity and sharing successful models of employer-academic collaboration.

Next Employer Partner meeting

The missing middle: What happens after chartership?

Date & Time: Thursday 10 December 2026, 11:00–14:00

Location: National Railway Museum, York (held alongside the IChemE Global Awards)

For many chemical engineers, development pathways become less visible after the early career stage. As careers become more specialised and leadership responsibilities grow, how can engineers continue to develop the skills and networks they need to thrive? This session will explore the mid-career experience and the role IChemE can play in supporting professional development, career progression and professional identity.

[Find out more and register here](#)

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