YOUTH AI SURVEY 2026

WORK, STUDY & LEISURE IN THE AGE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

UNITED KINGDOM

COUNTRY POLICY BRIEF

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This policy brief presents country-specific findings from the Youth AI Survey 2026, a multi-country study examining how young people aged 18-35 use, experience, and think about artificial intelligence. Conducted globally by Restless Development, the University of Cambridge Centre for Human-Inspired Artificial Intelligence, and Makerere University, the survey collected 1,864 responses from young people, primarily in Africa and South Asia, with the United Kingdom serving as a high-income country comparator.

This brief is intended for the UK Government, in-country NGO partners, international funders, technology companies, and youth organisations working in the United Kingdom. It draws on country-level data to surface actionable findings and recommendations within the UK context.

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1. INTRODUCTION & COUNTRY CONTEXT

Country Context

The United Kingdom is the survey's sole high-income comparator among the 11 focus countries, and its digital landscape is correspondingly distinct: an estimated 98% of the UK population uses the internet (DataReportal, 2026), one of the highest connectivity rates in the world, with negligible variation by income or geography. The UK is home to large financial and technology sectors and to a fast-growing AI research, safety testing, and investment base centred on London, Cambridge, and Oxford. Because access is close to universal, the UK offers a rare lens within this survey on what young people think and do when infrastructure is not a principal constraint.

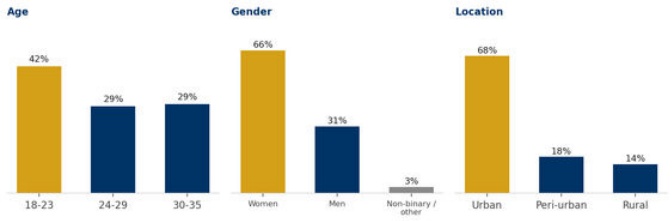
The UK has no single, comprehensive AI statute. Government policy instead relies on a sector-led, "pro-innovation" approach: existing regulators (the ICO, FCA and others) apply AI-relevant duties under the UK GDPR and the Data (Use and Access) Act 2025, while the AI Security Institute, renamed in 2025 from the AI Safety Institute, has narrowed its remit toward national-security-relevant risks such as cyber-attacks and criminal misuse, rather than the everyday ethical, labour-market and misinformation concerns young people raise in this survey. Separately, the Online Safety Act is being extended through 2026 to explicitly bring AI chatbots into scope, following Ofcom investigations into AI-generated child sexual abuse material and non-consensual imagery, alongside the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026 and the Crime and Policing Act 2026, which expand government powers on children's online safety.

The Youth AI Survey 2026 collected 136 valid responses from young people aged 18-35 living in the United Kingdom, out of 1,864 responses across 11 countries, during an 18-day data collection window from 4-22 March 2026. Where infrastructure is not the constraint, this brief finds, trust, governance and labour-market anxiety are.

> *It's a powerful tool with the potential to do great things if governed properly. The environmental impact of ever-growing data centres actually concerns me almost more than the social impacts.*
>
> 26-YEAR-OLD FEMALE, FULL-TIME EMPLOYEE, URBAN UNITED KINGDOM

2. ABOUT THE RESPONDENTS

UK respondents to the Youth AI Survey are more likely to be females (67%, compared with 52% across the full 11-country dataset), more urban (68% vs 60% survey-wide), and considerably more likely to report living with a disability (18%, the second-highest rate of any surveyed country, after India at 30%). Respondents are highly educated: 60% hold a bachelor's degree or higher, well above the survey-wide 37%, and almost all (98%) are currently studying or in paid employment. The sample skews towards the youngest age band (42% aged 18-23), likely reflecting the online, university- and early-career-linked recruitment channels used to reach UK respondents.



136	67%	68%
Total respondents	females	Urban dwellers

42%	60%	98%
Aged 18-23 (largest group)	Bachelor's degree or above	Currently studying or employed

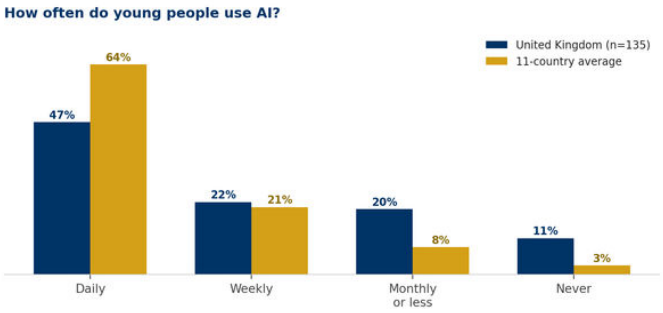
Because the UK sample is smaller than most focus countries (n=136) and skews female, educated and urban, findings should be read as indicative of digitally engaged UK youth rather than as nationally representative, consistent with the main report's methodology, note that this is a rapid, non-representative survey.

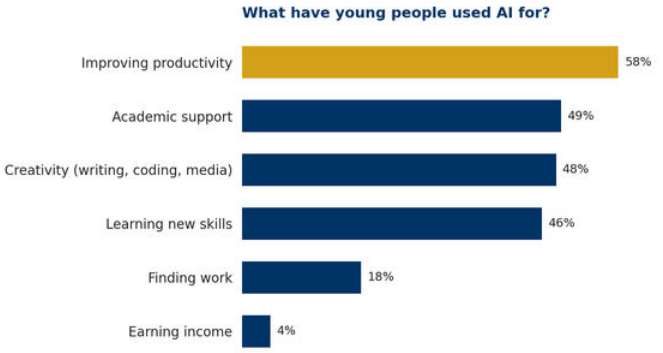
3. HOW YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE UK USE AI

47%
of UK respondents use AI daily

11-COUNTRY BENCHMARK
11-country survey average: 64% use AI daily

Despite near-universal internet access, UK respondents use AI markedly less often and with less confidence than their peers in the wider survey. Where the AI-use pattern elsewhere is typically led by learning and academic support, UK respondents most often report using AI to improve everyday productivity (58%), for academic support (49%) and creativity; writing, coding or media (49%), with "learning new skills" somewhat lower at 46%. In the past 30 days, 62% had used AI for education and 57% for work.





I regularly use it for work as a GP to summarise notes, guidance, create referral letters, review unusual blood test results or create patient explanations. I use it to help plan DIY projects, garden design, interior design, and create colouring pages for my daughter.

35-YEAR-OLD MALE, FULL-TIME EMPLOYEE, URBAN UNITED KINGDOM

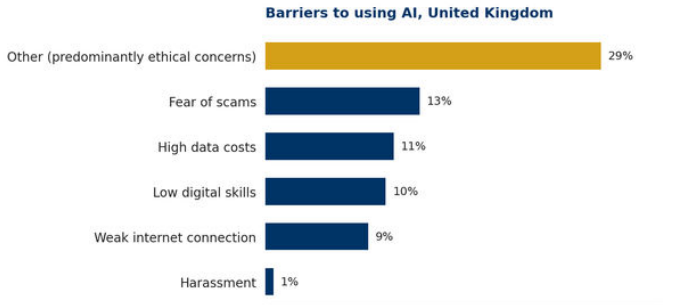
Key Findings: AI Use Patterns

- **Frequency gap:** 47% of UK respondents use AI daily, compared with a survey-wide average of 64% and 11% have never used AI at all (n=135), roughly four times the survey-wide average of 2.7%. Alongside India, the UK is one of only two countries where non-use is a notable pattern, despite having the best connectivity among the 11 countries surveyed.
- **Income gap:** Just 4% of UK respondents report earning income directly through AI, well below the survey average of 14% and among the lowest across all 11 countries, consistent with the main report's finding that AI's perceived impact on employment and income is lowest in the UK.
- **Confidence and use gap by gender:** 45% of men report 'a lot' of AI knowledge compared with 23% of females, a 22-percentage-point gap. This confidence gap tracks directly into use: men are far more likely to use AI for creativity (68% vs 43%), learning new skills (66% vs 40%) and finding work (27% vs 15%).
- **How people engage:** 80% of UK respondents use AI tools directly; smaller shares build products with AI (17%), develop AI models (10%) or train datasets (4%). 18% say they don't know how they engage with AI, a sign that AI is often embedded invisibly in tools UK youth already use daily such as search, spellcheck and social media.

4. WHO BENEFITS, WHO DOESN'T?

Barriers to AI Access

11%	9%	10%
cite high data costs as a barrier	cite weak connectivity	cite low digital skills



Access-related barriers are marginal in the UK: only around one in ten respondents cite data costs, weak connectivity, or low digital skills. The main survey report finds these same barriers affect over half of respondents in nearly all African countries surveyed. Instead, 29% of UK respondents selected "other" when asked about barriers to AI use and, echoing the main report's finding that all 17 UK long-answer barrier explanations referenced ethical concerns, open-text responses in this dataset are dominated by principled objections: worries about environmental cost, data exploitation, intellectual property, and a deliberate choice not to use generative AI at all. In the UK, non-use is more often a decision than a deprivation.

Gender Gaps in AI Knowledge & Economic Impact

22pp	11-COUNTRY BENCHMARK
UK average: 45% of males vs 23% of females report 'a lot' of AI knowledge	Survey average: 38% of males vs 23% of females report 'a lot' of AI knowledge

UK females' self-reported AI knowledge (23% report 'a lot') tracks almost exactly with the survey-wide average for females. The gap is driven by males: 45% of UK males report 'a lot' of AI knowledge, seven points above the 38% survey average, suggesting a UK-specific confidence gap rather than a UK-specific knowledge deficit among females. Regarding income and employment, UK males are also more likely than females to report that AI has had a high impact on their income or opportunities (24% vs 13%), while females are more likely to report low or no impact (21% vs 10%). Alongside the usage and confidence gaps outlined above, this suggests that AI's economic opportunities are accruing disproportionately to young men, even within this small, highly educated UK sample.

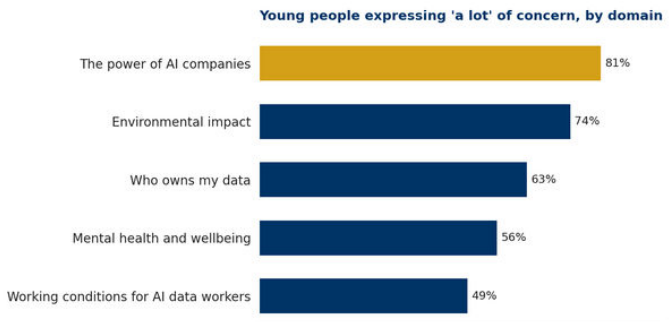
> *I am limited by fear of accuracy and legitimacy; ethical concerns about how my usage trains the models.*

31-YEAR-OLD FEMALE, FULL-TIME EMPLOYEE, URBAN UNITED KINGDOM, ON BARRIERS TO AI USE

5. YOUNG PEOPLE'S AI CONCERNS

Across the full 11-country dataset, daily AI users are the most concerned about AI risks, not the least. Daily users express the highest concern across all five domains, with the largest gap in data ownership (58% of daily users express high concern vs 37% of non-users, a 21-percentage-point gap). In the UK, the raw data show the opposite pattern: respondents who have never used AI report higher concern than daily users across all five domains (e.g. data ownership: 86% of never-users vs 58% of daily users; power of AI companies: 100% vs 73%). This should be read cautiously; only 15 UK respondents report never using AI, but it suggests that in a market this saturated, non-use itself may be a form of concern-driven avoidance, rather than concern being purely a product of exposure.

Overall, UK respondents express very high concern across all five domains measured: the power of AI companies (81% 'a lot' concerned), environmental impact (74%), data ownership (63%), mental health and wellbeing (56%) and working conditions for AI data workers (49%). Females record the highest concern about AI company power (86% vs 69% of males) and mental health (57% vs 51%), while males are somewhat more concerned than females about working conditions for AI data workers (55% vs 44%), broadly consistent with the main report's finding that UK females are the most institutionally sceptical demographic in the dataset.



Misinformation & Safety

89%	60%	87%
concerned about AI misinformation	say safety concerns limit their AI use	want stronger laws on AI

At 89%, concern about AI-generated misinformation is markedly higher among UK respondents than the 64% survey-wide figure, and higher still among UK females (92% vs 81% of males), consistent with the main report's finding that UK females record the highest misinformation concern of any country/gender group. 60% of UK respondents say safety concerns limit their AI use, well above the survey average of 47%, pointing to a pattern of cautious, values-driven engagement rather than either wholesale adoption or wholesale rejection.

What Would Make AI Safer?

UK respondents were considerably more likely than the 11-country average to call for every proposed safety measure, most strikingly on design and accountability: 87% want stronger laws (vs 64% survey-wide), 84% want platform accountability (vs 47%), 66% want digital literacy training (vs 57%), 57% want community awareness campaigns (vs 48%), and 56% want better reporting systems (vs 45%). The widest gap of all is in AI design that considers females: 54% of UK respondents selected this, more than double the 23% survey average, the largest country gap on this measure, and a direct echo of the gendered concern and confidence gaps documented above.

> *AI can never be used ethically. It requires the use of the intellectual property of humans, as well as an insane environmental impact. AI should only be used where absolutely necessary – i.e. in early detection of cancer cells.*

25-YEAR-OLD FEMALE, STUDENT, URBAN UNITED KINGDOM

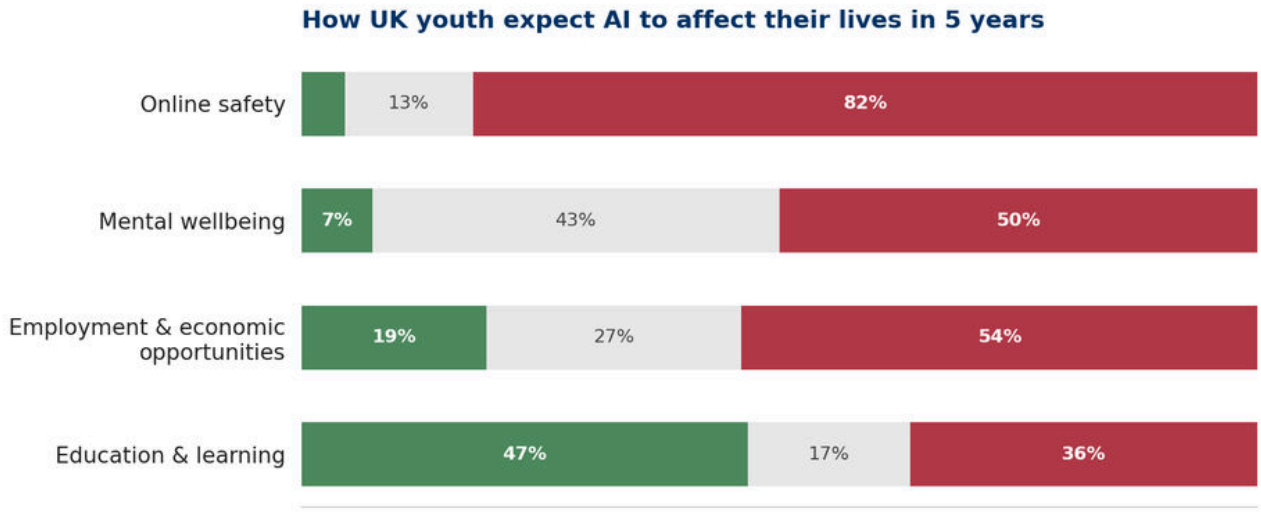
6. EMPLOYMENT, FUTURES & SENTIMENT

47%

of UK respondents expect AI to have a positive impact on education & learning in the next 5 years

11-COUNTRY BENCHMARK

11-country survey average: 71% expect positive impact on education



The UK shows the starkest pessimism of any country in the survey across every dimension of AI's expected impact on young people's lives. 82% of UK respondents expect AI to worsen online safety in the next five years (vs 37% survey-wide) and 54% expect it to worsen employment and economic opportunities (vs 27% survey-wide); only 19% expect improvement, the lowest optimism of any surveyed country. Even on education, where the survey-wide picture is strongly positive (71% expect improvement), UK optimism is markedly lower at 47%. This pattern is echoed in respondents' direct worry about their income: 61% of UK respondents say they are at least a little worried that AI will affect their income sources in the coming years, with 22% "very worried."

Where AI is viewed elsewhere in the survey as a potential "leapfrog" tool for development, a lens through which optimism is common in countries such as Uganda and Tanzania, in the UK, AI is more often perceived through the lens of job displacement and erosion of entry-level opportunity, as one respondent described:

> *My role is in the cultural sector, where I would grow from an entry role into higher seniority except now with AI the current roles are only offered for senior leaders, not for entry level. This means there are no bottom rungs of the ladder anymore.*

24-YEAR-OLD FEMALE, FULL-TIME EMPLOYEE, URBAN UNITED KINGDOM

7. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The UK findings tell a distinctive story within the Youth AI Survey 2026: not one of access, but of trust. With internet access close to universal, UK respondents are AI-literate, heavily exposed to AI in work and study, and yet use it less often, more cautiously, and with markedly more pessimism about its trajectory than young people in any of the ten other focus countries. Where AI's main barrier elsewhere is infrastructure, in the UK it is ethics: nearly a third of respondents who cite a barrier to using AI point to a principled, deliberate choice rather than a lack of access, and open-text responses describe environmental cost, data exploitation and mistrust of AI companies as reasons for restraint.

This scepticism is sharpest where UK respondents have the most at stake. Concern about the power of AI companies (81%) and AI-generated misinformation (89%) are the highest recorded in the survey, and expectations for the next five years are the most pessimistic of any country, especially on online safety and employment. Gender gaps compound this picture: UK males report both higher AI confidence and a greater economic upside from AI than UK females do, while UK females report the highest institutional scepticism of any demographic group in the dataset. Notably, the UK data also contradict the survey's main finding that increased AI use leads to higher levels of concern. In this small, saturated market, those who have opted out of AI express the most concern, suggesting that non-use in the UK is an informed, values-driven choice.

Together, these findings suggest that UK youth are largely already in it, but are asking government and industry to earn their trust through binding rules, transparent design, and protection of entry-level opportunity, rather than through voluntary codes or growth-first framing alone.

FOR THE GOVERNMENT OF THE UNITED KINGDOM

- Extend the Online Safety Act's chatbot provisions and the forthcoming ICO statutory AI code with explicit youth-specific safeguards: 82% of UK respondents expect AI to worsen online safety, and 89% are concerned about AI-generated misinformation, the highest of any surveyed country.

- Fund embedded AI and critical-literacy modules in schools, colleges and universities, distinct from generic digital-skills training, covering factchecking, source verification and data-training pipelines: digital literacy training was UK youth's second most-requested safety measure (66%).

- Commission monitoring of entry-level and graduate-scheme roles as AI adoption spreads, given qualitative evidence of a “hollowing out” of junior positions; 54% of UK respondents expect AI to worsen employment and economic opportunities, the most pessimistic figure of any country surveyed.

- Ensure young people who cite ethical objections to AI are represented in AI Growth Lab and regulatory sandbox consultations, since almost a third of UK respondents' stated barriers to AI use reflect a deliberate ethical choice rather than an access constraint.

FOR TECHNOLOGY COMPANIES

- Publish clear, accessible data-provenance and data-ownership information: 63% of UK respondents are highly concerned about who owns their data, and only 24% say safety concerns never limit their AI use.
- Design AI tools and safety features with gender explicitly in mind. UK respondents were more than twice as likely as the 11-country average to call for "AI design that considers females" (54% vs 23% survey-wide), the widest country gap on this measure in the survey.
- Engage young people meaningfully in decision-making processes to create relevant AI tools that respond to their needs.
- Build proactive safeguards against misinformation and deepfakes into products marketed to UK users, given the UK's highest concern about AI-generated misinformation (89%) of any country surveyed.
- Publish transparent, worker-focused disclosures on AI's role in recruitment and entry-level hiring decisions, responding directly to UK respondents' concerns about graduate-scheme and junior-role displacement.

FOR ALL SECTORS (GOVERNMENT, CIVIL SOCIETY, FUNDERS, ACADEMIA)

- Treat "ethical non-use" as a distinct and legitimate category in AI policy design, rather than folding UK abstention into the same access-barrier framework used for lower-income countries in this survey.
- Invest in longitudinal UK youth research to track whether the current gap between usage (47% daily, below the 64% survey average) and concern (the highest misinformation concern of any country) narrows or widens as AI tools mature.
- Support cross-sector convenings that bring UK youth concerns about data ownership, company power and environmental impact, the three highest-scoring domains, directly into AI governance forums that young people describe as dominated by technical rather than governance framing.

FOR RESTLESS DEVELOPMENT & OTHER UK CSOs

- Use the UK findings as a high-income comparison case within wider digital rights and youth governance programmes. With internet access already near universal, efforts should focus less on digital access and more on ensuring that young people are meaningfully involved in shaping trustworthy, safe, and accountable AI systems through participatory governance and co-design approaches.
- Develop youth-designed AI literacy and critical-thinking resources tailored to UK further and higher education settings, building on digital literacy training as the second most-requested UK safety measure (66%).
- Convene UK survey respondents who report ethically motivated AI abstention as a distinct voice in policy consultations (e.g. DSIT and Ofcom calls for evidence), ensuring "opting out" is represented alongside "using."
- Feed UK findings into engagement with funders such as the Botnar Foundation, particularly on responsible AI governance and online safety, where UK data offers a high-income counterpoint to Restless Development's core LMIC programming.

"I think AI has some real benefits but also has HUGE potential for harm, and big data companies are tailoring information about me and to target how I use search engines etc. I think in the NHS, it definitely could have a role in streamlining services and aiding in diagnoses/triage. I have been shocked by fake videos on YouTube which seem realistic but cannot in all plausibility be true. I think the use of someone's image in AI, for example making an AI-generated image about someone, needs explicit consent, and without this, it should be punishable by law, including protecting children. This has huge potential for misuse and could be seriously dangerous for mental health. There is also the environmental impact of using AI and the cost of the excess heat produced and energy consumed. I don't know much about this, but I am aware I need to read up on the impact of this."

35-YEAR-OLD FEMALE, URBAN UK

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For more information about this research or Restless Development's work on AI and digital rights, contact: info@restlessdevelopment.org