IChemE Employer Partner Networking Lunch – September 2025

Executive Summary

IChemE convened its Employer Partners in Leeds in September 2025 to explore the opportunities and implications of the UK Government's 10-year Industrial Strategy. The session focused on aligning the strategy with the priorities and challenges that our employers across the chemical, biochemical and process engineering sector are facing now, and looking to the future.
Discussions centred on skills development, recruitment gaps, scale-up support, research alignment, and infrastructure needs. Particular attention was paid to retention of mid-career professionals, skill gaps of graduates, and the need for stable policy environments and government support for industrial placements and innovation. This summary provides a focused reflection on the deep-dive discussion and highlights clear areas for IChemE and its partners to drive forward.

Background

The meeting brought together IChemE Employer Partners from across the UK to examine the Government's 10-year Industrial Strategy and the opportunities and impact across the sector. The strategy aims to boost productivity, drive innovation, and enhance supply chains. For the chemical engineering community, it presents an opportunity to accelerate decarbonisation, scale-up advanced manufacturing, and strengthen the skilled workforce needed for the future. IChemE used this session to gather views on practical barriers, priority actions, and where the Institution can add value.

Skills and recruitment

Developing and retaining a skilled workforce was highlighted as fundamental to the success of the Government's Industrial Strategy. Employers agreed that the most acute recruitment challenge lies at the mid-career stage, around six years in, where competition is intense and companies, including outside of the sector, often compete for the same pool of talent. While graduate recruitment was considered less problematic in terms of numbers, concerns were raised about the quality of graduates and the skills they bring. Gaps were noted in entrepreneurial thinking, interpersonal capability especially when talking to non-technical audiences, and the ability to work across disciplines or apply systems thinking, all skills increasingly vital for modern chemical engineers.

Industrial placements were recognised as one of the most effective ways of equipping students with real-world skills, but companies noted that such programmes can be resource-intensive. Participants suggested that government subsidies or other forms of support could help expand access and uptake. IChemE was viewed as having a potential role to play here in helping map out the skills needs (at present and into the future) perhaps across the areas covered by its various Special Interest Groups, as well as in helping to broker opportunities for placements.

Research and scale-up

Participants emphasised the growing importance of aligning academic research with the practical needs of industry to support the Government's Industrial Strategy. Suggestions included focusing on applied challenges such as identifying uses for captured carbon, with IChemE academic partners and

funding bodies like EPSRC playing a central role in steering research priorities to better meet industry needs. IChemE Special Interest Groups were seen as vital in capturing and articulating the industry-driven research needs.

Alongside research, the ability to scale up new technologies emerged as a critical issue. Employers highlighted the shortage of workforce skills in scale-up and the need for government to play a stronger role in enabling innovation, through investment, access to infrastructure, and mechanisms to de-risk industrial adoption. Together, better targeted research and effective scale-up support were seen as essential to accelerating decarbonisation and securing the UK's competitive advantage in advanced manufacturing.

Perception and sector promotion

Negative perceptions of the chemical and process industries were still thought to be discouraging some young people from considering the profession, albeit applicants to degrees in 2025 were up ~18% year on year. Industry was often seen as dirty, declining, or damaging the planet, whereas in fact there is a huge amount of growth and innovation and progress in making a more sustainable future. The Government was seen as having a key role to play in promoting the opportunities available in chemical engineering and IChemE must continue to positively promote the opportunities that the sector brings, linked to the UN sustainability goals.

Policy consistency

Participants raised concerns about inconsistent policy direction and the short-term nature of current government funding. This was seen as a barrier to strategic industrial investment. Businesses called for clearer policy frameworks and long-term commitments that allow for more confident planning and less deviation which costs the industry money and resource.

Energy costs and grid connections

Energy costs were seen as having a significant dampening effect on UK industry, and this was particularly true in the context of multinational companies with a presence in the UK deciding which of their territories to invest in. Energy costs were also seen to have significant negative implications for companies' sustainability and decarbonisation plans.

Grid connections were seen as presenting a 'chicken and egg' problem with companies having to manage risk and uncertainty during the process of making a business case and dealing with long waits for approval. Participants suggested that the Government could play a greater role in bearing some of the risk of these processes.

Next steps

IChemE will use the insights gathered to inform its policy engagement, support development of future-facing skills resources, and advocate for a clearer partnership model between industry, academia, and government. Focus will be given to enhancing placement accessibility, strengthening research relevance, and promoting the role of chemical engineering in the UK's industrial future. The next Employer Partner meeting will take place during the IChemE Global Awards in November 2025.