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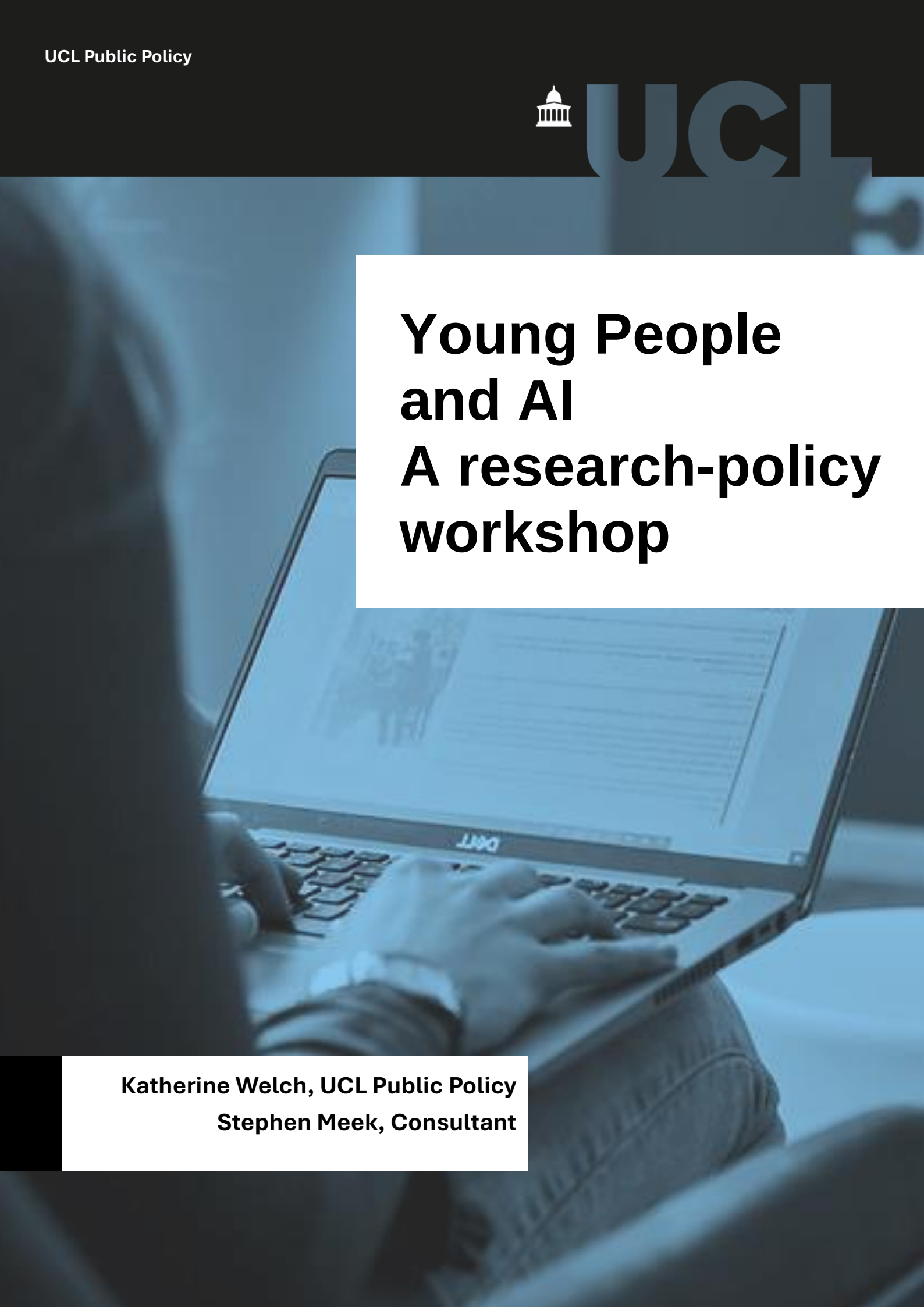

Young People and AI
A research-policy workshop

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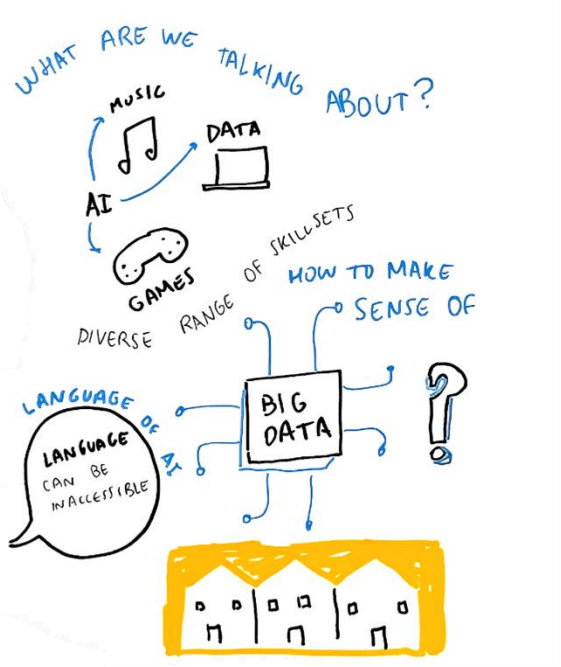
Digital technology and increasingly AI are becoming a ubiquitous feature of our everyday lives. But what does this mean for todays young people, for their education, careers and social lives as the navigate an uncertain digitally enabled future. AI and digital technologies will alter all aspects of their personal and professional lives, where both data science skills and individuals who can handle complex information and embrace change will be in high demand.

In June 2024, UCL Public Policy facilitated an interdisciplinary workshop with researchers, practitioners and policy makers to explore the topic, opportunities and research and policy evidence gaps on creating a safe and engaging AI future for young people. Among the many questions we had, we asked:

- How can AI be used as a resource to positively impact and transform young people's working, learning and living?
- How do we engage young people, especially from underserved backgrounds, to follow a path in STEM?
- What do we need to know to develop evidence-based policy solutions?



What is AI?

The workshop identified that pinning down 'AI' as a discrete thing to respond to is difficult. AI is a tool that has different implications in different context and applications rather than a distinct phenomenon. Indeed, when it comes to education for example it may not be possible to teach 'AI' but rather the digital and data skills to develop and utilise AI technology.

Furthermore, through discussion we identified many continuities with existing digital issues, for example, endemic discrimination in the sector, differential access to devices/social capital, the digital world and young people's physical and mental health.

A question to explore is the extent to which issues raised by AI are just a continuation or acceleration of existing challenges for young people and policy relating to young people, or whether there are new and distinct challenges that AI creates.

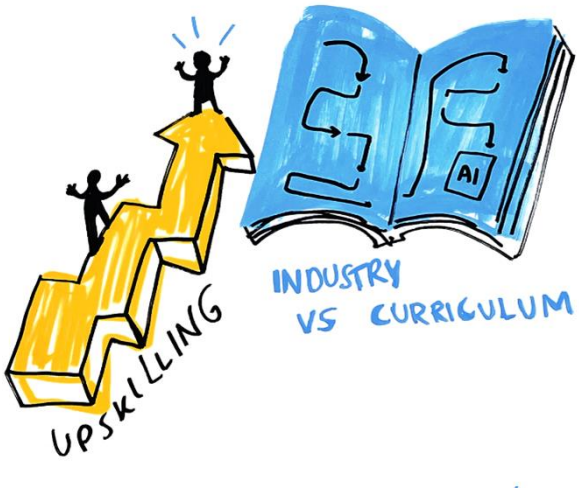
This might mean engaging different people in discussion, research and policy development, for example AI specialists, people who know where the sector is going and can see its potential and risks, and young people themselves.

And who are young people?

Future research or policy development into the impacts of AI on young people should first consider who we mean by 'young people' and avoid over-simplifying, grouping or speaking for a diverse part of our wider society.

Actors in the space must be mindful of the different ways of thinking and attitudes of young people at different ages and stages of development, and how this is further split by other circumstances and experiences, for example gender or ethnicity, as well as the external influences and drivers informing their choices and views.

We must take time to understand young people – what do they think? what attracts them or puts them off AI tools? What would engage them? Are there particular cultures, backgrounds, demographics or other groups alienated from working in or engaging with AI? And are there regional differences?



Education, training and skills

Education, broader skills and careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) featured heavily in the workshop discussion. Conversation featured both distinct career paths into AI and digital technologies, and the barriers and opportunities for young people interested in this field, but also the broad critical analysis and data handling skills all young people will need to be equipped with in a data-enabled future.

Workshop participants considered some of the demand challenges including: what are the dynamics and conscious/unconscious biases in recruitment to the tech sector generally, and AI in particular? Is there a distinct AI issue or is it an extension of a tech issue?

It was argued that employers are not doing enough to create an empowering environment for young people, which would allow them to attract and keep diverse talent. This in turn creates both risks and missed opportunities for AI developers and their products. There may be an opportunity to learn from international examples or other firms or sectors that are already doing this better.

Demand concerns notwithstanding, there are also a range of supply issues. Addressing differential social and science capital, differential access to devices and technology in school and especially at home, may be factors in how young people access potential career paths and opportunities. Theres is potentially more work need to understand these driver and how to address them?

The IT curriculum is perennially accused of struggling to keep pace with technology, or to inspire young people into STEM, digital or AI careers. Teachers do not have the time to dedicate to sustained efforts beyond the curriculum, and there are questions as to whether the science curricula feels relevant to young peoples lives.

Furthermore, not all young people will want to “work in AI”, nor should they. Yet AI will touch most jobs as well as general ways of living. How does or could the broader curriculum prepare young people for increasingly digital future?

Restricting AI learning to STEM subjects perpetuates exclusion of some young people from it, and fails to prepare those interested in other sectors, for example law or creative arts, for the impact AI may have on their careers (both positive and negative). Thinking more broadly about where AI will appear in the workplace, and how it will look and be used in each context, would be advantageous in future curricula design, as well as where AI may be incorporated in the curricula beyond STEM subjects.

Beyond curricula design, questions remain as to the capacity of teachers to engage on AI and how best to motivate and inspire teachers and students on the topic. For example, are there opportunities to develop greater industry partnerships such as visits, work placements, clubs and to capture interest through activity outside the classroom? An if so, who should be responsible for leading such programmes?

Finally, where/who are the other influences on young people’s career choices and to what extent are these supporter or obstacles to careers in AI? While technology is visibly an exciting and potentially lucrative career, it changes so fast that it is hard for people outside it to keep up with opportunities, roles within it and pathways into it

Good AI for young people

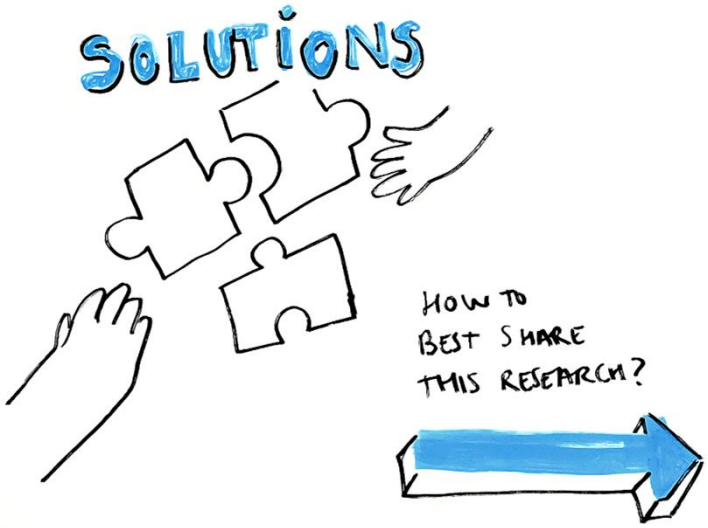
The workshop also discussed broader considerations of AI on young peoples lives, in particular their interactions with AI and aspirations for a 'good AI future'.

As discussed above, AI in anticipated to touch most jobs and all lives, so how can the wider school and social experiences of young people best prepare them for this future.

Once again, it is important here to consider both how digital (and by implication AI as an accelerator of digital) has and is changing the world for children, perhaps making greater use of existing longitudinal data, and building more longitudinal data sets on digital and AI questions; and young people's own perspectives on the world, attitudes, worries, and how they see the opportunities, as well as the inhomogeneity of views and experiences within the cohort.

Discussion repeatedly returned to the need to give young people agency as both creators and consumers of AI. From input to design, control over their relationship with digital/AI and managing their digital identities, how do we strengthen the voice of young people in AI development and design?

Furthermore, broader fundamental questions still remain, asking are we looking at good AI for young people, or how AI supports a good life for young people, for example practically managing products as they emerge or thinking of, and designing for, the future we want? Is that possible or meaningful?



Opportunities for research and policy

The above discussion provides myriad opportunities for further research and policy development centred on the impact and opportunities for young people presented by AI technologies.

Challenges remain as to how to increase young people's agency in both research and policy making. There is a need to create greater equity of voice in both domains, for example through greater co-production with young people, parents, developers, practitioners and specialists, as well as better understanding of the range of young peoples' personas.

Concurrently, there is a need to understand and develop the evidence base that will engender change, particularly from those with vested interest in the sector or concerned to see economic benefits.

Finally, although AI is a new and rapidly evolving technology, interactions with digital technologies are not. There has been significant research and policy in the field over the past 25 years, and there are lessons to be learned from the impact of this work and the approaches taken. A short period of stock taking and reflection might help determine the next research and policy questions that need answering.

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