

EXPERT OPINION: PROFESSOR SYMEON DAGKAS



PROFESSOR SYMEON DAGKAS is Vice Chancellor of the University of Chichester, where he leads the institutions strategic direction with a strong focus on education quality, inclusion and civic impact. He brings more than 25 years' experience across higher education, combining academic leadership with a long-standing commitment to social justice and place-based collaboration.

Before joining Chichester, Symeon was Provost and Chief Academic Officer at St Mary's University, Twickenham, and previously held senior roles at Canterbury Christ Church University, the University of East London and the University of Birmingham. He is an established researcher with an international profile, publishing extensively on inclusion, education, sport and health.

BEYOND SKILLS: CREATING A RESILIENT TALENT ECO-SYSTEM FOR SUSSEX

The current regional landscape presents Sussex with a significant opportunity.

Across Chichester and the wider county, we benefit from a diverse and well-established mix of industries: digital and creative sectors, aerospace, horticulture, seasonal tourism, retail and land-based industries all play an important role in shaping the local economy.

Alongside this diversity sits another defining feature of Sussex: a very high proportion of small and micro-businesses, which make up the majority of the business population, contrasted with a relatively small number of large employers concentrated around areas such as Royal Manor and Gatwick.

This structure brings both strength and challenge

Small businesses are often agile, innovative and deeply embedded in their communities.

However, many lack the capacity, networks or resources to plan long-term workforce development.

As a result, Sussex continues to experience a persistent skills gap.

Qualification levels in parts of the region sit below national averages, and many employers struggle to identify clear pathways to growth or access appropriate talent. Too often, this translates into a labour market dominated by lower-skilled roles, limited progression opportunities, and reduced attraction of specialist expertise.

The consequence is a local economy constrained in its ability to scale, innovate and compete. Addressing this challenge requires coordinated action across education, industry and regional stakeholders.

Collaboration must be the starting point.

Working closely with employer associations and directly with businesses enables education and training providers to understand real workforce needs, rather than relying on assumptions or outdated models.

Meaningful engagement helps surface current skills shortages, emerging roles and future opportunities, allowing curriculum design and training provision to reflect genuine labour market demand. For employers, this engagement creates visibility of talent pipelines and development routes that may otherwise remain inaccessible — particularly for smaller organisations.

However, sustainable growth cannot be achieved through skills provision alone. Higher Education Institutions have a critical role to play, not only as providers of technical knowledge, but as generators of insight, innovation and future-focused thinking. Universities bring research capability, global perspectives and industry-relevant expertise into regional ecosystems. Yet their impact is maximised when knowledge is combined with practical application and employer partnership.

This is where the conversation must shift from skills alone to skills plus attributes.

While technical competencies remain essential, they are no longer sufficient in isolation. The future workforce must also demonstrate adaptability, resilience, problem-solving capability, communication, and the ability to learn continuously.

We cannot predict precisely what the labour market will look like in 2032, but we know that digital transformation, artificial intelligence, sustainability pressures and global connectivity will continue to reshape jobs at pace. In this context, educators must prepare students not just for today's roles, but for careers that will evolve repeatedly over time.

Developing an adaptive, flexible and responsive mindset alongside underpinning knowledge is what differentiates graduates and future talent. These attributes enable individuals to move across sectors, adopt new technologies and respond confidently to change — making them valuable not only to employers, but to the wider economy.

The rise of the Institute of Technology (IoT) model offers a prime example of how this can be achieved in practice. By bringing together further education, higher education and employers, IoTs create collaborative environments where innovation, technical expertise and industry insight meet.

They support learners to develop high-level technical skills in areas such as digital, engineering and emerging technologies, while grounding learning in real-world application. Crucially, they also embed employability attributes through project-based learning, employer engagement and exposure to live industry challenges.

Another powerful example of regional collaboration is our recent signing of Civic University Agreements with the Universities of Brighton and Sussex. These agreements are formal commitments between universities and their regions to work together to support local economic, social, and cultural development. Through this partnership, we aim to actively contribute to skills development based on a regional analysis of business needs.

For Sussex, this type of initiatives represents a genuine opportunity for growth. By aligning curriculum with regional priorities and employer needs, and by encouraging learners to develop both competence and character, we can strengthen the local talent pipeline and attract higher-value activity into the region.

Employers themselves must also remain “at the edges and on their toes”. In a fast-moving economy, waiting for fully formed talent to arrive is no longer a viable strategy. Businesses — particularly SMEs — benefit from engaging early with education providers, contributing to curriculum design, offering placements or live projects, and helping shape future skills provision.

This proactive involvement allows employers to influence the development of their future workforce while gaining access to emerging talent and fresh perspectives.

Ultimately, closing the skills gap in Sussex is a shared responsibility. Educational institutions must continue evolving their offer, embedding attributes alongside skills and knowledge. Employers must actively participate in shaping provision and creating opportunities for learners. Regional partners must support alignment through strategic collaboration and investment.

If Sussex is to realise its full potential, we must move beyond transactional approaches to skills and embrace a connected ecosystem — one that values adaptability as much as expertise, collaboration as much as competition, and long-term capability as much as short-term recruitment. By doing so, we can build a resilient, future-ready workforce that supports sustainable economic growth across Chichester and the wider region.

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