

IAF SPACE EDUCATION AND OUTREACH SYMPOSIUM (E1)
Enabling the Future - Developing the Space Workforce (5)

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MISSING LINKS: THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON CAREER PROGRESSION
OPPORTUNITIES IN THE UK SPACE SECTOR

Abstract

Student and young graduate cohorts in the UK and worldwide were affected by a mass cancellation of early career training and opportunities in the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, the majority of internships and graduate opportunities in the space sector were cancelled or postponed at short notice, while a smaller number were moved to an online provision with little planning opportunity of experience for this new mode of delivery. Disruption to traditional workforce development schemes continued into 2021, with a greater number of opportunities moving online and relatively few resuming in a standard format. From networking to skills development, the long-term career impacts of these "lost years" for graduating and early career cohorts is likely to be significant. Impacts to sector skills retention are also likely to be high, as many STEM-trained graduates were forced to seek opportunities elsewhere after the cancellation of previously planned career steps.

At the same time, undergraduate and graduate cohorts experienced unprecedented impacts due to COVID on the delivery of university programmes. With online teaching, opportunities to develop practical skills, lab work, and project management became effectively absent for many cohorts. Furthermore, the aspects of the STEM higher education most closely linked to reported skills shortages in the UK space sector were also often the aspects of programme delivery most impacted by the effects of COVID.

In the first investigation of its kind for the UK space sector, we survey employers, students and recent graduates across space-related and STEM disciplines in the UK to quantitatively investigate the volume of lost career development opportunities during 2020 and 2021. We examine the intersection between the most affected methods of experience-building and pre-existing skills development gaps in the UK space sector, and discuss potential longer term impacts for the sector. We consider the impact of reduced education and experience on the self-confidence and perceived ability of COVID cohorts on entering the space sector workforce. While many fortunate and strongly-motivated graduates have succeeded in building a space career during and after the end of COVID restrictions, it is crucial that employers in the sector remain mindful of the opportunity cost of the COVID pandemic to affected cohorts over the years to come.