Q: What is the programme doing about the future of work in the fourth industrial revolution?
A: The digital futures of work programme is an attempt to systematically understand what is really changing. There's a lot of hype around the impact of AI and about how it would destroy lots of jobs but what we want to do is really try and get a proper understanding of where the technologies can take us, but from an understanding that technologies are not destiny, that we have choices that we can make. And we need to make sure that we're making choices which are going to be good for everybody, not just good for capital, but also good for employees, and also think about the sorts of jobs for the future.

Q: What is different about this period of technological innovation?
A: When you think about how many people are going into higher education, some of the past success is now creating a major problem regarding how we distribute work in the future, especially with advances in technology. We know that there may not be a huge demand for so-called high-skilled workers, so how are we going to organise ourselves? Now the answer to that is going to have profound implications in virtually every society.

We often talk about an opportunity bargain- "get yourself educated, get yourself skilled, and then you'll be able to get a really good-quality job" but what if that's not the case for a lot of people? We can't take it for granted that there are going to be all these high-skilled jobs, high-wage jobs that people will be able to go into if they get an education, that's very unlikely to be the case, so we need to make sure that the technologies are being used properly.

Q: How are digital technologies changing work?
A: When we think about the future of work and the role of digital innovation one of the really interesting areas to explore is the whole question of platformisation. So the question that we have is does that mean a lot of the knowledge people have in their heads, when we think about professional, managerial, and technical forms of work, to what extent does the platform capture that knowledge and therefore structure work in a particular way where a lot of the discretion in what we do is actually taken away?

It's going to be very interesting for us to explore some of these different kinds of platforms and then to think about the implications for work because this derives from what we call the cognitive challenge. Now the cognitive challenge, in general terms, is often understood as how we stay ahead of the technology, what kinds of things humans need to do, like being creative, empathetic, etc., that the technologies can't catch up with, not yet anyway, this is the basic idea, but for us, the cognitive challenge is somewhat different from that. It's not that education is unimportant, it is important, but really it's also how the companies are using the technologies because the companies can use new technologies to actually restructure the work process in ways that can transform the nature of knowledge work, of professional, managerial, and, technical work, and not just at the bottom end.

But the nature of work is likely to change but it changes in two ways, not one, so it changes in terms of job content, what people do and the sorts of skillsets they might need, but it also

changes in terms of job context. And one of the things we really need to understand is to what extent are we seeing this blurring of a boundary between the kind of gig forms of work and the idea of the established labour contract.

Q: How has the interest from the stakeholders been?
A: I've been researching internationally for a very long time and I would say that this particular research programme has been the one where we've had the most buy-in from those we've spoken to, whether it be the policymakers or whether it be the companies, or the education providers, actually, for that matter, and I think the reason for that is because there's a lot of uncertainty. People understand there's something not quite right but they're not quite sure what it is, so they're very keen to engage with us.

Q: What has your global research team been like?
A: It's been a great pleasure for me to work with such a broad range of kinds of academic talent on these programmes, where there's enough shared understanding of our end goal. We are just simply not prepared to accept the kind of talk or narrative we often get, well, it will all be fine, the technologies will sort things out, you know we can just free people up and they'll find ways of working it out for themselves.

We need to be, as I describe it, hard-nosed but soft-hearted; we're hard-nosed in the sense we really want to understand what's going on but soft-hearted in the sense we want a better future of work, we want it to be inclusive, we want it to be humankind of centric.