Entrepreneurial Universities

From Strategy to Impact

An NCEE Catalogue of Best Practice 2026

Insights from the 2026 Times Higher Education Outstanding Entrepreneurial University Award shortlist













Six universities. Different approaches. Shared learning.

Foreword

Higher education is facing a period of significant change. Universities are being challenged to rethink how they operate, respond to financial pressures, meet changing student expectations and demonstrate their value to society.

In this environment, entrepreneurial thinking has never been more important.

At NCEE, we believe that being an entrepreneurial university is about much more than supporting business creation. It is about developing a culture that encourages innovation, embraces opportunity, empowers people and enables institutions to respond positively to change.

Through our sponsorship of the Times Higher Education Outstanding Entrepreneurial University Award, we have the privilege of seeing how universities are putting these principles into practice.

The six institutions featured in this publication demonstrate the diversity of entrepreneurial approaches across higher education. Their experiences show that entrepreneurial universities are not defined by their size, location or academic specialism, but by their ability to mobilise their distinctive strengths, people and partnerships to create meaningful impact.

What is particularly encouraging is their willingness to share not only their achievements, but also the lessons they have learned along the way.

At NCEE, we recognise the importance of creating opportunities for universities to learn from one another. By sharing effective practice, challenging established thinking and connecting colleagues across institutions, we can collectively strengthen the entrepreneurial capabilities of the sector.

I hope this publication provides both inspiration and practical insights for those seeking to develop their own institutions' entrepreneurial ambitions.

Becoming an entrepreneurial university is not a destination. It is a continuous journey of learning, reflection and improvement.

Ceri Nursaw
Chief Executive, NCEE

About this publication

What does it mean to be an entrepreneurial university? How can institutions translate entrepreneurial ambitions into practice? And what can universities learn from one another as they develop their own approaches?

This NCEE Catalogue of Best Practice brings together insights from the six universities shortlisted for the 2026 Times Higher Education Outstanding Entrepreneurial University Award, sponsored by NCEE.

Drawing on articles contributed by each institution as part of NCEE's EDGE Series (Entrepreneurship, Digital, Growth and Education), the publication explores how universities are embedding entrepreneurship within their strategy, culture and practice.

Rather than presenting a single model of an entrepreneurial university, this publication recognises the importance of institutional context. Each university's journey reflects its distinctive mission, academic strengths, communities and ambitions.

From sharing practice to informing action

Each case study explores the institution's entrepreneurial journey, highlights specific examples of effective practice and identifies lessons that may be transferable to other universities.

Drawing these experiences together, NCEE identifies six overarching principles for developing entrepreneurial universities, alongside practical questions to support institutional reflection and discussion.

The publication is intended as a resource for university leaders, enterprise educators, researchers, professional services colleagues and others involved in shaping entrepreneurial institutions. Its purpose is to encourage reflection, stimulate new thinking and support the continued development of entrepreneurial practice.

A note on the case studies

The examples and impact figures are drawn from the universities' own contributions in 2026. They illustrate different approaches and achievements rather than provide a comparative assessment or ranking. Links to the original articles are included throughout.

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ASTON UNIVERSITY

Entrepreneurship as a driver of inclusive growth

Connecting institutional purpose, enterprise and business growth

The entrepreneurial journey

Rooted in Birmingham's industrial heritage, Aston has developed an entrepreneurial ecosystem through work-based learning, business engagement and research. Its commitment to inclusive growth reflects the needs of a diverse city, first-generation university students and businesses with the potential to create jobs and prosperity.



Enterprise learning at Aston University. Image supplied by Aston University.

The strategic approach

Aston's 2030 Strategy is anchored in three principles: Inclusive, Entrepreneurial and Transformational. Sustained investment in the Aston Centre for Enterprise and Entrepreneurship (ACEE) translates this purpose into teaching, research and knowledge exchange.

Best practice in action

Build connected pathways. ACEE brings students, academics, alumni and businesses together through its Enterprise Hub. Its three pillars connect skills development, start-up support and business growth, including mentoring of student founders by experienced entrepreneurs.

Build capability through external partnerships. Programmes such as BSEEN, Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses and Help to Grow: Management have helped Aston build specialist expertise and a skilled team that also supports teaching and research across the university.

From practice to impact

3,200
Entrepreneurs in intensive growth programmes

500+
Student founders supported to start businesses

11,000+
Enterprise Hub event attendees

Source: NCEE, based on data provided by Aston University.

Best practice in action (continued)

Connect research, inclusion and enterprise. ACEE draws on the Centre for Research in Ethnic Minority Entrepreneurship to inform inclusive practice. Its Enterprise Working Group connects schools, the Students' Union and professional services, while external partnerships such as Pitch Up extend support across the regional ecosystem.

What other universities can learn

A clear institutional purpose can guide investment and programme choices. Externally funded activity can build lasting internal capability when expertise is shared across teaching, research and enterprise. Connecting founders to role models and networks can help address social as well as financial barriers to entrepreneurship.

Questions for institutional reflection

How does enterprise contribute to your institution's core purpose? Can externally funded programmes build sustainable internal capability? How could students and researchers access the networks and social capital they need to progress?

READ THE FULL ENTREPRENEURIAL JOURNEY

Aston University | NCEE website

SWANSEA UNIVERSITY

From regional catalyst to global impact

Embedding entrepreneurship through people, partnerships and place

The entrepreneurial journey

Rooted in its founding identity as a university created by industry, for industry, Swansea has broadened enterprise beyond business creation. Entrepreneurial capability is seen as a graduate attribute, relevant across disciplines and careers.

The strategic approach

The 2023–28 Institutional Enterprise Strategy centres on three priorities: unlocking talent, creating an enabling environment and delivering impact in place. More than 133 enterprise champions connect academic and professional teams, combining local ownership with strategic alignment.



Pan Wales Hackathon.
Image supplied by Swansea University.

Best practice in action

Embed capability in the curriculum. The Innovative Thinkers graduate attribute creates opportunities to develop creativity, leadership, resilience and problem-solving across disciplines.

Use specialist teams as connectors. Small teams work with faculties, research institutes and external partners, linking workshops, hackathons, mentoring, accelerators and funding into an enabling ecosystem.

From practice to impact

14,000+
Students engaged

508
Ideas validated

101
Student start-ups supported

133+
Enterprise champions

Student enterprise activity: 2024/25.
Source: NCEE, based on data provided by Swansea University.

Best practice in action (continued)

Connect research to real-world challenges. Swansea's partnership with the UK Atomic Energy Authority links research expertise to industrial innovation in fusion energy. The SUNRISE initiative brings universities, businesses and communities together internationally to develop affordable solar-energy solutions.

What other universities can learn

Strategic alignment, empowered colleagues and embedded networks can create impact without large new central structures. Enterprise can become part of institutional culture when people close to students and researchers are supported to act. Success should encompass graduate capabilities, research commercialisation, regional development and societal value, as well as start-ups and spin-outs.

Questions for institutional reflection

Where could existing academic and professional networks champion enterprise? How could entrepreneurial capability be embedded across disciplines? Which measures would capture the wider economic and societal value of enterprise?

READ THE FULL ENTREPRENEURIAL JOURNEY

Swansea University | NCEE website

ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY

From supporting enterprise to becoming entrepreneurial

An integrated approach to education, innovation and public value

The entrepreneurial journey

Over more than a decade, ARU has evolved from supporting student business creation to using entrepreneurial thinking as a core approach to education, innovation, regional development and public service transformation. ARU was the first UK recipient of NCEE's Entrepreneurial University Award.



Enterprise activity at Anglia Ruskin University.
Image supplied by Anglia Ruskin University.

The strategic approach

ARU treats entrepreneurship as both a mindset and a method: identifying opportunities, mobilising resources and creating value. Its integrated ecosystem connects academic disciplines, employer engagement, innovation infrastructure and regional priorities.

Best practice in action

Embed enterprise in learning. The Anglia Ruskin Enterprise Academy (AREA), Freelancer Fast-Start and The EDGE provide accessible routes into enterprise. Live projects connect students with real business challenges: in 2024/25, more than 7,100 students worked with 147 organisations on 159 projects.

Connect entrepreneurship to place. ARU Peterborough was established with local government and industry to address a higher education cold spot. Teaching, business support and innovation infrastructure work together to strengthen skills, productivity and social mobility.

From practice to impact

4,890
Students engaged by AREA

115
New graduate ventures supported

260
Active businesses; 90% survival rate

£10.6m
Turnover generated by active businesses

Student and graduate enterprise outcomes: 2024/25.
Source: NCEE, based on data provided by Anglia Ruskin University.

Best practice in action (continued)

Apply entrepreneurship to public services. Delivered with NHS England, the Clinical Entrepreneurs Programme enables clinicians to develop entrepreneurial skills while remaining in practice. Cumulatively, it has supported more than 1,500 clinicians and facilitated 592 ventures, demonstrating how frontline insights can become scalable solutions.

What other universities can learn

Entrepreneurship can be an institution-wide method for creating value, not just a specialist function. Connecting curriculum, business engagement and public-sector partnerships can broaden participation and impact. ARU's place-based approach also shows how enterprise can respond to regional needs and support social mobility.

Questions for institutional reflection

Where could entrepreneurial thinking strengthen existing teaching and research? How can partnerships address regional or public-service challenges? What measures capture value beyond business creation?

READ THE FULL ENTREPRENEURIAL JOURNEY

Anglia Ruskin University | NCEE website

UNIVERSITY OF YORK

Making enterprise everybody's business

Mobilising entrepreneurial communities for public good

The entrepreneurial journey

Founded to serve the public good, York sees enterprise as a way to equip individuals to create change for themselves and their communities. Its approach connects students, staff and local entrepreneurs from initial ideas through to post-investment growth.



New Era for Female Entrepreneurship research.
Image supplied by the University of York.

The strategic approach

York brings together enterprise education, research commercialisation and regional business support. Its networks provide access to expertise, customers and opportunities, while partnerships are built around shared purpose.

Best practice in action

Embed enterprise in learning. The Business Planning and Sustainable Entrepreneurship module brings interdisciplinary teams together to test venture ideas addressing sustainability challenges. Community Engaged Learning also connects students with local civic and non-profit organisations through live consultancy projects.

Mobilise regional networks. York Science Park, Phase One Incubator, Enterprise Works and Barclays Eagle Labs connect founders with expertise and business contacts. Innovate York supported 125 businesses, helping develop 17 new products and services and create 12 jobs.

From practice to impact

500+

Undergraduates on the Business Planning and Sustainable Entrepreneurship module

538

Students completing Community Engaged Learning modules

93%

Module students rating the teamwork project valuable or extremely valuable

880+

SMEs supported through Enterprise Works and Barclays Eagle Labs

Education figures: 2024/25.

Source: NCEE, based on data provided by the University of York.

Best practice in action (continued)

Use research to widen participation. York's research identified 23,562 fewer self-employed women than men in the region and a potential £2.6 billion economic opportunity. The local Growth Hub adapted its support in response, and partners developed a ten-point plan to address barriers to female entrepreneurship.

What other universities can learn

Universities can mobilise their networks as a strategic asset, providing introductions, credibility and access to clients alongside skills development. Partnerships built around shared purpose can create lasting value, while research can help target support where it is most needed.

Questions for institutional reflection

How can existing networks open doors for entrepreneurs? Where could live community projects enrich the curriculum? How can research identify and address barriers to participation?

READ THE FULL ENTREPRENEURIAL JOURNEY

University of York | NCEE website

ROYAL COLLEGE OF ART

Turning innovation into successful ventures

Building on distinctive strengths in art, design and technology

The entrepreneurial journey

Founded in 1837 to support industrial competitiveness, the RCA combines art, design and technology with practical experimentation. For more than two decades, InnovationRCA has helped translate creative ideas into products, services and ventures that benefit society.



InnovationRCA's entrepreneurial community. Image supplied by the Royal College of Art.

The strategic approach

InnovationRCA supports students, staff and alumni across the full entrepreneurial journey. Its sector-agnostic model combines internal expertise with external specialists, entrepreneurs and investors to meet diverse founder needs.

Best practice in action

Connect learning with venture support. Curriculum-based taster weeks, individual advisory clinics, IP protection, acceleration and incubation create a pathway from initial ideas to investment. Staff can access entrepreneurial fellowships and proof-of-market funding.

Build specialist networks and finance. A network of 60+ angel investors and a dedicated S/EIS Design and Innovation Fund complement external sector expertise, helping founders access support suited to ventures at the intersection of art, design and technology.

From practice to impact

97
RCA start-ups and spinouts launched

850+
UK jobs generated to date

£45m
RCA start-up turnover in the last year

£34m+
Overseas sales in the last year

Source: NCEE, based on data provided by the Royal College of Art.

Best practice in action (continued)

Share expertise internationally. RCA's external entrepreneurship programmes have supported more than 80 start-ups and spinouts worldwide, including training 38 women founders in Saudi Arabia. Partnerships such as the Terra Carta Design Lab also connect creative enterprise with global sustainability challenges.

What other universities can learn

Specialist institutions can build entrepreneurial support around their academic strengths without restricting founders to a single sector. A connected pathway, tailored external expertise and suitable investment can help creative ideas become viable ventures. RCA also reports that half of its founders over the last five years were women.

Questions for institutional reflection

How can your academic strengths shape enterprise support? Where are the gaps between early ideas, IP protection and investment? Which external partners could help founders access specialist expertise and finance?

READ THE FULL ENTREPRENEURIAL JOURNEY

Royal College of Art | NCEE website

DURHAM UNIVERSITY

From small beginnings to a thriving enterprise ecosystem

Building ambition, connected pathways and lasting capability

The entrepreneurial journey

Between 2017 and 2019, student enterprise provision was supported by one staff member. The team grew to 3.6 FTE in 2019 and subsequently to 7.6 FTE. The opening of the Hazan Venture Lab provided a dedicated space for ideas, founders and ventures.



Durham Venture School participants on the Golden Gate Bridge.
Image supplied by Durham University.

The strategic approach

Durham prioritises helping students solve important problems and develop ventures capable of positive impact at scale, rather than competing primarily on start-up volume. This focus guides decisions about which opportunities to pursue.

Best practice in action

Adapt proven approaches to institutional context. Durham drew on models shared by other universities. Its SDG-based Game Changer programme has engaged more than 1,500 students, and its toolkit has reached over 50 universities worldwide.

Build connected pathways. Game Changer, the Summer Innovation Fellowship, Enactus, early-stage funding and Durham Venture School offer flexible progression from initial exploration to venture creation. Students can enter at the stage that suits their needs.

From practice to impact

2,385
Students engaged in 2025/26 (370 in 2018/19)

£40.1m
External investment raised by active Venture Lab-supported companies (up from £252,500)

273
Jobs created (up from 10)

£1.6m+
Alumni philanthropic funding

Source: NCEE, based on data provided by Durham University.

Best practice in action (continued)

Mobilise alumni and external supporters. A Venture Lab Advisory Board helped shape the 2024–2029 strategy. Alumni philanthropy funded five years of activity, including innovation fellowships and prizes, and increased the Blueprint Startup Challenge prize fund from £20,000 to £50,000. Alumni also helped enable the Silicon Valley experience.

What other universities can learn

Clear institutional priorities can guide resource allocation and attract support. Connected programmes give students a next step when they are ready, while tracking a range of outcomes helps teams understand progress beyond start-up numbers. Enterprise teams can also strengthen impact by connecting with wider institutional activity.

Questions for institutional reflection

What does entrepreneurial success mean in your context? Where are the gaps in student progression? How could alumni and external partners contribute expertise, networks or funding?

READ THE FULL ENTREPRENEURIAL JOURNEY

Durham University | NCEE website

Six lessons for building an entrepreneurial university

There is no single model of an entrepreneurial university. These six journeys reveal shared principles that can inform practice in different institutional contexts.

01 Start with purpose, not programmes

Aston's commitment to inclusive growth guides strategic investment and enterprise support. York connects enterprise to public good, while RCA builds on creativity, design and technology. These approaches show how institutional purpose can guide priorities, resources and partnerships.

THE NCEE PERSPECTIVE

Begin by asking why entrepreneurship matters to your institution and what it should achieve. Use that purpose to guide investment and measures of success.

02 Make entrepreneurship an institutional responsibility

Swansea's network of more than 133 enterprise champions connects academic and professional teams. ARU integrates entrepreneurial thinking across education, innovation and public services. Specialist teams can act as connectors and catalysts for wider change.

THE NCEE PERSPECTIVE

Empower colleagues, develop internal networks and create shared ownership. Building an entrepreneurial culture need not require significant new infrastructure.

Six lessons for building an entrepreneurial university

03 Develop entrepreneurial capability beyond business creation

Swansea's Innovative Thinkers graduate attribute extends enterprise across disciplines. York's interdisciplinary teams tackle sustainability challenges, ARU uses live business projects and Durham's Game Changer introduces innovation through the Sustainable Development Goals.

THE NCEE PERSPECTIVE

Embed entrepreneurial capabilities in the wider educational experience, widening participation and preparing graduates for an uncertain world of work.

04 Build connected pathways, not isolated interventions

Aston's LEARN, START and GROW model links skills, venture creation and business growth. Durham connects initial innovation experiences with venture development. InnovationRCA combines learning, advice, IP protection, incubation and investment.

THE NCEE PERSPECTIVE

Examine provision from the perspective of its users. Are opportunities visible, accessible and connected? Identify gaps and make better use of existing provision.

Six lessons for building an entrepreneurial university

05 Recognise partnerships and networks as strategic assets

York connects entrepreneurs with customers and opportunities. Durham mobilises alumni expertise and philanthropy. Aston builds capability through externally funded programmes, while RCA draws on specialist advisers and investors. ARU's NHS Clinical Entrepreneurs Programme extends impact into public services.

THE NCEE PERSPECTIVE

Build relationships around shared purpose and ensure external collaboration contributes to lasting institutional capability, not only individual projects.

06 Measure what matters

Durham selects measures that reflect institutional context rather than start-up volume alone. Swansea considers graduate capabilities and regional development; ARU illustrates civic and healthcare impact; York's female entrepreneurship research informs regional business support.

THE NCEE PERSPECTIVE

Develop balanced measures aligned with mission, recognising economic and societal outcomes, entrepreneurial capabilities, culture and partnerships. Use evidence to learn and improve.

Different approaches, shared principles. The challenge is not to replicate these six models, but to consider how their principles can inform your own entrepreneurial journey.

Reflecting on your own entrepreneurial journey

Use these questions to stimulate institutional discussion, identify opportunities and shape future ambitions. They are not formal Award assessment criteria.

01 Strategic purpose and leadership

· Is there a shared understanding of what being entrepreneurial means?
· How does entrepreneurship contribute to institutional priorities?
· Is ambition reflected in leadership decisions and resources?

02 Institutional culture and ownership

· Is entrepreneurship a shared responsibility?
· How are academic and professional colleagues empowered?
· How is effective practice shared?

03 Entrepreneurial capabilities and inclusion

· Are learning opportunities accessible across disciplines?
· How are capabilities developed beyond business creation?
· What barriers to participation remain?

04 Entrepreneurial pathways and support

· Are there connected pathways from engagement to growth?
· How do existing programmes and teams complement each other?
· Where are the gaps in your ecosystem?

05 Partnerships and external engagement

· How effectively are alumni, business and community networks mobilised?
· Are partnerships aligned with institutional purpose?
· How can collaboration build lasting capability?

06 Impact and continuous improvement

· Do measures reflect institutional mission and strengths?
· How is wider educational, economic and societal value captured?
· How is evidence used to improve practice?

Supporting your entrepreneurial journey

For more than 20 years, NCEE has worked with universities in the UK and internationally to strengthen entrepreneurial leadership, culture and practice. Through our programmes, networks and partnerships, we support institutions at different stages of their entrepreneurial journeys.

Entrepreneurial University Award

Reflect on your entrepreneurial approach, recognise achievements and identify opportunities for further development through institutional reflection and external assessment.

Entrepreneurial University Leaders

Develop the skills, perspectives and confidence to lead change, identify opportunities and build more entrepreneurial institutions.

Global Alliance of Universities

Connect with an international community committed to developing entrepreneurial capabilities through collaboration, knowledge exchange and shared learning.

Entrepreneurial Universities Summit and EDGE series

Explore emerging challenges, exchange ideas and share examples of entrepreneurial practice with university leaders, educators and practitioners.

Wherever you are on your entrepreneurial journey, NCEE can help you take the next step.
www.ncee.org.uk