



Enterprise Placement Year Programme

5-year review
2020-25

Acknowledgement

from the Author



I would like to thank all of the individuals who participated in this review, and in particular our Enterprise Placement Year Alumni, your time and insights are greatly appreciated.

Thanks also to all those who contributed to the design, content and supported the review of this report.

For any queries about this report or the wider programme, please contact Jackie Smyth at j.smyth@ulster.ac.uk

Jackie Smyth
Employability & Enterprise Consultant



“ EPY doesn't just nurture individual entrepreneurial talent, it actively strengthens the broader innovation landscape by connecting ambitious students with the resources, networks, and real-world experience they need to succeed.”

Amy Junkin, General Manager, Ormeau Labs

Foreword

from Professor Angela Scanlon



Higher education in Northern Ireland, is a sector which empowers individuals through academic achievement and personal growth, serving as a catalyst for regional growth, economic prosperity, and innovation. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, universities in Northern Ireland are rising to meet the demands of a rapidly evolving global economy, while fostering local talent and creating meaningful opportunities for students and graduates to thrive in an ever-changing landscape.

The broader impact of higher education on Northern Ireland's local economy is also undeniable. Universities attract substantial investment, foster partnerships with businesses, and contribute to the creation of high-value jobs and industries. This, in turn, helps to strengthen the region's economic resilience, reduces unemployment, and supports the creation of sustainable futures. Ulster University is an engine of enterprise and has a long history of developing excellence in research, innovation, and entrepreneurship, providing students with the skills, knowledge, and confidence to launch new ventures and drive many local and global advancements.

Launching in 2020, the entrepreneurial spirit within UU students has been supported and cultivated through the provision of a new innovative pathway - **the Enterprise Placement Year (EPY)**, encouraging students and graduates to explore ideas and innovations enabling them to launch new entrepreneurial ventures or enter the workforce as leaders, trailblazers, and changemakers in their respective field. As an award-winning team recognised across the UK sector, the Employability & Graduate Futures team at UU secured the Association of HE Careers Services (AHECS) Strategic

Innovation Award in 2023 and are now engaged by the professional body for work based and placement learning, ASET, to deliver CPD training to UK Universities on Placement Learning through Freelancing and Entrepreneurship.

Graduates who have engaged in the enterprise placement year option, transition to professional life with specialised academic skills complimented by broader, transferable capabilities that make them highly adaptable as a business leader and or changemaker. Whether entering the public, private, or non-profit sectors, the skills honed during their applied EPY experience - critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and collaboration, position them as valuable assets to the local and regional community whether as an employer or employee.

Since 2020 over 100 EPY students, including the new 2025/26 cohort of 35 students, have been demonstrating success in a range of competitive spaces including: regional and national competitions, securing investment, fostering partnerships with businesses, freelance consultancy, exploring and building new markets and generating over £1.25 million in turnover across a range of business areas while contributing to the creation of jobs within their local communities and beyond. With 65 new businesses launched in the first 5 years, and another 22 launching in 2025/26, this has and will undoubtedly help to strengthen the region's economic resilience, reduce unemployment, and contribute to Skills Strategy for NI – Skills for a 10x Economy (DfE) – and the creation of a sustainable future for generations to come.

As we continue to nurture the next generation of leaders, innovators, and skilled professionals our Enterprise Placement Year graduates are a shining example of the synergy between higher education, the local economy, and the global job market which as a consequence of their success will only grow stronger, making Northern Ireland a vibrant, dynamic, and prosperous place to live and work.

Well done to all our EPY graduates and changemakers, whether you are growing your business or bringing your insight and ambition to other businesses locally and globally, we at Ulster University are confident that you have and will continue to make a positive difference to economic success.

Professor Angela Scanlon
Director of Student and Graduate Success

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Background to Enterprise Placement Year at Ulster University

Rationale

Entrepreneurship education has grown in recent years, with enterprise and entrepreneurship being seen as a key route to securing future jobs, either by the graduates creating jobs themselves or applying entrepreneurial skills to employment opportunities. Young Enterprise NI state that creativity, enterprising and being commercially aware are the foundations for the future of our Economy, the Northern Ireland Executive shares this view and have acknowledged the value of appropriate education pathways as part of the 10X Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland “to enable all our citizens to reach their potential, benefitting from and contributing to a stronger, more prosperous, more resilient Northern Ireland” (2022).

The Enterprise Placement Year (EPY) programme was developed in September 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic in response to cancellation of industrial placements and students keen to undertake placement on a self-employed basis instead. This first cohort of 9 students were from various disciplines, with very little business knowledge or skills to enable them to commercialise their products or services.

A collaboration between the Enterprise team at UUSU and the team from Employability & Graduate Futures led to the design of a wraparound business support programme, delivered fully online, to support these students in launching their businesses over their placement year and additionally earn their Diploma in Professional Practice.

Since then, the programme has been developed and improved to become a fully accredited module comprising bi-monthly workshops on business topics; monthly one to one mentoring; weekly drop ins; external business partner support and networking events and provision of free hotdesking in co-working spaces.

This module is now highly in demand as an alternative pathway for placement at Ulster for those students who desire to be a self-employed professional, whether they wish to set up a company, a social enterprise, operate as a sole trader or provide consultancy services on a freelance basis. Students are supported to develop business and consultancy skills, using creativity, originality, innovation, and problem-solving skills to move ideas to practical action.

Working independently, students are supported by the Employability & Graduate Futures team, local enterprise and business development partners, national student societies and gain access to exciting events, initiatives, and funded opportunities to develop employability and entrepreneurial skills so that they can manage their future careers in a changing landscape.

A Diploma in Professional Practice (DPP) is awarded upon passing the module which is assessed through a digital portfolio showcasing their business progress & professional development, a critical reflection of the year and a final business pitch to a panel of ‘dragons’ from our business support network. This final pitch also affords the opportunity for students to win prize funds for their business development.

What is Enterprise Placement Year at Ulster University?

Overview

The Enterprise Placement Year (EPY) at Ulster University is a self-employment placement programme designed to support students in launching and developing their own businesses or freelance ventures. Delivered by the EPY Team within Employability & Graduate Futures, this accredited programme provides a structured and supportive environment for students to build commercial and professional competencies which align to the Graduate Attributes Framework (ulster.ac.uk/graduateattributes).

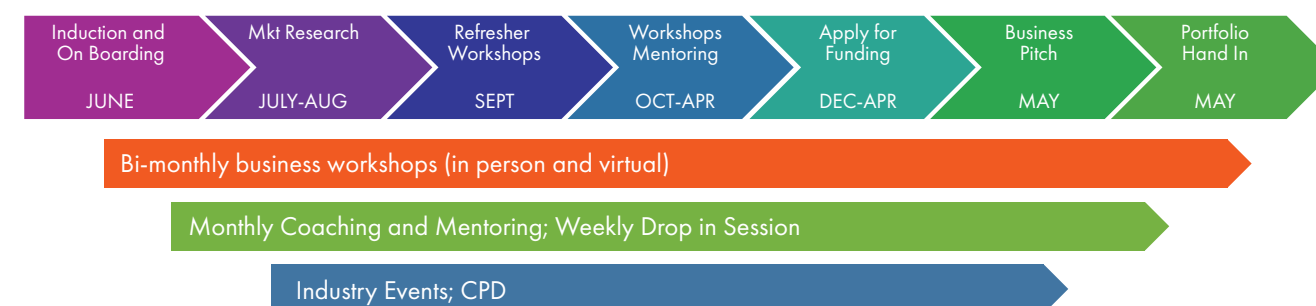


Figure 1: The EPY programme schedule

Programme Structure

Running annually from June to May, EPY combines supported learning, mentoring, and practical guidance with self-directed development. Students are also encouraged to engage with sector-specific events to enhance networking and continuous professional development.

Induction and Initial Engagement

The programme begins with a three-day in-person induction hosted by strategic partners such as Catalyst, Innovation Factory, and Ulster Bank Accelerator. This induction introduces students to the entrepreneurial landscape, fosters peer connections, and covers key topics including entrepreneurial mindset, branding, networking, and workplace wellbeing. Student feedback consistently highlights this induction as a pivotal moment in their entrepreneurial journey.

Ongoing Support and Coaching

Each student is assigned an EPY Coach from the Graduate Development Team, supported by the Employability and Enterprise Consultant and Academic Lead. Monthly coaching sessions focus on goal setting, progress tracking and overcoming challenges. Students also gain access to external entrepreneurship programmes such as Go Succeed, The King’s Trust, and Co-Founders, which help accelerate their route to market.

Community and Connectivity

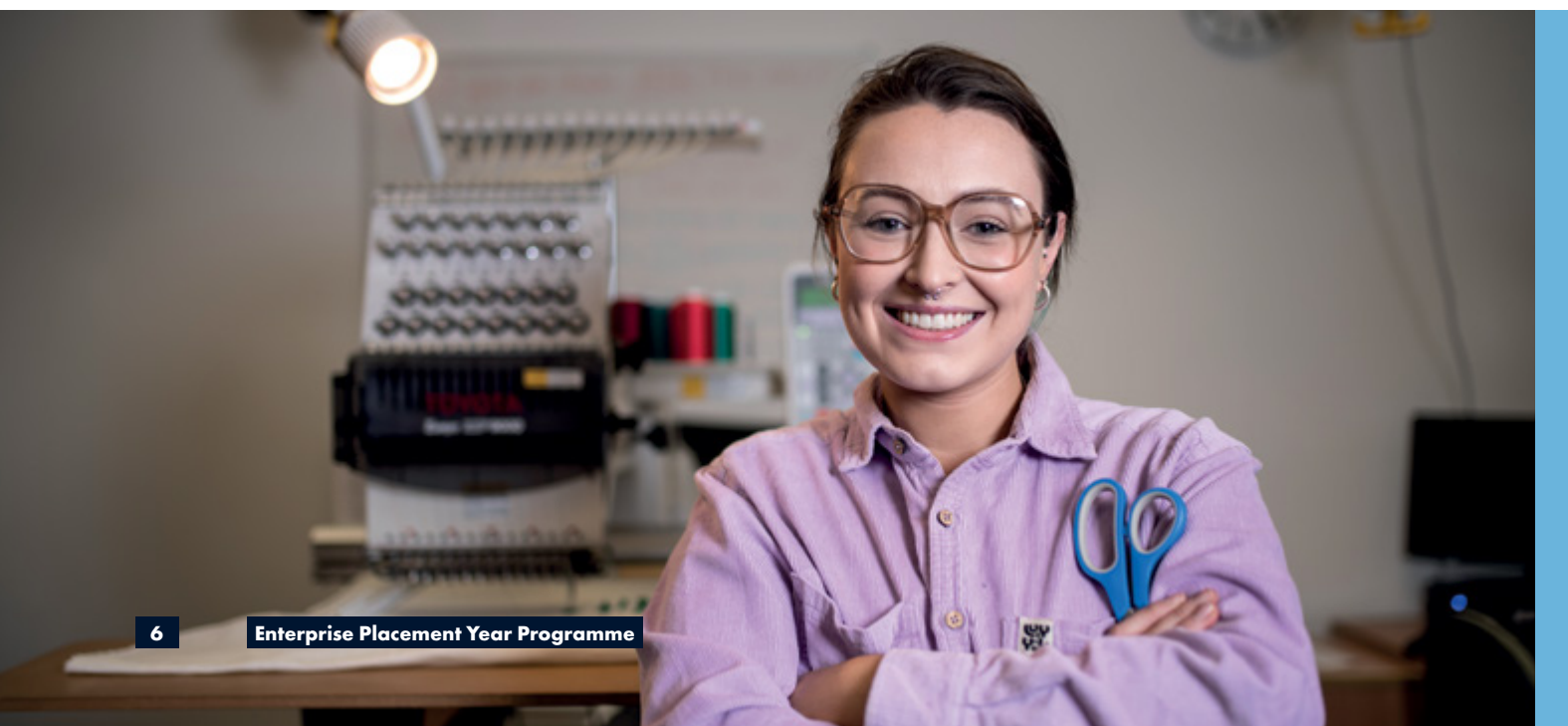
Weekly virtual “stand-up” meetings provide a platform for wellbeing check-ins, issue resolution, and community building. Bi-monthly workshops—alternating between in-person and virtual formats—offer flexibility and reduce travel costs. These sessions, delivered by internal and external stakeholders, cover essential business topics including the 5 Ps of marketing: Product, Price, Place, Promotion, and People. Students also engage with local entrepreneurs to gain insights into real-world business experiences.

Regional Engagement and Workspace Access

All in-person workshops are hosted at entrepreneurial hubs across Northern Ireland, enabling students to build regional networks and connect with Local Enterprise Agencies, Council Business Support teams, and other entrepreneurial resources. Many students benefit from free or subsidised workspace access, which helps reduce isolation, improve mental wellbeing, foster collaboration, and enhance professional development. These spaces have proven instrumental in driving business growth, with students reporting increased sales, innovation, and investment opportunities.

Funding and Competitions

Throughout the year, students are supported to apply for competitive funding opportunities such as INVENT, Student INVENT, Ideate Ireland, Santander X, The Ultimate Pitch, and the Enterprise Hub Bursary. EPY participants have consistently performed well, often securing awards and recognition alongside mainstream business competitors.



Academic Achievement

Throughout the Enterprise Placement Year (EPY), students engage in the development of their own businesses or freelance ventures, with all activities contributing toward the attainment of a Diploma in Professional Practice (DPP)—a 60-credit academic module. Assessment is based on three key components, presented at the conclusion of the year:

- 1 A Digital Portfolio documenting their entrepreneurial and professional development journey;
- 2 A Critical Reflection evaluating their experiences and learning outcomes;
- 3 A Business Pitch, which serves both as an academic assessment and an opportunity to compete for prize funding to support their venture.

The module is led and assessed by the EPY Academic Lead, who provides ongoing guidance and support to ensure students are well-positioned to succeed in this self-directed placement year. Upon successful completion, students graduate with their degree awarded with Diploma in Professional Practice, formally recognising their achievements and applied learning throughout their EPY.

The EPY programme has made a significant impact on the ambitions, attainment and ultimately the lives of students in the School of Communication and Media. EPY students are thriving on the programme and return to final year energised and enthused to continue developing themselves and their businesses.

(Adrian Hickey, Associate Head of School, Communications and Media)

Enterprise Placement Year Team at Ulster University

The Enterprise Placement Year programme is managed and delivered by the Employability and Graduate Futures department at Ulster University, with designated members on the EPY team below.

Head of Employability and Graduate Futures
Shauna McCloy

Course Director and Academic Lead
Dr. Donna Caldwell (Interim)
Dr. Patricia McDonnell

Employability and Enterprise Consultant
Jackie Smyth

Graduate Development Coaches
Kate Crosbie
Rebecca Ellison
Angie Johnston
Katrina Marron



Awards/Recognition

The EPY programme at Ulster University is widely recognised by the UK & Irish University network as a leading innovative programme of support for student entrepreneurship and as such it attained the Strategic Innovation Award at AHECS Ireland (Association of Higher Education Careers Service) in April 2023.



Jackie Smyth & Ursula McTaggart receiving AHECS Strategic Innovation Award for EPY, April 2023

The EPY team are also engaged by ASET (professional body for work based and placement learning) in delivering annual CPD training to UK Universities who do not yet or are in their early stages of supporting students on a self-employed placement year, sharing insights and inviting collaboration with our colleagues across the HE network. In September 2022 colleagues travelled to Keele University for the annual ASET conference, delivering in person workshops on 'Placement learning through Freelancing and Entrepreneurship'.



ASET conference at Keele University 2022, Dr. Rachel Shannon, Seamus McConomy, Samantha McCombe (Placement Student), Jackie Smyth.



Entrepreneurship in Northern Ireland: Key Trends and Challenges

Entrepreneurship is increasingly viewed as a viable career path across the UK and Ireland, with societal support for entrepreneurial values reaching 71.65% in the UK and 67.02% in Ireland - both above the regional average of 63.39%. According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM, 2022), Northern Ireland's entrepreneurial landscape is largely driven by graduates, reflecting a strong link between higher education and start-up activity (see Table 2).

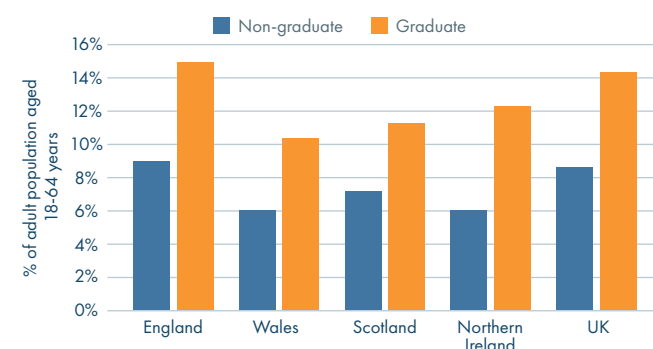


Table 1: Total early-stage Entrepreneurial Activity in the UK Home Nations by Graduate Status, 2022 (Source: GEM APS, 2022)

The Department for the Economy (DfE) highlights Northern Ireland's "young and fast-growing population" as a strategic asset, emphasising the need to attract and retain talent capable of becoming the entrepreneurs of tomorrow. (Department for the Economy NI, 2018)

Globally, the UK and Ireland ranked 18th and 24th respectively in GEM's 2022 index of best countries for entrepreneurship. This ranking considers factors such as post-school entrepreneurial education and societal norms that support entrepreneurship as a career choice (Table 2).

Rank	GEM Economy	NECI Score
1	United Arab Emirates	6.8
2	Netherlands	6.3
3	Finland	6.2
4	Saudi Arabia	6.1
5	Lithuania	6.1
18	United Kingdom	4.9
24	Ireland	4.7

Table 2: Ranking of countries on NECI 2021 score (National Entrepreneurial Context Index)

TEA Statistics and Youth Entrepreneurship

The GEM Northern Ireland 2023/24 Report shows that Total Early-stage Entrepreneurial Activity (TEA) in NI stands at 9.7%, below the UK average of 10.7% and England's 10.8%. Gender disparities persist, with female TEA at 8.2% compared to 11.3% for males. However, the 18–24 age group in NI has emerged as the most entrepreneurial, with TEA rising from 10.5% in 2022 to 13% in 2023. (Luong, et al., 2023)

TEA Rates (2023)

NI Average	9.7%
UK Average	10.7%
England Average	10.8%
Female TEA Rate in NI	8.2%
Male TEA Rate in NI	11.3%
18-24 age group in NI	13%

Research data from the Graduate Outcomes Reports (2025) shows that 11.1% of UK domiciled graduates were self-employed 15 months after graduation, with 3.8% based in Northern Ireland.¹

This surge in youth entrepreneurship suggests successful outreach to students and recent graduates. University-led incubators and enterprise hubs have played a pivotal role in fostering innovation and start-up culture.

"The EPY programme was my favourite year of university, it gave me a chance to see if running my business full time after university was a realistic and viable option for me, and it proved it was - 2 years after graduating my business is growing steadily and has just expanded to include a second business."

(Tyler Currie, TDC Motors, 2021-22)

Gaps in Support and the Role of Higher Education

Despite these positive trends, tailored support for student and graduate entrepreneurs remains limited. The recent withdrawal of Invest NI's "Student to First Sale" programme has created a gap in the ecosystem, placing greater responsibility on universities and colleges to provide targeted support.

Ulster University's EPY programme is a timely intervention aimed at addressing this need. However, sustained efforts are required to ensure student-led ventures remain viable beyond graduation and continue contributing to the local economy.

Enterprise Placement Year (EPY) Student Participation: 2020–2025

Figure 2 illustrates a steady increase in student engagement with the Enterprise Placement Year (EPY) programme over the past five academic years. A total of 86 students participated, launching 65 businesses or freelance ventures as part of their preparation for post-graduate self-employment. Notably, the 2021–2022 academic year saw a significant surge in participation, attributed to the reduced availability of traditional placements during the COVID-19 pandemic. This prompted many students to pursue self-employment as an alternative placement route.

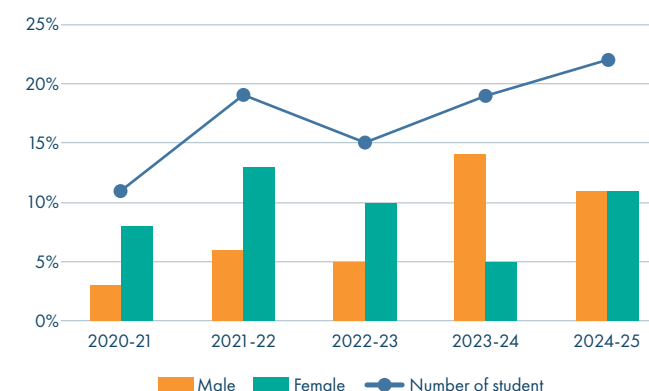


Figure 2: Students undertaking EPY between 2020-25

In addition to the core EPY programme, a further 30 students undertook consultancy-based placements within their academic Schools. These placements followed completion of the Civic and Economic Recovery (CER) module, developed in response to the pandemic. Over a 15-week period, students engaged in consultancy projects and received targeted professional development support, including coaching in freelance consultancy skills such as business communication, report writing, time management, and remote collaboration. Participation has continued to grow in the current academic year (2025–2026), with a new cohort of 35 students initiating 22 business and freelance ventures. These include both sole trader enterprises and collaborative business partnerships.

Student Origins and Subject Representation on the Enterprise Placement Year (EPY) Programme

The Enterprise Placement Year (EPY) is available to all undergraduate students who are eligible to undertake a full placement year as part of their degree programme. As illustrated in Figure 3, the programme attracts students from a diverse range of disciplines across all Schools and campuses at Ulster University, reflecting a strong entrepreneurial mindset among the student body, irrespective of academic background.

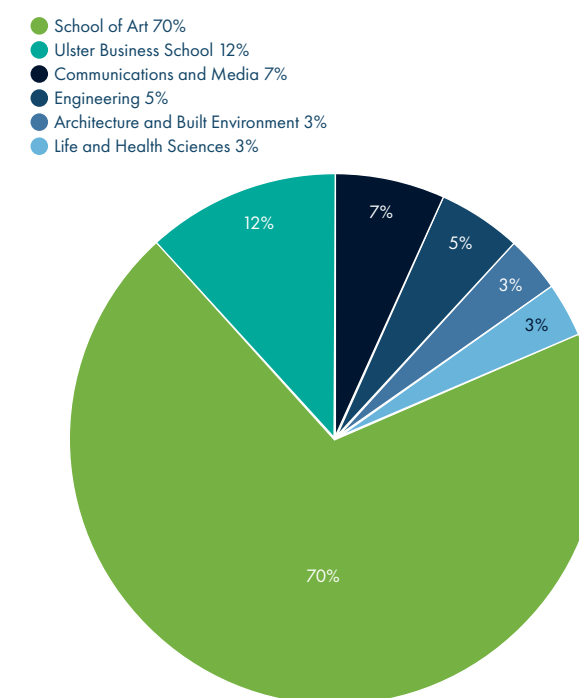


Figure 3: Schools represented on EPY programme

A particularly high level of engagement has been observed among students from the Belfast School of Art, with 70% of EPY participants over the past five years coming from programmes such as Creative Arts, Games Design, and Textile Art Design & Fashion. This trend is closely linked to the employment landscape within the creative industries, where traditional job opportunities remain limited. According to the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA, 2025):

"The number of jobs in the creative industries decreased by 1% compared with 2022, while overall employment in Northern Ireland increased by 2%."

¹ <https://luminate.prospects.ac.uk/self-employed-graduates-in-the-uk>

Employment in the creative sector has consistently accounted for only 3–4% of total employment in Northern Ireland between 2011 and 2023. However, entrepreneurial activity within the sector is growing, with the music, performing, and visual arts subsector experiencing an 11% increase in business sites between 2023 and 2024. This shift underscores the importance of freelance and entrepreneurial pathways as viable career options for graduates in these fields. It is therefore essential that tailored support is provided to ensure students pursuing degrees in these areas can sustain meaningful careers post-graduation.

Table 3 presents the distribution of EPY students by campus, with the majority based at the Belfast campus. This is attributable not only to higher student numbers but also to the concentration of programmes aligned with entrepreneurial and freelance career paths, particularly within the Belfast School of Art.

Campus	Student Numbers	Percentage
Belfast	60	70%
Coleraine	15	17%
Derry/ Londonderry	11	13%

Table 3: Campus representation on EPY 2020-25

Over the past five years, EPY participants have come from a broad spectrum of subject areas, including:

- Animation
- Business Analytics
- Communication, Media & Public Relations (CMPR)
- Consumer Management & Food Innovation
- Creative Audio
- Culinary Arts
- Economics
- Engineering
- Events Management
- Food & Nutrition
- Games Design
- Graphic Design
- Illustration
- Interactive Media
- Investment & Finance
- Journalism with English
- Marketing
- Music
- Photography and Videography
- Product Design
- Sport
- Technology with Design
- Textile Art Design & Fashion

This diversity highlights the cross-disciplinary appeal of the EPY programme and its relevance to a wide range of career aspirations.



Higher Education Driving Entrepreneurial Trends in NI

The student and graduate-led enterprises which had their start via the EPY programme are dominantly in creative industries (animation, games design, video, publishing – see Figure 4) and align closely with the regional economic momentum in the creative & digital media sector as outlined below.

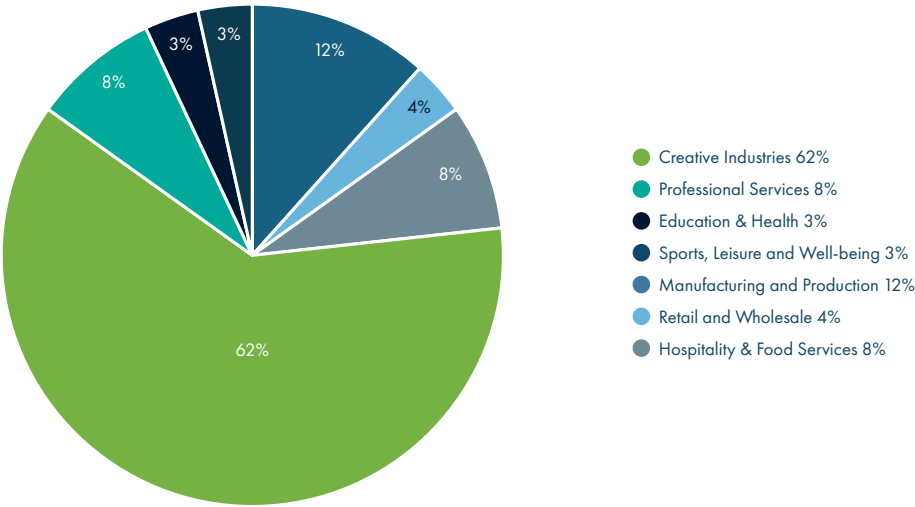


Figure 4: Business sectors represented on EPY 2020-25

In 2020, Northern Ireland had approximately 3,500 creative businesses, making up around 3.8% of all business units, with creative industries contributing £1,311 million in GVA and showing strong growth (12% increase from 2018 to 2019). (NI Business Info, 2022)

The creative technology sector in Northern Ireland—covering gaming, animation, media, and interactive content—is vibrant and export-oriented. “From December 2021 to April 2023, the number of staff working in video games in Northern Ireland grew by around 33.5% (Source: TIGA’s Making Games in the UK 2023 report)” (Invest NI, 2024)

This is reflected with a 37% increase in Games Design students from 2023 to this current year seeking business support via the EPY programme to get a head start on setting up their own studios and launching their own games.

“The Enterprise Placement Year (EPY) has become a vital part of our Games Design programme at Ulster University, with more students choosing it to launch their own studios, build business skills, and pitch to publishers. A standout example is Mad Moon Studios, who emerged from EPY and now contribute actively to the local games industry. EPY has strengthened our industry links, enhanced student resilience, and elevated the profile of our course—supporting the growth of Northern Ireland’s creative sector.

(Brian Coyle, Senior Lecturer in Games Design)

As shown in Figure 4, the next highest sectors represented from EPY businesses are in Manufacturing and Hospitality, which are among the largest and most influential business sectors in Northern Ireland, driving prosperity and economic strategy. (Trade NI, 2023)

Development of EPY student ventures in manufacturing innovations are welcomed in Northern Ireland with an investment of £4.3 million launched in 2024 aimed at helping micro-businesses and SMEs embrace innovation.

The growth of hospitality and food-related businesses on EPY echoes the regional drive in these business sectors, with an economic impact of approximately £6.9 billion annually.

All these alignments are well-supported by the sources above, emphasising the relevance and strategic value of the student entrepreneurial activity to Northern Ireland’s larger economic vision.



Student Demographics on the Enterprise Placement Year Programme

Gender Balance

The gender distribution within the EPY programme at Ulster University reflects a relatively balanced representation, with a male-to-female ratio of 54% to 46%. This compares favourably to broader entrepreneurial trends in Northern Ireland. According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) Northern Ireland Report 2023/24, the Total Early-stage Entrepreneurial Activity (TEA) rate was 11.3% for males and 8.2% for females, indicating a gender ratio of approximately 58% male to 42% female. (Luong, et al., 2023)

Despite Northern Ireland having the lowest proportion of female-led companies in the UK at 13.6%—compared to the UK average of 17.3%—female-led businesses in the region are demonstrating strong performance in accessing external capital. In 2023, 27.6% of female-led companies in Northern Ireland secured external investment, the highest rate across all UK regions (McErlean, 2023).

The EPY programme actively supports female entrepreneurship through strategic partnerships with organisations such as Women in Business NI and initiatives like the Barclays Labs Female Co-Working Club and Fierce Belfast. These efforts align with national trends showing increasing female engagement in entrepreneurship, particularly in sectors driven by social impact.

Social Deprivation

Entrepreneurship has proven to be a viable pathway for individuals from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The 2023 “Mission Critical” report by Social Enterprise UK highlights that over 131,000 social enterprises operate across the UK, many of which are embedded in deprived communities. These enterprises collectively reinvest over £1 billion annually into their missions, demonstrating their economic and social value. (Luong, et al., 2023)

The EPY programme has seen a notable emergence of student-led businesses originating from rural and economically deprived areas. These ventures have benefited from local council and lottery funding, highlighting the importance of community-based support mechanisms. Motivations such as “earning a living because jobs are scarce” remain prevalent, particularly in regions with limited employment opportunities.

Ulster University enhances this support through collaboration with Student Wellbeing and Student Success teams, offering tailored guidance in areas such as personal finance, learning support, and motivational coaching. This holistic approach ensures that students from all backgrounds can access the support needed to succeed in enterprise.

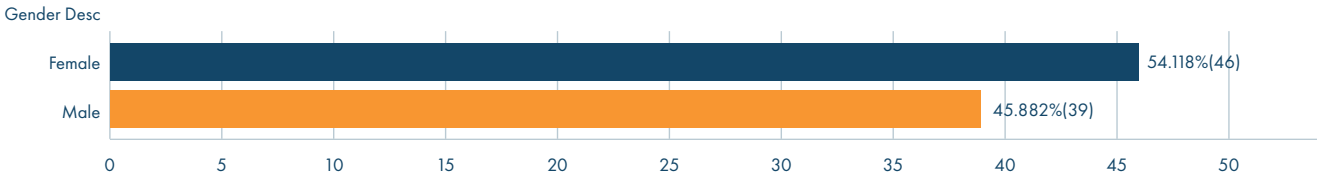


Figure 5: Percentage of Male to Female EPY students undertaking EPY between 2020-25

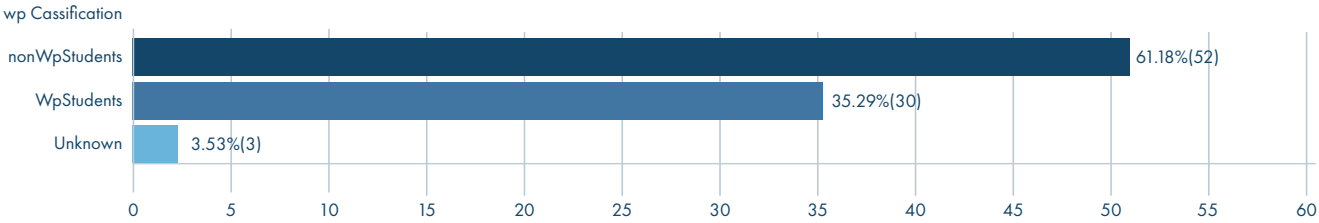


Figure 6: Breakdown of Widening Access Participation students undertaking EPY between 2020-25

Disabilities

Entrepreneurship among individuals with disabilities is gaining recognition as a powerful avenue for self-employment and economic inclusion. A 2023 report by Small Business Britain and Lloyds Bank found that 25% of UK entrepreneurs identify as disabled or neurodiverse. However, 84% of these individuals feel they lack equal access to opportunities and resources compared to their non-disabled peers. (Luong, Hart, Bonner, Prashar, & Hewitt-Dundas, 2024)

Within the EPY programme, 22% of students have disclosed a registered disability.

Survey responses highlight that the programme’s flexible and supportive environment enables these students to thrive. One participant noted, “**Severe OCD and EDS are not the best friends of self-employment, but I worked around them,**” illustrating the resilience and adaptability fostered through EPY.

Support is further strengthened by Ulster University’s newly established Student Talent team and Student Wellbeing Team, which specialise in assisting students with disabilities—including those with neurodiverse conditions—into professional employment. Their work focuses on building confidence, communication skills, and resilience, which are critical for entrepreneurial success.

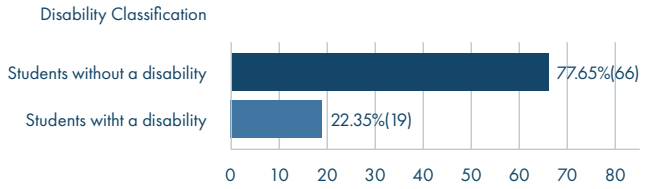


Figure 7: Breakdown of Students with a disability undertaking EPY between 2020-25

Ethnic Minorities

According to the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (2023), 3.45% of the population belongs to ethnic minority groups in Northern Ireland. However, as Figure 8 illustrates, the EPY programme attracts students from various ethnic backgrounds who make up 7% of this student demographic, thus showcasing the inclusive nature of student entrepreneurship on this self-employed placement option.

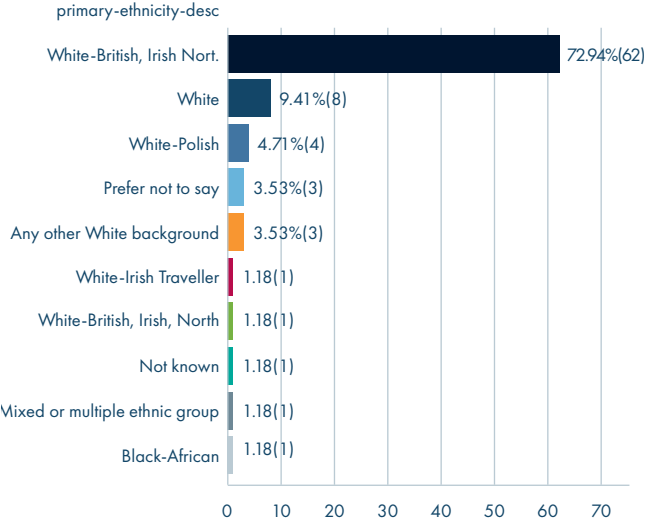


Figure 8: Percentage of Ethnic Minority students undertaking EPY 2020-25



Support for Enterprise Placement Year

Financial Provision

As the Enterprise Placement Year (EPY) is a self-employed placement option, the year is unsalaried, therefore, by opting into this programme students assume a financial risk, as they are required to pay placement fees and may face limitations in accessing student loans or grants through Student Finance NI.

In response, the Employability & Graduate Futures department has proactively sought financial support from various sources, including Widening Access and Participation (WP) funding, to mitigate these challenges. (Figure 9)

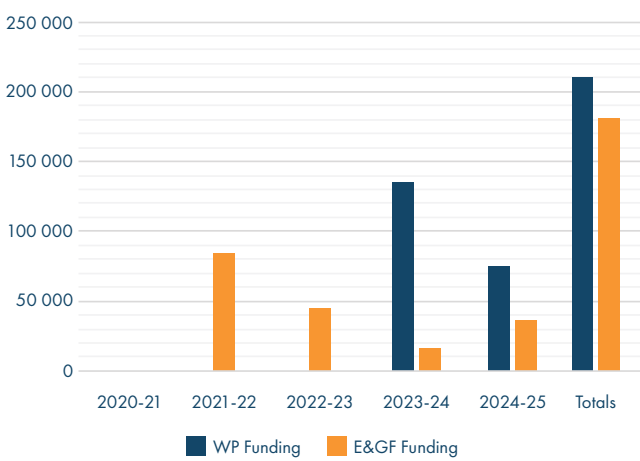


Figure 9: EPY Bursaries from Widening Participation and Employability and Graduate Futures 2020-25

Financial Barriers

Despite efforts to increase financial assistance, the bursaries awarded in some years is below the placement fee of £2,360 (see Table 4). Approximately 35% of EPY participants come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, and others face additional living costs due to not residing at home. Furthermore, the financial demands of launching a business—such as securing resources, managing partnerships, and accessing capital—can deter students from applying or lead to attrition during the year.

EPY Cohort	No. of Students	Total Bursaries	Average per Student
2020/21	11	£0.00	£0.00
2021/22	19	£84,000.00	£4,421.05
2022/23	15	£45,000.00	£3,000.00
2023/24	19	£151,000.00	£7,947.37
2024/25	22	£111,000.00	£5,045.45

Table 4: EPY Bursaries 2020-25

The average bursary per student has varied significantly across cohorts, resulting in disparities in funding distribution, limited access to opportunities, and uncertainty for students prior to accepting a place. This variability also necessitates careful management of student expectations regarding the support and opportunities available throughout the year.

The programme has benefited greatly from the generous pro bono contributions and complimentary workspace offered by business supporters, made possible through the EPY team’s strong professional networks and Ulster University’s valued corporate partnerships. As the programme continues to grow, unlocking further business development opportunities—many of which involve associated costs—will be key to enhancing impact and accessibility. With additional funding, these opportunities can become more readily available to participants, helping to drive even greater success.

Student Employment and Business Development Focus

While students are permitted to engage in part-time employment (up to 16 hours per week), the core objective of the EPY programme is to support the development of viable products and services, the establishment of sustainable businesses, and the achievement of financial independence. A key indicator of success is when a student can transition from part-time work to full-time commitment to their business. However, without appropriate financing, this transition may be delayed, as time spent in external employment detracts from business development. Alternative investment options could accelerate progress, enabling students to reach market potential sooner and position their ventures for growth and scalability.

“The EPY programme has been a genuinely transformative experience. It provided me with the structure and confidence to take my business idea seriously and shape it into something tangible. The support and insight I received, particularly around business planning, funding opportunities and creative development were invaluable in helping me grow Blue Pool into a viable, exciting venture. I would highly recommend the programme to anyone with a creative or entrepreneurial spark looking to take the next step.”

(Sam Foote, Blue Pool PR, Cohort 2023-24)

Workshops, Coaching and Mentoring

The EPY programme’s workshop provision has evolved significantly since its inception in 2020, which was delivered entirely online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Subsequent years adopted a hybrid model, with a mix of online and in-person sessions, with a total of 93 workshops delivered during the 5 year period. Following student feedback, a revised format was introduced featuring one in-person and one online workshop per month.

Students have expressed a strong preference for in-person delivery, citing screen fatigue and the value of peer interaction and informal discussions. However, given the geographic spread of student businesses across Northern Ireland, travel costs and time remain a consideration. To address this, the EPY team has secured free-of-charge venues in Belfast, Antrim, and Coleraine to ensure equitable access, although most sessions continue to be held in Belfast due to cost constraints.

Workshop topics span both business and professional development, including:

- Market Research
- Business Financing
- Branding and Marketing
- Contracts and Trademarks
- Business Model Canvas
- SMART Planning
- Professional Communication
- Pitching Skills

These sessions are delivered by the EPY team, internal university colleagues (e.g., the Law Clinic), and external partners such as Ulster Bank Accelerator, Antrim Enterprise, Enterprise Causeway, and Innovation Factory (see Strategic Partnerships on page 25).

Coaching and Mentoring has also expanded from being exclusively delivered by the Employability & Enterprise Consultant to include Graduate Development Coaches trained in business coaching. This has enabled increased student intake and more distributed support. The Consultant continues to provide mentoring when required, oversee complex business cases and supports the EPY coaches throughout the year.

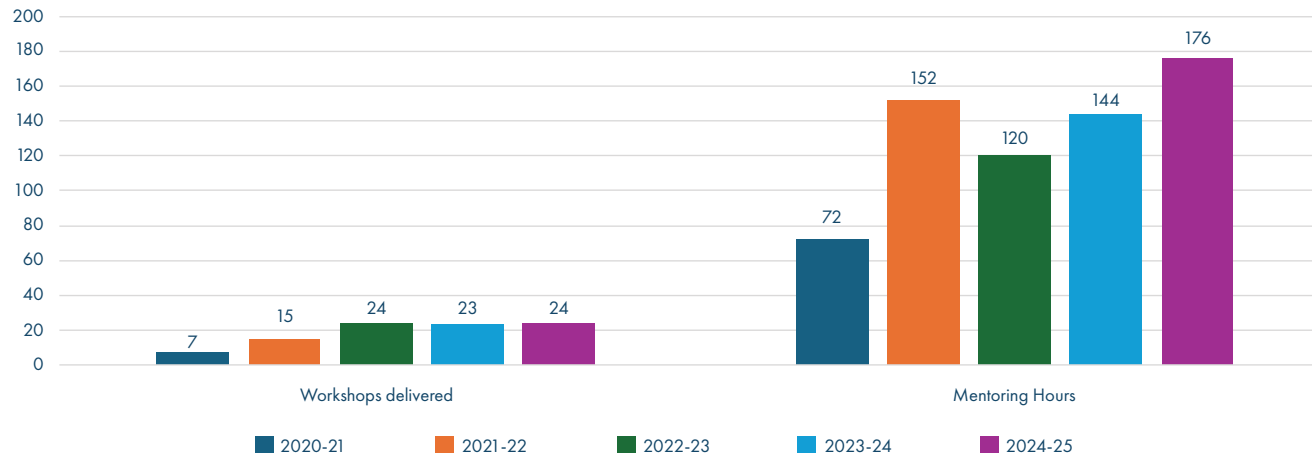
Monthly coaching sessions are mandatory, with additional support available upon request. These sessions are informed by students’ monthly logs, which outline goals, achievements, challenges, and support needs. The coaching process encourages critical and creative thinking to help students overcome barriers and progress their business ventures.

Students are also signposted to relevant external supports within the Northern Ireland entrepreneurial ecosystem, including:

- Go Succeed
- Local Enterprise Agencies
- Catalyst Student Invent
- 22 Under 22 Entrepreneurs (Belfast)
- Enterprise Ireland Student Entrepreneurship Awards

Additional support includes assistance with funding applications, pitch preparation, business meeting readiness, proposal writing, and negotiation skills.

As reflected in survey results, mentoring has consistently been rated as the most valuable aspect of the EPY programme, with student feedback highlighting its significant impact.



Celebrating Innovation, Creativity, and Enterprise: The EPY Yearbook 2020-25

Welcome to this special photographic yearbook, a celebration of the entrepreneurial spirit, creativity, and determination of students who embarked on the Enterprise Placement Year (EPY) at Ulster University.

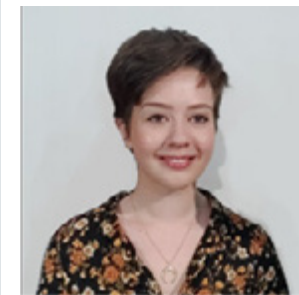
This yearbook captures not only the faces behind these ventures but also the stories of resilience, growth, and success. Many of our EPY alumni have continued their entrepreneurial journeys beyond graduation, turning placement-year ideas into thriving careers.

This stands as a testament to the power of enterprise education in unlocking potential and shaping future-ready graduates.

As you turn these pages, we invite you to be inspired by the journeys of these student entrepreneurs—each one a reflection of what's possible when passion meets opportunity.

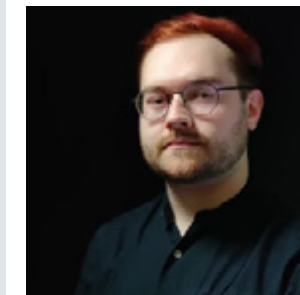


EPY Cohort 2020/21



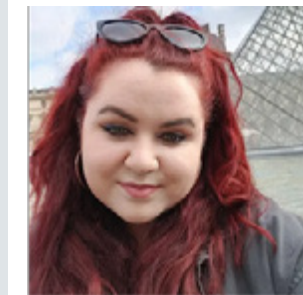
Sinead Burns
Aura Digital Studios
BA (Hons) Animation
Graduated 2022

Award winning virtual production company based in Belfast.



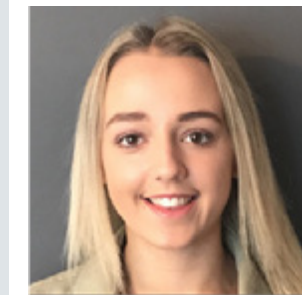
Josh McAvoy
Aura Digital Studios
BA (Hons) Animation
Graduated 2022

Award winning virtual production company based in Belfast.



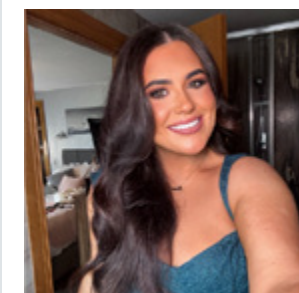
Eva Robinson
Aura Digital Studios
BA (Hons) Animation
Graduated 2022

Award winning virtual production company based in Belfast.



Emma Hutchinson
Power of Touch
BSc (Hons) Sport
Graduated 2022

Power of Touch is a portable sports massage therapy service offering Deep Tissue Massage, Acupuncture & Cupping Therapy.



Rose McGuigan
Bites by Rose
Head of Home Economics
St Louise's Belfast
BSc (Hons) Consumer
Management & Food
Innovation
Graduated 2022

In addition to those featured above, this cohort included:

Tierna King, Hannah Phelan
Manic Designs

Sophie Riddell
Love Sophie Photography

Reece Anderson
The Candid Cake

EPY Cohort 2023/24



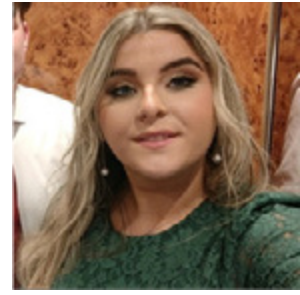
Tyler Currie
TDC Motors
BSc (Hons) Finance, investment
& Management
Graduated 2023

An independent second hand car dealer offering finance plans to suit different budgets.



Michelle Farmer
Kouros
BSc (Hons) Energy
Graduated 2023
Completing PhD

Renewable energy solutions for micro farming.



Georgina Harrison
Beautiful Bakes and Fabulous Cakes, Blackpool
Food Safety Audit Technologist, Dunbia
BSc (Hons) Consumer Mgmt & Food Innovation
Graduated 2023
Top 5 places in Lancs for Afternoon Tea (2022)



Ethan Hill
Troggs Surf School
BSc (Hons) Interactive Media
Graduated 2023

Offering Surf & Paddle Board lessons, hire and a new retail outlet in Portrush, Co. Antrim.

'Top 5 places to learn to surf in the UK in 2022' The Guardian



Lauren Kelso
Lauren Kelso Illustration
BA (Hons) Graphic Design & Illustration
Graduated 2023

Award winning illustrator with newly opened studio & retail outlet in Ballymena.



Cassie Kennice
Cassie Kennice Marketing
BSc (Hons) Interactive Media
Graduated 2023

Creation of websites and social media management for SMEs and micro businesses around the Carrickfergus area.



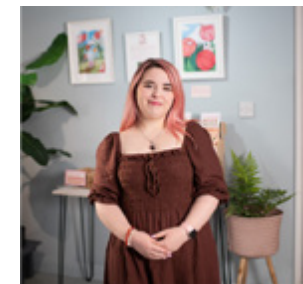
Grainne Mullan
Point Angel
BA (Hons) Textile Design and Fashion
Graduated 2023

A freelance textile artist, and Co-Founder of Kitsch Sisters CIC delivering workshops in embroidery and craft.



Deneen White
Southside
Conferencing & Events Asst, QUB
BSc (Hons) Events Mgmt
Graduated 2023

Vintage clothing pop up focused on sustainability.



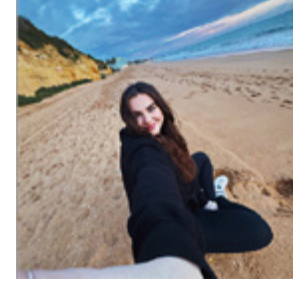
Courtney Stockman
Limseca Studios
BA (Hons) Animation
Graduated 2023

Specialising in anime style art, and accessories with over 11k followers on Social Media and a fan favourite at Comic Con.

In addition to those featured above, this cohort included:

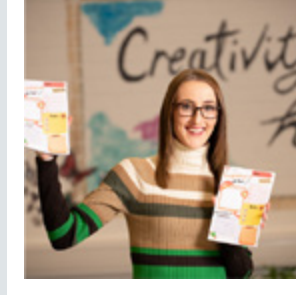
Joe O'Hagan - Soniscapes
Michael Cassidy
Magnus MacMathuna - Kouros
Caitlin McAlinden, Georgia Irvine, KerryAnn Denny - Fearless Three Events
Oisín McDevitt - Lumino Works
Courtney Sofley - C S Designs
Meghan Dunne - Meep
Beth Corner - Beth Bunny

EPY Cohort 2024/25



Ebony Alexander
Ebony Alexander Media
BSc (Hons) Interactive Media
Graduated 2024

Freelance photographer & videographer specialising in music & events.



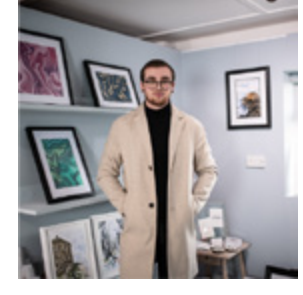
Eilis Gilloway
Eire le h'Eilis
BA (Hons) Irish
Graduated 2024

Irish Language merchandising business providing printed designs on a range of media and textiles.



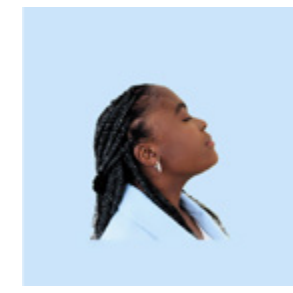
Ryan Johnston
Ryan Johnston Piano
BMus (Hons) Music
Graduated 2024

Piano tutor, accompanist and performer based in Belfast.



Joshua Keyes
Keyes Designs
Marketing Manager, Pure Pharmacy Group
BSc (Hons) Interactive Media
Graduated 2024

Graphic design & website design for small businesses.



Geraldine Michelo
Hamis Studios
BA (Hons) Graphic Design & Illustration
Graduated 2024

Freelance Illustrator and visual storyteller, specialising in children's books.



Kathryn Morton
Blue Oak Equestrian
BSc (Hons) Business Studies
Graduated 2024

Accredited riding instructor, pony club camps and events and provision of Equine Therapy.



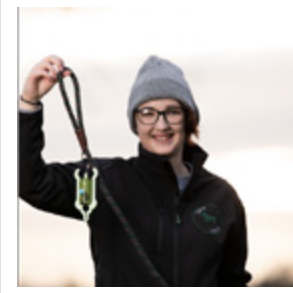
Sarah O'Grady
Your Word Counts
BA (Hons) Journalism with English
Graduated 2024

Copywriter and published poet, highly commended Graduate of the Year, Causeway Chamber Awards 2024



Andrew Spence
Crusade Designs
Cowboy Health
BEng (Hons) Engineering
Graduated 2024

Wood & resin furnishings. New business 'Cowboy Health' to support health & wellbeing of haulage drivers.



Charis Stockley
Tuff Tails NI
BA (Hons) Product Design
Graduated 2024

Innovative designs for dog toys and accessories.
Runner up in the 2023 Enterprise NI Start Her Up Awards.



Maja Szotkiewicz
Majukooo
BA (Hons) Graphic Design & Illustration
Graduated 2024

Belfast Telegraph 30 under 30; 2025 Oliver Jeffers prize; 50 retailers globally; Clients include: Apple & StoryBox NI

In addition to those featured above, this cohort included:

Jennifer Captain
Tia Gabbington-Lytle - Gabbsigins
Jack Marshall - Marshall Media
Neave Thompson - Neavelings
Pawel Zbikowski - Fuze Media

EPY Cohort 2023/24



Jack Belshaw
Clean Kicks
BSc (Hons) Business Analytics
Graduated 2025

Customisation of designer footwear specialising in Nike trainers.



Sophie Ennis
LESKARD Equestrian
BSc (Hons) Marketing
Graduated 2025

Contemporary equestrian clothing designed to empower riders, promote self-confidence in the saddle, and celebrate individual shapes and sizes.



Sam Foote
Blue Pool PR
BSc (Hons) Communication, Marketing & Public Relations
Graduated 2025

A music-focused PR and live events company, created to support and elevate emerging talent across Ireland



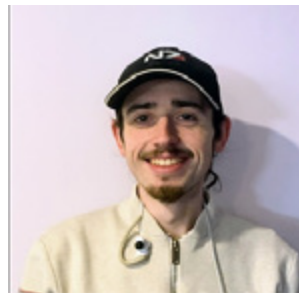
Karolina Francuz
WireDrip
BA (Hons) Textile Design and Fashion
Graduated 2025

Handmade jewellery and bags from thrifted/secondhand fabric remnants and materials



Luke Gilmour
Ad Luminate
BEng (Hons) Mechatronic Engineering
Graduated 2025

Customised LED signage for vehicles.
Starting PhD Sept 2025



Zach Johnston
Mad Moon Studios
BA (Hons) Games Design
Final Year to be completed

Secured investment from NI Screen - currently on the Platform programme 2024/26 to develop Sol Drift game.



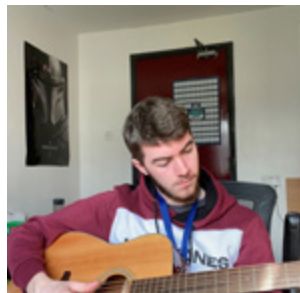
Daniel Kirk
Bird House Studios
BA (Hons) Animation
Graduated 2025

A team of 3 animators specialising in animation and graphic design for the music industry.



Rebecca Lively
R J Lively Art
BA (Hons) Illustration
Graduated 2025

Unique mixed-media illustrations inspired by nature, folklore, and mythology.



Ruairi McAleer
RJ Sound Designs
BA (Hons) Creative Audio
Graduated 2025

Freelance sound engineer/technician. Theatre, bands, recording and PA hire.



Josh McCamley
Mad Moon Studios
BA (Hons) Games Design
Final Year to be completed

Secured investment from NI Screen - currently on the Platform programme 2024/26 to develop Sol Drift game.

In addition to those featured above, this cohort included:

Chloe Campbell - Nxromantic
Clare McAllister, Brandon McRae, Daniel Pradzynski, Nathan Warren - Blappy Productions
Christopher McClean - CJ Media Marketing
Leon Moody, Finn McLoughlin - Birdhouse Studios

EPY Cohort 2024/25



Cerys Ferguson
Three C's Coffee
BSc (Hons) Culinary Arts
Graduating 2026

Coffee Trailer owner & hosts events to enhance social inclusion within the local community and beyond.



Anna Kelly
Croobview Creations
BA Hons Illustration
Graduating 2026

Illustrator & Creative Designer specialising in pet portrait commissions.



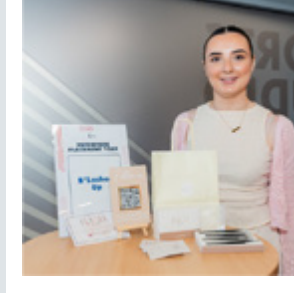
Vladyslav Kravchenko
Vlad Kravchenko
BDes Hons Games Design
Graduating 2026

VFX Freelancer offering virtual effects commissions to games design businesses.



Logan Mawhinney
Silver Sparrow
BDes Hons Game Design
Graduating 2026

Freelance Games Designer providing 3D modelling and programming.



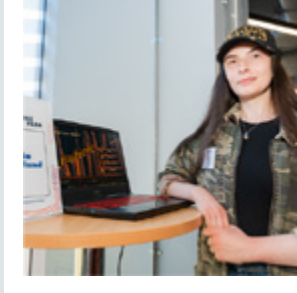
Bethany Medwell
B-Lashed Up
BSc Comm.Advert & Marketing
Graduating 2026

Lash Artist, created her own Tailored Masterclass & training academy. Has established networking events in her local area for beauty industry.



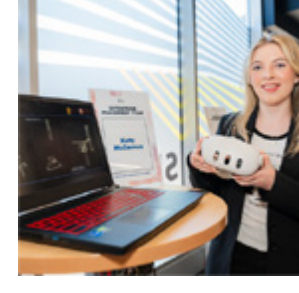
Craig Millar
Craig Millar Marketing
BSc Hons Business & Education
Graduating 2026

Digital Design Agency, works with local and international clients.



Olivia Mulholland
Olivia Mulholland
BDes Hons Game Design
Graduating 2026

Games Design freelancer offering 3D modelling and creative design.



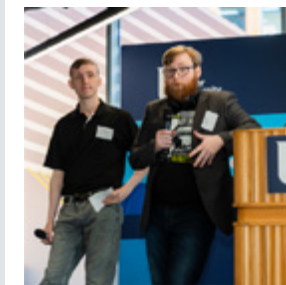
Katy McCarron
Katy McCarron
BDes Hons Game Design
Graduating 2026

Games Design freelancer with strong project management skills and specialising in 3D modelling, rigging and character design.



April Rose
April Rose Marketing
BSc (Hons) Marketing
Graduating 2026

Digital Content Creator & Freelance Marketing. Secured a place on Catalyst co-founders programme.



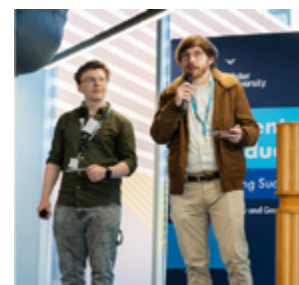
Eoghan Brady
Isaac Smith
Kinetic Bards Studio
BDes (Hons) Games Design
Graduating 2026

Irish Language educational games studio. Winners of "22 under 22 Entrepreneurs to Watch in Belfast" 2024



Rory Campbell
Charmaine Madden
Clear Captures
BA (Hons) Screen Production
Graduating 2026

Videography service for small businesses.



Jonathan Lyons-Walsh
Luke Thompson
Fruit Ape
BA (Hons) Animation
Graduating 2026

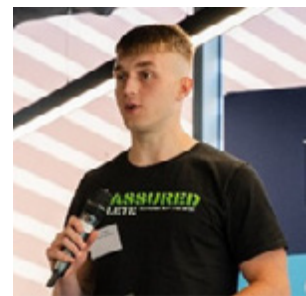
Animation Studio creating short animated films based on life growing up in Belfast.



Ryan Liggett, Erin McCloskey, Caitlin Harbinson, Michael McKee, Sarah Watson

Wee Donkey Productions
BA (Hons) Cinematic Arts
Graduating 2026

Video Production company serving the community and charity sector and based in North West NI.



Niall Doherty
Assured Supplements

BSc (Hons) Sports & Exercise Science
Graduating 2026

Sports supplements retailer and about to launch own branded supplement.



Victoria Howells
StrawV11 3D

BA (Hons) Animation
Graduating 2026

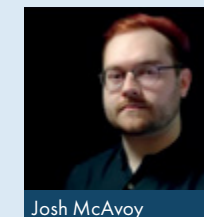
Designing 3D characters, accessories, environments for purchase by Games designers

Case studies

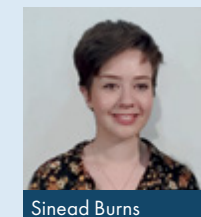
Aura Digital Studios – Pioneers of the Enterprise Placement Year at Ulster University (Cohort 2020-21)



Eva Robinson



Josh McAvoy



Sinead Burns

“Aura uses a range of innovative technologies from XR, Realtime Rendering and Virtual Production to make content for Animation, Interactive, Film & TV and Games. We tell stories that entertain, educate and that make you think. But in all we do, Story Comes First.”

Aura Digital Studios was instrumental in launching Ulster University’s Enterprise Placement Year (EPY) programme. In 2020, students Josh, Eva, and Donal proposed a self-employed placement after COVID-19 disrupted traditional opportunities. Their initiative marked the beginning of EPY and showcased the potential of student entrepreneurship. Within one academic year, they launched their brand, secured two major contracts, and generated over £20,000 in revenue—all while operating virtually during a global crisis.

By 2023, Josh and Eva expanded the leadership team by welcoming Sinead Burns as a full partner. The company moved to The Gasworks in Belfast, grew to five employees, and built a strong portfolio of clients and industry recognition.

Key Achievements:

- **Geo-location AR Project** with The Museum of the Royal Navy, featured at the New European Bauhaus event in Brussels (2024).
- **Virtual Production Innovation**, delivering Northern Ireland’s first broadcast commercial using LED wall technology.
- **UKRI Creative Catalyst Award 2023** for a Virtual Production data management solution.
- **VP Futures 2022 Winners**, selected for a UK accelerator programme with Epic Games and Industrial Light & Magic.

Future Outlook: Aura plans to scale operations, create new jobs, and expand internationally. As Director Josh McAvoy reflects, “If EPY wasn’t an option for us, our company likely wouldn’t still be here.”

More at: auradigitalstudios.com

Lauren Kelso – Illustrator and EPY Alumna (Cohort 2021-22)



Lauren Kelso is an award-winning freelance illustrator who successfully transitioned her creative hobby into a thriving business during her Enterprise Placement Year (EPY) at Ulster University. Based at her newly established studio and retail outlet at Raceview Mill in Broughshane, Lauren leveraged the support and resources of the EPY programme to scale her Etsy side hustle into a fully-fledged creative enterprise.

Her products are now stocked by ten retailers across Northern Ireland, including Born & Bred, Storybox NI, and The Designerie. In addition to selling through her own shop and online via laurenkelso.uk, Lauren has expanded into corporate commissions, securing her first client—Galgorm Resort—during EPY. She has since added seven more corporate clients to her portfolio, including Ulster Orchestra, Monday’s Child, and Digg Deep for Kids Charity.

Key Achievements:

- Named in the **Belfast Telegraph 30 Under 30 (2025)**
- Student Winner of the **7th Worldwide FIDA Awards**
- Recipient of the **Rush Digital Award Prize**

Lauren offers the following advice to prospective EPY students at Ulster University:

“Be open and curious. Try to create opportunities for yourself, take advantage of networking events, and push beyond your comfort zone—you never know where it might lead. Make full use of the support offered by EPY mentors and enjoy the process of building your brand in a supportive environment.”

Case studies

Ryan Johnston Piano – Building a Creative Career Through Enterprise Placement Year (2022-23 Cohort)

Ryan Johnston is a dedicated and versatile piano teacher and performer who launched his business, Ryan Johnston Piano, during his Enterprise Placement Year (EPY) at Ulster University. Specialising in piano instruction, music theory, performance, and accompaniment, Ryan offers lessons across a wide range of musical styles including classical, baroque, rock, and pop. His teaching philosophy is rooted in a holistic and engaging approach, designed to make learning both effective and enjoyable for students of all ages and abilities.

Since establishing his business through EPY, Ryan has grown his client base to over 40 regular pupils. Many of his students have achieved notable success in their music examinations, earning Distinctions and Merits in both piano and theory assessments.

In addition to teaching, Ryan provides professional accompaniment and performance services for events and examinations. He is currently working towards his Trinity College London Piano Performance Diploma, further enhancing his credentials and expanding his professional capabilities.

Reflecting on his experience with the EPY programme, Ryan shared:

“Enterprise Placement Year at Ulster University has allowed me to create a full-time career from doing what I really enjoy. The support from this programme has made me feel more confident in both myself and in running a self-employed business.”



Future Outlook: Ryan plans to continue expanding his teaching studio, offering group workshops and masterclasses, and exploring digital platforms to reach a wider audience. His long-term vision includes opening a dedicated music education centre and collaborating with other musicians and educators to promote music learning across Northern Ireland.

April Rose Marketing – Empowering Startups Through Creative Strategy (Cohort 2024-25)



Founded by April Rose during her Enterprise Placement Year (EPY) at Ulster University, April Rose Marketing supports small businesses and startups across Northern Ireland with social media management, branding, marketing consultancy, and professional photography. Inspired by a former EPY student’s lecture, April embraced the opportunity to build a business that helps entrepreneurs save time by outsourcing their marketing.

Since its launch, the business has grown into a full-time operation supported by three freelance professionals. It has expanded its services and formed strategic partnerships with Ards Business Hub and Antrim Enterprise, embedding itself in the local entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Key Achievements:

- Nominated for **Best New Startup** at the Ards Peninsula Business Awards
- Secured a place on **Catalyst Co-Founders**
- Financially sustainable and operating full-time
- Strategic partnerships with local enterprise hubs

Future Outlook: April plans to scale her business by growing her client base, refining services, and exploring new digital marketing technologies. Her long-term vision is to build a creative agency model supporting startups across the UK and beyond.

Reflecting on EPY, April says:

“The Enterprise Placement Year allowed me to grow from an inkling of an idea to a fully-fledged business... I cannot recommend the programme enough.”

More at: www.aprilrosemarketing.com

Assured Supplements – Fuelling Performance Across Sports (Cohort 2024-25)

Founded in 2023 by a Sports and Exercise Science student at Ulster University, Assured Supplements Ltd launched through the Enterprise Placement Year (EPY) programme. The Belfast-based company quickly gained traction in the sports nutrition market by offering high-quality, affordable supplements tailored to athletes across various disciplines—including athletics, football, GAA, and rugby.

Drawing on the founder’s experience in grassroots football coaching with the Irish Football Association, the brand prioritises accessibility and effectiveness. Its proprietary product line, Assured Sports, has helped establish a strong identity in the sector.

Key Achievements:

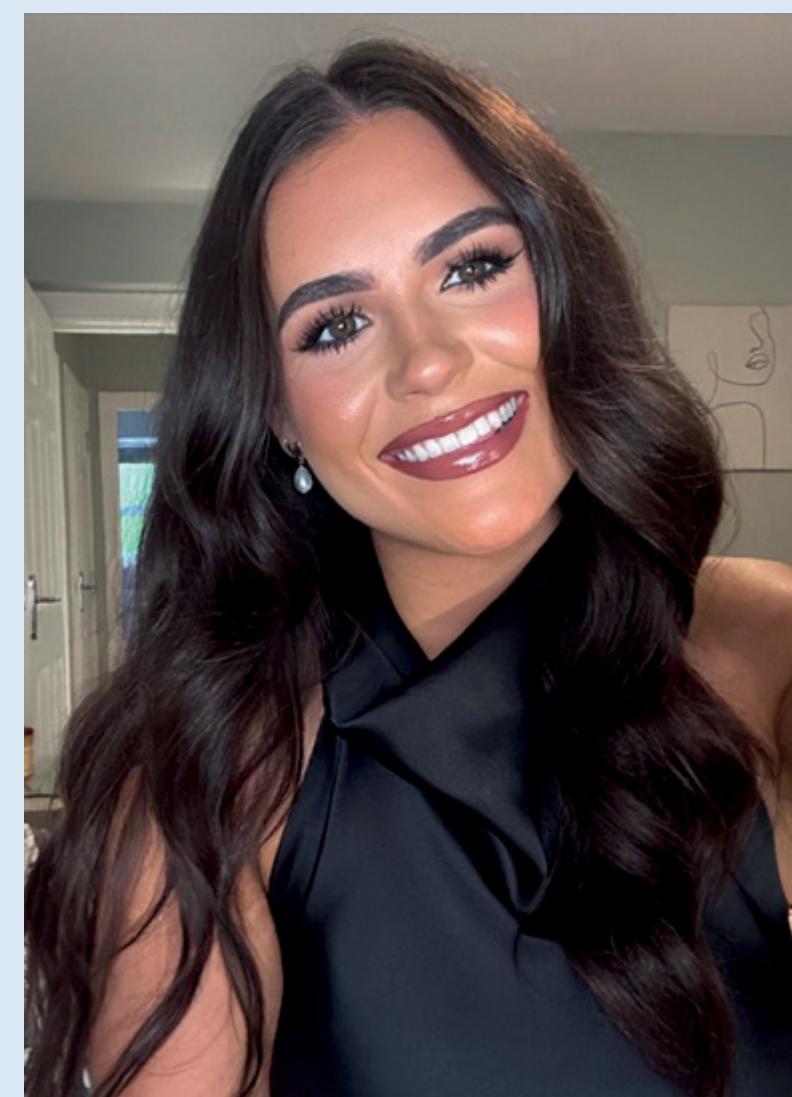
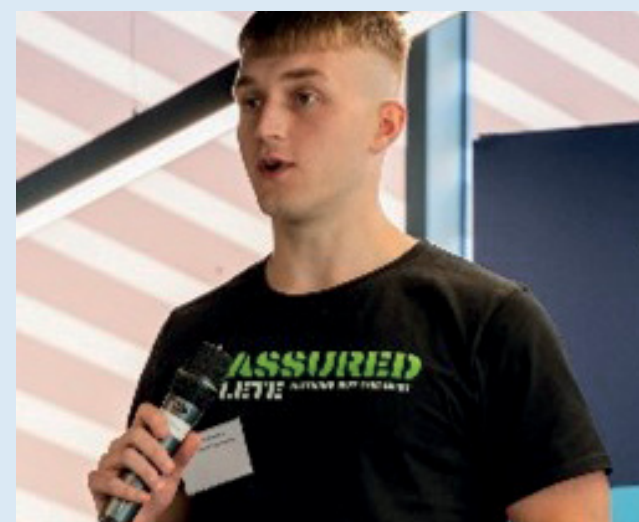
- Opened a physical retail store within the first year
- Generated over £30,000 in revenue in 18 months
- Launched a fully functional e-commerce platform
- Expanded sales across the UK and Europe
- Built brand partnerships with Belfast-based athletes

Future Outlook: Assured Supplements plans to grow its product range, enhance digital marketing, and forge new partnerships with sports organisations. Its long-term goal is to become a leading multi-sport supplement brand across the UK and Europe.

As founder Niall reflects:

“The EPY programme is one of the best ways to turn an idea into a real business with genuine support behind you.”

More at: assuredsupplementsltd.com



“The EPY mentors have supported me to develop my business from idea to a real-life venture.

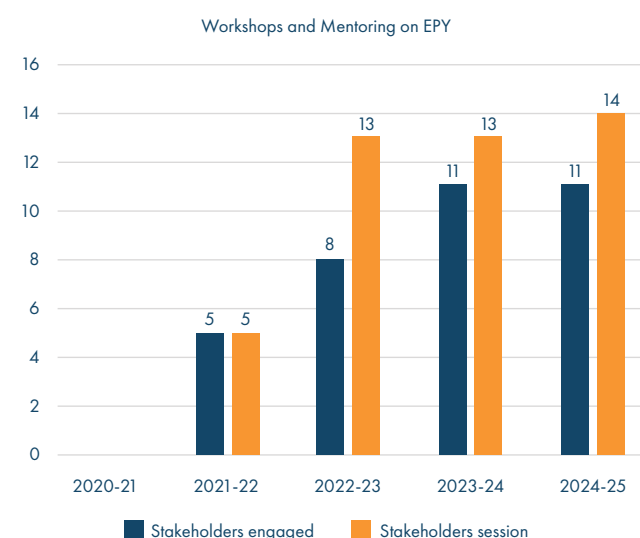
I have always loved baking, so the Enterprise Placement Year has presented me with the perfect opportunity to make my dream come true; and the fact that I can provide people in my local community with products they love and are keen to purchase is an added bonus.

Rose McGuigan (Founder of Bites by Rose) BSc Consumer Management & Food Innovation, Cohort 2020-21

Strategic Partnerships

Over the past five years, external stakeholder engagement has significantly increased, driven by connections established through the EPY team, corporate partnerships, Ulster University alumni, and participation in business networking events.

The EPY team and participating students deeply value the contributions made by these organisations and small businesses. Their generous provision of time, expertise, workspaces, and financial support has played a crucial role in accelerating the development of student-led enterprises, many of which have progressed to trading within a year.



A number of organisations have consistently supported the programme over this period, with several becoming annual contributors. The list continues to grow, with new partnerships anticipated for the 2025/26 academic year:

- Antrim Enterprise Agency
- Aura Digital Studios
- Belfast City Council
- Blue Sky Video Marketing
- British Business Bank
- Carrick Enterprise Agency
- Catalyst
- Enterprise Causeway
- Enterprise NI
- Enterprise North West
- Federation of Small Businesses (FSB)
- Go Succeed
- Innovation Factory
- Invest NI
- Kainos
- Music Video Marketplace
- NI Screen
- Ormeau Labs
- Pixel Mill
- Podiem
- Raise Ventures
- SENI
- The Courthouse Bushmills & The Designerie
- The King's Trust
- Ulster Bank Accelerator
- Women in Business NI
- Workspace, Draperstown



“Enterprise Northern Ireland and the Local Enterprise Agency network are proud to collaborate with Ulster University on its Enterprise Placement Year programme. We regard this initiative as a powerful catalyst for cultivating future entrepreneurship, fostering both its quality and its reach.”

Michael McQuillan, CEO Enterprise Northern Ireland



“As a supporter of EPY, we have witnessed first-hand the positive impact supporting student entrepreneurs can have. From starting their businesses to growing them into sustainable incomes for the future. The students learn a wide range of skills and can help them grow faster and have confidence and support to expand beyond their potential.”

Loraa White, Music Video Marketplace

Importance of Entrepreneurial Workspaces

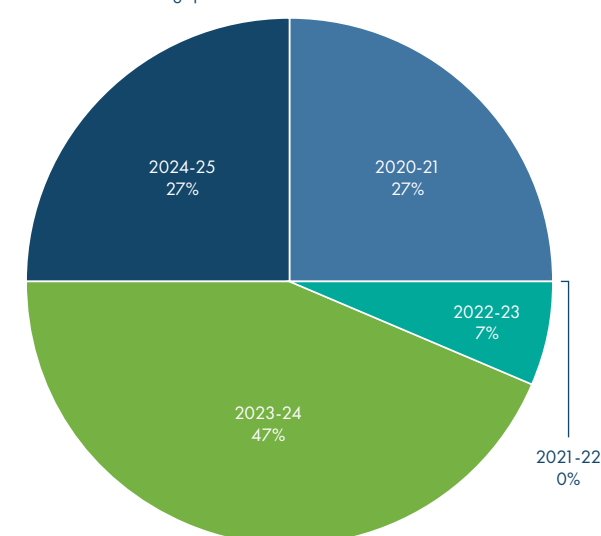
A critical area of support for EPY student businesses is access to dedicated workspaces within entrepreneurship hubs, co-working environments, or sector-specific start-up communities. These spaces have proven to be instrumental in fostering business, professional, and personal development, as outlined below:

Business Development

- **Collaboration Opportunities:** Interaction with other founders has led to the creation of new projects, products, and services.
- **Mentorship and Guidance:** Access to experienced professionals has facilitated problem-solving and accelerated market entry.
- **Support Networks:** Students benefit from funding opportunities, networking events, and other support programmes.
- **Visibility and Promotion:** These environments help raise the profile of student businesses and attract new clients.

Case studies from EPY graduates such as Aura Digital Studios, Lauren Kelso Illustrator, and final-year students April Rose Marketing and Mad Moon Studios highlight the transformative impact of these spaces. Each has exceeded initial business expectations, attributing part of their success to the opportunities provided by these environments.

% EPY students in Co-working spaces 2020-25



“One suggestion to enhance the EPY programme would be to increase networking opportunities between EPY students and local entrepreneurs and potential investors.”



Minister for Communities, Deirdre Hargey MLA, meeting with EPY Students (from left to right) Courtney Stockman and Lauren Kelso at The Designerie in Bushmills, May 2022



Partnerships with Purpose event Sept 2022. Left to Right: Jackie Smyth (Employability & Enterprise Consultant), Ryan Johnston (EPY student), Lauren Kelso (EPY Alumni), Seamus McConomy (Student Talent Manager)

“It would be great to see participants encouraged to interact more within their sector’s communities in order to build important networks.”

Survey results from Enterprise Placement Alumni 2020-25

A total of 43 respondents from our survey of 86 EPY alumni provided a 51% response rate with key findings outlined below:

Key Statistics

- **Total Responses:** 43 students
- **No of Businesses represented:** 35
- **Average Programme Impact Rating:** 9.28 / 10
- **Turnover Responses Provided:** 19
- **Total Reported Business Turnover 24/25:** £1,248,550
- **Average Reported Business Turnover 24/25:** £65,713 (19 businesses)
- **Total Number of Employees (including founders):** 46 (35 businesses)

Continuation in Business or Freelancing:

An impressive 71% of respondents have continued on in the businesses started up through the EPY programme, with 17 operating full time, 9 part time and 4 on a casual/seasonal basis.

- **Number of students** who have continued on in business: **30**
- **Percentage** of respondents: **71%**

This indicates a strong retention rate and emphasises the impact of the EPY programme in supporting sustainable entrepreneurial careers.

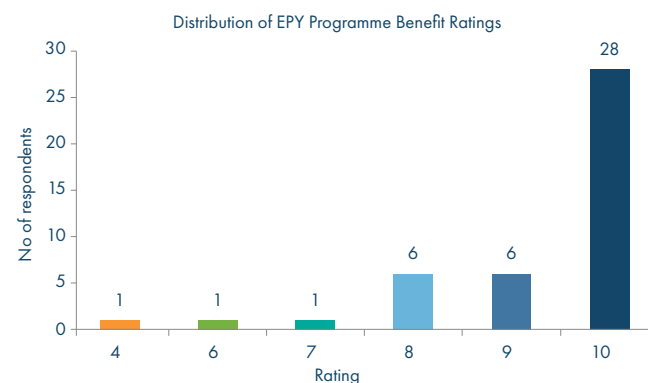
Feedback on the Enterprise Placement Year Programme:

Recurring themes identified from this survey are outlined below to highlight EPY alumni feedback on the following areas:

- Benefits of the EPY programme
- Opportunities availed of
- Challenges faced
- Advice for future participants
- Suggestions for Improvement

Benefits of the EPY Programme

The average rating on the benefits of the EPY programme scored an impressive **9.28/10**, testifying to the quality and effectiveness of this entrepreneurial support initiative at Ulster University.



Recurring benefits from the programme are highlighted below:

1. **Confidence & Personal Growth** – Students report significant boosts in self-belief, breaking out of their comfort zones, and feeling more at home in the business world.
2. **Practical Business Skills** – Hands-on experience in setting up and running a business, including financial management, pitching, and strategic planning.
3. **Expert Support & Mentoring** – One-to-one guidance from experienced lecturers, mentors, and industry professionals, plus access to expert-led workshops.
4. **Risk-Free Environment to Start Up** – A safe space to experiment, learn from mistakes, and refine ideas without the immediate pressures of the wider market.
5. **Stronger Business Outcomes** – Many businesses launched through EPY have survived and grown, with some achieving major milestones such as securing funding, purchasing significant equipment, winning awards, and expanding operations.
6. **Networking & Community** – Access to a supportive network of peers, mentors, and professionals who provide advice, encouragement, and collaboration opportunities.
7. **Long-Term Career Impact** – The programme helps students assess the viability of running their business full-time after graduation, with many continuing successfully post-university.
8. **Resilience & Adaptability** – Students develop the mindset and skills to persevere through challenges, adapt to market changes, and thrive even in economic downturns.

Student Testimonials

Respondents expanded further on why they rated the programme so highly, providing testimonials outlined as follows:

“EPY allowed me to develop my already existing business, Majukooo during my time at Ulster University. Without the 1-2-1 mentoring, networking events and opportunities to develop confidence with my public speaking, I would not be where I am today. I use the skills I developed in EPY everyday while running my business. If you are 100% passionate about your business idea, willing to put in the work (with lots of mentoring and support) and have tenacity and determination, this programme is for you!”

(Maja Szotkiewicz, Majukooo, Cohort 2022-23)

“I wear EPY as a badge of honour because before it I would have shuddered at the idea of plunging into the business world. I felt I was naive, hopelessly out of the loop and not at all business savvy. Now I feel at home with what I do and I very much owe that to the professionals, experts and helpful mentors who were in my corner to guide and motivate me. This can be the most formative and life changing experience if you give yourself the chance to fail, learn and then succeed”

(Zach Johnston, Mad Moon Studios, Cohort 2023-24)

“The Enterprise Placement Year has been a game-changer for my entrepreneurial journey. It gave me the time, mentorship, and confidence to fully develop my business while gaining real-world experience. Being able to grow my company while earning academic credit was invaluable - I’d highly recommend it to any student with a passion for innovation and self-employment.”

(Craig Millar, CraigMillar Enterprises Ltd, Cohort 2024-25)

Opportunities on EPY rated to have been of most value:

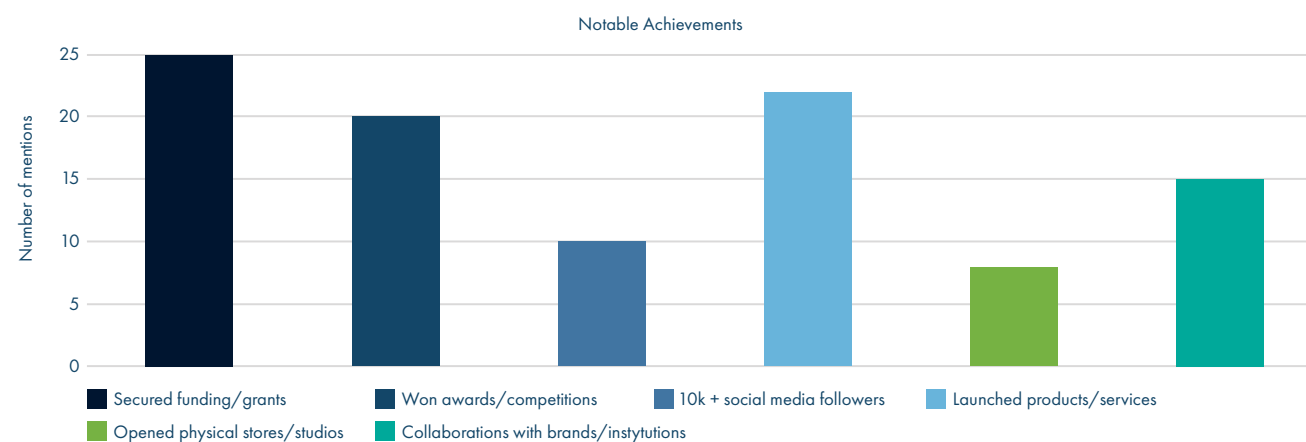
- **Mentorship:** 1-to-1 mentoring from EPY staff and external advisors.
- **Funding & Grants:** EPY bursaries, Santander X, Prince’s Trust, Enterprise Hub.
- **Networking:** Events, guest speakers, and peer connections.
- **Workshops:** Covering finance, marketing, pitching, branding, and legal topics.
- **Co-working Spaces:** Access to The Designerie, Antrim Enterprise, Pixel Mill and others.



“ Throughout the EPY programme, be confident in yourself and your business idea. Be confident when dealing with clients and don’t feel the need to undersell yourself, you are a business professional!

Katy McCarron, Freelance Games Designer, BDes (Hons) Games Design, Cohort 2024-25

Student Successes and Feedback



Summary of Achievements

Participants reported a wide range of successes, including:

- **Business Growth:** Several respondents scaled their businesses to full-time operations, some reaching turnovers of £200,000–£500,000.
- **Employment:** Several respondents have more than 4 employees and some employ freelancers on a project basis.
- **Awards & Recognition:**
 - Belfast Telegraph 30 Under 30
 - 21 under 21 (2023) and 22 under 22 (2024) "Entrepreneurs to Watch in Belfast"
 - EPY Dragon's Den Winners
 - NI Social Media Awards
 - VP Futures Accelerator (Epic Games & ILM)
 - Start Her Up Awards 2022
 - Graduate of the Year Awards (Causeway Chamber of Commerce)
 - Ideate Ireland Awards
- **Client Work:** Collaborations with Apple, Ulster Orchestra, Galgorm Resort, and more.
- **Expansion:** Opening new premises, hiring staff, and entering global markets.

Challenges faced - Recurring themes:

- **Confidence & Public Speaking:** Many overcame initial fears through EPY support.
- **Financial Stress:** Small bursary helped somewhat.
- **Financial Literacy:** Tax, pricing, and budgeting were common hurdles.
- **Mental Health & Isolation:** Especially for solo entrepreneurs and during COVID.
- **Time Management:** Balancing business with academic responsibilities.
- **Legal & Contractual Issues:** Some faced disputes with clients or co-founders.



Advice for Future Participants

- **Believe in Your Vision:** Passion and perseverance are essential.
- **Network Relentlessly:** Attend every event, bring business cards, connect online.
- **Be Open to Change:** Pivoting is part of the entrepreneurial journey.
- **Use the Support:** Mentors, workshops, and peers are invaluable.
- **Plan and Prioritise:** Structure your time and set realistic goals.

Suggestions for Improvement

- **More In-Person Events:** Especially post-COVID, to combat isolation.
- **Specialised Workshops:**
 - Marketing, social media, contract law, tax returns.
 - Sector-specific sessions (e.g. hospitality, creative industries).
- **Pre-EPY Engagement:** Early access to resources before the placement year.
- **Post-EPY Support:** Continued mentoring and funding opportunities.
- **Peer Networking:** Structured check-ins and support groups.



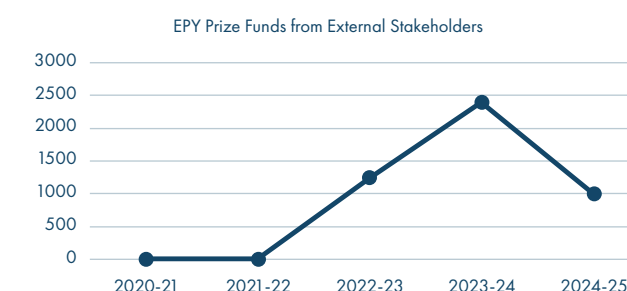
The Annual EPY Business Pitch Event

In May each year the EPY business founders participate in an assessed Business Pitch event as part of their Diploma in Professional Practice accreditation, but also to share their accomplishments in bringing their business ideas to market and compete for prize funds. This event was launched in 2023 to coincide with the newly accredited module.

In addition to the panel, the organisations who have supported the programme over the year are also invited to hear the pitches and network with these student businesses on the day. In addition to those volunteering as 'dragons', some have also sponsored the event with prize funds – see contributors below:

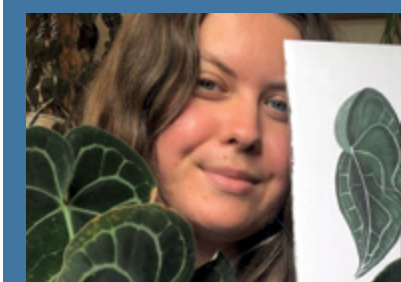
Enterprise Placement Year Business Pitch Sponsors and Judges

- Ulster University Enterprise Hub (Tim Brundle 'Dragon')
- Innovation Factory (Neil Allen 'Dragon')
- Enterprise Causeway
- Antrim Enterprise Agency (Jennifer McWilliams 'Dragon')
- Enterprise NI
- Raise Ventures (Jenny Irvine 'Dragon')
- FSB NI

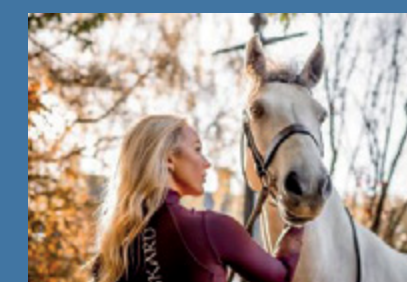


Enterprise Placement Year Business Pitch event winners:

Each year the winner of the EPY business pitch event from the previous year takes their seat as a 'Dragon'.



2023
Maja Szotkiewicz – Majukooo
 Connect with Maja here:
www.majukooo.co.uk
 Read more from Maja's Irish News article



2024
Sophie Ennis – LESKARD
 Connect with Sophie here:
www.instagram.com/leskardequestrian
 Hear from Sophie Tik Tok Interview



2025
Cerys Ferguson – The Three C's
 Connect with Cerys here:
www.instagram.com/threecscoffee
 Read more about Cerys' EPY journey here



Raising Entrepreneurial Ambition at Ulster University

The Enterprise Placement Year programme is not the only support for enterprise and entrepreneurial education available at Ulster University, with initiatives such as those outlined below helping students at various stages to explore and develop their self-employed career paths.

Students as Entrepreneurs Programme

Being launched in October 2025, this exciting 3-tiered programme will provide both pre-start and post-EPY support to encourage entrepreneurial ideas, develop these to start-up stage and help final year students to sustain and scale their EPY businesses. The programme will be supported by our wide range of stakeholders who are keen to contribute to the delivery of this initiative.

Ulster University Sponsored pod at The Designerie, Bushmills

This creative space was sponsored by Employability & Graduate Futures between 2021-2024, providing Belfast School of Art students and graduates with a launch pad for their creative businesses. The pod allowed both EPY students and Graduates in Residence to showcase their products and sell their work whilst receiving mentorship from the Designerie manager in areas such as pricing, merchandising, promotion and business planning. This initiative proved very successful with the following Ulster University graduates being supported into growing their creative businesses which now are self-sufficient: Lauren Kelso Illustrator, Gillian Brownlow Art, Grainne Mullan (Kitsch Sisters CiC) and Caitlin McCracken Knitwear.

Ulster University Enterprise Hub

The Enterprise Hub supports students and recent graduates to access entrepreneurial advice, guidance, and resources, delivered across campuses and online. (<https://www.ulster.ac.uk/enterprise>)

Students from any level from Undergraduate to PhD have access to programmes, resources, funding opportunities, and competitions. The Enterprise Hub provide additional support to the students on EPY through bursaries, prize funds for the EPY business pitch, professional connections and networking opportunities.



"This was the best decision I made at university, the support from the EPY team was incredible and provided me with a fantastic chance to learn and give my business a go!"

Charis Stockley, Tuff Tails NI, Cohort 2022/23

"EPY provided me with a platform to develop so many skills in business and professionally and these really made me stand out in interviews allowing me to secure my current professional post."

Deneen White, Southside, Cohort 2021-22

"The EPY programme has been such a benefit, not only to starting up my small business but also in my own personal development. My confidence sky rocketed and I was able to break out of my comfort zone. EPY gave me the support and learning environment I needed to push my ideas further."

Courtney Stockman, Limseca Studios, Cohort 2021-22

"My Enterprise Placement Year was an incredible opportunity that allowed me to bring a creative business idea to life in a supportive and entrepreneurial environment. It's a rare chance to turn your vision into something tangible while still having the structure and support of your university behind you."

Grainne Mullan, Point Angel, Cohort 2021-22

Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

Summary

The Enterprise Placement Year (EPY) programme at Ulster University has evolved into a nationally recognised model of entrepreneurial education and support. Over five years, it has empowered 86 students to launch 65 businesses and freelance ventures, contributing over £1.5 million in turnover and creating 46 jobs. The programme has demonstrated strong alignment with regional economic priorities, particularly in the creative industries, manufacturing, and hospitality sectors.

EPY has successfully addressed gaps in traditional placement provision, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, and has become a vital pathway for students seeking self-employment. Its inclusive design has supported students from diverse backgrounds—including those with disabilities, from socially disadvantaged areas, and underrepresented groups—through tailored mentoring, workshops, and strategic partnerships.

While the programme has achieved significant successes, it continues to explore opportunities for enhancing financial sustainability. The programme team will continue to work with committed internal and external partners across the region to enhance access to essential development opportunities, workplace provision and post EPY-support.

Conclusion

The EPY programme has proven to be a transformative initiative, fostering entrepreneurial ambition, resilience, and innovation among Ulster University students. It has delivered measurable impact in terms of business creation, graduate employability, and regional economic development. The high retention rate of EPY alumni in business (71%) and the average programme rating of 9.28/10 underscore its effectiveness and value.

Building on this momentum, the programme's growing impact is further evidenced by a significant rise in student engagement. In the 2025/26 academic year, 35 Ulster University students opted for an entrepreneurial placement, launching 22 businesses or freelance enterprises --representing a 59% increase compared to the previous year. This new cohort is already demonstrating exceptional entrepreneurial talent, with several ventures earning prestigious recognition, including the Young Business Person of the Year award at the North West Business Awards and finalist positions in Catalyst INVENT. These accomplishments not only highlight the calibre of student entrepreneurs emerging from EPY, but also reinforce the programme's vital role in cultivating a pipeline of innovative, sustainable businesses that contribute to Northern Ireland's economic growth and resilience.

"The EPY programme has been life changing for me and helped create a business that is robust enough to survive and thrive in economic downturns when well established companies have struggled."

(Sinead Burns, Aura Digital Studios, Cohort 2020-21)



Recommendations

1. Secure Sustainable Funding Streams

- Establish dedicated EPY funding through internal and external contributions and grants.
- Advocate for transformative regional initiatives such as Invest NI's "Student to First Sale" programme to bridge the business support gap tailored to university students entering self-employment.

2. Expand Bursary Provision

- Explore additional support for start-up costs and living expenses to allow for greater concentration on the development of the business idea.
- Prioritise funding for students from widening access backgrounds and those with additional financial needs.

3. Enhance Workspace Access

- Formalise partnerships with co-working hubs across Northern Ireland to provide free or subsidised access.
- Explore access to entrepreneurial pods and where necessary, sponsorship to support this, in locations relevant to student businesses to reduce isolation and foster collaboration.

4. Strengthen Post-EPY Support

- Launch the "Students as Entrepreneurs" programme with clear pathways for post-EPY mentoring, funding, and scaling.
- Develop alumni networks and peer support groups to sustain momentum beyond graduation.

5. Increase Sector-Specific and In-Person Engagement

- Introduce specialised workshops tailored to high-growth sectors (e.g., creative tech, food innovation, social enterprise).
- Expand in-person events and networking opportunities to combat isolation and build professional confidence.

6. Promote ongoing Success and Impact of EPY

- Promote individual and collective successes within EPY leading to increased access and inclusion for student participation.
- Report EPY outcomes to support regional economic development frameworks.

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For any follow up queries about this report please contact us at studententerprise@ulster.ac.uk

EPY Cohort 2025/26 at Ulster Bank Accelerator





ulster.ac.uk/epy