



# Creative Higher Education Strategy: Project Briefing

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# Foreword

The creative industries are one of our greatest UK success stories. They represent not only a fast-growing sector of our economy, but also a defining feature of our cultural identity, global influence and social fabric. As Skills England has confirmed, they collectively comprise the largest high-growth sector for employment in 2025, expansion of which is expected to continue rapidly through 2030. This trajectory is no accident. It is underpinned, shaped and driven by the expertise, ingenuity and resilience of our creative higher education institutions.

Specialist higher education institutions define this success. As well as shaping employable, adaptable and entrepreneurial graduates across the country, they also foster excellent research, progress innovation, regenerate places, and provide the skills and leadership needed to sustain growth across every one of the UK's industrial priority sectors. Their graduates don't just power the creative economy; they transform industries as diverse as health, advanced manufacturing, clean energy, and technology through the transversal skills of creativity, problem-solving and critical thinking.

Though the government's Industrial Strategy recognises the potential of the creative industries to grow the economy, we believe greater understanding of creative higher education and more exacting policy interventions are necessary to drive this exceptional sector towards and beyond 2030. We seek to ensure that a ready pipeline of skilled people, a thriving research and innovation environment, and an effective regional economy can supply the creative fuel needed for those ambitions. This campaign will showcase the indispensable role of creative higher education in driving economic transformation, cultural enrichment and social opportunity. It will make clear that investing in this sector is not a matter of choice; it is an economic and societal imperative.

Today we launch this project briefing that aims to highlight where we believe creative higher education is already making a substantial contribution to industry, society and wider economic growth in response to the most recent policy developments. However, to meaningfully meet 21st century challenges we need to reflect on what is not working and adapt policy and our sector to ensure that creative education thrives to support our nation's aspirations. To do this, over the next 12 months we will produce a Creative Higher Education Strategy alongside our members, industry, policymakers and researchers to pave the way for a more effective, sustainable and transformative system for creativity in the UK.

**Dr Brooke Storer-Church, Chief Executive Officer, GuildHE**

**Professor Roni Brown, Chair of GuildHE Creative Project Steering Group**

# Introduction

According to [Skills England's Assessment of Priority Skills to 2030](#), the creative industries represent the largest high-growth sector for employment in 2025 and are projected to see sustained expansion in both graduate employment levels and occupational demand by 2030.

Specialist creative higher education (HE) institutions are central to meeting this growth, developing the skills, research, and innovation that drive economic and industrial progress across the whole economy. They supply all eight of the [Industrial Strategy's](#) high-growth sectors with highly skilled graduates, entrepreneurial talent and new businesses, while also acting as catalysts for place-based regeneration through inspirational creative works, cultural programming, public engagement and industry partnerships. By combining specialist training with real-world innovation, creative higher education not only fuels the creative economy but also strengthens the UK's global competitiveness, transforming towns, cities and regions into vibrant hubs of cultural, social and economic opportunity.

The creative industries [significantly rely](#) on university graduates, with approximately 75% of their workforce holding a degree-level qualification, considerably higher than the UK average of 51%. While creative graduates comprise only 17% of the full graduate population, they represent 46% of graduates working in the creative industries. This figure is even higher in certain sub-sectors. For example, 82% of creative graduates working in design, 78% in music, performing and visual arts, and 75% in architecture have a creative degree, according to the [research](#).

To support and strengthen this demonstrably vital employment pipeline, we are dedicated to preserving and expanding it through our upcoming Creative Higher Education Strategy - to be published in 2026. This strategy will aim to cultivate growth within the creative sector and beyond, through adapting creative education systems and policy. It will seek to achieve this by addressing identified skills gaps, exploring R&D investment opportunities, and defining higher education's role in developing inspirational creative output and places. Our strategy will establish clear pathways for collaboration between education providers, policy-makers and industry, to ensure graduates are not only highly skilled but also prepared and adaptable for the evolving landscape of creative employment. This will ultimately shape the future of the creative higher education ecosystem.

## **Creative skills are interdisciplinary and versatile in a highly skilled workforce**

Rooted in teaching that blends ideas with technical expertise and entrepreneurial skill, creative higher education institutions generate graduates whose skills reach far beyond the creative industries. The government's [Creative Industries Sector Plan](#) recognises the sector as a growth engine, not only for its own £125 billion contribution to the UK economy, but for the transversal skills that contribute to other vital industries such as advanced manufacturing, digital, life sciences, and clean energy.

Creative graduates bring with them leadership of innovation, problem-solving, and human-centred design that is indispensable in the development of products, systems and services across all eight priority sectors of the Industrial Strategy. Their training in critical thinking, multi-disciplinary teams and adaptive practice equips them to thrive in emerging markets and to bridge the gap between technological capability and real-world application. Digital skills have been identified by Skills England as a key shortage across multiple sectors. Creative education institutions have adopted a tech-first pedagogical approach to many technical and knowledge-based roles and are well-positioned to address upskilling demand from multiple frontier industries.

In the context of high levels of employment in the creative industries and the projected occupational demand, creative higher education is vital to the functional delivery of labour for an already lucrative sector for the UK. With good policies such as stable higher education funding, recognition of the value of creative education, and close industry contribution, we can ensure that the UK's creative higher education system functions not only as the bedrock of the Creative Industries but as a catalyst for the full spectrum of the Industrial Strategy's high-growth sectors.

## **Acceleration of creative research, innovation and entrepreneurship**

Specialist creative institutions act as natural conveners of talent, technology and ideas because of their deep expertise in practice-led research and innovation. Multiple government missions underscore the need to increase public and private R&D investment. The Creative Industries Sector Plan commits to strengthening createch capabilities and maximising the commercial potential of intellectual property and enterprise formulated at the intersection between universities and the business sector.

Creative higher education institutions (HEIs) are already delivering in these areas. They leverage world-class facilities – from motion capture studios and fabrication labs to immersive media suites and sustainable materials workshops – alongside highly skilled academic and technical staff. Industry partnerships are embedded into research and teaching, enabling the co-development of next-generation products and services, including novel immersive media experiences, environmentally sustainable textiles, interactive installations, and AI-assisted creative tools. By engaging business partners directly in live projects, creative HEIs create fertile ground for rapid prototyping, user-led design, and agile testing of new business models that can scale across multiple high-growth sectors.

Yet, despite their proven impact, creative R&D in the specialist HE sector faces persistent barriers. Funding frameworks do not efficiently recognise creative practice outside of arts research. Practice-based research often sits outside eligibility criteria and is systemically undervalued in assessments. This limits access to innovation funding, even when creative outputs have clear commercial applications. Fragmented regional investment strategies also leave creative research under-resourced outside major cities, slowing the development of vibrant local innovation clusters.

There is also a structural challenge in connecting creative R&D to long-term industrial growth strategies. Too often, creative research is seen as culturally important but economically and socially peripheral, despite evidence that it underpins competitive advantage in multiple IS-8 sectors. Without a shift in perception, the UK risks underutilising one of its most distinctive strengths: the ability to fuse artistic vision with technological innovation to produce market-leading products, services, and experiences.

Funding models should recognise the unique value of practice-based and interdisciplinary research and incentivise partnerships. Specialist creative HEIs act as the connective tissue between industry, technology, and culture and deliver innovations that build UK industry and transform the wider economy. However, to accelerate progress creative R&D must be fully integrated into national and regional innovation strategies, with equitable access to public and private investment.

## **Creative places for regional industry, civic engagement and regeneration**

Creative higher education institutions are anchors in the cultural and economic fabric of their regions, driving regeneration, opportunity and wellbeing. Embedded in their places but globally connected, they work alongside local government, industry clusters, and charitable and cultural organisations to build thriving creative ecosystems. These ecosystems are not only vibrant hubs for arts and culture but also thriving environments for innovation-led businesses seeking the skills, research capacity, and collaboration needed to succeed.

Creative HEIs foster creative clusters that link talent pipelines to regional growth priorities, from digital and screen industries to sustainable design and immersive technology. They act as conveners across Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs), ensuring that training provision, R&D activity, and infrastructure investment are joined-up and responsive to both local labour market needs and national growth ambitions.

Recent research shows that whilst it is very beneficial for a town or city to have a university presence, it is not always guaranteed that this will correlate to productivity or prosperity. However, regeneration results from the Knowledge Exchange Framework shows that specialist institutions punch way above their weight in growing their local economies and regenerating their towns and cities. Many factors contribute, but success in part comes from creative specialist institutions that attract innovative business, international trade and higher living standards through world-leading and compelling projects and activities with the public.

By embedding graduates, researchers, and entrepreneurs into the heart of local communities, creative higher education strengthens the UK's position as a world leader in cultural production, fuels place-based innovation, and attracts inward investment. Whether revitalising high streets through creative enterprise, transforming disused spaces into cultural venues, or co-developing curriculum with industry partners, creative HEIs help shape places where creativity and commerce co-exist – making them indispensable to thriving places and communities.

## **Specialist higher education delivers for high-growth creative industries**

The creative industries are growing. Inward investment in UK film and high-end TV production has already doubled to over £2 billion per year in the last five years. The games sector, the largest in Europe, saw £7.6 billion in annual consumer spending and benefits from a £30 million games growth package and new creative clusters fund of £150 million set out in the Creative Industries Sector Plan.

However, creative higher education providers face reports of a widening skills mismatch. Recent research shows 65% of 'hard-to-fill' vacancies in creative industries are due to skills shortages, and 78% of employers report shortages in high-skilled roles. This is vastly higher than the overall economy. According to the same research, nearly 60,000 creative workers in 2022 were not fully proficient in their roles; this is a rise of 15,000 since 2017. These perceived skill levels require further scrutiny, and close and honest collaboration between industry and education providers.

Specialist creative HE institutions, industry and policymakers have the power to change this trajectory. Offering practice-based learning, live briefs, advanced R&D facilities, and industry partnerships, creative higher education providers deliver expert training and have the innovation capacity needed to close the skills gap, but strategically the system needs coherence.

To unlock this potential, the system must change. Funding models need to recognise the true cost and economic value of advanced skills in the creative industries and ensure long-term sustainability. Creative skills must be embedded across all growth sector strategies, recognising their role in innovation far beyond the cultural industries. R&D frameworks must value and support practice-based and interdisciplinary research, and provide equitable access to innovation funding. Regional growth plans should place creative HEIs at their heart, building on their capacity to convene industry, community, and policy partners. At a national level, a concerted campaign is needed to shift perceptions – showcasing the creative sector's role as being not just as a cultural asset, but as a strategic growth engine for the UK economy.

# Get involved!

The Creative Higher Education Strategy Project is our opportunity to bring together higher education providers and policymakers to design collaborative, considered plans for futureproofing creative HE as the main pipeline for delivering the energy and human capital required for the next chapter of this UK success story. We will highlight the contribution of creative research and innovation to new markets, the role of creative graduates in addressing skills gaps, and the ways in which our creative institutions act as anchors for thriving, resilient places. The project will also make a clear case for the systemic changes needed: sustainable funding models, equitable recognition of practice-based research, innovation and entrepreneurship, and integrated policy approaches that embed creativity across the whole economy.

This is a pivotal moment. The UK government has recognised that we cannot afford to underutilise an industry that generates £125 billion a year for the economy. To sustain it we cannot overlook the educational sector that is its driving force. Specialist creative higher education has the power to accelerate growth, opportunity and living standards across the whole country through its dynamic ecosystem of skills, innovation, business and research.

**We invite you to join us in this campaign – to recognise the power of specialist creative higher education, to imagine innovations that can secure its success into the future, and position creativity firmly at the heart of the UK’s future.**

If you are a part of a creative higher education provider and you would like to get involved by contributing to policy ideas or submitting your case studies to the project, get in touch!

If you are a government official, an MP or a political advisor and you are already taking part in forums, groups and taskforces to explore ways to improve the creative education and work ecosystem, get in touch!

If you are a researcher or analyst and are currently exploring ideas, producing evidence or analysing datasets to support the foundation of creative advocacy, get in touch!

[Read case studies of how GuildHE members are fulfilling the ambitions of the Creative Industries Sector Plan](#)

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