

---

## **Supporting diverse and inclusive entrepreneurship**

Report dated 4 July 2025

## Executive summary

This report presents insights and practices from eight CESAER Member universities that are driving institutional change to support female entrepreneurship. Developed under the auspices of the Task Force Innovation, it is grounded in the outcomes of our April 2024 workshop at Technische Universität Wien (TU Wien) and aligns with our association's commitments to equality, diversity, inclusion, and sustainability.

Despite significant strides in recent years, systemic barriers continue to hinder women's full participation in innovation ecosystems—particularly in deep tech and science-based entrepreneurship. Challenges include access to funding, visibility, mentoring and cultural biases in entrepreneurial support structures. This report compiles examples of how universities are actively addressing these issues.

The case studies—from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), the University of Belgrade, KTH Royal Institute of Technology, the University of Strathclyde, Université Paris-Saclay (CentraleSupélec), the University of Sheffield, the University of Surrey, and Technische Universität Wien (TU Wien)—demonstrate the power of institutional commitment, student-led initiatives and inclusive design. They highlight the value of tailored programmes, peer mentoring, early engagement and structural reforms. Several examples show that even modest interventions, when thoughtfully implemented, can significantly increase the number and confidence of women innovators.

The report culminates in recommendations to university leaders, industry, policymakers, and EU institutions. These aim to strengthen gender-inclusive innovation ecosystems and ensure that underrepresented groups are supported throughout the entrepreneurial journey—from curiosity to company formation.

CESAER Members are uniquely positioned to lead this agenda in Europe. By embracing inclusive innovation not just as a social imperative but as a strategic asset, universities of science and technology can shape a more just, dynamic and impactful future.

## Contributors

The development of this report has been led by:

- Louise Drogoul (CESAER Secretariat)

We are grateful for the following persons for their contributions:

- Mahnaz Arvaneh (University of Sheffield)
- Caroline Flemming (University of Surrey)
- Stéphanie Hajjar (Université Paris-Saclay, CentraleSupélec)
- Toril Hernes (Norwegian University of Science and Technology)
- Fiona Ireland (University of Strathclyde)
- Alexandra Negoescu (TU Wien)
- Viktor Olsson (KTH Royal Institute of Technology)
- Nenad Zrnica (University of Belgrade)

The editing was completed by Mattias Björnmalm and Justine Moynat (CESAER Secretariat).

We thank the CESAER Task Force Innovation, which has been crucial in the writing and finalisation of this report.

We also thank the colleagues from each project who kindly provided quotes and photos to illustrate their initiatives, enriching this report with practical insights and personal perspectives.

Finally, we extend our gratitude to our guest speakers in the April 2024 workshop 'Supporting diverse and inclusive entrepreneurship'.

This document has been approved for publication by the CESAER Presidency.

For more information and enquiries, please contact our Secretariat at [info@cesaer.org](mailto:info@cesaer.org)

Please reference this document using <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15804276>

Rooted in advanced engineering education and research, [CESAER](#) is an international association of leading specialised and comprehensive universities with a strong science and technology profile that advocate, learn from each other and inspire debates. Our [Members](#) champion excellence in higher education, training, research and innovation, contribute to knowledge societies for a sustainable future and deliver significant scientific, economic, social and societal impact.



## Table of contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Executive summary                                     | 2  |
| Contributors  | 3  |
| Background  | 6  |
| Recommendations                                       | 7  |
| To university leaders                                 | 7  |
| To industry   | 7  |
| To political leaders                                  | 7  |
| To EU institutions                                    | 7  |
| Case study analysis                                   | 9  |
| University of Belgrade                                | 9  |
| Short description of the initiative                   | 9  |
| Key characteristics and funding mechanisms            | 9  |
| Key findings and outcomes                             | 9  |
| KTH Royal Institute of Technology                     | 10 |
| Short description of the initiative                   | 10 |
| Key characteristics and funding mechanisms            | 11 |
| Key findings and outcomes                             | 12 |
| University of Strathclyde                             | 13 |
| Short description of the initiative                   | 13 |
| Key characteristics and funding mechanisms            | 13 |
| Key findings and outcomes                             | 14 |
| Université Paris-Saclay (CentraleSupélec)             | 15 |
| Short description of the initiative                   | 15 |
| Key characteristics and funding mechanisms            | 15 |
| Key findings and outcomes                             | 16 |
| Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) | 17 |
| Short description of the initiative                   | 17 |
| Key characteristics and funding mechanisms            | 17 |
| Key findings and outcomes                             | 17 |
| University of Sheffield                               | 18 |
| Short description of the initiative                   | 18 |
| Key characteristics and funding mechanisms            | 18 |

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Key findings and outcomes                  | 18 |
| University of Surrey                       | 19 |
| Short description of the initiative        | 19 |
| Key characteristics and funding mechanisms | 19 |
| Key findings and outcomes                  | 20 |
| Technische Universität Wien (TU Wien)      | 21 |
| Short description of the initiative        | 21 |
| Key characteristics and funding mechanisms | 21 |
| Key findings and outcomes                  | 22 |

## Background

CESAER's commitment to equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) is longstanding, as set out in our [2019 EDI declaration](#) and reinforced by our [2023 Sustainability declaration](#). In April 2024, the Task Force Innovation held a workshop at TU Wien focused on 'Supporting diverse and inclusive entrepreneurship'. The workshop, attended by task force members and invited external speakers, reflected the association's ambition to reinforce the position of universities of science and technology at the forefront of fostering inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems.

The workshop provided a platform to reflect on institutional strategies and EU-level policies. It featured interventions from:

- Tim Bedford, CESAER Vice-President, Co-Chair of the Task Force Innovation and Associate Principal for Research and Innovation at University of Strathclyde, on the leadership role of universities.
- Lisa Marie Fassel, Co-founder of Female Founders, on systemic barriers in the European tech sector.
- Athanasia Mougou, Policy Officer at the European Commission, on EU policies advancing inclusivity in research and innovation.

Task force members from KTH, TU Braunschweig, TU Wien, and Istanbul Technical University, shared institutional best practices.

The discussions underlined that gender equality and inclusive entrepreneurship are essential to the missions of our universities. Diverse teams fuel creativity, improve problem-solving and lead to greater societal and economic impact.

This report was motivated by the recognition that while many promising initiatives exist across our Members, more work is needed to embed inclusivity into the structures of entrepreneurship support. The report also builds upon the [recent EIT report](#) on women founders in deep-tech, and [recommendations](#) from a subgroup of the ERA Forum for inclusive gender equality in the tenth framework programme (FP10), highlighting structural barriers such as unequal access to funding, valuation gaps, and lack of women in leadership roles.

This document brings together eight institutional case studies and suggests recommendations grounded in practice and policy insights.

## Recommendations

### To university leaders

- Establish inclusive entrepreneurship as a strategic institutional goal, supported by dedicated staff and sustainable funding.
- Recognise and resource student-led initiatives that drive change from the ground up.
- Embed entrepreneurship pathways early in academic careers, especially in undergraduate and master's level programmes, to increase exposure and reduce self-selection bias.
- Create targeted pathways for underrepresented groups, with mentorship, coaching, peer networks, and flexible formats that account for part-time roles and caregiving responsibilities.
- Track diversity metrics across the innovation pipeline, from ideation to spin-off, and apply corrective measures when disparities are detected.
- Ensure that all staff involved in entrepreneurship support are trained on implementing inclusive practices and avoiding unconscious bias.

### To industry

- Collaborate with universities to co-create inclusive programmes that support women and other underrepresented founders.
- Diversify panels and mentors involved in university-industry entrepreneurship schemes to ensure diverse perspectives and role models.
- Commit to equitable investment practices and engage with VC initiatives targeting female-led startups.

### To political leaders

- Ensure sustained public investment that underpin programmes that remove structural barriers for underrepresented entrepreneurs.
- Introduce incentives for industry and academia to partner on inclusive innovation initiatives.
- Expand data collection frameworks to better understand and act on gender and intersectional inequalities in the entrepreneurship ecosystem.

### To EU institutions

- Sustain and strengthen inclusive gender equality policies under FP10, including intersectional Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) and gender analysis in research and innovation.
- Promote closer collaboration between the European Commission and Legal Entity Appointed Representatives (LEARs) to improve the implementation and verification of

GEP requirements, building on our proposal outlined in the position ‘A tool to implement the ERA in the framework programme’.

- Allocate adequate resources and budget to inclusive gender equality and broader diversity topics and ensure the inclusion of experts in gender and diversity in evaluation panels.
- Fund dedicated actions to address specific barriers faced by underrepresented groups in entrepreneurship—such as women founders in deep-tech—including challenges related to valuation gaps, access to private funding, and visibility.



## Case study analysis

### University of Belgrade

#### Short description of the initiative

The University of Belgrade actively participated in the activities regarding female entrepreneurship within its membership in the European University Alliance CircleU, during the implementation of the past and ongoing Erasmus+ project CircleU and Horizon project ERIA. One of the aims of implemented activities was to inspire more women to build businesses and become confident with the entrepreneurial toolbox. It aligns with the overall vision and mission for Circle U: to empower students and staff to mobilise knowledge for impact to make the world a better place.

#### Key characteristics and funding mechanisms

CircleU organised various interactive workshops, hackathons, challenges, other events, and mentoring sessions open to all students—individuals, teams, and start-ups. Successful entrepreneurs, business advisors, and professors mentored based on their experiences, blending academic knowledge with entrepreneurial learning. Activities specifically focused on women's engagement and motivation. To address gender imbalance, the Female Founders Network (FFN) was established, comprising a partners' network, a university founders' network, and an academic network (Academic Chairs). Funding came from Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe.

#### Key findings and outcomes

A baseline study within CircleU found that gender diversity in student entrepreneurship remains a challenge across institutions, with most universities reporting that men are still more likely to become entrepreneurs. Nevertheless, around 200 students—including a large part of women—participated in activities, often as part of mixed-gender teams. Events included talks with female leaders and founders who discussed challenges such as overcoming internal barriers, building self-confidence and developing leadership as well as entrepreneurial skills.

A student-led retreat in Paris resulted in the creation of the 'Female Founders Manifesto', a collaboratively developed action plan for empowering women innovators and fostering entrepreneurial collaboration. The data suggests that female students were often more inclined towards social entrepreneurship and had diverse academic backgrounds, including medicine, technology and biology—not just humanities and social sciences. Importantly, participation encouraged all students regardless of their gender to engage in forming teams and entrepreneurial initiatives, boosting gender inclusion and awareness within the broader CircleU network.

## KTH Royal Institute of Technology



### Short description of the initiative

KTH Royal Institute of Technology (KTH) has a strong commitment to increasing diversity among students and staff. Although the university still faces challenges with regards to gender imbalance due to its STEM nature, the university has a strong ambition to contribute to a gender-equal society, reflected in its vision and goals. Centrally at the university, the Diversity Equality and Inclusion (DEI) work is organised through the KTH Equality Office.

KTH Innovation, a unit within KTH, supports the development of innovative ideas from students, researchers and staff. It focuses on fostering inclusivity, tailoring their offering to attract a broader range of entrepreneurs, challenging stereotypes and addressing global challenges through impact-driven startups. Portraying innovation development as a normal and risk-free activity for all, and not as a special interest for a typical kind of entrepreneur, is key to making a long-term difference. Every year, KTH Innovation accepts about 400 new innovation projects into its innovation support process.

KTH Innovation believes that universities and their innovation offices are the perfect actors to drive change and show how innovation and entrepreneurship can be done in a different, more diverse and equal way. KTH Innovation typically meets projects in their early phases and thus has the opportunity and responsibility to lay the right foundation, culture and mindset – where diversity is integral, not only in terms of gender but also in background and experience. They also lead by example by ensuring and working for diversity, including in how events are arranged, how entrepreneurship is taught and how investments are attracted. As public institutions with relatively stable funding and well-established practices and renown, universities have the endurance and collective experience to prove what works, how it works and how to lead by example.

### **Key characteristics and funding mechanisms**

- **Inclusivity and diversity focus:** KTH Innovation actively seeks to tailor its support to attract all types of entrepreneurs, achieving 40% female co-founders in supported ventures. In its programs, KTH Innovation uses inclusive language and avoids language that reinforces stereotypes such as a male-only norm and the ‘work hard, never stop’ attitude which is prevalent in the entrepreneurship scene. Instead, KTH Innovation seeks to engage underrepresented groups and encourages everyone to try entrepreneurship in their own way.
- **Communication:** Communication is designed with inclusivity in mind, portraying a diverse group of people active in idea development and entrepreneurship. When referring to examples and role models, KTH Innovation pays attention to the diversity of their experiences and backgrounds.
- **Targeting bias:** KTH Innovation recognises that unconscious bias is an integral part of human life and a frequent source of unintended discrimination. Recognising this is key to identifying weaknesses in the processes and changing the way one works. For instance, female founders are known to ask for less funding than their male counterparts when applying for grants and funding. This can be rectified by being more proactive in suggesting and providing better guidance to ‘even out’ the differences, putting a price tag on typical funding activities and not making subjective calculations.
- **Impact orientation:** Over 85% of supported innovation projects at KTH Innovation align with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), mirroring Sweden’s broader emphasis on impact-driven innovation and working together towards a sustainable society, where public agencies such as universities play a crucial role.
- **Programs and events:** Initiatives like the Discovery Program and ideation workshops provide targeted support to researchers and students who do not necessarily identify as entrepreneurs or approach the innovation office with an existing idea. Instead, their participation is encouraged by allowing them to be curious and explorative in forming a business idea or in being entrepreneurial. Many of the participants that join these activities are women, but KTH Innovation has noticed an overall increase of male participants as well. It cannot be emphasised enough that by inviting people from all experiences and

backgrounds to explore and be curious in entrepreneurship, KTH Innovation does not repel anyone but rather expand their potential reach. Thus, the chances of contributing to positive impact in society through entrepreneurship are increased as well.

- **Creativity:** The programmes and workshops offered, including coaching and networking opportunities, are organised through a creative and inclusive environment – where words such as curiosity, creativity, impact and encouragement guide how the work is organised and how to engage potential entrepreneurs.
- **Funding sources:** KTH Innovation leverages grants from agencies like Vinnova, which prioritise diversity and societal impact, to support and validate early-stage innovation projects. Most of the public grants in Sweden require applicants to map out and describe their impact and diversity efforts – which is also part of the scoring to secure the grants. This is another example of how public institutions can be a positive force for creating a more diverse set of entrepreneurs.

### Key findings and outcomes

- Since 2016, the percentage of women involved in innovation projects at KTH Innovation has increased from 16% to 40%, reflecting the success of the inclusivity efforts.
- At KTH, the researchers, particularly women, report higher confidence and interest in entrepreneurship when supported through targeted and inclusive programs that address their needs and preferences. This includes connecting them to relatable role models and introducing them to a diverse set of experienced founders that can share their stories.
- The inclusive approach contributes to Sweden's shift towards impact startups, with a majority of the venture capital going to companies with impact as part of their mission.

"The Discovery program provides a fantastic opportunity to help you make a difference and maximize the impact of your research at KTH."

- **Katia Gallo**, Professor of Applied Physics at KTH. Participated in the Discovery Program during the spring semester 2022.

"This strong male norm manifests itself in every aspect of innovation support and we are so used to it that we often don't notice. We have to be constantly aware of our bias, and continue questioning how and why we do things. We will continue scrutinizing our work to create an inclusive and welcoming innovation support system at KTH"

- **Lisa Ericsson**, Head of KTH Innovation & CEO of KTH Ventures



## University of Strathclyde



### Short description of the initiative

In February 2023, the Scottish Government published a report called '[Pathways: A new approach for women in entrepreneurship](#)'. The report seeks to change how we think about the under-participation of women in entrepreneurship and sets out a series of concrete recommendations. In response to extensive public and private sector engagement and the momentum generated by the report, the 'Pathways Forward' programme was launched. The primary objective of the programme, led by Pathways report author Ana Stewart, is to drive positive change through tangible, practical, and swift action and to influence policy through collaborative thought leadership across the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Engagement with ecosystem organisations is through the 'Pathways Pledge'—a light-touch, collaborative initiative where organisations implement their own actions using the Pathways Report as the 'manifesto' for change. The University of Strathclyde is a proud Pathways Pledger.

### Key characteristics and funding mechanisms

As a Pathways Pledger, the University of Strathclyde:

1. Commits to raising awareness of entrepreneurship-related Equality Diversity Inclusion (EDI) issues by delivering a series of (ideally quarterly) events to educate all staff involved in the delivery of 'Strathclyde Inspire' about EDI in the context of entrepreneurship. Attendance at a minimum number of sessions is required for all

Strathclyde Inspire staff, and changes in EDI understanding are tracked via pre- and post-event surveys.

2. Ensures diversity in decision-making: a diversity checklist and monitoring system have been implemented to guarantee a minimum of 33.3% female representation in all decision-making/selection processes at key stages of the entrepreneurial journey—from developing mindsets to supporting growth businesses through investment and training.
3. Commits to collecting and sharing data on gender diversity across the entrepreneurial journey. This includes anonymised and aggregated data on senior executives within the university's investment portfolio and working with portfolio companies to improve decision-making diversity.

These pledges are embedded within Strathclyde Inspire, the university's institution-wide entrepreneurship strategy to 2030, aligning entrepreneurial ambition with social progressiveness.

### Key findings and outcomes

As the pledges were only made in September 2024, measurable impacts are still developing. However, Pledge 1 has already fostered new collaborations between academic centres such as the 'Hunter Centre for Entrepreneurship' and professional service teams in the Innovation & Industry Engagement Directorate. This marks a promising model for combining academic and operational excellence in support of entrepreneurship.

A key challenge noted under Pledge 2 is maintaining gender balance on decision-making panels, particularly in cases of last-minute cancellations. The university is now focused on expanding its network of female mentors and advisors to sustainably address this gap.

"The University of Strathclyde is renowned for its commitment to widening access and enabling students from all backgrounds to reach their academic potential. From this strong foundation, we are very well positioned to do the same for entrepreneurship. The next phase of our institution-wide entrepreneurship strategy commits to fostering inclusive entrepreneurship, opening new pathways for underrepresented groups and enabling transformative opportunities for all."

- **Fiona Ireland**, Head of Entrepreneurship Strategy at the University of Strathclyde

## Université Paris-Saclay (CentraleSupélec)



### Short description of the initiative

To address a low number of female founders, CentraleSupélec and ESSEC Business School launched the 'Lead'hers' mentoring programme. It is designed to build entrepreneurial confidence and offer mentorship to women interested in entrepreneurship.

CentraleSupélec has launched three major programmes to encourage startup creation targeting researchers, students and alumni, with a primary focus on deep-tech ventures. The percentage of women working on entrepreneurial projects is still low, except in the health sector. To counter this trend, the Lead'hers programme builds participants' confidence early through masterclasses and shared experiences and provides dedicated mentorship.

### Key characteristics and funding mechanisms

- The programme is a collaboration with ESSEC, one of the first French business schools to engage deeply in women-focused entrepreneurship support.
- The first cohort ran from September to December 2024 and involved 16 recent alumni (mostly within a year of graduation).
- Activities included four themed learning expeditions on 'Being bold', 'Convincing', 'Leading' and 'Influencing', organised in partnership with Femmes Business Angels (a female-focused angel investor group), Wilco, F-Club from Station F, and Tomcat.
- These sessions combined experiential learning with direct exposure to the investor ecosystem.

## Key findings and outcomes

Participants reported the programme was highly valuable in building confidence, receiving guidance from seasoned entrepreneurs, and reducing feelings of isolation. Specific benefits highlighted by the women entrepreneurs included, among others:

- receiving practical advice from other entrepreneurs,
- gaining confidence in their role as Chief Executive Officers (CEOs),
- becoming part of a network of talented mentors, offering a support system.

The programme helped to create visible role models, leading to expectations of increased applications from women to the university's incubation programme. CentraleSupélec continues to work on developing a long-term supportive ecosystem for female founders by partnering with like-minded institutions and networks.

Women currently represent 26% of the co-founders in CentraleSupélec deeptech & AI acceleration program. The goal is to increase this to 35% by 2026.

"Daring to pitch, even in a small group, was already a big step for me! I also really appreciated the presentation on public speaking, which gave me confidence in my ability to take the floor."

- **Emma Morice**, mentee at LeadHers

"Thank you to the LeadHers program for giving me this opportunity to talk with brilliant women and to benefit from the entrepreneurial support offered by the network."

- **Christine Klamm**, leader at JPMorganChase, mentor at LeadHers



## Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU)

### Short description of the initiative

'Boost Henne NTNU' is a student-driven initiative that inspires and empowers female students at the NTNU to explore entrepreneurship. Founded with the motto "Don't dream about the dream job – create it!", Boost Henne aims to significantly increase the number of female founders at the university by offering access to tailored resources, a vibrant network and a supportive community.

### Key characteristics and funding mechanisms

The initiative is funded by NTNU Innovation with additional support from external partners such as the renewable energy group Aneo and the bank DNB. It is also backed by a robust network of knowledge and network partners, including HER, StartupLab, and Frøya Ventures.

Boost Henne NTNU organises events, workshops and outreach activities to encourage female students to consider entrepreneurship as a viable career path. A key annual event is the Social Human Equity Conference, where the initiative brings a delegation of over 40 female students to engage with broader themes of inclusion, innovation, and equity.

### Key findings and outcomes

- In 2018, only 14% of founders at NTNU were women. By 2024, this figure had increased to 35%, reflecting the initiative's success in changing perceptions and increasing participation.
- As of December 2024, Boost Henne NTNU has built a community of 460 members.
- 30% of the women admitted to the NTNU School of Entrepreneurship's Class of 2026 credited Boost Henne NTNU as their motivation to apply.

The initiative demonstrates how a focused, student-led effort, when properly resourced and connected, can drive institutional change and foster a new generation of women entrepreneurs in science and technology.

## University of Sheffield

### Short description of the initiative

The University of Sheffield supports inclusive innovation through its Commercialisation Journey programme. This initiative was designed to address the specific barriers faced by underrepresented groups, including female researchers and innovators, particularly those managing additional responsibilities such as caregiving or working part-time.

The University of Sheffield also offers dedicated networking opportunities for female entrepreneurs. For example, to foster entrepreneurial confidence among women, the university held a networking event in March 2025 called 'Women in Business', in celebration of International Women's Day. The event featured inspiring speakers, student pitches, and engaging panel discussions. It attracted strong interest, bringing together both experienced entrepreneurial women within the university and those newly exploring opportunities in the business world.

### Key characteristics and funding mechanisms

The programme is funded by the Research England's Connecting Capability Fund (CCF), through the RED (Research England Development) stream. It provides micro-fellowships and small, flexible grants tailored to the needs of individual researchers.

Support can include temporary adjustments to contracts to increase hours or free up time from teaching or administrative responsibilities, allowing researchers to participate in key entrepreneurship activities such as market exploration or validation.

This individualised, responsive approach recognises that rigid frameworks often exclude those with more complex life or work circumstances.

### Key findings and outcomes

Though still in its early stages (the initiative has been operational for about a year), early feedback indicates that these personalised mechanisms are allowing more women and underrepresented staff to consider commercialisation pathways.

The university has also found that the case-by-case nature of the support reveals the layered and intersectional nature of barriers. Some of the most impactful interventions have been relatively modest but delivered at the right moment, underscoring the need for flexibility in inclusive entrepreneurship programming.

## University of Surrey



### Short description of the initiative

The Surrey Women's Entrepreneurship Network (SWEN) is a dynamic initiative launched in 2023 to support women entrepreneurs and to promote inclusive entrepreneurship in the region. It was designed to curate and create opportunities for women-led ventures and provide a space for growth, connection and knowledge-sharing.

With more than 350 members—and growing—SWEN brings together women from across sectors and industries throughout Surrey and the neighbouring counties in the United Kingdom (UK). It also attracts male allies and champions of women-led businesses who want to contribute to a more equitable entrepreneurial ecosystem.

### Key characteristics and funding mechanisms

SWEN was founded by the University of Surrey and is hosted by the Surrey Research Park as part of the university's wider outreach and business engagement activities within the Surrey Innovation District.

The network is transitioning into a member-led model focused on peer-to-peer support and community-driven programming.

Events range from financial literacy and fundraising workshops to networking and mentoring sessions. These are designed to demystify finance and investment for women founders and enhance their access to funding.

The initiative operates on modest core funding provided by the university, supplemented by sponsorships and the voluntary engagement of mentors and advisors.

### Key findings and outcomes

SWEN has rapidly evolved into a vibrant ecosystem aligned with the fifth SDG (“achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”). It empowers women through practical business support and community-building, enabling more confident participation in entrepreneurship.

As the network continues to grow, its inclusive design and openness to grassroots input have made it a model for scalable, university-facilitated support platforms for women in business. The light-touch administrative model combined with member ownership fosters sustainability and adaptability.

“When I was starting my new business locally I was researching and thought that there has to be somewhere to go to build your business skills, to better understand the market. SWEN has been a blessing to me, it’s been this community where I go to get the positive energy I need to go back and keep doing what I’m doing.”

- **Delmwa Deshi-Kura**, Founder and Creative Director of Delmedia Productions

“SWEN is all about a community of women supporting women, championing one another and addressing the issues of gender inequity when it comes to finance and support for venture creation and business growth.

- **Kat Mack**, Founder and Chair of the Surrey Women’s Entrepreneurship Network

## Technische Universität Wien (TU Wien)



### Short description of the initiative

TU Wien fosters inclusive innovation through a variety of interconnected initiatives spanning education, incubation, alternative career development for research commercialisation and community building. The university's entrepreneurship ecosystem places particular emphasis on outreach to young learners, support for women and international founders and the development of practical, inclusive skills for startup success. Central pillars of this approach include sciencepreneurship education, the TUW i<sup>2</sup>ncubator and initiatives like the 'She Leads' programme, Mastermind groups, and the Negotiation Club.

### Key characteristics and funding mechanisms

- **Early engagement:** TU Wien contributes to the Kinderuni programme, a joint initiative involving multiple universities across Vienna that introduces children to STEM fields and entrepreneurial thinking in an engaging and accessible way. By reaching a broad and diverse group of young learners, this collaborative effort supports long-term cultural shifts in how science and technology are perceived and pursued, especially by girls.
- **Sciencepreneurship education:** TU Wien supports scientists—especially women—in developing business acumen alongside their research skills. Language barriers and confidence in negotiation were identified as two major challenges and TU Wien addresses these through practical programmes.
- **'She Leads' & Mastermind groups:** The university created both women-only and mixed-gender Mastermind groups to provide monthly peer support and exchange. These proved vital in strengthening leadership and creating safe, supportive environments. The 'She Leads' group continues to offer a voluntary, female-only space.
- **Negotiation Club:** Founders meet monthly to develop their negotiation skills in a safe and supportive space. Originally developed for women, this initiative has since broadened to benefit the whole founder community.
- **Inclusive events:** TU Wien ensures its founder events are family-friendly, including amenities like a kids' corner, to support parent-founders. Events are conducted in English when possible, to increase accessibility for international entrepreneurs.

- Values in action: TU Wien developed and enforces a manifesto on mutual respect and inclusive behaviour. Founders and all participants in their programs are encouraged to speak out about discriminatory experiences, with institutional support provided.
- Individual coaching: All founders at TU Wien have access to a high-performance coach to work through personal, team-related, or structural challenges. Female scientists are additionally supported through dedicated coaching to assess the market potential of their research.
- Institutional partnerships: TU Wien collaborates closely with internal groups such as 'FemChem' to offer tailored support to female scientists and connect them with entrepreneurship resources.

## Key findings and outcomes

In 2023, 46% of the startups supported by TU Wien included at least one female founder. Feedback from founders highlighted the benefits of both women-only and mixed-gender spaces. Male founders also expressed appreciation for the insights brought by women in mixed Mastermind groups, affirming the added value of diverse collaboration.

The Negotiation Club and She Leads programme were particularly noted for improving confidence and leadership skills. TU Wien's inclusive ecosystem, structured around mentorship, mutual respect, and targeted empowerment, offers a robust model for universities seeking to institutionalise support for women in entrepreneurship.

The mastermind sessions and the individual high performance coaching helped me understand how to apply my personal strengths in a business context and create real added value

- **Julia Kruselburger**, co-founder independo

Empowering more female founders starts with creating spaces where women can access the training, mentorship, and support needed to reach high performance. Encouraging greater awareness and collaboration across the entrepreneurial community helps foster an environment where everyone—regardless of gender—can contribute, grow, and succeed together. By investing in growth for all, we move closer to a truly inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem

- **Alexandra Negoescu**, Senior Program Manager for Scientific Service Portfolio TU Wien  
Innovation Incubation Center

"Being a founder or stepping into a C-level role at a startup can test even the most experienced leaders. The shift from structured management to the uncertainty of early-stage entrepreneurship often brings moments of doubt, where the weight of decisions and team dynamics feel both exhilarating and overwhelming. This is where professional coaching can be particularly valuable. At the TUW i2ncubator program, the coaching sessions provided exactly that kind of strategic and emotional compass. For me personally, they offered a rare space to reflect, strategize, and receive honest, actionable feedback, focused on team development and growth from a leadership perspective."

- **Elizabeth Pavez Lorie**, co-founder CompreVie