

THE CHALLENGER ACADEMY

Impact Report 2025



2025: Impact & Growth

The Challenger Academy experiences a landmark year in 2025, significantly expanding its reach and impact. We continued our core mission of empowering young people across Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire, and now Nottingham, providing vital connections to learning and employment opportunities through skills training, mentorship, and real-world experience.

This year saw substantial mission-aligned programme growth:

- > We took our successful work experience model national through a **new partnership with OLIVER**, a leading London ad agency, creating opportunities in deprived wards in Nottingham.
- > We are successfully targeting areas of acute need to bridge the opportunity gap. **70% of students in Nottingham** participating in 'The Biggest Pitch' live in the **20% most income-deprived neighbourhoods** in England. Furthermore, our Primary School 'Future Skills' programme in Stoke engaged an average of **66% Pupil Premium pupils**.
- > We embedded creative learning early by **partnering with a local multi-academy trust** to roll out creative teaching resources in four North Staffordshire Primary schools, aligning with the National Curriculum.
- > In **collaboration with Adobe**, we were at the forefront of innovation, introducing **AI training** into our programmes and beginning development on AI teaching **resources for local Secondary schools**, with two local multi-academy trusts.
- > We provided young people with **paid opportunities to share their voice**, establishing a Gen-Z research panel for a diverse range of clients.

A major highlight was our **summer internship with partner LADbible**, which supported four additional young people to work on a live brief, present their ideas, and gain a unique glimpse into the media world.



None of this success would have been possible without our dedicated funders, partners, volunteers, and the Stoke-on-Trent and Nottingham communities.

Thank you for helping us open doors, inspire creativity, and shape brighter futures.

Our Mission

Our mission is to make the creative industries more accessible and socially diverse through valuable work experience opportunities, free skills training, and career guidance.

We aim to spark a passion and create a pathway for young 'challengers' to thrive in a creative career within their own community.

What do we do?

Free skills training & work experience opportunities

Creative careers teaching resources with a focus on AI for Primary & Secondary schools

Connecting young talent to local employers & paid opportunities

Supporting local economic growth



Our 2025 Impact in Numbers



372

students engaged



5,620

hours of skills training delivered



65% of the students we worked with come from the UK's most disadvantaged communities

*Data based on 260 survey respondents; 65% (170) meet socio-economic deprivation criteria (FSM/IMD 1-2).



21%

increase in young people engaged compared to 2024



£2.6m

economic benefit to the local economy



80%

of our interns have gone on to full-time employment in local creative roles

Strategic Aims

Guided by our mission, The Challenger Academy establishes annual strategic priorities designed to break down barriers and accelerate progress. These pillars serve as our roadmap for inspiring, motivating, and celebrating young people as they unlock their full potential and redefine their futures.

1

Increase Reach

We will continue prioritising growth in high-need communities across the UK.

2

Harness the Power of our Network

We will connect young people to mentoring, work experience, and employment opportunities via our growing partner network.

3

Expand Programme Offerings

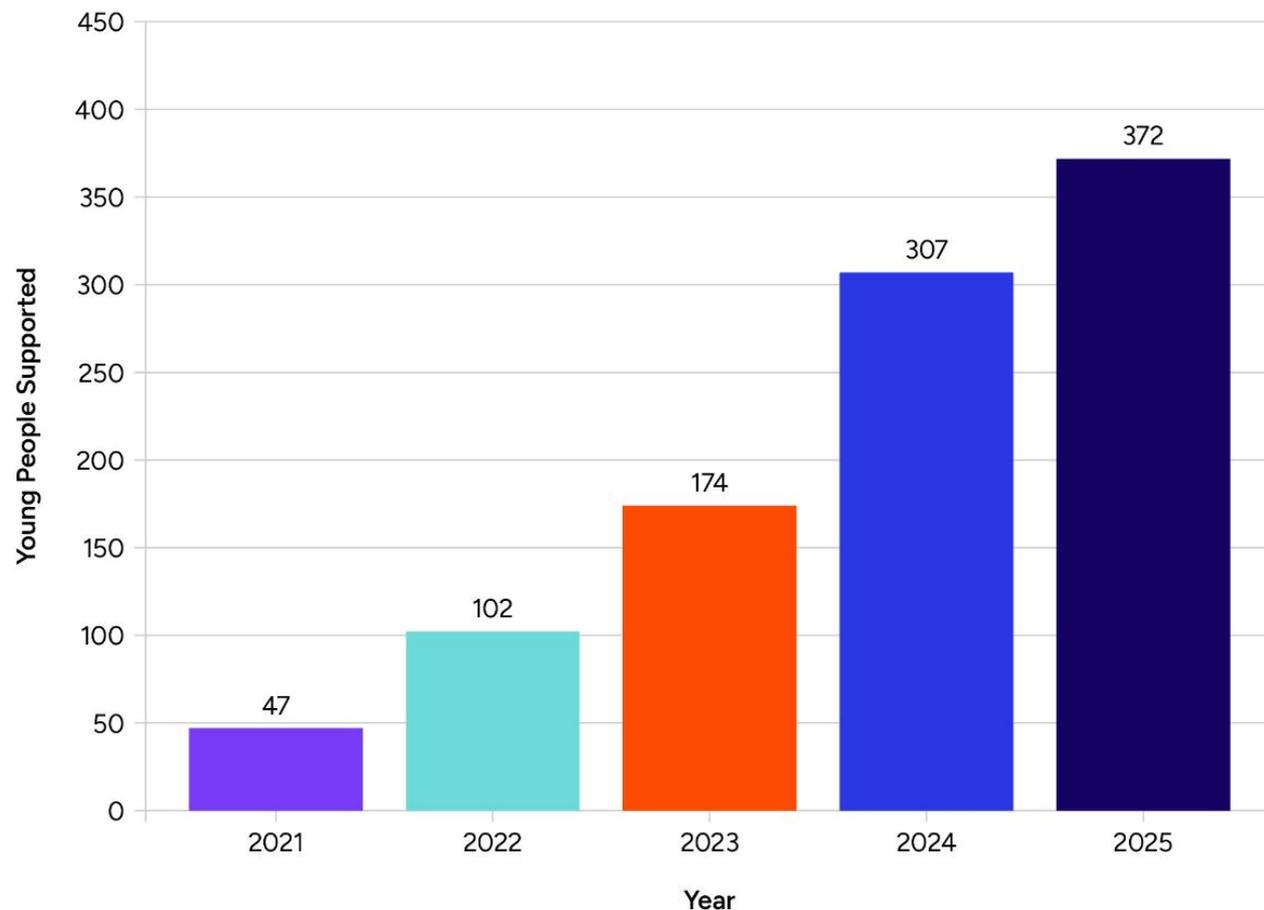
We aim to create programmes that support more young people facing systematic barriers (care-experienced youth, NEETs, etc).

4

Maximise Impact

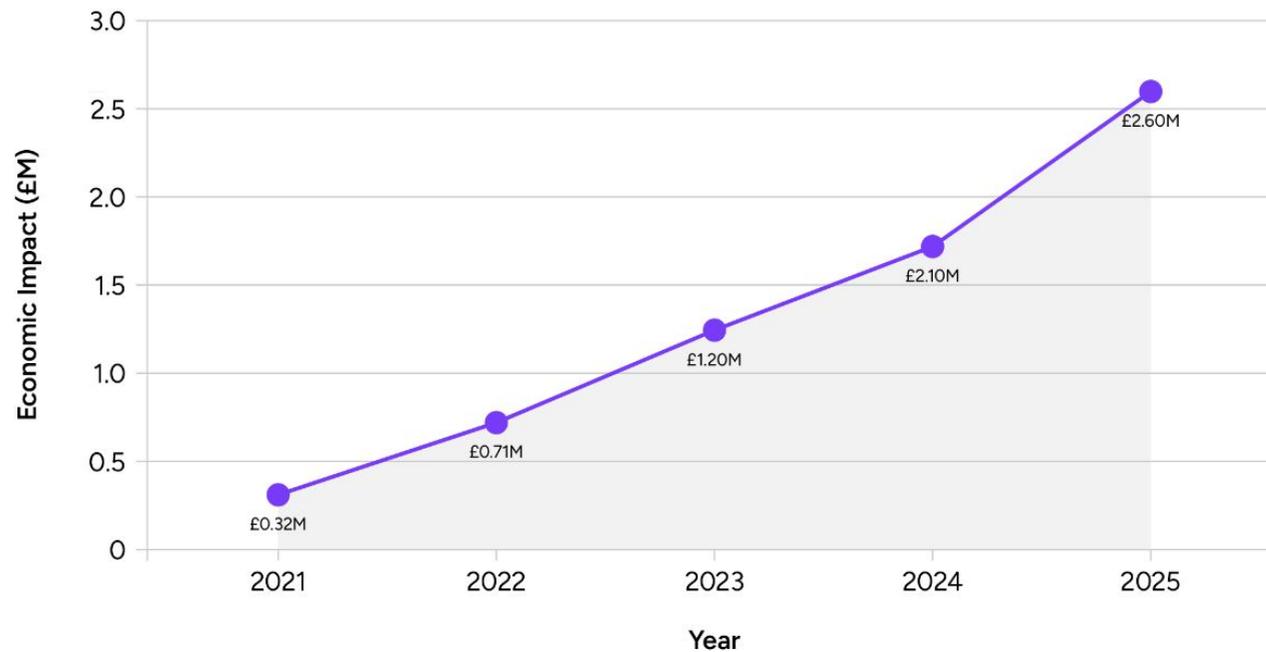
We aim to drive change by scaling our most effective programmes and prioritising outreach to underserved young talent.

**As we expand
we are able to
support more
young people
in Stoke and
beyond...**



Right: A bar chart showing the growth in the number of young people supported by The Challenger Academy year-on-year (2021–2025)

As a result of our vocational training, job creation, and wellbeing benefits of increased confidence, we've had a positive impact not only on young people, but also on the Stoke economy.



Right: A line graph showing The Challenger Academy's economic impact local Stoke economy (2021–2025)

2025 Programmes

Best Summer Job Ever Internship

Open to anyone aged over 18, living in Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire, The Best Summer Job Ever is a paid 4-week summer internship programme with our partner and global advertising agency VCCP, that offers an introduction to, and experience in, multiple advertising and creative disciplines. Students receive hands-on experience working on live projects for some of VCCP's flagship clients, employability skills training, and mentorship from industry experts.

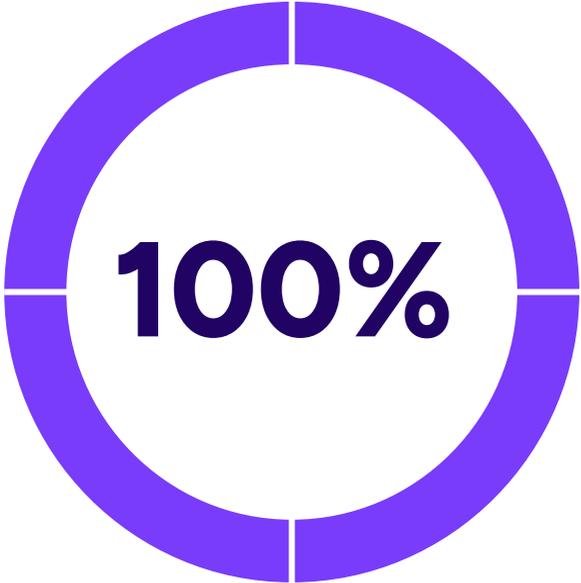
This year, we partnered with global media powerhouse LADbible Group to provide students with a glimpse into the world of media through insight sessions, creative workshops, and production planning. In the final week of the internship, students worked on a mock brief for LADbible, and senior leaders attended the final presentations to provide feedback. As part of the partnership, LADbible financially supported 4 additional interns, increasing our intake from 8 to 12 interns this year.

Supported by

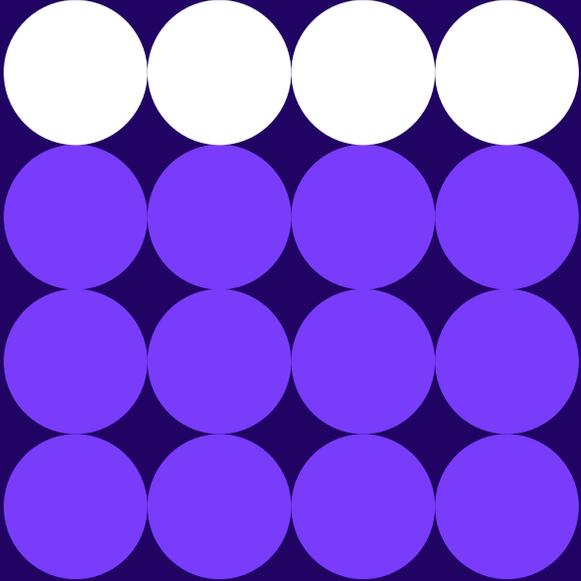


Best Summer Job Ever — Key Stats

These statistics highlight the positive impact of the internship on skills development, industry knowledge, and career interest.



100% of participants would consider applying for a role in the creative industries following the internship.



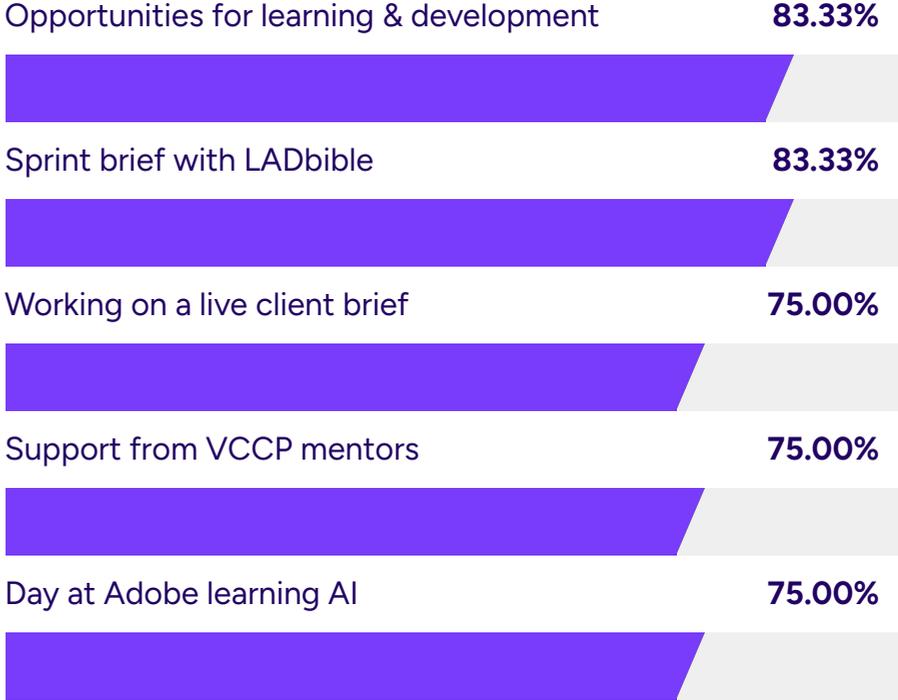
75%

of our summer interns said the programme provided them with a deeper understanding of the creative industries and the jobs that exist within it.

The top 3 skills that the interns felt they developed / improved during the internship:



Programme Aspect Ratings





“The internship has been fantastic, not just from a development standpoint, but also showing me where my career can lead and the opportunities available to me that I wouldn’t otherwise have considered or realise existed”

Alex, Summer Intern

“From trips to London and excursions to Adobe, networking events, public speaking opportunities, and working with LADbible, this experience has been invaluable for my professional development and career progression”

Millie, Summer Intern



Biggest Pitch of the Year 2025

The Biggest Pitch of the Year (formerly the Intercity Student Challenge) is aimed to provide students with an introduction to the world of advertising and creative agencies, while teaching them a host of essential skills.

This year, we've partnered with OLIVER agency to expand the programme reach into Nottingham. With hands-on support from mentors at VCCP and OLIVER agency over the 8-week programme, The Biggest Pitch of the Year allows young people from Stoke and Nottingham to work in a team, get real-world experience working with a client, produce an advert, compete against others, and have fun doing it!

We've expanded into Nottingham with the help of our partner OLIVER agency!



Biggest Pitch of the Year — Key Stats

* A total of 70 students completed the pre and post-programme survey.



1 in 5 students surveyed identify as part of an ethnic minority group.

- > **75 students** participated across 4 colleges in Stoke and 1 college in Nottingham
- > **70%** of the surveyed students in Nottingham live in the **20% most income-deprived** neighbourhoods in England.
- > **67%** of the surveyed students from 2 of the 4 participating colleges in Stoke live in the **20% most income-deprived** neighbourhoods in England.

A significant number of respondents are studying:



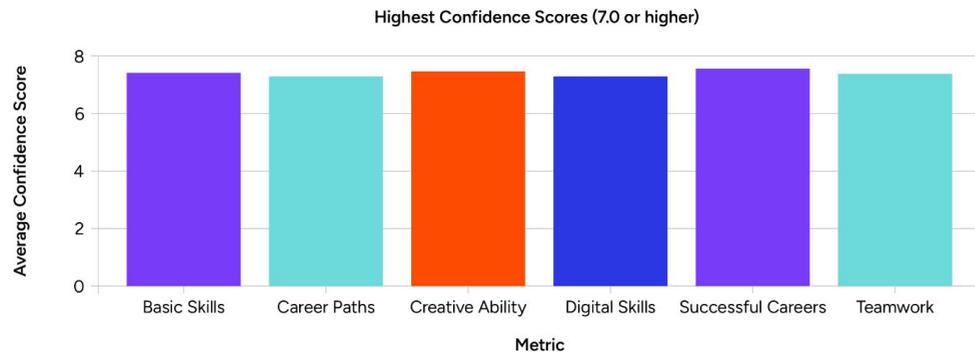
Biggest Pitch of the Year

High Confidence in Creative Potential

After completing the programme, our participant survey found that students are generally confident in their creative potential and ability to pursue successful careers.

Areas of Highest Confidence (top 3 scoring metrics):

- > "I can see people like me can have successful careers in the creative industry" (7.55/10)
- > "I am confident in my creative ability" (7.48/10)
- > "I believe I have the basic skills required for a role in a professional environment" (7.40/10)





“This project has been a game-changer for the students; I have seen them grow and develop since initially hearing about the brief, through to developing their ideas... All of the students have learnt so much, not only about producing a body of work for a client within a professional setting, but also learning about themselves and their self-belief in their ability and creative potential.”

Graeme Malcolm, Teacher at Stoke-on-Trent College

“The most valuable thing that (The Challenger Academy) has brought to the students is hope. They’ve shown there are opportunities within Stoke that can lead to bigger things and keeps local creative options open to students.”

Ruby Mair, Teacher at Stoke Sixth Form College



Primary School 'Future Skills' Programme

This pilot programme with **Alpha Academies Trust** (a network of 4 Primary academies in North Staffordshire) is aimed to inspire Key Stage 2 pupils by introducing them to the creative industries, with a particular focus on careers in advertising. The goal is to offer immersive opportunities at an early stage through valuable teaching resources that align with the National Curriculum and Gatsby Benchmark 4, to help pupils explore creative pathways and make more informed decisions about their future.

Objective 1

To create teaching resources that compliments National Curriculum teaching and learning at Key Stage 2.

We want pupils to understand the importance, and relevance, of curriculum learning for creative industries, especially maths, English and digital specialisms.

Objective 2

To provide opportunities for pupils to develop essential and technical skills relevant to the creative industries and beyond.

We want pupils to practice industry relevant essential skills in comms, time management, and teamwork, as well as AI and digital skills.

Objective 3

To raise awareness of creative careers and inspire the next generation of creative talent.

We want pupils to understand how their skills are relevant to industry job roles and improve knowledge of the creative sector, inspiring them to consider a creative career.

Primary School 'Future Skills' Programme — Key Stats

- > **230 pupils participated** from Alpha Academies Trust primary schools in Stoke.
- > **66%** of participating students on average were **Pupil Premium** and in receipt of Free School Meals.
- > **97.5%** of pupils felt the skills they've developed during this programme will help them in year 7.
- > **100% of teachers** felt that pupils had an opportunity to develop crucial skills such as communication, time management, and resilience.
- > Pupils reported **improved confidence** working with others in a team and presenting ideas to the class.
- > These **teaching resources** are available now for schools nationwide to download from our website.

* A total of 230 pupils completed the pre-pilot survey and 156 pupils and 3 teachers completed the post-pilot survey.



Case Study: Sophie Slim From Learner to Leader

Originally from Cradley Heath in the Black Country, Sophie Slim is a graduate of The Challenger Academy and VCCP's 2022 summer internship programme. She went on to earn her MA in Graphic Design from the University of Staffordshire and became a Junior Designer at design studio Girl&Bear in the VCCP Stoke office, where she has worked with major brands including Cadbury, Walkers, Transport for London, and Müller.

She recently led the redesign of The Challenger Academy's brand identity, giving back to the programme that first set her on the path into the industry.

A rising star who has been recognised as one of [Campaign's 'Faces to Watch 2025'](#), Sophie's creativity, purpose, and originality sets her apart. Sophie's not just a designer; she's a changemaker, already having a positive impact on the industry.

"I am sincerely grateful to everyone at The Challenger Academy who have encouraged and supported me on my journey to becoming a designer. I hope to see even more opportunities for young creatives like myself, living outside major cities, to access creative careers in the future. It can be difficult as a young person to see yourself pursuing a career where the best opportunities are sometimes so far away."

Sophie Slim, Junior Designer at Girl&Bear

campaign
faces
to 2025
watch



University of
Staffordshire

GIRL&BEAR



Case Study: Music Venue Trust x Biggest Pitch of the Year



Key Outcomes:

- > **Industry Experience & Skills Development:**
Students gained first-hand experience navigating a professional brief, developed essential employability skills like teamwork and communication, and presented to a national charity / real client.
- > **Advocacy:**
Participants left the programme not just as creators, but as new advocates for the grassroots music sector.
- > **Innovative Insights:**
MVT received a fresh perspective on youth engagement, providing them with actionable insights for future campaigns.

Partnership:

- > TCA partnered with national charity Music Venue Trust (MVT) to co-design a brief for The Biggest Pitch of the Year, tasking students with solving the issue to protect the future of the UK's cultural scene.

The Creative Brief: Students worked to bridge the gap between digital trends and physical community spaces through:

- > **Targeted Research and Strategy:**
Identifying the barriers preventing Gen Z from attending local gigs (e.g. cost, lack of awareness).
- > **Creative Production:**
Scripting the producing a short-term video for social media, as well as designing a high-impact poster.

The Impact:

- > The partnership provided students with an opportunity to work on a 'live' industry problem and develop real-world skills. The results were a testament to the students' creativity and social conscience. They moved beyond simple 'ads' to create narratives focused on community and identity.

“All of the MVT coordinators felt genuinely inspired by the students. Their ideas were thoughtful, ambitious, and in some cases incredibly moving. It’s amazing to see the next generation so motivated to protect their local grassroots music venues, and it was a real privilege to witness their passion first-hand.”

Toni Coe-Brooker, Campaigns & Comms Lead, MVT

To all our partners and funders who have provided in-kind and financial support this year, thank you for believing in the potential of young people!



Join us. Empower the Next Generation.

We rely on generous donations, funding and participation to support our programmes that ensure young people, no matter their background, have the opportunity to thrive in a creative career.



Donate

Our work relies on the support and fundraising efforts of the incredible people who donate directly, complete challenges and give up their time to organise events. The money raised is an investment in reaching more local young people. Please click to donate via our [PayPal Giving page](#) or sign up to [Easyfundraising.org.uk](https://www.easyfundraising.org.uk) (it's simple and free!) and raise money for us every time you shop online!



Employers & Agencies

We design and deliver skills training to young people who are 16+. Explore the option to run, support or facilitate one of our training programmes. Give your employees the rewarding opportunity of making a big impact on the career ambitions of young people from low-income backgrounds.



Educators & Youth Workers

If you are a teacher, youth worker or involved with a local youth group, please get in touch to learn more about how we can provide programmes to your school or college, employability and work experience workshops, and mentoring for young people. All programmes are free of charge.

Get in touch

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