

SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT
GOALS



UNIVERSITY
of York



**UNIVERSITY OF YORK
SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT GOALS**

**HIGHLIGHTS REPORT
2025**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report showcases the University of York's transformative impact throughout 2025, demonstrating how our research and community action are driving progress toward the UN Sustainable Development Goals on a local, regional, and global stage. From our designation as the **'Community University of the Year'** to the historic launch of our **£35 million deep geothermal energy project**, this year has been defined by bold interventions for the public good.



**Read our
Sustainability Plan**





NO POVERTY

Breaking the cycle of deprivation requires more than just policy. It demands evidence based blueprints that empower families and secure fairer futures.

The University of York was a central leader in the [National Opportunity Summit](#) and the Child of the North campaign, which is a powerful effort to tackle child poverty and its severe long term impacts. This National Opportunity Summit brought together policymakers, academics, and clinicians to drive transformative, evidence led policy change.

Key findings from York's associated research reveal that almost half of all children receiving free school meals start formal education without the necessary "school ready" skills, putting them at much higher risk of future challenges. The University is leading on evidence-based policy recommendations aimed at breaking the link between a child's background and their life chances, securing a fairer future for all children.

The '[Changing Realities](#)' project embeds lived experience into policymaking, directly influencing the Scottish Government's Child Poverty Delivery Plan. Research presented to the First Minister revealed that matching Scotland's investment levels across the UK could [lift 700,000 children out of poverty](#). This collaboration secured commitments to strengthen the Scottish Child Payment, offering a proven, evidence-based blueprint for tackling deprivation nationwide.





2 ZERO HUNGER



ZERO HUNGER

Whether engineering crops to withstand climate disease, mapping out practical actions to fix broken domestic systems or innovating fortified foods to combat global malnutrition, our researchers are delivering the solutions needed to end nutritional inequality.

In 2025, our biologists achieved a major breakthrough in [crop protection](#) by identifying how the devastating *Phytophthora infestans* pathogen disables plant ‘alarm systems’—a discovery that paves the way for disease-resistant harvests.

In parallel, our social scientists have launched a powerful campaign for domestic change. Through the [‘Hungry for Change’](#) and [‘Nutrition in the North’](#) reports, we have exposed the deep divides in food security between the North and South, while our [‘FixOurFood’](#) team has published 27 evidence-based recommendations, from regenerative agriculture to auto-enrolment for free school meals, to radically transform the UK food system.

The University’s impact on global food security was highlighted in the [Financial Times](#), which featured the award-winning [“C-Real”](#) project. Addressing severe child malnutrition in Northern

Ghana, the project collaborated with the University for Development Studies and a local social SME to develop a high-nutrient, fortified cereal made from locally sourced crops. This impact project also delivered a range of benefits for the local community including farmers and female workers receiving the [2024 “Changing the World”](#) Innovate UK award.





GOOD HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Health inequality is not just a social issue but a biological one and our 2025 research is targeting the root causes of ill health to drive a holistic recovery agenda.

This year, York researchers provided stark evidence that health inequality is not just a social issue but a biological one: new studies revealed that societal wealth gaps are linked to [structural brain changes](#) in children.

These insights were reinforced by the [INGENIOUS](#) project in Bradford, which found that families in deprived areas face dangerous levels of indoor air pollution.

The University is also charting the path to recovery. Our health economists demonstrated that expanding pharmacy services could save the [NHS £1.2 billion](#) annually, while our mental health researchers proved that '[green social prescribing](#)', such as nature based therapy, can be as effective as clinical treatments for anxiety, offering a sustainable new model for public healthcare.





QUALITY EDUCATION

Education is the most powerful tool for social mobility and we are redefining access to ensure knowledge is as inclusive as it is innovative.

The University launched a major offensive against educational inequality by opening two new [learning centres in Bridlington and Grimsby](#), towns where child poverty rates reach nearly 40%. In partnership with IntoUniversity, these hubs are already providing thousands of young people with the academic mentoring and aspiration raising workshops needed to close the gap in higher education progression.

On campus, the University is pioneering new ways to teach global challenges. The [Play for the Planet](#) network is using game design to make complex climate data accessible to students, while the award winning [Sustainability Clinic](#) has empowered nearly 500 students to earn credit by solving real world sustainability problems for local charities and business. Supported by the 'Latte Levy' [Sustainable Development Grant](#), which funds student-led eco projects, York is creating a learning environment where education translates directly into community action.



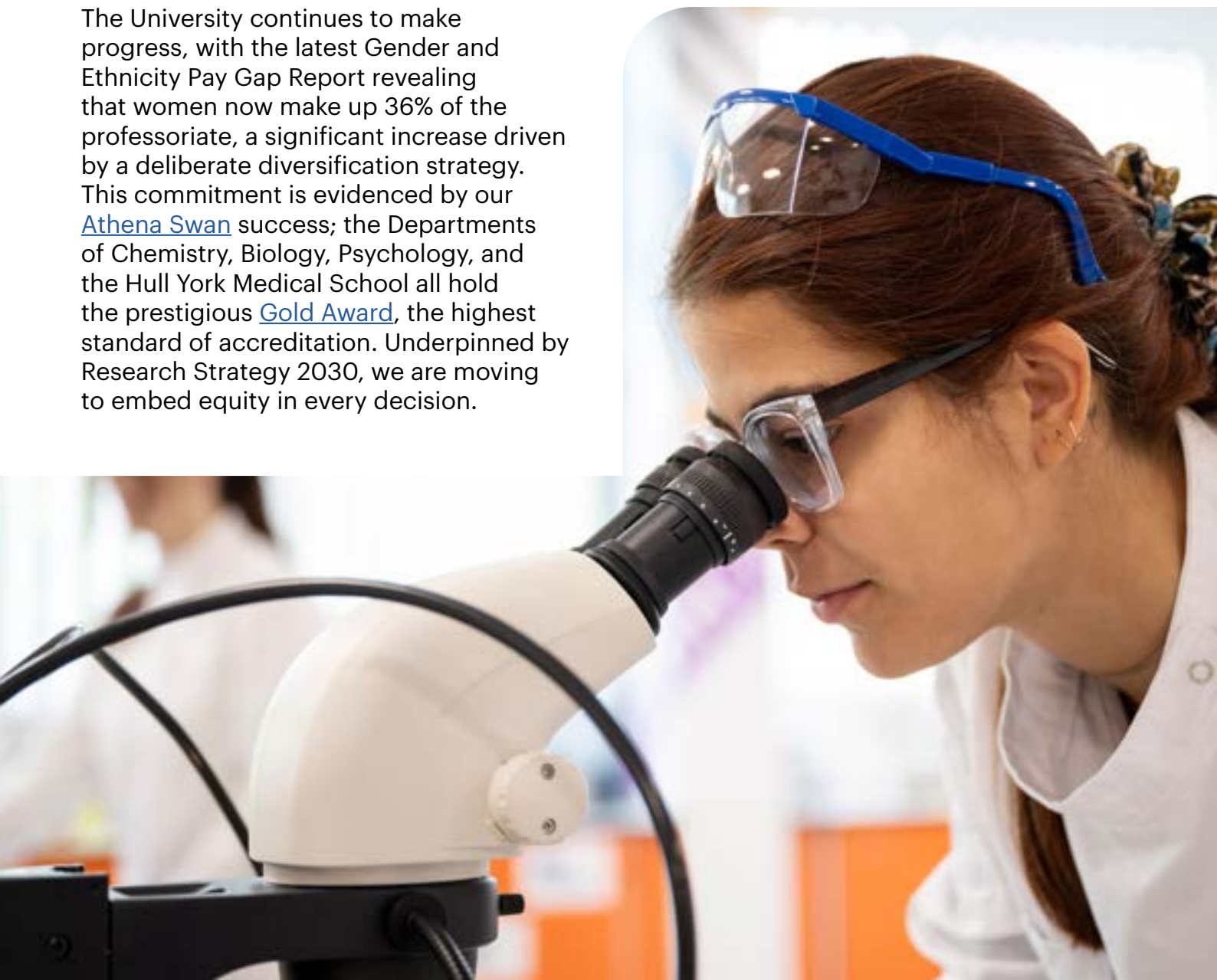
5 GENDER
EQUALITY



GENDER EQUALITY

Gender equity is being woven into the fabric of our institution, dismantling structural barriers to ensure that talent, not gender, defines success.

The University continues to make progress, with the latest Gender and Ethnicity Pay Gap Report revealing that women now make up 36% of the professoriate, a significant increase driven by a deliberate diversification strategy. This commitment is evidenced by our [Athena Swan](#) success; the Departments of Chemistry, Biology, Psychology, and the Hull York Medical School all hold the prestigious [Gold Award](#), the highest standard of accreditation. Underpinned by Research Strategy 2030, we are moving to embed equity in every decision.



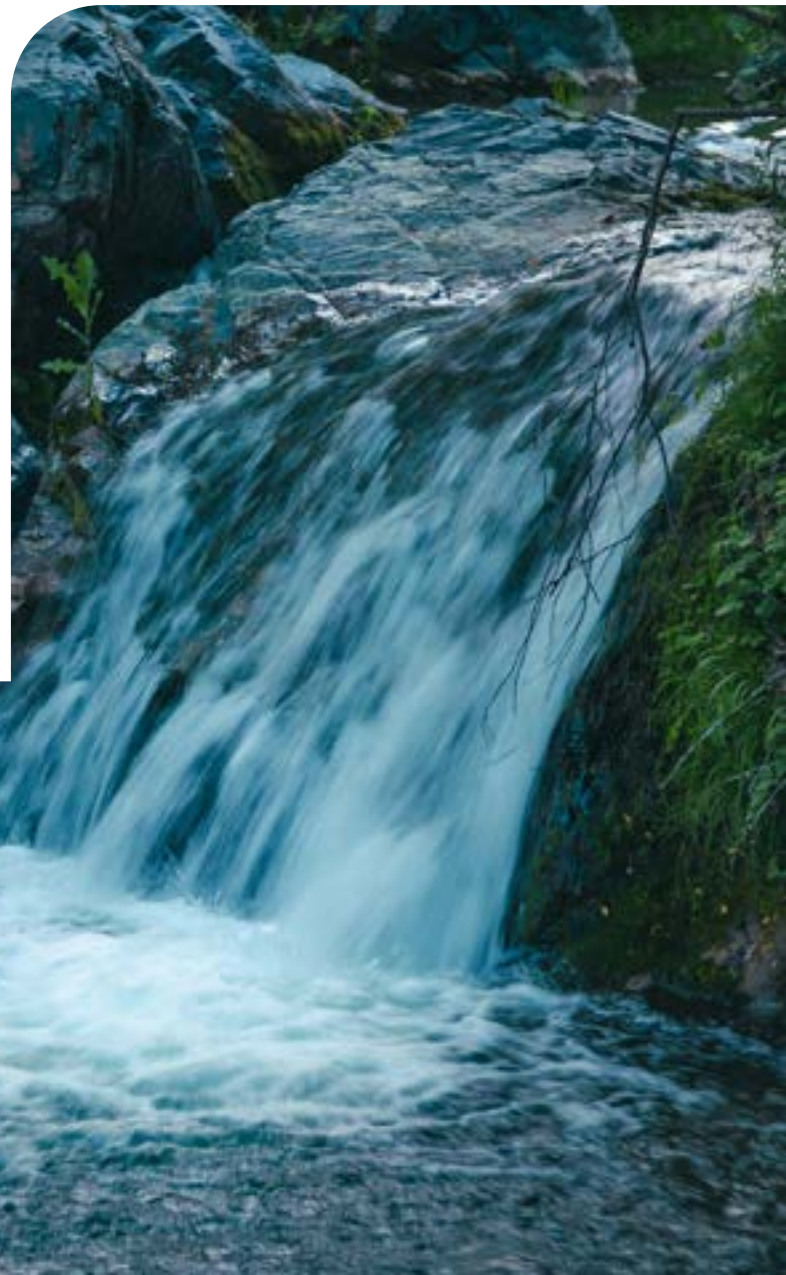
6 CLEAN WATER
AND SANITATION



CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION

Record breaking levels of ‘forever chemicals’ have been uncovered in British waterways, forcing a national rethink on water safety.

In a [landmark study](#), researchers detected some of the highest concentrations of Trifluoroacetic acid (TFA) (a strong acid used in pharmaceutical and pesticide manufacturing processes or in the electronics industry) ever recorded in surface water, with contamination in 98% of tested UK sites, including North Yorkshire rivers. With levels in the River Kelvin exceeding those in Germany and Sweden, these findings have exposed a critical gap in chemical management. The research is now driving urgent calls for a ‘source control’ strategy to stop these toxins before they reach drinking water.





AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY

Retrofitting homes is a complex challenge, but new initiatives are turning confusion into a streamlined pathway for green living.

To meet York's goal of becoming a Net Zero city by 2030, 44,000 homes must be upgraded. In response, the Stockholm Environment Institute-York (SEI-Y) collaborated to launch the [Retrofit One-Stop-Shop York \(ROSSY\)](#), and subsequently the [YorEnergy](#) digital platform, a pioneering service that simplifies the journey for residents. By uniting the Council, financiers, and technical experts, the project removes the 'hassle factor' of installing heat pumps and solar panels, creating a scalable business model for local authorities nationwide.





8 DECENT WORK AND
ECONOMIC GROWTH



DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

A major new Northern partnership is engineering a £5 billion boost to the bioeconomy, proving that sustainable innovation drives prosperity.

Collaborating with local government and industry, the University is leading the transition to a low carbon, circular economy by replacing fossil fuel derived goods with bio based alternatives. This initiative is set to create approximately [5,000 skilled jobs](#), building the critical infrastructure and workforce needed to attract global investment and secure the UK's bio-based future.





INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Digital innovation meets physical regeneration in our ambitious bid to build the foundations of a future ready economy.

This year, the University cemented its position as the region's economic engine by leading a transformative bid to designate York and North Yorkshire as a national [AI Growth Zone](#). With the potential to unlock £85 billion in growth and establish the world's first carbon negative data centre, this initiative champions the 'responsible AI' expertise of our Institute for Safe Autonomy.

Beyond digital infrastructure, new funding from the [Mayoral Investment Fund](#) is accelerating our work in the creative and bio- economies, from training the next generation of immersive technology experts at XR Stories to expanding the BioYorkshire cluster. These efforts were spotlighted during a recent visit by the [Government Chief Scientific Adviser](#), confirming that York's research clusters are not just academic hubs but critical national assets driving sustainable industrial strategy.





REDUCED INEQUALITIES

Inclusivity drives excellence, and we are actively dismantling the barriers that exclude marginalised voices from higher education.

This year, the University's commitment to inclusive education was recognised on the national stage. The Department of Chemistry received the prestigious [Royal Society of Chemistry Horizon Education Award](#) for its groundbreaking work to decolonise the curriculum, creating a global roadmap for STEM departments to integrate diverse voices and improve attainment for ethnic minority students.

York also secured renewed recognition from the [National Network for the Education of Care Leavers \(NNECL\)](#), achieving an 'exceptional' rating in five key areas of student support. By providing dedicated financial aid, year round accommodation, and tailored career pathways for care experienced and estranged students, the University is proving that reducing inequality requires both structural academic reform and targeted, compassionate social support.





SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES

Cleaner air and stronger communities are at the heart of our mission to create a vibrant, livable city.

This year, York scientists reshaped the debate on urban air quality with two landmark studies: one revealing that simply moving car exhausts to the right hand side of vehicles could [cut roadside pollution by a third](#), and another identifying that gas boilers—not cars—are now the [primary source of nitrogen oxides in central London](#) (accounting for 72% of emissions). While these findings drive the urgent case for heat pumps and smarter vehicle design, the University is also looking indoors, launching the £600,000 [‘GREENIN’](#) project to determine how houseplants can act as natural air filters to protect human health.

Beyond the lab, York’s commitment to civic vibrancy was honoured nationally when it was named [‘Community University of the Year’](#), recognising the York Festival of Ideas as a powerful engine for public engagement that brings over 60,000 people together annually.





RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION

Sustainability must be embedded into every stage of the research lifecycle, ensuring the pursuit of knowledge does not come at the planet's expense.

This year, the University took decisive action to 'green' the scientific process by launching a comprehensive [Code of Practice for Sustainable Research](#). This new framework ensures that environmental responsibility, from procurement to waste disposal, is embedded into the design of every project, ensuring that the pursuit of knowledge does not come at the cost of the planet. This strategic commitment is actively delivering results through the [Green Impact Lab Accreditation](#) scheme, which challenges departments to minimise energy use and plastic waste in high intensity laboratory environments.

These systemic changes are mirrored by student-led innovation; in a standout example of circular thinking, a University of York student has successfully developed a novel [bio-polymer](#), offering a scalable, biodegradable alternative to fossil fuel based plastics that directly tackles the global crisis of single use waste.



13 CLIMATE ACTION



CLIMATE ACTION

A £35 million investment in deep geothermal energy is set to significantly cut our campus fossil fuel consumption, positioning York as a national leader in zero carbon operations.

This year, the University launched its most ambitious infrastructure project to date: a [Deep Geothermal Energy](#) initiative designed to cut campus fossil fuel consumption by 78%. Backed by a £35 million government grant, this 'living lab' will tap into the Earth's natural heat to power the campus.

While we transform our own footprint, our researchers are helping the world adapt. New studies on [African mountain communities](#) reveal severe climate impacts requiring urgent adaptation, while our '[Seasons of the Anthropocene](#)' research challenges policymakers to recognise how shifting weather patterns are reshaping human resilience globally.





LIFE BELOW WATER

New satellite analysis of the world's coldest continent is rewriting our understanding of sea level rise.

Challenging the assumption that [East Antarctica is too cold for melting](#), York researchers produced the first continent wide dataset of surface meltwater. Analysing over 133,000 images, the team discovered increasing 'ponding' that threatens to destabilise ice shelves. This critical data provides policymakers with the early warning signs needed to protect global coastlines from catastrophic change.



15 LIFE
ON LAND



LIFE ON LAND

Protecting biodiversity requires a science first approach that challenges political expediency and uncovers hidden risks.

York researchers issued a stark warning against proposals to [downgrade wolf protection status](#), arguing that such moves undermine recovery efforts without solving livestock conflicts. Simultaneously, new research into [‘biodiversity leak’](#) revealed a dangerous paradox: abandoning farmland in wealthy nations can inadvertently export environmental destruction to the tropics, increasing global extinction risks by offshoring food production.





PEACE, JUSTICE, AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS

As a designated 'University of Sanctuary', we stand as a fortress of safety for those fleeing persecution, ensuring education remains a right even in uncertain times.

Reaffirming our dedication to human rights, the University successfully reaccredited its sanctuary status, providing critical scholarships to over 50 displaced students since 2020. Beyond the classroom, we serve as a shield for intellectual freedom, supporting over 100 Human Rights Defenders and at-risk academics through the Cara network, ensuring that the voices of justice are protected, not silenced.



17 PARTNERSHIPS
FOR THE GOALS



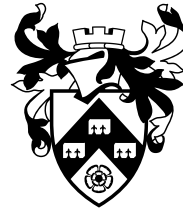
PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS

Global challenges require global solutions, and 2025 has been defined by collaboration at every level.

This year, the University demonstrated the power of connection on a global stage. In a significant move for international cooperation, Vice-Chancellor Professor Charlie Jeffery joined the UK Prime Minister on a landmark trade and [education delegation to India](#), strengthening research ties and forging new cross border partnerships to address shared global challenges.

This commitment to working together was further validated by the [QS Sustainability Rankings 2026](#), which recognised York as a world leader in environmental and social governance. Closer to home, the spirit of partnership was celebrated through the [Student Volunteering Awards](#), honouring the students who dedicated thousands of hours to working alongside local charities, schools, and non-profits, ensuring that the University's resources actively enriched the fabric of the local community.





UNIVERSITY
of York

A decorative background graphic consisting of several overlapping, semi-transparent, fan-shaped segments in various colors (light blue, grey, pink, yellow, green) arranged in a semi-circle.

**UNIVERSITY OF YORK
SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT GOALS**

**HIGHLIGHTS REPORT
2025**