

Cultural Institute
Annual Review

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UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Cultural Institute

Annual Review 2024/25

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We look back on a successful year in which the Cultural Institute began implementing the Cultural Engagement Strategy with partners across the campus. Together we made significant progress behind the scenes in shifting towards a more audience-focused approach, bringing our cultural offer under one ‘arts centre’ umbrella, newly branded as Open Up.

A vibrant business as usual programme saw new investments in interdisciplinary research through Ignite, Sapling, and Creative Labs. A particular highlight was the first fully curated Light Night programme, which drew over 13,000 people across two nights of research-inspired arts and creative installations all over campus. Other highlights included the Leeds International Piano Competition in September, a new ‘What’s Next?’ sector event in February, and embedding our work within Bradford 2025’s hugely impressive City of Culture programme.

We end the year with the exciting news that — in context of widespread cuts to arts and humanities courses in UK Higher Education Institutions — the University of Leeds is foregrounding Culture and Creative Industries as one of its three signature areas of research strength in its One Leeds White Paper (June 2025), to be developed over the coming years.

We continue to make meaningful contributions towards supporting the University as a civically engaged institution — working towards a fairer, more socially just and environmentally sustainable world, and supporting a thriving region. The activity outlined in this report demonstrates how art, culture, and creativity have the power to positively impact everyday lives, strengthen communities, and enrich society as a whole.

— Wieke Eringa

The Cultural Institute activates exchange between the University of Leeds and the creative sector, benefiting people, research and student experience. In 2024/25, we:

£50_k

Funded **10** research projects, including Sapling and Ignite

1.7_k

Attendees across our **18** supported and held events

17

Supported **17 freelance artists** across Creative Labs, Light Night Leeds and Play Space

120

Engaged with **120** organisations, an **increase of 27% on the previous academic year**

13_k

Attendees across two nights of Light Night. An **increase of 894% on 2023**

50

Created paid **employment** for **50 students**, an **increase of 117% on the previous academic year**

£4.2_m

Actively supported UKRI bids from the Faculties of Arts and Humanities, Social Sciences and Medicine and Health schools

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“These projects are a fantastic example of how interdisciplinary partnerships can contribute meaningfully to respond to complex global issues.”
— **Shona Smith, Head of the Priestley Centre for Climate Futures**



Climate Futures © Leeds Creative Labs

Research impact

In 2024/25, the Cultural Institute strengthened interdisciplinary research by connecting academics with artists and cultural partners working across health, heritage, environment and community. A key strand of work focussed on creative health, delivered with the Horizons Institute, building a cross-campus research community in this emerging field. Through Ignite, Sapling, and Leeds Creative Labs, we supported early-stage collaborations that fostered co-creation, innovation, and public engagement. These projects facilitated new partnerships and experimental approaches, with several now progressing toward further funding and long-term impact.

Creative Labs: Climate Futures

Delivered in collaboration with the Priestley Centre for Climate Futures, this year's Creative Labs paired six artist-researcher teams to tackle climate issues through interdisciplinary exchange. Themes included eco-feminism, sustainable materials, repair culture and climate communication. Participants described the process as “invigorating”, with outputs shared in a summer showcase that sparked future project development.

Creative Health

Following our body of Creative Health work focused on three conferences in 2018, 2019, and 2020, we have begun to revisit this important area with the Horizons Institute and Professor Alice O’Grady (School of Performance and Cultural Industries), exploring potential for a more connected, interdisciplinary Creative Health research community.

University of Leeds is well placed in the Creative Health policy landscape, including hosting Leeds Arts Health Wellbeing Network. Two workshops brought together 62 researchers from 12 schools and six artists, fostering co-creation and early-stage research. Delegates discussed challenges and opportunities of working in the creative health space as researchers and heard from policy experts.

Ignite fund

The Ignite fund supported four projects across the across the Faculty of Medicine and Health, Environment, and Arts, Cultures and Humanities. The purpose of the fund is to connect researchers with regional arts, cultural, and third sector partners, to bring about a step-change in partnership work.

Professor Alan Mackie and colleagues from the National Alternative Protein Innovation Centre (NAPIC) expanded their collaboration with Compass Live Art into a broader project exploring how artists can influence public perceptions of alternative proteins. A two-day workshop brought together four artists and NAPIC scientists, which led to a commission for artist Freddie Yauner to develop Plain English Flour in partnership with the School of Food Science and Nutrition. The resulting will be used in schools and at open days.

“The strong collaboration with Compass Live Art will drive a number of future projects including Light Night 2026 and other NAPIC related activities. These could never have been achieved without the support of Ignite.” — **Professor Alan Mackie (Faculty of Environment)**



PPIE Creations © Lucy Prodggers

Sapling

The Sapling Fund, offered in collaboration with the Leeds Arts and Humanities Research Institute, supported six early-stage collaborations between researchers and cultural partners. The projects enabled experimentation and co-creation.

The projects explored a wide range of ideas and approaches: investigating the impact of Play on Prescription on families; reimagining river management through ‘riverkinship’; and combining engineering with carnival arts to create costumes for Leeds West Indian Carnival and Light Night. Others used sound and movement to examine environmental change, engaged Wakefield young people in public history through medieval court records, and facilitated co-learning with Holocaust-era Torah scrolls.

These projects show how interdisciplinary partnerships can connect research, creativity, and community to explore new perspectives on social and environmental challenges.



Sapling © Banyan

Research: in focus

Building neurons with the Follow-on Fund

The Creative Labs Follow-on Fund supported the collaboration between artist Sue Walpole and Morgan Thomas, a Postgraduate Researcher (School of Computing), exploring neural pathways through art. Their project evolved from puppetry to a modular light-based installation mapping brain activity, now being developed for Light Night Leeds 2025. Students engaged in a workshop learning to build and programme responsive 'Neurons', noting how the creative approach deepened their understanding of neuroscience.

"It removed the pressure of chasing funding and let us focus on developing the idea."

— **Morgan Thomas**

"It's helped us grow our connection and deliver real results."

— **Sue Walpole**



© Illuminating Minds

"We needed some dreaming space for people to re-author themselves."

— **Ellie Harrison**

"It's about flipping traditional methods and giving power back to participants."

— **Lucy Prodders**

Embodying fatigue

Dr Lucy Prodders (Faculty of Medicine and Health) collaborated with artist Ellie Harrison (Polite Rebellion) to explore chronic fatigue through creative, research-led methods. Supported by the Cultural Institute's Ignite Fund and NIHR Leeds Biomedical Research Centre, they co-created tactile kits of creative activities designed to help participants express and reflect on their lived experience. The kits were trialled in workshops with people living with fatigue, fostering emotional accessibility and creating space for honest, nuanced dialogue. The project challenged traditional research approaches by prioritising participant empowerment and creativity. A follow-on research bid is in development, with RIS advising on suitable funding to expand this work.

"Thank you for a thoughtfully curated session, which was very useful in outlining the considerations needed in planning, delivering and evaluating events of this nature."

— **Anonymous participant**

Courageous Programming — research with, and for, the sector

Dr Dani Abulhawa (School of Performance and Cultural Industries) and James Harker led a free workshop for the creative and cultural sector on how to programme content related to Palestine and other politically sensitive issues. Fifteen organisations and freelance producers attended the session, which drew on timely, practice-led research to explore how institutions respond to politically motivated complaints, internal tensions, and public scrutiny. Participants developed tools to uphold artistic freedom, protect staff and artists, and commit meaningfully to anti-racism. The discussions connected to wider debates on ethics, freedom of expression, and the role of the arts in political life.



© Courageous Programming

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Student education & opportunity

The Cultural Institute continued to support students to access inspiring cultural experiences and learning opportunities with our partners on campus and in the city.

Enhancing employability through cultural partnerships

Enabling early career development in the cultural sector

16

paid internships through our partnerships

7

live briefs for students

3

year-in-industry placements

65

in-curriculum placement opportunities

Three students received paid commissions as early-career artists to create installations for Light Night Leeds. Other students contributed to a site-specific performance and responded to a design brief as part of Campus Reimagined.

"It was a great honour to be selected for Light Night Leeds. My dream is to develop a career as an artist and this commission felt like the start."

— **Ed Green, BA Fine Art graduate & Light Night Leeds 2024 commissioned artist**



Ed Green, Light Night

"The Cultural Institute created a rich, structured route for international students to connect with UK professional practice.

The combination of mentorship, research, and consultation provided vital professional literacy in a sector where employment often depends on networks and lived experience."

— **Dr Sarah Feinstein, Lecturer in Performance and Cultural Industries**

"Getting the opportunity to meet, connect and collaborate with other creatives from the international cultural sector really helped put into perspective the universality of cultural practice... Being given the opportunity to not only travel (which financially isn't always viable, particularly when you're working class!) but to be seen as an expert in your respective field is incredibly assuring that the work you have put into your studies and development is meaningful and deserves a place of recognition"

— **Samuel Hackney-Ring, Applied Theatre and Intervention MA**



Sam Hackney Ring

Embedding research within the curriculum

Ten Masters students engaged in live cultural research as part of their academic studies. Six investigated Campus Reimagined Live! as a case study in public engagement through live events, supported through the Engaging the Modern City module. The remaining four undertook Independent Research Projects on Light Night, conducting fieldwork with external partners and presenting their findings to cultural producers based on campus.

This collaboration with the School of Performance and Cultural Industries gave international students in particular a valuable route into the UK cultural sector. Working closely with Cultural Institute staff, students developed practice-based research and gained experience in consultation—an area of growing importance in the cultural industries.



Enabling early career development in the cultural sector

Each year, our year-in-industry placement student works across production and project management, including a 'placement within a placement' with a cultural partner. In 2024, Edie Wright joined Yorkshire Contemporary to support the delivery of the Turner Prize.

Through our membership of Culture Next, we also funded Sam Hackney Ring (MA Applied Theatre and Intervention, PCI) to attend an international conference in the Netherlands focused on youth cultural participation across 50 European cities.



Antara Malhotra & Yun Ci Liu (Poe)

Student work: in – focus

Hundreds of exhibition visitors take part in student-designed engagement activity

MA Art Gallery and Museum Studies students Antara Malhotra and Yun Ci Liu (Poe) gained hands-on experience through our partnership with Bradford 2025 designing an interactive experience, engaging over 1300 exhibition visitors at Loading Bay, Bradford 2025's new pop-up arts venue.

The exhibition, based on the hit BBC TV series 'Extraordinary Portraits with Bill Bailey', showcases powerful and emotive portraits created by well-known artists depicting people with incredible personal stories. Antara and Poe designed an activity allowing participants to draw portraits of themselves, family members and friends for display in the exhibition space. Visitors' contributions were layered together, creating a vibrant and ever-evolving display.

"This project has been an incredible opportunity for us to contribute to a groundbreaking exhibition while learning from professionals in the field. The hands-on, collaborative nature of this activity not only strengthens visitors' interaction with the art on display, but also encourages them to interpret their stories in imaginative ways while looking at their reflections in mirrors. It is a powerful exploration of identity and shared experiences."

— Antara Malhotra

"We've really enjoyed the creative process, and it's been great to work alongside Nicola (Murray, Bradford 2025 producer) and the fabrication team to bring this interactive element to life. The exhibition reflects the diversity of modern Britain, and we are proud to be a part of this initiative that brings people together through art."

— Yun Ci Liu (Poe)

Student work: in – focus

Student-led research into increasing access to music in Bradford

Second year student Aya Rose (BA Global Cultural Industries, PCI) began her research project 'Access to Music in Bradford, a UK City of Culture'. Co-supervised by Dr Hugh Brown, Aya was funded through a Footsteps Fund project to support students from underrepresented groups to engage in research. Aya explored the impacts of Bradford 2025 on the local live music scene. Her research includes desk-based analysis of live music events and face-to-face interviews with people who are part of the District's live music scene in different ways. Aya gave a fantastic lightning presentation of her work at the Cultural Institute's Summer Celebration in June.



Image: Aya Rose at the Cultural Institute's summer celebration

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"I joined the University post-COVID and have never seen it so vibrant and full of life, colour and excitement!"
— University of Leeds staff member

Cultural engagement strategy

In 2024/25, the University of Leeds began delivering its new Cultural Engagement Strategy (CES) — a five-year change programme to embed culture across campus life, research, and civic engagement. The strategy recognises the transformative power of arts and creativity in shaping a more inclusive, sustainable, and connected university.

The CES aims to

- Enhance staff and student experience through meaningful cultural engagement
- Foster equity, diversity, and inclusion by championing co-creation and civic participation
- Support environmental sustainability through creative responses to the climate crisis
- Strengthen coherence and visibility across the University's cultural offer

Open up: A new brand identity

This year saw the development of Open Up, a new brand unifying the University's cultural programmes under one audience-focused umbrella, set to go live in September 2025. We commissioned a new cultural listings website and recruited a dedicated Audience Development and Marketing Manager to lead on branding, box office, and audience insight.

"Open Up represents a significant step forward in how we connect people with culture at University of Leeds. It brings together the extraordinary breadth of creative activity happening across our campus and opens it up to our wider communities. This new platform will not only make it easier to discover and attend events, but also help us understand, engage with and grow our audiences, strengthen our cultural partnerships, and celebrate the cultural vitality that defines our University."

— Ben Walmsley, Dean of Cultural Engagement



Open up new brand identity



The Nectary

32

paid student opportunities

17

installations and performances

4

student commissions

13k

attendees across four nights

894%

increase in attendees from 2023

"The missing link between research, art and the city — all illuminated as part of Leeds' best ever Light Night."
— University of Leeds staff member

"Amazing event... I am glad I came to Leeds." — International student

Light Night

On 24–25 October 2024, we hosted the University's largest-ever Light Night programme, welcoming over 13,288 visitors—an 849% increase from the previous year. The event transformed the campus into a vibrant cultural destination, with 17 installations and performances co-created by students, researchers, and artists. The programme included:

Smeaton's planetarium

A collaboration between the School of Music and the School of Physics and Astronomy, where students composed original music in response to astrophysical data.

Impossible patterns

A large-scale digital projection by Urban Projections and Professor Alistair Rucklidge School of Mathematics, exploring non-repeating patterns through immersive visuals.

Leaf lanterns

A participatory light installation by Dr Robin Hayward, School of Earth and Environment, inviting audiences to reflect on nature and sustainability.

Ubuntu

Professor Briony Thomas and her team in School of Mechanical Engineering co-designed a piece called 'Ubuntu' alongside partners RJC Dance, Mango Arts, High Esteem Carnival Designs, and the School of Mechanical Engineering's technical team, led by Dr Briony Thomas.

Students played a central role in the event's success—as commissioned artists, assistant producers, ambassadors, and evaluators. Their contributions exemplify the CES's commitment to experiential learning and creative leadership.



Light Night

“Smeaton300 and the partnership with Foxglove underpinned a hugely collaborative programme, rich and surprising, that allowed us to explore the relationship between research and cultural production in new and exciting ways for and with varied audiences. Its legacy is already seen in the development of cultural programming on campus, research trajectories, and the University’s civic role.”
— **Wieke Eringa, Director of the Cultural Institute**

Smeaton300

In January 2024 the University of Leeds launched its Smeaton300 programme in collaboration with a national creative initiative by Foxglove to celebrate the 300th anniversary of the birth of John Smeaton, recognised as the UK’s first civil engineer.

The programme brought interdisciplinary research-inspired cultural activities to staff, students, and the public and was led by the Cultural Institute in partnership with the School of Civil Engineering, and Foxglove, supporting activities across the School of Music, Public Engagement Team, stage@leeds, Cultural Collections and Galleries, and the University of Leeds Poetry Centre.

The Smeaton300 partnership exemplifies the University of Leeds’ dedication to developing a unique, interdisciplinary cultural offer that draws inspiration from our research to enhance student opportunities and promote public engagement.



Mohammad Barrangi © Justin Slee



Smeaton 300 © Skywall Photography

Smeaton300: In numbers

31

students involved
in the programme

30+

artists involved in
the programme

24

academics involved
in the programme

324

people engaged
in 19 workshops

262

audiences across
five performances

25k

people attended
across six events

4

‘That’s why I value this opportunity to focus deeply on a sustained enquiry. I want time to learn, to shape my thinking, and to influence how Cities of Culture approach ‘race’ and engagement in future.’
— Dawn Cameron, PhD student, School of Performance & Cultural Industries

Bradford 2025 partnerships

The institutional partnership with Bradford 2025 continues to deepen through interdisciplinary research, sector collaboration, and public engagement. This work supports the city’s journey as UK City of Culture and strengthens relationships between researchers, artists, and communities across the region.

PhD on community, research and culture in Bradford 2025

Researcher and cultural sector evaluator Dawn Cameron was awarded a PhD scholarship with the School of Performance and Cultural Industries to investigate her central question: ‘Are we Bradford? Interrogating ‘race’, space and culture-led regeneration in a UK City of Culture.’ Since starting, Dawn has worked closely with Bradford 2025 Evaluation and Engagement teams and begun fieldwork interviews with Bradford 2025’s ‘Our Patch’ artists and community practitioners.

Turner Prize education partnership

To support the education engagement of this year’s Turner Prize we brokered a new partnership with Yorkshire Contemporary and Bradford 2025. The University’s School of Fine Art, History of Art and Cultural Studies (FAHACS) and Cultural Collections & Galleries will work closely with Leeds-based Yorkshire Contemporary and Bradford 2025 to support the prize’s public engagement and education programme. The partnership will provide University of Leeds students with real-world cultural sector experience through live briefs and creative industry talks, and offer public events with artists, researchers and cultural professionals.

“The cultural sector plays an enormously important part in our lives and has huge societal and economic benefits... our role as an academic partner on Turner Prize is incredibly exciting, and is another demonstration of the quality and expertise in teaching and research at the University of Leeds.”
— Vice-Chancellor and President, Professor Shearer West



Dawn Cameron



BD25 Culture Fair, Carl & Sabs



Evie Facer-Floate

“The idea was to find creative ways to help people feel more positive about themselves, their place, and others — enhancing both individual and community wellbeing.”
— Dr Beverley Searle (University of Leeds, Faculty of Environment)

National Data Observatory

Dr Clare Daněk (Postdoctoral Research Fellow and Craft Ethnographer) is researching Bradford 2025 as part of the ESRC-funded National Cultural Data Observatory project led by the Centre for Cultural Value. Clare is working with Bradford 2025 and local cultural organisations to explore how qualitative data could be integrated into a future data observatory. Her work includes interviews with artists, cultural organisations, directors, marketeers, and data managers, and engagement with networks such as Bradford Cultural Voice Forum, Bradford Producing Hub, and Heritage Hub.

Carbon data repository for large scale cultural events

A partnership between SAIL (Sustainable Arts In Leeds), Bradford 2025, University of Leeds and University of Bradford has been established. The group have tested data capture methodology used to assess the environmental impact of events. As well as contributing to SAIL’s ambition to prototype an open data platform, this piece of work directly impacts the type of sustainability data that SAIL collect throughout Bradford 2025, and will be used as a blueprint for future cultural festivals of culture. Follow the project on the SAIL website.

Seeding early research

Three Bradford-based projects supported by the Horizons Institute and CI brought together artists, communities, and academics from Leeds and Bradford to explore wellbeing and climate. Re-imagining Relationships with Urban Nature is a collaboration between Natural England, local artists, and academics to reconnect residents with biodiversity through creative workshops in scenography, writing, photography, and mapping. Muslims in the North Led by Dr Maria Hussain (LUBS), captured untold soundscape stories celebrating Bradford’s Muslim community and cultural diversity’s impact on workplaces and public life. The Energy of Intention supported wellbeing through journaling, photography, and poetry, culminating in a public exhibition in Keighley.



Partnerships

The Cultural Institute oversees a suite of high-profile, institution-wide cultural partnerships, alongside its collaboration with Bradford 2025.

These partnerships support the University’s ambitions across research, student opportunity, civic engagement, and international collaboration.

National Poetry Centre

The National Poetry Centre (NPC) has successfully completed its National Lottery Heritage Fund resilience research and attracted additional funding to support new project activity, including the National Young Poet Laureate programme; the Rubbish Words weekend, part of the Poetry School’s ‘Summit Festival’; a British Council funded collaboration with Brazil; and research into poetry and creative health in collaboration with the South West Yorkshire NHS Foundation Trust. The development of Trinity St David’s church on our campus received £5m investment from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government earlier this year and the University is now working in close partnership with the NPC to fund the capital development of the building for shared use and to support a wider range of activities related to research, student education and civic engagement.

Leeds International Piano Competition

The Leeds International Piano Competition, one of the world’s leading classical music competitions, successfully held its 2024 edition on campus and at St George’s Hall in Bradford. Following this, the Cultural Institute has secured a new five-year partnership to support the next two editions in 2027 and 2030. This renewed collaboration will enhance global brand visibility, deepen civic and educational engagement, and create new opportunities for students and researchers. The University will work closely with the Competition to strengthen its presence across campus and the wider region, ensuring its ongoing impact on culture, education and international collaboration.



Leeds International Piano Competition © Frances Marshall



The Flying Dutchman, DARE © James Glossop

DARE partnership with Opera North

This year, the DARE partnership between the University of Leeds and Opera North hosted a sandpit on The Creative Case for Sanctuary. The event brought together researchers, arts professionals from across the city, and artists with lived experience of displacement to explore the role of creativity in supporting Leeds as a City of Sanctuary and the University as a University of Sanctuary.

DARE Academic-in-Residence Dr Katie Gardner led a workshop on the XR potential of operatic choral performance, while DARE Art Prize winner Keisha Thompson continued her work on creative approaches to maths education. Students engaged through talks, visits, challenge briefs, and dress rehearsal attendance. The 20th Pettman DARE Fellowship took place alongside several internships — including Assistant Conductor, Assistant Director, and Facilities Assistant — providing valuable professional experience.

Four public performances by Opera North musicians and singers were held on campus and were warmly received by staff, students and visitors.

Partners & artists we've worked with this year

Institutional Partners

Bradford 2025 UK City of Culture
Leeds International Piano Competition
National Poetry Centre
Opera North (DARE programme)

Sector partners (A-Z)

Come Play With Me
Left Bank
Leeds Museums & Galleries
Leeds Heritage Theatres
Music Leeds / Launchpad
Henry Moore Institute
Mafwa Theatre
Leeds City Council
Leeds International Film Competition (LIFF)
Bradford Producing Hub
South Asian Arts UK (SAA-UK)
The Hepworth
East Street Arts
Yorkshire Contemporary
Transform Festival
Super Friendz Ltd
Compass Live
Foxglove
Compass Live Art
Polite Rebellion
Yorkshire Dance
Yorkshire Sculpture Park

Artists we've worked with

Alison Smith
Boris Maas
Eleanor Craig
Ed Green
High Esteem Carnival Designs
Immortal Bloom
Kelly Cumberland
Khadijah Ibrahim
Mango Arts
Matthew Dangerfield
Rebecca Smith (Urban Projections)
RJC Dance
Storytelling by Liv
Mia Symonds
Jo Kennedy
Hannah Sibai
Cat Scott
Lauren Saunders
Parham Ghalamdar
Govi Asano



Image: Illuminating Minds

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