

PATHWAYS PLEDGE

Practitioner's Guide to Inclusive Entrepreneurship Support

**For university staff, ecosystem
partners and supporters and
enterprise programme managers.**



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Pathways Pledge

At the University of Edinburgh, we are proud to join the Pathways Pledge – a national movement aimed at addressing the deep-rooted gender imbalance in entrepreneurship. In collaboration with leading partners across Scotland’s startup ecosystem, we are committing to meaningful, measurable action that supports and empowers women to thrive as entrepreneurs.

Background: pathways for progress

In February 2023, the Pathways: A New Approach for Women in Entrepreneurship report – authored by Ana Stewart and Mark Logan – shone a spotlight on a critical issue: although women make up over half of Scotland’s population, they represent only one in five entrepreneurs and receive just 2% of institutional investment.

In response, the Scottish Government committed £17.5 million to drive systemic change across the startup economy. A cornerstone of this commitment is the Pathways Forward programme, launched in September 2023 to catalyse action through collaboration, investment and practical support. At its heart is the Pathways Pledge – a call to action for organisations to create lasting, structural change for women in entrepreneurship.

From pledge to action

As the commercialisation service at the University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh Innovations is proud to lead on the Pathways Pledge and take tangible steps to transform the landscape for future women founders.

This is a key moment in our Pathways journey and we are keen to share the progress we have made so far. This is a quick-reference guide and action tool. Use the checklists to audit your current practice, fill in the commitment sections in your own time and work through it with your team. The goal is not perfection, it is one incremental shift at a time.



Things to keep in mind

The report is clear: this is not about individual women lacking confidence or ambition. Under-participation is the result of deep structural and societal causes and it will only change if we actively address them.

The root causes run deep

Decades of societal conditioning shape who sees entrepreneurship as 'for them'. Fixing surface-level access issues alone won't shift that. We need to challenge norms, not just processes.

Informal networks are a core problem

The entrepreneurship ecosystem runs on informal, largely male-dominated networks. Women are structurally excluded from these. Formalising access pathways isn't a 'nice to have', it is essential.

The problem isn't caring responsibilities, the problem is that our systems weren't built with them in mind.

Women account for a significant majority of unpaid carers in Scotland. Data from the Scottish Government's Carers Census shows that around three-quarters of carers in the 2023-24 census 73% were female.

Support infrastructure was designed around a founder with no caring responsibilities. Pop-up, flexible and genuinely accessible provision isn't a nice extra or a concession, it's what good design looks like.

Diversity in decision-making changes outcomes

Evidence from Scottish EDGE and Converge Challenge shows that diversifying judging panels directly leads to more diverse finalists and winners. Who sits in the room determines who succeeds.

Source: Scottish Government, Gender policy coherence: annual statement 2025



SECTION 1

What the Pathways Report Tells Us

The Pathways report is the evidence base underpinning everything we do through the Pledge. These are the findings to carry with you.

1 in 5

businesses in Scotland are female-led

2%

of investment capital goes to women-founded startups



Source: Pathways: A New Approach for Women in Entrepreneurship, Stewart & Logan, 2023

SECTION 2

Language and Culture

The words we use signal who belongs. Language shapes who applies, who feels taken seriously and who believes entrepreneurship is for them. Small shifts matter more than you might think.



 Move away from	 Move towards
Describing risk-taking as the hallmark of a 'real' entrepreneur	Framing resilience and sustainability as equally valid entrepreneurial values
Asking women about risks while asking men about growth	Asking all founders the same quality of ambitious, opportunity-focused questions
Language that assumes everyone has unlimited time and energy (not considering caring responsibilities)	Normalising flexible engagement and varied working patterns
Defaulting to 'guys' for mixed-gender groups	Using inclusive language: 'everyone', 'team', 'the room'
Founder imagery and case studies that represent a narrow demographic	Actively curating diverse role models across all communications
Framing caring responsibilities as a barrier to founder success	Recognising diverse life experience as founder strength

Language audit - do this with your team

Take one piece of your communications, an email, event invite, website page or application form. Read it through the eyes of a founder who doesn't see themselves reflected in your current cohort. What stands out?

One language or framing change we will make:



SECTION 3

Behaviours to Embed

These are practical, low-cost shifts grounded in Pathways insights. Tick what you already do well. Circle what needs work. Start there.

In every conversation with a founder:

- Don't make assumptions. Avoid assuming gender in email or in-person. Use the founder's name rather than gendered greetings and follow their lead on how they introduce themselves.
- Lead with growth-focused, opportunity-oriented questions, not just risk and barrier questions.

Instead of: What are the biggest challenges you face as a founder?

Try: What would you do with the right support behind you?

- Active listening - before anything else, identify and name specific strengths and capabilities you hear from the founder. What are they already doing well?
- Once you've recognised their strengths, where are the gaps and how can you address those in a way that builds on what's already there?
- Avoid assumptions about availability, ambition or risk appetite based on caring responsibilities or gender.

- Every introduction you offer, deliver on it. One genuine connection is worth more than a whole resource list.
- When you notice a bias playing out, in yourself or others, speak confidentially with the person involved, your manager or your diversity champion.

In your programmes and events

- Check the timing and format of every event or deadline - does it exclude people with caring responsibilities, or those who are menopausal or perimenopausal and managing fluctuating energy, sleep and wellbeing?
- Offer hybrid options wherever possible.
- Audit your speakers, panelists and case studies for diversity. If they're all the same, change them.
- Review application forms for language, length and assumptions, are they accessible to founders with non-linear paths, including those who are neurodivergent, have career gaps or come from non-traditional backgrounds?
- Design for different learning styles. Avoid relying on a single format. Mix approaches, for example: small group discussions, 1-2-1s, self-study, worksheets and peer learning — so that everyone has a way to engage that works for them.
- Track who participates, who progresses and who drops out, disaggregated by gender. If you're not tracking it, you can't change it.
- Actively facilitate peer connections. Organic networking reproduces existing inequalities. Be purposeful: look out for anyone who seems isolated or new and make direct introductions. Consider assigning an informal buddy or chaperone for the event, someone whose job is to bring people into conversations and make sure no one is left on the sidelines.
- Be intentional about who you invite. Who receives your invitations matters. Organic outreach tends to reach the same networks. Take positive action to ensure specific and underrepresented groups are actively included, think about where you're sending invitations, not just how many you send.

In your organisation

- Advocate for diverse panels, committees and interview panels, in recruitment and in funding decisions.
- Share gender breakdown data with leadership and make it a standing agenda item.
- Actively put women founders forward for opportunities - awards, speaking slots, media, introductions, etc.
- Watch out for "they remind me of someone successful." That's not a reason to select someone, it's a bias. Feeling comfortable with a founder often just means they're familiar, not that they have more potential. Ask yourself: are you recognising genuine capability, or just what success has looked like before?
- Review your referral pipeline: who are you referring to investors and funders? Track it.
- Look at your referral list: are your go-to investors and funders a diverse group?
- Of the investors, legal advisors and founders in your network, how many come from underrepresented backgrounds?

Bring this worksheet back to your team and work through at least one section together.



QUICK REFERENCE

The Pathways Pledge Principles

Keep these visible. Share them with your team. Return to them.

- We commit to building an entrepreneurship ecosystem that works for everyone.
- We recognise that women founders face specific, systemic barriers and that removing them benefits the whole ecosystem.
- We will not stop at good intentions. We will take practical, measurable action.
- We will hold ourselves and each other accountable.

SECTION 5

Your Commitments

The Pledge is only as meaningful as the actions that follow from it. Be specific. Small, consistent changes are more powerful than ambitious intentions that don't make it back to the office.

My Pledge

In the next two weeks, I will... _____

By the end of this quarter, my team will... _____

A longer-term shift I will advocate for is... _____

Who will I share this with and when? _____



Pathways is about collective action. Whether you're a student, founder, mentor, ecosystem partner, enterprise programme managers or ally, we invite you to engage and share in our journey to a more inclusive entrepreneurial future.

Join our LinkedIn group – connect, collaborate and help us keep the momentum alive. As a community we can make change happen: share what you're working on, post progress and honest challenges, connect with like-minded peers and collaborate to turn ideas into impact.



Connect now
eil.ac/InclusiveEnterpriseCollective

This worksheet was developed as part of the Pathways Pledge initiative, led by the University of Edinburgh. For resources, data and support in embedding these changes, please speak to the Edinburgh Innovations team.

We are Edinburgh Innovations, the University of Edinburgh's commercialisation service. We bring University of Edinburgh research to industry, working to identify ideas with value, and facilitating the process of bringing them to life in real-world applications.

WE MAKE IDEAS WORK FOR A BETTER WORLD.

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