# Durham University hails North East AI Growth Zone as driver of jobs and innovation



Durham University has welcomed the UK Government’s decision to designate North East England as an AI Growth Zone, describing it as a major opportunity to harness the region’s academic strengths to boost skills, jobs and innovation.

Vice-Chancellor Professor Karen O’Brien said the move would attract businesses keen to collaborate with local universities and retain skilled graduates. “Durham is a world-leading university that is proudly part of our city, county and region—driving innovation, boosting skills, raising aspirations and playing a key part in the transformative AI sector,” she said. The university sees the Growth Zone as complementary to its plans for the Durham Innovation District, developed with Durham County Council as a hub for data-intensive businesses.

The Growth Zone is expected to create thousands of jobs spanning construction, research, data engineering and AI safety, while driving productivity across industries including healthcare, energy, finance and manufacturing. Access to advanced AI infrastructure will also fuel research in areas such as drug discovery, climate change and safer technology.

Durham’s research credentials are already well established. Its Computer Science Department and Institute for Data Science are pioneering hybrid intelligence techniques that combine human expertise with AI to enhance cybersecurity, and developing explainable AI tools for healthcare, including cancer detection and emergency risk assessments. The university is also part of the £12 million National Edge AI Hub, focused on the resilience of AI in edge devices, and contributes to collaborative projects laying new mathematical foundations for AI.

Durham has secured significant research funding. A £1 million EPSRC grant supports its role in the Erlangen Programme for AI, aimed at creating safe and reliable systems, while additional EPSRC backing underpins its work in the INFORMED-AI hub on trustworthy AI. Beyond pure AI research, its Energy Institute was awarded £1.84 million to develop physics-informed AI for virtual power plants, contributing to the UK’s Net Zero goals.

The university is also committed to widening participation in AI careers through initiatives such as the TechUp project, which supports under-represented groups, and skills training via the N8 Centre of Excellence in Computationally Intensive Research. Its Leverhulme Centre for Algorithmic Life examines the social impact of AI, while its Advanced Research Computing unit supports work with the Bede supercomputer.

Regional leaders see the Growth Zone as transformative. North East Mayor Kim McGuinness said it would put the region “at the forefront of the next technology revolution,” attracting billions in investment. Technology Secretary Liz Kendall said the initiative would deliver jobs, enterprise and economic growth.

The Growth Zone forms part of a wider strategy to establish the North East as a leading European data centre hub. Newcastle University has set out plans to help generate more than 5,000 jobs and attract up to £30 billion of private investment through sites at Blyth and Cobalt Park.

Durham University is continuing to build partnerships, hosting events such as its ‘AI for Science Day’ to connect researchers and industry. With strong academic expertise, government backing and coordinated regional efforts, the North East is now positioned to become a UK leader in responsible AI innovation and inclusive skills development.

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.miragenews.com/durham-uni-to-lead-ai-growth-in-north-east-1536116/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.durham.ac.uk/news-events/latest-news/2025/09/ai-growth-zone/> - Durham University has welcomed the UK Government's announcement on 17 September 2025 that North East England will become an AI Growth Zone. This initiative aims to leverage the university's academic expertise to unlock the potential of Artificial Intelligence (AI), contributing to the regional and national economy and skills. Vice-Chancellor Professor Karen O'Brien highlighted the opportunity to attract businesses, create jobs, and retain highly-skilled graduates in the region. The AI Growth Zone will also support the development of the Durham Innovation District as a hub for data-intensive businesses, in partnership with Durham County Council.
3. <https://www.durham.ac.uk/news-events/latest-news/2024/02/durham-university-receives-1-million-epsrc-grant-for-ai-research-hub/> - In February 2024, Durham University was awarded a £1 million grant as part of a new £10 million national research hub from the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC). The grant focuses on developing new mathematical foundations for artificial intelligence (AI). The collaborative project, named the 'Erlangen Programme for AI', brings together leading researchers across computer science, statistics, and mathematics from six universities, including Durham, to enable the next generation of more effective, reliable, and safe AI systems.
4. <https://www.durham.ac.uk/news-events/latest-news/2024/02/durham-at-forefront-of-ai-research-with-major-grants-from-epsrc/> - Durham University is part of a consortium that received multiple high-value grants from the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC), part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), establishing the university as a leader in artificial intelligence (AI) research in the UK. The grants will drive forward groundbreaking work in distributed systems, quantum computing, edge computing, and more. One of the awarded grants funds Durham's role in the INFORMED-AI hub, a national consortium aiming to create more effective, resilient, and trustworthy AI systems.
5. <https://www.durham.ac.uk/research/institutes-and-centres/data-science/events-/ai-for-science-day/> - Durham University's Institute for Data Science is hosting an 'AI for Science Day' on 10 April 2025. The workshop aims to bring together AI experts from NVIDIA, Dell, and Durham to discuss joint success stories, identify future challenges, and explore collaboration pathways and new projects. Participation is open to all Durham staff, PhD students, and Research Software Engineers, with guests from other UK institutions welcome. The event will focus on the latest technology trends in AI and their impact on scientific workflows, ambitions, and plans.
6. <https://www.durham.ac.uk/news-events/latest-news/2023/06/durham-researchers-awarded-new-funding-to-harness-the-power-of-artificial-intelligence/> - In June 2023, researchers at the Durham Energy Institute were awarded a £1.84 million grant to lead a consortium of university and industry partners in developing virtual power plant technologies. This funding is part of UK Research and Innovation’s (UKRI) £13 million investment to help the UK meet its Net Zero targets. The project aims to develop innovative physics-informed Artificial Intelligence (AI) solutions for enabling Virtual Power Plants, capable of aggregating and managing diverse Distributed Energy Resources to improve decision-making and enhance grid resilience during natural hazards and extreme weather events.
7. <https://www.ncl.ac.uk/business-and-partnerships/latest-news/item/north-east-ai-powerhouse/> - Newcastle University has announced the creation of an AI Growth Zone in North East England, set to generate more than 5,000 new jobs and attract up to £30 billion in private investment. The initiative aims to solidify the region’s ambition to become one of the largest data centre hubs in Europe, with sites in Blyth and Cobalt Park near Newcastle. The AI Growth Zone will boost the rollout of AI in the area, creating thousands of jobs across the region, including in construction, data engineering, AI research and development, and AI safety.