

SAIEF 2026 REPORT

Swiss Academic Innovation &
Entrepreneurship Forum (SAIEF)

www.swissacademicinnovation.ch
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SAIEF Swiss Academic Innovation
& Entrepreneurship Forum

Mission

The Swiss Academic Innovation & Entrepreneurship Forum (SAIEF) is the national platform that connects innovation and entrepreneurship practitioners across academic institutions, industry, and the wider Swiss ecosystem.

By bridging education, research, and industry, SAIEF ensures that Switzerland remains a leading hub for academic-driven innovation and entrepreneurship, where talents turn ideas into impactful solutions that benefit both the economy and society.

“Bridging academia and society to power innovation for Switzerland’s future.”

Vision

To further enable Switzerland to be the global benchmark for academic-driven innovation, where education, research, and entrepreneurship seamlessly converge to create transformative societal and economic value.

SAIEF in numbers

The **Swiss Academic Innovation and Entrepreneurship Forum (SAIEF) 2026** convened for its second edition, bringing together more than 150 participants from across Switzerland's academic, innovation, and entrepreneurship ecosystems. Through 12 interactive workshops led by 26 workshop leads, the participants discussed key ideas and challenges for academic innovation and entrepreneurship.



Context and Focus

The participants gathered for the 2nd Swiss Academic Innovation and Entrepreneurship under the theme

Collaboration for Impact

In 12 interactive workshops timely ideas and current challenges such as Entrepreneurship in Social and Healthcare Sector, Why Innovations fail?, Encouraging female entrepreneurship and Measuring Impact were discussed.

Across sessions, three themes consistently emerged:

- Improving commercialization of research-based innovations in research-based entrepreneurship,
- Rethinking how universities measure and enable innovation impact,
- And strengthening social innovation and public value creation alongside technological innovation.



Plenary Session

Strengthening the Path from Research to Market

The plenary session examined how Switzerland can strengthen its position as an innovation hub by improving collaboration along the entire value chain—from academic research to startup creation, industrial uptake, and market scaling. A shared diagnosis emerged: while Switzerland excels in research quality and innovation, commercialization and scale-up remain structurally constrained.

Raphael Tobler, President of the Swiss Startup Association, emphasized that having ideas is rarely the problem; bringing them to market is. He highlighted insufficient funding for scaleups, unclear intellectual property processes, and a lack of early guidance for founders as key bottlenecks, calling for stronger entrepreneurial education and standardized startup procedures within universities.

Thomas Gfeller, CEO of Switzerland Innovation Park, stressed the importance of bottom-up innovation and long-term ecosystem development. He underlined the role of Switzerland Innovation Parks in bridging science and industry, while cautioning that time horizons and expectations between SMEs and research institutions must be managed more transparently.

The importance of alignment between research, startups, and industry was further emphasized by **Tanja Zimmermann**, Director of Empa. She highlighted EMPA's technology validation platforms and careful selection of experienced researchers for industry collaborations as successful measures to improve success in these projects.

From an investor and coaching perspective, **Penny Schiffer**, CEO of Raized, reinforced these points by pointing to how unclear IP arrangements and university legal frameworks risk deterring investment and slow down venture development.



Breakout Session

20 Years of University Startup Funding: Learnings and Design Considerations

In this session, participants reflected on two decades of startup support in Switzerland. EPFL pioneered this work by the introduction of the Innogrants with the motivation to support researchers with innovative ideas to prepare the launch of their spin-offs. Since then, the support for science-based startups has evolved to stretch far beyond the funding per se.

The moderators emphasized three important points to build long-term impact.

- Don't expect to see results fast. Sustained institutional commitment is needed since science-based entrepreneurship has a long runway and it's not an isolated intervention that does the trick, but rather a maturing ecosystem.
- Community is a hidden infrastructure. Alumni founders are a key asset for mentoring, role modeling, and knowledge transfer.
- Mindset change is the real outcome of these programs. This needs to be built into the design.

The session ended with a call for stronger national coordination and collective learning, suggesting that Switzerland would benefit from shared cohorts across the startup support ecosystem.

Workshop Moderators:

Isabel Casado, Head of the EPFL Startup Launchpad

Eva Maria Håkanson, Deputy Head of the University of Zurich Innovation Hub Office



Breakout Session

Evaluating the Impact of Innovation Support

This session addressed how universities can meaningfully assess the impact of innovation support activities in a heterogeneous ecosystem.

Anita Buchli, Director Entrepreneurship at ZHAW, challenged the idea of a single standard for impact measurement. She emphasized that ecosystem diversity is a strength and argued for differentiated approaches rather than uniform metrics. A key distinction was made between internal impact (mindsets, incentives, institutional culture) and external impact (startups, SME collaboration, societal value).

Buchli proposed complementing traditional Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) with Key Behavioural Indicators (KBIs) to capture enabling behaviors and mindset change.

Sébastien Hug of the Innovation Office at the University of Bern presented Bern's impact model as a practical tool for reflection and strategic steering. He emphasized the importance of clearly defined target groups, awareness-building, and institutional anchoring, noting that, in the case of higher education institutions in the Canton of Bern, innovation and knowledge transfer are legally defined core responsibilities of universities and therefore require accountability.



Breakout Session

Turning Researchers into Entrepreneurs: Leaving the Nest and Achieving Problem–Solution Fit

Against the backdrop of the transition from academic research to entrepreneurship, this session focused on achieving Problem–Solution Fit. The moderators highlighted the practical nature of entrepreneurship, emphasizing that early engagement with customers, stakeholders, and markets is essential. Without this insight, researchers risk investing time, funding, and energy in solutions that lack relevance. Investors, in particular, are convinced by market traction and real-world impact, not by concepts alone. Some key learnings included:

- Entrepreneurship is a hands-on process. Researchers rarely succeed alone, and complementary skills, co-founders, and interdisciplinary perspectives are often found outside the academic environment.
- Exposure to real entrepreneurial practice, diverse role models, and structured experimentation is more motivating than incentives alone.
- Leaving the academic “nest” is about both market access and building teams capable of execution.

The session concluded with a call to foster early market engagement and team-building support for aspiring researcher-entrepreneurs.

Workshop Moderators:

Christian Lundsgaard-Hansen, Head of Startup Program at be-advanced AG

Jessica Plucain, Deputy Head of BioMed Entrepreneurship Programs at the University of Zurich



Breakout Session

Social Innovation: Why It Matters for Higher Education

This session positioned social innovation as R&D for society: a process aimed at creating solutions that tackle societal challenges, generate public value, are co-created with affected communities, and are designed to be sustainable and transformative rather than incremental.

The moderator emphasized several important points for building impact.

- Innovation is not limited to technology or startups.
- Social innovation is bottom-up, involves a wide range of stakeholders, and complements responsible entrepreneurship by addressing systemic causes rather than symptoms.
- It equips future decision-makers with the skills to navigate complexity, accelerates new business models and policy approaches, and empowers students to move from eco-anxiety to active problem-solving.

The session concluded with a call to position social innovation as a strategic capability, strengthening universities' societal relevance and long-term impact.

Workshop Moderator:

Emilie Romon Carnegie, Head of Social Innovation, University of Lausanne



Participant statements

"Having spaces like SAIEF to discuss entrepreneurship and innovation in a broader sense is great to share best practises and start building coalitions".

Emilie Romon, University of Lausanne

"A relevant setting where SMEs, startups, academics and large corporations can meet to build something that the market truly wants".

Rafael Kellner, Venture Lab

"Really enjoyed the format, especially the balance between organized and free-flow networking, as well as the breakout sessions and panel discussions that allowed for deeper discussions.".

Titiana Benavides, Swissnex

"SAIEF is an excellent networking event with a clear focus on the target group. It truly fills a gap and offers many opportunities for contacts and conversations"

Pascale Vonmont, Gebert RUF Stiftung

Conclusions (I of II)

From Reflection to Collective Action

The wrap-up panel, moderated by Ana Marques, Head of Technology Transfer and Innovation at the Adolphe Merkle Institute at the University of Fribourg, synthesized the discussions and outlined future directions for SAIEF and the Swiss innovation and entrepreneurship ecosystem.

Isabel Casado, EPFL called for greater confidence in Switzerland's innovation ecosystem and stronger use of successful entrepreneurs as visible role models. She also cautioned against reinventing existing structures, pointing to instruments such as Swissnex as examples of initiatives that could be better connected to domestic efforts.

Christian Lundsgaard-Hansen, be-advanced AG, emphasized execution and exposure as drivers of entrepreneurial behavior, particularly for undecided researchers. He advocated for diverse role models, ranging from startup CEOs to less visible entrepreneurial profiles, as well as hands-on formats such as summer schools, hackathons, and sprints embedded in companies to lower the threshold for engagement.

An international perspective was provided by Lutz-Peter Berg, Head of Science & Innovation at the Embassy of Switzerland in the UK. He noted that leading universities worldwide are surrounded by large, well-funded ecosystems and warned that global competition in innovation is intensifying. Using the UK as an example, he highlighted substantial public investments in innovation and argued that Switzerland must continue to invest strategically, particularly beyond patent generation and toward commercialization and ecosystem connectivity. He also emphasized the importance of stronger international exchange and partnerships between universities.



Conclusions (II of II)

From Reflection to Collective Action

The societal dimension was reinforced by Emilie Romon Carnegie, University of Lausanne, who stressed that innovation is not synonymous with technology. Technology, she argued, is a tool rather than an end in itself. Social innovation starts with problems, goes deep into their root causes, and is fundamentally bottom-up, involving many stakeholders from different fields. From this perspective, she called for dedicated funding mechanisms for social innovation and for broader recognition of impact that extends beyond startup creation.

Anita Buchli, ZHAW built on this statement and pointed out that on Switzerland, a significant share of innovation takes place within SMEs, which should be more systematically included in innovation narratives, support structures, and metrics. She emphasized that ecosystem strength lies in diversity and complementarity, not uniformity.

Looking ahead, the discussion converged on several directions for the future development of SAIEF. While Switzerland performs exceptionally well in research filing of patents, the commercialization phase was identified as a key area for further investment and coordination. Rather than launching new initiatives, panelists suggested better leveraging existing programs, infrastructures, and international networks.

The panel concluded that the impact of SAIEF may be way beyond the annual event. *per se*. As a connector it has the potential to catalyse new collaboration, create opportunities for inter-institutional learning, and nurture a healthy, strategic exchange on how to use synergies between existing programs and infrastructure.

Panelists:

Lutz-Peter Berg, Head of Science & Innovation at the Embassy of Switzerland in the UK

Anita Buchli, Director of Entrepreneurship at ZHAW

Isabel Casado, Head of the EPFL Startup Launchpad

Christian Lundsgaard-Hansen, Head of Startup Program at be-advanced AG

Emilie Romon Carnegie, Head of Social Innovation at the University of Lausanne

Moderator:

Ana Marques, Head of Technology Transfer and Innovation at the Adolphe Merkle Institute, University of Fribourg

Gold Partners

WISSENSCHAFT. BEWEGEN

GEBERT RÜF STIFTUNG

Gebert Rüt Stiftung promotes innovation for the benefit of Switzerland's economy and society. It makes science effective by initiating impact-oriented innovation projects. With an annual funding budget of up to CHF 15 million, it supports the breakthrough of new technologies, but also to lay the foundations for an entrepreneurial mindset and a broad interest in innovation by funding educational and transfer projects.

www.grstiftung.ch/en.html



Switzerland Innovation is a network of innovation parks across Switzerland, enabling both international and domestic companies, alongside world-leading Swiss universities, to collaborate on the development of new, market-ready products and services. In and around our 16 locations across Switzerland, vibrant innovation ecosystems have been carefully nurtured, attracting companies, SMEs, start-ups, and researchers from around the world.

www.switzerland-innovation.com



Swissnex is the Swiss global network connecting Switzerland and the world in education, research and innovation. Our mission is to support our partner's outreach and active engagement in the international exchange of knowledge, ideas and talent. Together with around 20 Science Offices and Counselors based in Swiss embassies, we contribute to strengthen Switzerland's profile as a world-leading hotspot of innovation.

swissnex.org

Silver Partners

BRIDGE

BRIDGE is a funding programme of the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) and Innosuisse. Together, we have been funding projects between basic research and innovation since 2017. Support is provided to researchers whose results have potential for an innovative product or service. However, further work is needed to clearly determine the potential. The BRIDGE contributions make this possible. In this way, they accelerate the transfer of research results into the economy and society. We are investing 105 million Swiss francs in BRIDGE projects between 2025 and 2028.

www.bridge.ch/en



The Swiss Federal Institute of Intellectual Property (IPI) is responsible for examining, granting and administering industrial property rights (patents, trade marks and designs). It works together with governmental agencies, trade associations and businesses to enforce Swiss indications of source within Switzerland and internationally. The IPI also supervises the collective rights management organisations for copyright and provides information on intellectual property rights to individuals and companies in a variety of ways.

www.ige.ch/en/

Supporting Universities

Cantonal Universities & Federal Institutes



The valorization of research results is one of the Adolphe Merkle Institute's key missions. We aim to translate our discoveries in materials science into practical applications by actively promoting technology transfer, fostering collaboration with industry partners, and supporting innovation initiatives that generate economic and societal impact.

[Read more](#)



With the mission to foster a thriving innovation ecosystem, the Innovation Office at the University of Bern supports students, researchers and clinicians in translating ideas, research and inventions into innovations. It thus strengthens the University's role of creating value through knowledge for the benefit of society and economy.

[Read more](#)



Founded in 2017, the Innovation Office is the University of Basel's hub for entrepreneurship and innovation. To turn our vision into reality, we deliver entrepreneurship education courses, run startup incubation and acceleration programs for talented founders, and foster collaborations with industry and global partners.

[Read more](#)



A specific goal of the NCCR Bio-Inspired Materials is to seek applications of the research undertaken, where one route to leverage the research into the market is in collaboration with industry. For this, we are constantly seeking company partners interested in our research to set up trial projects, research agreements and other forms of collaboration.

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Supporting Universities

Cantonal Universities & Federal Institutes

EPFL startup launchpad

The EPFL Startup Launchpad provides students, researchers, and aspiring founders with a structured platform for building technology-driven startups. Our modular startup tracks combine EPFL's flagship support, ecosystem funding, prototyping capabilities, and expert networks into a coherent system. Embedded in a vibrant entrepreneurial community, founders de-risk their technology, gain market traction, and progress toward incorporation readiness.

[Read more](#)



The Science Innovation Hub at the University of Geneva is a pre-incubator dedicated to experimenting with your experimental-entrepreneurial ideas and supporting the development of innovative start-ups from the Faculty of science laboratories. We also aim to foster exchange among the Faculty and industry to help turn research results into products to create value and impact on society.

[Read more](#)

ETH zürich

ETH Entrepreneurship supports students, researchers, and founders on their entrepreneurial journey at ETH. We advise students and researchers on founding and growing ETH spin-offs, connect entrepreneurial minds with programs, funding opportunities, and infrastructure at ETH Zurich and in the ecosystem, as well as run events and initiatives that foster an entrepreneurial culture on campus.

[Read more](#)



UNIL | Université de Lausanne

The HUB Entrepreneurship and Innovation at the University of Lausanne was launched at the end of 2019 to foster an entrepreneurial spirit and support impact-driven entrepreneurship and innovation projects from the UNIL community. The HUB supports a vision of entrepreneurship at the service of the social, ecological and economic transition.

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Supporting Universities

Cantonal Universities & Federal Institutes



The University of St. Gallen (HSG) places a strong emphasis on fostering an entrepreneurial mindset. HSG Entrepreneurship introduces university members to the various facets of entrepreneurship and promotes technology-oriented and knowledge-intensive start-up and innovation projects. Students, researchers and staff receive support in various ways, such as through relevant courses, student initiatives or specific offerings from the Entrepreneurship Hub at HSG.

[Read more](#)



As Switzerland's largest comprehensive university, the University of Zurich (UZH) promotes outstanding interdisciplinary research in areas that benefit society. Since 2018, UZH Innovation Hub empowers students and researchers to adopt new perspectives, to discover the impact potential of their research and to shape the future as entrepreneurs.

[Read more](#)



USI Startup Centre is the centre of gravity for the entrepreneurial community on campus. We bring together researchers, students, entrepreneurs and business people to enable the creation and development of science-based innovative projects. Our flagship initiative is the incubation programme, within which we select promising projects and help the founders transform their inventions into innovative startups capable of attracting funding and bringing their products to the market.

[Read more](#)

Supporting Universities

Universities of Applied Sciences



BFH is part of Bern's vibrant innovation and entrepreneurship ecosystem. We support founders (including students and researchers), start-ups and companies – from the idea to the foundation and beyond. With our pioneering innovation and research, we are actively shaping the future and creating added value for society.

[Read more](#)



The School of Management Fribourg (HEG-FR) is a public business school, part of the HES-SO University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland. It specializes in trilingual (French, German, English) education, offering bachelor's, master's, and executive programs focused on entrepreneurship, finance, and management, with a strong emphasis on practical, applied skills for future leaders.

[Read more](#)

HSLU Hochschule Luzern

At HSLU, Smart-up supports all university members in successfully implementing their ideas by providing inspiration, support, and networking. Smart-up aims to motivate students, alumni, and employees to realise their business ideas and provide guidance on their path to self-employment.

[Read more](#)

Supporting Universities

Universities of Applied Sciences



At the IDEE Institute for Innovation, Design and Engineering, we support small and large companies and organizations in developing sustainable innovations by bringing future-proof ideas to life through prototypes. As an interdisciplinary team, we see ourselves as partners who work with you to explore new perspectives, break down outdated ways of thinking, and create space for bold experimentation. Our goal is to shape a responsible future together.

[Read more](#)

Zürcher Hochschule
für Angewandte Wissenschaften



At ZHAW Entrepreneurship, we offer knowledge, skills training and opportunities to build the right mindset for innovators and entrepreneurs. We also have sandboxes where you can drive your projects forward. In short, we are here to accompany you on your journey. So, pack your bags, let's shape the future together

[Read more](#)