

Game on: UK campus looks to turbocharge esports

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The National Esports Performance Campus trains prospective esports players and other industry professionals.

Rows of super-powerful computers fill a classroom in northeast England, their LED-lit keyboards, mice and headsets washing the space in a

futuristic blue glow.

Each one costs £3,000 (nearly \$4,000) and is dedicated to one thing—training students to play video games at the highest level.

The new kit is part of a new eSports campus that has recently opened in the city of Sunderland, with the aim of boosting the country's virtual sports sector.

Dave Martin, [chief operating officer](#) at the British Esports Federation, said there was "incredible talent" in the country.

But he believes more could be done, particularly as other countries are further ahead.

Popularity

Esports — [professional level](#) competitive gaming — is booming in popularity and officially became recognized as a sport by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 2017.

The [global market](#) is worth more than \$1.8 billion, according to a report by Nielsen and specialized foundation ex corp. published in August.

That is still less than one percent of the entire video games market, which is worth more than £237 billion worldwide.

But the esports sector is growing fast.

It tripled in size worldwide between 2017 and 2022 and is projected to grow by another 50 percent by 2026.



Dave Martin, of the British Esports Federation, hopes the NEPC will nurture talent.

In the UK, the esports market was valued at over \$69 million in 2022, far behind industry giants like China (\$594 million) and the United States (\$440 million), the report said.

In an effort to catch up, the British Esports Federation has invested £7.0 million into Sunderland's National Esports Performance Campus (NEPC).

Martin says he hopes it will "enhance the UK esports ecosystem from grassroots upwards".

The federation already provides training for a range of gaming industry professions, including marketing, competition broadcasting, team management and pro-gaming itself.

Olympics

The new NEPC will not exclusively focus on training prospective players.

It will also educate other future industry professionals via a partnership with Sunderland College, a local higher education institution whose premises it shares.

"The esports industry is comprised of lots of different professions," explained Toby Bowery, leader of the Sunderland College esports program.

"There's the events management side of things, the business side of things. There's the creative media side of things. Then you've got the sports side of things" with players, psychologists and nutritionists, he added.



Prize money for esports is increasing, which is recognised by the IOC as a sport.

Bowery described the facility as a "real work environment" shared with the British Esports Federation, enabling students to meet pro-players.

Prize pools in virtual sports are now exceeding traditional sports.

Each of the five-member team that won 2021's "The International"—a showpiece tournament hosted annually for esports giant DOTA 2—took home more than \$3.6 million.

In comparison, that year's Wimbledon men's tennis champion, Novak Djokovic, won \$2.2 million.

In September 2023, the IOC announced the creation of a separate commission dedicated to esports, to develop virtual sports as an Olympic staple.

Sunderland's new campus will soon complete construction of "The Arena", a complex designed to host esports tournaments.

'Quite surreal'

Nicholas Wilkinson, a student on the college's esports program, called the development of an esports campus in northeast England "quite surreal".

He hopes to start a career as a "caster" — the esports equivalent of a professional commentator.



The campus is a gateway for students who don't have access to equipment at home.

Previously, "every time you'd want to go to an esports event or anything to do for esports, you'd have to travel down south to London, to Nottingham," Wilkinson said.

Another student on the course, Evan Howey, aims to become a pro-player.

"Different people on the course have different interests," he explained.

With students aiming to get into a variety of jobs in the sector, he said it

would be good to encourage collaboration, to help growth.

The new campus is also a gateway for "students with underprivileged backgrounds that may not be able to have access to this equipment at all at home", added Chris Jeffrey, an independent game developer and esports coach.

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