

BROADER TOKYO ECOSYSTEM

From

GREATER TOKYO AREA

JAPAN



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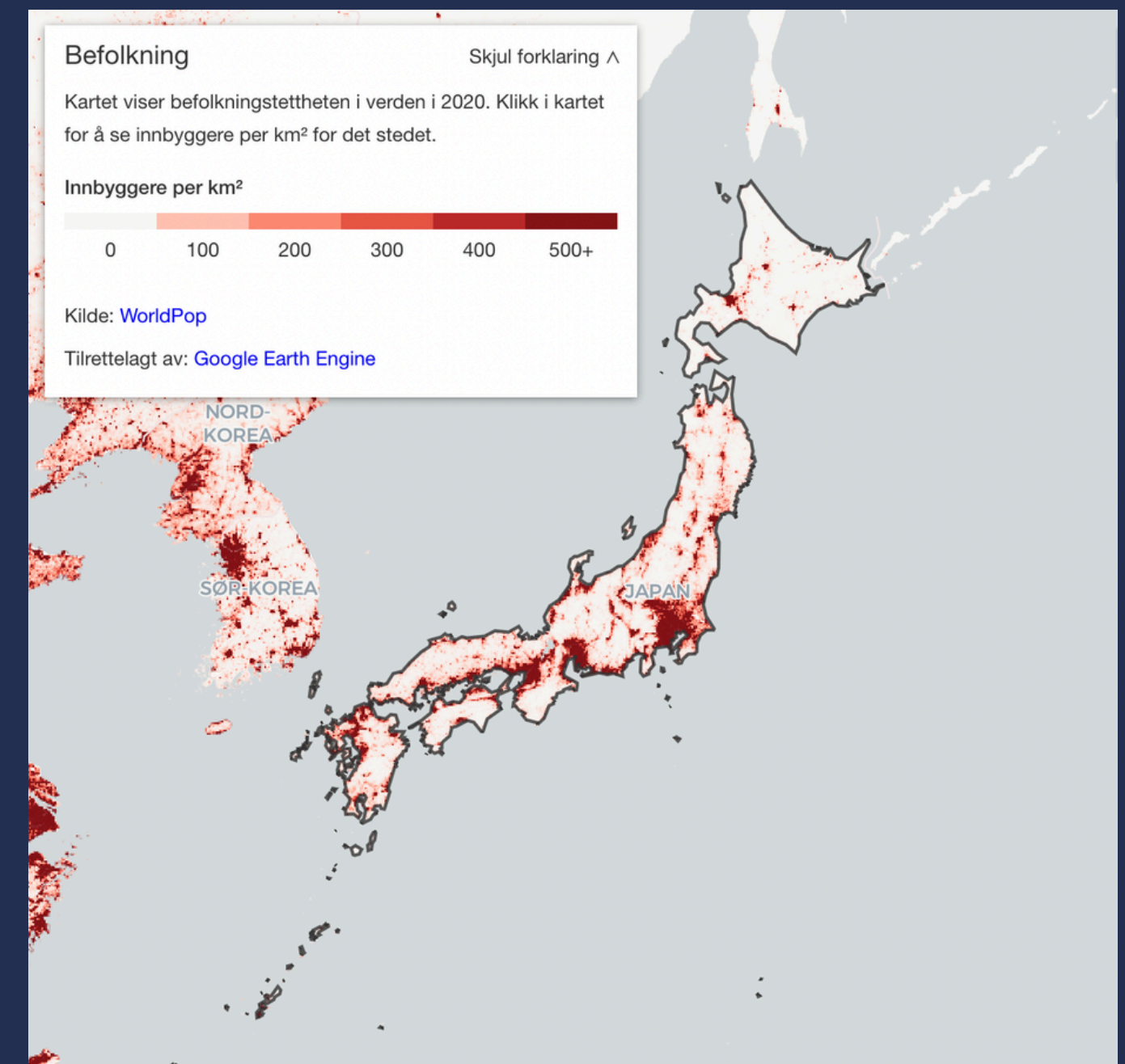
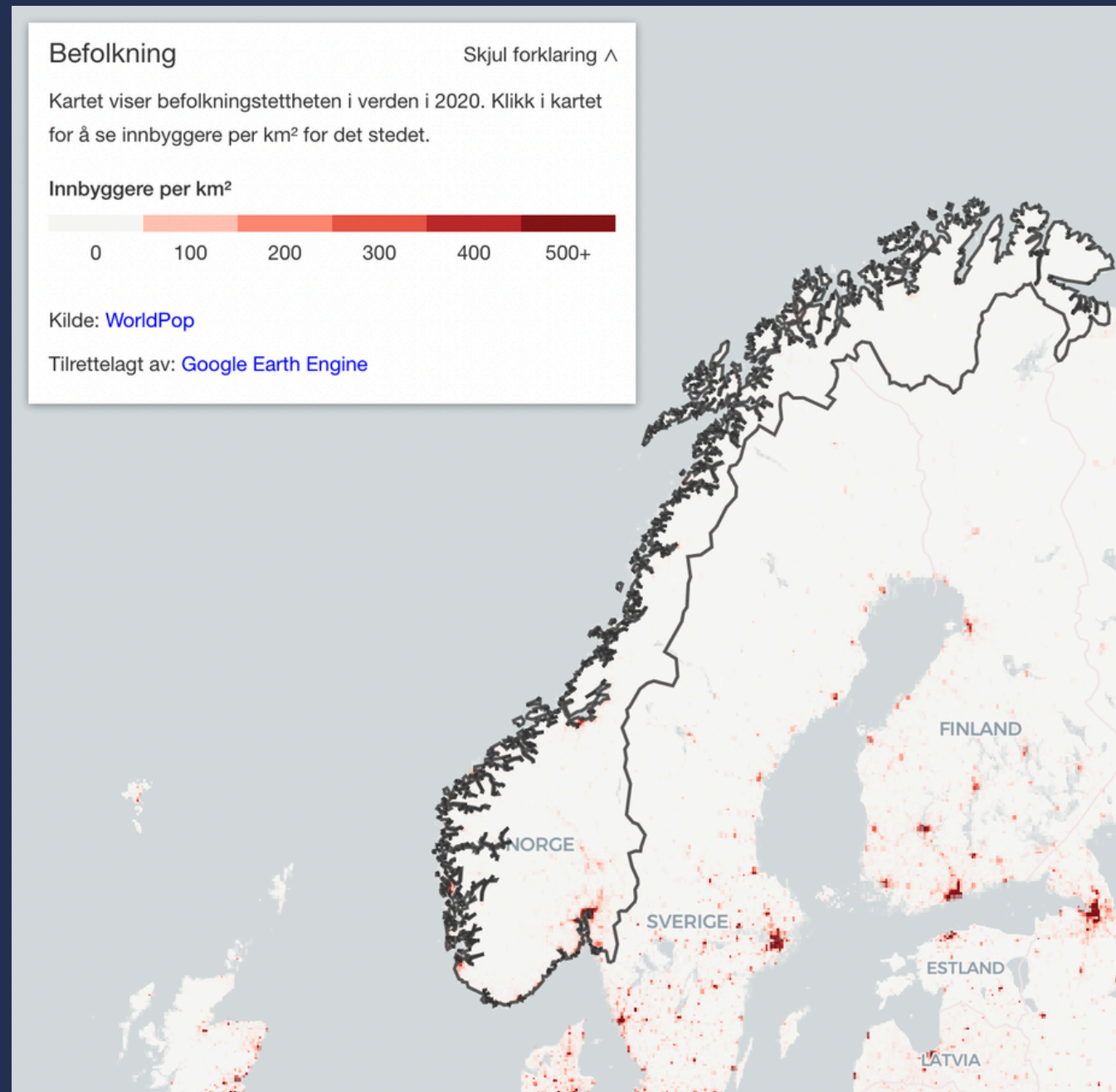
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PREFACE



NORWAY

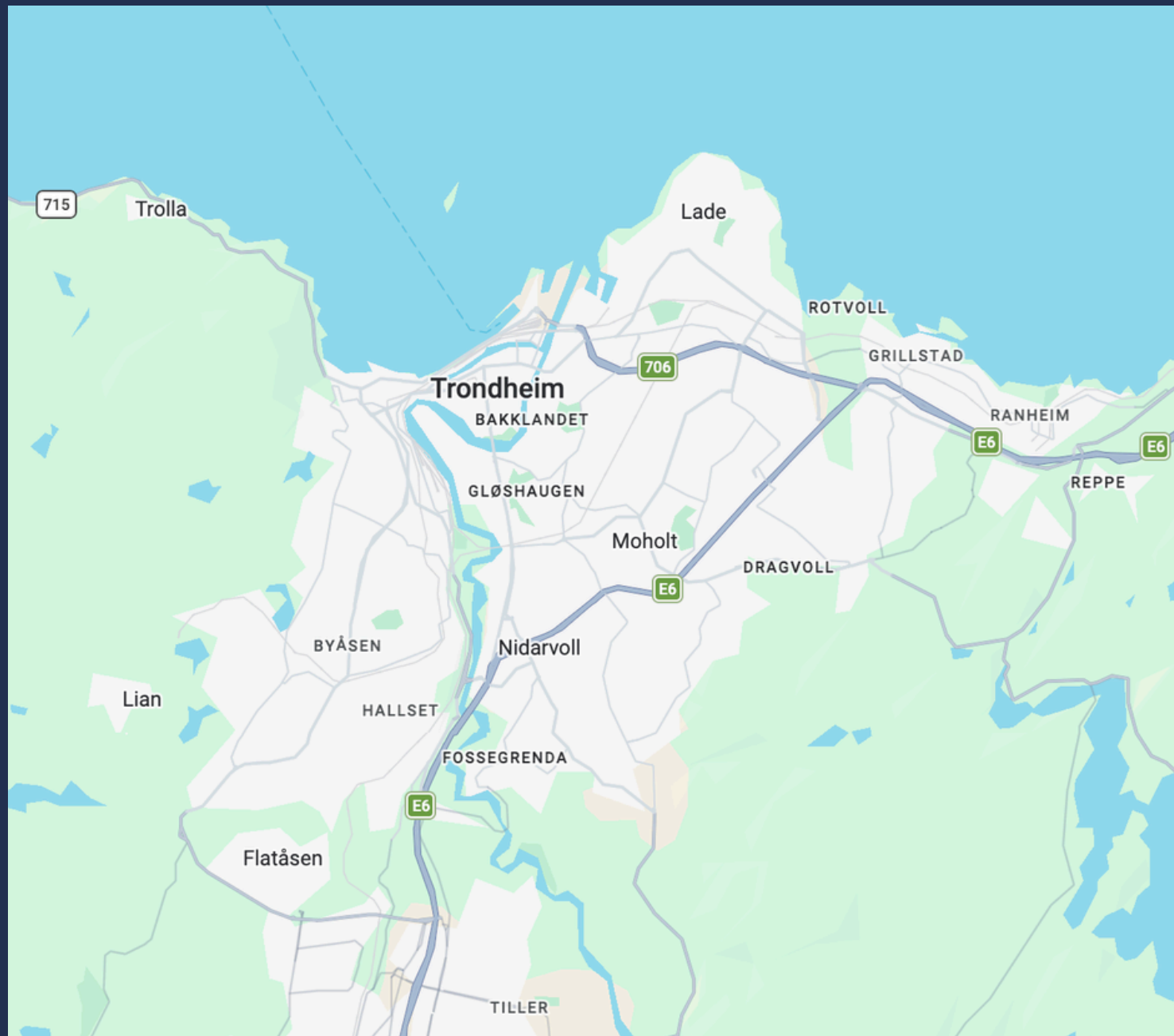
Population: 5 623 071 (2025)

Area: 385 178 km²

JAPAN

Population: 123 103 479 (2025)

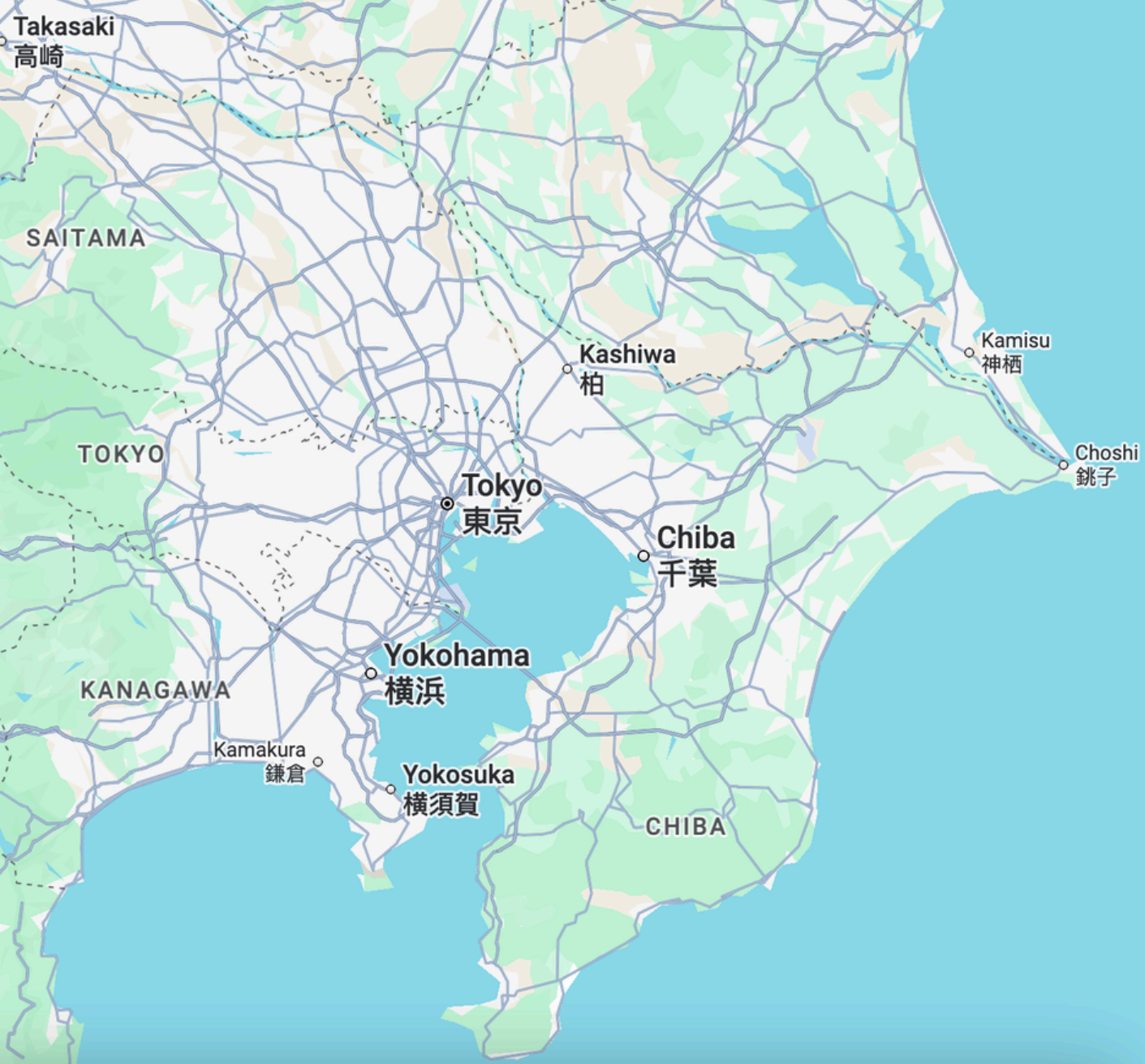
Area: 377 915 km²



TRONDHEIM

ca 200 000 inhabitants

1 university
ca 40 000 students



TOKYO

ca 37 million inhabitants

154 universities
ca 800 000 students

TRONDHEIM AND TOKYO

To scale

- Trondheim
- Greater Tokyo Area



GTIE

**GREATER TOKYO
INNOVATION ECOSYSTEM**



Greater
Tokyo
Innovation
Ecosystem

GTIE

Overview

The Greater Tokyo Innovation Ecosystem (GTIE) is a platform built to nurture university startups capable of competing on the global market

It is led by three host institutions. The University of Tokyo, the Institute of Science Tokyo and Waseda University. Partner universities joined the consortium primarily to gain access to its gap fund

Today GTIE connects a wide network across the Greater Tokyo region, including universities, venture capital, accelerators and private companies

GTIE was established in 2021, initially without funding. In 2022 it launched a GAP fund together with the national government, and a new, larger GAP fund followed in 2024. It operates as a project selected under the Japan Science and Technology Agency's (JST) program for university-originated startups



Example of a VC firm having their office space in one of the science Tokyo campuses, bringing the private funding closer to the startups

GTIE

The GAP fund

GTIE only funds research-based ventures, not idea-based ones. "GAP" refers to the gap between university research and its implementation. Students can receive support, but rarely do in practice, and only with research behind them

Type 1 - Entry course (9 months)

5 million yen per project (\approx 291 000 NOK)

The only gap-fund type students can access, linked to a 9-month accelerator. It remains difficult for students to obtain, as applicants need completed research to be accepted

Type 2 - Explore course (2-3 years)

60 million yen per project (\approx 3.7 million NOK)

Not available to students, by decision of the Japan Science and Technology Agency. It is linked to two accelerator tracks, Explore (2-3 years) and Overseas (1 year)

GTIE

Programs accessible to students

GTIE runs six programs, including three one-week overseas programs (San Diego, Boston, Toronto) and an online program; these are free for students

GTIE also runs a student Slack (228 members) exclusively for GTIE students

Lean Launch Program (4 months)

A free, basic introduction to lean startup methodology. Students form teams of 2-3 and attempt to build a venture

Entrepreneurship Advanced (3 months)

for those who have started, or are about to start, a company focuses on how young founders communicate with established businesses, and includes a mentor program

Manufacturing Program (3 months)

Teams build a prototype and receive funding to do so

TIB

TOKYO INNOVATION BASE

TiB

**Tokyo
Innovation
Base**

TIB

Overview

Tokyo Innovation Base (TIB) is a startup support hub established by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government in 2023, described as Japan's largest startup support hub with its grand opening followed in May 2024

Unlike GTIE, TIB is not connected to a university. It is a comprehensive startup support center operated by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government

TIB aims to be a global node of innovation and aspires to be the world's most startup-friendly location. It connects startups with accelerators, venture capital, universities and local governments, both domestic and international

It was created deliberately. With little existing startup culture and limited student interest in entrepreneurship, the city chose to build the ecosystem and actively recruit students. Which requires significant spending to bring them in



TIB has a small core of around 30 regular students, but its frequent events draw far larger numbers. Within its first year it welcomed approximately 100,000 visitors and hosted over 500 events

TIB

Programs and services for students

TIB runs two programs:

Student Day

Wednesdays after 15:00, designed to make students more comfortable with entrepreneurship. Includes courses in engineering, ideation and fundraising, plus guidance with supervisors

TIB Studio

Provides actual VC funding if selected

TIB also offers mentoring from top executives and entrepreneurs, monthly pitch events (TIB Pitch), and certified SME consultants for business-setup consultations, with bilingual one-stop support in English. It explicitly supports the endeavors of students and the young generation

A makers lab is available for prototyping. Everything at TIB is free, though producing a full proof of concept costs some money

TIB Service

STUDIO

Refining youths' Creative ideas into viable business ventures.

FAB

Providing hardware development equipment and technical support.

STUDENTS

Offering youth opportunities to take on new social challenges.

JAM

Supporting independent youth activities through a creative community.

SHOP

Providing startups with a trial sales space and collaboration opportunities.

TIB PITCH

Hosting monthly pitch events to test startup services and products.

ESTABLISHMENT

Offering expert consultation and administrative support for opening a business.

For Foreign Companies (BDGT)

Providing comprehensive business and lifestyle support for foreign companies expanding into Tokyo.

サービス内容
For service



TIB
イベントや支援プログラムなど
TIBパートナー



OTHER INITIATIVES AIMED AT STUDENTS

CIC Venture-cafe

Take off Tokyo

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND BARRIERS

Choosing the entrepreneurial path is seen as deviating from the norm. Founders risk being viewed as "crazy" for not following an established career

There is strong pressure from home and society to choose a safe and predictable path, usually through lifetime employment with a big corporation

Students receive no state study support, so studies are effectively funded by the parents. This creates a debt-like dependency that reinforces the expectation to choose stability

Other factors derived from the culture

The ecosystem is not student-driven, because the students are not trusted to lead it and handle the grants awarded

Brain drain. The most talented and most affluent students leave for other countries in search of better opportunities.

INSIGHTS FROM GRAND STORY

GRAND STORY, as a private actor operating between founders, investors and corporations through their network platform Storium, offered a clear vantage point on how Japanese society views entrepreneurs:

An idea on its own carries little weight. Founders are expected to demonstrate research or proof before they are taken seriously and trusted, which creates a barrier for the students to enter

Startups also struggle to form partnerships with large, established Japanese companies, which they described as a distinctly Japanese obstacle

These attitudes reflect a society that sets a high bar of proof before extending trust to entrepreneurs

This is expected to shift over time, as experienced professionals increasingly spin out of established firms, and a network effect between startups and academia begins to take hold, which will hopefully have a positive influence over student involvement

FINANCING

City vs. state funding

The Greater Tokyo ecosystem is financed primarily by public money, but from two distinct levels of government

The national government (state) funds the universities and is the partner behind the gap fund, with a national agency setting its rules

The Tokyo metropolitan government funds dedicated city-level innovation infrastructure, such as Tokyo Innovation Base, but does not fund the universities directly

The bodies financing the universities and the bodies financing the city's innovation hubs are therefore not the same

STRUCTURE

Unrealized collaboration opportunities

The major actors largely operate in parallel rather than together

GTIE and TIB are a clear example. They have run at least one joint event (at TIB's venue) and both have expressed a wish to collaborate further

In practice, cooperation remains limited, partly due to a shortage of staff and capacity on both sides

There is visible, untapped potential for tighter coordination between the university consortium (GITE) and the city's innovation infrastructure (TIB)

GOVERNANCE

Who owns this ecosystem?

The ecosystem has no single owner. It is publicly driven, with ownership and responsibility distributed across the national government, the Tokyo metropolitan government, and university consortia, alongside participating private actors

Public authorities are the main drivers, and students are recruited participants rather than owners

Who is responsible?

This diffuse ownership leaves an open question over who is ultimately responsible for ensuring students gain access to the ecosystem

EDUCATIONAL OFFERINGS

Musashino University has a dedicated institute for entrepreneurship

It is one of the few universities in the Greater Tokyo area to have organized entrepreneurship education within its own institute, rather than offering it only as scattered courses or professor-led arrangements



INTERDISCIPLINARY

At NTNU, interdisciplinarity and flexibility in the study path are actively emphasized. For example through EiT and open elective courses available to students across study programs

By comparison, the Japanese system appears more rigid, channeling students into specialized tracks at an early stage

This rigidity stands out given that the labour market still hires candidates across disciplinary boundaries, meaning the structure of the education system is not necessarily mirrored by the demands of employers

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES TO NTNU

Spørsmål	NTNU	Tokyo	Observations
Governance / ownership	Both top-down and student-driven	Strongly top-down and state-driven. Public authorities deliberately decided to build the ecosystem	
Who owns the startups?	Often student-owned Idea-stage student ventures are core	Startups are predominantly research-based, founded by researchers and professors. An idea alone is rarely enough, and public funding is directed toward researchers rather than students	
Are students the drivers?	Largely student-driven	Students are recruited participants rather than drivers, and are described as "not trusted" to lead parts of the system. The state spends heavily to attract them	
Student-driven initiatives	Spark, Start, BRAIN, Boost, Fram, Gruva, Revolve and many others	Student-driven organizations exist locally at individual universities	
Mentorship	Free, student-driven mentoring via Spark	Mentoring is offered through structured programs and supervised guidance at innovation venues	

Spørsmål	NTNU	Tokyo	Observations
Degree-based entrepreneurship programs	The Entrepreneur School (ES)	Entrepreneurship courses and electives exist at several universities, and a few have dedicated entrepreneurship departments or programs	
The universities roles	Foundation for most key actors and arenas	Universities have jointly formed a consortium to access public innovation funding	
Financing	Several public soft-funding options (NTNU Discovery, Aneo-bidraget, pitch competitions)	Two-tier public gap funding – a smaller research-stage grant students can access and a larger pre-seed grant closed to students. Alongside private equity and VC finance, funding is largely research-gated	

Spørsmål	NTNU	Tokyo	Observations
Ecosystem actors	Spark, BRAIN, Start, Boost, Fram, Gruva, Revolve and many others	A mix of semi-public consortia, state-backed innovation infrastructure and private companies. Actors collaborate only partially	
Is entrepreneurship socially accepted?	An accepted and normalized part of student life	entrepreneurship goes against strong group norms, money is a taboo subject, and parents push students toward safe jobs. Acceptance exists but remains limited	In Tokyo, becoming an entrepreneur means going against social norms. At NTNU it is a normalized choice. Acceptance in Japan is increasing slowly, and entrepreneurship is also emerging as an arena for highly educated women
Support in the scaling phase	Mainly early/pre-seed support (soft funding, mentoring, networking)	Equity and VC finance and international accelerator opportunities exist, however startups typically fundraise domestically but scale abroad. Corporate partnerships are also difficult	

RECOMMENDATIONS

What NTNU could learn from Tokyo

Introduce short overseas immersion weeks

GTIE's one-week programs in San Diego, Boston and Toronto give students international exposure at low time-cost. NTNU could pilot similar short formats through Engage or ES

Offer open entrepreneurship courses for all students

Inspired by GTIE's 4-month Lean Launch Program, NTNU could set up open elective courses accessible across all study programs where any student can learn the basics of entrepreneurship

Set up a dedicated student community channel

GTIE's student Slack (228 members) shows the value of a single shared digital space for the students

What NTNU should protect

Open access for idea-based and solo student founders

A clear lesson from Tokyo is what happens when funding is research-gated. Students and solo founders are effectively excluded. NTNU should keep its soft funding and support open to early, idea-stage student ventures rather than narrowing toward research-only criteria

Student ownership of the ecosystem

NTNU's student-driven, trust-based model is precisely what Greater Tokyo is spending heavily to build from the top down. NTNU should maintain student agency as a structural feature and avoid drifting toward a state- or institution-led model

WORTH EXPLORING FURTHER

Musashino University

Musashino University has a dedicated entrepreneurship institute. As one of the few universities in the region offering an entrepreneurship-based degree, it would be worth examining more closely as a potential academic partner and as a model for organizing entrepreneurship education

Take Off Tokyo

A student-run startup fair and one of the largest in Japan. As a rare example of a student-led initiative at scale within the Greater Tokyo ecosystem, it would be worth exploring how it is organized and whether it could inspire or connect with student-driven events at NTNU

Women's entrepreneurship in Japan

Entrepreneurship is emerging as an arena for highly educated women to work outside fixed frameworks, with young people noted as a focus area. Initiatives and programs targeting women founders could be a distinct theme for a follow-up study

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QUESTIONS?

