

CoSTAR Evolve

Call Brief

11th September 2025

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Overview

Many UK creative technology businesses face a shortage of resources and access to expertise for business, product, and commercialisation strategic planning. This gap threatens their long-term sustainability and financial viability.

As a result, the overall strength of the UK's creative economy is at risk, particularly when promising creative technology enterprises cannot overcome key business challenges due to insufficient support.

CoSTAR Evolve is dedicated to strengthening the business development and commercial innovation capabilities of high-value UK creative technology companies.

This intensive six-month programme is designed to help 10 scaling enterprises address mission-critical business and market development needs, empowering them to achieve sustained growth and success.

CoSTAR Evolve enables:

- Routes to business development and commercial innovation support needed to maximise on new business opportunities, accelerate routes to market or meet business growth 'spurts' arising from market opportunities.
- A pathway to enable a rapid response to commercialisation opportunities, without which risks limiting or at worse, jeopardising a business's commercial value, success and future growth.
- Personalised and flexible growth journey suited to the unique needs of each business.

How CoSTAR Evolve Can Help Your Business:

- **Over £15,000 in total support**, including £10,000 of in-kind support and a £5,000 Enterprise Development Award.
- **Comprehensive guidance for business development** and building robust commercial innovation pipelines.
- **Direct access to industry experts** to address critical gaps and unique challenges—ranging from IP management and commercialisation strategies to product-to-market processes and becoming investment ready.

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- **Community-building across CoSTAR Labs** and the national network, providing access to expertise, infrastructure and connecting you with peers and partners for ongoing collaboration.
- **Opportunities to fast-track business growth** and effectively navigate barriers to product innovation.
- **Training and tailored mentorship in social impact**, with a focus on EDI (Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion) and sustainability.
- **Exposure to investors**, including pitch opportunities and actionable feedback from angels and investment networks

Who is CoSTAR Evolve for?

Participants will be companies who typically can demonstrate one or more of the following:

- Can identify clear opportunities for business growth through IP development, commercialisation, or distribution activities but lack access to support or expertise to action.
- Identified gaps in team knowledge or expertise that are limiting business momentum.
- A need for specialised support not currently addressed by existing business support mechanisms.

What is on offer?

CoSTAR Evolve provides:

- Six months of dedicated business growth support for 10 UK creative technology enterprises.
- 40 hours of personalised 1-2-1 mentorship and guidance from a pool of carefully selected mentors, matched to the bespoke needs of each company, over a 6-month period.
- £5,000 Enterprise Development Award for each participant, tailored to advance the unique development goals of their business.
- Expert led masterclasses and workshops on crucial topics, including:
 - Commercialisation and scaling strategies
 - Expanding monetisation routes for IP and distribution

- Copyright, licensing, and legal frameworks
- AI, data, and ethics preparation
- Building inclusive and sustainable businesses
- Funding, finance, and investment readiness and pitching support.
- Meet-ups and networking opportunities with peers, mentors, and industry partners.
- Introductions, inductions and workshops with CoSTAR Network Labs to develop knowledge, skills and foster future collaborations. Support for travel included.

CoSTAR Evolve Schedule

| Date | Milestone |
|---|----------------------------------|
| January 14 th | Cohort Induction |
| January 15 th – 20 th | Company Diagnostics |
| January 21 st | Meet the mentors |
| January 28 th | Confirm mentor selection |
| February | CoSTAR Network Lab Introductions |
| March | Cohort Meet Up 1 |
| March/April | Social Impact Training |
| May | Cohort Meet up 2 |
| June | Closing Event |
| June 26 th | Mentoring Ends |

Eligibility Criteria

To be eligible, applicants must meet the following criteria:

- Have a lead applicant that is a legal entity registered and trading in the UK
- Have a healthy financial track record
- Be from or support the screen and/or performance sectors
- Have an operations and/or project team based in the UK
- Intend to exploit the results of work from or in the UK

Evolve Programme Details

All are welcomed to take part regardless of age, sex, gender identity, ethnicity, socio-economic background, (dis)ability (visible or hidden, physical or mental), sexuality, religion or belief.

We strongly encourage applications from businesses led by those from diverse backgrounds and those currently under-represented in the creative technology sector.

Enterprise & Commercialisation programmes will monitor diversity across its range of participants, external experts and mentors we engage for delivery. The CoSTAR EDI framework measures our success against the annual EDI Action Plan.

Our goal is to deliver programmes within an infrastructure which is fit for a future creative industry that values diversity and inclusion for its commercial and societal value.

1. Mentorship

Evolve Mentors are active industry professionals with hands-on experience in growing and scaling businesses. Their expertise spans commercial innovation, IP, creative technologies, technical development, EDI (Equality, Diversity & Inclusion), data and ethics, sales, marketing, and distribution.

Coming from diverse backgrounds and disciplines, mentors offer a broad range of insights, perspectives, and specialisms to support the evolving needs of creative technology companies.

The Role of a Mentor

CoSTAR Evolve Mentors support participants across three key areas:

1. **Goal Setting & Strategic Planning:** Help mentees clarify their business objectives and develop a structured plan to achieve them.
2. **Problem Solving & Business Growth:** Support founders and leaders in identifying and addressing challenges that may be limiting creative or commercial progress.

3. Industry Connections & Opportunity Building: Connect mentees with relevant tools, contacts, networks, and opportunities to accelerate growth and innovation.

A 'Meet the Mentors' session provides an opportunity bring mentors and mentees together to network and get to know the range of mentorship support available to them. Mentees will select the mentors they wish to work with in advance and mentorship sessions will be agreed between the mentor and mentee directly. Mentorship can take place online and in person.

On conclusion of the programme, both mentors and mentees will participate in a structured review to reflect on progress and maximise future impact. Mentors will provide a brief summary that includes:

- Key areas of development and progress achieved by the mentee
- Recommendations for next steps and areas for continued focus
- A record of any insights, resources, introductions, or follow-up actions shared

2. Enterprise Development Award

The Enterprise Development Award of £5,000 is available for participants to allocate resource to critical gaps and development opportunities that are unique to the business whilst on the programme. Applicants are asked to state in their application how they would use the Enterprise Development Award and to define the timeline in which it will be utilised.

Examples of eligible costs include:

Trade show participation, market research studies, testing new business processes or methodologies, strategic partnerships and collaborations, export market development, process optimization, brand development, sales and marketing campaign development, professional development, travel costs to networking events and mentorship.

Costs to cover company time on the programme, expenses, technology, software and equipment upgrades, supplementary income or general expenses/purchases are ineligible.

3. Intellectual property

We will not acquire (and no Collaborator nor any third party participating in the CoSTAR Programme will acquire) any rights in your intellectual property (whether created before, during or separately to the CoSTAR Programme) by virtue of your participation in the CoSTAR Programme.

4. Programme costs:

- There is no fee to participate in CoSTAR Evolve. The programme is funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). The value of in-kind value of support to participants on the programme is estimated to be £10,000 per company.
- An Enterprise Development Award of £5,000 is available to companies to support unique company development requirements. This includes bringing in external specialists, UK and international market development activity, bespoke spends that justify addressing critical growth gaps.
- An Access Bursary is available to support participation, in line with our Social Impact Plan, for eligible individuals who may face additional barriers to participation. More information can be found here <https://www.costarnetwork.co.uk/bursaries>
- Travel costs: Travel expenses to visit CoSTAR Network Labs to be agreed with programme leads and paid on submission of receipts in arrears.

5. Company Participation:

Please ensure that one senior business development lead is identified within the company team. Applicants can identify up to 2 roles from within the company to put forward to take part in the programme as follows:

- Attend the programme initial diagnostic session.
- Attend the programme kick off and induction sessions.
- Use at least 80% of the mentorship hours available and attend support meetings or webinars as required.
- Ensure that relevant team members are attending scheduled mentorship sessions.
- Attend, present and demonstrate project outcomes at the closing event in 2026.

6. Programme Obligations

Participants must be willing to commit to the following key programme and attendance obligations:

- A 'Give-Back' of 8 hours mentorship to future E&C programme participants over the following 2 years.
- Companies will be required to provide case studies on programme completion.
- Companies will be supported with mandatory training and mentorship in social impact areas that include; equitable design, developing environmental sustainability principles and working with diverse user groups.
- On application, companies will be asked to stipulate their approach to social impact and how they intend to deliver social impact commitments over the given period.

7. Social Impact (EDI & Sustainability)

Environmental Sustainability and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) are central to our work at CoSTAR and all our Access Programmes. All projects, regardless of their main R&D focus, are expected to have a demonstrable engagement with either EDI, sustainability or both. Please see our [EDI Policy and Action Plan here](#). With regards to



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Monitoring and Evaluation, Social Impact data will be regularly reviewed in partnership with CoSTAR's Inclusion team.

CoSTAR Network is a welcoming and supportive programme. All are welcomed to take part regardless of age, sex, gender identity, ethnicity, socio-economic background, (dis)ability (visible or hidden, physical or mental), sexuality, religion or belief. We strongly encourage applications from businesses led by those from diverse backgrounds and those currently under-represented in the creative technology sector.

Enterprise & Commercialisation programmes will monitor diversity across its range of participants, external experts and mentors we engage for delivery. The CoSTAR EDI framework measures our success against the annual EDI Action Plan. Our goal is to deliver programmes within an infrastructure which is fit for a future creative industry that values diversity and inclusion for its commercial and societal value.

FAQs

Key Information

- All details about the CoSTAR Network can be found [on our website](#)
 - Please read the call brief before attending the webinar or submitting your application.
- Please check your eligibility for this call:
 - To be eligible, applicants must meet the following criteria:
 - Have a lead applicant that is a legal entity registered and trading in the UK
 - Have a healthy financial track record
 - Be from or support the screen and/or performance sectors
 - Have an operations and/or project team based in the UK
 - Intend to exploit the results of work from or in the UK

General Call Inquiries

- *How does E&C fit within wider CoSTAR activity?*
 - Enterprise & Commercialisation is one of two Industry Access programmes at the CoSTAR National Lab, the second being the Pilots and Prototypes Programme. Both programmes provide a gateway for industry into the CoSTAR Network.
- *Can I apply to other CoSTAR programmes such as PPP?*
 - Yes, you can apply for any other CoSTAR programme. If the programmes are being run simultaneously, applicants would need to demonstrate how they can adequately resource the team to deliver across both.

Eligibility

- *Does the applicant company need to have been registered as a UK company for a certain period prior to application?*
 - We are aware that some companies won't have been trading long enough to have submitted any accounts or may have submitted abridged accounts if turnover is not of a sufficient level. This should not prevent you from applying for the programme, as long as your company is

registered with Companies House. This has been communicated to the judging panel and will not affect the judging process.

- *My startup is not incorporated yet. Can I still apply to the CoSTAR Evolve Program?*
 - No. Your company needs to be incorporated, and you'll need to provide the incorporation date in the application form.
- *Can Universities apply?*
 - Universities and researchers may be named as a partner in a proposal; however, they may not be a lead applicant on an application to a CoSTAR Access programme. The lead applicant must be a company registered and trading in the UK.
- *What companies can apply under creative industries?*
 - The CoSTAR Ideate programme is designed for SMEs incorporated in the UK, that are working in or are developing solutions in the creative industries. The DCMS groups creative industries into the following sub sector:
 - i. Advertising and marketing
 - ii. Architecture
 - iii. Crafts
 - iv. Design and designer fashion
 - v. Film, TV, radio, and photography
 - vi. Museums, galleries, and libraries
 - vii. Music, performing, and visual arts
 - viii. Publishing
 - ix. IT, software, and computer services

Programme Obligations

- *What are the programme obligations?*
 - Participants must be willing to commit to the following key obligations:
 1. Attend the diagnostic session in January 2025.
 2. Attend the programme kick off and induction sessions.

3. Attend at least 80% of the mentor sessions, support meetings, masterclasses.
4. Ensure that relevant team members are attending scheduled sessions as indicated.
5. Attend, present and demonstrate project outcomes at an industry showcase event.
6. Attend meetings hosted by programme delivery partners.
7. Participant agrees to be visibly (name and logo) associated with the Programme, whilst in the Programme, and afterwards as a former participant and beneficiary. This includes marketing collateral, such as website, print and digital materials.
8. Join the E&C Alumni Cohort Group to continue to develop valuable relationships created on the programme.
9. A 'Give-Back' of 8 hours mentorship to future E&C programme participants over the following 2 years.
10. Monitoring and Evaluation: Regular evaluation of the cohort will be conducted to understand how successful the programme is in supporting both the professional development goals of the cohort, and of their respective businesses. A short feedback survey will be provided after each stage to provide insight to the value of that workshop and facilitator and a final evaluation survey on programme completion.
11. For a maximum period of five years following the Project end date, Participant shall use its reasonable endeavours to answer specific questions from CoSTAR National Lab relating to its growth and progress to assist CoSTAR in demonstrating the impact of its activities. This shall include: (i) participation in an annual telephone conversation of one hour, and (ii) participation in a survey issued by CoSTAR.

- *Is the programme remote or in person?*
 - The programme will be delivered in a hybrid model. Most of the mentorship sessions are online, with no obligation to attend a CoSTAR-related premises.
- *Do I have to attend all of the activities?*

- In general, attending all activities on the programme can be beneficial as it provides you with the opportunity to learn from experienced mentors, connect with other cohort members, and develop your business skills. However, it is important to prioritise your time and focus on activities that are most relevant to your business goals.
- *How is data related to my business or product treated?*
 - CoSTAR National Lab and Network Labs will not be signing NDAs with programme participants. CoSTAR National Lab will ask you to share your data with programme delivery partners and, if access is given, these will be regarded as confidential information.

Who will own the IP of my business or product, is equity taken?

- The participants will have full ownership of their intellectual property created. For full details, please refer to the programme terms and conditions. Whilst no equity will be taken in the businesses of any participants.

Application Process

- *Can I speak to someone from the team before submitting?*
 - Yes. We will be holding a briefing event during the application window. This will be a good opportunity to understand further details about the programme. Whilst you'll also be able to have any queries or concerns addressed by members of the CoSTAR E&C team. These briefing events are intended to be informal, open, and accessible to anyone who wishes to participate in the programme, regardless of their background or experience level. They will not have an impact on the judging of your application.
- *Do I have to use Submittable to complete my application?*
 - We encourage applicants to let us know about any reasonable adjustments they may require for the application process or their proposed project. You may already know what you would like to request, or you may like to have a general discussion of your options. Individual requests for access support will be accommodated wherever possible and equitable.

- Please forward requests to costar.enterprise@rhul.ac.uk.
- *What information is asked for in the application form?*
 - The application form will be the first method that we use to assess both the eligibility of all applicants, and their suitability to the programme. To determine eligibility, we'll need to understand details of your business and product/ service/ experience being developed. Whilst to understand suitability, we'll need further details on the problem and solution that you're addressing, your aims and objectives both in programme and afterwards and an understanding of any project members that will also be participating.
- *I need support with making my application; what should I do?*
 - Please forward requests to costar.enterprise@rhul.ac.uk.
- *Who will my application data be shared with?*
 - We only use your application information for the purpose of the programme. If information is shared outside of CoSTAR this will be made clear in the application form and/or programme agreement.
- *Will I be able to save my application form?*
 - Yes, you will be able to save it during the application process, so that you can complete it in more than one session if you need to.
- *How are applications selected?*
 - All applications will be initially assessed for eligibility in accordance with the programme's eligibility criteria. Once verified, all applications will be assessed against the selection criteria by a diverse pool of external assessors and industry experts. Whilst they'll also be assessed by members of the CoSTAR network for suitability.
- *How long will the review process of applications take?*
 - All applicants will be informed of the outcome of their application within 8 weeks of the programme closing for applications.

- *I want to include more detail than a section in the application form allows, is this permitted?*
 - No, only the information contained within the application form and within page limits specified for each section will be evaluated when selecting proposals. This is to ensure all proposals are scored fairly and equally, and also helps assessors to more easily compare proposals.
- *Will I be asked to complete an Equity, Diversity and Inclusion form as part of the application process?*
 - Yes, for the lead applicant only.
- *Will I receive feedback on my application?*
 - Because of the number of applications we receive, we can't provide feedback on applications that do not progress to the interview stage.
- *If my application is not successful, can I apply for a later programme?*
 - Yes, you are welcome to apply for any other CoSTAR programme.
- *What if I am involved in another CoSTAR programme?*
 - You can still take part in other CoSTAR-funded programmes, so long as the timings do not cause a conflict of interest and you are eligible to participate.