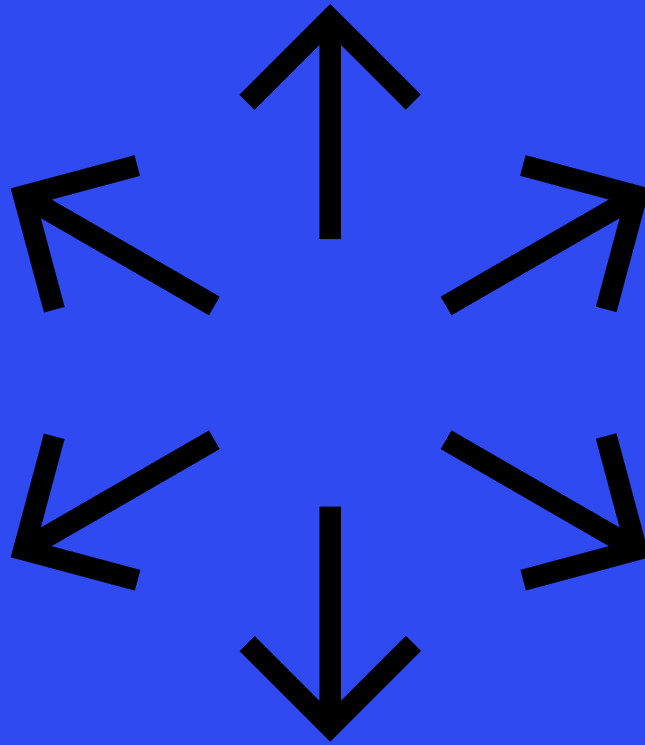




Upstarts Guidelines 2026



core[™]

TBWA Ireland

Overview

The ICAD Upstarts programme is Ireland's foremost training and mentorship initiative, designed to develop the skills of emerging creatives, educate them about the industry, and introduce them to key industry figures and organisations. ICAD Upstarts specifically caters for advertising creatives (art directors and copywriters) and designers, preparing them for successful careers in their respective fields. Furthermore, the programme is committed to providing a clear pathway into the creative sector for individuals from marginalised and underrepresented communities.

Now entering its 20th year, the ICAD Upstarts programme is the most established and recognised initiative of its kind in Ireland, delivering tangible benefits to participants (Upstarts), mentors, and host agencies/studios alike.

Programme Details

Stage 1: Workshops

For the initial part of the programme itself, Upstarts will attend a series of workshops, delivered both in-person and online. These workshops are designed to provide deep insights into their chosen craft, help them hone essential skills, and offer valuable opportunities to engage directly with leading industry figures. The workshops also prepare the Upstarts for the weeks ahead, offering guidance, establishing ways-of-working and support.

Stage 2: Agency/Studio Briefs

This core component of the programme involves working on a series of spec briefs. Typically, six to eight host studios and agencies participate per stream (Advertising and Design), with each issuing a single brief and hosting the Upstarts the following week to present their responses and receive constructive feedback.

Stage 3: Final Showcase Exhibition

The programme culminates in the Upstarts Exhibition, where Upstarts showcase the body of work developed throughout the programme. The Exhibition provides a platform for Upstarts to present their work to the broader creative industry, including potential employers, collaborators, and industry leaders.

Mentorship

A successful mentoring relationship is key to the Upstarts experience.

Mentors are established industry professionals who volunteer their time. They will be available to answer questions, discuss briefs, and review work in advance of each hosted evening session. ICAD will facilitate initial contact, and it is anticipated that mentors and Upstarts will connect via calls (e.g., Zoom) at key stages during the programme, supplemented by intermittent phone calls and emails. Mentors receive guidance and support from ICAD to help ensure a positive and productive relationship.

Upstarts are reminded that their mentor is invested in their success and should utilise this opportunity to learn to its fullest. To make the most of this relationship, Upstarts should:

- ↳ Be proactive in preparing for discussions.
- ↳ Have questions ready and clearly articulate areas where they need guidance.
- ↳ Be receptive to constructive feedback and advice.
- ↳ Respect their mentor's time and schedule.

At the beginning of the relationship, mentors and Upstarts are encouraged to discuss mutual expectations, preferred communication methods, and key goals for the Upstart during the programme.

Discussions within the mentor-Upstart relationship should be treated as confidential by both parties, fostering an environment of trust and open communication.

91%

of participants would recommend Upstarts.

92%

*secured roles during the programme
or within 6 months of completing Upstarts.*

82%

*of participants rated real - world
agency briefs as highly valuable.*

Upstart Expectations

Attendance & Participation

Upstarts are expected to be present at each workshop and all weekly evening sessions hosted by agencies/studios.

Brief Completion

A core commitment is the undertaking of a weekly brief, to be developed to a high standard and presented to peers and the host agency/studio for feedback.

Exhibition

Upon completion of the programme, Upstarts are also expected to submit one piece of work that was created on the course for inclusion in the Exhibition. Upstarts also assist ICAD in the organisation and creation of the final showcase exhibition.

Time Commitment

Upstarts is an intensive programme. While it can often be completed in conjunction with a full-time job, participants should anticipate a significant weekly time commitment - approximately 10—15 hours per week, including session attendance, travel, and work on briefs).

Professionalism

Uphold professional conduct in all interactions with mentors, host agencies, ICAD staff, and fellow Upstarts.

Guidance & Feedback

Upstarts will have the dedicated support of their mentor throughout the process and will receive valuable feedback from host agencies/studios on their brief responses.

Support

ICAD Support

ICAD will be available throughout the programme to assist Upstarts with queries or issues they may have. For any concerns, including challenges within the mentorship pairing or programme structure, please contact info@icad.ie

Wellbeing

Staying healthy and happy throughout the Upstarts programme is paramount. Should they require it, Upstarts will be signposted to support networks, including mental health service providers. ICAD is committed to supporting the wellbeing of all participants.

Feedback Channel

ICAD will conduct pulse surveys to provide an opportunity for Upstarts to provide feedback and inform the programme.

Application & Participation

Application Process

To apply to Upstarts, applicants respond to a speculative brief set by an established industry leader from each stream (Advertising and Design). We encourage you to flex your creative muscles, think differently, and submit work that stands out. Upstarts are selected based on their responses to this brief and their demonstrable potential to grow and succeed as a commercial creative. We want to see how you think and approach creativity. Apply [Here](#).

Criteria for Entry

- ↳ The primary criterion for entry is that applicants respond fully to the issued brief and submit their best work based on it.
- ↳ This programme is aimed at creatives who are near the start of their career or are looking to embark on a new creative career. This has previously included recent graduates, individuals looking to make a career change, or those seeking to formalise their pathway into the creative industries.
- ↳ That said, anyone is welcome to apply regardless of their background, educational achievements or employment history. Candidates will be selected by a panel of judges based on the quality of the submitted work, their application, and their perceived potential.

Participation & Fees 2026

Programme Cost

Participation in the ICAD Upstarts programme itself is free for all selected candidates in 2026. This is made possible by the generous support of our programme partners from within the industry, who recognise the immense value of this initiative to individuals and the creative sector as a whole.

Application Fee

To cover the administrative costs associated with the application and selection process, a non-refundable application fee of €20 is required.

Fee Assistance

In certain instances, we may grant a fee waiver to applicants who can show significant financial hardship and for whom paying the application fee would be an insurmountable barrier to entry. For more details see our [Fee Waiver Policy](#) and to apply email info@icad.ie

ICAD and our programme partners are profoundly committed to fostering a diverse, inclusive, and equitable environment within the Upstarts programme and the wider creative industries.

Diversity, Equality & Inclusion (DEI)

Aim

Upstarts actively aims to attract and support individuals from marginalised and underrepresented groups, thereby enhancing the diversity of voices and perspectives in the advertising and design industries. The programme is designed to provide a tangible pathway to the creative industries for these communities.

Active Support

We strive to create an inclusive learning environment through our programme content, selection, and support. This includes:

- ↳ Ensuring where possible diverse representation on our judging panels, among mentors, and guest speakers.
- ↳ Designing inclusive workshop content and briefs that reflect a variety of perspectives and actively avoid stereotypes.
- ↳ Proactively engaging with community organisations to reach underrepresented groups and removing financial barriers by keeping the programme free and exploring further support.
- ↳ Making the programme accessible and providing clear channels for feedback on our inclusivity efforts.

Policy

For more information, please see our full Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity policy available [here](#).

Code of Conduct

To ensure a positive, respectful, and productive environment for all, ICAD expects all Upstarts participants, mentors, and affiliated individuals to adhere to the following principles:

Respect

Treat all individuals with courtesy, dignity, and respect, regardless of background, experience, or role. Harassment or discrimination in any form will not be tolerated.

Professionalism

Maintain a professional demeanour in all programme-related interactions, including communications, workshops, agency visits, and the final exhibition.

Collaboration

Engage constructively with fellow Upstarts, mentors, and programme facilitators. Share knowledge and support each other's learning journey where appropriate.

Integrity

Uphold honesty and integrity in all your work and interactions. Properly attribute any collaborative work.

Commitment

Fully commit to the programme's requirements, attend sessions punctually, and meet deadlines to the best of your ability.

Failure to adhere to this Code of Conduct may result in a review of your participation in the programme. Any concerns regarding breaches of this Code should be reported to info@icad.ie

Intellectual Property (IP)

Your Work

Unless otherwise specified for a particular brief, the intellectual property rights for original work (e.g., concepts, copy, designs) created by you, the Upstart, in direct response to programme briefs, remain with you.

Showcasing

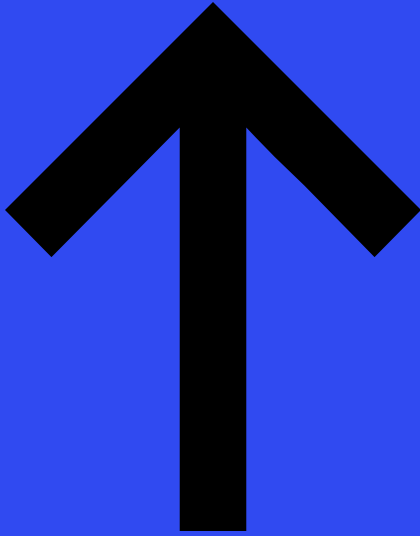
By participating, you grant ICAD and host agencies/studios permission to showcase your programme-related work for non-commercial promotional purposes related to the Upstarts programme itself (e.g., on websites, social media, at the exhibition), with appropriate attribution to you as the creator.

Confidential Information

Some briefs may contain confidential information. You will be expected to respect this confidentiality and not disclose such information outside of the programme context.

What You Will Gain from Upstarts

Participating in ICAD Upstarts offers a range of benefits designed to prepare you for and propel you into a creative industries:



Portfolio Development:

Create high-quality, brief-driven work suitable for inclusion in your professional portfolio.

Industry Experience:

Gain invaluable real-world experience by working on briefs set by leading agencies and studios, receiving direct feedback from industry professionals.

Mentorship:

Receive dedicated guidance, support, and career advice from an experienced industry mentor.

Networking:

Build a strong professional network through interactions with mentors, agency hosts, guest speakers, and your fellow Upstarts.

Showcase Opportunity:

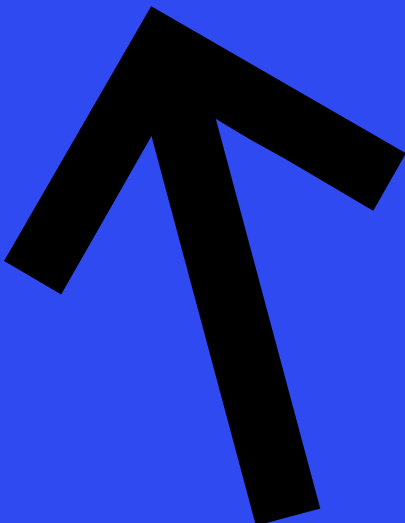
Exhibit your work to the creative industry at the final Upstarts Showcase event, providing a platform for exposure and potential employment opportunities.

Industry Insights:

Develop a deeper understanding of industry standards, practices, and career pathways.

Skill Enhancement:

Hone your creative, conceptual, and presentation skills in a supportive yet challenging environment.



Contact Us

If you have any questions, concerns, or require support at any stage, please do not hesitate to contact ICAD. For any queries, please email: info@icad.ie

Thanks

We extend our heartfelt thanks to our partners for their invaluable support in fostering creative talent and helping retain it within the Irish creative industries. Their commitment also enables us to introduce more diversity into the industry, which is proven to enhance creative outputs and benefit the sector as a whole. Together, through the programme, we are building a more vibrant, inclusive, and sustainable future where Irish creativity flourishes.

Lead Partner

core

Core is Ireland's largest marketing communications company. We collaborate across multiple Practices, working towards a single purpose, to expand the possibilities of what brands can achieve. By truly embracing collaboration, sharing ideas freely and empowering one another, we create work that is more powerful and transformative than our individual efforts can ever be.

Programme Partner

TBWA\Ireland

TBWA\Ireland, is over 100 ambitious people who believe in creating a total brand world for their equally ambitious clients. Backed by a network of over 11,100 people, we use Disruption® to connect a brand's total ecosystem. All with the ambition to go beyond just saying things, to doing and making amazing things, every day. Because we believe our best work is always ahead of us.

Diversity Partner

DesignOpp

DesignOpp is a not-for-profit initiative championing diversity in Irish design, so People of Colour can fulfill their creative potential. Our goal is to provide more opportunities, diversify education and create a welcoming community for Creatives of Colour.