

Top 10 Bristol incubation hubs & accelerators propelling startups to stardom



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Reading time 14 mins

Key Points

- Bristol incubation hubs and accelerator programs have become an integral part of the business landscape that sets startups up for success
- They provide a supportive and innovative environment for everything from ideation to product commercialisation and funding opportunities
- Incubation hubs are generally more suited to early-stage startups that haven't received any seed funding, have no product, and are still establishing their concept and business model
- Accelerator programmes are ideal for later-stage startups who have (at least) a minimum viable product, established product-market fit, and a developed business model
- While both may offer access to funding opportunities, accelerators usually provide product development financing and ask for an equity stake in return
- Startups must research before joining an incubator or accelerator programme to ensure they get the most value and opportunities that address their specific weaknesses (e.g. finance coaching).

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What do Dropbox, Airbnb, Canva, and Reddit have in common? They were all nurtured through an incubation hub that helped to set them up for success by providing business coaching, infrastructure support, and investment capital. Given that an [estimated 60% of UK small businesses fail](#), despite a robust investment and funding ecosystem, this support is crucial in giving startups the advantages needed to secure their place on the winning side. Bristol incubation hubs, in particular, are becoming a haven for entrepreneurs and are an integral part of the business landscape, helping to [catapult startups to stardom](#) by providing:

- An 'innovation environment' to ideate, evaluate, and test solutions
- Unique partnerships, funding, and networking opportunities
- Resources and exposure
- Access to new audiences
- Talent acquisition
- Refinement of strategies

Harder to measure – but equally important – is the emotional well-being that incubation and accelerator environments provide. Startup life can be a mentally tough and lonely one, filled with uncertainty and a lack of support. But by connecting people with resources, these support mechanisms help to reduce stress, inject energy, and offer like-minds valuable opportunities to create, collaborate, and even console.

Suggested articles

A comprehensive guide to Series A funding for product development

A lean business plan template for startups and entrepreneurs

Free Non-Disclosure Agreement NDA template to keep your next product idea safe

Incubation vs Acceleration: What's the difference?

Startups generally require funding and resources to grow – [incubator hubs and accelerator programmes](#) provide precisely that. Both offer early-stage startup founders the same networking, funding, support, and mentorship opportunities but differ significantly in size, duration, suitability, and, often, equity.

Incubators provide startups with valuable resources such as office space, equipment, mentorship, a collaborative community, networking opportunities, and access to [early-stage funding opportunities](#) from angel investors or venture capitalists. They focus on brand-new businesses that still need to develop a product idea and business model.

To submit to a business incubator, you'll often have to go through an application process to meet the incubator's specific criteria and submit a viable [business plan that outlines your value proposition](#).

For example, the Istorya Group (a collective of creative agencies) held a [Bristol incubation hub competition](#) earlier this year, where the winner was awarded private office space, free website design and development, PR and marketing support, mentorship, free electricity, and Wi-Fi. Because this agency is B Corp Certified (companies that have verified high standards of environmental, social, and governance performance), startups that shared their values were given preference.

Accelerator programmes fast-track the growth of existing companies with a developed business model and validated products in the marketplace. They focus on businesses with a solid foundation but need guidance (e.g., securing intellectual property rights) and resources to scale up as quickly as possible. Accelerators usually also give their ventures seed investment in return for an equity stake in the company.

For example, the [EU Startupbootcamp Accelerator Program](#) 2023 aims to accelerate ventures supporting UN Sustainability Goals. Applications were open to startups engaged in Mobility & Transportation, Sustainability, and Renewable Energy & Net Zero sectors to apply. Winners were awarded €15K cash + up to 450K in services (e.g. legal, accounting, marketing), access to solid investors and a corporate network, experienced mentors, and dedicated life cycle support in return for 8% equity.

To incubate or accelerate: Which one's right for you?

As mentioned above, incubation hubs and accelerator programs have their own eligibility criteria. Knowing which is appropriate will help you [target suitable opportunities](#) from the get-go, save you time in the long run, and help you to establish long-lasting connections for future growth.

	INCUBATION HUB	ACCELERATOR
STAGE OF ENTRY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early-stage startups • No seed funding • No product • Establishing concept • Needs to validate product-market fit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Later-stage startups • Minimum viable product (MVP) • Developed business model • Established product-market fit
DURATION	Slow timeline with no fixed duration as the business model requires validation.	Set time frame between 2 weeks to 6 months
SEED FUNDING	None given (usually)	Seed investment in exchange for an equity stake
RESOURCES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Infrastructure (office space, use of equipment, meeting rooms) • Networking, funding, and mentorship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No infrastructure needed as the startup has its own premises • Networking, funding, and mentorship
ELIGIBILITY	None. Although some incubators have a preference for startups which align with their goals and vision	Startups that are in the growth stage

Top 10 Bristol incubation hubs and accelerators

1. Bristol Robotics Lab (BRL):

Incubation Hub

The UK's most comprehensive academic centre for multidisciplinary robotics research, and a collaborative partnership between the University of the West of England and the University of Bristol.

[BRL's Technology and Hardware Incubator](#) provides a supportive and entrepreneurial workspace for startups needing to develop hardware. Once accepted, startups can access a full range of facilities (free, subsidised, or low-rental office space), workshops, legal and accounting services, networking and pitch events.

2. Entrepreneurial Spark

Accelerator Program

One of the world's largest free business accelerators for early-stage and growing ventures run in partnership with KPMG. The program offers support, mentoring, office space, workshops and training free of charge. Their ['purpose-led' accelerator programs](#) include:

- Space Accelerator, in collaboration with the UK Space Agency, for businesses in any sector that are using space technology (e.g. satellite, GPS) to innovate new ideas
- Transform SY accelerator to facilitate collaboration
- Partner Accelerator program to create sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystems

3. SETSquared Bristol

Incubation Hub and Accelerator

A world-leading business incubator and enterprise partnership with a [comprehensive range of support programs](#) to boost businesses to the next level – regardless of whether they're at the early ideation phase or ready to scale up.

- Innovation to Commercialisation of University Research (ICURE) pre-accelerator programme for researchers funded by Innovate UK
- Telecomms Support for high-tech companies looking to accelerate their growth in telecoms and assistance with translating early-stage technology solutions into commercial products
- Intrapreneurial Knowledge Exchange Enterprise Pathway (IKEEP): A free programme that provides businesses (at any stage) with three graduate/post-graduate students to help finish projects
- Business Incubation Programme to help startups validate concepts, build a team, find funding, and launch an investor-ready business
- Scale Up: Tailored support for SMEs to secure public and private investment for R&D

SETSquared also has [pre-incubation and incubation programmes](#) where startups receive bespoke services, facilities and access depending on their membership package.

4 & 5. University of the West of England (UWE) Bristol

Incubation facilities

UWE Bristol recently transformed its incubation space on campus, bringing two technology incubators into one area: BRL Hardware and [Launch Space Incubator](#).

Both incubators are set up to work with tech founders in the early stages of their business

development, and both enabled startups to colossal success: Launch Space works with founders to develop their ideas and value proposition and prepare businesses for their first fundraising. BRL Hardware Incubator allows companies to prototype, build and test their products, refining them for commercial launch.

This [Bristol Incubation Hub](#) offers:

- 12 months of free desk space
- Bespoke technical mentoring and expert services
- Access to a programme of business frameworks
- Peer group sessions
- Professional meeting facilities

6. Future Space

Incubation Hub

Part of the University of the West of England's Enterprise Zone, this innovation centre is designed to bring university-business collaborations together. Membership packages start from £150 per month to access [startup and incubation programmes](#). This includes a network of professional advisors to support business growth, peer-to-peer funding forums, and fundraising support.

7. Pervasive Media Studio

Membership-based collaborative spaces

Housed within Watershed, a multidisciplinary arts centre, Pervasive Media Studio is a creative technologies collaboration between [Watershed](#), UWE Bristol, and the University of Bristol.

Pervasive Media Studio enables a diverse community to explore creative technologies and is home to many early-stage ideas and over 100 startups, professionals, and academics. The focus is on the future of mobile and wireless - including gaming, robotics, and location-based media. Those who would like to become members must apply and, if accepted, receive free desk space and access to valuable opportunities such as [joining an ongoing resident](#) programme to:

- Connect and collaborate with other residents
- Receive ad-hoc support with business, technology, and creative development
- Free desk space
- Bookable meeting rooms and workshop spaces (with some access to equipment)

8 & 9. ScienceCreates

Deep Tech and Science Innovation Incubator Hubs

Science and engineering incubators in central Bristol bring together specialist facilities with focused business support and have been instrumental in creating a science-centric ecosystem in Bristol. Their members span the bio-design, chemistry, quantum, and deep tech industries and a network of angel investors instrumental to leading funding rounds.

Two Bristol incubation hubs for startups in relevant fields are [St. Philips Incubator and the Old Market Incubator](#). Both take no equity and offer members:

- Laboratory, office, and event space
- Support and mentorship opportunities
- Purpose-built laboratories
- Cutting-edge instrumentation

10. Focused for Business

Funding accelerator

Crowdfunding and investment specialists who are passionate about seeing new businesses get off the ground. Their funding [accelerator programme starts every month](#) and has raised over £11 million for startups to date. Successful applicants receive:

- A 90 day programme that takes them from preparing for investment, to attracting investors, and finally closing a deal
- Weekly interactive Zoom workshops
- A step-by-step approach to preparing all the documentation investors need to see
- Tools, templates, and playbooks
- One-on-one mentor support
- A tailored list of investor profiles and masterclass on how to engage with them
- Pitch practice

Crucial questions to ask before joining a business incubator

While launching a new product or developing a startup might seem like you're racing against the clock to hit a range of milestones, always research and consider your options carefully. Crucial questions to ask:

1. Are the mentorship opportunities and the mentors aligned with what you seek at this stage? Startups that receive mentorship have a higher success rate than those that don't, so if an incubator doesn't provide the specific mentorship you need, you'll be wasting your time. Find out who the mentors are on the roster, how accessible they are, and how much time they can dedicate to you.
2. Networking opportunities are also crucial to your success. However, if they are unstructured and poorly curated, they will be more of a distraction. Please find out how diverse their community is, how their networking events are organised, and whether there are opportunities for collaboration that provide real traction

3. What are their success stories or social proof? Find out what the incubator has managed to accomplish for other startups in a similar position and whether that aligns with the short and long-term objectives you're seeking for yourself
4. What resources will you have at your disposal, and are those resources what you need?
5. What will they want from you in return? Non-profit incubators or those funded by the government have different objectives than for-profit companies that need to meet specific success metrics. Are they asking for an equity stake in your business or charging a monthly membership fee?

Questions aside, before applying to or joining a business incubator, ensure you have a Non-Disclosure Agreement that will keep your ideas and intellectual property safe. If you don't have one, [download our free NDA template](#) here and customise it to suit your needs.

A final word on Bristol's accelerator programmes and incubation hubs

As you may have noticed, most top accelerator and incubation programmes are either housed at or affiliated with a university or academic institution. Signing up for their newsletter or keeping them on your social media radar is an excellent way to stay abreast of new opportunities or get a heads-up on private companies launching initiatives targeted at specific sectors.

If there's an incubator or accelerator that didn't make it into our Top 10 but deserves mention, please [let us know](#). We'll add to and update our list regularly, so watch this space!

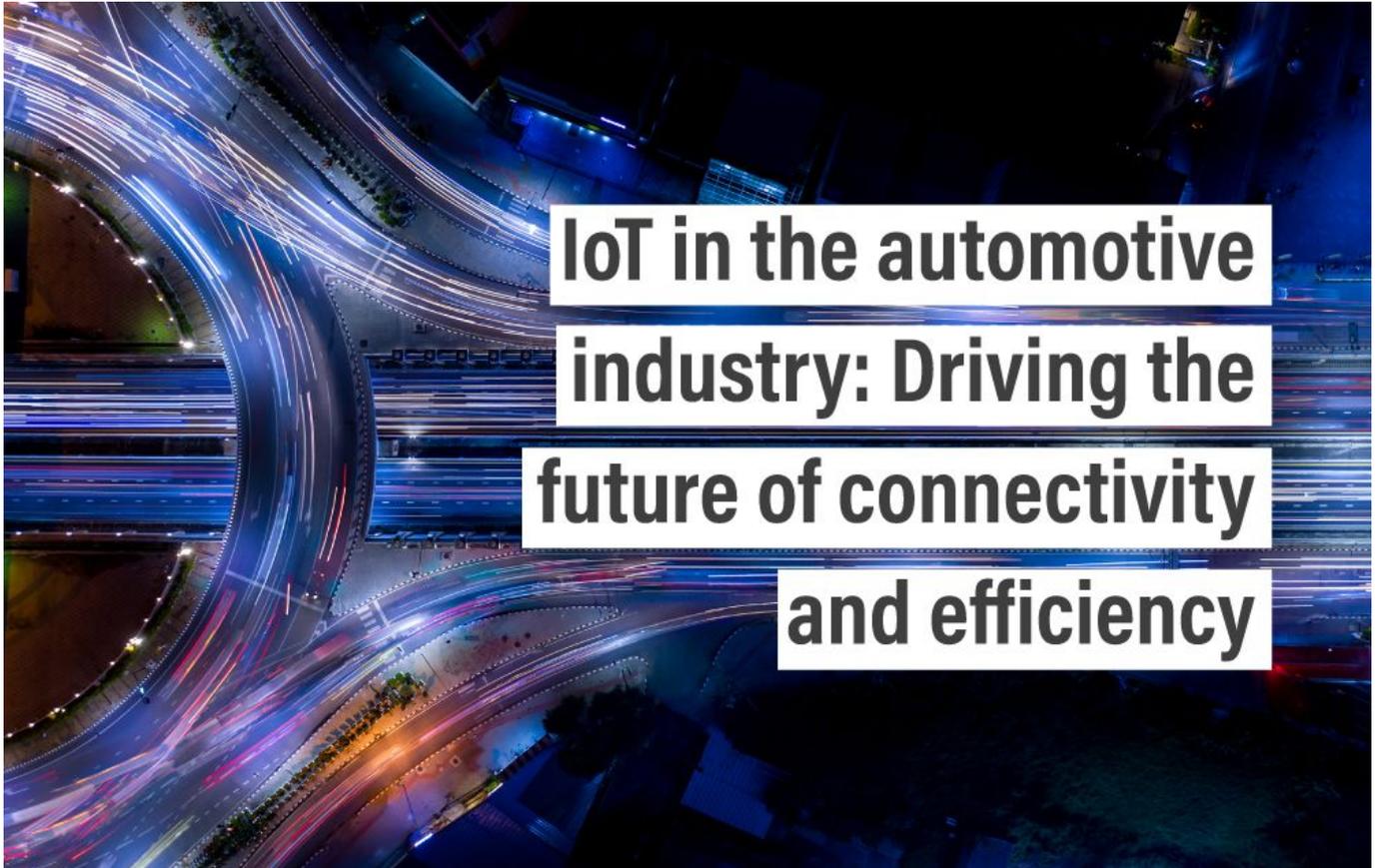
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