ICUBE STUDIO

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO MISSISSAUGA

ICUBE UTM

Impact Report

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About Our Studio

The Creative Studio (ICUBE Studio) is a full-service creative and strategic agency embedded within ICUBE UTM, the University of Toronto Mississauga's hub for entrepreneurship and innovation. Operating at the intersection of education, innovation, and design, the Studio offers a unique model that integrates the expertise of industry professionals with the fresh perspectives and technical capabilities of top-performing students across disciplines.

Our multidisciplinary team—comprising consultants, marketers, strategists, designers, and developers— works under the mentorship of seasoned faculty and staff. This structure not only ensures high-quality deliverables but also fosters a dynamic environment where emerging talent is cultivated through real-world experience.

We support organizations at all stages, from early ideation and brand development to product launches and digital transformation. Our services span the full creative and development pipeline, including branding, marketing strategy, UX/UI design, web development, content creation, and more. What distinguishes the Creative Studio is our ability to deliver innovative, cost-effective solutions at subsidized rates—an outcome of our academic integration and commitment to experiential learning.

By engaging with the Creative Studio, partners are not only investing in high-impact work tailored to their organizational goals but also contributing to the professional growth of the next generation of Canadian innovators. This dual mission reflects our core belief: that education and enterprise can thrive together, generating both social and economic value.
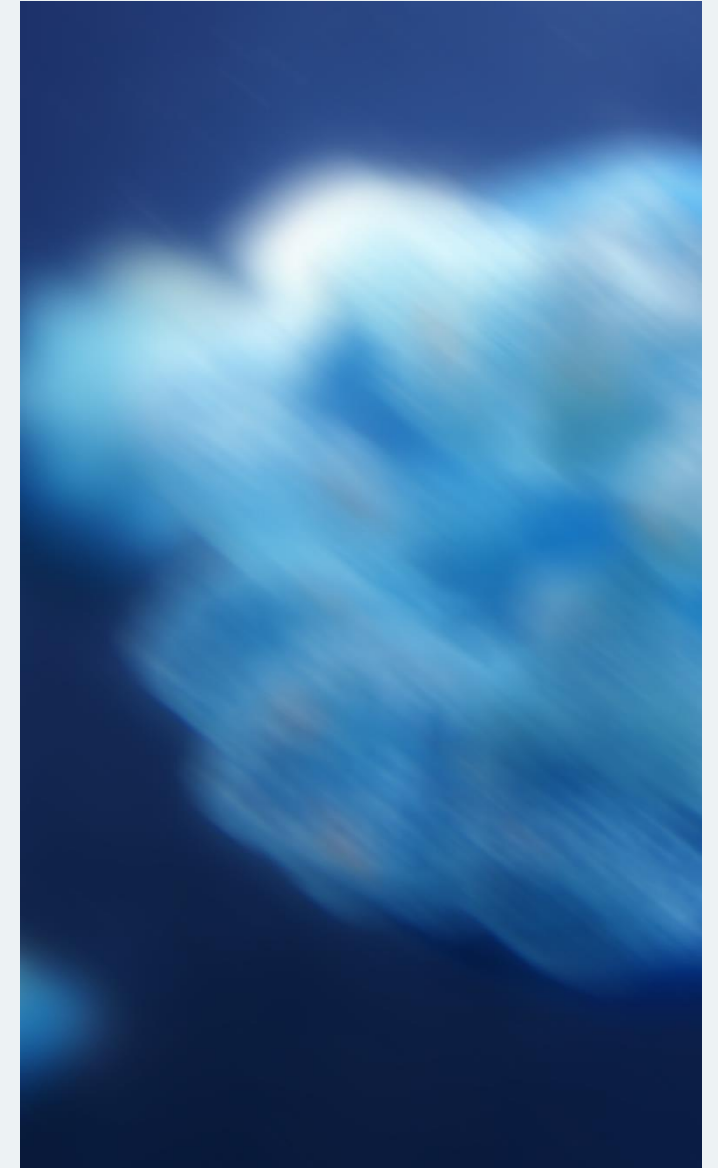
The Challenge

Small businesses and startups are widely acknowledged as the backbone of economic development and innovation. They create jobs, introduce new ideas, and respond rapidly to changing market needs. Yet despite their critical role in the economy, the majority of these ventures struggle to survive. Data consistently shows that approximately 20% of small businesses fail within their first year, and nearly half do not make it past their fifth. These failure rates are not merely statistical artifacts—they reflect structural challenges that inhibit long-term sustainability.

One of the most prominent barriers facing startups is the lack of access to affordable, high-quality support in areas fundamental to business success: branding, digital marketing, web development, and technology integration. In the earliest and most vulnerable stages of growth, startups often find themselves caught in a paradox—they need professional services to grow, but they cannot afford them. Standard market rates for these services remain out of reach for most early-stage ventures, with marketing agencies charging upwards of $100 to $300 per hour for services like social media management, digital strategy, branding, and software development. These costs quickly add up, making it nearly impossible for bootstrapped teams or founders operating on limited funding to compete at a professional level.

In search of more affordable options, many entrepreneurs turn to freelance platforms like Upwork or Fiverr. While these platforms offer lower upfront pricing, they come with significant risks. Inconsistent quality, communication gaps, and limited accountability often result in work that needs to be redone—costing valuable time and resources. For many founders, the initial savings are quickly lost in the cycle of revisions and rework, ultimately delaying time-to-market and increasing financial pressure.

On the other side of the ecosystem, thousands of skilled university students are eager to gain practical, career-relevant experience. These students—many of whom are studying business, design, computer science, and related fields—possess fresh ideas, up-to-date technical skills, and a strong desire to contribute to real-world projects. However, their opportunities are often limited. Co-op programs are competitive and may be inaccessible to many. Campus roles tend to focus on administrative tasks rather than creative or technical development. Independent engagement with startups is appealing, but often difficult to navigate: students may lack the guidance needed to deliver industry-standard work, while startups may not have the time or expertise to mentor inexperienced contributors.

What emerges is a dual-sided gap. Startups need affordable, reliable, and professional services to grow—while students need meaningful, structured opportunities to apply their learning. Yet the systems that currently exist often fail to bring these groups together in a way that ensures mutual value. This gap represents not only a missed opportunity for individual businesses and students, but also a broader inefficiency in how we support entrepreneurship, talent development, and innovation within the economy.

Our Solution

ICUBE Studio was established to directly address the systemic gap between the needs of small businesses and the capabilities of emerging talent within the university ecosystem. As a full-service creative and development studio embedded within ICUBE UTM—the University of Toronto Mississauga's innovation incubator—we offer a dual-impact model that creates value for both early-stage ventures and students preparing to enter the workforce.

For startups and small businesses, ICUBE Studio delivers professionally guided services in branding, digital marketing, user experience design, and software development—at rates significantly below traditional market offerings. Our solutions are tailored specifically for the startup environment, acknowledging the realities of limited budgets, evolving business models, and the urgency of early traction. Every project is executed with a focus on impact and sustainability, helping clients enhance their visibility, streamline operations, and reduce risk. By lowering the barriers to accessing high-quality creative and technical services, we enable more businesses to survive, grow, and succeed.

At the same time, ICUBE Studio creates transformative learning experiences for students. Rather than engaging in narrowly defined, administrative campus roles, participating students are embedded in real-world projects from concept to execution. They gain exposure to client communication, problem-solving under pressure, and industry expectations—all under the close mentorship of professionals with deep experience in entrepreneurship and small business development. This structure ensures that students are not only building portfolios but also developing critical thinking, collaboration, and leadership skills that are essential in today's workforce.

What sets ICUBE Studio apart is its ability to facilitate this exchange in a structured, supported, and scalable way. Projects are carefully scoped and managed to ensure quality and learning outcomes, clients receive tangible value, and students graduate with the confidence and experience needed to thrive in competitive industries.

This symbiotic model—where startups gain affordable expertise and students gain meaningful experience—demonstrates how educational institutions can play a proactive role in solving real economic challenges while nurturing the next generation of innovators.

Our Services

Brand Development

We'll create a distinct brand identity to help you stand out and connect deeply with your audience, ensuring every touchpoint resonates.

Web/App Development

Our team builds responsive, user-friendly platforms so you can grow, prototype, and sell with confidence.

Product Design

We craft beautiful, intuitive designs for websites, apps, and more—ensuring your business offerings look great and function flawlessly.

Search Engine Optimization

We refine your technical, local, and managed SEO so you can reach the right audience and boost online visibility.

Graphic Design

From product packaging to social media templates, we produce cohesive graphics that showcase your brand's style and values.

Consultation

Tap into our expertise for tailored advice on marketing, branding, development, or design to help with your goals.

Digital Marketing

We plan and manage campaigns to increase engagement, reach, and brand loyalty across social media and other digital channels.

CTO-as-a-Service

Gain a part-time or project-based technical leader who offers strategic guidance and hands-on support, perfect for scaling your venture without committing to a full-time CTO.

Our Numbers

Since our launch on June 1, 2020, ICUBE Studio has been dedicated to bridging the gap between emerging talent and small businesses.

100

Businesses have received high-quality, affordable creative and technical support.

37

Social enterprises assisted, helping mission-driven businesses make a greater impact.

40

Students have gained real-world industry experience while ensuring fair compensation for their work.

42

Women-founded businesses supported, empowering diverse entrepreneurs.

5,000+

Hours of expertise provided in branding, digital marketing, and technology solutions.
(Valued at $500,000)

ICUBE Studio continues to shape the future by delivering professional solutions to startups while equipping students with industry-ready skills.

Our Future

ICUBE Studio is more than a service provider—it is a scalable innovation model designed to empower students, support early-stage ventures, and enhance institutional capacity. In addition to working with startups, the Studio is increasingly supporting internal departments at the University of Toronto, helping streamline and modernize digital processes related to expense reimbursements, invoicing, hiring workflows, and timesheet management. This demonstrates the Studio's growing role as a campus-wide resource for digital transformation and operational efficiency.

Looking ahead, ICUBE Studio is focused on four strategic pillars for growth, with the goal of creating a sustainable model that can be replicated across other universities, incubators, and innovation hubs:

1. Online Academy for U of T Students

We are developing a digital training platform to equip University of Toronto students with essential skills in branding, web development, digital marketing, and client communication. This platform will allow students to access practical, project-ready knowledge at their own pace and ensure they are well-prepared to contribute effectively to client engagements. By building this foundation, we increase project efficiency and elevate the quality of work delivered to startups.

2. Expanding Client Reach Beyond UTM

ICUBE Studio is actively exploring ways to broaden its impact beyond the UTM campus. This includes engaging startups and small businesses from outside the university ecosystem through targeted outreach and referral strategies. By partnering with local business support organizations and entrepreneurship networks, we aim to serve a more diverse range of entrepreneurs in need of accessible, high-quality creative and technical support.

3. Developing Advanced Technologies for Incubators

A major milestone in our evolution has been the development of the Ecosystem Management Solution (EMS)—a robust platform that streamlines how incubators manage applications, mentorship, and program delivery. This suite of tools includes:

- Application portals to simplify intake and tracking
- Intelligent mentor-matching systems to facilitate high-impact connections
- Program management interfaces that help administrators run more effective and scalable programming

The EMS platform is already in use and serves as a foundation for broader digital transformation in the startup support ecosystem. Click here to learn more.

4. Collaborating with Other Incubators

We are actively working to share our model with other incubators and universities interested in building their own versions of ICUBE Studio. By offering a structured operational framework and a customizable technology stack—including white-labeled or licensed versions of EMS—we enable institutions to replicate this model in a way that fits their unique contexts. This approach empowers more students with real-world experience while expanding startup support services at scale.

Through these four areas of strategic development, ICUBE Studio is positioning itself as a replicable, future-ready model for innovation support—one that brings academic talent, entrepreneurial energy, and institutional resources together to build a more inclusive and resilient economy.

Our Flagship Product

The Ecosystem Management Solution (EMS) is a purpose-built, all-in-one digital platform developed by ICUBE Studio as our flagship product to help incubators and accelerators manage their operations more efficiently, transparently, and impactfully.

Developed by an incubator for incubators, EMS addresses a long-standing gap in the entrepreneurial support landscape: the need for a unified system that understands and adapts to the complexity of startup ecosystems.

At its core, EMS centralizes and streamlines the essential functions that incubators rely on to serve their ventures, including:

Application Management: Easily configure and manage custom application forms, deadlines, and review processes.

Program Coordination: Track multiple cohorts and program cycles with clarity and structure.

Mentorship Tracking: Match ventures with relevant advisors and log interactions, feedback, and outcomes.

Resource Distribution: Manage access to funding, office space, training sessions, and other program benefits.

Service Hour Logging: Capture the time and support delivered by mentors, advisors, and staff in real-time.

Team & Venture Oversight: Maintain records of team members, business updates, and venture milestones.

Integrated Communications: Enable seamless updates and messaging across staff, ventures, and mentors.

Unlike fragmented spreadsheets or generic platforms, EMS offers a customizable, scalable, and white-label-ready solution tailored specifically for the needs of innovation hubs. It is branded to the incubator's identity, accommodates diverse program structures, and is built with a modular architecture to evolve alongside growing ecosystems.

Strategic Importance

EMS is not only a core operational tool for ICUBE UTM—it is a strategic pillar. It enhances internal efficiency, elevates the participant experience, and provides rich data insights to inform decision-making and impact measurement. It also serves as a foundation for collaboration with other incubators, offering a replicable model for ecosystem-level coordination across institutions.

As the first platform of its kind grounded in the realities of incubator operations, EMS is a direct response to the limitations of existing options such as AcceleratorApp (cost-prohibitive and overly complex) and F6S (free but unreliable). EMS is designed to meet the needs of both early-stage incubators and established innovation organizations alike—scalable, accessible, and built for real-world use.

If interested in learning more about EMS, getting a live demo of the platform, or connecting with us on how we can customize this for your needs, please head to: https://ems.icubeutm.ca/

Client Testimonials

"The ICUBE Studio was amazing to work with, the **quality** of the deliverables produced in addition to the **speed** and **professionalism** of the students was **fantastic**. I would highly recommend this service!"

"Mo was incredibly **friendly and professional**, often replying within minutes. He took ownership over the work and was prepared to implement changes. In the end, he delivered a **top-quality final product**."

"It was huge, I was able to **maintain full focus on product development** and other areas while the details of our website and hosting were sorted out. Further, Mo was able to take my pretty general feedback about a logo redesign and **create exactly what I was looking for**."

"It was significantly useful for my business as we were in the process of focusing on elevating our online brand and having access to **experts in visual graphic design** and the **speed of the turnaround** made our ability to start to produce consistent content much more doable. Shout-out to Mohammad who was amazing to work with! Thanks so much!"

"Communicating expectations and project outlines with the Studio is **effortless**. Mo takes my general feedback and ideas and transforms them into **exactly what I envisioned**. Projects are always delivered on time and at the **highest quality possible.**"

"Before coming to the Studio, my company **struggled to stand out in the market**. At first, I didn't think much about what the Studio could offer, but after seeing the first draft, **I was blown away by the quality. It was everything I had imagined a successful business should look like.**"

"We were on the **verge of shutting down**—costs were too high, and our technology wasn't working despite pouring in tons of money. Mo and his team stepped in, **rebuilt the entire system the right way**, and delivered it in a **fraction of the time and cost**. Thanks to the Studio's support, we're **now generating thousands in revenue.**"

"Gone are the days when solo founders with **no tech background** and a small budget had to **abandon their app ideas**. The Studio built an MVP for me with incredible efficiency and **took the time to explain every part of the technology**, giving me a clear understanding of what goes into app development."
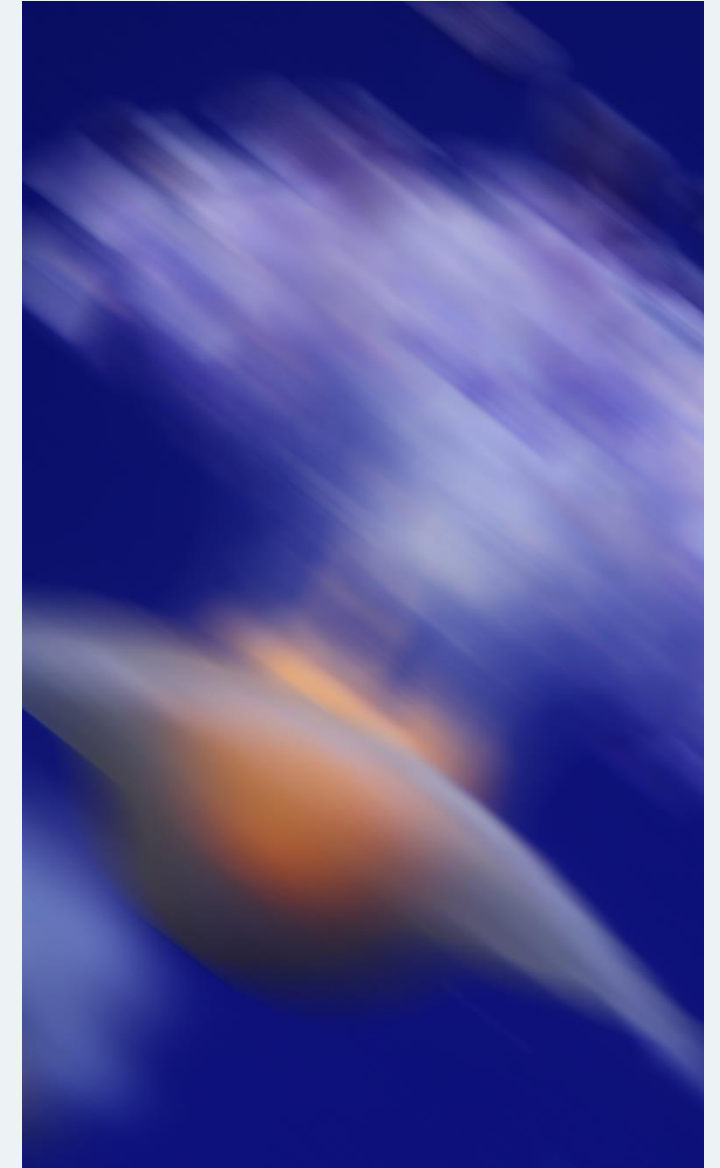
Student Testimonials

"Joining ICUBE Studio in Summer 2024 as a Full Stack Developer accelerated my growth as a Software Engineer by **10x**. Leading large-scale projects from start to finish sharpened my technical skills, strengthened my ability to navigate ambiguity, and enhanced my client collaboration—**an experience rare even in traditional co-ops**. The guidance and trust from Mo and the team were unparalleled.

The depth of ownership I had at ICUBE helped me **land interviews and internships** at leading tech companies like **Shopify**, **Amazon**, **DoorDash**, and **Meta**—many of which showed more interest in my ICUBE work than my industry co-ops."

"Working at ICUBE Studio as a software developer has been one of the most valuable opportunities in my journey as a UTM student. The projects I worked on were **engaging**, **challenging**, and **highly relevant**, allowing me to refine my skills both as a software developer and an **aspiring entrepreneur**. I had the chance to collaborate with experienced team members and solve real-world technical challenges faced by startups on a daily basis. I would highly recommend ICUBE Studio to any UTM student looking to gain **hands-on experience** in entrepreneurship while building their technical and creative expertise."

"At ICUBE Studio, I had the opportunity to work on branding and design, including creating logos and marketing materials. Contributing to multiple projects has strengthened my understanding of brand strategy and design, allowing me to **develop skills that go beyond the classroom**. This has been visible in my work since at first the amount of revisions were very high and now I am able to provide quality work that Mo and the client love within only a few tries."

"ICUBE Studio has given me the opportunity to create work that **directly impacts others**. For the first time as a student, **I feel like my contributions are making a real difference for end users**—something that is rare to experience in a traditional academic setting or co-op placements."