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Re: Concerns Regarding the TechExpert Pilot Scheme

Dear UKRI/EPSRC Team,

We write as a group of PhD students from six Centres for Doctoral Training (CDTs) at the University of Edinburgh to express our concerns regarding the TechExpert Pilot Scheme. This initiative offers Home fee status students an additional £10,000/year stipend for select CDT cohorts commencing in 2026, with the aim of improving accessibility and Home fee student participation in high tech-related doctoral programmes across the UK.

We strongly support the objective of broadening access to postgraduate research. However, we have significant concerns about the design of this initiative, its consequences for CDT students who do not qualify for TechExpert status, and the likely resulting impact on CDT community dynamics. To this end, we urge you to re-evaluate its implementation and take remedial action for students affected to ensure fair and equal treatment of all your doctoral students.

We detail our concerns as follows.

Concern 1: Impact on CDT Community and Cohort Dynamics

The collaborative environment fostered by CDTs, both within and between cohorts, is fundamental to our training experience. The connections we have made with other CDT students have been among the most valuable aspects of our doctoral journey. Introducing significant pay disparities within and between cohorts risks undermining these dynamics in several ways:

- **Structural Inequality:** Home students entering the CDT in 2026 receiving the enhanced stipend would earn approximately 50% more than both their Overseas peers and any previous, more senior cohorts of CDT students. Such a disparity in pay between students with similar workloads is likely to create tension both within and across cohorts.

- **Community Erosion:** CDTs that have declined this initiative due to such concerns may find themselves at a competitive disadvantage relative to those that accepted. Conversely, CDTs that have accepted the initiative have mentioned fear of losing competitiveness as one of their main reasons for accepting, despite their concerns about the programme. These disparities risk eroding the collegial, respectful, and driven culture that characterises our CDT communities.
- **Devaluing Peers:** The large gap in pay between Home and Overseas fee students risks devaluing Overseas students' labour and contributions to CDT culture and tech expertise in the United Kingdom. Edinburgh CDT students, regardless of fee status, already significantly contribute to public outreach and industry engagement opportunities (see below) and will continue to do so regardless of being labelled "TechExperts". Recognising these contributions and rewarding them with higher pay only among a subset of these students is unjust and devalues the work that has been and will continue to be done.

Concern 2: Devaluation of Current Students' Work and Outreach

Core to the remit of our CDTs, and a significant condition of our original grant funding, has been a sustained commitment from us to perform outreach to the general public. A few examples of outreach events from our CDTs have included an annual showcase at the Edinburgh Science Festival, with 238 attendees from the local community in 2025; stands at several Doors Open Days per year; a PhD Shadowing Scheme, positioning Informatics doctoral degrees as a possibility for undergraduate and master's students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds; and frequent engagement with our CDT industry and community partners, including through our annual Partner Summits.

None of these contributions have been compensated beyond our regular stipends; we have seen them as valuable training opportunities intrinsic to our programme as well as central to the responsibility one takes on when working with public funds. However, the TechExpert scheme directly links the stipend uplift to an expectation of contributing up to ten days a year of additional outreach and widening participation activities. This link is seemingly made explicit by allowing new students to opt *out* of TechExpert status, releasing them of these additional responsibilities at the cost of losing the increased stipend. This would imply that UKRI values a day's work of outreach at approx. £1,000.

Linking a stipend uplift to participation in outreach activities wrongly suggests that current CDT students could be doing more and are not already working to 100% of

their capacity. In addition, it disregards the fact that most of us already undertake comparable amounts of outreach and public engagement activities, as outlined above, and devalues this work, as it has not been compensated in any way. Finally, it directly disincentivises current students to continue with their own outreach activities. Why bother spending a day's worth of your own time on widening participation work when your more junior colleague gets paid £1,000 for doing the same?

Concern 3: Non-TechExpert UKRI Stipend is Unsuitable for Cost of Living in Edinburgh

The current (2025-2026) UKRI stipend of £20,780 does not cover the University of Edinburgh's own estimated cost of living for students in private accommodation. According to the University's [published guidance](#) (updated April 2025), a single student can expect to pay approximately £22,672 per year when accounting for rent (minimum £750/month), food, utilities, health and wellbeing expenses, and local travel. Across the 25-26 academic year, this represents a shortfall of £1,892. For many students, this gap may determine whether they can access secure housing, maintain adequate heating during winter months, fulfil caring responsibilities for dependents, or cover other vital costs that allow them to live with dignity.

This is not a new concern: the [Russell Group Students' Unions Cost of Living Report \(2023\)](#) found that 60% of postgraduate research students reported their academic performance had suffered due to financial pressures, with one PhD student stating that “it is becoming impossible to balance rent, utilities and food on the UKRI studentship rate”. If distributed more equally, the funding allocated to the TechExpert scheme could instead be used to address these real pressures faced by the entire doctoral student population through an equitable uplift across all UKRI stipends.

Concern 4: Contradiction with UKRI's Strategic Values and Statutory Duties

We believe the implementation of this pilot is in direct tension with UKRI's own established strategies for Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) and Research Culture.

- **The Public Sector Equality Duty (Equality Act 2010):** UKRI is legally obligated to “foster good relations” between groups. Creating a two-tier stipend system based on fee status inevitably fosters division rather than good relations, alienating international students and damaging the cohort cohesion that CDTs are designed to build.

- **UKRI EDI Strategy (2023–2028)**: Strategic Objective 3 commits UKRI to creating a “fair organisational culture, where everyone [...] feels valued and respected”. Valuing the labour of “TechExpert” scholars at £10,000 per year more than their peers for identical work signals that the contributions of non-recipient students are valued significantly less.
- **EPSRC EDI Action Plan (2022–2025)**: EPSRC acknowledges that 40% of its Principal Investigators are non-UK nationals. By financially penalising the international doctoral pipeline, this scheme contradicts the goal of attracting and retaining the widest pool of talent.
- **Research Culture**: This pilot risks previous efforts UKRI has made in promoting collegiality. By introducing financial stratification, the scheme incentivises resentment rather than the collaboration that is the hallmark of the CDT model.

Ways Forward

We share the UKRI’s commitment to widening participation in doctoral tech education and appreciate the ambition of the TechFirst programme as a whole. However, as currently designed, the TechExpert pilot risks introducing significant disparities within and between CDT cohorts, while leaving unaddressed the underlying cost-of-living pressures and structural constraints that affect doctoral researchers across fee statuses and stages of study.

We are not asking for the TechExpert funding currently allocated to next year’s Home fee students to be withdrawn, nor do we suggest that this would be feasible or desirable. Instead, we ask UKRI to adopt transitional or complementary measures that would mitigate cohort-level inequities and provide more proportionate, needs-responsive support across the doctoral community.

For example, we suggest you:

- **Raise the general UKRI stipend to at least close the cost-of-living gap in expensive cities.** We believe the most equitable and just way forward is to raise the stipend of *all* CDT students, regardless of fee status or year started, to the new TechExpert stipend. At the very least, however, the UKRI stipend should be able to cover a doctoral student’s basic cost of living. Currently, normal stipends operate on a ‘two-tier’ system, with a higher stipend for students in London to account for the higher cost of living there compared to the rest of the UK. This system might need to be expanded to account for other highly

expensive cities in the UK, including but not limited to Edinburgh. While we greatly appreciate the yearly raises of the UKRI stipend, they are consistently falling short of the University of Edinburgh's estimated cost of living, which requires a more substantial increase.

- **Design future schemes to be more tailored to individual students.** While the TechExpert scheme purports to enable wider participation, the stipend increase is given to all Home fee students regardless of background. If instead these funds had been allocated to provide targeted support to students who needed financial assistance most, even if still only targeted at Home fee students, the scheme's implementation would have better aligned with its stated goals, not breached UKRI's own policies as listed above, and likely been received much more positively than it currently has.
- **Commit to co-designing future pilot schemes with the CDTs that deliver them.** We understand that the introduction of the TechExpert scheme was sudden, with very little information available at first, and only after CDTs had already started recruitment for next year. To prevent future backlash and loss of morale, we suggest directly engaging CDTs in designing schemes like these, instead of imposing them top-down with little space for consideration or negotiation.

We would welcome the opportunity to engage constructively with UKRI on these issues and to contribute to discussions about how the aims of the TechExpert scheme can be achieved without undermining the collegiality, sustainability, and inclusivity of doctoral training environments.

Please do not hesitate to reach out to us with any questions or if you would like to discuss our concerns further.

Yours sincerely,

This letter was signed by 42 PhD students from the CDTs in [DR-NLP](#), [AI4BI](#), [MLS](#), [OI](#), [SPADS](#), and [D2AIR](#) and shared with UKRI executives in March 2026. The full list of signatories and their email addresses are known to CDT staff.