Academic Sponsorship at Essex – Scheme Overview

## The Aim of Academic Sponsorship at Essex

The University Education Strategy sets out our commitment to supporting and equipping students to reach their full potential and thrive in their future lives. Celebrating the diversity of student backgrounds, circumstances and aspirations, the university seeks to nurture individuals, maximising resilience, ambition, and capacity to succeed and develop.

Of particular relevance to the academic sponsorship scheme is the intention to ‘…build confidence, resilience and experience among our students to support them to make the transition to the next stage of their lives by maintaining, evaluating and innovating in the development of skills and wider personal development opportunities…’ (EO2, EO6).

Working to these objectives, an academic sponsorship pilot is being developed within the T&T project and will be positioned within the Black Research Hub programme. The Black Researchers Hub comprises a range of interlocking activities which challenge systemic barriers to career progression for Black researchers.

The sponsorship scheme at Essex aims to:

* Increase Black student access, participation, and retention in postgraduate research by creating an empowering and supportive environment (from undergraduate study to academic research careers) that enables individuals from underrepresented backgrounds to thrive in their academic pursuits.
* Foster diversity in the academic field.
* Develop evaluation of these interventions.
* Identify best practice and evidence-based strategies for improving access, participation, retention and employability of underrepresented populations in PGR.

Building / drawing on existing mentoring / sponsorship schemes in the UK, it is expected that this scheme will:

* Actively support Black students who are considering a career in academia, by partnering them with established academics who can provide guidance, support, and opportunities for professional growth.
* Equip Black students with the skills, knowledge, experiences, and networks to enhance their career prospects in their chosen field.
* Build a sense of connectedness, capability, resourcefulness and purpose among participants.
* Provide students with insights and guidance on career paths and employment opportunities in their field and the wider academic world.
* Establish new role models for Black UG, PGT and PGR students considering a career in academia.

## What is Academic Sponsorship at Essex?

The sponsorship programme at University of Essex aims to develop research and professional skills, networks, and knowledge of opportunities among UK domiciled Black PGR students, encouraging and enabling them to make informed career choices in academic and other fields.

The sponsorship partnership is formed between a UK domiciled Black PGR student (as this student population is the most disadvantaged group at the University, and the key beneficiary of the ‘Transitions and Transformations: The Black Researcher’s Journey’ project) and a current member academic staff at the university.

Sponsorship builds on the principles of mentoring. Sponsors may find themselves undertaking mentoring activity during the partnership, however, the intention of the scheme is to seek opportunity for a sponsorship approach wherever possible. This progression is indicated by the Advance H.E. sponsor toolkit below:

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| --- | --- |
| **Mentors** | **Sponsors** |
| Skill you up | Use your skills |
| Talk with you | Talk about you |
| Buff up your confidence | Buffer you against risk |
| Focus is on development | Focus is on leverage |
| Nurture you | Advocate for you |
| Talk with you | Talk about you |

To further illustrate, Pro NE (2023) suggests that sponsors are*:*

* Problem solvers – helping to identify options / solutions to a problem and support decisions to address them.
* Referrers – identifying and introducing the best person to talk to on a particular subject.
* Supporters and listeners – actively engaging to encourage endeavour, understand challenges and provide support.
* Translators – making sense of complex issues.
* Normalisers – helping navigate new experiences.
* Intelligence gatherers – providing insight from experience.
* Change agents – championing better student outcomes.

In addition to guidance and advice that might be found in a mentoring arrangement, a sponsor will leverage their social and career capital to seek progression opportunities for the participant. The role of the sponsor is unique for each partnership, but it could include opening doors, creating opportunities for exposure, and actively advocating on behalf of the programme participant in spaces that they may not have access to. Some benefits for our PGR students might include:

* Enhanced academic support - students benefit from having an established figure who can provide guidance on career, research opportunities, and personal development in their academic discipline.
* Professional networking opportunities - the partnership between students and their sponsors may provide valuable networking opportunities, enhancing students’ career prospects and professional development.
* Increased retention - sponsorship schemes can have a positive impact on student retention rates challenging the systemic barriers that prevent Black students progressing their academic career.
* Achieving wider diversity and inclusivity in research environments
* The opportunity to build a network of allies.

The scheme also provides an opportunity for the sponsor to learn from the participant. They are encouraged to be receptive to diverse perspectives and open to recognising success and excellence outside of the typical and fixed notions familiar to academia.

## How the Partnership Works

This outline builds on a consultancy input from Leading Routes and existing mentoring practice at the University of Essex, as well as current mentoring / sponsorship practice proposed by Advance HE, Pro NE and Eastern Arc.

The partnership is guided by a sponsorship agreement drafted by the parties in the matching process. The sponsorship arrangement focuses on achieving agreed goals and development opportunities for the student and the sponsor, based on a principle of partnership, bringing benefits to both parties. These might include the opportunity to share, knowledge, insights, technical skills and cultural experience, or provide access to new/wider networks.

In recognising the power dynamic of the sponsorship partnership, sponsors must ensure that the expectations / goals and activities resulting from it do not create an unmanageable burden for the student. Staff engaged in a sponsoring are bound by the university’s employment policies and procedures - <https://www.essex.ac.uk/staff/employment-policies-procedures>. Students in a sponsorship arrangement are bound by the university’s student code of conduct - <https://www.essex.ac.uk/student/values/code-of-student-conduct>.

### Expectations of sponsor activity:

Specific goals, activities and expectations will be defined by the sponsorship agreement established between staff and students. As a guide the following applies to all sponsorship arrangements:

Sponsors are expected to:

* Attend a minimum of five scheduled sessions throughout the year and actively engage with the participant.
* Provide support and guidance to the participant regarding identified aims and in areas such as research, career goals, and academic progress.
* Identify or create suitable opportunities for the participant that support the agreed goals of the partnership – see ‘Professional Opportunities’ below.
* Facilitate the participant's transition into the academic community and relevant networks.
* Seek out and assist in accessing professional development opportunities.
* Offer constructive feedback and support the participant in their academic and professional development.
* Submit periodic reports/notes on the progress and achievements of the sponsored students.
* Take part in any evaluation activities required.

### Expectations on students being sponsored:

*Specific goals, activities and expectations will be defined by the sponsorship agreement established between staff and students. As a guide the following applies to all sponsorship arrangements:*

Students in the sponsorship scheme are expected to:

* Be willing to lead the sponsorship partnership – establishing aspirations and goals for the period of sponsorship and taking responsibility for progress and academic / professional development.
* Attend five scheduled sessions throughout the year and actively engage with their sponsor.
* Maintain open communication with the sponsor and provide updates on their progress, challenges, and achievements.
* Demonstrate dedication and commitment to studies, striving for academic excellence.
* Be open to and actively consider any sponsorship, development or networking opportunities identified and positively engage with those that are appropriate.
* Make the most of the sponsorship opportunity, demonstrating a strong work ethic, and staying focused on their educational and career goals.
* Be open to sharing skills, knowledge and experience with a sponsor in order to support their interests / research etc.
* Represent the University of Essex in a positive way.
* Maintain open communication with sponsors, updating on progress, challenges, and seeking guidance when required.
* Accept, absorb and act on critical feedback from the sponsor.
* Provide periodic reports on progress, showcasing achievements.
* Take part in any evaluation activities required.

The sponsorship period is for one year. Sponsors and students are expected to meet five times in this period and maintain appropriate contact throughout.

Goals established within sponsorship agreements should be explicitly aligned to the expected outcomes outlined bin the Transitions and Transformations Research Development Framework (T&T RDF, available on the Black Researcher’s Hub). The success of partnerships will be demonstrated by progress towards / achievement of these goals and associated framework outcomes.

Building on the Advance HE toolkit successful sponsorship relies on:

* Trust –confidence that commitments will be honoured, differences respected, privacy / confidentiality protected, and sponsorship arrangements established and undertaken in good faith.
* Honesty – an open, straightforward partnership built on loyalty, sincerity, truthfulness, and personal, academic and professional integrity
* Communication – regular effective / active interaction to build relationships, foster understanding, allow knowledge exchange and achieve goals.
* Commitment – demonstrable engagement and progress towards the agreed goals of the partnership by both parties.
* Reciprocity - recognising the power dynamics in the partnership is important to ensure that all interactions are equal, authentic and provide opportunity for sharing skills, knowledge, and experience.

## Professional Opportunities

The following, proposed by Leading Routes, provides examples of the types of opportunities that may benefit participants.

These opportunities can be created directly by the sponsor or through them connecting with other colleagues across the university or external partners on behalf of the student.

This is not an exhaustive list but should provide a starting point for sponsors and students to discuss appropriate opportunities. The T&T RDF should be taken into consideration in the development of any opportunities. How activities might link to the T&T RDF are indicated in bold below.

### Example Professional Opportunities

* Networking Events: Facilitate networking opportunities by introducing the participant to key individuals in their field, both within and outside the university. **(A3.1; B1.1; B1.4; B3.1; B3.3; B3.4; D1.6)**
* Professional Society Membership: Assist the participant in becoming a member of relevant professional societies or associations**. (B1.4; B3.1; B3.3; B3.4; D1.6)**
* Introductions: Introduce the participant to respected researchers or professionals in their field who can serve as additional mentors or advisors. **(A3.1; B1.1; B1.4; B1.5; B3.1; B3.3; B3.4; D1.6)**
* Professional Conferences or Seminars: support in identifying funding opportunities which enable the participant's attendance at conferences or seminars**. (A1.4; A 3.1; B1.4; B3.1; B3.3; B3.4; D1.6; D2.1)**
* Research Facility Access: Provide access to specialised research facilities or equipment that may enhance the participant's research capabilities. **(A1.1; A1.4; A1.7; A 2.5; A3.1; B1.1; B1.4; B2.1; B3.2; C2.2)**
* Research Funding Proposal Review: Offer feedback and guidance on the participant's research funding proposals, helping them refine their ideas and increase their chances of success**. (A1.1; A1.4; A2.5; A3.1; B1.1; B2.1; B3.3; C2.2; C3.2; D2.1; D3.2)**
* Research Exchanges and Collaborations: Facilitate research exchanges or collaborations with other researchers, universities or research institutions to broaden the participant's research perspectives. **(A1.1; A1.4; A1.7; A1.7; A 2.5; A3.1; B1.1; B1.4; B2.1; B3.1; B3.2; B3.3; B3.4; C2.2; D1.2; D2.1)**
* Research Funding: Assist the participant in securing research grants or funding for their projects through feedback on proposals, collaborations or internal university resources. **(A1.1; A1.4; A2.5; A3.1; B1.1; B2.1; B3.3; C2.2; C3.2; D2.1; D3.2)**
* Collaborative Research Projects: Invite the participant to join collaborative research projects within the sponsor, their network, research group or with external collaborators. **(A1.1; A1.4; A1.7; A1.7; A 2.5; A3.1; B1.1; B1.4; B2.1; B3.1; B3.2; B3.3; B3.4; C2.2; D1.2; D2.1)**
* Professional Development Workshops: Share information on workshops or seminars on topics such as academic writing, grant proposal preparation, or presentation skills to enhance the participant's skills and professional competencies. **(A1.4; A1.7; A3.1; B1.1; B1.4; B1.5; B3.1; B3.2; B3.3)**
* Event Organising: Encourage the participant to organise a session, workshop, conference, or event, providing them with the opportunity to take a leadership role and showcase their expertise. **(A1.1; B1.1; B1.4; B2.1; B3.3; B3.4; D1.6; D2.1; D2.2; D3.2)**
* Grant Review or Application: Involve the participant in the review process for grant proposals, allowing them to gain insights into the peer review process and enhance their critical evaluation skills. **(A1.1; A1.7; A3.1; B3.2; B1.1; B2.1; B3.3; C2.2; C3.2; D2.1)**
* Teaching Opportunities: Support the participant in gaining teaching experience by offering guest lectures or co-teaching opportunities within relevant courses. **(A1.1; B1.1; B1.4; B2.1; B3.3; B3.4; D1.6; D2.1; D2.2; D3.2)**
* Publication Support: Provide guidance, feedback and/or hands on support to help the participant publish their research findings in an academic journal. **(A1.1; A1.4; A1.7; A2.5; A3.1; B1.1; B1.4; B2.1; C2.2; D2.1; D2.2; D2.3)**
* Conference Attendance: Support the participant's attendance at conferences, workshops, or symposiums related to their research area to enhance their exposure and networking opportunities**. (A1.1; A1.4; A3.1; B1.4; B3.1; B3.3; D1.6)**
* Panel/Presentation Involvement: Include the participant in expert panels, seminars, groups or committees relevant to their research area, allowing them to contribute to important discussions and gain visibility. **(A1.1; A1.7; A3.1; B1.4; B3.2; B3.3; B3.4)**
* Outreach and Public Engagement: Encourage the participant (and share opportunities) to engage in public communication activities, such as public lectures, podcasts, or writing popular science articles, to disseminate their research to a broader audience. **(A1.1; B1.4; B2.1; B3.3; B3.4; D1.6; D2.1; D2.2; D3.2)**
* Industry Visits and Partnerships: Support the organisation of visits to relevant industries or organisations to expose the participant to real-world applications of their research. **(A1.1; A3.1; B1.1; B1.4; B3.1; B3.3; B3.4)**

## 23/24 Academic sponsorship structure and timeline

The programme launches in September 23 with sponsor recruitment activities. Partnerships are due to commence in January / Feb 24 with five sessions scheduled throughout the calendar year. These provide a framework for regular interaction between sponsors and participants. Sponsors will create 2-3 professional opportunities for the participants, aligning with their research interests and career aspirations

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| Sept – Oct ‘23 | Launch, sponsor recruitment |
| Nov ‘23 | Sponsor acceptance, profiles published  Sponsor training |
| Nov ‘23 – Jan ‘24 | Student training  Sponsor matching |
| February ‘24 | Networking event  Meeting 1 between sponsors and participants: Goals and objectives set  Professional Opportunity 1 secured (schedule the opportunity with the longest lead time if possible) |
| April ‘24 | Meeting 2 between sponsors and participant: T&T Check in on goals and objectives |
| June ‘24 | Meeting 3  Professional Opportunity 2 secured. |
| October ‘24 | Meeting 4 between sponsors and participants: Update on Professional Opportunities  Professional Opportunity 3 secured. |
| December ‘24 | Meeting 5 – Final meeting between sponsors and participants: Reflection |
| February ‘25 | 23/24 Programme close event. Evaluation |

## The matching process

* Sponsors build and submit their sponsor profile. After review and acceptance by T&T staff this will be presented to eligible T&T / BRH students who will be able to identify potential sponsors based on research interest, skills, work history and areas of support. Students and sponsors do not necessarily have to be in the same field of research, as collaborations and support can be implemented across disciplines.
* Students contact sponsors directly through the listings platform, making a case for the benefits of establishing a sponsorship partnership.
* Sponsors are able to engage with applicants directly to discuss the merits of a possible partnership.
* If sponsor and student agree, the sponsor confirms a match on the GI platform.
* Depending on the number of students a sponsor is able to take on, their listing will indicate to students whether they are still available to contact.
* A sponsorship agreement is drawn up, agreed and signed by the parties.
* The one-year period commences.
* Interactions and outcomes are recorded by both parties on the shared platform for the purposes of progress and outcome monitoring.

## Supporting sponsorships

### Training

Training and guidance in cultural competence and support for PGR students will be provided by Leading Routes for all sponsors. Students will receive training and guidance on making the most of their sponsorship partnership, again from Leading Routes. The content of these workshops is as follows:

#### Staff Training

**Workshop 1 - Preparing to be a sponsor workshop: cultural competence**

This session will cover:

* The role of sponsor and managing expectations.
* Race and racism in education settings, and how these issues can impact PGR education.
* Power and privilege in academia and developing strategies for addressing systemic barriers to success for students on the sponsorship programme.
* Creating an inclusive environment for Black students and colleagues.

**Workshop 2 - Preparing to be a sponsor workshop: support for PGR students**

This session will cover:

* Effective communication skills and providing feedback and guidance as a sponsor.
* Building a supportive partnership with sponsored students.
* How to be an effective advocate for Black students.
* Practical tips on good practice as a sponsor.

#### Student Training

**Workshop 1 - Preparing to be sponsored workshop: support for PGR students**

This session will cover:

* Setting goals and expectations of the sponsorship programme and what it means to be a participant on the programme.
* How to develop your career within academia and beyond – insight into progression in academia and advice on identifying transferable skills.
* Prioritising wellbeing - practicing self-care, developing a support network, and addressing obstacles during your research
* Practical tips on how to maximise the sponsorship programme and opportunities available, including networking, establishing a good partnership with your sponsor, effective communication, and setting realistic goals.

### Building networks

A networking event for all sponsors and participants is planned for February 24. This is an opportunity to bring the cohort together with alumni and senior academics from the university of Essex. Content to be confirmed in collaboration with stakeholders.

### Recording interactions

Students and sponsors are required to record and reflect on interactions and progress through the Gradintel / Black Research Hub sponsorship tool. This is a record that both parties can see and share comments on. An orientation to the tool will be provided.

### Further Training / Resources

Sponsors will be guided by existing university of Essex resources that focus on effective mentoring and coaching relationships. The student development team is happy to share best practice and resources readily available on Moodle: <https://open.essex.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=175>. These will complement the training and resources around sponsorship provided by Leading Routes. There are also several resources available for the university’s inclusion team. e.g. information and training around tackling racism <https://www.essex.ac.uk/staff/diversity-and-inclusion/tackling-racism>

### Ongoing Support

T&T will conduct check ins by email to ensure that partnerships are functioning, and progress being made towards agreed goals. Should any issues occur where a sponsor or student feels that a partnership is not making progress T&T will seek to make arrangements for a new sponsorship partnership.

## Other Information

### Eligibility

UK domiciled Black PGR students.

### Promotion and recruitment of participants

Initial recruitment of sponsors will involve a call out to staff through university channels (e.g. Essex Weekly) and use of existing networks to identify and inform interested colleagues. Student recruitment will be targeted to eligible students through BRH channels.

### Evaluation

Evaluation will primarily focus on student and staff experience and outcomes. This evaluation will take the form of case studies, surveys and experience recorded in the sponsorship platform. Evaluation will also examine the requirements and processes for managing such a scheme and opportunities for automation to inform the scaling of similar endeavours.

## References / Links

Pro NE: <https://www.pronortheast.org.uk/>

Pro NE mentoring presentation: <https://essexuniversity.box.com/s/rummbkatpa1q5u7upqzv5v60pmxxjxza>

Advance HE sponsor toolkit: <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-02/Diversifying-Leadership-Sponsor-Toolkit.pdf>

Eastern Arc Mentoring

<https://easternarc.ac.uk/mentoring/>

Essex university mentoring programme information / resources (Moodle):

<https://open.essex.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=175>

### Some wider reading on sponsorship

<https://researchwhisperer.org/2012/07/31/academic-sponsor/>

<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-023-00123-z>

<https://mentalhealthresearch.org.uk/i-never-realised-i-benefitted-from-academic-sponsorship-until-i-read-about-the-concept/>