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Planning

UKRI-5495: CyberFirst/TechFirst undergraduate scholarship, and Spärck AI scholarship programme: Payment Function

UK Research & Innovation (UKRI)

UK2: Preliminary market engagement notice - Procurement Act 2023 - [view information about notice types](#)

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Scope

Reference

UKRI-5495

Description

UKRI is engaging the market ahead of procuring a payment processing service for the TechGrad scholarship programme, including secure student payments and related administration.

Total value (estimated)

- £1,745,000 excluding VAT
- £2,094,000 including VAT

Above the relevant threshold

Contract dates (estimated)

- 9 February 2026 to 30 April 2030
- 4 years, 2 months, 20 days

Main procurement category

Services

CPV classifications

- 66170000 - Financial consultancy, financial transaction processing and clearing-house services
- 72320000 - Database services
- 75121000 - Administrative educational services
- 66171000 - Financial consultancy services

Engagement

Engagement deadline

16 December 2025

Engagement process description

UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), in partnership with the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT), is undertaking preliminary market engagement to help shape an upcoming procurement supporting delivery of the TechGrad programme, part of the wider £187m TechFirst initiative to strengthen the UK's domestic tech talent pipeline.

TechGrad is an undergraduate scholarship programme supporting up to 900 UK students per year with a £4,000 annual scholarship throughout their studies. It forms the core of TechFirst, building on the successful CyberFirst model, where graduates have achieved an 88% employment rate in the cyber sector.

The programme also includes the Spärck AI scholarship, offering up to 100 fully funded AI master's degrees each year. Both scholarship schemes will provide wraparound support such as industry and government placements and training.

Together, these initiatives aim to invest earlier in future tech talent, helping students gain the skills, experience, and networks needed to fill critical skills gaps and support growth in frontier tech industries. As competition for global talent increases, TechGrad seeks to incentivise domestic students and ensure the UK has a strong pipeline of skilled British nationals driving innovation and supporting national security.

About This Procurement

This procurement focuses on the payment processing function for the TechGrad programmes, delivered under a single contract of up to four years. The provider will manage the transfer of scholarship and other relevant payments directly to students on the TechFirst scholarship programme, ensuring compliance with all relevant legal, financial, and programme conditions.

The TechFirst Scholarship Programme aims to support top domestic talent through their undergraduate studies. The first cohort will start in Autumn 2026, with approximately 600 students joining the programme (250 transferring from the existing CyberFirst bursary and 350 new students). There will be three further cohorts of up to 900 students recruited (2026/27, 2027/28, 2028/29). No recruitment is currently planned for 2029/30.

The Spärck AI scholarship scheme aims to support domestic and international talent through their master's studies with a range of opportunities. The first cohort will start in Autumn 2026, with approximately 70-80 students that will sit across the nine partnered universities. There will be three further cohorts again of up to 100 students a year recruited (2027/28, 2028/29, 2029/30).

Expected High-Level Requirements:

Onboard TechGrad/CyberFirst students, including a route for students to submit identity and bank details for placement and scholarship payments.

Cooperate with other TechGrad suppliers, IUK, and DSIT on data sharing while complying with robust data protection principles.

Ability to securely manage data for individuals who have undergone national security vetting. Required for the TechGrad/CyberFirst scholarship programme, not for the Spärck AI scholarship programme.

Ability to accept and process stipend budget from UKRI in the form of grants. The stipend money will be managed and delivered separately from the contract/service budget by UKRI.

Ensure payment processes comply with all relevant guidance and regulations, including appropriate due diligence and counter-fraud processes.

Make annual £4,000 scholarship payments to TechGrad students each September.

Process annual placement stipend payments (approx. £2,000) for TechGrad/CyberFirst students, with first payments made between May and June 2026.

Payments for the Spärck AI scholarship programme under this contract will take place for cohorts from 2027/28 onwards. Payments for the first cohort starting in Autumn 2026 will be managed through UKRI and universities directly.

For the cohorts 2027/28 onwards, to make Stipend payments to Spärck scholars on a monthly/quarterly basis from the Autumn. The total stipend cost for each scholar over the course of their academic year will be between £21-24,000, dependant on London/non-London weighting.

Tuition fee payments to be made directly to each university on a quarterly basis from the Autumn that year. This will be around £20,000 per scholar for the whole academic year. Universities will absorb the remainder of the scholar's tuition fee.

Provide appropriate management information and programme data to IUK for contract management and evaluation purposes.

Market Engagement Webinar:

A market engagement webinar will take place on 16th December 2025 at 10:00 AM. Following the session, the presentation and Q&A will be shared with participants. This

webinar is an opportunity to learn more about the TechGrad Programme and the procurement process, as well as to provide valuable feedback.

If you would like to take part, please register here:

<https://events.teams.microsoft.com/event/d3dfc304-1a01-4246-bd64-30b6b049571c@8bb7e08e-daa4-4a8e-927e-fca38db04b7e/registration>

Please note that not registering an interest will not prevent any organisation from participating in any future procurement, nor will any information shared during preliminary market engagement provide an advantage in any subsequent process.

Contracting authority

UK Research & Innovation (UKRI)

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Organisation type: Public authority - central government