

EMERGE Pacesetter Round 1

Opportunity status: Open

Funder: UKRI via EMERGE RehabTech

Funding type: Grant

Award range: up to £30,000

Publication date: 18 May 2026

Opening date: 18 May 2026

Submission deadline: 19 June 2026 16:00 BST

Phase 1: Training workshop: 14 July 2026

About EMERGE Pacesetter

Pacesetter will support researchers in exploring market potential for new rehabtech concepts and developing understanding around routes to market via new spin-out companies or licencing to other organisations. This opportunity has been designed to complement our other funding mechanisms as well as existing regional and national accelerator programmes.

EMERGE RehabTech aims to accelerate translation of novel rehabtech, deliver economic impact and drive development and deployment of devices, services and tools that benefit people in the East Midlands. Through Pacesetter, we aim to empower researchers to test commercial potential and establish end-user need, providing confidence around the appropriate route to market. A combination of focussed training, mentoring and tailored funding will support researchers to determine demand for their rehabtech from a sustainable customer base and tackle questions around routes to deployment.

Pacesetter is a three-stage, intensive programme funded by EMERGE RehabTech and delivered with support from Nottingham Trent University, Loughborough University, the Universities of Nottingham and Derby, and in collaboration with Health Innovation East Midlands (HIEM). Participants that progress successfully to Phase 3 will be eligible to request funding up to £30,000 to access support for in-depth market evaluation.

The programme will be open to academics, researchers and clinicians working at eligible organisations within the EMERGE RehabTech consortium.

Programme format

Progression through the three phases of Pacesetter (Training, Mentoring, and Acceleration) will involve a competitive process and different methods of assessment.

Phase 1: *Training*

Training will be delivered as a one-day, in-person intensive workshop. **This will take place on 14 July 2026 at Nottingham Trent University's Clifton Campus.**

Prior to taking part in this practical workshop, participants will be required to undertake preparatory work exploring content offered by HIEM through their [Innovation Academy](#).

On the day, expert case studies will be presented with further input from innovation specialists, after which participants will be tasked with developing an initial business plan pitch, supported by our facilitators.

Each participant will deliver their 5 min pitch to a panel of experts and receive feedback.

Phase 2: *Mentoring*

Following completion of Phase 1, a subset of the initial cohort of Pacesetter participants will be invited to progress to Phase 2. Assessment will be determined based on a) outline application and b) pitch at the Phase 1 workshop.

Phase 2 will focus on guided development of a Business Plan Outline, building on the initial pitch from Phase 1. This will be supported by expert mentors and bespoke, flexible input from a range of other sources, and will take place over a period of 6-7 weeks from September to November 2026.

The second phase will culminate with an opportunity to pitch a business idea to an external panel of experts; each participant will receive specific advice and recommendations for viable next steps from the panel, which may include applying to progress to Phase 3 of EMERGE Pacesetter.

Progression to Phase 3 will be assessed based on feedback from the pitch and a formal proposal for EMERGE funding, setting out the need for funding and justifying how requested resources will accelerate the development and deployment of rehabtech.

Phase 3: *Acceleration*

EMERGE RehabTech funding will enable participants to produce a detailed business plan, working with our partners to create a formal value proposition.

Awards of up to £30,000 will be available and are expected to start from 1 January 2027. Candidates will have up to six months to complete Phase 3, with grants ending in June 2027. In addition to funding, ongoing mentoring will be available to support business plan development.

Who can apply

Pacesetter is suitable for participants looking to explore the potential of their rehabtech to translate into commercial opportunities. Our expectation is applicants will have a clearly defined innovation, supported by underpinning research, and are able to demonstrate feasibility via a working prototype, or have undertaken proof-of-concept work demonstrating technology validation in a relevant environment, that indicates the potential for future commercialisation.

Applicants are encouraged to contact the EMERGE RehabTech Management Team to discuss their suitability for Pacesetter, if unsure.

EMERGE RehabTech funding is only open to individuals from UK higher education institutions, public sector research establishments, research council institutes, and UKRI-approved independent research organisations and NHS bodies with research capacity. For Round 1 of Pacesetter, these individuals should also be based at organisations who are existing members of the [EMERGE RehabTech consortium](#).

Applicants must be resident and eligible to work in the UK at the time of the award. Applicants should ideally hold a permanent post at lecturer level or equivalent, but fixed-term employees may be eligible provided the host organisation will provide all the support expected for a permanent employee. The term of employment of a fixed-term employee must extend beyond the duration of involvement in the Pacesetter programme.

Across all our funding mechanisms, EMERGE RehabTech is particularly interested in supporting under-represented groups of researchers and research stakeholders/end-users, and will actively look to fund ideas and concepts that aim to address urgent societal needs and social disparities identified through proactive Patient and Public Involvement and Engagement (PPIE).

We encourage researchers from all disciplines supported by UKRI to apply and welcome interdisciplinary collaborations that accelerate development, delivery, and uptake of new RehabTech. All projects we fund should be within Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) remit, but do not need to directly link to prior EPSRC funding.

Support and funding available

During Phase 1 and 2, EMERGE RehabTech will provide a combination of training and mentoring to initiate the early stages of exploring commercial viability and routes to market for their innovation. No funding is available during these phases; instead, support from EMERGE RehabTech will focus on facilitating access to a network of experts.

For participants who are successful in progressing to Phase 3, grants of up to £30,000 will be available for activities related to market discovery, such as for market research and analysis, health economics, branding and marketing, developing a value proposition pitch, end-user engagement, or other related activities. We expect Phase 3 projects to start from 1 January 2027, with up to six months to complete activities.

In total, up to £120,000 funding is available for Phase 3 projects. Due to the nature of our underlying funding, EMERGE RehabTech grants only cover Directly Incurred costs associated with the project. Eligible Directly Incurred costs will be funded at 100%. We will not cover Directly Allocated Staff costs, Estate costs or Indirect costs, and Equipment over £10,000 in value (including VAT) is not available.

Please note, this funding is specifically intended for developing business plans and not to undertake further product development. The EMERGE RehabTech Management Team will provide further guidance regarding eligible costs to prospective applicants during the lead-up to preparing a proposal for funding during the latter stages of Phase 2.

Intellectual Property

The responsibility for negotiating ownership and use of arising intellectual property (IP) from projects funded by EMERGE RehabTech resides with the award recipient's organisation, in consultation with the project team.

Where necessary for multi-partner projects, collaboration agreements must be in place prior to projects starting to ensure appropriate provisions are in place for managing arising IP. Where projects involve partnership-building or collaborative working that lies outside the scope of a formal collaboration agreement, the external collaborator should have sight of the application, workplan and budget in advance of submission.

All commercialisation projects funded by EMERGE should be developed in consultation with the awardee's institutional IP and Commercialisation team.

In line with the EPSRC research data policy framework, our expectation is that EMERGE projects will commit to making data open access wherever possible, subject to necessary restrictions to protect privacy, confidentiality, or IP.

Please note, EMERGE RehabTech funding cannot be used to support costs relating to Intellectual Property protection including but not limited to registering, maintaining, or supporting patents or property rights.

How to apply

Applicants should ensure they are aware of, and comply with, any internal institutional deadlines that may be in place. The lead applicant is responsible for completing the application process.

Round 1 of the EMERGE Pacesetter programme will open on 18 May 2026.

Applicants should complete this [Phase 1 Application Form](#) describing their novel rehabtech and its underpinning research, as well as their aspirations around commercialising a new product, device or service. The submission deadline for this application form is 19 June 2026 16:00 BST.

Progression to subsequent phases of EMERGE Pacesetter will be subject to ongoing evaluation.

How we will assess your application

EMERGE RehabTech reserves the right not to fund a project if ethical concerns are raised by reviewers or panel members. Phase 3 Awards are conditional upon acceptance of the Terms and Conditions, which will be set out in an Award Letter.

Spaces are limited on this programme; we intend to select a small cohort of 10-12 people to participate in Phase 1 to ensure participants get the most from the experience, and that our mentors and facilitators can provide high-quality, dedicated support.

Phase 1 applications will be considered by a panel of experts according to the Assessment Criteria for the call.

Progression to Phase 2 will be assessed based on the Phase 1 application and panel feedback from the pitch at the Phase 1 workshop

Progression to Phase 3 will be assessed based on panel feedback from the external pitch and a formal proposal for EMERGE funding, which will be reviewed and considered by a funding panel.

Contact details

For support with your proposal please contact your research office in the first instance, allowing sufficient time for your organisation's submission process. Any queries regarding the call or submission of proposals should be directed to the EMERGE RehabTech team:

EMERGErehabtech@ntu.ac.uk

Assessment Criteria

Innovation

- Novel, unique rehabtech that addresses a clear clinical need and is relevant to rehabilitation service provision
- Early evidence of commercial potential and that the innovation will fill a gap in the market
- Builds on an identified base of robust, relevant high-quality research
- Has potential to improve lives for all and address health inequalities, and to engage at-risk people, groups and communities with rehabilitation services

Applicant

- Applicant has appropriate experience (relative to career stage) to participate in Pacesetter
- Evidence the applicant has played a lead role in developing the innovation
- Clear ambition and commitment to explore commercialisation opportunities

Additional info

Background

EMERGE RehabTech funds activities that deliver impact through advances in rehabilitation technologies (rehabtech) by improving health outcomes, promoting wellbeing, and enhancing quality of life for individuals and communities, with a focus on supporting the growth of the East Midlands rehabtech economy.

We are particularly interested in funding projects and activities that address at least one of three key challenges for the rehabtech pipeline in the East Midlands:

- Widening health inequalities within the East Midlands
- Engaging at-risk people, groups and communities who typically do not engage with rehabilitation programmes and opportunities
- Disconnect between rehab research infrastructure and businesses in the region

We define **Rehabtech** as encompassing tools, equipment, and digital solutions designed to support people in recovering, maintaining, or improving physical, cognitive, or functional abilities following injury, illness, surgery, or age-related decline. They include devices and systems such as mobility aids, therapeutic equipment, assistive technologies, remote monitoring tools, digital platforms, and robotics. Rehabtech accelerates recovery, reduces disability, and enhances independence, ensuring safe and effective therapy, and empowering people to manage their health and daily activities.

As people live longer and chronic health conditions increase, rehabtech demand is soaring; developing new approaches that improve health outcomes and are more efficient and cost effective is essential.

We define **rehabilitation** as person-centred approaches that support individuals to recover, maintain, or improve physical, cognitive, or emotional function following serious injury, illness, surgery, or age-related decline. It aims to help people regain independence, enhance quality of life, and participate fully in daily activities through coordinated therapies, support services, and adaptive strategies.

Also in scope for EMERGE RehabTech is **prehabilitation**, which includes proactive approaches to prepare for upcoming medical treatments, surgery, or health challenges by optimising physical, psychological, and nutritional wellbeing. The aim is to build resilience and enhance recovery outcomes through tailored interventions such as exercise, education, lifestyle changes, and emotional support, improving both short- and long-term health and independence.

The East Midlands is at the forefront of rehabilitation and associated technologies, establishing a thriving ecosystem of world-class facilities, networks, and centres, and recognised at a national level by the Government's £105M investment in the National Rehabilitation Centre (NRC). In parallel, economic decline in the region is causing widening health inequalities, with more people living in income-deprived areas and with higher rates of preventable disease, e.g. heart disease, stroke, and COPD, in East Midlands cities compared with the UK average. In the East Midlands, 18.6% of the population have a limiting long-term illness or disability, compared to 17.6% in England.

EMERGE RehabTech is a UKRI-funded Place-Based Impact Accelerator. The work we fund will deliver impact for communities in the East Midlands, and beyond, through advances in rehabtech. We will consider rehabtech in the broadest sense; we want to fund ambitious projects that deliver tangible, quantifiable benefits in *any* field of rehabilitation. For instance, this might be (but not limited to):

- advances in sensor technologies and imaging for non-invasive health monitoring
- medical device materials and custom-fit device design
- smart medical wearables (physical and mental health)
- bioengineering
- robotics
- artificial intelligence
- data and synthetic data
- data for therapeutic use and in silico
- digital twin modelling
- biomaterials
- software, including apps for movement and mental cognition
- collaboration with SHAPE disciplines to embed interdisciplinary approaches to complex challenges

We are looking for projects that address the significant known health inequalities in our region, such as people experiencing homelessness, drug and alcohol dependence, vulnerable migrants, and those in the justice system. These barriers introduce and exacerbate fear of stigma, lack of identification, limited awareness of the healthcare system, language barriers, and digital exclusion. Innovations that increase access to rehabilitation and recovery services on an equal footing are essential to reduce these inequalities.

What do we mean by ‘Impact’?

Impact encompasses real-world applications and influence of research outcomes. It refers to demonstrable effects, changes, or benefits of research that extend beyond academia, influencing the economy, society, culture, public policy, services, health, the environment, or quality of life.

Fundamental research projects primarily focus on generating new knowledge, understanding, or theoretical insights without requiring an immediate pathway to application. Fundamental research is driven by curiosity, discovery, and methodological advancement.

In contrast, an impact project is designed to translate research into real-world benefits, delivering measurable improvements for people, organisations, public services, or the economy. These projects emphasise implementation, scalability, and collaboration with users, practitioners, or industry partners. While fundamental research builds the evidence base, impact projects ensure that this knowledge is applied in ways that create tangible societal, economic, health, environmental, or cultural outcomes.

EMERGE Rehabtech will only fund impact projects. that focus on translational or applied activities that build upon existing research to progress technologies toward real-world use, such as refining prototypes, conducting user studies, or progressing commercialisation or clinical pathways.

The EMERGE RehabTech programme aims to boost and accelerate impact from cutting-edge translational research at the intersection of engineering and physical sciences, and rehabilitation. We are looking to support projects that move rehabtech innovations beyond the lab and into real-world health, care, or commercial settings, through clinical deployment, partnership with industry, or scale-up strategies.

Ethics and regulatory approval

In the event that ethics permissions and regulatory approvals are required by any projects we fund, we expect these approvals to be in place before a project commences, and a clear plan for obtaining approvals before project kick-off outlined in the proposal. It is the responsibility of the

project team and their host organisation to ensure that the appropriate ethics and regulatory approval has been obtained and that no activities requiring approvals are initiated before it has been granted.

EMERGE RehabTech will not fund a project if it is felt that ethical concerns have been overlooked or not appropriately accounted for. We reserve the right to pause or terminate projects experiencing significant delays associated with ethical or regulatory approvals where such delays are not outlined and mitigated for in the application for funding.

Conflicts of interest

Applicants are expected to declare any potential or actual conflicts of interest between parties, explaining the nature of these conflicts and providing details of how they will be managed, including in relation to managing IP.

Academic applicants must declare any interests in the commercial owners of background technologies or IP, such as shareholding options or consultancy fees.

Grant additional conditions (GACs)

Please note that due to the nature of this funding, there will be specific monitoring and evaluation requirements. Project teams and funded individuals are expected to engage fully with the programme, including participating in EMERGE RehabTech activities and events, alongside fulfilling monitoring and reporting requirements during the lifetime of the project. In addition, within one month of the end of the project, a final report will be submitted to the EMERGE RehabTech Executive Committee highlighting and evidencing the project outcomes and impact.