



A Mentoring Playbook for Disability Innovation

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[TIDAL N+](#) is a collaboration between UCL, Strathclyde, Salford, Nottingham Trent and Loughborough Universities, led by Prof Cathy Holloway, Academic Director of Global Disability Innovation Hub and Professor at UCL. The purpose of TIDAL N+ is to improve the quality of Assistive Technologies (AT) and hence the lives of the people who use them, their families and carers.

[Attvaran](#), an assistive technology (AT) start-up accelerator, is a collaborative initiative between UCL's Global Disability Innovation Hub, IIT Delhi, and IIT Madras, and part of AT2030, a programme funded by UK Aid and led by Global Disability Innovation Hub. Attvaran's mission is to empower early stage innovators and entrepreneurs working on developing affordable assistive technologies for people with disabilities and older people in India and other parts of the world. It aims to augment start-up growth by bringing all actors in the AT ecosystem, including customers, experts with lived experience of disability, business mentors, advisors, technical experts and investors, together with start-ups to address technical, social, market and business challenges.

[We Love Mentors](#) helps incubators and accelerators to provide the best mentoring programme for start-ups and innovators. The company offers individually designed programmes for incubators and accelerators who want to offer the best support and networks for their entrepreneurial clients. We Love Mentors improve the impact of any entrepreneurship programme by elevating the professional networks in specific innovation ecosystems, proving that the right mentor is a game-changer for start-up founders.

[GDI Hub](#) is a research and practice centre driving disability innovation for a fairer world. Headquartered at [UCL](#) in London, operational in 60 countries, and with more than 100 partners, GDI Hub has reached 34 million people since launching in 2016. GDI Hub Accelerate is the global agency for disability innovation - combining leading edge insight, innovation, and technical excellence to support Assistive Technology (AT) ventures to design, test, and scale their solutions.

The views and opinions expressed in this playbook are those of the authors and not necessarily official policies of the organisations they work for.

Please direct any questions regarding this report to TIDAL N+ care of [GDI Hub](#).

Executive Summary

This playbook provides a comprehensive guide for organisations seeking to launch and manage mentoring programmes aimed at early-career researchers (ECRs) and start-ups in the disability innovation sector. Rooted in the experiences of the TIDAL ECR Accelerator, insights from the Attvaran Accelerator, run by GDI Hub as part of the AT2030 programme, and We Love Mentors, this playbook outlines a practical and adaptable framework for fostering mentoring in a complex, yet essential, area of innovation.

Key challenges in mentoring within disability innovation include the need to navigate the unique barriers faced by assistive technology (AT) ventures. Entrepreneurs in this sector often face issues like understanding market dynamics, accessing inclusive innovation processes, and adapting products to the needs of diverse users with disabilities. Additionally, ECRs frequently lack commercial skills, making it difficult for them to articulate their mentoring needs effectively. These obstacles highlight the need for tailored mentoring approaches that address both the commercialisation and inclusivity aspects of disability innovation.

To tackle these challenges, this playbook proposes structured solutions such as initial business training for ECRs focusing on customer discovery, value proposition and sales strategies, as well as the need for additional team members or partnerships to fill out talent gaps in the spinout. It also highlights the need for raising disability awareness amongst ECRs and start-up founders, who may not have a complete understanding of the challenges faced by disabled people. For mentors supporting these kinds of programmes, there is a need to understand the disability sector as well as the language, culture and needs within the sector. The playbook suggests a structure with clear screening criteria for potential mentors and mentees, proper introduction and training, a structured match-making process, and follow-up. The benefit of these strategies lies in creating more effective and productive mentoring relationships, ensuring that both AT ventures and ECRs receive the right guidance at the right time, thus driving impactful innovation in the disability sector.

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1. Introduction

This playbook provides a detailed framework for successfully launching and managing mentoring programmes tailored to early-career researchers (ECRs) and commercial start-ups within the disability sector. It is based on lessons learned from initiatives supporting innovations at early Technology Readiness Levels, where ECRs and AT entrepreneurs often struggle to articulate their mentoring needs due to limited commercial experience. It was inspired by the challenges and learnings that came out of the [TIDAL ECR Accelerator](#), which was developed to test the viability and process of running an accelerator programme for early-career researchers working on innovations at TRL 1-3. Drawing on those learnings, and experiences from Global Disability Innovation (GDI) Hub's incubators and accelerators, and the consultancy We Love Mentors, the playbook offers both practical and adaptable guidance.

The purpose of this playbook is to help incubators bridge the gap between research and commercialisation by providing structured support for both mentors and mentees. By following the guidance in this document, programme managers can design and execute mentoring programmes that meet the specific challenges faced by ECRs working at the intersection of disability inclusion and innovation. The playbook emphasises the importance of training, preparation, and continuous engagement in mentoring relationships to ensure mutual benefit for both mentors and mentees.

The remainder of the playbook is structured to provide both context and practical guidance. Section 1 introduces the broader context of disability innovation, defines what mentoring entails, and explores the unique challenges faced by founders of assistive technology ventures. Section 2 outlines essential plays for running mentoring programmes within mainstream start-up accelerator environments, offering a foundation that can be applied across different sectors. Finally, Section 3 presents two detailed case studies, illustrating how the general mentoring model should be adapted to the specific needs of early-career researchers and assistive technology ventures. This section is based on lessons learned from previous programmes and provides corresponding plays to address the distinct challenges and opportunities in mentoring within the disability innovation space.

1.1 Disability innovation and the assistive technology ecosystem

The need for Assistive Technologies (AT) is massive, largely unmet and rising rapidly. It is estimated that by 2050 the number of people needing AT will have doubled from 1 billion to 2 billion (World Health Organization & United Nations Children's Fund, 2022). Only 10% of AT needs is currently met and it is unclear how many individuals have AT that is well matched to their needs. Engineering and physical sciences research, commercial innovation, and global partnerships for scaling access to AT have led to some major advances. However, the cost of current devices remains too high for many of those who need AT. Delivery of services frequently requires physical access to centralised facilities, and expert knowledge and skills, both of which can be scarce.

There is currently a disconnect between the high-end research and the daily reality of many people in need of fit-for-purpose AT. Despite the volume of AT research, serious challenges remain in getting the right AT to the right people and supporting individuals to continue to use these technologies over the long-term, without interruption.

Initiatives such as TIDAL N+, the UK AID funded AT2030 programme, and GDI Hub Accelerate are bringing together designers, ergonomists, engineers, physical scientists and AI specialists, alongside entrepreneurs, innovators and manufacturers, AT users, clinical and social care practitioners, and commissioners. As ecosystem enablers, their collective aims are to drive problem understanding, identify new research challenges and co-create novel, innovative solutions through research and innovation grants, blended finance vehicles for investment, and incubator or accelerator programmes across a spectrum of business maturity levels, to address the disconnect between academic research and the everyday experience of AT users. Yet how best to transform knowledge and network capital into sustainable knowledge exchange through mentoring remains a challenge.

1.2 What is mentoring and why does it matter?

We have always passed on our skills and wisdom to the next generation. Mentoring is an important way of doing this and can have a big impact on an individual's learning process and personal development. Many skills are taught in schools, colleges and universities, but there is a need also to develop personal competencies outside formal classrooms, to enable people to use their formal knowledge and skills when facing real life situations in professional life and critical life events.

What is mentoring?

The term 'mentor' can be traced back to ancient Greek Mythology described in Homer's epic poems, "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey" about the Trojan wars, in which King Odysseus asked his best friend "Mentor" to take care of his son, Telemachus, while he was away at war. King Odysseus was away for 20 years, during which time Mentor did an excellent job of raising Telemachus, as an act of friendship. Hence the term 'mentor' has come to mean a combination of educating, training and nurturing.

Homer's Odyssey also paints a broader picture of the personal development process. The Gods present Odysseus with all manner of obstacles on his journey home (his Odyssey) to test his strength and wisdom. The entrepreneurial journey can also be compared to an Odyssey: it is a development process with many obstacles to be overcome before the end goal is reached and you have become aware of your full potential.

A good mentor will be able to support their mentee on a personal level, as well as bringing their professional experience into play in a way that benefits their mentee and enables them to grow. It is important to differentiate mentoring from coaching and consultancy. Not everyone would agree on the precise distinction between each discipline, and there are some overlaps. For example, like a mentor, a business coach would help someone to grow on a professional level as well as a personal level. Nevertheless, there are some nuances between the role of mentor, coach and

consultant in terms of responsibilities, the nature of the relationship, duration, purpose and methodology.

Mentoring, coaching, and consulting serve different roles in professional development. Mentoring is a long-term, voluntary relationship focused on personal and professional growth, with mentors providing guidance based on their experience. Coaches, in contrast, engage in structured, short-term relationships aimed at personal development and self-awareness, often through questioning techniques, and usually avoid sharing personal expertise. Consulting is typically a paid, short-term engagement where consultants apply their subject expertise to solve specific, defined problems, offering direct solutions and strategic advice.

Why does mentoring matter?

Mentoring for innovators and entrepreneurs can help to:

- Build general founder skills
- Help set the strategic direction for the start-up
- Question and validate the value proposition
- Identify the core competence of the company
- Identify the “blind spots” of the founder and the start-up
- Help lay the foundations for a healthy company culture

Start-up founders who have a mentor are significantly more likely to be successful. The business will grow faster, be able to attract more investment capital, and survive longer. According to a big study in New York City (Morris, 2015), 33 percent of founders who were mentored by successful entrepreneurs went on to become top performers: mentoring increased the chances of success by 3 times compared to a peer group of founders. Another study showed that entrepreneurs who receive guidance from an experienced mentor increased their annual revenue by an average of 83%, whereas entrepreneurs who didn't have mentors only increased their annual revenue by an average of 16% (Bury, 2016). Another study confirmed the importance of mentors: 70% of small business owners who received mentoring survived for five years or more, which was double the rate of those who did not receive mentoring (Mentorcam, 2024).

Besides studies that indicate the value of mentoring, the business success stories from Silicon Valley also support its value. Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg was mentored by Steve Jobs of Apple; Microsoft's Bill Gates was mentored by Warren Buffet (an American businessman and highly successful investor), and Google founders, Sergey Brin and Lary Page, were mentored by Bill Campbell (an American businessman, director, CEO and board chairman of multiple corporations).

Mentoring in different industries and sectors

Mentoring as a discipline is defined in general terms. The question, therefore, arises as to whether a mentor needs specific industry knowledge to have an impact on their mentee. This question touches on different aspects of mentoring:

1. A mentor supports their mentee on a personal and professional level. The personal level calls for empathy, communication skills and the ability to connect to another person. If a mentee is mostly looking for personal support, the professional experience with the mentor is not so important to the success of the

relationship, but if the mentee primarily needs professional support, the mentor's professional experience is far more relevant and may be a necessary ingredient for a successful relationship.

2. The balance between mentoring and advising. A mentor is not primarily an advisor, telling their mentee what to do or doing it for them, so although a mentor needs to have some general, relevant business experience and have insights into the industry that the mentee is focusing on, they should not need to be a subject matter expert. If the mentor assumes the role of advisor, the mentee will not grow and learn by themselves but become dependent on their mentor.
3. Innovation often happens when someone looks at an industry from an outside perspective. The benefits of an outside perspective also apply to mentoring. A mentor from the mentee's own industry is not always the best fit, although it may be, depending on the challenges which the mentee wants to solve, so it is always important to have relevant industrial experience in the pool of mentors for matchmaking with the mentees.

1.3 Unique challenges of supporting entrepreneurs in disability innovation

Entrepreneurs in the AT sector often face a lack of ecosystem-aware mentoring, training, and resources. Mainstream accelerator programmes may not fully understand or cater to the unique challenges of disability innovation, leaving entrepreneurs without the guidance they need to overcome the specific hurdles they encounter.

Inclusive innovation

The first challenge, which is not actually unique to the AT sector, is that too few innovators are themselves disabled. It is vital to address this to help ensure that disabled people are properly represented in all fields, at all levels, and have the same opportunities that are open to others. Increasing the diversity of innovators supported is also likely to lead to better and more successful innovations.

Addressing this issue starts with ensuring that accelerator programmes themselves are accessible to disabled entrepreneurs. This includes making physical spaces accessible, providing materials in formats that are accessible to all, and making reasonable adjustments to the programme content and the way it is delivered to enable disabled innovators to participate fully.

One of the other foremost challenges in the field of AT innovation is understanding and addressing the diverse needs of disabled users. There is a wide range of disabilities, each requiring unique solutions. The design process necessitates a deep and nuanced understanding of social barriers and the nature of particular disabilities, which can make the design process more complex. Products and services in the AT sector must be developed with direct input from disabled people to ensure that they are inclusive and designed for, or adaptable to, the individual's needs. The process of co-designing with users is crucial and the necessary time must be built into the design process, as it requires continuous feedback and iteration to ensure the final product is both effective and beneficial.

The need for collaboration extends beyond end users to a broad range of stakeholders. Entrepreneurs often need to work closely with healthcare

professionals, disability advocates, government agencies, as well as the users themselves. Coordinating the input and interests of these diverse groups can be complex, but it is vital for the success of any project in this space. Building trust and engaging meaningfully with the disability community are crucial steps in this process. Establishing strong relationships with disability organisations and advocacy groups provides valuable insights and helps to ensure that the solutions developed are well-received and genuinely helpful.

Social and ethical considerations

Social and ethical considerations also play a significant role in the field of AT innovation. Entrepreneurs must navigate the ethical responsibilities inherent in creating products for disabled people, ensuring that their innovations do not reinforce stereotypes or inadvertently create new barriers. The impact of these products on the autonomy and dignity of users is a critical consideration. Additionally, societal stigma associated with disability can affect the adoption of these products, making it essential for entrepreneurs to design solutions that are not only functional but also socially acceptable and desirable.

Ecosystem conformities and market failures

In addition to the complexities of stakeholder engagement, user-centred design and ethical considerations, market validation and AT product development pose significant challenges. The market for disability-related products is often considered niche, which can limit the potential for economies of scale. Entrepreneurs in this field frequently operate within smaller, segmented markets, making it more difficult to achieve the scalability and profitability that are often more straightforward in mainstream markets. It's not that the consumer need and desire isn't there, it's that those who need the products are often socially and economically excluded and can't afford them. There is also a lack of robust evidence of effectiveness of many AT devices. This makes it difficult for customers and/or commissioners of services to choose the right or most appropriate AT based on anything other than price. Furthermore, assistive technologies, particularly if defined as a medical device, typically face stringent regulatory requirements. Compliance with medical device regulations (which can depend on the context of use, not just the product itself), accessibility standards, and obtaining necessary certifications can be complex, costly and time-consuming, further complicating the path to market.

Funding and investment present another major hurdle for entrepreneurs in disability innovation. Traditional investors may be hesitant to invest in this sector, often due to perceived (and actual) market limitations or the complexity of the products being developed. As a result, entrepreneurs may need to rely on specialised funding sources or grants that are tailored to social impact and disability innovation. Moreover, the development and approval processes for assistive technologies tend to be longer than those for mainstream tech products, which can deter investors who are seeking quicker returns on their investments.

Scalability and achieving a global reach present further challenge. Products in the disability innovation sector must often be tailored to different cultural contexts and regulatory environments across regions. This need for localisation can complicate efforts to scale and expand into broader markets. Entrepreneurs must strike a

delicate balance between adapting their products to local needs and maintaining the consistency needed for broader market penetration. Moreover, creating sustainable business models in this sector can be particularly challenging, especially when products are designed for low-income or underserved communities. Entrepreneurs need to carefully balance their social impact goals with the financial viability of their ventures.

It follows that mentors for entrepreneurs developing assistive technologies must have a broad understanding of the range of particular challenges that they face.

2. Mentoring in mainstream innovation

This section sets out a generic design for a mentoring programme for start-up founders. It covers plays for launching a mentoring programme, including the application process and acceptance criteria; training workflows and events; a high-level outline of training topics; principles of matchmaking; engagement and check-ins; optional assessment and mentor certification; and an example timeline for mobilising stakeholders and operationalising the programme.

2.1. Mentoring plays: What works in mainstream start-up acceleration?

When launching a mentoring programme, it is important to appoint a Mentor Programme Manager (MPM) within the organisation who can commit resources and up to 50 % of their time for managing a programme. Sometimes organisations choose to work together with an external facilitator to run the programme, but it is highly recommended that there is a clear point of contact within the organisation, who sets the overall vision for mentoring, and looks after the administrative tasks of the programme.

The role of the MPM is to be a key contact for both mentors and mentees during the recruitment process, as well as strengthening the initial relationship with mentors throughout the entire programme. The MPM needs to develop, and be accountable for, the timeline and events during the programme. It is also the task of the MPM to schedule events, send out reminders as well as follow-up on all questions on the programme along the way.

Online mentoring platforms can make it easier for the MPM to maintain the necessary oversight of the program, share resources and get data on interactions between mentors and mentees based on meeting frequency, exchanged messages and achieved goals. They can help provide an overview of active mentors and mentees in the program as well as the matches between mentors and mentees and enable the MPM to generate polls easily for the mentors and mentees to rate their sessions and the program. We refrain from recommending any specific mentoring platform, as it is important to choose one that offers the right functionality to support the individual MPM and their programme and is within their budget. In terms of digital accessibility, the Pushfar and Brightside Mentoring platforms are known to be compatible with assistive technology, such as screen readers; however, multiple other mentoring platforms are easy to find through an online search.

The MPM may also use e-learning platforms to provide self-paced training for mentors and mentees to make sure they understand their role in the program and how they make the best of their time together. Again, there are many options available through an online search.

In the following sections we outline a set of mentoring plays, which offer a practical guide for MPMs to the components of a mentoring offer for start-up incubators and accelerators, which can be tailored to the specific needs of the host organisation.

Mentoring play 1: Set your goals

What do you want to achieve with your mentoring programme?

Before launching a mentoring programme, it is essential to define the programme goals. Is it to improve the survival rate of the founders, to increase their investment readiness level or simply to work on their value proposition? The defined goals will help determine who you need to target as mentees and mentors.

The Mentor Programme Manager needs to develop content that defines the goal of the programme and promotion packages that appeal to the target mentors and mentees, such as social media campaigns. This can be as simple as LinkedIn posts highlighting the programme with an open call for mentor and mentee applications. All the communications, advertising and promotion for your programme should be targeted to reach the profiles of people that you want to recruit.

It is much easier to manage the expectations of mentors and mentees when the programme has a clear purpose and to measure outcomes of the programme when you have clear goals.

Action:

Start by defining your programme goals. Based on those, determine who you need to attract as both mentees and mentors. Develop your recruitment communications strategy and content with them in mind.

Mentoring play 2: Recruit the right mentees

Mentees must be motivated to join the programme to benefit from a mentor. They need to be open-minded and curious to learn from other more experienced founders. They also need to understand the role their mentor plays during the innovation journey and get comfortable with ways they can make the most of mentoring. As such, recruiting the right people into the mentoring programmes is essential for success.

It is important to assess applicants, identify whether they have a need for mentoring, what their needs are, and assess their 'mentorability' before accepting them into a mentoring programme. The necessary considerations may vary between one programme and another, and the following may or may not be relevant considerations for your programme:

- What is the business idea and model?
- What kind of competencies does the founder, and their team have (education and professional experience)
- What are the founder's ambitions for the start-up?
- What role or tasks is the founder passionate about?
- What is the make-up of the team?
- What does the founder see as the biggest challenges for the start-up?
- Are some of these challenges the kinds of thing a mentor could help with (or do they need an advisor or coach?)
- Are they mentorable? (Are they really open to the mentoring, process and are they likely to benefit from it?)

- Is the timing right? Do they have the time, resources and necessary commitment to fully benefit from mentoring at this point?

Exploring these aspects in an application form and a follow-up interview is one way to assess the suitability of an applicant. The application form and/or interview should collect information on:

- Basic info on the company and founder
- Contact details
- Professional background and educational background
- Information on the company's team including their skills and experience in:
 - Business development
 - Technology development
 - Operations
 - Human resources
- Strengths of the company
- The challenges they hope mentoring will enable them to address
- Their goal for the programme: what do they hope to get out of it
- Their commitment to join the programme: what are their motivations and expectations? How will they set aside the time and energy to commit to it?
- TRL level: It is also a good idea to capture data on the technology readiness level and the business readiness level of the start-ups. This will make it easier to assess at the end of the cohort how the companies have matured through the process.

In some instances, accepting or declining an application is not a straightforward decision, and you may wish to conduct a follow-up interview. An interview enables you to probe more deeply into different aspects of the application, explore the challenges the individual and/or their company is facing and whether or not the applicant is mentorable. Appendix C: Assessing mentorability gives more detail on assessing the mentorability of applicants. If you find that the applicant is not mentorable, you should consider declining them a place on the programme, as it is unlikely to benefit their business, and you should draw on the mentoring programme's resources.

Proper screening of the mentees sets high standards for the programme, as the mentees are likely to benefit significantly more, and it will keep the mentors engaged. Initial screening also makes it easier to make high impact with the resources available in the programme.

Action:

Assess mentee applicants to determine their needs and readiness for mentoring before accepting them into your mentoring programme, to make sure they are a good fit. Application forms and interviews are one way to do this but may not be appropriate for all programmes or all applicants.

Mentoring play 3: Recruit the right mentors

Initial screening and training of mentors, making sure they understand their role and learn appropriate ways to bring their professional experience into play, will help to ensure that the mentoring relationship is beneficial for the mentee. The essential competencies for a good mentor are effective listening skills, the ability to host a dialogue by asking thoughtful questions that help to move the mentee's thinking forward, and the ability to connect to their mentee, making them feel supported and comfortable while challenging their perspectives. A key challenge for the mentor is the need to adapt continually to the needs of the mentee, so the ability to flex their approach is also key. Recruitment of mentors calls for some deeper reflections on:

- What type of mentors do we need for the mentees (local, global, experience, industry, age, gender, specific issues)
- How do we recruit them

1. What type of mentors does the programme need?

When recruiting, by whatever method, it is important to know what kinds of mentors you are looking for. What are the ambitions for the programme? For example, to attract investment capital. These ambitions should inform the ideal profiles for your mentors and the recruitment strategy, which should be designed to target people with the appropriate skills and experience.

2. How to recruit them

What is driving mentors?

In order to attract the right mentors, who will be volunteers, you need to consider what you are offering to them that will make it feel worthwhile to give their time: what's in it for them? Mentors are often most driven by making new connections to other mentors and mentees, gaining new insights, and learning from the experience. It is worth noting that in the AT sector, established experts and business leaders want to make positive impact on the lives of disabled people through enabling AT ventures to solve the right problems, and scale solutions faster. Consider how you could highlight a range of relevant benefits and opportunities in your recruitment advertising and promotion to incentivise potential mentors.

Some mentors seek new mentoring opportunities in order to improve their mentoring style and approach through structured feedback and formal assessment. One incentive could be to provide training, certification and awards for the mentors so that they get the feeling of a well-structured programme with a clear format and game plan. To make room for the mentors to get to know one another in the training and the check-ins is also important. This is a good way for them to make new connections and feel comfortable in the programme. For instance, the We Love Mentors certification process is based on the initial training and mentors are assessed by their mentees. Based on a score, the mentors receive certification as well as feedback on their style and approach. Mentees have the chance to nominate their mentors for an award at the end of the relationship, acknowledging their outstanding support.

Methods of recruitment

There are different ways to recruit mentors, such as 'snowballing' and online outreach, each having their respective benefits and drawbacks. Many programmes use the 'snowball' approach: you find a couple of suitable mentors through your existing networks and start recruiting them. In the recruitment process, you may ask them to recommend like-minded people from their network. And as you recruit them you keep expanding the pool of mentors through the 'snowball effect'.

The snowball model tends to be slower than an online outreach and application process, and you may also be recruiting a narrower group of mentors as opposed to a diverse group of mentors representing a variety of genders, locations, experiences age groups etc.

In contrast, online outreach and call to applications offer programme managers an opportunity to actively research suitable profiles and invite them to apply as a mentor, and/or advertising and promoting the opportunity through appropriate communications and media channels that target the kind of people with your desired profile (much as you would advertise a paid role).

The application process

Applicants, however recruited, are asked to complete an application form. A typical application form for mentors (see example in Appendix A: Example application form for mentors) usually includes:

- Basic info on the mentor, including contact details
- Professional background and educational background
- Own entrepreneurial experience
- Experience attracting capital
- Previous experience with mentor and advisory role positions
- Relevant skills and experience, including soft skills such as empathy, self-insight, the ability to connect to others etc.
- Motivational factors
- Commitment
- Resumé or LinkedIn profile as an attachment

Based on the online application and resumé or LinkedIn profile you can choose to approve/decline the candidate, or you can follow-up with a personal interview to dig deeper into their experiences and motivation.

Similarly to mentee screening, a proper selection process for mentor candidates sets a high standard for the programme, making sure that mentors engage for the right reason. It will be possible to sort out mentors who are looking for business opportunities by doing a proper screening and selection process.

Action:

Decide the qualities and experience you need in the mentors for your programme (type of experience, specialisms, industries, any requirements specific to your programme etc.). Identify the motivators for the kind of people you are looking for (such as the opportunity to develop their mentoring skills, mentoring training, formal certification, making new contacts, learning from others' experience etc.). Highlight

these in your recruitment efforts and target these appropriately, either through recruitment or a 'snowballing' approach. Screen potential mentors to ensure they are engaging for the right reason and have the requisite competencies, skills, experience etc.

Mentoring play 4: Structure training and engagement before launch

Mentor programme managers are responsible for making an operational plan for the entire process of mentoring relevant to the onboarding cohort before applications are opened up. The MPM should create a framework for the mentoring programme, to set expectations for both mentors and mentees, with start and end dates, key activities, time commitment, and avenues for professional development, such as training or certification. This will help participants and mentors to have a clear understanding of the structure of the programme and level of commitment.

Action:

Create an operational plan and programme structure before launch and provide the full schedule for interested mentors and mentees at the application stage so they understand the commitment involved and can make sure they have the time required to participate fully.

Appendix B: Programme structure provides a detailed description of a generic programme structure which you could follow if you are designing your own programme.

Mentoring play 5: Bring everyone together

After the selection of participating mentors and mentees, it is good practice to hold a shared kick-off session to introduce:

- The mentoring programme's objectives
- The structure and content of the programme
- The resources available from the host incubator or accelerator (which may include training courses, business coaching, access to advisors and other relevant content.)
- The mentor training programme and preparation for it
- Any certification process for mentors
- The graduation process for mentees

At the programme kick-off, mentors and mentees meet for the first time. This occasion is a good opportunity for the mentors to introduce themselves; However, in order to save time, the mentees can wait for the match-making session to introduce themselves and their businesses.

The kick-off can be a one-hour virtual event if the programme includes a broad geography, or it can be in-person. In either case, it is a good idea to leave room for informal talk and introductions between participants. If it is virtual, this can be done by using break-out rooms during the session; in-person, it can be simple coffee breaks throughout the programme.

It is important that mentors and mentees understand the programme, what organisations it taps into and what resources are available in the programme and with the host organisations. The shared kick-off also sets the tone and expectations for the programme and will influence how seriously the participants take it.

Action:

Hold a shared kick-off event at the start of the programme, either in person or online, attended by mentors and mentees. The purpose is to introduce the programme and set everyone's expectations.

Mentoring play 6: Provide training for mentoring skills

The week following the shared kick-off event, mentors and mentees are invited for their respective training. Training for both should cover what mentoring is, why it matters, and how it differentiates from coaching and advising. Beyond this point, the training content for mentors and mentees diverges.

Training for mentors

The mentor training should include:

- The role of a mentor and how it differentiates from coaching and advising
- Tools and techniques of good mentoring
- How to understand and connect to your mentee through analysing their motivation, personal profile and learning style
- How to lead a session through a clear structure and an open dialogue
- The success factors any session must include like trust, purpose, progress, feedback etc.

If you don't have the necessary expertise within your own organisation to train mentors, you will need to hire a specialist service or individual who does. The training can be provided online or in person, depending on the needs and preferences of the mentors. It is likely that busy people will prefer self-paced online training.

Training for mentees

The mentee training session should be a live session, focusing on defining the mentor role, setting expectations and preparing the mentees on how they need to work to make the best of the time with their mentors.

It should also introduce mentees to the pitch they need to prepare for the matchmaking session. The pitch is structured around the screening model, discussed in Mentoring Play 2. The purpose is to provide the mentors with a full picture of the start-up including their resources, knowledge, and experience gaps. The challenges faced by the mentee and their business are very important at the matchmaking as these are top priority to address in the mentor-mentee sessions.

After the training sessions, mentees and mentors are provided with guidelines and templates to help them prepare for their first mentoring session.

By providing proper training, guidelines and templates, the mentors and mentees are much better prepared for their sessions and will benefit far more from the programme than they would with unclear expectations and guidelines.

60 minutes will often be enough for this session, depending on the size and nature of the cohort.

Action:

Provide structured training for mentors, covering their role, tools and techniques, and differences between mentoring, coaching and advising; and mentees, covering their responsibilities as mentees, what to include in their pitch to the mentors, and what they need to do to get the most from their mentoring sessions.

Mentoring play 7: Facilitate the right match

The match-making session can be organised either as an online event, where all the mentors and mentees in the programme participate, or it can be organised as an in-person event. Before the session it is a good idea to share the mentee applications with the mentors to make sure they are well-informed. The mentees will have prepared 5-minute-long pitches on their business, their challenges, and their needs for support, which they will present. The mentors should have the opportunity to ask clarifying questions.

When the needs of the mentees are clearly communicated, and the mentors have the chance to follow-up on with exploratory questions, the matchmaking becomes more algorithmic and more appropriate. This systematic approach also allows for the use of mentoring platforms, which can support organisations to sustain and scale their mentoring offer across multiple programmes, years, and geographic regions.

The mentors should be asked to submit their preferences for which founders they think they are best equipped to mentor, and to prioritise each founder from 1 – 3 to help facilitate the best matches. Depending on the resources available and the size of the cohort, this could be done on paper, but it is likely to be easier and more efficient using the polling tools available within the organisation's chosen mentoring platform or one of the many digital polling or questionnaire tools available online.

After the training session, the mentor programme manager, or someone else who is familiar with the detail of mentees' needs, such as a specialist needs assessor, should go through the results of the poll and make the best matches, considering the mentors' preferences, and their background and the needs of the mentees. The MPM should propose the set of matches to the mentors, who should have the opportunity to approve their matches before the mentees are notified. It should be made clear to the mentees that it is up to them to contact the mentor and schedule the first session.

Action:

Organise a match-making session, online or in person, at which mentees present a 5-minute pitch to the mentors about their business, challenges, and what they need from a mentor. Ask mentors their preferences for who they think they are best placed

to mentor, then make the best match between mentors and mentees based on these preferences and mentees' needs.

Mentoring play 8: Keep the momentum and drive continuous engagement

To run a good programme, it is essential to follow-up on the mentors and mentees as the programme progresses and ask them to share their experiences. If a match for some reason doesn't work out, you need to act and perhaps make another match.

The first follow-up would usually occur within the first 4 – 6 weeks of the programme. It is important to do separate follow-ups for the mentors and for the mentees as you may not get honest feedback if mentors and mentees are present simultaneously. A streamlined way of scheduling engagement sessions is to invite the mentors as a group for the check-in, ensuring every mentor has a chance to express their experiences to date, and ask any questions they might have. The same goes for the mentees. If any challenge or topic comes up in a relationship it is important to act on it in a timely manner.

Later in the programme, continuous check-in sessions are also a great opportunity to identify additional mentee needs, and make the necessary connections to advisors, mentors, investors or potential customers. This can be of great value to the individual mentee, and the existing network with the mentors is an invaluable resource.

Action:

Schedule regular group check-ins with mentors and, separately, with mentees, to gather feedback and ensure needs and expectations are being met on both sides and make any necessary adjustments.

Mentoring play 9: Measure the impact of mentoring

As you enter the last month of the programme, it is time to measure the impact on the mentees.

Some effects and outcomes will not show until 6 or 12 months later, but it is possible at this stage to survey mentees to capture data on elements like:

- Qualitative impact (such as personal development and skills building)
- Professional skills
- Expansion of personal network
- Turnover and employees

Impact surveys should be designed and implemented ahead of the mentoring programme so there are no delays during the programme itself. It is important to measure the outcomes of the programme and relate these to the original goals set out at the beginning of the programme, as described in Mentoring Play 1. Impact measurement can help organisations to tailor and improve their offer for greater success in the future, and attract more mentors, more funding, and support more AT entrepreneurs.

The initial training session with mentees should set the expectation that they must complete the survey. You may also consider additional motivators such as making any further mentoring sessions contingent upon completing the survey, or, if you offer a certificate or diploma on completion of the programme, you can make submission of the survey a prerequisite to graduate with a diploma.

Action:

In the last month of the programme, carry out an impact survey to measure how the programme has performed against its goals. Offer an appropriate incentive to ensure that all mentees complete the survey. Use the feedback to improve future offerings.

Mentoring play 10: Celebrate and acknowledge achievement

If you are offering a mentor certification process, this can begin in parallel with measuring the impact of mentoring. The facility to conduct assessments online may be included in your mentoring platform if you are using one, or you may look to an external provider who offers mentoring certification. Mentors can also be given the opportunity to self-assess their own behaviours and achievements in their mentoring assignments. You can also offer feedback for the mentors from their mentees. Mentees (perhaps chosen by the mentor) could be asked to comment on the various skills and qualities that make a good mentor such as the ability to build trust, set purpose in the sessions, drive progress, communication skills including giving constructive feedback, creativity and innovation. Such feedback is often valued by mentors, typically in a more junior phase of their career. The opportunity to practice their mentoring skills and receive feedback on their performance to help them improve can be a motivational factor in volunteering.

Action:

Carry out assessment of mentors' performance in parallel with the impact survey. This could involve any combination of formal assessment for certification, self-assessment and feedback from mentees. This feedback is often highly valued by mentors, so it is an important step and often a motivator for them to volunteer in the first place.

Mentoring play 11: Bring formal mentoring to a close

It is beneficial to host a formal "Graduation Party" at the end of the mentoring programme to share positive outcomes with participants and other key stakeholders, highlight successes, and formally conclude the period when full commitment has been expected from all participants.

In preparation for the event, it is good practice to analyse the data from impact measurement, follow-up with mentees to gather qualitative reflections on the results, and frame positive outcomes in the form of success stories. Programme managers may consider preparing a slide deck highlighting the achievements of mentees, their award nominations, and, if relevant, the results of the certification process for mentors. During the event, encourage social interaction, comments, and feedback offered by mentees and mentors when the results are shared. Ask and encourage the mentors and mentees to stay connected after the official programme comes to an end.

Even though some of the mentees may continue to be mentored in a new cohort, if they still feel the need to be mentored, mentors and mentees will be able to recognise their shared results at the closing event, celebrating their achievements.

Action:

Mark the end of the programme to celebrate everyone's achievements and the positive outcomes of the programme. Use the data gathered from the impact survey and mentor assessment to identify examples which highlight these. Encourage mentors and mentees to continue contact after the formal end of the programme. Successful mentoring can lead to mentors becoming trusted advisors for life.

3. Mentoring in disability innovation

In this section we look at how might we adapt the general design for a mentoring programme to the needs of early-career, entrepreneurial researchers, as well as the needs of assistive technology start-ups, highlighting shared approaches and benefits, but also the unique differences in catering to each respective audience of innovators.

3.1 Adapting the mainstream mentoring approach to research translation

Adapting a general mentoring approach in research translation at technology readiness levels 1-3 is crucial to ensuring that early-career researchers and academics receive the most relevant and effective support. To be able to get the most benefit from mentoring, it is essential that researchers possess a foundational understanding of business fundamentals. This includes knowledge of value propositions, customer discovery/identification, human-centred design, innovation ecosystems, and sales and market development strategies. With a mature business idea and a clear understanding of their target market, researchers can engage more meaningfully with mentors, allowing them to maximise the impact of the guidance and expertise offered throughout their innovation journey.

Case study 1: The TIDAL ECR Accelerator

The TIDAL ECR Accelerator, which ran from May through July 2024, was an innovative three-month programme aimed at empowering early career researchers (ECRs) in the assistive technology sector. The programme was organised by Global Disability Innovation Hub (GDI Hub) on behalf of TIDAL N+. It was designed to bridge the gap between research and commercialisation, by providing participants with the skills and support needed to bring their ideas to market.

Four ECRs were selected to participate in the accelerator, each bringing unique perspectives and research at the early stages of technology readiness. The programme kicked off with a session focused on assumption validation, de-risking, and understanding Technology Readiness Levels (TRLs). Over the course of the programme, participants engaged in weekly innovation coaching sessions and fortnightly workshops covering topics such as building a commercial hypothesis, business modelling, human-centred design, innovation ecosystems, pitching techniques, medical regulation, and strategies for moving into start-up accelerators.

Three of the four participants were matched with a mentor, on week 3, 6, and 12 of the incubator respectively, offering tailored innovation support. In addition, guest speakers, including entrepreneurs from the MedTech sector, were invited to share their experiences and insights, further enriching the learning experience.

One of the successful projects from the accelerator was the work of a team of researchers from the University of Newcastle on optical myography, a non-invasive technique using light to measure muscle activity. Initially focused on competing with traditional electromyography (EMG), the ECR leading the project pivoted during the programme to explore using the technology for speech restoration for individuals who have lost their voice due to conditions like motor neurone disease. This pivot,

driven by user-centred insights and market research, highlighted the programme's emphasis on flexibility and real-world application.

The TIDAL ECR Accelerator not only provided the participating researchers with the practical tools needed to translate their research into social impact but also played a pivotal role in shaping the future direction of their innovations, ensuring that they are well-positioned to make a significant impact in the field of disability technology. This is evidenced by the participants' feedback. Representative quotes include:

- “Before participating in the TIDAL Accelerator program, I was unsure how to transition my research into an actual business. However, I am now fully aware of the entire process. I gained valuable experience in developing and commercialising technology solutions. I learned about market validation, business model development, and effective communication with stakeholders.”
- “The insights and knowledge I gained from the accelerator program have transformed me from an academic researcher into an entrepreneur who can now apply business models to invest in technology.”
- “The TIDAL Accelerator has been invaluable, offering key insights into product development, business strategy, and market validation. The mentoring and networking opportunities have significantly advanced my project and its path to commercialisation.”
- “The one-to-one coaching sessions were invaluable, offering targeted guidance and insights that significantly advanced my project.”
- “The program greatly enhanced my understanding of commercialisation, particularly in market analysis, strategic positioning, and balancing product development with market needs.”
- “Overall, my experience with the TIDAL Accelerator was extremely positive. The program provided valuable resources, insightful mentorship, and essential networking opportunities. I appreciated the personalised support and found the collaborative environment encouraging.”
- “I would definitely recommend the TIDAL Accelerator to other early career researchers if they had a start-up idea in mind. It's boosted my confidence and given me an opportunity to lead a potentially impactful and tangible project with support from professionals.”
- “The TIDAL Accelerator was a transformative experience, providing the necessary skills, knowledge, and networks to take (my app) from concept to commercialization.”
- “The TIDAL Accelerator significantly impacted my professional development and project success. It provided me with critical insights into commercialisation strategies, enhanced my understanding of the innovation ecosystem, and helped me refine my project for greater market readiness. The connections I made and the skills I acquired through the program have been invaluable in advancing my career and pushing my project closer to success.”

3.2 ECR plays: What works in mentoring early-career researchers?

Mentoring for early-career researchers in the assistive technology sector differs from that offered to more mature start-up teams in several ways. Firstly, mentoring for early-stage researchers often focus more on foundational business knowledge and helping them translate academic research into commercially viable products. This may include basic training in entrepreneurship and innovation, which is typically unnecessary for more seasoned teams. Secondly, early-career researchers may require more hands-on guidance in navigating regulatory landscapes and understanding market dynamics specific to assistive technologies, as they are likely to be less familiar with these complexities compared to mature start-up teams who have already begun to engage with these challenges. One of the outcomes of running the TIDAL ECR Accelerator is a range of lessons learnt and actionable insights with regard to mentoring ECRs, which we have organised into a set of plays below.

ECR play 1: Align recruitment with programme focus

The TIDAL ECR Accelerator experienced difficulty in recruiting a sufficient number of ECRs who were specifically focusing on AT, which led to a more diverse range of projects than originally intended. This didn't matter from the perspective of testing the accelerator process (which was the primary aim), but this broader scope made it harder to leverage GDI Hub's existing networks and expertise within the accelerator. Greater alignment between the mentees' projects and the programme's intended focus on AT would have enhanced the quality of available support, mentoring, and increased networking opportunities. Mentors would have been able to provide more relevant guidance, and mentees would have benefited from a more supportive ecosystem with access to the right networks and experts for their projects, who may be more advisors than mentors where a project is at a very early TRL.

Strong alignment between mentees' projects and a programme's focus enhances the mentees' experience of available support. Mentors can provide relevant guidance, and mentees benefit from a more supportive ecosystem with access to the right networks and expertise.

Action:

Target outreach, communicate your programme's focus clearly, and adopt strict selection criteria to help attract applicants whose projects align with your programme's specific thematic areas. Additionally, an in-depth screening process will help you assess how well prospective participants align with your programme's goals and their readiness to engage with mentoring, which may have as much to do with the stage they are at in the research translation and commercialisation process as with their attitude.

ECR play 2: Ease the programme structure for small cohorts

A small cohort size, such as in the TIDAL ECR Accelerator (only four participants), can create challenges for structuring a conventional mentoring programme. In larger cohorts, it's easier to design a structured programme with clear stages and a formal mentoring process. However, with a smaller group, flexibility becomes essential, and

a rigid structure can hinder the mentoring process by not allowing enough adaptability to individual projects and timelines.

This approach enables more personalised support, ensuring that even small cohorts benefit from high-quality mentoring. It allows mentors to tailor their guidance more closely to the progress and challenges of individual mentees, thus creating a more impactful mentoring relationship that can adapt to evolving project demands.

Action:

For small cohorts, adopt a flexible and rolling mentoring approach instead of a rigid, formal structure. This means offering mentoring on an as-needed basis and adjusting session frequency and content to align with the specific needs of each mentee. Such flexibility allows mentors to dive deeply into the unique challenges of each project rather than sticking to a one-size-fits-all schedule.

ECR play 3: Allocate adequate preparation time to set mentees up for success

During the TIDAL ECR Accelerator, the two-week period between recruitment and the start of the programme proved to be insufficient for conducting detailed assessments of mentees' needs, even though there were only four of them. This resulted in mentors being selected without a full understanding of mentees' weaknesses and blind spots. As a result, the mentor-mentee pairings were less effective, limiting the programme's potential to deliver high-impact support.

Well-prepared mentor-mentee relationships lead to more focused and impactful mentoring. With a thorough needs assessment, mentors can provide targeted advice that addresses the mentee's weak points, ultimately improving the mentee's ability to advance their project and develop professionally.

Action:

Ensure sufficient time for detailed needs assessment between recruitment and the start of services such as innovation coaching and mentoring. How long is required will depend on the nature of the programme and the number of participants. This period should be dedicated to conducting in-depth assessments of each mentee, identifying their specific needs for mentoring, and preparing mentors accordingly. This approach ensures that mentors are not only aligned with the mentee's technical area but are also aware of the specific challenges the mentee is facing. Plays 4, 5, and 6 described below offer suggestions on how to insert productive time between the recruitment of mentees and the beginning of mentoring.

ECR play 4: Introduce disability awareness training

One participant faced a significant challenge when a stakeholder group refused to meet with them due to concerns about their use of language. This suggested a lack of disability awareness to the stakeholders. The incident highlighted the importance of proper training on how to communicate effectively with stakeholders in the

disability innovation sector, especially, but not exclusively, for researchers working on solutions aimed at people with disabilities.

Ensuring that ECRs are trained in disability awareness prepares them to engage effectively with stakeholders and communities. This not only enhances their credibility but also increases the likelihood of building successful partnerships and networks that are essential for advancing their research translation projects and ultimately creating inclusive products and services and/or ones which meet the specific needs of people with disabilities.

Action:

Integrate disability awareness training into the early stages of the mentoring programme. This training should cover appropriate communication, sensitivity to disability issues, and understanding of the lived experiences of people with disabilities. Such training can either be provided directly by the programme or through external workshops and courses. Many disability advocacy organisations offer training.

ECR play 5: Provide foundational business training

Many of the early-career researchers who took part in the TIDAL accelerator did not yet have foundational business skills, such as formulating a value proposition or conducting a pitch. This made it difficult for them to effectively engage with their mentors because they couldn't clearly identify or articulate their mentoring needs. Without a solid understanding of basic entrepreneurial concepts, mentees struggled to leverage the expertise offered by their mentors fully.

In general, researchers, especially those embedded in academia, are focused on expanding their research and don't yet have the entrepreneurial mindset needed to translate their innovations into market-ready products. Business training provides the foundation needed for this shift, ensuring they can navigate the complex process of bringing academic research into the commercial world.

A proven model for business training is the Scandinavian-based platform "Entrepreneurdy" (<https://entrepreneurdy.com>), which guides researchers through the business process with an external facilitator. Users get a space on the platform, where they are able to discover different models for commercialising research.

Institutions such as the University of Florida have incorporated business training as part of their biotech accelerator, allowing researchers to enter the entrepreneurial ecosystem better prepared. Similarly, the Technical University of Denmark has effectively utilised platforms like Antoprenuri to guide researchers through the intricacies of value creation, resource allocation, and business strategy. UCL takes this play one step further in its "Venturer Programme for Entrepreneurial PhDs and Postdocs" (University College London, 2024). This programme is tailored for business-minded PhD and Postdoc candidates who are eager to combine their research with a focus on entrepreneurship, promoting the creation of spinouts based on deep-tech research, and offering a founding equity stake to research sponsors when viable spinout opportunities arise. While the Venturer PhD programme sets

expectations for post-graduate students to incorporate a level of entrepreneurial thinking from the beginning of their research career, Conception X – a London-based social enterprise – focuses on turning late-stage PhD thesis work into deep-tech venture opportunities (Conception X, 2024).

By equipping ECRs with foundational business knowledge and an understanding of the research translation process, the mentoring process becomes more focused and effective. Mentees will be able to better articulate their needs, ask informed questions, and receive tailored guidance from their mentors, which ultimately leads to more productive outcomes in both personal development and project progress.

Action:

Introduce a pre-mentoring training phase where mentees are taught key entrepreneurial and research translation concepts. This could include workshops on value proposition development, market research, and basic business models. Ensuring that ECRs understand these core concepts before engaging with mentors will make the mentoring process more efficient and productive.

ECR play 6: Encourage team building and recruitment of a co-founder

Pairing ECRs with external co-founders who possess entrepreneurial expertise is another vital strategy for translating research into successful ventures. In this model, researchers are not expected to make the business case. Instead, they are partnered with entrepreneurs or corporates who will be able to commercialise the research through a joint venture. Researchers, while experts in their field, are often passionate about discovery rather than commercial development, which can hinder the journey from lab to market. By introducing external co-founders with entrepreneurial backgrounds, incubators can balance these skill sets, allowing researchers to focus on innovation while their partners manage business growth and scalability.

For instance, the Danish Technical University's co-founder program connects researchers with external entrepreneurs to foster collaboration that drives innovation to market (Skylab, 2024). Additionally, the London Business School has successfully implemented a similar model during its "Innovation to Market" course, matching MBA students with researchers to leverage business acumen in the development of academic innovations over a period of six months (Skinner, 2024).

The partnership approach enables the creation of well-rounded teams that can tackle both the technical and commercial challenges of bringing a product to market. Such collaborations not only enhance the likelihood of successful research translation but also create lasting entrepreneurial ventures that benefit from the synergy between deep research knowledge and practical business expertise.

Action:

Partner with programmes focused on business administration, inviting practitioners of entrepreneurship to form teams with early-career researchers.

ECR play 7: Encourage proactive engagement between mentees and mentors

Some participants in the TIDAL ECR Accelerator were hesitant to proactively seek help or engage regularly with their mentors. In some cases, this reluctance was due to a lack of confidence in reaching out or uncertainty about how to make the best use of their mentor's time. In a mentoring relationship, it is mentees that are expected to take the initiative, so where this didn't happen, it led to weaker mentor-mentee relationships and participants didn't get as much as they might have done from the mentoring process.

With more frequent and proactive engagement, the mentoring relationship becomes stronger and more productive. Mentees who regularly interact with their mentors are more likely to develop deeper insights, receive continuous feedback, and progress more rapidly through their challenges, leading to better overall outcomes in their projects.

Action:

Establish clear communication guidelines and expectations for mentees. Provide them with training on how to proactively engage with mentors, including how to schedule sessions, prepare for meetings, and follow-up on advice given. Building a culture of open and regular communication from the start ensures that mentees take full advantage of the resources available to them.

ECR play 8: Follow-up regularly with mentees and mentors

Consistent communication and engagement are a key element of successful mentor-mentee relationships. Where regular check-ins weren't scheduled, some of the TIDAL mentees missed out on valuable guidance, and mentors found it harder to provide support in a timely manner. The mentor programme manager was not aware of the lack of engagement so was unable to address it. This lack of regular follow-up created a disconnect between the intended goals of the mentoring and the extent of progress made.

Regular follow-ups with mentors and mentees ensure that mentees remain on track and that mentors are providing timely and relevant guidance. By keeping communication open, programme managers can identify and resolve any problems early, preventing potential issues from derailing the mentoring relationship or the mentee's progress.

Action:

Implement a structured system for regular follow-ups with mentors and mentees. Programme managers should check in periodically with both parties to ensure that communication remains consistent and that any emerging issues are addressed promptly. These follow-ups can be scheduled based on the mentee's progress and project milestones.

ECR play 9: Implement an impact measurement framework

Because the primary aim of the TIDAL ECR accelerator was to test the accelerator process, it was not a priority to track the long-term impact of the mentoring relationships on the progress of innovations, and there was no structured method in place to do this. However, without clear metrics gathered over the long-term, it is difficult to measure the effectiveness of a mentoring programme or to understand its contribution to the ultimate success of research translation projects.

An impact measurement framework provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of a mentoring programme. By tracking progress and outcomes, programme managers can make data-driven improvements to future programmes and demonstrate the value of mentoring in accelerating research translation and entrepreneurial success.

Action:

Develop a simple yet robust impact measurement framework to track mentoring outcomes over time. This could involve setting specific goals at the start of the mentoring relationship, such as improvements in entrepreneurial skills, progress in research translation, or successful stakeholder engagement. Periodic evaluations should be conducted to assess progress toward these goals, with follow-ups at six- and twelve-months post-programme. Where feasible, the achievement of other milestones towards commercialisation should be tracked over the longer term.

3.3 A lean approach to mentoring AT ventures

The Attvaran accelerator adopted a lean approach to mentoring, based on a high-level understanding of mentoring as a process to support the growth of the entrepreneur and the business, but bespoke to their needs and highly driven by the stakeholders' personalities. This approach gives room for a diversity of project relationships, evolution of the nature of the engagement, and design of internal meetings and workshops that are driven by the challenges the business and the entrepreneur face – for which the solution could be in the internal process, in networking, in raising capital or simply improving the product market fit.

The program supports multiple assistive technology start-ups that are at various levels of maturity, but every start-up is matched to a mentor who is either a senior C-level leader and business manager in a relevant industry, or a Disability, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) / Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) leader in a well-established business. The reason being that these individuals understand and have experience of running and managing businesses. Some of them have emerged from an entrepreneurial world and actively mentor start-ups, while some have many decades of experience in managing global or national businesses. Hence relevant experience is there for all start-ups, irrespective of their stage.

Case study 2: The Attvaran Accelerator

The Attvaran Start-up Accelerator programme is designed to provide targeted support to 20 assistive technology start-ups across three cohorts running in parallel: Spark, Start, and Scale. The mentoring programme pairs start-ups with seasoned C-level

leaders from diverse sectors, including banking, services, marketing & media, and technology, who bring their expertise to assist ventures in overcoming key challenges at various stages of growth.

Each start-up benefits from regular, personalised guidance through sessions once a week, or once every two weeks, with mentors. These touch-points were designed to continue throughout the programme and can extend beyond it to foster long-term relationships that help the ventures scale and succeed in the competitive assistive technology market.

Attvaran is located in India, but its learnings about how to implement effective mentoring for AT start-ups are relevant to any other initiative, wherever in the world it may be, concerned with supporting AT entrepreneurs to develop marketable, successful products and services.

Attvaran Spark: Mentoring early-stage ventures

These start-ups are in the ideation or prototype phase and are working towards defining a product-market fit. Mentors help participants validate assumptions, discover customers, and build viable business models. They also guide them through technical, social, and market challenges, assist in creating prototypes, and pilot test products. Key mentoring objectives include clarifying value propositions, establishing early partnerships, providing feedback on prototype development and user testing, and identifying early adopters through market research.

Attvaran Start: Achieving product-market fit & creating go-to-market strategies

'Start' cohort members have achieved some level of product-market fit and are beginning to enter the market. Mentors help these ventures refine their go-to-market strategies, focusing on scaling initial sales, solidifying market presence, and optimising marketing and sales processes. They also assist in building stronger partnerships with stakeholders and distribution channels. Key objectives include refining go-to-market strategies, optimising marketing tactics and distribution networks, securing funding for growth, and establishing scalable business operations.

Attvaran Scale: Scaling operations & expanding product lines

Ventures in the Attvaran 'Scale' cohort are more established businesses looking to grow operations or expand into new markets or product lines. Mentors provide strategic guidance on scaling operations, entering new markets, and launching additional products or services. They also offer insights into building robust organisational structures and securing investment for expansion. Key objectives include optimising operational processes, guiding product or service launches, navigating complex market entry strategies, and supporting fundraising efforts for scaling.

3.4 AT venture plays: What works in mentoring AT entrepreneurs?

In mentoring AT entrepreneurs, a tailored approach can significantly enhance both business growth and social impact. AT start-ups face unique challenges, as discussed in section 1.3. The following AT Venture Plays provide structured

strategies for mentors to guide founders effectively. Each play addresses a specific area, from refining business structure to fostering emotional resilience, enabling founders to develop sustainable, mission-driven ventures.

AT Venture Play 1: Position mentors as sounding boards

Mentors play a vital role as a sounding board for AT founders, creating a space where ideas can be shared and refined. Regular check-ins allow founders to openly discuss evolving concepts and receive constructive, impartial feedback. This consistent engagement enables founders to navigate new ideas confidently, fostering a collaborative relationship built on trust and open dialogue.

By providing feedback without directing outcomes, mentors encourage founders to think critically about their strategies. Rather than dictating solutions, mentors offer insights that challenge founders' assumptions, inspiring them to explore alternative perspectives. This approach strengthens founders' decision-making processes, helping them build a more resilient and flexible strategic mindset for the future.

As founders articulate and test their hypotheses in these sessions, they develop a clearer understanding of their vision and goals. The mentor's role in guiding but not controlling these discussions allows founders to reach informed conclusions independently. Through this dynamic, founders become empowered to make decisions grounded in thoughtful consideration and increased clarity, ultimately enhancing their strategic direction.

Action:

Ensure regular check-ins between mentors and mentees to foster trust, feedback and dialogue so that mentees can be consistently challenged, empowered and strengthened through ongoing engagement with their mentor.

AT Venture Play 2: Guide with sense-making

Mentors help founders interpret complex market signals and internal challenges, making sense of ambiguity in the rapidly evolving AT sector. By providing valuable context about industry shifts, they enable start-ups to understand how these trends affect their business. This role is crucial in building founders' confidence in navigating uncertain territory.

Through mentoring, founders are encouraged to distinguish between pressing priorities and noise. Mentors guide them in identifying core issues, allowing start-ups to focus on decisions that genuinely impact growth. By honing this skill, founders can allocate their attention more effectively, which is especially important in a crowded and dynamic market.

Mentors also help founders frame difficult decisions within a broader business landscape, offering a strategic perspective that grounds choices in real-world contexts. This approach ensures that decisions align with both current and future objectives, strengthening the foundation on which the business is built and preparing founders for long-term success.

Action:

Encourage mentors to bring their experience, industry knowledge and strategic insight to the mentoring relationship, to help founders understand the context they are working in and what the core issues are, so they can direct their focus intentionally and effectively.

AT Venture Play 3: Separate emotional reactions from rational decision-making

The journey of building a start-up can be challenging no matter who the founders are, and mentors provide an essential space for founders to express their frustrations. This support may be especially valuable to young and disabled founders, who not only face the frustrations of entrepreneurship but also the challenges that arise through activities of daily living and inaccessible tools, venues, and documents relevant to the start-up. Through empathetic listening, mentors allow founders to release stress without fear of judgment, helping them build mental resilience for the road ahead. This support fosters a deeper trust and openness.

Mentors encourage founders to vent freely, refraining from immediately offering solutions. This non-directive approach gives founders the opportunity to process their emotions fully, which is crucial for long-term emotional stability. By allowing space for unfiltered expression, mentors help founders regain focus and approach issues clearly.

In these sessions, mentors guide founders to separate emotional reactions from rational decision-making. This skill enables founders to navigate challenges objectively, reducing the impact of stress on their work. By instilling this self-awareness, mentors empower founders to approach obstacles with a balanced perspective, which is critical for sustainable growth.

Action:

Encourage mentors to build deep trust through empathetic, non-judgemental listening, to enable founders to release and process their frustrations and other emotions, as a mechanism for clearing their minds and achieving a more balanced perspective, so that they are better able to make sound decisions.

AT Venture Play 4: Work with founders to refine business strategy

AT start-ups must develop a business strategy that is both adaptable and sustainable, aligning with market realities in the AT sector and their mission. Mentors play a pivotal role in this by reviewing growth strategies with founders in the context of a fragmented market and cultural differences, challenging them to consider broader, long-term goals. This helps ensure that strategies are grounded in practicality and vision.

Mentors encourage scenario planning, helping founders prepare for varied market conditions that might impact their growth. By guiding them through potential challenges, mentors help mentees build a strategic resilience that allows start-ups to pivot effectively when needed. This approach is especially valuable in the dynamic and often unpredictable AT sector.

Mentors also provide insights into competitor strategies or emerging opportunities, giving founders a comprehensive view of their position within the market. This broader understanding enables start-ups to make informed strategic decisions that not only address immediate needs but also foster long-term competitiveness and alignment with their core values.

Actions:

Ensure that mentors understand their pivotal role in helping mentees to develop an appropriate and sustainable business strategy aligned with their values. Set the expectation with mentors that they should be willing to share their business and industry insights to help founders understand their market position in relation to competitors.

AT Venture Play 5: Connect strategically and integrate with the disability innovation ecosystem

Building connections in the AT industry is essential for growth, visibility, and credibility. Mentors can introduce founders to investors, partners, and customers who can accelerate their journey. By strategically broadening the founders' networks, mentors help position AT start-ups within a supportive ecosystem that amplifies their presence and impact.

Mentors also connect founders to specialised advisors or industry experts who offer tailored advice. These connections provide founders with insights that extend beyond their immediate capabilities, supporting informed decision-making and strengthening the team's overall knowledge base. Strategic networking serves as an asset that evolves with the company's growth.

Guiding founders on which industry events or disability innovation forums to attend further enhance their exposure. By attending relevant gatherings, founders can access industry trends, build valuable relationships, and find potential collaborators. This play enables founders to establish a strong network that fosters growth opportunities and strengthens their reputation with investors and other enablers.

Action:

Set the expectation with mentors that they should open up their personal and business networks to help founders access specialist advice, fast-track the development of new contacts, and locate themselves in a supportive and ecosystem.

AT Venture Play 6: Support internal efficiency

Efficient internal processes are crucial for AT ventures as they scale. Mentors assist founders by reviewing existing workflows, identifying potential areas for improvement, and recommending tools that enhance communication and project management. By optimising these systems, mentors help build a streamlined operation that supports productivity and clarity.

Mentors also recommend tools and practices tailored to the start-up's needs, from project management software to data-tracking solutions. These tools ensure that teams operate smoothly, minimising disruptions and fostering a culture of

accountability. An efficient workflow enables founders to focus on growth while maintaining consistent internal performance.

Establishing performance metrics with mentors' guidance allows founders to monitor productivity effectively. Tracking team performance helps in identifying and addressing bottlenecks, creating a proactive approach to process improvement. These efficiencies reduce operational friction, creating a work environment that supports innovation and responsiveness to change.

Action:

Mentors should support mentees to develop appropriate performance metrics and implement systems, tools and workflows to deliver these effectively and efficiently in a way that does not constrain innovation or compromise the ability to flex in response to external (or internal) factors.

AT Venture Play 7: Define a purpose-driven business structure

The initial business structure is a foundational choice for AT start-ups, influencing future growth and funding options. For founders considering outside investment, equity stakes may be essential, allowing investors to provide capital in exchange for ownership. However, those preferring to bootstrap (relying on their own resources) might focus on organic growth, prioritising operational control and gradual expansion over quick capital influx. Mentors can guide founders through this choice, helping them weigh the trade-offs between control and growth speed.

In the AT sector, the decision between for-profit and not-for-profit structures is particularly complex. In some regions, access to assistive technology is seen as a fundamental right, making it challenging for for-profit models to balance financial sustainability with the ethical imperative of accessibility. For some founders, a not-for-profit model better aligns with their mission, as it avoids charging for essential services. Mentors can help founders assess how each model impacts long-term viability and the venture's capacity to serve diverse markets sustainably.

A founder's values play a critical role in structuring their business. Founders who prioritise social impact may hesitate to cede control to investors focused primarily on financial returns, as this shift could compromise the business's mission. Mentors help founders reflect on these values, ensuring the chosen structure resonates with their vision and aligns with both social and financial goals, thus fostering a sustainable path for impactful growth.

Action:

Choosing an appropriate business structure that not only supports business growth but also aligns with the founder's mission and values is a critical decision, often complex and difficult. Mentors should help them to consider all the relevant factors and trade-offs in making their choice.

AT Venture Play 8: Enable founders to model entrepreneurial conduct

AT founders often set the tone for ethical and professional standards within their companies, especially in mission-driven markets. Mentors model integrity and ethical

decision-making, encouraging founders to lead transparently and build a trustworthy company culture. This guidance establishes a foundation of respect and accountability within the organisation.

Mentors also encourage resilience and adaptability, qualities essential for navigating the ups and downs of entrepreneurship. By instilling these values, mentors help founders approach setbacks as learning opportunities, reinforcing a growth mindset. This approach strengthens the founders' confidence and prepares them to handle future challenges constructively.

Self-awareness is another critical trait that mentors cultivate in founders, helping them develop a leadership style rooted in empathy and insight. By fostering reflective leadership, mentors enable founders to create positive relationships within their teams, promoting collaboration and fostering a healthy, mission-aligned organisational culture.

Action:

Consider a potential mentor's values, integrity, ethics, leadership style and self-awareness during the mentor recruitment process. These personal qualities will be an important consideration during matchmaking. They influence a mentor's ability to both build a founder's confidence and foster the desired organisational culture.

AT Venture Play 9: Match mentors and mentees intentionally

Every AT venture has unique needs, and matching founders with mentors whose expertise aligns with these requirements amplifies the mentors' impact. By intentionally pairing start-ups with mentors based on the development stage—whether focused on product development or market expansion—founders receive specialised guidance tailored to their current objectives.

Mentors who align with the venture's needs provide targeted advice, whether it's technical insights for early-stage start-ups or fundraising expertise for scaling businesses. This intentionality optimises the mentor-mentee relationship, creating relevant support structures that help founders address immediate challenges and unlock new growth opportunities.

By aligning their mentoring with founders' current challenges, mentors help start-ups progress more effectively. This alignment ensures that the mentoring is not only impactful but also directly contributes to the venture's goals, allowing founders to focus their efforts on strategic areas that promote measurable growth and advancement.

Action:

Conduct a thorough assessment of the mentoring needs of each applicant to the mentoring programme. Target your mentor-recruitment activities to attract individuals with relevant experience that can meet these needs, such as appropriate technical advice or expertise in a particular developmental stage.

AT Venture Play 10: Foster long-term mentor engagement

Continuous mentoring helps AT ventures maintain momentum through different stages of growth. By establishing regular, adaptable touch-points—such as biweekly sessions—mentors provide an enduring support system that evolves alongside the start-up. This consistent engagement gives founders a reliable foundation from which to navigate changing market conditions.

Mentors who remain engaged beyond program timelines help founders sustain progress even after initial milestones are achieved. This long-term commitment fosters a stable relationship where mentors act as trusted advisors throughout the venture's journey. Founders gain a dependable ally who adapts to the start-up's evolving needs and challenges.

Such long-term mentoring is invaluable, as it offers sustained guidance that can be tailored to address emerging challenges. By fostering an ongoing connection, mentors help founders stay proactive, continually adapting their strategies as they grow and ensuring that their ventures can respond effectively to new opportunities and obstacles.

Action:

Aim to select mentors who are open to maintaining a long-term relationship with their mentees, so that the option for ongoing engagement is there for founders who wish to maintain the connection as part of building their personal and professional support system. Consider how to position the possibility of a long-term engagement, beyond the end of the formal mentoring programme, as an attractive opportunity for your target mentors that you wish to recruit.

4. Conclusion

This mentoring playbook serves as a practical guide for organisations looking to foster effective mentoring programmes for early-career researchers and start-ups in the disability innovation space. Mentoring is a powerful tool that can accelerate growth, build skills, and drive success for both mentees and mentors. We provide a structured approach that can be adapted to different settings and needs, helping to bridge the gap between research and commercialisation in a challenging but vital sector.

In conclusion, three core lessons emerge as pivotal for impactful mentoring: the importance of aligning mentoring to each founder's developmental stage, the value of providing adaptable, ongoing guidance, and the essential role of understanding unique sectoral challenges—especially in AT and disability innovation contexts.

Across mainstream and specialised mentoring, many plays apply universally, such as maintaining regular engagement and providing a sounding board for strategic decision-making. However, ECR and AT venture mentoring bring unique challenges. ECR mentoring can involve supporting those with a mindset predominantly focused on research and with ideas at a very early TRL, so they may need to emphasise building foundational business skills, which may be less critical in mentoring programmes aimed at founders with more of a business or entrepreneurial background. AT ventures need to balance social impact with commercial viability. They often confront sustainability challenges in markets where access to assistive technology is a perceived right rather than a service, making mentor guidance on business model structuring invaluable.

This playbook, informed by the TIDAL ECR accelerator and the Attvaran AT start-up accelerator programmes, underscores that mentoring, when tailored to the specific needs of founders, can be a transformative force, fostering not only commercial success but meaningful societal impact within disability innovation.

As disability innovation continues to grow in importance globally, the need for robust mentoring programmes will only increase. This playbook is designed to help organisations establish the necessary frameworks to support innovators in their journey from early-stage research to market-ready solutions, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and accessible world for people with disabilities.

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Appendices

The appendices of this playbook are practical tools and materials to assist incubator and accelerator teams to launch mentoring programmes.

Appendix A: Example application form for mentors

Use your expertise to mentor entrepreneurs bringing assistive technology to everyone who needs it

By 2050 there will be an estimated 3.5 billion individuals who will benefit from Assistive Technology (AT), with 90% lacking access. We are seeking mentors to help us tackle this challenge. We support entrepreneurs from seed to growth stage AT ventures addressing the complex challenges of disability interactions. Your expertise in business administration, innovation, or commercialisation will complement your skills and guide you towards success.

As a mentor, you will drive disability innovation towards a fairer world. You'll help entrepreneurs transform their ideas into impactful solutions, expanding both your professional and personal networks. We offer free mentor training, and you can become a certified disability innovation mentor accredited by (*insert your accreditation provide, if relevant*).

Submit the form below to apply to join our mentoring programme and make a significant impact in the world of disability innovation. Become a mentor now and be part of a transformative journey.

Setting expectations

Before we begin, please acknowledge that you are willing to commit to the following key terms and conditions of our mentoring programme.

I commit to:

- Remain an active mentor for 12 months upon my successful application to the programme.
- Recommit to remaining an active mentor or resign from active involvement once a year when prompted to do so by the programme team.
- Communicate directly with an assigned mentee after the matching process has been successfully completed.
- Open my professional networks up to mentees as appropriate.
- Attend quarterly mentor training (approx. 2 hours of live and self-paced learning), during one of several training dates.
- Attend occasional in-person or virtual networking events, subject to my availability.
- Receive communications via email from the programme team, specifically related to the mentor programme.

I commit, let's go!

About you

Great! Thanks for your commitment. To start with, we just need a few personal details to help us to get to know you.

1. What's your name?
2. Where can we contact you?
 - Please provide a valid email address that you are also comfortable sharing with us and your mentees.
3. Which country are you resident in?
 - We ask this to match you with disability innovators from similar cultures and time zones.
4. How old are you, approximately?
 - Knowing this also helps with the matching process and ensures diversity across our mentor network.
 - I prefer not to say.
 - Younger than 30 years old.
 - Between 30 and 40 years old.
 - Between 40 and 50 years old.
 - Between 50 and 60 years old.
 - I'm over 60 years old.
5. What's your gender?
 - Knowing this also helps with the matching process and ensures diversity across our mentor network.
 - I prefer not to say.
 - Female.
 - Male.
 - Other (please self-describe if you wish to).
6. What's your educational background?
 - Please list the subjects you studied and the educational qualifications you achieved.
7. How would you characterise your field(s) of expertise?
 - Please briefly describe your career path, including key roles you have held and the professional experience you have gained, for example sales and marketing manager at Nike for 5 years, or clinical trials administrator at NHS.
8. Where do you currently work? What is your role in the organisation?

Personal and professional experiences

Now, tell us a bit about why you are considering becoming a mentor.

9. What makes you want to become a mentor in disability innovation?
10. Have you ever had a mentor who played a pivotal role in your professional life?
 - If yes, please give us a short description of how it helped you grow.

11. Have you ever mentored early career researchers or other innovators, focusing on research translation or developing an entrepreneurial mindset and skills?
- If yes, please tell us a little more about a successful outcome as a result of your mentoring.

Interpersonal skills and values

12. Please share one success story of your professional life?
13. What is important to you if you are going to be a successful mentor?
14. In a couple of years, what will your mentees say they valued most about your mentoring?
15. What will you take care to avoid doing as a mentor?
16. What have former colleagues appreciated the most about you and the way you work together?

Areas of expertise

17. Which level of technology-readiness and business maturity are you the most excited to work with as a mentor?
- TRL 1 to TRL 3: Incubating innovation ideas, including problem definition, market analysis, and understanding the value proposition.
 - TRL 4 to TRL 6: Accelerating seed stage (pre-revenue) start-up teams, including human-centred product design, prototype iterations, and business administration.
 - TRL 7 to TRL 9: Accelerating early-stage (post-revenue) start-up ventures, including go-to-market strategy, clinical trials, and attracting investment.
 - Growth stage: Scaling the impact of ventures with proven business models to new markets or geographies.
 - I'm open to mentoring innovators and businesses at any stage of maturity.
18. Which of the following areas of expertise are you most comfortable bringing into play during mentoring?
- Disability inclusion.
 - Business administration.
 - Innovation.
 - Deep subject-matter expertise.
19. Disability inclusion: If you selected disability inclusion, please let us know which disability type and assistive technologies you are most familiar with.
- Hearing loss and related assistive technologies
 - Sight loss and related assistive technologies
 - Limb difference and related assistive technologies
 - Mobility impairment and related assistive technologies
 - Speech impairment and related assistive technologies
 - Neurodiversity and related assistive technologies
 - Intersectionality, for example, digital access or inclusive design
 - Other:

20. Business administration: If you selected business administration, please let us know which organisational functions and processes you are most familiar with.

- Business development, leadership and management, such as strategic, operational, project, or change management, including business analysis and goal setting.
- Finance, including financial planning, accounting, and tax compliance.
- Human Resources (HR), such as recruitment and staffing, employee development, and employee relations.
- Marketing, including market research, brand management, advertising, and sales management.
- Operations, such as production, quality management, supply chain management, and logistics.
- Information Technology (IT), including infrastructure development, data management, cyber security, and system development.
- Customer Service, including customer support, customer relationship management, feedback, and impact measurement.
- Research and Development (R&D), such as innovation, product improvement, or technical R&D.
- Legal and Compliance, including regulatory compliance, risk management, and contract management.

21. Innovation: If you selected innovation, please let us know which aspect of innovation you are most familiar with.

- Innovation ecosystems, e.g. the interaction between policy, culture, funding and user need.
- Human-centred design, including design thinking, and understanding users.
- Lean methodology, e.g. agile project management, or rapid validation of value propositions.
- Other (please state):

22. Deep subject-matter expertise: if you selected deep subject-matter expertise, please describe your field of expertise (which may be academic or commercial), including the professional networks you are a part of. For example, local production systems, web application deployment, or digital fabrication.

And finally...

23. Is there anything else you'd like to share with us?

24. Please confirm that we may keep your details on file and contact you in respect of opportunities which arise aligned to your profile above. All details are retained in line with our Privacy Policy (*provide a link to your organisations Privacy Policy*).

- I consent to (*name of your organisation*) processing the information provided in this form and using it to contact me in relation to mentoring opportunities and activities (*add a tick box to your form*).

Confirmation note

Thank you for your application to join our mentoring programme as a mentor. We will review your application and contact you via email with the outcome.

If your application is successful, we will send you details of the next steps, such as mentor training, and opportunities to be matched with your first mentee. In the meantime, thank you for your patience.

Appendix B: Programme structure

The following overview outlines the key steps in implementing and executing a structured mentoring program.

Preparation Phase (1-2 months):

- Set the overall ambitions, goals, and milestones for the mentoring program.
- Create customised content to promote the program to potential mentors and mentees.
- Determine the selection process for mentors and mentees.
- Set up forms for mentor and mentee applications.
- Assess applications.
- Formally recruit mentors and mentees.

Activation Phase (3-4 months):

- Carry out detailed needs assessment sessions with mentees.
- Run a shared kick-off session with mentors and mentees together, to introduce the programme and set expectations.
- Run separate mentor and mentee training sessions.
- Match mentors with mentees.
- Share guidelines for both mentors and mentees.
- Schedule individual sessions and regular check-ins for mentors and mentees.

Evaluation Phase (3-4 months):

- Carry out a feedback process to gather feedback from mentees and share it with mentors.
- Where applicable, complete the mentor certification process (which may involve other formal assessments, depending on your approach).
- Carry out a final survey with mentees to assess the impact of the mentoring programme on mentees. This may be repeated after 6 and/or 12 months to assess longer term impact.
- Mentors and mentees work together to create action plans for mentees.
- Hold a shared graduation and celebration for mentors and mentees.

Appendix C: Assessing mentorability

'Mentorability' may be defined as the extent to which someone is open to being mentored and is likely to benefit from it.

It is not always easy to determine the mentorability of the applicant based solely on their application form, but in an interview there are a number of questions which help you to assess this.

Asking someone for examples that demonstrate how they have used a particular quality will give you more insight into someone's actual qualities and skills than asking whether they have them or what they would do in a hypothetical situation.

Bearing in mind the importance of increasing diversity amongst AT innovators and entrepreneurs, note that the interview situation is an example where it may be necessary to make 'reasonable adjustments' to how the interview is carried out, what is expected of the interviewee, and the assessment criteria, to enable the interviewee to perform at their best, and for their performance to be assessed appropriately. It may even be that an interview is not an appropriate assessment method at all.

Are they open to feedback?

- Does the applicant show a genuine desire to learn? How can they evidence this? (For example, what personal development and training have they undertaken in the last year? What new opportunities have they embraced to learn new skills?)
- Are they curious and show an open mindset to this opportunity for mentoring? Do they ask questions about what it involves?
- Are they open to receiving feedback and show a positive attitude towards it? What examples can they give where they have been given challenging feedback and how they responded? What examples can they give which demonstrate how they have been open to exploring new perspectives and ideas, even if they challenged their current way of thinking?

Motivation

- Notice if they show up on time and how well-prepared they are for the interview

You could ask:

- What is your primary motivation to join this mentoring programme?
- What does success look like to you? What do you need to do to get there?
- What are your expectations of a mentor? This will tease out whether they are looking for someone to solve a problem for them. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, but it isn't the role of a mentor, and they may be best advised to find a suitably qualified advisor.

Initiative and taking responsibility

- What examples can they give that demonstrate their ability to take the initiative?
- What examples can they give of where they have taken responsibility for their actions and the outcomes of those?

- Someone more advanced in their entrepreneurial journey should have a clear picture of their goals and their business purpose and be able to articulate their role in delivering those.
- They should also be able to articulate their challenges and be aware of what kind of support they need, so for those more advanced in their journey, you can ask directly about these. Watch out for applicants who blame others or their surroundings for the challenges they have met on the way: someone who blames others may be less aware of their own role in events and less open to taking responsibility for themselves and their actions, which is necessary to benefit from mentoring
- It is important to remember that innovators at the earliest stages of their entrepreneurial journey may not even be aware of the kinds of founder skills they need to develop and may not be able to articulate business goals and purpose. For them, help with defining and developing these may be precisely what they need from mentoring.

Self-awareness

A mentorable person has insight into their strengths, weaknesses and potential, or is at least willing to explore what those might be. Direct questions about weaknesses are best avoided as, in an interview situation, they are likely to yield answers where a strength is presented as a weakness, which won't really tell you anything. For example: 'I am really committed to my work, so I have to be careful to make sure I don't take on too much and that I delegate properly. I have become a really good delegator'. It may be better to ask questions like, 'A good team enables everyone to play to their strengths in pursuit of a common goal. What qualities, strengths and experience would you bring in to your team in order to complement your own'. If they can answer this, it will tell you that they do have an awareness of their strengths and weaknesses. It doesn't really matter at this stage what those are: you are just looking for an awareness of them. An acceptable answer might also be for someone to say that, one thing they would like from a mentor would be help identifying their strengths, weaknesses and potentials: they are aware that they need to be more self-aware, even if they aren't aware of these qualities yet.

Depending on where someone is in their journey, you could also ask, 'If you were to bring investors on board, what weaker aspects of your business do you think they would pay special attention to?'

When asking about strengths, ask people to give examples of situations where they have used their strengths to achieve a goal.

Listening skills

Listening skills are very important for the mentee as well as mentor.

You could ask applicants how they have used their listening skills in the past to gain an insight into their strengths and weaknesses, or to support another aspect of their personal development, or to solve a problem.

Although as a general guide, someone with good listening skills will pay attention listen while you talk, not interrupt, and will demonstrate a good balance between

listening and talking, be cautious about judging someone's listening skills based on their behaviour in the interview.

It is important to recognise that neurodivergent individuals may respond differently in interview situations and may behave differently from a neurotypical person when trying to focus and listen. For example, someone with autism may rock or fidget to help them focus, may find it hard to maintain eye contact, or experience overload if asked long or complicated questions, and be unable to process what is being asked. Similarly, people with certain disabilities may not be able to perform the physical actions that we typically associate with listening, such as nodding, smiling or sitting forward. A deaf person may not be able to understand your questions properly if you don't look directly at them when you speak, or if you obscure your mouth with your hand, preventing them from lip reading, so they are unable to give appropriate answers that indicate they have been listening to what you say. These behaviours and responses do not in themselves indicate that someone is low on mentorability. Rather, they may signal that the programme manager needs to think carefully about who an applicant is paired with and how the mentoring is delivered for the applicant to be able to benefit from it.

Their commitment

You may want to ask about their commitment to the programme. You could ask:

- What does success look like to you? What do you need to do to get there?
- What kind of support do you think you need to be successful?
- What are your expectations for how much time you will need to invest in your mentoring relationship to harness this support?
- What will you do to make sure that this time is ring-fenced and not eroded by other priorities?
- What examples can you give to demonstrate how you usually react when things get tough?
- How do you make yourself accountable for your own progress?