



NERC SENSE CDT Recruitment: EDI Best Practices

The aim of this document is to provide a consolidated list of suggested actions for PhD student recruitment, that follow equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) best practices. This is not intended to act as a summary of legal requirements. In the absence of guidelines on this topic, this document was written by the NERC SENSE Centre for Doctoral Training (CDT), referred to as 'we' in this document, using our experience of practices we have implemented, or will implement during our PhD recruitment process. This is a working document that will continue to evolve, and we certainly don't presume to cover all the best practices for PhD student recruitment. We always welcome comments, corrections and suggestions of further improvements that we can make. We hope this document will be a practically useful resource for other CDTs and Doctoral Training Programmes (DTPs) to improve their PhD student recruitment processes in the future, in order to build happy, diverse, cohorts of students that will enrich the scientific community for decades to come.

These guidelines have been organised into four sections which corresponds to the four main stages of PhD student recruitment. This includes PhD project design, PhD advertising, the interview selection process and the interviews themselves.

1. PhD Project Design

- We ask that PhD project supervisory teams strive to be diverse, for example including academics with a mix of gender, ethnicity and career stage, in the same way that breadth of subject expertise is considered.
- We require that academics collaborate with industry partners on PhD projects, as the visibility of career opportunities beyond academia are a key consideration for some groups.
 - All SENSE students will do a 3-month industry internship - this is largely through formal CASE partnerships
- We ask that academics use inclusive language in the PhD project description, the links below provide good advice on this topic and can be used to check the language in project descriptions*¹:
 - <http://gender-decoder.katmatfield.com/>
 - <https://www.totaljobs.com/insidejob/gender-bias-decoder/>
- We include a clear statement of eligibility for applicants on our website, which explicitly encourages applications from underrepresented groups.
 - We also provide names and contacts details of the centre managers who can answer questions about applying and provide assistance, and clearly state that they are not on the recruitment panels.

¹ Items indicated with a "*" represent best practices that will be newly implemented by SENSE in the 2020/2021 recruitment round, following research and discussions with our colleagues to improve our process.





2. PhD Advertisement

- We will advertise PhD projects beyond common sites such as findaphd.com, with adverts also posted specifically to BAME groups. The list below is a good set of suggested options, which we hope will grow over time*:
 - Many are listed here: <https://www.geolsoc.org.uk/About/Diversity/resources/race-ethnicity>
 - Stuart Hall Foundation <http://stuarthallfoundation.org/>
 - Black British in STEM <https://bbstem.co.uk/>
 - Minorities in STEM <https://minoritiesinstem.wordpress.com/>
 - Pride in STEM <https://prideinstem.org>
 - STEM Disability Advisory Committee <http://stemdisability.org.uk/>
 - Diversity in UK Polar Science Initiative <https://www.bas.ac.uk/project/diversity-in-uk-polar-science-initiative/>
 - Minorities in Polar Research <https://www.polarimpactnetwork.org/>
 - Equate Scotland <https://equatecareerhub.org.uk/>
- We will also advertising PhD project opportunities specifically to ethnically diverse universities. The list below is a good set of suggested options, which we hope will grow over time*:
 - Aston, Queen Mary, Kings, UCL, Leicester, Royal Holloway
 - <https://thetab.com/uk/student/2016/02/12/revealed-the-most-ethnically-diverse-unis-629>
- We will create fact sheets, run short webinars and set up discussion groups to freely and openly communicate advice about what a PhD is, and how to write a good application, and tips and tricks for interviews, for applicants that may not have access to this information*.

3. Interview Selection Process

- We require that the recruitment committee takes or refreshes their unconscious bias training in advance of the recruitment process.
- We anonymise all application documents before being read by recruitment committee, in order to reduce unconscious bias. This includes redacting the name, and gender indicative wording in all application documents.
 - This is a time-consuming, but essential, manual job which we very much hope will be automated by the university in the future, however, we found that allocating a week of time and using the Xodo software or Adobe's redact tool was the best solution currently available.
- We ask that academics are asked to write gender neutral references, in order to reduce the time required for the anonymising task*
 - We ask that the applicant is referred to as they/them and without name
 - We also include a link to 'Academic Gender Bias in Reference Writing' in the reference page <https://www.utc.edu/national-scholarships/faculty-resources/avoiding-bias-in-reference-letters.php>





- The recruitment committee and supervisors grade all applications quantitatively on pre-defined criteria
 - The theory is that quantitative ranking helps remove any unconscious bias, but we did also leave room for written comments
- We carefully considered criteria the candidates are graded on
 - Industry experienced treated equal as academic experience
 - De-emphasised scores for masters degrees (*new)
- We will guarantee interviews for appointable applicants from underrepresented groups*
 - This year (2020/2021 recruitment) SENSE are guaranteeing interview slots for up to 50% of our previous years interview allocation, for underrepresented groups. This includes for example BAME or disabled applicants². Gender is not one of SENSE's underrepresented categories as we are happy to report that 53% of SENSE's previous years intake are female, and 47% male.
 - If we find that ring-fencing interview opportunities fails to deliver a diverse cohort of PhD students, we will consider implementing the ringfencing of PhD studentships for underrepresented groups in future years – For example, the White Rose DTP has ring-fenced 2 PhD studentships this year: <https://wrctp.ac.uk/studentships/ring-fenced-pathway-awards/>

4. Interviews

- We ensure that invitations to interview are sent with sufficient notice to allow for preparation, considering that the applicant may have pre-existing and immovable caring or financial commitments.
- We make clear to all interviewees that their decision about whether to accept an in-person or virtual interview slot will have no bearing on the outcome of the interview.
- We check the set of interview questions with an EDI coordinator.
 - It almost goes without saying that the same interview questions are asked to all students.
- It is mandatory that there are no single-sex or homogenous shortlisting panels or interview panels
- We quantitatively grade the interviewee responses on pre-defined criteria.

² As of 19th June 2020 the Leeds Doctoral College committed to collecting and providing to CDTs and DTPs the UKRI required EDI data of **all PhD applicants**, not just those who are awarded studentships. This data, which was not provided in previous years, will be available to the centres at the time of application, thus enabling us to guarantee interviews for appointable candidates from underrepresented groups, such as BAME or disabled students.



- We use a calibration grid for each interview questions, which defines the criteria for a poor, good, excellent and exceptional answer, and therefore their associated grade.
 - We have found that this provides a robust framework around which the interview panel can agree on final marks, and has the additional benefit of calibrating grades between rooms when interviews are conducted in parallel.
 - The SENSE calibration grid from the Year 1 recruitment round is available on request
- We ask a number of interview questions in the format of a practical test, providing an opportunity for students to demonstrate their capability on the key skills that are being recruited on, reducing the burden on providing descriptive answers.
 - Applicants are informed the general nature of these practical tests in advance
- We record a quantitative, overall interview score is for each applicant, and use this information to rank and then select the applicants that offers are made to.

We welcome suggestions and comments, and hope this document may be useful to other CDT and DTPs in their recruitment processes.

Signed,

SENSE Management team

September 2020

Appendix 1: SENSE Year 1 calibration grid

Please note that the logos on this page are of SENSE's organisations and funders, and does not necessarily infer that this is the policy positions of these organisations.

