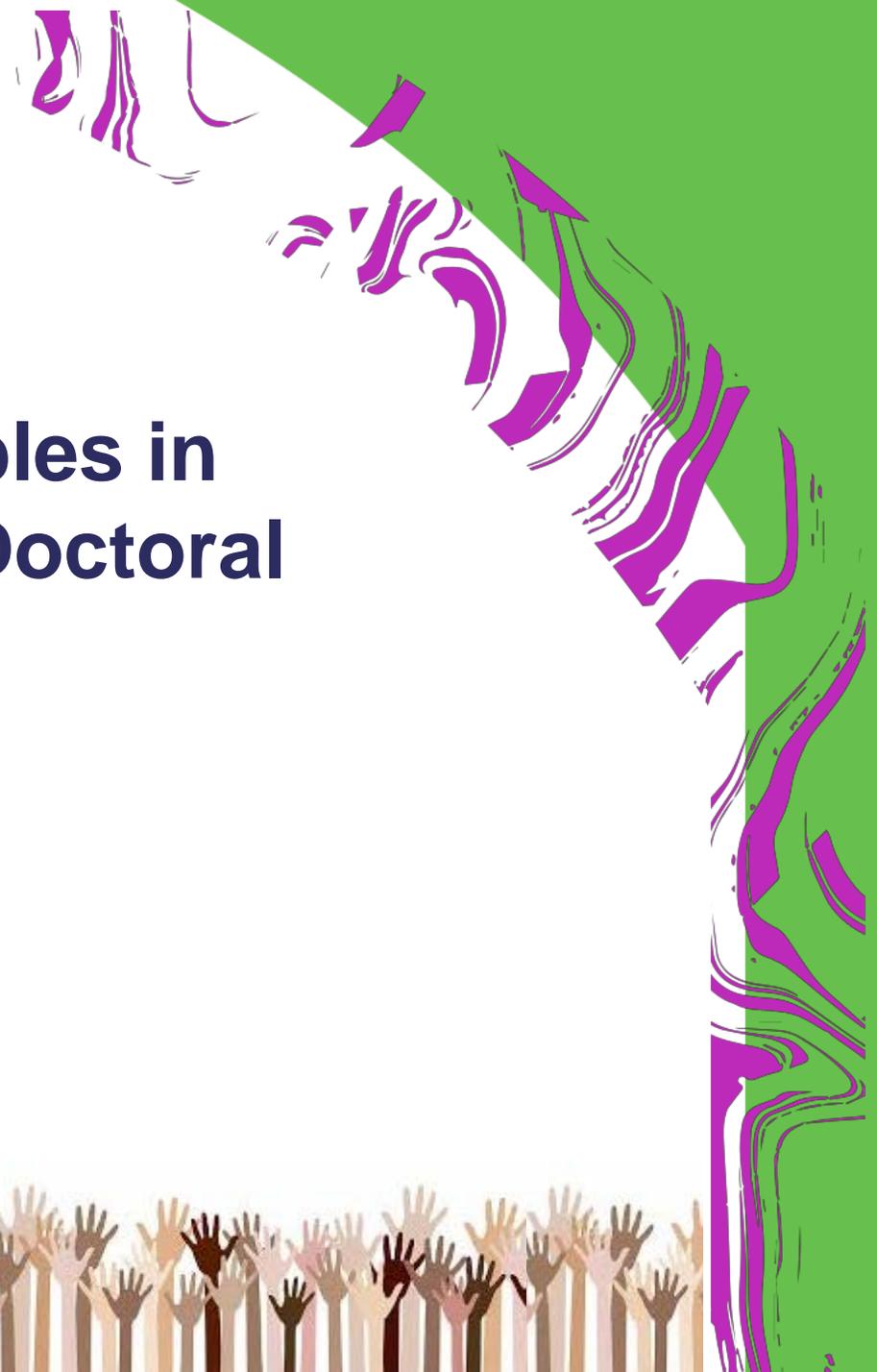




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NERC Best Practice Principles in Recruitment & Training at Doctoral Level

Edition 1 published December 2021.



Background: UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) Strategic Drivers

- Rory Duncan (UKRI Director of Talent & Skills) releases statement outlining Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) obligations for Centres for Doctoral Training (CDTs) / Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs) (September 2020)
- UKRI Corporate Plan (published October 2020)
 - Includes **priority objective** to develop a DEI programme to harness the power of diverse approaches, and to develop our research evaluation policy specifically to reward openness and diversity in research.
- Report on Diversity Results for UKRI funding data 2014-2019 and Tableau Public dashboard (published 2021)
 - Harmonised diversity data on funding applicants and recipients of research council grants.
 - Data highlighted diversity challenges e.g. the NERC proportion of students identifying as an ethnic minority has been consistently lower than the UKRI and postgraduate population (HESA estimate) for diversity data between 2014-2019, whilst studentships awarded to those aged 29 and under have been consistently higher.
- R&D People and Culture Strategy (published July 2021)
 - Proposed government strategy: “we must work together to diversify and widen routes into R&D and inspire people from all backgrounds to consider careers in the sector...we must also ensure that people want to stay in R&D by creating a positive working environment.”
- UKRI Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy (due ~December 2021)

Background: NERC Strategic Drivers

- **Increasing NERC & Community Concern over Diversity in Environmental Sciences**
- **NERC Responsible Business Statement (published July 2020) and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Living Action Plan 2021-2024 (due ~December 2021)**
 - Sets out NERC's approach and commitment to sustainability and corporate responsibility to prioritise actions, including DEI commitments.
 - Acknowledges as a funder we have a responsibility to encourage an inclusive and diverse grant holder community.
- **NERC Collaborative Inclusivity Community Roundtable Discussions & Report (June 2021)**
 - Over 60 attendees openly shared their insights, experiences, and examples of best practice over 6 roundtables.
 - To identify how collective action can be taken to better embed diversity into all aspects of environmental science.
 - The summary report highlighted 'Directed opportunities', 'Fair policies and processes', 'Diverse representation' and 'Training and development' as 'Action Hotspots' identified by participants in the roundtable series.

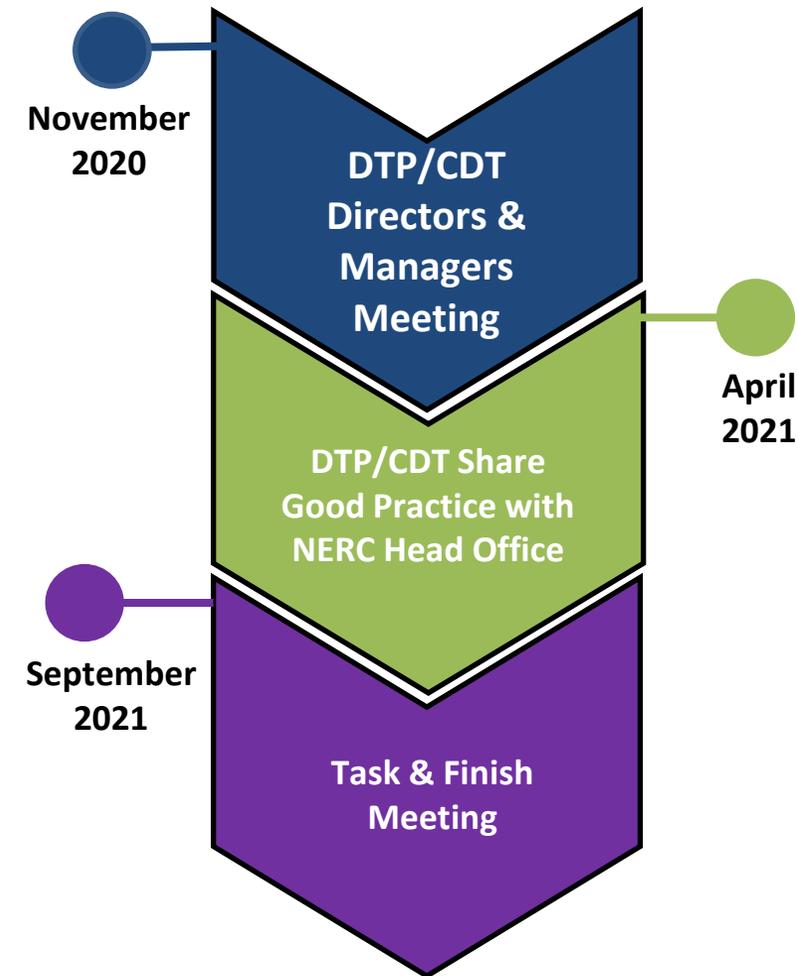
Background: NERC Best Practice in Doctoral Recruitment & Training

- As part of NERC's commitment to DEI, NERC held a meeting with our training grant holders on the potential for changes to training investments to address widening participation (November 2020).

Through this meeting a number of actions were agreed:

- NERC training grant holders to share with Head Office the current practice, policy and actions being taken currently to widen participation and access within their Centres for Doctoral Training (CDTs) / Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs) (completed April 2021).
- NERC to convene a Task and Finish Group Meeting of the NERC Advisory Network to develop a set of minimum expectations for student recruitment to address the ambition of widening participation (meeting held September 2021).

The resulting set of **Best Practice Principles for Doctoral Recruitment & Training**, and expectations of training grant holders, are shared [here](#).



Best practice recommendations in the doctoral recruitment and training process for NERC training grant holders with the aim of widening participation.

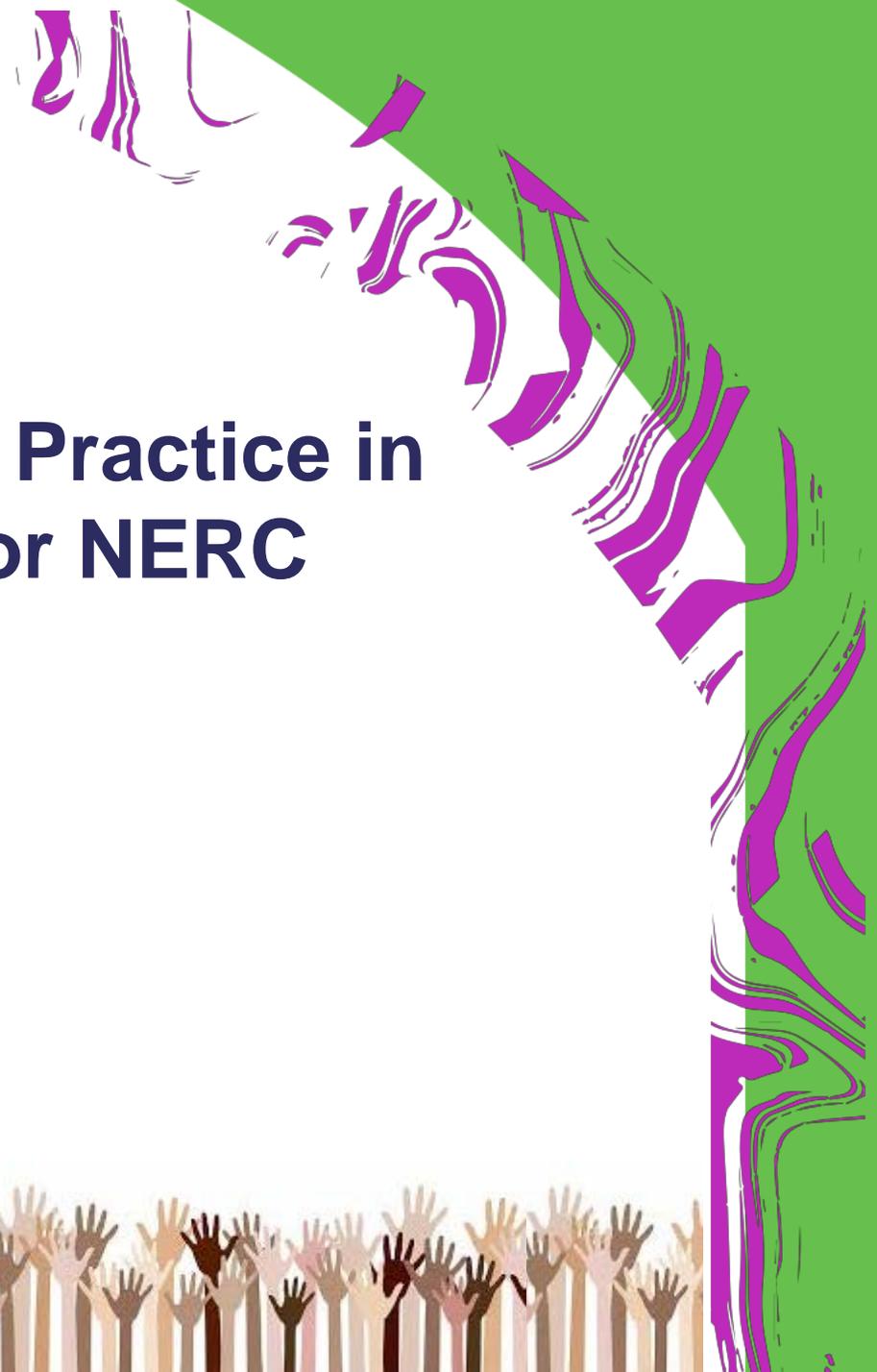
Expectations of Training Grant Holders

- NERC is sharing this set of best practice principles across 4 key stages of the doctoral recruitment and training process. These principles set out **the minimum considerations for training grant holders in implementation, monitoring and reporting.**
- **NERC expects CDTs and DTPs to start, or continue implementing, the most appropriate best practice principles for their model from the recruitment of students starting in October 2022 (e.g. DTP2 Cohort 4).** CDTs and DTPs should monitor, and will be expected to report on, any evidence of improved/changed practices and build in considerations of changes into future recruitment and training cycles. Those no longer recruiting should focus on changes related to the stages 'Nurturing Talent' and 'Monitoring & Reporting'.
- Further information and examples of **how** these principles can be met (including actions training grant holders should consider) are included in the following slides. It is the responsibility of the individual CDT/DTP to employ the most appropriate actions for their model, ensuring they are sound in law.
- The CDT/DTP should consider the planned timescales over which each principle is considered, whether that is within the current recruitment round, by the next recruitment round or through future NERC doctoral investments
- As stated in the September 2020 letter from Rory Duncan outlining DEI obligations for CDTs and DTPs, positive action and ring-fenced funding for recruitment initiatives is allowable where there is evidence of under-representation or disadvantage. It is the responsibility of the training grant holder (the director or other lead) to ensure that such initiatives are compliant and are delivered in line with the relevant equality legislation.



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Recommendations on Best Practice in Recruitment and Training for NERC Training Grant Holders



Recruitment & training stages

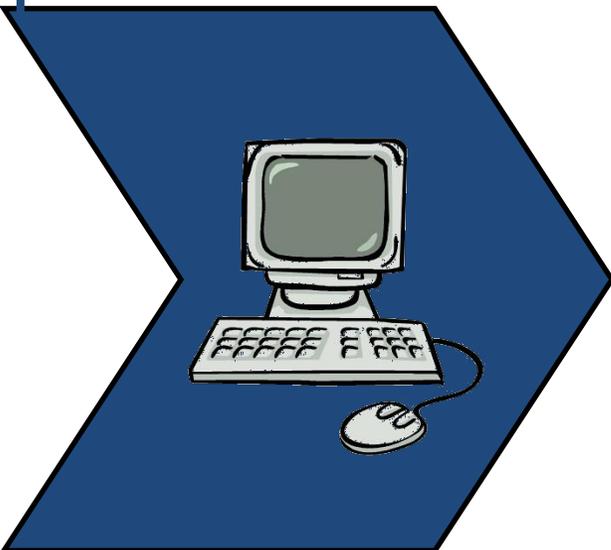
For the purpose of these recommendations, the stages of recruitment and training have been described as shown in the diagram below:



Project design	Applicant shortlisting	Management structures	Monitoring & reporting
Advertisement	Interviews	Training & supervision	
Applicant support	Assessing potential	Support & expertise	

Finding talent

The following principles aim to make the PhD pathway accessible and attract potential applicants who may not currently view a PhD as accessible to them.



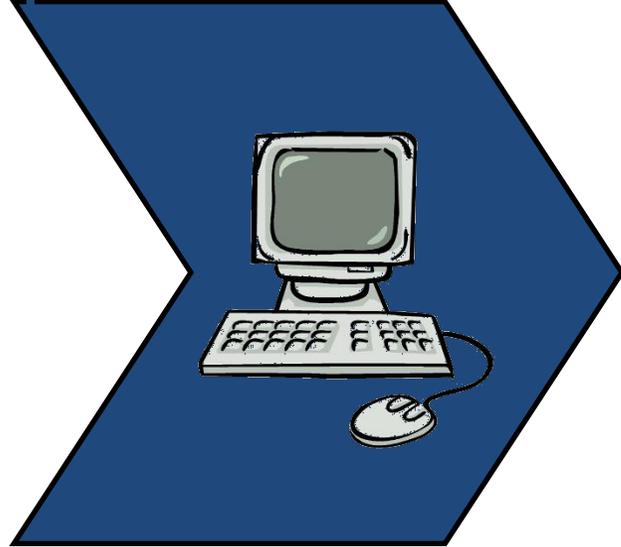
Project design

Advertisement

Applicant support

Principle	Comments and Examples
Collaboration with non-academic partners encouraged where appropriate.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To improve visibility of career opportunities beyond academia and help attract applicants from more diverse disciplines. - E.g. Industry, government bodies, NGOs.
Clear communication of support available throughout studentship.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - From proposal stage onwards. - E.g. Opportunities for part-time/remote study, flexible fieldwork, funding for disabled students' needs.
Inclusive use of language in all communications.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Language checked for bias (e.g. gender decoder; able-bodied terminology); correct terminology/categories used; avoid loaded words e.g. 'Leaders'; staff add personal pronouns to email signatures where comfortable.
Broad advertisement networks beyond "business-as-usual" CDT/DTP/university websites and FindAPhD used regularly.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support for and use of targeted networks/universities/departments; social media is critical to reach underrepresented groups at undergraduate level. - E.g. Targeted summer school / placements (REPs) / visits.

Finding talent



Project design

Advertisement

Applicant support

Principle	Comments and Examples
<p>CDT/DTP specific PhD destination data / case studies published.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To evidence how a PhD can be used as a career step, what the research is contributing to and its importance. - Case studies should be reflective of different career trajectories and experiences.
<p>Ensure imagery, case studies and personal profiles are truly reflective of a diverse community.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To increase visibility of current diversity and associated commitments, and encourage a broad range of applicants by ensuring they see themselves reflected in materials. - E.g. DEI statements/policies, imagery & person-profiles, diversity webpages.
<p>The application process is transparent yet rigorous.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To reduce inequalities from coaching bias. Transparency in assessment criteria, and candidate support provided where appropriate. - E.g. Dedicated process & contacts for applicant queries e.g. signposting visa/immigration advice & supervisor contacts; Increased transparency in application and interview process e.g. online guidance, Q&A sessions or published merit criteria; Guided application forms. - This must be balanced with the need to assess intellectual capacity via the application process.

Shortlisting & Interviews



Applicant shortlisting

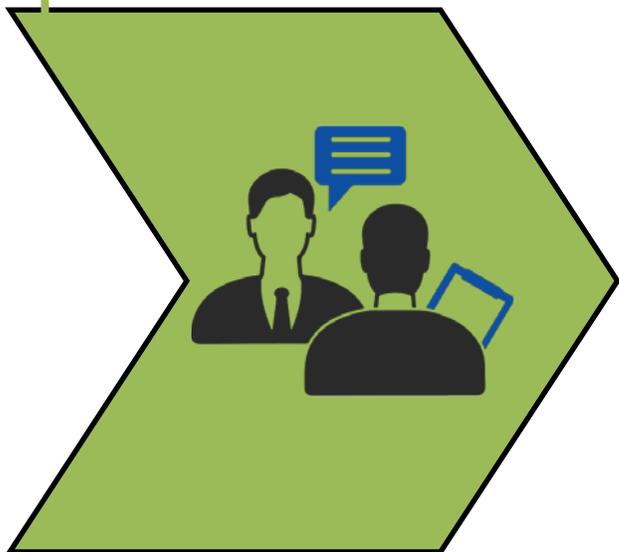
Interviews

Assessing potential

The following principles aim to ensure the applicant shortlisting and interview process is fair and transparent.

Principle	Comments and Examples
Appropriate panels for each recruitment cycle.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Consider the diversity and representation of the Recruitment Panel e.g. gender/ethnicity/career stage. - Consider how the panel can be kept up to date on recruitment practices/criteria. - Other examples include Independent DEI observer present throughout to report on the selection process; mandatory DEI/unconscious bias training.
View of 'excellence' in the applicant assessment criteria is broad and beyond standard grade-based definitions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To incorporate criteria based on candidate potential and suitability for PhD study. - E.g. Reduced emphasis on grades/degrees/awarding institution/references; contextualised applications via narrative descriptions of experiences/declare belong to an under-represented group; scoring criteria broadened to enable comparison of standard academic achievements (e.g. paper authorship) with non-standard achievements (e.g. working to fund studies/ industry experience); use of competency-based questions or practical tests where appropriate.

Shortlisting & Interviews



Applicant shortlisting

Interviews

Assessing potential

Principle	Comments and Examples
<p>The application scoring process is fair and transparent.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - E.g. Use of standardised quantitative shortlisting matrix with pre-defined scoring criteria; option for written supporting statements; consideration of the same submitted documents per applicant; justification required in systems where supervisors nominate a top candidate; consider hiding CASE and international awards until after final candidate ranking has taken place; anonymisation of applications (incorporated into certain stages of the process). - Clear guidance provided for those involved in recruiting process.
<p>Applicant's needs and/or preferences met at interviews where special adjustments required.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Consider the most appropriate interview structure. - Aim to provide as much information as possible to candidates/panellists in advance, e.g. dates & schedule, reasonable adjustment requests. - Aim to be increase flexibility and accommodate variable circumstances where possible e.g. dates; choice of remote/in-person interview provided with no bias towards either option; interview expenses covered where appropriate/possible.

Nurturing talent



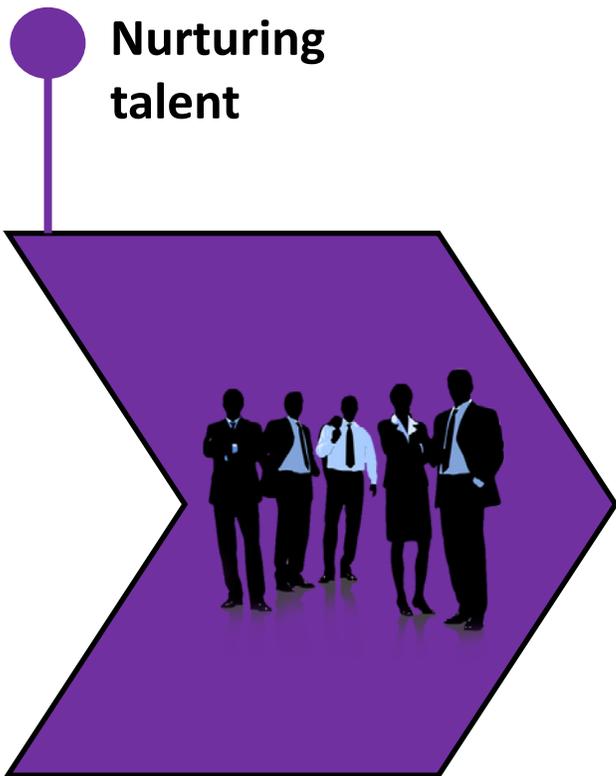
Management structures

Training & supervision

Support & expertise

The following principles aim to make the student training experience as inclusive as possible.

Principle	Comments and Examples
Inclusive CDT/DTP Management Team.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Consider the diversity and representation of the Management Team e.g. gender/ethnicity/career stage; dedicated Head/Team for inclusivity endeavours.
Inclusive supervision process and teams.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Consider the diversity and representation of the Supervisory Team e.g. gender/ethnicity/career stage; use of co-supervisors/supervisory teams; DEI/unconscious bias training. - Ensure mechanisms for supervisors to receive adequate support.
Appropriate DEI training for all students and staff.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Made mandatory.
Use of mentoring where appropriate.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Available to students and staff. - The mentor should be matched to the mentee's needs, e.g. Independent Training Advisor outside of academic supervisory team; mentor with same protected characteristic. - Ensure mechanisms for mentors to receive adequate support.



Nurturing talent

Management structures

Training & supervision

Support & expertise

Principle	Comments and Examples
<p>Inclusive cohort training events.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide as much information as possible in advance, e.g. dates & schedule, pre-work, information on physicality & reasonable adjustment requests. - Increase flexibility and accommodate variable circumstances where possible e.g. part-time students; provisions for those with caring responsibilities to attend residential events.
<p>Appropriate signposting mechanisms employed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Signposting should be designed so that students can easily obtain the most up-to-date and appropriate information & support resources. - Consider the most appropriate place to publish information e.g. CDT/DTP websites vs. hosting Research Organisation pages. - Policies and practices easily accessible to students and clearly explained under induction and training.
<p>Effective communication structures between students and staff.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Between individual students, staff and CDT/DTP Management Team e.g. dedicated email/phone contact, open meetings, regular bulletins. - Consider use of Student Representatives/representation groups e.g. LGBTQ+ societies, 'race champions', and their input into Management team meetings.

Monitoring & reporting should be used effectively to foster a diverse and inclusive environment.

Principle	Comments and Examples
Full set of applicant characteristic data collected.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- At each stage of recruitment process to meet NERC reporting requirements.- Consider a centralised application process or standardised DEI form for CDT/DTP applicants (rather than each hosting partner operating independently).- Clear communications around why the data are being collected and the option to not disclose.
Recruitment process kept under timely review.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Use of mechanisms such as applicant/panel feedback; Equality Impacts Assessments for any significant CDT/DTP changes and/or for individual students e.g. a live document throughout PhD.



Monitoring & reporting

Next steps...

- NERC expects CDTs and DTPs to start or continue implementing, the most appropriate best practice principles for their model starting from the recruitment of students starting in October 2022 (e.g. DTP Cohort 4). CDTs and DTPs should monitor and will be expected to report on any evidence of improved/changed practices and build in considerations of changes into future recruitment and training cycles. Those no longer recruiting should focus on changes related to Nurturing Talent & Monitoring & Reporting.
- NERC recognises that training grant models differ, that DTPs may be mid-recruitment cycle for the fourth cohort starting in October 2022, and CDTs will be at various stages of recruitment.
- **By Autumn 2022 NERC will collect information on the use and impacts of the best practice implemented to inform future doctoral training investments, through annual reporting cycles and monitoring visits.**
- **Indicators of success would include elements of these best practice principles having been thoughtfully implemented, monitored and reported on through annual reporting and monitoring cycles, and lessons learnt considered for future implementation, enabling continuous improvement to address DEI related challenges.**