



DEI Forum Report 2023

**Recommendations &
best practice from
NERC DTPs & CDTs**

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- *ECORISC CDT*
- *ENVISION DTP*
- *NERC CDT in Oil & Gas*
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**Natural
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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Acronym	Definition
CASE	Collaborative Awards in Science and Engineering
CDT	Centre for Doctoral Training
DEI	Diversity Equity and Inclusion
DTP	Doctoral Training Partnership
DTP3	Doctoral Training Partnerships phase 3
FAQs	Frequently Asked Questions
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
HMRC	Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning +
NERC	Natural Environment Research Council
PGR	Postgraduate Researcher
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy
REPs	Research Experience Placements
STEM	Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
UG	Undergraduate
UKRI	United Kingdom Research and Innovation

MISSION STATEMENT

We are a grassroots collective, comprising staff in the NERC Doctoral Training Partnership (DTP) & Centre for Doctoral Training (CDT) community with aspirations towards a more diverse, equal and inclusive academic landscape. Whether we are full-time DEI Champions, or Managers and Directors dedicated to making a difference, within our DTPs & CDTs each of us has contributed towards this shared future. Through specific, evidence-based examples, this report seeks to share best practice and recommendations to improve Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) across all DTPs & CDTs and, in turn, encourage positive long-term change within the wider NERC community.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report represents the collective voice of NERC DTPs & CDTs, demonstrating the reality of nurturing Diversity, Equality and Inclusion at the ground level from the perspectives of staff and students. Individually, we have faced common barriers towards improving DEI within our host universities and honed our expertise in realising DEI through extensive research and project delivery.

From our unique vantage point, we have identified 5 key themes of DEI recommendations, evidenced by case studies from our DTPs & CDTs including examples of successful DEI projects, common barriers towards progression, and examples of best practice. We believe these should form the focus of future, embedded NERC DEI initiatives in conjunction with the [NERC DEI living action plan](#) and [NERC best practice principles in doctoral recruitment](#).

For these recommendations to support NERC and its community in becoming the frontrunner of DEI in innovation and academic research, and achieving the aims laid out in the [NERC DEI living action plan](#), they should be integrated into NERC's strategy for clear actioning.



The 5 key recommendation themes:

- 1. Clear Guidance & Policies**
- 2. Feedback Best Practice**
- 3. Centralised Resource Hub**
- 4. Data Collection & Reporting**
- 5. Project Longevity & Impact**

KEY ACTIONS

Process-related (short-term)

1: Clear Guidance & Policies

- Provision of increased, clear guidance from NERC, with mandatory and non-mandatory recommendations clearly distinguished.

2: Feedback Best Practice

- Publish a NERC DEI point-of-contact for queries and issues from DTPs/CDTs.
- Keep a record of DEI Officers employed at NERC and at NERC DTPs/CDTs.
- Establish and maintain a centralised network of DEI leads at NERC and across DTPs & CDTs.
- Host regular DTP/CDT-led DEI feedback sessions, including workshops to feed evidenced best practice up to NERC for wider implementation.
- Report feedback from completed REPs to DTPs/CDTs as well as NERC.

Structural and resource-related (long-term)

3: Centralised Resource Hub

- Create a centralised, online resource platform available to all NERC DTPs/CDTs.
- Provide centralised online training for DEI leads to learn important foundations and implications for effective DEI work.
- Regular, NERC-led opportunities for networking and sharing of best practice.

For the future

We urge the entire NERC DEI community to not only reflect on the contents of this report, but use it as a starting point to implement real action towards a better shared future. We hope to work together with NERC to achieve this and propose a follow-up meeting with NERC and its DTPs & CDTs to form an action plan and discuss progress towards the recommendations outlined above.

4: Data Collection & Reporting

- Make existing protected characteristic categories on DEI reporting forms more inclusive; include categories beyond the necessary protected characteristics.
- Transparency: publish NERC's aggregated DEI data across all DTPs & CDTs, to aid in targeting DEI efforts.
- Centralise NERC DEI data collection for DTPs & CDTs, providing specific guidance on data collection to ensure standardisation.
- In the long-term, encourage UKRI to press universities to standardise PGR data collection, in a system comparable to UG data collection via UCAS

5: Project Longevity & Impact

- Create permanent DEI roles for each DTP & CDT, or for regions covering several DTPs/CDTs.
- Ensure DEI values are written directly into all funding, including the upcoming DTP3 applications.

Theme 1: Clear Guidance & Policies

1.1 DEI GUIDANCE

Areas requiring specific guidance:

- a. Anonymising applications
- b. Contextual admissions
- c. Reducing interview bias
- d. Partial randomisation in recruitment
- e. Providing reasonable adjustments (including funding extensions)
- f. Implementing positive action in universities (including legal advice)



Several NERC funded DTPs/CDTs have already implemented ringfenced studentships/interviews/REPs. Guidance from NERC on this topic would benefit DTPs/CDTs by demonstrating the benefits of ringfencing, and how to implement it legally within the current parameters of the Equality Act 2010. Supporting DTP & CDT engagement with the often complex and bureaucratic university legal systems would be particularly beneficial.

For example, sharing evidence that can be used to prove positive action (e.g. where there is already a precedent for ringfencing, UK population data, PGR population data, evidence of underrepresentation in STEM more generally) could immensely help the process of DTPs/CDTs assembling successful proposals for ringfenced scholarships.

Case Study: Ringfenced studentships

Panorama DTP hired a full-time DEI Officer with its NERC DEI Flexible funding. The obvious lack of diversity evident in their DEI data, particularly for ethnic groups, led the role to be primarily focused on improving diversity in recruitment for the final two funded cohorts.

Given that, at the time, there were only two remaining recruitment rounds for Panorama, ringfencing a proportion of studentships was an attractive option. Approval was immediately gained from the relevant school within the university, and tentative plans were made to ringfence 10% of the studentships for the following UK/Home-fees underrepresented groups: black, Asian and minority ethnic groups, disabled persons and those from a disadvantaged socio-economic background.

However, the process to obtain University legal approval lacked transparency and was difficult to navigate. A 30 page proposal was drafted, evidencing the underrepresentation via Panorama and University PGR data, UK census information, academic references and reports from higher education institutes and DEI bodies.

Despite the compelling evidence, the proposal significantly delayed by the legal team, in part due to fundamental misunderstandings of PGR funding and DTPs, in part due to a lack of sector-wide data.

Thankfully, in the end the proposal was approved and the ringfencing implemented successfully, with two students in the penultimate Panorama cohort due to start under the ringfencing scheme.



However, it took 4 months to gain approval, and consequently, the logistics of the ringfencing had to be managed *after* the project application deadline. This severely limited Panorama’s ability to advertise its available opportunities for underrepresented groups, which also included webinars for prospective applicants.

While the ringfencing was ultimately a success, the circumstances highlight several key flaws:

1. the burden of DEI work often exceeds the capacities of DTPs & CDTs who do not have full-time DEI officers
2. the lack of NERC PGR DEI data available to DTPs & CDTs hinders attempts to implement positive action, and
3. guidance from NERC is needed to enable and support DTPs & CDTs to navigate the intricate complexities of the Equality Act 2010 and associated university legal systems and bureaucracy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There are many areas in which there is a current absence of clear and consistent guidance for DTPs & CDTs, and increased guidance from NERC would be a significant benefit. These include (but are not limited to) the areas detailed in the above sections.

Mandatory and non-mandatory DEI recommendations for DTPs & CDTs should be clearly distinguished (e.g. via a traffic-light system).

1.2 PUBLISHING PGR CONTRACTS WITH FULL T&Cs

- a. If this should already be happening at DTP/CDT level, significant additional guidance from NERC is required.
- b. Guidance on policy hierarchy is needed. It is currently unclear when NERC policies should be prioritised over university policies.
- c. This information should be provided to new PGRs, either via the DTP/CDT or more directly in a bespoke NERC DTP/CDT handbook.

HIGHLIGHTED EXAMPLE

A lack of clear guidance has a detrimental effect on DTPs & CDTs, and more importantly on the students they support. For example, many landlords and letting agents require employment/proof of income contracts from prospective tenants in order for them to secure rented accommodation.

Furthermore, one CDT had a student who took maternity leave, covered by UKRI stipend payment conditions, but who was unable to return to study for financial reasons. HMRC didn't class PhD posts as being students, so the individual was unable to claim certain benefits related to child/family or tax discounts. NERC was contacted to press them to speak to HMRC, and although they indicated that they had other similar cases, nothing happened, and the individual permanently withdrew in order to take another full-time role with a garden centre, which paid more and allowed her and her partner to claim benefits. The CDT considered this an extremely significant loss, especially when the UKRI grants cover maternity pay but can't help with return to work. Clear guidance and additional support from NERC would significantly aid in student retention in such cases.

Similar issues are experienced by students who develop chronic illnesses or disabilities during their PhD and therefore require additional support. Their additional support needs are not just financial, but require time and pastoral support. A lack of transparency of processes and concern for losing funding often hold students back from accessing the support they need as they're unaware of the options and precedents.



1.3 INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS & VISAS

a. Hidden costs:

Visas, medical costs etc. have a huge impact on international PGRs and should be made transparent applicants. Advice on whether DTPs/CDTs can use their budget or underspend to cover these costs is required.

b. Placements:

Students on visas may not be able to do placements. To clarify this issue, DTPs/CDTs request additional guidance on what constitutes a 'wage' for PGRs on stipends.

c. CASE contracts:

Students on visas may not be able to spend time at external Collaborative Awards in Science and Engineering (CASE) partners. Institutions who sponsor visas may have expectations, and guidance on navigating these situations is required. Additional guidance on managing CASE studentships against specific visa restrictions, which may prohibit students from participating if placements are not graded elements of PGR study, is necessary.

d. 30% Recruitment cap:

Detail on the 30% cap for international students is required. Guidance on applying this cap, especially across centres and cohorts, can be unclear. This impacts recruitment by potentially encouraging tactical candidate nominations and shortlisting, consequently disadvantaging very highly ranked international students. When the proportion of international applicants is high, clarification from NERC on when the cap should be applied (e.g. during shortlisting, after interviews, etc.) would be hugely beneficial.

HIGHLIGHTED EXAMPLE

If a DTP/CDT has international students who are being accredited by a university, but are physically based at a research institute, the university is required to add the research institute as a partner to their visa licence. This process usually takes a long time, so it would be beneficial if all universities could add all partner institutions to their visa licences in advance. Due to lack of understanding of how a DTP/CDT recruits students, universities are often reluctant to do this, or will only process this on a case-by-case basis.

Envision DTP has noted that it would be beneficial for administrators to have a statement from NERC/UKRI to present to university visa offices, requesting that all partner institutions should be added to university visa licences.

Theme 2: Feedback Best Practice

2.1 CONTACT BETWEEN NERC & DTPs/CDTs

“The impact and benefit of research and innovation will be more relevant and useful for everyone when people with different expertise, experiences, approaches and ways of thinking work together”¹. Increased interaction between DEI staff at NERC and across NERC funded DTPs & CDTs would greatly benefit the implementation of DEI activities and best practice in each.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- NERC should publish a point-of-contact for DEI queries and issues, with this information made clearly available to DTPs & CDTs.
- NERC should keep a record of DEI Officers employed at DTPs & CDTs. DEI leads should be introduced to one another via a network to improve cross-DTP/CDT communication and collaboration, on an opt-in basis if need be.

The current DEI Officers network could be used to facilitate this. In the future, this network could be:

1. hosted externally by NERC,
2. run by a full-time paid DEI Lead Officer, or
3. co-lead as it currently is by a core team of nominated DEI Officers.

Current DEI officers have noted that the DEI network *“provides the benefit of being able to ask more experienced DEI officers for help and advice where other guidance was not available”*. Centralising this through NERC would help ensure that all new DEI officers were able to access and benefit from the network.



¹ [UKRI's equality, diversity and inclusion strategy](#) :4.

2.2 SHARING FEEDBACK

Sharing feedback from DEI activities would allow for successful activities to be implemented more widely, and for lessons learnt to be learnt by all. Currently, there are pockets of excellent work that are unfortunately being siloed rather than fostering collaboration and maximising our resources. Effective collaboration could be facilitated by the proposed online platform in Section 3.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- NERC to host regular DTP/CDT led DEI feedback sessions, including workshops for DTPs & CDTs to feed evidenced best practice up to NERC for wider implementation.
- Feedback from completed REPs should be reported back to DTPs/CDTs as well as to NERC.

DTPs & CDTs have many examples of best practice and successful DEI activities and would benefit significantly from sharing these or being enabled to jointly deliver activities to maximise resources and impact across the sector. Several current examples of best practice reported by DTPs & CDTs are provided below. Additionally, these provide examples of how best practice can be reported back to NERC with a focus on testimonials and retention, rather than focussing solely on the quantitative side of recruitment.

EXAMPLE: TRAINING

DTPs/CDTs have implemented DEI training for a range of groups, including:

- training for those involved in recruitment
- training on Consciously Inclusive supervision for supervisors
- DEI training within an induction programme for new students
- DEI training for new staff joining the DTP/CDT



EXAMPLE: NETWORKS

DTPs & CDTs have successfully set up networks for underrepresented groups, such as for PhD students who are Parents and/or Carers. These create inclusive space for underrepresented groups e.g. for mothers/mothers-to-be and fathers/fathers-to-be.



EXAMPLE: INCLUSIVITY

SUPER DTP's flexible funding bid focused more on the inclusion part of DEI. Rather than focussing on increasing diversity in recruitment, they hosted training events to provide an inclusive environment after recruitment is completed:

- [First Aid for Mental Health course](#) with Mental Health Scotland
- Understanding and Supporting DEI in Academia workshops, first one to be held at [the MASTS Annual Science Meeting](#)
- From this workshop, it was requested that SUPER provide a [Glossary of DEI Terms](#), and information around [Protected Characteristics](#) so that the community could be better informed
- [Understanding Autism course](#) for supervisors with the National Autistic Society
- [Deaf Awareness training seminar](#) and SQA [Introduction to British Sign Language course](#) with charity Deaf Action

[Global Challenges Research Fund exchange visit](#) for current PGRs



Case Study: Widening Participation Summer Scholarship Scheme

ECORISC CDT introduced a summer scholarship scheme which aimed to address the under-representation of applicants for PhD programmes from students from a widening participation background.

The scheme addressed a number of factors, including:

- awareness of what a PhD programme is, what it involves and what opportunities are available,
- introducing students to the global challenges of chemical pollution and the skills sets and research needs required to tackle these challenges,
- providing students with an insight into the different career opportunities in the area, and
- providing students with hands-on experience and guidance in best practice for the PhD application process.



Fourteen students followed the programme, each coming from a range of backgrounds including: low-income families, the first in the family to follow a higher education programme, from neighbourhoods where university education participation is low, students who identify as LGBTQ+ and students with a disability or long-term illness.

Students were offered a scholarship payment of £400 per week for six weeks to enable them to complete the programme. Costs associated with the two in-person events were also covered. Additional funding was available to cover other costs (e.g. caring costs) that might preclude the involvement of a student in any of the summer school activities.

Summary: summer school activities:

- **A face-to-face induction event:** as well as introductions to the programme and fellow scholars, students worked in teams to identify and discuss some of the current major challenges around chemicals in the environment. The teams then went on to discuss the technical and non-technical skills that would be needed to tackle these pollution problems.
- **6-week placement at one ECORISC's institutions:** the training programme was designed to expose the students to the PhD experience and a range of methods and skills required to deliver an independent research project. Online weekly career talks were included in the programme where members of the Environmental Pollution community from underrepresented backgrounds talked about their career journey and their scientific work. Speakers included academics, postdoctoral researchers, PhD students and those who work in industry or the regulatory environment.
- **Final residential event:** the programme concluded with a 2-day residential event. The objective of this event was to prepare students in applying for a PhD (or a role outside academia). The event included: presentations for a range of CDT and DTP programmes, team working where students reviewed a set of written applications to a PhD programme, identifying good and bad practice, a 45 minute mock interview where each student gave a short presentation and team working exercise where students pulled together what they had learnt over the summer to develop a PhD project idea.

Feedback from the programme was positive: all students completing an anonymised survey at the end said that they recommend this type of programme to other students considering studying for a PhD; 90% found time spent with current PhD students to be useful; 80% found the career talks to be useful; and there was a significant increase in student understanding of what a PhD programme entails, how CDTs operate, funding opportunities, the application process and of the career prospects associated with a PhD in environmental science.

As a result of running this scheme, an application workshop providing more guidance on the PhD application process was embedded into ECORISC's recruitment process for 2023, aimed primarily at students from under-represented areas. This workshop was designed to provide guidance on how to prepare and write an application, how to approach meeting potential supervisors, and skills in preparing/delivering presentations and interviews. Past panel members and current students were involved to give first-hand experiences.

Case Study: Proforma Personal Statement

ACCE DTP created a guided proforma to replace the freeform personal statement, aimed to:

1. increase the diversity of applicants and recruited students,
2. improve opportunities for applicants from non-traditional academic backgrounds, and
3. to alleviate disparities between applicants who have support and experience in developing academic applications and those who do not.

This was combined with a redesign of the selection criteria, to recognise a wider range of skills and experience. The questions on the proforma were carefully designed to assess the key qualities identified as needed to make an excellent PhD student: commitment, passion and creativity. A final question, 'Is there anything else you would like to tell us that can help to frame your application?', allowed applicants to provide information about barriers they had faced in their academic journey. Training was provided to assessors in how to use and interpret this information, and in all shortlisting and interview sessions one person was present solely to ensure this information was used as intended.

It was found that the use of the proforma standardised what and how much applicants wrote about, while the final question enabled contextualised applications. Applicants were open about barriers they had experienced, and this information was used to assess applicants equitably.



Project Assessment: the use of the proforma & updated selection criteria was assessed by questionnaire to panel members:

- Anecdotally, panel members reported that they felt the changes encouraged them to approach applications differently.
- Panel members reported that several students who were unlikely to have been selected through the previous recruitment procedures were selected using this process, due to the additional contextual information and greater freedom to explore and weigh scientific understanding.
- 75% of panel members felt the new system helped to decrease inequalities in recruitment (this is entirely subjective).
- The majority felt the new proforma and accompanying training led to a greater awareness of the bias that applicants face and factored this in when ranking candidates.
- Comments suggested that the new recruitment practices empowered panellists to take a more holistic approach, knowing that it was supported by ACCE.
- However, the profile of successful applicants was judged to be similar to previous years – encouraging applicants from a wider diversity of backgrounds was identified as key to improving the impact of the changes made.
- All panellists reported finding the new process more energy and time consuming, due to the higher decision-making load.
- While around half of panellists were comfortable using the additional contextual information, others found it challenging and were unsure how to weigh it. From observations of a subsequent recruitment round it appears that panellists have since become more comfortable in using this information through experience and/or improvements in guidance.



Theme 3: Centralised Resource Hub

3.1 ONLINE PLATFORM

For DEI Officers & Directors/Managers



A centralised, online resource platform available to all NERC DTPs & CDTs would improve access to relevant, useful DEI resources. For example, one DTP noted that:

“it is extremely difficult for individual DTP/CDTs to reach out to potential candidates in targeted under-represented groups, where a centralised approach would be more effective.”

There is a precedent for the creation of a research hub at other UKRI funding councils. For example, EPSRC lists the creation of a DEI sharing hub in their DEI action plan².

This platform could include resources such as:

- FAQs for common email queries to NERC.
- Clear UKRI/NERC DEI policies and guidance (see Section 1), including version control.
- Resource packs and case studies from previously run successful DEI projects.
- Existing DEI data reports relevant to DTPs/CDTs, STEM, or geosciences.
- Guidance and resources for prospective applicants
- PGR contracts and/or T&Cs for NERC-funded DTP/CDT PhD projects
- Public-facing portal for DTPs/CDTs to advertise:
 - widening-participation initiatives
 - outreach and additional opportunities available during recruitment for underrepresented groups
 - PhD and REP projects
 - DTP/CDT webpages and contact details.

² [EPSRC 3 year EDI Action Plan 2022-2025](https://www.edi-resourcebank.co.uk/) :23.

BEST PRACTICE: EXAMPLE

The team of DEI Officers leading the current DEI network of NERC DTPs & CDTs felt the need for a central place for information around DEI initiatives. This team created a Google Drive of various DEI resources, including:

- examples of best practice
- DEI data reports
- NERC & UKRI materials
- live databases of good training providers
- applicant webinars
- advertisement contacts
- DEI survey questions
- and more.



This has been of significant benefit to DEI officers and other DTP & CDT staff by allowing them to avoid “*reinventing the wheel*” when implementing DEI best practice on the ground level, and in training for DEI roles. The inclusion of reports and case studies specifically relevant to DTPs/CDTs or environmental sciences was particularly beneficial for DEI officers with non-DEI backgrounds.

These points are supported by specific feedback from DEI officers:

The collated DEI data reports and example of best practice significantly enhanced initial training for the role, and optimised preliminary learning around DEI issues

Given the limited time of the fixed-term contracts for DEI officer roles, the time-saving benefits of the shared resources in training and in implementing best practice are especially beneficial for maximising the impact of the role and related DEI project for the DTP

Access to information regarding recruitment practices and training which have previously been implemented by DTPs & CDTs allowed for suggestions for improvements to build on work already done, particularly utilising strategies which have already been proved to be effective. This ensured more progress was made, and significant time was saved, than if work on suggested improvements for recruitment strategies had been started from scratch

BEST PRACTICE: EXAMPLE

CDT SuMMeR wanted to give applicants a richer way to find out about their projects and research teams, given the importance of the space between project advert and the often life-changing decision for applicants to do a PhD within the recruitment process.

To do this, they hired a video editor to create [eleven videos of supervisors in conversation about their projects](#) for Cohort 2 recruitment. The idea was to capture the teams explaining the ideas they feel passionate about and which formed the project proposals. Supervisors were asked about what the first year will look like to give insight into the 'real-life' of a project.

Project outcomes & findings:

- They've had lots of good responses to the videos from their current cohort
- The videos generated interested and exposure on social media channels.
- The following year saw 3× more applications to SuMMeR, possibly as a direct consequence of the published videos.
- Enquiry exchange time could become more highlighted as part of the PhD application process.
- The videos may have generated many more enquiries for supervisors, which leads to suggesting to NERC that supervisors, especially ECRs, may need funding for the extra time involved in fielding enquiries.
- Unfortunately, hiring the video creators was costly (£2000), so SuMMeR are **unlikely to be repeating the project due to funding**.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Centralising such resources through NERC would help ensure that all new and existing DEI officers, and DTP/CDT managers and administrators are able to access and benefit from these resources. This would vastly improve the efficiency of DEI project delivery for all.

The Living Documents in the DEI Network shared drive have worked well as a format, and any centrally managed resource hub should ideally have an easy way for the NERC DTP/CDT community to submit resources. We can provide access to our shared network drive as an example of best practice.

Case Study: Annual PhD Applications Webinar

SENSE CDT runs an annual PhD applications webinar which is [recorded and uploaded to YouTube](#). It is a panel set up with 5-6 PhD students and a chair directing live audience questions. It is run as a Zoom webinar, allowing attendees anonymity to ask any questions they might be worrying about. Student panellists were compensated for their time, including an hour of preparation, at University of Leeds demonstrator module A rates (£15.80 for 2022). Advertising for the webinar was included in all PhD project advertising which was also sent to targeted diversity groups and universities with a strong representation of traditionally underrepresented groups.

Combined the webinar recordings have achieved thousands of views showing a clear appetite for the format and increasing the transparency of the PhD application process, particularly as SENSE currently only has 70 studentships. The student panels have received positive feedback, as they were accessible and the students had recently been through the process. For the December 2022 webinar, we provided a short feedback form to assess whether it is a successful format. When asked “how useful the webinar was for you?” (1 being not useful at all and 10 being outstandingly useful), the average response was 9 out of 10. Additionally, when asked “how likely were you to apply for a PhD this year?” at the start of the webinar, the average response was 8, increasing to 9 out of 10 at the end. SENSE CDT also included a DEI survey when attendees signed up through Eventbrite which revealed a diverse audience.

Notably, the CDT was limited this year by their shortened recruitment cycle due to late notice of confirmation of funding. Increased advertising time in the run-up to the webinars and sharing of events would be beneficial to all.

The majority of these types of webinars are relevant to any PhD program and hosting them on a centralized resource hub would be a cost-effective and efficient way to reach many applicants.



3.2 TRAINING & NETWORKING

Centralised training from NERC for DTP/CDT DEI leads to learn important foundations and implications for effective DEI work (e.g. NERC DEI strategy, NERC DEI statistics, Public duty under the Equality Act 2010) would strongly benefit the implementation of DEI activities in DTPs & CDTs.

Due to structural issues, primarily around resourcing, DEI roles are typically short-term (as discussed in greater depth in Section 5). Therefore, centralised DEI training provision, would currently work best as an online training package, hosted via the proposed centralised resource hub, which would be regularly updated, and accessible at any time to allow for the significant variation in DEI contract start- and end-dates and for staff to voluntarily refresh their knowledge. This would particularly benefit new DEI officers who do not come from a DEI-related background or have had limited or no previous DEI training. Centralisation of this resource is crucial, especially as DTPs & CDTs are unlikely to have another DEI-related staff member who could provide training, and the quality and accessibility of university DEI training provision varies drastically.

DEI in DTPs & CDTs would also strongly benefit from opportunities to network and share best practice between DEI leads, facilitated through centralised events led by NERC. To account for the various short-term contract lengths of DEI officers, such events should be held at least twice a year.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Providing an online training package which can be easily accessible to new DEI starts, or as a refresher.
- Running bi-annual NERC-led networking events for DEI officers to discuss and share best practice.
- Running regular training or supporting the running of training for the most commonly issues faced by EDI officers such as mental health first aid, unconscious bias, active bystander and disability awareness.



Case study: DEI Officer Mental-health first-aid training

One Doctoral Training DEI officer was fully mental-health first-aid trained from a previous role. When one of their PGRs started demonstrating out-of-character behaviour, the DEI officer was able to respond professionally and offered to meet with them to check-in. The student then disclosed they were recently diagnosed with a serious mental illness: they were struggling to function and were clearly distressed. Thanks to their mental-health first aid training, the DEI officer knew how to handle the situation appropriately. They ascertained if the PGR posed a danger to themselves or others, signposted the PGR to additional support, and followed mental-health first aid best practice.

Mental health crises are proportionally higher in the PGR population than the general population³. Whilst it's not a DEI Officer's job to be a counsellor, often situations occur where sensitive issues are disclosed, and it is important that DTP/CDT staff know how to respond to ensure the students' and their own safety. If this DEI officer hadn't previously proactively sought training they would have been ill-equipped to handle the situation and may have caused more harm whilst attempting to provide support.

In this case, the student has since accessed many different formal support mechanisms provided by the university and has now resumed their PhD with improved mental health, demonstrating the importance of mental-health training and the positive effect this can have on PGRs.

This highlights the key issue of ensuring DTPs & CDTs are equipped to provide adequate additional and systematic support for students from underrepresented groups. Particularly, structural support such as healthcare can be more difficult to access for people from underrepresented backgrounds. As an example, racial and ethnic minorities may experience a variety of barriers to accessing health support, including cultural differences which affect the perception around mental health, etc.

These barriers are exacerbated by the intersectionality between multiple underrepresented characteristics. To ensure positive engagement and full participation it is important that any additional needs of these groups are considered and supported.

³ Levecque, K. et al. [Work organization and mental health problems in PhD students](#). *Res. Policy* **46**, 868–879 (2017).
Evans, T. et al. [Evidence for a mental health crisis in graduate education](#). *Nat. Biotechnol.* **36**, 282–284 (2018).

Theme 4: Data Collection & Reporting

4.1 IMPROVE INCLUSIVITY

Previous reports on DEI have found that *“improved data collection and the application of lessons from it are key to addressing under-representation”*⁴. The current NERC DEI data collection format is not inclusive. It has been noted by DTPs that the data requested from NERC does not reflect DEI good practice.



This is particularly true for certain categories. For example, the existing ethnicity question makes no distinction between Black African and Black Caribbean, while the existing gender question gives the options (Male/Female/Other/Not Disclosed), despite the UKRI diversity data for funding applicants and awardees 2020-2021 report noting that *“we appreciate that gender and sex terminology is more nuanced and highly personal and plan to reflect this through data collection in the new funding system”*⁵. Additionally, there is a distinct lack of any questions about trans history.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Make existing categories for protected characteristics more inclusive.
- Include categories beyond the necessary protected characteristics, e.g. socio-economic background, and caring responsibilities.

To this end, a guide on best practice questions for DEI surveys has been compiled by DTP & CDT DEI officers, and shared among NERC funded DTPs & CDTs:

[*LIVING DOC* - EDI Survey questions](#). This is a living document which will continue to be updated to reflect future developments in best practice.



⁴ [House of Commons Science and Technology Committee Diversity and inclusion in STEM Fifth Report of Session 2022–23](#) :50.

⁵ [UKRI Diversity data for funding applicants and awardees 2020-21](#) :42.

4.2 GREATER TRANSPARENCY

At present, DTPs & CDTs do not have access to adequate DEI data from across the NERC landscape (including undergraduate students, postgraduate students, and staff) to effectively target current DEI efforts.

This is exacerbated due to the limited sample numbers for an individual DTP/CDT, DEI data often cannot be anonymised enough to be shared due to Data Protection concerns. If there was a baseline calculated across NERC DTPs/CDTs, the data could be compared to UK population demographics and used by individual DTPs/CDTs to establish how effective their current DEI mechanisms are compared to the average.

Due to these issues, the diversity landscape across NERC is currently unclear. Despite this, the recruitment of underrepresented groups through analysis of quantitative PGR recruitment data is often the principal focus of DEI efforts. Though this is important and valid work, recruitment diversification is only part of the issue.

Qualitative and cultural change is just as vital as quantitative improvements. Wider academic environmental change is necessary to ensure that recruited minorities are actually part of academia and not just a DEI number. When recruitment is the sole focus, other pertinent issues such as the retention and adequate support of minoritised groups can be neglected.

RECOMMENDATION

The publication of aggregated DEI data across all DTPs & CDTs by NERC would be of significant benefit to DTPs & CDTs in targeting DEI efforts to the appropriate groups.



4.3 CENTRALISATION, STANDARDISATION & GUIDANCE

DTPs & CDTs have to navigate the complex, bureaucratic and idiosyncratic DEI data-collection systems of their respective partners. This, combined with a lack of clear guidance, generates flawed data. As noted by a comparable NERC report⁶, many of the challenges come from a lack of standardisation and guidance.

Consequently, these challenges produce notable differences in the data collection methods of DTPs & CDTs. Crucially, for DTPs/CDTs that accept more than one application per candidate, some collect DEI data *per application* and others *per candidate*. Similarly, candidates may apply to more than one NERC DTP/CDT. Both of these issues inherently cause flaws in aggregated data across the NERC Doctoral Training landscape. The latter point will potentially skew DEI data towards privileged groups i.e. those with unlimited time to dedicate towards applications, and with access to additional resources and social capital to support their applications.

Furthermore, DTPs & CDTs use different data collection methods, including, but not limited to: handmade forms, Qualtrics, and agreements with partner universities' admissions teams. These DEI data are also collected at different stages in the admissions process.

Though often preferable from an administrative point of view, integrating DEI data collection with distinct university processes is also extremely challenging. For example, the 30% international cap is difficult to apply as university procedures don't always query admission fees status until the admitting student stage, leaving DTPs in the lurch.

Finally, DTPs & CDTs collect fundamentally different datasets on various selections and combinations of characteristics, both those protected by the Equality Act 2010 and others. This frustrates the comparison and aggregation of DTP/CDT DEI data, as certain categories of characteristics cannot be compared or considered equal, and gaps appear where not all DTPs/CDTs have collected data on a given characteristic or category.



⁶ NERC Advancing equity, diversity and inclusivity in the environmental sciences: Collaborative Inclusivity Roundtable Series: Summary report ([August 2021](#)):12.

Consequently, comparing data across DTPs & CDTs is currently unnecessarily complicated. Standardising data collection would improve DEI data quality and make the process of comparing data across DTPs & CDTs easier, faster, and more revealing about the current landscape of NERC PhD applicants.

Case study: Anonymisation

CDT SuMMeR have set up a system for gathering anonymous data across the recruitment cycle for NERC. As they don't ask applicants to fill out a university form, they had no clear way of gathering this data at the four stages requested by NERC. Eventually, they found a research organisation, SERIO, which is partnered with the University of Plymouth where SuMMeR are based, who are doing the data collection for them for free.

SERIO's involvement means that no one in the CDT office ever sees data connected to names. They had to attach the DEI data to names, or they would not be able to identify which data to draw from each stage of recruitment. It took many meetings and email traffic to get there, which highlights the resources involved in gathering personal data for the CDT. They would prefer if NERC could do this centrally. It is also a solution that might be useful for others to know about.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Short-term:

- Centralise the NERC DEI data collection process for DTPs & CDTs.
- Provide DTPs & CDTs with specific guidance on data collection and adopt an inclusive set of DEI questions to ensure standardisation.
- Clarify which DEI data will be required as part of the upcoming annual reporting to NERC, giving sufficient advance warning prior to applications opening in October each year.

Long-term:

All universities should be collecting the same information for PGR applicants. We recognise that NERC and individual DTPs/CDTs are unable to influence the data collected by universities, but this could be achieved by UKRI. Ideally, a system comparable to undergraduate data collection via UCAS would be implemented. For example, UKRI could use Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and impose sanctions if data is not collected to leverage universities. This would circumnavigate Data Protection issues involving universities passing DEI data to DTPs & CDTs for reporting to research councils. It would also allow for a more tailored strategy for addressing DEI issues to be developed by NERC and offer the opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to DEI and improving the academic landscape for all.

Theme 5: Project Longevity & Impact

5.1 LONG-TERM FUNDING

At present, much of the DEI funding given to DTPs & CDTs is short-term. This includes the current NERC DEI CDT/DTP Flexible Funding Award, which has meant that the DEI officers hired by DTPs & CDTs are on short, fixed-term contracts. Additionally, the complications of university hiring processes have resulted in short-term contracts being even shorter than intended due to hiring delays, giving even less time for DEI projects to be carried out.

DEI Officers and DTP/CDT DEI projects need longer term funding to achieve their full potential and engender change. For example, lack of project longevity was listed as a limiting factor within the Equator report⁷.

Longer term funding is particularly important due to the long and bureaucratic nature of university processes, which make it extremely challenging for DEI Officers to deliver concrete action on short-term contracts. For example, one implemented project, which focused on a quantitative and qualitative repository of experiences (initially focused on women in the field, then widened to students' ethnicity and experiences of LGBTQ+ students), lost 6 weeks of project time due to delays with the university's HR department. This contributed to an underspend. A longer lead-in time than had been allocated was needed to have avoided this issue. The lead-in time needed would have been even longer if those hired had not been internal.⁸

The work achieved by NERC-funded DEI Officers or DTP/CDT-led projects exists in a vacuum. Funding these short-term initiatives is a start, but is inadequate for affecting systemic change or demonstrating a long-term commitment to DEI. Guidance from NERC on the next steps for continuing DEI work after current funding ends would be beneficial to DTPs & CDTs.



RECOMMENDATIONS

DEI roles should be made permanent posts for each DTP and CDT, or for different regions of the UK (with DTPs/CDTs belonging to the region in which their 'lead' university is located).

⁷ [2022 preprint - Dowey et al - Equator Project full report.pdf](#) :76.

⁸ It is common for University hiring practices to be significantly faster when hiring those internal to the University - with short lead in times and strict cut off points for funding to be allocated, this could lead to hiring bias towards those already within an institution.

5.2 EMBED DEI INTO FUNDING

Writing DEI values directly into funding (e.g. Training Grants, Flexible Funding for DEI projects, etc.) would ensure the implementation of DEI best practice throughout the landscape of each DTP and CDT. This would enable DEI officers to do more than just make well-meaning recommendations on the ground level, with no uptake from management, and would facilitate accountability of PGR supervisors, DTPs & CDTs.

A precedent for writing DEI values into funding may be seen from BBSRC, which requires proposals from DTPs & CDTs to include a two-page DEI strategy covering recruitment of PhD students from all backgrounds and support systems for the protection of their health and wellbeing⁹.



Consideration of additional burdens

Commonly DEI roles are filled by people from underrepresented backgrounds. Whilst this means they are paid for work that commonly goes unrewarded, it also adds additional complexity to the roles, as well as mental and emotional burden. Furthermore, these roles are often precarious by nature, taking the form of fixed- and short-term funded contracts characteristic of academia, and often over-relying on the drive and passion of the individual to deliver and achieve within their contracts.

For any DEI initiatives to be successful, it is important that individuals in these roles receive appropriate structural support within their Higher Education Institutes. Whilst the current grassroots network and proposed centralised DEI hub recommended in this report go towards this, there are many complex and sensitive issues that DEI workers need to deal with. As well as contributing to an additional mental burden, these may also be triggering. Furthermore, the pressure to overachieve to ensure future funding and contract extensions exacerbates the rate of DEI Officer burnout. Therefore, additional well-being support and checks-ins should be implemented as standard, and DEI funding should be embedded to ensure role longevity.

⁹ [UKRI Addressing under-representation and active participation](#)

RECOMMENDATIONS

DEI should be written in as a key part of the upcoming DTP3 applications. For example, on the application form a section for DTPs to outline their plans with regards to improving DEI practices and creating a long-term commitment could be included. This would allow DTPs & CDTs the opportunity to include DEI best practice at the very core of their activities and allow provisions for funding for regular and repeatable DEI activities and long-term DEI officer roles.

However, as noted above the additional burden of DEI work should not be solely placed on individuals, nor only at DTP/CDT level. For DEI values to be truly embedded within the NERC Doctoral Training landscape, adequate funding for DEI staff and/or projects must be provided *throughout the whole lifespan of the training grant*.



Similarly, centralised support from DEI staff at NERC is vital both for the efficient and effective integration of DEI within DTPs/CDTs and to nurturing a thriving workforce who can foster positive cultural change across the research and innovation sector.

Conclusions

The examples and case studies within this report highlight only a few of the excellent DEI initiatives delivered by DTPs & CDTs. These serve as evidence that NERC has funded a huge number of successful DEI initiatives. The NERC DTP & CDT community can take pride in the hard work being done in this sphere.

However, often the successes and lessons from these projects are not reported centrally, nor provided as best practice for others to build on. DEI work can be strengthened and developed through a more efficient, joined-up approach which would reduce the burden on the individual in both senses – as the DEI lead, and as DTP/CDT. This in itself is a DEI action, as often it is minoritised groups who carry the weight of DEI work.

We hope our 5 Key Areas and associated actions (on page 4), will help the NERC DEI community advance towards a fairer and more equitable future for all:

1. Providing *clear guidance and policies* will enable DTPs & CDTs to operate fairly and consistently.
2. Regular opportunities to *feedback best practice* between NERC and DTPs/CDTs will foster collaboration and improve efficiency
3. *Centralised resources* will help to facilitate the sharing of best practice between DTPs/CDTs and NERC, and between individual DTPs & CDTs.
4. Ensuring that *data collection is standardised* and DEI data available to DTPs/CDTs will enable strategic and targeted DEI efforts
5. *Embedding DEI* into DTPs/CDTs will in turn maximise the DEI/social value gained from public NERC money and ensure DEI runs throughout the lifetime of DTPs/CDTs training grants.

We should celebrate the achievements and progress of NERC DTPs/CDTs, this work should not exist in a vacuum but should be built upon. Some of the issues touched upon in this report, such as issues with the standardisation of data, have previously identified in the NERC Advancing Equity, Diversity and Inclusivity in Environmental Sciences report¹⁰. We strongly recommend regular meetings and evaluations following this report to ensure NERC and all its DTPs/CDTs are pushing DEI forward as a collective.

In this way, NERC can cement itself as the forerunner of DEI in the UKRI umbrella, across the whole research and innovation sector – whether that be in industry, academia, or in collaborative partnerships across both spheres.

¹⁰ NERC Advancing equity, diversity and inclusivity in the environmental sciences Collaborative Inclusivity Roundtable Series: Summary report (August 2021), available at: <https://www.ukri.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/NERC-130122-AdvancingEquityDiversityInclusivityEnvironmentalSciences-SummaryReport.pdf>

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NERC DEI Network

It is also important that we acknowledge the wider NERC DEI community, in particular the grassroots NERC DEI Network, for the fruitful discussions and solidarity around DEI issues that we all commonly face. This network came together organically last year through the merge of two pre-existing self-assembled groups, and has met regularly since to share best practice and provide informal support.

From this group, a separate team of EDI Officers emerged to lead this project.

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