

Inclusive Recruitment in Higher Education

Introduction

The UK Higher Education sector is adept at responding to change. It has been navigating sequential periods of transformation for years, most recently through the implementation of TEF, Brexit uncertainty, rising costs, COVID-19, international recruitment fluctuations, funding gaps, digital transformation, a mental health crisis amongst students, and the rise of AI, just to name a few.

As the sector responds to challenge after challenge, they need leaders at all levels who can widen the lens through which solutions are developed, bringing a diversity of experience, thought and approach with them.

Why is it important?

Studies have shown that diverse teams often perform better and are more productive, and organisations which have built brand identity around inclusivity often benefit from reputations that value fairness and equality. Inclusive workplaces tend to have higher employee satisfaction and retention rates. They also report enhanced levels of creativity and innovation, better decision making, and higher performance than homogeneous workplaces.

So where does it all start?

In order to build an inclusive workplace, the first challenge higher education organisations face is reaching and attracting broad and diverse candidate pools in authentic and meaningful ways. What follows below is a non-exhaustive review of recent research and best practice taken from HEIs around the UK sector.

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STEP

01

Review and update the Job Description and Person Specification

Is the JD and Person Specification forward or backward-facing?

When a vacancy becomes available within an organisation, is the first port of call the original Job Description and Person Specification which the previous incumbent was hired against? If that's the case, then against the current rate of change we see in the sector, we need to confront the uncomfortable truth that recruiting to replace a specific person yields candidates who are prepared for yesterday's challenges, not tomorrow's. This in practice limits the candidate pool to 'the usual suspects'.

A 2019 study from research and advisory firm, Gartner, found a number of trends rendering traditional recruitment tactics obsolete¹. In a survey of 3,500 managers across different sectors, only 29% of new hires had all the skills required for their current roles, let alone future ones. Skills needed in many posts have



¹ Gomez and Bernet, 2019; McKinsey & Company, [Diversity matters even more: The case for holistic impact](#), 2023; Rahman, Rodriguez-Serrano, Shimul and Faroque, 2023

increasingly short shelf lives, owing in part to more frequent and disruptive technological breakthroughs. Key functions, such as Finance, IT and Marketing positions filled today will require up to 10 new skills within 18 months. The talent pools that recruiters and talent acquisition partners have routinely tapped into are becoming outmoded as more people are acquiring critical skills informally or on the job through virtual learning. To respond appropriately to these trends through recruitment, the study suggests that we should be hiring for potential by testing for learning agility and curiosity. By looking beyond formal experience, we can see past traditional talent pools and look at the “Total Skills Market”, which boosts diversity through non-traditional pools which we know contain more women and people of colour.

It's also important to pare back the criteria to the essential and measurable. Many university HR teams are already resolved to streamline lengthy person specifications because research has shown how **affinity bias*** sneaks into desirable criteria, which can lead to a diversity gap in appointments . By eliminating desirable criteria, you can reduce bias, simplify the hiring process, encourage more applications from a broader range of people, and focus on core competencies.



*Affinity Bias



Affinity bias is the tendency to favour people who share similar interests, backgrounds, and experiences with us. This bias can lead to unconscious preferences and exclusions in various settings, such as hiring or team-building. Any perceived similarity or connection, however big or small, can cause affinity bias: hobbies, preferences, cultural backgrounds, shared past experiences.

STEP 02

Re-structure the advert and candidate brochure

Is your language truly inclusive, or just a series of statements?

In 2021, the University of Nottingham published “Towards Diverse Workforces; Transforming the Language of Exclusion and Bias in Recruitment”, as an output of their EPSRC-funded STEMM-CHANGE project². The project in its totality sought to radically overhaul how staff in STEMM roles are recruited, retained and rewarded in both academic and technical openings, but its findings arguably apply to the full sector. Its first workstream used linguistic analysis to identify and challenge the language of exclusion used in current job adverts and recruitment materials from different institutions.

Its key findings included...

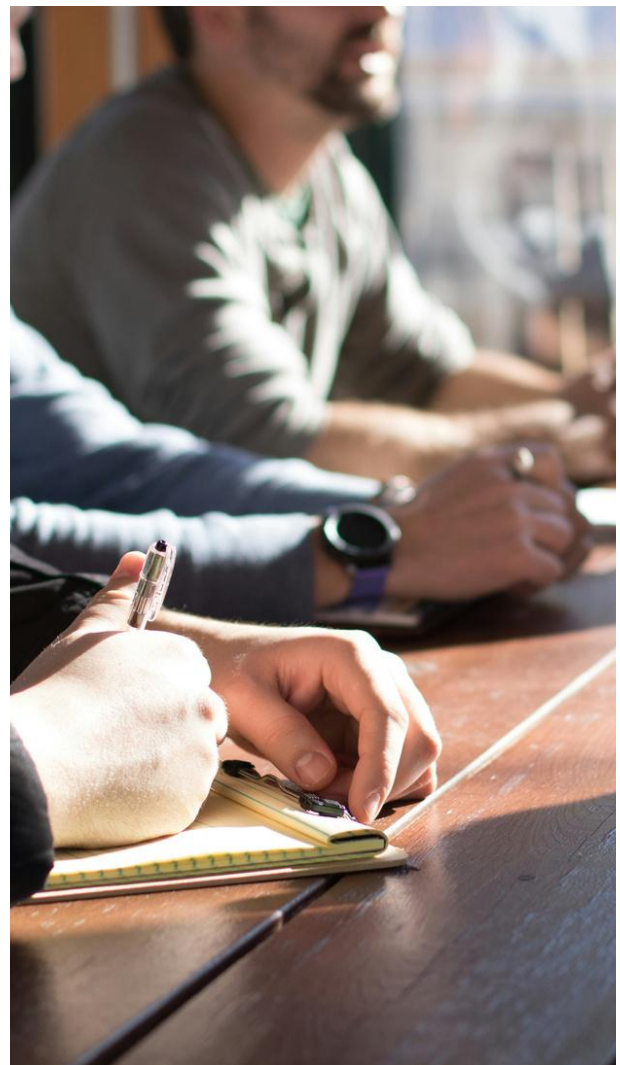


² Westover, J. (2024) ‘Affinity Bias: An Overlook Threat to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Efforts’, [Human Capital Leadership Review](#)

1). Diversity and inclusion are rarely salient enough in recruitment materials. Less than 5% of language used in recruitment materials, i.e. adverts, job descriptions, and role profiles, relate to DE&I, which is effectively an indicator of corporate culture as it relates to wider corporate communications.

2). Diverse and inclusive language needs to go far beyond statements of legal compliance with DE&I to be effective. It's common to read statements of legal compliance and affiliation, such as institutional adherence to the Race Equality Charter, usually placed at the end of a job advert or candidate brochure, after the "How to Apply" section. What is less common to read are statements of encouragement and expectation, placed more prominently within the text of the advert or candidate brochure and repeated in the role description and person specification.

3. Further to the above, the positioning of inclusive language can communicate a level of tokenism to the reader around commitment to DE&I issues. By relegating statements of affiliation and compliance to the closing paragraph it reduces the perceived importance



of DE&I and relegates it to being an afterthought rather than a core value.

Tokenism conveyed by frequency and positioning is unlikely to put off already interested candidates but can convey to minoritised applicants a minimal level of sincerity on the part of the organisation or appear performative.

Furthermore, expanding on this and the above point, within their recruitment and marketing collateral, institutions rarely seize the opportunity to highlight in prose (rather than through a hyperlink to a policy) the inclusive work they've done in augmenting their employee value proposition (EVP). An EVP is about defining the essence of your organisation, how it is unique and what it stands for. Many higher education organisations have implemented generous research sabbaticals, offer in-house and external opportunities for continuous learning, career advancement and professional development, generous leave policies for parents and flexible working options. These and other factors combine to create an EVP which is inclusive in nature, and should be highlighted more prominently when seeking to attract prospective candidates.



4. Vague and inflated language operate as barriers to inclusiveness. Statements such as “Exceptional customer service skills” use subjective self-assessment or otherwise ambiguous characterisations, often paired with a skill that is foundational to the role. Instead, using relational language frames the job description and person specification more inclusively, offering space for the candidate to interpret the role fit through the lens of their own experiences, without diminishing the level of skill required to be successful. A better version would be written as “Strong ability to build positive relationships with customers”.

5. Using dominant societal identity labels poses a high risk of exclusion. Coded words like ‘Builder’, ‘Evangelist’, or ‘Hunter’ has the potential to rule more people out than it rules in.

Using a gender decoder tool, such as <https://gender-decoder.katmatfield.com/>, can help identify words and language which inadvertently communicate undesired cultural values.

6. Creativity of expression can be useful, but as above, the level of inclusion or exclusion is highly dependent on the encoded bias of the language used. Statements of encouragement and expectation made through metaphor can be eye-catching and memorable, but if reliant on a traditional, dominant, masculine worldview, can raise more barriers to inclusion.



7. Informed use of pronouns is key to attracting inclusive and diverse pools of candidates. Of all the recruitment collateral analysed by the study, under 5% used the impersonal they, and 7% used combined and paired forms of pronouns such as s(he) or his/her. Though the former is inclusive of gender, it is also impersonal and doesn't invite candidates to envision themselves in the post. The latter is also gender inclusive, but can be perceived to be exclusionary to gender-fluid candidates.

As a result, the study's authors advocate for the use of the second person pronoun, you / your, more commonly used in industry, as it directly engages with prospective candidates without inadvertently excluding select demographics.

8. Inclusion and appeal are directly linked to the formality of the language used. Traditional recruitment language is often formal, creating social distance between the employer

and the applicant. This formality stems from historical legal conventions, and the authors note that higher education institutions tend to use more formal language than commercial organisations, with senior positions using even more formal language overall. By using more contemporary approaches, such as changing pronouns to "we" for the organisation and "you" for the applicant this formality can be mitigated.

This personalised approach makes the application process more inclusive and appealing, especially to under-represented groups.



STEP 03

Walk through each stage from an 'Inclusion' perspective

Do your recruitment processes actually support and encourage applicants from diverse backgrounds, or those who require reasonable adjustments?

Traditional recruitment processes can be rigid and process-heavy, and there is of course a balance to strike between being accommodating and expeditious. Due attention to **equity*** of opportunity is also of crucial importance to ensure no applicants are unfairly advantaged or disadvantaged.

However, there are a number of practices that can be incorporated into the recruitment process which would enrich the experience from both the candidates' and organisations' perspectives. Most, if not all, universities are already aware of the need to remove biased language from their recruitment collateral, acknowledge the existence of unconscious bias (and provide regular



*Equity vs Equality



We purposefully use the term “equity” as although both promote fairness, equality achieves this through treating everyone the same regardless of need, while equity achieves this through treating people differently dependent on need. So for instance, should one candidate be offered an informal conversation with the hiring manager ahead of final interview, all candidates should have the same offered to them. However, an equitable approach is to take into account other candidates’ needs, for instance, should someone be deaf, then a text-based conversation would be an inclusive and equitable adjustment.

training to counter it) and install diverse hiring panels for final selection. Below is a selection of less common practices in use at the moment.

1. An inclusive approach to project planning is essential.

A successful recruitment campaign requires a fixed timetable, agreed at the outset, in order to maintain momentum and allow candidates and panellists the maximum notice to organise their diaries accordingly. Very often though timetables are set out using the internal stakeholders' diaries as the primary consideration, rather than the prospective candidates'. If interviews are booked and held during religious festivals, or school holidays, it can have a limiting effect on who decides to apply.

Another area that requires consideration is the location and facilities available to candidates who are asked to visit campus and interview. Are the locations candidates are expected to visit physically accessible to all? If the use of a lift is required, is there another option available should the lift break down? The candidate may be physically capable of accessing various spaces, but if they walk with the use of stick, they may find an on-foot campus tour to be overly taxing.





2. Asking about reasonable adjustments instead of disability.

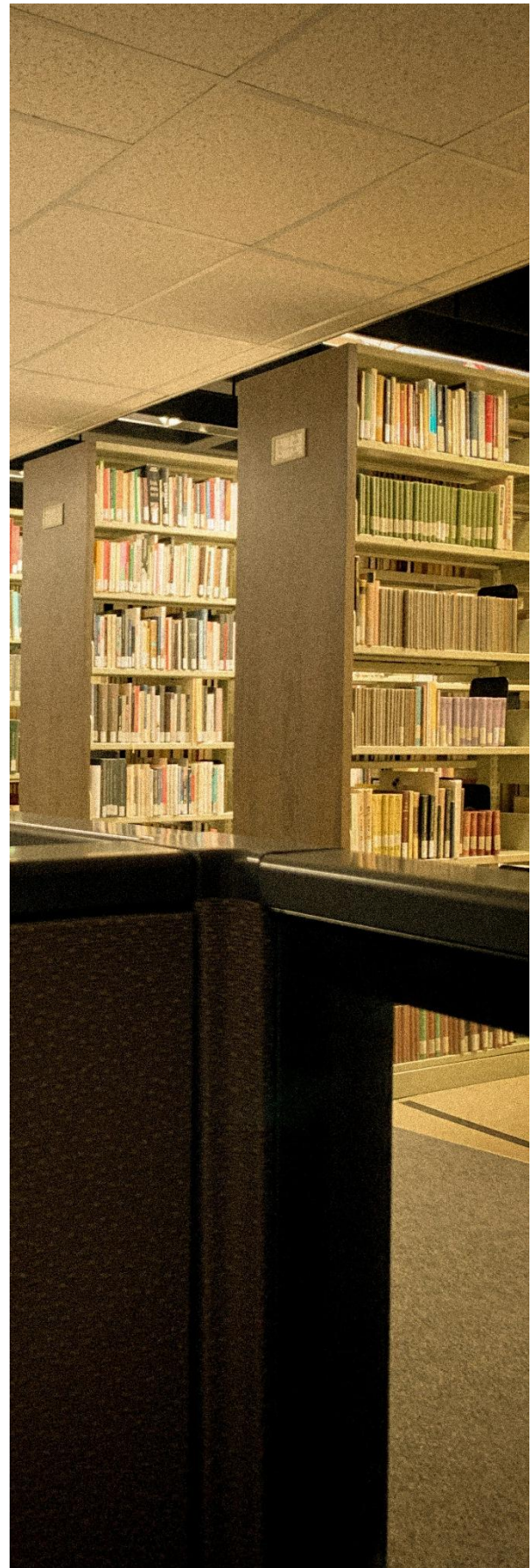
Outside of a standard Diversity Monitoring Form which many candidates will be asked to complete, they may also be specifically asked to make the organisation aware of any disabilities they have. This can be off-putting to individuals who may be uncomfortable revealing personal information at early stages, and it puts the onus of responsibility on the candidate. Instead, some organisations, such as the National Centre for Atmospheric Science (NCAS), have made it a practice to email each applicant a Reasonable Adjustment Form – making the applicant aware of each reasonable adjustment which they can ask for and NCAS is already prepared to offer. This proactive approach signifies to candidates NCAS's seriousness about accommodating individuals and further enforces their inclusive credentials.

3. Share the interview questions in advance.

In a straw poll of Higher Education sector hiring managers, 34% said they would not share the interview questions with candidates prior to interview as a matter of process. Concerns ranged from worries regarding the use of AI, to a sense that candidates should demonstrate their ability to think on their feet.

But to interrogate those concerns more closely, how many roles in Higher Education require the appointee to give a perfect answer to a question, on the spot? And why shouldn't AI be used in preparing the answer to a complex question? Most interviewers will be able to tell the difference between a response that has been memorised by rote from ChatGPT, versus a response that has been researched, thought-through, and articulated in someone's own vernacular.

Buckinghamshire New University has been leading the charge in this area, where for the last two years every interviewing candidate for every level of role has been given the interview questions 72-hours in advance. Rachael Cornwall, Chief People Officer at Buckinghamshire New University, says...



“Providing the questions in advance allows a better experience for both the recruitment panel and the candidates. We have seen an increase in the diversity of our workforce since introducing this change and have a lot of positive feedback, particularly from neurodiverse applicants. This feedback is evidenced in our disability pay gap which is 0% for the second year running. That being said, we have lots more to do but we are really thinking about what makes a difference and what supports diversity in our workforce. Recruitment techniques have remained largely unchanged for decades, and that can’t be conducive to true equity and diversity.”



Rachael Cornwall
Chief People Officer
Buckinghamshire New University

This intervention has clearly made a material impact on the quality and strength of the appointments BNU has made. The quality of candidate interviews has improved, providing richer and more robust content on which to make a hiring decision. This is in no small part attributable to an interview scenario that more closely matches a real-world experience, in which people have time to think through challenging questions and conduct their own research.

It acknowledges that there are neurodiverse candidates who perform better in an interviewing scenario when they are given more time to prepare. It also accepts that there are a minority of under-qualified candidates who are blessed with good interviewing skills and are able to win over selection panels who are not trained in spotting unconscious bias. Sharing the interview questions equally levels the playing field for all candidates.

4. Requesting feedback from unsuccessful candidates.

It may be a brave thing to do, but with each rejection email, the National Centre for Atmospheric Science also asks applicants to share their feedback on the interview process to the organisation's Glass Door profile. This mechanism allows





people to give their honest feedback transparently, while protecting their identity. More importantly, it signifies and builds brand identity amongst a wider cohort of people outside of the organisation, demonstrating their commitment to continuous improvement and an authentic appreciation of inclusivity. This kind of activity is an important signifier to potential candidates that the organisation is genuinely interested in building practices that foster an inclusive culture.

Outside of these specific actions, some institutions benefit from having dedicated Inclusive Recruitment Leads embedded in their HR and Recruitment Teams. The benefits this post brings to an organisation's aspirations are meaningful – a dedicated individual tasked with designing, developing, and refreshing an inclusive recruitment commitment, and keeping the organisation honest with respect to best practice. The scope of their influence runs from first point of contact with a prospective candidate from advertising or marketing, through to onboarding. Throughout, they offer policy development, ensure transparent processes, robust channels of communication, regular audits, and innovations in best practice. Given the current state of Higher Education finances, we recognise this could fall into the 'nice to have' category. So perhaps a more realistic option is to upskill relevant talent acquisition and HR colleagues to fulfil this function.

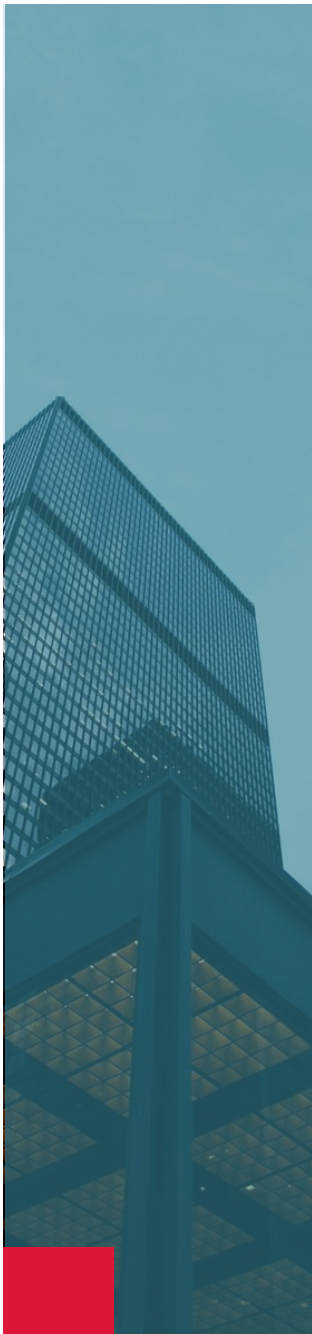
STEP 04

Cross reference your level of inclusivity with third party reference points

Can your organisation prove it cares about Inclusion and Diversity?

Outside of the recruitment process, what can prospective candidates look to that will tell them your organisation really is committed to inclusion and diversity? This notion builds on the concept found in point 3 of Step 2 above, that inclusivity doesn't exist in a vacuum, but is something that is affirmed repeatedly and in multiple locations.

Most higher education institutions will be signed up to the Race Equality Charter, will be a Disability Confident Employer, will have some level of Athena SWAN Award, be a Living Wage Employer and a Stonewall Diversity Champion. But the institution must translate those commitments into a narrative that communicates its cultural pledge to the spirit of inclusivity, rather than a tick box exercise.



A new generation of jobs board is emerging, rebranded as a 'careers site', with specific mission statements around inclusion and diversity. A small number of higher education institutions currently have profiles, with one such site which seeks to showcase "inclusive employers building sustainability, belonging and meritocracy into their workforce". Such sites serve a purpose in reinforcing an organisation's public commitment to diversity and inclusion.

Other examples of positive reinforcement include positioning your institution's DE&I strategy and commitments prominently in the 'About Us' section of the university website; foregrounding staff network communities (such as LGBTQ+, Women, Global Majority and Disability staff networks) in marketing and recruitment collateral; and advertising internal networking and leadership initiatives across social media platforms.

In addition, measuring the impact of

your organisation's actions is crucial in truly ascertaining how inclusive your recruitment practices and culture are. Sue Johnson, DE&I Consultant and Managing Partner at Odgers Berndtson, says that organisations with a high level of diversity and inclusion in their systems and culture have a measurable commitment to developing policy, ongoing training of hiring managers, and systems that track candidates through their recruitment processes³.



³ [Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, DE&I Consulting, Odgers](#)

Sue employs an Inclusive Recruitment Diagnostic self-assessment tool to assist organisations in assessing the level of inclusivity in their recruitment processes . She has worked with more than 200 organisations and has built a robust library of benchmarking data across sectors. She notes that the Higher Education sector has higher maturity levels across almost all markers than other sectors in the economy, but share a fairly common pitfall. Many institutions fall into a trap of being policy-driven without giving the same level of attention to execution and audit to ensure the policies in place are adhered to.

Through her work, she has found that:

- Organisations with an inclusive recruitment policy are 3.4 times more likely to train hiring managers on inclusive recruitment practices, than those without a policy;
- Organisations that train hiring managers have 14% higher inclusive recruitment practice scores; and
- Organisations that track the diversity of candidates have 7% higher inclusive recruitment practice scores.



This level of information and assessment allows organisations to identify where their weaknesses may lie, across 5 key areas of the recruitment and onboarding process, analysing 22 separate metrics. Honest self-assessment and reflection is key to ensuring continuous development and providing the environment in which a culture of inclusion can naturally and authentically flourish.



Conclusion

It is impossible to write a paper about inclusivity in recruitment without acknowledging that in some areas of the economy and society we are seeing a severe backlash to DE&I programmes. As some global corporations roll back their DE&I initiatives with disconcerting ease, the message this sends to people of diverse backgrounds is perhaps one that they've suspected all along – that these initiatives were mere lip service.

We at Berwick Partners and Odgers are fiercely opposed to this, and believe that we echo the sentiments of the UK Higher Education sector as we reaffirm our commitment to engaging with and attracting the best talent, regardless of background. As discussed in the opening of this paper, the need to widen the lens through which solutions are developed has never been greater. To play our part, our role is to advise and design recruitment processes that are truly inclusive, and represent the sector's (as well as our own) values around inclusivity, belonging, and excellence.

If you would like to discuss our approach to inclusive recruitment in Higher Education or have a general discussion about hard to fill posts, please do not hesitate to get in touch with us for a confidential discussion.



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