Envision Doctoral Training Partnership Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Audit Report January 2023

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Contents

Background

An Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) audit of processes and practices of the Envision Doctoral Training Partnership has been carried out. This work was supported by the NERC EDI flexible funding grant[1]. This report describes the recommendations for change that were highlighted by the audit.

The audit focused on students and applicants with disabilities, and students and applicants from ethnic minority backgrounds. Data indicate that these two groups are areas of underrepresentation within Envision. How we measured the representation of specific characteristics depended on the data available, but the comparison was made with UK domiciled postgraduate research (PGR) students. Data relating to the socioeconomic background of Envision students and applicants are not currently collected. Therefore, the audit also targeted provision of support for students and applicants across all socioeconomic backgrounds.

Recommendations to improve EDI are made across the four areas highlighted in the NERC best practice for recruitment at doctoral level guidance[2]: finding talent; shortlisting and interviews; nurturing talent, and monitoring and reporting. The aims of these recommendations are to (1) reduce the effects of systemic inequality and unconscious bias in our recruitment process, (2) provide more support to applicants and students, especially for those in underrepresented groups and ensure that the support available is transparent and (3) increase the diversity of applicants for Envision studentships and research experience placements.

Summary of recommendations

Recommendations include: increasing accessibility (both digitally and in the planning of events); decreasing opportunities for bias during recruitment by partially anonymising applications and making the assessment criteria more transparent; emphasising available accommodations before application; improving EDI monitoring practices, and increasing engagement on social media.

Data collection

To identify areas of underrepresentation to focus on, the EDI data collected for cohorts 8 and 9 (i.e. students joining Envision in academic years 2021-22 and 2022-23) were compared to external data sets. These cohorts were deemed the most appropriate for this comparison because (1) they are the two most recent cohorts, so will best reflect how our current recruitment process is affected by systemic bias, (2) they allowed applications from international students, while previous cohorts did not, and (3) the EDI questions asked to applicants were the same for cohorts 8 and 9 meaning the data sets could be easily combined, whereas less data were collected for previous cohorts. Note that the proportion of studentships available to international applicants was capped at 30% for cohorts 8 and 9, and this cap will remain during the recruitment of cohort 10.

Data on the applicant's age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and whether they had a disability were examined. To identify if there are any clear barriers at a particular stage of the recruitment cycle, the proportion of students with these characteristics was compared at the stage of application, the final 32 candidates who went through the shortlisting process, and for the successful Envision students. In all areas, there is not a significant change in demographics after any stage of recruitment. Thus,

[1] Envision NERC DEI CDT-DTP Flexible Funding Award Proposal
[2] NERC best practice principles in doctoral recruitment – UKRI

one of our main focuses needs to be attracting a more diverse range of applicants at the finding talent[2] stage of recruitment.

High levels of non-disclosure may have affected the accuracy of some of the statistics used. Non-disclosure about disability and sexuality was particularly high. Going forwards Envision needs to ensure it is made clear to students why these data are being collected, and that data will be completely anonymised and has no influence over the recruitment process. Envision recognises however, that these are particularly sensitive areas of disclosure and all EDI questions will continue to have a 'prefer not to say' option.

The Envision EDI data collected is of small sample size. Therefore, we will not be publishing these data explicitly to preserve the anonymity of our students.

Disability

In 2021 the proportion of postgraduate students in the UK with a disability was 10.8%[3]. In the UK generally, 18.9% of people aged 16-64 have a disability[4]. Compared against both metrics, Envision has an underrepresentation of students with disabilities. We must try to address this underrepresentation by making changes to our recruitment process at the shortlisting and interview stage[2] (ensuring that the application process itself is as accessible as possible, and that shortlisting decisions are being made in a way that does not disadvantage students with disabilities), increasing transparency around accommodations available through the application process and during studentships, and providing resources and support for Envision students with disabilities, in line with the nurturing talent[2] training stage.

Ethnicity

In 2020/21, 80% of UK domiciled PGR described themselves as white, 5% as black, 9% as Asian, 4% as mixed ethnicity, and 2% as other[5]. Compared to this data set, Envision has an underrepresentation of black students and students from a mixed ethnic background. There was a high level of non-disclosure to the question on ethnicity so there may be further underrepresentation not indicated by our EDI data. Data for home students and international students are also currently combined. We should consider separating these data to ensure that where we have underrepresentation this is transparent. We should aim to reduce this underrepresentation through changes to our recruitment process to address unconscious bias and systemic disadvantage at the finding talent[2], and shortlisting and interview[2] stages, and provide support to students during their PhD studies at the nurturing talent[2] stage.

Gender

In 2021 in the UK the proportion of female postgraduate students was 58%[6]. In Geography, Earth and environmental studies courses, the proportion of female postgraduate students was 52% for natural science courses, and 59% for social sciences courses[7]. The proportion of female Envision students is representative of the wider UK PGR population, but we will continue to advocate that our female students receive the necessary opportunities to address the underrepresentation of women in more senior academic positions and industry in Environmental Science. It is important to note that

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[3] Figure 5 - HE student enrolments by personal characteristics 2016/17 to 2020/21 | HESA
[4] Prevalence and employment - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk)
[5] Table 14 - UK domiciled student enrolments by ethnicity and sex 2014/15 to 2020/21 | HESA
[6] Figure 5 - HE student enrolments by personal characteristics 2016/17 to 2020/21 | HESA
[7] Figure 13 - HE student enrolments by CAH level 1 subject and sex 2019/20 to 2020/21 | HESA

HESA, Envision, nor NERC currently collect data about non-binary students. Therefore, we should aim to improve our monitoring and reporting practices in this area.

Sexuality

According to the office for national statistics, in 2020 3.1% of the UK population identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual[8]. Compared to this, Envision does not currently have an underrepresentation of lesbian, gay and bisexual students but note that statistics on trans students are not currently being collected. There are, however, systemic issues affecting the experience of LGBT+ students, even if there is not a notable barrier to entry. Data from Stonewall show that 28% of LGBT students say they were excluded by other students in the last year for being LGBT[9]. Our focus, therefore, should be on providing resources and support to LGBT+ students at Envision at the nurturing talent[2] stage.

Socioeconomic background

Quantifying socioeconomic background is not straightforward, as there is not one metric with which we can clearly identify the socioeconomic background of a student. No EDI data relating to socioeconomic background have been collected by Envision in previous years. Research by the Sutton Trust indicates that students from 'less well-off backgrounds' are less likely to pursue postgraduate education[10], both in the UK and abroad. Our focus will be on making sure that students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds are aware of Envision at the finding talent[2] stage, and that applicants are aware of the support Envision provides at the shortlisting and interview[2], and nurturing talent[2] stages.

Intersectionality

Our ability to collect data on intersectional[11] identities for Envision students is limited to ensure that data about our students remains anonymous. Thus, we will aim to work with other DTPs to produce combined anonymous data sets to improve our EDI monitoring and reporting. Data regarding the wider UK student population indicate that students with intersectional identities are at increased risk of disadvantage and discrimination. For example, according to Stonewall's University Report[12], 14% of LGBT students have been the target of negative comments from a member of university staff because they are LGBT, but for LGBT students from a black, Asian, or other ethnic minority background this figure rises to 24%, and for disabled LGBT students the figure rises to 22%. We will therefore keep the effects of intersectionality in mind when developing support for applicants and students throughout the finding talent[2], shortlisting and interview[2], and nurturing talent[2] stages.

Audit methodology

The audit was compiled by consulting staff at the six Envision partners about Envision practices and processes. These practices and processes were then evaluated to determine whether EDI could be improved and, if so, specific recommendations were made.

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[8] Sexual orientation, UK - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk)

[9] LGBT in Britain - University Report (stonewall.org.uk). Note: these data are not exclusively about postgraduate students.

[10] Inequality in the Highest Degree? - Sutton Trust

[11] The Cambridge dictionary defines intersectionality as 'the way in which different types of discrimination are connected to and affect each other' INTERSECTIONALITY | English meaning - Cambridge Dictionary

[12] LGBT in Britain - University Report (stonewall.org.uk). Note: these data are not exclusively about postgraduate students.

Information about Envision's practices and processes, as well as the associated recommendations were compiled into a spreadsheet. This is available from the authors upon request. These recommendations are summarised in this report, which has incorporated feedback from Envision staff and students. Some of these recommendations will be directly implemented by the EDI Advocate and wider Envision team in the 2022-2023 academic year, and others will be considered during future years.

Recommendations

The recommendations given below are the outcomes of the EDI audit. They are categorised in terms of: accessibility; student recruitment; student support; marketing; communication with students; EDI training/monitoring; Research Experience Placements; Training/placements, and other. The staff/staff groups responsible for delivery of the recommendations are noted. Progress to-date, and if applicable how the EDI measure should be continued going forward is indicated.

Issue	Recommendation	Actioned by	Progress
Accessibility			
Digital accessibility	Create an 'accessibility checklist' for distribution to Envision staff, supervisors, and students to ensure documents and social media posts are created in an accessible manner.	EDI Advocate	Created 2022, available for ongoing use
	Add alt text[13] as standard to all images/graphs in documents and social media posts.	All staff	Ongoing guidance
	Ask for alt text to be written whenever images are submitted by students, university staff, and external partners.	All staff	Ongoing guidance
	Offer digital accessibility training to Envision students and staff.	EDI Advocate	Training offered 2022 and could be repeated, recording is available
Accessibility for in-person events	Create an 'accessibility checklist' of the necessary accessibility information to be shared ahead of in-person events.	EDI Advocate	Created 2022, available for ongoing use
	Circulate accessibility information about the venue ahead of all in-person activities[14].	Training lead	Ongoing guidance

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[13] Alt text, or alternative text is a description provided alongside images or graphs to provide the same information for visually impaired users.

[14] Accessibility information is available for buildings on the Lancaster University campus via the website AccessAble. (This link gives a specific example for a building in the Lancaster Environment Centre, but all buildings on the Lancaster University campus except Forest Hills have an AccessAble page. Buildings at the other Envision centres are not currently available on AccessAble. However, the categories on AccessAble can be used as a template for creating accessibility information).

	Provide a designated accessibility contact person to request any individual accommodations for events.	Training lead	Ongoing guidance
	Provide details of the accommodations available with respect to interviews (e.g. travel expenses paid, choice of online or in-person interview, accommodations for disability[15] etc.) ahead of application.	EDI Advocate/ management lead	To add to website ahead of 23/24 recruitment round, will remain available
Student recruitment			
Application procedure	Collect EDI data relating to the applicant's socioeconomic background.	Questions prepared by EDI Advocate, changes made by management lead	To do for 23/24 recruitment
	Emphasise the importance of talking with the prospective supervisor before putting in an application.	EDI Advocate	Done in 22/23 recruitment round, advice should be repeated going forward
	Consider mentorship opportunities for students from underrepresented ethnic minority backgrounds[16] and/or ringfencing.	EDI Advocate completed ringfenced mentoring, management team to consider studentships	Ringfenced mentoring done 22/23, revisit studentships

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[15] This should not just cover accommodations for physical disabilities. Interview panels should ensure they are offering appropriate accommodations such as extra information, breaks, or a quiet space that may be required by neurodiverse applicants.

[16] Nottingham BBSRC DTP admitted 0-6% of its students from BAME backgrounds across seven entry cohorts in the period 2012-2019. Targeted interventions were introduced, e.g. (1) anonymisation of name, gender, age, previous institution of study, (2) creation of the AMPlify applicant mentoring programme for home applicants from black and black mixed backgrounds, and (3) an opt in guaranteed interview scheme for home applicants from black and black mixed backgrounds. In 2021 15.8% of BBSRC home PhD students identified as black/mixed heritage, indicating a notable improvement in the representation of black/mixed heritage students after the interventions were introduced.

	Avoid including any necessary/desired previous experience or qualifications with a high associated cost, and provide guidance to outline what experience is appropriate for supervisors to ask for at the project proposal stage.	EDI Advocate/ management lead	Added to project proposal form ahead of 23/24 recruitment round
Shortlisting	Agree on a more detailed shortlisting criteria, which emphasises an applicants potential.	Management team	Complete 22/23
	Make clear what will be assessed during the interview process. For example, will the student be tested on academic knowledge, or questions asked about their CV/prior experience?	EDI Advocate/ supervisors	To do ahead of 23/24 recruitment round
	Collate data from the independent panel member on the type of EDI training done by the interview panel – consider setting up a multiple choice Qualtrics questionnaire.	EDI Advocate	Added to guidance for independent panel members 22/23
	Add a question to confirm EDI training has been completed by the panel at the project proposal stage. EDI training should be completed by anyone on a recruitment panel.	EDI Advocate	Added to project proposal form ahead of 23/24 recruitment
	Add more detailed guidance on interviews to the 'Advice on selection for supervisors' document: e.g. standardising interview questions, designated accessibility contact etc.	Guidance from EDI Advocate, action from supervisors	Done for 22/23 shortlisting, guidance to remain in place in future
Student Support			
Ease of access to support	Add a list of resources (mental health services, student support groups etc.) available at each of the universities/research institutes to the student handbook, to be updated annually.	Training lead/ EDI Advocate	Done 2022, to be updated each academic year
	Link to each university/research institute disability service, with information given on claiming Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) and creation of an Inclusive Learning Support Plan (ILSP) where appropriate.	EDI Advocate/ management lead	To do 22/23
	Add information, given by UKRI, to the Envision website about options such as caring leave and working part-time.	EDI Advocate	To do 22/23

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Support during application process	Create an applicant mentoring scheme, aimed at increasing the diversity of applicants and successful students, as well as making the process of applying easier and more transparent.	EDI Advocate	Done 22/23, to be repeated annually
	Deliver a webinar available to all prospective applicants to provide advice on the application process.	EDI Advocate	Done 22/23, to be repeated annually
Support for international students	Provide guidance on additional upfront costs for international students (visa, medical etc) at interview; to avoid conscious/unconscious bias give this information to everyone, not just those who ask. Appropriate contact details/resources from the accrediting University may also be useful.	All supervisors	To do 22/23
	Provide clear guidance on how visas affect placements.	Training lead	In progress 22/23
Marketing			
Marketing of projects	Include a gendered language checker in the submission form for prospective supervisors[17].	EDI Advocate	Done ahead of 23/24 recruitment round
	Add a 'how did you hear about this studentship' question to the application form to collect data on how students from underrepresented groups hear about Envision projects to target marketing in future years.	Management lead	Done 22/23
	Increase engagement generally on social media by providing resources and advice for all students.	EDI advocate/ management lead/training lead	Done 22/23, Qualtrics form asking for advice from supervisors could be repeated
Marketing of Research Experience Placements	Ensure that accommodations available at interview and during the Research Experience Placements (REPs) are emphasised.	EDI Advocate	To add to website ahead of 22/23 REPs

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[17] When checked using the following gender bias language checker (Gender Decoder: find subtle bias in job ads (katmatfield.com)), 41% of the Envision projects adverts in 2020 were either masculine coded, or strongly masculine coded. According to the study this language checker was based on, women are put off applying to jobs for which the adverts are written using words which are masculine coded, whereas men are not put off applying for jobs that have adverts with feminine coded language.

	Emphasise, in all advertisements, that the REP is paid. Provide clarity that the length of the placement may change but the overall salary will not.	Training lead	To do 22/23
Communication with students			
Advice for supervisors	Encourage supervisors to have a conversation about working hours/expectations if the student and/or supervisor communicate outside of working hours.	EDI Advocate	To do 23/24
	Make staff aware of reasons behind adding pronouns to email signatures[18]/introducing themselves using pronouns and encourage them to do so if comfortable.	EDI Advocate	To do 23/24
EDI training/monitoring			
EDI training	Add any postgraduate student EDI training available through each research institute/university[19] to the Envision Moodle and encourage students (at the Welcome Event) to complete this.	EDI Advocate/ training lead	To do at 2023 welcome event
EDI PhD student monitoring	Update the EDI questions asked at the point of application to Envision projects to be more inclusive: • Gender question needs to be more inclusive of trans and/or non-binary applicants • Sexuality question requires more options • Ethnicity question requires more options • Disability question needs to ask about type of disability, i.e. physical impairment, neurodiversity etc (This is currently difficult due to the way EDI statistics have to be reported to NERC).	EDI Advocate	To do 23/24, dependent on requirements on reporting from NERC
	Create a set of criteria to try to capture socioeconomic background, and add this to the EDI questions asked at application.	EDI Advocate	To do ahead of 23/24 recruitment round
	Add additional information about the purposes of EDI data collection, and the process of anonymisation to ensure students are comfortable with this practice, and ideally boost the number of students who are willing to provide this information.	EDI Advocate	To do ahead of 23/24 recruitment round

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[18] Using Pronouns in Our Email Signature | Inclusive Employers
[19] Lancaster University provides EDI, mental health, and digital accessibility training. Bangor University provides EDI and accessibility training. The University of Nottingham provides EDI courses and accessibility support.

	Where possible share anonymised EDI data with other DTPs to produce a larger dataset.	EDI Advocate	To do 22/23
	Analyse data about home applicants and international applicants separately[20].	Management lead	To do 23/24
EDI REP student monitoring	To discourage incomplete applications, change the REP application form so there is no delay between filling out the EDI form and filling out the main application.	Training lead	To do ahead of 22/23 REPs
	Update the gender question to be more inclusive of non-binary and trans identities.	EDI Advocate	To do ahead of 22/23 REPs
EDI supervisor monitoring	Consider collecting EDI data on potential supervisors when they apply[21] to address any areas of underrepresentation for supervisory committees.	EDI Advocate/ management lead	To do 23/24
Research Experience Placements			
Recruitment process	Consider fully ringfencing some or all of the REPs so that only students who meet a set of widening participation criteria can apply[22].	Training lead	To do 22/23
	Add a 'how did you hear about us' question to the EDI form to collect data on how to best advertise to underrepresented students.	EDI Advocate/ Training lead	Completed 22/23
	Consider sharing anonymized EDI data sets with other DTPs while the data set is so small to gain a more accurate picture of which demographics of students are currently applying to REPs.	EDI Advocate	To do 22/23
REP project selection	Ensure the selection process is appropriate for an increased number of project proposals.	Training lead	To do for 22/23 REP program
	Consider limiting the number of projects advertised to the number Envision can provide funding for.	Training lead	To do for 22/23 REP program
Mentoring of REP student by PhD student	Create guidance for the student and mentor so that both can get the most out of the mentorship.	EDI Advocate	To do for 22/23 REP program

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[20] This is particularly important for the qu

[21] While all Envision projects are allocated the same funding, data from UKRI show that research grant PIs identifying as female, and from a minority ethnic group, or who have a disability, receive less in award grants (Diversity results analysis for UKRI funding data, financial years 2014-15 to 2018-19 – UKRI) and it is not clear to what extend these systemic issues affect Envision project shortlisting.

[22] Last year project decision was made based on (1) having a project at each partner, (2) student fit to project, and (3) widening participation criteria. All students were allowed to apply regardless of whether or not they fulfilled any of the widening participation criteria.

Student experience after REP	Set up a mailing list for REP students who are happy to be contacted and, once they have graduated, send email adverts for PhD studentships with a reminder that they are guaranteed an interview.	Training lead	To do for 22/23 REP program
	Applicants for Envision studentships who have previously done an Envision REP are guaranteed an interview, but may not be one of the 3 candidates chosen to be interviewed for a project who are guaranteed £75 for interview travel costs. In this case, interview travel costs should also be reimbursed, so that REP students can be guaranteed an interview with travel costs covered.	Training lead	To do 22/23
Training/placements			
Accessibility of training	Monitor the accessibility of training provided by external companies and provide a clear contact person if students need to request any accommodations.	Training lead	To do 22/23
Working for non-domiciled students	Add to the student information section of the website to clarify any restrictions around taking on placements for students on visas with a limit on the hours allowed to work; emphasise that placements are optional.	Training lead/ EDI Advocate	To do 22/23
Other			
EDI information to circulate/provide training on	At the project proposal stage, supervisors will be asked to report on any considerations for how to make their project as safe and inclusive as possible. This particularly relevant for projects which include fieldwork, which may involve extra risks to students who have certain protected characteristics. Supervisors should consider physical accessibility, adaptations for neurodiversity, and safety of fieldwork location for women/LGBT+ researchers).	EDI Advocate	Addition to project proposal form completed ahead of 23/24 recruitment round
	Where possible, share guidance on inclusive viva practices.	EDI Advocate	Ongoing guidance
	Advocate for staff and students to be educated in decolonising their work[23].	EDI Advocate	Ongoing guidance
Making EDI improvements going forward	Consult with Envision students and staff and/or members of underrepresented groups when changes are being made; use the "don't talk about us, without us" approach.	All staff	Ongoing guidance

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[23] [Challenging colonial practices in research: A guide for PhD researchers - Google Docs](#)

	Wherever possible, compensate people for providing their input on EDI issues, helping to advertise Envision, or taking on mentoring roles.	All staff	Ongoing guidance
	Create a plan for reviewing EDI processes, increasing the allowance for expenses in line with inflation[24], and updating any relevant documents, ideally in preparation for the recruitment of each new cohort.	Management board	To do 22/23
	Consider parity for staff success in being awarded an Envision student. Introduce the rule that supervisors cannot be the lead supervisor more than once every other year, but they could be a co-supervisor each year. This would encourage diversity of staff applications and topic areas for studentships plus wider mentoring of colleagues.	Management board	Rule implemented ahead of 23/24 project proposals

Additional EDI measures planned for the 2022-23 academic year

During the 22-23 academic year, Envision will consider and start to enact the above recommendations, but other measures to improve EDI are planned. The applicant support program (including a webinar and the mentoring scheme) is being trialled during the recruitment of cohort 10, which aims to (1) increase the diversity of applicants to Envision studentships, (2) increase the diversity of people who take up an Envision studentship and (3) make the process of applying for an Envision studentship easier and more transparent for all students. Outreach events with the aim of promoting careers in environmental science to a diverse range of students are also being planned.

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[24] In 2020, 15 of the 29 claims made for interview travel expenses were £75 or above.