

Developing an Inclusive and Transparent Recruitment Process for the NHS Digital Academy

Report commissioned by the Digital Readiness programme

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Background

The NHS Digital Academy is a virtual organisation set up to develop a new generation of excellent digital leaders who can drive the information and technology transformation of the NHS. It was set up following a 2017 Secretary of State commitment as the concept emerged from [Making IT Work: Harnessing the Power of Health Information Technology to Improve Care in England \(the Wachter review\)](#) and recommendations outlining the need to develop and invest in the capability and capacity of digital change leaders (including specifically CIOs and CCIOs).

Four years on, the NHS Digital Academy continues to develop current and future generations of excellent digital leaders to drive the information and technology transformation of health and social care. To date, Health Education England (HEE) have commissioned three cohorts of 100 and at time of writing, Cohort 3 is well underway. An expansion is also underway and more details of this can be found on the [NHS Digital Academy website](#).

The [Digital Readiness team](#) is actively embedding the equality, diversity and inclusion agenda into all of its work and the Establishing the NHS Digital Academy workstream will have a significant role to play in supporting those with protected characteristics and a range of professional groups at different stages of their careers. We will ensure that our offers are accessible to a wider range of individuals. We hope that blended learning approaches and standalone modules will facilitate some of this as well as ensuring accessibility standards are adhered to in all of our learning, both online and face to face.

As part of our commitment to developing a more inclusive and transparent recruitment process, which is particularly important to those learning opportunities with limited capacity such as the Digital Health Leadership programme, the HEE Digital Readiness Programme (led by colleagues from South, Central and West CSU (SCW)) working with Imperial College London (as the incumbent supplier for the Digital Health Leadership programme) have undertaken some research to develop an updated evidence-based process ahead of the Cohort 4 application process. Imperial College London are committed to working with us on this research and the opportunity to review the process collaboratively.

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"I am very keen to support the diversity alongside HEE, and within the NHS Digital Academy. We have surveyed, reflected on, and listened to how we could better serve underrepresented groups in the leadership training we provide. We look forward to working with Health Education England to educate and elevate digital health leadership that is diverse, inclusive, and more representative of the NHS workforce."

Rachel Dunscombe, Digital Health Leadership programme, Imperial College London

Methods

As part of our evidence based approach to developing a transparent and inclusive recruitment process, we undertook the following activities:

- We reviewed the process for previous Cohorts working with Imperial College London as the incumbent supplier
- We received the available demographic data to identify where the maximum interventions points could be and understand what data we should collect in the future
- We undertook a literature review (see Appendix 1) and spoke to other organisations (see Appendix 2) to understand what best practice already exists, including Equality, Diversity and Inclusion professionals
- We reviewed high level ESR data on gender and ethnicity review to give us a baseline
- Our own user research survey

These sources of information, alongside general feedback from the research undertaken as part of the NHS Digital Academy future vision work and existing evaluation scoping report, formed the basis for future interventions.

Key findings from our user research

We sought user feedback from both those who had previously applied for the Digital Health Leadership programme (either successfully or unsuccessfully), and those working in Informatics/Digital in the NHS who had never applied.

- This survey ran from 11th December 2020 to 3rd January 2021
- A total of 86 responses were received.
- The surveys were disseminated mainly using Twitter, LinkedIn, the Digital Academy alumni network and the Digital Health forums.
- Our user survey indicated that those who had applied for the scheme felt it was sufficiently well-advertised, whereas those who had not applied rated this lower. Both groups stated that Twitter was one of the main initial sources of information, as well as word of mouth.
- Our user survey for both previous applicants and those who never applied shared similar views on what they perceived to be the target audience, that being those who were aspiring to become Directors or equivalent in the next 3 years.
- Our user survey indicated the most common reason for not applying was a belief that they were underqualified. However, the application success rate of previous candidates indicates that previous educational achievement is not a relevant factor, if they do apply.

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- Our user survey indicated that those who were unsuccessful tended to report a negative experience. However, all respondents who had received feedback (even if unsuccessful) reported a more positive experience than those who did not receive feedback.

Below we list our interventions and explain our rationale behind them. These interventions are chronological, looking at all aspects of the process: advertising, applications, shortlisting, scoring, feedback and evaluation.

Interventions: Advertising

Intervention 1: Increase reach to underrepresented groups by targeting communications at key networks

According to previous applicants in our own user research survey, the most under-represented groups were women, ethnic minority staff, and nurses. Allied Health Professionals (AHPs), midwives and those working in mental health organisations also mentioned.

Responses from those who never applied show that equal numbers of respondents felt they were, and were not part of the target group for the Digital Health Leadership programme. This signifies the need for clarity on who should apply within the application process.

High-level analysis of Cohort 3 data from Imperial College London suggests that the issue is with the number of women applying, rather than there being a gender bias when it comes to shortlisting. The same data looked at ethnicity, and identified that of the 259 applicants, 68% were white, 29% were from ethnic minorities and 3% were unspecified. Of the 100 successful candidates, 80% were white, 19% were BME and 1% were unspecified.

We propose to reach underrepresented groups and encourage their applications by running a series of targeted webinars throughout April 2021. This includes collaborations with [OneHealthTech](#), [FEDIP \(the Federation for Informatics Professionals\)](#), the national Chief Nursing Information Officer and their team and a session with Allied Health Professionals. We will also promote previous resources developed by the [Shuri Network](#). We will support attendance at other groups where possible on invite. In addition to this will be Q&A drop-in clinics open to all to have their questions answered in regards to all aspects of the application process.

Interventions: Application

Intervention 2: Clarity over academic requirements and time commitment in application materials

Our user research survey of previous applicants showed general satisfaction (93%) with the quality of information provided in the application resources but indicated that there was a lack of information regarding the time commitment the scheme required. In addition to this, the most common reason given for not applying was the belief that individuals were under-qualified, whereas successful applicants had a range of qualifications, from A Levels to PhD.

40% of respondents who didn't apply for the Digital Health Leadership programme had caring responsibilities which may have acted as a barrier. It is important to gain a better understanding

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of how caring responsibilities can impact potential applicants' decisions, and provide necessary information regarding time commitments required to complete the course. To encourage a supportive approach, these conversations should be encouraged up front where possible so talent is not lost at the first stage. It is however important to note we are aware that Cohorts 1-3 have been well supported by Imperial College London when they have required flexibility in their studies due to unforeseen events.

As part of the application process for Cohort 4 we will ensure the key points around time commitments, experience and qualifications in the updated application materials are clear, while encouraging supportive dialogue so they are not seen as barriers.

Interventions: Shortlisting

Intervention 3: Offer previous NHS Digital Academy alumni to be on shortlisting panels to improve diversity (particularly in terms of ethnicity and educational background)

A literature review on inclusive recruitment (see Appendix 1) showed that in line with best practice we need to ensure that 'selection panels and processes are established with both merit and diversity in mind'.

Based on data provided by Imperial College London, the shortlisting panel for Cohort 3 was 95% white, with the majority having a high level of academic qualification (first degree or higher). This makes the need to diversify the shortlisting panel clear, particularly as the proportion of ethnic minorities selected for Cohort 3 was lower than the proportion that applied. Although the exact reasons for this are unclear, it is notable that the shortlisting panel were overwhelmingly white.

Intervention 4: Anonymise applications so the panel cannot see names or personal details of those applying

'Blind decision making' in shortlisting is suggested in a report by Hays, 'to ensure the selection criteria is based on desired skills and competencies only' (see Appendix 1). Therefore removing personal details from applications such as name, university, place of residence, etc. would be advisable. Qualitative conversations (see Appendix 2) also highlighted this as a useful way to minimise bias. We will be implementing this for Cohort 4 and a long list process beforehand will eliminate applicants who are not eligible for the programme (e.g. due to their organisation or contract type).

Intervention 5: Provide clear positive & negative indicators for shortlisters in order to make the process more objective

This intervention contributes to removing unconscious bias. Where shortlisters have to score against indicators, it may drive them to think more about the specific content of the application, rather than an overall impression of the applicant. This increases overall objectivity and is common recruitment practice. It will also contribute towards providing meaningful feedback to applicants (see intervention 8 for more on this). We will be introducing these for Cohort 4 and we will also share them upfront with applicants so they know what we will be looking for. Shortlisters will be given training in how to use the criteria and what level of feedback to capture.

Intervention 6: Unconscious bias training

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Shortlisters will be required to undergo unconscious bias training alongside their basic shortlisting training, to help ensure they are scoring objectively. Qualitative conversations with similar schemes (e.g. the Topol Fellowship) highlighted this as an essential aspect of making the process more inclusive. There was some debate over whether this would still be useful with no face-to-face aspect to the application, but upon consultation with EDI experts from SCW we concluded it would still be a useful and valid intervention, as long as it is used with other inclusive recruitment processes.

Interventions: Scoring

Intervention 7: All applications to be scored twice individually to minimise bias/subjectivity

The Hays report ‘Recruiting for difference’ as referenced in the literature review (Appendix 1) indicates that ‘there are three biases which affect every stage of the recruitment journey- status quo bias, selective perception and anchoring. In recognising them, we can challenge them and ensure every part of the recruitment process remains inclusive.’

All applications for Cohort 4 will be independently scored twice, and all shortlisters will receive a pack with revised instructions for how to carry out the assessment, alongside a wider briefing pack covering the interventions being undertaken to ensure more inclusive recruitment for this Cohort. Generally this is essential from a recruitment practice perspective for minimising bias and providing useful challenge on scoring. Where necessary we will recommend moderation meetings if major discrepancies identified. Shortlisters will not be advised of their pairing until they have submitted their score, and even then this will only be done if moderation needs to take place.

Interventions: Feedback

Intervention 8: Offer feedback to all unsuccessful candidates. Ensure this is sufficient and not generic.

The data from our user research survey highlighted insufficient feedback is being offered to applicants following their application, with 91% of respondents stating that they did not receive any feedback. Our understanding is that feedback has previously been offered, but that message does not seem to have reached applicants appropriately. Our user research highlighted that candidates who were unsuccessful tended to report a negative experience; however those who received feedback (even if unsuccessful) reported a more positive experience than those who did not receive feedback.

From our user research, over 35% of unsuccessful applicants applied a second time, with half of those being successful. More consistent feedback on applications may influence the numbers of people applying a second time and support them in their application.

Providing individual, meaningful and constructive feedback demonstrates respect and appreciation for the candidate for expressing an interest in a particular scheme and taking the time to apply, supporting their own personal development journey. Providing good feedback also develops a better reputation for a programme. For Cohort 4, we will provide all applicants with meaningful feedback whether they are successful or not.

Reserve Lists

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Additionally, consideration should also be made as to those who are meeting the standard of the programme yet do not get a place as it is full, and whether they should need to complete a full application if they wish to be considered for a subsequent cohort. We are going to review this as part of the Cohort 4 application process.

Interventions: Evaluation

Intervention 9: Collect full protected characteristic data from applicants

The availability of protected characteristics data from the survey enabled the analysis which showed the gender discrepancy in those who decided not to apply. Having access to this data from the application process would enable this to be monitored. Additionally, having protected characteristics data enables an evidence-based method to assess any suggestions that the scheme is not inclusive enough. However, the full range of protected characteristics data was not collected for all the Cohorts, for example, Cohorts 1 and 2 did not collect ethnicity data, and therefore it is important to ensure the full range is collected for future Cohorts so we can continue to measure improvements in participant diversity.

Intervention 10: Evaluate the process as we go – not just at the end

Qualitative conversations with other organisations who have conducted similar exercises (see Appendix 2) suggested this as a continuous improvement process. For example, if there is a heavily male bias in applications received within the first 2 weeks after a recruitment window opens, we will still be able to act on this and make changes e.g. promote it more to female networks.

Next Steps

With the application window for Cohort 4 of the Digital Health Leadership programme due to open on 1st April 2021, these interventions have been embedded into the updated transparent and inclusive recruitment process for this cohort.

For Cohort 4 we are not going to impose quotas on specific groups (whether that is professional groups or demographics) however we will be scrutinising our data to understand what we can do for Cohort 5 and beyond to keep improving diversity on this programme and as per recommendation 10, we may extend the application window if we need to promote more to underrepresented groups.

While for Cohort 4 we have placed a large emphasis on advertising underrepresented groups to apply and reducing bias through transparent scoring, there will be further work to undertake and we will continue to evaluate this process.

Appendix 1 – Literature review: Inclusive Recruitment

Intervention/Theme/Info	Key quote	Examples/research	Source (what document does it originate from)
Ambition for all new hires/publishers and authors to reflect UK society taking into account ethnicity, gender, sexuality, social mobility and disability by 2025	'Make sure you're not simply relying on geography for your next hire'	A publishing industry survey found a huge bias those who grew up south of Birmingham	The Guardian Jobs guide
'Cultural fit'	'Someone just like the rest of us, please?'	Very London-centre approached in recruitment	The Guardian Jobs guide
How to draw on a talent pool from across the UK? Hold interviews in more than one location	'You don't want to miss out on the ideal person because they couldn't afford high train fares.'	Skype/Zoom interviews Travelling to different offices to interview candidates	The Guardian Jobs guide
Financially inclusive interviews – suggestion for employers to cover cost of interviews (travel etc)	'Put yourself ahead by making your recruitment process financially inclusive and showing respect and care for your future employees.'	Report by Barclays Bank – 43% grads had to turn down their interview because they couldn't afford the associated cost (travel, outfit etc)	The Guardian Jobs guide
Diverse teams deliver improved customer orientation, support innovation, and secure greater employee productivity and loyalty.	'The right person can transform an organisation, and the right job can transform a life'.	Hays and Vercida report 2020	Hays report 'Recruiting for difference'
Eight core areas of the hiring process (see below):	'Every step of the recruitment process needs to be consciously inclusive'.	Report designed by Hays and Vercida Consulting	Hays report 'Recruiting for difference'
Stage 1: Pre-process <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish workforce diversity metrics by monitoring demographic data • Train hiring managers on bias 	'Stakeholders are more likely to engage with diversity and inclusion programmes if they are informed about the benefits of a diverse workforce.'	Report designed by Hays and Vercida Consulting	Hays report 'Recruiting for difference'
Stage 2: Job design and person specification <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review the JD and PS for any biased language 	'Job adverts that are over populated with traditionally masculine words or sentiment may trigger stereotype threat.'	Report designed by Hays and Vercida Consulting	Hays report 'Recruiting for difference'

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hays Thrive – useful tool on improving the recruitment process 			
Stage 3: Job advert	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be flexible, underline your commitment to diversity and inclusion and check for biased language • Key issues to assess are affinity bias, in-groups bias, and stereotype threat <p>'Stereotypical images and phrases used in job adverts reinforce existing assumptions and biases about the types of people you're seeking to hire.'</p>	Report designed by Hays and Vercida Consulting	Hays report 'Recruiting for difference'	
Stage 4: Candidate attraction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess under-represented groups • Promote jobs to the widest possible pool of candidates 	Report designed by Hays and Vercida Consulting	Hays report 'Recruiting for difference'	
Stage 5: Shortlisting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involve a range of diverse stakeholders • Include minority groups • Consider 'blind decision making' 	<p>'...you need to maintain a sense of conscious inclusion and a heightened awareness of the potential impact of bias'.</p>	Report designed by Hays and Vercida Consulting	Hays report 'Recruiting for difference'
Stage 6: Interviewing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure your interviewing panel is visibly diverse • Bring your sense of neutrality • Assess risk factors such as halo effect, horn effect, confirmation bias 	<p>'...make sure your selection panels and processes are established with both merit and diversity in mind.'</p>	Report designed by Hays and Vercida Consulting	Hays report 'Recruiting for difference'

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Stage 7: Debriefing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Challenge any decision makers pushing for one particular candidate Check and monitor data to assess diversity of those who applied Avoid decision fatigue <p>'Once you have a selection in mind, carefully debrief and be sure to aggregate everybody's feedback to ensure as balanced and unbiased a process as possible'.</p>	Report designed by Hays and Vercida Consulting	Hays report 'Recruiting for difference'
Stage 8: On-boarding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reflect on status quo bias, selective perception and anchoring <p>'There are three biases which affect every stage of the recruitment journey. In recognising them, you can challenge them and ensure every part of your recruitment process remains inclusive.'</p>	Report designed by Hays and Vercida Consulting	Hays report 'Recruiting for difference'
The use of language in job adverts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> List of words we should replace <p>'Job advertisements within male-dominated areas contained greater masculine wording than advertisements from female-dominated areas'</p>	Research conducted in 2011 (five separate studies)	HEE Literature review
The use of language in job adverts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of F/M form in a job advert <p>'Female applicants were perceived to fit less well with the high-status position than male applicants when either the masculine or the feminine form with (m/f) was used – even though they were perceived equally competent.'</p>	Research conducted in Germany	HEE Literature review
Civil Rights Act 1964 prohibits such wording	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How to attract diverse groups to apply for a job <p>'Messages that focused on personal and career benefits were three times as effective at getting people to apply, particularly women and people of colour.'</p>	Research conducted in the US	

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Gender bias in job advert	'Gender Bias Decoder tool helps to identify gendered words in emails, job descriptions, or any other text.'	Invented by Totaljobs	HEE Literature review
When job ads turn down highly qualified women	'You remain calm in a stressful situations' – this behaviour-like verbs were affecting the job attraction (...) because of negative meta-stereotypes.'	Studies conducted in Belgium	HEE Literature review
GFL – Gender Fair Language in job adverts can be achieved by neutralisation and feminisation	'Neutralisation is achieved by replacing male masculine forms (policeman) with gender unmarked words (police offices).'	Research conducted in 2016	HEE Literature review
How to avoid discrimination in job adverts: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Job titles for instance in nursing and midwifery • Job descriptions • Top examples of diversity statements 	<p>'Job titles need to reflect modern times and go gender neutral.'</p> <p>'Without examining potential unconscious biases job descriptions can include language that might deter certain pool of candidates, thus reducing the diversity of candidates.'</p>	Report – Language matters (LinkedIn) McKinsey research Apple statement – different together	HEE Literature review
Inclusive job descriptions	'Ensure requirements listed in the description are relevant to that job, non-relevant duties could lead to excluding people from applying.'	University of St Andrews research	HEE Literature review
Diversity cues on recruitment websites	'Diversity cues on recruitment websites influence website viewers' processing of presented information.'	The Journal of Applied Psychology, 2012	HEE Literature review

Appendix 2 – Qualitative Conversation list

This list details the people, networks or organisations we spoke to for knowledge, experience or information around this piece of work. These conversations were not formally recorded but broadly influenced some of the interventions outlined in this document.

1. HEE Equality, Diversity and Inclusion lead
2. SCW Equality, Diversity and Inclusion lead
3. South East Regional Talent Board
4. London Talent Board
5. Topol Fellowship
6. Faculty of Clinical Informatics
7. Imperial College London
8. Wider HEE Digital Readiness team
9. Digital Academy Steering group
10. SCW Workforce & Resourcing team