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Good Practice Guide for Employers

QAA

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

Welcome to this Good Practice Guide for Employers, which is designed to help you to get the most out of virtual careers fairs. The Guide draws on experiences and learning developed through working with students as partners in a QAA-funded Collaborative Enhancement Project. The project created a toolkit to enable students from underrepresented backgrounds to develop the confidence and competencies needed for securing graduate level employment.

In a recent survey[1] only 22% of employers across the UK thought that graduates were equipped with the key employability skills they required. Key skills highlighted included team working, critical thinking and problem solving, and communication ("Bridging industry skill gaps…; Phoenix, Issue 166, November 2022).

In addition to the above industry skills gaps, students from underrepresented groups may have challenges linked to confidence, lack of representation, building networks, digital exclusion and understanding of recruitment norms and practices.

The Inclusive Futures Fair, which a consortium of seven universities[2] has been organising since 2019, is open to students from the consortium universities and specifically aims to help students from underrepresented groups, including students:

- from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds

- with a disability

- from lower socio-economic backgrounds

- who are first generation university attendees

- who are care experienced, estranged from their parents or carers for others

- who are mature students

Below we highlight some conceptual and practical advice for employers, which we hope will be useful guidance when reaching out to students from underrepresented groups. We first highlight the types of challenges our underrepresented students might face, then suggest ways in which employers can create inclusive virtual events and build relationships with students at these events. Finally, we give two practical recommendations on engagement strategies that can continue after events have concluded.

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[1] 'Bridging industry skill gaps…'; Phoenix, Issue 166, November 2022
[2] Inclusive Futures Consortium (Universities : Hertfordshire, Greenwich, Kingston, London Metropolitan, Roehampton, West London, Westminster

What are the challenges for our students?

1. Finding time to attend virtual fairs. Although it might apply to many students, it is often typical that underrepresented students work and care for their families whilst studying, so squeezing in extracurricular activities can be a challenge.

One employer mentioned:

"Sometimes students were not attending booked meeting requests so we could have let others use that time instead."

2. Digital exclusion. From anecdotal evidence and feedback, students from underrepresented groups are less likely to have private spaces at home, strong Wi-Fi and suitable equipment.

3. Flat conversations. Employers often mention that some students have the challenge of having enough confidence to communicate their skills and expertise in an impactful manner. Often students are reluctant to switch on cameras, which also contributes to flat conversations.

4. Converting conversations with employers into successful applications. A high proportion of students reported having a positive experience but did not go on to submit applications

One student mentioned:

"It was held at a time when I had class/other commitments, so when the exhibitors texted me, I was not available."

How employers can create inclusive virtual events

1. Treat underrepresented students as individuals by avoiding generalisations or stereotyping them.

2. Corporate messaging and lack of role models. Students fed back that while the individuals they met were representative and inclusive, in some cases this contrasted with the corporate written materials. In some sectors, especially Law, the recruitment resources still reflect "pale and male" work environment.

3. Commitment to diversity and inclusivity. Tailor your messages to students and state clearly and upfront what your organisation stands for, with examples showing how you value diversity. For example, are you in the process of establishing diversity schemes or do you already have some schemes where you recruit students from underrepresented groups?

4. Clearly state if you are looking to recruit students from a particular discipline (e.g. law, technology,accounting etc) and proactively reach out to students yourself. Set up your booths by the time the event platform opens to students

5. Use easy to register and navigate platforms. When referring students to your own platform(s) for group chats or webinars, try to make it simple for them to join the conversations. One student said: I clicked on so many links and I couldn't find where the links for webinars were.

6. In 1-2-1 meetings create a safe space where students can express their concerns and ask questions about their career. Where possible, perhaps you could give students examples of questions they could be asked during interviews to give a taste of your recruitment process

Ways employers can build relationships with students at the event

1. Accept that underrepresented students come with different levels of social, cultural and economic capital. There is a growing concern that the Coronavirus pandemic has increased psychological–social barriers for underrepresented groups. In 2022, a poll conducted by Bright Network[3] found that 77% of responding students believed Covid has widened inequalities for graduates entering employment.

2. All students prefer to be recruited for their skills and knowledge and not for belonging to a certain category. Explain what a "right candidate" means in your organisation's context and how your organisation nurtures and develops talent. Are you offering coaching around self-awareness, resilience and professionalism that would help underrepresented students to build their confidence?

3. Be fully engaged, genuine and proactive and reach out to students. Many event platforms allow employers to see user profiles well ahead of the careers fair to help you prepare with reaching out to students. Some students need to first hear what you have got to say. Just be aware, as with face to face events, students will sense fake engagement straight away.

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[3] 'Majority of graduates believe the pandemic has widened job inequality'; People Management, 21 February 2022

4. Make your organisation relatable. Include topics such as "*What does a typical day in x job look like.."* in your conversations with students. If you have interns or recent graduates from underrepresented groups in your teams, invite them along to share their experiences.

5. Convey inclusive and easy to digest "bite size" information. Careers events run for a limited time, so make sure students get the most out of your booths and 1-2-1 meetings. For example, maybe you could create 30-second video clips about your organisation, how to apply for available roles and critical information such as whether you are recruiting only at a certain time of year or all year-round.
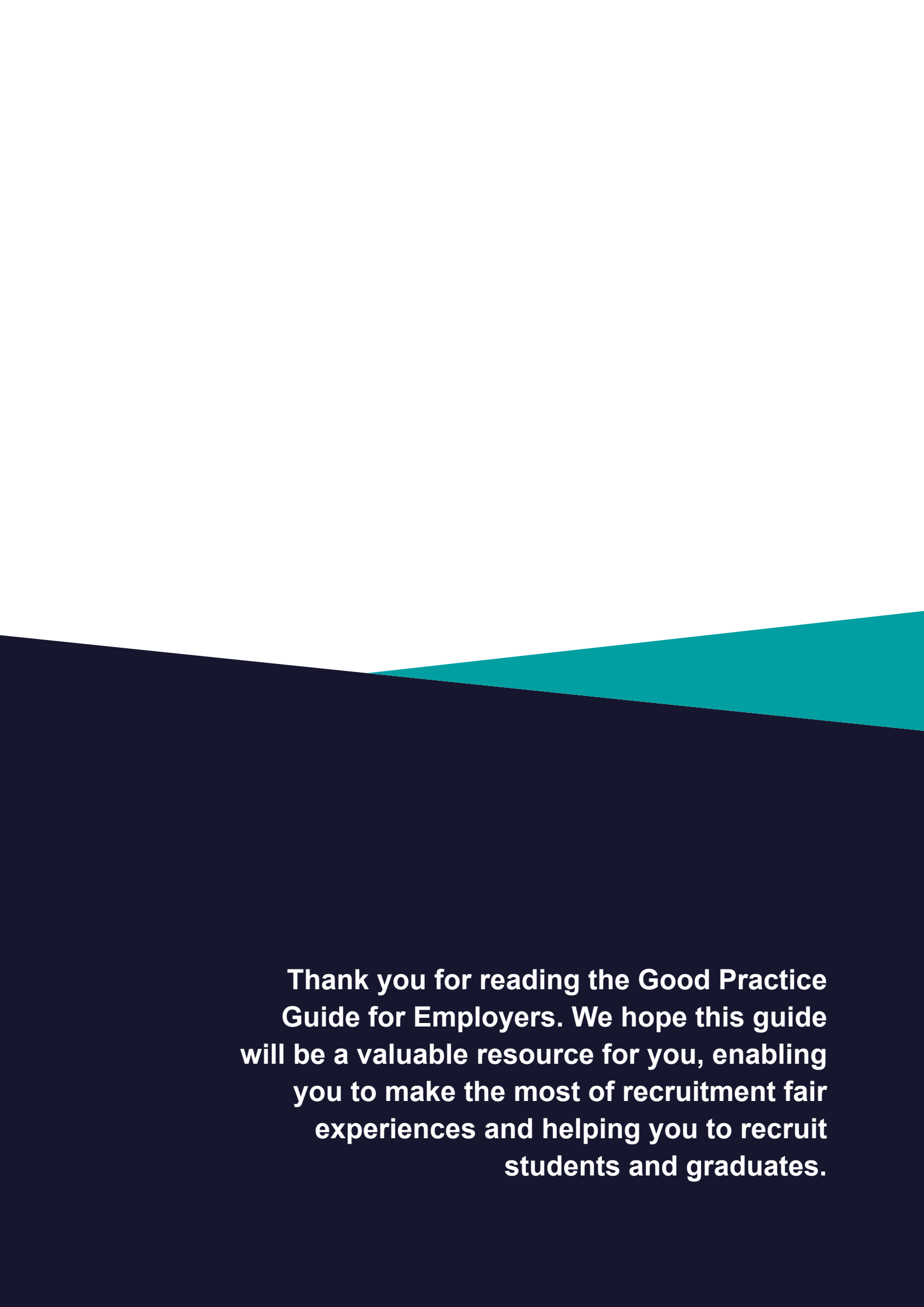
6. Are you offering visas to international students? Be transparent about your recruitment processes for international students. Stay up to date with new developments about the Graduate Visa route and the Skilled Worker Visa route (formerly Tier 2) applicable to international applicants having previously studied in the UK.

7. Create "easy applications" for specific events. Many underrepresented students are working and have no time to put together lengthy applications etc. What is the bare minimum information that you need from the applicant in terms of skills and education? Leave the rest for later stages, e.g. is the address really needed if the opportunity is online only? Perhaps think about what type of information you can collect at the interview stage and what information once the contract is offered?

Strategies that can continue after the event

1. Keep track of the students you spoke to. Lead by example by connecting with students on LinkedIn and ask for feedback from them on how you could improve your outreach to under-represented students.

2. Use positive case studies. Where possible, share and use positive case studies. For example, it would be useful and encouraging for students to know that X number of underrepresented students applied as a result of attending a particular event. It would be even more impactful if you were able to share that students you first met at a similar event in previous years have been recruited. Where possible, try also to share more detailed data on applications with careers services, since this will help them plan necessary support for other under-represented students.

Thank you for reading the Good Practice Guide for Employers. We hope this guide will be a valuable resource for you, enabling you to make the most of recruitment fair experiences and helping you to recruit students and graduates.