

Exploring Barriers to Employment for New Scots and Ethnically Diverse Candidates



Photo: Whole Family Equality Project 2025 Celebration

CAPITAL CITY PARTNERSHIP 

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Edinburgh's Jobs Strategy


WHOLE FAMILY
EQUALITY PROJECT

September 2025

Executive Summary and Recommendations

Barriers to employment

Although equity standards are well established in the Scottish labour market, New Scots and ethnically diverse individuals in Edinburgh continue to face significant challenges, including securing employment, finding jobs appropriate to the level of skill, maintaining stable work, and advancing in their careers. This remains an area of both urgent concern and opportunity.

This report, commissioned by Capital City Partnership (CCP), examines the challenges faced by New Scots and ethnically diverse individuals in gaining and sustaining employment within Edinburgh's enterprise landscape. It explores how systemic, cultural and procedural barriers intersect to create obstacles and sets out practical recommendations for improving employability outcomes. The barriers we identified span across three themes:

Access to Work

Factors contributing to unemployment are:

- Limited access to professional networks and inflexible roles hinders job opportunities.
- Complex application processes and language barriers create challenges.
- Bias against foreign names and lack of recognition of overseas qualifications reduce chances of interview invitation.

Retaining work

Ethnically diverse employees often leave or seek to leave their employment because they face discrimination:

- Employees face lack of trust and unconscious bias.
- Cultural misunderstandings and weak support systems discourage raising concerns.
- Inclusion efforts are often inconsistent or tokenistic.

Career Progression

Advancement is limited due to:

- Non-UK work experience often being undervalued, leading to underemployment of skills.
- A persistent glass ceiling, lack of diversity in leadership, unclear progression routes and lack of mentorship.
- Employers rarely tracking diversity in promotions or pay, missing opportunities to address gaps and unlock talent.

Employers highlighted many benefits of having ethnically diverse workforce such as *inclusive and dynamic workplace culture, introducing innovation and fresh perspectives, and addressing critical skills gaps*. However, employers also expressed greater need for support around the following areas: training on unconscious bias and cultural competency (33%); clearer strategies for integrating ethnically diverse workforce (20%); legal guidance on Visas, Right to Work, diversity and inclusion (20%); and support for English language provision and communication support (18%).

These findings point to clear opportunities for targeted actions to build more inclusive and sustainable workforce practices.

Recommendations

The findings from this report highlight areas of improvement in engaging and retaining ethnically diverse workforce and the areas where employers require additional support. Based on the voices of ethnically diverse participants and the survey data from local employers, we have developed the following recommendations that can help strengthen inclusive practices and maximise the advantages of workforce diversity:

Inclusive Hiring Practices



- **Bias-Free Recruitment:** Use name-blind applications and structured, transparent hiring processes, shorten and share interview questions before the interview.
- **Feedback:** Provide general feedback to unsuccessful applicants to help improve future applications.
- **Training:** Equip hiring managers with cultural competency training.

Active Recruitment



- **Outreach:** Engage diverse candidates at job fairs and advertise inclusively.
- **Work Placements:** Expand placements for ethnically diverse adults to build skills and workplace exposure.
- **Entry-Level Roles:** Increase access through in-house training and development programs.

Recognition of International Experience



Value non-UK experience by offering mentorships, work trials, and paid internships to underrepresented groups.

Workplace Inclusion & Culture



- **Inclusive Environment:** Foster respect and empowerment through training, leadership, and feedback. Ensure diversity at all levels.
- **Track Equity:** Use diversity metrics to monitor promotions, pay gaps, and representation.
- **Staff Voice:** Implement culturally sensitive feedback systems to understand workplace issues.

Professional Networks & Mentorship



- **Networking:** Create industry groups and partnerships to connect diverse talent.
- **Mentorship:** Pair experienced staff with underrepresented employees to support career growth and inclusion.
- **Partnership:** Collaborate with local partners to access language or practical support.

Policy & Process Review



- **Fair Work:** Ensure equitable pay, job security, and anti-discrimination protections.
- **Feedback & Audits:** Strengthen recruitment and performance review feedback; conduct independent Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) audits.
- **Supportive Practices:** Promote flexible working, inclusive management, and robust grievance mechanisms.

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Background

Employment is one of the most powerful levers we have, to build a more inclusive and equitable society. However, in Scotland, the employment gap between white and minority ethnic groups was 13.8% in 2023. (Scottish Government, 2024a, p. 8).

Poverty rates in Scotland are also disproportionately high, at 50% for 'Asian or Asian British' and 51% for 'Mixed, Black or Black British, and Other' groups between 2019-24 (Scottish Government, 2025). Migrants face major adaptation challenges, including navigating UK systems, securing housing, and adjusting to workplace norms. Culture shock, mental health pressures, and prolonged unemployment can reduce confidence and skills. Contributing factors include underemployment, debt, poor housing, and limited childcare, particularly affecting single-income and single-parent households. These conditions often trap individuals in low-paid roles, limiting career mobility.

Capital City Partnership (CCP) commissioned this report to inform strategies that address employment barriers faced by ethnically diverse communities, a need consistently identified through CCP's ongoing work and that of its third sector partners.

CCP is the anchor delivery body for Edinburgh's employability strategy, working together to tackle inequality and poverty. The current report represents a collaboration between the Whole Family Equality Project and the Joined Up for Business teams under CCP. The Whole Family Equality Project addresses poverty and inequality in ethnically diverse communities by delivering measurable improvements and involving participants in shaping the project. Joined Up for Business offers a "no wrong door" approach, providing free, tailored recruitment, training, and business growth support for Small and Medium Enterprises (SME), including help accessing relevant funding.

By adopting a holistic, lived-experience-based approach, this report explores barriers faced by ethnically diverse individuals in Edinburgh, across gender, ethnicity, and age. Participants included recent graduates, women over 50 re-entering the workforce, and both new arrivals and long-term residents from European, African, East Asian, and South Asian backgrounds.

The findings offer practical insights for employers and policy-makers, highlighting both persistent barriers and examples of inclusive practice.

Barriers into Employment: Access

Finding employment Opportunities

a. Professional Networks

Participants shared that the limited access to professional networks places ethnically diverse individuals at a disadvantage in the job market. Very often, casual or distant connections are key to accessing new job opportunities (Granovetter, 1973), yet such ties are often unavailable to those with restricted networks, such as New Scots. Moreover, networking skills are not universally taught and may vary across cultures, further compounding challenges in finding the employment especially among the skilled jobseekers.

"I do have a small social circle here in the UK, but most of us are in the same situation, so it's hard to get new perspectives or leads."

b. Suitable work and flexibility in job opportunities

"My rota changes all the time, ... Some shifts are whatever suits the employer. But there's no flexibility in return... it impossible to take on another job or focus on studying..."

Limited job flexibility disproportionately affects carers and part-time workers who are balancing employment, study, and personal responsibilities. Participants noted that entry-level roles are often concentrated in on-site sectors such as retail and caregiving. These sectors are frequently characterised by shift-based work, lower pay, and higher levels of precarity, which can create barriers for ethnically diverse employees seeking stable, long-term career development. For New Scots, the lack of childcare support and financial constraints means that inflexible work arrangements exclude many, particularly women, from employment, further education or additional work opportunities.

Application Process and Interviews

a. Job Application

New Scots and ethnically diverse applicants face significant barriers in recruitment processes. Application procedures are often lengthy, jargon-heavy, and inaccessible to those facing language or cultural barriers. Participants reported bias against foreign names and the widespread non-recognition of overseas qualifications, limiting progression to interviews and leading to underemployment where individuals end up in jobs that do not fully utilise their skills. New Scots in particular struggle to translate prior experience into the UK context, despite holding degrees in fields such as Finance, Dentistry, and Social Sciences.

b. Interviews

The Employers' survey results indicate that many employers focus on promoting inclusivity through practices like using clear language in job postings and accepting non-traditional references (see **Appendix 1**).

However, the interview process poses challenges for New Scots unfamiliar with UK recruitment norms, such as behavioural interviews and articulating transferable skills. Participants reported feeling they were "guessing" employer expectations due to vague guidance, often relying on practices from their countries of origin, resulting in rejections. Cultural mismatches and limited exposure to UK workplaces hinder effective self-presentation.

"I've noticed that employers here seem to focus a lot on your character. ... In my home country, interviews are very skill-based and strictly professional, so I'm not always sure how to present myself. ... It's hard to know what they're really looking for."

c. Feedback

The absence of constructive feedback after rejections creates uncertainty about improvement areas. Gaps remain in providing feedback post-rejection, which many applicants view as essential for improvement. Participants in the focus groups and one-to-one interviews revealed that they initially exhibit assurance in their skills, but repeated application rejections and insufficient feedback lead to a loss in confidence. They described beginning to doubt the relevance of their qualifications and experiences, prompting them to pursue lower-level jobs or consider costly retraining options.

"The feedback I received I can't say it was comprehensive. The constant rejection chipped my confidence. It made me feel demotivated, so I decided to re-train and change the industry [admin assistance]"

Barriers to Employment: Retaining Work

Despite employers expressing a clear desire to create inclusive workplaces (see **Appendix 2**), some barriers continue to persist in workplaces. These barriers mean that many ethnically diverse employees face challenges that lead them to leave or consider leaving their jobs, resulting in poor retention.

Discrimination, Fair Treatment and Support

Participants reported frequent workplace discrimination, including micromanagement, higher performance expectations, and biased evaluations, often tied to country of origin or accent. Everyday racism and microaggressions, such as comments about food or cultural background, were common.

Many felt it was easier to remain silent than risk conflict, reflecting a lack of psychological safety. These left employees feeling disempowered, particularly those with limited English. Where respondents said Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) training was provided, it was inconsistently applied and often seen as tokenistic.

"It's also frustrating when people make racist comments or judge me based on where I'm from. I usually just ignore it. ... Some people just don't care."

"I've heard comments about how my food smells or things like that. It's not always worth speaking up, sometimes it feels easier to just let it go."

Workplace Practices and Culture

Discrimination is often reinforced by a lack of cultural

"I don't trust management. There's no fairness. Some people get away with more... But other colleagues spend much longer chatting or scrolling on their phones, and nothing happens."

awareness in organisations. While higher-level managers are generally fair, some respondents felt that supervisors and middle managers differentiated between employees and bent the rules, asking employees not to escalate the issue to a higher manager.

"...they can't see me when I come home crying, only when I return to work every day smiling."

When employers and colleagues are not equipped to navigate diverse norms, misunderstandings and exclusion become common, even without overt hostility. Inadequate feedback channels and culturally responsive support leave employees unsure how to raise concerns, contributing to frustration, disengagement, and poor retention.

Barriers into Employment: Training and Career Progression

Professional Growth and Opportunities

Ethnically diverse employees often face limited access to training, feedback, and clear pathways for progression. While employers may demand flexibility through unstable contracts, unpredictable shifts, or zero-hour contracts support for development is minimal. This is especially true for those with entry-level skills, right-to-work restrictions or limited English. These conditions hinder growth and foster inequity. Those who do advance face underrepresentation in senior roles, often encountering a “glass ceiling” that limits access to executive positions. A lack of visible role models further impedes the consideration of growth.

Many organisations monitor workforce metrics such as pay, absenteeism, professional development but do not break the data down by ethnicity or migration background. Our survey results indicate that while some employers track diversity, equity and inclusion metrics in their candidate pool, there is a lack of diversity-related data on performance, progression and retention, particularly for ethnically diverse staff and New Scots (see **Appendix 3**). This gap makes it difficult to track progress or implement targeted interventions. Without this level of detail, disparities may remain hidden and efforts to support inclusion are harder to evaluate.

Underemployment

Ethnically diverse employees often experience underemployment due to their skills and qualifications being undervalued or dismissed. As a result, some pursue retraining in the UK, when finances, time, and personal circumstances permit.

Others feel forced to accept roles that do not match their qualifications or consider changing careers entirely. The lack of recognition for overseas qualifications and experience further restricts career progression and leads to frustration and a sense of stagnation.

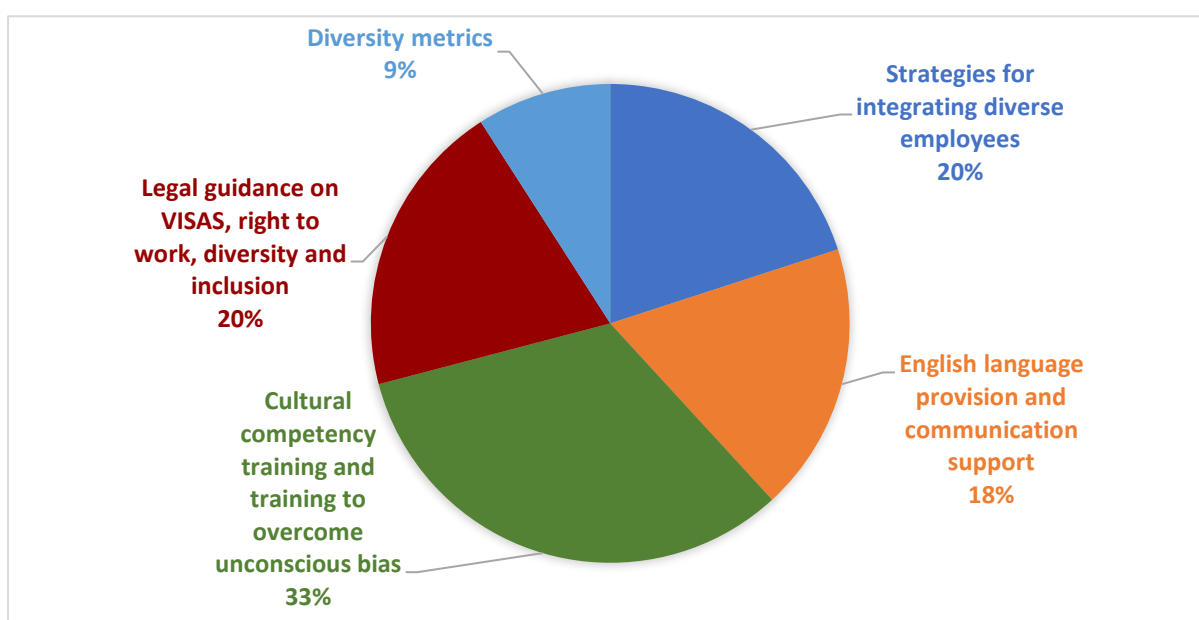
“I asked to apply for a course that could help me grow, but my manager said it was only for managers... saying it was for people who can make an impact. That made me feel like they don’t see my potential. I just wanted the chance to try.”

What Employers Need

We engaged with employers across Edinburgh to understand their perspectives on having an ethnically diverse workforce. The feedback revealed a strongly positive attitude toward diversity, with many employers' expressing enthusiasm about the benefits it brings to their businesses (see **Appendix 4**). Employers highlighted several advantages of having an ethnically diverse team. These include fostering a more *inclusive and dynamic workplace culture, introducing innovation and fresh perspectives, and addressing critical skills gaps*. Additionally, businesses serving diverse clientele found that a *representative workforce enhances customer engagement* and satisfaction.

Despite already implementing a range of supportive measures, employers identified challenges and expressed greater needs for provisions. These were:

Figure 1: % of Top priority needs to engage ethnically diverse workforce



- More comprehensive cultural competency training and targeted training to address unconscious bias,
- Clear strategies for integrating diverse employees into existing teams,
- Legal guidance on VISAS, Right To Work, diversity and inclusion policies,
- Expanded language support, such as English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programs and Ongoing language and communication support,
- Enhanced monitoring systems to track employee satisfaction, equity, and inclusion.

Recommendations

The recommendations closely reflect employer-identified priorities in the survey, particularly around integration strategies, communication support, and unconscious bias training.

Access to Employment

a. Adopt More Inclusive Hiring Practices:

- **Implement name-blind recruitment and bias-free screening** to reduce unconscious bias at early application stages.
- **Simplify and standardise recruitment processes** to reduce unnecessary complexity, jargon, and cultural bias. Ensure that job descriptions clearly articulate role expectations and required competencies.
- **Shorten and share interview questions in advance** to support fairer assessment, reduce candidate anxiety, and ensure the focus is on genuine skills rather than performance under pressure.
- **Structured feedback to unsuccessful applicants**, particularly those who repeatedly do not progress, to support learning and reduce attrition.
- **Provide cultural competency training for hiring panels**, with regular refreshers and impact evaluations to ensure inclusive decision-making.
- **Promote recognition of international qualifications and experience**, emphasising that lack of UK work history does not imply lack of capability.



Photo: Whole Family Equality Project 2025 Celebration

b. Active Recruitment

- **Expand active recruitment and inclusive work placements** by engaging ethnically diverse candidates through job fairs, inclusive advertising, and targeted entry-level roles.
- **Structured placements for adults outside education** to build industry-specific skills and support workplace integration, aligned with the No One Left Behind strategy. Encourage partnerships between employers, educational institutions, and local authorities to deliver these programmes.
- **Encourage employers to work with third sector organisations to offer mentorship, work trials, and paid internships** to support equitable entry and progression for underrepresented groups.

Retention

a. Workplace Inclusion and Culture

- **Require ongoing cultural competency training** for staff and incentivise uptake across private and third-sector employers. Training should focus on everyday bias, communication norms, and inclusive leadership.
- **Strengthen grievance mechanisms**, ensuring they are accessible, culturally sensitive, and protective of vulnerable employees.
- **Support the development of inclusive workplace policies** that go beyond representation to foster meaningful belonging and wellbeing.
- **Promote transparency**, ensure fair workload distribution, and support recognition diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts.

b. Professional Networks & Mentorship

- **Encourage peer networks and cross-cultural learning programmes** within and across organisations to reduce isolation and improve retention.
- **Establish industry networks and partnerships** to connect ethnically diverse talent with employers, promote knowledge exchange, and improve access to sector-specific opportunities, such as access to tailored English language provision (e.g. ESOL programmes).
- **Implement structured mentorship programmes** that pair experienced staff with underrepresented employees to support retention and a sense of belonging.



Photo: Whole Family Equality Project 2025 Celebration

Training and Career Progression

Review policies and processes

- **Promote flexible working practices** that accommodate carers, part-time workers, and employees balancing work with retraining or reskilling.
- **Commission regular reviews** of underemployment and systemic barriers to progression among ethnically diverse workers across sectors.
- **Implement robust diversity monitoring and pay equity measures** by conducting regular anonymous pay audits, tracking career progression and representation by ethnicity, and publishing salary structures.
- **Encourage employer accreditation schemes** (e.g. Investors in People, Fair Work First) to demonstrable efforts to address pay gaps, improve career progression, and increase leadership diversity.

Conclusions

Employment is one of the most powerful levers we have to build a more inclusive and equitable society. This research has shown that, despite national commitments to equity in Scotland, significant barriers persist for New Scots and ethnically diverse job seekers and employees. These barriers are not isolated incidents but are systemic, intertwined with structural, cultural, and procedural factors that hinder access to, retention in, and progression within employment.

Despite these challenges, the report also highlights clear opportunities for employers and policy-makers to take a series of impactful actions. Many of the recommendations, such as implementing bias-free recruitment processes, valuing international experience, fostering inclusive workplace cultures, and supporting career development, are both achievable and beneficial. These actions not only contribute to business growth and workforce retention but also align with national strategies such as No One Left Behind and the National Strategy for Economic Transformation.

Ethnically diverse employees want respect, connection, and opportunities to thrive. Many feel isolated due to cultural and systemic barriers. Lasting change requires inclusive leadership, structural reform, and sustained efforts to create workplaces where everyone can belong and form strong workplace relationships that boost engagement and wellbeing at work.

By incorporating the voices of those with lived experience employers and policy-makers can help shape a more equitable labour market in Edinburgh. In return, employers will gain a more diverse, ambitious, innovative, and resilient workforce that is better equipped to meet the demands of a dynamic and expanding local economy.

Methodology

Data Collection

This study, conducted between August and November 2024 in Edinburgh, used a multi method approach to explore employment barriers faced by ethnically diverse individuals in the city. It included qualitative interviews in three waves of follow-up and focus groups. The three-month follow-up offered longitudinal insight into job-seeking experiences. The research was conducted in English. Additional insights came from discussions with third-sector organisations and volunteers supporting employability, immigration, and inclusion.

Employers' perspectives were gathered through a survey to collect data on their inclusive practices, identify gaps, and understand the specific support they need to cultivate more equitable work environments.

Participants

The study engaged a total of 15 participants across interviews and focus groups. Six individuals (five women and one male) took part in one-on-one semi-structured interviews, each followed up after three months.

Two focus groups were conducted with a total of nine participants (seven women, two men). Focus Group One included four women, all of whom had children under the age of 10, with two women being new to Scotland (less than three years). Focus Group Two comprised five participants: three women and two men.

All participants' occupation from their country of origin varied from routine manual work, intermediate occupations such as administrative and clerical workers to professional occupations such as medical professionals or engineers. Their length of stay in the UK spanned from less than a year since arrival to several decades. Their ages varied, but all were within the working age range from their early 20s to late 50s.

The employer survey included 24 respondents from small and medium companies across Edinburgh city. Respondents varied from employers, hiring managers working in ethnically diverse teams. This predominantly included businesses such as Education (37.5%), Voluntary Sector (37.5%), Hospitality and Creative industries (12.5% respectively).

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all the interview and focus group participants, partnering organisation, volunteers, and local businesses who contributed by completing surveys and engaging in in-depth discussions about the employability barriers faced by ethnically diverse individuals. We thank all contributors for helping identify ways to reduce employment barriers and support a more equitable Scottish labour market.

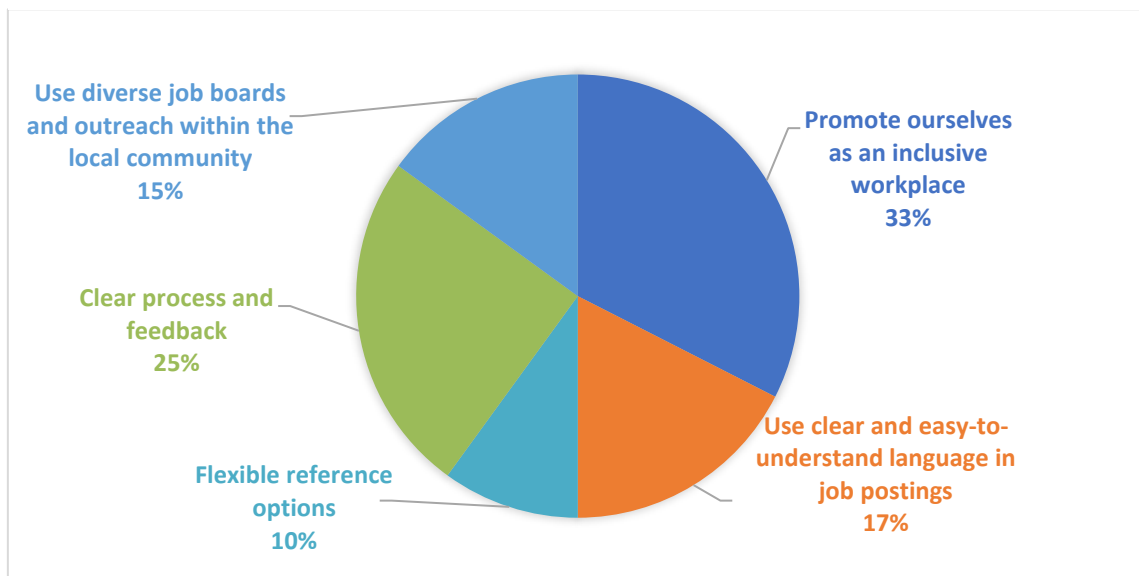
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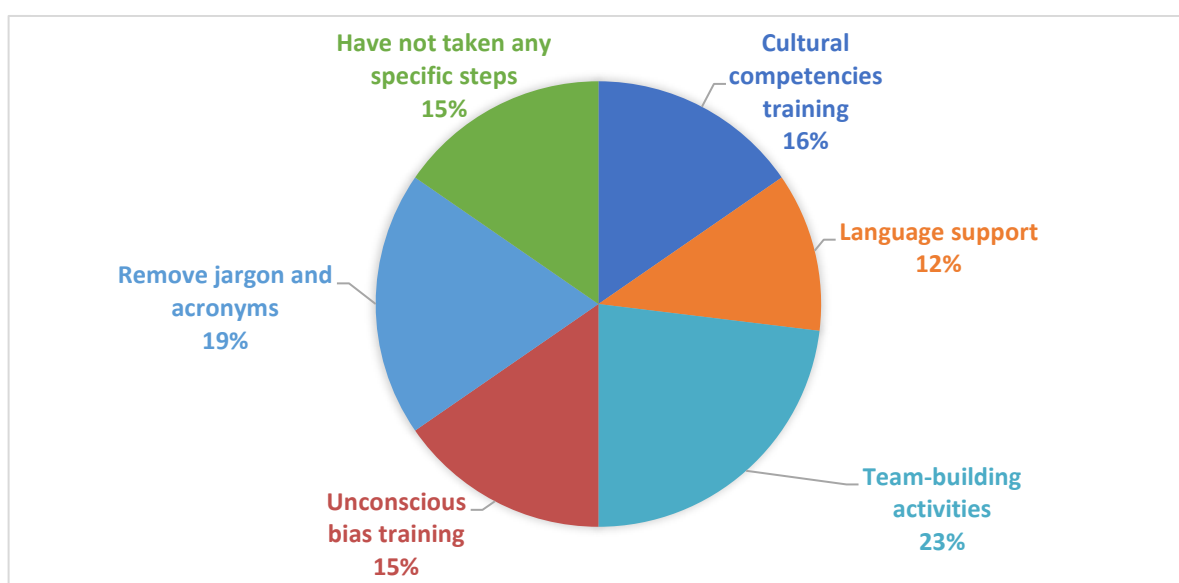
Appendices

The following appendices include results from the Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) survey conducted as part of this project. They provide key findings from ranking and multiple-choice questions, and additional insights into the challenges and opportunities identified by employers in recruiting and retaining ethnically diverse staff and New Scots.

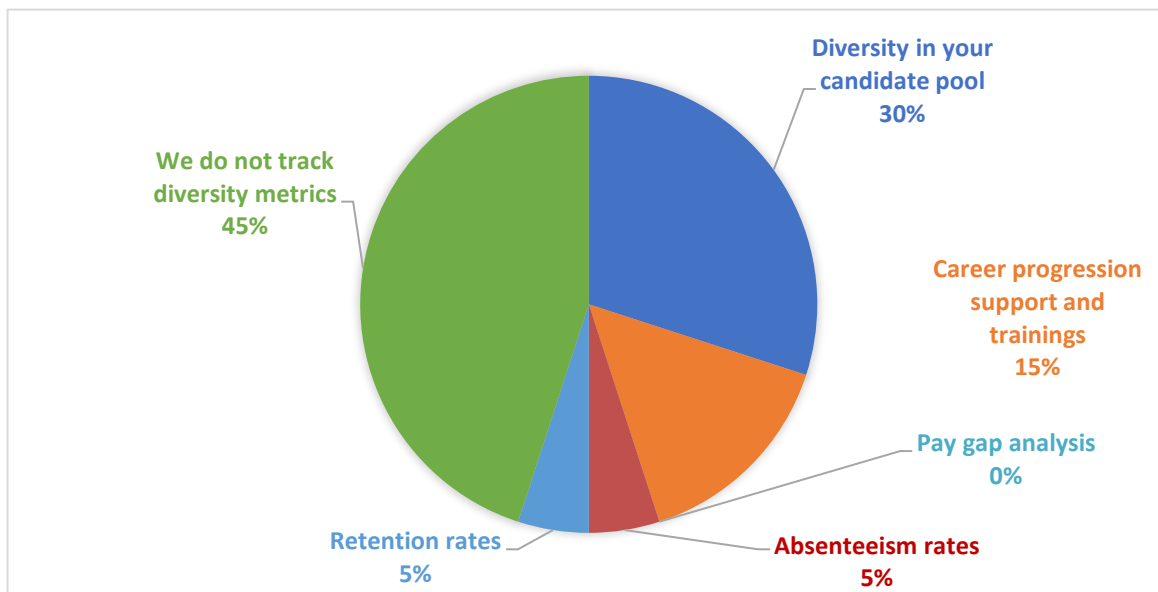
Appendix 1: % of dedicated practices followed by employers to recruit ethnically diverse workforce.



Appendix 2: % of steps taken by employers in the past 12 months to support and retain ethnically diverse employees.



Appendix 3: % of employers tracking diversity metrics against performance and progression data.



Appendix 4: % of Perceived Types of Benefits by Employers of Having Ethnically Diverse Teams.

