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Submission to the APPG on Diversity & Inclusion in STEM - Call for Ideas 2026

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Idea 1 – Identifying and mapping the most effective policies and initiatives for promoting EDI in STEM, drawing on global lessons to inform the UK context.

Focus or problem area of our suggestion: It is well established that stronger EDI across STEM fields drives greater innovation and overall performance. Yet the UK lags behind comparable nations in the representation of women within its STEM workforce. Valuable insights can be gained from countries that outperform the UK in STEM attraction, retention and/or innovation.

By examining these countries' EDI-focused legislation, policies and initiatives—and comparing them with those currently in place in the UK—we can identify evidence-based recommendations to strengthen the UK's competitiveness in both EDI and STEM.

Suggested activity: The focus of this proposal is for UK policymaking on EDI in STEM to systematically draw on international evidence about which national-level policies, investments and governance models deliver the strongest diversity outcomes and innovation pay-offs. There is an opportunity for the APPG to lead a focused, comparative mapping exercise that links EDI in STEM (with a focus on gender) to skills, innovation, regional growth and international competitiveness in the UK versus similarly/outperforming countries – and to identify where the UK can adapt proven approaches from these countries.

With a focus on gender parity, for each country selected, the APPG could map:

- Their national policy and legal frameworks on EDI in STEM
- Specific interventions they have implemented supporting EDI in STEM (e.g., funding opportunities, data dashboards/infrastructure, accountability mechanisms)
- Available evidence on the impact of said interventions (changes

in STEM representation over time vs innovation performance and regional development etc) or at least how their EDI-in-STEM metrics compare to the UK's. Countries with higher EDI-in-STEM metrics than the UK can be used as a proxy for determining more effective law, policies and interventions than those used nationally.

Around 27% of the UK STEM workforce is formed of women compared to 48% in the rest of the workforce. Since gender is the most comparable EDI metric across countries due to its widespread collection, this EDI metric can form the starting point of this project, with potential future iterations expanding to other EDI metrics such as ethnicity.

Suggested countries to include in this review are: Switzerland, Sweden, the USA, the Netherlands and Finland because of the following statistical comparisons:

- Estimated % of women in the STEM workforce: Switzerland (36%), Sweden (33%), Netherlands (29%) are all ahead of the UK (27%) and the USA is on par (26%).
- From an [analysis](#) of the top countries for women starting a career in STEM, the Netherlands (#1), Switzerland (#4), the USA (#5) and Sweden (#10) all surpass the UK (#15), and an [analysis](#) of the top countries championing women in STEM, also shows the Netherlands (#2), the USA (#3), Sweden (#6) and Switzerland (#11) surpassing the UK.
- Global Innovation Index [2025](#) – Switzerland (#1), Sweden (#2) and USA (#3) are all ahead of the UK (#6). Finland (#7) and the Netherlands (#8) are directly behind the UK.
- Women in Work Index [2025](#) – Sweden (#4), Finland (#11), Netherlands (#15) are all ahead of the UK (#18), and Switzerland (#20) and USA (#25) are behind.
- WEF Global Gender Gap index [2024](#) – Finland (#2) and Sweden (#5) are ahead of the UK (#14). Switzerland (#20), Netherlands (#28) and USA (#43).

A report could be produced that summarises which policy levers and practices appear most effective in these countries for supporting gender parity in STEM and provide options and recommendations for UK government, funders, regulators and industry based on the findings, setting out which levers and practices are transferable to the UK context.

As well as looking at countries performing more strongly than the UK, the project could be expanded to include countries not performing as well

as the UK, to understand what policy levers to evaluate (if the UK follows similar protocols) and/or avoid if not already implemented.

Who are the potential beneficiaries of policy change: Beneficiaries include employers as more diverse workforces have been shown to be more productive and innovative, benefiting the UK STEM sector more broadly, women aspiring to enter the STEM space and those already within it as any recommendations taken up will support their entry and retention, society because of the enhanced innovation that comes from a more diverse and inclusive workforce.

What potential solutions could arise from this work: Carrying out a comparative analysis will allow the APPG to identify clear policy recommendations to strengthen the UK STEM workforce for women. Recommendations could inform initiatives in primary and secondary schools, at universities or apprenticeships to highlight available career paths, or within STEM organisations (potentially linked to hiring practices, internal policies that impact retention), increasing the number of women (and overall individuals) within the STEM workforce.

Idea 2 – Evaluating the impact of the UK visa system on attracting a diverse international STEM workforce

Focus or problem area of our suggestion: AMI recommends focusing on the impact of the UK visa system on attracting a diverse international STEM workforce. According to [The Royal Society](#), total upfront visa costs for the UK are up to 17 times higher than similar science leading nations. High costs and rapidly changing regulation are making the UK less attractive to researchers and making it harder for employers to justify sponsoring employees.

The STEM sector in the UK addresses challenges of a global nature which require international collaboration. The current visa system is acting as a roadblock to attracting international talent required to address these challenges. Further evidence of the problem:

In [February 2025](#), the House of Lords Science, Innovation and Technology Committee highlighted the damage the UK visa system could have on attracting an international, diverse and highly qualified STEM workforce – essential for the UK's growth agenda and position as a leading science nation. Since then, [new changes to the visa system have been announced](#) including limiting the types of jobs that can be sponsored, making it harder for universities to sponsor students, and doubling the

time required to apply for settle status from 5 to 10 years. [The Guardian reported](#) that these changes risk plunging the NHS into a workforce crisis as 25% of the UK's nursing staff are international and new rules put their immigration status in jeopardy. This exemplifies the need for simpler visa routes to ensure the UK STEM workforce is robust and well supported.

A recent Royal Society [report](#) lays out the cost differences between the UK visa system and other similar countries. Pertinently, UK visa costs have increased by 126% since 2019 and the UK has the highest upfront visa costs than all 17 science leading countries analysed putting the UK at a comparative disadvantage. The Immigration Health Surcharge is the biggest upfront cost, increasing by 66% in February 2024 from £624 to £1,035. Upfront costs for a family of four are over £20,000 creating a financial barrier to researchers or future employees with families.

[CaSE](#) has highlighted the impact on research organisations pointing to high costs as a key barrier. It is not uncommon for job applications to only have 10–15% of applicants be UK nationals, underscoring the potential of international talent to contribute to the UK STEM sector. Moreover, frequent changes are causing stress for employers and employees alike.

[The Royal Society of Chemistry](#) emphasize that the current system is making it more challenging to recruit PhD students, particularly from Europe as post-Brexit fees make the UK unattractive. [The Sainsbury Laboratory](#) argue that visa fees are “draining UK science” industries. The [Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry](#) argue that high upfront costs and misperceptions surrounding the Global Talent Visa are undermining its potential, limiting the ability to attract international talent.

Suggested activity: We recommend a multipronged approach to identify the impact of current visa regulation on STEM recruitment in the UK. First, we recommend launching an inquiry to identify the impacts of current visa regulations on organisations in the STEM sector, including universities, research centres, STEM charities and private STEM companies. Next, it would be useful to assess, through secondary research, the impact of cheaper and less complex visas in other countries on attracting a diverse STEM workforce. Finally, the findings from the inquiry and secondary research should be used to support an evaluation of current UK regulation and provide recommendations.

Who are the potential beneficiaries of policy change: Research institutes, universities, and private sector companies would benefit from simpler visa routes and lower sponsoring fees. Due to rapid changes, many organisations have opted to get external consulting support to ensure they obeyed with regulation. [One organisation highlighted](#) fees are becoming unsustainable with costs increasing from £15,000 in 2020 to over £120,000 in 2024/2025.

Easier and cheaper routes to the UK for STEM employees would make the UK a more attractive destination for early career researchers and for those with dependents. At present, high salary thresholds for visa eligibility make it challenging for early-career researchers to qualify. Meanwhile, individuals with dependents are faced with high upfront costs making the UK less attractive.

Attracting and retaining a diverse and international STEM workforce to supplement the existing domestic workforce would amplify the potential economic impact of the UK science and innovation sector.

What potential solutions could arise from this work: Potential solutions include clear recommendations to government on how best to attract a STEM workforce.

In addition, employers and future employees have noted challenges accessing clear information on costs and requirements, the APPG could support the development of simple guidelines to support employers and future employees.

Addressing current challenges could create a more robust workforce that can address challenges quicker and with more innovation.