

# **Opportunities and support for law students:** how can the legal fraternity better support diverse candidates





## Context

The **South African General Counsel for Diversity & Inclusion (SA GC for D&I)** initiative aims to foster greater inclusivity within the legal professional community by providing a platform for corporate entities, law firms, groups of advocates, and other legal sector players to engage on critical diversity issues.

A key aspect of the initiative is the **creation of working groups** to facilitate comprehensive and multi-stakeholder conversations around critical themes linked to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within the South African legal fraternity.

**These working groups discuss topics proposed and voted on by members and partners to the initiative.**

Each working group is tasked with using the discussions to create an output intended as a public good resource for those wanting to enhance DEI. This document is such an output and we encourage readers to share it with others in the South African legal fraternity who may benefit from its content.

This particular document is the fruit of the collaborative efforts of the **“How can the legal fraternity better support diverse candidates” working group, which concluded its work in late 2024.** The SA GC for D&I gratefully acknowledges the efforts of all of those who took part in these working group discussions and thanks their organisations for allowing them the time to do so.

**The discussions within the working groups adhere to the “Chatham House” rule, ensuring the anonymity of individual contributors to the dialogue.** For further information or to become part of the SA GC for D&I and its current or future working groups, visit [www.sagcdi.co.za](http://www.sagcdi.co.za).

# Document user guide

## Why do diverse candidates need better support?

Diverse candidates may face unique challenges, sometimes stemming from systemic biases and a lack of support, that can hinder their entry and progression within the legal sector. While the industry has made strides toward inclusivity, there remains more to be done. Closing this gap is crucial to enabling equity, unleashing the full potential of diverse talent, and enhancing the DEI outcomes of the legal profession.

## The “Diverse Candidates” working group

This working group was established to address the specific needs and challenges faced by diverse candidates entering the legal profession in South Africa. Comprising a diverse mix of representatives from various organisations, the group has focused on identifying barriers, discussing real-world experiences, and proposing actionable steps to promoting equity and inclusion for diverse candidates.

## What is this document about?

This document serves as a guiding resource for those working on enhancing DEI within the South African legal sector. Structured around three key areas—defining diverse candidates, exploring the challenges they face, and proposing actionable solutions—it synthesises insights from working group discussions to offer practical guidance for stakeholders.

## Who is this for?

This document is intended for legal professionals, law firms, and corporate legal departments committed to fostering a more inclusive legal environment for new entrants. It provides insights for **leaders and HR professionals** who aim to create supportive frameworks and cultivate diverse talent within their organisations.

## Defining “diverse candidates”



### What does “diverse candidate” mean to you?

Defining what is a “diverse candidate” is a complex and paradoxical exercise, because it requires us to place a predetermined label on individuals, thus appearing to undermine the possibility that “diversity” can take on different forms and can vary by different lived experiences. Therefore, different people are very likely to define “diverse candidates” differently.



### Point of reflection

As a senior leader of your firm or an HR professional, hoping to cultivate a supportive environment for “diverse candidates”, **you should first ask yourself the following questions:**

- What does “diverse candidate” mean to me and to our organisation?
- By defining “diverse candidate” in this way, what does it imply about my perception of a “stereotypical lawyer/employee”?
- How might other people think differently about these two questions and how do I integrate different perceptions?

**With all of this in mind, our working group members described “diverse candidates” in different ways, including as having one or more of the following characteristics:**



### “Non-archetypal” backgrounds:

Diverse candidates are those who do not fit into the socially expected archetype of a particular profession. This implies a break from the traditional image of what a legal professional (for example) is perceived to be.



### Marginalised groups:

Diverse candidates are those from marginalised groups, who might face prejudice on various grounds such as race, gender, sexual orientation, or age.



### Socioeconomic disadvantage:

Diverse candidates come from disadvantaged backgrounds, where privilege and access to resources are limited. This includes those lacking financial means or social capital.



### Intersectionality:

Diversity can stem from a combination of factors, including race, gender, socioeconomic background, sexual orientation, and more, which intersect to create unique experiences and challenges for the candidates.



## Challenges facing diverse candidates



The next crucial step is to identify the specific challenges these individuals face. **Our working group has delved into these issues, uncovering key obstacles that may hinder the progress of diverse candidates in the legal sector. Some quotes from these discussions are provided below to serve as a foundational reference.** However, it is essential that you identify unique barriers that impact staff in your organisation.

“A challenge I personally faced early in my career was **limited access to social capital**, like professional connections or alumni networks, which many others seemed to have.”

“I often felt isolated at work due to the lack of representation; it’s hard to stay motivated when you don’t see people like you in **leadership positions**.”

“**Communicating confidently** was tough initially, especially since I didn’t have the same upbringing or language skills that others did.”

“Navigating the **latest IT tools** was another challenge I faced, as I didn’t have the same exposure or access to technological training as some of my peers.”

“Financial hurdles were a constant struggle—things like **transportation and suitable work attire** might seem basic, but they were significant barriers for me.”

“It was frustrating to hear the **constant talk about diversity, yet see little action** being taken to address the real issues at hand.”

“There were times when I felt implicitly held back by the **organisation’s resistance to genuinely push for diversity and inclusion**.”



### Point of reflection

Reflecting on the challenges faced by diverse candidates requires a nuanced approach.

**Here are some questions that senior leaders and HR professionals should consider:**

- Are there unconscious biases in any of your company practices?
- Is your organisational culture truly inclusive?
- How does your existing senior team impact the experience of diverse candidates?
- Are you truly encouraging feedback from diverse candidates and are you willing to adapt?

## “Low-hanging fruit” suggestions



In addressing the challenges faced by diverse candidates, organisations have the opportunity to implement “low-hanging fruits”—**simple, yet impactful solutions that can create positive changes**. These initiatives often require minimal resources but have the potential to significantly improve the experiences of diverse candidates. Our working group has identified four practical examples.



### 1. Financial Support and Resources

**Financial education** should be considered as part of **new employee induction** programmes, with an awareness by employers that **not all lawyers have equal access to resources**. Access to transportation, for example, is likely to vary by individual.

Employers should ensure they have **clear policies relating to expenses and other financial assistance** (like stipends) for employees.

Resources could also be made available **indirectly** by employers, for example through initiatives like lift clubs or transport shuttles.



### 2. Mentorship and Development

Match diverse candidates with mentors **who share similar backgrounds or experiences**, ensuring they receive guidance and support from someone who understands their unique challenges.

**Equip mentors with training** to be more cognisant of diversity, equity, and inclusion, enhancing their ability to support diverse mentees effectively. Additional guidance can be found [here](#).



### 3. Skill Development and Workshops

Offer training sessions to improve proficiency with essential **technological tools and platforms** used in daily operations.

Provide workshops focused on building **communication skills, networking** and **professional confidence**, tailored to the needs of diverse candidates.

Conduct sessions on **business etiquette** to help candidates navigate professional environments comfortably and confidently.



### 4. Awareness and Education

Organise regular **DEI workshops for senior managers** to raise awareness and educate them on the importance of supporting diverse candidates. Ensure that senior leaders and decision-makers undergo training to **understand the barriers** faced by diverse candidates and to promote an inclusive culture actively.

# Tell us what you think

**We are committed to fostering an inclusive legal environment and recognise that continuous dialogue and feedback are essential to this mission.** Your insights, experiences, and suggestions are invaluable in helping us refine our approach and implement effective solutions to better support diverse candidates!

How would you define “diverse candidates?”

What challenges have you faced as a “diverse candidate”?

What better support should be provided to help “diverse candidates”?



**Complete our survey**

Tell us your insights on the above questions using the survey we developed: <https://tally.so/r/nWpNOJ>

Alternatively, share your comments, feedback, and experiences with us on LinkedIn or via email at [info@sagcdi.co.za](mailto:info@sagcdi.co.za).





**We would like to hear  
your feedback!**

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Get in touch with us at  
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