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Learning from OneTech: Recommendations for Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Initiatives in Tech and Start-Up

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Purpose of the brief

This policy brief aims to share learnings with, and facilitate good policy and practice for, equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) initiatives in tech and startup. It is based on a longitudinal, critical realist action research project evaluation of the initial two years of OneTech (Summer 2018-Summer 2020). The study consisted of 78 interviews with programme participants, delivery team members, project partners and mentors, and an alumni survey with 48 respondents administered in Spring 2020.

This brief approaches the OneTech project as a case study of a newly established initiative designed to diversify London's tech entrepreneurship ecosystem. It indicates a number of achievements as well as challenges experienced in this initial phase of delivery, and presents them here as key learnings with recommendations, reflection questions and a good practice checklist for ongoing or future EDI initiatives, intended to support commissioners, leaders, policy makers, programme designers, delivery teams, project partners and funders.

Project overview

The OneTech project has been a ground-breaking initiative galvanizing the advancement of EDI activities across the London tech entrepreneurship ecosystem, through a range of mechanisms: a variety of direct support channels for underrepresented founders, consultancy, leadership and development opportunities for partner organisations led by members of underrepresented communities, thought leadership through convening research and diversity action planning for accelerators and venture capital firms, and the creation and consolidation of key relationships amongst stakeholders across the London EDI and technology ecosystem.

The leadership and delivery team has continually innovated, adapted, and grown organically to meet an unexpected level of demand, attracting and developing talented, capable and committed staff, and building valuable relationships with relevant consortium members, delivery partners and industry mentors. Initial core funding from JPMorgan Chase (JPM) was successfully mobilised to obtain new funding streams from the Greater London Authority (GLA), and a number of other local authority and private sector funders including the Stride and Lift programmes in London, Google for Startup and NESTA.

Service provision has expanded to target young people across London (GLA funded), with concentrations of efforts for the 24+ age groups in East (Hackney, Newham, and Tower Hamlets), and South (Southwark, Wandsworth, Lambeth and Lewisham) London boroughs, funded by JPM and Stride, respectively. Additional work has been undertaken with the LIFT (Leading Inclusive Futures through Technology) Programme in North London (Camden, Islington, Hackney and Tower Hamlets).

However, rapid growth within the first two years has presented challenges, albeit relatively normal to an entrepreneurial organisation in its nascent stages, such as: consistency of service delivery, data management, perceived reputation, and overall strategic positioning. In addition, the EDI focus of the organisation, particularly in a wider social climate and local community context of intersectional anti-racist and feminist activism, highlights the need for continued deep and distributed organisational learning around how to best serve underrepresented communities, as well as redesign inherited exclusionary, unequal or otherwise unsustainable ways of working, in collaboration with parent organisation Capital Enterprise. As OneTech launches its second phase, it will undergo a systematic programme of organisational change to incorporate this.

Key Project Learnings

A diverse range of participants with differing needs

Depending upon user criteria, a programme supporting diverse founders may attract a wide range of user profiles with differing needs across and within various activity streams. In OneTech's first 2 years, the project was enormously well-subscribed, with most expected founder support activity targets reached or exceeded. Most founders had businesses in much earlier stages (Ideation and Minimum Viable Product) than expected. Those with earlier stage ideas and less experience of other support programmes tended to report higher levels of satisfaction with the programme. In particular, and perhaps not surprisingly, activity streams delivered by partner organisations led by members of the target communities, close mentoring and introductions to investors, garnered extremely positive responses.

Because of the predominantly earlier stage of the businesses and the structural hurdles reflected in them, some of the original Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) agreed with funding bodies, such as jobs created and investment raised, were not always the most appropriate measures of the project's impact. Better measures included whether participants are running a business after the programme as compared to before, are ready to raise investment and/or hire employees in the year following their participation, and the relative strength or weakness of different mechanisms, programmes or strands of support. Moreover, different funders had more moderate expectations for what impact was sought and how it should be described; high growth tech logics and vocabulary from Silicon Valley and Roundabout are tempered by local councils who favour a regeneration and participation model over 'unicorns' and 'talent'.

If funds allow, recruiting an external evaluator with research training is a worthwhile investment and supports the development of long-term organisational learning and reflection.



Educational programming and Matthew effect

Diversity initiatives in tech tend to have educational components at their core; for example, even dedicated pre-accelerator and investment readiness programmes are, for the user, perceived as classes and courses. Thus, clear structure and learning outcomes with goals and expectations are needed for users, who are learners on entrepreneurial schedules, and service providers and mentors, who are often energetic but time-poor entrepreneurial teachers themselves. A pattern known as the Matthew Effect¹ means those people who have more social privileges, are furthest along in their business stages and have the most human and social capital – for example, highly educated white European, American, Australian immigrant women and men with professional knowledge, tech start-up, managerial or entrepreneurial experience – could potentially benefit more from the support than less privileged groups. This resonates with evidence that generic EDI policies tend to benefit white women most.² Consider how an intersectional analysis spotlights differing social and economic impact across individuals and groups, increasing the potential for precision in support policies and mechanisms.

Enabling collaborative leadership and mutually beneficial partnership with underrepresented groups

Members of underrepresented groups were included as team members and partner organisations throughout the OneTech project and led different aspects of the programme. Leadership by underrepresented people and groups who have developed a critical analysis of existing systems of structural oppression often introduces non-typical ways of working that tend to benefit diverse founders, and which all organisations, especially those with EDI goals, can learn from: for example, recognising intersectionality, prioritising self- and collective care, centring relationship-building and accountability, collaborative and shared leadership, frequent, consistent, and open communication, and clear expectation-setting and management.

Simultaneously, partners from underrepresented backgrounds and especially protected categories may encounter capacity or knowledge caps due to a combination of structural and individual factors: for example, their organisational stage and need for income, previous experience or lack thereof, lack of relevant powerful networks, and persistent overlooking and under-resourcing. Being trusted to design a project was a valuable opportunity for growth, but scope of work expected could be a drain. Legally sound positive action could include the generation of paid developmental opportunities, network introductions and mentoring, e.g. in fund raising or project management. Mentoring exchanges and shared strategic development could facilitate inter-organisational learning and ecosystem maturity.

Perception of the organisation

Because of the current popularity of EDI initiatives, it is possible that some users could perceive that an organisation new to EDI work is 'jumping on the bandwagon'. This is especially the case if user or partner expectations are not well met or managed, and/or communication about the goals and outcomes of participation are inconsistent or unclear. The organisation could appear inauthentic in its allyship and reputational issues could be at stake. However, partners and users who are happy with the support or service have the potential to become great advocates for the organisation or initiative and help to advance its aims.

Challenging and changing normative culture³

In contrast to assumptions that tech is an open market or digital meritocracy, or that the pipeline is the main problem,⁴ this study highlights how typical overlapping technology, start-up and entrepreneurial cultural norms centre and reward normative masculinity, are characterised by anti-Blackness, and generally operate by the best and worst rules of capitalism: not only ingenuity, independence and innovation, commitment and determination, but also competitiveness, gatekeeping, opaque career trajectories, encouragement of risk, rapid pace of change, high churn, overwork and burnout. Project leadership and delivery teams should explicitly recognise these norms and decide to what extent they aim, and are ready to challenge, change, transform, or sidestep exclusionary and unequal cultures and ways of working – both for the benefit of users, as well as for themselves as part of the EDI community.

¹ Perc, M. (2014) The Matthew effect in empirical data. *Journal of the Royal Society Interface*. 11(98): 20140378.

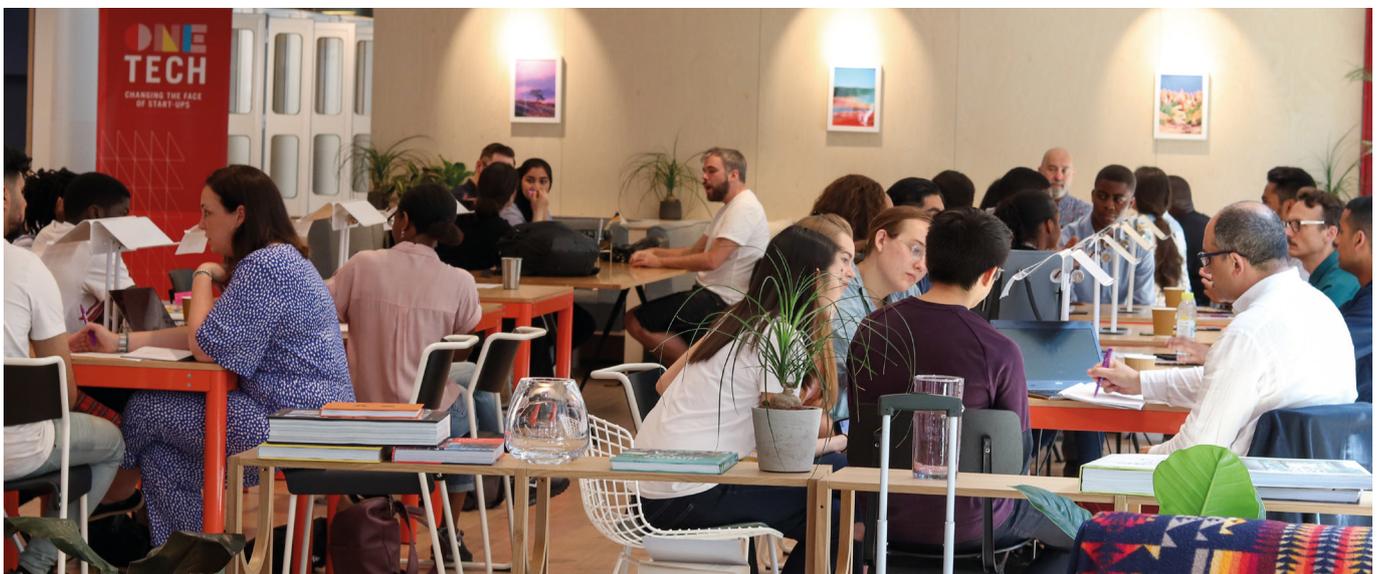
² Daniels, J. (2014) White Women and Affirmative Action: Prime Beneficiaries and Opponents. *Racism Review: Scholarship and Activism Toward Racial Justice*. Available at: <https://www.racismreview.com/blog/2014/03/11/white-women-affirmative-action/>.

³ Okun, T. White Supremacy Culture. Available at: https://www.dismantlingracism.org/uploads/4/3/5/7/43579015/okun_-_white_sup_culture.pdf

⁴ Cody, D. (2018) What Obstacles Are Still in Place for Diversity in Big Tech? *YSYS Medium Blog*. 15 May. Available at: <https://medium.com/ysys/what-obstacles-are-still-in-place-for-diversity-in-big-tech-7554cd2f7772>

Key Recommendations for Policy and Practice

1. Prioritise relationship building with users and potential users, and the ethical collection, monitoring and management of user data.
2. Through this, seek to continually and deeply understand the diversity of user needs and experiences, and iteratively tailor aims and workstreams accordingly.
3. Develop streamlined, low friction yet robust processes and record keeping systems from the outset to support these goals.
4. Develop clear criteria for participation. The wider the criteria, the greater the spread of the needs of participants is likely to be. The programme may not have the scope to meet the full range of needs.
5. Manage expectations carefully - users will have a range of expectations and opportunity costs for engagement; if they feel they have exhausted other options, a current opportunity increases substantially in importance.
6. Go beyond access and representation to involve experts and organisations from target groups as partners in project design and delivery, with appropriate compensation.
7. Set clear expectations, share resources, communicate early and often, and recognise capacity limitations of partners as well as trust in and reward contributions.
8. If possible, co-design initial KPIs with partners and potential users as well as funders. Monitor whether expected KPIs are appropriate for the specific user groups engaging with the programme. Introduce means to adjust them as necessary depending upon what is learned over time.
9. Collaboratively agree on organisational or project values, mission and vision. Enable them to guide strategy and embed them throughout the organisation's practices. Revisit during strategic review. Bring on board relevant stakeholders, including participants, to support values alignment.
10. Seek ways to be more intentional, transparent, and accountable, especially with important decision making processes, and communication, both internal and outward facing.
11. Explore transformative ways to identify, challenge or amend institutional mechanisms (people, power, policy, processes and practices) that, upon examination, appear to reproduce, exacerbate or otherwise perpetuate structural inequality, exclusionary norms and outcomes.
12. As part of strategic planning, pro-actively reflect on the distribution of power and responsibility. Be aware of and mindfully navigate intra- and inter-organisational hierarchies and other dynamics generated by positionality and complex lived experiences of privilege and oppression.
13. Examine in what ways, and to what degree, the organisation is orientated to meeting the expectations of funders or founders, and if necessary, how these might be better aligned.
14. Actively seek to listen and learn: This will be a process of education for all involved. Accept and acknowledge tensions may arise.
15. Enable organisational learning through opening channels for the team to discuss and reflect. Grapple out loud with the implications of unintended or unthinking practices based on privilege, stereotypes or unfamiliarity, or lack of awareness.
16. Consider how conflict can deepen or define relationships between individuals, groups and organisations.
17. Practice care and persistence; patience with people but not systems. Lean into non-defensiveness, reflective listening and thoughtful responses.
18. Connect early and often with others whose agendas are related. Together, explore community building opportunities and whether joining or supporting efforts could increase impact.



Learning theme	Reflection questions for policy and practice development
<i>Diverse participants with differing needs</i>	<p>How well do we understand the issues, needs and experiences of those we seek to support?</p> <p>What are their stories, goals, and what is at stake for them?</p> <p>How can we gather and share this knowledge amongst our delivery teams and leadership?</p> <p>Are we able to systematically and iteratively amend or adapt our KPIs and tailor our work according to new information?</p>
<i>Educational programming and Matthew effect</i>	<p>What is our mission and vision? What are our values? What is our programme's USP, and what specific things do we do well?</p> <p>Are we aiming to engage those in greatest need, facilitate achievement for those who are already engaged, or both? How is this reflected in our criteria for support, services, and KPIs? Do we meet these aims equally well?</p> <p>How clear is our criteria for support? How are we ensuring that participants meet this criteria?</p> <p>How does the initiative package and deliver knowledge, experiences and opportunities? If a service is primarily educational, are the intended learning outcomes clear?</p>
<i>Leadership and partnership with under-represented groups</i>	<p>How early and deeply are members of underrepresented groups involved in project design and delivery?</p> <p>Are we cognisant of potential capacity limitations, and do we make achievable asks?</p> <p>Are we sharing resources, developmental opportunities, and adequately recognising and compensating contributions?</p>
<i>Perception of the organisation</i>	<p>Is this a genuine initiative for cultural change, or are we jumping on the bandwagon?</p> <p>What are our mechanisms for learning, shifting and sharing good practice in our industry or sector?</p> <p>How can we be more transparent and accountable, especially with communication?</p> <p>Does our organisation practice what it preaches? How do we negotiate power relationships?</p> <p>Do we seek and listen to diverse people, value their insights, and enable their leadership?</p>
<i>Challenging and changing normative culture</i>	<p>To what extent do we notice and challenge underpinning structural barriers to equality or equity as they show up in organisations, networks and systems?</p> <p>How have we prepared our team, staff, delivery partners, mentors, and users for this work?</p> <p>How orientated is our programming towards the expectations of our funders vs the needs of our users?</p> <p>Are we moving away from bringing underrepresented delivery partners and founders into spaces which reproduce inequality and exclusion, and towards transforming those spaces and/or making new ones?</p>

Perceived strength of various 1T support mechanisms



Figure 1. Users' perceived strength of support mechanisms (N=48)

Based on these learnings, OneTech aims to be:

- A go-to high quality support partner connecting underrepresented communities with opportunities in London's tech start-up ecosystem, leveraging our position, connections and resources to create a sustainable EDI movement of change
- An inspirational EDI changemaker and servant leader, with well established relationships, contributing to collective direction and action
- A visionary organisation, creating its own destiny through a robust, tangible and clearly understood strategy
- A transparent organisation who is able to tangibly provide assurance that all activities lead to better EDI outcomes
- An adaptive, learning organisation who uses key performance data to drive strategic decision-making and continuous improvements
- A proactive and responsive organisation, serving user needs and delivering consistent, high quality services
- A value-driven organisation with an efficient operating model and clear understanding of value drivers with an inbuilt organisational change capability
- A 'people first' organisation with happy, motivated and capable employees with authentic values and best practice ways of working, effective employee processes and development practices
- A connected, approachable and collaborative partner who actively engages with all stakeholders through ongoing dialogues and information exchanges

Good practice checklist

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Clear sense of who we are supporting; why, how | <input type="checkbox"/> Partners from across the range of stakeholders |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Organisational/project mission, vision, and values | <input type="checkbox"/> Team diversity training and project preparation |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Periodically updated theory of change | <input type="checkbox"/> Team handbooks, mentor and user guides |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Simple yet robust data systems | <input type="checkbox"/> Opportunities for users to gather and connect |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Systems to document and track project impact | <input type="checkbox"/> Independent 'critical friends' and advisors |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Change processes for iterative improvement | <input type="checkbox"/> Opportunities/channels for dialogue and learning |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Leadership by people from groups supported | |

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