Data Science MSc Scholarships for Underrepresented Groups

The Leeds Institute for Data Analytics (LIDA) successfully secured OfS funding to create 18 new scholarships for home-based students from underrepresented groups undertaking a data science related MSc. An important step towards making the UK Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Data Science workforce more representative of the wider population.

An Underrepresented Workforce

Data Science and AI are increasingly predicted to be major drivers of the UK economy in the next 20 years. However, the 2020 Ipsos MORI report 'Understanding the UK AI labour market' emphasised that the current UK workforce in AI and Data Science is not representative of the wider population. 53% of the AI-related firms surveyed said none of their employees were female, and 40% had no employees from an ethnically-minoritised background.

The University of Leeds is recognised as an important national centre for 'deep tech', with AI and data science at its heart. Working in partnerships with Schools across the University, LIDA seeks to develop research-based knowledge and skills in data science and AI that secure successful outcomes for students and industry.

Aligned to the University's academic strategy for the period 2020-2030: Universal Values, Global Change, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) are also fundamental to LIDA's work. Consequently, the LIDA Education & Training Committee decided that action was needed to directly address this issue of underrepresentation.

Bidding for Funding

In January 2023, LIDA responded to the OfS's call for AI and data science postgraduate conversion course scholarship funding for home MSc students. Their application included funding for three data science-related MSc programmes - Data Science and Analytics, Precision Medicine: Genomic Data Science, Urban Data Science and Analytics.

The coordination of this project being run through LIDA meant that the application was able to request 18 scholarships across the subject areas. If the programmes had submitted applications individually, they would have found it difficult to meet the minimum bid of 7 scholarships themselves.

A successful bid meant that all three programmes could offer £10k scholarship funding to students from underrepresented groups who are due to commence MSc study later in 2023. Additionally, through collaboration with Leeds's Plus Programme, students could simultaneously apply for both this funding and a Leeds Masters Scholarship, potentially providing a total package of £17k funding towards either fees or maintenance. A figure which covers the full home fees for MSc study - around £13k.

Students will join their programmes in September after a period of pre-sessional learning in August. They will also receive additional academic support throughout programmes via an enhanced personal tutoring programme.

Faculty Support

Evaluation of the scheme will be undertaken from September 2024. Whilst too early to provide data on application trends and student success, Dr Luisa Cutillo, Programme Leader for the MSc Dara Science & Analytics, says:

“By offering scholarships specifically for students who are interested in converting to data science, our MSc program in Data Science and Analytics can attract students from a wide range of academic backgrounds, including those who may not have considered pursuing a career in data science before. This can help to diversify the student body and bring in perspectives and experiences that may have been previously underrepresented.

Additionally, by offering financial support, the scholarships can help to remove financial barriers that may prevent students from diverse backgrounds from pursuing graduate education in data science, further increasing diversity and inclusion on the program.”

Becoming Self-Sustaining

By 2024/25 LIDA aims to increase industrial engagement with the scheme so that 1 in 3 of the £10k scholarships are funded by the AI and data science industry, enabling it to be self-sustaining after the initial two years of funding.

To find out more about the scholarship scheme, contact Paul Baxter at P.D.Baxter@leeds.ac.uk.