

Limiting Unconscious Bias – good practice guidelines

To help ensure all candidates have fair opportunity within our recruitment processes we have developed this note to help raise awareness of ways to limit unconscious bias – factors which can, often inadvertently, influence the outcome of selection decisions.

Research indicates that social and environmental factors including unconscious or implicit bias contribute to the under-representation of women in senior academic positions. This guidance should also help to ensure that this, and any potential bias against other under-represented groups, is addressed and limited.

What is unconscious bias?

The Gender Equality Unit describes unconscious bias as the associations that we hold which, despite being outside our conscious awareness, can have a significant influence on our attitudes and behaviour. These associations are difficult to override, regardless of whether we recognise them to be wrong, because they are deeply ingrained into our thinking and emotions.

Research has shown that people of all genders are equally susceptible to gender-biased behaviour.

Limiting unconscious/implicit bias

To help us limit unconscious bias within our selection processes please consider the following good practice guidance when writing your reference:

- Address all points in the essential criteria detailed in the Person Specification, giving equal space to research and teaching achievements if a combined career track is followed.
- Provide specific examples of accomplishments to support points.
- Only include information relevant to the position. If some limited personal information would be highly valuable, for example to explain a gap in the nominee's record, ensure that sensitive detail is avoided or that you have consent from the nominee to reveal it.

- When describing character and skills, avoid adjectives that may reinforce stereotypes, such as describing a woman as agreeable, sympathetic, selfless, nurturing.
- Consider using 'stand-out' adjectives for men and women, where appropriate.
- As well as avoiding gender bias, be mindful not to rely on other assumptions regarding age, ethnicity, religion, disability, sexual orientation or other personal characteristics.
- Review the final letter for any statements or gaps that could raise doubt.

Unconscious/implicit bias and gender in reference writing

Research studies which have systematically compared letters of recommendation written for female applicants with those written for male applicants have found that references written for women are more likely to:

- be shorter in length and incomplete;
- use gendered terms (woman, lady) including those irrelevant to the post (mother, wife).
- include fewer 'stand-out' adjectives (eg excellent, outstanding, successful etc.);
- include 'doubt raisers' (negative language, hedges, unexplained comments, faint praise);
- focus on interpersonal attributes versus skills/achievements;
- include personal information irrelevant to the position, such as details about personal lives;
- where combined research and teaching tracks are followed, teaching achievements are emphasised far more than research achievements.

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