

# Good Practice: Unconscious Bias

## Six areas of good practice

*“Good practice benefits all staff and students. Bad practice adversely affects women’s careers more than men’s.”*

**Prof. Paul Walton**  
lead on first successful  
Athena SWAN Gold  
departmental submission

**Unconscious bias could potentially be affecting the recruitment, retention and progression of female staff and students within your department.**

### What is unconscious bias?

The term *unconscious bias* refers to the way in which the brain routinely and rapidly sorts people into different groups, bypassing normal, rational and logical thinking. Regardless of how fair-minded we believe ourselves to be, all people have some degree of unconscious bias, and many people even hold unconscious bias towards the groups that they belong to. Although these thought processes are unconscious, they can have a significant influence on the conscious attitudes that we hold regarding different groups of people, and our behaviour towards them. These unconscious biases can lead us to favour people who look like us, sound like us and share our interests and overlook those that are different from us, but who may well be equally talented or qualified.

### Measuring unconscious bias and identifying its impact

Tools have been developed to assess an individual’s unconscious bias towards different groups – see Harvard’s “Project Implicit” <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>. Identifying where these biases are having an impact is more complicated, but there are indicators that a department could look for because unconscious bias will often reveal itself in statistical anomalies in representation of certain groups at certain levels relative to the level below (e.g. applicants versus shortlisted candidates versus appointed candidates). By understanding and controlling where unconscious biases may be having an impact on individual or group decision-making, departments can ensure that they are making fairer and more transparent decisions.

Outlined below are **six areas** where you may be able to identify if unconscious bias is having an impact, and suggestions to help mitigate this potential bias. These are designed to prompt discussion or action in your department.

### Student admissions

Offer and acceptance rates are different for males and females. To address this your department could:

- Ensure images within the department and materials publicising the department are inclusive and representative.
- Female staff are visible on open days and the role they play in the department is made evident.
- Those responsible for admissions decisions receive equality and diversity training in which they are encouraged to consider their unconscious bias, particularly when they are reviewing contextual data or personal statements.

### Student assessment

Differences in attainment between the genders in different modules, coursework, year-end assessments or final degree class. To address this your department could:

- Consider implementing anonymous and/or second marking.
- Look at group work and how students interact with each other in diverse groups.
- Consider how to overcome bias in assessments that are not anonymous, such as presentations.
- Look at the feedback given to different groups of students and whether they receive the same level of feedback.

## Recruitment of staff

Differences in the ratios between applications, shortlisting, interviewing and appointments. To address this your department could:

- Ensure that advertised jobs are visible to under-represented groups and that under-represented groups are encouraged to apply.
- Ensure that all those who are involved in Search Committees or interviews have received unconscious-bias training.
- Ensure that the criteria for a post are strictly defined before candidates are considered so that the person specification and required experience are based only on the essential requirements of the post.
- Consider using standardised application forms rather than CVs, so all candidates are submitting the same types of information and can be compared fairly.
- Consider anonymous shortlisting where all information that is irrelevant to the job is removed by the human resources department so it does not have any impact on the recruiter's decision-making processes.
- Ask interview panel chairs to:
  - Make a verbal commitment to equality at the beginning of the process.
  - Explicitly mention unconscious bias and acknowledge that it may lead panel members to overlook candidates.
  - Encourage panel members to consider the similarities, rather than the differences, of people from minority and majority groups.
  - Ensure decisions are justified on objective rather than subjective grounds. Document decisions to ensure that they are consistent.

## Promotion of staff

Gender differences in the proportion of male and female staff self-nominating/being nominated for promotion and success rates of applications. Differences by gender in the time spent at each grade for academic staff. To address this your department could:

- If staff are selected for promotion ensure that those doing the selection have received unconscious-bias training. If staff apply for promotion, encourage all staff to consider

themselves eligible, particularly staff from under-represented groups.

- Clearly define the objective criteria for promotion to all staff so that they know what is required of them.
- Ensure that the Chair of the Promotions Panel specifically considers equality and diversity issues at the outset.

## Staff appraisals

Gender differences in the perception of the appraisal process among staff monitored via qualitative surveys. Gender differences in the outcomes of appraisals. To address this your department could:

- Ensure that all staff who are appraisers have had training in equality and diversity and/or unconscious bias.
- Ensure that the appraisal process recognises the variety of work carried out within the department, including research, teaching, outreach activities and administrative responsibilities.
- Consider how outcomes from appraisals could be moderated across the department and whether targets are equally ambitious for all staff members.

## Workload allocation

Gender differences in time allocated to various work areas including research, teaching, administration and outreach. To address this your department could:

- Consider whether certain groups of staff are volunteering for, or being expected to, carry out more of the work that is positive for career progression or work that is not as highly valued.
- Ensure that research is assessed according to quality and not just quantity.
- Examine the process by which staff are allocated teaching responsibilities.
- Ensure that administrative work is not disproportionately allocated to certain groups of staff.
- Ensure that work on Juno and Athena SWAN submissions is considered as part of the model.

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