

Unconscious Bias: discussion points for Juno departments

Introduction

This paper is aimed at Juno departments who have already gone some way in embedding gender equality and are now looking for innovative approaches to make further progress across the five Juno principles. It is designed to encourage discussion within departments on further embedding gender equality across all policies, practices, procedures and culture.

The focus of this paper is unconscious bias, and how this could potentially affect the recruitment, retention and progression of female staff and students within your department. Unconscious bias is also likely to be affecting the participation of other underrepresented groups, including black and minority ethnic groups, and disabled people. Most research on unconscious bias has focused on businesses and, in particular, recruitment. This paper is based on work carried out by the Equality Challenge Unit¹ and encourages you to consider how unconscious bias might be creating barriers to female staff and students across five areas of activity:

- Recruitment and promotion of staff
- Student admissions and course evaluation
- Appraisals
- Grievances
- Workload allocation

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 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. Within higher education physics, where participation of females is particularly low, being aware of unconscious bias and the impact that it may be having is particularly important.

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 vs. shortlisted candidates vs. appointed candidates). If no compelling reason can be found for the anomaly, it is likely to be due to unconscious bias, and a commitment should be made to minimise its impact.

1. Recruitment and promotion of staff

¹ "Unconscious Bias in Higher Education" - <http://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/unconscious-bias-in-higher-education>

As part of your Juno work, you are expected to make commitments to monitor the proportion of female applicants for posts, compared to the proportion of offers. By monitoring these, not just at the departmental level, but at group level (if you have a group structure), this may help to highlight where unconscious bias could be affecting the decision making process. By monitoring the promotions of female staff, in similar ways, this could also help highlight where unconscious bias may be having an impact.

If data indicate that proportional rates of recruitment of female staff are lower, the following discussion questions may help the department or Group to consider if unconscious bias may be having an impact. Where appropriate action is taken it will help to ensure that the most talented candidates are being appointed, regardless of their gender.

Discussion questions

Application:

- Are the criteria for a post strictly defined before candidates are considered?
- How do you ensure that the job criteria (person specification and required experience) are based only on the essential requirements of the post, to avoid creating barriers to any qualified individuals?²
- Do you use standardised application forms rather than CVs, so all candidates are submitting the same types of information and can be compared fairly?
- How do you advertise jobs to ensure that they are equally visible to underrepresented groups?
- Do you take steps to encourage under-represented groups to apply?
- If you have a Search Committee, have you provided training on unconscious bias or equality and diversity?
- Would you be able to implement anonymous short listing where all information that is irrelevant to the job is removed by the HR department so it does not have any impact on the recruiter's decision-making process?³

Interview:

- How do selection panels specifically consider equality and diversity issues when preparing for recruitment? Selection panels or chairs of panels could consider the following:
 - Making a verbal commitment to equality at the beginning of the process
 - Explicitly mentioning the potential impact of unconscious bias and acknowledging that it may lead panel members to overlook candidates from underrepresented groups
 - Encouraging panel members to consider the similarities, rather than the differences, of people from minority and majority groups

² Several CV studies have highlighted the level of impact of unconscious bias in short listing decisions and the tendency to adapt requirements of the post to the attributes of a preferred candidate where clear criteria have not been set.

³ Evidence indicates that recruiters have a tendency to value the same qualities differently in candidates from certain groups.

- How do you ensure decisions on recruitment and promotions are justified on objective rather than subjective grounds? For example, are justifications based on the specific skills and knowledge of a candidate, and not on their 'fit' in the team?
- Are all decision-making processes documented to ensure that justifications are consistent, based on the defined criteria and in compliance with your legal obligations under the Equality Duty? ⁴

Promotion

- If staff are selected for promotion, rather than apply, how do you ensure that unconscious bias is not having an impact on this process?
- If staff apply for promotion, how do you encourage all groups of staff to consider themselves eligible?
- Are the objective criteria for promotion clearly defined to all staff, so that they know what is required of them?
- Do you take steps to encourage underrepresented groups to apply for promotion?
- How does the Chair of the Promotions panel specifically consider equality and diversity issues at the outset?
- How can you raise awareness of this issue at the University or Faculty promotions level?

2. Students: Admissions and course evaluation

As part of your Juno work, you will have been monitoring the levels of applications by gender, conversion rates of applications to offers, and offers to acceptances and identifying if there are differences between males and females. Monitoring any difference in the marks received by male and female students in various modules and across all years of their degree may help to reveal any bias in the style of teaching or the evaluation process, and can guide action to ensure that the department supports all students to fulfill their potential.

Discussion questions

Admissions

- How do you ensure that images within the department and any materials publicising the department are inclusive and also representative? Do you consider how they will be interpreted by prospective students?
- How do you make female staff visible on open days and demonstrate the active role they play in the department?
- Do those responsible for admissions decisions, particularly where departments conduct interviews, receive equality and diversity training in which they are encouraged to consider their unconscious bias?

Course evaluation for undergraduates

⁴ Documenting the decision-making process is a legal requirement. As a result of a Freedom of Information Request in 2009, a local council was forced to demonstrate how the interview process had been fair and transparent through providing anonymised notes from several interviews. As public bodies, universities could be required to do the same.

- Where data reveal a difference in exam performance between different groups does your department investigate the potential causes? Factors to consider might include the way the course is delivered and the content/style of assessments.
- Where data reveal a difference in coursework performance between different groups does your department investigate the potential causes? Factors to consider might include how support and guidance is provided and which groups are more likely to access it.

Encouraging female students' aspirations

- Do you review the content of all modules to ensure that they acknowledge the contributions of underrepresented groups, such as women, to that area of physics?
- What does the department do to promote counter-stereotypical images of underrepresented groups to avoid encouraging automatic associations between certain groups and certain roles?

Appraisals

Conducting surveys on the attitudes of different groups towards the appraisal process can ensure that appraisals are carried out in a way that caters for all needs and recognises the contributions of all staff. Monitoring the outcomes of appraisals by gender can help to highlight whether all staff are being evaluated equitably.

Discussion questions

- Have all staff who are appraisers had training in equality and diversity and/or unconscious bias?
- Does the appraisal process recognise the variety of work carried out within the department including research, teaching, outreach activities and administrative responsibilities?⁵
- How does a staff member's self-evaluation feed into the process? Are certain groups of staff more likely to be self-critical and will this affect their appraisal outcomes?
- Have you considered how outcomes from appraisals can be moderated across the department?
- If targets are set for individual staff, are these moderated across the department to ensure that all staff are set equally ambitious targets which will be recognised when they are evaluated?

Grievances

Although numbers should be small, looking at the number of enquiries/requests to lodge a grievance, compared to those that are taken forward, and their outcome by gender, can reveal whether all staff are being treated equitably when making a formal complaint. For example, complaints from certain groups may be taken more seriously than others. It can also demonstrate whether some

⁵ This is particularly important where appraisals are linked to performance related pay or promotions.

grievances are more often reported amongst male or female staff, highlighting wider issues for a particular gender within a department.

Discussion questions

- Has the grievance procedure been designed in a way that will make sure all staff are comfortable to raise a formal complaint? Is the procedure likely to put off certain groups of staff more than others?
- How is the grievance procedure introduced and publicised to all staff?
- Specifically considering cases of sexual harassment, are members of staff encouraged to report such incidents? Is it made clear that their complaints will be dealt with appropriately?
- Do staff that are dealing with grievances attend equality and diversity training? Are these staff members aware of the potential impact of unconscious bias on their assessment of staff grievances?

Workload allocation

Monitoring and analysing how work is divided across the department can help to reveal how unconscious bias may influence the allocation of different types of work. For example, it will reveal any disparities in the amount of time different staff members choose to/are expected to conduct different types of work including research, teaching, administration and outreach.

Discussion questions

General workload allocation

- Are certain groups of staff volunteering for, or being expected to, carry out more of the work that is positive for career progression?
- Are some groups of staff taking on work or projects that are not as highly valued?
- How do you ensure that staff with heavy workloads over two or three years are then given lighter or different responsibilities in later years?

Research contributions

- How do you ensure that research workload is assessed according to quality and not just quantity?⁶

Teaching responsibilities-

- Have you examined the process by which staff are allocated teaching responsibilities? Is consideration given to the length of time the staff member will have to dedicate to developing the teaching materials?

Outreach work

⁶ Research indicates that this focus is likely to create a more level playing field for staff. See Pautasso (2013) "Focusing on publication quality would benefit all researchers" <http://download.cell.com/trends/ecology-evolution/pdf/PIIS0169534713000839.pdf?intermediate=true>

- Are all staff encouraged to engage with outreach work? Is there an assumption that certain groups are more likely to volunteer for or willing to be volunteered for the work?

Administrative work

- How do you ensure that administrative work is not disproportionately allocated to certain groups of staff?
- How do you ensure that work on Juno and Athena SWAN submissions is considered?
- Is administrative work formally recognised through the appraisal and promotion procedures?