

UNCONSCIOUS BIAS – BRIEFING DOCUMENT

This document is to remind you of the issues surrounding unconscious bias in the context of all aspects of departmental life: staff and student recruitment, including advertising, shortlisting and holding interviews, appraisals, promotions, budget allocations etc.

What is Unconscious Bias? Unconscious bias is when we make judgments or decisions on the basis of our prior experience, our own personal deep-seated thought patterns, assumptions or interpretations, and we are not aware that we are doing it. The result of this is that we unconsciously discriminate in favour of things that feel ‘natural’ and ‘right’ as opposed to those that are less familiar, but might actually be correct.

Who is Affected by Unconscious Bias? We are all affected by unconscious bias. We are born with a predisposition to prefer the sort of people by whom we are surrounded and to learn from them. Then, throughout development and adulthood, our attitudes are shaped by cultural values, experiences, and the attitudes of those around us. Our unconscious brain is constantly processing vast amounts of information and looking for patterns in order to rationalise it. The ability to quickly and automatically categorise people according to social and other characteristics against our own set of values is a fundamental quality of the human mind to give order to the complexities of life. With time, certain patterns become familiar and natural to us (e.g. many male senior managers or many female nurses), whereas others start to feel less ‘normal’ and more challenging to process. If left unchecked, this can easily lead us to lazy stereotypes at best, and prejudiced or discriminatory behaviours at worst.

How Does Unconscious Bias Manifest Itself? We are expected to judge and make decisions about candidates entirely on their merits. Whilst each and every one of us tends to believe that we are open-minded, objective, fair and less prejudiced than the average person, research shows consistently across all social groups that this is not the case. We are heavily influenced in ways that are completely hidden from our conscious mind in how we view and evaluate both others and ourselves.

We all have both a positive bias towards our in-group and a negative bias towards an out-group. We are familiar with members of our in-group and, therefore, feel confident when judging their excellence and trustworthiness, and in control of our decisions. However, with unfamiliar members of other groups, we become less confident about our decisions. It often seems like taking a high risk to select such a candidate. As a result of our unconscious preconceptions about people’s competence, interests and behaviours, we are often unaware that we are redefining merit to justify discrimination. It is particularly true when under time pressure or other stress that our hidden biases automatically come into play and take over the control of our actions or judgments.

We are often driven by strong cultural stereotypes which feel truthful when, in fact, they are not. For example, women’s careers in science are often blighted by such stereotypes. Furthermore, it is not always clear which in-group we belong to, and it is not always easy to predict this for others. As a rule of thumb, our in-group is the group we would like to belong to. Understandably, this is often the group that is currently in power. Thus, it is not surprising that women can be biased against other women, and people from black and minority ethnic (BME) groups against other people from the same BME groups.

What Can We Do about Unconscious Bias?

Key Points:

- Unconscious bias is natural and largely unavoidable. The very **act of realising** that we all have **hidden biases** can enable you to mentally monitor and attempt to ameliorate any hidden attitudes. Once we accept that we will all quite naturally use subconscious mental shortcuts, then we can take the time to consider them and reflect on whether such implicit thought processes are inappropriately affecting the objectivity of our decision-making. Remember that you are **unlikely** to be fairer and less prejudiced than the average person.
- It is hard to deal with what we might call suspicion of the unfamiliar. This includes the suspicion that women and people from different cultural backgrounds might not be quite such excellent scientists, or that somebody with family commitments would not be able to commit themselves fully to their job. However, in order to make decisions on the basis of merit and excellence, **do not fear the unknowns. Question cultural stereotypes** that seem truthful when, in fact, they might not be. Be open to seeing what is new and unfamiliar and increase your knowledge of other groups.
- Unconscious bias tends to be exacerbated under time pressure, stress or other emotional load. You can achieve more fairness and improve the quality of your decision-making if you **slow down the speed of your decision-making** when selecting candidates, shortlisting applications, holding interviews, or in decision-making committee meetings. In the context of recruitment, be aware of potential unconscious bias hidden within the references for candidates, bearing in mind that more enthusiastic language tends to be used towards favoured groups.
- In recruitment, assessment of candidates should be based on **facts**, not feelings.
- **Reconsider** the reasons for your decision, recognising that your reasons may simply be post-hoc justifications.
- You can detect unconscious bias far more easily in others than in yourself. Thus, be prepared to **call out bias when you see it**, in particular when making a decision as part of a group. Recognise and be particularly vigilant in situations when you have incomplete information or are being rushed to make a decision. Politely challenge the relevance of an ungrounded piece of information in terms of the decision being made and seek clarification and evidence. Be mindful when assessors use very vague but positive statements to describe individuals as these tend to be biased towards men and dominant groups – seek clarification and evidence.

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