

Minimising the impact of unconscious bias during the shortlisting process¹

What is unconscious bias?

Unconscious bias refers to a bias that we are unaware of, and which happens outside of our control. It is a bias that happens automatically and is triggered by our brain making quick judgments and assessments of people and situations, influenced by our background, cultural environment and personal experiences.

(ECU: 2013 *Unconscious bias in higher education*)

Although we all like to think we are open-minded and objective, 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.

What can we do?

Once we accept that we all naturally use subconscious mental shortcuts, then we can take time to consider them and reflect on whether such implicit thought processes are inappropriately affecting the objectivity of our decision-making. It is easier to recognise bias in others than in yourself. For this reason, polite challenge is possibly the most powerful form of mitigating bias - respectful intervention can increase accountability and improve decision-making.

Practical steps

- ❑ Wherever possible, avoid undertaking the shortlisting process by yourself. We do however recognise that there may be occasions when - depending on the volume of applications - the Lead Recruiter may want to do an initial sift of applications, passing on a more manageable number to members of the Shortlisting Panel.
- ❑ Each member of the Shortlisting Panel should produce an initial shortlist independently and using only the essential criteria; desirable criteria should only be used when necessary as a deciding factor. Members of the Panel should then meet to discuss their selection and make a final decision on who should be invited for interview.
- ❑ Do not compare one applicant against another – you should be comparing each application against the set criteria; not making comparisons between applicants as this is where bias can influence your decisions.

¹ Please note that this guidance equally applies to the longlisting process.

- ❑ Do not let any other aspect of the application influence your decision – for example, making assumptions based on things such as gaps in service or placing more emphasis on a degree awarded by a Russell Group university.
- ❑ Allow sufficient time to shortlist - research shows that unconscious bias has a more pronounced influence on decisions when time pressure or other distractions exist.
- ❑ Be able to defend every decision for eliminating or advancing a candidate. All decisions must be based on evidence.
- ❑ Do not base decisions on a candidate being a 'good fit'. Focus instead on the specific reasons for a 'poor fit' and explore whether these reasons reflect biases and a tendency to recruit individuals who are similar to yourself.
- ❑ If your shortlist is not reflective of the diversity of the pool of applicants, engage in further discussion and identify the reasons for this. Ensure that your final decision can be clearly justified based on the essential criteria you have listed for the job.

**This guidance should be considered within the context of the University Resourcing
Guidance that is available online at
<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/hr/resourcing/practicalguidance/>**