The potential influence of unconscious bias on the evaluation of candidates and measures to circumvent inequality

Background
Attracting and selecting suitable candidates is an important task of the hiring and selection committee. Although we tend to believe that we are objective scholars and professionals who are able to evaluate candidates based entirely on merit, the quality of their work and the nature of their achievements, research has shown that each of us brings with us a lifetime of experience and cultural context that shapes the way in which we evaluate other individuals. These biases are pervasive and do occur even when there is no intent or motivation to be biased, as they derive from expectations or learned associates based on our ‘models’ of the world.

Consequences of implicit bias on the scientific CV include:
- Women and researchers from underrepresented groups have a harder time getting their research published or obtaining grants.
- Women and researchers from underrepresented groups are less likely to be nominated for prestigious commissions.
- Women are more frequently asked to take up management tasks.

Examples of implicit biases during evaluation of candidates from underrepresented groups include:
- The candidates may be subject to higher expectations, and the same achievements may be evaluated less positively than equal accomplishments of the majority group.
- The ideas and research findings of the candidates may be undervalued or unfairly attributed to a mentor or to other collaborators, despite contrary evidence in publications and letters of recommendation.
- The ability of the candidates to run a research group or to obtain funding may be underestimated.
- Assumptions about whether the candidates will ‘fit in’ to the existing academic environment can influence the evaluation.
- Assumptions about possible family responsibilities and their effect on a candidates’ career path may negatively influence the evaluation of merit, despite evidence of productivity.
- The professional experience a candidate may have acquired through an alternative career path may be underestimated.

A first step towards ensuring fairness in the evaluation process is to recognize that implicit biases, attitudes and other influences not related to the qualifications of the candidate can influence our evaluations of them, even if we are committed to egalitarian principles.

Practices that can minimize the impact of such implicit bias include:
- Reflect on your own impressions.
- Create a culture of pointing out bias or the potential for bias.
- Ensure that the recruitment process is well structured and transparent.
- Minimize or eliminate situations that can trigger implicit bias.
- Continue exploring implicit bias throughout the selection and evaluation process.

The following recommendations highlight key points to consider throughout the search process, including helpful tactics to use and potential pitfalls to avoid in the routines.

Provided by: Working Group Recruitment, Gender and Diversity Committee, FoS, RU University
Source: Adapted from University of Colorado Boulder’s, Harvard University’s and Brown University’s Guide for Faculty and Search Committees

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1 This guideline is based upon the information provided in the FoS workshop ‘Towards equality in Science’.
Practices that can Minimize the Impact of Implicit Bias in Attracting and Evaluating Candidates

1. Starting the process

- **Search committee**
  - The search committee consists of members who represent all types of diversity in the department, including age, gender, origin, (dis)ability, etc. At the same time be mindful that women often have greater administrative commitments.
  - Members of the faculty of the search committee (assistant professor level and higher) have received training on implicit bias provided by the faculty.
  - All members of the search committee commit to a hiring procedure that is inclusive and as unbiased as possible.¹
- **Diversity Representative (DR)²**
  - Assign a Diversity Representative to ensure that a diverse, fair and equitable search is conducted as well as to act as a full member of the search committee. While it is expected that all search committee members consider diversity, equity and inclusion, the DR serves as an advocate for best practices as well as a resource to their colleagues.
  - The DR typically is a member of the faculty who cannot also be the chair, must have had prior experience in taking seat in a BAC and must be from the majority group of the committee.
- **Profile of the candidate**
  - Distil the four to five most important criteria.
  - Make sure to cover multiple aspects relevant to the position (e.g. research, teaching, leadership, management, acquisition, collaboration, communication, etc.).
  - Keep the description as broad as possible to attract a wider range of candidates.
  - Take both, past accomplishment and future trajectories/potential, into account when formulating the profile and evaluating the candidates.
- **Requirements**
  - Make the requirements appropriate for the starting level of the position.
  - Explicitly include potential for development.
  - Be clear about what is required and what is preferred.
- **Use the profile and criteria to guide the whole process.**
- Choose the most decisive criterion in case there is a tie and more excellent candidates.
- Define relevant or diagnostic cues and agreed upon specific concrete procedures to evaluate the candidates. Decide upon the information applicants need to provide to enable an objective evaluation. Consider making a rubric/form to be used for the latter evaluation, which helps keep focused on the agreed upon criteria:
  - What are the requirements?
  - What type of evidence is necessary to evaluate past achievements and further potential?
  - Does the job advertisement request material appropriate to the assessment criteria?
  - Are any of the criteria ambiguous?

¹ For more information about unconscious bias and how to counteract it, the GROW module je vooroordelen de baas (in Dutch) can be followed.
² The specific tasks and responsibilities of the DR are explained in the Diversity Representative Checklist.
• **Letters of Recommendation**
  Letters of recommendation often reflect stereotypical views of demographic groups. Letters for women and underrepresented groups are often shorter and focus on interpersonal skills rather than knowledge, skills and abilities as compared to men identified candidates. Tone and language differs depending on the cultural origin of the person writing the letter.
  - Carefully consider whether letters of recommendation are an essential part of the process.
  - If letters of recommendations are deemed essential, give clear instructions in order to receive comparable information for all candidates.

• **Avoid informal discussions** about candidates outside scheduled committee meetings.

• Throughout the process **periodically evaluate your judgment**:
  - What objective evidence supports the decision to include or exclude a candidate?
  - Are negative assumptions about whether the candidate will fit into the existing environment influencing the evaluation (e.g. ‘Their personality doesn’t seem like a good match’)?
  - How does the demographics of the shortlist compare to the candidate pool?
  - Which measures have been taken to control for potential bias?
  - Have subjective evaluations be challenged (e.g.: ‘Their priorities do not seem to match up with ours very well’, ‘She hasn’t worked with any leaders in the field’)?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Best practices checklist:</th>
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<tr>
<td>□ 4-5 requirements based on the candidate profile</td>
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<td>□ The requirements are objective and testable</td>
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<td>□ Clear assessment criteria agreed upon by all BAC members</td>
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2. Writing the vacancy text

- Describe the scientific context of the vacancy, the role of the applicant and the general goal of the institute.
- Research has shown that people from underrepresented groups are less likely to apply for positions compared to the majority group if they feel that they do not fulfill or surpass all criteria described in the vacancy text. Therefore an inclusive formulation of the qualification requirements is essential:
  - Focus on the 4 to 5 most essential requirements and make a distinction between what is required and what is simply preferred. Detailed lists may deter otherwise qualified candidates.
  - Keep domains of teaching and research expertise as broad as possible and not specify too much. Indicate assessment measures (e.g. ‘as evidenced by.’).
  - Pay attention to the formulations and avoid too compelling formulations (use ‘preferred’ instead of ‘required’, ‘should’ instead of ‘must’, etc.)
  - Allow for personal development.
  - Focus on experience and ambitions instead of excellence.
- Clearly describe which material candidates have to submit (e.g. length of research statement, information the CV should contain, etc.)

- Describe the work environment (It is important that the vacancy is attractive to the candidates and also highlights what is offered):
  - Mention atmosphere, culture, composition of the institute (diversity, nationality, gender, etc.).
  - Emphasize collaborations and partnerships within and outside the institute.
  - Highlight unique selling points, such as e.g. unique research facilities.
  - Mention societal relevance and impact.
  - Emphasize opportunities for personal development.
  - Mention specific programs for women and the presence of a gender and diversity committee.

- Use appropriate language:
  - Avoid using gendered pronouns (plural often offers a solution).
  - Be personal (use personal pronouns such as you and us: ‘You are part of...’).
  - Write active (‘we strive...’, ‘we seek...’).

- Use the vacancy description as an opportunity to communicate that the department sees diversity as an integral component of academic excellence, e.g. asking candidates to describe experience working with and teaching diverse student populations provides useful information and signals the committee’s interest in recruiting a diverse pool of applicants.

Best practices checklist:

- Inclusive vacancy text
- Requirements in accordance with criteria decided upon in step 1
- Vacancy text gives clear information about expectations
3. Advertising the vacancy

- **Broad distribution**
  - Make use of the top recruitment channels of RU for scientific staff: Academic transfer, RU website, LinkedIn.
  - Distribute in email lists, possible candidates, your own network, invite colleagues to share the posting in their network and social media platforms, etc.
  - Make use of the network of all search committee members to achieve a broader distribution of the vacancy.

- **Identify a wide diversity of people**
  - Send the job advertisement to at least 10 women or people from other underrepresented groups in the field of at least the same level as the vacancy and ask to disseminate it (think e.g. of members of editorial boards in main journals of the field).
  - Contact with colleagues from diverse backgrounds, who are often well positioned to help reaching highly qualified women and potential candidates from underrepresented groups.
  - Identify and contact potential candidates, e.g. by attending conference sessions given by younger researchers you may not know yet, examining lists of award winners in relevant professional societies, etc.

- **Bias free communication**
  - When coming into contact with potential candidates directly, it is important to focus on their scholarly professional qualifications and experiences, and not on their identity.
  - When images are included in the advertisements (such as in the University newsletter), make sure that they do not only reflect the traditional gender roles but portray a diverse set of people.

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**Best practices checklist:**

- [ ] Broad distribution of vacancy text
- [ ] Bias free communication
4. Making the right short list

- Check whether the diversity of the applicants reflects the diversity in the field (e.g. in terms of gender)
- Make an assessment matrix\(^1\) which committee members can use to score the applicants on competences, skills and experience based on the set evaluation criteria in step 1. This assessment matrix forms the starting point of the discussion on how to rate the candidates.
- Avoid global evaluations and summary rankings and directly comparing the candidates.
- Exclude information unrelated to the job.
- Do not rank candidates until the final decision, but make a binary choice (yes/no) for whether candidates go to the next round.
- Take potential negative effects on a candidates’ CV into account, such as:
  - Implicit bias on the CV of women and underrepresented groups (see first page).
  - Part-time work, parenting or care-leave can reduce the actual research time.
- The chair should bring forward women and candidates from underrepresented groups who might deserve a second look. Pay special attention to candidates who are just below the cutoff or who excel in one or two criteria, but not necessarily in all.
- Be aware of what can look like tokenism on the short list: e.g., one women or one minority on an otherwise all-white, all-male group. Research has shown that they are more subject to unconscious bias and have a lower chance to get hired.
- Document why candidates do not move forward at any stage of the process.
- Identify possible doubts that need to be addressed during the interview for each candidate on the short list.

Best practices checklist:

- [ ] Diverse initial applicant list
- [ ] An assessment matrix is used
- [ ] Shortlist made using objective and predefined criteria, taking effects of bias on the CV of underrepresented groups and the true research time into account
- [ ] Shortlist represents initial applicant list in terms of diversity

\(^1\) For an example of an assessment matrix see the CV assessment matrix available on the central recruitment page: [https://www.ru.nl/sites/default/files/2023-03/cv_assessmentmatrix.xlsx](https://www.ru.nl/sites/default/files/2023-03/cv_assessmentmatrix.xlsx)
5. Managing the visit

- **Give information well ahead of time** including schedule, expectations, etc.
- **Provide a welcoming environment** during the visit, e.g. by appointing a host to set the proper tone.
  Remind yourself that candidates are evaluating you and your department as much as you are evaluating them.
- Ensure that all candidates **meet a diverse set of people** so that they are more likely to meet someone like them.
- Provide an unscheduled opening in the itinerary to allow candidates to have flexibility to schedule as they wish. E.g., the **candidate may want to talk (confidentially) with someone from a specific group** (e.g. LGBTQ+ community, HR-advisor). Offer the name of someone not associated with the search to arrange for meetings during the open time.
- Identify whether the candidate needs any **special accommodations** during the visit and arrange necessary accommodations.
- Avoid announcing a presentation given to the institute as a “job talk”.
- **Inform the candidates about the audience** to be expected during their talks and the level of knowledge the audience will have (e.g., does the audience consist of specialists or is it composed of people from different fields, does the audience include (undergraduate) students, etc.).
- Strive to treat internal and external candidates with **consistency**.
- **Provide sufficient break** time for candidates.
- **Agree on a global time schedule beforehand.**
  - Make sure that main aspects are prioritized.
  - Plan in time for questions by the candidate.

**Best practices checklist:**

- [ ] Clear schedule communicated in advance
- [ ] Candidates informed about the audience during talks
- [ ] Special accommodations arranged if needed
- [ ] Scheduled opportunity to meet diverse group of people
6. The interview

- Pay attention to the climate of the interview process.
  - Avoid common patterns of micro-messages that may convey bias (examples include mispronouncing of names, ‘othering’ comments, such as ‘that’s an interesting accent’ or stereotypical assumptions).
- Provide relevant interviewing documents to all individuals involved in the interview process well before the interview.
- Use an evaluation matrix (competences, skills and experience) that is filled in by all committee members individually (prevent group think).
- Be aware of differences in presentation and communication depending on cultural background/gender/neurodiversity and how this might differ from what is the expected performance in the Radboud context.
- Be open to a variety of cultural differences in body language and verbal and nonverbal communication (eye contact, use of pauses, etc.). There are many cultural cues that diverse candidates use as a sign of respect that may differ from one’s own understanding. Being mindful of this ahead of time will allow the committee to be open and to focus on the interview responses.
- Allow for silence in the interview. This gives candidates time to formulate more robust responses and accommodates a variety of styles.
- Interview questions
  - Develop one consistent set of interview questions for all candidates in advance.
  - Use the STARR (Situation, Task, Action, Result, Reflection) method when formulating questions.
  - Make a list of questions that you would like all candidates to answer.
  - Address possible doubts openly in the interview so that the candidate can respond to this (see step 4) ¹.
  - Be aware of doubt raisers by not asking the same level of detail for each candidate and do not ask different type of questions for women/specific groups, such as only asking female candidates for their contribution to a scientific publication or questioning the time/effort a candidate can spend on the job in case they have children or other family responsibilities.
  - Avoid personal questions and do not ask questions that are not job-related as these may potentially be discriminatory.
  - Be as consistent as possible for all candidates (e.g. same person assigned to each question, consistent setting, same time allocation, questions in the same order, etc.).
- Leave sufficient room for questions from the candidate.

Best practices checklist:

- Pre-defined questions
- No non-job-related questions asked during interview
- Possible doubts addressed openly
- Doubt-raisers are avoided

¹ You do not want to “guess” the answer during the decision making process
7. Choosing the candidate

- **Power dynamics** can play a role during the evaluation process and junior members may feel uncomfortable disagreeing with senior members. Therefore, consider how you can create practices that avoid these dynamics:
  - Use an evaluation matrix where all committee members can individually and independently score each candidate on competences, skills, and experience. The evaluation matrix forms the starting point of the discussion on how to rate the candidates.
  - Use anonymous voting.
  - Create an open atmosphere where all committee members (irrespective of their position) can contribute to the discussion.
  - Start with the more junior members of the committee when asking for input.
- **Stick to the agreed upon evaluation criteria** while considering the areas where the candidates are allowed to develop (e.g., a beginning assistant professor needs to build a teaching CV but has an accomplished research CV).
- **Be aware of doubt raisers**.
- **Be vigilant about statements concerning ‘fit’** which can directly or indirectly advert diversity. ‘Cultural fit’ can exclude promising candidates who might not look, think, or act according to the norms and expectations with which we are familiar.
- Make sure that the potential versus experience of the applicants is **evaluated similarly** for each candidate.
- Keep the **possibility of different career trajectories** in mind.
- Use the **beforehand decided upon most important/decisive criterium in case there is a tie**.

**Best practices checklist:**

- [ ] Doubt-raisers are avoided/or addressed
- [ ] Discussion limited to before-hand agreed upon criteria
- [ ] Evaluation matrix used
- [ ] Final ranking made according to objective criteria, using the before-hand decisive criterium in case there is a tie

**Final note:** High profile candidates from underrepresented groups are likely in high demand and may be considering multiple jobs. Be sure to express genuine interest in each candidate’s scholarship and learn what the candidates’ needs and desires are. Be also aware that the work of recruiting and retaining diverse candidates as well as fostering an inclusive environment is an ongoing commitment and should be seen as parallel to other academic exercises that seek to make the department stronger over time. Identify a proactive plan to help new hires acclimate and connect, based on their interests and needs.