



SPA Good practice considerations in admissions on unconscious and implicit bias in admissions

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Higher Education staff strive to remain as objective and as consistent as possible in their procedures for the recruitment and admission of students. There are also many decisions across the communication of, selection to and support for HE entry that are justifiably subjective: applicants, advisers and HE staff all make judgements in identifying the best match. However, subjective decisions based on unconscious biases (those we are unaware we have) or implicit biases (those fundamental to misconceptions we are aware of) can lead to unfair discrimination, interfere with identifying the best match and perpetuate barriers. Such unintended biases will exist across all involved, so it is important for HE providers to raise awareness, promote understanding and develop mechanisms to support informed judgement, not only for their own staff, but for applicants and for their advisers as well.

According to the Equality Challenge Unit:

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.

As we become aware of our biases they surface from our unconscious and we are able to recognise them and find ways to minimise their impact on our behaviour and decisions. **Implicit bias** is used to signify this move from the unconscious and to remind us of our increased responsibility to be proactive in identifying, acknowledging and managing our biases so that they do not compromise our behaviour.

ECU has already developed extensive resources on unconscious and implicit bias, including a literature review and training pack. Although primarily designed with the recruitment of HE staff in mind, most of it is directly applicable to student recruitment, and we consider it the definitive reference point. We highly recommend you download the materials from the ECU website.

www.ecu.ac.uk/guidance-resources/employment-and-careers/staff-recruitment/unconscious-bias

Key recommendations (based on ECU's recommendations)

SPA recommends HE providers tackle unconscious and implicit bias in their recruitment and admissions through five key goals:

1. Create a culture of equality

Having written equality and diversity policies is insufficient; policies need to be put into practice. Managers should make it clear that they are committed to equality, holding themselves and others to account.

2. Ensure transparency

Ensure that all decisions, including interviews, are properly documented in a standard and consistent manner, and that they demonstrate why decisions were made. This will make providing feedback easier, facilitate any auditing process and help protect against legal challenges.

3. Reduce stereotypes

Look for situations where you can promote counter-stereotypical images of underrepresented groups, without misleading applicants. This should apply not just on the website and in marketing materials, but also around the institution where they would be encountered by visitors.

4. Prepare individual selectors

Consider introducing training in a supportive, unthreatening environment to give staff the chance to think about their biases in a constructive way. Familiarity with non-stereotypical student, academic or career examples will implant an intention to counter bias and promote a conscious effort toward equality.

5. Ensure the qualities of different candidates are valued in the same way

Before any selection decisions are made, all involved should be clear about what they are looking for, adhering to a robust admissions policy and consistent admission criteria that should not change within any period of equal consideration.

Additional resources, including a table indicating some potential biases by applicants and by HE providers, plus a template action plan for tackling unconscious and implicit bias within admissions, are available on the SPA website – www.spa.ac.uk/resources/unconscious-bias.

SPA would be very happy to discuss any concerns on this topic with HE providers, and would be especially keen to share good practice with anyone who is developing, or has already developed, training for recruitment and admissions on unconscious and implicit bias. Please contact us via enquiries@spa.ac.uk.