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**Introduction to the Social Bias Observer Scheme**

This guide provides some background information on the source of social bias, the effects of such bias, and the role of the social bias observer scheme in helping to minimise discrimination.

There is evidence of endemic workplace inequality and discrimination across the UK labour market (*Equality and Human Rights Commission Strategic Plan*, 2019-2022). Research suggests the origins of discrimination often stems from social bias related to group membership and associated stereotypes.

**The source of social bias**

Group membership: Everyone is a member of many different social groups (e.g., groups associated with sex, gender, race, age, nationality). Whether we perceive others as belonging to the same social group as ourselves (the in-group) or a different social group (the out-group) can influence the way we think and behave[[1]](#footnote-2). Group membership can lead to intergroup bias, with people more likely to favour in-group members and discriminate against out-group members. People are often unaware of their in-group/out-group biases.

Stereotypes: Stereotypes are bits of information associated with social groups and their members (e.g., women are stereotypically warm, caring and organised, whilst men are stereotypically analytical, assertive and competitive). When people endorse stereotypes, it can lead to overt prejudice in the form of preconceived beliefs and attitudes[[2]](#footnote-3). However, even when people refute stereotypes knowledge of their content can lead to unconscious and unintended bias in thoughts and behaviour[[3]](#footnote-4).

Bias blind spot: Most people do not consider themselves to be biased. However, research suggests that social bias is a universal human trait, but that individuals are more likely to see bias in others than in themselves.[[4]](#footnote-5)

**The effects of social bias**

Discrimination: Discrimination is the unjust treatment of people based on social group membership. Direct discrimination occurs when someone is treated unfairly because of who they are (e.g., not inviting vegetarian colleagues to dinner). Indirect discrimination occurs when someone is treated the same way as other people but in a way that is unfair because of who they are (e.g., providing a set menu for dinner that does not have vegetarian options).

Prejudice and discrimination: Prejudice is often based on the belief that stereotypes are accurate descriptions of social groups. If people behave in a way that is consistent with their prejudiced beliefs the result is discrimination. However, people with prejudiced beliefs can control their actions to behave in a non-discriminatory way.

Stereotypes and discrimination: Everyone has similar knowledge of stereotype content irrespective of whether they believe stereotypes to be accurate. Unconscious bias caused by knowledge of stereotypes can lead non-prejudiced people to behave unintentionally in a discriminatory way.

**The role of the social bias observers**

The primary goal of the social bias observer scheme is to monitor and record any evidence of discrimination based on a persons’ membership of a protected characteristic group during the promotions decision making process. Importantly, there is also evidence that being observed might reduce the likelihood of social bias occurring[[5]](#footnote-6).

|  |
| --- |
| Age  Disability  Gender reassignment  Race  Religion or belief  Sex  Sexual orientation  Marriage and civil partnership  Pregnancy and maternity |

**Protected characteristics**

The nine ‘protected characteristics’ are listed in the Equality Act 2010 (see table on the left). The UK law prohibits employers from discriminating against people (e.g. job applicants, promotions applicants, etc.) because of ‘protected characteristics’. However, research suggests that bias still exists, and that age, disability, race, sex and sex-orientation may still represent the most common ground for bias and discrimination.

Therefore, making decisions based on applicants’ protected characteristics may be a barrier for the individual’s employment and career progression.

**Good practices to minimise bias**

* Minimising the impact of unconscious bias cannot happen at once. A combination of sustained activities over some of time provide better results. To be aware of our own bias is the first step. Reflecting on our behaviour when interacting with others can help in achieving such a step.
* Questioning and reflecting on our own judgements during decision making process is essential. This allow to slow down the process and control bias.
* Taking an online IAT (Implicit Association Test) can highlight the stereotypes and assumptions we make about people <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/selectatest.html>.
* Using situational explanations rather than dispositional ones reduce automatic bias. Dispositional explanations refer to interpreting people’s behaviours linking them to personal factors such as personality traits, abilities, or feelings. In contrast, a situational approach explains behaviours relating them to the context or the situation. In this case, the risk to evaluate someone on the basis of their protected characteristics can be minimised, leaving space for more relevant aspects to be considered.

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**Social Bias Observer Scheme**

**Guidelines for University Promotion Committee Observers**

**Why have an observer present at the University Promotion Committee meeting?**

There is evidence of endemic workplace inequality and discrimination across the UK labour market (Equality and Human Rights Commission Strategic Plan, 2019-2022). Research suggests the origins of discrimination often stems from social bias related to group membership and associated stereotypes. The primary goal of the social bias observer scheme is to monitor and record any evidence of discrimination based on a persons’ membership of a protected characteristic group during the promotions decision making process. Importantly, there is also evidence that being observed might reduce the likelihood of social bias occurring.

**Role of an Observer**

The observer’s role is to observe the committee members, carefully listen to the language used when discussing each promotion application and monitor the occurrence of any equality issues during the promotion procedure.

**Confidentiality and data protection**

The same rules of confidentiality that apply to panel members apply to observers. Acknowledging the sensitivity of information disclosed on a confidential basis within the promotion meetings, observers are required to follow the principle of confidentiality and do not disclose under no circumstances any applicant’s promotion outcome or any other related information. Breaching confidentiality in this way may result in disciplinary action. The University’s data protection guidelines provide additional information on [data protection](https://ico.org.uk/media/for-organisations/documents/2614158/ico-introduction-to-the-data-protection-bill.pdf).

**General recommendations**

Observation should begin at the point that collective discussions begin. It is the role of observers to look at the decision-making process, not select the best candidate.

Observers should keep anonymised notes highlighting examples of good and bad practice without attribution to a specific committee member.

Observers should use the pro forma provided to record their anonymised observations. The observer will then complete and submit a report of their observations to [m.cascio@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:m.cascio@abdn.ac.uk).

**Observers must not**

Attempt to influence the decision outcome

Audio or video record at any time of the meeting

Contact the University Promotion Committee members after the meeting to discuss any issue observed

Send the ‘Observation form’ to the committee members/chair

Make any direct reference to a member of the committee in their observations

**Disclose any details discussed during committee meetings with third parties under no circumstances**

**The list below is a general guidance on what to observe**

1. **In relation to the committee composition**

*Are both genders represented?*

1. **In relation to the 9 protected characteristics** (Age, Disability, Gender reassignment, Race, Religion or belief, Sex, Sexual orientation, Marriage and civil partnership, Pregnancy and maternity)

*If any of the above were disclosed by the applicant and made available to the committee members, is there any negative/biased reference to them during the decision-making process?*

1. **In relation to the employment status of the applicant**(open-ended but funding limited, part-time, flexible)

*If any of the above were disclosed by the applicant and made available to the committee members, is there any negative/biased reference to them during the decision-making process?*

1. **When discussing each candidate’s application**

*Are committee members using neutral language free from negative/biased reference to disclosed protected characteristic groups, contract status or other disclosed special circumstances?*

*Are committee members continually referring to the promotions criteria or are they considering other factors?*

*Are recommendation letters of both female and male candidates given the same importance, or there is a gender imbalance?*

*Are committee members evaluating each application on its own merits without referring to previous unsuccessful applications?*

*Are committee members using a consistent approach in the evaluation of all applicants?*

1. **Overall decision-making process**

*Are all decisions evidence-based?*

*Is each application given enough time for consideration?*

I confirm:

I have successfully completed the University’s online Equality and Diversity training

I have completed the University’s Observer Training

I understand my role as observer and abide to the guidelines above

**[](https://www.abdn.ac.uk/)**

**Social Bias Observer Scheme**

**Observer Report Form**

The Observer should use this form only if any equality issues were observed during the University Promotion Committee meeting. Observers should keep anonymised notes highlighting examples of good and bad practice without attribution to a specific committee member.

**Observers must not disclose any of the content in this report with third parties. Breaching confidentiality in this way may result in disciplinary action.**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **University Promotion Committee observed** | | | |
| **Area** | **Meeting (1st- 2nd – 3rd – final)** | **Date** | **Time** |
| University Promotion Committee 1 |  |  |  |
| University Promotion Committee 2 |  |  |  |

|  |
| --- |
| **Candidate’s number: (**Please report here the number assigned to the applicant by HR) |
| Observer’s comments |
|  |

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Name of Observer** | |  | | |
| **Signature** |  | | **Date** |  |

**PLEASE FORWARD THIS FORM TO THE ATHENA SWAN COORDINATOR Dr Maria Grazia Cascio, m.cascio@abdn.ac.uk**

1. Dasgupta (2004); Hewstone et al. (2002); Tajfel & Turner (1979) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Devine (1989) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Devine (2012); Greenwald & Banaji (1995) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Pronin et al., (2002) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Leyens et al., (1994); Lowery et al., (2001) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)