Selection Committee Briefing Sheet:

Mitigating the impact of unconscious bias in the selection process

What is unconscious bias?

Unconscious bias refers to a bias that we are unaware of, which 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 hidden from our conscious mind about how we view and evaluate both others and ourselves. Once we accept that we all naturally use subconscious mental shortcuts, we can take time to consider them and reflect on whether such implicit thought processes are inappropriately affecting the objectivity of our decision-making.

What can we do?

Once we accept the existence of unconscious bias, we can begin the process of mitigating risk. 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.

Snap judgements and shortcuts are more likely to occur if committee members are stressed either by time constraints, work pressures or by hunger and dehydration. Therefore, it is valuable to consider these factors before a shortlisting meeting or meeting of the board.

Training and other resources:

Training is another useful consideration in mitigating unconscious bias. You will find the relevant links to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion training (and other resources) on the Equality and Diversity webpages.

http://www.equality.admin.cam.ac.uk/

Common Recruitment Shortcuts

Cloning: Replicating oneself by selecting someone with similar attributes or background, or undervaluing a candidate's research because it is not familiar. Cloning limits the scope and breadth of approaches and perspectives in research and teaching.

Good Fit/Bad Fit: While it may be about whether the person can meet the requirements for the position, it often is about how comfortable and culturally at ease one feels.

Negative Stereotypes: Characterised by presumptions of incompetence. For example, the work of women and under-represented minorities is scrutinized much more than majority faculty, at all stages of their academic career.

Positive Stereotypes: Dominant group members are automatically presumed to be competent. Such a member receives the benefit of the doubt, negative attributes are glossed over and success is assumed. Also called the "original affirmative action" because dominant group members are automatically presumed qualified and thereby given an unearned advantage.

Elitist Behaviour: Also called "Raising-the-Bar", increasing qualifications for women/other under-represented candidates because their competency doesn't strike board members as trustworthy.

Visionary: Members of dominant groups are evaluated based on their potential whereas under-represented groups are judged on their accomplishments and their track record only. For example: "*He has vision*" or "*She lacks vision*".

Star: Used when the speaker is an infatuated fan of the candidate under consideration. When you hear it, ask the speaker to explain their use of the term and support it with evidence. For example: "*She's not a star*" or "*It's clear he's a star*".

Committed, single-minded focus or hard-worker: These terms could be cloaking a bias against care-givers, those who cannot depend on what Williams (2000) calls a "flow of family work" which allows ideal workers to log long hours in the office while still having their material needs met.

Practical Steps to Mitigate Bias:

- Ensure that you are able to be fully present with no other immediate stresses on your mind;

- Ensure that everyone involved in the selection process has completed Unconscious Bias online training wherever possible;

- Ensure the committee has balanced representation of members across gender and minority groups;

- Ensure that the Chair specifically highlights equality and diversity and unconscious bias issues at the outset and reminds committee members to be mindful of bias throughout the meeting;

- Consider each candidate individually at shortlisting stage; avoiding the tendency to make comparisons between candidates, as this is where bias can influence your decisions.

- Ensure that every decision has a clear and reasoned rationale, based on evidence to help mitigate against bias or instinct taking over.

- Ensure that all decisions are evidence-based – stating that a candidate should not be shortlisted is not sufficient. Focus on reasons why you believe they are not suitable and where these reasons originate.

- Ask other committee members to explain and evidence their use of potentially 'loaded' words such as 'driven' 'hard working' and 'star'.

- Where there are individual contextual factors, such as a period of absence due to family or caring leave, consider them carefully and evidence how they should be taken into account. Consider seeking advice on how to understand the impact of contextual factors on research outputs and teaching from the Secretary to the committee.

- Focus on quality rather than quantity, ensuring that all information provided is given due consideration.

- Be prepared to provide clear and detailed feedback on each candidate's application, particularly if they were not selected to attend an interview. Effective feedback should give insight on how to strengthen future applications.