

A quick guide to reducing bias in decision-making

At Griffith we are committed to equity, diversity and inclusion and understand some decision-making practices can pose a threat to these values. The purpose of this quick guide is to provide a brief overview of

- what unconscious bias and discrimination are;
- the types of biases that exist; and
- practical ways to reduce bias.

Unconscious bias



We do not always have conscious, intentional control over our social perception, impression formation and judgment especially if we

- make **rushed decisions** or
- **don't have all the information** we need.




We use **mental short cuts** or **heuristics** to process information. These short cuts are based on our experiences (cultural background, media messages, for example) and can result in oversimplified, inaccurate, and biased decisions or judgements (Whysall 2018).

Types of bias

The following are some common types of bias in decision making:

	Affinity bias or similarity-attraction principle: We tend to like and select people who are similar to ourselves. <i>For example</i> , favouring a candidate who went to the same school or University as you, or liking a candidate because they have similar beliefs, cultural background ¹ , skills or experience to you.
	Confirmation bias or diagnosis momentum: We can be prone to making a decision very early on in a selection process. <i>For example</i> , make a decision in the first few seconds of an interview and then continue to find evidence to support that decision.

¹ **Bias against names** – In an experiment [Booth, Leigh and Varganova](#) (2012) found clear evidence of discrimination with CVs of people with Chinese and Middle Eastern sounding names - both having to submit at least 50% more applications in order to receive the same number of call-backs as Anglo candidates (p 566). In this experiment Indigenous Australian applicants also experienced a statistically significant level of discrimination, though the effects were smaller (p 566).

	Stereotyping: We associate a position with a certain gender ² , age or cultural background. We may become biased against people who do not fit our stereotype for the role (for example, men applying for a childcare position, women applying for an engineering role).
	Anchoring: We may rely too heavily on one piece of information and judgements are made around this anchor.
	Group Think: Members of the selection committee align their views with those of a powerful member of the group, for example, a senior leader. Committee members avoid dissent.

Discrimination

In making decisions we should not treat, or propose to treat, a person with an attribute less favourably than another person without the attribute³. Under State and Commonwealth laws, there are a range of attributes or grounds for which it is unlawful to discriminate against another person. These include:

- age;
- breastfeeding;
- carer's or family responsibilities;
- gender identity;
- impairment, mental, physical disability;
- intersex status;
- lawful sexual activity;
- marital or relationship status;
- parental status;
- political opinion, belief or activity;
- pregnancy or potential pregnancy;
- race, colour, descent or national or ethnic origin or national extraction;
- relationship status;
- religion, religious belief or religious activity;
- sex;
- sexuality or sexual orientation;
- social origin;
- trade union activity;
- association with, or relation to a person identified on the basis of any of the above attributes.

Note: there are exemptions under Acts.

² **Gender bias in academic letters of recommendation** – [Madera, Hebl, Dial, Martin & Valian](#) (2018) found that both male and female recommenders use **more doubt raisers in letters of recommendations for women** compared to men and that the presence of certain types of doubt raisers in letters of recommendations results in negative outcomes for both genders. Since doubt raisers are more frequent in letters for women than men, women are at a disadvantage relative to men in their applications for academic positions (p 287).

³ This may include imposing a condition, requirement or practice that a person with the attribute is not able to comply with; and a higher proportion of people without the attribute can comply with; and is not reasonable.

Practical ways to reduce bias

PRINCIPLES	HOW?
DEFINING	by questioning what is really needed from the role and selecting accordingly. Consider what Griffith's strategic aims and KPIs are in terms of our workforce profile.
STRUCTURING	by structuring bias interrupters into the decision-making process.
SLOWING DOWN	by slowing down to engage in deliberate, less biased thinking to reduce the likelihood of taking mental shortcuts.
QUESTIONING	by challenging our own and others' biases.

Methods to actively reduce bias include:

- Evaluate a person's achievements based on the opportunities that have been available to them (achievement relative to opportunity)⁴.
- Ensure people on long leave (for example, parental leave) are being effectively communicated with regarding major change and opportunities;
- Ensure information and systems are accessible for people with disability;
- If constructing a selection panel, ensure it is diverse. Diversity of opinion (that is allowed to be expressed) means that bias is either less likely, or more likely to be challenged in a decision-making process.
- If conducting interviews, ensure they are structured. This means questions are:
 - written ahead of time and are closely related to the position.
 - asked of each candidate and in the same order.
- Implement a scoring system (decided on ahead of time).
- If there are selection committee members, ensure they record their scores without conferring with other members. Stick to what your scores tell you.
- Beware of selecting for "cultural fit" to the team – this can work against diversity. Consider "cultural add" and alignment with Griffith's values.
- When conducting large scale change, conduct analyses to see if specific groups (for example, aligned with our KPIs) would be disproportionately impacted.

If you'd like more information please contact the People Support Team on 07 3735 4011 or people.support@griffith.edu.au

⁴ In applying achievement relative to opportunity, we prioritise:

- the level and conditions of appointment (including the nature of the academic work profile and employment type)
- the quality and impact of the person's work
- outcomes given the time and/or resources available to the person
- any ongoing impact on achievement related to the person's circumstances.