

Diversity and fairness in recruitment

Guidelines from the Coordination Centre for Gender Studies and Equal Opportunities at the University of Graz

Introduction

The more diverse the members of a university are in terms of age, gender, regional and social background, physical and mental abilities, sexual orientation and lifestyles, appearance and values, the more diverse the skills and experiences available at the university. This increases its **creativity** and **adaptability**, and can strengthen productive conflict management as **different ways of thinking**, experiences and attitudes come into contact with each other.¹

This guideline includes recommendations covering the entire personnel selection process:

- Requirement's profile
- Job advertisement
- Pre-selection
- Job interview
- Assessment and decision-making process

1 Requirements profile

The following **unconscious mechanisms** and underlying **prejudices** can limit diversity fairness in personnel selection and reduce the chance of finding well-suited applicants:

- Searching for people whose opinions, values, and views are similar to one's own² (e.g., the view that science is a profession and not just a job) and formulating requirements that are shaped by one's own or existing strengths
- Perceiving other people who do not share your opinions, values, and views as "types" rather than as individuals with skills, strengths, and weaknesses³ (e.g., not all people of German origin are punctual or well-organized)
- Stereotypical, unquestioned understanding of competencies⁴ (e.g., resilience or strong communication skills can be understood in very different ways)
- Stereotypical, unquestioned attribution of competencies to professions⁵ (e.g., not all education scientists are socially competent, and not all technicians are exclusively task-oriented)

We therefore suggest that you take the following **recommendations** into account when formulating job profiles in order to increase diversity fairness and formulate your job profile in such a way that you find as many suitable applicants as possible:

- Reflect on your **understanding** of the **skills** that are relevant to you and the corresponding requirements criteria: Define ...
 - ... resilience not as the ability and willingness to work long hours and at a fast pace, but rather as a social skill in dealing with conflicts
 - ... commitment not as high availability in terms of time, but rather, for example, as the ability to deal with multiple stresses or biographical challenges
 - ... communication skills not as a bundle of rhetorical abilities, but, for example, as the ability and willingness to refer to others in conversation and to listen to other people's contributions
 - ... leadership skills not as assertiveness, but rather, for example, as the ability to mediate or the ability and willingness to shape communication structures.
- Expand your requirements profile: Look for people who **complement or expand** the existing **skills** in your team.
- Formulate the requirements using the **multiple-eyes principle**, discuss your expectations with as many different people as possible. Therefore, make selection committees as heterogeneous as possible (based on several diversity criteria such as age, personnel category, origin).
- Assume that someone who has different socio-demographic characteristics or a different biographical background than you or your colleagues will also "fit into the team."

2 Job advertisement

If you take the following points into account in your **job advertisements**, you will increase the willingness of many people to apply and strengthen the **attractiveness** of the university as an employer⁶:

- Highlight the importance of diversity fairness and specific diversity initiatives at your university⁷.
- Emphasize elements of a **culture of cooperation** and the promotion of young talent at your university, and highlight the importance of employee satisfaction, work-life-balance / work-domain-balance, and flexible working hours.
- Use community-related (so-called communal) words such as "*committed, responsible, sociable, supportive, trusting, conscientious, collaborative, loyal, committed, interpersonal.*"
- Avoid references to competition, incentive systems, and workload, as these reduce the appeal for applicants.
- Also avoid wording that emphasizes the homogeneity of your team or university. Such wording reduces the likelihood of people who belong to a minority group applying.
- Describe a broader understanding of competence, i.e., in job advertisements for management positions, emphasize commitment and communication skills rather than assertiveness, and for young scientists, emphasize social skills rather than availability (see also the **guidelines to competency-based personnel selection**).

- Keep in mind that, especially for very talented young scientists, high job security and a good work-life-balance / work-domain-balance are important criteria for applying to a university⁹.
- Fortunately, it has now become standard practice to mention gender diversity (m/f/d) in job advertisements.
- Previous experience shows that very general job advertisements – open-rank and open-topic advertisements – tend to increase intransparency rather than diversity fairness.¹⁰
- Supplement English-language job advertisements with information about the Austrian academic system and living conditions at the location (e.g., finding accommodation, childcare).

3. Pre-selection

Avoid the following **distortion effects** that frequently occur during preselection:

- Information from personal networks is trusted more than that from application documents.¹¹
- In the case of applicants who are personally known, sympathy is valued higher than fulfilling the requirements profile.
- People who represent a minority in the applicant pool (e.g., due to disability, gender, origin) are considered less competent or judged more strictly.¹²
- People with foreign-sounding names are less likely to be invited to interviews.¹³
- Information about previous management positions leads to a more positive assessment of the person as a whole. For example, people with management experience are also attributed competencies that they do not actually have according to their CV ("hierarchy error").¹⁴
- When publications are assessed on their own, the evaluation of scientific achievements is distorted by the failure to take family-related breaks into account or the inclusion of self-citations.¹⁵
- Women are less likely to be invited to participate in review activities, have more difficulty accessing third-party funding, and receive fewer citations than sole authors or first and last authors. These differences are not correlated with their scientific achievements, but result from stereotypical role expectations and attributions.¹⁶
- Stereotypical attributions can also be found when comparing letters of recommendation. In these letters, men are described in greater detail and with more excellence-oriented words, regardless of their performance. Community-related descriptions, which are more likely to be attributed to women, correlate with a reduced likelihood of being hired.¹⁷

To avoid these biases, you can **keep the following in mind**¹⁸:

- Focus on the **job requirements**.
- The more diverse and competent the pre-selection committee is, the fairer the selection process will be.
- Express your subjective assessments and ask others for their opinions.
- Before the pre-selection process, remove **photos**, references to **gender**, and ideally names from the application documents. This will reduce the influence of prejudices based on appearance, age, gender, and origin.
- Define exactly which application documents, including attachments, you expect and in what form. Ask applicants to list their five most important publications and projects, for example.
- When evaluating letters of recommendation, publications, third-party funding acquired, and previous positions held, take into account the existing gender bias described above (i.e., do not evaluate previous leadership positions more positively, do not consider self-citations, review activities, third-party funding, authorship, and letters of recommendation as an objective reflection of scientific achievement, but also as a stereotypical role attribution).
- Avoid distortions in academic performance due to age and parenthood/care work or illness/disability by asking applicants to indicate their "academic age" themselves, taking into account childcare periods, illnesses, and part-time positions. Alternatively, these criteria can be positively considered in structured evaluation schemes.

4. Job interview

In job interviews and hearings, be aware of the following potential **cognitive biases** and **stereotypical expectations**¹⁹:

- Taller and more attractive people are often rated more favorably, as are people with easy-to-pronounce names and those who are perceived as being of normal weight.
- Younger applicants are more likely to be attributed characteristics such as flexible, motivated, and dynamic, while older people are more likely to be attributed characteristics such as calm, loyal, reliable, and prudent.
- Applicants from ethnic minority groups are assessed more closely during interviews.
- Applicants who come from an academic household are more than ten times more likely to obtain a doctorate or be appointed to a professorship.²⁰
- Applicants with disabilities are often attributed lower performance capabilities. This is also associated with the attribution of a need for protection or the expectation of particular bravery.²¹ Due to (unconscious) gender stereotypical attributions, women are more likely to be expected to have social skills than men, and men are more likely to be expected to have creative drive than women. Men without leadership experience are more likely to be trusted with a leadership position than women without leadership experience.²²

- Stereotypical attributions of competence to people working in science and stereotypical attributions of competence to men are similar ("*science-is-male-phenomenon*"). The same applies to attributions to leadership and men ("*think-manager-think-male-phenomenon*").²³
- Different national university systems promote different behaviors. For example, directness, letting others finish speaking, or interrupting are practiced differently internationally, but also within Europe, and say more about previously learned practices than about the corresponding competencies of individual persons.

To avoid these distortions, you can follow these **recommendations**²⁴:

- If you conduct highly **structured interviews**, implicit assessment criteria (such as appearance, age, etc.) are more easily eliminated.
- Consider how the appearance and attractiveness of applicants influence your (competence-) assessment.
- Reflect on your implicit expectations of certain social groups – such as those of American or African descent. Broaden your **role expectations** and assume that, in principle, any person could meet your requirements.²⁵
- When interviewing applicants of international origin, challenge stereotypical **cultural attributions** – e.g. not all people from Turkey are collectivist, and not all people of Chinese origin are oriented toward "social harmony."²⁶ At the same time, be careful not to show understanding for discriminatory behavior based on stereotypical cultural attributions ("That's just how it is in this culture").
- To avoid stereotypically expecting excellence (*science-is-male*) and leadership skills primarily from men, define your understanding of scientific achievement and leadership and look for people of any gender who meet these requirements.
- Consciously express atypical role expectations²⁷: Ask men about childcare, and older people about their visions and development goals.
- Pay attention to diversity- and gender-neutral language – even in case studies that you bring up. Also avoid stereotypical questions, such as only asking members of minority groups about experiences of exclusion or discrimination.
- Avoid stress interviews: Under stress, people lose their ability to think clearly and learn. Their answers do not provide insight into their general stress resistance and resilience. They only demonstrate their ability to handle similar situations.
- Be transparent about your expectations and requirements.

Legal protection against discrimination²⁸ prohibits questions on the following topics: religious beliefs, worldview, sexual orientation, marriage, marital status, children, desire to have children, partnership, pregnancy, health, criminal record, union-, party-, or club membership, debts, personal financial situation.

5. Assessment and decision-making process

The more structured the preliminary steps in the process are, the more successful and fair to diverse candidates the final personnel selection decision will be.²⁹ The same applies to how thoughtfully and consciously competencies, perceptions, and expectations are discussed and evaluated in relation to the requirements profile. You can also consider the following points in the decision-making process to ensure diversity fairness³⁰:

- "Objective" evaluation criteria, such as scoring, help to compare applications in a non-discriminatory manner. Present non-quantifiable requirements, such as personal and social skills, using comprehensible descriptions.
- Additional **joint reflection** on the formation of assessments/decisions/evaluation criteria in heterogeneous selection committees is even more effective than simply **structuring** the individual steps of the process.³¹
- Anti-bias training or related preparation or **support** for **selection committees** (by experts in equal treatment and diversity) is also effective.³²
- Avoid giving disproportionate weight to individual criteria. Sometimes a particular characteristic of a person stands out in a particularly positive or negative way ("halo effect").³³ Treat this impression as one piece of information among many. This also happens when, for example, a "perfect-fit-person" (due to the amount of third-party funding) is accepted and other important requirements (such as teamwork skills, leadership skills, etc.) are neglected.
- When drafting letters of justification and expert opinions for your personnel decisions, make sure to use comparable descriptions (both positive and negative) for the selected individuals, regardless of their gender, age, or origin, and avoid reproducing stereotypes (e.g., avoid justifying the selection of women based on their social skills or attributing excellence to men).
- Sympathy is a legitimate criterion in personnel decisions, but should not be the decisive criterion. At the same time, check to what extent a person actually meets the requirements profile. It can be advantageous to explicitly address emotional topics such as sympathy in order to make unspoken but existing influencing factors explicit.
- Structured interviews in combination with other selection methods can increase diversity fairness. If possible, combine job interviews with work samples, role-play, group discussions, or personality questionnaires ("mixed method approach").

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