

Interrogating 'excellence': Implicit bias in academic promotion decisions perpetuates gender inequality.

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*The ostensibly objective criteria outlined in many Key Performance Indicators of excellence can become highly subjective and gendered when applied in practice. **Pat O'Connor** and **Clare O'Hagan** share the findings of a cross-national project concerned with women's underrepresentation at senior levels in STEM disciplines. Structural aspects, including the bureaucratisation of the promotion process and the composition of the boards, were seen as inhibiting and implicit bias facilitated the perpetuation of gender inequality and undermined the assessments of 'excellence'. Making gender privilege visible is essential if universities are serious about addressing the under-representation of women.*



In explaining the under-representation of women in senior positions in higher education in general or in Science, Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) in particular, the focus is often on women as 'the problem'. However, in our [recent article](#), we focus on the criteria used in evaluating excellence in advancement processes and the way in which these are applied within promotion/hiring boards. The article is a provocative piece concerned with perceptions of excellence and their application in hiring and promotion processes. Drawing on a case study involving both documentary evidence and semi-structured, qualitative interviews with a total of 23 respondents (11 men; 12 women) we highlight the subjective nature of such evaluations and the gendered processes within these boards. Thus implicitly we challenge the idea that universities are meritocratic places, where excellence is assessed using objective key performance Indicators (KPIs) in gender neutral organisational processes.

The research was undertaken as part of a larger cross-national project concerned with women's underrepresentation at senior levels in STEM disciplines. In the case study, depending on the position, between 32 and 46 defined indicators of excellence (i.e. KPIs) were used to define excellence across the three areas of research, teaching and service. They include the number and quality of research publications in refereed journals of high national and international reputation and impact; the ability to attract funding from external peer reviewed research grant awarding agencies; high quality teaching and active, sustained service contributions to university, faculty or departmental committees. The respondents included a purposive sample involved in evaluative activities either as candidates or board members and respondents who emerged as candidates in such processes in a random sample study of career trajectories. Candidates in the academic hiring and promotion processes were asked 'What criteria were used to assess candidates'? ; Do you think these criteria signify academic excellence'? Are there other skills or qualities a candidate could possess which would signify academic excellence? Members of hiring and promotion boards were simply asked 'How do you define academic excellence'? All of those interviewed were academics. Within the larger study which involved 60 respondents in the case study university, research was undertaken on career trajectories, decision making and supervision practices as well as perceptions of excellence.

We found that although the criteria of excellence appeared clear, at first glance, respondents highlighted considerable complexities. Thus there was confusion about the point at which adequacy became excellence, and about the necessary balance within elements (for example, could high levels of research funding offset limited publications and vice-versa). Various structural aspects, including the bureaucratisation of the promotion process and the composition of the boards were seen as inhibiting an objective assessment of a candidate's excellence. In the case study university, hiring boards typically consist of five to seven people and promotion boards of 11 to 14 people. In both cases, the majority are typically male. The position of women on these boards is typically weak,

particularly in terms of voting, and their voices were seen as further marginalised by their gender.



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Respondents adverted to various gendered aspects of the power dynamics within the boards which, as they saw it, undermined the purportedly objective process. Thus for example, organisational actors introduced subjective elements (such as judgement or potential). Outcomes were also often seen as reflecting the power dynamics operating within boards. Thus for example, respondents recognised that there might be ‘an implicit gender bias’ because ‘guys tend to group together’. Others referred to the impact of gendered ‘horse trading’ within boards; to the tendency to appoint people like oneself and to the impact of micro-politics. Such practices facilitated the perpetuation of gender inequality and undermined the logic of objective KPI’s and potentially objective assessments of ‘excellence’.

These findings suggest that there are both structural and cultural factors which contribute to the gendered outcomes of advancement processes. At a structural level, ensuring gender balance on key committees which make advancement decisions is essential. At a cultural level, it is apparent that the ostensibly objective criteria outlined in the Key Performance Indicators of excellence, can become highly subjective and gendered when applied by organisational actors. Hence training decision makers in gender awareness and increasing the transparency of decisions is recommended.

Underlying the article is the recognition that gender privileging (like whiteness) is frequently invisible. In this context, making it visible is essential if organisations are serious about changing the under-representation of women in STEM positions in higher education. Making gender privileging visible involves making an assessment of the gender awareness of those who make evaluative judgements about who is/is not ‘excellent’ as well as an interrogating the criteria which ostensibly denote ‘excellence’.

The full article can be found here: O’Connor and O’Hagan (2015). [Excellence in university academic staff evaluation: a problematic reality?](#) *Studies in Higher Education*.

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