How do we encourage diversity in academic calls for contributors?

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A recent call for new LSE Review of Books contributors seemed to appeal mostly to groups already over-represented in academia, despite the intention of the call to reach reviewers of diverse gender and ethnic backgrounds. Once the call was updated to explicitly encourage a wider selection of candidates – without excluding any group – the gender and background of new candidates completely shifted. **Amy Mollett**, *Managing Editor of* **LSE Review of Books**, *discusses why semantics matters in academic calls and why we need more diversity in academic debate.*

On 5th June 2013 we published a call for new contributors, encouraging applications from anyone interested with a background in the social sciences to get in touch with us as we expand our coverage.

In the week following the call we heard from 20 potential reviewers, all equally enthusiastic and experienced. Leafing through the CVs from the first week, it was quickly apparent that the majority we received were from male applicants: **14 applications came from men and 6 came from women** . Also of note was the balance of applications from universities across the world: 16 applications came from candidates based in the UK, USA, or Western Europe (groups over-represented on this site), with 4 applications from candidates based in South America, Africa and the Middle East, and South Asia (groups under-represented here). Despite our commitment to a gender balanced review site and encouragement in the call for reviewers "based at any university in any country", it seemed that our call wasn't drawing interest from a more diverse selection of academics and students.

Some of our reviewers: meet them in our Reviewers' Hub
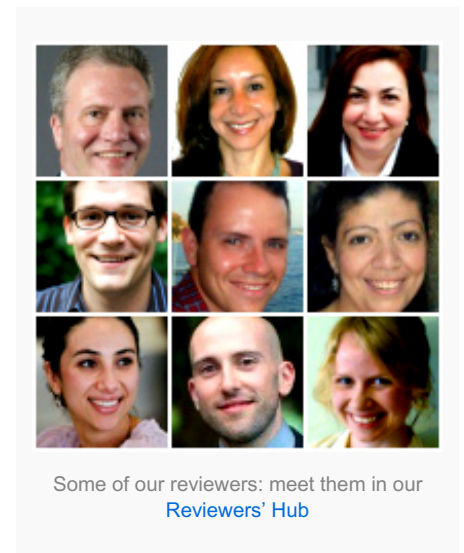
In an attempt to balance out both the gender and background of our new applicants, the call was updated on 12th June to include the following line:

> As part of our commitment to *a diverse representation of academic voices*, we're particularly interested in hearing from women and under represented minorities.

In the week that followed, we received another 20 applications. This time just **7 came from men and 13 from women**; a near reversal of the gender balance compared to the first week. Looking at the balance of applications from universities across the world, 14 of these new applications came from groups under-represented in academia, while 6 came from those already well-represented. By adding one line to our call – which aimed not to exclude some but to encourage all – the gender and background of candidates completely shifted.

Through 2012, 54% of our reviewers were male, and 46% were female. We hope the variety of voices in the content we publish signals to academics and all readers that we're committed to and interested in the opinions of female experts as much as male ones. With the results of our contributor experiment showing a near-perfect reversal of gender and background ratios from the second batch of applicants, several questions can be raised:

What was it about the original call that did not encourage applicants from under-represented areas to apply?
The original call did not make reference to any specific groups, but it also did not explicitly *encourage* any specific groups. A concrete statement on diversity certainly seems to be the trigger here; perhaps the call was more widely tweeted by those interested in gender parity the second time around, or the original call did not do enough to signal that under-represented voices are valued on the site?

How can we encourage under-represented groups to apply and simultaneously avoid discouraging other candidates?
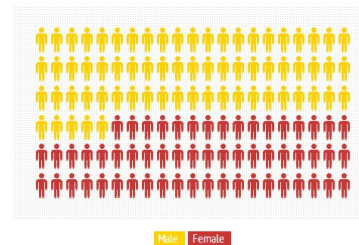Updating the call meant that we received an increased number of applications from women, but also a decreased number from men compared to the first week, and the same when we look at location. Ideally we want to appeal to both in even numbers, but the updated call perhaps semantically signalled to potential male contributors that this call was not for them. Yet the new call stated that we were "particularly interested" in hearing from under represented minorities, not that we were "only interested". Should the call have been updated to encourage applications from both "traditional and non-traditional" backgrounds, "over and under represented" groups, or "all genders and nationalities", etc.?

How can other blogs and sites seek to encourage a more balanced selection of contributors?
It would appear that editors must continue to be proactive in ensuring a range of voices in online academic debate. In an excellent *Slate* article this week, Berkeley professor Mary Ann Mason discusses how having children differently affects the careers of male and female academics (no prizes for guessing the results). Mason urges female academics to "become more assertive at faculty meetings, to negotiate starting salary", and not wait to be invited to higher levels as part of shaking up current structures, and this can be applied here too. So until all sites and journals organically achieve a diverse selection of contributors – which has a good chance of occurring only when much larger academic structures are challenged and also made more even – we should all continue to encourage diversity.

The call for reviewers is still open: find out more.

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Amy Mollett is Managing Editor of the **LSE Review of Books**. Amy graduated from the University of Sussex with a First in English Language, and completed a Masters degree in Social Policy and Gender at the LSE. She joined the PPG in September 2010 as Book Reviews Editor on the *British Politics and Policy at LSE Blog*, before moving on to manage the *LSE Impact of Social Science Blog,* until the launch of the *LSE Review of Books* in April 2012.

LSE Review of Books: contributors by gender

Male Female

The LSE Review of Books is an online-only, open access site publishing daily reviews of books from across the social sciences. Knowing that a wide gender gap still pervades in some academic disciplines, and so into academic material published in journals, books, and online, we've attempted to address this disparity by aiming for a near 50-50 gender ratio of reviewers. Through 2012, 54% of our reviewers were male, and 46% were female. We achieved this through web searches that included not only keywords but also 'she'; careful gender monitoring of weekly schedules; and encouraging female writers in male-dominated subjects and vice versa.

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