

Best Practices for Mitigating Cognitive Biases in Awards Adjudication

Whether they are conscious or unconscious, cognitive biases can adversely affect equity in awards adjudication discussions and decision-making. Therefore, it is critical for adjudication committees to build inclusive and equitable processes that prevent bias from affecting awards decisions.



Affinity
Bias

An inclination to prefer applicants or projects we feel are like own- background, race, gender, academic trajectory, history, interests, etc.-instead of making an earnest evaluation of their qualifications and suitability for an award.

Example: "We went to the same university for our post-docs." "This research is similar to my own," "Their last name sounds like we are from the same culture," "They taught the same first year classes as me."



Bandwagon
Effect

An inclination to assent to the the preferences of other influencers, rather than advocate for our own perspectives in an effort to reach genuine consensus.

Example: "Going with the flow." "Not my hill to die on." "Pick my battles." Complying with the majority or the people in the room or those who hold the most power or experience in the room, even if you personally have a counter-perspective.



Confirmation
Bias

An inclination to seek evidence that supports our pre-existing conclusion [about someone or a project] and dismiss information that does not, rather than come to a conclusion after considering the available evidence.

Example: "My gut says the University needs projects that do X, Y and Z, so I am ready to advocate for those types of proposals. I am less enthusiastic about proposals that take other approaches because they won't be as effective."



Recency
Effect

An inclination to view recently encountered applicants and projects more positively because we can more easily recall our experience with them. We tend to avoid considering a longer timeline of data because it takes mental effort to recall our past impressions. The more recently formed a positive impression of something is, the more fresh-and potent-it seems compared to the positive impressions we formed further in the past.

Example: "The first proposals I read were uninspiring, but as I kept reading, the latter ones became more interesting."



Halo
Effect

Similar to affinity bias (above), an inclination for our assessment of applicants and projects to skew more positive because of a seemingly adjacent but out-of-scope positive trait, instead of choosing to critically reflect on and filter out such information.

Example: "She has many publications, so I bet her proposal is well-written." "Hmm, this applicant's name is similar to my childhood friend's name." "He must be a good teacher because his research record is so strong."



Fundamental
Attribution
Error

A tendency to believe that flaws or weaknesses we perceive are inherent to the applicants or projects, rather than imagine more reasonable explanations in which situational or environmental factors are responsible.

Example: "I see this application was received after the deadline. Why give a teaching award to someone who sets such a terrible example for students?" [Maybe there was a family emergency]
"I saw a couple of spelling errors. Their glaring lack of attention to detail does not bode well for how they would spend the award funds." [Maybe English is not their first language]

Practices to Mitigate Cognitive Biases in Awards Adjudication Processes



Rubrics

- Create a common rubric and review it with all adjudicators
- Stick to it
- Minimize the impact of non-rubric factors and influences



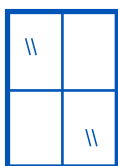
Personal Note-Taking*

- Take good and detailed notes
- Anticipate that you will forget impressions, observations and details, so be sure to note them
- Review your notes to recall your thoughts in the moment



Reminders

- Remind team members about cognitive biases throughout the process
- Remind team members to review their notes



Transparency

- As a committee- be transparent about the true purpose of the award(s) and who or what it is intended to recognize
- Be transparent about the purpose and goals of each step of the process



Reflection

- Reflect on the process and make adjustments
- Consider keeping a journal to capture the thoughts, priorities, challenges, and outcomes of each cycle



Guardrails

- Be transparent internally about the information being used by the committee to make decisions
- Shut down conversations about immaterial hearsay, rumors, and unsubstantiated information



Space

- Slow down and invite dissenting opinions. Make sure to continually ask, “does anyone have a counter-perspective?” “Is there anything missing?” “I have heard a lot from X, Y, and Z, but I wonder how Sara and Ahmed feel.”
- Create time and space to allow alternative perspectives to surface.

Conflict of Interest (COI)

According to the Office of University Counsel, “All UBC Persons are responsible for identifying, disclosing, and appropriately managing any Conflict of Interest in accordance with [this Policy](#) and conducting themselves at all times with the highest ethical standards, including considering any Conflict of Interest in a manner that will bear the closest scrutiny.” ([SC3, 3.1.1](#))

It is important to be aware that some individuals’ participation in awards adjudication processes may have COI implications that would need to be identified, disclosed, and managed appropriately.

For example—depending on specifics—an adjudicator supporting an applicant because it would benefit their own access to resources for their research could be viewed as a conflict between their personal benefit and their obligation to the University of assessing applications based on the criteria in the rubric.

*[The Office of the University Counsel’s privacy guidance](#) outlines recommendations regarding the content, use, and handling of notes created during certain kinds of adjudication processes, which may also be applicable.

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