Beyond appearances: Unveiling the hidden biases in hiring academics in Australian universities

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This paper presents preliminary findings from research investigating the influence of selection panel biases on recruiting academic positions in Australian higher education. Emphasising the need for cultural diversity and inclusivity among students, the study argues that these goals should also be reflected in the selection of academics within higher education institutions. Notably, this research addresses a significant gap, as no prior studies in Australia have explored how selection panel members' personal and organisational characteristics and belief systems shape university academic selection. Data for this study were collected through surveys and optional semi-structured interviews with university staff who have participated in academic interviews or served on academic selection panels. Descriptive and thematic analysis techniques were applied to both survey and interview data, with verbal data analysis used for the interview transcripts. While the research is ongoing, this paper reports preliminary findings based on 45 surveys only from the participants interviewed. This paper does not report the findings from participants who were in interview panels. This research does not report on semi-structured interview data collected as a part of this project. The results highlight intense feelings of discrimination due to the race, age, gender, and cultural background of the candidates in the academic recruitment process in Australian universities.

Keywords: academic recruitment, hiring biases, cultural biases, age discrimination, minority groups

Background

The importance of diversity in higher education has been widely emphasised. Numerous studies have focused on the significance of student diversity in higher education. Campbell (2000) argues that a culturally diverse teaching team is essential to effectively educate a culturally diverse society, emphasising the necessity of such diversity. Murray (2016) highlights explicitly the linguistic dimension of diversity, stating that increased student diversity requires higher education staff to adapt to their students' linguistic and cultural values in teaching rather than imposing their own. Therefore, intercultural competence should be a critical aspect of training and development for educators in higher education institutions.

Research indicates the absence of a coherent, university-wide strategy for addressing diversity, which may be attributed to disciplinary and organisational disconnections within large institutions like universities (Thomas, 2014). Diversity is discussed in various contexts, including students, teaching methods, policies, initiatives, interventions, and indigenous culture. Some studies argue that inclusion in diversity is not a matter of chance but choice (Armstrong et al., 2011). Considering the arguments of Campbell (2000) and a comprehensive review of inclusion literature, it can be argued that having diversity among academic staff is crucial for universities and serves as a foundation for cultural diversity and inclusivity among students.

In recent years, universities have undergone workforce restructuring due to the COVID-19 pandemic, making many academic positions redundant. Consequently, academic positions that are advertised have received overwhelming numbers of applications. Studies suggest that decision-makers personal and organisational characteristics can influence the screening of immigrant professionals during the recruitment and selection process (Fernando et al., 2016). Hiscox et al. (2017) conducted a study assessing whether women and minorities face discrimination in the early stages of the recruitment process for senior positions in the Australian Public Service while testing the impact of implementing a "blind" or de-identified approach to candidate evaluation. The results indicated biases related to gender and immigration status (Hiscox, 2016). Various studies suggest that individuals often employ questionable arguments to justify implicit biases regarding gender and race (Norton et al., 2004).

In a ground-breaking study in 2004, racial discrimination in the United States job market was measured by sending fictitious resumes with African American- or white-sounding names to help-wanted ads in newspapers. Resumes with white names received 50% more callbacks for interviews. Similar studies have been conducted in Europe and Australia (Booth et al., 2012). Correspondence studies focusing on gender also indicate pronounced bias against women, particularly in high-status or male-dominated jobs. Public service recruitment often faces scrutiny regarding gender discrimination (Towell, 2016).

Considering the research on the necessity of diversity in universities and the potential biases that may exist in the academic selection process, this study aims to examine the influence of candidates' cultural, racial, and gender identity, as well as the composition of selection panels, on the academic recruitment process in universities.

Why do we need to learn about biases in the recruitment process?

Biases have been extensively studied and are described in Webster's dictionary as "prejudice in favour of or against one thing, person, or group compared with another, usually considered unfair". Scholars in social psychology have conceptualised biases as either implicit or explicit. Explicit bias is consciously prejudiced beliefs or attitudes towards a person or group. These attitudes are consciously acknowledged and can be intentionally documented. On the other hand, implicit biases are prejudices, beliefs, or attitudes that operate outside of conscious awareness, making them challenging to recognise and control (Birkelund et al., 2022). Implicit biases can undermine explicit intentions or openly held beliefs (Hiscox et al., 2017).

Numerous studies have explored the impact of biases on individuals' self-perception, mainly focusing on women and people of colour (Clance & Imes, 1978; Cokley et al., 2017). Research on racial and cultural stereotyping suggests that such stereotypes increase the sense of threat within a group, leading to underperformance as the stereotyped group may struggle to identify with the mainstream (Miyake et al., 2010; Spencer et al., 1999; Steele & Aronson, 1995). This phenomenon holds for academic staff and students (Murray, 2016). The existing literature highlighted in the background indicates that candidates' cultural and racial identities influence recruitment. (Lippens et al., 2023)

A recent study by Lippens et al. (2023) addressed hiring discrimination. This meta-analysis synthesised extensive correspondence experiments on hiring discrimination published between 2005 and 2020. The findings revealed that discrimination against candidates with disabilities, older candidates, and less physically attractive candidates was equally severe as the unequal treatment of candidates with salient racial or ethnic characteristics (Lippens et al., 2023). In the political context, research has shown a significant absence of obese candidates in primary and general elections. Overweight women, but not overweight men, were also underrepresented. Despite an extensive literature review, a research gap was identified in how racial, cultural, and gender biases of interviewees or selection panel members impact the selection process in higher education institutions, particularly Australian universities.

For candidates, multiple rejections without substantial reasons can be incredibly frustrating. This study aims to help prospective academics understand 'recruiters' preferences and drive changes in the academic recruitment process within higher education institutions, demonstrating a genuine commitment to cultural diversity and inclusivity among academic staff and students.

Methodology

An open invitation was sent through the newsletters of professional bodies, conferences, and university contacts in Australia (Ethics Approval No HE23-044). Anyone interviewed for academic appointments and those who served on such selection panels could participate in this research. The mixed method approach was taken to collect the data. The anonymous data was collected through a survey. The survey invited the respondents to make them available for an optional semi-structured interview. The survey data was analysed primarily through descriptive statistics. All qualitative comments from survey and interview data were analysed thematically using verbal data analysis (Chi, 1997). The preliminary findings from 45 survey responses are presented in this paper. This is a work in progress, and only the data from the participants who appeared for academic interviews in Australian universities is presented here. The data from participants who were part of the interview panel and the interview are not presented here.

Results and discussion

The results discussed here involve 45 participants, of whom 41 appeared for the academic interview at least once in their careers. Some facts about the respondents are described in the table below:

Table 1: Characteristics of sample

Women	27
Participants aged 41-60	29
Non-visible disability	9
Migrant/refugee background	22
Ethnic minority	15
People who did not identify as religious	29

The participants who appeared for interviews and were not selected were 38. Of those 38 participants, 28 fulfilled all essential and desirable criteria, and 8 fulfilled all essential and most preferred criteria. On their unsuccessful application, 81% of candidates asked for feedback via phone, email, zoom call or face-to-face. One participant did not seek feedback and said, "*No point. What you are told has little to do with the real reasons for selection."*

Of the participants who sought feedback (N=26), 19 were unsatisfied with the feedback they received and felt discriminated against. They provided the reasons for the discrimination.

Reasons for discrimination

Participants provided various reasons for feeling discriminated against during the academic recruitment process. One prevalent concern was the lack of detailed and satisfactory feedback provided to them. Participants felt uncertain about the reasons behind their non-selection without clear explanations of their strengths and weaknesses. Some participants also expressed frustration when comparing their qualifications and achievements to those of the chosen candidate. For instance, one participant mentioned:

"Because the other person who applied has a lower h index than me and no successful grants. However, she has been with the university a long time (more than ten years)."

This raised suspicions of biased decision-making. Another aspect that participants believed influenced their selection was their perceived lack of fit or physical attributes, such as race or age (Hiscox et al., 2017). Participants also mentioned instances where they felt they did not meet the panel's communication style or expression expectations. One respondent revealed that he/she consulted a recruitment expert who revealed that personal details such as name, photo, age, and birth country could potentially play a role in the success of shortlisting or final selection (Birkelund et al., 2022; Steele & Aronson, 1995). The presence of younger, less qualified candidates being chosen over more experienced ones also led to feelings of discrimination. Some participants perceived that the selection process in academia was influenced by factors beyond merit, including nepotism and preferential treatment based on personal connections. "Academia is a mate's club. Selection is not on merit unless the panel knows nothing about the candidates. It is an amazingly nepotistic system", a participant wrote.

Others noted a lack of transparency in panel preferences, making it difficult to pinpoint specific reasons for their exclusion. In some cases, participants opted not to apply for positions altogether when they were aware of the gender or status of other candidates, highlighting a self-discrimination process based on the perceived biases of the panel members. Instances of being questioned about personal background rather than professional qualifications further contributed to participants' feelings of discrimination. A participant mentioned, "I remembered being interviewed for an academic position and being asked about where I was coming from". Selecting a less experienced candidate with no publications over a more qualified applicant added to the perception of unfairness.

Overall, these comments shed light on the multifaceted nature of biases that participants believed influenced their experience of discrimination in academic recruitment, ranging from inadequate feedback to concerns of ageism, personal attributes, and favouritism.

How the interview processes could be organised to minimise discrimination?

Participants in the research provided valuable insights into their perspectives on how the interview processes could be organised to minimise discrimination in academic recruitment. The participants put forth several suggestions. One recommendation emphasised the importance of having selection panels with members from diverse cultural backgrounds and abilities to ensure unbiased evaluation of candidates. *"I think the selection panels should also have the members from different cultural diversities and abilities to review the candidate in an unbiased manner,"* a participant said. Another participant highlighted the need for a merit-based approach considering factors such as h-index, successful HDR graduation, and grants. Transparency and constructive feedback were also mentioned as essential elements to minimise discrimination. Some participants proposed practical measures like removing names and photos from the application materials to reduce potential biases.

There were calls for panel training and including a mix of individuals on the panel to ensure diverse perspectives and prevent discrimination. However, some participants expressed scepticism about the effectiveness of these measures, citing the morally corrupt nature of academia or the challenges associated with changing deeply ingrained biases. Despite recognising the potential benefits of diversifying panels, a participant acknowledged that institutionalisation could diminish the awareness of the panel members' own past experiences and perpetuate discrimination. The participants' comments suggest that a combination of diverse panels, transparent equity processes, transparency, constructive feedback, and panel training could contribute to minimising discrimination in the interview processes of academic recruitment.

Conclusion

As mentioned, this paper reported preliminary findings from only a part of the data, and the research is still in progress. What was found with the data analysis, the author believes, is an early stage to conclude. To conclude, further data analysis and a combination of qualitative and quantitative data would be needed.

Even though the interview data is not analysed and included here, the author could hear loud and clear messages from the evidence presented in the interviews by the participants and through the survey. Even though it was not asked, many participants provided information on the discriminatory treatment they received in the recruitment and their day-to-day work in the universities. Many participants also suggested expanding this research to all university staff in recruitment and their regular life in higher education. Much needs to be done in this area, and this research may be the first small step.

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