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We must dismantle the invisible career barriers in HE

Despite surface appearances, universities' recruitment and selection practices even now present a hidden barrier to underrepresented groups in accessing academic posts.

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On the surface, universities' recruitment and selection practices appear to be highly equitable and transparent – but dig under the surface and there are hidden barriers to certain groups who continue to be underrepresented in academic roles.

Certain groups are acknowledged to be underrepresented amongst university academic staff, based on intersecting identities of gender identity, ethnicity, disability, and socio-economic background. This is despite universities' public commitments to equality and representation.

Higher Education Institutions have taken steps to address a lack of diversity through formal policies and processes to enable fairer outcomes from recruitment and selection processes. There have been widely publicised attempts to introduce training in unconscious bias to help selection panels overcome the biases inherent in us all. Many universities have implemented structured interviews and diverse panels to try and instil a reliable and inclusive process. Gone are the days of overt forms of illegal discrimination; universities strive to attract applications from diverse groups through inclusive language, case studies, and improved recruitment channels.

Why then do many universities report the continued underrepresentation of certain groups? Are we just going through the motions of transparent recruitment and structured selection processes? The data would suggest so. The following points lift the lid on the hidden barriers faced by underrepresented groups in our recruitment and selection practices. The onus is on us as organisations to adapt, not individuals. By talking about the hidden barriers, we can help bring them down.

- **Research metrics**: A scan of job descriptions and adverts reveals that the selection criteria used for academic roles are largely based on measurable research outputs such as publications, H index, impact factor, and income. This reliance on research metrics contradicts the reality of the broader role of the academic, who today is expected to be much more than a researcher. Lecturers are expected to be not only productive

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researchers, but also educationalists, managers, and strong administrators, as well as collaborative corporate citizens. Yet these broader contributions are not valued by selection panels, meaning some academics are overlooked in the selection process. This includes if an academic has a lower H index or fewer publications, or had an a-typical career trajectory due to caring responsibilities or a previous career in industry. It also excludes those who have taken on additional managerial or administrative roles. Our preoccupation with research outputs is undermining universities' attempts to become more diverse, but commitments such as DORA (https://sfdora.org/) are starting to help us question the reliance on research metrics.

- **Networks and cronyism:** The importance of networks cannot be underestimated in academia – access to jobs, conferences, peer review processes, letters of reference and even editorships or co-authoring opportunities depends very much on networks. This has a double whammy effect - those who cannot access such networks will be excluded from generating the research metrics outlined above, and subsequently excluded during the selection process. This accepted form of cronyism is adversely impacting the outcome of recruitment and selection processes.
- **Academic inbreeding**: Academics in the UK are often employed in the same institution that awarded their PhD. Meaning the effects of networks and exclusion described above can start right at the point of entry into the HE system if people do not have the 'right' institution listed on their CV.
- **Academic CV:** The academic CV is unique compared to other sectors. The extent to which information is available to selection panels about academic candidates (including their networks, co-authors and research metrics) is unparalleled. Yet, this accumulated data could be exacerbating bias and the flawed decision-making in selection processes described.

The existence of extensive, formal policy and a reliance on measurable research metrics could be giving a false sense of security to universities. By raising awareness of these hidden barriers, universities can start to overcome them and address the persistent and pernicious underrepresentation of certain groups.

It is incumbent upon universities to adjust our practices to be more inclusive. Optimistically speaking, I think the tide is slowly turning, and universities are trying to adapt. In the meantime, candidates can use these top three tips to navigate their way through these barriers:

1. **Network, Network, Network** – as mentioned, academia is built on the back of networks and so anything you can do to access these networks will help you. Many

universities offer networking opportunities and coaching in the art of networking as part of their development plans to support up and coming career academics. Speak to your HR or Learning and Development teams to see if your institution offers these opportunities,. Similarly, employee-led networks can help open doors too and connect you with different people.

2. **Mentoring** – it has been said many times before, but a mentor can help with career progression – they can help you with interview coaching, spotting opportunities, or giving you the courage to take the plunge with a job applications, with the added bonus of opening up more networks. Many institutions have formal mentoring programmes, or speak to your line manager or head of department. Reverse mentoring has also become popular– whereby less experienced academics mentor more experienced, more senior staff.
3. **Take part in selection panels**- if you can help, even as an observer in a shortlisting or interview process, you can learn so much about the protocols, questions and criteria. Your participation could also help spread the word about inclusive recruitment and selection practices to those who may not be aware of the hidden barriers described above, and you will help challenge the status quo. Universities have been encouraging more diversity on selection panels – so register your interest. Sign up to interview and selection training - even if you are not a hiring manager right now, the insight you gain can be invaluable in your own job search.