ETH

Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zürich
Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich

Tenure Committee

Tenure Committee Recommendations

Guidelines on How to Avoid Implicit Biases in the Assessment of Tenure-Track Assistant Professors and in Tenure Recommendations

All forms of bias are detrimental to the judgement of tenure candidates and represent a threat for the development of academic institutions. The recommendations of the ETH Tenure Committee (TC) should therefore be free of implicit biases such as gender biases, culture-related biases and minority-related biases in general. It is thus essential that the TC has procedures in place that help detect implicit biases that may be hidden in judgements of, or letters on, candidates. The TC should have strategies at hand to detect these biases, deal with these biases, and prevent additional biases. These guidelines, consisting of five procedural steps, should help the TC members to be aware of and combat potential implicit biases.

1) Define the assessment criteria in a clear and transparent way

The TC regularly discusses and determines the key criteria for candidates' assessments. These criteria are brought to the attention of all TC members at the start of every new assessment. Potential new criteria, if they come up, are discussed in the committee. The President of ETH is informed about these criteria, which are also regularly communicated to all Department Heads.

2) Take into account personal circumstances

Taking into account personal circumstances of candidates and weighting them appropriately may reduce the effectiveness of stereotypes. This task requires all TC members to study the candidates' dossiers carefully and with sufficient time. Given candidates' privacy concerns, no other information than the information contained in the dossiers should be taken into account. Yet, candidates should be encouraged by their Departments to include specific personal circumstances in their dossiers. Circumstances to be considered and discussed in the TC are, for instance:

- academic age,
- duties in the Department or at ETH,
- family engagement.

3) Focus on content and not on numbers

Developing recommendations free of implicit biases requires that the TC focuses more on research content than on the number of publications, the impact factors of journals, and citation-based indices. The TC members are committed to the fair assessment of the candidates' work, in particular of the five most important achievements of the candidates and the research plan, as provided in their dossiers. The TC gives special attention to the following aspects:

- the content itself,
- the relevance and importance of the research,
- methodological aspects.

4) Identify and discuss biases in referees' letters

Referees' letters may contain phrases that explicitly or – more often – implicitly discriminate against women or minorities. All TC members should be aware of such phrases and hence be able to identify and discuss them at the TC meetings. Examples of phrases potentially indicating a gender bias could be, depending on the situation:

- She is a good communicator.
- His publications are stellar.
- Her teaching is very good.
- His research is groundbreaking.
- She is a hard-working person.
- He is a brilliant researcher.

Further examples can be found in the material listed at the end of this document.

5) Alert new TC members to the implicit bias topic

New TC members inform themselves carefully about potential implicit biases in the assessment of tenure dossiers prior to their activity in the TC. The following videos provide useful information:

- University of Heidelberg: https://www.uni-heidelberg.de/gleichstellungsbeauftragte/career/onlinetutorial_genderbias.html

- Université de Lausanne: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TQG7zySAyaE

- Canada: http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/lms/e/bias/ (includes Harvard's Implicit Association Test)

- Royal Society: https://royalsociety.org/topics-policy/publications/2015/unconscious-bias.

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