

Barriers – what the data suggests

Implicit Bias

“Most people – even those who explicitly and sincerely avow egalitarian views – hold ‘implicit biases’ against such groups as blacks, women, gay people, and so on, based on unconscious stereotypes of these groups. Even members of the ‘targeted’ group are susceptible”

This means that all of us are at risk of underestimating the ability of our female students (as well as those of other ‘non-mainstream’ groups).

Stereotype threat

“Victims of stereotype threat [...] are unconsciously preoccupied by fears of confirming the stereotypes about their group [...] they show elevated heart rate and blood pressure [and so underperform on relevant tasks]. But when the threat is removed, performance from the stigmatised group improves dramatically – often to the point of equality.”

“Stereotype threat is likely to be provoked where one is from a group that is negatively stigmatised in a certain context, one is in that context, and one’s group membership is made salient [...] being one of only a few women in a roomful of men is sufficient to make one’s group membership salient”

This means that our female (and other non-mainstream) students are at risk of underperforming for entirely non-academic reasons. Even worse, the problem is more pronounced amongst those who are committed to doing well.

Sexual Harrassment

“Harassment occurs when you engage in unwanted behaviour ... which has the purpose or effect of violating a persons dignity, or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment which interferes with an individual’s learning, working or social environment.”

(<http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/equality-diversity/2.2636/harassment-bullying>)

Sexual harassment is a species of this.

Harassment (including sexual harassment) is illegal under the Equality Act 2010.

Recommendations

Encourage participation

- Look out for non-verbal cues
- Note patterns of interruption
- Intervene in communication patterns that shut people out
- Pay extra attention to women, and call on them specifically (most people are more likely to notice men attempting to contribute than women).

Language

- Avoid the generic 'he'
- In examples reverse stereotypes about jobs etc.
- Use inclusive terminology
- Refer to female contributors by name so that others notice their contributions too
- Make a point of referring to female authors by full name/gender-based pronouns
- Think about how you refer to female staff

Non-verbal communication:

- Eye-contact
- Posture
- Classroom set up
- Tone

Techniques

- Splitting students into smaller groups - be mindful of gender balance.
- Teach your students how to have a fruitful and respectful discussion early on. Refer back to this if problems arise.
- Make sure students have equal opportunities to participate/get advice:
 - Allowing time to respond
 - 'Coaching'
 - Varying types of questions
 - Essay plans/feedback

Other things to pay attention to:

- Feminine/masculine styles of a student's comment might affect perceptions
- Try not to think about gender when marking
- Have similar expectations of your female students as you do of your male students
- Encourage all promising students to consider postgraduate study (in the areas in which they show promise/interest)