Western

Enhancing Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, Accessibility, and Decolonization in Graduate Admissions

CAGS
November 2022

Ruth Martin, PhD
Alexandra Levine, PhD

Linda Miller, PhD
Lorraine Davies, PhD

Western University

**To download the slides for this presentation, go to:
grad.uwo.ca/edi-d.html**

Our journey to date:

- Reflecting on our current admission practices and processes
  - Reflection Guide
  - Common Unconscious Biases Guide
- Sharing reflections, identifying biases & barriers
  - Retreats
    - Biases and barriers identified
    - Characteristics of students who thrive
- Taking action
  - Voluntary, self-report questions
  - New reference template
  - …continuing the reflection, discussion, revision…

Our partners:

- Vice-Provost / Associate Vice-President Indigenous Initiatives – Dr. Christy Bressette
- Associate Vice-President Equity, Diversity & Inclusion – Dr. Opiyo Oloya
- Faculty Associate Deans Graduate:

Dr. Nandi Bhatia	Dr. Kevin Mooney
Dr. Immaculate Namukasa	Dr. Kamran Siddiqui
Dr. Laura Murray	Dr. Pam McKenzie
Dr. Andrew Botterell	Dr. Hubert Pun
Dr. Tom Drysdale	Dr. Jisu Jin
Dr. Liz Webb	Dr. Jamie Baxter

- Graduate Program Chairs
- Campus Partners, Stakeholders, EDIAD Experts

The Western Context

- The review of our current admission practices and processes was embedded in the context of Western's strategic plan:

Towards Western at 150

"Of all the aspirations voiced by the Western community through this planning process, the expectation of a more inclusive Western stood out, and progress toward this goal will be foundational to our success in reaching the other goals articulated in the plan."

The Story behind our Reflection Guide

- The importance of consultation and what we learned

- The **reflection guide** for programs that we created

- The importance of an unconscious bias framework

- Our **guide to common unconscious biases**

Reflection questions addressed:

- Triaging and prioritization of applicants

- Processes at the program level – admissions committee: (eg, membership, responsibilities, authority)

- **Importance afforded to and potential biases** related to aspects of applicants' academic record (eg, grades, previous institutions, leaves/interuptions, time to completion)

- **Importance afforded to and potential biases** related to information (eg, citizenship, awards, language proficiency, statement of interest, references)

- Role of potential supervisor in selection of applicants and weighting of supervisor input

- Additional information that would be beneficial to admission decisions (eg, characteristics of applicants)

- Strengths of current processes

- Areas for improvement

Guide to Common Unconscious Biases

- Adapted "Boyden's Guide for Application Reviews"
- Instructed those involved in the admissions process to consider the potential for:
  - **Performance Bias -** Am I evaluating demonstrated achievements and potential based on stereotypes?
  - **Confirmation Bias -** Am I looking for evidence or information that confirms preconceived ideas or expectations based on stereotypes?
  - **Performance Attribution Bias -** When considering an applicant's past achievements, am I attributing their achievements to their personal skills, academic abilities, and/or talent, or am I attributing them to luck and/or external supporting factors?
  - **Competency/Likability Trade Off -** Am I overlooking an applicant's competencies and potential by focusing on their likability based on stereotypical expectations?
  - **In-Group Bias -** Am I giving preference to some applicants because I relate personally to some aspect(s) of their identity, background, previous education, or interests?
  - **Projection Bias -** Am I drawn to certain applicants because they appear to share my interests, values, or ways of thinking?
  - **Normative Bias ('groupthink') -** When evaluating applicants, do I tend to conform to the thoughts of others on the committee? Do I tend to be swayed by what the majority think, or by what someone in a position of authority thinks?

Sharing reflections, identifying biases & barriers

- Faculty Associate Deans led their programs in the reflection exercise and compiled the feedback

- We held two retreats:

  - The first retreat included only the Associate Deans and SGPS to provide a safe space for frank and honest sharing of feedback, focusing on **biases and barriers**.

  - The second retreat broadened participation to include key campus partners and some graduate program chairs, focusing on identifying the **characteristics of students who thrive** and **how our application process can better highlight these characteristics** while striving to avoid biases.

Biases and Barriers

- ## <u>Biases</u> identified through reflection include:
  - **Performance Bias** related to interpretation of applicants' achievements
  - **Reputational Bias** related to prestige and reputation of previous institutions and referees
  - **Opportunity Bias** related to applicants' ability to engage in various experiences
  - **Comparison Bias** related to comparing applicants to stereotypes or ourselves
  - **Supervisor Bias** related to expectations of potential supervisors
  - **Interviewer Bias** related to expectations of interviewers
  - **Reduction/Efficiency Bias** related to "filters" used to screen applicants to enhance efficiency and speed of application review
  - **Projection/In-Group Bias** related to perceptions of how well applicants align with our interests and share our views

- **<u>Biases</u>** - continued:
    - **Quantification Bias** related to over-reliance on quantitative data and rubrics
    - **Reputational Bias** related to prestige and reputation of previous institutions and referees
    - **Attribute/Characteristic Bias** related to our expectations of "typical" students (eg., age)
        - **Intersectional Bias** related to how applicants' characteristics intersect with "normative" expectations
    - **Competitive Bias** related to our perceptions of how "competitive" applicants will be for awards, scholarships, and reputation-enhancing recognition
    - **Recruitment Bias** related to applicants' perceptions of their "fit" with our programs and various factors, such as affordability of our programs

- **<u>Barriers</u>**:
  - The way we calculate admission averages
  - Conversion of grades from international institutions
  - The international tuition differential for our master's programs
  - The value of our funding packages, especially for master's students
  - The cost of tuition in many of our professional programs
  - The cost of admission applications
  - The lack of graduate student housing on campus
  - Linking supervisor funding with admission decisions
  - Requirement (in some programs) for applicants to secure a commitment from a potential supervisor prior to admission
  - Silos within the university that make interdisciplinary study challenging
  - The lack of "pathways" to support non-traditional learners
  - Changing requirements related to securing study permits and post-graduation work permit eligibility

Characteristics of Students Who Thrive

- Several characteristics, most of which are difficult to extract in our current admission application or processes, were identified:
  - Work Ethic
  - Social Capital and Context
  - Integrity
  - Resilience
  - Prior Knowledge and Skills
  - Willingness/Openness and Ability to Learn
  - Communication and Writing Skills (in the language of study)
  - "Thriving Traits" – curiosity, critical thinking, multi-tasking ability, internally motivated, compassionate, respectful, team player, humility, willing to be mentored, good interpersonal skills, flexible and able to shift thinking, self-aware, able to maintain healthy work/life balance, community engaged

Taking action

- Based on the recommendations coming out of the two retreats, we have moved forward on two key priorities:

  - **Voluntary, self-report questions** have been added to the graduate admission application to help us better understand our applicants.

  - A **new reference letter template** was created to solicit information about the characteristics of students who thrive.

Voluntary Self-Report Questions

- Explanation of why we are asking for this personal information – Western's commitment to Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, Accessibility & Decolonization

- Assurance of confidentiality of personal data

- Questions addressing:
  - Gender Identity
  - Sexual Orientation
  - Identification as Indigenous (First Nations, Métis or Inuk)
  - Ethnic Identification
  - Ethno-Racial Identification
  - Disability or Impairment
  - First Generation

New Reference Letter Template

- Instructions to referees to minimize unconscious bias

- No rating scale comparing applicant to others

- *"Thinking about your interactions with and knowledge of the applicant, how would you describe the applicant in terms of each of the following. Where possible, please provide an example."*

  - Work Ethic
  - Resilience and Ability to Overcome Challenges
  - Oral Communication
  - Curiosity
  - Ability to Contribute as Part of a Team
  - Community Engagement

  - Integrity
  - Willingness / Openness to Learning
  - Written Communication
  - Critical Thinking
  - Adaptability / Flexibility
  - Humility

More To Be Done

- Work with various partners to identify, develop, and disseminate EDIAD training resources for members of graduate admissions committees

- Keep the conversation going…
  - Gather ongoing feedback
  - Consider adding a personal statement to the admission application
  - In the Spring, review the impact of what we've changed

- Keep revising and modifying based on feedback and learning from our shared experiences

Western 🛡 Graduate&PostdoctoralStudies

Western

UNIVERSITY · CANADA