REFLECTIONS ON INCLUSIVE RECRUITMENT PRACTICES

By Anya Lawrence

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During the 2021 Virtual Goldschmidt Conference, Pieter Bots (University of Strathclyde, Scotland) and Bettie Higgs (University of Cork, Ireland) convened Session 14e ‘Diversity and Inclusion in the Geosciences’, where talks were followed by a special panel discussion. This panel discussed a set of observations and questions intended to give focused attention to areas in which advancing equity could have significant positive outcomes for diversity and a wider sense of belonging in geochemistry. In contributing to this panel, researcher Anya Lawrence (University of Birmingham, UK) gave a response, which the audience and conveners found so striking that they immediately sought to facilitate this being published, as realised here.

Statement and Question: Recruitment is often said to be based on merit and interview performance. However, it has been shown/argued that these are inherently biased in favour of people that ‘fit in’ instead of ‘stand out’ (e.g., biases exist in student evaluations for teaching staff in higher education), and minorities ‘are less likely to be viewed as future leaders, in part because they may be perceived to not have traditional qualities we associate with leadership (e.g., decisiveness, competitiveness)’. How should we change recruitment to be more inclusive?

This statement is actually quite personal for me because I am a real-life example of someone who has an intersectional identity and belongs to several minority groups, who was actively discriminated against by standard recruitment practices when I was an undergraduate applying to do a PhD. Here, I write about my personal experiences and then follow this up with some suggestions for how recruitment can be more inclusive.

The reason I was able to speak at the recent Goldschmidt conference, as someone who is autistic and really struggles with social communication, was primarily because it was virtual. I could take part from a safe space where I wasn’t having to worry about giving eye contact, understanding body language, being overwhelmed by lots of sensory stimuli like noises, smells, and movement, all of which face-to-face conferences involve. I also had the chance to prepare for the conference for several months in advance, and the organizers were so helpful in giving me a detailed schedule and idea of what to expect. Finally, I had my mum and dad, who are my carers, really close by, watching the session that I was presenting in and being there just in case I needed their help.

Yet when I applied to a well-known UK doctoral training partnership, I was denied this much-needed support. I was given no idea of what to expect on the day of the interview. When I arrived at the interview with one of my carers, we were made to sit in an open departmental common room where there were lots of unknown staff members and students walking in and out, often staring at us whilst they did so, plus loud conversations going on, tea and coffee being made, food being carried in and out, and so on.

We had to wait like this for over 20 minutes before someone came to tell us that the interviews always ran late. When I did actually get called for interview, I had to go in alone, as my carer wasn’t allowed to be present. I had to stutter my way through long verbal responses to questions that were written in ambiguous language that I struggled to understand. All of this was done to apparently make sure that recruitment was ‘fair for all the other candidates’. Yet interviews requiring intense social communication aren’t fair for autistic people, like myself, who find most social situations extremely anxiety provoking and frightening. They aren’t fair for those of us who are completely non-verbal or have learning difficulties. In fact, they aren’t fair for most people who belong to minorities, as any visible marker of difference—like skin colour, a mobility aid, or cross-dressing—can shape the expectations and behaviour of the interviewers.

In terms of merit-based recruitment, I know with hindsight that I was written off before I had even applied. You see, as a disabled person who finds just leaving the house daunting and requires a huge amount of support from my carers to help me manage my daily life, I had completed all of my undergraduate studies through distance learning with the Open University. By studying from home, which offered safety and calm, I hadn’t been able to generate the impressive CV, boasting international conference presentations, summers spent doing unpaid internships, and public outreach that the recruiters favoured. Even though I was doing well academically, really enthusiastic about my studies, and eager to be the first person in my family to do a PhD, none of this mattered against the biased selection criteria.

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Needless to say, I wasn’t recruited by the doctoral training partnership. I have had to struggle along, doing my doctoral project with a minimal fee waiver and no salary, whilst those who were more confident than me at interviews, more affluent than me in their lifestyle, and more able than me were awarded a salary, expenses, full fee payment, and a package of training and professional development opportunities for their own research projects.

But I’m still here. I feel so lucky to have been given the opportunity to share my experiences at conferences like Goldschmidt so that no minority person applying to do a geoscience PhD, postdoctoral fellowship, lectureship, or any other academic position should have to go through what I went through.

I think that, firstly, interview panels and merit-based recruitment criteria shouldn’t be the only way that candidates are assessed for academic positions. If you look at leading multinational software corporations like Microsoft and SAP, they use a variety of methods to evaluate potential applicants, including initial online assessments and technical skills assessments, and the interview process itself typically lasts between one to three weeks. At the beginning of this process, all candidates are offered in-person or virtual meet-and-greets, and during the interview period, candidates take part in soft-skills exercises themed on team-building, communication, and work simulations. In this way, global corporations are able to get to know the applicants personally and see if they are suited for the role. This approach also maximizes the corporations’ ability to uncover the hidden talents of candidates that were unlikely to have shined through had highly stressful, one-off interviews been their sole recruitment procedure.

Secondly, where panel interviews are required, I think it’s really important that the panels comprise people with different backgrounds and as diverse a mix of seniority as possible, with postdoctoral fellows as well as professors present. Diverse interview panels can make the whole interview process a lot less stressful for applicants who represent minorities, as it is just so inspiring to be able to look across that table and see someone who looks like you who has made it in academia. Diverse interview panels also help reduce unconscious bias in hiring, and showcase to the applicants that a geoscience department or research group is serious about diversity and inclusion.

Finally, what I think is key to remember for recruitment is that equality is not equity. Many of the recruitment methods currently used in academia claim to be concerned with creating equality. Equality means ensuring that everyone has the same opportunities and receives exactly the same treatment and support. However, by this premise, those who require more support beyond this initial level to succeed do not have equal opportunities as those who do not. Equity is about giving people what they need, in order to make things fair. It means giving people from marginalised groups support and treatment that is proportionate to their own circumstances in order to ensure that everyone has the same opportunities, such as providing more support to a disadvantaged student so they can reach their full potential. Therefore, to create true equality of opportunity, equity is needed to ensure that everyone has the same chance of getting there.

Any Lawrence is a researcher at the University of Birmingham (UK) with interests ranging from rock magnetics, geochemistry, and structural geology to transformative emancipatory research, understanding the intersection of different types of identification, and accessibility advocacy. As an intersectional individual, Anya is determined to help improve EDI (equality, diversity and inclusion) in geography, earth and environmental sciences, and wider academia.