

Gender and cultural bias exists against teachers at university level

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Students are more likely to rate male university teachers higher than their female counterparts in some areas of STEM and Business,

according to Australia's largest review of student experience surveys.

The study, published today in *PLOS ONE*, examined almost 525,000 individual [student](#) experience surveys from UNSW Sydney students from 2010-2016 across five faculties. It is the first study to examine the interaction between gender and cultural [bias](#).

"These results have enormous flow-on effects for society, beyond education, as over 40% of the Australian population now go to university, and graduates may carry these biases with them into the workforce," said Associate Professor Yanan Fan, lead author on the study and statistician from UNSW Science.

The study showed that in Business and Science, a male [teacher](#) from an English-speaking background was more than twice as likely to get a higher score on a student evaluation than a female teacher from a non-English speaking background. In Engineering, there wasn't a significant swing against [female teachers](#), except male English-speaking teachers were 1.4 times more likely to get a higher score than teachers in all other categories. For Medicine, local students were more likely to give lower scores to female teachers from non-English speaking backgrounds.

"In the Business and Science faculties in particular, male English-speaking teachers have the highest probability of getting the highest possible grade at six, out of six possible scores," Associate Professor Fan said.

In Arts and Social Sciences, there was no statistically significant bias against female teachers. The results suggest that where there is a larger proportion of female teachers, such as in Arts and Social Sciences, there is less bias. Bias was observed, however, against male non-English speaking background teachers when evaluated by local students.

"The results show universities must be models of equity and diversity in order to breakdown inequalities that persist in even the most progressive of workplaces," said Professor Merlin Crossley, UNSW Deputy Vice-Chancellor Academic.

"We regard student experience surveys as essential, but we have to know how to interpret the results in order understand unconscious bias and how we can bring about change. UNSW is driving a strategy that embraces diversity and we believe these biases will diminish over time. Diversity is a great strength of UNSW and we must keep celebrating it," said Professor Crossley.

Professor Crossley pointed to unconscious bias training, one of the key initiatives of UNSW's Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Board, as a program that tackles often hidden beliefs and attitudes about gender and culture.

In 2017, UNSW appointed Professor Eileen Baldry as UNSW's first Deputy Vice-Chancellor Inclusion and Diversity. One of the key objectives of the role, and of UNSW's 2025 Strategy, is achieving gender equity targets at all staff grades.

Associate Professor Fan said there was growing evidence to suggest that all aspects of employment, from hiring to performance evaluation to promotion, are affected by gender and cultural background.

"Reducing bias will have great benefits for society as university students represent a large proportion of future leaders in government and industry," said Associate Professor Fan.

Dean of Science at UNSW and co-author of the study, Professor Emma Johnston, says encouraging more women at the professorial level, in leadership positions and in membership of key committees will help

shrink these biases.

"We need to continue to support women at all levels of academia in STEM across Australia, in order to smash stereotypes that create the partiality that exists within our community."

"We have clear targets for more gender diversity, particularly at the top. The Science Equity, Diversity and Inclusion working group is crucial for improving the number of women at all levels and helping to remove unconscious bias in performance evaluation," said Professor Johnston.

Last year, UNSW appointed five new Diversity Champions who will act as advocates, lead diversity working groups and identify ways UNSW can achieve its goal to be a global leader in equity, [diversity](#) and inclusion. The new Diversity Champions will serve a two-year term from 2019-2020.

Provided by University of New South Wales

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