Is there unconscious bias in the recruitment process for academics in Biology?

Background:

Prof Jane Hill, as Faculty Athena Swan Champion, suggested that we consider unconscious bias in the recruitment process for academics.

It was agreed that Prof Calvin Dytham, as Deputy Head of Department and Chair of the Biology Equality and Diversity Committee, should observe the process for the recruitment of Biomedical Science lectureship, Department of Biology, June-Sept 2016.

Process:

There were 163 applications for three lectureships. 102 were from male applicants, 61 from female (37%).

All members of the shortlisting panel were professors in Biology, two male (inc HoD) and two female (inc panel chair).

All panel members had access to all applications before the shortlisting meeting and submitted their rankings to the panel chair.

The shortlisting meeting lasted around four hours and was observed by CD.

Using the rankings made before the meeting there were 28 candidates discussed in detail at the shortlisting meeting: 19 males, 9 female (32%).

The independence of individual candidates was raised 9 times – 7 times for male candidates, 2 for female (22%).

Four of the candidates were reported to have directly contacted panel members, including 2 of the final appointees, and all were male.

Mean time spent discussing male candidates was 5min:58sec, or 6:16 if the candidate who was only discussed for 54 seconds is ignored. Mean time spent discussing female candidates was 6:59. This difference is not significant (Mann-Whitney U test).

At the start of the meeting there was some concern about order that candidates were looked at to favour beginning of alphabet - could disadvantage X / Z etc. Although candidate gender wasn’t mentioned at this stage, three of the first ten candidates considered were female and five of the last ten.

During the meeting there was no clear instances unconscious bias against the candidates, but on two occasions there was an assumption that the PI of the group
where the candidate worked was male when that PI was known by one of the panel to be female.

There was frustration from the panel about the eRecruiter system, which might have affected candidates looked at towards the end of the scrutiny process, but this didn’t lead to any gender bias.

Towards the end of the meeting the size of the short list was discussed, but initially not the gender mix, until one panel member asked. Then the chair reported three female and 7 male on the shortlist at that point. It was queried by a panel member how this was ‘corrected’, but the panel decided it wanted to shortlist on merit and avoid bias and continued without discussing gender mix further.

At the end of the meeting there was a ‘long list’ comprised of five female, seven male, but the two reserves were both F - so 3F 7M is the final list invited for interview.

There was some evidence of ‘sponsorship’ and asking for individual advice about particular people.

The interviews were not observed and the eventual outcome was 2 male appointments, 1 female appointment.

Recommendations for BioEDGE to carry forward...

1. There should be recording and analysis of the number of F/M candidates, how many are discussed, shortlisted, interviewed etc.
2. Panel chairs should be reminded to consider the gender mix of candidates at all stages of the process.
3. All panel members should be reminded:
   a. Of the potential for unconscious bias from themselves, other panel members and from people providing references for candidates.
   b. That even if not directed against any of the candidates, that judgments should not be made based on gender or any other protected characteristic.