

GUIDELINES FOR EQUITABLE DECISION-MAKING IN ASSESSING ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

1. OUR COMMITMENT TO EQUITABLE DECISION-MAKING

Monash is committed to fair and transparent processes, ensuring that principles of equal opportunity are applied, and that, where applicable, career achievements are evaluated relative to the opportunities available to academic staff. In line with Monash's broader commitment to social justice and inclusion, we value the contributions of our talented and increasingly diverse workforce. We recognise that our academic staff experience a range of personal, professional, and other circumstances that shape their career trajectories and achievements.

Our commitment to equitable decision-making is grounded in the Assessment Relative to Opportunity (ARtO) framework, which goes beyond equal opportunity by actively mitigating unconscious bias and fostering understanding of systemic, structural, and cultural barriers to equity. Equitable decision-making does not involve preferential treatment, quota-based outcomes, or the lowering of academic standards; rather, it ensures that excellence is identified and recognised accurately by accounting for differences in access to opportunity.

As part of this commitment, the staff development module, Assessing Achievement Relative to Opportunity, is required to be completed by all academic leaders, supervisors, and staff on committees and panels that make employment-related decisions for academic staff, including appointments, probation reviews, promotions, the Outside Study Program (OSP), internal grant opportunities and relevant associated appeals,

2. PURPOSE OF THESE GUIDELINES

The Guidelines support fair and equitable decision-making by providing a structured framework for assessing achievements in context. They are designed to ensure that decisions are evidence-based, consistent, inclusive, free from discrimination, and mindful of unconscious bias. At the heart of this approach is the Assessment Relative to Opportunity (ARtO) framework, which helps decision-makers evaluate an academic staff member's achievement relative to the opportunities they have had.

The principles of equitable decision-making and the Assessment Relative to Opportunity (ARtO) framework are broadly applicable across all employment stages, including recruitment, performance development, probationary confirmation, the Outside Study Program (OSP), and in the review of any grants or awards where an individual's achievements are assessed. For information specific to academic promotion, refer to: [Guidelines for Equitable Decision-Making in Assessing Academic Achievement: Academic Promotion](#).

By highlighting relevant circumstances and promoting an intersectional approach, the Guidelines help decision-makers recognise how personal, professional, and systemic factors can shape career opportunities, academic success and career progression.

Additionally, the guidelines serve an educative function, supporting decision-makers to develop shared language, confidence, and capability in making equitable, evidence-based judgements across diverse academic pathways.

3. ASSESSING ACHIEVEMENTS RELATIVE TO OPPORTUNITY

About Achievement Relative to Opportunity

Achievement(s) Relative to Opportunity (ARtO) is a framework that supports a fair and equitable assessment of career progression and achievements over a period of time, given the opportunities available to academic staff. This approach focuses on the quality and impact of achievements rather than their quantity, rate or breadth, taking into account personal, professional, and other relevant circumstances.

More specifically, this provides for the appropriate evaluation of achievements in relation to:

- the quantum or rate of productivity,
- the opportunity to participate in certain types of activities, and
- the consistency of activities or output over the period of consideration.

ARtO is a positive acknowledgement of what an academic staff member can and has achieved, given the opportunities available to them. It is not a “special consideration” or lowering of standards. Instead, it ensures that assessments are calibrated to individual circumstances and challenges the assumption that all academic staff should be measured against a single normative career trajectory.

About Relevant Circumstances

At Monash, staff members are invited to state their career-impacting personal, professional, or other circumstances. These circumstances help decision-makers assess achievements in context.

Key points about circumstances:

- Circumstances are often interconnected, and their impact should be considered holistically, where possible.
- Some circumstances are time-bound (e.g., a period of illness, parental leave or relocation) while others are ongoing, such as a chronic disease
- Some circumstances arise from entrenched systemic, structural, or cultural barriers that sit beyond the control of the staff member and cannot be resolved through individual effort alone.
- Certain circumstances may have a cumulative impact over many years — such as caring responsibilities, disability, part-time work, or geopolitical restrictions — and this can also include experiences of discrimination, bias, and microaggressions. Together, these factors can limit or prevent participation in work-related activities and can compound over time, influencing access to career development opportunities, mobility, and research engagement.

Examples of circumstances:

- parental leave, carer responsibilities, major illness/injury, disability, experiences of gender-based violence, personal trauma, and gender-related biases in research success (such as citation disparities);
- periods of part-time work, late or non-linear entry into academia, varied workload allocation;
- country relocation, relocation of a research laboratory or clinical practice setting;
- geopolitical circumstances, legal or international policy factors, such as conflicts, war, visa restrictions, sanctions, or regional instability that prevent staff from participating in conferences, collaborations, fieldwork, or other work-related activities;
- natural disasters such as flooding, bushfires, storms, earthquakes, or other emergency situations caused by natural phenomena;
- identification with marginalised or minoritised communities where systemic, structural, or cultural barriers may impact opportunities;
- global health issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic;
- cultural expectations, such as obligations from an individual's cultural context, that can influence work participation and access to career opportunities.

In recognising an individual's achievements, decision-makers are asked to carefully consider the cumulative impact of these career-impacting circumstances over time. Relevant circumstances may also shape the nature, visibility, or form of academic contributions (e.g. leadership, service, teaching innovation, community-engaged scholarship), not only their volume or rate. Decision-makers should be attentive to diverse expressions of academic impact.

Staff and Applicants must be assured that sharing relevant career-impacting circumstances is voluntary and that the information will:

- be used only for the intended purposes;
- form the basis of a contextual and holistic assessment of achievements; and
- be kept confidential.

4. RESPONSIBILITY FOR ASSESSING ACHIEVEMENT RELATIVE TO OPPORTUNITY IN DECISION-MAKING

The [academic performance framework](#) articulates high-level expectations for academic endeavour, adopting a consistent approach across the three key areas of academic activity – research, education and engagement.

Decision makers are asked to assess staff against the evidence provided in support of each criterion or practice elements within each of the relevant categories (research, education and engagement), whilst considering achievements relative to opportunities available.

Assessing ARtO may not come easily at first. Expectations of academic output are typically “metric-driven”, and maintaining a balance between the integrity of performance metrics and the quality of the achievement within the context of a candidate’s personal circumstances and individual working arrangements will require a shift in how decision-makers assess performance.

Decision-makers are asked to actively promote equitable treatment by evaluating each applicant based on their achievements, skills and contributions within the full context of their career, working arrangements, and relevant circumstances. Assessing ARtO does not lower expectations; rather, it ensures that staff are assessed fairly in context. In doing so, decision-makers should consider:

- the quality and impact of achievements, rather than the quantity, rate, or breadth;
- the stage of the staff member’s career and their career trajectory;
- access to opportunities;
- the impact of circumstances over the period of assessment, including personal, professional, cultural, systemic, or geopolitical factors; and
- ongoing effects on productivity and achievement, beyond the period directly impacted by the outlined circumstances;
- avoiding reliance on implicit or normative career trajectories (e.g., uninterrupted, full-time, mobile, continuously productive careers) as a default benchmark for excellence.

Assessments should be contextual, evidence-based and inclusive, accounting for factors that may have affected opportunities and avoiding assumptions based on uninterrupted full-time academic career trajectories. This includes recognising that staff from marginalised, minoritised or historically underrepresented groups may face compounding systemic, cultural or exclusionary barriers that may limit or restrict access to opportunities. Additionally, decision-makers should recognise that some staff may use restrained self-description of achievements due to cultural norms, previous workplace experiences or personal communication style, and this should not negatively impact the assessment of their stated achievements.

Core principles for decision-makers:

- a) Assessing achievements in context
 - Assessing each applicant’s available ARtO requires considering their career stage, trajectory, working arrangements, career history, and relevant circumstances.
 - Focus on evidence of performance, impact, and potential, assessed in the context of each individual’s career, working arrangements, and relevant circumstances.
- b) Focus on quality and impact
 - Prioritise the quality and significance of achievements over quantity or rate of output.
 - Consider the applicant’s capacity to perform at the level to which they are aspiring, as well as their potential for ongoing contribution to their academic unit and beyond as relevant.
 - Recognise that traditional markers of assertiveness or self-promotion may not fully reflect a staff member’s contributions; modesty should not be interpreted as a lack of achievement and impact.
- c) Recognise systemic and structural barriers
 - Be mindful of cultural, structural, and experiential factors that may influence how achievements are pursued, presented, or recognised.
 - Recognise that standard requirements or practices may unintentionally disadvantage certain groups whose opportunities have been reduced due to systemic barriers or biases and assessors should instead adapt assessment approaches to ensure equitable outcomes.
 - Apply an intersectional lens to understand how overlapping aspects of identity may compound disadvantage, while avoiding inference or speculation about protected attributes and using any relevant information only to contextualise opportunities.

d) Maintain fairness and transparency

- Assess staff applications individually rather than comparatively against other applications. Instead, consider diversity of career pathways and unique circumstances.
- Reflect on personal biases as an assessor, before and during assessments, and consider tools such as Harvard University's Implicit Bias tests to support self-awareness.
- Foster a fair and transparent process, actively recognising achievements that may be understated due to cultural norms, modesty, or other contextual factors.

5. FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE EQUITABLE DECISION-MAKING

Decision-makers are asked to actively consider how systemic, cultural and experiential factors may influence career opportunities, achievement recognition, and the presentation of achievements. This includes understanding the potential impact of unconscious bias, exclusionary practices, and cultural norms that shape self-promotion and visibility. Awareness of these factors helps ensure assessments are fair, contextualised, and aligned with the principles of ARtO.

Understanding unconscious bias

Unconscious or 'hidden' bias refers to patterns of perceptions that are shaped by one's personal experiences, values and culture. Unconscious bias is natural, and everyone has it. This is because the human brain is 'wired' to speed up information processing and decision-making through the utilisation of mental short-cuts born out of automatic associations, not dissimilar to stereotyping.

The result of this process is the development of assumptions about people and situations, which are not always accurate.

In workplace contexts, unconscious bias affects decision-making processes and can have a detrimental effect on equitable outcomes if left unchecked.

Common forms of bias that can affect academic assessment include:

- **Affinity bias** - The tendency to warm to people or prefer people who are like oneself.
- **Halo effect** - The tendency to overemphasise positive impressions based on one characteristic and/or see only the good in a person because of a personal affinity.
- **Perception bias** - The tendency to form stereotypes and assumptions about certain groups that can interfere with an objective assessment of individuals in those groups.
- **Confirmation bias** - The tendency to seek information that confirms pre-existing beliefs or assumptions.
- **Gender and other identity biases** - Making assumptions about ability, leadership or potential based on gender, ethnicity or other identity characteristics.

Unconscious bias of decision-makers in assessment processes can unintentionally disadvantage staff from marginalised, minoritised, or historically underrepresented groups.

Mitigation of bias is complex. The detrimental effects of unconscious bias can be partly reduced through raising awareness (especially self-awareness), seeking diverse composition/membership of committee (decision-making) panels, and equipping staff with competencies of inclusive leadership.

Actionable guidance for decision-makers:

- **Raise awareness and reflect** - Acknowledge that everyone has unconscious bias and actively reflect on how it might influence your assessment of applicants. Note assumptions before reviewing materials and check whether decisions are influenced by perceptions of confidence, assertiveness, or career trajectory.
- **Promote diverse decision-making** - Ensure decision-making panels include staff with varied backgrounds and experiences and encourage dissenting views to reduce bias in deliberations.
- **Adopt inclusive practices** - Use structured, transparent, evidence-based processes for assessment. Undertake relevant training to strengthen awareness and mitigation of bias.

6. RECOGNISING SYSTEMIC, STRUCTURAL AND CULTURAL BARRIERS

Systemic, structural, and cultural barriers are known to impinge on equitable access to career progression and opportunities. Such barriers include:

- Historical underrepresentation or exclusion from key opportunities.
- Workload allocation or employment arrangements that limit participation.
- Geopolitical, legal, health or environmental factors restricting access to professional activities or funding.

- Cultural norms or practices that influence self-promotion, communication of achievements and visibility within the institution.
- Staff communicate, demonstrate or present achievements differently. Cultural norms, personal disposition or prior professional experiences can influence whether staff self-promote or present their impact assertively.

Decision-makers should also recognise that the same nominal circumstances may affect individuals differently. For example, one staff member may have been able to travel for a conference soon after returning from parental leave, while another may have been unable to do so due to caregiving responsibilities, personal health, or cultural factors. The danger lies in applying one's own limited view of how these circumstances may, or may not, pose barriers, rather than valuing the context shared by the applicant. Assumptions based on personal experience should not be applied universally.

7. USEFUL REFERENCES

Access the [equitable decision-making website](#) for additional information.

- [Guidelines for Equitable Decision-Making in Assessing Academic Achievement: Academic Promotion](#)
- [Unconscious bias](#)
- [Importance of diversity on decision-making panels](#)
- [Inclusive Meeting Guidelines](#)
- [Indigenous Employment Policy](#)
- [Indigenous Employment Procedure](#)

8. EXAMPLES

The best way to illustrate how the ARTO framework is applied is through examples.

Example - OSP A staff member with significant caring responsibilities for an elderly parent develops an exciting research proposal as the basis for an Outside Study Programme (OSP) application with the work to be undertaken in Melbourne. The OSP Committee agrees that the application is strong and that the staff member's research and the work of their department would be significantly enhanced without the need to travel overseas. Example - probation A staff member returns to work after 12 months of parental leave. Their research activity stops during this leave, but upon their return to work, the staff member is actively supported to re-establish research projects through such things as teaching relief, mentoring and the funding of a postdoctoral fellow. This means that within 12 months of returning to work, the staff member is able to regain their research momentum. In their confirmation of probation review a couple of years later, the committee considers both the 12-month career interruption (parental leave period) as well as the first 12 months post-parental leave associated with restarting their research and loss of momentum.	Example - health/travel and performance review A staff member with a chronic health condition is limited in capacity to attend and present at international conferences. This staff member lists a small but appropriate number of publications in good quality journals and has a high citation rate. In their annual performance review, the supervisor determines that the staff member has demonstrated the appropriate quality and impact of performance in the overall criterion of "research" and the staff member is not penalised for having a relatively lower output of conference presentations. Example - caregiving responsibilities A member of staff works part-time because of caregiving responsibilities for a teenager with a mental illness. In their annual performance development review and planning discussion, the staff member and supervisor negotiate ways in which they can continue to be involved in a number of committees, teach on a pro-rata basis and develop a research profile consistent with their academic level and part-time status. It is acknowledged that the quantity of work produced will be less than a full-time staff member and not penalised for the reduced breadth of activities.	Example - HDR supervision A staff member who took a period of parental leave during the assessment period was able to include additional information in their relevant circumstances to clarify the HDR supervision roles listed in their performance reports. During parental leave, the staff member could not be appointed as primary supervisor. Other example types -Suspension of international funding or research schemes by foreign governments, affecting project continuity and resources -Travel bans or visa restrictions affecting certain nationalities or dual citizens, constraining participation in conferences, research visits, international collaboration, and fieldwork -Geopolitical conflict or war in an individual's country of origin, which may have significant psychological and emotional impacts, particularly where travel restrictions or safety concerns prevent individuals from visiting or supporting affected family members.
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9. GLOSSARY/DEFINITIONS

Intersectionality	Different aspects that intersect to define or influence a person's identity such as gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, economic status, national origin, disability, and other aspects of one's identity. The intersectionality of identity means that individuals can be exposed to multiple and overlapping forms of discrimination and marginalisation, and that attitudes, systems, and structures in society and organisations can interact to create and/or deepen inequality and result in their exclusion.
Unconscious Bias	Unconscious or 'hidden' bias refers to patterns of perceptions that are shaped by one's personal experiences, values and culture. Unconscious bias is natural, and everyone has it. This is because the human brain is 'wired' to speed up information processing and decision-making through the utilisation of mental short-cuts born out of automatic associations, not dissimilar to stereotyping. The result of this process is the development of assumptions about people and situations, which are not always accurate. Unconscious bias can be about race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, age and parental status, just to name a few.
Systemic barriers	Systemic barriers are obstacles built into the way an organisation, service, or society is structured. These barriers make it harder for certain people or groups to access opportunities, resources, or fair outcomes — not because of individual behaviour, but because of how the system itself operates.
Structural barriers	Structural barriers are obstacles that come from the way systems, organisations, or environments are physically or organisationally set up. These barriers limit people's access, participation, or opportunities — not because of personal ability or effort, but because the structure itself creates disadvantage.
Cultural barriers	Cultural barriers are obstacles that arise from differences in beliefs, values, norms, communication styles, or behaviours between groups. These barriers can make it difficult for people to understand each other, collaborate, or fully participate in a workplace, service, or community. They are not caused by individuals intentionally excluding others — rather, they stem from cultural expectations built into how people interact or how systems operate.
Opportunity	Opportunity refers to access to time, resources, networks, mobility, visibility, and institutional support that enable academic work to be undertaken and recognised.

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