

Guidance on creating a job description and person specification

The following guidance has been created to support the creation of job descriptions and person specifications. It provides an overview of our recommendations, good practice and our legal obligations.

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[Writing a job description and person specification](#)

Before writing a job description from scratch, managers should visit the online [job description library](#) to review a selection of University standard graded job descriptions in each of the job families. These examples are provided as guidance and are expected to be amended to reflect the specific duties and responsibilities relevant to the role and department within which it sits.

[Amending an existing job description and person specification](#)

Minor amendments to existing job descriptions (that have been previously evaluated at Panel) can be made without requiring the job description to be re-evaluated. This also includes changes made to the template [job descriptions](#). Such changes can include changes to specific duties and responsibilities, or the time required to deliver those duties and responsibilities may have changed over time, so long as the level of responsibility and accountability of the post holder has not changed.

As long as the cumulative changes do not represent a change of more than 20 per cent, the amended job description may not require re-evaluation.

Managers should seek current post-holders' input into new or updated job descriptions to ensure a holistic view of the role. However, the final content of a job description must be signed off by line management, who retain ultimate responsibility and accountability for the content.

Please contact your [HR Business Partner](#) in the first instance to discuss new or existing job descriptions and especially if seeking to amend a job description. They will be able to advise whether or not it is necessary for a job description to be evaluated by a panel.

[What should be included?](#)

It is essential to clarify the role's key duties and responsibilities (the role descriptor and key accountabilities), and the key characteristics of the person who could most effectively perform it (the person specification).

The combination of role descriptor, key accountabilities and person specification must;

- accurately and concisely describe the role (consider an appropriate job title)
- clearly define the line management relationships (which post(s) it is responsible to and for (direct line management or supervision)
- be clearly articulated and the job evaluated and graded before the recruitment process begins;

- be written to promote equality and reduce inequality;
- uphold University policies and principles on the promotion of equality; and
- create an inclusive working environment where diversity is valued.

Competencies are the knowledge, skills, abilities, personal characteristics and other “worker-based” factors that help differentiate superior performance from average performance under specified circumstances. Competencies are identified to clearly define the essential functions of the job.

There are three types of competencies that can be included in a job description. They describe the skills, knowledge and behaviours necessary to perform the job.

- Skills – Abilities needed to execute job duties, such as software and computer proficiency, interpersonal skills, accounting skills, or specific laboratory techniques.
- Knowledge – Areas of specialty or expertise; for example, nursing, finance, employment law, or history.
- Behaviours – Characteristics an employee must display in the job; This may include reference to [Our Southampton Behaviours](#) (for example, working together, developing others, personal leadership), and other examples include initiative, collegiality, resourcefulness or professionalism.

Knowledge, Skills, and Behaviours needed to succeed in a job can fit into two basic categories of competencies: “general/organisational” or “specific/individual.” A good job description includes both kinds and will usually be expressed in the Person Specification in support of the relevant Key Accountabilities.

Competency category	Examples
General/Organisational – These competencies need to be demonstrated by everyone in a particular organisation.	- Quality/Compliance: Ability to achieve a specified standard of excellence with our work processes and outcomes, honouring University policies and all regulatory requirements.
	- Customer focus: Proven experience of delivering high customer satisfaction, going out of our way to make it as easy as possible on the customer rather than our department or the University.
	Communication: Evidence of balancing listening and talking, speaking and writing clearly and accurately, influencing others, keeping others informed.
	Collegiality: Able to evidence being helpful, respectful, approachable and team oriented, building strong working relationships and a positive work environment.
	Initiative: Proven ability to take ownership of our work, doing what is needed without being asked, following through.
	Efficiency: Demonstrable ability of planning ahead, managing time well, being on time, being cost conscious, thinking of better ways to do things.
	Coachability: Able to demonstrate being

	receptive to feedback, willing to learn, embracing continuous improvement.
	People management (for those with direct reports): Significant experience of setting clear expectations, reviewing progress, providing feedback and guidance, holding people accountable.
Specific/Individual – These competencies need to be demonstrated by people doing particular jobs.	computer applications and deadline-sensitive
	strategic planning and results orientation

A job description also contains the following specific items:

- Work related activities, duties and responsibilities, as well as accountabilities
- Reporting relationships within the organisation, (post(s) responsible to and for, as well as details of internal and external relationships)
- Education, licenses, certification, or other essential qualifications for the job,
- Special skills required to perform the job, and
- Work experience needed for effective performance.

Completing the University job description template:

The University's Job Description template consists of six main sections;

- Job information
- Job purpose
- Key Accountabilities
- Person Specification
- Job Hazards
- Organisational Structure chart/Organogram

It is important to adopt an objective, job-based approach to the process. Prepare the job description to define clearly the key duties and responsibilities of the job (in the key accountabilities) and the type of person (in the person specification) who could most effectively perform it. The following sections will assist you with writing a job description.

Key Accountabilities of the role

Review any criteria and conditions attached to the job to check that they are genuinely relevant and necessary for the performance of the job, rather than based on personal opinions or preferences (or the current job holder).

Take care to avoid any criteria and conditions that could have a disproportionate adverse impact on people with a particular protected characteristic (see Avoiding Discrimination below).

It is generally easiest to start by itemizing the key accountabilities that the job is expected to perform, answering the question of 'what do I want this job to do?' with concise, factual statements.

Each key accountability should start with an action verb that is specific in nature. For example, a statement such as 'assisting with marketing materials and brochures' is too vague to be of value. Rather, a statement such as 'editing copies submitted by faculty and staff for marketing pamphlets and newsletters, utilizing desktop publishing software to format copy, selecting and adding appropriate graphics' tells a much clearer

story of what assistance is expected of the job. It also identifies necessary skills and qualifications to be itemized later.

In addition, it is important to identify the end results that will be achieved through the completion of the accountability or responsibility. For example, a description such as 'editing copies submitted by faculty and staff for marketing pamphlets and newsletters . . . in order to assure accuracy and appropriateness of materials' provides information as to the accountability performed as well as the end results achieved.

If the job has supervisory or lead worker responsibilities, the extent of the job's authority to hire, discipline, and recommend termination of the employment of subordinates, and to assign work, train and evaluate the performance of those subordinates must be included.

Consider the job's scope after the key accountabilities have been written. These questions help to describe the degree of responsibility the job has in important areas such as management/supervision, finance and budget, and student and faculty interaction. If the job has responsibilities in any of these areas, it is important to revisit the key accountabilities section to ensure that specific details about the scope areas are provided.

Job Purpose

At this point the job purpose can be written. This summary must not be a reiteration of the accountabilities, responsibilities, and qualifications for the job. It is, rather, a concise summary telling the reader why the job exists. In fact, the easy way to write it is often to simply answer the question 'why does this job exist?' To illustrate: "This job performs editorial, layout, and graphic design work on a wide range of brochures, newsletters, posters, and other marketing materials which are targeted to student and alumni audiences" summarizes the primary purpose of the job without going into specific duties, tasks and qualifications.

Finally, while it has often already been decided where this job fits in the organisation, it is a good time to review if that decision is correct now that the job has been described. It is also a good time to look again at the jobs reporting to this job to see if that relationship still makes sense.

Job Descriptor/Information

At this point the job descriptor/information section of the job description can be completed. A proposed Job Title can be entered and will be reviewed for best fit by the Job Evaluation Panel. Existing generic titles should be used whenever possible to assure consistency of job grading, other comparisons throughout the University and for external wage survey purposes. If a generic title is used, a school or department may use a more specific title internally if desired.

The following table sets out section by section guidance when completing the job description template:

Section – Job Information

Section	Purpose
Post title	Insert the official job title as it should appear in contractual documentation. This should be short and broadly descriptive of the role (e.g. Administrative Assistant, or Administrative Assistant – Project Alpha etc.)
School/Department	Insert the appropriate School/Department name
Faculty	Insert the appropriate Faculty/Service name
Job Family	ERE/MSA/TAE/CAO [delete as appropriate]

Career Pathway (ERE only)	Education/Research/Balanced/Enterprise [delete as appropriate]
Posts responsible to	Specify which role this post will directly report to for line management purposes.
Posts responsible for	Specify the number and type of roles that this post directly line manages or indirectly line manages, i.e. supervisory relationships.
Post base	Specify the primary location of work. Secondary work bases should be referenced in the special requirements section below.

Section – Job Purpose

Job Purpose	<p>A short statement (of just a few sentences) that summarises why the post exists. A few key sentences setting out the main purpose, accountabilities and responsibilities of the role. Is an accurate description of the job done, neither under- or over- stating the inherent requirements of the job. For example:</p> <p>A secretarial role’s purpose might be defined as;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To provide day-to-day clerical and/or administrative support for the team. <p>A Laboratory Manager role’s purpose might be defined as;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To deliver student teaching and supervision in scientific research with responsibility for ensuring Health and Safety compliance in the laboratory. <p>A Lecturer role’s purpose might be defined as;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To teach at an undergraduate and postgraduate level and to undertake research in line with the department’s research strategy and to participate in departmental management activities. <p>The job purpose must avoid listing the duties and accountabilities of the role as the accountabilities must be detailed in the key accountabilities section below.</p>
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Section – Key Accountabilities

Key accountabilities/ primary responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No more than 12 statements representing the main responsibilities and expected outputs of the role describing the job’s financial, supervisory, and faculty and student responsibilities. Listed in order, starting with the responsibility/output that will be the greatest percentage of the post-holder’s time. These are not a detailed and exhaustive list of every single task to be undertaken in the role. Each accountability is accompanied by an estimation of the percentage of time (to the nearest 5%). This allows prospective applicants to understand the major demands of the role, and is important to the job evaluation process. All job descriptions should have 5% of time ring-fenced to “any other duties as allocated by the line manager following consultation with the post holder” in order to provide operational flexibility. This ensures that the document is a more complete job description and is not interpreted in a more prescriptive way. It is not possible to finitely define each accountability, and some variations in assignment of accountabilities may be necessary from time to time. Including this statement precludes the need to modify the job description when these variations occur.
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roles with line management responsibilities should always have a minimum of 10% of their time allocated to their direct reports. • Roles with financial/budget responsibility/accountability must have financial values quantified. • Roles with forward planning requirements must have timeframes quantified (days/weeks/months/years).
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Internal and external relationships
Insert details of the key stakeholders this role will have direct contact with in fulfilling the duties specified in the Key Accountabilities.

Section – Person specification

Person specification	
<p>This section Details the knowledge, skills, abilities, experiences and aptitudes required to do the job – both essential and desirable criteria - the successful candidate is expected to deliver. The essential criteria should represent the minimum skills and experience requirements required to successfully fulfill the role and will add context to the key accountabilities described in the job description.</p> <p>These will form the basis of the selection decision, enabling the recruitment panel to ensure they have chosen objectively by being specific, measurable and evidence-based. For more information on designing the selection decision making process, please refer to the Recruitment webpages and Shortlisting guidance.</p> <p>The essential criteria are the skills, experience and knowledge that an applicant must (ideally) have on day one in the role. The desirable criteria should only be considered as an ‘added bonus’, indicative of what a stronger candidate might be able to evidence. Additionally;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The criteria should link back to the stated key accountabilities • This section must not be an extension of the key accountabilities (i.e. don’t add anything in here that should be in the previous section). This section is all about the candidate’s past experience. • Avoid referencing experience and knowledge that is specific to the University of Southampton in the essential criteria (e.g. “knowledge of the University’s finance systems”) as that would preclude potential candidates from outside the University. If still appropriate, make this reference in the ‘desirable’ category. • The essential criteria will be considered as part of the job evaluation process, the desirable criteria will not. 	
Qualifications, knowledge and experience	<p>Avoid overstating the qualifications and level of experience required to perform the job.</p> <p>The University’s standard qualification knowledge and experience requirements for each grade and career pathway are set out in the Career Pathways Guidance and the generic job descriptions contained within the job description library.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Except where a specific named qualification is a statutory/essential requirement for a post, state that a qualification (or equivalent qualification or experience) is required. • Stating “Experience equivalent to the attainment of X qualification’ is important to recognise that prospective applicants may have achieved particular levels of knowledge or experience by non-standard routes. It will be for the recruiting panel to determine whether an applicant’s knowledge and skill levels are sufficient. • Indicate if there is a job requirement to obtain or maintain professional accreditation through appropriate updating of knowledge.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For most posts, it is the ability to demonstrate certain skills/activities that is required, rather than simply a period of time in a role. List specifics rather than a generic reference to 'experience' Do not refer to a number of years' of experience – see Avoiding Discrimination below. <p>Other areas of knowledge to consider;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Theoretical knowledge Project management qualification (or equivalent experience) Procedural knowledge Practical knowledge (use of tools or specialised equipment) Organisational knowledge
Other skills and Our Southampton Behaviours	<p><u>Embedding Collegiality (see appendix 1.)</u></p> <p>*As a Line Manager role model the Southampton Behaviours and work with the management team to embed them as a way of working within the *faculty/directorate/school/department.</p> <p>OR</p> <p>*Demonstrate the Southampton Behaviours and work with colleagues to embed them as a way of working within the team.</p>
Management and teamwork	<p>The requirements for management skills in the job. Consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Operational management (managing a service or a project) Financial management (managing budgets or research grants/contracts) <p>People management (leading a team or department)</p>
Planning and organising	<p>The requirements for planning and organising in the job. Consider;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The requirement to plan and organise own-workload or the workload of others The complexity of planning prioritising required by the post The timescales over which planning is required (e.g. days, weeks, months, years) The extent to which the job is proactive or reactive
Problem solving and initiative	<p>The requirements for initiate and problem solving in the job. Consider;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The type of problems the post-holder has to solve, how they solve them and what support is available to them. Do they provide advice to committees or make independent decisions, and what policies/procedures/guidelines are available to them? The ability to follow clearly defined instructions/procedures The extent to which the post impacts on the direction of the team/academic unit/University Innovation/unconstrained thinking
Communicating and influencing	<p>The requirement for communication and interpersonal skills in the job. Consider;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To whom the post-holder communicates, how frequently they communicate and why they communicate Are they exchanging information, persuading someone to share their point of view, motivating their team or negotiating a new contract? The use of tact and diplomacy The ability to develop and change the motivation and behaviour of others Communication with the immediate team, the wider University or external individuals/bodies
Special Requirements	<p>Details of any special features that may impact upon the job. For example;</p> <p>Non-standard working hours, regular travel, seasonal and/or cyclical features of the job, environmental factors, forthcoming large-scale re-organisation etc.</p>

	<p>Driving Licenses – Some University roles genuinely require mobility across and between campuses as well as travel within the UK. However, requiring applicants to have a driving license, rather than facilitating alternative transport options, is potentially discriminatory - see Avoiding Discrimination below.</p> <p>Criminal Records checks - Some University roles genuinely require a DBS check, but these are likely to be strictly limited. Gov.UK publishes a tool that managers can use to work out if a role qualifies for a DBS check. The University's Recruitment Team will also seek confirmation from our DBS processing partners that any job description containing a DBS requirement is properly authorised to do so.</p>
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Section – Job hazards

Job hazards	Details any potential health and safety hazards that are additional to those found in an office working environment.
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Section – Organisational structure chart/Organogram

Organisational structure chart/Organogram	<p>Remember to include an organisational chart that accurately represents the intended team structure and management reporting lines. This will help the panel to understand the relationships the role being evaluated has with other roles in the team. Do NOT attach an organisational chart that simply reflects the current roles and structure.</p> <p>Example organograms/structure charts can be found here.</p>
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Avoiding discrimination

It is against the law to discriminate against anyone because of any protected characteristics. Discrimination is unlawful irrespective of whether it was intentional or not. Steps must therefore be taken to ensure that job descriptions and person specifications are not discriminatory.

For example, requiring a role to be full-time potentially discriminates against women who, statistically, are more likely to work in part-time roles. Consider whether the role really needs to be full-time or could it be done by two people working part-time in a job-share?

If you need someone to speak to customers in Malay, you don't need to advertise for a Malaysian, you need to ask for someone who speaks Malay.

If you want someone who is hard working, don't advertise for someone who is youthful or energetic, you need to ask for someone who can evidence they can handle a demanding workload.

Make sure, before assuming that the job is one to which an occupational requirement applies, that it can be performed effectively only by someone with a particular protected characteristic as permitted under the Equality Act 2010.

Examples of potential discrimination in job descriptions to be avoided:

Protected characteristic	Advice
Gender	<p>Unless necessary for the effective performance of the job, a requirement that the post-holder works overtime or is available to work at weekends or work shifts or a requirement that the post-holder travels extensively away from home on University business could indirectly discriminate against women who are more likely than men to be unable to meet the requirement due to child-care responsibilities.</p> <p>Such requirements are likely to be exceedingly rare in the University. If you believe such a requirement exists, please speak to your HR Business Partner in the first instance.</p>
Race	<p>Unless necessary for the effective performance of the job, a requirement for job applicants to speak fluent English (rather than be reasonably conversant in English) could indirectly discriminate against job applicants whose first language is not English.</p> <p>Such requirements are likely to be exceedingly rare in the University. If you believe such a requirement exists, please speak to your HR Business Partner in the first instance.</p>
Religion	<p>A role that requires staff to work on a Sunday could indirectly discriminate against some Christians who may feel strongly that Sunday must be respected as a day of rest.</p> <p>Equally, a role that requires staff to work on a Saturday could discriminate against the Jewish and other faiths who celebrate Saturday as the Sabbath.</p>
Disability	<p>A statement in a job description that job applicants must be “energetic” could place people with a condition that causes them to tire easily at a disadvantage. If the job were largely sedentary in nature, it would not be justifiable. Any criterion of physical fitness would have to be shown to be necessary for the effective performance of the job in question, such as the requirement to be “physically fit, a strong swimmer and/or ability to carry X additional weight” might be appropriate to a lifeguard or other water based role.</p> <p>Requiring job applicants to hold a driving license would exclude people with certain medical conditions who may be unable to hold a driving license. It may be reasonable for the University to waive this requirement if the post-holder could, without excessive expense or disruption, travel for business in some other way (e.g. taxi or public transport). More appropriate wording might include;</p> <p style="text-align: center;">“The ability to travel to multiple locations across the city/county/country ...”</p> <p>If specific or significant caveats apply to that ability to travel, you might consider wording such as;</p> <p style="text-align: center;">“The ability to travel to multiple locations across the city whilst transporting X material for the delivery of services to customers.”</p>
Age	<p>Do not apply upper or lower age limits or specify age ranges in recruitment material.</p> <p>A requirement for job applicants to have a defined minimum number of years’ experience would indirectly discriminate against younger candidates as they will be less likely to have accrued the requisite length of service/experience. Such unintended discrimination can be avoided by using the following wording;</p> <p style="text-align: center;">“Proven experience in ...”; or</p>

	<p>“Significant experience of ...”; or “Extensive experience in ...”</p> <p>Similarly, a requirement for applicants to have a degree or other higher education qualification might potentially discriminate against older applicants as they are statistically less likely to have been to University. Such unintended discrimination can be avoided by using the following wording;</p> <p>“Skill level equivalent to achievement of a [insert appropriate] qualification.”</p>
<p>Rehabilitation of Offenders Act</p>	<p>Requiring job applicants to undertake a DBS check without proper authority would potentially exclude or discourage individuals who would otherwise be suitable candidates for the role.</p> <p>Additionally, the General Data Protection Regulations and Data Protection Act (2018) prevent the unauthorised collection, processing or retention of criminal history. Employers requiring DBS checks unnecessarily will be in breach of the law and may be reported to the Information Commissioner for England and may face significant fines.</p> <p>If you are considering requiring an individual to apply for a standard or enhanced DBS check, as the employing manager, you are legally responsible for making sure the job role is eligible to be subject to a DBS check.</p> <p>Please refer to the Gov.UK guidance on DBS eligibility for further guidance and an on-line eligibility-checking tool. Alternatively, please speak to the Recruitment Team.</p>

Unconscious bias

The subject of Unconscious Bias has been more broadly researched in the context of higher education in recent years and this section provides an overview of the debate. At the end of this section there is a link to the Implicit Association Test. This test will take no longer than 15mins.

What is bias?

Unconscious bias refers to a bias that we are unaware of, and which happens outside of our control. It is a bias that happens automatically and is triggered by our brain making quick judgements and assessment of people and situations, influenced by our background, cultural environment and personal circumstances.

Implicit bias refers to the same area, but questions the level to which these biases are unconscious especially as we are being made increasingly aware of them. Once we know that biases are not always explicit, we are responsible for them. We all need to recognise and acknowledge our biases and find ways to mitigate their impact on our behaviour and decisions.

Social categorisation

Biases arise partly because of the way our brains rapidly categorise other people for expedient and efficient decision making. As a result people and objects are compressed, grouped and placed into easy to use categories. Social Psychologists call this social categorisation whereby we routinely and rapidly sort people into groups rather than think of each as unique (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). This can save time in processing information; however it also brings with it the powerful process of stereotyping and bias. This can be particularly damaging when rapidly judging people categorised as part of our “out group” compared with those in our “in group”.

Stereotyping and attitudes

When preparing a new or updated job description and person specification, you will need to be mindful of how issues such as “fit” may focus loyalty towards the “in-group” and make a conscious effort to highlight the values of equality and multiculturalism. The “in-group” members are likely to be those who are categorised as having the same shared identity, characteristic or interest to us.

The term stereotyping is used to describe the construction of a conventional, formulaic and oversimplified conception, opinion or image of a social group. This impression about a group or person is often based on limited knowledge of that group or person.

Although implicit biases operate in the unconscious mind, they can have significant real-world effects. Empirical research shows that automatic bias plays an important role in producing discriminatory behaviour and judgements, and that measures of implicit bias are significant predictors of the level of discriminatory behaviours and judgements.

A key consideration are the associations you may hold which produce bias regardless of whether or not you consider yourself to endorse that bias. This was demonstrated by studies showing that female psychologists (Steinpreis et al, 1999) and women in STEMM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine) departments (Moss-Racusin et al, 2012) are just as likely to discriminate against female candidates as their male counterparts.

The same qualities can be perceived very differently depending on whether they are demonstrated by a member of the majority or minority group (Eagly and Carli, 2007). Uhlmann and Cohen (2005) explored this in a recruitment context and found that merit was redefined to fit the profile of the candidate of the preferred (in this case) gender.

Before writing your job description you should be clear about what you are looking for in relations to skills, knowledge and experience at a university and discipline/unit level and these should not change once applicants are assessed. Applicants need to have a clear understanding of what they need to demonstrate to be appointed to the role, then they can develop these skills and gain relevant experience. When these attributes are not consistently referred to, bias can creep in and prevent some groups of people from being appointed or promoted at the same rate as others.

The Implicit Association Test

Before preparing a job description or person specification you are encouraged to use the following link to confidentially measure your attitudes and beliefs. It is a good reminder that we all carry internal schema which are liable to make us make assumptions about our colleagues.

[The Implicit Association Test \(IAT\)](#)

Herbert, C., (September 2013). Unconscious Bias and higher education. Equality Challenge Unit. London. www.ecu.ac.uk

Disclaimer

While every effort is taken to ensure that the advice provided here and by HR colleagues (including the Job Evaluation Panel) is accurate and up to date, it does not guarantee that you could successfully defend an equal pay claim. Only the courts or tribunals can give authoritative interpretations of the law.