



Best practice guide to inclusive conferences

Summary brief

In March 2019 the [REACH programme](#) organised an International Conference on Water Security and Poverty in Oxford. Well aware of the lack of inclusivity and diversity at many academic conferences, we searched for guidance to follow on developing inclusive events. Yet to our surprise, we found a limited amount of comprehensive resources available online - so we thought there would be value in creating our own 'best practice guide'.

Over an eight-month period, we have worked to prepare a practical resource that event organisers can use to develop inclusive events - not only in terms of the diversity of speakers, but also in the ways participants are welcomed, respected, and involved. [The guide](#) was released in May 2019, and many of the recommendations presented in it were put into practice at our own REACH conference.

Why develop an inclusive conference?

- Speaking at conferences raises profiles and builds skills. Providing women and members of other under-represented groups with this exposure demonstrates the value of their contributions and helps to support their career progression.
- Individually, conferences provide excellent opportunities to foster new connections, partnerships and ideas, supporting career development. Generating a wider variety of ideas, discussions and collaborations also ultimately means a better meeting.
- It is important that early career professionals see a diversity of speakers at conferences, as these can become important role models.
- As conference organisers we should ensure that participants feel welcome, accepted and safe (from both physical and verbal assault).

How was the guide developed?

- Review of literature and documentation related to promoting diversity in events.
- Consultation with more than 15 conference organisers, gender and diversity experts as well as other professionals.
- Design and analysis of online survey of more than 230 staff at the University of Oxford, other higher education institutions, and the wider public, private and third sectors.

The best practice guide

The guide makes practical recommendations for organisers in charge of conference logistics as well as those involved in more strategic decisions. Our recommendations cover six key areas, as highlighted below:



Our 8 key take-aways

1. **Diversity should not focus solely on gender.** Many minorities also experience challenges in being excluded or discriminated against at events on account of their ethnicity, religion, gender identification, seniority, physical abilities or other characteristics of their identity.
2. **Inclusivity needs to be built into the conference planning and logistics from the outset.** This includes collecting information about participants' needs early and considering how the choice of venue, facilities, date/time and ticket price can exclude certain attendees or on the contrary make them feel welcome.
3. **It is important not simply to give women and minority groups 'some' opportunity to speak at a conference.** Organisers should spread diversity among all speaking and presenting roles (keynotes, session chairs, poster presentations etc).
4. **Choosing alternative formats can help create a more inclusive conference.** The default format is often the 'unidirectional' talk in a large lecture theatre. Recognising that conferences serve purposes other than just disseminating knowledge can justify the adoption of other types of formats that are more conducive to sharing knowledge, generating new ideas and building partnerships, visibility and skills.
5. **Ensuring speaker diversity is important but not sufficient to developing an inclusive event.** We recommend that conference organisers work to ensure everyone (speakers and attendees) has equal opportunities to participate in discussions, and actively engage in Q&As and networking opportunities.
6. **Conference communications, too, should be inclusive.** For instance, this entails ensuring diversity in who is featured and how, in online and print communications, before, during and after the event.

7. **Caring responsibilities can be a considerable barrier to attending and presenting at conferences for both men and women** – although the responsibility is often largely borne by women. An increasing number of conferences now provide on-site crèche facilities, or financially support attendees with caring responsibilities, but there are other ways conferences and institutions can help.
8. **Recognise that incidents of discrimination and harassment happen, and make your stance clear.** For instance by specifying what is (un)acceptable behaviour (e.g. with code of conduct) and making sure there is a clear process for reporting and managing incidents.

Developing our own inclusive conference

Many of the recommendations from the guide were successfully put into practice at our REACH conference in Keble College, Oxford, last March:

- 50% of speakers were women, 50% were from BME background and a third were early career.
- Our two opening keynotes were from women and our two closing keynotes were from early career researchers of BME background.
- Participants were asked to sign a code of conduct upon registration. We designed an online form for reporting any incidents.
- All session chairs were asked to take a question from a woman or early career researcher first.

These visibly changed the conference dynamics, allowing a wider variety of views to be expressed in an open and receptive setting. However, we do recognise that there are lessons to be learnt and ways in which the event could have been even more inclusive. We believe inclusivity is not something that can be achieved fully, but an ambition that conference organisers should continuously work towards, as there will always be room for improvement.



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Feel free to get in touch if you have any questions, suggestions, ideas or examples of best practice:

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