



Influencing change around inclusive conferences



Story of change: Key findings & emerging impacts

Summary

- Conferences often reflect wider inequalities, with women, early career researchers (ECRs), and those from the Global South under-represented in speaker line-ups, despite events being crucial for professional growth.
- In response to the lack of existing resources, the University of Oxford's REACH programme and School of Geography and the Environment developed a practical best practice guide on organizing inclusive conferences, based on research, expert consultation, and a survey of over 230 respondents.
- The REACH International Conference on Water Security and Poverty, held in Oxford in March 2019 was developed and structured based on this guide, so as to actively promote the visibility of under-represented researchers.
- The guide covers six key areas of planning inclusive events – logistics, speaker diversity, inclusive participation, communications, discrimination and harassment, and respect for caring responsibilities – and has been used by institutions including Oxford, UKRI, FCDO, and international bodies like the UN.
- Since its 2019 launch, the guide has had significant policy and practice impact, influencing event design across sectors, being cited in academic and evaluation reports, and continuing to shape inclusive research culture at Oxford and beyond.

Photo: © Alice Chautard

Introduction

The under-representation of women and minority groups in senior positions is often reflected in the line-up of speakers at events and conferences. These events offer valuable opportunities to advance careers through networking, increasing exposure and recognition, building partnerships and developing skills. If they are not designed in an inclusive manner, they risk reinforcing or accelerating inequalities.

Throughout REACH (2015-2025), the programme was committed to raising the voices and supporting the development of women, early career researchers and researchers from the Global South. This approach was embedded within the programme's communications strategy, events and research activities. A key example is how we developed and structured the REACH International Conference on Water Security and Poverty, held in Oxford in March 2019 so as to actively promote the visibility of these researchers.

In preparation for the 2019 conference, we spoke to diversity experts and event organisers, and searched for guidance, yet we found a lack of comprehensive resources.

To address this gap, REACH Knowledge Exchange and Communications Manager Alice Chautard initiated a collaboration with the Equality and Diversity Officer at the School of Geography and the Environment, Dr. Claire Hann, to produce some best practice guidance to support the development of our own REACH conference, and guide other institutions interested in developing inclusive conferences. This Story of Change describes the creation and dissemination of this guidance output, which in 2025, is still having an influence on event inclusivity at the University of Oxford and beyond.

The guide

- [The guide](#) was developed through extensive research of the published and grey literature on inclusive conferences, consultations with experts, and a survey with more than 230 respondents.
- It is practical, not prescriptive, in demonstrating how to make events more inclusive – not only in terms of the diversity of speakers, but also the ways in which participants are welcomed, respected and involved.
- It covers six areas of conference planning: events logistics; speaker diversity; inclusive participation; communications; discrimination and harassment and caring responsibilities.



Inclusive conference guide

A 'How-to' guide to help conference organisers promote diversity of attendance and inclusivity of participation at events in 6 areas:



Planning
'inclusive'
event
logistics



Ensuring
speaker
diversity



Promoting
inclusive
participation



Communicating
diversity &
inclusivity



Preventing &
dealing with
discrimination &
harassment



Supporting
attendees with
caring
responsibilities

8 key take-aways from the guide

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-side 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.

UK & International dissemination

Since its launch in May 2019 the guide has been extensively re-shared, including in Oxfam's Poverty to Power Newsletter, as well as Portia's 7,000 member newsletter, and in an article via the LSE Impact blog where it was accessed over 3,000 times. Alice Chautard and Dr Claire Hann were invited to speak at, and hosted a number of talks, workshops and consultations, including in Oxford:

- Invited to give a talk at the University of Oxford Social Science Division Impact Forum;

- Invited to give opening plenary at the University of Oxford Research and Innovation Support Network Conference in September 2019;

In the UK:

- Invited by UKRI and UK Innovate to lead a workshop on inclusive events in London in October 2019.
- The guide was circulated to the Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology by University of Oxford's Social Science Research Impact Facilitator, as part of an initiative to make the UK Parliament more inclusive.

Internationally:

- Discussion with Jocelyne Turner at the Meetings Management Unit at United Nations Offices in Vienna (UNOV), as they are interested in improving the inclusivity of UN events and conferences internationally;
- A call with the events management team from the World Water Week conference in Sweden.

Capacity building impact

- The guide was used as a central resource when organizing the REACH International Conference on Water Security and Poverty, held in Oxford in March 2019 and opened by Prof. Louise Richardson, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Oxford.
- Half of the speakers at that conference were women, half were from Africa and Asia, and one third were early career researchers. Two ECRs from Ethiopia and Bangladesh delivered the closing speech.
- Many attendees described the event as the most inclusive they had ever attended.

Tweets from attendees of the REACH 2019 International Conference in Oxford

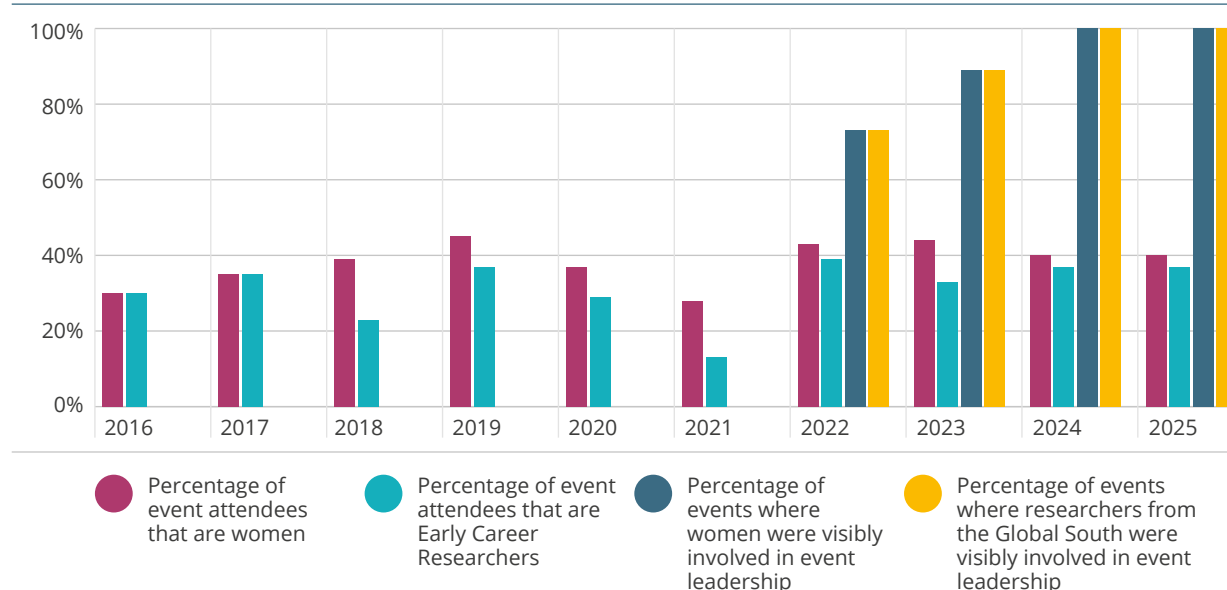


The University of Oxford Vice-Chancellor opening the REACH 2019 International Conference (top), and the climate panel from the REACH 2023 conference (bottom).



As a central resource within REACH, the recommendations from the guide had long term influence on the organisation and delivery of events throughout the programme. The graphic on the next page shows results of tracking of specific indicators at knowledge sharing events organised by REACH.

Tracking attendance and involvement for knowledge sharing events organised by the REACH programme. Covid-19 affected events in 2020-2021. In 2022, additional metrics were introduced.



Policy and practice uptake & impact

- Shortlisted in the University of Oxford Vice-Chancellor's Diversity Award in 2020 and endorsed by the School of Geography and the Environment, the guide has been included as a key resource for the University of Oxford central Events Team, and used by multiple departments across the University.
- Beyond Oxford, the guide has already been used and put into practice by many organisations for specific events, including by FCDO (DFID at the time) and PWC (as part of the African Investment Summit), UKRI, UK Innovate, Knowledge Transfer Network, UCL, GCRF Water Security Hub, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, and Elrha, among others. Cecilie Hestbaek, HIF Senior Innovation Manager at Elhra, said that the guide "is a huge step forward in the inclusion and diversity conversation in the water sector, and your impressive results at the REACH conference speak for themselves."
- The guide has also been used by various organisations to support the development of their equality and diversity or conference policies, including by Imperial, Glasgow University, as well as the Knowledge Transfer Network (KTN).

"Your contribution was immensely useful to us, and this is something we will be continually working on going forwards."

KTN Knowledge Transfer Manager, Siwan Smith

Through 2021–2024, the guide has been cited as influencing the development and set-up of a Social Policy Lab workshop on *Labour Rights and organization in Platform Economy* (Tabarés, Bartolomé, and García, in Mezzadra et al. (Eds), 2024); Cano, Espelt & Pirone, 2021) and also mentioned as an example of "calls for vigilance to consider many forms of diversity, including abilities, languages, cultures, genders, age, perspectives that are accessible, amenable to, and respectful of difference" in Akama et al. (2022). It also received a mention in the Final Report Global Challenges Research Fund Evaluation Module: Gender Equality, Social Inclusion and Poverty Audit.

"One of the few key documents to address gender-responsive communication and dissemination at the award level was the Developing inclusive conferences – Best Practice Guide."

Brocklesby et al., 2021

In 2025, the guide was presented by Anita Ghosh, Senior Research Support Officer, SoGE as an example of best practice in an Oxford University workshop on 'Research Culture at Oxford: What Next?'

Outputs

Summary brief: [Best practice guide to inclusive conferences](#).

LSE Impact blog: [Inclusive conferences? We can and must do better – here's how](#).

Conference Inference blog: [Inclusive conferences: thoughts on why and how we can \(and must\) do better](#).

Chartered Institute of IT Professionals blog: [Making conferences inclusive](#).

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Story of change themes



Groundwater



Land



Coasts



Gender



Schools



Services



Health



Climate



Cities



Basins

REACH was a global research programme to improve water security for the poor by delivering world-class science that transforms policy and practice. The REACH programme ran from 2015–2025 and was led by Oxford University with international consortium of partners and funded with UK Aid from the UK Government's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office. Project code 201880.