Inclusion Insights

All welcome

A guide to inclusive and accessible events

This guide contains best practice tips from across the higher education sector and beyond, to support colleagues who are involved in organising, hosting, and participating in events. These can be meetings, workshops, or conferences – held online or in person.

All events should strive to be as inclusive and accessible as possible. People of all backgrounds and career stages should feel included and be able to participate in events and feel themselves and their contributions to be recognised and valued

The content in this guidance has been adapted from guidance developed by the British Academy of Management.

1. Diversifying participants

Consider the theme and range of speakers that might be involved: does the event reproduce established power structures and hierarchies, or does it challenge them? Aim to be as inclusive as possible and provide a balanced representation of the topic. Remember that theme choices are not 'diversity neutral'; some themes are more likely to attract members of certain groups than others.

Consider how calls for papers and invitations to speak are presented. If practical, you might use an event to highlight the contribution of under-represented groups (such as women or people from ethnic minority groups) or to showcase those whose work is at a developmental stage (such as doctoral students, junior teaching staff and early career researchers). Choose the topics and speakers based on relevance and expertise. It falls to organisers, hosts, and speakers to mitigate against homogeneity, lack of representation, or tokenism.

In line with other industries and sectors of work, academic colleagues are increasingly comfortable declining invitations to speak on non-inclusive (such as all-male, all-white) panels, or requesting that a commitment to inclusion is a condition of their participation.

If homogeneity or exclusion are a danger, and if you are organising an event or conference stream, consider broadening your search for potential speakers whose work would make a contribution that speaks from and with under-represented groups. Include doctoral students, ECRs and junior teaching and professional services staff, in chairing presentation sessions, and in acting as discussants.

Encourage collaborative abstract submission for events or conference streams to include junior teaching and professional services staff, doctoral students and ECRs as much as possible. If appropriate, highlight that alphabetical ordering of authors' names is preferred. If this is not followed, ask how the order was decided and actively discourage authors being listed in order of seniority.

If possible, consider event formats that foster inclusion, collaboration and interaction and which are conducive to dialogue, reflexive exchange and the generation of new ideas and insights. For example, smaller interactive workshops and discussion groups or roundtables, rather than formal panels with traditional question-and-answer formats.

2. Enabling Participation

3. Reaching out

Give early consideration to when the event will be scheduled. Where possible, try to aim for a start and finish time that will allow participants with caring responsibilities to attend as much of the event as they can.

Organisers should consider factors such as the timing of school holidays, relevant religious festivals (consult an interfaith calendar as dates for some festivals change each year), national holidays and caring responsibilities when suggesting dates, so that speakers and other participants have as much opportunity to participate as possible.

For residential events, offer flexible options for participants to attend all or part of the event, as this is more inclusive towards participants with caring responsibilities. When planning the wording of your registration form include an accessibility statement in the invitation, registration, and confirmation to all participants (including co-organisers and speakers).

For example:

We will do our best to meet any requirements that will allow you to fully participate in this event. Please let us know in advance if you have any specific requirements such as religious or medical dietary needs, advance access to presentational materials or alternative presentational formats, or any access needs.

Try to give people as much notice as possible to make any necessary arrangements, as this is likely to increase opportunities for participation especially amongst those with caring responsibilities or additional needs.

Consider where and how details of the event will be publicised to encourage a broad range of participants. Effective use of social media before and during the event can help extend the range of participation.

If publicising the event involves the use of images, particularly of people, make sure that consideration has been given to diversity of those portrayed in the images.

4. Fair sharing

Any meeting is an opportunity for different people, regardless of their career stage or specific role, to bring their perspectives, expertise, and experience to the discussion. All attendees should make sure that everyone is given opportunities to contribute. Chairs and participants should aim to share time fairly and equally. Ideally, chairs should try to find ways to ensure that no individuals or groups dominate the time available or the discussion. This could mean actively encouraging participation from communities or individuals that are easily overlooked or marginalised.

Give practical guidance to session chairs to increase diversity of participation and intervention in debates, especially in entirely online or hybrid events. Think about how to make networking accessible to all, including those working online. Conventional structures and cultures of networking can be competitive and opaque in face-to-face events, and these experiences can be replicated, even accentuated, online. Consider providing alternative, smaller scale networking opportunities that can be organised by participants before, during, and after the event. All these issues need advance planning and keep under review as the event develops.

During the event, chairs can take the first question, or two or three questions at a time, from participants who might change the dynamic of the discussion (for example, those who might otherwise be overlooked, marginalised or feel less confident). It is good practice to make it clear that all follow-on questions will be passed on to the speakers. This gives a mechanism for everyone who would like to contribute; and creates opportunities to network, collaborate, and encourage dialogue. If the event is online only, or a mix of in person and online, consider organising the event in shorter blocks than you might do for an entirely face-to-face event to avoid long periods of screen time without breaks, and to offer as much flexibility as possible.

Make sure that your event is digitally accessible. For live video-conference events, find out if any participants need a sign-language interpreter, and what their preferred needs are in advance. Think about 'Zoom etiquette' and how it relates to accessibility. Displaying a picture when cameras are turned off, use of preferred pronouns alongside names, having an appropriate background, and preferred use of the chat function, can all help to support an inclusive online environment.

Consider issues such as connectivity requirements, timings (especially when working across time zones), social conventions and preferences, and access to event materials before, during, and after the event.

5. Fair access

Venue

The venue should be accessible for people who may have a variety of access needs. Consider gathering information on the types of facilities nearby and make this available to the event delegates.

For example:

- reserved parking due to access needs
- wheelchair access
- hearing loops
- gender inclusive toilets
- prayer rooms

The AccessAble organisation conducts access audits at venues across the UK. You can check building accessibility using the AccessAble website before you decide on a venue.

Ensure that you have a named IT contact on the day of the event who will be able to help in case of any technical problems that might occur in the venue. This could include issues with the hearing loop or display screen equipment, which can disadvantage guests with accessibility requirements.

Content

Presentation materials should be simple, accessible, and flexible.

All presentation slides and other materials should ideally be made available in advance and in accessible formats on the day. PDF file formats should ideally be avoided, as they are difficult to render as accessible.

Ask the speakers to ensure that their slideshow presentations are accessible to all (for example, using appropriate font style, font size, and slide colour schemes). Discourage animated, 'busy' or very text heavy presentations.

Care

Consider participants' dietary restrictions and the needs of participants who may be fasting, for example during Ramadan. Give thought to participants with mobility needs, and how they can be supported (if required) during refreshment and meal breaks. For example, if buffet-style catering is provided, one of the organisers could give assistance.

Full day events can be exhausting, especially for people with disabilities, including 'hidden disabilities', such as chronic pain which can make it difficult to sit for long periods of time. Some people's circumstances might mean it is difficult to concentrate for long periods without short breaks.

Additional resources: AccessAble – Search for accessible places to go

6. Privacy and safety

Attendance and full participation at all events depend on those involved feeling safe. One aspect of ensuring safety refers to following the established procedures for risk assessment.

When organising events is concerned, especially if a visitor flags in advance that they have certain health and safety related requirements, it may be necessary to review and update risk assessments.

In professional contexts, people's sense of safety is closely intertwined with intersectional inequalities. Think in advance about how to ensure that none of the participants will experience overt discrimination, or more subtle forms of microaggression during the event.

Creating and maintaining a safe, welcoming, and mutually respectful environment should be a key priority for event organisers and participants; everyone involved should expect this. All participants need to know how to report issues of concern.
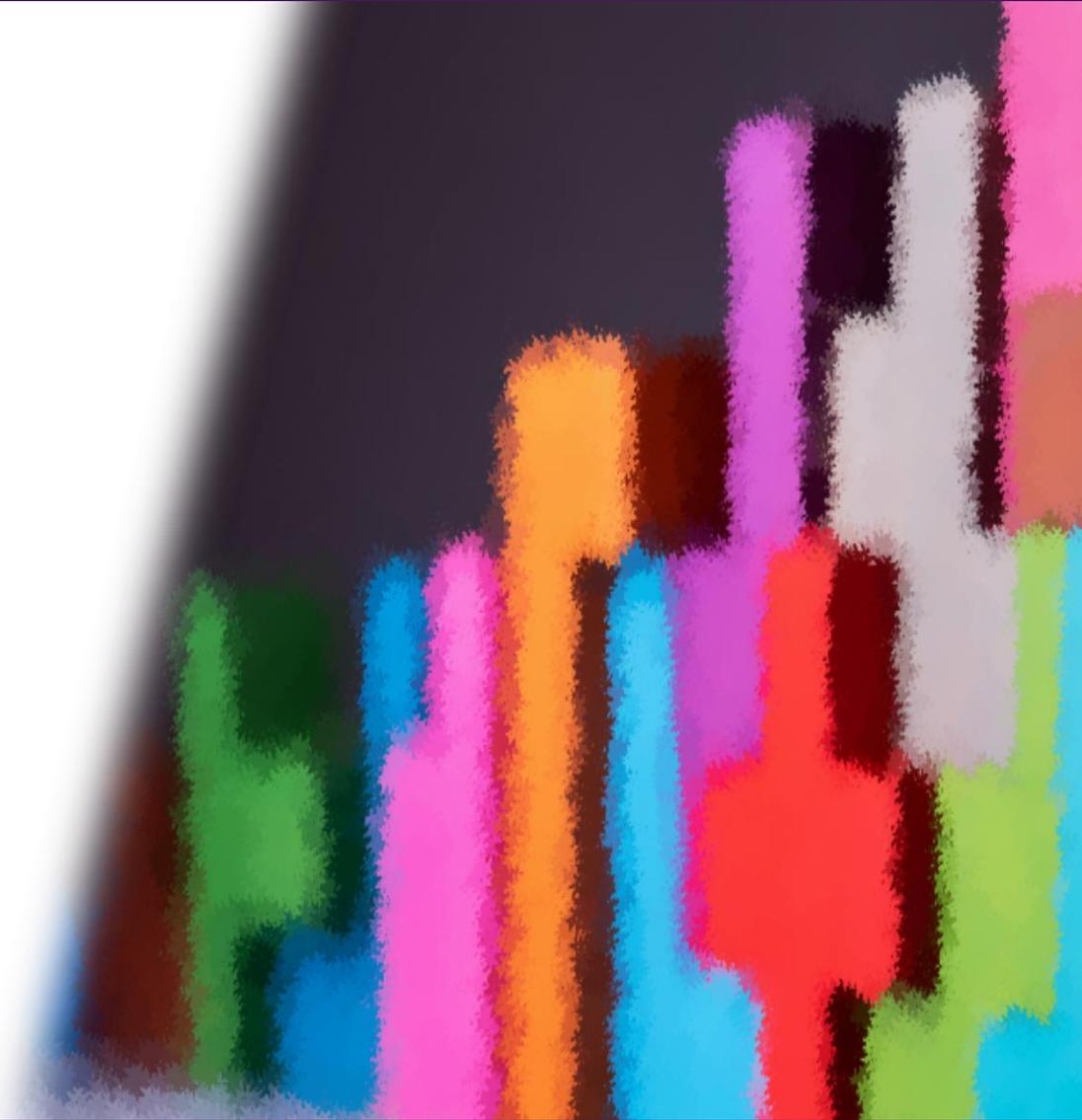
Key Questions and Basic Principles

	Tick
1. Diversifying participants	
Are the organisers and speakers a diverse group? Seek out contributors from underrepresented and marginalised groups if not or be prepared to explain why this is not possible.	
Consider the presentation of themes, calls for papers and invitations. Ensure you have used accessibility principles in your messaging.	
2. Enabling participation	
Are the date, timing, and venue fully accessible to everyone who might want or need to take part?	
Have you provided clear contact details for participants to make requests for accessibility and any other special requirements?	
Has thought been given to scheduling a lunchtime or daytime event, as this may be easier than an evening event for participants with caring responsibilities?	
3. Reaching out	
How will you contact groups that are typically under-represented or marginalised?	
Are you using a range of images in publicity materials?	
Can electronic copies of presentations be obtained in advance, to be sent to participants on request?	
4. Fair sharing	
Have you ensured an inclusive allocation of chairing and discussant responsibilities?	
Have you encouraged chairs to take questions from participants who might visibly change the demographic dynamic of events?	
Have you provided speaker access to facilities and software to convert presentations, handouts, and materials into alternative formats, such as large print or differently coloured backgrounds?	
Have you emphasised the need to follow the agenda and timings, and to let as many speak as wish to, avoiding dominance of individuals or groups?	

Key Questions and Basic Principles

	Tick
5. Fair access	
Are directions and joining instructions clear?	
Ensure the venue is as accessible as possible for restricted mobility, hearing, and vision. Ask participants when booking, about special dietary requirements, including allergies and vegetarian, vegan, Halal or Kosher meals (if your catering menu is able to provide such options)	
Have you provided alcohol-free refreshments?	
Have you taken steps to ensure that adequate catering is provided for all participants, including those with special dietary requirements?	
Have you taken steps to ensure that, as far as possible, food and packaging waste is minimised, without precluding any participants from the opportunity to have enough food, and without jeopardising hygiene standards?	
Have you scheduled one or more short breaks for events longer than two hours?	
Have sufficient changeover times been allowed for events that involve sessions in different locations, especially for participants with mobility needs to be able to move between them?	
Is there a named IT contact on the day who will be able to help in case of technological issues that might affect accessibility within the venue?	
6. Privacy and safety	
Have you made participants aware that they can raise issues with a designated person if something happens during the event that is of concern to them?	
If sensitive topics will be discussed during the event, have you made sure they will be treated in an appropriately serious manner and handled sensitively?	
If the content of the event includes flashing, flickering and strobe lighting that may cause a problem for some participants, have you issued a warning to participants in advance?	
Do you have, or need, a statement in event invitation and confirmation about compliance with data protection regulations)? This should be clear about how personal information, for example, access, pronouns, disability, will be stored, used, and deleted.	