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Your Old Road Is Rapidly Aging. Please Get Out of the New One if You Can't Lend Your Hand, for the Times They Are A-Changing: Time for Inclusive Conferences

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1. Setting the Scene

As academics, we play a crucial role in developing our students in a critical phase of their lives as they prepare to undertake the university-to-work transition (Donald et al., 2022). We are often seen as the frontline for student support, whether academically by fostering a commitment to life-wide and lifelong learning (Cole & Donald, 2022) or pastorally, particularly given the detrimental impacts on student wellbeing of the COVID-19 pandemic (Donald & Jackson, 2022). Additionally, our diversity of views and backgrounds can inspire students to feel a sense of belonging and inclusion.

Unfortunately, all is not well 'behind the scenes' in academia, where inclusivity can often feel like an afterthought rather than being embedded into the fabric of every decision (Donald & Frank, 2023; Donald & Yarovaya, 2023). In the context of this piece:

Inclusion is seen as a universal human right. Inclusion aims to embrace all people irrespective of race, gender, disability, medical or other needs. It is about giving equal access and opportunities and eliminating discrimination and intolerance (removing barriers). It affects all aspects of public life (Inclusion, 2022, Online, Paragraph One).

My viewpoint in this piece is underpinned by the social model of disability, which, unlike the medical model, adopts the view that the oppression and exclusion of people from marginalised communities are "caused by the way that society is run and organised" (Inclusion London, 2015, p. 8). Consequently, Ingram and Gamsu (2022) call for "policy to focus on dismantling rather than reinforcing social hierarchies" (p. 189). This essay focuses on academic conferences, representing one arena where exclusionary practices play out.

You might ask why our ability to attend academic conferences affects our students. First, academic conferences are valuable spaces of knowledge exchange that inform teaching and research (Donald, 2022). Second, they provide access to networks and job opportunities, increasing the likelihood of those attending securing grant funding, publications in prestigious journals, and career progression (Sarabipour et al., 2021). Therefore, they influence the diversity of individuals who transition into influential positions of power and prestige visible to students.

Third, they set the tone for the stance in academia on critical issues such as inclusivity, social mobility, and climate change (Leochico et al., 2021), influencing the appeal of a future career in academia and the sustainability of our academic careers (Donald & Mouratidou, 2022).

In response, this food for thought piece sets out five indicators of an inclusive conference and a call for action. These five indicators are based on nearly a decade of my lived experience as a disabled and housebound academic. My views are complemented by valuable insights from a group of over seventy scholars whom I confidentially advocate for to try and give them a voice since they feel they do not have a voice of their own. I hope that by setting out these five indicators, conference organisers can make more informed and inclusive decisions.

2. Five Indicators of an Inclusive Conference

- a) The conference team includes a designated inclusivity specialist who proactively advocates for the broader academic community by identifying areas for improvement and delivering meaningful change. While individuals currently excluded from academic conferences due to a lack of inclusivity should be involved in these discussions (ideally in a paid capacity), they should not be expected to provide solutions since they lack the agency to implement them. Examples of those who are excluded if your event is not run in a fully hybrid or entirely virtual format include disabled or housebound academics such as me, those with carer responsibilities, those without access to funding, and those who cannot secure a visa to travel to the destination where the conference is being held.
- b) When excluded members of our academic community approach your conference organising team and voice concerns, you thank them for doing so and look at what action you can take to rectify the oversight. You do not deploy gaslighting tactics by claiming your conference is already inclusive or benchmarking it against less inclusive conferences if colleagues share their lived experiences of exclusion in good faith. Similarly, a survey that says 95% of people think your conference is inclusive is equally irrelevant if a) the 5% represent those from marginalised groups and/or b) your sample is biased because you only sent the questionnaire to people who had the means to attend the last conference run in an inaccessible format. Instead, proactively reach out to marginalised groups for feedback and take responsibility for implementing it where feasible.
- c) A fee waiver form is publicised during the submission and registration process whereby at least 10% (ideally, considerably more) of the conference tickets are made available specifically to individuals without the means to attend otherwise. Clear criteria are set out, and the process is run in good faith with minimal paperwork required. You ensure that such provision fully complies with disability law and other legislation related to inclusive practices, viewing these as the absolute minimum requirements. The virtual conference fee is set at the lowest possible amount to promote affordability, volume, and diversity of participants. For instance, if your break-even point is £7,500, then selling 150 tickets at £50 each for a 2-day event is preferable for inclusivity to selling 50 at £150.
- d) The conference is either run entirely virtual or fully hybrid (i.e. this applies to keynotes, paper presentations, professional development workshops, meet the Editors, social events, etc.) so that when a fee waiver is secured, individuals attending online have the same opportunities as their colleagues attending in person. An entirely hybrid format is likely more inclusive than fully virtual since everyone can choose the best format for their specific circumstances. However, an entirely virtual format is likely more inclusive than in-person only (or in-person with token elements tagged under a hybrid format). As organisers, it is essential to remember that for those unable to attend conferences in

person, we are entirely excluded from any conference run in person only. We also feel excluded when a conference is run only partly in a hybrid format because we still do not have the same opportunities as afforded to our colleagues with the means and opportunity to attend in person. These risks exacerbate pre-existing inequalities and should be avoided.

- e) Your keynote speakers, panels, and other presenters come from diverse regions, backgrounds, career stages, and institutions. You actively foster an inclusive environment where people feel safe sharing diverse opinions and perspectives rather than perpetuating echo chambers by only inviting the ‘usual suspects.’ You may need to reach out to colleagues beyond your immediate network and ensure such speakers feel welcomed and valued so that they recommend your conference to others in their network - aiding the process of attracting diverse participants for future iterations.

3. Call to Action

The necessity for entirely virtual conferences during the social distancing restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic put to rest the argument by conference organisers that virtual conferences were not feasible. Yet, my colleagues and I, who temporarily had access to these valuable spaces of knowledge exchange, have now been excluded again, as many conferences have transitioned back to in-person only or in-person with limited virtual options (Donald, 2022). Clearly, as an academic community, we can do better. As conference organisers, we must take every decision with inclusivity, social mobility, and climate change at the forefront of our minds and share best practices or make way for those who will. As scholars, we must advocate for those without a voice and use our privilege and power to influence change for good, whereby the benefits transcend to colleagues, their students, and broader society. *For the times, they are a changing.*

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