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OVERCOMING SYSTEMIC BARRIERS TO INCLUSION IN ACADEMIA: THE CASE FOR A HYBRID CONFERENCE FORMAT

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Conference season is upon us, and in-person events are back this year. My social media feed is full of posts from fellow academics jetting off to exciting destinations and relieved that the majority of pandemic-related restrictions of 2020 and 2021 are over. No more complaints from some participants about the virtual technology platforms, zoom fatigue, time zone differences, or a lack of networking opportunities. An easier life for conference organisers as they revert to ‘tried-and-tested’ norms of delivery. The conferences that have offered hybrid formats in 2022 have often delivered these with the level of enthusiasm usually reserved for marking 400 essays. One leading conference has even charged the same fee for in-person or virtual attendance despite over half of the sessions only being available in ‘real-time’ to those who attend in person. A cynic might think this was the objective all along. Make such a fuss and deliver a one-off hybrid conference so poorly that it will never need to be done again. For these groups, 2022 appears to signal what they hope will be a permanent return to the in-person conference ‘glory days’.



Yet, the virtual conference format in 2020 and 2021 was a revelation for previously excluded participants. Such groups include disabled and housebound academics, people with caring responsibilities for children or elderly parents, and pregnant women unable to fly. They also include academics who live in remote places, those unable to secure visas, or those unable to secure sufficient funding to cover travel and accommodation fees. As a disabled and predominantly housebound academic, I previously found myself excluded from key conferences in my field. Organisers would continually state that the technology did not exist to offer me the same level of access afforded to many of my peers. However, the COVID-19 pandemic suggested otherwise, as the academic community was temporarily forced to adopt virtual conference formats. I felt fully included for the first time. Yet, this inclusion was short-lived as conference organisers opted to revert primarily to in-person events for 2022. Somehow, it felt even worse this time because I knew it was an active choice to exclude me and roll back on the inclusivity gains afforded by the COVID-19 pandemic. This motivated me to write an opinion piece in the hope that I could use the platform to raise awareness and influence change.

I believe hybrid conferences can act as a catalyst for accessible and inclusive academia to overcome systemic barriers to exclusive spaces of knowledge exchange. A failure to offer a virtual component for a conference represents an ableist view and makes organisers complicit in a system that excludes particular academics from participation. This complicity has a trickle-down effect whereby excluding certain academics from conference settings reduces the diversity of views and voices. Such exclusion also limits access to informal networks and the opportunities for research collaborations. In-person conferences also remove agency from other academics to reduce their carbon footprint.



Therefore, the in-person format is at odds with conference organisers' claimed commitments to 'Equality, Diversity and Inclusion', 'Technological Advancement', and 'Sustainability' agendas. So, what can we do as an academic community, and how can conference organisers address this issue?

As individuals, we need to reframe our thinking from 'do we prefer in-person or hybrid conferences?' to 'do we want to be an inclusive community or not?'. The aftermath of the pandemic offers an opportunity to embrace change during a period of disruption before we revert to previous norms. This requires buy-in and support across the academic community since those of us whose voices are excluded often have fewer opportunities to influence policy decisions directly. We rely on individuals sitting on the conference organising committees to raise these concerns on our behalf and secure commitment to a hybrid format. Leading Professors in their respective fields can also operationalise their status and influence to support inclusivity agendas. Moreover, we rely on all academics to voice their concerns and call for hybrid formats even where their personal preference is for an in-person-only conference. We also ask for a commitment that everyone interacts with virtual participants to avoid two separate conferences taking place in parallel under the guise of a hybrid approach. Additionally, are you prepared to publicly call out and boycott conferences that actively exclude your peers to help manifest change?

As conference organisers, what steps can you take to normalise hybrid conferences as the accepted 'default' format? Maybe you can highlight the point that a hybrid format maintains the flexibility for academics to choose to attend in person if that is their preference and they have the means to do so. Perhaps you can vocalise your priority for the inclusion of all scholars in conference spaces, even though some academics may consider hybrid conferences to be 'less fun' in their current form than



traditional in-person events. Maybe you can take steps to address this by promoting cross-platform networking and hashtags to engage people via social media before, during, and after the event. Alternatively, you might consider investing extra revenue from virtual conference fees in developing technology platforms that facilitate networking opportunities between all attendees. It will also be imperative to convince either your existing or alternative sponsors of the value of the hybrid format.

There also needs to be a discussion around pricing. It is not reasonable to expect a conference to offer virtual attendance for free unless, of course, they have the means to do this without it being subsidised from the cost charged to in-person attendees. However, conference organisers need to ask themselves if they can offer a near-identical experience for academics attending in-person or virtually? If not, the virtual fee needs to be adjusted accordingly. The argument that virtual attendees should pay the same in-person fee regardless since they do not have to cover hotel and accommodation costs represents systemic ableism. Those costs bear no reflection on the conference's content, and in-person attendees have the option of virtual attendance if they prefer. Organisers may wish to consider running one day of the conference entirely hybrid with the remaining days in-person and a pro-rata ticket price for virtual attendees. Alternatively, if there are four conferences in a particular field per year, is there an option for three to follow a hybrid or virtual format with the fourth in-person over a four-year rotation period?

I believe that now is the time for academia to re-consider its actions under a spotlight of inclusivity and climate change agendas through the provision of hybrid conferences. I hope this opinion piece will act as a catalyst for such action.