



Learning to be accessible

Jenny Jenkins, Sophia Baker and Andrew Curtis of the British Geophysical Association describe how the organisation is working to make its meetings and conferences accessible to all through a new online guide

Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity (EDI) is now a common phrase across the academic community and is a key focus for many institutions and professional bodies. This includes the British Geophysical Association (BGA), who in 2023 appointed a committee member to the new role of EDI officer, with the remit of supporting and advancing the cause of underrepresented groups in the British Geophysics community. BGA is now working to build EDI into the planning and operation of regular activities. We want consideration of how to make all members of our community feel welcome and included to be standard practice in everything we do.

Students lead the way

The first step in this journey was taken through one of BGA's key activities – running the annual Post-Graduate Research in Progress Meeting (PGRiP). For this meeting, BGA provides funding and support to the student-led organising committee. In 2023, PGRiP committee members worked with the BGA EDI officer to consider how the meeting could be made welcoming and accessible to all attendees. Head of the organising committee was Sophia Baker, a third-year PhD student from the University of Aberdeen. "I largely based my ideas on my personal experiences, and on the experiences of my friends and family who are members of minority demographics," says Baker. "I let myself be 'selfish' and addressed as many of the things that I personally find difficult about conference attendance as I could. For example, I grew up on bursaries and scholarships, and I am on a UKRI minimum stipend with no additional research budget, so I'm hyper aware of the benefit that grants can have; I'm neurodivergent and have struggled with the continuous length of presentation sessions and lack of breaks at some conferences; I can't eat gluten and have had to miss poster sessions at conferences because I have had to leave to find food. I engage with a lot of disability activists online, so I get a stream of bitesize EDI resources as part of my daily content consumption."

Actions taken at PGRiP ranged from standard practices of collecting demographic data on attendees for long-term monitoring, to consideration of details

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such as the provision of convenient disabled and gender-neutral toilets. Organisers included an EDI/careers panel with a diverse range of representatives from academia and industry to whom attendees could direct questions at any time during the meeting. BGA funds were used to offer grants for access and travel to attendees. Conditions under which people could apply for access grants were kept very open, so any attendees who had needs that meant their attendance entailed additional costs (caring costs, child care, medical needs) were encouraged to apply, while travel grants and fee waivers were offered to any who had no other funding to support attendance.

BGA gave out five accessible travel grants to applicants and three fee waivers in total, with these fee waivers also supported by funding from industrial sponsors. These supported the attendance of several students from underrepresented groups whose funding streams were not sufficient to pay for conference attendance, and several neurodivergent and disabled attendees who required more direct and more expensive travel options to get to the venue in Edinburgh, which made the stress of long-distance travel less of a barrier to their attendance.

"Often with EDI work it can be hard to feel you're making a significant difference," says BGA EDI officer Jenny Jenkins of Durham University. "But giving out those grants and fee waivers resulted in several of our young postgraduate geophysicists attending, enjoying and fully engaging in a conference which they might otherwise have not been able to participate. Having such a direct and immediate impact feels incredibly positive, and who knows what benefits the meeting might have in the long run for the careers of those students?"

What did PGRiP attendees think?

Attendees were asked for feedback after the meeting to help future committees see where improvements could be made; how did they feel about the attempts to make the meeting accessible?

A full 100% of respondents reported they had had their access needs met, and general conference accessibility was rated very highly with an average score of 4.8/5. Multiple respondents took the opportunity to provide feedback, praising some of the actions taken:

- “a supportive space for everyone to share research”
- “Friendly audience. Diverse.”
- “I was pleased at the recognition of EDI and actually felt that the speakers were diverse and from a great range of backgrounds.”
- “Each session being just over an hour was great for reducing burnout.”
- “It felt very inclusive, with considerations on dietary requirements, activities, as well as a quiet room to allow a space for anyone who wanted time to decompress during the event.”

The feedback was not all positive, however. One item that split opinion was the BGA Awards Committee’s practice of awarding ‘honourable mentions’ to any student who appeared on the long-list of notable posters or presentations of any one of the committee members. This resulted in an extensive list of students who received Honourable Mentions, which had the unintended consequence of making some who were not included on the list appear more marginalised. This practice will not be continued in future meetings.

The EDI/Careers panel also split opinions, with multiple attendees considering it a very positive addition to the programme, while others found it demoralising and considered some of the panel members poorly prepared to address questions put to them. Future events will aim to ensure that a diverse range of external sponsors are approached in advance, and all panel members are enthusiastic about discussing these important issues. Questions will also be solicited in advance, and a set of commonly asked questions will be prepared, to allow the panel time to consider their responses.

One positive outcome of the EDI/Careers panel was the series of persuasive stories aired by students who felt that they needed more support than was offered by default within their departments and universities. As a result, the BGA EDI officer and president decided to issue a general offer of external mediation for cases in which students had tried the avenues open to them within their organisation, but had failed to have their concerns addressed. Since PGRiP 2023, one intervention has been made on behalf of a group of students; the outcome is that an action plan was agreed and is being implemented within one university department to try to address the issues raised. The BGA will follow up with a request for information about progress, to encourage completion of the plan.

Capitalising on our progress

Building on the hard work of organisers and the clear appreciation of meeting attendees of PGRiP 2023, BGA intends to encourage the organisers of all the meetings and conferences that it supports financially to implement the successful actions taken.

But how can this be achieved? Not all organising committees will be as diligent and committed to this cause as the students who ran PGRiP 2023. Indeed, many overworked academics organising meetings in addition to heavy teaching loads and research responsibilities are unlikely to have the time to consider the numerous small details that can make such a difference to an individual’s ability to fully engage with a meeting. Some of us may feel we lack knowledge about how to build an accessible meeting, even if we wish to do so.

To assist event organisers BGA has written a set of Accessible Meeting Guidelines, which are available on the BGA website and will be distributed to anyone awarded BGA funding to support their event.

Guidelines are based on successful actions that were implemented at PGRiP 2023, feedback from attendees on future improvements, and what the committee wish they had done differently. They also benefitted from additional suggestions from the President of Diversity in Geoscience

(DiG) Prof Alison Stokes and the Royal Astronomical Society’s EDI Lead Dr Ben Fernando, as well as numerous excellent online resources.

These guidelines are designed to make implementation as easy to achieve as possible for event organisers. The document is concise (six pages, mostly bullet points) with a clear list of suggested actions to be implemented at each stage of a meeting, from initial planning to running the meeting on the day. Wherever possible, templates (such as codes of conduct, or consequences policies) are provided so that organisers can adapt the guidelines to their requirements without having to do significant additional work themselves. While the brevity of the guide limits the detail that it includes on how and why actions have impact, we include a full list of resources used to generate the guidelines for anyone who wants to learn more and delve into the details themselves. “We hope that this resource is useful for anyone in our community, even beyond the meetings run by the British Geophysical Association in future,” said BGA president Andrew Curtis. “The guidelines should make it as straightforward as possible to ensure that their events are welcoming to all.”

We leave you with a few final tips from PGRiP 2023’s lead organiser Sophia Baker for those trying to organise accessible meetings in the future: “As well as asking people for their access needs, implement as many accessibility measures as possible as default, using data from previous events as a point of reference. I can’t stress enough the benefit I anticipate this would have. People are often afraid to ask for accommodations, or don’t realise that they’re struggling until they get relief. Implementing accessibility measures by default also means that if someone’s access needs change, you’re more likely to have already anticipated and accommodated them. One simple example is always making sure your venue is wheelchair accessible, even if no-one initially says that they’ll need wheelchair access; if someone begins using a wheelchair, they are already catered for.

“If your event is truly accessible, attendees shouldn’t need to actively seek assistance to access it. Your venue isn’t wheelchair accessible if attendees need someone else to go inside and ask for a ramp or to operate a lift for them. If your quiet room is locked and attendees must find someone to unlock it for them then it’s not properly accessible. If people with dietary requirements are having to bring their own food when you’re providing it for other attendees, your event is not accessible. Alcohol should not be the default at social events – have just as many soft drink options, just as easily available. These are just a few of many scenarios where well-meaning organisers can fall short – or excel!

“Push for EDI measures even when it is hard. Listen to people. I would recommend following a diverse range of accounts on Twitter/X, Instagram, etc. as a way that anyone organising a conference (or anyone in general) can gently get a bit more clued up on the experiences of others.” ●

The BGA Accessible Meeting Guide

BGA meeting guidelines can be found here: geophysics.org.uk/bga-accessible-meeting-guide This will be continuously updated based on feedback from meetings. If you have any insights on what else should be included, please reach out to the BGA EDI officer to share your thoughts.

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