

A conversation about accessible university conferences

Here in the WAARC team we've been exploring what it means to curate an accessible and disability positive event. Members of our team have already written about this. This includes an [Accessibility guide for inclusive university events](#) - led by Antonios Ktenidis in collaboration with [the University of Sheffield Research Culture team](#) which builds on some earlier work Antonios did with Sheffield Voices in producing an [Easy read accessibility guide](#).

Dan: Hi. The three of you have been involved in organising and participating in university conference events. Can you tell me a little about some recent experiences?

Daniel: I have been involved in academic event organisation and facilitation since my MA degree, where I began attending conferences and working as a conference assistant for various events in order to help fund my degree programme. As a disabled and neurodivergent scholar myself, I was very much *forced* into thinking through accessibility and inclusion in various academic events. The additional labour of finding workarounds and small changes I could make to make things more accessible for me became something I expected when planning academic event attendance. However, this has now become a key part of my own ethics and practice as a scholar of disability - access and inclusion are core to my practice as a researcher who facilitates academic events, which has ultimately led to my involvement in the WAARC project!

Antonios: Soon after I joined the University of Sheffield as a lecturer, I succeeded in securing some internal funding from Research England to do work on inclusive research cultures (you can find more about this work [here](#)). As part of this work we co-created an [Accessibility Guide for University Events](#), which we made clear that it should not function as a "checklist" but instead a starting point to reflect critically on various access matters. Following the creation of the Guide, we (including the [Centre for Equity and Inclusion](#)) held a number of events, where we adhered to the principles of the guide to make our events as accessible and inclusive as possible. In hindsight, there are two highlights I would like to briefly reflect on. Firstly, one common theme that was reported by the attendees in the feedback forms about the events we organised was how they felt genuinely welcomed and that their access needs were most often met without having to engage in endless cycles of disclosure. Embedding anti-ableist principles (Ktenidis, in press) in such events, for instance, such as not being expected to sit still throughout such events, was something that attendees appreciated. On the other hand, there were times where we failed to meet attendees' access needs, especially in cases

of access frictions. Rather than treating such failures as the ‘elephant in the room’, we tried to have the difficult conversations that needed to be held in order for such mistakes to not be repeated. Most importantly though, we apologised genuinely and such apologies came with accountability (see [The Four Parts of Accountability & How To Give A Genuine Apology](#)).

Lauren: I have to say, I have less event organising experience than Daniel and Antonios but I have a few examples to reflect upon. The first is around my role as the School for Education’s Knowledge Exchange Lead where I organised an event on International Knowledge Exchange. The second is that I’d say that a lot of the work we do I build into my teaching practice. So imagining every classroom session as an event that requires us to think about very similar matters of access and inclusion. I also bring my own experiences of living with a chronic health condition into this, and this is a key lens in which I experience space, place and inclusion within higher education.

Dan: I know that you are all researching what makes an inclusive and/or accessible event. How do you understand these big words - ‘inclusive’ and ‘accessible’?

Lauren: Well, that’s a big question! The sociologist in me says that we each construct different meanings for what these mean and they are also contextual. However, these are commonplace words many of us use in our everyday life so I think we can think about everyday understandings to help us with this. In a simple way, inclusive means to be or feel included. Accessible means something (often a place or specific environment) can be accessed (e.g. got to). These are also in relation to each other. But of course as critical disability studies scholars, we know we can unpack this a lot further! How much time do we have? Ha!

Daniel: As Lauren suggested, this is a *huge* question and in all honesty it could be its own larger project - perhaps there’s some scope for more in depth research into this moving forwards! Ultimately, how I understand ‘access’ and ‘inclusion’ is in line with Lauren’s comments. If ‘accessibility’ is about getting people *in* the building, so to speak, then ‘inclusion’ is about what happens *after* people get in the building. Inclusion is much more about culture, and I think this is where some of the wider work in WAARC comes in, as a project specifically about anti-ableist research *culture*. However, it’s important to acknowledge our disciplinary backgrounds and how they might influence our understandings of these terms. I’m a social scientist who has been trained predominantly within the field of Human Geography. In our research in WAARC we’ve been speaking to people from a range of disciplinary backgrounds and from both researchers and professional service staff - the variation in how people understand the terms ‘access’ and ‘inclusion’ are stark. For example, ‘inclusion’ for some biomedical

researchers might refer more so to the specific inclusion criteria for data, whilst those in the social sciences may have an understanding more in line with what I previously mentioned. It raises a lot of questions about the language we use when thinking about anti-ableism in the context of research cultures. Is a shared language needed? Is it even possible?

Antonios: My understanding of these words/concepts has been shaped and informed by disabled activists, such as Sandy Ho, Mia Mingus, and Alice Wong (see for instance [Access is Love](#)), Critical Disability Studies scholars, such as Aimi Hamraie, Kelly Fritsch, Margaret Price, Tanya Titckosky, and collaboratives such as the [Critical Design Lab](#). Needless to say, this list is far more exhaustive, but I would encourage everyone to engage with their work.

In a recent article, [Whitburn and Riffo-Salgado \(2025: 1129\)](#) considered how they negotiate institutional ableism together “as a disabled scholar employed at a HEI in the UK, and a non-disabled, culturally and linguistically diverse individual employed to bridge inaccessible spaces.” To do so, they drew on “Wong’s (2023) conceptual framework of spatial belonging in higher education, which traverses the intersecting terrain of physical, digital, relational and structural spaces”. I found this conceptual framework along with the narratives of the colleagues particularly helpful, as it highlighted the multifaceted nature of accessibility as well as its relational aspects, drawing attention to matters such as ‘access intimacy’.

Regarding the word inclusive, [Haegele’s and Maher’s \(2023: 385\)](#) definition of ‘inclusion’ as “intersubjective experiences associated with feelings of belonging, acceptance, and value that are dynamic, ephemeral, spatial, and in flux” is the one that resonates the most with me currently. In particular, the attention to the relational, dynamic and affective aspects of inclusion and belonging are of equal importance to matters of physical access, for instance (see also [Goodley, Liddiard, and Runswick-Cole, 2018](#)).

Dan: It has been said, perhaps tongue in cheek, that the university is not really the most accessible venue to hold an event - what do you think?

Lauren: I’m afraid I would have to agree. Despite the university having a whole host of buildings and new developments, some of the fundamentals to access still aren’t being met. And often, this is an afterthought or a response to an event rather than centralising access in the very start of design and planning. I’d also go a step further in thinking about access beyond the university (e.g. thinking about Sheffield as a whole and its transport connections) and returning also to the concept of inclusion. Do people feel

included in university life and events? I think there's plenty of evidence that unfortunately says otherwise. For example, my work on joyful learning with students demonstrated that students often feel that education is not designed for diverse bodies and minds. So I see this as very much connected in how we imagine higher education and what goes on within it, whether that be a research focused event or an interaction within the classroom. And let's not get started about elitism...ha!

Daniel: The University as a broader concept, not solely the University of Sheffield, has a history of exclusion. The entire Higher Education system in the UK is designed based on elitism and those who achieve the highest grades. University and academia has been built on the concept of separating the most 'elite' thinkers from everyone else. As a result, there are many who have been actively excluded from Higher Education by universities, and this particularly affects disabled people. As a result, any University can be an inherently inaccessible place for people, regardless of any measures taken to ensure access or an *inclusive* culture on the inside. It is for this reason that universities have taken up civic engagement in order to build connections with the community their institutions are based within, which includes the hosting of events in non-university venues. Engaging and investing in the local community can be a great way for institutions to demonstrate their active involvement in the community, and to push back against the exclusionary foundations that academia as a whole have been built on.

Antonios: Ableist logics and practices are deeply rooted in university spaces and often remain unchallenged. There are wider questions that need to be considered and reflected on here, such as 'Who is the 'desired' audience of an event', 'Who is organising the event', 'Who is presenting at the event' etc. It is also no secret that the university can be experienced as a space of exclusion, violence, mistrust and so on, especially from communities which have been marginalised previously, including by the university as an institution, but they are now invited to be part of. Such resistance and refusal to access university spaces needs to be acknowledged and respected.

Secondly, very often assimilationist approaches to accessibility are often adopted by universities, where the expectation and onus lies on people to make themselves fit in. These are the very people that universities usually render as 'misfits' ([Garland-Thomson 2011](#)).

However, it is within the university (and its constraints) where some of these logics and approaches are pushed back. Co-production, working in partnership with Disabled People's Organisations, understanding access and accessibility as intersectional, political matters, anti-ableist initiatives, these are the things that make me feel a little more hopeful that there is also resistance from the inside.

Dan: If you were approached by a university colleague who was thinking of hosting, running and supporting an inclusive conference at the university, what three pieces of advice would you give them?

Daniel: For me, the first thing would be to be realistic about what you can commit to. One of the key issues amongst well-meaning colleagues is overpromising and under-delivering on access commitments. If you cannot afford to provide FFP-3/4 masks, do not state that it is a COVID-safe event; if there are limited accessible toilets available, let people know. It's important to be transparent about the access limitations and not to overstate how brilliantly accessible your event is without acknowledging limitations. Doing so ensures that people are able to make an informed decision about whether to attend or not.

Secondly, if you are hosting a hybrid or remote event, technology used at the event must be tested in advance. There is no point in providing a remote or hybrid option for event attendance if the tech has not been tested. This also extends to the use of microphones for in person attendance, sound systems more generally, and so on. Whilst tech issues can occur, time and time again we see easily avoidable accessibility issues that could have been prevented by things as simple as checking that a microphone had batteries charged, ensuring that microphones are placed so that Zoom, MS Teams or GoogleMeet calls can pick up the audio, or even just that presenters and organisers know how to use the technology they advertise as being a part of their accessibility commitments.

Finally, and something that I feel is incredibly important, is that you need to abide by your access commitments. If you have advised people to stay home and attend remotely if they are sick, then regardless of your role in the event, you *must* abide by this. If you are sick, host your panel remotely or ask a colleague to step in. There is always a better option than attending events whilst sick. Us disabled, neurodivergent and chronically ill folks in particular notice when commitments and promises are empty, and it has a profoundly negative impact on how inclusive events, organisations, institutions and even sectors feel as a whole. If we are seeking to move towards a more inclusive and accessible academia, we need to take this seriously. Ensuring access and inclusion is a collective responsibility, and we as organisers and facilitators are not above that.

Antonios: My response to this question draws on a [blog post/case study](#), where I reflected on the work I was involved in around inclusive research cultures. So, the first piece of advice was to be constantly critically reflective of all the decisions made to

organise such a conference and, most importantly, who is making such decisions and who remains excluded or whose voice is missing. It is quite common for one person to be the designated contact for accessibility practice, which perpetuates an understanding of access as an individualistic matter. Instead, I would strongly encourage the establishment of accessibility committees, which include diverse voices and lived experiences and decisions around access are made collectively. Moreover, such decisions might entail difficult conversations and discomfort. Be open to these and don't rush to shut them down.

Secondly, you do not need to reinvent the wheel. Such work -hosting, running and supporting inclusive events- is an established practice, not necessarily in university spaces, but in Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs). So, my second advice is work with DPOs, pay them for such work, learn from them and be led by them.

Last but not least, returning to my response to the first question, be prepared to be called out for failing to organise a fully accessible and inclusive event and reflect on how you respond when this happens. Avoid 'able-panicked' responses e.g. "it is not my fault, it's the technology that is not working today, next time we will remember this" and apologise genuinely for the wrongdoings, taking full accountability for them and demonstrating how the same mistakes will not be repeated.

Lauren: I think Daniel and Antonios have covered all the essential points so beautifully, so I'll come in with a slightly different lens. I want to draw attention to the affective - so the felt experiences of being part of an event...

First, I'm going to return to Antonios' point, who mentioned the wonderful work of Mia Mingus and the concept of '[Access Intimacy](#)'. There are some things we simply cannot plan for, but are relational. Access intimacy is 'that elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else "gets" your access needs'. This may not be something that conference organisers or chairs can be explicit about, but it is rather about noticing, listening and responding. And this might not arise until the day itself. It may be a 'I need to sit down to co-present today' or 'can we split this work up?' and your collaborator seamlessly works alongside you. As Mingus notes, 'some people who have the deepest access intimacy have no education or exposure to a political understanding of disability'. I think for me, it's about reminding ourselves of our human needs, our interdependencies, our vulnerabilities and our universal desire or need to feel connected. It's about smiling and nodding to the nervous presenter, asking generative questions, reminding others of their strengths. These are small things, but they matter.

Second, and related to the first, is a consideration of intersectionality. In feeling included, we must also remember that our social identities sit alongside each other. Things aren't felt or experienced equally. What does it mean to have a working class or regional accent in a room full of university academics? How does it feel when complex theory or jargon are used and you feel the panic of a lack of understanding? Is that even good research and scholarship? I don't think so. Are the women in the room given sufficient time to speak? Are beliefs, histories and politics all carefully held in the same space? All of these things need to be carefully considered if we are to have a truly inclusive event.

My third and final point is that failure and vulnerability are part and parcel of all of this work. Daniel and Antonios have also highlighted this but it's pretty crucial. We will always miss something, something will break, we may forget something, we may misunderstand or simply not align with a subjective experience of what it means to feel included. Centre failure and vulnerability and do this at the start (we discuss this in [our work with the Maker{Futures} team based on collaborative workshops](#)). Afterall, this is just part of the human condition and it's essential that we remind those that we occupy the space with that we are very much doing this (and learning this) together.