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Conferences need to be more diverse — but organizers must be cautious about how they achieve diversity.

WOMEN AND LGBTQ+ PEOPLE AREN'T TOKENS — DON'T TREAT THEM AS SUCH

A disingenuous invitation made Gwen Grinyer reconsider taking part in equity, diversity and inclusion sessions at conferences. **By Gwen Grinyer**

I recently turned down an invitation to participate in an important conference in my field. Such an invitation is normally an honour — and an opportunity for professional advancement that many early-career scientists don't get. So, why did I decline?

The invitation wasn't to talk about my research, but to co-organize a one-hour session for delegates to engage in conversations about equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in physics. According to conference

rules, I was told, this session had to be led by a woman. My heart sank. I felt I was invited only because of my gender — not because of my qualifications as a scientist.

Despite being a woman in physics and a member of the LGBTQ+ community, as well as being passionate about learning and supporting others to make my field more welcoming, EDI is not my area of expertise. I am educated, trained and qualified to study and talk about science. And, although I am more than happy

to share my own experiences and to be a visible role model for younger people, I am not qualified to run EDI training sessions for my peers and colleagues.

This conference has had more than 60 annual meetings — and very few of those meetings were chaired by a woman. I and another female scientist were asked, in the same e-mail, to lead the diversity session. We weren't given any guidance on what we should talk about or whether we would be

compensated for doing this volunteer work, or even acknowledged in any way.

Leading a diversity session is over and above our already busy jobs as scientists. It is also work that is most often given to (and unfairly expected of) people who belong to under-represented groups, who have been oppressed by historical and systemic barriers for their entire careers, and who are now overburdened with trying to make things better for future generations. The irony is that, because of this, diversity sessions are really important, but those running them take on more work. And because that leaves less time for research, they ultimately run the risk of falling further behind in their careers. Organizers must recognize this and value EDI contributions on a par with research.

“Organizers must be respectful, and take their roles seriously.”

This conference is held in the United States, which I would not feel safe visiting. In just the past few years, the country has seen significant increases in instances of gun violence, racism, homophobia and transphobia. In the first three months of this year, for example, US state legislators proposed a record 238 bills, most of them targeting the trans community, that would severely limit the rights of LGBTQ+ Americans. In June, the Supreme Court removed constitutional protections for access to abortions. As a result, some scientific conferences have already boycotted, or are considering doing so, states that have passed laws against abortion. I suggest that conference organizers take a similar approach to countries that have homophobic or transphobic legislation.

Make conferences inclusive

Being able to connect remotely to the conference would have alleviated some of my concerns. However, this option was not mentioned in my invitation, and I had the impression that the organizers were planning a full return to an in-person event, just like the ones before the COVID-19 outbreak. During the pandemic, online tools were developed and expanded that allow people to be included in in-person meetings in innovative ways, without having to be physically present. Providing such remote-access or hybrid options at conferences encourages participation from immuno-compromised individuals; people with disabilities; those whose safety is a concern in certain cities, states or countries; people

who encounter travel barriers, such as delays in obtaining visas or the prohibitive costs of attending an international conference; and people with children or other care responsibilities. Remote options are also an excellent choice to reduce our contributions to climate change.

Overall, I felt that my invitation to participate in this conference was tokenism and a poorly thought-out attempt at improving EDI. Such initiatives are of fundamental importance to science, and we need to treat them seriously. Approaches similar to the one that I experienced are performative and won't improve diversity in science – they will only damage it.

My message to conference organizers is simply that EDI initiatives require careful and thoughtful planning. There are several questions that you need to ask to create a safe, affirming and inclusive space for everyone. For anyone planning a conference, I suggest considering the following issues to make your event more inclusive:

- Why does your conference need a diversity session, and what are its goals?
- Is a short session at a week-long conference a serious enough attempt to make your field better? Can it be integrated into other activities to provide year-round opportunities?
- How are you going to ensure that everyone can participate and feel safe and welcome?
- Can you avoid placing all the responsibility of organizing the event on members of under-represented groups?
- What are you doing to acknowledge the effort that these people are putting into developing EDI initiatives?
- Are you treating the talk as an integral part of the conference programme? Don't schedule it as a parallel session or over a lunch break, and encourage all delegates to attend.
- Are you inviting under-represented speakers because you want them there and because you respect their knowledge and the value of what they can teach you? Or do you simply need to satisfy a diversity requirement?

Conferences are still very privileged, patriarchal places. For members of minority groups, speaking in these spaces about the barriers that they have faced in their journeys to become scientists can be vulnerable, personal and emotional experiences. So organizers must be respectful, and take their roles in planning these sessions seriously. Publicly reliving our trauma to satisfy your EDI obligations is not our job.

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