

Inclusivity in this virtual world of work



Diversity creates innovation, but how can we make our workplace more inclusive in the ever-changing world? Inclusivity is having a sense of belonging. It can be difficult to accommodate everyone's needs, or is that just a mindset that has stopped us from progressing?



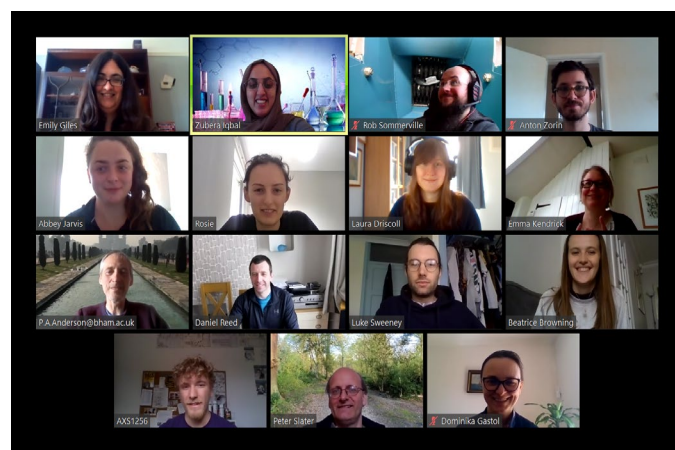
Zubera Iqbal is a Faraday Institution Research Fellow at the University of Birmingham, and member of the organisation's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Working Group, and provides her personal view...

The recent crisis has forced us into a new unknown world, everything we knew as normal, whether that be work life, social life and even family life has changed. Everything is now conducted at home; work, keeping healthy and even, strangely enough, socialising. One of the challenges we face is how do we keep inclusivity in the virtual world? In this blog I'll talk about my and other experiences in the hope that it helps others.

Keeping in Touch

As a Faraday Institution Research Fellow, my main responsibilities have been finding new ways to maximise the value of staring at a laptop all day. Instead of mixing chemicals and avoiding explosions in the lab I joined many groups on WhatsApp, Slack, Telegram, which helped with fostering a sense of belonging and enable me to keep up to date in a new virtual world. The university started a new Facebook support group and even my local community started a Facebook group to help the vulnerable in our area. There was so much help, support and energy coming from all directions it was refreshing and helped make the adjustment so much easier!

Zoom meetings were welcomed, as they are a great to catch up with everyone (plus explore the virtual background settings!) It's strange how you miss catching up with people on campus - the random conversations and knowing what day of the week it is! It was also good to hear updates on what the university was doing. I managed to get our group picture - can you spot any themes?



Dr Rob Sommerville from the ReLiB team also provided his experiences of the lockdown and how he's been making the most of his time: "Whilst this is a very troubling time, I'm fortunate to be able to put isolation to use clearing a backlog of paperwork, and working on review papers. Our research group's regular video calls allow me to keep in touch, and not feel isolated whilst working from home. In my spare time, I've been able to complete a couple of projects I've been putting off for a while."

SOME WAYS TO HELP MANAGE YOUR MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING



SEEK MEDICAL ADVICE

Speak to a medical professional about how you are feeling. This may lead to intervention such as medication or counselling to help you manage your mental health.



TAKE SOME TIME OUT

Taking a break can actually improve efficiency when you return to work. If you cannot justify taking a couple of weeks off, take a series of long weekends to get some time away.



FOCUS ON YOU

It is a proven fact that lack of sleep can add to feelings of stress. Exercise can also work to alleviate stress. It may feel like you don't have time, but going for a walk at lunchtime (for example) may be a positive change you can make.



REQUEST COUNSELLING

Universities have counselling services that are available for you to use. This can be useful to help talk through your problems and also make sure appropriate coping strategies are in place.



TALK TO YOUR SUPERVISOR

It is not always possible, but if you feel you can approach your supervisor, discuss your mental health concerns with them. Other options include discussions to reduce workload temporarily or take time out.



TALK TO YOUR PEERS / POSTDOCS

It is highly likely that people around you have also experienced the stressful nature of a PhD. Reach out, if you feel able. Remember, postdocs have survived their PhD so may have some useful tips / coping strategies.



CREATE MANAGEABLE CHUNKS

If everything is overwhelming, try to break down your research into manageable tasks. It may help to do this in consultation with your supervisor. A good tip is to aim to get into the lab first thing in your day, before looking at other tasks like emails.



READ LITERATURE

There are a large amount of online resources available to help manage mental health and wellbeing. For example, the charity Mind, have a range of booklets available, from how to manage stress, to how to support others with mental health problems.

As a final note, if your PhD is heavily affecting your mental health and wellbeing, there is absolutely no shame in quitting and starting a new chapter in your life. There are plenty of successful people that quit their PhD! Put it this way - you might put up with an ill-fitting t-shirt for a while, but you wouldn't wear it for 4 years!!

REFERENCES

1. Graduate Student Happiness & Well-Being Report, 2014, University of California, Berkeley.
2. Sakulku, J. The Impostor Phenomenon. The Journal of Behavioral Science, 6(1), 75-97.
3. Graduate survey: A love-hurt relationship, Nature 550, 549-552.
4. Guthrie, Susan, et al. Understanding mental health in the research environment: A Rapid Evidence Assessment. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017.
5. The Scientific Century: Securing our future prosperity, The Royal Society, 2010.

A poster by Dr Zoe Ayres (not a medical professional). Free to distribute.

Challenges

Very quickly my calendar, as I'm sure yours was, became filled with meetings and I felt that I may have celebrated too soon. I watched the [Royal Society of Chemistry talk on kindness](#), which focused on the topics of diversity and inclusion. It was refreshing to hear from all of the speakers including Dr Zoe Ayres, who is a research scientist and a mental health advocate who is very active on twitter ([@ZJAYres](#)). She gave an insight on how to manage your time best, and tips on how to manage your general health and wellbeing during lockdown. I've included a few tips from her above.

Dr Zoe's top tips were: don't feel guilty about relaxing, implement a routine with SMART goals and plan your day with time blocks so you can have rest periods without feeling guilty. Also remember most of the online meetings are recorded, so if you can't attend you can catch up later. Consider getting your teams to shorten meetings from say 1 hour to 50 minutes instead, just so you can have a quick break before the next one starts.

Top Tips on Meetings, Inclusivity and Socialising

To the right are some [great tips](#) by Charlotte Caimino, Eszter Porter and Stephanie Pearson, who work in Hearing Sciences at the University of Nottingham. They listed some effective ways to help maintain the feeling of community and productivity in these unusual times, in the hope that it will help others. I do hope you will find some useful. In this time of change we can embrace new and creative ways of working that will help not only ourselves, but others feel connected and included.

Meetings

- When not speaking, consider muting your microphone
- Try not to speak over one another. Type in the "chat" function if you have a question or raise your hand
- Consider recording the meeting, with everyone's consent, this is useful for people to play back parts they may have missed
- Be aware that people's working hours may have changed
- Set an agenda and share it before the meeting. Take minutes to be shared after the meeting
- Check at the beginning of the meeting that everyone can see/hear
- Be open to feedback and discussing ways to improve the meeting

Inclusivity

- Ask all attendees in advance if they have any specific requests relating to accessibility e.g. automated subtitles
- Do not shout or cover your mouth when speaking
- Talk at your usual pace and volume
- Make sure the room is well lit and you can see your face clearly
- Try to be in a room with minimal background noise
- Be mindful and patient. Many people aren't used to this technology and are likely to have more distractions when working from home
- This is a new way of communicating so be active with checking and clarifying things

About the Faraday Institution EDI Working Group

The Faraday Institution aspires to create a truly inclusive environment where all its researchers can thrive and feel a sense of belonging whilst empowering everyone to have a voice. We celebrate individuality and know that combining the skills and talents of a dynamic and diverse community brings great strength. The Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Working Group, headed up by CFO Susan Robertson, is looking at positive ways to ensure these values are lived out throughout our community.

If you would like to raise an issue with the EDI Working Group or write an EDI blog, please contact [Susan Robertson](#) or [Fran Long](#).

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