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Pulling up new chairs to the table: experiences of organising diversity and inclusion events during a pandemic

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Young Women of Geosciences (YWOG) is a group at Utrecht University (the Netherlands) which aims to create an equal and inclusive working environment for all employees in the faculty of Geosciences. Now in our fourth year, with an expanding committee and increasing support from the faculty, we share some details and insights from events held during the pandemic. After several years of having primarily the same small group of people attending our events (i.e. “preaching to the choir”) our aim was to engage with more people in our faculty. We wanted to pull up new chairs to the table and hear new opinions and thoughts and so, our events were planned with this primary goal in mind. However, under changing and variable conditions due to the pandemic, the planning of events to promote diversity and inclusion became more of a challenge. We had to devise strategies to keep people engaged in diversity and inclusion topics while people became tired of online events, and were busy just dealing with the pandemic.

Our primary success was a book giveaway and discussion where three books related to diversity and inclusion (some also with climate and environmental aspects) were given for free to 30 staff members. This was followed by an open online discussion about topics that arose in the books and how these issues were experienced in our own faculty. This session had the greatest number of male participants we have ever had at one of our events (despite all sessions always being open to all genders) and this led to great information sharing and discussions. We also organised two Wikipedia hackathons which aimed to improve information on Wikipedia about female and minority scientists. This event required a great deal of time and skill development which unfortunately many people were not able to commit to, which led to smaller numbers and less engagement than our book event.

Overall, we managed to introduce new groups of people to our discussions and engage with a broader audience than in previous years, within a virtual environment. We attribute this in large part to attractive events and hard work on our communication strategy. We found that engagement in activities, particularly for new attendees, was highly dependent on time availability and concrete communication of details of the event. We frequently used social media to communicate about our events and significant growth of these channels in the virtual-only environment of lockdowns led to overall increased engagement. This was particularly the case on Twitter, where we have found active and supportive fellow networks to engage with, be inspired

by, and inspire.