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Access-centred virtual conferencing for planetary science and beyond: reflections from Space Science in Context 2020

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There is a pressing need for climate-friendly conferences that are accessible to different people and which can still connect scholars meaningfully. The pressure on virtual conferencing technology in a COVID-19 era, as well as the many years of disabled activism around remote access and virtual meetings, make this an even more important issue. Furthermore, the need for dynamic intersection and collaborative work between the spheres of science and technology studies (STS), environmental and other justice-based activism, and the space sciences around issues of space ethics, governance, and human rights grows more urgent.

We will discuss Space Science in Context (14th May, 2020), an experimental virtual conference aiming to bring together space scientists, activists, and STS scholars, funded through the UCL Researcher-Led Initiative Award. The conference used a flipped-classroom model for 12 invited talk videos and ~30 multimedia e-posters across three primary sessions and two e-poster sessions, and engaged ~450 attendees worldwide. Invited talks were provided with full transcripts and closed captioning by Academic Audio Transcription, a company committed to the fair employment of disabled people. On the day of the conference, the five sessions were hosted at different times in video-chat hybrid formats. We reflect on the different access-centred aspects of this experimental format and their efficacy in facilitating cross-disciplinary conversations.