Courses and Workshops

Accessibility & Inclusion Guidelines

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1. Introduction

EMBO is committed to advancing excellence in the life sciences by supporting an international and diverse community of researchers. To achieve this, it is important that all participants—regardless of disability, health condition, or personal circumstance—can participate fully in EMBO meetings and events.

This guide was designed to reinforce the message that accessibility and inclusion in the context of scientific conferences go beyond compliance to specific measures (e.g. ramps, captions, or dietary labelling). The goal is to ensure that no participant is excluded or disadvantaged. Importantly, inclusive design can benefit everyone: clear signage helps both newcomers and those with vision impairments; microphones support those with hearing loss and those sitting far from the speaker in large conference rooms; dietary labels serve people with allergies as well as those with cultural or ethical preferences.

We would encourage the organizers of EMBO-funded meetings to consider accessibility early on during their planning, which will enable them to create an environment where all participants feel respected, supported, and able to contribute their best. Below are some suggestions for organizers. It is important to remember that even small measures can have a meaningful impact. Thoughtful planning and adopting these practices, where possible, can help reduce barriers to participation, foster diverse perspectives, and strengthen the scientific dialogue that EMBO seeks to promote.

2. Venue and Pre-Meeting Arrangements

- **Choosing a venue:** Selecting step-free, wheelchair accessible venues with ramps, lifts, and wide corridors makes participation possible for those with mobility needs, and easier for everyone handling luggage or equipment.
- **Sanitary facilities:** Accessible toilets, ideally with a gender-neutral option, provide dignity and comfort for participants who might otherwise feel excluded.
- **Accommodation:** Recommending hotels with verified accessibility helps participants plan with confidence, reducing stress and uncertainty.
- **Transport information:** Sharing details about accessible public transport or taxis ensures that travel to and from the meeting is manageable for all.
- **Registration:** Including a question on access requirements shows to participants that their needs are valued and will be considered.

- **Event materials:** Providing advance materials in accessible formats (e.g., tagged PDFs, Word with alt text) enables participants using assistive technology to prepare and engage fully.

3. On-Site Setup and Delivery

- **Signage and navigation:** Clear, high-contrast signage benefits everyone—from those with low vision to first-time visitors—by making navigation intuitive.
- **Audio accessibility:** Using microphones and, where feasible, captioning ensures that participants with hearing loss are included, while improving clarity for all attendees.
- **Presentations:** High-contrast slides and verbal descriptions of visuals aid those with vision impairments, and support learning for those unfamiliar with the topic.
- **Seating:** Providing priority seating recognizes that some participants need to be closer to the speaker or screen, helping them to participate equally.
- **Poster sessions:** Wider aisles between poster boards improve mobility access and reduce crowding for everyone.
- **Networking:** Offering quieter networking options acknowledges different communication preferences, supporting those who find large groups challenging.
- **Scheduling:** Regular breaks and keeping sessions on time show respect for participants' wellbeing and allow people to manage health, childcare, or other needs.

4. Food and Environment

- **Dietary options:** Clearly labelled food ensures that participants with allergies or dietary restrictions can eat safely and reflects cultural and ethical diversity.
- **Quiet rooms:** A designated quiet space benefits participants with sensory sensitivities and can support anyone who needs a private pause.
- **Lighting:** Avoiding strobe or flashing lights reduces risk for people with photosensitive conditions, while ensuring a comfortable environment for all.

5. Virtual and Hybrid Participation

- **Captioning:** Live captions allow participants with hearing impairments to engage, and they also help non-native speakers follow discussions.
- **Transcripts:** Recorded transcripts offer flexibility for those who cannot attend live, extending the reach of the meeting where no unpublished data is presented.
- **Templates:** Accessible slide templates support speakers in preparing materials that are readable and inclusive.
- **Remote interaction:** Remote poster or networking options open participation to researchers who may face financial, health, or visa barriers to travel.

6. Speaker Considerations

- **Guidelines:** Encouraging speakers to use clear fonts, high contrast, image descriptions, and accessible colour choices helps ensure their work is understood by the widest possible audience.

  Slide Accessibility: To make presentations more inclusive, organizers can provide an accessible slide template to presenters or otherwise provide guidance on how to prepare slides.

  Guidance may include the following tips: Use clear, sans-serif fonts in large sizes (24pt or above) to support readability. Ensure strong contrast between text and background (for example, dark text on a light background or light text on a dark background) and avoid colour combinations that are difficult for people with colour vision deficiencies (e.g., red–green). Where colour is used, pair it with another indicator such as bold text, symbols, or patterns. Keep slides uncluttered with limited text per slide, consistent layouts, and minimal distractions such as busy backgrounds or excessive animations.

7. Support and Feedback

- **Staff and volunteers:** Training staff in accessibility awareness ensures they can respond sensitively, making participants feel welcome and supported.

- **Accessibility contact:** A dedicated point of contact reassures participants that help is available if challenges arise.
- **Feedback:** Collecting and acting on feedback shows that accessibility is valued as an ongoing process of improvement, not a one-time effort

Annex 1: EMBO Accessibility & Inclusion Checklist

Quick reference for meeting organizers

1. Before the Meeting

☐ Venue is fully wheelchair accessible (step-free, ramps, lifts, wide corridors).
☐ Accessible toilets available, gender-neutral option signposted.
☐ Hotels with verified accessibility recommended.
☐ Public transport & accessible taxi information provided.
☐ Access needs question included in registration.
☐ Event materials available in advance in accessible formats (PDF/Word with alt text).

2. On-Site Setup

☐ Large, high-contrast signs with clear fonts & pictograms.
☐ Venue maps highlight accessible routes, quiet rooms, toilets.
☐ Microphones used for all speakers & audience questions.
☐ Live captioning or speech-to-text (if available).
☐ Slides & videos are high contrast, with verbal descriptions of visuals where possible.
☐ Priority seating for those with hearing, vision, or mobility needs.
☐ Adequate space between poster boards for wheelchair access.
☐ Quiet networking options available.
☐ Regular breaks in the program
☐ Keeping sessions on time so that breaks are not skipped

3. Food & Environment

☐ All food labeled for allergens & dietary preferences (vegan, vegetarian, halal, kosher, gluten-free, lactose-free).
☐ Quiet room available for breaks.
☐ No strobe or flashing lights used.

4. Virtual & Hybrid

☐ Live captioning for virtual sessions.
☐ Recordings have transcripts.
☐ Accessible presentation templates shared with speakers.
☐ Remote participation options for posters/networking.

5. Speaker Guidance and Slide Accessibility

☐ Guidelines sent in advance: clear fonts (min. 24 pt), high contrast, image descriptions, no red/green-only distinctions.
☐ Slides uploaded early for accessibility checks.

6. Support & Feedback

☐ Staff/volunteers trained in accessibility support & easy to identify.
☐ On-site accessibility contact point or phone number provided.
☐ Anonymous post-event accessibility feedback collected.