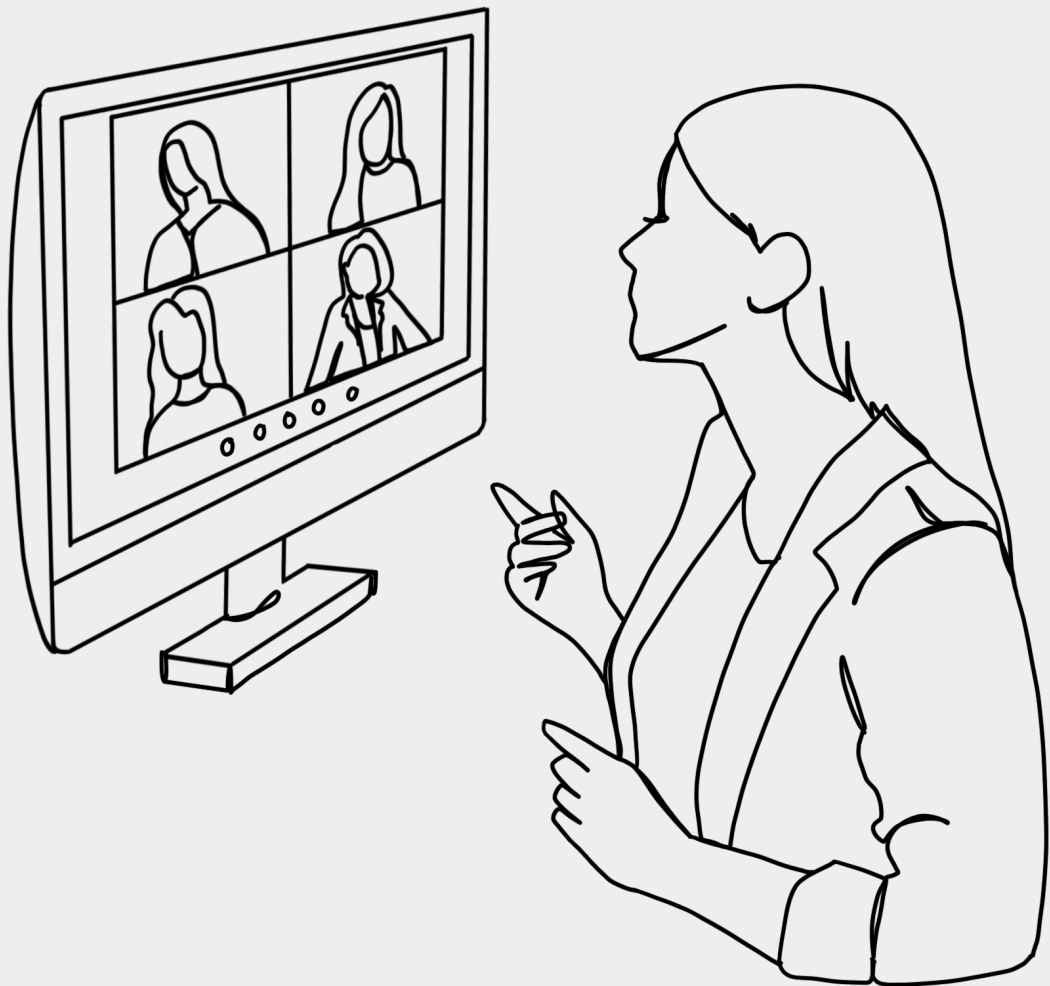# DWL
## DIVERSE WOMEN IN LAW

# IMPACTS OF ONLINE ENGAGEMENT ON DIVERSE WOMEN LAW STUDENTS

## IN CONSULTATION WITH THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY BUSINESS SCHOOL

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# INTRODUCTION

Diverse Women in Law Inc[1] (DWL), in consultation with the University of Sydney Business School, undertook a survey of law students from universities across Australia[2] identifying as Diverse Women[3] between June 2020 and June 2021 to understand their experiences following restrictions on face-to-face interactions and events due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Survey).

The aim of the survey was to understand whether the shift to an online interface enabled or restricted the mode of interaction for Diverse Women law students. That is, did they experience changes in behaviour – good, bad or indifferent. The central question we sought to answer was: how did Diverse Women law students experience the shift to online engagement, including online networking events, training, online classes, work and mentoring initiatives (Online Engagement)?

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1 For details about DWL's mission, visit https://www.diversewomeninlaw.com.au/mission.
2 The survey was shared publicly, on DWL's social media pages and with the law students' societies the following universities: Adelaide University, Australian National University, Bond University, Canberra University, Curtin University, Deakin University, Flinders University, Griffith University, James Cook University, La Trobe University, Macquarie University, Monash University, Sydney University, University of New England, University of Queensland, University of Sunshine Coast, University of Technology Sydney, University of Western Australia.
3 DWL defines Diverse Women as people who self-identify as women (cis, non-binary or gender diverse) and also self-identify as being from one or more the following underrepresented backgrounds: culturally and linguistically diverse persons, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander persons, LGBTIQ+ persons, people living with a disability, people who are or have experienced socioeconomic disadvantage and people with caring responsibilities (collectively, Diverse Women).

# FINDINGS & TAKEAWAYS

This report outlines findings from the 177 Survey responses which included both quantitative and qualitative questions.[4] The survey aims to reveal the preferences, advantages, and disadvantages of Online Engagement during COVID-19 as experienced by Diverse Women law students. Accordingly, we have outlined the "key takeaways" from the outcomes of survey responses as practical considerations to keep in mind when hosting or attending an Online Engagement. In summary, these include:

1.    No camera, no worries: There is no universal experience when it comes to "presenting" oneself during Online Engagements. When hosting or attending an Online Engagement, there are likely a range of reasons why a Diverse Woman law student may choose to have their camera off, including lack of access to a clear, quiet space, consciousness about their appearance and privacy concerns. However, there may also be some negative implications of having cameras off during Online Engagements, as individuals are unable to interact fully by not engaging with expression, body language or other non-verbal cues.

2.    Hybrid online and offline: As the world is slowly returning to more in-person events, consider offering "hybrid" events, whereby attendees are given the option of attending either in-person or online. This reduces barriers of engagement for those who, for example, live in outer metropolitan regional or rural settings or have limited mobility due to a disability or caring responsibilities. However, it also allows those who face difficulties with Online Engagement (e.g., due to poor internet, insufficient working space at home or a general difficulty with online interactions) to engage in the discussion. Where events can be accessed online, consider making available a written Q&A option (e.g. via chat function) which is actively monitored by coordinators, or allocating time for people to ask questions, so that attendees can engage without fear of interrupting.

3.    Safe space for discussion: Whether online or in-person, a safe space should be created for Diverse Women law students to speak about their backgrounds: that is, their lived experience as Diverse Women; concerns they may have in relation to entering the legal profession and any personal challenges they may be experiencing. Such discussions must be encouraged by hosts or moderators of Online Engagements to ensure a safe space for Diverse Women law students in the legal profession.

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4 Responses were received from 177 respondents who self-identified as Diverse Women studying law in NSW at the time of completing the survey

# VISIBLE AND NON-VISIBLE INDICATORS OF DIVERSITY

The responses to the Survey indicated that having a "visual" indicator of diversity changed the experience of certain Diverse Women law students accessing Online Engagements during COVID-19 restrictions. Whilst around 65% of all respondents preferred to have their cameras off during Online Engagements, 80% of respondents who identified as having a disability and/or from lower socio-economic backgrounds noted a preference to switch off their cameras.

The concerns affecting certain groups of Diverse Women law students may not necessarily be visually apparent in person, however may be amplified in online engagements. For example, respondents experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage noted:

"I live in a small apartment and don't have a very professional looking space so I prefer to keep the camera function off"

"I feel more connected when the camera is on but I prefer to keep mine off because my apartment is small and I feel like there's no suitable place to Zoom."

A number of other respondents who preferred to keep their camera off during Online Engagements cited feeling self-conscious, intimidation and anxiety when their camera was on during Online Engagements. For example, one respondent from a culturally, racially and/or linguistically diverse background noted, "I feel like people take me more seriously when they do not know what I look like. There is absolutely no judgment of my opinions and contributions and it feels so empowering".

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Key Takeaway

There is no universal experience for Diverse Women law students when it comes to "presenting" oneself during a video-conference. When hosting or attending an Online Engagement, you should be aware of and consider the range of reasons why an attendee may choose to have their camera off, rather than assuming that is because they are disengaged, or are doing something else.

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# CONFIDENCE AND EMPOWERMENT IN DISCUSSION

Survey respondents provided varied and interesting insights regarding confidence and empowerment in both person-to-person discussions and online engagement.

## Comfort levels: in person

Over 52% of respondents felt more empowered in person than they did online. Those who preferred in-person discussions attributed this to fears of interrupting in online engagements. One respondent noted, "I think... I'm going to interrupt someone [and that] turning yourself off mute feels like such a big step and requires a lot of confidence". This reflects the findings of Molyneaux, ODonnell et al. (2008) in their paper on "Participatory Videoconferencing for Groups", which noted that "in multi-site videoconferences gaining floor control to interject or ask questions can be challenging." [5]

This is likely further exacerbated by difficulties in reading non-verbal cues online (e.g. body language, eye contact). For example, one respondent noted:

"I find it easier to speak up [in person] because it's easier not to accidentally interrupt someone in person and I find you can convey meaning more effectively in person through expression and gesture. I also feel it's important to have eye contact with peers and professors when speaking to them and I dont think this is the same virtually."

Even when people have their cameras turned on, body language is difficult to interpret online, and eye contact is near impossible in video calls involving more than two people.[6] Some Diverse Women law students noted that a lack of non-verbal cues was disempowering compared to in-person discussions, with one respondent noting in-person events "enable me to employ more body language to express my views", and another noting "body language and physical proximity help with feeling more empowered".

5 Heather Molyneaux, Susan ODonnell, Helen Fournier and Kerri Gibson, 'Participatory videoconferencing for groups,' (2008) Proceedings of the IEEE International Symposium on Technology and Society 8, 5.
6 Ibid.

# CONFIDENCE AND EMPOWERMENT IN DISCUSSION

## Comfort Levels: online

However, many respondents also noted they felt more confident in Online Engagements. This was often based on fear of judgement of personal appearance in person. One survey respondent from a culturally, racially and/or linguistically diverse background felt <u>"as though everyone is seen as equal and there is no way for people to judge my dress code or hairstyle"</u>. Another respondent noted that <u>"[my] camera [is] turned off so I do not worry about what I'm wearing or my hair etc"</u>. In our view, Diverse Women law students whose appearance may provide an indication of their diverse background (i.e. due to physical attributes) may be subject to assumptions, (un)conscious bias or perceptual shortcuts made about them based on their physical features/appearance. Therefore, the ability to be more anonymous in online forums may also increase confidence and remove the fear of judgement as a Diverse Woman. These feelings are not unfounded, with Molyneaux, ODonnell et al. (2008) noting[7] that <u>"virtual teams are judged more on performance than discriminatory or stereotypical cues"</u>. However, Online Engagement is not the panacea when it comes to avoiding bias and assumptions,[7] with one respondent noting:

> "In one of my zoom tutorials, I was asked if I was an international student (I am not) simply because my accent is American. It felt quite awkward for me to explain that I am not an international student over a zoom call and that my accent is the way it is because I am a Filipino."
>
> [1]

There are also clear practicalities in engaging online rather than in person. One respondent living with a disability noted that <u>"online is more accommodating to my needs"</u>. Online Engagements not only provide an alternative means of communicating and providing information to law students, they also provide greater accessibility (e.g. easier access for individuals with mobility difficulties or caring responsibilities).

7 Ibid 4.

# CONFIDENCE AND EMPOWERMENT IN DISCUSSION

Finally, whilst respondents were generally split on whether they experienced a change in confidence regarding asking questions online, those that experienced an increase in confidence cited the "text chat" and "anonymous question" functions as enabling interaction. One respondent found that asking questions online was "less intimidating than face-to-face", and another respondent noted that she felt "more comfortable and assertive in participating in the discussion" at home. This aligns with the findings of Teoh, Regenbrecht and OHare (2011) in their paper on the interaction of gender and video-conferencing, which noted: "the distance and lack of face-to-face interaction means that domination and posturing related to physical size or gender is not able to be used".[8]

Key Takeaway

As the world slowly returns to more in-person events, consider offering "hybrid" events, whereby people are given the option of attending in person or online. Having both options reduces barriers to engagement for those who may find in-person events more difficult to access or more physically intimidating, however, it also allows those who are less able to attend online (e.g., due to poor internet or insufficient working space at home) to engage in the discussion in-person.

Where events can be accessed online, consider making available written Q&A, or specifically leaving time for people to ask questions, so that an individual can engage without fear of interrupting.

8 Cameron Teoh, Holger Regenbrecht and David OHare, 'The transmission of self: Body language availability and gender in videoconferencing,' (2011) University of Otago 273, 274.

# DISCUSSION OF BACKGROUND AND EXPERIENCES

Around 60% of respondents did not find a difference in the confidence they felt talking about their background or experiences as a Diverse Woman in Online Engagements versus in person events. The two most common reasons for this were that (a) the respondents did not feel comfortable speaking about their background in any context, and (b) they did not feel as though they had the opportunity to do so. For example, one respondent from a lower socioeconomic background noted, "[w]hen I went to university I was judged by my background, and certain people didn't want to be friends with me so I do not share it in any setting". Furthermore, some respondents found that talking about their background would not be positively received online or in person. In particular, one respondent commented:

*"I do not engage in this type of conversation with people who are not really interested in changing anything for the better. I am sick of complaining and being perceived as a problem."*

Whilst working, studying, and networking online may not have generally changed the confidence of Diverse Women law students to talk about their backgrounds or experiences, this speaks to the broader cultural issue of people feeling like the "other", rather than being able to speak openly about their diverse backgrounds and still be accepted without judgement or bias. This aligns with the findings of Molyneaux, ODonnell et al. (2008), whose study found that "participants using videoconferencing interacted with the technology according to pre-established social norms that were critical in determining how the videoconferencing system was used".[9]

These findings therefore highlight the importance of changing those social norms to create spaces where Diverse Women law students feel comfortable talking about their experiences and backgrounds. This may include ensuring there is a diverse array of attendees so that individuals feel less "tokenistic" or for the moderator to ask specific questions that prompt individuals to share their experiences.

> **Key Takeaway**
> Whether online or in-person, a safe space must be created for Diverse Women law students to speak about their backgrounds and such discussions must be encouraged by hosts or moderators of online engagements.

9 Molyneaux (n 5) 2.

# NETWORKS AND CONNECTIONS

Around <u>50% of respondents</u> found that their access to existing networks and connections was reduced online, and that it was harder to create new networks. Many cited a reduced personal connection and an inability to have one-on-one discussions in the context of larger events. For example, one respondent noted <u>"[i]t's disheartening to see a chatroom with like 80 participants because you know there's no chance of forming any sort of connection"</u>. A number of respondents revealed that the inability to connect on a personal, one-on-one basis made accessing these networks difficult. As one respondent aptly put it, it's <u>"easier to attend events but harder to build a rapport".</u>

However, whilst some found online engagements more difficult for rapport-building, others found it easier to create new networks online. For example, one respondent noted that online engagements have broadened her network geographically, as <u>"being able to engage with individuals outside of [my state] community has been a wonderful experience and my network has grown".</u> Therefore, whilst the quality of engagement may be reduced for many Diverse Women law students, our findings show that having <u>easily accessible online engagements</u> may increase the ability of many groups who may otherwise be less mobile to engage in the first place.

> **Key Takeaway**
> As outlined above, a hybrid online and in-person model should be adopted where possible so that attendees may choose to attend as best suits them, and access to the event is universally greater.
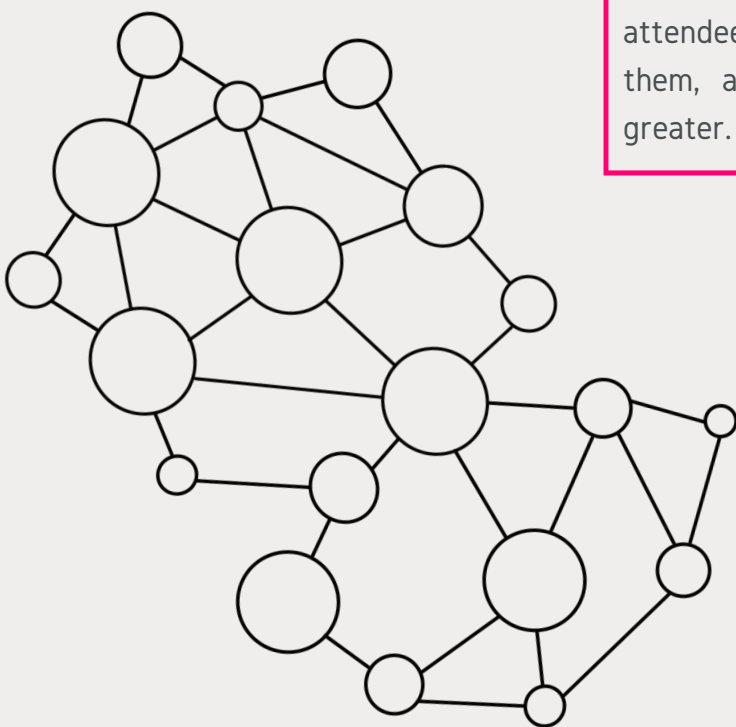
# CONCLUSION

This report has demonstrated that there is no 'one size fits all approach' to facilitating Online Engagements with Diverse Women law students during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the world begins to return to in-person events, providing options for both online and in-person attendance will ultimately increase accessibility to, and engagement with, events for all involved. Furthermore, during Online Engagement, it is important to allow individuals to attend in the manner which suits them – whether their camera is on or off, or whether they engage verbally or through a chat function. As outlined in this report, rather than demonstrating disengagement, not turning on the camera or using the chat function may allow the individual to increase their engagement, and allowing individuals to do so without judgement is important. As <u>"communication is influenced and shaped by our cultural experiences and gender stereotypes, and it is a learned social behaviour from childhood"</u>,[10] it is important to take into account the experiences of Diverse Women law students in both providing events which are accessible and not judging their engagement during Online Engagement.

*Diverse Women in Law*

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10 Sherry Wang and Marilyn A Roubidoux, 'Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), Videoconferencing, and Gender' (2020) 17(7) Journal of the American College of Radiology 918, 918.