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Whose culture is it anyway? Perceptions of accessibility in museums by professionals working with people with intellectual disabilities in Greece

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ABSTRACT

This research examines perceptions of accessibility in museums by professionals who work with people with intellectual disabilities and live in housing/rehabilitation settings in Greece and highlights factors and conditions that hinder people with intellectual disabilities from experiencing culture when visiting museums. Out of the 46 officially registered social organisations by the Hellenic Ministry of Health and the Hellenic Ministry of Employment and Social Affairs, 35 participated in the study, a percentage that allows monitoring the situation on a national level. The results showcase deficiencies in the provision of accessibility to cultural heritage with regards to information content, exhibitions and visitor experience, and participation and co-creation opportunities for this particular audience. This paper also makes policy proposals targeted at museums, aiming at enhancing accessibility to culture for people with intellectual disabilities and comes to fill a gap in the respective literature.

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Museums; cultural accessibility; intellectual disability; co-creation; human rights

Introduction

Museums serve as essential cultural institutions in society, imparting knowledge to the public and showcasing a wide array of cultural facets via their exhibitions and activities. The topic of International Museum Day (2020), 'Museums for equality: Diversity and Inclusion', urged museums to be accessible to a wide range of audiences. Nevertheless, not everyone enjoys the same level of access to cultural experiences, whether as audiences, artists, researchers or experts. People with disabilities, in particular, encounter obstacles due to various factors, including the lack of accessibility in cultural settings or content.

Research shows that museums do not offer the same opportunities as other social institutions regarding the needs of people with disabilities such as wheelchair users, the visually challenged, and people with hearing impairment or intellectual disabilities (Montscho 2022). People with disabilities have been historically experiencing isolation

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from society, and this sometimes continues even in recent years. Like other minority groups, people with intellectual disabilities wish to be accepted and integrated into society, but research shows that they are often victims of social stigma and prejudices (Li and Moore 1998). As Montscho (2022) argues, people with disabilities belong to the community educated or represented by museums, so it is of paramount importance to make museums accessible to them by enabling access with regard to different disabilities within the museum space.

Empirical research has provided much evidence of people who struggle because they have been stigmatised by having an intellectual disability (Kelsey 2011; Kelsey and Wade 2014). Intellectual disability is non-visible, and as such, it requires further support and different solutions that relate mostly to sensory, cognitive and language accessibility, adapted methodologies and specific staff training, which are not always easy to provide. In addition, people with intellectual disabilities who are resident in social facilities are often deprived of cultural opportunities, and accessibility in public goods, therefore, are at risk of social exclusion or have been socially excluded (EASPD 2021). These arguments inform the rationale of this paper.

Aim of the research

The aim of the research is to identify and discuss perceptions of accessibility in museums by professionals working with people with intellectual disabilities and live in housing/rehabilitation settings in Greece. The two main research questions it answers are what is the perception of professionals working with PIDs who live in housing/rehabilitation settings in regards to the accessibility of museums in Greece, and which are the factors that may hinder or reinforce this accessibility. The paper highlights factors and conditions that hinder people with intellectual disabilities from fully enjoying access to and experiencing museums. The discussion also underlines the importance of supporting and facilitating the needs of this segment of the disability population and makes policy proposals for museums to address the issue.

We are basing our underpinnings on barriers and facilitators on the World Report of Disability references regarding these two terms. The Report considers barriers as 'factors in a person's environment that, through their absence or presence, limit functioning and create disability', and facilitators as 'factors in a person's environment that, through their absence or presence, improve functioning and reduce disability' (WHO and World Bank 2011, 302; 304 as seen in Leahy and Ferri 2022, 69).

Methodology

A self-reported questionnaire was developed and distributed online in order (a) to reach a wider sample size and (b) to increase the geographic distribution of the sample (Stalikas 2011). The online questionnaire contained 25 close-ended questions in total (including 6 demographic questions). These were evaluated by participants based on a Likert scale (1–5, or 1–3). Based on the literature review, the questionnaire examined the following indicator areas: cultural accessibility, information accessibility, physical accessibility, sensory accessibility, content accessibility, adapted guide tours, experiential workshops and methodology and co-production and participation of disabled artists in museums.

The questionnaire was kept as short as possible in order to decrease the drop-out response rate, which is one of the main challenges of internet-mediated research (Stalikas 2011), and was distributed in Greek since the recipients' mother tongue was Greek.

Questionnaires were administered to the coordinators/professionals working with the target population in different areas of Greece. Online questionnaires were sent exclusively to the certified Public Social Rehabilitation Mental Health and Disability Facilities (Supported Living Housing facilities for People with Disabilities, Social Rehabilitation Units, Day Centres for People with Disabilities, and semi-autonomous apartments for People with Disabilities) that were listed as officially registered by the Hellenic Ministry of Health and the Hellenic Ministry of Employment and Social Affairs as organisations providing support to People with Intellectual Disabilities. Out of the 46 officially registered social organisations, 35 participated in the study ($N=35$), which is a significant percentage in order to monitor the situation on a national level. Inclusion criteria for the individual participants were (a) being a professional, (b) providing direct support to the current target that lives/receives services from Social Rehabilitation Mental Health Facilities and (c) working as a professional in Social Rehabilitation Mental Health Facilities.

The questionnaire was designed considering the definition of accessibility (UNCRPD, Article 9¹). According to the article

to enable persons with disabilities to live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life, States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure to persons with disabilities access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment, to transportation, to information and communications, including information and communications technologies and systems, and to other facilities and services open or provided to the public, both in urban and in rural areas.

The aim of the questionnaire was, therefore, to collect data with regards to different forms of accessibility such as physical accessibility and accessibility to the different museum facilities, and multisensory accessibility and accessibility to digital information. Additional data gathered include the training of museum staff and customised services provided by museums, particularly for people with intellectual disabilities, which are also enablers and facilitators of accessibility for these audiences. The list of the questions, except the demographic ones, is here below:

1. How often do you visit cultural organisations with your beneficiaries?
2. How well do you know the available services provided by cultural organisations for this target group?
3. How are you being informed about these services?
4. How are your beneficiaries being informed of the available services so that they can choose themselves which ones they would like to visit?
5. Is the information provided by the available cultural organisations in an accessible language so that your beneficiaries can decide if they are interested in visiting them?
6. Is this information reaching out directly to the beneficiaries in ways that they have access to?
7. Please evaluate the available services in the cultural organisations that you have lately visited with your beneficiaries in terms of safety and infrastructure (e.g., access to wheelchairs, adapted bathrooms)

8. Please evaluate the available services in the cultural organisations you have lately visited with your beneficiaries in terms of multisensory accessibility (i.e., special labelling for sound/ visual stimuli, crowded areas, etc.)
9. Please evaluate the available services in the cultural organisations you have lately visited with your beneficiaries in terms of spatial orientation (e.g., visual maps, tactile maps, etc.)
10. Please evaluate the available services in the cultural organisations you have lately visited with your beneficiaries: are there available cultural services financially accessible for your beneficiaries?
11. Please evaluate the services in the cultural organisations you have lately visited with your beneficiaries: are there guided tours for people with special needs?
12. When you visit a cultural organisation, what kind of guided tour do you choose for your beneficiaries?
13. If you use customised tour services, what are the tools used that relate to your beneficiaries?
14. Are there adapted tour guides in a suitable language for your beneficiaries (e.g., tactile guides, easy-to-read guides);
15. What do you think about the importance of customised tours in terms of the understanding of the cultural experience by your beneficiaries?
16. How well trained is the staff (guards, café/reception staff) of the cultural organisations you have visited to welcome people with disabilities?
17. How well trained are the guides of the cultural organisations you have visited to guide people with disabilities?
18. How often do your beneficiaries have access to co-creation opportunities in cultural institutions?
19. Do you know if there are any relevant opportunities/projects for disabled artists from cultural organisations?

Information, consent forms and research contact details were provided in the first page of the questionnaire. Only complete questionnaires were included in the data analysis. The research project has been approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University where the first author was studying during the time the research took place. The empirical research was conducted by the first author as part of a larger research project; the other parts of the paper have been enriched and complemented by both authors. The project complies with the GDPR guidelines, and anonymity has been ensured throughout the data collection process. Geographic distribution was attempted and was representative of the services distribution in Greece; 50% of organisations were based in Athens and Central Greece, 30% in Northern Greece and 20% in Southern Greece and in the islands.

Disability and accessibility: some theoretical underpinnings

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities² (UNCRPD) is the main international legal framework affirming the human rights and fundamental freedoms of people with disabilities. The UNCRPD is dedicated to ensuring and promoting the complete realisation of all human rights for people with disabilities by introducing new laws, policies and programmes and assessing existing measures.

Article 30³ of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities emphasises the entitlement of individuals with disabilities to engage in cultural activities. This includes access to culture via accessible formats for different cultural genres such as film, television or theatre. Furthermore, it extends this right to include cultural services and performances, encompassing theatres, museums, cinemas, libraries and possibly also monuments and sites of national cultural significance. Additionally, it establishes the right of individuals with disabilities to develop and apply their creative, artistic, and intellectual talents, whether they are amateur or professional artists and emphasises the importance of recognising and supporting their linguistic and cultural identities, such as sign language. For this purpose, it is essential to guarantee that intellectual property rights laws do not create unjust or prejudicial obstacles for individuals with disabilities when it comes to accessing cultural resources. The UN organisation responsible for advancing accessibility for people with disabilities, along with UNESCO, is committed to endorsing and facilitating accessibility for everyone at historical landmarks, heritage sites and cultural establishments, such as museums and galleries, and within the cultural sector. Their aim is to foster the development of comprehensive knowledge-based societies and work towards accomplishing the Sustainable Development Goals.

When discussing the integration of individuals with disabilities into social and cultural life, the primary barriers often result from social stereotypes and prejudices. The Centre for the Human Rights of Users and Survivors of Psychiatry (CHRUSP⁴) and the Campaign to Support CRPD Absolute Prohibition of Commitment and Forced Treatment (Absolute Prohibition Campaign⁵) have recently introduced (2018) the term ‘psychosocial disability’ that is perceived as relevant to the issues of assumed incapability for the cultural accessibility of people with intellectual disabilities. The term is defined as

the person’s experience of discrimination, which may include segregation, confinement, violations of autonomy, and physical and mental integrity and/or denial of desired supports and accommodations, based on their subjective distress or disturbance or attributions of others to them of distress or disturbance.⁶

According to the World Report on Disability research (World Health Organization and The World Bank 2011), 75% only of disabled people are employed; 28.4% of disabled people are at high risk of social exclusion or of poverty compared to 17.8% of non-disabled people and 52% of people with disabilities have experienced discrimination. The 2015 impact assessment,⁷ which accompanied the European Accessibility Act, included further information on the access to cultural life by people with disabilities (Pasiowska-Schnass 2019).

The social disability movement has placed forward the right for people with disabilities to be part of all aspects of the community with the distinctive motto *Nothing For us Without Us* (Etmanski 2020). Providing opportunities for co-creation and participation can be associated with efforts to valorise disability experiences and to overturn the devaluation that society holds for people with disabilities (Jakubowicz and Meekosha 2003, 190 in Leahy and Ferri 2022, 69). This is connected with the Article 30 of the UNCRPD, which requires assessing the barriers in cultural accessibility (cultural goods, heritage) and undertaking specific measures that will allow this target group the opportunity to ‘develop and utilise their creative, artistic and intellectual potential’ (Art. 30 CRPD n.d.).

Regarding the importance of disability arts to the disability rights movement, Abbas et al. (2004) argue that

disability Arts and Culture marks the growing political power of disabled people over their narratives, as disabled artists use it to counter cultural misrepresentation, establish disability as a valued human condition, shift control to disabled people so they may shape their narratives and bring this disability controlled narrative to wider audiences. (Abbas et al: 1)

As Chica-Núñez and Jiménez-Hurtado (2020) argue, although the EU and public and private organisations have undertaken efforts to enable access to culture to all citizens, the real extent of access to culture for those who are at risk of exclusion or have disabilities is largely unknown. Different sets of barriers such as linguistic, perceptual or technological hinder the access to culture for people with disabilities, so essential efforts in adaptation, translation and accessibility of facilities, technological support, as well as of multimodal methods of education, for people with disabilities have to be made.

Greek context

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the cultural rights of people with disabilities and to reflect on the social and accessibility policy of museums. The literature review identified current understandings of factors and conditions that enable access to museums by people with disabilities. The empirical research was conducted with the aim to identify perceptions of accessibility in museums by professionals working with People with Intellectual Disabilities who live in housing/rehabilitation settings in Greece. Research shows an existing gap in this area in Greek as well as international literature (Levi 2005; Tsitouri 2005); the emphasis of the empirical research was, therefore, placed on the specific target audience of People with Intellectual Disabilities who live in institutional settings in Greece and face difficulties in accessing cultural organisations.

Argyropoulos and Kanari refer to Nakou (2010; in Argyropoulos and Kanari 2015) who argued that although museums in Greece acknowledge the right of people with disabilities to access museums, there is still a wide variety and differences in the types and regularity of initiatives that facilitate this access. The introduction of relevant legislation for an accessible environment took place in the 1980s (Polychroniou 2004 also in Argyropoulos and Kanari 2015). Initiatives are limited and are to be seen largely in museums in big urban centres in Greece, most of them being temporary and with particular focus on physical, visual and hearing disabilities (Levi 2005; Tsitouri 2005 also in Argyropoulos and Kanari 2015). According to Leahy and Ferri (2022) in order to implement Article 30 and evaluate disability experiences in the arts, it is important to identify the factors that hinder and those that enable cultural participation.

Accessibility in culture for disabled people has been mostly studied and addressed in regard to physical and visual or hearing disabilities (Ministry of Culture 2004 in Argyropoulos and Kanari 2015). Based on the literature review, very little evidence exists in this area, and it mostly concerns other disability groups, the so-called 'visible disabilities' (Levi 2005; Nakou 2010; Polychroniou 2004; Tsitouri 2005).

But can the paradigm of cultural accessibility for the visually impaired be applied for people with intellectual disabilities? Over the past decade, museums have been increasingly striving to enhance their accessibility for individuals with disabilities

through the introduction of various services and facilities tailored to accommodate diverse disability needs. Nevertheless, there remains a significant disparity in the levels of accessibility among various museums and across different countries. It appears that more emphasis has been directed towards improving physical accessibility, with relatively less focus on addressing sensory access (Sandell and Dodd 2010 in Argyropoulos and Kanari 2015).

Based on the study of Hetherington (2000) who examined 36 Museums in the UK, it is argued that the issue of seeing and not being able to touch any of the art objects in museums is a major accessibility barrier for people with visual disabilities. As he puts it, their presence was rather unexpected. The same can be argued about people with intellectual disabilities. More and more museums are searching for effective ways to respond to the right of people with intellectual or visual disabilities to access and experience culture.

Comprehensive research work has been done by researchers in collaboration with Museums (i.e., Argyropoulos and Kanari 2015; Papadimitriou et al. 2017), especially for the visually impaired. Weisen (2008) also notes that accessibility barriers nowadays are multidimensional, interdependent and changing. The experience of facing access barriers in cultural spaces has an impact on the life of people with disabilities. Weisen furthermore states that *'repeated experiences of unnecessary barriers leads to frustration, anger, resignation and finally cultural exclusion'* (Weisen 2008, 247 in Argyropoulos and Kanari 2015). In the context of individuals with intellectual disabilities, the role of museums becomes notably intricate. They must present artworks in a manner that is accessible to the senses while simultaneously ensuring their protection. Candlin (2006), for example, notes that there are some tactile possibilities offered to the general public in some museums and galleries, which can be beneficial for the disabled audience.

Research findings

Demographics

Out of the 46 officially registered social organisations, 35 participated in the study ($N=35$), which is a significant percentage in order to monitor the situation on a national level. Those offered housing facilities and/or rehabilitation/psychosocial support services for the supported living of People with Intellectual Disabilities participated in the study. Geographic distribution was attempted and was representative of the services distribution in Greece, 50% of organisations were based in Athens and Central Greece, 30% in Northern Greece and 20% in Southern Greece and in the islands. Out of the 35 professionals who were representatives of the organisations, 82.9% were women and 17.1% were men and were working mainly as social workers (20%), psychologists (20%), coordinator of the services (22.7%), special educators (8.7%) and support workers (8.7%) (see Figure 1).

The main target group of those organisations participating in the study were 28.6% PIDs, 48.6% people with multiple disabilities (intellectual, psychiatric and physical/motor disabilities) and 17% people with psychiatric disabilities (see Figure 2). The age range of those was 18–65 (62.9%), 41–64 (11.4%) and 26–40 (25.7%).

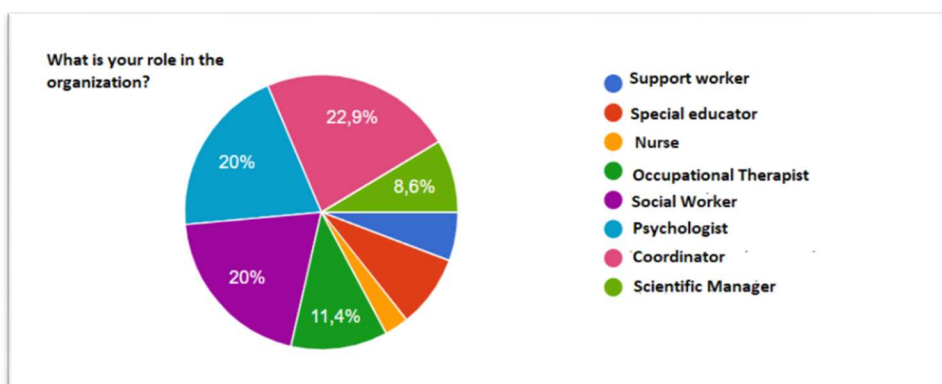


Figure 1. Role of professionals in the organisation.

Overall cultural accessibility

Regarding cultural accessibility of the people supported by the above-mentioned organisations, the results of the study revealed the following outcomes. About 91% of professionals argue that financial accessibility is provided as a result of initiatives by museums themselves and cultural policies. Professionals mentioned that they visit museums with their beneficiaries 1–2 times/year (42.9%), 7 times a year (37.1%), 3–6 times/year (17.1%) and never 2.9% (see Figure 3). The diversity of those answers was linked to the geographic distribution of organisations: those in the capital of Greece, Athens and surrounding areas visit museums more often than other organisations based in regional areas.

Physical accessibility

With reference to physical accessibility (i.e., wheelchair access, toilet access, etc.) in the areas of the museum, professionals responded that museums were physically accessible at a satisfactory level (65.7%), a good level (22.9%) and inaccessible (11.4%). This is in line

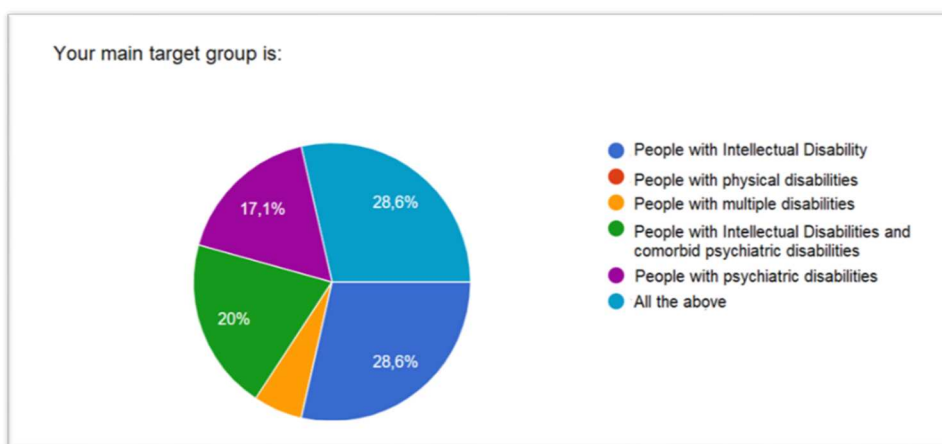


Figure 2. Target group.

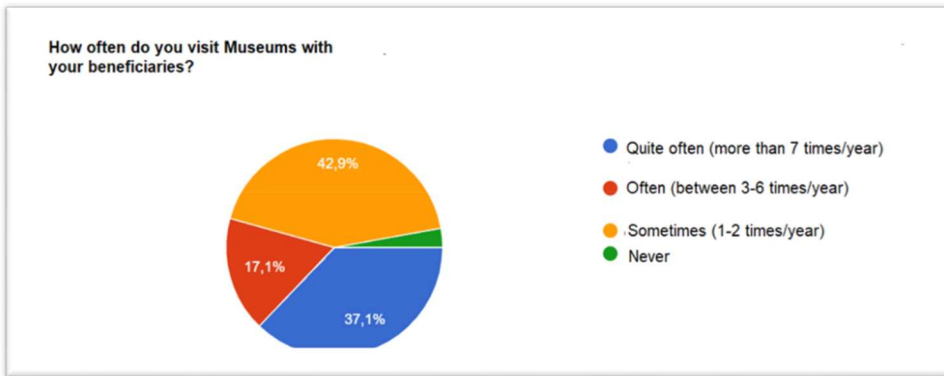


Figure 3. Frequency of museum visits.

with the previous literature on physical accessibility of people with disabilities that shows that significant steps have been made globally in regard to providing physically accessible museum spaces (i.e., Levi 2005). (Figure 4)

Sensory accessibility

In contrast with the evaluation of the physical accessibility, which was generally found good, professionals revealed different results in terms of sensory accessibility and adaptation (lightening, sound, overcrowded spaces, indicator signs, etc.). The majority stated that museums were sensory accessible in a satisfactory level (62,9%) or were not adequately accessible (25,7%). Only 11,7% were found adequately accessible (see Figure 5). In terms of language accessibility and navigation. professionals responded that 54,3% were satisfactory accessible and 31,4% were not accessible at all.

Information accessibility

The majority of professionals responded that they have a satisfactory level of knowledge of the services of museums in terms of accessibility (62,9%) and are learning about

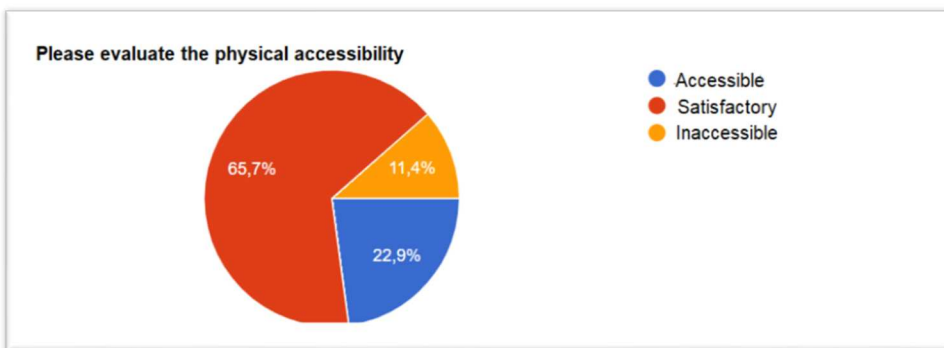


Figure 4. Physical accessibility.

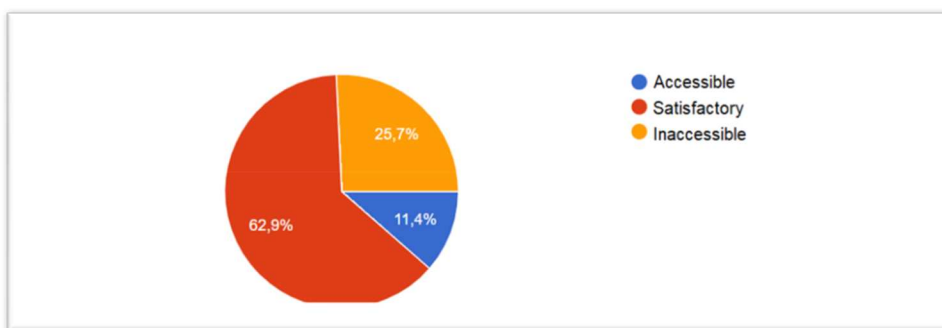


Figure 5. Sensory accessibility.

exhibitions/cultural activities of museums through digital social media (88.6%). When asked how this information reaches the target group, professionals responded that they are distributing this information (82.9%). When asked whether the information is adapted to a language that can be understood by the PIDs in order to be able to choose themselves which museum they want to visit (i.e., easy-to-read documents or media that PIDs have access to), responses were almost divided in half with 'No' to appear to 45.7% of the answers, and 'Yes' 54.3%.

Content accessibility: adapted guide tours, experiential workshops and methodology

The next set of questions examined the content accessibility made by museums. In regard to the existence of adapted guide tours, participants responded that they exist sometimes (57.1%), often (20%), rarely (20%) or never (2.9%). Interestingly, most professionals choose to visit museums with their support workers/caregivers without an adapted guide tour (60%) but facilitating the visit themselves and only 14.3% with the support of an adapted guide tour (i.e., multimedia tour) or other supportive means (i.e., sound/digital supported tour). Most professionals indicated that there are rarely (40%) or never (25.7%) easy-to-read guides to support the tours in museums for PIDs. In addition, the majority of professionals agreed that experiential art workshops are needed in order to foster the accessibility and holistic cultural experience of PIDs in museums (71.4% strongly agreed, 14.3% agreed). Regarding the training of the general personnel of museums in being accessible and receptive to PIDs, professionals indicated that it is inadequately trained (1 = highly inadequate to 2 = inadequate, in total 36.1%), neutrally trained (25.7%) and adequately trained (37%) (see [Figure 6](#)). Regarding the training of the Museum tour guides in being accessible and receptive to PIDs, professionals stated that 22.9% of those are not adequately trained or neutrally trained (40%), 20% are well trained and 17.1% are adequately trained (see [Figure 7](#)).

Co-creation and participation of disabled artists in museums

The issue of the co-creation of less privileged groups in culture is central for social inclusion and reflects inclusive cultural policies. In terms of co-creation and participation

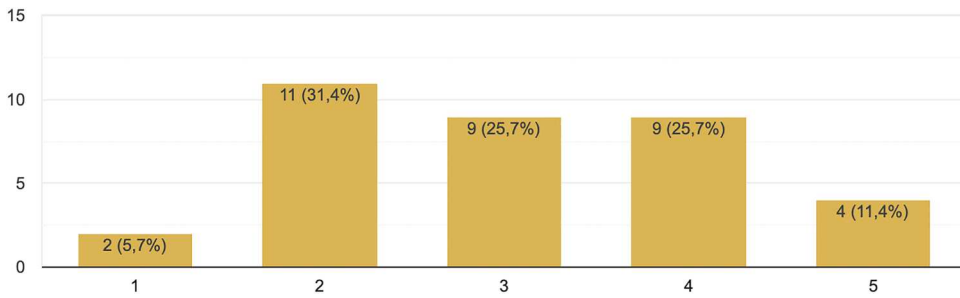


Figure 6. Training of the general personnel of Museums in the accessibility of PIDs.

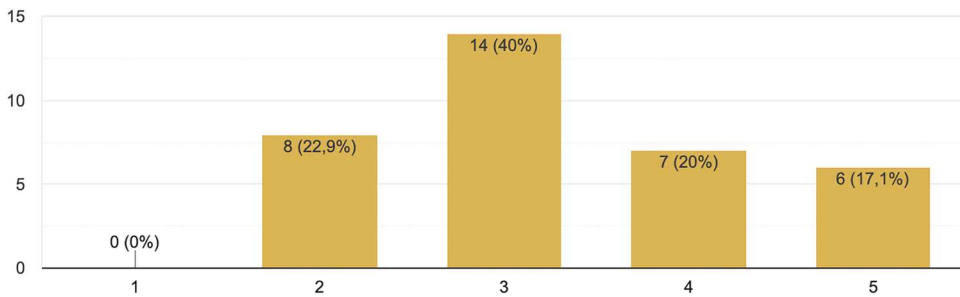


Figure 7. Training of the Museums tour guides in the accessibility of PIDs.

opportunities of PIDs as artists in museums, professionals graded mostly negatively (54.3%), replying that their beneficiaries rarely if ever have such opportunities, 22.9% were neutral and 20% were positive (see [Figure 8](#)).

Re-thinking cultural accessibility policies in museums

Digital and multi-sensory accessibility

After the revealing results of the empirical research, the question is how cultural institutions can respond to the challenge of being inclusive to the community of disabled people. The goal should be common for all museum organisations, that is to produce

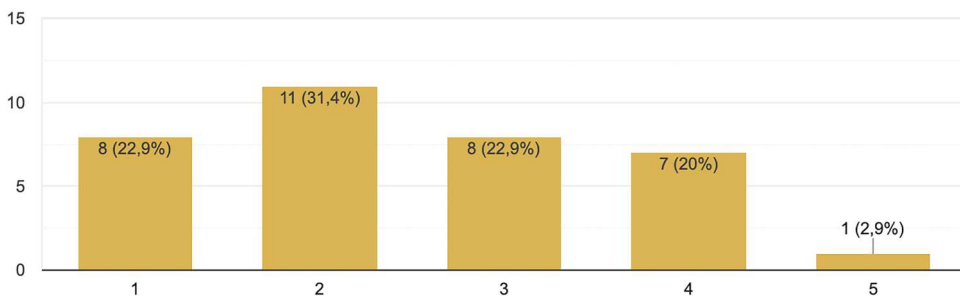


Figure 8. Opportunities of co-creation and participation.

and showcase quality art that stimulates engagement, educates and is accessible to different audience segments. However, the critical power of inclusion lies in questions such as how to make art accessible and which initiatives and/or policies should be made in that direction.

Museum exhibits that appeal to all the senses – touch, taste, smell and hear as well as sight – can also be of benefit to all visitors. Many museums use multisensory displays to that end, with, for example, sounds of nature in a natural-history display, music sounds and sounds of musical instruments, or with the touch of textiles and ceramics. These can enable the use of all senses and the involvement of all visitors, including those who perceive the world better in a multisensory way. They would also facilitate an embodied cultural aesthetic experience for people with intellectual disabilities.

Exploring the potential of connecting the museum experience with sensory experience offers valuable opportunities that can benefit everyone, regardless of their abilities. It is essential to integrate visitors with intellectual disabilities seamlessly with the general public, which underlines the need for museums to raise their overall standards. To achieve true social inclusion, it is vital to move away from the previous approach of perceiving disabled visitors as different and instead view audiences as diverse groups with varying perceptual, aesthetic and learning needs. This approach would not only be advantageous for museum staff but also for the broader public, as it encourages natural interactions among all visitors.

Given the limited technological accessibility and limited cognitive abilities of the target group in receiving information, it is important that appropriate audience development policies such as easy-to-read language for the websites and leaflets are also developed. Audience development policies aim to include support for touring and distribution, support for marketing as a means of developing new and existing audiences and research to improve the overall understanding of both audiences and participants including the barriers (psychological, educational, geographical, social, economic and physical) to full artistic enjoyment (Hadley 2021). Kawashima (2006) identifies this specific form of audience development strategy, as ‘outreach’, something that involves activities targeted at people unlikely to attend, for example, in deprived communities who *‘for apparently social reasons are the least likely to attend the arts’* (Kawashima 2000, 8). Audience development is further understood as a strategic, dynamic and interactive process of making the arts widely accessible. It means that cultural spaces have to find a way to engage both individuals and communities in all aspects, to experience, participate, understand, enjoy and possibly, co-create. Kawashima (2000) further mentions that social inclusion (within the cultural context) can be achieved by target-led strategies that help to engage a new audience on their own terms.

Content accessibility

Rendering the information to a language that can be easily understood by the PIDs in order to be able to choose themselves which museum they want to visit, such as, for example, easy-to-read documents or media that PIDs have access to, has been identified as an important issue in our research. Every visitor to a cultural venue is special, but some need a greater degree of support than others. Accessibility of culture for disabled visitors of cultural venues requires measures and improvements at all levels, from interpretation of exhibitions to adequate provision of space and services accessibility. The results

demonstrate that, especially for this segment of the disability group, it is important to have an adapted methodology for guided museum tours (i.e., multimodal, art-based workshops following a multisensory guided museum tour) by qualified professionals such as art therapists.

The training of museum staff is also of paramount importance when it comes to content accessibility. In most questions about multimodal (i.e., digital and sensory) accessibility, the respondents graded the museums low and further claimed that tour guides of museums are neutrally or adequately trained. Professionals who support people with intellectual disabilities, therefore, tend to accompany their beneficiaries and assist them during their museum visits by providing information, instead of relying on Museum tour guides. This lack of adequate training for museum guides is a sign that still, accessibility efforts have a long way to go until the provision of access has reached a level that really enhances inclusion and safeguards equality of experience by all visitors. To our knowledge, there is no published research that explores in depth the perceptions of caregivers or social/mental health professionals in Greece that support the cultural participation of people with disabilities regarding the whole process from assisting their beneficiaries to choosing which museum to visit and throughout their visit, including accompanying them and acting as guides in the museum. In that sense, the data here provide the first overview of this particular aspect in the Greek context but further, qualitative in-depth research is needed.

Accessibility to cultural dialogue and participation

Historically, the relationship between people with intellectual disabilities and the arts has been framed around the medical model, that is in relation to art therapy or recreational art (Ineland 2005; Solvang 2012, 2018, in Stober and García Iriarte 2023) rather than the active participation in cultural creation. However, a significant dimension of social inclusion for disabled individuals involves the provision of opportunities for active involvement and participation in community life. People with disabilities are seldom encouraged to express themselves, frequently learning more about what they cannot do and how cautious they should be, which can have adverse effects on their self-esteem, personal creativity and independence. It has been evident that people with disabilities and especially those with intellectual disabilities have limited chances to participate as artists or secure employment in cultural institutions. Museums, in particular, have the capacity to nurture the creative potential of disabled individuals, a potential that they may not have many opportunities to develop in their daily lives.

People with intellectual disabilities hold the right to participate in cultural life as co-creators and/ or artists and should therefore have the space and opportunities to contribute to cultural production as co-creators or artists and to participate actively in the life of cultural heritage institutions. With regards to this dimension, the research highlights a significant lack of co-creation opportunities for this category of audience in Greece. In the context of this research, the overall results demonstrate that the discussion for cultural accessibility for people with intellectual disabilities is open and ongoing regarding access to cultural goods. However, when it comes to providing access to co-creation and active involvement in the cultural dialogue, the opportunities remain untapped, and their potential is possibly undervalued. It seems, therefore, that the discussion regarding accessibility in the sense of participating equally as active citizens and artists who have something to add to the cultural scene of today is still at the beginning.

More representation and visibility of people with intellectual disabilities as well as the creation of spaces that help bring forward issues with respect to accessibility and disability are important for strengthening their right to enjoy culture equally. Disability representation in the arts disrupts the assumption that it can only be therapeutic; it shows that disability can be seen as a creative and dynamic situation rather than a limiting and problematic condition. This understanding is consistent with the shift from a medical view of disability towards one where people with disabilities are holders of human rights which they enjoy on an equal basis with others (Quinn 2009, 216).

Degrees of accessibility and participation are also indicators of democracy. Museums, as landmark cultural institutions, should cater for and treat all categories of audiences equally. Safeguarding equal access to all is denoting the will and will of a heritage organisation to stand by principles, and its commitment to serving the citizens. Promoting the accessibility of this target audience in regards to co-creation and co-production of culture is an essential element that can also lead to a change of paradigm; viewing people with disabilities as active citizens and contributors of cultural content instead of passive users of the services museums have to offer can lead to a more active presence of people with intellectual disabilities in museums and cultural heritage institutions, and to a more democratic and pluralistic experience of culture as a basic human right by this category of audiences. The potential benefits for individuals and the community in this regard are truly immeasurable.

Re-thinking the use of digital technology to improve accessibility of museums

The research results reveal that people with intellectual disabilities often lack the digital skills to navigate museum websites, and/or the museum websites do not use adapted language in order for all audiences to have access to the respective information. Digital technology could provide significant help in both issues, improving the accessibility of museums for these audiences and equipping these audiences with the skills necessary to navigate museum websites. Improvements should be considered with regards to (a) the use of digital, more inclusive, more user-friendly formats in order to reach out to these audiences, and (b) the adaptation of information by creating easy-to-read/ easy-to-understand language formats. To that end, synergies developed between the cultural and the technology sectors could only be beneficial. Adequate consideration given to these two parameters and the respective changes adopted will allow people to benefit more from the information provided by the websites of museums, interact with these websites, but also choose themselves which cultural institution they wish to visit.

Digital technology can also contribute to an increase in cultural accessibility of people with intellectual disabilities. Regardless of the individual cognitive level of understanding, the quality of reception of information is crucial when it comes to accessibility. Access through technological means can be seen as a facilitator for social inclusion as it allows conscious decisions and participation in cultural services. It can further enable individuals to learn, work, socialise, and interact with the community without being subjected to physical barriers (Vanderheiden 2006). However, as this research demonstrates, technology-based applications are not widely used as enablers of inclusion in Museums in Greece.

Re-thinking the role of cultural managers

Disability as a socially constructed concept impacts, with its many forms, all levels of a person's access and enjoyment of a museum. Museums can become inclusive spaces by training their staff to understand how to engage disabled people, how to avoid situations that are not handicapping, and how to create opportunities for people with disabilities. Such training should be made available to all levels of staff and would, in turn, facilitate the planning of programmes and exhibitions that would take into account accessibility needs for all categories of audiences, as well as sensitise the general public towards their needs. This might be as simple as presenting the life story of an artist or historical figure with a disability to more complex efforts of curating exhibitions that enable a more active involvement of people with disabilities and foster the engagement of disabled audiences.

The above also emphasise the role of cultural managers as key agents in fostering accessibility in the museum space and creating the circumstances and conditions that can make it happen. It is imperative for leading professionals in the cultural heritage sector to be informed about accessibility and its social aspects and implications in order to be able to develop appropriate strategies for fostering this accessibility and suitable training programmes. It is, therefore, important for aspiring museum professionals to receive an education and training, which, apart from offering them the necessary theoretical knowledge, equips them with the necessary skills and competencies to comprehend and tackle the challenges museums are facing and which make them invaluable players in and for society.

Conclusions

This paper reveals a deficiency of museums in Greece regarding the provision of content and visitor accessibility but also regarding participation and co-creation opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities. Future research and policy recommendations should, therefore, address areas like audience development, content provision and training for cultural managers and museum personnel – all areas in which changes should have to be introduced.

Cultural heritage institutions should work towards establishing or strengthening those conditions and opportunities where people with disabilities can be seen as active citizens and contributors to culture and not as passive audiences that use cultural services. Full-scale accessibility can be achieved when more people with disabilities will not only participate as audiences in cultural institutions but also become represented and visible and have access to co-production of artistic work. More accessibility can lead to more visibility, which, in turn, leads to a different perception of people with intellectual disabilities and contributes to safeguarding and strengthening their right to enjoy culture as equals.

Our research serves as an initial step in quantifying and conveying this information to cultural institutions and relevant stakeholders in Greece – but not only there. Our hope is not just to enrich scientific research in the area of accessibility to culture for people with disabilities but also to encourage cultural institutions to take further actions to advance social inclusion and bring about a much-needed cultural transformation. People with disabilities including artists could also serve as catalysts for cultural change, playing a pivotal

role in convincing those who may be hesitant to adopt more inclusive approaches to museum practices of the benefits of doing so.

Notes

1. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-2.html>.
2. See <https://social.desa.un.org/issues/disability/crpd/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-crpd>.
3. See <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-30-participation-in-cultural-life-recreation-leisure-and-sport.html>.
4. www.chrusp.org.
5. <http://absoluteprohibition.org>.
6. https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/CRPD/DraftGC7/CHRUSPAbProsubmission_1.docx.
7. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/644200/EPRS_BRI\(2019\)644200_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/644200/EPRS_BRI(2019)644200_EN.pdf).

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