

## **Museums: Accessibility to visitors with visual impairment**

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### Abstract

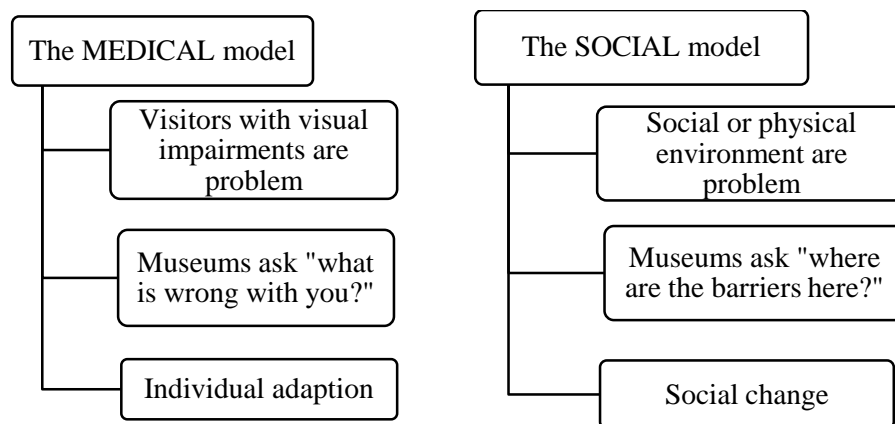
The purpose of museums is to enable all visitors to enjoy its collections and to learn. Although programs for visitors with visual impairment have appeared in developed countries, it does not seem that much has been done to integrate this group into the museum audience. Museum staff had to consider the different learning needs of visitors and consult with members of the community to gain a better understanding of what needs to be changed in order to make their museum accessible to visitors with different abilities. However, it has also been suggested that inclusive practices can be achieved through the use of Universal Design. According to McGinnis (2007), Universal Design means that exhibitions and programs would have to be designed so that everyone was able to use them. This article aims to analyze the accessibility of museums in Skopje to visitors with visual impairments, with a particular focus on how they can become more inclusive.

*Keywords:* visitors with visual impairment, museums, accessibility, accessible tourism, museum staff

## Introduction

Museums have played an important role in combating social exclusion of the visitors with visual impairment. Social exclusion means lack of access to various social benefits to an individual or a social group (Brstilo, 2010). According to Sandell (1998), social exclusion is a multi-dimensional process through which groups in society become marginalized by being thrown out, fully or partially, from any social, economic, political, and cultural systems.

To avoid social exclusion of visitors with visual impairment, the museums should adopt and understand the social model of disability. The social model of disability does not deny impairments, but positions the 'problem' within the social or physical environment, not with the person or the impairment (see Figure 1). This means that museums need to change themselves to become more accessible (Disabled people and museums in the Western Balkans, 2010).



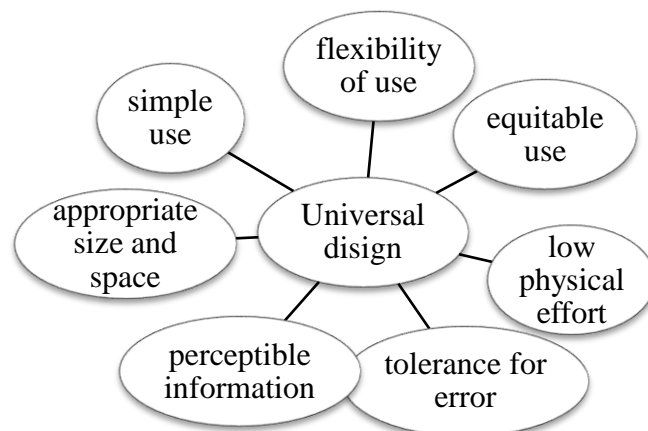
*Figure 1.* Medical and social model of museums

The purpose of the museum is to enable visitors with visual impairment to enjoy its collections, to learn, and to enjoy. To achieve that goal, the museum should underpin practice by implementing several key principles (Council for Museums, Archives, and Libraries, 2000):

- Visitors with visual impairment have right to be included in all the activities of the museums.
- Museums should have a dialogue with visitors with visual impairment to find out what they need and want, and how to deliver it.

- The use of the social model of disability should be adopted. This model is one in which disability is acknowledged as a result to barriers created by society.
- The access barriers for visitors with visual impairment should be identified and dismantled to enable and allow them to participate. For visitors with visual impairment, those barriers can be sensory, intellectual, emotional/attitudinal, financial, social, educational or cultural.
- Universal design principles should be the basis for inclusive practice in museums.

Universal designs mean that exhibitions and programs would have to be designed so that everyone was able to use them (McGinnis, 2007). However, it has been argued that universal design possesses some problems because the needs of individuals are so varied and it would be hard to come up with a model that would provide access for all (Imrie, 2004). McGinnis (2007) offers a solution to this problem. She suggests that instead of searching for one ideal model, museums should consider the seven principles of universal design (Figure 2).



*Figure2.* Seven principles of universal design of museums

The majority of the literature that exists about museum programs for visitors with visual impairment focuses on touch tours, visual descriptions, tactile diagrams, and art making, and not on how to integrate these tools into mainstream programs (Axel &Levent, 2003). Namely, exhibitions should present information in different formats such as braille text, large print text, and audio. Also, artworks should be placed so that children and adults can see them clearly and opportunities for tactile, visual, and audio exploration should be available throughout the exhibition. Candlin (2006) makes a strong argument about how the use of touch in museums is

seen as a “lesser, substitute form of seeing” (p. 137) since it is mainly used by museums during access programs and not as a mainstream option for teaching.

Visitors with visual impairments seem to be some of the first people with disability that museum staff welcomed (Andrus, 1999). Although programs for visitors with visual impairment have appeared in developed country, it does not seem that much has been done to integrate this group into the museum audience. Museum staff had to consider the different learning needs of visitors and consult with members of the community to gain a better understanding of what needs to be changed in order to make their museum accessible to visitors with different abilities. The purpose of this study was to determine 1. Museums accessibility to visitors with visual impairment and 2. Assess employees ‘attitudes toward the people with blindness.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

A total of 24 employees from six museums of the capital city Skopje participated in this research (seven employees of the Contemporary Art Museum, five employees of the Museum of the Macedonian Struggle, four employees of the Museum of Macedonia, three employees of the Holocaust Memorial Center of the Jews from Macedonia, three employees of the National Archaeological Museum and two employees of the Museum of the city Skopje). Of the total number of participants, 18 (75%) were female and the other 6 (25%) were male. The participants ranged from 22 to 63 years old, with mean age of 40.6 (SD=12.98). Twenty or 83,3% of participants had an academic degree.

### ***Instrument***

A special questionnaire was designed to assess the accessibility of museums to visitors with visual impairment. The questionnaire was based on the questions of a previously reported study (Landman et al., 2005). It consists 14 questions about sensory access (e.g., offer objects which can be touched), emotional/attitudinal access (e.g., trained staff), and access to information (e.g., large print, Braille). Also, museums’ staff completed the Social Responsibility about Blindness Scale (Bell & Silverman, 2011), which was used as a measure of their attitudes about blindness. The scale includes 20 self-report items evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale with 1= strongly agree and 5= strongly disagree.

### Results

Data were collected from six museums; however, two museums did not answer on the first questionnaire for the museum accessibility to visitors with visual impairment (Table 1).

Table 1

*Museums accessibility to visitors with visual impairment*

Items	MMS	HMC	NAM	MSK
Consistent light throughout the space	yes	no	yes	no
Additional light to read labels/text	no	yes	yes	no
Main panels and introductory text in 24-point or larger	yes	yes	yes	no
Text printed on a solid background	yes	yes	yes	no
Audio version of labels/text available	no	no	no	no
Provide an audio-described guide of the exhibition	yes	no	yes	no
Use of Braille labels	no	no	no	no
Large print catalogue	no	no	no	no
Braille catalogue	no	no	no	no
Use appropriate language for visitors with visual impairment	no	yes	no	no
Reproduction of works for small objects	yes	yes	no	no
Tactile opportunities for visitors with visual impairment	no	no	no	no
All staff received awareness training	yes	no	no	no
Staff person responsible for disability access services	no	no	no	no

*Notes:* MMS = Museum of the Macedonian struggle. HMC = Holocaust Memorial Center of the Jews from Macedonia. NAM = National Archaeological Museum. MSK = Museum of the city Skopje.

Social Responsibility about Blindness Scale can be applied to test the effectiveness of social interventions to the blind and to better understand the content of common stereotypes about blindness. Scores on the Social Responsibility about Blindness Scale (SRBS) range from 20-100, with increasingly higher scores indicating more positive attitudes toward blindness. The mean SRBS score of the museum staff was 52.5 (SD=7.41), with a minimum score of 38 and a maximum of 70 (Table 2).

Table 2

*Social Responsibility about Blindness Scale*

	Min	Max	M	SD
SRBS score	38	70	52.5	7.41

### Discussion

Museums can and should sensitize to the social needs in their community by architectural transformations, by adopting their programs, performances and similar. Also, their training and learning programs need to be adjusted and developed according to the needs of the visitors with visual impairment.

A lack of access to information can be a huge barrier to visitors with visual impairment and can make visiting a museum or planning that visit a frustrating experience. For blind and partially sighted visitors, it is essential that visitor information is made accessible. The absence of useful information lowers their confidence. Those access barriers will be addressed to the venue itself, and they may not make the visit, feeling excluded from the museum's target audience. Unfortunately, the museums in the capital city Skopje have no information access for visitors with visual impairment (e.g., Braille catalogue, Large-print catalogue). Information in small print is often hard to read for anyone. However, 3 of 4 museums provide introductory text in 24-point or larger. Audio description is putting visual images or events into words. Describing visual images and objects in a museum will help visitors with visual impairment to understand the collections much better. In this study, 2 of 4 museums provide an audio-described guide of the exhibition. Many visitors with visual impairment will enjoy the opportunity to touch objects as a way of gaining access to collections. There are two main ways for them to touch – touching real objects or artifacts, or touching representations such as tactile images or models. The museums in Skopje have no tactile opportunities for visitors with visual impairment.

Museum staff should consistently ask their audience questions and listen to what they need in order to make necessary changes to the programs. In order to develop staff confidence in welcoming visitors with visual impairments, it is important to develop a program of visual awareness training. This will help the staff to develop the confidence and skills to make visitors with visual impairment more welcomed. In this study, only the staff in the Museum of the Macedonian Struggle has performed awareness training for visitors with visual impairment.

Museums as employers and as service providers should ensure equal treatment for people with visual impairment. They, perhaps uniquely, have the potential to represent the diversity of communities and, in doing so, to challenge stereotypes and promote tolerance and social cohesion. Both McGinnis (2007) and Andrus (1999) agree that in order to create successful programs for people with disabilities, the museum staff must have the right attitudes. There is

only little museum-specific literature that considers what might be the most desirable or necessary attitudes for the museum staff. The mean score on the Social Responsibility about Blindness Scale of the museums' staff in the current study is above the one of the sighted and blind groups in Rowland and Bell (2012) study.

### **Conclusion**

Museums can logically hope to resolve all the difficulties in their building or situation that excluded people with visual impairment. What is needed is careful consideration of what the institution can do within their limits. They have a responsibility to eliminate existing barriers systematically, and to access and consider the visual impairment in plans for future exhibits and buildings.

### **Acknowledgement**

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