

QUALITY ASSURANCE FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH CULTURAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP: A CASE STUDY ON THE MUSEUM OF THE LESVOS PETRIFIED FOREST

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Vouglanis Taxiarchis

Doctor of Sociology from the University of the Aegean in the field of Social Work (DSW), Researcher at the National Center for Scientific Research 'Demokritos' in the area of Special Education, Special Education Teacher in Special Vocational Education and Training Center
tvouglan@gmail.com

Papaioannou Olympia

Laboratory Teaching Staff, Department of Educational Studies, School of Philosophy, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, cognitive subject «Quality Assurance in Higher Education»
ipapaio@eds.uoa.gr

Maniou Fotini

Ph.D C Harokopio University of Athens
fmaniou@hua.gr

Abstract

Quality assurance for people with disabilities (PWDs) at the Museum of the Lesvos Petrified Forest is a critical issue that is directly linked to the concept of cultural equality and accessibility to culture. A museum is not just a place for storing cultural goods; it is a place of education, learning and cultural experience for all. The concept of accessibility for people with disabilities must be addressed holistically, not only at the level of physical access, but also at the level of cognitive and technological accessibility. The use of technologies such as audio devices, Braille descriptions, augmented reality (AR), or digital tools that allow visitors with disabilities to fully experience the exhibits is extremely important.

Conversely, cultural entrepreneurship focuses on the sustainable management and development of the cultural heritage with the aim of creating both economic and social value. A museum, by implementing practices that serve the needs of people with disabilities, acquires a dual role. On the one hand, it fulfills its mission to be a space open to all, and on the other hand, it offers opportunities for innovation, attracting a wider audience and increasing its attendance.

Another aspect that connects accessibility with cultural entrepreneurship is the possibility of creating new partnerships and sponsorships from organizations that promote accessibility and inclusion, thus contributing to the financial sustainability of the museum. An example is the development of special educational programs for schools that focus on the inclusion of people with disabilities, which could be funded by public or private institutions.

Key Words: *social responsibility, quality assurance, people with disabilities, Museum of the Lesvos Petrified Forest, cultural entrepreneurship.*

Introduction

Equal cultural participation of all people regardless of their differences is founded on the basis of human rights (human rights-based approach) (McGhie, 2020) and is linked to issues of

inclusion, social cohesion and well-being, quality of life, sustainable development, cultural democracy and democratization of culture, elimination of discrimination, equality and justice (Laaksonen, 2010; McGhie, 2020). The concept and defense of the right to cultural participation constitutes a very broad field of studies, practices and applications in the field of culture internationally (Laaksonen, 2010). As cultural participation is clearly a matter of education, a similar emphasis is given in the field of education, at all levels of formal education, non-formal, informal and lifelong education and learning (UNESCO, 2015) as well as in the synergies between them.

Participation is a dimension of people's quality of life, since it is closely related to social integration and identity processes. For this reason, participation can be defined as an educational and at the same time social process, which must be taken into account in the entire spectrum of the educational system (Papaioannou, 2021). The concept of participation can take on different dimensions depending on the context and how we give meaning to the term, the manner, the means and the degree of participation and involvement in a cultural activity (Laaksonen, 2010). McGhie, considering cultural life as “a living process, historical, dynamic and evolving, with a past, present and future”, summarizes the right to participate in cultural life in three main axes: the possibilities of every person to be involved in cultural activities, to know and understand through education and information their own culture and that of others, as well as to contribute to cultural life through their own participation and contribution as a creator or co-creator of the spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional expression of the community (McGhie, 2020). Regardless of its different dimensions and manifestations, cultural participation is linked to and presupposes the access and opportunities that a society – at both the macro and micro levels – gives to all its members. As Laaksonen (2010) characteristically states, access is almost always a precursor to participation, from physical access to access to decision-making, participatory practices and educational opportunities (Simon, 2010).

Inclusive museums and participation in cultural life

Museums as key pillars of culture are institutional bodies with a duty (duty-bearers) to contribute to the defense of the right of all people to equal participation in cultural life (McGhie, 2020). The characteristic of the museum as an organization open to the public is an element at the heart of its operation and mission and is explicitly formulated in both the previously applicable definition and the new definition of the museum. In an era that is constantly changing and at a rapid pace, the issue of identifying and removing barriers to access, changing the paradigm and creating a museum for all takes on particular and different dimensions (Papadimitriou et al., 2017). The new definition of the museum, adopted by the Extraordinary General Assembly of the International Council of Museums in Prague on 24 August 2022 (ICOM, 2022), was the result of a long, democratic consultation at the international level and a consequence of the major and continuous changes at all levels of society, the expanded role of museums and the requirement to respond to the social and educational imperatives of the 21st century (Brown & Mairesse, 2018).

The concept of accessibility is understood as a set of actions to provide fair access to all people without discrimination, taking into account the full range of human capacity and experience (American Alliance of Museums, 2022). The broadening of the concept of accessibility and cultural accessibility emphasizes the quality of experience, fair and equitable treatment, access to content, and representation (American Alliance of Museums, 2022). In the same vein, the concept of diversity as a natural element of the human condition and cultural and social diversity concerns the full range of differences between people at both the individual and group levels. At the same time, people have and share common characteristics,

as they have multiple identities and experiences (American Alliance of Museums, 2022). The above is of particular importance for people with disabilities, accessibility, and inclusion in museums.

Participation in cultural life, museums and people with disabilities

Although the realization of an inclusive museum, as shown by the above, does not only concern people with disabilities (Papadimitriou et al., 2017), it is a fact that in recent decades museums have developed an intense activity to enhance the accessibility and participation of people with disabilities - adults and children - in museums (Pressman & Schulz, 2021), without this meaning that there are still many and significant barriers to access to varying degrees between museums and for people with different disabilities.

The social model of disability that highlighted the social construction of disability and the obstacles that society places on people with disabilities, as well as the human rights model (Lawson & Beckett, 2021), have significantly influenced museums as they constitute key frameworks for investigating the social conditions of exclusion from participation. A number of international conventions and strategic frameworks for action underline the right and importance of equal access and participation of persons with disabilities in cultural life as an integral part of full social participation and the full development and realization of their potential (European Union, 2021). The European Commission in its Disability Rights Strategy 2021-2030 highlights the role of cultural organisations, including museums, and the importance of developing a dual approach and policy to promote inclusive actions for groups of people with and without disabilities or specially designed actions for children and adults with disabilities. It should be noted that the role of museums in this issue concerns both the accessibility of the cultural goods they preserve and exhibit and the participation of people with disabilities in their activities, as well as issues of representation, representation of the history of disability and the promotion of the art of people with disabilities (Sandell et al., 2010).

In addition to the function of museums as lifelong learning spaces connected to people's free time, the long-standing relationship between museums and schools and the importance of cultural heritage in education (Nuzzaci, 2020), highlights the role of museums in the education of all children, including children with disabilities (Kanari & Souliotou, 2023). The recognition that the museum can, under the right conditions, constitute an enriched environment that offers tangible learning experiences, opportunities for social interaction and different learning benefits is not new (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007). Over time, the development of Museum Pedagogy, the expansion and systematization of educational programs in most museums, the promotion of inclusive education, the requirement to provide quality education to children with disabilities across the spectrum of school life inside and outside of school, has attracted interest from both the museum and the school side, highlighting issues of cooperation and the role of the school and teachers (General and Special Education) in linking museum and school, non-formal and formal education respectively (Ainscow, 2020).

The interactive dimension of access barriers for people with disabilities in museums

In order to understand both the multiplicity of different access barriers faced by people with disabilities – and correspondingly the multiplicity of accessibility dimensions – it is necessary to mention the heterogeneity of the population of people with disabilities. There are different types of disability – a significant part of which are invisible – but also many differences within each population with the same disability, as not all individuals display exactly the same characteristics, to the same extent or at the same time in their lives (Vouglanis, 2019, 2020a,

2020b, 2020c, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2023d, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c; Vouglanis & Drigas, 2022a, 2022b; Vouglanis, Driga & Drigas, 2022a, 2022b; Vouglanis & Driga, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2023d, 2023e, 2023f, 2023g, 2023h, 2024a; Vouglanis & Raftopoulos, 2023; Vouglanis & Salapata, 2024). People with disabilities and more generally disabled people face various barriers inside and outside the museum and concern access to the physical space, access (sensory, perceptual, intellectual) to museum content (exhibits and other interpretive means), to information, cultural access, the possibility of participating in decision-making, to the extent to which the museum environment is welcoming and the museum staff is knowledgeable, educational opportunities and choices, etc. (Weisen, 2008). The different barriers to access for people with disabilities in museums, although often recorded separately, depending on the type of disability in order to better understand them, address and evaluate relevant applications, practices and accessibility facilities (e.g. physical and sensory access barriers, language barriers, communication barriers, etc.), constitute, as Weisen (2008) states, a “multidimensional reality” that is interdependent with each other, to a lesser or greater extent depending on the case. For example, barriers to sensory access or access to information may affect understanding and the formation of a perception of whether a museum is welcoming and takes into account the diversity of its visitors, that is, operating interactively with each other (Weisen, 2008).

The accumulated international experience of recent decades and the relevant literature provide many useful guides with information and good practices for accessibility provisions and appropriate ways of dealing with and communicating with people with different disabilities (e.g. people with motor, intellectual disabilities, people who are deaf or hard of hearing, people with visual impairments, people with autism spectrum disorder, etc.) that are constantly being enriched and which museum professionals can consult (Pressman & Schulz, 2021). However, in addition to the importance of knowing the characteristics of different disabilities, knowledge that “dictates” and corresponding accessibility facilities and communication issues, it is important to understand people with disabilities as visitors who have different individual characteristics, roles and identities, their own personal visit agenda, seek an experience that is meaningful to them, visit the museum as members of different groups and must have the right to choose. Accordingly, at the level of the student population, each child with a disability is a unique and special case, with different individual characteristics and experiences, as well as their development. Children with disabilities attend different school structures – general and special schools – and no school class is homogeneous. Taking into account the promotion of educational inclusion, museums educators are more likely to encounter children with disabilities in mainstream school settings, a fact that has been noted by museum professionals for decades. It is now understood that access barriers for people with disabilities also impact their family and social environment, i.e. a much larger population of people and social groups with different composition and motivations for visiting (Lisney et al., 2013).

The combination of the above – degree of accessibility of the museum, personal choices, communication and other needs and characteristics depending on the type of disability, the composition of the group if they are not individual visitors – influence choices, the decision to visit a museum or not, the experience in the museum itself – if they finally visit it – and their desire to repeat a similar experience. This element is particularly important for children who are still forming attitudes and values, such as, among others, attitudes towards the museum space itself (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007), how they perceive their “place” in it, their sense of “belonging”, whether the museum space is welcoming for them, whether it concerns them, etc. Thus, new barriers to access and participation may be created on the part of the public of people with disabilities that are linked to beliefs that influence the motivations for participation (Weisen, 2008). From the above, it seems that the relationship between the

interactive dynamics of access barriers and the interactive nature of the museum experience constitutes a multi-level, multi-factorial dynamic process that influences and shapes the museum experience as a whole. A museum accessibility strategy should take into account this interaction between access barriers and the museum experience and learning as a whole.

Museums and cultural entrepreneurship

Cultural entrepreneurship practices in Lesvos are directly linked to the unique natural and cultural heritage of the island, such as the Lesvos Geopark and the Sigri Petrified Forest Museum.

The promotion of the Lesvos Geopark, which has been recognized by UNESCO, plays a key role in the cultural entrepreneurship of the region. Actions focusing on the preservation and promotion of geological monuments, the development of geotourism products and the provision of educational programmes make a significant contribution. One of the practices is the creation of tourist routes linking geological monuments, natural landscapes and cultural points of interest (Matsuura, & Zouros, 2014; Manola et al., 2022; Manola & Tsagakarellis, 2020).

Tourism as an organized activity is associated with the desire of people to visit other places, to learn about other cultures and to share the cultural knowledge and experiences they will acquire (Ikonomou et al., 2024). The organization of festivals and cultural events enhances the cultural life of the island. Events that promote music, dance and local traditions are a key component of cultural entrepreneurship. Typical examples are the "International Music Festival in Molivos, Lesvos" and the "Ouzo Festival", which link culture with tourism and strengthen the local economy (Manola, & Koufadakis, 2020; Manola et al., 2023).

The development of educational programmes and tours to museums, such as the Petrified Forest Museum and the Archaeological Museum of Mytilene, contributes to the dissemination of knowledge about local history, geology and cultural heritage. These programmes attract visitors and scholars, promoting sustainable development. (Apostolaki, 2010; Vardopoulos, 2019).

Partnerships with local communities and producers are another practice of cultural entrepreneurship. The promotion of local products, such as ouzo, olive oil and traditional handmade products, enrich tourism activities, offering authentic experiences to visitors. These partnerships strengthen the local economy, linking culture with gastronomy and agri-tourism (Maniou, 2023; Maniou et al., 2024; Maniou, 2024; Manola, 2020).

Digital visibility and promotion are equally important tools for the development of cultural entrepreneurship. The development of digital platforms and applications that provide information on the geological and cultural monuments of Lesvos helps to attract visitors from all over the world. International promotion through digital media highlights the value of the Petrified Forest Museum and the Geopark (Mitoula & Kaldis, 2018; Maniou, 2024; Maniou et al., 2024; Maniou, 2024b; Maniou et al., 2024b; Maniou et al., 2024c; Maniou et al., 2025; Maniou & Mitoula, 2025; Maniou, et al., 2025a).

Finally, the development of thematic routes, such as the "Route of Ouzo", the "Route of the Monasteries" and the "Literary Routes" which link cultural and religious monuments with nature and local products, is a practice that promotes cultural tourism and contributes to the sustainable development of the island (Manola & Vekri, 2021; Manola & Teliopoulou, 2021; Manola & Angelopoulos, 2020; Papaioannou et al., 2024).

Sigri Petrified Forest and Natural History Museum

In the western part of Lesvos, the barren expanses with bare hillsides are the guardians and narrators of an astonishing 20 million-year-old geological history of plants, which constitute

the Petrified Forest of Lesvos. Plant fossils are found throughout the western peninsula of Lesvos, as well as in various other locations where volcanic rocks are found (Zouros et al., 2001). The most important fossil sites are located in the areas of Sigri, Eressos and Antissa. In total, the Petrified Forest of Lesvos covers an area exceeding 150 km².

The first descriptions of the fossils of Lesvos were made by Theophrastus and Pliny, while the first scientific report and identification of the fossils was made in 1845 by the Austrian paleobotanist Franz Unger. In 1985, the Greek state declared the Petrified Forest area as a protected natural monument, while, as mentioned above, the island of Lesvos was declared a UNESCO Geopark in 2012, being the first island on European territory to be included in the Geoparks Network.

Additionally, the marine part of the Petrified Forest constitutes a rare evidence of geohistorical evolution, reflecting the 20 million years of geological history of the Aegean (flora, climate, volcanic activity as well as major tectonic movements), which was created by the fragmentation of parts of the Aegean landmass (Valiakos et al., 2015).

In 1994, the Natural History Museum of the Petrified Forest of Lesvos (MFIADL) was founded, aiming at the protection and effective management of the Petrified Forest (Zouros, 2007) and at the same time carries out research and excavations in the western part of Lesvos in order to further highlight the natural heritage of plant fossils and geotopes (study, research, promotion, conservation, preservation and protection), starting systematic excavations in 1997.

It is the first Natural History Museum established by the State in 1994 with Law 2260/1994 and operates as a legal entity under the Ministry of Culture, Education and Religious Affairs. The building where it is housed has an area of 1,597 m². The management of the Petrified Forest is carried out by the Museum and as a management body it is responsible for the operation and development of the geopark. It is staffed - in addition to the director, the staff consists of 15 permanent and 25 temporary scientific and technical employees and rangers - with important decisions being assigned to the board of directors (lesvosmuseum.gr). Its exhibits come from the Petrified Forest, including tree trunks, roots, branches, while there are also exhibition sections on the history of plant evolution and geodynamic processes in the Aegean region (petrifiedforest.gr). The museum's exhibitions present the evolution of plant life on earth, the flora of the petrified forest with over 40 different species, which were found and identified in the wider area. In addition to the above regarding the activities of the Museum, various projects and programs of excavations and conservation of fossils are implemented.

The Natural History Museum is clearly at the core of this infrastructure, as it has become a key factor in attracting visitors to this part of the island and developing participatory activities for them, such as educational activities and environmental education programs for primary and secondary school students (e.g. geotope identification, fossil excavation and preservation, nature observation, bird watching, etc.), mainly during spring and autumn, outside the main tourist season, the walking route also known as the "Lava Trails", which lead visitors along the ancient paths of pyroclastic flows from the main volcanoes to the petrified forest, equipped with information boards explaining the various geotopes, lectures and presentations at the Museum, guided tours of the petrified forest parks, thematic walks (Bentana et al., 2010).

Regarding accessibility to the Museum and the parks, we should mention the facilities for people with disabilities. Access to the Museum area for people with mobility problems is via a special side entrance to the Museum, while the Museum building also has special access ramps to the exhibition areas and all auxiliary areas as well as restrooms for people with disabilities. In addition, a guide dog is allowed in the Museum area for people with vision problems.

The tour of the Petrified Forest Parks is through walking paths which in sections have different degrees of difficulty. For people with mobility problems, access is via a special side entrance to the Parks and access with special wheelchairs is only possible in certain sections.

Finally, the Museum actively participates in the ERASMUS+ cooperation program "Geology for the Visually Impaired and Disabled", which includes the creation of educational applications for mobile phones, aiming to introduce people with visual impairments and mobility problems to our geological heritage and the geotopes of the Global Geoparks around the world.

Conclusions

A sustainable solution for the development of the Island of Lesvos UNESCO Global Geopark is the strengthening of the tourist identity (branding) of the island as an area with a great natural environment, strong elements of cultural heritage and monuments, a vibrant agricultural economy and a distinctive gastronomy. And it is precisely this variety of choices that is important to highlight, through the promotion of the unique monuments of nature, culture and production. There is an obvious need to create comprehensive and quality tourist packages that will combine the natural and cultural environment with the cultural and productive identity that will offer the visitor a holistic travel experience.

The information infrastructure, signs, routes, information spaces regarding the Geoparks, although they were deemed satisfactory in the recent evaluation, should be constantly renewed and enriched, in order to achieve the purposes of information and awareness, addressing all potential visitors, of all ages (children, elderly people, etc.) and all categories (disabled people, blind people, etc.) as well as being visible at the entrance gates of the island, but also in collaboration with tour operators to make their presence felt on the major travel platforms in Greece and abroad.

The Museum as the Body managing the Geopark should enrich and strengthen experiential activities, such as Birdwatching and other such initiatives, because they cause the general public not to feel disconnected and alien to the scientific effort, when it is explained and becomes more understandable. In conclusion, it seems that in recent years, significant steps have been taken towards the exploitation of cultural heritage with the aim of sustainable development and the design of a sustainable tourism development model, so there should be individual collaborations between different bodies and local actors. Particular focus should be given to cultural entrepreneurship with a focus on people with disabilities.

The above proposals seem to enhance the improvement of accessibility and inclusion of people with disabilities in the field of cultural entrepreneurship, contributing to quality assurance regarding the promotion of equal access and participation in culture.

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