



# Barriers and Facilitators to Cultural Participation by People with Disabilities: A Narrative Literature Review

**ANN LEAHY** 

**DELIA FERRI** 

*\*Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article*

**REVIEW ARTICLE**



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## ABSTRACT

Article 30 of the UN Convention on the rights of Persons with Disabilities obliges States Parties to ensure accessibility of cultural goods, services and heritage and to adopt measures enabling persons with disabilities to utilize their artistic potential. However, people with disabilities experience barriers to engagement in cultural life as audiences and as creators. This article presents a narrative literature review that classifies barriers and facilitators to cultural participation identified in previous studies. It does so under five headings: (1) lack of effective/adequate legislation, policies and legal standards; (2) lack of funding and/or of adequate services; (3) negative attitudes; (4) lack of accessibility; (5) lack of consultation with, and involvement of, persons with disabilities in cultural organisations. This provides a novel contribution to the state of art by synthesising findings from different yet related fields. It forms the basis for future multi-method research addressing barriers to participation in culture.

**CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:**

**Ann Leahy**

Maynooth University, IE

[ann.leahy@mu.ie](mailto:ann.leahy@mu.ie)

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Some studies about rates of participation in culture exist. However, they often relate to particular countries or regions, or specific sectors. Generally, they present a grim picture, signaling low participation rates for persons with disabilities both as audience and as creators. One survey suggested that while the proportion of adults with long-standing illness or disability who engaged in the arts (as attendees or as participants<sup>1</sup>) in England had increased since 2005/06, rates of engagement in 2015/16 were lower (72.9%) than those of other adults (77.5%) (Department for Culture, Media & Sport 2016). Reports from other countries also suggest that cultural facilities are not accessible or that there are lower participation rates for people with disabilities compared to the rest of the population (for Italy, see ISTAT 2019: 99; for Northern Ireland, see Byrne et al. 2014; for Slovakia, see National Education Centre Slovak Republic 2020; for Sweden, see Swedish Authority for Participation 2016). By contrast, Arts & Disability Ireland (Maitland 2017) found that people with disabilities in Ireland were *more* likely to have attended an arts event within the past year than the population as a whole.

Rates of persons with disabilities as creators of culture—artists or cultural producers—are also low. Preliminary results from a Europe-wide survey in the performing arts evidence limited knowledge and experience relating to artists with disabilities and their works (British Council 2021). Statistics (from England) suggest that figures for workers with disabilities in the arts are disappointing (Arts Council England 2016; 2017; 2020) and that the number of people with disabilities serving on boards of arts organisations is also limited (Arts Council England 2020). Differences are identified as between art forms, with theatre, dance, and combined arts performing better than music and visual arts (Arts Council England 2017: 16). Statistics within film and audiovisual industries suggest (in the UK) that people with disabilities make up only 5.2% of contributions off-screen and 7.8% on-screen, compared with a national figure of 17% for working-age people with disabilities (European Audiovisual Observatory 2021). Finally, with the arts sector in crisis due to the Covid-19 pandemic (UNESCO 2021), rates of employment by people with disabilities in the arts have likely worsened (Gentry 2021; IDEA Consult et al. 2021).

Having set the scene for this review by presenting evidence of (for the most part) lower levels of attendance, participation, and employment in culture by people with disabilities, we next outline the methods employed in this review.

## METHODS

Narrative reviews provide interpretation and critique intended to deepen understanding by selecting evidence judiciously and purposively, with an eye to what is relevant for key policy questions (Greenhalgh, Thorne & Malterud 2018). By contrast, engaging in the explicit (though sometimes narrow) processes of systematic review would have emphasised technical (rather than interpretive) synthesis methods (Greenhalgh, Thorne & Malterud 2018). In line with recommended practice for narrative reviews (Byrne 2016), we first defined the review's scope, identifying a review question:

What do academic sources and grey literature identify as barriers or facilitators to cultural participation (as audience and cultural creators) of people with disabilities?

Interpretive and discursive synthesis, characteristic of narrative reviews, in which less explicit methods are the trade-off for broader coverage (Collins & Fauser 2005), allowed us to best answer this question. Our aim was, nonetheless, to make a unique contribution by combining literature from separate but related fields, with breadth and balance, and by citing studies that are representative of those available (Byrne 2016).

We drew on our prior knowledge of literature and included searches on websites of selected think-tanks and cultural actors for grey literature that identifies barriers or facilitators. We searched the database Academic Search Complete, JSTOR Arts and Sciences, and our institutional library resources. The following keywords were used where appropriate: 'disab\*/'special needs\*/'access' plus 'barrier\*' or 'facilitator\*', as well as any of the words arts, cultur\*, museum, galler\*, heritage.

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<sup>1</sup> Respondents were asked whether they had attended or participated in arts events/activities within the past 12 months. The definition of 'participation' involved active participation or making art (e.g., painting or membership of a book club) (Department for Culture, Media & Sport 2016: 9 and Annex C).

We focused on literature that is more likely to embed the paradigm shift enshrined in the CRPD by largely examining papers published later than 2006, when the CRPD was adopted by the UN General Assembly. We aimed at a cross-disciplinary publication search, albeit paying particular attention to disability studies, cultural studies (including museum studies), as well as policy reports and relevant political science scholarship. Because of our focus on arts, culture, and heritage, we excluded papers addressing broader aspects of cultural participation, such as physical activity, sports or tourism, or articles primarily concerned with therapeutic outcomes of cultural participation. We focused largely on sources in English, while citing some reports published in other languages. We acknowledge that this is an inherent limitation of this review. While the literature engaged with is varied, we also acknowledge that several (but not all) of the sources retrieved relate to States that are part of the Global North or have been written by authors based in academic institutions of Western countries. We did, however, endeavour to achieve a broader geographic coverage.

We did not assess the methodological quality of the sources reviewed, but we excluded blogs or online contributions. We focused on different types of cultural participation: as audience, as creators and/or professional artists, as amateurs in the context of community practices.

## REVIEW RESULTS

The reviewed sources approached cultural participation from different disciplinary perspectives. Discussion of barriers and facilitators was associated with empirical research or action research with groups making art at different levels (amateur, professional, semi-professional) or with particular projects or settings (e.g., arts centres or museums). They were often art-form specific and/or disability-type specific. We found similarities in barriers and facilitators identified across diverse studies. However, some barriers were identified in the context of a particular art form (such as aesthetic barriers in dance) or sector (such as specific accommodations within museums) that were not as obvious in studies in other contexts. We contend, nevertheless, that there is value in presenting a classification of the factors identified across this range of studies. Even if some of those factors are more relevant in some settings than others, our review shows that many operate across sectors and disability types. As Rix, Lowe, and the Heritage Forum (2010) argue, developments intended to improve access to cultural/heritage sites for people with physical or sensory disabilities also facilitate access for people with intellectual disabilities (ID).

We present the results of our review under three headings, and we synthesise them in **Table 1**. The first heading addresses studies of attendance as audience of arts, cultural, or heritage venues. The second heading discusses professional engagement. The third heading engages with amateur creation or community arts, with overlap between these two as amateur creation could also involve a serious or semi-professional approach.

### **BARRIERS AND FACILITATORS TO ACCESS: AUDIENCES IN ARTS VENUES, MUSEUMS, AND HERITAGE SITES**

We found sources that identified barriers or facilitators for audiences of arts venues, especially in reports produced in the context of policy-making, while within studies of museums and heritage, debates are often about new audiences and equal access, with legislation on discrimination and equality contributing to these developments (Argyropoulos & Kanari 2015; Rix, Lowe & the Heritage Forum 2010). For Ott (2010: 271), museum visitors can learn to reframe what they know using a disability consciousness (see also Sandell & Dodd 2010). Lid (2016: 87) suggests that cultural heritage often fails to represent people with disabilities as equal citizens, while visitors with disabilities can remind others 'of the plurality of humanity and equal status'.

Identified barriers include, first, physical accessibility barriers and inaccessible content, often within research concerned with particular venues or disability-types. Most attention focuses on physical access (Argyropoulos & Kanari 2015; Cho & Jolley 2016), with Guffey (2015) highlighting how lack of seating in modernist museums is a barrier for some people. Within museums it is highlighted how adopting solely visual cues for navigation may exclude people with visual disabilities; auditory only cues may exclude Deaf or hearing impaired people, while people with ID may be excluded when wayfinding cues are complicated (Renel 2019: 383;

see also Mastrogioseppe, Span & Bortolotti 2020; National Education Centre Slovak Republic 2020). Cultural heritage projects that address only physical barriers are often, nonetheless, considered to be accessible (Muscarà & Sani 2019). We lack studies that assess accessibility across museums based on comprehensive strategies (Mesquita & Carneiro 2016).

Thus, dismantling physical barriers is prioritised rather than broader understandings of accessibility (Swedish Authority for Participation 2016). A study of 28 museums across Europe suggests that accessibility for people with visual disabilities was limited even in museums that had implemented accessibility strategies (Mesquita & Carneiro 2016). Yet more attention has been paid to people with sensory disabilities than to people with ID (Seale et al. 2021). Guidelines for institutions vary in approach but focus frequently only on people with physical or sensory disabilities (Jongerius et al. 2020).

Lack of a comprehensive approach to accessibility and, instead, access facilitated only in limited ways or to limited museum exhibitions are consistently highlighted in studies addressing different disability types and settings (Argyropoulos & Kanari 2015; Eardley et al. 2016; Mesquita & Carneiro 2016; Rix, Lowe & the Heritage Forum 2010). For example, Renel (2019: 378) suggests that people with disabilities are still positioned as 'special' patrons, invited only to engage with specific parts of a museum collection or with certain events.

Lack of access to content (such as through hearing loops) and lack of interpretation in sign language are identified in Sweden across a range of arts and cultural settings (Swedish Authority for Participation 2016). Martinez Amador (2016) highlights lack of accessibility of Spanish cinemas for Deaf people. Access to technologies cannot be assumed for all groups, including people with disabilities on low incomes, but Constantinou, Loizides, and Ioannou (2016) suggest that barriers to a more widespread use of technology for access to cultural content and exhibitions in museums is often not the cost, but awareness and willingness (see Weisen 2012). Furthermore, technologies are more typically explored relative to sensory disabilities than other forms of disability, such as ID (Seale et al. 2021), and some groups, such as people with ID, neurodivergent conditions such as dementia, and a broad range of cognitive disabilities, are underrepresented in terms of navigational information design (Renel 2019).

Lack of accessible information, transport, and support to reach cultural venues represent further barriers. For example, reports suggest that ongoing barriers include transportation issues, price of tickets, and lack of information and support at venues (Gratton 2020; Shape 2013). Another report suggests that the cost involved and difficulties with travel are obstacles when it comes to attending arts events, museums, or libraries and that people with disabilities are more likely than others to consider that the types of activities available are not of interest or relevant (BritainThinks 2018; see also Swedish Authority for Participation 2016). Lack of accessible information about cultural venues, goods, and services is also identified as a barrier in Croatia (Primorac, Obuljen Koržinek & Uzelac 2017).

Other barriers identified by an array of scholarly and policy work include attitudinal ones. A survey of people with disabilities and arts organisations in the US found that nearly half of respondents with disabilities felt that attending arts organisations was difficult, with stigma perceived as sometimes harder to overcome than physical or programme-related barriers (Ludwig 2012). Similarly, a range of people with disabilities and Deaf people experience negative museum interactions (Renel 2019), and people with visual disabilities experience constraints due to negative attitudes and lack of specific knowledge of staff (Mesquita & Carneiro 2016; see also Argyropoulos & Kanari 2015; National Education Centre Slovak Republic 2020). Lack of awareness of staff of cultural institutions limits participation by children with disabilities; this is linked to low budgets and inadequate time devoted to access issues (Cho & Jolley 2016).

While some of the factors enhancing access to museums and heritage sites are implicit in the discussion of barriers, a huge range of facilitative practices are evident from the studies reviewed. Jongerius et al. (2020) suggest that regulation does not always lead to creating an inclusive and equally accessible environment for everyone, but they mention examples of accessible festivals, cinemas, theatres, and museums in the Netherlands, including use of an app enabling audio-description of Dutch-language films. Technology and digitalization are important facilitators within archaeological/heritage sites and museums (Agostiano 2016; Renel 2019: 379; Seale et al. 2021). Other examples include taped guides, touch tours, handling sessions, tactile plans, large-print and Braille information, clear labels and signs, sign-language

interpreted tours, lip speaking and reading (Seale et al. 2021). Facilitators for people with visual disabilities include both good physical design of buildings (e.g., avoiding glass doors, steps, and steep slopes) and accessible supports for way-finding, appropriate lighting and sound-systems, good visibility of text and figures, accessibility of publications (e.g., leaflets/guides, interpretative panels, and identification labels), magnification of objects (e.g., traditional magnifying glasses or more advanced equipment), and ability to explore based on senses other than sight (such as audio explanations), tactile experiences (including use of replicas or use of gloves when touching objects) (Argyropoulos & Kanari 2015: 132; Mesquita & Carniero 2016). To create spaces that are socially inclusive and equitable to a wide a range of people, Renel (2019) highlights providing diverse sonic environments that support different cognitive needs.

Other facilitative factors include input from stakeholder groups, considered central to addressing barriers within cultural heritage (Lid 2016). Good access programmes in museums actively seek input from patrons, artists, scholars, and activists who are blind or experience visual disabilities (Lazar & Briggs 2015; Levent, Kleege & Pursley 2013). Levent and Pursley (2013) stress the importance of outreach and programme development with input from a variety of people who are blind or have low vision. However, museum collaboration to co-produce exhibitions with blind or visually disabled visitors are more common than those involving people with ID according to Seale et al. (2021: 24). Ludwig (20212) suggests organisational facilitators within arts organisations, including creating an advisory council of staff and people with disabilities; internal evaluation assessing accessibility on physical and perceptual levels (management practices, employment, grievance procedures, communications); staff training that focuses on accessibility issues; and marketing communication to promote accessible, welcoming environments.

It is notable that all museum visitors are considered to benefit when exhibitions and programmes provide access to people with disabilities (Eardley et al. 2016; Levent, Kleege & Pursley 2013; Rappolt-Schlichtmann & Daley 2013; Weisen 2012). Similar arguments are made in respect of heritage sites (Muscarà & Sani 2019). Finally, factors designed to engage visitors, not just to provide technological solutions, can be facilitative of building a sense of community (Hoyt-O'Brien 2013). For people with ID, to feel safe and welcome in mainstream arts and cultural activities was an important facilitator, and social interaction was central to participants' understanding of culture (Gratton 2020).

## **BARRIERS AND FACILITATORS TO PROFESSIONAL CREATION**

Several studies focus on experiences of people with disabilities as makers of culture. This literature tends to consider engagement by different groups in professional or semi-professional capacities or examines development of skills or education towards professional engagement. It often suggests barriers and facilitators to participation, even if this is not the stated aim or research question. Sometimes it incorporates discussion of expressions of identity and of potential of arts participation to transform the societal mainstream. This literature reflects, therefore, the shift in disability art from a close association with the emerging disability rights movement to a recent phase characterised by seeking to reach mainstream audiences and by a combination of disability issues and non-disability issues (Solvang 2012).

Barriers faced by artists with disabilities participating in a range of art forms (literature, fine arts, music, and performing arts) include lack of adequate education and of empowerment, underpinned by negative attitudes towards people with disabilities. In that connection, assumptions that disability art is merely a hobby or form of therapy, not a professional endeavour, are often highlighted (Bang & Kim 2015: 543–4). This approach to arts engagement (as social, recreational, therapeutic, or educational) could hamper access to cultural opportunities or funding. For example, focusing on experiences within a theatre involving actors with ID, Saur and Johansen (2013: 258) highlight how the theatre is considered educative, not professional, something they link to how the actors have no formal education. Instead, Saur and Johansen (2013) argue for recognition that people with ID can develop their own mode of expression, which should be treated on equal terms. Lack of educational opportunities could hamper development or progression. For example, a literature review on barriers to dance training for young people noted that most relevant dance provision is recreational, focusing on creativity and fun, instead of technical development (Aujla & Redding 2013).

Examining participation in contemporary dance, Marsh (2016) argues that attitudinal and perceptual barriers limit progression for artists with disabilities, who may be discounted as potential leaders because their bodies are not perceived to signify key physical markers of leadership and that we lack role-models to counter negative perceptions. Again in the context of dance training, Aujla and Redding (2013) identify four main barriers to engagement, which resonate with findings in several other studies. These were aesthetic barriers (related to ideas of ideal body types for dancers), attitudinal barriers (which can be internalised or come from others including parents, teachers, and companies), training-related barriers (including lack of technical training and teachers' lack of knowledge or confidence), and logistical barriers (e.g., lack of transport, support needs, and financial costs). Additional barriers related to physical accessibility (including the fact that venues are sometimes accessible for audiences but not performers) and a lack of knowledge or information. Amongst the recommendations for facilitating access are help identifying role models and development of dance and disability networks (Aujla & Redding 2013: 83–84).

A study with young people with disabilities engaged in visual art within pre-degree and higher education details facilitative factors within education, including disability awareness in the arts curriculum, highly developed support systems in terms of practical assistance and IT, teachers who are art specialists, an accessible arts curriculum, constructive criticism, an accessible environment, and, critically, disabled artists as role models (Taylor 2005: 777).

Finally, barriers and facilitators discussed above drawn from scholarly works are echoed in grey literature. For example, a study by Arts Council England (ACE 2017) with people with disabilities working in arts and culture, as well as people aspiring to enter the workforce, identified similar barriers (including attitudinal barriers, lack of networks, and lack showcasing of work by people with disabilities). Additionally, welfare policies that can create 'welfare traps' by discouraging entrance into the labour market were identified as barriers, along with a challenging working culture (involving unpredictability and long hours<sup>2</sup>).

As regards facilitators, the ACE (2017) study suggested organisational changes to facilitate entry and progression, including building supportive teams and mentorship, providing access to advice for employers (including on making reasonable accommodations), providing mentoring and peer support, ensuring inclusive board recruitment and working practices, and supporting employees through welfare claims. Bang and Kim's (2015) work is notable for a number of recommendations for change in Korea. It highlights the role of effective law and policies to advance disability art, the importance of government bureaus focused on disability art, and the role of disability arts centres as a hub for development. Other recommendations include quota systems to ensure opportunities to practice arts, personal assistance services to support artistic work, and measures to solve financial problems experienced by artists (Bang & Kim 2015: 553–5). These authors also cite a survey with artists with disabilities suggesting that the best way for disability arts to be promoted would be financial support by government (35.1%), legislation that promotes artists with disabilities (33.4%), and expansion of arts education for persons with disabilities (9.6%).

## **BARRIERS AND FACILITATORS TO AMATEUR CREATION**

The last heading under which we present the findings of our review relates to studies on participation in community arts and the role of persons with disabilities as non-professional creators. The disability arts movement in the UK has a long history of community-based collaborative arts practice (Levy & Young 2020; Penketh et al. 2019). Literature often takes as its focus either the issue of inclusion or its impact on people with disabilities (Levy, Robb & Jindal-Snape 2017: 257). However, we found identification of barriers and facilitators even if that is not the stated objective or central research question in all cases. Additionally, some studies engage with issues of identity, or (relatedly) self-expression, or impacts of participation on perceptions of disability within society generally.

Again, medicalised or paternalistic attitudes to disability and to arts engagement by people with disabilities was an identified barrier. Considering initiatives focused on younger people, Penketh et al. (2019) suggest that funding streams in community arts can be closely aligned

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<sup>2</sup> 'Welfare traps' are identified in contexts other than cultural employment: see Bonfils et al. (2017) who reference how benefit traps (that is, risk of loss of social benefits) operate as barriers to implementation of individual placement and support approach for employment.





CATEGORY	TYPES OF BARRIERS	FACILITATORS THAT ADDRESS/COUNTERACT THOSE BARRIERS
<b>3. Negative attitudes</b>	Lack of knowledge and ambition (which can be linked to ideas of disability arts as therapy) and negative attitudes of staff create barriers for audiences/visitors and creators/participants.	Development of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• awareness raising opportunities,</li> <li>• supportive networks between organisations, including special and mainstream schools, arts companies, integrated companies, and</li> <li>• opportunities for human interaction and of conveying a sense of welcome to participants.</li> </ul>
	Absence of a sense of welcome or community (especially important for some groups).  Aesthetic barriers in professional contexts (especially in some art forms, such as dance) related to ideas of ideal body types for performers and for leaders.	Showcasing of role models who are PWD.  Virtuous circle in which engagement is understood as potentially transformational for individuals and for societies, leading to re-conceptualisation of disability itself.
<b>4. Lack of accessibility</b>	Access facilitated only for special exhibitions or parts of an exhibition/venue—not mainstreamed within everyday offerings—and lack of knowledge of staff.  Venues that are accessible (or partly accessible) for audiences but not performers.  Lack of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• accessible information on websites,</li> <li>• support at venues and seating in exhibition spaces,</li> <li>• physical access to buildings, including easy identification of entrance/reception and access to all rooms/sections,</li> <li>• accessible content (lack of IT solutions, of accessible interpretation encompassing guided tours, brochures, and interpretation panels for a range of disabilities),</li> <li>• navigation, orientation, and wayfinding information that is accessible for people with a range of disability types,</li> <li>• spaces that are suitable for people with sensory/neurological processing needs.</li> </ul>	Accessible front- and back-of-house design. More frequent scheduling and mainstreaming of events/tours/performances that are accessible.  Use of IT supported by consultation with different groups of PWD and by guidelines encompassing different types of disability and promoting awareness of existing IT solutions. Accessible design might include mobile devices, assistive listening systems, and embedding audio-description, information, and way-finding (incorporating audible, tactile, and visual cues and environments that support different cognitive needs).  Requesting feedback from visitors with disabilities about what was difficult to navigate.  Marketing communication and public relations to promote an accessible and welcoming environment for audiences and artists.  Accessible websites, including instructions on accessibility and on getting from nearby public transport.  Participatory approaches and engagement that help build a sense of belonging and community.
<b>5. Lack of consultation with, and involvement of, persons with disabilities in cultural organisations</b>	Insufficient involvement of PWD in cultural industries, including <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• lack of employment,</li> <li>• insufficient input into decision-making and into developing policies and evaluating services.</li> </ul> Working cultures (i.e., unpredictability and long hours) that are challenging for PWD.	Input by PWD <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• on decision-making fora,</li> <li>• into policies and practices (two-way exchange),</li> <li>• into evaluation processes, assessing accessibility on physical and perceptual levels (all of which may require financial support for representative organisations).</li> </ul> Changes in organisational and employment practices: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• inclusive recruitment/employment/management/communications practices,</li> <li>• access to advice for employers on reasonable accommodation of employees and on how to support them through welfare claims,</li> <li>• staff training focusing on attitudes and on handling accessibility issues,</li> <li>• building disability-supportive teams, mentorship, and more supportive terms of employment,</li> <li>• employment-based apprenticeships and internships for PWD.</li> </ul>

## CONCLUSION

This article contributes to understandings of barriers and facilitators to participation in cultural life through a narrative literature review. It synthesises the findings in a classification that has relevance across cultural participation opportunities. As Mesquita and Carneiro (2016) suggest, existing research is mainly limited to a single setting, or to a single or a small set of strategies to increase accessibility. The lack of a more overarching perspective within research may limit scope for identifying common challenges and strengths. The discussion and classification of barriers and facilitators that this article offers aims to be conducive to a greater understanding of the relevant issues with a view to fostering participation.







