CRETE FOR ALL: EVALUATION OF AN ACCESSIBILITY LITERACY TRAINING PROGRAM IN THE TOURISM WORKFORCE OF AN ISLAND DESTINATION

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1. Introduction

Accessibility has increasingly emerged as a strategic priority for tourism destinations seeking to improve social inclusion, service quality, sustainability, and competitiveness. Contemporary approaches to disability, and in particular the Social Model of Disability, emphasize that exclusion results from inaccessible physical, social, informational, and organizational environments, thereby highlighting the responsibility of organizations and destinations to remove barriers (WHO 2011, Kritsotakis et al., 2017). Consequently, improving accessibility requires not only investments in infrastructure but also individuals capable of recognizing, understanding, and responding to diverse visitor needs (Rielander, 2025). This challenge is particularly relevant for tourism-intensive destinations facing demographic and social transformations. Population ageing, increased longevity, growing recognition of visible and invisible disabilities, and expanding expectations regarding inclusive travel experiences are reshaping the profile of travelers (Darcy & Dickson, 2009).

Crete, one of the most important tourism destinations in the Mediterranean, receives millions of visitors annually and relies heavily on tourism as a driver of economic development. At the same time, accessibility training remains relatively underdeveloped within the tourism workforce. To address this gap, the Region of Crete and the Hellenic Mediterranean University jointly developed *'Crete for All'*, a workforce development programme aiming to strengthen accessibility literacy among tourism professionals across the four regional units of Crete over a two-year period (Kritsotakis et al., 2026). The *'Crete for All'* programme targeted professionals working in accommodation establishments, food and beverage services, travel agencies, destination management organizations, public administration, education, and other tourism-related sectors across the island of Crete. Topics include, but are not limited to, disability terminology, medical and social models of disability, neurodiversity, invisible disabilities, demographic trends, the Purple Economy, accessibility principles, barriers in tourism environments, reasonable accommodations,

inclusive communication and marketing, customer service, international good practices, and ISO 21902:2021 Accessible Tourism for All.

2. Theoretical Framework

The *'Crete for All'* programme was developed around the concept of accessibility literacy, which constitutes the central framework of the intervention. Accessibility literacy refers to the capacity of individuals and organizations to understand disability and accessibility, recognize barriers to participation, critically evaluate their impact on visitors' experiences, and integrate inclusive practices into everyday decision-making and service provision. This capacity is approached as a multidimensional professional competence that combines knowledge, attitudes, values, communication skills, critical thinking, and practical competences, rather than mere compliance with technical standards. Accessibility literacy is further supported by principles of Inclusive Design, which recognize diversity as a characteristic of human existence.

The programme also incorporates the concept of the Access Chain, according to which accessibility must be ensured throughout the entire visitor journey, spanning transportation, accommodation, information, digital services, cultural experiences, customer interaction, and feedback. This systemic perspective, aligned with the international standard ISO 21902:2021 Accessible Tourism for All, underscores the interdependence of infrastructure, organizational culture, governance, marketing, and staff training in shaping the overall visitor experience (Ferreira et al., 2026)

Particular attention is given to invisible disabilities and neurodiversity, encompassing autism, ADHD, sensory sensitivities, chronic conditions, and mental health conditions, alongside the role of social attitudes, stereotypes, and disability-related perceptions in shaping visitors' experiences.

3. Methodology

The present study evaluates the implementation of the *'Crete for All'* training programme and examines participants' perceptions, learning outcomes, and intentions regarding accessibility-related professional practice. The evaluation employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data through an anonymous questionnaire constructed by the research team. The questionnaire was administered following the first ten training seminars, conducted between late February and early May 2026. All seminar attendees were invited to participate, and the analysis includes the respondents with complete data.

The questionnaire included measures of prior familiarity with disability and accessibility issues, satisfaction with the programme, evaluation of educational content and instructional methods, perceived learning outcomes, and intentions regarding future professional practice. Most evaluation items were measured using five-point Likert scales, while overall satisfaction and self-reported initial familiarity were measured using ten-point scales. All statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 31. Descriptive analyses included frequencies, percentages, and means.

Qualitative data were obtained through open-ended questions inviting participants to identify the most useful elements of the programme, suggest improvements, and indicate topics for future training. Responses were analysed thematically to identify recurring themes and educational needs. The study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Hellenic Mediterranean University.

4. Findings

Participants reported a moderate level of prior familiarity with disability and accessibility issues before attending the programme, with a mean self-assessment score of 5.34 on a ten-point scale. Overall

satisfaction with the programme was very high, with a mean score of 9.34 out of 10: 93.5% of participants provided positive evaluations, and 86.4% rated the programme either 9 or 10 on the satisfaction scale.

The educational content was evaluated positively across several dimensions. An appropriate balance between theoretical concepts and practical examples was confirmed by 94.1% of participants, while content comprehensibility was rated highly, with 98.8% finding the material understandable regardless of prior knowledge. The trainer and the educational process received particularly high evaluations. Subject knowledge was rated at 4.87 out of 5, with all participants providing positive responses, and similarly high ratings were recorded for communication skills, clarity of presentation, educational techniques, and encouragement of participant engagement.

In terms of learning outcomes, the programme changed how 91.1% of participants perceive accessibility within the tourism sector, and 95.9% reported acquiring new knowledge applicable to their professional activities. The same percentage felt more comfortable interacting with and serving visitors with disabilities, and expressed an intention to implement accessibility-related changes in their workplace practices. Programme effectiveness was confirmed by 92.9% of participants, who reported that the seminar met or exceeded their expectations, while 97.6% stated that they would recommend it to other tourism professionals; many also expressed interest in a more advanced accessibility training programme.

Qualitative responses highlighted several recurring themes, with communication practices, interaction with visitors with disabilities, and customer service guidance identified as particularly useful components, alongside practical examples, case studies, videos, and real-life scenarios. Participants also identified invisible disabilities and neurodiversity as topics of particular interest, while suggestions for future training included additional practical applications, sector-specific examples, accessibility implementation strategies, legal and policy issues, certification systems, and advanced accessibility training.

5. Discussion and Implications

The findings indicate that the participating tourism professionals entered the programme with relatively limited prior familiarity with disability and accessibility issues, highlighting the existence of educational needs within the tourism workforce. At the same time, the consistently high evaluations of the programme, the educational content, and the instructional process suggest that accessibility literacy training can be successfully integrated into professional development initiatives targeting tourism stakeholders, confirming Guillén et al.,' (2025) review.

The results support the central premise of the programme that accessibility extends beyond technical or infrastructural compliance to encompass attitudes, communication skills, and practical competencies relevant to service delivery. Participants reported acquiring new knowledge, greater confidence in interacting with visitors with disabilities, and a willingness to implement accessibility-related changes in their professional practice, confirming that accessibility literacy translates into tangible shifts in professional disposition and intended behaviour. Particular interest expressed by participants in topics such as invisible disabilities, neurodiversity, and customer interaction further reflects the broader understanding of accessibility promoted throughout the programme, consistent with its theoretical foundations.

Building on the experience of Crete for All, future initiatives may expand the scope of training through more advanced modules, sector-specific applications, experiential learning activities, and continuing education opportunities tailored to the needs of different tourism professions. As destinations increasingly seek to align accessibility, inclusion, service quality, and sustainability objectives, accessibility literacy may constitute an important component of destination capacity building and tourism workforce development.

Keywords: accessible tourism; accessibility literacy; disability inclusion; evaluation; tourism workforce development; Crete.

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