

The situation of accessible tourism in Hungary in the light of the literature¹

Abstract

In Hungary, accessible tourism has been an under-researched area of tourism research for a long time. Only in the last few years has this changed, with a few researchers becoming interested in the scrutiny of this topic. The authors therefore present the Hungarian focus of research on this issue by reviewing the Hungarian literature. In order to provide a more complex understanding of accessible tourism, the authors also present the most relevant international literature in addition to the Hungarian research results. The issue of accessible tourism concerns at least 10% of the European population. So, beyond the social and societal importance of the issue, it is not a negligible number from a market point of view, either. Understanding the expectations and specific consumer habits of the stakeholders is essential to develop an appropriate offer and to ensure equal access to services. Recognising this, the last few years have seen a significant increase in research interest and a proliferation of articles on accessible tourism.

Keywords: accessible tourism, disability, technical accessibility, research

Introduction

Most people take living without barriers for granted. In fact, some estimates suggest that around 10% of the European population is affected by a disability. In developed countries, accessibility is also receiving increasing attention in the organisation of the tourism supply, partly out of humanity and partly in recognition of the significant business potential. In the most general terms, accessible tourism is tourism that is equally accessible to all, including people with disabilities, people who are temporary disabled, elderly people, people with young children and multi-generational families. Accordingly, the main areas of analysis of equal access are the same as the main areas of the supply side of tourism, namely: accommodation; hospitality; tourist attractions; transport; and communication. Of these, the literature is perhaps most concerned with the accessibility of attractions, probably in the context of the fact that a significant proportion of attractions are state-owned public facilities (Csesznák et al., 2009, p. 82; Káldy, 2010, p. 5).

Defining the target group for accessible tourism is also a problem. In many cases, the public does not even include in the target group those who, due to their life situation, are members of the target group for a shorter or longer period of time: e.g. pregnant women, people with temporary disabilities recovering after a surgery, or the elderly. The proportion of the elderly in the overall population is steadily increasing, and many forms of technical accessibility are becoming an essential need for them. Many of us therefore live with a permanent or temporary disability which can be a barrier to their lives and a barrier to their journeys. In fact, “accessible tourism is a *continuous effort* to ensure that all destinations, tourism products and services are accessible to all people, regardless of any physical limitation, disability or age, and whether they are private or public tourist sites” (Accessible Tourism, 2017).

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At the level of declarations, accessibility is no longer an issue, but the reality is different. This is confirmed by the results of a research carried out in the framework of the international project called Peer Act. When exploring the relationship between people with disabilities and tourism, it should always be borne in mind that different disabled visitors have different specific needs. For them, however, technical accessibility is essential, as in many cases ignoring their specific needs can make it impossible for them to participate actively in tourism. Today, in Hungary, the tourism opportunities, habits and needs of people with disabilities show significant differences in some respects compared to the general population.

1. Literature review

Defining disability is not an easy task, as it takes many forms. “We can include not only people with limited mobility, visual and hearing impairments, intellectual disabilities, but also those who suffer from other conditions that have a long-term impact on their quality of life, such as allergies” (Zsarnóczky, 2018a, p. 39). According to WHO estimates, *every 6th person on Earth* suffers from some kind of disability, and this number is continuously increasing (WHO 2011). The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, adopted by the United Nations in 2006 and also proclaimed in Hungary, obliges States Parties to ensure access for persons with disabilities to sport, recreation and tourism facilities and services (Act XCII of 2007). Any of us can be concerned by this issue, if not for any other reason, because of the progress of our age. This is why the problem has taken on particular importance today in the context of ageing societies. Special needs in older age are common to all, but there are also many other life situations that may give rise to special needs: e.g. people undergoing rehabilitation after an accident, families with young children (Darcy & Dickson, 2009, p. 33).

The United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNTWO) is committed to promoting accessible tourism. In this spirit, it has dedicated World Tourism Day 2016 to this theme. The organisation has made a number of recommendations and published a handbook on the issue (UNWTO, 2016).

Accessibility has been the subject of many efforts throughout human history. It became a widely recognised social issue in the second half of the 20th century. It is now widely accepted that everyone, despite a disability, should be able to enjoy the pleasures of travel as much as anyone else, “since the enjoyment of the fullness of life is a right for all” (Végh, 2005, p. 31). The European Parliament’s resolution of 29 October 2015 on European Strategy for the Future and the Challenges of European Tourism emphasises the importance of developing sustainable, responsible and accessible tourism; the principle of “tourism for all”; and that full accessibility and affordability of tourism are key elements for the sustainability of the sector. It proposes that Member States develop a Europe-wide, uniform and transparent labelling scheme for accessible offers and that they make accessibility a criterion for support in the context of economic support programmes for the tourism sector.

At the regulatory level, Hungary is not lagging behind other EU countries. According to Act XXVI of 1998, persons with disabilities have the right to an accessible, perceptible and safe built environment. They must be able to visit cultural, educational and sports facilities and to use transport systems and means of transport safely. The new National Disability Programme (2015-2025), adopted in 2015, noted that service providers had not yet recognised the tourism opportunities for people with disabilities. It is therefore important to update existing tourism demand surveys and disseminate them within the tourism profession, as well as to train and sensitise service providers and staff. It stresses the need to apply the principle of universal design. The aim is to encourage the operation of tourism packages for people with disabilities,

with a complex accessibility objective. The Programme emphasises the development of accessible websites and accessible electronic services.

According to HCSO (2016), there are 408,021 people with disabilities in Hungary. The breakdown by type of disability is shown in Figure 1. In our opinion, the population affected by accessible tourism may be much larger, as it can be assumed that an elderly person in good health would not classify him/herself as disabled, but would already require access to accessible facilities when using tourism services.

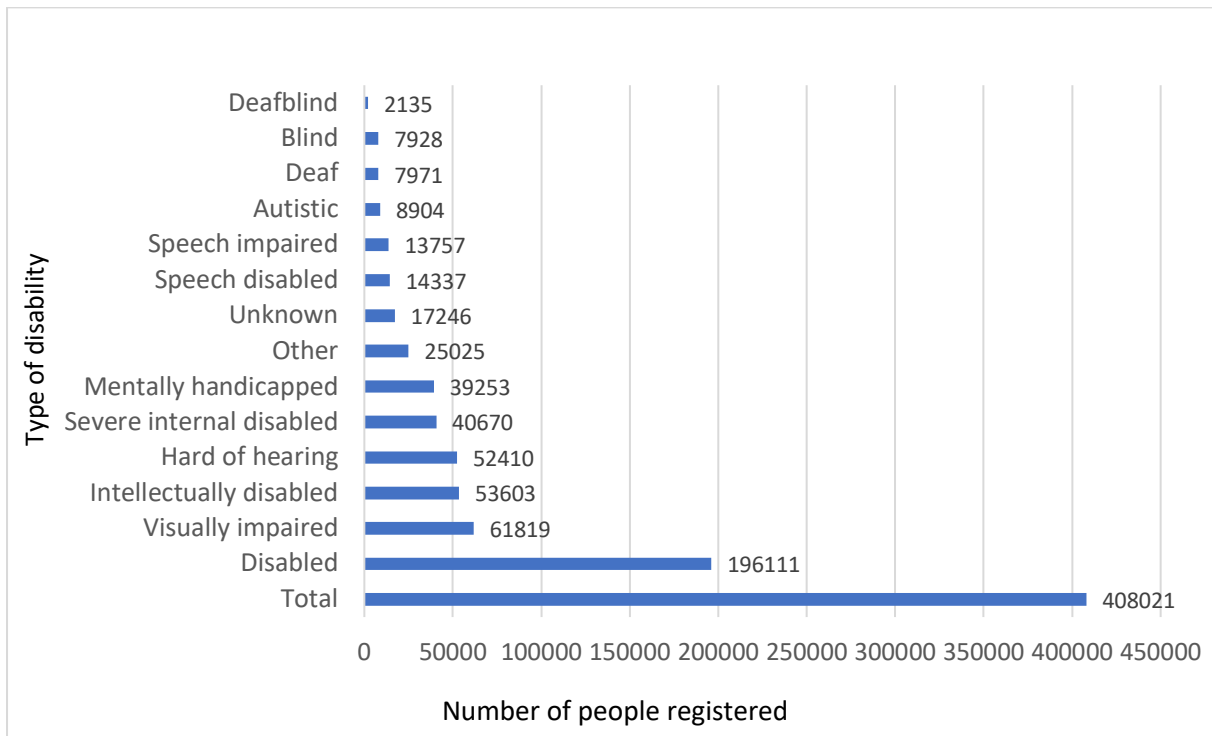


Figure 1: Number of people with disabilities in Hungary by type of disability (persons)
 Source: own editing based on HCSO 2016

As tourism has become a social phenomenon, it has also become an important factor in shaping quality of life (Gonda et al., 2019, p. 1791). Today, it is fortunately accepted that facilitating travel for people with disabilities and providing the necessary physical conditions is not only a human, ethical, moral and legal obligation, but also an important economic issue. At present, this represents an untapped niche in the tourism market, although there have been many positive counter-examples in the recent past (Buhalis et al., 2012). However, this untapped market segment should not be seen as a homogeneous group, as they have different specific needs for services depending on the type and extent of their disability. There are barriers that may affect all travellers and barriers that are insurmountable problems for certain narrow segments, only (Shaw & Coles, 2004, p. 398).

Different tourist destinations have reached different levels of accessibility. Some destinations are developing special offers for people with disabilities, others are making accessibility a distinctive feature – recognising the market opportunity it represents. Unfortunately, there are still places that do not address this issue at all.

The major European countries in the international tourist flows are clearly placing great emphasis on this issue. Thus, the efforts of Spain (Vila, Darcy & González, 2015, p. 261) and Italy (Agovino et al., 2017, p. 59) in the field of tourist accessibility deserve special mention. In our personal experience, the situation in Germany is significantly better than in Hungary; in

Germany correct solutions for accessibility and equal accessibility in all areas of life (including transport, which is of particular importance for tourism) are in place. The implementation of accessible tourism is not the same as physical accessibility. The experience provided by an accessible destination is much more than that: it is the realisation of the principles of independence, equality and human dignity while enjoying the tourism experience. Experiencing the spirit of place is as important for people with disabilities as it is for anyone else.

It is generally accepted that the experience of travelling and holidays enhances subjective happiness (Csapó et al., 2018, p. 115). This is particularly true for people with disabilities. For them and their family members, the joy of travelling offers the possibility of escaping from difficult and often trying everyday life. In many cases, travel is a celebration for them, and the experiences help them to make contacts and integrate more easily into society (Gálné Kucsák, 2008, p. 54). Several empirical studies in Hungary have shown that *people with disabilities face significant problems* when travelling and that their disability hinders them in realising their travel plans. This is why many of them choose to ‘not travel’ (Csapó & Gonda, 2019, p. 59, Csapó, Töröcsik & Nagy, 2019, p. 14). Half of disabled people with reduced mobility have a disability that prevents them from participating in a tourism programme, and 75% of visually impaired people have the same problem (Motivation Foundation and Revita Foundation Research Workshop, 2009). Providing a high standard of service to disabled guests requires empathy and attention from tourism industry stakeholders.

2. Early stage of accessible tourism research in Hungary (1990-2020)

From the last decade of the 20th century we cannot find any study dealing specifically with accessible tourism, and it was only at the end of the first two decades of our century that Hungarian researchers started to deal with this issue more intensively. In 2004, a short study entitled “Tourism opportunities for people with disabilities in Hungary” was published in the pages of the periodical *Turizmus Bulletin*, i.-e. *Tourism Bulletin* (Végh, 2005, p. 26), in which the author makes statements that are still valid today, ranging from the (unfortunately still) unfavourable situation of people with disabilities in Hungary to the fact that their travel needs are basically no different from those of their ‘healthy’ counterparts. She analyses the needs and problems of those involved in “paraturism” in the areas of transport, accommodation, spas and animators. Also published in the *Turizmus Bulletin* is a study by K. Gálné Kucsák on the situation and opportunities for visually impaired people in tourism in Hungary (Gálné Kucsák, 2008, p. 55), in which she explains that while more and more places are becoming accessible for the disabled, when thinking about accessibility we tend to forget the visually impaired, perhaps because they are a less “conspicuous” target group, whose vulnerability is a major deterrent to both everyday and leisure travel. The author underlines the positive (happy) impact of tourism in improving the quality of life of those concerned. For the visually impaired, the study reveals for the first time the problem of accessible tourism in Hungary and points out the directions for essential improvements. The author emphasises the positive (beatific) impact of travel on the quality of life of the people concerned. The study is the first of its kind to explore the issue of accessible tourism for visually impaired to be realised in Hungary, pointing out directions of the inevitable development. It examines the accessibility of tourism products in terms of accessible transport and tourist superstructure, and analyses the opportunities for visually impaired visitors in active, cultural and health tourism. The study concludes that the main reason why visually impaired people are not offered accessible tourism is the lack of information. One year later, in 2009, Csesznák and co-authors in their paper entitled ‘Ensuring fuller access for people with disabilities,’ published by the Szentendre Ethnographic Museum, edited by the Centre for Museum Education and Training, discuss the problems of accessibility in a specific area, namely museums (Csesznák et al., 2009). The study describes professional

cooperation between institutions for people with disabilities and museums in order to create equal opportunities.

Since 2010, the number of articles on the subject has been increasing. Among them we can find a book (tangentially) dealing with the issue: Beatific travel – Hungarian aspects of the relation of tourism and quality of life (Michalkó, 2010); a book (book chapter) written as a research summary: Accessible Tourism in some European countries – findings and results of an empirical survey, Peer-Act Project (Raffay & Gonda, 2020); The Primacy of Technical accessibility in tourism product development (Farkas, 2019); doctoral theses: Performance sport for people with disabilities and its impact on different sport arenas (Dorogi, 2012), Special needs in tourism – the place, role and potential of people with disabilities in the tourism sector (Gondos, 2020), The potential for fulfilment in existential disability – Insights into the meaning of the concept (Farkas, 2020); thesis: The central importance of information accessibility in barrier-free tourism (Mező, 2019); papers published in Hungarian academic journals: Paraturism and conflict management in the hotel industry (Kovács & Kozák, 2016), The potential of equal opportunities for people with disabilities in tourism (Gondos 2019), Innovative good practices in barrier-free tourism (Raffay & Gonda, 2020), Accessibility and parasport tourism opportunities in the European Union (Zsarnóczky, 2018a). A study on a legal approach by the authors Farkas and Nagy, entitled “One possible way to achieve fuller accessibility through the use of trusts”, has been published in the journal *Legal Theory Review* (Farkas & Nagy, 2020). The articles of Hungarian authors published in international journals improve the international visibility of Hungarian research on the topic, such as *The Future Challenge of Accessible Tourism in the European Union* (Zsarnóczky, 2018b) in the *Vadyba Journal of Management in Lithuania*, *The impact of tourism on the quality of life and The impact of tourism on the quality of life* (Gonda, Nagy & Raffay, 2019), *Travelling Habits of People with Disabilities* (Gonda, 2021) published in the *Romanian Geojournal of Tourism and Geosites*, *The Phenomenon of European Accessibility as a Special Niche in Active Tourism* (Zsarnóczky & Zsarnóczky-Dulházi, 2019), also published in the *Romanian Journal of Tourism Challenges and Trends*. In 2018, the *Polish Journal of Management Studies* published *An empirical study on the influences of management’s attitudes towards employees with disabilities in the hospitality sector* by the trio of authors Sharma, Zsarnóczky & Dunay.

The topic has of course also appeared in conference presentations, more and more frequently towards the end of the decade: *The relationship between tourism and quality of life for people with reduced mobility* (Gondos, 2017), *Accessible tourism in the European Union* (Zsarnóczky, 2017), *The evolution of accessibility, or the path(s) of travel. Tourism security: on the field of practice and theory* (Farkas, 2018), *Can’t make it on my own – an analysis of travel habits of people with disabilities in the light of the results of an international survey* (Gonda & Raffay, 2020b), *Accessibility as a tourism niche opportunity in the European Union* (Zsarnóczky, 2018), *Accessible tourism as a rehabilitation “tool”* (Dulházi & Zsarnóczky, 2018).

Several authors (Gonda, Gondos, Farkas, Raffay, Zsarnóczky) has published a significant part of their works on the issue of accessible tourism in the last five years.

3. Research on accessible tourism today (2020-2023)

In recent years, the study of this issue has entered the mainstream of tourism research. One of the triggers for this was the Erasmus+ project Peer Act, which included a major and influential research project (Gonda & Raffay, 2020a; 2021), exploring some good practices of accessible tourism in Hungary and internationally in five countries (Raffay & Gonda, 2020) and conducting a questionnaire survey among people with disabilities. In the course of this, 262 questionnaires were filled in and a small sample of about 30 questionnaires was also surveyed in each of the 4 foreign partners. The technical preparation of the questionnaire survey was

carried out in Barcelona in December 2018 with the involvement of all partners. There it was decided that the Hungarian partner in charge of the research would carry out the baseline survey on a sample of 200 respondents, which would be compared with the national characteristics, for which the partners undertook to fill in 30-30 questionnaires. The questionnaire survey started in spring 2019 and due to the low response rate it took 5 months to complete instead of the planned 2 months. It was very difficult to reach disabled stakeholders. The questionnaire was mainly completed through an online filling-in tool, but in some cases face-to-face interviews were also carried out. In this respect, the Hungarian partner was very successful, as 89 questionnaires were completed in person at the Orfű Accessible Tourism Day in early September 2019, involving university students. A total of 262 completed questionnaires were received from Hungary, which is one of the largest sample numbers in the Hungarian accessible tourism research to our knowledge. To this result, we compare the results of the other 4 countries, where the number of fill-outs ranged from 22 to 34, as controls. The larger sample was evaluated first, with the results expressed as a percentage. Given the low number of foreign samples, in their case percentages were not calculated but the number of responses was indicated. A short research summary and a workshop paper presenting the full research results (Gonda & Raffay, 2021) were prepared. 47.8% of the Hungarians who completed the questionnaire were male, while 52.2% were female. The results have generated considerable national and international interest. The sample size does not seem very large compared to other studies, but to our knowledge it was the largest sample size in Hungary among studies specifically targeting access for people with disabilities. The importance of the accessibility of tourism supply and, in line with this, the provision of access to tourism services is also underlined by the study. The authors point out that only a small proportion of respondents, only 19.1%, prefer to participate in programmes specifically designed for people with disabilities. The proportion of those who prefer inclusion programmes is also small (19.8%). However, almost two-thirds of respondents (61.1%) were of the opinion that they do not prefer to participate in programmes specifically for people with disabilities, but would like to take advantage of the same supply as everyone else. It is interesting to note that when asked what kind of programmes they like to participate in, no Spanish respondents indicated programmes for people with disabilities. They prefer integrational programmes or programmes not specifically created for people with disabilities. In the other three countries too, programmes for people with disabilities were also the least popular answer, while tourism programmes not specifically designed for them were the most popular.

Besides the questionnaire survey, an initiative was taken in 2020 to bring together all Hungarian tourism researchers interested in the topic. For this purpose, a scientific conference was organised in September 2020 in Orfű, which was attended by most of the Hungarian researchers working on accessible tourism. The conference speakers were given the opportunity to publish their articles in the first issue of the periodical *Turisztikai és Vidékfejlesztési Tanulmányok*, TVT (Tourism and Rural Development Studies) in 2021. At that time, it was already clear that a wide range of research had begun in the field of accessible tourism. In addition to examining more general issues such as travel frequency (Gonda & Raffay, 2021), the authors also reported on relatively narrow but also important sub-areas. In addition to the study of accessibility of cultural facilities (Angler, 2021; Máté, 2021), for example, the exploration of barrier-free possibilities in wine tourism was presented (Slezák-Bartos et al., 2021) and the issue of river cruise holidays and barrier-free tourism was also addressed (Pókó, 2021). Of course, the study of accommodation, the most important service sector of tourism, was not left out of the scope (Horváth, 2021). The sensitivity of the journal to this topic remained even after the 2021 thematic issue of TVT. The authors Raffay-Danyi & Ernszt (2021) examined the issue from the perspective of Veszprém, European Capital of Culture in 2023, and in 2022 the well-known authors on the topic (Farkas & Raffay, 2022) tried to approach the issue of equal access from a

new angle and from new perspectives using the method of investigation of the discipline of philosophy. It can also be noted that among the Hungarian journals, only TVT has developed a strong workshop on equal access in tourism. After 2020, only one study on the topic was published in the other leading Hungarian tourism journal, *Turizmus Bulletin* (Farkas, Raffay & Dávid, 2022b).

A further result of the Peer Act research mentioned above was that Hungarian researchers were able to make international contacts. In this context, a scientific volume published in Germany was produced, in which several Hungarian authors published (Gonda & Raffay, 2020a).

The quality and depth of research results in Hungary has reached a level of international scientific interest. This is also supported by the fact that, in addition to WoS-qualified conference proceedings, several Q1 and Q2 journals have enabled the publication of research results in recent years (Farkas et al., 2023; Farkas, Raffay & Petykó, 2022). Temporary collaborations were created for the better use of synergies between research activity and publications. Among these, the collaboration between colleagues from the Faculty of Business Economics of the University of Pécs, the BGE Budapest Business School, BGE and the Hungarian University of Agriculture and Life Sciences is noteworthy, also resulting in prestigious international publications (Farkas et al., 2022b; Farkas et al., 2022).

4. Summary

The number of people living permanently or temporarily with a disability, whether since birth or acquired during their lives, is in the billions of people in the world's population, and this group with special needs and special circumstances is growing in numbers and in proportion in almost every country. In order to live a full life like their non-disabled peers, in addition to ensuring the usability of spaces and buildings used in everyday life, they also need, among other things, to be able to travel, to participate in the "beatific journey" of tourism. This is not only an ethical duty for the profession, but also a well-understood financial interest, because people with disabilities (and in many cases their accompanying persons) represent a significant, and far from fully exploited, market potential for tourism. In order to improve the situation, in addition to complying with the provisions of international conventions and Hungarian legislation on accessibility, it is necessary to sensitise society and change the attitudes of the general public towards people with disabilities, as well as to sensitise and train those working in the travel sector and, of course, to make tourist facilities and services (travel equipment, accommodation, catering facilities, attractions) accessible to all, not only in a physical sense. The research results also clearly show that the willingness and frequency of travel among the target group is higher than the national average. Their motivation and interests are similar to those of the vast majority in terms of tourist attractions and services. It was also confirmed that if physical accessibility were to improve significantly in certain areas (public transport, access to extreme sports, accessible tourist routes), demand would increase by leaps and bounds.

Professional interest in accessible tourism is still considerable today. The ACCESSIBELE Erasmus+ international higher education project, which will be implemented between 2023 and 2025, will provide an additional impetus for research and analysis of the situation in 4 countries (Hungary, Croatia, Poland, Romania). The results are expected to further contribute to the literature on accessible tourism.

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