



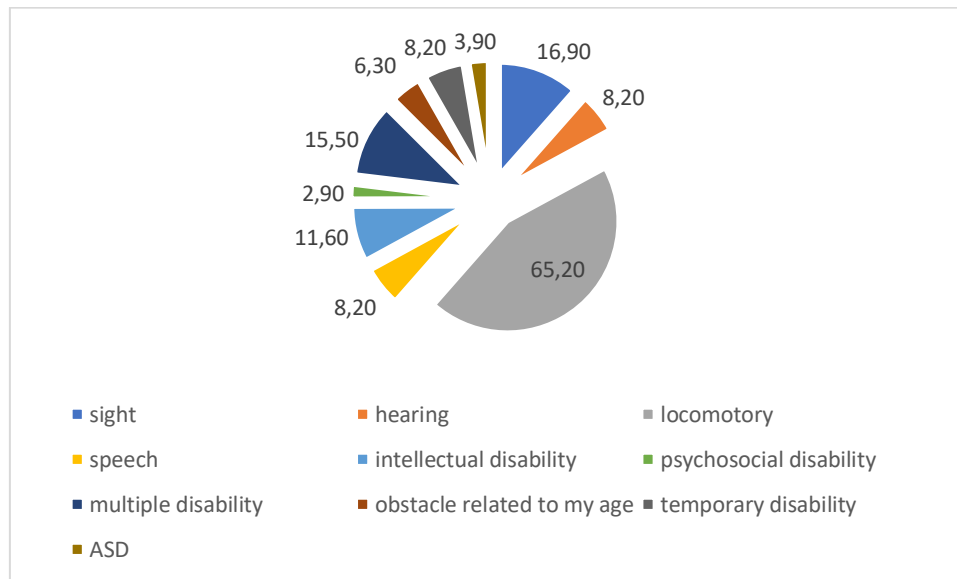
Accessible tourism in Croatia – potentials and challenges

Results of the research among people with disabilities

The primary research was conducted from October to December 2023 using a Google form sent to over 100 associations for people with disabilities, who were asked to forward the form to their members. A simple random sample was used to ensure the representativeness of the results. In the end, a total of 211 questionnaires were collected and the responses were analysed using descriptive statistics methods. The sample consisted of 124 (59 %) women and 83 (39.5 %) men; they were predominantly (33.2 %) 36-50 years old, followed by 51–65-year-olds (23.6 %), over 66-year-olds (14.4 %) and 26–35-year-olds (14.4 %). The youngest group, 18 to 25-year-olds, accounted for 13.5% of the total number of respondents. In terms of marital status, 40.8 % of respondents were married, 39.3 % were single, 5.8 % did not wish to provide any information, 5.3 % were in a non-marital relationship, 4.9 % were divorced and 3.9 % were widowed.

When analysing employment status, the majority of respondents (23.5 %) were pensioners, employees (19 %), receiving a disability pension (14.8 %) or dependent on their relatives (9 %). Of the total number of respondents, 16 (7.6%) were unemployed. Almost a third of respondents (27.1 %) live in Zagreb, 20.5 % of them in towns with 25,000 to 100,000 inhabitants, 13.3 % in villages with more than 1,000 inhabitants, 10 % in small towns with 10,000 to 25,000 inhabitants and 10 % in small towns with up to 10,000 inhabitants.

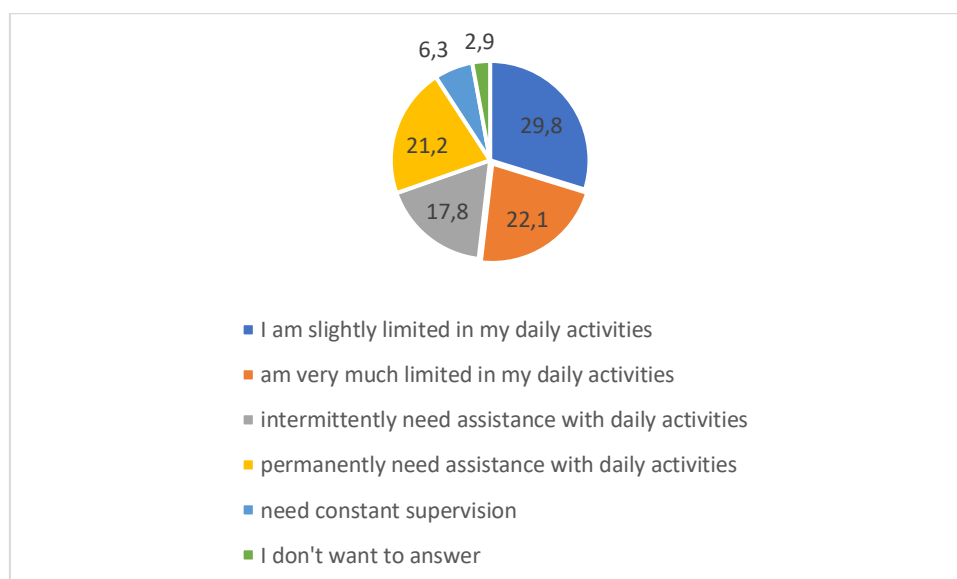
Figure 1: Type of disabilities that respondents live with



The respondents mainly lived with motor impairments (65.2 %), visual impairments (16.9 %), multiple disabilities (15.5 %) and intellectual impairments (11.6 %), while other types of disabilities are listed in Figure 1.

More than half of the respondents (60.4%) were not born with their disability. Most of them (29.8%) were slightly restricted in their daily activities, 22.1% were very severely restricted in their daily activities, while 21.2% constantly needed help with their daily activities.

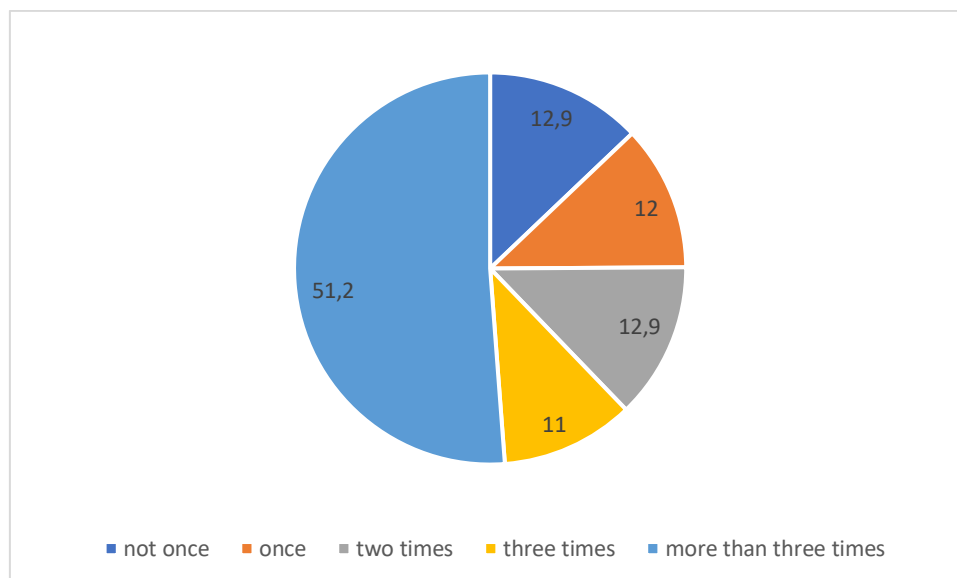
Figure 2: The need for assistance with daily activities



In terms of mobility restrictions, 30.6% of respondents require assistance when using public transportation, 27.3% are unable to get around without help, while 24.9% of respondents are able to use all modes of transportation without assistance. At the same time, however, almost half of the respondents (47.1%) travel for leisure purposes and require assistance. 30.3% of respondents are not travelling for leisure, while 22.6% of respondents are travelling for the same reason and do not require assistance.

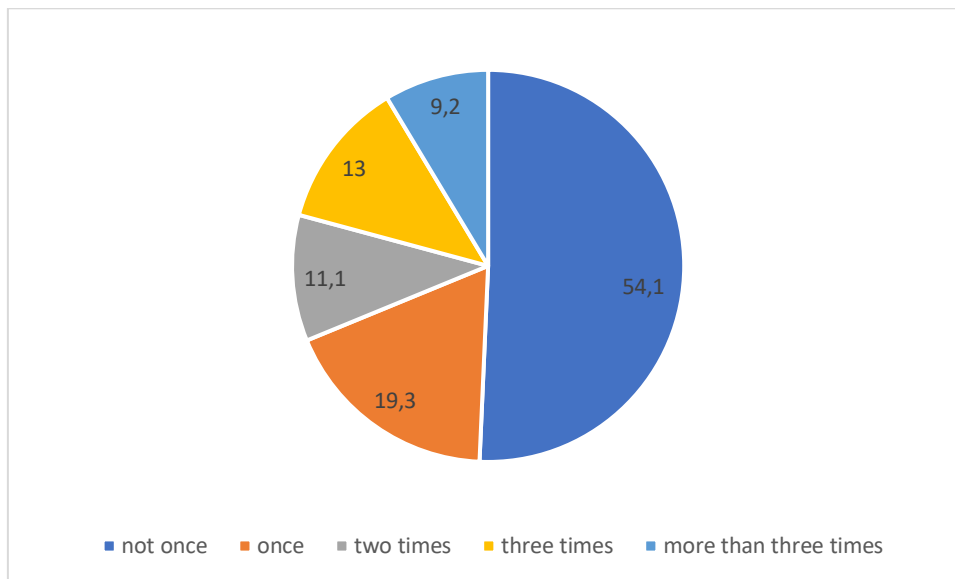
To determine the frequency of their travel, respondents were asked to answer questions about the number of trips they would take in 2022. In terms of domestic travel, 51.2% have made more than three trips that year, with an equal proportion of those who have made two trips and those who have not made a trip that year (12.9%).

Figure 3: Frequency of domestic travels in 2022



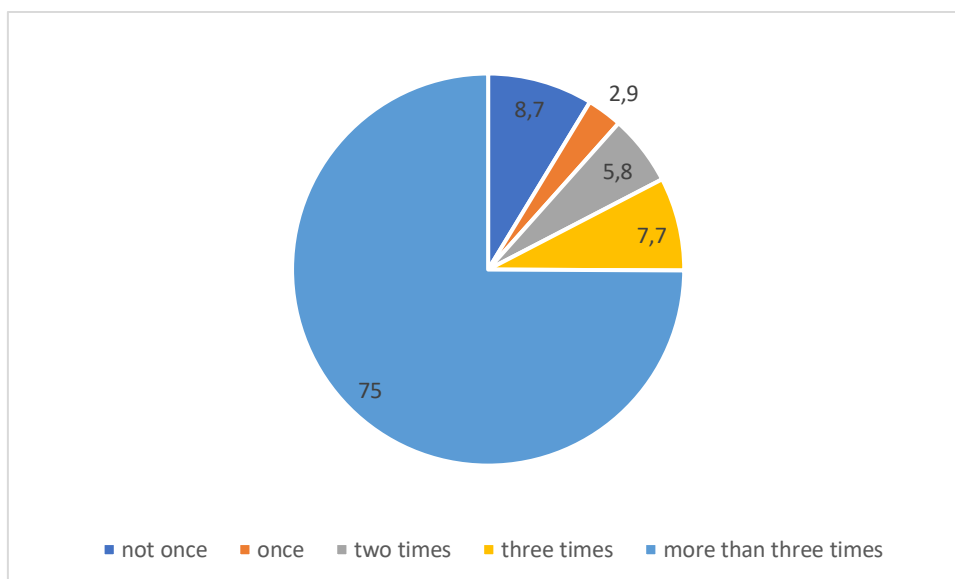
In terms of trips abroad, 54.1% of respondents did not take any trips abroad, 19.3% took one trip, while 9.2% of respondents took more than three trips abroad in 2022.

Figure 4: Frequency of international travels in 2022



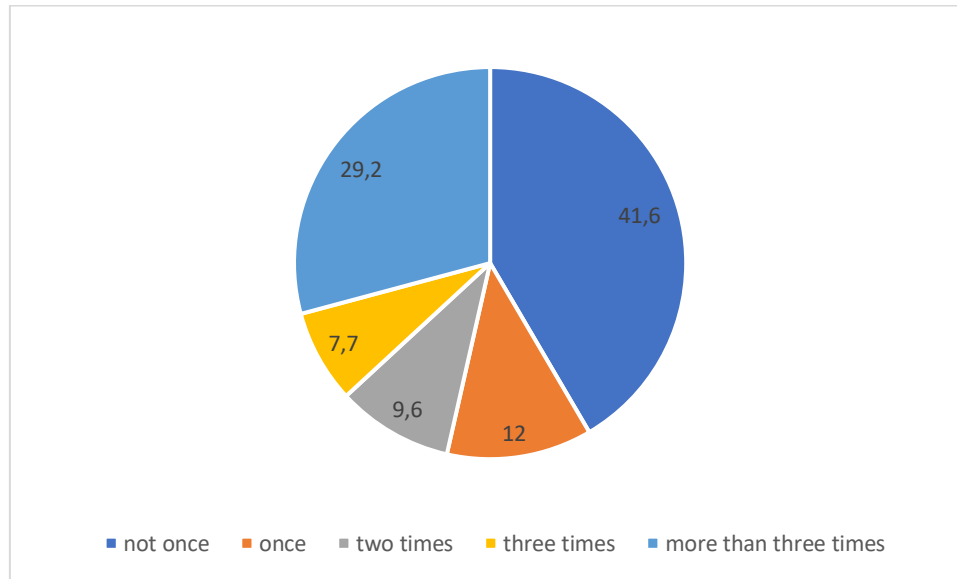
When asked about longer period of time, 75% of respondents made more than three domestic travels, which is an encouraging result.

Figure 5: Frequency of domestic travels in the period 2018-2022



When it comes to international travels in the longer period of time, the respondents did travel a bit more than in 2022, but they are not very much engaged in those travels. However, it has to be noted that two out of four years in this period were compromised with COVID-19 restrictions, and some respondents might have forgotten about some of their former travels.

Figure 6: Frequency of international travels in the period 2018-2022



Respondents were further asked to evaluate the factors that keep them from travelling as tourist. For evaluation they were given 7-point Likert scale (1 – this factor is not a problem for my travels at all; 7 – this factor is a huge problem for my travels).

Table 1: Causes of difficulties during leisure trips

| ITEM | AVERAGE | MODE | STANDARD DEVIATION |
|--|---------|------|--------------------|
| Use of transportation | 4.38 | 7 | 2.34 |
| Use of accommodation | 4.01 | 7 | 2.39 |
| Use of catering facility | 3.51 | 1 | 2.13 |
| Sport activities | 4.50 | 7 | 2.21 |
| Visiting attractions | 4.24 | 7 | 2.18 |
| Lack of reliable information on actual accessibility | 4.74 | 7 | 2.21 |

The results show that the values are relatively uniform and that the respondents have the same views on the causes of difficulties during their leisure trips. While only *the use of catering facilities* is not perceived as a discouraging factor for their leisure trips, all other items are quite frequently the cause of difficulties, with the highest average score given to the item *lack of reliable information on actual accessibility*. Although the Guide to Accessible Tourism for People with Disabilities was published in 2023 (Centar za razvoj vrijednosti, 2023), it is clear that the information has not yet reached the target group. Such materials are the first step in

bridging the gap between service providers and tourists. All other causes are related to the quality of infrastructure, which has also been pointed out by the. Furthermore, these barriers are in line with the reasons for the poor development of accessible tourism in Croatia, as the lack of coordination and lack of dialogue hinder the more intensive development of accessible tourism.

Table 2 lists the factors that discourage people with disabilities from travelling as tourists. The main discouraging factor is the fear that *accessibility will not meet the promises and/or their needs*. Based on the fact that the main discouragement factor is the lack of reliable information about actual accessibility, one of the first steps seems to be to build trust between service providers and tourists. Considering that this particular demand segment is highly dependent on the quality of information, there is an urgent need to provide reliable, trustworthy and timely information to all potential customers.

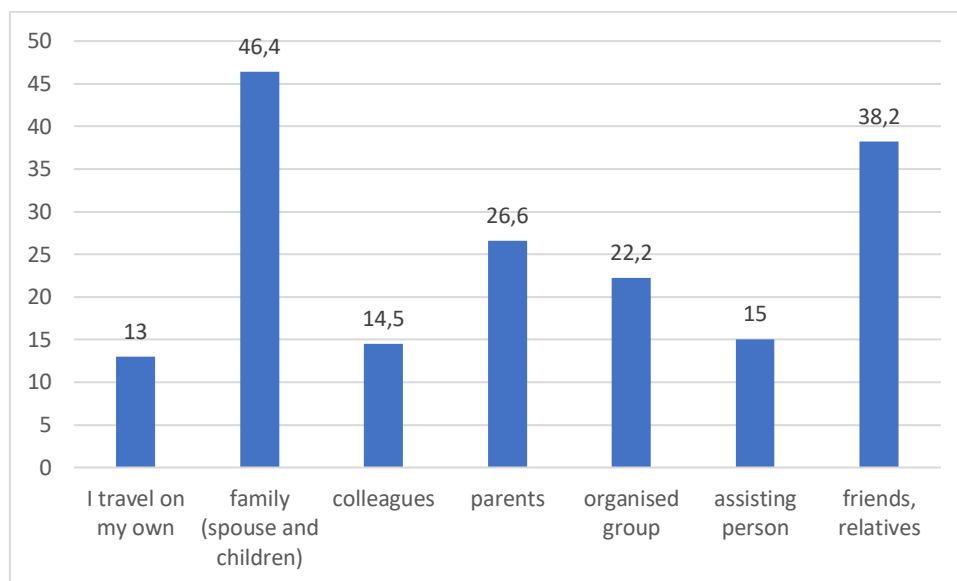
Table 2: Factors that keep people with disabilities from travelling as tourists

| ITEM | AVERAGE | MODE | STANDARD DEVIATION |
|---|---------|------|--------------------|
| I do not like travelling | 1.83 | 1 | 1.77 |
| Lack of time | 3.13 | 1 | 2.07 |
| Lack of money | 4.08 | 5 | 1.91 |
| Lack of company | 3.61 | 1 | 2.29 |
| Lack of language skills | 3.36 | 1 | 2.70 |
| Lack of assisting person | 3.43 | 1 | 2.73 |
| I am afraid of new situations | 2.95 | 1 | 2.55 |
| Travelling there and back is problematic | 3.65 | 1 | 2.40 |
| I am afraid that accessibility will not meet the promises and/or my needs | 4.68 | 7 | 2.23 |
| My health conditions do not allow travelling | 2.95 | 1 | 2.34 |
| Previous bad experiences | 2.76 | 1 | 1.84 |
| I can get travel experiences at home, using internet and technology | 2.65 | 1 | 2.13 |

Respondents disagree with the statement that they *do not like travelling*, simultaneously emphasizing that they disagree with the statement that they *can get travel experiences at home, using internet and technology*. Such attitudes strongly support the main characteristics of tourism – it is not possible to consume tourism products and services without personal participation of tourists. In terms of evaluating development of accessible tourism offer, it seems that *previous bad experiences* and the *fear of new situations* do not have prevailing impact on discouraging people with disabilities from travelling as tourists. These results should be kept in mind in the process of developing tourism policies for this specific tourism product.

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Figure 7: Company during travels



In this question multiple answer option was given. Respondents dominantly travel with their families, followed by travels with friends and relatives. When it comes to the organisation of trips, respondents organise them by themselves or somebody in their family helps them with the organisation.

Figure 8: Organisation of trips

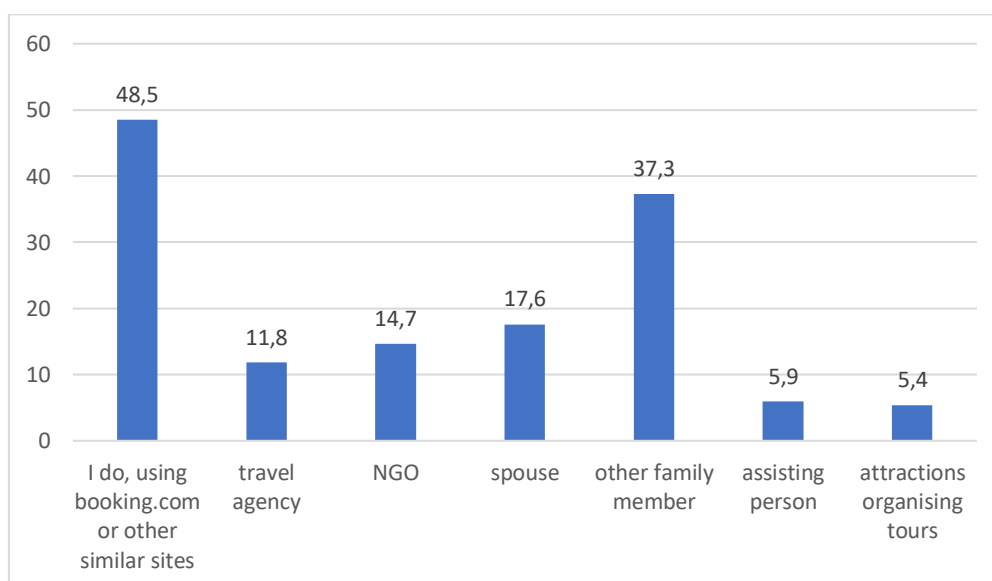
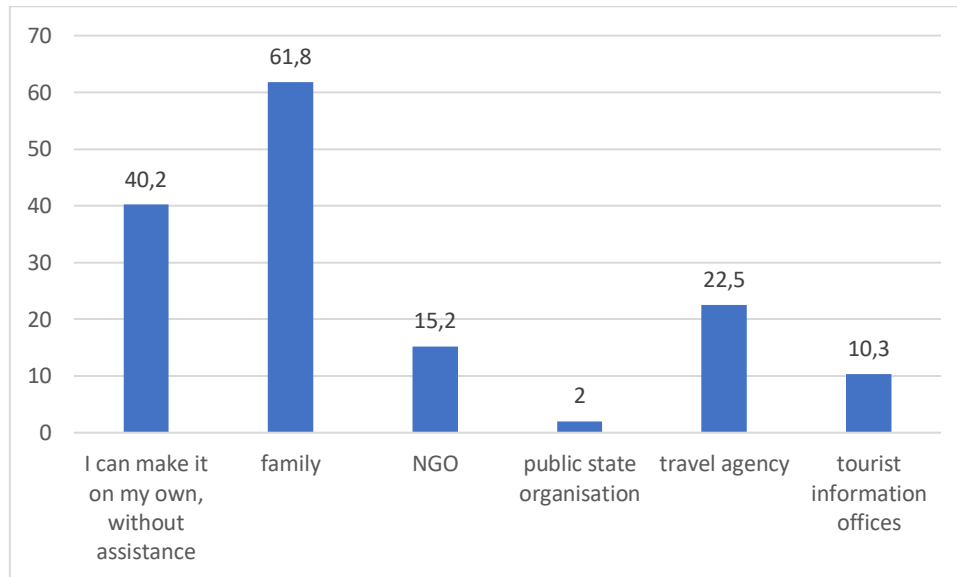
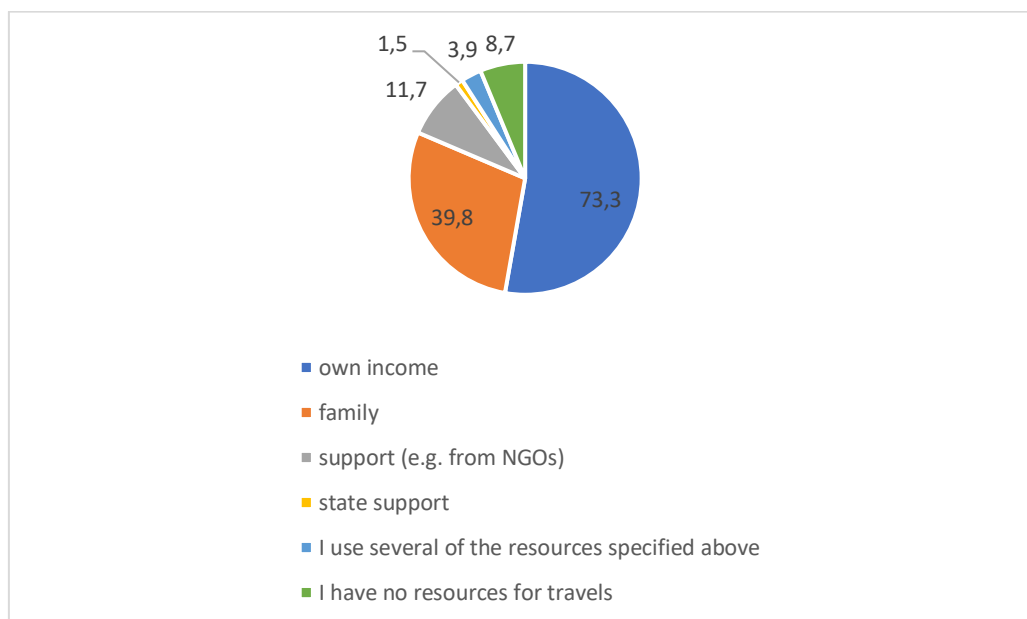


Figure 9: Potential sources of help in the case of needing assistance in organising and implementing travel



Once again, respondents rely most intensively on family when it comes to assistance with organising their travels. This was also a multiple-choice question, while under the option other the respondents listed also their friends.

Figure 10: Sources of financing travels



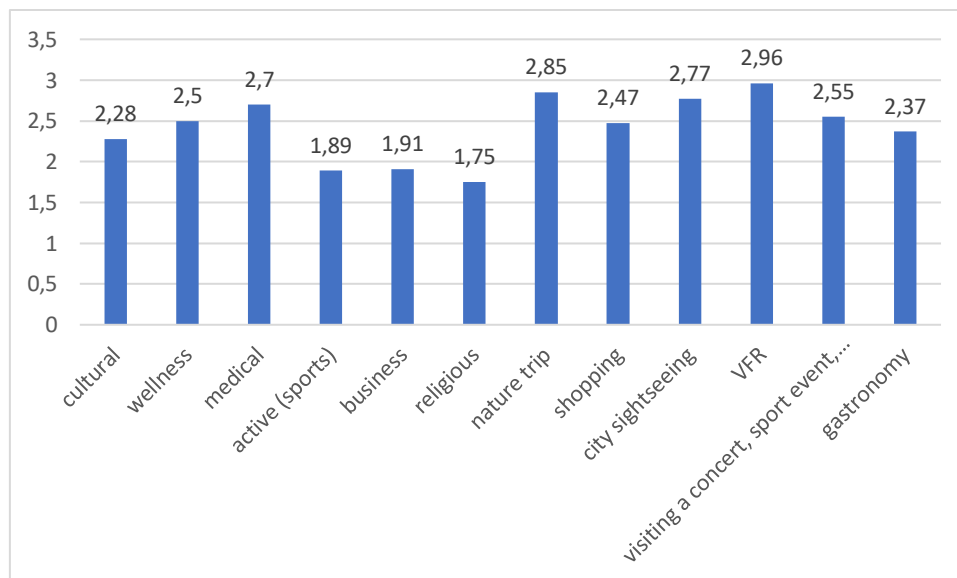
When it comes to the

Table 3: Preferences in choosing the type of travel

| STATEMENT | AVERAGE |
|---|---------|
| I prefer to travel with programmes for people with disabilities. | 3.78 |
| I prefer to travel with integrational programmes (designed for both disabled and non-disabled travellers) | 4.01 |
| I prefer to travel with programmes that are not specifically designed for people with disabilities. | 3.81 |
| I prefer to travel without any assistance. | 3.31 |

Majority of respondents prefer the option of travelling with integrational programmes, while the least number prefers to travel without any assistance.

Figure 11: Motivation for travels among people with disabilities included in the sample



Respondents included in the sample are dominantly motivated by visiting friends and relatives, nature trips and medical reasons, while they tend to travel the least motivated by religious, active and business reasons.

Furthermore, respondents were asked to evaluate various aspects of the development of accessible tourism in the Republic of Croatia (Table 4). The respondents do not agree with the statement that the *possibilities of accessible tourism in Croatia are continuously improving*. Furthermore, respondents are fairly unanimous in their opinion that the infrastructure is not sufficiently developed to be suitable for the development of accessible tourism. There is a great need to *make trains and buses accessible to wheelchair users* to increase the number of trips made by people with disabilities; to *build tourism trails in park forests* to enable people with disabilities to make trips; to *create a reliable online collection of wheelchair-accessible tourism trails* to encourage people with disabilities to hike in nature; and to *provide adequate safety and assistance* to encourage people with disabilities to participate in extreme sports and activities. These are all infrastructure requirements that stand in need for collaboration between all stakeholders in the planning, funding, construction, monitoring and promotion of the infrastructure in question.

Regarding the emotional and social component of tourism, all respondents agreed with the statements that tourism has a positive impact on their lives, either from an individual or social perspective, as it increases opportunities for social engagement. Finally, the aim of the survey was to identify the tendency to use the potential of virtual reality as a means of overcoming physical barriers in destinations. Respondents show no interest in using these opportunities and point to the potential. Although there are studies that try to identify the potential of virtual reality in the context of accessible tourism, especially when it comes to people with disabilities, this research indicates that the potential tourist demand in Croatia is not interested in using this option and prefers to meet their tourism needs through traditional travel. This result is quite encouraging for tourism services providers as it points out that potential tourists with disabilities are willing to travel, if circumstances allow it, and efforts made by all stakeholders should result with increased travels among this segment.

Table 4: Attitudes of people with disabilities towards different aspects of accessible tourism development in Croatia

| STATEMENT | AVERAGE | MODE | STANDARD DEVIATION |
|--|----------------|-------------|---------------------------|
| The possibilities of accessible tourism are continuously improving in my country. | 3.36 | 2 | 1.86 |
| Tourism service providers are more and more prepared and open to receive guests with disabilities. | 3.45 | 3 | 1.82 |

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| | | | |
|---|------|---|------|
| False communication of accessibility by accommodation providers and other establishments is becoming less and less common in my country. | 3.38 | 3 | 1.78 |
| Society in my country is more and more tolerant and open to the problem of people with disabilities. | 3.59 | 3 | 1.77 |
| People are disturbed by spending their holidays in places where people with disabilities also are. | 3.61 | 3 | 1.95 |
| If trains and coaches were more accessible by wheelchairs in my country, more people with disabilities would travel. | 5.37 | 7 | 2.05 |
| If in my country there were tourism paths in park forests, at least in the vicinity of cities, more people with disabilities would make excursions. | 5.51 | 7 | 1.89 |
| If there were a reliable internet collection of tourism paths accessible by wheelchair, more people would choose hiking in nature. | 5.30 | 7 | 1.96 |
| Extreme sports and activities would attract people with disabilities, if they were given adequate security and assistance. | 4.86 | 7 | 2.10 |
| Tourism is an important part of my life. | 4.76 | 7 | 2.09 |
| Tourism significantly promotes my wellbeing. | 4.68 | 7 | 2.10 |
| My experiences from tourism make me happier. | 5.32 | 7 | 2.03 |
| Tourism improves my relationships to others. | 5.26 | 7 | 1.96 |
| I have an increasing interest in the potential of virtual/digital tourism. | 3.23 | 1 | 2.04 |
| I have already used online tourism services, e.g. “visited” a museum with an online application or participated in virtual tours. | 2.47 | 1 | 1.93 |
| I own/am planning to buy a device that makes virtual experiences more enjoyable, e.g. VR glasses. | 2.02 | 1 | 1.71 |
| During my travels I like to use modern technological tools (apps, AR, i.e. augmented reality, I also used VR glasses during a city tour and VR, i.e. virtual reality devices that facilitate and/or enhance the travel experience). | 2.68 | 1 | 2.02 |

During their travels 66% of respondents need to use some aid, dominantly wheelchairs, white stick, walkers and crutches.

Unfortunately, majority of respondents encountered some sort of discrimination during their travels. Some of their experiences are:

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I cannot access and check in at the hotel by myself because the counter is too high.

Inadequacy of public transport, adapted accommodation and facilities.

The waiter didn't want to serve me.

The guides don't see people with disabilities at all and think that everyone can do everything...

...it often happens that I can't visit a landmark because the object is not adapted...

Impossibility of finding adapted accommodation, non-adapted toilets for people with disabilities in restaurants, museums...

...the issue of architectural barriers...

There are many of them. There is no place to write. There are very few places that are wheelchair friendly. Extremely little.

I did not go on a tourist trip at all because there is no adapted public transport. In most destinations in the Republic of Croatia, there is no toilets for people with disabilities or toilets have been converted into warehouses for cleaners.

Access to the bathroom, instead of a shower cabin there is a bathtub, a room with too little space to move around, you sometimes have to ask the waiter to bring you food instead of offering it yourself, access to the toilets (stairs or lack of toilets for wasps at all), lack of wardrobes in shopping centres, ...

A lie regarding the adjustment of access to the tourist facility.

When asked about positive examples of accessible tourism, both in Croatia and internationally, respondents listed Slovenia, Germany, Lourdes, Italy, Canada, Vienna, Portugal, Great Britain, Scotland, Sweden, Austria, Switzerland, Norway, Ireland, France, and in Croatia Rovinj, Pula, the island of Pag, Zagreb, Varaždin and Zadar.

The final two questions in the questionnaire were related to the willingness of respondents to help with organising travels for people with disabilities and the need to include these materials into the education of tourist professionals, i.e. students at universities.

Figure 12: Willingness to help as a volunteer with the travel and tourism activities of people with disabilities

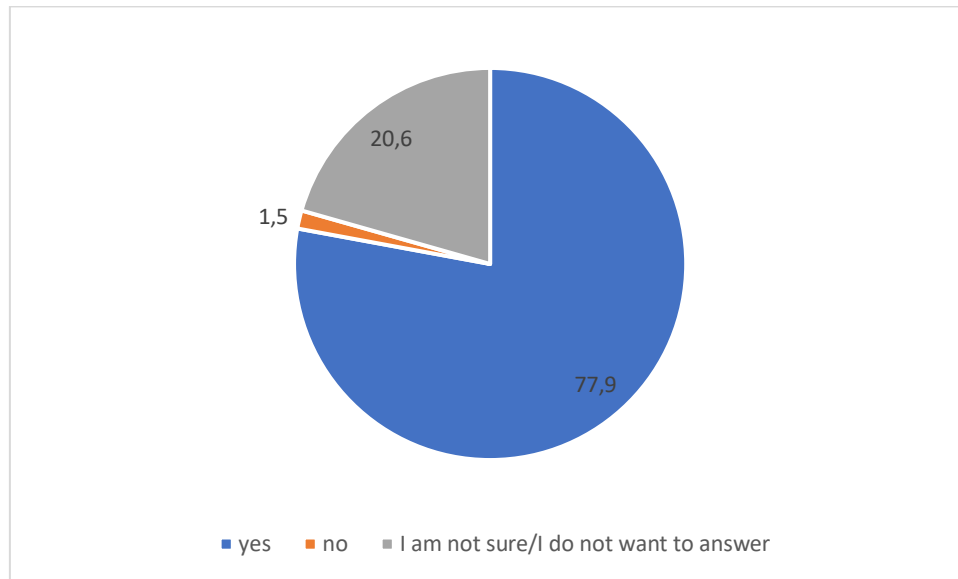


Figure 13: Opinion about including materials in tourism training in higher education

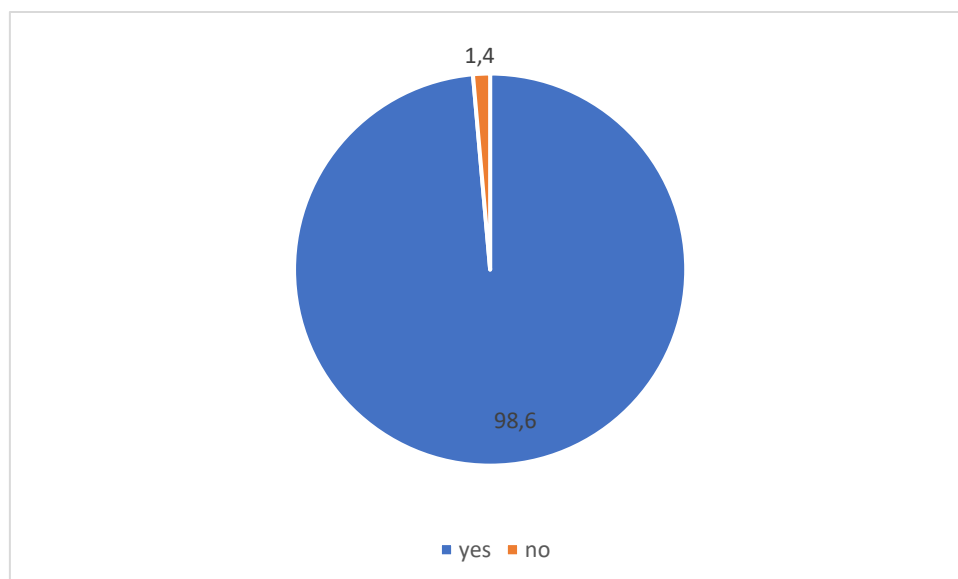


Figure 14: Opinion about publicly available educational materials for increasing knowledge about accessible tourism

