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The issue of accessibility from the point of view of tourism service providers

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Abstract

This article deals with the issue of accessible tourism. The objective of the article is to sum up the evaluation of accessibility criteria from the point of view of tourism service providers. The questionnaire survey was conducted in restaurants, accommodation facilities, information centres, tourist attractions and travel agencies. More than 90% of respondents were interested in clients with special requirements. As far as evaluation of the current state of accessibility is concerned, 81% of respondents regarded the business premises as barrier-free, 70% of them think that they provide services adjusted to the special requirements of clients and 93% of respondents consider the communication of staff to be satisfactory. The respondents also expressed their opinions on the influence of particular criteria of accessibility on service quality. They regarded barrier-free access in buildings as the most important (95%), followed by offer adjustment to special requirements (77%), the level of communication between staff and clients (71%) and the possibility of lending disability equipment (64%).

Keywords

Accessible tourism, criteria of accessibility, questionnaire survey, service quality.

JEL Classification: L83, L20

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1. Introduction

The objective of this article is to sum up the evaluation of accessibility criteria from the point of view of tourism service providers in the Moravian-Silesian region. A general experimental question, *How do tourism service providers evaluate accessibility?*, is used for the investigation.

1.1 The issue of accessible tourism

Accessibility, which comes from the philosophy of *design for all*, is the basis and condition of travelling regardless of age and state of health. It is an approach to planning and realization of developed areas, products and services that allows everyone to be a participant in the community life (The Centre for Universal Design, 2016). The aging population is becoming a significant demographic effect that is closely connected with this issue and will strongly influence the aspects of tourism. The senior segment concerns nowadays more than 75 million people in Europe and according to estimations the ratio of elderly people will increase by 35% by 2025 (European Commission, 2015). Such development will certainly be evident in the Czech Republic. It will mean a growing number of people who welcome an accessible tourism environment. That is why I consider it beneficial to investigate the issue of accessibility. The current share of Po65¹ in the total population in the Czech Republic is 17.3% and in the MSR² it is 16.9%.

From the global point of view, many authors regard *universal design* as a paradigm extending the approach of continuous journeys, accessibility, mobility and a barrier-free environment, including integration of intergenerational planning which acknowledges the connection between aging, disability and the skill development of people throughout their lives (Aslaksen et al., 1997; Ostroff, 2001; Steinfeld and Shea, 2001, in: Darcy et al., 2010).

Buhalis and Darcy (2011) regard accessible tourism as a phenomenon that is developed in a certain way not only in academic studies, but also in practice. The dimensions of this phenomenon are multidisciplinary and they concern geography, disability studies, economy, politics, psychology, social psychology, management, postmodern cultural studies, marketing,

architecture, medicine and many others. The definitions of accessible tourism come from the points of view of the authors. The General Assembly of UNWTO emphasizes accessibility as a central element of any responsible and sustainable tourism policy (UNWTO, 2013). Buhalis and Darcy (2011) claim that accessibility is a tourist industry that includes and requires the cooperation of all participants involved, the result of which is a universally designed tourism product, services and environment that allow people with access requirements to participate in tourism individually, equally and dignifiedly. The authors emphasize the necessity of a lifelong approach to clients who could use these arrangements throughout their lives. Kazuist is a company in the Czech Republic that emphasizes simple access to facilities, buildings, transport, roads, attractions and other services including an active integration of all clients in programmes and events for guests. Competences of staff, namely their abilities to respond to special requirements of customers, are also reflected in accessibility (Kazuist et al., 2010).

A potential client with special requirements expects access to a complex offer including all kinds of tourist services. The accessibility of tourism services consists of the following dimensions:

1. Physical accessibility (buildings and environment, transport and infrastructure),
2. Information accessibility (reliability of information, accessible communication channels, standards for accessibility assessment),
3. Communication accessibility (access of staff to clients and communication with them),
4. Economic accessibility (access to various price levels) (Kazuist et al., 2010).

The most significant segments of potential customers of accessible tourism are:

- People aged 65 and older (Po65),
- People with disabilities (PwD),
- People with children up to 3 years old (PwCh).

All the above-mentioned segments present special requirements while travelling, as Tourism from the Point of View of Clients with Special Requirements confirms (Zorková, 2014). The number of potential

¹ People over 65 years of age

² Moravian-Silesian region

clients in the main segments in the Czech Republic is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1 The number of potential clients of accessible tourism in the Czech Republic and in the Moravian-Silesian region

Segment of accessible tourism (in thousands)	Number of people in CR	Number of people in MSR
Po65	1 826	207
PwD	1 078	125
PwCh	325	61
Total	3 229	393

Source: Czech Statistical Office (2013)

1.2 Theoretical basis of accessibility in tourism

Baggio and Klobas (2008) emphasise tourist destination to be a complicated system. When we focus on this system we find many different stakeholders, diverse sizes and functions, which have many things in common. The final result leads to a quite incalculable system. Therefore characteristics emerge that cannot be deduced by linear folding of behaviour and component characteristics. Occasionally stakeholders can act as a catalyst for significant socio-economic growth while in other similar situations conduct does not have any identifiable effect. Such impacts are reflected in the development of accessibility in tourist destinations. There are destinations where cooperation between stakeholders proceeds at a high level and they have realized that an accessible environment means an important business opportunity for them. On the other hand, there are many enterprises in tourism that for various reasons are not interested in the principles of accessibility.

Researches focusing on the issue of accessibility deal with various topics. The original researches suggest models of relations between tourism and accessibility. Buhalis and Darcy (2011) apply the model of conceptual approach and they emphasize that it is essential to view accessibility from the medical (individual) as well as social point of view. Packer et al. (2002) extended this model with the dimension of environment and based on their personal and environmental factors they suggested a six-level model. They established the presumption that a potential tourist might go through particular levels to reach active travelling. As Shaw and Coles (2003) assert, in contemporary postmodern society there are noticeable changes making travelling faster. Due to this acceleration, the time and space compression is increasing, which is depriving for people with special requirements. The connection of accessibility with social responsibility and sustainability of tourism is a current issue. Darcy, Cameron and Pegg (2010) investigate the concept of accessible tourism and its connection with the triple-bottom-line (TBL) scorecard

concentrating on finances, life and social environment. This scope emphasizes the sustainability of tourism and the interest of companies in developing and being financially successful.

The researches of the demand side of accessible tourism are the most frequent. They investigate customers' needs and behaviour. Neumann et al. (2004) describe the demographic situation in Germany where more than half of the target market are customers over 65 years of age. The demographic trend shows a rise in the number of elderly tourists. We can also expect a rise in the length of their holiday. This age group travels without being affected by seasons but they spend a large proportion of their holidays in Germany. I consider the Final Report of the European Commission, which deals with the demographic situation, travellers' behaviour, economic benefits and recommendations for further development of accessible tourism in Europe, to be fundamental material. In the Czech Republic we still regard accessible tourism as a new topic. The only exception is the company Kazuist, where they carried out a research project called *Barrier-free tourism* in 2012.

The Final Report of the European Commission (2015) focuses on researches of the supply side of accessible tourism and it surveys the supply of accessible tourism services via Accessibility Information Schemes (AIS) and suggests practices and tools for tourism.

2. Methods

The research deals with the supply side of accessible tourism, namely the evaluation of accessibility from the point of view of service providers.

Research area: accessible tourism

Research topic: specification of supply side of accessible tourism

General and experimental questions were set as follows.

General experimental question: How do tourism service providers evaluate accessibility?

Specific experimental questions:

1. What is the attendance of clients with special requirements like?
2. How do service providers evaluate the current state of barrier-free accessibility to buildings and what design changes are they planning?
3. How do service providers evaluate the current offer adjustment to special requirements?
4. How do service providers evaluate communication between staff and clients with special requirements and are they interested in staff training regarding this issue?

5. What is the influence of accessibility on service quality like?
6. Are service providers interested in manually dealing with the issue of accessibility and placement in the database of showplaces and tourist destinations?

Objective of the research

The objective of the research was to find out how the service providers evaluate the issue of accessibility, namely criteria of accessibility and the influence on quality.

Design of the research

This subchapter specifies the methods of the research, the formation of the general sample and the method of implementation of the research.

Method: investigation-type survey

Sample selection: combination of QTA sampling and judgement sampling

Data collection, tools: personal questioning, questionnaire for a structured interview

General sample: five types of subjects providing tourism have been chosen as a general sample: restaurants, accommodation facilities, information centres, tourist attractions and travel agents

The general sample was specified according to the following attributes:

1. Belonging to one of five types of subjects – 12 business premises have been chosen from each category, which means 60 business premises in total.
2. Size and attendance of subject – it is presumed that larger and more attended subjects have better resources for the creation of surroundings for clients with special requirements and that they are interested in them.
3. Geographic area – Ostrava, Opava and its surroundings.

In total, the sample included 60 subjects providing tourism services.

Implementation of the research:

Personal questioning in the form of a structured interview with the manager or employee of the subject of tourism took place from January 2014 to April 2015.

3. Results of the research and discussions

The following chapter deals with the results of the research and discussions divided according to specific experimental questions.

3.1 Attendance of clients with special requirements

Introductory experimental questions were focused on the attendance of clients with special requirements at

particular types of tourist facilities. A group of 12% of all the addressed subjects responded that they are not attended by seniors, 25% are not attended by disabled people and 13% are not attended by families with children up to 3 years old. On the other hand, 97% of respondents are interested in senior attendance, 93% in the attendance of disabled people and 95% are interested in the attendance of families with children. Interesting results have emerged regarding the average number of clients of particular segments per month. The data are summarized in Table 2, from which it is obvious that it is the senior segment that uses tourism services the most and this trend will increase according to statistical estimations.

Table 2 Attendance of clients with special requirements per month

<i>Types of tourism subject</i>	<i>Po65</i>	<i>PwD</i>	<i>PwCh</i>
Restaurants	144	10	96
Information centres	756	60	186
Tourist attractions	610	6	430
Travel agencies	60	2	25
Accommodation	25	3	7

Discussion:

From the comparison of three segments it is obvious that information centres (ICs) are mostly used by people aged over 65 years. This phenomenon is, in my opinion, caused by the fact that older people prefer personal contact with IC employees and they enjoy the possibility of receiving advertising materials. People with disabilities use tourism services the least, which is most obvious in the case of travel agencies (TAs), which are attended by only two people per month. The travel agents explain that disabled people do not travel on their own and they do not organize their journeys. Attendance at tourist attractions is also very low (six people per month), which is caused, in my opinion, by the unsatisfactory level of physical (barrier-free access) and information accessibility in the Czech Republic. Currently, there is no unified methodology for categorizing tourist destination accessibility and potential clients are not informed about existing databases. For these reasons, the choice of destination and tourist facility is complicated by the current level of relevance of information about barrier-free access (Accessible Tourism and Relevancy of Information about Barrier-free Access, Zorková, 2014). As was expected, tourist attractions are mostly attended by families with children. However, they do not use IC services as much as seniors, because younger generations prefer searching for information using electronic devices.

3.2 Evaluation of the current state of barrier-free access in buildings and design planning

The initial condition of accessibility development in an environment is barrier-free access to buildings and their surroundings. The opinions of respondents regarding barrier-free access to their business premises are shown in Figure 1. For the purposes of the research, a barrier-free building is considered to have a barrier-free entrance and circulation areas, a barrier-free toilet, a lift and a barrier-free room. 81% of respondents (a combination of *definitely yes* and *rather yes* responses) consider their business premises to be barrier-free. A number of 19% of respondents assessed their buildings negatively, namely *rather not* or *definitely not*. However, the realization of barrier-free design is planned by only one of the respondents.

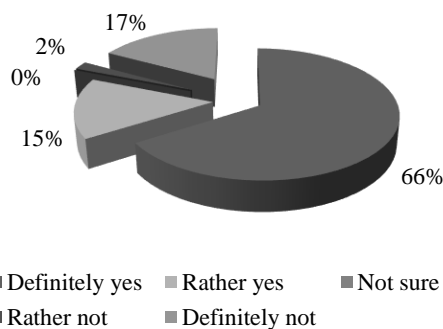


Figure 1 Barrier-free buildings

Discussion:

A group of 81% of respondents consider their business premises to be barrier-free. This might be influenced by the sample selection and by insufficient knowledge of the demands on barrier-free access, which come from Act No. 398/2009 of the General Technical Requirements Ensuring the Use of Buildings by Persons with Limited Movement and Orientation Capabilities.

3.3 Evaluation of current offer adjustment to special requirements

The offer adjustment of services to special requirements of seniors includes, for example, clear arrangement and comprehensibility of information, larger font size on printed materials and special requirements regarding diet. Parents with small children will appreciate the possibility of warming up baby food and babysitting. Disabled people will appreciate barrier-free tourist routes and information materials written in Braille font. The respondents evaluated how the offer of services is adjusted to their special requirements. Their opinions are shown in Figure 2. From the above, it is obvious that offers that would be *tailor-made* to the requirements of clients are not common among tourism service providers.

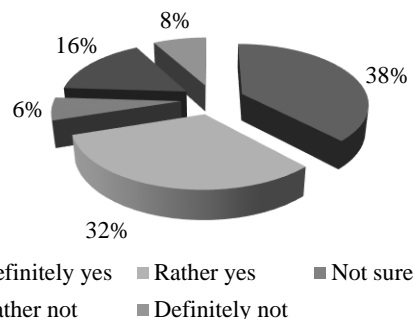


Figure 2 The adjustment of services to special requirements

Discussion:

The topic of adjustment of services to people with special requirements was examined by The Research of Demand Side of Accessible Tourism (Zorková, 2014). The results of the research show that the representatives of particular segments have a lot of wishes and suggestions regarding service providers and destination management companies. A total of 1229 suggestions were proposed by seniors, 729 by disabled people and 745 by people with children. According to the opinions of customers, it is obvious that there is significant potential for improving the quality of tourist services. Just to illustrate the situation, the most common suggestions of seniors are: better marking, a possibility of collective transport, more benches and resting places, special room equipment, presence of a medic or medical assistance, more banisters, self-service counter aid, a clearly arranged menu, more space around the table and a space for crutches, more willing staff etc.

3.4 Evaluation of communication of staff with clients with special requirements and the concern about training in this field

This specific experimental question investigated whether respondents consider the behaviour of staff towards clients with special requirements to be adequate. As can be seen in Figure 3, most of the respondents consider the behaviour of staff to be adequate. This surprised me, as I assumed that tourist service employees are not sure how to deal with clients with special requirements. My presumption was confirmed by the following question focusing on the need for training. An amount of 41% of respondents said they would be interested in training (a combination of *definitely yes* and *rather yes* responses). Four subjects would be willing to pay up to 3000 Czech crowns for the training, the others would be interested in training just in case of financing from other sources. As regards the contents of training, practical demonstrations and model situations in particular workplaces would be required the most.

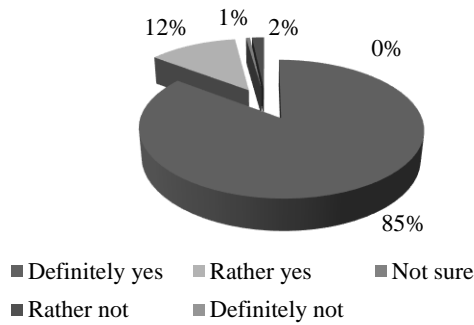


Figure 3 Communication of staff with clients with special requirements

Discussion:

Comparisons of responses from particular segments show very similar results. The respondents who chose *definitely yes* argued that they are professional towards all clients. They responded *rather yes* regarding disabled people, as they were not sure of the adequacy of their behaviour towards them.

The responses of potential customers from The Research of Demand Side of Accessible Tourism confirms (Zorková, 2014) are mentioned to make comparison. Clients of tourism services responded to a question about the influence of behaviour and training of staff on increase of their satisfaction. A group of 93% of respondents regard this influence as important. Staff training should involve communicativeness (29%), information about particular special requirements of clients (27%), personal approach (25%) and practical training in particular situations (17%). Willingness, stress management, patience and basic knowledge of sign language were mentioned among other suggestions.

As the specific experimental questions 3 and 4 are nominal variables, it is not possible to perform the T test, but we can estimate the error. If the number of respondents is 60 and the probability 95%, the admissible error is 3.7%, from which it is obvious that the variations between them are statistically insignificant.

3.5 The influence of accessibility on service quality

The question investigating opinions of service providers on the relation between accessibility and quality was divided into several subsections: barrier-free access to buildings, possibility of lending disability equipment, *tailor-made* offers and staff training. A number of 95% of service providers (a combination of *definitely yes* and *rather yes* responses) consider barrier-free access in buildings to be the essential element of quality, as is obvious from Figure 4.

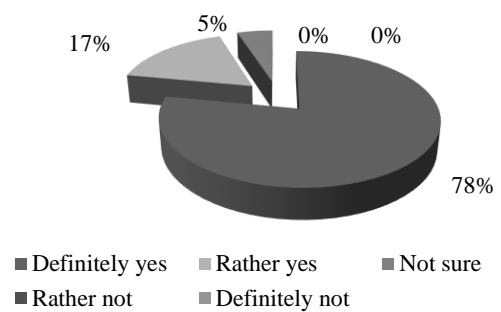


Figure 4 The influence of barrier-free access on service quality

Figure 5 shows the results of the following subsection. A group of 64% of respondents (a combination of *definitely yes* and *rather yes* responses) consider lending of disability equipment an important aspect of quality.

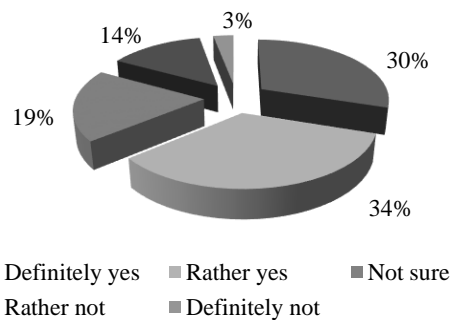


Figure 5 The influence of the presence of disability equipment on service quality

The following Figure 6 shows the opinions of providers on adjusting the *tailor-made* offer to special requirements of particular groups. A number of 77% of respondents responded *definitely yes* or *rather yes*, 18% chose the option *not sure* and 5% *rather not*.

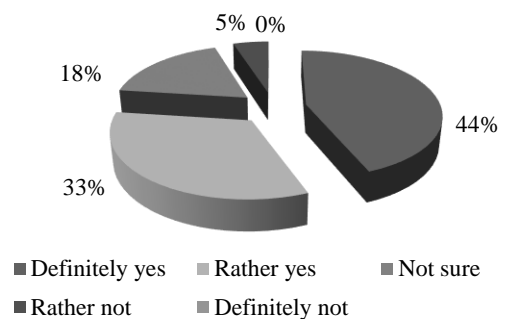


Figure 6 The influence of *tailor-made* offer on service quality

The influence of staff training and behaviour towards clients with special requirements can be seen in Figure 7. The percentage of *definitely yes* and *rather yes* responses is 35% and 36%, respectively.

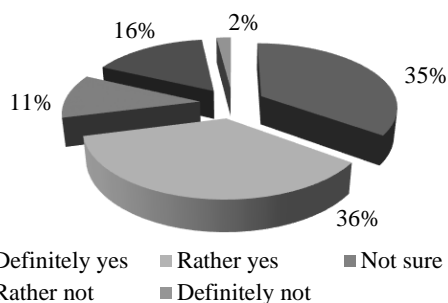


Figure 7 The influence of staff training and behaviour towards clients with special requirements on service quality

Discussion:

The conclusions drawn from the responses to all the subsections show that barrier-free access in buildings (95%) influences quality the most, followed by *tailor-made* offer of services (77%), staff training and behaviour (71%) and possibility of lending disability equipment (64%). The comparison of the results of the subsection about staff training and behaviour with the results of the fourth experimental question is contradictory. Even though service providers consider the approach of staff to be an essential aspect of quality (71%), only 41% are interested in staff training. The rest of them probably believe that the staff are sufficiently trained. In my opinion, it is necessary to develop and intensify this sphere.

In my view, particular items that form the accessibility of services significantly influence the quality perceived by customers. For this reason I have prepared and have been carrying out a research focused on a comparison of that issue from the point of view of both the provider and the customer.

3.6 Interest in a manual dealing with the issue of accessibility and placement in database of showplaces and tourist destinations

The final part of the research focused on the questions regarding the interest in a manual and placement in a database. An amount of 45% of respondents (e.g., IC Ostrava Svinov, Ostrava Gong, Opava) were potentially interested in the manual. The manual should inform service providers about the requirements of clients in regard to accessible tourism. An amount of 55% of respondents are not interested in this manual (e.g., Ostravské museum, Hradec nad Moravicí castle, Slezské zemské museum and others). The database of showplaces and tourist destinations (www.jedemetaky.cz) is known by only 18% of respondents and 60% of them would like to be placed in the database.

4. Conclusion

The conclusion is divided into three parts. The first part shows how the respondents evaluated the current

situation regarding the accessibility of their services and the opinions of respondents on the influence of particular criteria on quality in general. In the second part the differences between particular segments of potential customers are summarized. The third part introduces the planned phase of the research dealing with accessible tourism and the benefits of the results presented herein of the supply side research.

A group of 81% of service providers consider the building of their business premises to be barrier-free. The lowest percentage found was for adjustment of service offer, with 70% of respondents mentioning that their offer is so-called *tailor-made*. On the other hand, most of the respondents evaluated communication between staff and clients positively. They felt that the behaviour of their staff towards all clients is adequate. In contrast to that belief is the fact that only 41% of respondents would be interested in training regarding this issue. According to the respondents, barrier-free access in buildings influences the quality of services the most (95%), followed by offer services adjustment to special requirements (77%) and the level of communication between staff and clients (71%), while lending of disability equipment is the least important (64%).

The pivotal research questions also investigated the opinions of service providers on particular segments of customers of accessible tourism. About 90% of respondents are interested in the attendance of clients with special requirements. They are mostly interested in the attendance of seniors (97%), followed by families with children (95%), while the least interest was expressed towards disabled people (93%). However, I consider the differences between particular segments to be minimal. As far as the attendance of business premises is concerned, most service providers said that they are visited by people over 65 years old (85%) and people with children (87%), while the attendance of disabled people is lower (75%). From the comparisons it is obvious that seniors visit mostly information centres and tourist attractions, disabled people visit mostly information centres and restaurants, and families with children visit tourist attractions and information centres. In total, the segment of people aged over 65 shows the highest attendance in all types of tourism facilities. The responses concerning the adjustment of offer to special requirements, which is not different for particular segments, showed surprising findings. The providers consider their services to be *tailor-made* to seniors in 70% of cases, to disabled people in 67% and to families with children in 73% of responses. Another question involved communication between staff and guests. From the comparison of responses it is obvious that differences between segments are not large. A number of 100% of providers consider their offer to be adjusted to seniors, 97% to

disabled people and 93% to families with children. I assumed that the differences between evaluated segments of customers would be more considerable in the last two evaluated fields.

Based on the above-mentioned results, it is possible to claim that tourism service providers are aware of the importance and significance of increasing the accessibility of their service offers, which is the essential and initial prerequisite for the development of accessible tourism in the Moravian-Silesian region.

The study Mapping and Performance Check of the Supply of Accessible Tourism Services (2015) includes a survey among small and medium-sized service enterprises in Europe. The survey results from countries of the second³ group show that respondents regard the lack of knowledge and skills in disability issues (51%), the lack of guidance and standards of accessibility (33%) and the high investments and additional costs (63%) as the biggest obstacles to the development of accessible tourism.

The results of the research presented herein will be included in the comparison of analyses of the demand and supply side of accessible tourism in the Moravian-Silesian region. The demand side will be characterized by the research results of clients' opinions (Zorková, 2014) and the size of the potential market of accessible tourism to the level of the potential of barrier-free accommodation. The supply side will be characterized by the research results of tourism service providers and the size of the barrier-free accommodation capacity. The aim is to compare both analyses, from which the contemporary situation of accessible tourism in the Moravian-Silesian region will be obvious.

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³ Group 2: Latvia, the Netherlands, Portugal, Greece, Sweden, the Czech Republic, Germany and Slovakia

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