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access

ON
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LEARNING
TO CHANGE

The Role of Educational Institutions
in Fostering Accessibility for Disabled
Artists & Culture Professionals
in Europe

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Background

This report examines accessibility barriers faced by disabled people in higher education performing arts institutions across Creative Europe countries and the UK. It has been conducted in the context of Europe Beyond Access (EBA), an EU funded project that supports the creation of new works by Deaf and/or disabled artists across Europe. The report builds on previous EBA research which identified higher education institutions as key 'gatekeepers', frequently hindering opportunities for disabled artists.

The elaboration of the report involved multiple data collection methods, including three online surveys (addressing, respectively, disabled artists/professionals, higher education institutions and performing arts organisations), interviews and focus groups, desk research and analyses of existing practices. Thanks to this, the resulting report presents substantial evidence of obstacles and challenges that impede access to higher education and subsequent access to the professional performing arts, as well as some good practices and enabling factors.

While recognising that the number of respondents in the survey is not fully statistically representative, the team of researchers coordinated by the On the Move network also acknowledges that many disabled people who were excluded from or discouraged by higher education institutions in the past did not pursue subsequent performing arts careers. For this reason, they could not participate in the surveys, interviews or focus groups. It is only by ensuring that access to higher performing arts education is accessible that such challenges may be overcome. This report and the EBA project from which it emerges, aim to address this situation by offering practical, actionable recommendations across the performing arts ecosystem, including higher education institutions.

Main Findings

The report reveals that, while legal frameworks and institutional commitments to make performing arts education accessible exist, substantial gaps persist between stated intentions and actual practice. The current system creates a cascade of exclusion: inaccessible education limits disabled people's entry into professional performing arts, which in turn reinforces the perception that there is no demand for accessibility.

Breaking this cycle requires coordinated action across education, culture and policy sectors. The evidence demonstrates that accessibility benefits not only disabled students but enriches the entire educational environment through diverse perspectives and innovative approaches. However, change must be systemic rather than relying on individual goodwill or ad-hoc adaptations.

The research underscores that achieving true accessibility requires viewing disability not as a deficit to be accommodated, but as a valuable form of diversity that brings unique aesthetics, knowledge and approaches to the performing arts. Only through this fundamental shift in perspective, coupled with adequate resources and institutional commitment, can European performing arts education become truly inclusive and representative of society's diversity.

The summary of the main findings of the report are as follows:

1. Systemic Barriers in Higher Education

Access to Higher Performing Arts Education Studies

Typical challenges to access higher education include the failure of entry tests to recognise diverse bodies, aesthetics and forms of expression, non-accessibility of buildings, non-accessible communication and limited adaptation of entry tests in terms of time and methodology, among others. According to data collected for this report, only 41% of surveyed institutions have adapted entry tests for disabled applicants, only 31% have adapted entry requirements, only 27% provide information in accessible formats (Braille, audio, Easy-to-Read) and only 41% describe their accessibility on websites.

Only 41% of surveyed institutions have adapted entry tests for disabled applicants

Disabled artists and performing arts professionals who never enrolled in higher education identified several factors that prevented them from doing so, including legal issues (for instance, in Greece, where legislation excludes disabled people from dance education institutions), lack of accessible entry tests, non-accessible buildings and an organisational culture that actively excludes disability.

Challenges in the Educational Experience

Current and former disabled students rated accessibility in higher education institutions across nine areas on a 0-10 scale, with no area scoring above 5.87. The lowest-rated aspects were support services, including guidance of further training or professional development opportunities (4.44), building facilities (4.67) and timetables and break arrangements (4.94).

Common accessibility problems identified by respondents include inaccessible buildings, lack of adaptation of schedules to the abilities and time needs of disabled students, lack of understanding of neurodivergent and invisible disability needs, ableist training practices and expectations, the belief that performers must have "neutral" bodies without distinctive characteristics and an overall organisational culture, at least in some institutions, that effectively excludes or rejects disabled people. As a result, some disabled students choose to conceal their disabilities, where this is possible and fear advocating for change, which frequently takes an emotional toll on those who take it on.

Alongside these challenges, some respondents highlight the understanding, adaptability and openness of some teachers and the ability of some institutions to adapt in response to their needs. 30% of graduates and current students remember that some adaptations were made to meet their requirements, although 57% say that no changes were made.

2. Impact on Professional Opportunities

The research demonstrates clear connections between educational access and career outcomes: 49% of disabled artists who graduated from a higher education institution participated in over 15 professional productions, compared to only 24% of disabled artists who did not attend an institution. Former students stress that accessing higher education has given them a 'stamp of approval' which recognises them as professionals and provided technical knowledge and skills, enhanced familiarity with the professional world and additional networking and early professional opportunities. In some countries, academic degrees are critical to access some professional posts, although, as the report shows, this correlation is variable depending on country and type of job.

This serves to highlight that exclusion from higher education institutions prevents a more diverse and accessible performing arts field across Europe. Cultural organisations acknowledge this impact, with 75% viewing lack of educational access as a problem requiring sector-wide action and adequate policies supporting systemic change.

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49% of disabled artists who graduated from a higher education institution participated in over 15 professional productions, compared to only 24% of disabled artists who did not attend an institution

81% of institutions claim their official documents commit to access, inclusion or diversity

Less than 20% of graduates recall being asked about access needs

3. Insufficient Institutional Responses and Gaps

While 81% of institutions claim their official documents commit to access, inclusion or diversity and 80% cite legal obligations, implementation remains inadequate, as shown in terms of budgets, human resources, data and enabling action, despite the fact that more answers were potentially obtained from institutions that are committed to accessibility:

- Only 29% have dedicated accessibility budgets

- 38% have no budget for access improvements

- Only 12% collect data on disabled staff members

- Only 29% know how many disabled people have applied and only 22% have data on disabled graduates

- Less than 20% of graduates recall being asked about access needs

86% of higher education staff recognise that their institutions and activities need to be made more accessible – highlighting the discrepancy between institutional commitments and effective practice. Areas where they recognise action is needed include the full accessibility of premises, entrance exams and academic programmes, support to disabled students, cultural change, priority setting and available knowledge and advice.

Although some respondents argue that more demand from disabled people to access higher education would be a precondition, this report argues that a "vicious cycle of exclusion" exists, whereby disabled people refrain from applying because they are aware of the likelihood of being rejected or the challenges they would encounter during education. It is only through systemic change, including simultaneous action across all the barriers identified above, that institutions will truly be able to welcome disabled students.

86% of higher education staff recognise that their institutions and activities need to be made more accessible

4. Alternative Training Pathways

Among disabled professionals who could not access formal education, 77% found alternative training through specialised organisations, companies or informal routes. These alternatives scored significantly higher on accessibility (average 6.16/10 vs 5.18/10 for formal institutions), particularly in areas like understanding and adaptability of teachers (7.18 vs 5.87); recognition of diverse aesthetics and bodies (6.90 vs 5.11); and curriculum and teaching methods (6.84 vs 5.17). Respondents highlight that these alternative training pathways are more accessible, have a more humane approach, which recognises diversity and allow collaboration with peers.

However, alternative paths lack the "stamp of approval" (including the lack of equivalent examinations and certificates) and networking opportunities that formal education provides. Furthermore, it is necessary to underline that the availability of alternative routes should not justify inaction by higher education institutions or the public authorities which fund them. For several reasons, including equity in accessing education and training, affordability and the recognition of diverse bodies, stories and aesthetics, accessibility to higher education institutions in the performing arts remains critical.

5. Drivers of Change

Evidence gathered for this report also shows that some higher education institutions have taken measures to become more accessible, including by asking disabled students about their needs and through policies and funding programmes that have enabled change. Other factors that can drive change include the ability of institutions to adopt more flexible approaches in entry tests and requirements, institution leaders setting access and inclusion as strategic and budgetary priorities, the presence of disabled staff members, partnerships with specialised organisations in the field of accessibility, the recognition of diverse aesthetics and ways of being an artist as an asset and accompanying policies and funding programmes.

Key Recommendations

For public authorities:

- Make accessibility a priority in higher education in the performing arts, providing adequate investment;

- Revise laws preventing universal access to higher education in the performing arts;

- Establish funding schemes and programmes enabling a transition to full accessibility;

- Support alternative training pathways and foster partnerships between formal and informal education providers;

- Support cross-border, European exchanges in this field, which enable peer learning and drive change.

For higher education institutions, based on a progressive, step-by-step and contextualised way:

- Conduct accessibility audits across all operational areas;

- Develop accessibility strategies with dedicated staff and resources;

- Modify entry tests, curricula and timetables to accommodate diverse needs;

- Actively recruit disabled staff and involve disabled people in governance;

- Include disability content in curricula and provide staff training on accessibility.

For cultural organisations:

- Analyse accessibility and disabled representation in programming;

- Collaborate with educational institutions and specialised organisations, to enhance accessibility, inclusion and diversity;

- Voice concerns about lack of disabled representation when engaging with educational institutions.

For EU institutions, in line with the signing and ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities by EU Member-States:

- Strengthen key sectoral values related to diversity, inclusion and accessibility as part of policy frameworks, such as the upcoming Cultural Compass and within the scope of devising the AgoraEU programme and Erasmus+ under the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for the period 2028-2034;

- Support a stronger focus on disabled artists and cultural professionals in discussions on a reference framework for fairer working conditions for artists and cultural professionals, and while highlighting the importance of attending performing arts education institutions to facilitate entry and networking opportunities into the professional world;

- Include the ADICLUS (the European Arts and Disability Cluster) in stakeholder consultations, recognising that the breadth of its membership (more than 40 members in over 20 countries) means ADICLUS has a broad and unique expertise on artists and cultural professionals with disabilities.

Key findings

Introduction

The performing arts have long been recognised as a vital expression of human creativity and cultural diversity, yet access to higher education in this field remains severely restricted for disabled people across Europe. This comprehensive analysis examines the systemic barriers that prevent disabled people from accessing higher education in the performing arts and traces the cascading effects of these exclusions on professional opportunities, cultural representation and artistic innovation.

The research reveals a troubling paradox: while European institutions increasingly seem to embrace rhetoric around diversity and inclusion, the reality for disabled people seeking careers in the performing arts remains one of pervasive exclusion. This exclusion operates not merely as individual discrimination but as a systemic network of barriers that begins with inaccessible application processes and entry tests and extends through educational experiences that fail to accommodate diverse bodies and minds, ultimately limiting the richness and representativeness of the European performing arts.

Research Methodology and Limitations

This report has been conducted in the framework of Europe Beyond Access (EBA), an EU-funded project that supports the creation of new works by Deaf and/or disabled artists across Europe. Between September 2024 and August 2025, the research team, led by On the Move, employed a comprehensive multi-method approach, reaching across the Creative Europe countries and the United Kingdom. It gathered data through three targeted surveys that captured responses from 139 disabled artists and cultural professionals, 59 higher education institution staff members and 116 performing arts organisations spanning 27 countries. The methodology extended beyond quantitative data collection to include in-depth interviews with disabled artists and institutional representatives, focus groups, desk research and consultation sessions in person and online. The EBA editorial committee provided advice throughout the process.

However, the research confronts a fundamental methodological challenge that speaks to the very nature of the exclusion it seeks to document. The most profound limitation lies in the voices that remain absent from this study. Many disabled people who encountered barriers to accessing higher education in the performing arts likely abandoned their artistic aspirations entirely, pursuing careers in other fields or remaining excluded from professional artistic practice altogether. These individuals, representing perhaps the largest group affected by institutional inaccessibility, could not participate in a survey targeting disabled artists and cultural professionals because they never achieved professional status in the arts.

This absence creates what might be termed a "survivorship bias" in the data, where the research captures primarily those who managed to navigate barriers successfully or found alternative pathways to professional practice. The true scope of exclusion therefore likely exceeds what this research can quantify.
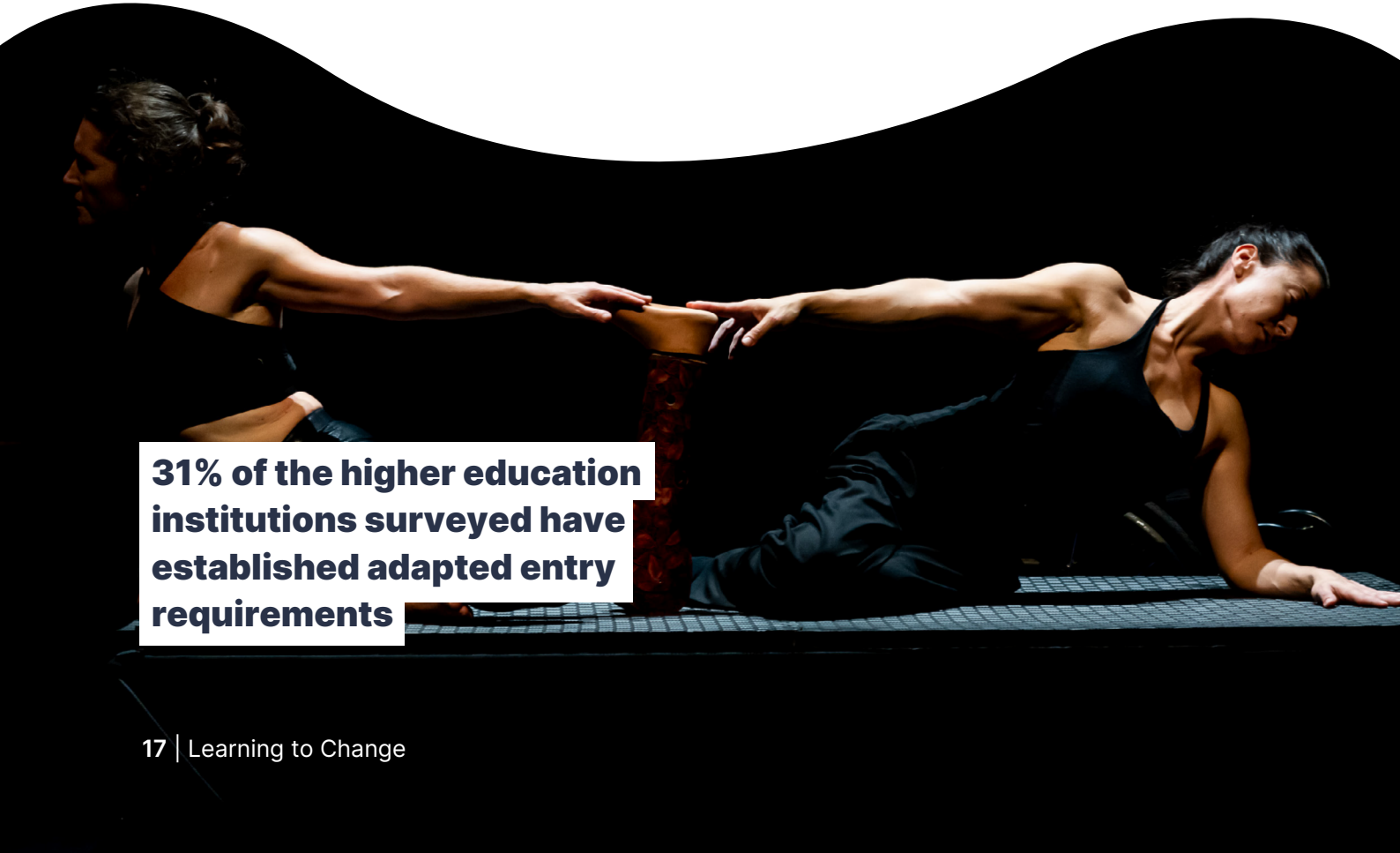
Additionally, the institutions that responded to surveys may represent those that are already engaged with accessibility issues, potentially presenting a more optimistic picture of institutional commitment than exists across the sector as a whole. These methodological limitations underscore rather than diminish the significance of the findings, suggesting that the documented barriers represent a conservative estimate of the challenges facing disabled people in European performing arts education.

The Landscape of Exclusion

Entry Barriers: the First Line of Exclusion

The journey toward professional performing arts education begins with application and entry processes that systematically screen out disabled applicants before they can demonstrate their artistic potential. The quantitative evidence reveals the extent of this initial exclusion: only 41% of the higher education institutions surveyed have adapted their entry tests for disabled applicants, while a mere 31% have established adapted entry requirements. These statistics represent more than administrative oversight; they reflect institutional structures designed around assumptions of normative bodies and minds: one disabled artist recalls how, when applying to become an actress in 2009, "I was rejected due to my disability... They told me at various acting schools that there was no chance I would ever become an actress".

The implications extend beyond individual disappointment to represent a fundamental failure in terms of educational access. When only 27% of institutions provide information to prospective students in accessible formats such as Braille, audio versions, Easy-to-Read versions or sign language videos, they effectively communicate to disabled people that their participation is not expected. While this exclusion operates through omission rather than explicit rejection, it sends the message that disabled people are not particularly welcome.

31% of the higher education institutions surveyed have established adapted entry requirements

The inadequacy of institutional communication about accessibility further compounds these barriers. With only 41% of institutions providing descriptions of their accessibility features on websites, prospective disabled applicants must navigate uncertainty about whether their needs can be accommodated. This uncertainty often leads to self-exclusion, as disabled individuals choose not to apply rather than face potential rejection or inadequate support.

These entry barriers create what interviewees described as a "vicious cycle of exclusion." Institutions point to low numbers of disabled applicants as evidence that accessibility improvements are unnecessary, while disabled people avoid applying to institutions they perceive as inaccessible or unwelcoming. This cycle perpetuates itself, maintaining the artificial scarcity of disabled representation in performing arts education.

"A vicious cycle of exclusion"

## The Educational Experience: Systemic Inadequacy
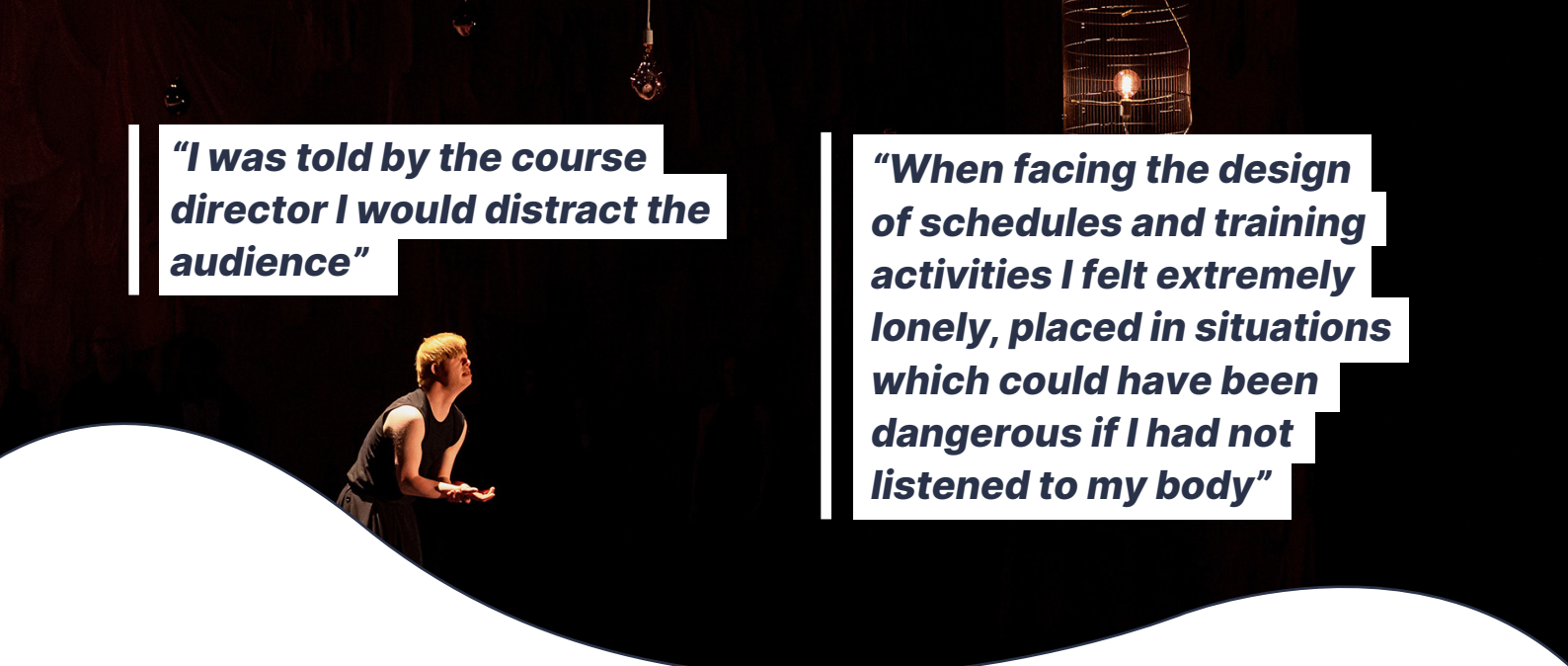
For those disabled students who successfully navigate entry barriers, the educational experience itself presents a landscape of inadequate accommodation and institutional indifference. Current and former disabled students evaluated their educational experiences across nine accessibility dimensions using a 0-10 scale, with results that reveal systemic institutional failure. No area achieved even a rating of 6 out of 10, with the highest-rated aspect – understanding, adaptability and openness by teachers – receiving only 5.87 points.

The lowest-rated areas tell a particularly troubling story about institutional priorities and competence. Support services (for instance, guidance on further training or professional development opportunities), which received the most dismal rating of 4.44, represent a fundamental failure to provide disabled students with guidance on subsequent professional development. This deficiency extends beyond immediate educational needs to impact long-term career prospects, as disabled students lack access to the networks and knowledge that support successful transitions to professional practice.

Building facilities, rated at 4.67, reflect both historical constraints and contemporary choices. While many institutions operate in heritage buildings with protected status that complicates accessibility improvements, the consistent inadequacy of physical access suggests a lack of institutional commitment to creating genuinely inclusive environments. Students describe experiences of exclusion from parts of their own educational institutions, forced to rely on others for access to spaces that should be freely available to all learners.

Timetabling arrangements, receiving a rating of 4.94, reveal institutional inflexibility that fails to accommodate what disability studies scholars term "crip time", namely, the different relationship to time that many disabled people experience. The rigid scheduling that characterises many performing arts programmes, with intensive daily requirements and minimal break periods, reflects an ableist assumption that all bodies operate according to identical rhythms and capacities.

These quantitative assessments gain deeper meaning through student testimonials that reveal the human cost of institutional inadequacy. One student described their experience as follows: "While [the institution] seems very open at first, in terms of access for disabled students and awarding of diplomas, when facing the design of schedules and training activities I felt extremely lonely, placed in situations which could have been dangerous if I had not listened to my body."

"I was told by the course director I would distract the audience"

"When facing the design of schedules and training activities I felt extremely lonely, placed in situations which could have been dangerous if I had not listened to my body"

The Culture of Disposable Bodies

One disturbing finding of this research concerns the cultural attitudes that pervade many higher education programmes in the performing arts, particularly regarding the treatment of student bodies. Multiple testimonials describe what one student characterised as "a general attitude that the students' bodies are disposable". This culture manifests in expectations that students continue training while injured, ill or experiencing personal crises, creating hardship for disabled students whose bodies and minds may require different forms of care and accommodation.

The concept of the "neutral" performer body emerges as a particularly pernicious form of exclusion. Many institutions maintain explicit or implicit beliefs that professional performers must possess bodies without distinctive characteristics that might "distract" audiences. This approach directly contradicts the reality of disabled experience and artistic expression, creating an impossible standard that requires disabled people to minimise or hide their disabilities to succeed in training programmes.

One student's experience illustrates this dynamic starkly: "When I got my disabilities I was told by the course director I would distract the audience". This statement reveals not only individual prejudice but institutional commitment to aesthetic norms that exclude disabled bodies from consideration as legitimate artistic vessels. The assumption that disability inherently diminishes artistic value reflects an ableist / disablist perspective that permeates many educational institutions.

The culture of disposable bodies extends to training practices that normalise physical and psychological harm, including verbal abuse and nonconsensual touching in some cases. For disabled students, who may require different forms of physical interaction and communication, these practices create additional layers of vulnerability and exclusion.

Invisible Disabilities and Forced Disclosure

The research reveals particular challenges faced by students with invisible disabilities, including mental health conditions, neurodivergence and chronic illnesses. These students often encounter disbelief, minimisation and accusations of laziness from faculty members who lack understanding of non-visible impairments.

The burden of disclosure creates what disability rights advocates term "forced intimacy", requiring disabled students to share deeply personal information about their bodies and minds to access basic accommodations. This disclosure often occurs in public settings, forcing students to expose themselves to peer scrutiny and judgment. The emotional toll of constant advocacy (i.e., to ask for adjustments and adaptation to their needs) and justification represents an additional barrier to educational success that non-disabled students never encounter.

As a result, many students with invisible disabilities choose to conceal their conditions entirely, fearing that disclosure will harm their educational and career prospects. One graduate explained: "I was diagnosed as neurodivergent aged 3, but was never open about my diagnosis during college. I felt that if I had, it would have hindered my course and my future career prospects." This concealment strategy, while protective in the short term, perpetuates the invisibility of disabled experience within performing arts education and prevents the development of supportive communities and advocacy efforts.

Institutional Responses: the Gap Between Policy and Practice
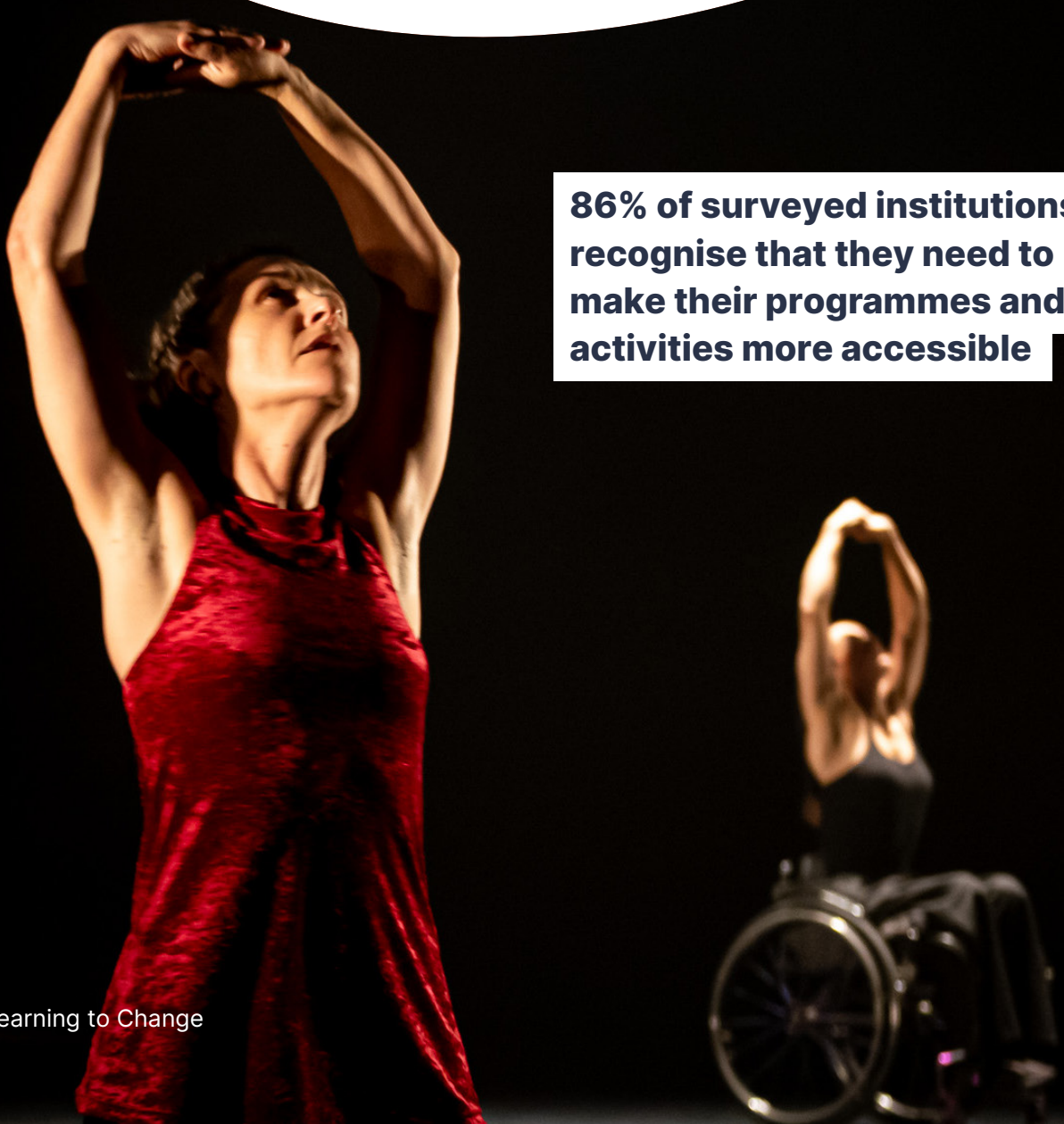
The Rhetoric of Commitment

The survey data reveals a striking disconnect between institutional rhetoric and actual practice regarding accessibility and inclusion. A substantial 81% of surveyed institutions claim that their statutes, constitution or objectives mention aspects related to access, inclusion or diversity, while 80% cite legal obligations to ensure accessibility and inclusion established in national, regional or local legislation or policies.
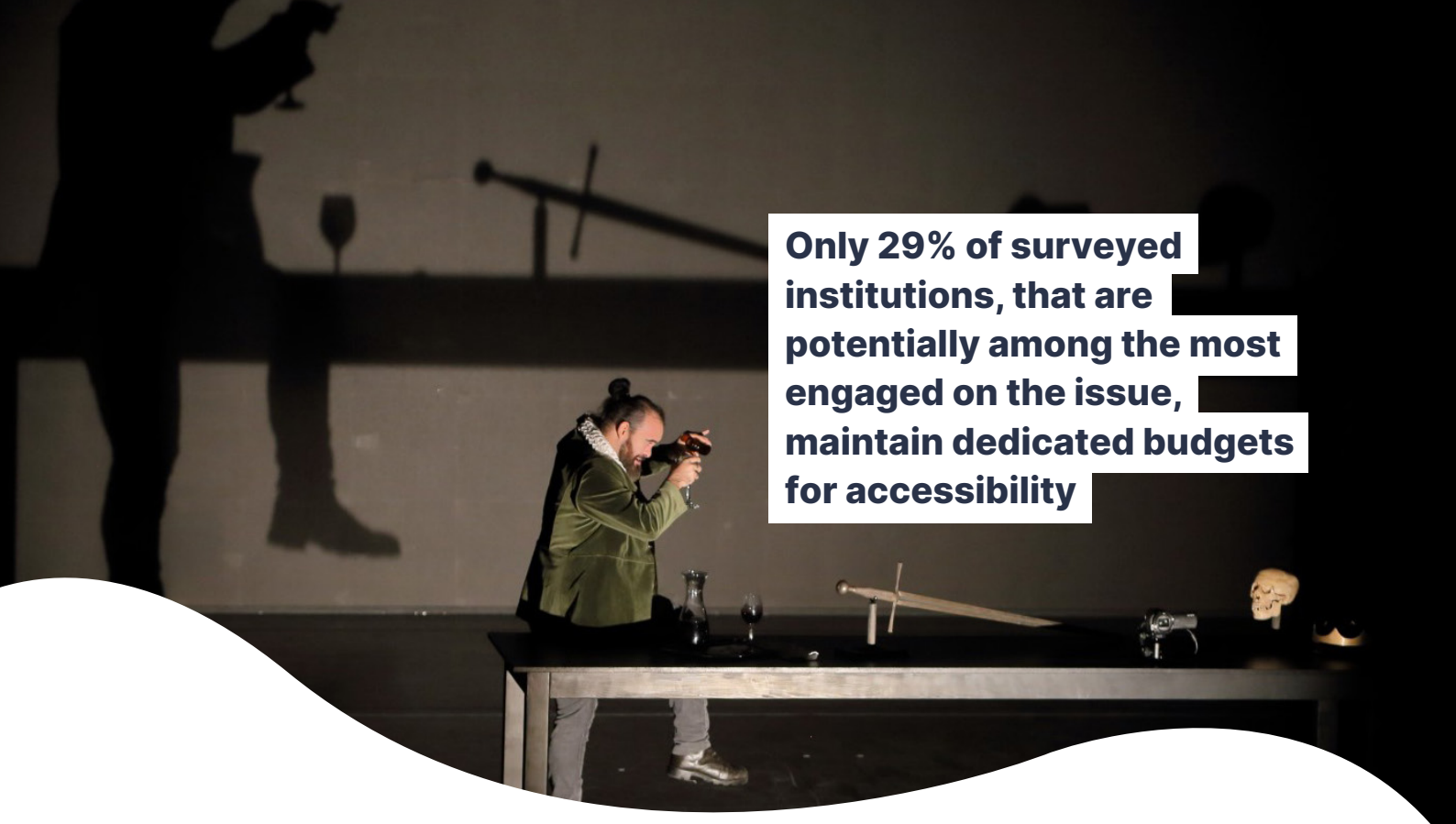
However, closer examination of these commitments reveals their often generic and non-specific nature. Institutional statements frequently reference broad principles of diversity and equal opportunity without concrete commitments to addressing the specific barriers faced by disabled students. Typical examples include vague declarations such as "We are committed to making the arts accessible for

everyone" or "The university guarantees access to all students", which sound progressive but provide no roadmap for actual implementation. This is not to say that some institutions have not actively worked to address obstacles and strived to become more accessible institutions, as the report also shows.

Even where more specific commitments exist, institutions acknowledge the gap between aspiration and achievement. Despite widespread policy commitments, 86% of surveyed institutions recognise that they need to make their programmes and activities more accessible. This near-universal acknowledgment of inadequacy, combined with claims of commitment to accessibility, suggests that institutional leaders understand the importance of inclusion while lacking the knowledge, resources or commitment necessary to achieve it – something that the report also provides evidence on.

86% of surveyed institutions recognise that they need to make their programmes and activities more accessible

Only 29% of surveyed institutions, that are potentially among the most engaged on the issue, maintain dedicated budgets for accessibility

Resource Allocation Reveals True Priorities

The allocation of financial and human resources provides a more accurate picture of institutional priorities than policy statements. Only 29% of surveyed institutions, that are potentially among the most engaged on the issue, maintain dedicated budgets for accessibility, while 38% have no budget whatsoever for access improvements. The remaining 33% say they have used other budgetary resources for accessibility purposes, although, without dedicated funding, these efforts are likely to remain sporadic and inadequate.

Where accessibility staff positions exist, they sometimes reflect tokenistic rather than substantial commitment to change. While 74% of institutions claim to have staff responsible for accessibility, inclusion and diversity, the reality frequently involves part-time positions with broad remits that extend far beyond disability issues. One institution reported allocating merely 2% of a staff member's time to equality and diversity concerns, a percentage that is clearly inadequate given the scope of accessibility challenges identified by the report.

The inadequacy of staffing arrangements reflects broader institutional failure to understand the complexity and expertise required for genuine accessibility implementation. Many institutions treat accessibility as an additional responsibility that can be absorbed by existing staff rather than recognising it as a specialised field requiring dedicated knowledge and resources.

Knowledge Gaps and Training Deficits

The research reveals alarming gaps in institutional knowledge about disability, accessibility and inclusive pedagogy. Less than 20% of disabled graduates rated their teachers' knowledge of accessibility as good or excellent, while only 13% thought lecturers and trainers demonstrated good or excellent understanding of disability arts. These assessments suggest that the majority of performing arts educators lack the basic knowledge necessary to support disabled students effectively.

The absence of disabled faculty members compounds these knowledge gaps significantly. Only 11% of graduates reported having disabled teachers during their studies, meaning that most disabled students encounter exclusively non-disabled faculty who may lack personal or professional experience with disability. This absence of disabled role models and expertise within institutional leadership perpetuates myths about disabled people's capabilities and contributions to performing arts.

Many institutions acknowledge their knowledge limitations while expressing uncertainty about how to address them, pointing to the lack of available advisory or consultancy services of, where they exist, limited knowledge about how to find them. Survey responses include statements such as "We are thinking how to make our programme more accessible but we are lacking help or reference" and "I perceive a great lack of awareness that a dance education is even possible for persons with disabilities." These admissions, while honest, also reveal the extent to which performing arts education has failed to engage with disability scholarship and practice.

Less than 20% of disabled graduates rated their teachers' knowledge of accessibility as good or excellent

Data Collection Failures

The systematic absence of data collection about disabled participation represents another significant institutional failure. Only 12% of surveyed institutions gather statistics on disabled staff members, while only 29% track disabled applicants to their institutions and a mere 22% maintain data on disabled graduates. Without basic information about disabled participation, institutions cannot identify problems and needs, measure progress or develop evidence-based strategies for improvement.

This data deficit serves multiple functions in maintaining exclusion. It allows institutions to claim ignorance about the extent of accessibility problems while avoiding accountability for improving disabled representation. The absence of data also prevents disabled students and advocates from documenting patterns of discrimination or holding institutions accountable for their commitments to inclusion.

When institutions do collect disability-related data, they often justify limited numbers as evidence that accessibility improvements are unnecessary. However, low numbers of disabled participants may reflect institutional inaccessibility rather than lack of interest or capability among disabled people. This circular reasoning perpetuates the vicious cycle of exclusion by treating symptoms of discrimination as evidence that discrimination does not exist.

49% of disabled artists and professionals who had graduated from a higher education institution said they had participated in over 15 professional productions throughout their careers, compared to only 24% of non-graduates

Professional Consequences: The Career Impact of Educational Exclusion

Quantifying Professional Disadvantage

The research provides compelling quantitative evidence that exclusion from higher education in the performing arts creates lasting professional disadvantages for disabled people. Among survey respondents, 49% of disabled artists and professionals who had graduated from a higher education institution said they had participated in over 15 professional productions throughout their careers, compared to only 24% of non-graduates. At the opposite end of the spectrum, 29% of non-graduates had fewer than five professional opportunities, compared to 16% of graduates.

These disparities reflect more than individual career differences; they represent systematic professional exclusion that begins with educational barriers and extends throughout performing arts careers. The networking opportunities, professional connections and institutional credibility that higher education provides create advantages that persist long after graduation. Disabled people who cannot access these educational pathways face cumulative disadvantages that may never be fully overcome.

The professional impact extends beyond individual career outcomes to affect the broader performing arts landscape. When educational barriers prevent disabled people from accessing professional training, the entire field loses potential artistic contributions, innovative approaches and diverse perspectives that disabled experience might bring to creative practice.

Industry Recognition of Educational Barriers

Professionals working in performing arts organisations demonstrate clear awareness of the connection between educational exclusion and professional underrepresentation. A substantial 76.5% of surveyed cultural professionals believe that the lack of higher education has a strong impact on early professional opportunities for disabled people, while 67.2% identify strong impact on networking with professionals and 64.6% recognise strong impact on socioeconomic status.

These assessments reflect industry understanding that performing arts careers depend heavily on credentials, connections and early professional opportunities that higher education typically provides. When disabled people cannot access these educational pathways, they face not only immediate exclusion from training but long-term disadvantages in professional recognition and career advancement. Indeed, cultural organisations are demanding more professional disabled artists, yet they realise that the educational sector is not responding to this market need and professional opportunity.

The industry perspective also reveals systemic awareness of educational inadequacy. Only 7% of performing arts professionals agree that the majority of performing arts education institutions in their countries are accessible to disabled students, while less than 1% consider all institutions fully accessible. This near-universal recognition of educational inaccessibility suggests that the problem cannot be dismissed as isolated incidents or individual failures.

Only 7% of performing arts professionals agree that the majority of performing arts education institutions in their countries are accessible to disabled students

"Personally I feel like I have a lot of competence, openness and new ways of thinking after attending alternative training, however I lack the network, credibility and formal technique training"

Alternative Training Pathways: Promise and Limitations

The research identifies significant numbers of disabled people who found alternative training pathways when formal education proved inaccessible. Among disabled professionals who did not attend higher education institutions, 77% accessed alternative training through specialised organisations, performing arts companies or informal learning opportunities. Notably, 53% participated in programmes specifically designed for disabled people, while 47% joined mainstream alternative programmes.

These alternative pathways demonstrate significantly better accessibility than formal institutions. Using the same nine-dimension assessment scale, alternative training received an average rating of 6.16 out of 10, compared to 5.18 for higher education institutions. Alternative programmes particularly excelled in areas where formal education performed poorly: understanding and adaptability of teachers (7.18 versus 5.87), recognition of diverse aesthetics and bodies (6.90 versus 5.11) and curriculum and teaching methods (6.84 versus 5.17).

However, alternative pathways cannot fully compensate for exclusion from formal education. The "stamp of approval" that higher education provides, along with the networking opportunities and professional connections it offers, remain difficult to replicate through alternative training. One professional noted: "Personally I feel like I have a lot of competence, openness and new ways of thinking after attending alternative training, however I lack the network, credibility and formal technique training."

The existence of successful alternative training programmes demonstrates that accessible performing arts education is possible when institutions prioritise inclusion and adapt their approaches to diverse needs. However, these alternatives should not be used to justify continued exclusion from mainstream higher education. Equity demands that formal educational institutions become accessible rather than relegating disabled people to separate training pathways.

Cultural and Systemic Challenges

The Ideology of Perfection

Performing arts education operates within cultural frameworks that privilege certain types of bodies and minds while excluding others. The ideology of physical and cognitive perfection pervades many training programmes, creating artificial standards that have little relationship to artistic expression or professional competence. These standards reflect historical biases rather than artistic necessities, yet they continue to shape institutional practices and individual expectations.

The concept of the "neutral" performer represents perhaps the most pernicious aspect of this ideology. Training programmes often seek to eliminate personal characteristics, physical differences and individual expressions that might distinguish one performer from another. This approach fundamentally contradicts the lived reality of disabled experience, which cannot be separated from identity and artistic expression.

Furthermore, the emphasis on physical uniformity ignores the potential artistic contributions that diverse bodies and minds might offer to performing arts practice. Disabled performers often develop innovative approaches to movement, expression and artistic creation that could enrich conventional training if institutions were willing to recognise and integrate these contributions. Equally, approaches that give space to personal characteristics would also be of significance for non-disabled students.

Heritage Buildings and Institutional Inertia

Many European performing arts institutions operate in historic buildings with protected heritage status, creating complex challenges for accessibility improvements. While these architectural constraints represent genuine obstacles, they may also serve as convenient excuses for inaction.

Only 27% of surveyed institutions achieve step-free access throughout all their spaces, while 44% provide partial step-free access. The most commonly available accessibility feature – accessible toilets, present in 75% of institutions – represents the minimum legal requirement rather than comprehensive accessibility planning.

The research reveals that physical accessibility problems extend beyond heritage building constraints to encompass broader institutional failure to prioritise disabled access. Yet when institutional commitment exists, architectural challenges can often be addressed through innovative design, temporary modifications or alternative spaces. At least in some cases, the absence of such solutions may reflect institutional priorities rather than insurmountable obstacles.

Fragmented Policy Approaches

The research identifies significant coordination problems between different policy sectors that affect disabled people's access to performing arts education. Cultural policy, education policy and disability policy often operate in isolation, creating gaps and contradictions that limit the effectiveness of inclusion efforts.

This fragmentation manifests itself in various ways: for instance, cultural policies may promote diversity and inclusion while failing to address the educational barriers that prevent disabled people from accessing professional training. The absence of coordinated approaches means that even well-intentioned efforts may fail to create meaningful change. Without alignment between educational access, professional opportunities and cultural representation, disabled people continue to face barriers at multiple career stages that undermine individual accommodation efforts.

Only 27% of surveyed institutions achieve step-free access throughout all their spaces

Pathways to Transformation

Leadership as Catalyst for Change

The research identifies institutional leadership commitment as one of the most critical factors in driving accessibility improvements. When leaders prioritise inclusion and allocate resources accordingly, institutions can achieve rapid and comprehensive transformation. The experience of the Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw illustrates this dynamic clearly.

Adopting a rights-based approach which involved establishing the position of Student Rights Ombudsperson, the Academy implemented structural changes that embedded accessibility throughout institutional operations. These changes included appointing a Representative of the Rector for Accessibility, establishing formal procedures for declaring accessibility needs and creating systems for negotiating accommodations with faculty and staff. Most importantly, these measures transformed accessibility from an informal concern dependent on individual goodwill to an institutional responsibility with clear procedures and accountability.

The transformation process at the Academy demonstrates several key principles of effective accessibility implementation. First, accessibility must be embedded structurally within institutions rather than treated as an additional service or special accommodation. Second, clear procedures and designated responsibilities prevent accessibility needs from being overlooked or inadequately addressed. Third, the presence of disabled people in institutional leadership positions would provide essential expertise and advocacy for continued improvement.

Flexible Approaches and Innovative Solutions

Successful accessibility improvements often require institutional willingness to experiment with flexible approaches to traditional educational requirements. The school of the Théâtre national de Bretagne in Rennes demonstrates how entry processes can be adapted without compromising educational quality or artistic standards.

Since 2018, the institution has systematically worked to make its competitive entry process more accessible to disabled applicants. This effort has included recording texts for candidates with visual impairments, providing technical support during presentations and offering assistance with travel and accommodation for final auditions. The results speak to the effectiveness of these changes: disabled

applicant numbers rose from none requesting support in 2021 to 13 requesting specific accommodations in 2024.

The Tnb school's approach illustrates an important principle about accessibility and time. Rather than viewing accommodations as time-consuming burdens, the institution reconceptualised quality in education to include accessibility for all students. This perspective shift allowed creative solutions that enhanced educational experiences for everyone rather than grudgingly accommodating disabled students.

Alternative assessment methods represent another area where institutional flexibility can create more inclusive environments. Rather than relying exclusively on standardised physical or cognitive tests, institutions can develop multiple ways for students to demonstrate competence and potential. These approaches often reveal talents and capabilities that traditional assessment methods miss.

Partnership Models and External Expertise

Many successful accessibility initiatives involve partnerships between educational institutions and organisations with specialised expertise in the field of disability.

The partnership model offers several advantages for accessibility implementation. External organisations bring specialised knowledge that educational institutions often lack, while their independent status allows them to advocate for disabled students without internal institutional pressures. Additionally, partnerships can provide ongoing support and consultation that helps institutions navigate complex accessibility challenges over time.

The Foundation Course in Dance for Disabled Students, operated by Candoco Dance Company in London from 2004 to 2007, represents another partnership model that bridged alternative and formal education. This programme prepared disabled students for degree-level training while providing individualised support that mainstream institutions typically could not offer.

The Foundation Course's innovative approach included Dance Support Specialists who worked one-on-one with students to provide specialised assistance and ensure continuity when students needed to be absent. This model created what researchers term "space for absence," recognising that disabled students may need flexible modes of attendance and participation while ensuring they receive equal access to educational content.

Legal Frameworks and Policy Support

The research reveals significant variation in accessibility progress across European countries, with some of this variation attributable to differences in legal frameworks and policy support. Ireland's Disability Act 2005 provides an example of how comprehensive legal requirements can drive institutional change, even when implementation remains incomplete.

The Act established structured, enforceable responsibilities for public bodies, including requirements to make services and buildings accessible and provide individualised assessments and support for disabled people. While critics note limitations in the law's implementation, it created frameworks that institutions like MTU Cork School of Music have used to develop comprehensive accessibility systems.

The Irish example illustrates both the potential and limitations of legal approaches to accessibility. Legal requirements can provide institutional leaders with mandates and resources for accessibility improvements while creating accountability mechanisms that drive continued progress. However, laws alone cannot address cultural attitudes, knowledge gaps or resource limitations that perpetuate exclusion.

France's recent policy initiatives, including the July 2025 ministerial declaration supporting expansion of inclusive training programmes, demonstrate how government leadership can support changes identified by the sector. These initiatives include spreading successful programmes to additional institutions, creating new support roles for disabled artists, establishing networks of inclusive venues and developing resources for disabled artists' professional development.

Cultural Transformation and Aesthetic Innovation

The most profound accessibility improvements require cultural transformation that moves beyond accommodation to embrace disabled experience as a source of artistic innovation and aesthetic diversity. This transformation involves recognising that disabled people bring unique perspectives, creative approaches and artistic knowledge that can enrich performing arts practice for everyone.

Ana Telles, former Dean of the School of Arts at the University of Évora, observed significant impacts on educational quality when disabled students were more integrated into collaborative artistic processes. Rather than viewing disabled students as requiring special accommodations, the institution began to recognise their contributions to innovative performance creation and diverse aesthetic exploration.

This perspective shift represents movement from a model which focuses on what disabled people cannot do, to one that recognises disabled experience as a valuable source of artistic technique, knowledge and expertise. In educational contexts, this transformation can lead to curriculum innovations, pedagogical experiments and artistic explorations that benefit all students while creating more inclusive environments.

The recognition of diverse aesthetics also challenges fundamental assumptions about performer training and artistic expression. Rather than seeking to eliminate personal characteristics in favour of neutral performance, institutions can explore how different bodies and minds contribute to rich artistic expression. This approach requires significant cultural change but offers the potential for genuine artistic innovation.

Conclusion: The Imperative for Systemic Change

This comprehensive analysis reveals that exclusion of disabled people from European performing arts education represents more than individual discrimination or institutional oversight. Instead, it constitutes a systemic network of barriers that operates at multiple levels to prevent disabled people from accessing professional training, developing artistic careers and contributing their perspectives to European cultural life.

The evidence analysed in this report demonstrates the scope and consistency of this exclusion across countries, institutions and educational experiences. The qualitative testimonies reveal its human cost in terms of lost artistic potential, professional disappointment and cultural impoverishment. The analysis of institutional responses shows the inadequacy of current approaches, which rely on rhetoric rather than resources and individual accommodation rather than systemic transformation.

However, the research also identifies clear pathways for change that have been successfully implemented by innovative institutions and supported by progressive policy frameworks. These examples demonstrate that accessible performing arts education is not only possible but can enhance educational quality and artistic innovation when properly implemented.

The urgency of addressing these accessibility barriers extends beyond individual equity to encompass broader questions about the representativeness and relevance of European performing arts. In societies increasingly committed to diversity and inclusion, cultural institutions that exclude disabled people risk irrelevance and legitimacy. The performing arts can only claim to reflect European diversity when they include the perspectives and experiences of all European

citizens, including the significant portion of the population that experiences disability (1 out 4 have a disability based on 2023 Eurostat estimates).

Furthermore, the exclusion of disabled people from performing arts education represents a significant waste of human talent and creative potential. The alternative training pathways that many disabled people have successfully navigated demonstrate artistic capabilities and innovative approaches that formal education has failed to recognise or develop. This loss represents not only individual tragedy but collective cultural impoverishment.

The evidence suggests that transformation requires coordinated action across multiple levels and sectors. Individual institutions must commit to systemic accessibility improvements with adequate resources and leadership support. Policy frameworks must align educational access with professional opportunities and cultural representation. The performing arts sector must recognise disabled experience as valuable artistic diversity rather than charitable accommodation.

Most fundamentally, this transformation requires cultural change that challenges deep-seated assumptions about bodies, minds and artistic expression in performing arts practice. The ideology of perfection that pervades much performing arts training must give way to appreciation for diversity, innovation and the creative possibilities that emerge from different ways of moving, thinking and being in the world.

The research demonstrates that this transformation is not only necessary but possible. The institutions and programmes that have successfully created inclusive environments show that accessibility enhances rather than compromises educational quality and artistic excellence. The alternative training programmes that provide more accessible and respectful learning environments prove that different approaches are possible and effective.

The choice facing European performing arts education is clear: continue perpetuating systemic exclusion that wastes human potential and cultural diversity or embrace transformation that creates more inclusive, innovative and representative artistic communities. The evidence presented in this analysis provides a roadmap for institutions, policymakers and cultural leaders who choose transformation over exclusion, innovation over tradition and inclusion over privilege.

Recommendations

Based on the evidence presented throughout the report, this final section presents a set of recommendations to public authorities, higher education institutions and cultural organisations.

National, regional and local authorities, in their cultural and educational policies, should:

- Make accessibility a priority in higher education in the performing arts and provide the necessary investment for higher education institutions to be truly inclusive;

- Revise any legislation and regulations that prevent universal access to higher education institutions in the performing arts, including on disability grounds;

- Establish programmes and funding schemes that enable a transition towards full accessibility, in the form of training, information and other support mechanisms;

- Recognise diversity of valid training pathways and provide support to organisations providing informal training, particularly where no valid higher education paths exist;

- Support partnerships between higher education institutions, non formal training providers and cultural organisations which enable initial access to the professional market for disabled artists and cultural professionals;

- Support cross-border, European exchanges, which are critical to ensure peer learning and sustain change.

Higher education institutions in the performing arts should, in relation with the different points below, adopt the following measures in a progressive, step-by-step and contextualised way:

Audits and data:

- Conduct accessibility audits, addressing all relevant areas covered by this report;
- Collect data (e.g. on disabled students, graduates, members of staff, etc.).

Strategic orientations and measures:

- Develop accessibility strategies and/or action plans and allocate responsibility to specific teams within the organisation, providing them with adequate resources to implement adequate measures;
- Take measures to adapt entry tests, making them accessible and ensuring that information about them is accessible and properly communicated to disabled people;
- Engage in collaboration at all levels, including local, national, European and international cooperation and networking, to take advantage of existing knowledge.

Entry process and curriculum developments:

- Inform possible applicants about the level of accessibility of institutions;
- Adapt and increase flexibility in curricula and methodologies;
- Adapt timetables to allow for more breaks and greater flexibility in response to the varying needs and the fluctuating conditions, of different bodyminds;
- Include contents related to accessibility and disability in the curriculum.

Work with a diverse set of professionals:

- Consider hiring dedicated staff to focus on accessibility, inclusion and diversity (e.g. an access manager or access coordinator);
- Identify opportunities to recruit disabled people as staff members, including as lecturers and admin staff, recognising their diverse expertise and their

ability to bring other qualifications besides the conventional ones and create accessible working environments for them;

- Never underestimate the importance of consultation with people with the lived experience of disability, including disabled artists, when adopting measures;

- Involve disabled people in governance spaces;

- Foster internal training and awareness about accessibility and disability, among all staff, including lecturers, trainers, administrative staff and juries involved in entry tests;

- Establish partnerships with organisations that represent disabled people or have expertise in disability and accessibility.

Work on continuous improvements:

- Ensure that disabled students are consulted about their needs and that they are not the ones who have to adapt to non-accessible structures;

- Provide opportunities for feedback regarding the accessibility of institutions (e.g. meetings between disabled students and staff, dedicated mailboxes, etc.) and accept the value of feedback received;

- Regularly share and communicate about the advancements made.

Cultural organisations, including performing arts venues, companies and events, should:

- Conduct analyses of accessibility and inclusion of disabled perspectives in their organisations, including in terms of the artists programmed, etc.;

- Seek partnerships with higher education institutions to work together in areas related to accessibility, inclusion and diversity;

- Seek partnerships with organisations or collectives representing disabled artists or with individual disabled artists;

- Voice their concerns regarding the lack of disabled representation and its impact in terms of artistic development and of missed employment opportunities for disabled people, when interacting with higher education institutions.

EU institutions (notably Parliament and Commission) should:

In line with the signing and ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities by EU Member-States:

- Strengthen key sectoral values related to diversity, inclusion and accessibility as part of policy frameworks, such as the upcoming Cultural Compass and within the scope of devising the AgoraEU programme and Erasmus+ under the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for the period 2028-2034;

- Promote stronger support for the participation of disabled artists and cultural professionals throughout the entire value chain, starting with higher education in the performing arts and the wider arts and cultural sector;

- Encourage the exchange of best practices in Creative Europe countries with regard to a more accessible entry process and overall curriculum in higher performing arts education institutions, for instance through OMC working groups;

- Make accessible education a priority theme in Erasmus+ for the period 2028-2034, including higher education in the arts as an area of focus;

- Support a stronger focus on disabled artists and cultural professionals in discussions on a reference framework for fairer working conditions for artists and cultural professionals, and while highlighting the importance of attending performing arts education institutions to facilitate entry and networking opportunities into the professional world;

- Include the ADICLUS (the European Arts and Disability Cluster) in stakeholder consultations, recognising that the breadth of its membership (more than 40 members in over 20 countries) means ADICLUS has a broad and unique expertise on artists and cultural professionals with disabilities.

Responses to the report by Europe Beyond Access

Europe Beyond Access is a project led by ten mainstream cultural institutions across Europe*. We are venues, festivals and mainstream companies. We are not cultural education institutions.

And so why have we commissioned research into accessibility of the performing arts education sector?

In the seven years of our work as a European project, the largest of its type in the world, it has become ever-clearer that a key barrier in our cultural sector is the inaccessibility of performing arts education. In some countries of our project accessible tertiary level performing arts education is impossible. In the extreme case of Greece participation in publicly funded tertiary dance education by disabled artists is prohibited by law!

So, of course, we conduct this research as we believe in access to education and access to culture as fundamental human rights – human rights guaranteed through international law, but so often denied to disabled artists.

But, more plainly, we have commissioned this research as we want to find out why so few disabled artists currently graduate from performing arts education institutions. We are representatives of a changing and more inclusive cultural sector. We represent 'the market'. And we, the market, are signalling that we have jobs and opportunities for disabled artists and cultural workers. But, so often, artists come to us without the necessary training which their non-disabled peers will have acquired. Cultural policymakers and education providers have a responsibility to produce artists and cultural workers with the right level of experience and skills to enter the profession.

What we don't want to do is to use this research to reprimand the cultural education sector. Firstly, as mainstream cultural organisations we know that many of our own processes and structures replicate the ableist barriers faced by disabled people. We are in no place to lecture others. And, secondly, we know that so many in the cultural education sector are facing a perfect storm of reduced funding, infrastructure of historic (and inaccessible) buildings, shrinking student numbers, and wider political challenges for the cultural and education sectors.

And yet it feels urgent to insist that performing arts education institutions look at the barriers to enrolment for disabled applicants, and also to think much more deeply about the experiences of disabled students in their institutions.

Certainly, some of the experiences of graduates from cultural education institutions described in this report are deeply troubling. Here we read of experiences that not only have caused distress and loss of dignity, but also experiences that have caused pain, the worsening of physical symptoms and chronic conditions, and contributed to mental health crises.

The report makes for difficult reading.

As commissioners, perhaps most concerning in the report is the clear variance between what performing arts education institutions state as their commitment to and knowledge of accessibility practices, compared with the actual experiences of disabled students and the testimonies of staff in those institutions.

For example, we note that 75% of institutions claim that applicants and students have the possibility to communicate their access needs to the teachers and the institution. Yet, when speaking to graduates, the researchers found that only 17% had been asked about their access needs while they attended a higher education institution. There is a disconnect here which we hope to better understand through this research.

At Europe Beyond Access, a consortium of mainstream cultural organisations, we know that the first step to improving access for disabled artists is to understand and acknowledge the very real barriers they experience in our institutions. Only once we have acknowledged these barriers can we work to dismantle them.

As commissioners of this report, we invite performing arts education institutions, policymakers, and cultural leaders to treat accessibility not as a future ambition, but as a present-day urgent responsibility. We encourage institutions to work alongside disabled artists and students, and to work with specialist Disability Arts pitioners, to co-create inclusive practices and commit to meaningful structural change. Europe Beyond Access is ready to collaborate, share knowledge, and support this shift—because only through shared action can we build a cultural sector that truly reflects the diversity and talent of our communities.

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Introduction

1.1. Background

Europe Beyond Access (EBA) is an international project that supports the creation of new works by Deaf and/or disabled artists from across Europe.[1] It has four major strands, including:

- **Artist commissions and public presentations**, involving support for disabled artists to make and tour new dance and theatre works and the presentation and touring of existing works by disabled artists;

- **Artistic exchanges**, including artistic laboratories in which artists from different countries come together to exchange ideas and learn new skills, as well as artistic residencies for artists who are seeking to develop a specific artistic idea;

- **Audience development and engagement**, which develops widespread public interest in disability-led performing arts, as well as increasing access to the arts for disabled audiences; and

- **Capacity-building and advocacy**, which seeks to build the capacity of disabled artists to package, market and present their work and artistic value; as well as building the knowledge of mainstream cultural managers and programmers on the quality of work by disabled artists and supporting their work. It also advocates for the needs and value of disabled artists, through reports, conferences and other activities.

The current phase of EBA, running between 2024 and 2027, involves a consortium of 10 high-profile European cultural organisations and two associate partners: Skånes Dansteater, Holland Dance Festival, Onassis Stegi, Oriente Occidente, Kampnagel – Internationales Zentrum für schönere Künste, CODA Oslo International Dance Festival, Centrum Kultury ZAMEK w Poznaniu, Project Arts Centre, Mercat de les Flors, Culturgest – Fundação CGD, in partnership with British Council and the collaboration of Théâtre National de Bretagne. As in the case of the first phase of EBA, which was implemented between 2018 and 2023, the project is co-funded by the Creative Europe programme of the European Union.

This report is one of the results of the capacity-building and advocacy component of EBA. It builds on previous research about disabled artists and professionals in the performing arts, including the *Time to Act* report series (2020-2023) conducted during the previous phase of EBA.[2]

The report has been undertaken by On the Move, the international cultural mobility network, which also authored the aforementioned *Time to Act* reports. The research team for this report has involved Jordi Baltà Portolés, Konrad Wolf and Sophie Dowden, under the coordination of Marie Le Sourd.

The reports published during the first phase of EBA identified higher education institutions in the performing arts (i.e., theatre schools, dance academies, conservatories and similar institutions) as key 'gatekeepers' (alongside curators, producers, programmers, etc.), whose policies and decisions can enable or hinder opportunities for disabled artists. *Time to Act* (2021) also highlighted that, in the longer term, educational institutions could contribute to a more level playing field for disabled artists, through the development of inclusive pedagogical approaches in their curricula, the introduction of inclusive methodologies for teachers, etc. The literature review and interviews conducted for *Time to Act* suggested that lack of access to training stood as a significant obstacle for disabled artists.[3] These elements provide the background to this new report.

1.2. Objectives and scope

In this context, EBA is undertaking research on the access, lack of access and experience of disabled students in higher education institutions in the performing arts across the countries participating in the Creative Europe programme and in the UK.[4]

Higher education institutions include, for instance, theatre schools, dance academies, conservatories, universities and similar institutions that provide practical, skills-based education for those seeking to enter the professional performing arts, for example as actors, dancers, technicians, directors, choreographers, producers, stage managers, lighting or costume or stage designers or production managers.

As per the **individuals** who are the focus of the research, the report addresses disabled, chronically ill, neurodivergent and d/Deaf performing artists and professionals working in the fields of theatre, dance and other performing arts forms. It also includes disabled students who are currently enrolled in higher education institutions in the performing arts such as those described in the previous paragraph.

In the context of EBA's broader goal of improving and increasing the opportunities for disabled artists in the performing arts across Europe, this research exercise aims in particular to analyse the current state of access and experience of disabled students in higher education institutions and its implications in terms of the opportunities for disabled people to develop a career in the performing arts. Research also analyses what alternative educational and professional development paths have been followed by disabled people who could not access mainstream educational institutions.

In line with these objectives, the main questions that the report aims to address are as follows:

- Analysing the barriers faced by disabled people, including disabled students and artists, when accessing and benefitting from higher education in the performing arts, including difficulties related to the application process, the curriculum and organisational aspects;

- Analysing how lack of or limited access to higher education affects opportunities to develop a professional career in the performing arts;

- Analysing the range of factors, including legal, policy, financial, architectural, knowledge-based, attitudinal and other aspects that may prevent higher education institutions from being accessible to disabled students;

- Analysing alternative paths in education and professional development that disabled students and artists follow in order to access the professional performing arts;[5] and

- Identifying and analysing good practice examples and related enabling factors that can drive change and improve accessibility and broaden opportunities for disabled students and artists, in areas including organisational change, curricula, policy and funding.

Key target audiences for this research report include the following:

- **Higher arts education institutions**, who can access data and expertise on the specific barriers experienced by disabled students, when applying or being accepted in those institutions and when studying there; become familiar with good practice examples that have broadened opportunities for disabled students; and understand how improving accessibility to higher arts education can be critical to respond to the growing demand for more disabled artists in the European performing arts scene;

- The **European cultural sector** at large, including performing arts institutions and individual arts managers and professionals, in order to understand how lack of access to formal education leads disabled people to seek alternative training routes, which should be better recognised by the cultural sector, but also how lack of access to higher arts education for disabled people becomes an obstacle in performing arts' organisations ability to present more diverse stories and a more representative set of people on stage and backstage; and

- **Cultural policymakers and education policymakers**, who should recognise their responsibility for cultural education to guarantee access for disabled students, learn from good practice examples and be encouraged to take measures in legislation, policy and funding to foster change and guarantee equal opportunities. This would go in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and particularly its articles particularly Articles 24 (on Education: 'States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education') and 30 (on Participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure)[6], a Convention signed and ratified by all EU members since January 2011[7].

These objectives, scope and target groups have informed the design and elaboration of the research report, the methodology of which is described hereafter.

1.3. Methodology

Between September 2024 and August 2025, the research leading to this report has combined consultations, interviews, focus groups, events, a literature review and several surveys. In particular, the following elements should be noted:

a. **Establishment of the EBA editorial committee** set up by the EBA coordination team, involving disabled artists and cultural professionals, academics, EBA staff and other key stakeholders in the field of the performing arts and disability, who have provided advice in the research design, the identification of interviewees and focus group participants, the design of surveys, the initial drafts of this report and other questions.[8]

b. **Analysis of existing literature** on the barriers faced by disabled people when accessing and enjoying higher education in the performing arts and good practices in this field.

c. **Design of a research framework**, in October-November 2024, drawing on EBA's goals, existing knowledge in this field and the advice provided by the editorial committee, which allowed to identify the key themes and research questions and what they implied from the perspective of education institutions, disabled artists, students and performing arts organisations.

d. **A focus group involving disabled artists and disabled students** in higher education performing arts institutions, held online on 10th December 2024, to discuss key issues in the accessibility of education, to inform the design of surveys and which also allowed to identify key stakeholders for subsequent interviews and consultations.

e. **Three online surveys**, addressed respectively to disabled artists and performing arts professionals; higher education institutions in the performing arts; and performing arts organisations, within countries covered by the Creative Europe programme as well as the UK. Surveys were disseminated online in English, French, Spanish and German and respondents were invited to respond in their own language and/or through a video/audio recording if they preferred to do so. Dissemination was made through EBA's and its members' and partners' communication channels, as well as by On the Move and ELIA- The European League of the Institute of Arts.[9] Replies were collected between 29 January and 24 March 2025. Additional information about respondents will be presented later in this section.

f. **Interviews** with disabled artists and cultural professionals, as well as representatives of higher education institutions, which have allowed in particular to delve deeper into the key issues emerging from survey responses, as well as to explore some of the good practices identified. In some cases, they also allowed to talk to key informants who could not attend a focus group. Eight online or in-person interviews have been undertaken between December 2024 and May 2025. The sample has sought to ensure balance in terms of profiles and countries represented. At the request of some interviewees, information drawn from interviews is generally anonymised, except where noted otherwise.

g. **A presentation of preliminary results** was made in the context of the ELIA Academy, organised by ELIA, the higher arts education network, in Oslo, on 19th June 2025[10]. Initial findings of the research were discussed in a breakout session, involving representatives of several higher education institutions as well as some disabled artists and members of the research team. Two additional feedback sessions on the preliminary results of the survey were held online on 3 and 5 September 2025 gathering a total of 6 people, including notably representatives of alternative training paths and EBA partners.

h. **Other consultations**, including a survey of artists supported by EBA to analyse their educational pathways and a consultation with members of the European Arts & Disability Cluster (ADICLUS) on legislation concerning access to higher education and on the importance of educational certificates in access to professional opportunities in their respective countries, were also conducted.

Drawing on this set of steps, this final report has been drafted between July and September 2025, with a view to its public launch in December 2025 and subsequent dissemination in 2026 and beyond.

Additional details on participation

The design and elaboration of this research report has aimed to be accessible to a diverse set of participants, including in particular disabled artists and students. In this respect, measures have been taken to enable contributions in a diverse range of languages and formats, including voice and audio messages as responses to the online surveys, as well as sign language interpretation in some interviews. While the research team and EBA are aware that some limitations to participation may still exist, an effort has been made to facilitate participation, by adapting data collection processes whenever possible.

As noted above, three online surveys have been one of the main sources of information for the drafting of this report. Some details about responses received are presented hereafter:

- **Survey for disabled artists and cultural professionals, including current students in higher education institutions**: 139 responses, from 21 countries covered by the research. 54.7% of respondents identified as 'disabled person / person with disabilities', whereas 13% identified as 'non-disabled'. In addition, 24.5% respondents identified as having a mobility impairment; 22.3% as neurodivergent; 17.3% as chronically ill; 13.7% as d/Deaf; 6.5% as 'learning disabled / with intellectual disability'; 5.8% as 'visually impaired / b/Blind'. 7.2% said 'other' and 2.2% chose not to disclose this information.[11] In terms of artforms, 48.9% of respondents identified theatre as their main artistic field, followed by dance (45.3%), circus and physical theatre (11.5%), site-specific and outdoor arts (8.6%) and puppetry (2.2%). As per their roles, 33.1% identified 'acting' as their main activity, followed by choreography (24.5%), dramaturgy (10.8%) and direction (10.8%).[12]

- **Survey for higher arts education institutions**, targeting individual staff members (working as lecturers, teachers, facilitators, etc., but also as managerial or administrative staff) as well as formal responses from administrations and considering the possibility that more than one answer be provided by staff from one institution. Overall, 59 responses were obtained, from 17 countries covered by the research. In this case, only 1.3% of respondents identified as 'disabled people', with 78.0% identifying as 'non-disabled'. Small percentages of contributions were made by respondents identifying as chronically ill (1.3%) or neurodivergent (1.3%), whereas 5.1% identified as 'other', 3.8% as 'any other identification' and 3.8% did not want to share this information. No respondents identified as d/Deaf, visually impaired / b/Blind, having a mobility impairment or a learning disability. Even if figures cannot be seen as representative of the sector, the very small percentage of respondents identifying as disabled suggests a lack of diversity in the make up of higher education institutions in the performing arts, something which subsequent sections of the report will examine further.

- **Survey for performing arts organisations** involved in the creation, production, distribution or presentation of professional works. <u>116 responses</u> were obtained, from 18 countries covered by the research. 83.6% of respondents were non-disabled and 3.4% were 'disabled people or people with disabilities'. Small percentages of respondents identified as neurodivergent (2.6%), chronically ill (1.7%) or having a mobility impairment (0.9%). No respondents were d/Deaf, visually impaired / b/Blind or learning disabled. 4.3% did not want to disclose this information, 6.9% chose 'other' and 2.6% had 'any other identification'.

Overall, responses were obtained from respondents based in **27 out of the 41 countries covered by the research** (40 countries taking part in the Creative Europe programme, plus the UK). Although the sample is diverse in terms of the countries covered, it is not fully balanced, as some countries are more represented than others. In the case of the survey for artists and cultural professionals, the most represented countries include Spain (18.7%), Portugal (18.0%), France (12.2%), Germany (11.5%), Ireland (5.0%), the UK (5.0%), Italy (4.3%), Greece (3.6%) and the Netherlands (3.6%). Among higher education institutions, respondents came more frequently from Portugal (17.0%), Germany (17.0%), Sweden (13.6%), France (11.9%), Spain (6.7%), the Czech Republic (3.4%), Poland (3.4%) and the UK (3.4%). Finally, the survey for performing arts organisations received responses from Italy (19.0%), Sweden (15.5%), Portugal (12.1%), Spain (10.3%), Germany (6.0%), the Netherlands (6.0%), the UK (4.3%) and Poland (3.4%), among others.

Given the size of samples, data presented in this report is not statistically significant in terms of disabled artists and students, higher education institutions or performing arts organisations. However, surveys provide very valuable qualitative and quantitative information about the current state of accessibility in higher education institutions and what this implies in terms of diversity in the performing arts. The report has complemented information obtained through surveys with that coming from interviews, focus and feedback groups, literature and other sources.

Two additional elements in terms of participation should be noted. Firstly, barriers to higher education institutions effectively limit the number of disabled people who can become professional artists or develop a professional career in other areas of the performing arts. Even if alternative education, training and professional career routes exist, it is clear to the research team that some disabled people who would have liked to build their skills and develop a career in the performing arts were prevented from doing so by non-accessible education institutions. Therefore, the sample of respondents to the survey for disabled artists and cultural professionals lacks responses from those who chose or were forced to, develop a professional career in other sectors. While it is not possible to estimate the size of this group, it is necessary to acknowledge the bias existing in this sample. This report somehow aims to contribute to redressing this situation.

Secondly, another bias may exist as regards the range of higher education institutions that have filled in the surveys, as institutions that have effectively integrated accessibility and inclusion in their mission statements and activities may be more likely to respond to surveys addressing these matters. At the same time, the combination of responses from current or past students and statements from higher education institutions can help to provide a more complex, comprehensive perspective on the integration of accessibility in higher education.

Structure of the report

Following this introduction, the report is organised as follows:

- **Section 2** analyses the barriers faced by disabled people when accessing and taking part in higher education institutions in the performing arts and what this implies in terms of subsequent professional careers.

- **Section 3** focuses on the experience of higher education institutions and the range of factors that may prevent them from being fully accessible.

- **Section 4** examines good practice examples and related factors that may enable positive change and enhanced accessibility to higher education institutions.

- **Section 5** presents recommendations to higher education institutions, policymakers, funders, the cultural sector at large as well as European Union Institutions, based on the evidence presented in previous sections.

The report has included quotes from respondents to the online surveys, as well as contributions collected through interviews, focus groups, presentations and other activities. Quotes are generally used literally and only shortened or edited when necessary. Readers are warned that, occasionally, quotes include discriminatory terms and can be seen to represent an ableist/disablist perspective. The research team decided not to erase these terms in order to illustrate the attitudinal barriers that still exist in the sector.

2

Barriers faced by disabled artists in the field of higher education

This chapter examines the barriers faced by disabled people when accessing and taking part in higher education in the performing arts, including difficulties related to the application process, the curriculum and organisational aspects (e.g. communication, accessibility of buildings, etc.). It also analyses how lack of or limited, access to higher education affects opportunities to develop a professional career in the performing arts.

2.1. Access to higher education studies

The barriers encountered by disabled people in accessing higher education institutions in the arts have been identified by several reports and debates as a major challenge to ensure accessibility, inclusion and diversity in the arts.[13] Typical challenges to access higher education institutions include the failure of entry tests to recognise diverse bodies, aesthetics and forms of expression (which frequently result in applicants being rejected because of their disabilities), non-accessibility of buildings, non-accessible communication and limited adaptation of entry tests in terms of time and methodology, among others.

Only 41% of the higher education institutions that responded to the survey disseminated in the context of this research indicated that their entry tests were adapted or accessible for disabled applicants and only 31% had adapted or accessible requirements for disabled applicants. While 75% claimed that applicants and students had the possibility to communicate their access needs to the teachers and the institution, it is worth noting that only 27% provide information to prospective students in accessible language and formats (e.g. Braille, audio versions, Easy-to-Read versions, sign language videos) and only 41% provide a description of the accessibility of their institutions on their websites – both aspects may effectively discourage prospective applicants.

These difficulties are reflected in the testimonials collected while preparing this report. The profile of respondents to the survey for disabled artists and cultural professionals is relatively balanced, with 46% former students, 21% current students and 32% being performing arts professionals who have never attended a higher education institution.[14] Among these 32%, approximately half have considered attending at some point in their lives and the other half has not. When describing the reasons that prevented them from enrolling despite their interest in studying, several relate to accessibility issues, including:

- legal factors ("Professional and public dance schools in Greece exclude me due to disability");

- lack of accessible entry tests ("Entry tests are not adapted to disabled people"*[15]);

- attitudinal barriers from juries in entry tests, which resulted in rejections (some participants in focus groups recalled that "I... tried to apply to study to become an actress in Germany in 2009... I was rejected due to my disability... They told me at various acting schools that there was no chance that I would ever become an actress" and that "I even got ableist feedback: 'How your eyes are looking, you'd never get a job'");

- non-accessible buildings and contents ("I could not follow their programme and they would not adapt it to my needs"; "There are no wheelchair accessible dance education in Norway and it was impossible for me to study abroad"; "... accessibility of buildings and accessibility of education with a different body"*); and

- organisational culture and the fear it engenders ("Lack of educational and accessibility behaviour from staff and materials"; "Institutional ableism"*; "It was because the school didn't have access to sign language and for fear of not feeling integrated into the audience's environment").

While other types of factors are mentioned as well (e.g. financial reasons or the fact that some current artists only discovered their interest in the arts at a later stage), a large majority of disabled and cultural professionals who considered enrolling but did not do so in the end were prevented by the perception or realisation that institutions were not accessible or would reject them. This is also visible among those who argue they have never seriously considered enrolling, as the perceived lack of accessibility of institutions frequently arises as a determining factor ("I knew that I would not be accepted with my disability"*; "The educational centres in Catalonia are not adapted to disabled people"*). A number of other reasons, not related to accessibility, are also provided, including the preference for less formal training.

Approximately 20% of current and past students state that they moved abroad to enter higher education studies. While in some cases aspects related to accessibility may provide an explanation for this ("Lack of availability of adequate training in my home country"), a broader set of personal and academic reasons is generally provided, including educational quality and personal connections. At the same time, it is important to consider that enrolling in higher education abroad is not affordable to many, particularly when the costs of adaptation and support for a disabled student are added. Therefore, even if education in some countries may be better adapted and more accessible and attractive for disabled students, it cannot be seen as a substitute to making accessibility a universal requirement.

2.2. Understanding and practice of accessibility in higher education

Disabled artists who have experienced higher education in the performing arts are frequently critical of the accessibility of that experience. Respondents to the online survey were asked to assess, on a 0-10 scale (where 0 is very bad and 10 is excellent), nine different aspects of their experience during higher education, from the perspective of accessibility. As illustrated in Table 1, only six of those nine areas obtained a mark above 5, yet none had a mark above 5.87 out of 10.

"Understanding, adaptability and openness by teachers" gets the highest mark (5.87), followed by "Examinations and certificates" (5.58) and "Entry requirements and expectations" (5.48). The lowest marks are obtained by "Support services (for example guidance on further training or professional development opportunities)" (4.44), "Building facilities" (4.67) and "Timetables (time and break arrangements" (4.94). As the report will later show, a similar assessment of the experience in other, less formal or 'alternative' educational paths, shows better results in most categories (e.g. understanding, adaptability and openness by teachers, recognition of diverse aesthetics and bodies, curriculum and teaching methods), although not in all of them.

Table 1: Assessment of accessibility of higher education

Responses to the question "Could you assess the following aspects of your experience during higher education, from the perspective of accessibility?", by former and current students, on a 0-10 scale.

Area	Assessment of accessibility (0-10)
Understanding, adaptability and openness by teachers	5.87
Examinations and certificates	5.58
Entry requirements and expectations	5.48
Communication (for example between staff and students, administrative staff and students and so on)	5.37
Curriculum / teaching methods	5.17
Recognition of diverse aesthetics and bodies (on stage)	5.11
Timetables (time and break arrangements)	4.94
Building facilities	4.67
Support services (for example guidance on further training or professional development opportunities)	4.44

Source: Own elaboration, based on survey data (n= 87)

Respondents highlight, in particular, difficulties related to the physical accessibility of buildings as well as the lack of adaptation of other issues. In particular, the following issues are frequently mentioned:

- **non-accessible buildings and spaces** ("The building where the course was held was inaccessible due to the presence of stairs at the entrance"; "In terms of physical access it was very hard to access the building"; "I had to pay for parking, because the only accessible parking spot was in the teachers basement. There were some spaces of the school I couldn't reach independently (I had to always call for a security to open some doors) and there was an activity that I could not attend because the designated spot was not accessible").[16] Further to these examples, it is important to recall that inaccessibility of buildings and spaces involves barriers not only for people with mobility impairments, but also for those with other kinds of disabilities (e.g. because of the lack of tactile guidance systems or resting rooms);

- **lack of adaptation of schedules**, with too much demand on students' time and little down time or the absence of 'crip time'[17] ("Not enough time to move between rooms/courses"; "Lack of clear communication about what was expected of the students and about the schedule, causing stress and sometimes very long days without breaks"; "Struggling with bipolar disorder there was no space to adjust timetables of requirements to allow me to care for myself"; "Because of my physical condition I was unable to take part in several courses throughout the week and was forced to attend courses without being allowed to do other things"*);

- **lack of understanding of the needs of neurodivergent or disabled people and lack of adaptation to them** ("Most of the obstacles that I faced were on the 'psychological' side, since the school had wheelchair accessibility, such as private parking, elevators, big entrances and rooms, but the organisation of the program itself was not thought for a disabled student"; "While [name of the institution] seems very open at first, in terms of access for disabled students and awarding of diplomas, when facing the design of schedules and training activities I felt extremely lonely, placed in situations which could have been dangerous if I had not listened to my body. Indeed, I think that the gap between the expectation and the conditions set by the institution towards students does not match the values they pretend to embrace"; "I was the only student with a disability and felt like the teachers didn't always know what to do with me. I felt like they tried to be better but the lack of knowledge was very noticeable"; "As a self-diagnosed person with mild ADHD I would say that the teachers/mentors won't show you the steps of a combination many times. They expect you to remember a combination that was shown to you twice, they don't mind if you were focused or not or if you're feeling nervous or left behind");

- **lack of understanding and sensitivity towards invisible disabilities** ("Stupidity and ignorance of teachers who didn't believe me, thought I was lazy and making it up (invisible disability). No adjustments done, just do the class and deal with it"; "My disability was minimised because it was not visible, I wasn't asked about it and my abilities were taken for granted and there was a lack of spaces or information where support or advice could be provided. Disability was also addressed from a practical, pragmatic perspective, without considering emotional aspects and the same level of effort was expected, without any kind of adaptation. Personal questions were also addressed to me in a public educational and professional setting, forcing me to expose myself in front of my peers"*)[18];

- **ableist training practices and expectations** ("The inaccessibility is part of a general attitude that the students' bodies are disposable. This affects me in particular as a disabled student, but it also affects the non-disabled students, for the simple reason that we all have bodies. The school (directly and indirectly) pressures students to train while injured, while ill and while enduring crises in their personal lives. Incompetent, negligent and abusive "teaching" that harms students is normalised and teachers with a record of severe injury to students are retained. Verbal abuse, nonconsensual touching and coercion are excused as "teaching". There is little respect for students as experts on our own bodies. There are also other forms of discrimination which make the school inaccessible, e.g. misgendering and deadnaming students. For students who are both disabled and genderqueer, this is additionally painful. Ironically, this kind of training produces disabled students through injury and psychological trauma."; "I receive no support to write my final thesis and have been waiting for seven months for an answer to my request for an extension"*);

- **the belief that performers' bodies should be 'neutral' or lack distinctive, personal idiosyncrasie**s,[19] something which may be at odds with the reality of disabled artists ("I started my studies as an able body. After a stroke during my last undergraduate year, my grades suffered because I couldn't deliver my last paper. I was in coma. Still on rehabilitation I started my masters, in which I was totally put aside and told my presence on stage would take the attention from the spectator. On my 3rd semester I went [abroad] and just there I could explore my new body. When returning [to my home country] I was kicked off from the first class I attended because 'I wasn't from the class.' I tried to attend some more but ended up giving up in 2011"; "When I got my disabilities I was told by the course director I would distract the audience"); and

- **an overall organisational culture, in some institutions, that effectively excludes or rejects disabled people** ("In school / further education my neurodiversity (undiagnosed) was very misunderstood. Oddness, quietness, specific needs, ways I learn, sensitivities, were often seen as difficult or stupid or deliberately awkward behaviours"; "Discrimination. Bullying. Isolation"). The

absence of an organisational culture that acknowledges diversity, let alone respects or embraces it, arises as a significant factor at least in some higher education institutions, including in responses from current students.

Alongside these testimonials that underline negative stories, some survey respondents highlight positive aspects, including how some institutions and teachers recognised the specific needs of disabled students and could adapt their approach to them: "My dream was to be a professional and be treated as equal and the institution helped me"; "The department was led by Aat Hougée, who invited artists to teach from all over the world at that time. Artist teachers were interesting, sensitive individuals to learn from. Also very empathetic sometimes". There are also some examples of education institutions which are specifically designed for inclusion ("The curriculum was fully adapted to me, since contents are related to deaf culture, sign language and the artistic practice of deaf people"*).

Some answers are nuanced, highlighting both positive and negative stories, which illustrate a complex landscape: "In my country, the curriculum and entry requirements are not accessible, while in the Netherlands I experienced a better understanding on the importance of diverse aesthetics and bodies in the field"; "Studying a contemporary performance live art context meant there was huge openness to differing aesthetics and live experiences and teaching formats reflected this. However, institutional systems, administrative and examination processes that were not led by the teaching team were more challenging for many. The material nature of the old buildings meant they would not have been accessible for many peers." Even if not the majority of them, some interviewees also noted the difference between theoretical subjects, which present fewer barriers for disabled students and practical or hands-on subjects, ranging from acting to lighting or costume design, where disabled students frequently face more challenges.

Former students who have been interviewed during the elaboration of this report also highlight some positive stories, including the ability to develop important creative collaborations with peers. At the same time, the perception that, where it exists, support provided by higher education institutions is frequently reactive and individualised, responding to specific demands, rather than systemic, has been noted. One of the implications of this is the emotional toll it takes on disabled people, who feel the burden of having to constantly demand adaptation and to define or justify themselves and their identity.

Mechanisms for adaptation

Only 17% of graduates remember being asked about their access needs while they attended a higher education institution. Whether or not a specific request for access needs was made, 30% of graduates and current students remember that some adaptations were made to meet their requirements or needs, whereas 57% say that no changes were made and the remaining 13% don't know or can't remember. Some of those who were asked provide negative feedback on the experience ("I got thrown out after the person very attentively had listened to what I needed and told to do everything as it was without adjustments or to defer and come back when I'd sorted myself out"), but some positive examples can be found too:

- **general adaptation of activities** ("They had a team working on accessibility of disabled students"; "Before I took the school entrance exams, I informed the institution of my disability and because of this they tried to find out how they could accommodate me");

- **partial adaptation of curricula**, even if this does not always entail a significant change on the part of schools ("After one and a half years in training, I asked to be allowed to slightly adapt my schedule so as to avoid some courses which were causing chronic pain, replacing them with individual, autonomous training. My request was accepted, but I was not provided with any kind of support. I was also allowed to use headphones in some courses, where noise was too intense for me"*; "I was able to do the Degree spread over four years; my first year was during Covid and for medical reasons I was exempt from going in for classes and did only the online units. Because I couldn't do the Dance unit my Institute offered to change my Degree from performing arts to Creative Arts where I had the option to select courses from the BA programmes for Journalism, Photography and Creative Media, so it worked out alright in the end"; "Spreading courses over double the time to the standard schedule is somehow a type of compromise between the Schools' regulations and my health condition, rather than a real adaptation, because even if I'm the only student in this situation, the school's programme hasn't effectively changed"*);

- **partial adaptation or broader openness to adapting, teaching and examination methods,** something which partly highlights that accessibility may sometimes depend on the goodwill of some individual teachers and other professionals, rather than on systemic transformation ("Some teachers adapted some teaching"; "Already in my first lecture lecturers came and asked if there was anything I needed, stressing that I could contact them at any time"*; "Longer time availability and written rather than oral questions"*; "[Was I asked about my access needs? Yes]… but only for assessments. Luckily I managed with the support of some of the lecturers and some of my classmates but there was no possibility of having a teaching assistant or support/access worker");

- **accessibility support** ("Sign language interpreter"; "Identification of peers who would help me"*);

- **physical accessibility and related changes in the organisation of spaces** ("Stairs, parking space and leave granted for health reasons and an adapted chair, considering the time I needed to spend sitting"*; "I was able to say that I needed space around me and help me in moving objects, like chairs"; "Space was made from the kitchen to the rooms for people to move around easier").

While these developments are encouraging, they represent a relatively small proportion of students and graduates and do not account for those who could not enter higher education in the first place. Furthermore, some of the testimonials collected also highlight tensions between a willingness to listen to disabled students and adapt to them, where it exists and the actual ability to change, as a number of factors may prevent the adoption of positive measures: "I felt that the school was keen to meet my needs, but it wasn't always possible because the school itself had various limits (physical, monetary, administrative, etc.) that made it difficult to adapt"; "[Was I asked about my access needs?] Yes, but after re-starting my studies after 3 years sick, which is a bit too late. The principal asked what I would need in order to pursue my studies, while reminding me that it was difficult to do, which is true. For the time being, that has led to nothing."* These stories serve to stress, again, the obstacles existing to systemic change, with lack of financial resources, a limited understanding of needs and willingness to accommodate them and the failure to integrate access and inclusion as core principles in policy and practice arising as some determining factors.

2.3. Individual and collective experiences of disability while in higher education

Disabled teachers and peer students

Very few graduate students (approximately 11%) report having had teachers who identified as disabled. This should not come as a surprise, since hardly any higher education institutions report on having many disabled teachers as members of staff (something which, as noted earlier, illustrates the lack of diversity existing in the sector) and, as this report will later show, only 12% of such institutions appear to gather statistics on how many staff members identify as disabled. As the *Time to Act* and *Time to Act: Two Years On* suggested, lack of diversity within institutions and lack of data and knowledge on diversity arise as significant barriers to change.[20]

Some interviewees consulted during the research leading to this report have also argued that the presence of disabled staff members within faculty remains a critical step to make higher education institutions accessible to everyone. In their view, even if institutions ask applicants or students about their access needs, without disabled staff it may be difficult for such needs to be fully understood or received. The presence of disabled staff could send the signal that there is genuine knowledge within institutions and that access needs will be considered from an informed perspective.

Where former students remember having teachers who identified as disabled, this is generally a positive factor, in terms of communication ("[How did this help?] [He or she] could communicate in my language and their contents and explanation were adapted to my training needs"*), learning and inspiration ("In the first year, a teacher with an intellectual disability supported me and inspired me when I felt stuck in a dance course, because of my own learning disabilities. The practice of movement she developed because of her own difficulties and qualities was very enriching to me and this working method was much more accessible than other courses, where I continued to struggle. She did however leave after my first year"*), as well as a form of motivation and trust-building ("That allows me to have someone with whom to talk in confidence, with regard to some everyday problems and to feel some more understanding on the part of the institution"*).

Others, however, argue that the presence of disabled teachers did not help them "at all"* or highlight that some disabled teachers may prefer not to identify as such ("This individual teacher also lived with bipolar disorder but did not tell me until years later. He was not open about his diagnosis during studies"). The latter point illustrates the unwillingness of some teachers and students to make their disabled

condition explicit, often out of fear, as we will later explore. It also shows that the presence of disabled staff, despite being an important step, may not be a sufficient condition to drive change, particularly where organisational culture does not acknowledge diversity.

A similar pattern arises when asking current and past students whether any fellow students identify as disabled, d/Deaf, chronically ill or neurodivergent, even if the percentage of those who can identify such peers is higher, at 32% (58% cannot identify any, whereas 10% do not know or cannot remember). Some respondents highlight the positive side of this experience ("One, my friend, she was a huge support cause she got it in a way that others couldn't, even if they tried and wanted to fully understand"), in what could be interpreted as a form of 'access intimacy' or the relationship of mutual understanding that may exist among disabled people.[21] However, there are examples of respondents who did not find this connection with other disabled students ("It didn't really help me"; "There were two of us in my course... The other student was not really a support. She kept repeating we had to feel fortunate we could be there"*).

The stigma and fear of recognising disability and the burden of advocating for change

The loneliness of disabled students has several implications, including the aforementioned emotional toll of having to advocate for change. When asked to what extent having fellow disabled students was helpful, some survey respondents respond with a mixed picture: "We could sympathize and share our frustration about the stress and inaccessibility, but I don't think many of us felt that it would be useful to advocate for themselves and when we did it didn't have much effect and those who took on the burden of being student representatives burnt out."

Such testimonials illustrate not only the barriers to change and the personal impact of the experience, but possibly also a climate of apathy, partly resulting from a sense of rejection and fear. Some interviewees have argued that without a visible internal community advocating for change, momentum is harder to build.

Yet the emergence of a visible internal community is hindered, firstly, because not many disabled people can access the institution and, secondly, because both disabled staff and students (at least those who have a 'hidden' disability) may frequently prefer to conceal their conditions, as noted earlier, due to stigma and fear: "I was diagnosed as neurodivergent aged 3, but was never open about my diagnosis during college. I felt that if I had, it would have hindered my course and my future career prospects. It's only been in the last couple of years that I've been able to be more open with colleagues and only once I've established my career and felt I've already 'proved myself'".

Similar testimonials have been collected in focus groups and interviews, with some professionals explaining how, after years of concealing their disability, physical changes in their bodies meant that passing as non-disabled became more difficult and this, combined with encounters with other disabled professionals, ultimately prompted deeper self-recognition and a new artistic direction. Others have noted that neurodivergent students will often prefer to hide their conditions, at least initially, because of the lack of a safe environment and adequate support tools, both in education and later in accessing the labour market. Some positive initiatives in this field have been discussed, including the DIVA project (Diversity, Inclusion, Visibility in the Arts), an initiative supported by Creative Europe, which sought to foster non-discrimination and inclusion for neurodivergent artists in the performing arts, in the post-pandemic context.[22]

2.4. Knowledge on accessibility and disability arts among teachers

Disabled artists and cultural professionals who had undertaken formal studies in the performing arts were asked to assess the knowledge on accessibility among their teachers and trainers. Less than one in five thought that such knowledge was excellent (8%) or good (10%), whereas almost three in five thought it was poor (34%) or very poor (21%) and others rating it as fair (26%).

The assessment of teachers and trainers' knowledge on disability arts receives even lower marks from graduates, with three out of five respondents seeing it as very poor (28%) or poor (32%). 27% think it was fair and only 13% think it was good or excellent.

Lack of knowledge on the experience of disability and on accessibility needs stands as a major factor impeding change. Although, as the report will also show, higher education institutions are increasingly organising training activities to raise staff awareness on diversity, accessibility and inclusion and there are positive examples in acknowledging disability and adapting to it, this remains a crucial area in which to continue fostering change.

2.5. Impact of access to higher education on skills and subsequent professional careers

A majority of disabled artists and cultural professionals who did not follow a formal higher education in the performing arts thinks that this has had a significant impact on their skills and capacities, but particularly on their professional opportunities

thereafter. While the sample in this case is relatively small, a majority of respondents agree that the most significant impact is in terms of early professional opportunities in the performing arts and networking with professionals, with impact in other areas, like the socioeconomic status, being relevant as well.

Meanwhile, there is less certainty about the impact that not accessing higher education may have in areas like artistic or professional skills, personal development and management skills, where similar numbers of respondents believe that not attending an educational institution may have had a 'strong', 'relative' (i.e., moderate or partial) or 'no impact'. This can be connected to the frequent perception that these skills and capacities may also be accessed through alternative training paths, as opposed to networking and early career opportunities, where access to formal education provides an advantage.

It is interesting to note that professionals working in cultural organisations share the same views of disabled artists on how lack of access to higher arts education may affect the skills, capacities and career opportunities of performing artists and professionals. As Table 2 shows and with a larger sample here, a significant majority of respondents think that not attending an educational institution has a strong impact on early professional opportunities (76.5%), networking with professionals (67.2%) and socioeconomic status (64.6%), with an additional 21% or more suggesting that this has a relative impact. In these fields, only a small fraction of respondents (under 5%) think that there is no impact. Cultural professionals also tend to believe that there is a strong or relative impact in areas like artistic or professional skills, personal development and management skills.

Table 2: Estimated impact of lack of access to higher education on professional opportunities

Responses to the question "In what ways do you think that lack of a formal education may impact on the skills, capacities and opportunities of disabled artists?", by professionals working in performing arts organisations, in percentage.

Area	Strong impact	Relative impact	No impact	n/a
Artistic / Professional skills	49.1%	43.1%	6.9%	0.9%
Personal development	46.1%	45.2%	7.8%	0.9%
Management skills	44.3%	46.1%	6.1%	3.5%
Networking with professionals	67.2%	28.4%	4.3%	-
Early professional opportunities	76.5%	21.7%	1.7%	-
Socioeconomic status	64.6%	32.7%	2.6%	-

Source: Own elaboration, based on survey data (n= 115-116, depending on item)

The experience of former students

Further evidence on this is provided by statements from disabled artists and cultural professionals who *did* attend a higher education institution. When asked how they think that enrolling in such an institution has contributed to their professional careers, responses cover a wide range of areas, including the following:

- **Recognition as professional:** "To be considered more professional"; "It gave me confidence and a 'stamp of approval', as well as connections and pathways into the industry"; "Primarily it has given me a legitimacy."*

- **Technical knowledge and skills**: "I think it has been very helpful in broadening the knowledge of performance art and performance practice"; "I learned almost everything I know in school. I wouldn't be who I am today without it"; "It gave me a solid base of technique that I could apply to my professional

work"; "It made a difference because I was able to turn my skill to different types of styles including contemporary dance. Plus I understood how anatomy and physiology impacted body"; "The performance training I came from gave a strong foundation in devised processes, dramaturgy, contemporary dance, live and performance art. It also centred body politics, which underpinned my routes into queer and crip communities later in life."; "I learned the basics of acting and was able to include this on my artistic CV, which led to residencies and grants."*

- **Enhanced familiarity with the professional world**: "It gave me a set of skills and a rough image of what rehearsals and performances are like, as well as how demanding dancers' life is, due to many hours of training every day"; "Without it, I wouldn't even have considered pursuing this career, especially not in theatre. I certainly wouldn't have made it to the municipal theatres without the training."*

- **Professional networking and early professional opportunities:** "It gave me the knowledge and contacts to establish my career, not as a performer, but as a professional marketing manager and fundraiser. It gave me the confidence to talk to other performers, which sometimes is tricky when performers see you as 'only the marketing manager'... I also had four professional internships as part of my Degree."; "Networks and connections that lead to jobs and work"; "It gave me a way into the business that I don't think I would have found otherwise and sought-after skills and connections"; "It allowed me to sign an early professional contract which was more accessible and sensitive to my needs. We had a salary and could therefore live from our artistic practice and that allowed me to establish a professional network."* "Huge. Degrees are extremely important and so is spending time at university for networking."*

The multiple effects outlined above were also echoed in the discussion held at the ELIA Academy held in Oslo in June 2025, where participants suggested that not entering higher arts education may reduce the ability of disabled artists and cultural professionals to engage in mobility opportunities while studying, identify and access funding opportunities after the studies or be familiar with the history and development of art forms.

At the same time, it is important to note that not all reflections on the contributions made by higher education in the performing arts among disabled professionals are so positive. Often, survey respondents remark that, while they could acquire some knowledge and connections, they still lacked relevant capacities in other fields or significant professional opportunities ("It gave me some theoretical knowledge, not enough to fend for myself as a professional. I skill lack practical skills (e.g. marketing, project management and so on)...") and highlight that, while access to education is important, it may not make up for barriers existing in the professional market ("I learned to act at school, but then there aren't many job opportunities").

Similar reflections were frequently found across survey responses: "Even if school was inclusive the market isn't. There is an enormous problem in [name of country] where companies / associations use people with disability to get financial support, not paying (or paying way less) to artists. Most of them are ruled by able people that expect for us to be able to endure the same physically demanding schedules as a professional dancer, for instance. Give the knowledge to artists with disabilities to start their own productions."

Furthermore, several respondents emphasise the tension between traditional approaches to arts education and their own experience of disability, which is frequently neglected: "On the one hand, yes, I learned basics etc. in formal training. But it was only possible to make it as a professional disabled neurodivergent dancer by taking control of my training and seeking out what I needed when I needed it, i.e., not within the confines of regular formal training". This also leads some respondents to underline the importance of alternative educational models: "[Formal education] represented one learning environment among many others – and it certainly stood on the side of ableist/normative vision while other less formal environments (Association, volunteer based environments) were the places to develop beyond ableism."; "I acquired some knowledge, but I also had to interact with a model with undervalued all informal or non-formal learning"*. The contribution made by alternative training approaches will be further analysed in Section 4.

Reflecting on the experience of higher arts education years later, some respondents highlight the contrast and contradiction between the hardness of the institutional context and the knowledge they acquired ("Even if the institutional part of it was shit the training was excellent and made me develop enormously. Being treated the way they did was so not worth it, but I also cannot say where I would have been today or what kind of dancer and performer I would have been if not") and how they have sought alternative ways of working and living: "It gave me the physical training I needed to enter the field of dance and circus but it also developed a hatred of the artform for all of the struggle and suffering I went through there mentally. I have since seriously slowed down my work and spent a lot more energy working in arts administration than in dance."

In this respect, an overwhelming majority (74.1%) of former graduates think that their professional opportunities would have been broader if the higher education programmes they attended had paid more attention to access and inclusion. 22.4% think this would not have made a difference and the remaining 3.4% does not know. When asked to describe how more attention to access and inclusion would have helped them, several issues are mentioned:

- **Better care of mental health while studying and later:** "If I'd been able to be more openly neurodivergent from a younger age, I think my career would have been similar, but I would not have suffered as much from poor mental health,

burnout etc. My way of coping throughout my 20s was through alcohol abuse, which I understand is common amongst neurodivergent people who are trying to 'fit in'"; "Taking care of a young artist's mental health, regardless of any diagnosis, should be number one priority in such demanding programmes that push young people to their limits."

- **Recognition and development of specific needs and aesthetics related to the experience of disability**: "Learning how to move around varied body types, also realising dance/arts was and is a therapeutic tool and community engagement tool"; "I would have received an education that was more suited to me and my body and I would have benefitted from it in terms of craftsmanship as well as artistic skills."*

- **More professional opportunities, in a more inclusive labour market**: "There would have been more awareness and knowledge and it would have helped to break into mainstream performing arts through creating opportunities…"; "If educational programmes had prioritised access and inclusion, I believe my professional opportunities would have been significantly broader. More inclusive policies would have ensured better support, equal opportunities and access to essential resources, allowing me to develop my skills fully and pursue a wider range of career paths. A more accessible and inclusive education system would not only have removed unnecessary barriers but also fostered a more diverse and equitable professional landscape."; "I would have been able to enter a big school and take part in funded theatre productions, work in a public theatre, etc."*

The latter paragraph in particular serves to highlight the strong connection which is perceived to exist between more inclusive education and the necessity of more inclusive, diverse professional markets and how public policy may be a drive to foster change in both.

Contrasting professional opportunities among those who have and have not attended formal education

Both disabled artists and professionals who had and who had not attended a higher education institution in the performing arts were asked to state in how many performing arts productions or projects they had been involved in their professional careers altogether. As illustrated by Table 3, there appears to be a connection between attending formal education and the strength of subsequent professional opportunities. It is particularly in the categories at each end where most significant differences are to be found: while 29% of non-graduates have had less than five professional opportunities, the percentage goes down to 16% among graduates. At the other end, 49% graduates have taken part in over 15 productions or projects, whereas only 24% non-graduates have achieved this figure.

Table 3: Professional experience among graduate and non-graduate disabled artists and professionals

Responses to the question "In how many different performing arts productions or projects have you been involved in your professional career?", among disabled artists and cultural professionals who attended or did not attend higher arts education, in percentage.

Number of productions	Graduates	Non-graduates
Less than 5	16.4%	28.9%
6-10	25.5%	26.3%
11-15	9.1%	21.0%
More than 15	49.1%	23.7%
Total	**100%**	**100%**

Source: Own elaboration, based on survey data (graduates, n=55; non-graduates, n=38)

This evidence, coupled with information presented elsewhere in this report, suggests that, even though there are other ways of entering the professional performing arts, such as the alternative training routes that will be examined later, higher education institutions remain critical - and only if they become fully accessible will pathways into the professional performing arts be effectively equal for disabled people.

Perception among cultural organisations

Professionals working in performing arts organisations, when surveyed, show an awareness of accessibility problems in higher education institutions and how this impacts negatively on the ability to have a diverse, inclusive performing arts sector in Europe. In particular, only 7% agree with the statement that "In my country, the majority of performing arts education institutions are accessible to disabled students" and less than 1% considers that "In my country all performing arts education institutions are fully accessible".[23] Meanwhile, there is significant agreement with the following statements:

- Depending on impairment, many disabled people have no access to performing arts education institutions (43%)

- Disabled people have no access to performing arts education institutions in my country (42%)

- In my country there are some examples of good practice of accessible performing arts education institutions, but these are rare (42%)

Meanwhile, 26% agree with the statement that 'In my country, access to performing arts education institutions is improving', something that, along with the aforementioned evidence, suggests that, while there is increasing awareness about this situation, at least in some countries, progress remains only partial across Creative Europe countries, despite the fact that at least in EU countries, according to the 2023 Eurostats' estimates, 1 adult out of 4 has a disability.[24]

A majority of performing arts professionals perceive lack of accessibility to higher education institutions in the performing arts as a problem: only 2% argue that 'I don't see this as a problem, because educational institutions in the performing arts are fully accessible in my country' and only 1% thinks that this is not a problem 'because it ultimately has few implications from the perspective of cultural life'. Meanwhile, over half of respondents think this is a problem that should be addressed by the whole cultural sector (75%), by educational institutions (62%) or by public authorities (55%).[25]

Cultural professionals responding to the survey were asked to explain why they thought that lack of access to higher education was problematic. Their answers suggest that lack of adequate training is everyone's loss, because it prevents the performing arts field from being representative of society and being able to present work by disabled artists which contributes to presenting new perspectives, knowledge, aesthetics, methods and techniques: "I'm not aware of any performing arts training institutions in [my country] that have addressed accessibility comprehensively and from multiple perspectives and made it a priority. The disabled artists who present their work with us are almost all self-taught. At the

same time, the number of disabled artists in our programmes is steadily increasing. Some of them lack knowledge or experience, but their work is valuable and influential. They are increasingly looking for disabled production managers, actors and dramaturgs, but there is hardly any training available for this."* Organisations involved in the EBA project have also emphasised that, as mainstream cultural institutions, they have employment opportunities for disabled people but do not find sufficient disabled artists and cultural professionals graduating from higher education institutions in the performing arts, which is everybody's loss.

Some respondents also highlight the specific case of Greece, where legislation prevents disabled people from accessing higher education: "Due to a presidential law of 1983 the disabled people are not allowed to study dance in Greece. The research of Dr Betina Panagiotara through the idance programme on Arts and Disability states the case of Greece clearly"26; "Higher performing arts education in Greece is not accessible to disabled individuals. This leads to the complete silence of disabled voices within artistic education and thus to the professional creative sector. Besides this human rights violation and systemic exclusion, I consider this to be a lost opportunity for the arts in general to include more diverse narratives, update their artistic practices with innovative methodologies, enhance their social relevance and contribute to more democratic and equal societies."

National legislation in Greece used to also exclude disabled people from higher education in theatre, but was overturned in 2017. However, it is argued that much still remains to be done for theatre education to be fully inclusive for disabled people - something that, as this report shows, could apply to most European countries as well. Evidence provided during the elaboration of this report by members of the European Arts & Disability Cluster (ADICLUS) suggests that, while such explicit exclusion does not exist in the legislation of other European countries, lack of effective access to higher education is identified as a challenge by performing arts professionals elsewhere (e.g. according to one contributor, '... it is very important to mention that in Hungary it is unthinkable for a person with a disability to obtain a vocational qualification or a college degree').

When considering how best to address this situation, respondents frequently refer to the need for systemic change, which happens simultaneously in education and in cultural organisations, with support from public authorities and which informs funding priorities and the narratives and stories being addressed in education and presented on stage: "We need solutions which are part of the system, not just grassroots initiatives"; "I think we need to change in a systemic way: together professionals, educational institutions and, above all, public authorities must deal with this problem because lack of professional education in arts for disabled artists means exclusion of them from the professional art field and this means lack of representation of diverse bodies and disability on our stage and on the imaginary of children. This is a big problem." Addressing this requires overcoming the tendency to work in isolation: "In [my country], one of the main challenges in terms of accessibility to cultural institutions that also provide education is

the lack of integrated and synergistic policies. The efforts made in the political, educational and cultural sectors tend to be fragmented and disconnected. These sectors do not engage in coordinated or organic dialogue, making it difficult to envision standardized, nationwide interventions. As a result, the interventions that do occur are often isolated initiatives, frequently driven by individuals or specific organizations rather than systemic, large-scale efforts."

Some respondents underline the critical position of higher education institutions in enabling change, but also that such transformation requires funding and making this a policy priority: "The most important problem is insufficient financing of educational institutions, outdated infrastructure and lack of money for its modernization. Politicians decide on the budgets of these institutions"; "It is important that public authorities establish policies for accessibility and inclusion and that they provide them with resources to support their effective implementation."*

In addition to funding, the availability of adequate information and knowledge is also mentioned: "This requires training for education institutions and their tutors, some are willing but most have no idea where to start accommodation when it comes to delivering an authentic accessible performing arts education to people with disabilities... Funding is needed for this training and the additional access costs required. The cultural sector needs to inform itself of the additional needs required by artists with disabilities to give and achieve their best contribution to the performing arts sector and society."

Some respondents also argue that, because this is a shared responsibility, partnerships are necessary and change, relying on knowledge transfer and progressive adaptation, can only be gradual: "It's one of the biggest challenges in our sector right now. The tricky part is that the solution isn't as straightforward as it seems. We're working on building alliances with educational institutions to explore how dance academies can become more inclusive. However, getting someone with Down syndrome fully integrated into a professional dance academy at academic level is, at this point, truly a bridge too far -especially given how such programmes are currently structured. That's why we're now investigating whether it would be possible to participate in specific modules, creating a kind of part-time situation. This approach could benefit both worlds -making it more realistic while also ensuring that teachers, students and organizations genuinely support the idea. The most important thing is to initiate dialogue, address the issue and make small, tangible steps toward change. Simply talking about it -or pushing for a complete 180-degree change all at once -is not meaningful. It all starts with doing. Together."

On the other hand, a quick overview of the reality across Europe shows that professional organisations in the performing arts give varying levels of importance to artists' educational certificates. Slightly over one half of the respondents to the survey for cultural organisations said that they took educational certificates into

account when recruiting or giving opportunities to professional artists: for 11.4%, certificates are a prerequisite, whereas 44.7% take them into consideration only for some positions and programmes. Meanwhile, the remaining 43.8% said they do not take them into account, some suggesting that "[for us] it's more relevant the professional experience that people bring and other expertise that are not always connected to educational degrees."

Responses given by members of the ADICLUS cluster show marked differences across countries. In some cases, like Cyprus, "most open calls from the Deputy Ministry of Culture require applicants to demonstrate professional status through their CV and educational background. Formal studies in a relevant cultural field are often considered necessary proof of proficiency." Some countries observe differences depending on the nature of the calls. In Romania, for instance, open calls addressed to artists or directors for state institutions require degrees, whereas those launched by private companies or NGOs primarily require expertise in the field. Similarly, in Portugal many calls for permanent positions in cultural organisations demand higher education diplomas - something that is not necessarily a legal requirement in all cases, but rather results from a social or cultural recognition of the value of formal education. This, however, would not apply to the calls for auditions or applications for short term contracts open to artists, where professional experience, rather than educational certificates, remain the more important criteria. Finally, in countries like Sweden work experience tend to be taken into account more than educational certificates, even if the latter may be relevant for some positions, particularly in the academic field.

The implications that addressing lack of access to higher education institutions has for the educational sector, cultural organisations and public authorities and funders and the nature of the systemic change required to this end, will be examined in the next sections of the report.

3

The experience of higher education institutions

Taking into account the range of barriers presented in the previous chapter, this section examines the perspective of higher education institutions. It analyses in particular the range of factors, including legal, policy, financial, architectural, knowledge-based, attitudinal and other aspects that may prevent higher education institutions from being fully accessible to disabled students.

3.1. Accessibility and inclusion in policy documents and its effective implementation

References to accessibility and inclusion in official documents and in legislation

81% of staff in higher education institutions that replied to the survey indicate that their statutes, constitution or objectives mention aspects related to access, inclusion or diversity. In addition, for 80% there are obligations to ensure accessibility and inclusion, as enshrined in national, regional or local legislation or policies.[27]

Respondents provide illustrative evidence of how this is reflected in their official documents, e.g. "Diversity and inclusion are mentioned as key values of the university"; "We have signed a charter of diversity with the other art institutions where we have committed to change"; "The university's mission statement declares equality as a goal"*; and "We have adopted an ethical charter on equality, diversity and against all forms of discrimination."*

While these statements are important, at times they may sound too generic, particularly when not complemented with specific details about their effective application or when no specific reference is made to the specific forms of inequality and discrimination that are considered (e.g. "In principle, the university guarantees access to all students", "The mission statement of the university states: 'We are committed to making the arts accessible for everyone'."

In this respect, it is important to highlight that references in statutes, constitutions and similar documents are frequently complemented with some information on what this implies in practice, e.g. "In the strategic plan it states [that] we will... strengthen an attractive and equal working and study life where different approaches are vital and where co-workers and students are given space for dialogue and reflection; and ensure that the continuous development of [our institution] is enriched by competences that include different perspectives and skills.... At [our institution], everyone should be able to study on equal terms and have the same opportunities to conduct their studies regardless of functional variation. If you as a student have a functional variation that affects your ability to

study, you are entitled to targeted study support."; "Through a Charter on Disability, the School ensures that its training is accessible and adapted to everyone's needs, whatever their disability. The School ensures physical accessibility to its premised for its activities, accessible digital communication on its website and social media and awareness raising among its users and School members."* This includes some institutions that are specifically targeted at disabled students: "[Our institution] is aimed at people with cognitive and/or intellectual disabilities. The entire operation is adapted to make higher artistic education accessible to this target group."*

Likewise, responding institutions provide details on legislation that establishes their commitments to guaranteeing equal opportunities for disabled students, ranging from international law (e.g. UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, European Accessibility Act) to national and regional legislation (e.g. the Disability Equal Action Act -BGG- and the Accessibility Strengthening Act -BFSG- in Germany; the Equality Act 2010, UK; the Legislative Decree 222/2023 in Italy; the Law 2005 on Disability and the strategic guidelines for Higher Schools in Culture provided by the Ministry of Culture in France; or the Higher Education Innovation Act -HIG- in Bavaria and the University Act in Hamburg -HmbHG). Some respondents also warn, however, that "the fact that there is legislation regarding inclusion and accessibility does not guarantee is full implementation on the ground due to multiple factors", which can include the nature of the buildings where education is provided, lack of funding, organisational culture and lack of sufficient information, as this section will further explore.

Perception of the need to enhance accessibility

Despite the large majority of institutions which include objectives related to inclusion and diversity in their official documents or are expected to implement them as a result of existing legislation, most of them also perceive a need to make institutions and activities more accessible. In particular, 86% believe that this remains pending - something which serves to highlight the discrepancy between the awareness to take measures and the legal engagements, on the other hand and the actual practice, on the other. When explaining their answers and identifying existing needs and barriers to increasing accessibility, the following elements are identified:

- **Full accessibility and adaptation of venues:** "We are a government organisation and our spaces, education, events should be accessible to all staff, students and visitors. This does not just involve ensuring our buildings are physically safely accessible (many are not yet) but also providing sign language interpretation, proper signage, safe fire evacuation, information in easy language, quiet spaces etc.". Several respondents highlight in particular the protected nature of some of the venues where higher education institutions are based, particularly because of regulations concerning heritage

buildings: "Some of our buildings are protected and changes to make them more accessible are expensive and difficult to implement."

- **Entrance exams and academic programmes:** "The biggest hurdle is and remains the entrance exam, since physical accessibility can enable access but not guarantee it."*; "We would need to adapt our programmes"*; "... there is a big issue in how our curricula are structured, in favor of abled-bodies (in terms of neurodivergence, it is a bit better)."

- **Provision of support to disabled students**: "If the university is serious about access, all students have the right to study there and to have appropriate assistance for them."

- **Cultural change:** "Our spaces, activities and ideals are still based on a normative and able-bodied understanding of an actor."; "I strongly believe that it is crucial to open up our Academy to people with disabilities. Theatre should genuinely reflect the diversity of society. While there is still much to be done in terms removing architectural barriers and adapting the curriculum, the most persistent obstacles are still the mental ones.... Among both the teaching staff and the students, there are concerns that a person with a disability might hinder the work of others, require more attention or slow down the process. The highly competitive nature of these studies makes some students less open to working alongside peers with disabilities. These beliefs make it difficult to implement any changes, such as adapting the curriculum or creating individual solutions." Some of the interviewees consulted during the drafting of this report echoed these thoughts, pointing to the cultural resistance that frequently exists within higher education institutions, where a deeply rooted belief persists that actors must have 'ideal, fully able bodies', something which can sometimes be observed through some staff's opposition to holding workshops on disability. Discussions at the ELIA Academy held on the 19th June 2025 also referred to 'ableism' as an hegemonic ideology in many institutions, taken as a given, which implies that only some bodies may be qualified to study arts. Finally, some survey respondents also argue that cultural change should occur not only within the institution but also at societal level, including through adequate role models: "It is still very challenging to get potential disabled applicants to apply, mostly for lack of positive models and previous examples."

- **Change in leadership and seeing this as a priority**: "Resistance from those with decision making power and from other members."; "The difficulties the organisation currently faces is helping members of the institution (especially people in positions of power) to realise that they are in fact not an accessible organisation and to prioritise access and inclusion in all areas. I am not just talking about physical access. I also mean creating an inclusive anti-ableist work and study environment."; "From my position, it is hard to push.... Right now we are still too far from it as an institution. Organised a few discussions around the topic of disability but they were never interested in the direction."

- **Lack of knowledge and advice:** "We are thinking how to make our programme more accessible but we are lacking help or reference."; "Within the programmes I work in dance, we would need more teacher resources to provide fully accessible and equal programs and learning outcomes for all disabled students. As teachers we are not given resources or time to make specialized specific alternative training or curriculum in various dance forms for a broad range of disabled students"; "I perceive a great lack of awareness that a dance education is even possible for persons with disabilities."; "The School's administrative staff must be fully trained to welcome disabled students".*

- **Financial support:** "We would need to raise additional financial support to undertake the necessary measures"*; "Of course, financial resources are also a challenge – not only for the necessary infrastructural adjustments but also for running awareness-raising workshops and training programmes, as well as initiating collaborative projects and experience exchanges with other European institutions."

- **More demand:** "The institution will not become accessible until it is forced to. So this requires persons / students for whom… the institution needs to become more accessible space-wise, pedagogically and in its operations. Until that happens the university won't change."

Respondents who do not see a need to improve accessibility in their organisations justify this either because they have been designed to address the needs of disabled students and are already achieving it ("Our school caters specifically for adults with an intellectual disability or any other disability"), because they do not see disabled students as a relevant group, illustrating a very disablist, discriminatory approach ("We do not pursue embracing educating people with diminished function and capacities into the programme that we currently provide for future professional dancers") or because an apparent lack of demand from disabled people has meant they have not considered the issue - in what some of the professionals consulted during the elaboration of this report have termed a 'vicious cycle of exclusion' ("… since we have never received applications, we have not needed to consider the issue"*; "We have few or no disabled applicants"*).

Of course, the latter statements suggest the institutions' communication, application and entry tests may not be very accessible in the first place, something which can be connected with an earlier observation on the fact that only 27% of schools provide accessible information to prospective students and only 41% inform about the accessibility of their institutions on their website. It could be argued that there is a misconception, among some higher education institutions, about the lack of demand from disabled people to access their institutions, which leads to inaction. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that, as also noted earlier, many disabled people could feel that higher education institutions were not accessible or would reject them.

When combined, the set of elements presented in the list above point to the range of measures that are necessary to effectively achieve systemic change - including the full accessibility and adaptation of venues, a revision of entrance exams and academic programmes, the provision of support to disabled students, a cultural change that tackles the roots of discrimination and recognises and embraces diversity, new priorities at leadership and policy level, more knowledge and financial support (which should ideally be reinforced through legislation and policy at national, regional and/or local level). Addressing these aspects within institutions and in their immediate legislative and policy environment, is necessary to make them welcoming institutions for everyone, including disabled people.

Needs among existing students

In addition to the perceived needs outlined above, approximately 38% representatives of higher education institutions have effectively identified accessibility needs among current disabled students in their institutions.

They include the following:

- the improvement of physical accessibility to specific parts of buildings;

- the availability of library resources in accessible languages and formats;

- sign language interpretation;

- the provision of support for students with specific conditions such as dyslexia or ADHD (which had to be provided outside school);

- better signage in the buildings; and

- the adaptation of schedules ("... some novel arrangements, especially with relation to the use of time, could help some students concentrate and work easier (even if they don't identify as disabled, nor have demanded formal individual study arrangements based on neurodiversity.").

In several cases, the needs identified could be addressed, it is suggested, through the availability of additional staff and/or the provision of adequate training and knowledge to existing staff, in addition to the relevant investments in more accessible spaces and communication channels.

3.2. Budget for accessibility and adoption of measures

Budget for accessibility

38% of representatives of higher education institutions that responded to the survey indicate that they do not have a budget for access (e.g. for access needs of students or staff or for training workshops on accessibility), whereas 29% have one. The remaining 33% do not have a dedicated budget but state that they have used other budgetary resources to improve access in the last two years.

When asked about what access improvements have been funded in their institutions in the last two years, the most frequent responses concern the following:

- improved accessibility in buildings ("One building has been made physically accessible in the past two years"; "After much insistence, access ramps, elevators and toilets were installed in the theater building");
- sensory accessibility (e.g. "Funding for BSL [British Sign Language] interpreters during auditions");
- more accessible websites;
- student support ("Direct support for students with special needs");
- specialised consultancy services ("... we hired a specialist to adjust documents, website and prints"; "an accessibility audit of our buildings, both physical and service level");
- staff and student training ("Autism training, accessibility training, New Directions training and Safeguarding Vulnerable Adults"; "... online workshops led by an artist with disabilities have been offered. Following this, a series of lectures on the topic of ableism was curated for students and staff. The acting department also has organized ... a symposium on inclusion"); and
- other measures ("an open day for prospective students with disabilities").

Some respondents indicate that, although a budget for diversity and inclusion exists, it is addressed primarily to other dimensions of diversity, rather than disability access ("The question of diversity in regards to gender and race are more and more present. Accessibility in regards to disability is so far out of the picture").

Dedicated staff

74% of representatives of higher education institutions state that they have one or more staff members in charge of accessibility, inclusion and diversity. When asked to provide further details about the name of this position and its scope, a very diverse landscape emerges, showing - just as in the question concerning objectives established in statutory documents or in existing legislation and policies - a broad understanding of diversity and inclusion, which implies very diverse levels of attention to accessibility and serves to nuance substantially the relatively high percentage emerging from the survey.

Among other situations, the following can be identified:

- No-one is responsible for accessibility, inclusion and diversity: "To my knowledge and experience with the institution, there is no-one in charge or knowledgeable when it comes to accessibility, diversity and inclusion. This has been identified as a problem by a number of students and staff."

- No specific position exists, but issues related to accessibility are dealt with by a service or department with a broad remit of tasks: "Not one specific person, but part of the responsibility of the student office and liaison contact person at each department."

- A position exists, within a broader remit of tasks, frequently related to inclusion and diversity, in what appears to be a relatively common approach: "There is a unit at the university responsible for inclusion"; "In the Office of Gender Equity and Inclusion"; "The person is part of our Health Team"; "Office coordinator of inclusion and gender equality depending on the rector". At least in some cases for which further details are provided, the effective allocation of working time and resources to accessibility may be limited: "The [human resources] responsible has a 2% (!!!) job as reference person for Equality and Diversity"; "Not a full-time position, just a few hours in addition to another job."*

- Focal points or reference persons for accessibility: "There are so-called contact persons: an accessibility contact person and an individual study arrangement specialist"; "There is a person at our research department dealing with the topics of inclusion and gender. This person sometimes organises workshops for the students and partially for employees, too"; "The School's General Manager is also the focal point for disability. She has been trained on the welcoming of disabled students".

- Accessibility coordinators or similar positions: "The name of the position is Accessibility Coordinator. [Their tasks] include, in particular, supporting persons with special needs in accessing services...; preparing and coordinating the implementation of an action plan to improve accessibility for persons with special needs..."; "Representative for students with disabilities and chronic illnesses"*.

- Everyone is responsible, in non-specialised institutions: "Allocation of tasks to all employees in technology, administration and teaching."*

- Everyone is responsible, in the case of education institutions that are specifically catered for disabled people: "All our staff are responsible for accessibility and inclusion".

Where no dedicated staff exists, this may be due to it not being seen as a priority ("I would love to know [why no dedicated position exists]. I have asked but have not received an answer. I assume budget and DEI not being a priority."; "It has not been a priority"; "Not foreseen in the staffing plan"), due to lack of resources ("Lack of financial and human resources"*; "We are very small. So far, this issue has not been allocated to any position. But the topic comes up in a lot of our meetings"*) or because, where a building is not accessible, it is assumed that no disabled students will enrol and no measures in this field need to be adopted ("Our institution does not have the physical conditions to receive people with disabilities. It's an old building that needs to be refurbished").

In some cases, there is also an understanding that everyone is somehow responsible ("We don't have a specific person having this as their responsibility, although it is something we all work with during auditions, in "equal treatment" and in communication and the projects we do"). Finally, some respondents argue that issues related to accessibility and disability do not require a distinctive treatment, which in their view may be perceived as a preferential treatment ("We see each other as different individually but sharing a common goal and striving for excellence. There is no separation or preferential treatment offered or expected on the basis of race, religion, income, class, sexual orientation etc.").

Adoption of accessibility measures

When asked which measures for accessibility they provide, the most frequent responses among higher education institutions include accessible toilets, the possibility for applicants or students to communicate their access needs to teachers and the institution and the existence of a contact person for questions and concerns regarding accessibility. As Figure 1 shows, these are the only types of measures provided by over 50% of the surveyed institutions.

Other measures related to physical accessibility are relatively frequent but do not reach 50%, including step-free access from street to institution, but not to all its spaces (44%) and reserved parking spaces for disabled students or trainers (39%). The same applies to the availability of online information on the accessibility of the institution (41%).

However, despite increasing awareness and potential demand, institutions are frequently not prepared to host disabled students – for instance, only 27% venues are fully step-free, only 31% have established adapted or accessible entry requirements for disabled applicants, only 41% have adapted or accessible entry tests, only 17% have accessible signage and only 37% have accessible changing rooms.

Figure 1: Accessibility measures in higher education institutions

Responses to the question "Which of the following measures does your institution provide?", among staff and representatives of higher education institutions, in percentage.

Above 50%

- Accessible toilets **75%**
- Applicants and/or students have the possibility to communicate their access needs to the teachers and the institution **75%**
- Contact person for questions and concerns regarding accessibility **59%**

35-50%

- Step-free access from street to institution, but not to all its spaces **44%**
- Rest / relaxation room(s) **44%**
- Description of the accessibility of your institution on your website **41%**
- Adapted or accessible entry tests for disabled applicants **41%**
- Reserved parking spaces for disabled students or trainers **39%**
- Accessible changing rooms **37%**

20-35%

- Accessibility workshops and training for staff and faculty **34%**
- Adapted or accessible entry requirements for disabled applicants **31%**
- Information to prospective students in accessible languages and formats (for example Braille, audio versions, Easy-to-Read versions, sign language videos and so on) **27%**
- Step-free access from street to institution, including all its spaces **27%**
- Protocols or guides addressing the needs of disabled students **27%**
- Sign language translation, where needed **27%**

Very infrequent

- Accessible signage **17%**
- Permanent hearing loops to support hearing aid **7%**
- Protocols or guides addressing the needs of disabled trainers **7%**

Source: Own elaboration, based on survey data (n=59)

Overall, evidence presented in Figure 1 contrasts sharply with existing commitments to accessibility and inclusion and points to the need for the type of systemic change described earlier.

3.3. Contents on disability arts, accessibility and diverse aesthetics

According to the survey of higher education institutions, approximately 52% of higher education institutions include content on disability arts, accessibility and diverse aesthetics in their curriculum.

As in the case of dedicated staff described earlier, how this is implemented in practice is variable and illustrates different levels of attention to accessibility and disability. This ranges from dedicated modules or courses ("[A course entitled] 'Accessible Structures, Accessible Art', with contents covering structural barriers and the 'cripping institution', as well as the 'Aesthetics of Access'"*; "There is an optional course entitled "Performing Arts and diverse abilities""*; "Last year we had a course in English on the accessibility of disabled people in theatre, involving disabled actors"*), to the inclusion of some contents in different modules, including some concrete contents ("Disability arts are part of the dance history classes and we have workshops upcoming for visual description in dance for teachers and students"; "Disability and accessibility in the arts are discussed in MA studies") and others that place disability in broader reflections ("Community engagement courses are embedded into each course curriculum").

3.4. Availability of data on accessibility and disability

As already noted, previous research has shown that the absence of data and specialised knowledge in areas related to disability and accessibility is a key barrier to progress in this field.[28] Similarly, the survey shows that higher education institutions have little data in areas such as disabled applicants, graduates and teachers, as well as on how best to address their knowledge needs in this field.

Disabled staff

Only 12% institutions appear to gather statistics on how many staff members identify as disabled, although an additional 33% of respondents do not know if this data exists in their institutions. The remaining 55% say their institution does not collect statistics in this field.

When asked why such data is not gathered, most respondents say they do not know, whereas a significant number also argue that this has never been considered and some point to the existence of legal restrictions in their country.

Disabled applicants and graduates

Only 29% of higher education institutions appear to have data on how many disabled people have applied to their institution in the last five years. This includes some specialised schools ("All applicants have an intellectual disability. We have at the moment 16 students") and non-specialised centres ("The students who have special needs indicate that in their application form"; "This year we have 5 disabled students"). Some respondents point to certain difficulties in this field ("Students who disclose their disability are systematically recorded. However, not all do so. We know of seven"*) and occasionally describe the procedures used to obtain such information ("Data is collected during the admission process"; "In their application form, candidates need to respond to a question on their disability status, which explains the type of support they are entitled to and asks them to indicate which services they need, e.g. adapted entry tests"*).

Respondents whose institutions do not record such data justify this on the basis of legal restrictions ("National guidelines prohibit that data to be part of admission system with the intention to avoid discrimination"; "personal data protection"), the effective absence of disabled students ("I think that a good explanation for this would be that we can only accept students into our programmes that have prior circus arts experience. If there are no measures taken in prep schools, then it is certain that no disabled students would walk in off the street and apply"; "We have not had any disabled student or anyone that has indicated being disabled"*), the lack of resources to collect data, the perception that this has not been a priority for their institution or the fact that cases are identified on an ad-hoc basis, when students signal their disability status. Several respondents also argue they do not know whether such data is collected or this is not part of their professional remit, whereas some believe that filling in the survey has served to raise awareness on this matter ("Thanks to this survey, which contributes to our reflection on this matter, we will explore measures that could be implemented in this field"*).

Similarly to the case of applicants, only 22% of responding institutions appear to have data on how many disabled students have graduated from their institutions in the last five years. Among those institutions that provide such data, some figures are very low (including two institutions that have had no disabled graduates over the past five years and one that had a single disabled graduate).

Knowledge on how to address existing needs

As explained earlier, 86% of higher education institutions say that they perceive a need to make their institutions and activities more accessible and 38% have identified accessibility needs among current disabled students in their institutions. The survey also asked them which support mechanisms they would need to address such needs and whether they knew if such support mechanisms were available to them.

Table 4 presents data from answers to the latest question. As can be observed, most support mechanisms are needed by over 90% of respondents, the exception being "legal requirements to enhance accessibility", which are required by only 82% of respondents. Responses also show, however, that a large proportion of respondents do not know whether the support mechanisms that they would need are available in their country. This includes 71% of respondents who do not know if public funding for accessibility is available, 60% who do not know if trainers with knowledge on performing arts and disability exist, 46% who ignore if training on accessibility is available and 44% who, likewise, are unsure whether networking spaces to exchange on availability measures exist.

Table 4: Accessibility support mechanisms and availability

Responses to the questions "Which of the following support mechanisms could help you address these needs? Are you aware if they are available in your country?", among higher education institutions, in percentage.

Type of support	We don't need it	We need it and it is available for us	We need it and we do not know if it is available
Training on accessibility	9.2%	44.4%	46.3%
Specialised information services / consultancy on accessibility	9.2%	51.8%	38.9%
Legal requirements to enhance accessibility	18.2%	49.0%	32.7%
Public funding for accessibility	9.1%	21.8%	70.9%
Networking spaces to exchange on accessibility measures	7.4%	48.1%	44.4%
Trainers with knowledge on performing arts and disability	5.4%	34.5%	60.0%

Source: Own elaboration, based on survey data (n= 54-55, depending on item)

The fact that needs exist but respondents do not know If support is available may suggest that, for many, accessibility has not been seen as a top priority, even if surveys like this can help in raising awareness. In this respect, some respondents acknowledge that "We have access to most support mechanisms, although perhaps not all of them to the extent needed – especially when it comes to public funding for accessibility. However, the real issue lies more in the mental barriers..., as well as in the time and energy that our community needs to dedicate to working on accessibility" or recognise that they have little knowledge on the issues addressed by the survey: "In answering this questionnaire... I was struck by how little I knew about university policy in this area" and "The questions and topics of the questionnaire alone were very helpful for us as a mirror to get an initial assessment of which measures we are already implementing and which we are not yet considering."

4

Good practice examples and factors to enable change

This chapter focuses on the enabling factors and the practices that can drive change and improve accessibility for disabled people in higher education institutions in the performing arts and which, in so doing, can also broaden professional opportunities for them as artists and cultural professionals. It takes into account the barriers and challenges identified in previous chapters. It also explores alternative paths in education and professional development that disabled people follow in order to access the professional performing arts.

Throughout this chapter, some examples have been highlighted in boxes, as relevant case studies. They serve to illustrate the progress made by some organisations and institutions in becoming more accessible. The choice of examples is made primarily for illustrative purposes, and serves to demonstrate that change and progress are possible, but should also be adapted depending on needs and contexts.

4.1. Alternative training paths

77% of disabled artists and performing arts professionals who answered the survey and had not attended a higher education institution explained that they had later been able to access performing arts training in other institutions or spaces, in the form of short courses, informal training routes and other forms of non-traditional education. Opportunities in this kind may be provided by training centres which are not seen as higher education institutions, by performing arts companies and other cultural organisations (including those that specialise in diversity, equality and inclusion), by cultural or social NGOs, public authorities and other types of organisations. A relevant example are performing arts companies existing in some European countries, including Germany, France or Belgium, which are designed primarily to provide educational and creative practice opportunities for disabled people and which can in some cases perform in professional venues or festivals.

Among respondents who stated they had taken part in this type of activities, slightly over one half had attended education or training activities addressed specifically to disabled people (53%), with the rest enrolling in training activities that were not specific for disabled people (47%).

As mentioned in the introduction of this report, the question remains, of course, as to how many disabled people who did not enrol in a higher education institution or were rejected at the point of entry changed their career course forever and did not consider following an alternative career path. Most likely, they have not been able to respond to the survey disseminated for this report, which was addressed to disabled artists and cultural professionals, nor have they been interviewed in the context of this report.

Assessing the accessibility of alternative training paths

When assessing the accessibility of these alternative training activities, disabled artists and professionals have a more positive view than that of their peers who had attended a higher education institution. As Table 5 shows, alternative training activities get marks above 5 in eight out of nine categories get marks above 5 (only "Examinations and certificates" gets a lower mark), as opposed to only six areas in the case of higher education institutions. In seven categories, the assessment of alternative training paths is above 6, whereas the highest mark obtained by any category in the assessment of higher education institutions is lower than 6 ("Understanding, adaptability and openness by teachers", 5.87). As a result, the average assessment of accessibility in higher education institutions is 5.18, whereas that of alternative training activities is 6.16.

Table 5: Assessment of accessibility of alternative training paths and higher education

Assessment of accessibility in nine different areas, in higher education institutions and in alternative training activities, by former and current students in higher education institutions and former participants in alternative training, on a 0-10 scale.

Area	Assessment of accessibility (0-10)	
	Higher education institutions	Alternative training activities
Entry requirements and expectations	5.48	6.24
Curriculum / teaching methods	5.17	6.84
Understanding, adaptability and openness by teachers	5.87	7.18
Examinations and certificates	5.58	4.25
Timetables (time and break arrangements)	4.94	6.42
Building facilities	4.67	6.09
Communication (for example between staff and students, administrative staff and students and so on)	5.37	6.15
Recognition of diverse aesthetics and bodies (on stage)	5.11	6.90
Support services (for example guidance on further training or professional development opportunities)	4.44	5.34
Average mark	5.18	6.16

Source: Own elaboration, based on survey data (higher education institutions, n= 87; alternative training activities, n=33)

When assessing the marks obtained in each individual category, "Understanding, adaptability and openness by teachers" gets the highest mark in both types of training, although with a higher mark in alternative education (7.18) than in higher education institutions (5.87). The "Recognition of diverse aesthetics and bodies (on stage)" (6.90), "Curriculum / teaching methods" (6.84), "Timetables (time and break arrangements)" (6.42) and "Entry requirements and expectations" (6.24) are seen as particular strengths of alternative training routes.

At the same time, it should be noted that "Support services (for example guidance on further training or professional development opportunities)" (5.34) and "Examinations and certificates" (4.25) receive relatively low assessments in alternative training paths – the former also being low among higher education institutions, the latter being the only category where assessment is lower in alternative paths than in higher education institutions – pointing to a clear and obvious strength of higher education institutions, that is, their ability to provide certificates. This may also be related to the 'stamp of approval', the legitimacy and the recognition as professionals which formal education institutions are able to provide, as discussed in a previous section.

The fact that support services, including guidance on further training or professional development opportunities, receives a low assessment in both cases may point not only to the potential lack of tailored information and support services for disabled people, but also to the weakness of professional paths for disabled artists and the absence of robust labour markets in this field.

Advantages and disadvantages of alternative training paths

The survey for disabled artists and cultural professionals asked those who had not attended a higher education institution but had followed an alternative training instead to what extent this path helped compensate for not attending a formal education institution earlier. The range of views collected provides a good overview of the advantages and disadvantages of these training opportunities:

- **Accessibility of training:** "Without associations such as [the one where I trained] it would have been impossible for me to train, as dance schools in [my country] are not ready to admit disabled people."*

- **A more humane approach, which recognises diversity**: "[Accessing this training] has fully compensated me, through the humane treatment I've been given, as well as all the learning I've acquired"*; "Personally, alternative training has been a place to explore my own bodily possibilities. My training in contemporary dance and contact improvisation over the past 13 years has allowed me today to have a better understanding of techniques but also of my own abilities, preferences, ambitions, without feeling assessed. That's what I like about the informal, we are not evaluated or compared. Everyone takes

what they have to take and does what they can. And it's a mode of training that has reconciled me with failure, small victories an the collective goodwill of the group in the evolution of each one!"*

- **Development of skills and networks and the ability to develop one's potential**: "Through alternative training opportunities such as workshops, I was able to acquire practical skills and engage with national and international artists"*; "I learned my trade and a certain amount of perseverance"*; "All the training at [name of organisation] has really helped me to achieve what I wanted to do in the future."

- **The opportunity of working with peers:** "Training in integrated practices in England... has been crucial in my feeling of legitimacy as a dancer, because in those places I learned about me, but I was also surrounded by other disabled dancers and I felt less lonely and these were places where my accessibility needs were taken into account – whereas it is usually me who needs to adapt and very often I'm the only self-declared disabled person."* Some interviewees concurred that meeting disabled peers was an essential part of their 'coming out' journey and that this was made possible by alternative training programmes: "My first coming out as a disabled person was when I met this company based in Switzerland, BewegGrund.... This was the first time I also met other crip and spoonie bodies, even if at that time I was still struggling with my identity as an invisible crip."

- **Lack of a formal degree:** "To a large extent, I'm a practitioner and have learned so much from practice that I wouldn't learn from theory. But of course, it would have been nice to have a degree in dance, to formalize my training and experience."

- **Lack of networks and more limited professional development opportunities**: "Personally I feel like I have a lot of competence, openness and new ways of thinking after attending alternative training, however I lack the network, credibility and formal technique training"; "I think that they didn't really help me and I didn't have the professional development in the arts that I would have liked to have."

- **Underfinanced opportunities**: "Rarely paid opportunities."

- **Instability and uncertainty:** "It was called studio, we were part of the theatre, but it was always just a project. There was funding. But it was always uncertain, if it would still be funded, if it would continue to be part of this theatre. It is always this, you don't really know, will the studio still exist, will there be a second group of students who will be able to get their education or not? So it is always very much up in the air" (taken from a focus group).

The range of quotes presented here serves to illustrate not only the set of advantages and disadvantages that alternative training opportunities may provide, but also the fact that this umbrella term includes a broad spectrum of

organisations, training formats, methodologies and positions with respect to the professional market – ranging from professional or quasi-professional companies that provide practical training as part of a path towards professionalisation, to organisations that support disabled people in their everyday lives and include a set of educational and training activities within their offer of services. A closer analysis of this set of models lies out of the scope of this report.

At the same time, the evidence collected suggests that, overall, less formal training paths are better placed to recognise and adapt to the needs of disabled people and frequently provide more humane environments, in which disabled people can acquire skills and feel safe. At the same time, it remains important to call formal education institutions to take steps towards accessibility, for they remain essential in a truly inclusive and diverse cultural life.[29] Indeed, for several reasons, including equity in accessing education and training, affordability and the recognition of diverse stories and aesthetics, accessibility to higher education institutions in the performing arts remains critical. Therefore, the availability of alternative training routes should not be seen as a pretext to justify inaction by higher education institutions or the public authorities which fund them.

In some cases, alternative training spaces can also be a bridge towards more formal learning programmes, particularly when the latter are open to recognising the value of informal training and some form of partnership or collaboration can be established with them, as the case below illustrates.

The **Foundation Course in Dance for Disabled Students** was one of the first dance programmes aimed at disabled students. It was run by the Candoco Dance Company in London, United Kingdom, from 2004 to 2007. The Foundation Course in Dance was a pioneering initiative designed to prepare disabled students for conservatoire or degree programme training. For a couple of students on the programme, this was the case; meanwhile, others went on to pursue their own practices. The programme was developed in recognition of the fact that many disabled students did not have equal access to provision as their non-disabled peers, which made it much harder for them to get into degree programmes.

The Foundation Course in Dance offered a one-year, full-time dance course for around eight disabled students at a time, with training and provisions designed for them individually.

Central was the quiet but constant presence of the Dance Support Specialists (DSS) on the course. In addition to the tutors and course leader, who were focussing on the whole class, there was one DSS for every two students focussing on specific developments for each. The DSS were individuals who were trained in dance and performance and worked one-to-one with students. They were keen to support the development and progression of each student. The DSS were there to support learning and training, be alongside and in the room as needed. They were also present if students were absent. This meant that when students needed to rest, the DSS would gather information for them and relay it back to them later. This mechanism allowed the training to respond to the ebb and flow of different 'bodyminds' and created space for absence.[30]

Creating space for absence could also be a central aspect when making higher performing arts education more accessible. Creating space for absence means releasing students who need to be absent due to needing rest from the responsibility of catching up alone and providing them with equity of information.

4.2. Drivers of change in the transformation of higher education institutions

Evidence gathered during the elaboration of this report also shows that several higher education institutions in the performing arts have progressively taken measures in a range of fields to become more accessible to disabled students and to integrate aspects related to diversity, equality and inclusion in how they conceive their mission and design their programmes. Some references in this direction have already been presented in chapters 2 and 3 (e.g. when describing how some disabled students had been asked about their access needs or how some higher education institutions had adopted measures to become more accessible). This section further examines the factors that may drive such changes.

Flexible approaches to enrolling and learning

Some disabled artists and professionals interviewed during the elaboration of this report have described their experience of attending higher education institutions that were able to adapt their programmes to the needs of disabled students. This includes cases of institutions that did not have disabled staff and had not fully embraced accessibility, but were however able to provide an environment of experimentation and creative freedom, where formats and methodologies could be adapted to suit specific needs – e.g. by allowing remote presentations when students could not attend in person, not penalising absences, etc.

A good example of how higher education institutions can progressively take measures to become more flexible, in areas like entry tests and enrolment, is provided by the Théâtre national de Bretagne, in Rennes, France, as illustrated below.

The **Tnb (*Théâtre national de Bretagne*) school in Rennes, France**, created in 1991, is one of the 12 drama schools and among the 5 to be integrated into a national theatre in France. Each three-year cohort of students includes around 20 people. Particularly since 2018 and the enrolling system based on an open competition, it has worked on making the overall process more accessible including for disabled people. As stated in their competition's regulation in 2024 for instance: 'The School offers support to disabled candidates. This support can take different forms depending on the nature of the disability: technical or human assistance, adjustments to the duration of the exam, etc. Any candidate wishing to benefit from this support can request it during the administrative registration phase'. This has for instance led to the recording of the texts to be worked on for the second phase of the competition (recording made by the students), technical support during the presentation, support for travel and accommodation for the third phase of the competition etc. For the competition in 2021, there were 1362 valid applications and among them 21 with people willing to share a specific disability, in 2024, among the 1,551 applications, 35 persons were willing to share a specific disability and 13 requested a specific support (against none in 2021). As Ronan Martin, Director of Studies at the Tnb School, mentioned, thinking in terms of inclusion does not necessarily mean thinking in terms of time. It is not a particular disability that generates time, but if we choose to make our project more accessible, we need to work on all aspects of quality for everyone and provide space for people to express their needs. This approach is worked on throughout the whole curriculum with two disabled students (including one whose disability started at the beginning of their study in the school) and one for the latest cohort (2024-2027).

The role of leadership

Research has also emphasised the importance of leadership within higher education institutions in establishing accessibility and inclusion as a goal and fostering its effective integration across the organisation. Leadership can be instrumental, for instance, in making decisions about funding priorities, determining in which areas resources will be allocated and how programmes will be designed.

The example of the **Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art, in Warsaw, Poland** is relevant even if the process of change takes time. Also part of the EBA editorial committee, Agata Adamiecka-Sitek is a theatre researcher, critic and publisher who teaches primarily in the Department of Theatre Studies at the Academy. She initiated and, together with a dedicated team, led the institutional transformation at the Academy in response to #MeToo, serving as the first-ever Student Rights Ombudsperson and subsequently actively supported initiatives aimed at improving accessibility. Adamiecka-Sitek highlighted the importance of embedding accessibility structurally within the institution. This included appointing a Representative of the Rector for Accessibility. This clearly defined role made an identifiable person responsible for supporting students and staff with disabilities or additional needs. Introducing a formal procedure for declaring needs, whether temporary or long-term has allowed students to confidentially request accommodations and has facilitated negotiation with teachers and other staff. These measures have helped move accessibility from an informal concern based on individual staff members' discretion to an institutional responsibility. It has also allowed for tailored, case-by-case responses while signalling to current and prospective students that the institution takes inclusion and accessibility seriously.

A significant step can also be taken when disabled people take part in the governance of higher education institutions, e.g. as directors or as part of leadership committees or advisory bodies.

Disabled staff members

The presence of disabled people in an institution, both as teaching and as administrative staff, provides better understanding of the reality and needs of disabled people and of the means necessary to address them. It can also serve to present a more diverse organisation to the outside world and to provide role models which encourage disabled young people and students to apply for entry and feel more legitimate in pursuing a career in the arts. Disabled teachers serve to show students that there are many ways to be an artist and to have a practice and a career.

The example of the **BA Performance for Deaf and Hard of Hearing actors at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland** is in this sense very informative even if focused on a small group of students (average of 8 per cohort). The story of the deaf theatre degree programme at the Academy began in the early 2010s when the CEO of Solar Bear, a local deaf youth theatre company, noticed a lack of vocationally trained deaf actors and contacted the college's vice principal. They conducted research, including international consultations in Sweden and Moscow, to develop a two-stranded approach for the degree programme, which was designed to train students to be actors and makers of new work. The programme initially started with evening classes to test course content before fully developing into a formal degree programme. The course, focused on deaf and hard-of-hearing actors, was validated in 2015 and has since trained 8 students per cohort every three years. The course, which has now begun its fourth cohort, has evolved to train students as versatile performers across multiple disciplines including acting, theatre making, film and BSL consulting. As noted by Mark Stevenson, Interim Head, Lecturer in Acting: "The programme maintains strong industry connections and has a history of welcoming professionals to work with students, with the current head of the programme emphasizing the importance of training both students and industry professionals (....) The programme employs a mix of deaf and hearing staff, with about half the core teaching team being deaf and maintains strong connections with graduates who often return for guest teaching. The programme collaborates extensively with other Conservatoire departments, including musical theatre, film and production students and has successfully trained stage managers in sign language, which enhances their employability".

In line with this example and as highlighted by some participants in the focus and feedback groups, engaging disabled people as staff requires higher education institutions being open to recognising other forms of qualifications, besides the traditional ones: "We don't have them (disabled teachers). We don't find them. There is no education to educate them. How can they become teachers? I don't know how to get out of this vicious circle, unless schools are willing to accept a qualification that is not the one teachers usually have." Such alternative pathways should be seen not only as the results of inaccessibility in formal institutions, but also as sources of innovation. As this report has also shown, such training routes often develop skills that are not included and appreciated by the formal curricula but which can enable different approaches to the arts.

Establishing partnerships with specialised organisations

The *Time to Act* reports showed how, for many performing arts venues, festivals and other organisations, partnerships with organisations specialising in the field of accessibility were frequently critical in order to access knowledge and respond to the needs of disabled artists and audiences. Similarly, higher education institutions can rely on resources and advocacy organisations in the field of disability and accessibility the key to transform themselves. Depending on the case, such partnerships can lead to staff training activities, accessibility audits, specialised advice to increase accessibility, regular advice and mentoring, etc.

A relevant example is with the abovementioned **Tnb School**, whose learning environment in Brittany was facilitated with the Catalyse company created in 1994 after ten years of amateur creative practice. The artistic team composed of 7 disabled artists and actors is fully associated with the development of the CNCA- Centre National de Création Artistique recognised by the French Ministry of Culture since 2021, under the direction of Thierry Seguin. Each of the students' cohorts (3 since 2018) is associated with a curriculum-long project with the actors of Catalyse / CNCA either through an artistic creation or creative labs. This programme is called '*Effractions*' (Breaks-in) articulated around a shared stage or joint artistic residency between the artists of the company and the students, which subsequently help to work on the diversity of aesthetics, bodies and representations on stage.

Recognising diverse aesthetics and ways of being an artist, as an asset

Some interviewees have emphasised the importance of recognising the lived experience, expertise and knowledge of disabled people as a valid way being and living, which can inform creative practices and should be recognised and seen as a legitimate narrative in higher education. This goes beyond adapting nondisabled mainstream education to the needs of disabled people and involves a more systemic change, which places diverse experience as central to the process of expression and learning.

Furthermore, it involves understanding that the coexistence of diverse perspectives or backgrounds within a learning space can be innovative and enriching for everyone, as they would be able to access more diverse aesthetics, processes of learning, etc. Conversely, the lack of such diversity in education and on stage limits the experience of all students and of audiences.

Legal, policy and funding priorities

The range of factors of change identified in this section can be facilitated when public authorities in charge of education and culture, as well as other funders intervening in this field, see accessibility and inclusion as priorities in their policies and programmes. As earlier sections of this report have suggested, several of the needs identified by higher education institutions, students and artists, including physical accessibility, understanding and adaptation to disabled students' needs, etc. require adequate financial and human resources. Both in the case of higher education institutions and in the broader cultural sector, countries where accessibility and inclusion of disabled people have been set as priorities have been able to make more progress than where this has not happened.

In general, the legal framework helped for changes to happen like in Cork with the example of **MTU Cork School of Music,** which is part of Munster Technological University (MTU), a public technological university consisting of six campuses located in Cork and Kerry. MTU Cork School of Music offers undergraduate programmes in Music, Musical Theatre, Popular Music, The Disability Support Service (DSS) at MTU is well-established and exists in the context of an Irish national legal framework that aims to improve the participation of people with disabilities in society. The Disability Act 2005, part of Ireland's National Disability Strategy, introduced legal obligations for public bodies to, for example, make their services and buildings accessible and provide assessments of need and individual service statements for people with disabilities. The Act was the first legal instrument to lay down structured, enforceable responsibilities, though it has been criticised as limited and under-implemented. However, accessibility systems should be reviewed regularly to identify and remove unintended burdens placed on disabled students. These reviews should be ongoing and responsive to student feedback.

For example, requiring students to share their own needs assessment documents with staff can create a significant barrier to support, especially for autistic or neurodivergent students who may find disclosure a difficult process to carry out. On this point, MTU is shifting to a consent-based, centralised system where support information is securely accessible to relevant staff with the permission of the student, removing the burden on the student to navigate the complex communication task.

Obstacles to change and inclusion can be numerous, when the legal framework conflicts with the particular needs of disabled students, like in the case of the **Evora University, Portugal** where the main building is a preserved UNESCO historical building and funding is limited. Yet, it was possible to build an elevator and ramps. There is also a strong connection with the students' office that provides psychological help, wellbeing and support to mental health. They have developed their own mission statement and have specific lines of actions with regards to disabilities. One of the vice-rectors is responsible for accessibility, infrastructure, health and wellbeing. There is a strategic plan that determines accessibility priorities among other ones. In this process, as noted by Ana Telles, former Dean of the School of Arts, what is important is to start to talk with other organisations at various levels (including at European level, with the ELIA network, among other stakeholders). 'We started to talk with other organisations and were able to reverse the issue: instead of saying that we cannot accept students with disabilities, we started to look at: how can we accept them? What do we need to do in order to accept people who have any types of disabilities? Even if you have problems as we all do, the idea is not to close your eyes and look away'.

This is also in line with what the **Tnb school** has been following while developing a 'Charte éthique' (ethical charter) where the question of disabilities is embedded with other key values such as diversity, (sexual) harassment, etc. and whose levels of advancement is regularly assessed. It seems as well important to ask for policy changes that act at all levels of the value chain from education to creation, programmation and dissemination in order for the schools not to act as a sort of bandage in the career of the artists. In that sense, the July 2025's declaration by French Minister of Culture, Rachida Dati seem to echo some of the recommendations of the sector including from the CNCA, while being articulated around 4 main points of action:

1) Spreading of the 'Effractions' programme to support artistic training in the higher education system for schools (on a voluntary basis), 2) Creation of a new role 'nouveaux accompagnements' or new support persons to accompany artists with disabilities in their daily lives, 3) Set up of a network for inclusive stages to support the programmation of artistic works by and/or with disabled artists and 4) A new toolkit for disabled artists including on their rights and way to facilitate their professional trajectories.

Sufficient financial and human resources' means should be allocated for changes to happen, coupled with the needs to better connect policies in different departments (culture, education, social affairs etc.)

5

Recommendations

Based on the evidence presented throughout the report, this final section presents a set of recommendations to public authorities, higher education institutions and cultural organisations.

5.1. National, regional and local authorities, in their cultural and educational policies, should:

- Make accessibility a priority in higher education in the performing arts and provide the necessary investment for higher education institutions to be truly inclusive;

- Revise any legislation and regulations that prevent universal access to higher education institutions in the performing arts, including on disability grounds;

- Establish programmes and funding schemes that enable a transition towards full accessibility, in the form of training, information and other support mechanisms;

- Recognise diversity of valid training pathways and provide support to organisations providing informal training, particularly where no valid higher education paths exist;

- Support partnerships between higher education institutions, non formal training providers and cultural organisations which enable initial access to the professional market for disabled artists and cultural professionals;

- Support cross-border, European exchanges, which are critical to ensure peer learning and sustain change.

5.2. Higher education institutions in the performing arts should, in relation with the different points below, adopt the following measures in a progressive, step-by-step and contextualised way:

Audits and data:

- Conduct accessibility audits, addressing all relevant areas covered by this report;

- Collect data (e.g. on disabled students, graduates, members of staff, etc.).

Strategic orientations and measures:

- Develop accessibility strategies and/or action plans and allocate responsibility to specific teams within the organisation, providing them with adequate resources to implement adequate measures;

- Take measures to adapt entry tests, making them accessible and ensuring that information about them is accessible and properly communicated to disabled people;

- Engage in collaboration at all levels, including local, national, European and international cooperation and networking, to take advantage of existing knowledge.

Entry process and curriculum developments:

- Inform possible applicants about the level of accessibility of institutions;

- Adapt and increase flexibility in curricula and methodologies;

- Adapt timetables to allow for more breaks and greater flexibility in response to the varying needs and the fluctuating conditions, of different bodyminds;

- Include contents related to accessibility and disability in the curriculum.

Work with a diverse set of professionals:

- Consider hiring dedicated staff to focus on accessibility, inclusion and diversity (e.g. an access manager or access coordinator);

- Identify opportunities to recruit disabled people as staff members, including as lecturers and admin staff, recognising their diverse expertise and their ability to bring other qualifications besides the conventional ones and create accessible working environments for them;

- Never underestimate the importance of consultation with people with the lived experience of disability, including disabled artists, when adopting measures;

- Involve disabled people in governance spaces;

- Foster internal training and awareness about accessibility and disability, among all staff, including lecturers, trainers, administrative staff and juries involved in entry tests;

- Establish partnerships with organisations that represent disabled people or have expertise in disability and accessibility.

Work on continuous improvements:

- Ensure that disabled students are consulted about their needs and that they are not the ones who have to adapt to non-accessible structures;

- Provide opportunities for feedback regarding the accessibility of institutions (e.g. meetings between disabled students and staff, dedicated mailboxes, etc.) and accept the value of feedback received;

- Regularly share and communicate about the advancements made.

5.3. Cultural organisations, including performing arts venues, companies and events, should:

- Conduct analyses of accessibility and inclusion of disabled perspectives in their organisations, including in terms of the artists programmed, etc.;

- Seek partnerships with higher education institutions to work together in areas related to accessibility, inclusion and diversity;

- Seek partnerships with organisations or collectives representing disabled artists or with individual disabled artists;

- Voice their concerns regarding the lack of disabled representation and its impact in terms of artistic development and of missed employment opportunities for disabled people, when interacting with higher education institutions.

5.4. EU institutions (notably, Parliament and Commission) should:

In line with the signing and ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities by EU Member-States:

- Strengthen key sectoral values related to diversity, inclusion and accessibility as part of policy frameworks, such as the upcoming Culture Compass and within the scope of devising the AgoraEU programme and Erasmus+ under the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for the period 2028-2034;

- Promote stronger support for the participation of disabled artists and cultural professionals throughout the entire value chain, starting with higher education in the performing arts and the wider arts and cultural sector;

- Encourage the exchange of best practices in Creative Europe countries with regard to a more accessible entry process and overall curriculum in higher performing arts education institutions, for instance through OMC working groups;

- Make accessible education a priority theme in Erasmus+ for the period 2028-2034, including higher education in the arts as an area of focus;

- Support a stronger focus on disabled artists and cultural professionals in discussions on a reference framework for fairer working conditions for artists and cultural professionals, and while highlighting the importance of attending performing arts education institutions to facilitate entry and networking opportunities into the professional world;

- Include the ADICLUS (the European Arts and Disability Cluster) in stakeholder consultations, recognising that the breadth of its membership (more than 40 members in over 20 countries) means ADICLUS has a broad and unique expertise on artists and cultural professionals with disabilities.

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Annex 2 : List of persons interviewed

Interviews with arts education institutions' representatives:

Agata Adamiecka-Sitek, Professor and researcher at the National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw, Poland

Ana Telles, Vice-rector for Culture and Community, School of the Arts, University of Évora, Portugal (ELIA member, also part of the ELIA academy roundtable discussion in Oslo on 19 June 2025)

Deirdre Collins, Head of Department (Pop, Jazz, Trad, Voice and Theatre Studies), MTU Cork School of Music & **Julie O'Donovan**, Disability Transition Programme Coordinator, MTU's Disability Support Services, Ireland (ELIA member)

Dr. Anna Luise Kiss, Artistic director, Hochschule für Schauspielkunst, Ernst Busch Berlin, Germany

Luke Pell, Research associate with Claire Cunningham at the Inter-University Centre for Dance Berlin (HZT) in Berlin, Germany

Mark Stevenson, Interim Head, Lecturer in Acting, BA Performance, Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

Max Greyson, Researcher, Antwerp Royal Conservatoire, Belgium

Ronan Martin, Director of Theatre Studies, Tnb School, Rennes, France

Interviews and/or focus groups with artists / former students in formal on non-formal education organisations:

Alice Giuliani, Italian dancer and performer based in Brussels, Belgium

Angela Bettoni, Performer, writer and disability rights advocate, Malta

Demy Papathanasiou, Choreographer, Greece (also part of the ELIA academy roundtable discussion in Oslo on 19 June 2025)

Ines Guerreiro Goncalves, Graduate / theatre artist, Portugal

Fia/Sophia Neises, Freelance performer, choreographer, theater educator (MA University of the Arts Berlin) and disability rights activist, Germany

Yulia Yáñez Schmidt, Actress, Germany

Online feedback groups based on the results with the survey, on 3rd or 5 September 2025:

Angela Müller-Giannetti, Director, EUCREA, Germany

Anna Emilsson, Operations / artistic director, Språng, Sweden

Carolina Mano Marques, Direction Assistant & European Projects at Culturgest - Fundação CGD, Portugal

Maka Chkhaidze, Curator / art manager, Georgia and translator in Georgian of the On the Move's publication, *Cultural Mobility Flows – The International Mobility of Disabled Artists and Culture Professionals*[31].

Maria Dragatakis, Project Coordinator, THEAMA – Theatre for the Disabled, Greece

Sonja Parmentier, Dance Professional, Activist, co-founder PodiumINC, The Netherlands

The researchers wish to thank the 10 participants of the ELIA academy roundtable session in Oslo on 19 June 2025[32] that commented on the results of the survey presented by Sophie Dowden, as well as Maria Hansen, Executive Director of the ELIA network.

Annex 3: List of the EBA's editorial committee members

Chair:

Lorena Martinez Mier, Consortium Project Manager, Europe Beyond Access. Mexico, Sweden.

Members:

Ben Evans, Project Director, Europe Beyond Access. United Kingdom.

Mira Helenius, CEO and Artistic Director, Skånes Dansteater. Finland, Sweden.

Betina Panagiotara, Dance theorist and dramaturg. Greece.

Aristide Rontini, Performer, choreographer, advocate and consultant in art and disability. Italy.

Ian Thomas, Head of Arts Research and Insights, British Council. United Kingdom.

Birgit Berndt, Artistic Director & CEO, CODA Oslo International Dance Festival. Norway.

Cecilia Roos, Dancer, researcher and Professor, Stockholm University of the Arts. Sweden.

Christina Liata, Curator and cultural manager. Greece

Agata Adamiecka-Sitek, Professor and researcher, Aleksander Zelwerowicz Theatre Academy. Poland.

Annex 4: Researchers' biographies

Jordi Baltà Portolés works as a freelance consultant, researcher and trainer in cultural policy, sustainability and international cultural relations. His areas of interest include cultural diversity, local cultural policy, cultural rights and the relationship between culture and sustainability. He was part of the research team for the *Time to Act* and *Time to Act: Two Years On* reports, conducted during the first phase of Europe Beyond Access. Jordi is an advisor on culture and sustainable cities at the Committee on Culture of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), a member of the UNESCO Expert Facility for the implementation of the 2005 Convention on the Diversity of Cultural Expressions and regularly works with other organisations, including Trànsit Projectes and On the Move. He teaches at the MA in Cultural Management of the Open University of Catalonia (UOC) and Universitat de Girona (UdG) and at other graduate and postgraduate programmes. He holds a PhD from the universities of Girona and Melbourne.

Konrad Wolf works as a consultant, lecturer, curator and director in the performing arts, with a focus on accessible, anti-ableist working practices. From 2014 to 2018, he studied directing at the Mozarteum University in Salzburg. From 2020 to 2023, he worked as an acting lecturer at the Inclusive Drama Studio at Wuppertaler Bühnen. In 2023, he was a guest professor at the Ernst Busch University of Theatre Arts in Berlin and curated the programme 'Inclusion in the Teaching of Theatre Arts', which aimed to sensitise faculty members for accessible and anti-ableist teaching practices. In 2024, Konrad Wolf curated the NO LIMITS Festival's symposium 'Cripping Leadership', which investigated the challenges and potentials of disabled-led structures. Since April 2025, he has worked as a consultant for 'Access Maker – Innovation Hub' by Un-Label, a Germany-wide training and advisory programme promoting inclusion and accessibility in the arts and culture sector.

Sophie Dowden is a freelance consultant for European cultural projects and policy, with two main focuses: DEI&B (diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging) and mental health. She works with several European cultural networks and national and regional cultural organisations on these topics. Her expertise lies in project management, facilitating processes, policy development and workshops, as well as contributing to research and reports. She currently manages two Creative Europe projects: the SWAN project and Choral TIES. She has worked as project manager at the European Choral Association, as policy officer at Culture Action Europe, as well as with the Council of Europe on resources for the European Heritage Strategy for the 21st Century. Sophie also led on the inclusion topic in the SHIFT project, developing resources for implementing inclusion in cultural organisations in the frame of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

Coordination by **Marie Le Sourd,** Secretary general of On the Move, the international cultural mobility information network.

Endnotes

1   The word 'disabled' is used in this report to include, but not be limited to, people who define themselves as d/Deaf, disabled, neurodivergent, chronically ill, visually impaired / b/Blind or who live with a mobility impairment or a learning / intellectual disability. This research acknowledges the existence of several terms in the field of disability and accessibility, which are often used differently according to cultural, national and political contexts. As in the case of the previous Time to Act reports, the research uses primarily the terms 'disabled artists' and 'disabled people' as equivalent to 'artists with disabilities' and 'people with disabilities'. Other terms may be used in accordance with the terminology used by interviewees or drawn from other sources.

2   See, in particular, Floch, Y.; and Baltà Portolés, J. (2021), Time to Act: How lack of knowledge in the cultural sector creates barriers for disabled artists and audiences. British Council / EBA, available at www.europebeyondaccess.com/resources/time-to-act-final-results and Baltà Portolés, J. (2023), Time to Act: Two Years On. Data-led insights on Performing Arts & Disability in Europe. British Council / EBA, available at https://www.europebeyondaccess.com/resources/time-to-act-two-years-on-data-led-insights-on-performing-arts-and-disability-in-europe

3   Floch and Baltà Portolés (2021).

4   Countries participating in the Creative Europe include, at the time of publishing, the 27 Member States of the EU, as well as Iceland, Norway, Liechtenstein, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Ukraine, Armenia and Tunisia.

5   'Alternative paths' may include training centres in the performing arts that do not qualify as higher education institutions; practical training provided by performing arts organisations, including disabled-led or integrated companies; short courses, seminars, etc.

6   UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-persons-disabilities. The Article 30: Article 30 emphasises that "States Parties shall take appropriate measures to enable persons with disabilities to have the opportunity to develop and utilise their creative, artistic and intellectual potential, not only for their own benefit, but also for the enrichment of society.' https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/disability/united-nations-convention-rights-persons-disabilities_en

7 'For the EU, the convention entered into force on 22 January 2011. All EU Member States have signed and ratified the convention. This means that every EU country must protect the rights of persons with disabilities'. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/poli-cies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/disability/united-nations-conven-tion-rights-persons-disabilities_en

8 The list of editorial committee members is presented in the Annex 3.

9 The lack of suitable censuses of organisations covered by the research (e.g. the number of higher education institutions in the performing arts in Creative Europe countries) and the open nature of the dissemination channels used make it impossible to estimate the surveys' response rate. ELIA's network is introduced via this weblink: https://elia-artschools.org/page/AboutUS

10 https://elia-artschools.org/page/ELIAAcademy2025

11 Since multiple options were possible (i.e., one respondent could identify simultaneously as 'disabled person / Person with disabilities', 'with mobil-ity impairment' and 'neurodivergent', for instance) the total sum of per-centages is higher than 100%. This is also valid for other surveys.

12 The term 'dance' was included as an option in the survey and chosen by 45.3% of respondents but, given that multiple options were possible, it is likely that it was chosen both by dancers and choreographers, which renders the identification of dancers difficult. Similarly, 'performance' was given as an option and chosen by 49.6% of respondents, who may in-clude both performers and professionals in the field of performance.

13 See e.g. Panagiotara, B. (2018), Dance & Disability: A research on in-clusive dance education & training in Greece, Netherlands, Sweden & the UK. iDance, available at http://www.idancenetwork.eu/activities/dance-disability; Fischer, D. (2016), Other Abilities, Evolving Aesthet-ics? Report from the IETM Valencia Plenary Meeting, 3-6 November 2016. IETM, available at https://www.ietm.org/en/resources/reports/oth-er-abilities-evolving-aesthetics; Marsh, K., & Burrows, J. (eds.) (2017), Permission to Stare: Arts and Disability. IETM, available at https://www.ietm.org/en/node/7424; and Aujla, I.; Petts, L.; & Marsh, K. (2025), Bar-riers to Progression and Employment in Dance for Disabled People. The Working Group, available at https://www.beyondbarriersindance.info/re-ports-and-resources

14 It seems likely that the percentage of disabled artists and cultural pro-fessionals who have not attended a higher education institution across

Creative Europe countries is higher than what these figures appear to suggest. Furthermore, as noted earlier, it is certain that many disabled people who did not manage to enrol in a formal institution were discouraged from pursuing a career in the arts and will not have been able to respond to this survey. At the same time, it is worth noting that a quick survey of 30 disabled artists participating in EBA activities conducted in August 2025 found that 67% had attended a higher education institution and 33% had not - figures thus resembling those of the survey conducted for this research (where former and current students also total 67%). It could be argued, however, that artists participating in EBA have an international profile that has been enabled by their past experience in higher education.

15 Quotes given in languages other than English and which have been translated for the purposes of this report are indicated with an asterisk (*)

16 This relates to what Annika Konrad has termed 'access fatigue' - that is, 'being plain sick of having to ask for access'. Konrad, A. M. (2021), "Access Fatigue: The Rhetorical Work of Disability in Everyday Life", College English 83(3), 179-199, https://doi.org/10.58680/ce202131093

17 The notion of 'crip time' refers to disabled people's specific relationship to time. While it is often understood as disabled people's need for more time, it goes beyond this and can be understood as "a reorientation of time… Crip time is flex time not just expanded but exploded; it requires reimagining our notions of what can and should happen in time or recognizing how expectations of "how long things take" are based on very particular minds and bodies." Kafer, A. (2013), Feminist, Queer, Crip. Indiana University Press, p. 27.

18 The latter quote could be seen as an example of 'forced intimacy' or the expectation put on disabled people to share (very) personal information with non-disabled people to get basic access, as well as instances of forced physical intimacy, especially for disabled people who need physical help that often requires touching of their bodies. Cf. Mingus, M. (2017, 6 August), "Forced Intimacy: An Ableist Norm", https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2017/08/06/forced-intimacy-an-ableist-norm

19 Sandahl, C. (2005), "The Tyranny of Neutral: Disability and Actor Training." In Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance, edited by Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander, 255–68. University of Michigan Press, available at https://1fireplace.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/artikkeli_disability.pdf

20 Floch and Baltà Portolés (2021); and Baltà Portolés (2023).

21 "Access intimacy is also the intimacy I feel with many other disabled and sick people who have an automatic understanding of access needs out of our shared similar lived experience of the many different ways ableism manifests in our lives. Together, we share a kind of access intimacy that is ground-level, with no need for explanations. Instantly, we can hold the weight, emotion, logistics, isolation, trauma, fear, anxiety and pain of access." Mingus, M. (2011, 5 May), "Access Intimacy: The Missing Link", https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/05/05/access-intimacy-the-missing-link

22 For additional information, visit https://diva-creative.eu

23 n=114

24 www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/disability-eu-facts-figures

25 n=114

26 Panagiotara (2018).

27 It is important to underline that the broad phrasing of the questions ('Do the statutes, constitution or objectives of your institution mention aspects related to access, inclusion or diversity?' and 'Are there any obligations to ensure accessibility and inclusion established in national, regional or local legislation or policies?'; emphasis added) allows respondents to say yes even if only generic references to diversity, rights or access are included in their statutory documents or in existing legislation. Both questions were complemented with an open question ('If yes, could you provide more details?'), which allows us to understand the nature of the specific commitments existing. As the next paragraphs will show, this is frequently not very specific to the accessibility of disabled people, but rather to a generic commitment to recognising diversity and fostering inclusion. Therefore, the aforementioned figures (81% and 80%) do not necessarily represent that a large majority of higher education institutions have an explicit commitment or a legal obligation, to ensure full accessibility for disabled people.

28 Floch and Baltà Portolés (2021); and Baltà Portolés (2023)

29 Aujla et al. (2025)

30 The term 'bodymind' is used in disability studies to highlight the insepa-

rable relationship between the body and the mind, thus challenging the traditional, ableist separation between the two. See e.g. Price, M. (2015), "The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain", Hypatia 30(1), 268-284, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24542071

31 https://on-the-move.org/resources/library/cultural-mobility-flows-international-mobility-disabled-artists-and-culture

32 https://elia-artschools.org/page/ELIAAcademy2025

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