

# Disability access and inclusion in performing arts festivals

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The study examines the current state of access and inclusion provisions at international performing arts festivals by asking, “How can performing arts festivals create accessible and inclusive spaces to enhance the representation and empowerment of people with disabilities?”

**Design/methodology/approach** – As a case study, the research focuses on two performing arts festivals in South Australia: the Adelaide Festival and the Adelaide Fringe, both established in 1960. The Adelaide Festival is a curated event, while the Adelaide Fringe operates as an open-access festival. Using qualitative methods, the study examines secondary data, including the 2024 festival programmes, access guides, impact reports and other relevant documents, such as news articles and critics’ reviews and conducts a comparative content analysis.

**Findings** – Implementing an effective access and inclusion plan for people with disabilities in performing arts festivals is challenging due to the diverse nature of disabilities, which demands careful consideration and consultation. A comparison of two Adelaide-based festivals highlights various initiatives designed to create welcoming spaces, challenge ableist biases and support the professional growth of artists with disabilities. While both festivals have made significant strides, there is room for improvement in better accommodating people with disabilities, reflecting the agency of artists with disabilities in programming and decision-making, and actively gathering and sharing audience feedback on the effectiveness of their provisions and the impact of disability-led arts in the broader arts and culture sector.

**Originality/value** – The access and inclusion provisions of two international performing arts festivals contribute to theoretical discussions and offer practical guidance for professionals, serving as both a moral compass and a blueprint.

**Keywords** Festivals, Accessibility, Diversity, Inclusion

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Previous research on festivals has primarily focused on the physical access and service needs of people with disabilities (Alvarado, 2022; Darcy, 2012; Bossey, 2020; Dickson *et al.*, 2016), with limited attention to how performing arts festivals can actively represent and empower them. Many festivals marginalise certain community groups and fail to engage in inclusive planning, often leading to structural exclusion or discrimination (Bossey, 2020; Darcy and Harris, 2003). However, the barriers to access at performing arts festivals differ from those at other types of festivals. Deep-rooted inequalities in artistic participation compound exclusion, as traditional barriers—such as cultural taste, socio-economic status, education, and wealth—intersect with disability-related barriers (Franklin *et al.*, 2022). Given that people with disabilities are often from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Lee *et al.*, 2023), these intersecting factors create additional challenges to participation, while systemic discrimination continues to hinder meaningful inclusion in the cultural industries (Darcy and Harris, 2003). This is particularly significant given the substantial public and private investment in these festivals and their potential to drive social change (Rentschler *et al.*, 2023).

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Despite the contested role of international performing arts festivals in fostering social impact, promoting cultural diversity, and advocating for the rights of marginalised communities, their contribution to disability representation and empowerment remains underexplored (Franklin *et al.*, 2022; Thomasson, 2012; Fillis and Lee, 2011; Martin, 2010). While these festivals have the resources and opportunities to support artists with disabilities, their engagement often remains tokenistic or inadequate (Collins *et al.*, 2022). Achieving true inclusion requires moving beyond physical accessibility and ensuring that people with disabilities are actively involved in festival programming and production. The principle “Nothing about us without us” (Charlton, 1998) underscores the necessity of a disability-led approach, where individuals with disabilities are empowered to take control of their representation and participation (Collins *et al.*, 2022). However, there remains a gap in understanding the practices and perspectives of disability-led initiatives in contemporary performing arts festivals (Darcy and Harris, 2003; Finkel *et al.*, 2019). To address this, the study asks: “How can performing arts festivals create accessible and inclusive spaces to enhance the representation and empowerment of people with disabilities?”

This paper examines how festival design, programming, production, and consumption can integrate inclusive practices to advance access and meaningful participation for people with disabilities (Walters, 2023; Maxwell *et al.*, 2022; Grabowski *et al.*, 2024). Moving beyond conventional accessibility measures, it explores how international performing arts festivals can actively represent and empower people with disabilities as both artists and audiences.

Building on existing studies of accessibility and inclusion in festivals (Dickson *et al.*, 2016; Finkel *et al.*, 2019; Alvarado, 2022; Bossey, 2020), we adopt Shore *et al.*'s (2011) inclusion model to explore how the uniqueness and sense of belonging of people with disabilities can be celebrated in two international performing arts festivals in Adelaide: the Adelaide Festival and Adelaide Fringe. We analyse their 2024 festival programmes, access guides, impact reports, and other relevant documents, including news articles and critics' reviews. Comparing the disability access and inclusion provisions of each festival provides valuable insights into broader practices, recognising that the effectiveness of these provisions may depend on factors such as the curatorial model, available funding, and specific circumstances.

We recognise that disability access and inclusion at international performing arts festivals are influenced by relational pressures, differing priorities, and demands at the micro, meso, and macro levels, including policy and individual perspectives (Azmat *et al.*, 2023). This paper focuses primarily on the role of festival organisers in promoting access and inclusion at the meso level. While ableism and harassment by non-disabled audience members can affect the experience of people with disabilities, this is not the focus of our study, as such behaviour is rarely documented in public records.

We find that both festivals aim to create welcoming environments, challenge discriminatory attitudes, and support the professional development of artists with disabilities. However, organisational priorities, resource constraints, and festival characteristics affect the accessibility and inclusivity of festival design both individually and interdependently. These challenges highlight the need for more transparent and comprehensive reporting on the impact of accessibility and inclusion initiatives, as publicly available data alone is insufficient for a full assessment. We recommend integrating accessibility planning from the outset, as this approach can be more cost-effective for festivals. The inclusion of artists with disabilities should go beyond representation to focus on agency, ensuring they are empowered to produce work with their own voice, choice, and control. These findings highlight the broader implications for social inclusion in the arts, suggesting that when empowered, individuals with disabilities can access, participate, self-represent (Azmat *et al.*, 2023). Empowerment is critical, yet its impact on life pathways, societal benefits, career development, and public recognition of people with disabilities requires further research (Rentschler *et al.*, 2024; Collins *et al.*, 2022).

In the remainder, we discuss the theoretical foundations of disability access, inclusion, representation, and empowerment in the literature review, followed by the research context

and methods. We then present findings comparing the access and inclusion provisions of two Adelaide-based performing arts festivals. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of our findings, study limitations, and recommendations for future research.

### Literature review

#### *Disability, accessibility, and inclusion*

The term “disability” and the dominant disability models are contested and constantly evolving. According to the World Health Organization’s (WHO) International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF), disability is “an umbrella term for impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions.” This definition, which highlights the negative interaction between a person’s health conditions and contextual factors, both personal and environmental (WHO, 2024), acknowledges both the medical and social models of disability. While the medical model views disability as an individual condition requiring treatment, focusing on diagnosis and rehabilitation, the social model attributes disability to environmental barriers and negative social attitudes (Dirth and Branscombe, 2017).

This paper is grounded in the social model of disability, which asserts that disability is caused by ableist structures, both physical and attitudinal, that limit access and participation (Rosqvist *et al.*, 2020, p. 5). Unlike the medical model, which views disability as an individual’s problem, the social model advocates for systemic changes, such as accessible design and inclusive organisational policies, to promote equity and reduce discrimination (Dirth and Branscombe, 2017). With an estimated 1.3 billion people experiencing disability worldwide (WHO, 2022), festivals must be accessible and inclusive to enable participation and celebrate diversity. Despite legal protections, societal barriers—such as negative attitudes, discrimination, and physical environments—continue to challenge people with disabilities (Bossey, 2020; Darcy and Harris, 2003). Therefore, festival organisers play a crucial role in ensuring accessibility and inclusion, upholding the legal right of people with disabilities to participate without discrimination (Alvarado, 2022).

While diversity concerns “who can be involved,” accessibility relates to “getting involved,” and inclusion focuses on “how involvement can be realised” (Finkel and Dashper, 2020, p. 476). “Accessibility” is defined as the removal of barriers that prevent people with disabilities from fully participating in festivals (Alvarado, 2022; Bossey, 2020; Dickson *et al.*, 2016). Finkel *et al.* (2019, p. 2) describe accessibility as “the measures put in place to address participation by those with impairments, both permanent and temporary, as well as both physical and mental, including perceived class and cultural barriers.” Some studies within the broader festival context have used “access” and “inclusion” interchangeably or discussed “inclusion” without clearly distinguishing it from “access,” arguing that inclusion extends beyond physical accessibility to encompass sensory and communication considerations, linking human rights with universal design principles and being rooted in dignity, agency, and equality (Alvarado, 2022; Darcy, 2012; Bossey, 2020; Dickson *et al.*, 2016).

“Inclusion” is conceptualised as a non-discriminatory approach that values diversity and ensures people with disabilities can meaningfully engage in all aspects of festival design, programming, and participation (Darcy and Harris, 2003; Darcy, 2012; Dickson *et al.*, 2016). It necessitates the provision of resources and opportunities to facilitate full participation, requiring proactive engagement, co-designed experiences, and equitable representation (Finkel *et al.*, 2019; Alvarado, 2022; Walters, 2023). Inclusion in festivals fosters environments where all stakeholders collaborate to develop accessible solutions, ensuring broad and meaningful participation (Dickson *et al.*, 2016; Alvarado, 2022). However, the absence of a clear definition of inclusion leaves festival organisers without guidance on its implementation or the consequences of exclusion. To address this, we adopt Shore *et al.*’s (2011) model to conceptualise and operationalise the concept of inclusion. The following sections explore disability access and inclusion in greater detail.

### *Access to festivals for people with disabilities*

Access to festivals requires addressing the entire journey of a person with a disability, with the lived experience being central to understanding and overcoming barriers to independence and equality (Rosqvist *et al.*, 2020, p. 5). While previous studies highlight the importance of universal design (Darcy and Harris, 2003; Darcy, 2012; Dickson *et al.*, 2016), accessibility goes beyond physical infrastructure to include service provisions like staff awareness, accessible ticketing, and assistive technologies (Alvarado, 2022). Achieving true accessibility requires overcoming structural and environmental barriers—physical, informational, communicational, social, and attitudinal—through a holistic approach that incorporates effective communication and an understanding of diverse disability needs (Darcy and Harris, 2003; Finkel, 2009; Finkel *et al.*, 2019), each of which will be explored in detail below.

*Removing physical barriers* includes transportation, festival sites and facilities (Finkel and Dashper, 2020; Jiménez-Andres, 2024). Previous studies emphasise the importance of “universal design” for ensuring accessibility, which promotes inclusive practices for all ages, sizes, and abilities, viewing disability as part of human diversity (Maxwell *et al.*, 2022; Dickson *et al.*, 2016; Darcy *et al.*, 2011; Darcy and Harris, 2003; Darcy, 2012). However, Hadley (2022) warns that the “universal design” approach may neglect traditional access features if assumed to meet all spectators’ needs, potentially overlooking specific requirements.

*Removing information and communication barriers* involves providing materials in various formats, such as sign language, audio descriptions, hearing loops, and both digital and easy-to-read hard copies (Udo and Fels, 2010; Walczak and Fryer, 2017; Whitfield and Fels, 2013), to accommodate diverse needs and cognitive challenges (Lee *et al.*, 2022, 2023). *Removing social barriers*, such as ticket pricing and the booking process, should ensure equity and inclusivity (Commonwealth of Australia, 2018). *Removing attitudinal barriers* involves creating a welcoming and inclusive environment that challenges unconscious biases and stereotypes related to ableism (Fletcher-Watson, 2015; Ludwig, 2012). Staff and stakeholder training is a step towards addressing the issue, although it may not eliminate attitudinal or stereotypical assumptions (Rodríguez-Zulaica and Ara, 2018). Increasing disability confidence and awareness among those involved in festival planning and execution helps ensure festivals are accessible and supportive for people with disabilities (Hadley, 2014).

Accessible event planning is essential for maximising community participation and ensuring optimal returns on resources (Darcy and Harris, 2003; Darcy, 2012). While studies on festival accessibility are abundant, ensuring equal access for people with disabilities in performing arts festivals remains a significant challenge (Alvarado, 2022).

### *Disability inclusion for representation and empowerment*

According to Perry *et al.* (2021), diversity can be understood through “facts”, such as the presence of individuals from varied political, cultural, and social backgrounds. Inclusion, however, is characterised by “acts” that utilise diversity as a positive and valuable resource within society. Therefore, it is essential to consider how diverse individuals should be valued as members of society through “inclusion”. Inclusion is measured by two key metrics—uniqueness and belonging—as shown in Table 1 (Shore *et al.*, 2011). For example, “exclusion” refers to a state where an individual’s uniqueness is ignored, and they feel a low sense of belonging in society. “Assimilation” occurs when an individual feels a sense of belonging, but their uniqueness is disregarded within the dominant culture. “Differentiation” describes a situation where an individual’s uniqueness is recognised, but they are not acknowledged as a full member of society. “Inclusion” is the state where an individual’s uniqueness is recognised, and they also fulfil their role as a member of society with a strong sense of belonging (Shore *et al.*, 2011). Thus, inclusion is developed through a process that “involves the satisfaction of the needs for both belongingness and uniqueness” (Shore *et al.*, 2011, p. 1262). The inclusive approach, which recognises and addresses the unique needs of people with disabilities while

**Table 1.** Inclusion in the context of festival event design

	Low belongingness	High belongingness
Low value in uniqueness	<i>Exclusion</i> Without adequate provisions, people with disabilities encounter physical, structural, social, and attitudinal barriers that hinder full engagement and a sense of belonging, resulting in exclusion from an ableist perspective	<i>Assimilation</i> Festival organisers may consult people with disabilities and treat them as insiders, but most decisions remain with the organisers, who conform to the dominant culture and downplay the unique needs of people with disabilities
High value in uniqueness	<i>Differentiation</i> People with disabilities are not considered insiders within the festival planning group, although their unique characteristics are acknowledged as necessary for success	<i>Inclusion</i> People with disabilities are celebrated for their uniqueness, with opportunities to actively collaborate in festival planning, fostering self-representation, agency, and empowerment

**Source(s):** Authors' own work; adapted from [Shore et al. \(2011\)](#)

ensuring their active participation as members of the community, creates a welcoming environment in festivals.

In Australia, one in five people live with a disability ([ABS, 2022a, b](#)), yet only about nine percent of them work as professional artists. These artists earn, on average, 42% less and experience higher unemployment rates compared to their non-disabled peers ([Throsby and Petetskaya, 2017](#), p. 13). People with disabilities face significant barriers to professional development, such as limited job opportunities, lower financial returns, time constraints, and restricted access to financial support and markets ([Throsby and Hollister, 2003](#), p. 78). Although there have been efforts to showcase works by disability arts communities, these artists are often still viewed as contributing therapeutic value rather than being recognised for their artistic merit ([Rentschler et al., 2024](#); [Darcy et al., 2019](#); [Collins et al., 2022](#)). These attitudinal barriers perpetuate discrimination and limit opportunities for representation on public platforms, ultimately hindering the professional empowerment of artists with disabilities.

This issue persists despite the success stories exemplified by internationally renowned companies such as Back to Back Theatre, which tours globally with its neurodivergent ensemble, highlighting the potential for greater representation and recognition of artists with disabilities on the world stage. Known for its groundbreaking artistic work, the company has garnered global recognition, winning prestigious awards such as the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the 2024 Venice Biennale and the 2022 International Ibsen Award ([Reich, 2024](#)). Such examples highlight the importance of empowering artists with disabilities by offering them opportunities to be showcased at high-profile platforms, such as international performing arts festivals ([Fillis and Lee, 2011](#); [Lee et al., 2022](#); [Rentschler et al., 2024](#)).

Inclusion spans access, participation, and empowerment ([Gidley et al., 2010a, b](#)). Empowerment also plays a key role in positively influencing individuals' motivation to consider their life path. Empowerment for artists with disabilities is about providing "a choice to pursue the arts for and in a way in which they want to be engaged, the outcomes they wanted to achieve and with those whom they wish to associate then it is best left to them to decide" ([Darcy et al., 2019](#), p. 531). This extends beyond simply removing barriers and ensuring accessibility; it involves fostering meaningful representation and empowerment that honours the uniqueness of artists with disabilities and promotes their sense of belonging. In the context of festivals, collaboration and co-creation with these artists are essential, not only to amplify their voices but also to enhance artistic outcomes ([Shore et al., 2011](#); [Collins et al., 2022](#); [Martin, 2010](#); [Walters, 2023](#); [Maxwell et al., 2022](#); [Grabowski et al., 2024](#)).

## Methods

### Research context

Adelaide, the capital of South Australia, is the fifth-largest city in Australia ([Government of South Australia, 2024a, b](#)). In 2021, South Australia had 1.8 million residents, with 1.4 million living in the Greater Adelaide area ([Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022a](#)). Festivals are integral to Adelaide's cultural identity with the title of "UNESCO City of Music" since 2015 ([City of Adelaide, 2024a](#)). Two key organisations working closely with festivals across South Australia are the City Council of Adelaide and Festival City Adelaide. The City Council of Adelaide supports various inclusive programmes and grant funding opportunities for people with disabilities and organisations working with them as part of the council's Strategic Plan 2024–2028. In June 2024, the City of Adelaide endorsed its Disability Access and Inclusion Plan (DAIP) for 2024–2028 ([City of Adelaide, 2024b](#)). Established in 2012, Festival City Adelaide is the peak body for festivals in South Australia, working to create a supportive environment through collaboration with government, businesses, academia, suppliers, and the public ([Festival City Adelaide, 2024](#)).

*Adelaide Festival and Adelaide Fringe.* Founded in 1960, the Adelaide Festival and Adelaide Fringe are two of the oldest and largest performing arts festivals in Australia, attracting significant tourism during "Mad March" ([Thomasson, 2017](#)). Initially held every two years, the Adelaide Fringe became an annual event in 2007, followed by the Adelaide Festival in 2012. Their main characteristics, including legislation, curatorial model, duration, number of events and venues, and finances, are compared in [Table 2](#).

The Adelaide Festival, established in 1960 as a flagship event to boost cultural tourism, is one of the world's major arts festivals. Modelled on the Edinburgh International Festival, it was founded by South Australian business and political leaders ([Thomasson, 2012](#); [Franklin et al., 2022](#)). Since 1994, it has been a statutory authority overseen by the state government ([Rentschler et al., 2023](#)). The festival is curated, with Ruth Mackenzie CBE as Artistic Director and Kath M Mainland CBE as Chief Executive in 2024. Held from 1 to 17 March, the festival presented 49 events across 25 venues, including opera, theatre, dance, music, and outdoor events, attracting 555,505 attendees, including those at WOMADelaide and Adelaide Writers' Week ([Adelaide Festival, 2024a](#); [Australian Arts Review, 2024](#); [Kelly, 2024](#)).

**Table 2.** Overview of festival characteristics

Characteristics	Adelaide Festival	Adelaide Fringe
Established in	1960	1960
Legislation	Statutory authority	Registered charity
Curation model	Curated	Open-Access
Durations in 2024	1 March – 17 March	16 February – 17 March
Number of events in 2024	49	1,484 (registered)
Number of venues in 2024	25	546
Number of audience attendees in 2024	555,505	n/a <sup>1</sup>
Number of audience attendance in 2024	n/a <sup>1</sup>	5,000,000
Revenue in 2023	A\$ 20,179,000	A\$ 12,717,824
State grants	43.53%	34.78%
Self-generated income	28.22%	30.57%
Donation and sponsorship	21.25%	26.35%
Sundry and interest income	4.23%	3.26%
Other grants (Federal, city, etc.)	2.77%	5.03%

**Note(s):** 1. The number of audience attendees represents the total number of unique individuals who attended multiple shows throughout the Adelaide Festival. The number of audience attendances refers to the total visits, including repeat visits by the same individuals during the Adelaide Fringe season. These figures are not directly comparable

**Source(s):** Authors' own work, based on the Adelaide Festival Corporation 2022–23 Annual Report; Adelaide Fringe Impact Report (2024), Adelaide Fringe Incorporated Annual report for the year ended 30 June 2023

In 2024, revenue grew to A\$21.5 million, up from A\$20.18 million in 2023. The proportion of funding from public grants increased to 48.92% compared to 46.3% in 2023, while sundry income and interest also rose significantly to 13.24% from 4.23%. However, self-generated income declined to 22.82% from 28.22%, and donations and sponsorships decreased to 15.02% from 21.25% the previous year. In 2024, total expenses rose to A\$22.34 million, an increase from A\$20.15 million in 2023, reflecting higher spending. Despite generating revenue, the net result in 2024 was a deficit of A\$825,000, in contrast to 2023's modest surplus of A\$32,000 ([Government of South Australia, 2023, 2024a, b](#)).

The Adelaide Fringe, a registered charity founded in 1960 alongside the Adelaide Festival, is a major multi-arts event showcasing new work across theatre, comedy, music, dance, circus, and visual art. It brings together over 8,000 artists globally ([Adelaide Fringe, 2024a; Thomasson, 2019](#)). As an open-access festival, it allows artists and venues to independently register and present their work while following general guidelines. Participants receive resources such as ticketing services, marketing support, and funding opportunities ([Adelaide Fringe, 2024c](#)). In 2024, under the leadership of Heather Croall AM as Director and CEO, the Adelaide Fringe hosted 1,484 events across 546 venues, attracting 5 million accumulated attendances ([Adelaide Fringe, 2024e](#)). The 2023 annual report, the most recent public document on financial status, showed a total revenue of A\$12.72 million. This was sourced from 39.81% public grants, 30.58% self-generated income, 26.35% donations and sponsorships, and 3.26% from sundry income and interest. Total expenses were A\$12.71 million, leaving a modest surplus of A\$7,717 ([Adelaide Fringe, 2023b](#)).

#### *Data collection and analysis*

Following our definition of inclusion, which emphasises providing resources, opportunities for full participation, and fostering a sense of belonging for people with disabilities ([Shore et al., 2011](#)), we focused on the “access” and “inclusion” provisions for audiences and artists with disabilities at the Adelaide Festival and Adelaide Fringe. These provisions were identified through an analysis of publicly available secondary data, including organisational documents, external reports, and critics’ reviews, as outlined in [Table 3](#).

Although the festivals have long histories, our review focused on the 2024 events. While we were unable to analyse changes in provisions over time, the data provided sufficient support for our argument within the current context. A comparative content analysis was conducted using [Krippendorff’s \(2013\)](#) and [Merriam’s \(1998\)](#) frameworks, applying a classificatory approach to assess and compare disability access and inclusion provisions. These included accessibility features, policies, and support mechanisms, which were manually coded by two authors and compared across the two festivals. This comparison provides a unique interpretive framework ([Yin, 2014](#)) for understanding access and inclusion in performing arts festivals, an area that has received limited attention. The analysis contributes to enhancing access and inclusion theory within festival and event management, offering practical insights ([Eisenhardt, 1989](#)). The following sections detail the analysis process.

First, organisational documents, such as the annual and impact reports from the festivals, provided valuable background on their priorities, strategic focus, and operational data. While these documents offered insight into the festivals’ financial and organisational contexts, only the relevant material was retained for analysis, specifically focusing on accessibility practices ([Krippendorff, 2013](#)). We then examined the 2024 programme guides for both festivals to evaluate accessibility and inclusion features. For the Adelaide Festival, all 49 events were reviewed, while 147 accessible events were highlighted from the Adelaide Fringe, representing 9.91% of all Fringe shows. Data on accessibility features, were compiled in Excel, and we tracked shows presented by artists with disabilities. The access guides and external accessibility report produced by the festivals primarily identified accessible shows, with listings for audiences with disabilities verified by cross-referencing the programme. These documents also discussed the festivals’ advocacy and policies aimed at improving

**Table 3.** Overview of secondary data collected

Category	Adelaide festival	Adelaide Fringe
Organisational document	Adelai - 23 Annual Report (Digital copy) –45 pages Adelaide Festival Organisation Annual report for the year ended 30 June 2024 (Digital copy) –21 pages 2024 Adelaide Festival Program Guide (Physical, digital, and plain text copy) –93 pages 2024 Adelaide Festival Access Guide (Digital and plain text copy. Audio copy on request) –28 pages	Adelaide Fringe Annual report for the year ended 30 June 2023 (Digital copy) –24 pages  2024 Adelaide Fringe Guide (Physical, digital, and plain text copy) –168 pages 2024 Adelaide Fringe Accessibility Guide (Physical, digital, and plain text copy) –76 pages  2024 Adelaide Fringe Impact Report (Physical, digital, and plain text copy) –9 pages Disability Access and Inclusion Plan (Digital copy) –35 pages
External report	Not available	Australian Tourism Industry Council (ATIC) Accessibility Report available for business organisation only and not for participating venues –11 pages
Critics review	14 reviews for 3 events	15 reviews for 10 events
<b>Source(s):</b> Authors' own work		

accessibility, particularly through partnerships with disability service organisations, and provided information on venue accessibility.

Lastly, we analysed critics' reviews of shows by artists with disabilities at both festivals to gain industry insights. Using an online database, we found 14 reviews for three events at the Adelaide Festival and 15 reviews for 10 events at the Adelaide Fringe. This disparity highlights the prestige of curated festivals compared to open-access festivals, as reflected in the number of reviews, enabling them to exert a broader influence on both the industry and society. During the analysis, two researchers extracted quotes reflecting themes such as artistic merit, agency, challenging stigma, diversity, inclusion, and empowerment. Given the subjective nature of qualitative data analysis, the two authors met regularly to ensure consistency and resolve discrepancies in interpretation and coding, thereby enhancing the trustworthiness of the data (Guthrie *et al.*, 2004).

## Findings

### *Adelaide Festival access provisions*

The Adelaide Festival Strategic Plan 2024–2027 highlights the importance of improving accessibility in audience development, particularly by removing barriers for financially disadvantaged and younger audiences (Adelaide Festival, 2024c, p. 8). The plan suggests collaboration with disability-led organisations and access services to ensure the festival is inclusive for both artists and audiences with disabilities. Although the plan commits to adopting an Access Inclusion Plan, it lacks specific details, and the plan has not yet been made publicly available (Adelaide Festival, 2024c, p. 15).

For the 2024 programmes, the Adelaide Festival provided a digital and print-at-home-friendly version of its Accessibility Guide, offering detailed access information for all events (Adelaide Festival, 2024b). An audio version was also made available upon request. The Festival’s website featured an accessibility plug-in, enhancing user experience, with symbols indicating accessibility features for each event, including “Auslan Interpretation” (Australian sign language), “Audio Description” (auditory narration of visual representations), and “Relaxed Performances” (where the ambience of the auditorium and theatre rules are relaxed). These accessible events were further promoted through South Australia’s disability services organisation, Access2Arts (Smerd, 2024a, b, c; Adelaide Festival, 2024b, c).

Among the 49 events presented by the Festival in 2024, nearly all were held at publicly managed, established venues with wheelchair access, as shown in Table 4. Detailed information and venue maps were also available in the Festival Access Guide (2024b, p. 2). Two events took place outdoors at Glenelg Beach. For the opening event, *Baleen Moondjan*—Stephen Page’s celebration of First Nations’ culture and storytelling—the Festival built a viewing platform (Adelaide Festival, 2024d). However, no accessibility features were implemented for *Whale*, the life-size art installation (Adelaide Festival, 2024g). Other access features included hearing loop facilities, hearing assistance packs, a quiet room, and sensory packs. These were available at a limited number of events. Additionally, some events offered audio description, Auslan interpretation, and surtitling (on-screen translation of spoken words). There was one relaxed performance, and assistance animals were welcome at one event (Adelaide Festival, 2024b, p. 7).

Patrons with access needs could contact the Festival for access services or book tickets through the online system, which offers options for wheelchair seats, Companion Card, Audio Described, and Auslan Interpreted tickets. The Companion Card offers free admission to events for the companion of a person with disabilities. The Festival also directly contacts patrons with disabilities to ensure all relevant access information is accurately communicated to the venue. In 2024, the Festival’s main focus was primarily on removing physical barriers,

**Table 4.** Adelaide Festival: programme features and accessibility provisions

Program feature	Number	Percentage (%)
Total number of events	49	100.00
Events with access provisions	48	97.96
Events presented by disabled artists	4	8.16

  

Access provision	Number	Percentage (%)
Wheelchair access	48	97.96
Assistive listening	15	30.61
Quiet room – No Music or Dialogue	8	16.33
Touch tours – Sensory packs available	7	14.29
Fully surtitled	4	8.16
Audio description	3	6.12
Auslan interpretations	3	6.12
Partly surtitled	2	4.08
Viewing platform	1	2.04
Relaxed performances	1	2.04
Assistance animals welcome	1	2.04

**Source(s):** Authors’ own work, based on secondary data from the programme guide and access guide

with limited efforts to address communication, information, social, and attitudinal barriers. The absence of a publicly available Access Inclusion Plan makes it difficult to understand the initiatives being tested, the involvement of stakeholders, and staff training efforts. Without feedback from patrons with disabilities, refining and enhancing the process remains a challenge.

### *Adelaide Festival inclusion provisions*

Among the 49 programmed events at the Festival, three were presented by artists with disabilities or disability-led organisations. As shown in [Table 5](#), curating these events showcases the talents of artists with disabilities and promotes their inclusion in major performing arts festivals. By centring the stories of people with disabilities, the Festival fosters both individual and collective empowerment ([Collins et al., 2022](#)) while challenging societal prejudices surrounding disability ([Grabowski et al., 2024](#)).

Partnering with other funders, the Festival presented *Private View* by Restless Dance Theatre, Australia's leading dance theatre company, featuring both dancers with and without disabilities. This performance challenged societal myths and encouraged viewers to reconsider attitudes towards sexuality and disability ([Adelaide Festival, 2024f](#)). With sell-out shows and positive reviews, *Private View* was praised for tackling rarely discussed topics and empowering its dancers ([Marsh, 2024](#)).

Artistic Director Michelle Ryan highlighted how the company's training programme and gym facilities develop dancers' skills while ensuring they are paid as professionals ([Marsh, 2024](#)). In contrast to the medical model, which views the arts as therapeutic or leisure-based, Restless Dance Theatre follows the social model, removing barriers and enabling dancers to be recognised and compensated as professionals ([Dirth and Branscombe, 2017](#)). Restless Dance Theatre's works, recognised with awards and critical acclaim, are valued for their artistic quality rather than contributing therapeutic outcomes. This marks their third appearance at the Festival, following *Intimate Space* (2017) and *Guttered* (2021), with the company now touring both nationally and internationally ([Rentschler et al., 2024](#)).

**Table 5.** Adelaide Festival: selected reviews of performances by artists with disabilities

Events	Selected critic reviews
<i>Private View</i> , Dance	<p>"... all distinctions based on ability or disability - or who is watching and who is being watched - finally seem to melt away." (<a href="#">Antmann, 2024</a>) – <a href="#">Limelight</a>, 4 March 2024</p> <p>"A highly enjoyable night of theatrical dance, sparking a reconsideration of the prudish moral limitations society imposes on the disabled community." (4.5 stars) (<a href="#">Smerd, 2024a, b, c</a>) – <a href="#">GlamAdelaide</a>, 10 March, 2024</p>
<i>Yucky</i> , Exhibition	<p>"A timely exhibition that explores notions of agency and choice by artists living with disability. ... <i>Yucky</i> is a well-paced exhibition tackling some of the big topics of contemporary society. It centres disabled, chronically ill, deaf and neurodivergent artists on an equal footing ..." (<a href="#">Fairley, 2024</a>) – <a href="#">ArtsHub</a>, 12 March 2024</p> <p>"This powerful group exhibition centres the perspectives of disabled, chronically ill and neurodivergent artists to explore the personal and political complexities that are part of the disabled experience. <i>Yucky</i> reckons with lived experiences of discomfort, neglect, stigmatisation and isolation through sculpture, photography, installation and performance. It explores societal perceptions of disability and the institutional systems that support and limit disabled people's autonomy." (<a href="#">Frangos, 2024</a>) – <a href="#">Broadsheet</a>, 13 Mar 2024</p>
<i>Floods of Fire</i> , Music	<p>"If this is our cultural celebration, then truly we have so much to celebrate." (5 stars) (<a href="#">GlamAdelaide, 2024</a>) – <a href="#">GlamAdelaide</a>, 17 March, 2024</p>

**Source(s):** Authors' own work, based on selected reviews

The 2024 Festival also showcased works like *Yucky*, which explores disability and confronts ableism (Jobling, 2024), and *Floods of Fire: Our Voices, Our Dreams*, a celebration of diversity featuring South Australian neurodiverse group Tutti Arts (Adelaide Festival, 2024e).

#### *Adelaide Fringe access provisions*

Fringe has developed a Disability Access and Inclusion Plan (DAIP) to guide event organisers in making their services and products accessible for people with disabilities. The Plan outlines five key objectives: Workplace Culture, Inclusion, Communication, Physical Environment, and Intersections and Community (Adelaide Fringe, 2023c). Fringe also consults an external advisory committee of access and inclusion experts. Since 2015, it has offered grants up to A\$5,000 to 139 individuals to eliminate barriers to participation, funding services such as Auslan interpretation, audio descriptions, relaxed sessions, tactile tours, captioning, equipment hire, physical accommodations like ramps and chair lifts, temporary sensory spaces, venue staff training, assisted listening devices, wayfinding signage, communication tools, and digital resources like social stories and access videos (Adelaide Fringe, 2024c).

As shown in Table 6, the 2024 Impact Report indicates that out of 1,484 events, 147 included access provisions. Of these, 79 events had wheelchair access, representing just 5.32% of the total. As an open-access festival, Fringe and presenting artists have limited control over venue accessibility, relying on the information reported by venues. However, inaccurate reporting and staff unfamiliarity with disability can also lead to inadequate accommodations and potential discrimination (Romano, 2021, p. 28). To address this, Fringe advocates for improved venue accessibility and organised training for presenters, venues, and artists in 2024 (Adelaide Fringe, 2024g). Despite not being a disability-led organisation or certified access training provider, Fringe collaborates with organisations promoting access services. In a submission to the Office for the Arts, Fringe noted that a 2021 study identified venue accessibility as the top barrier for artists with disabilities (Adelaide Fringe, 2021). Access consultant Jacqueline Tedmanson (CityMag, 2024) highlighted that “venues claim to be accessible but haven’t lived up to their statements,” stressing the need for stage access, back-of-house facilities, quiet areas, and climate control.

**Table 6.** Adelaide Fringe: programme features and accessibility provisions

Program feature	Number	Percentage (%)
Total number of events	1,484	100.00
Events with access provisions	147	9.91
Events presented by creatives with a lived experience of disability (This category includes individuals who identify as disabled and/or have direct personal experience navigating the world with a disability.)	139	9.37

  

Access provision	Number	Percentage (%)
Wheelchair access	79	5.32
Auslan interpretations	63	4.25
Relaxed performances	59	3.98
Audio description	10	0.67
Tactile tours	10	0.67
Open captioning	4	0.27
Closed captioning	1	0.07

**Source(s):** Authors’ own work, based on secondary data from the Impact Report and Access Guide

The Fringe Accessibility Guide offers detailed information on accessible events and support services, available in both hard and digital copies. 3,000 hard copies have been distributed, covering shows with Auslan interpretation, Relaxed Performances, Audio Description, Tactile Tours, and Captioning. Staff and volunteers received training in Autism Awareness, Human Guide techniques, Deaf Awareness, and support for those with the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower (Adelaide Fringe, 2024f). The Hidden Disabilities Sunflower is a symbol on a lanyard that discreetly indicates a person may have a hidden disability, allowing them to receive support without disclosing their condition (Jiménez-Andres, 2024).

In 2024, additional services included visual communication boards, hearing loops at box offices, venue accessibility videos, social stories, and sensory support for Fringe-produced events (Adelaide Fringe, 2024b).

Fringe partnered with Breakthrough, Guide Dogs, Access2Arts, Autism SA, Deaf Connect, and SACARE to expand access services. Notably, the SACARE Carers Lounge provides spaces for sensory, medical, and bathroom needs, featuring interactive screens and changing pods with a height-adjustable change table, hoist, and a lounge area for feeding and medicine preparation (SACARE, 2024). In 2024, the lounge attracted 100 visitors, and 3,809 Companion Card tickets were issued (Adelaide Fringe, 2024e). The Fringe's efforts were recognised with the Excellence in Accessible Tourism award at the 2023 Australian Tourism Awards (Tourism Industry Council South Australia, 2024).

Although Fringe's role in removing physical barriers is limited by its open-access model, it actively addresses information, communication, and social barriers. The lack of publicly available audience feedback on the effectiveness of access services is a significant drawback. Given the limitations of the open-access model, publicly sharing data on service effectiveness is essential to demonstrate the value of accessible practices for venues and organisations.

#### *Adelaide Fringe inclusion provisions*

The 2024 Impact Report shows that Adelaide Fringe provided financial support to 50 artists with disabilities and promoted 139 disability-inclusive shows (Adelaide Fringe, 2024e, p. 8). The festival offers grants to help artists with disabilities share their work and supports venues in providing access services such as wheelchair accessibility, Auslan interpretation, and accessible stages. It also recognises outstanding efforts through special awards, like the Mental Health Awareness Award and the Adelaide Fringe Access Award, which honour work that authentically represents marginalised groups and promotes accessibility (Adelaide Fringe, 2024d). These awards raise awareness and inspire more artists and arts workers with disabilities to challenge stereotypes and share their work.

Artists like Grace and Jazz, recipients of the 2024 Fringe Fund and My Plan Manager Access Award for *Smiling Through the Human*, highlight the importance of open-access festivals like Fringe for artists with disabilities (My Plan Manager, 2024). Grace says, "Open access festivals are crucial for artists, especially those with disabilities, as they provide opportunities to showcase work without the barriers imposed by traditional curators or producers. These festivals allow artists to create and present their art on their own terms, which is incredibly empowering and significant" (Adelaide Fringe, 2024d). Fringe provides opportunities for artists with disabilities to present on mainstream stages, build confidence, and connect with inclusive communities (Grabowski et al., 2024). Dr Kari Seeley, CEO of No Strings Attached Theatre of Disability, adds, "Several of our performers had their first taste of performing in a full-scale production as part of our Fringe seasons" (Adelaide Fringe, 2023a).

Table 7 presents selected critic reviews of Fringe shows produced by artists with disabilities, praising the performances as innovative, thought-provoking, and inspiring. These reviews emphasise the importance of disability representation at festivals, noting that inclusion fosters public understanding and challenges stereotypes, thereby promoting social awareness (Maxwell et al., 2022). Such experiences contribute to the emotional, social, and cognitive development of artists with disabilities, enhancing their self-esteem, sense of worth,

**Table 7.** Adelaide Fringe: selected reviews of performances by artists with disabilities

Events	Selected critic reviews
<i>Chronically Ill Prepared</i> , Comedy	“Arts purpose in exploring life and mental health isn’t to preach or be boringly crystal clear, the way some humans want life to be. Hence, art can present subtle, insightful, and event gentler into mental health with more resonance than a clear and easy-to-unpack essay. <i>Chronically Ill Prepared</i> is precisely the kind of mental health show I’d attend multiple times! A winning-structure with new authentic content every night! Bow of respect!” (Pinwill, 2024) – Mindshare, 22 February 2024
<i>Know Your Enemy/Talking Underwater (Double Bill)</i> , Theatre and physical theatre	“Written by a young person who is autistic themselves, the show authentically raises the importance of autism awareness and acceptance. Throughout the show, there are multiple moments when the audience is brought into Riley’s thoughts when the rest of the stage becomes still. In these moments Riley explores and shares with the audience their thoughts and utilises these moments to educate the audience on particular matters. There are very few theatrical performances that address such important topics in the way <i>Talking Underwater</i> does.” (Adrian, 2024) – Hub, 24 February 2024
<i>The Tumour Show</i> Theatre and physical theatre	“I was left with a strong impression of a fine, empathic human, a deep thinker and, without doubt, a writer to watch; I would hope too that Beaglehole might consider more performance opportunities where his words and truths can shine through his own voice and personality.” (Lanzi, 2024) – Theatre Travels, 22 February 2024 Adelaide Fringe Winner 2024

**Source(s):** Authors’ own work, based on selected reviews

belonging, and social connectivity, ultimately leading to empowerment (DADAA Inc and AAA, 2012, p. 18).

### Discussion and conclusion

This study examines the access and inclusion provisions employed by festivals to create more equitable and welcoming spaces for people with disabilities. Despite existing legal protections and a range of initiatives, substantial barriers remain in achieving comprehensive accessibility. A key challenge lies in the financial resources required to deliver meaningful access and inclusion.

To address this effectively, both access and inclusion provisions must be embedded in the planning process from the outset rather than treated as secondary considerations. Early consultation with disability experts and sustained engagement with the community are critical to ensuring that provisions are well-informed and responsive to diverse needs. Long-term support—through government funding or philanthropic partnerships—is essential for maintaining and improving these efforts over time. Importantly, access and inclusion provisions must be sufficiently flexible to accommodate the full spectrum of disabilities, including non-visible ones.

The inconsistent reporting of such provisions across festivals highlights the need for standardised frameworks that enable rigorous evaluation and support continuous improvement. The lack of publicly available reviews and comprehensive audits limits the ability to assess effectiveness fully (Finkel and Dashper, 2020). To address these issues, several recommendations are proposed. First, establishing an online platform for feedback would enable festival patrons to share their experiences and provide valuable insights, facilitating real-time adjustments and improvements to access services. Second, conducting

regular audits and enhancing transparency in both festivals are crucial for ensuring that accessibility services effectively meet the needs of people with disabilities. Third, appointing a dedicated Access and Inclusion Manager at both festivals would provide a clear point of contact for access-related concerns and facilitate prompt resolution of issues.

Our study demonstrates how inclusive approaches by festivals advance the professional development of artists with disabilities through opportunities, financial support, and connections with presenters, while enhancing their representation in the mainstream arts sector (Rentschler *et al.*, 2024). It is recommended that festivals implement programmes such as mentorship, training, artist-in-residence schemes, and networking events to provide essential resources for artists with disabilities (Lee *et al.*, 2018; Fillis *et al.*, 2022). Including artists with disabilities in programming can further enhance their participation within the community.

Growing literature in event management has expanded the understanding of access and inclusion. Early work (Darcy and Harris, 2003) established accessibility as a core aspect of event planning, which evolved towards a rights-based approach to inclusion (Darcy, 2012) and the application of inclusive design principles to foster more equitable event experiences (Dickson *et al.*, 2016). Recent studies (Darcy *et al.*, 2019; Maxwell *et al.*, 2022) have linked inclusive event practices to broader outcomes such as career development, health, and wellbeing, with qualitative evaluations demonstrating their social impact within disability arts (Grabowski *et al.*, 2024). Building on this trajectory, our study contributes to the literature by examining two contemporary performing arts festivals, focusing on how curatorial models and programming decisions not only enhance accessibility but also actively support the representation and empowerment of artists with disabilities through inclusion.

A key contribution of this study is introducing Shore *et al.*'s (2011) inclusion framework to the festival context, offering a new lens to categorise levels of uniqueness and belonging for people with disabilities and to better understand how festivals can move beyond access to achieve meaningful inclusion. *Exclusion* highlights barriers preventing participating, while *Assimilation* shows how organisers conform to the dominant culture and downplay uniqueness. *Differentiation* indicates that people with disabilities are not considered insiders within the work group, although their unique characteristics are acknowledged as necessary for success. At *Inclusion*, people with disabilities actively collaborate in festival planning, promoting self-representation and empowerment. This framework provides both theoretical and practical insights for improving festival inclusivity. Furthermore, our findings reinforce the role of inclusive design in achieving positive outcomes and broader social impacts (Collins *et al.*, 2022; Grabowski *et al.*, 2024; Maxwell *et al.*, 2022).

This study identifies organisational practices that promote genuine inclusion and strengthen agency, collaboration, and belonging for artists with disabilities. To celebrate the agency of artists with disabilities, festivals must uphold disability-led practices, joint programming, and cross-promotion, fostering an inclusive arts community and preventing tokenism. Incorporating disability awareness and empathy into festival practices is key for effective collaboration. Securing government and philanthropic support ensures access and enhances capabilities (Lee *et al.*, 2023). Addressing industry discrimination requires implementing inclusive policies, such as safer space policies, which establish guidelines to prevent discrimination, harassment, and harm. These policies promote respectful behaviour, inclusive language, and accessible reporting, creating a safe and inclusive environment for all, particularly marginalised groups like people with disabilities. Although this paper relies solely on secondary data and focuses on two international performing arts festivals in a relatively advanced Western society, future research could empirically examine the impact of festival accessibility and inclusion on people with disabilities in diverse cultural contexts. Additionally, future studies could explore how audience behaviours, such as ableism and harassment, affect the experiences of participants with disabilities at festivals. While these issues are significant, our study focuses on the strategic approaches of performing arts festivals to disability access and inclusion. Non-inclusive behaviour from audience members is rarely detailed in public reports, which limited the scope of our analysis in this paper. Nonetheless, by

introducing an inclusion framework to the festival context, this study offers a foundation for future research and practice.

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