

Accessible tourism futures: the world we dream to live in and the opportunities we hope to have

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Abstract

Purpose – Accessible tourism is evolving as a field of academic research and industry practice, set within a dynamic social context. The field is interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary. The purpose of this paper is to examine key concepts and global initiatives that will shape accessible tourism futures.

Design/methodology/approach – Three of the authors have extensive academic experience in the area and the fourth author is the Managing Director of the pre-eminent European Network for Accessible Tourism. In taking a limited Delphi approach to canvassing key areas likely to shape accessible tourism futures, the following concepts and policy initiatives were examined: motivations, dreams and aspirations of people with disability; demography; UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; destination competitiveness; universal design (UD); and the UN Sustainable Development Goals for 2030.

Findings – A discussion of each of the above areas was placed in context to accessible tourism futures and to contextualise the papers that were selected for the special issue. The latter part of the paper outlines the contribution of each empirical paper to the issue discussing the approach, findings and implications. Stakeholder collaboration was identified as the key common theme of the papers and the factor for developing accessible tourism solutions, recognising the value of the market and capitalising on it. A collaborative approach is required to recognise the complementary nature of the different paradigms; to re-shape and transform the future of the accessible tourism industry. To assist in the development of accessible tourism futures, UD principles should provide a foundation to enhance the future competitiveness of tourism destinations and organisations.

Originality/value – The paper's examination of the concepts and global policy considerations provides a strong academic and practitioner foundation for considering accessible tourism futures. In doing so, accessible tourism futures are shown to be affected by key concepts related to core tourism considerations and major policy initiatives on accessibility and sustainability. Yet, accessible tourism futures also have the potential to create their own momentum and contribute unique learnings on the diversity of tourism markets that will shape tourism concepts and global policy initiatives in their own right.

Keywords Tourism, Futures, Disability, Accessible tourism, Tourism industry, Organization practice, Destination management

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

This special issue was designed to examine the future dimensions of the intersection of disability and tourism in the emerging field of accessible tourism. The special issue explores theoretical approaches, foundations and issues in the study of accessible tourism from a futures perspective. Accessible tourism, as with any area of academic study is an evolving field of academic research and industry practice, set within a dynamic social context. The field is

interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary, and is influenced by geography, ageing and disability studies, economics, public policy, psychology, law, architecture, construction sciences, technology and marketing. Past research has attempted to view, explain and unpack the inherent complexities (Darcy, 2010) within accessible tourism through a variety of lenses, including human rights, critical tourism, embodiment, customer segmentation and universal design (UD), to name a few (see Buhalis and Darcy, 2011; Buhalis *et al.*, 2012).

The special issue is timely given the operationalisation of the United Nations (2006) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities by 160 countries. Central to the convention is the right for tourists with disability to access transport and built environment in Article 9 and tourism experiences, goods and services within Article 30. It is therefore pertinent to look at the future of accessible tourism and contemplate a number of issues including (but not limited to) the role of technology in reshaping disability; if and how policy makers and planners are addressing the impact of accessible tourism in a sustainable manner; the political influence of people with disabilities, who make up the largest minority group in the USA, on the future of tourism; the science fiction of exoskeletons and gene therapy as a new form of adventure tourist; and the future state of embodied identity and accessible tourism.

The special issue provides the opportunity for contributors to take part in the current discourses on accessible tourism from a futures perspective, in order that we can understand, manage and contribute to the development of accessible tourism in the context of economically, socially and environmentally sustainable communities. Specific topics included conceptual and research papers, viewpoints and trend papers, both qualitative and quantitative, discussing topics relating to the future of accessible tourism. Papers include a range of issues including: inclusive destinations; accessible tourism in Development Planning (toward the UN Sustainable Development Goals 2030); policy-making for accessible tourism; embodiment; representation; law and legislation; architecture and universal design; inclusion/exclusion from experiences; markets and needs analysis; accessible transport; accessible events; accessibility and culture/heritage; accessible accommodation; education/training; and technology and applications.

In contrast to the past 30 years, where disability and tourism research has been largely concerned with overcoming barriers that exclude certain people (see Smith, 1987), we can discern the contours of new movements in accessible tourism, whereby overarching principles and standards of sustainability, social responsibility and customer service. The delivery of equitable tourism experiences demand the attention of sector actors and stakeholders. Accessible tourism, in this context, should be seen in the future as much more than a range of supports to excluded target groups, becoming a set of ground rules and codes of practice which contribute to the development of all tourism offers and destinations in an inclusive way.

If we should gaze into the crystal ball for a moment, we could envisage that tourism will not be defined primarily in terms of different target groups, since principles of responsibility, sustainability and accessibility will in the future inform the quality criteria to which all destinations should comply and be judged as part of destination competitiveness in increasingly global context. Customers will become more aware of their individual rights and also the need to protect and sustain communities and the natural environment, influencing tourism service providers to follow generally accepted rules of service quality, genuine interactivity and engagement with the local culture, people and resources.

The capability of tourism providers to recognise those rights for all (e.g. of tourists with disabilities, Design for All, responsible behaviour, inclusion of the local communities in a transparent system of remuneration and participation, working opportunities for socially excluded group etc.) is going to be the threshold, which determines whether their offers will succeed or fail in the future. The tourism sector will increasingly be seen as having transformational power as “a shaper of society”, acting as a promoter of jobs and economic growth, a participant in regional and community planning and a partner in global development programmes. In addition, tourism should be developed as industry that promotes understanding, inclusion and well-being for all in an equitable way.

Businesses, destinations and networks, that are already active in the field of accessible tourism and/or representing markets with different specific requirements will participate more widely in

the mainstream, bringing their expertise and knowledge to bear on all those issues that are still seen as “different types of tourism”. In the development of accessible destinations and experiences, the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (2015) will be playing an increasingly supportive role, especially through its Global Code for Ethics in Tourism and the recently published *Manuals on Accessible Tourism (2015)*, produced by ONCE Foundation and the European Network for Accessible Tourism (2015b).

Before discussing the papers that have been selected for publication we would like to set the scene by examining some major conceptual and policy development areas that we believe will have a significant influence on accessible tourism futures in the future. These include: dreams and aspirations of people with disability; demography; UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; destination competitiveness frameworks; UD; and the newly adopted UN Sustainable Development Goals for 2030. Each of these areas of influence will now be outlined prior to the papers for the special edition being summarised for their contribution to the future of accessible tourism.

Defining and conceptualising accessible tourism

Conceptualising accessible tourism to reflect all its dimensions and multidisciplinary is critical for the future. The study of tourism and disability has been a reasonably recent phenomenon with the first detailed examination emerging from the leisure constraints literature (Smith, 1987). From this beginning, a great deal of individual studies are emerged that documented significant issues with demand, supply and coordination of travel for people with disability. More recently the field has started to mature with a conceptualisation that has sought to make sense out of the individual studies and provide an overall framework for understanding the phenomena. To assist with this conceptualisation, Buhalis and Darcy (2011) offer the following definition:

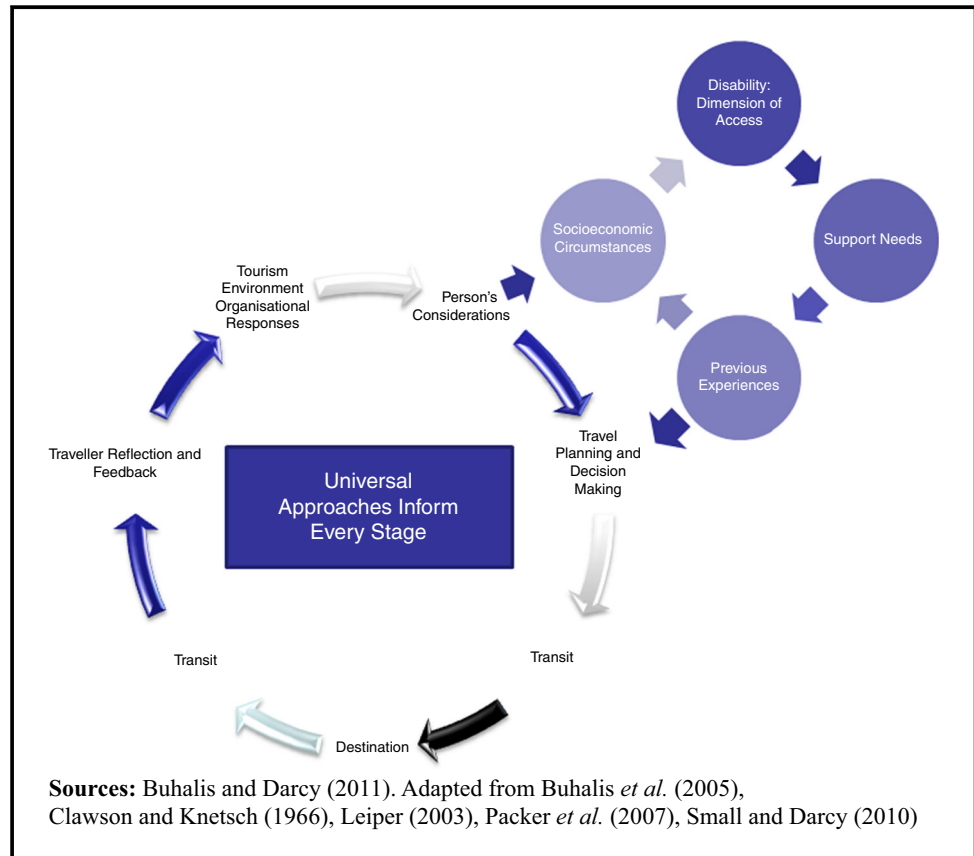
Accessible tourism is a form of tourism that involves collaborative processes between stakeholders that enables people with access requirements, including mobility, vision, hearing and cognitive dimensions of access, to function independently and with equity and dignity through the delivery of universally designed tourism products, services and environments. This definition adopts a whole of life approach where people through their lifespan benefit from accessible tourism provision. These include people with permanent and temporary disabilities, seniors, obese, families with young children and those working in safer and more socially sustainably designed environments (adapted from Darcy and Dickson, 2009, p. 34 in Buhalis and Darcy, 2011, pp. 10-11).

Importantly the definition recognises collaboration between stakeholders across demand, supply and coordination to recognise that disability is a complex construct involving mobility, vision, hearing, cognitive and other embodiments. The definition recognises that developing inclusive destinations and accessible tourism experiences also benefit other groups in the community. Hence, it contributes toward a greater social sustainability of the industry by including and, hence, providing for a much broader cross-section of consumers that has previously been considered by the industry. In understanding the importance of individuals with disability, the stakeholders they engage with and the influence of UD on the products, services and environments they wish to seek enabling experiences. Buhalis and Darcy (2011) suggests that to develop accessible tourism futures destination managers must strategically plan through the lens of UD. Figure 1 outlines the cyclical strategic approach to engaging UD approaches across disability and lifespan considerations as a foundation for developing future accessible destination experiences.

Dreams and aspirations of people with disability

The dreams and aspirations of individuals play a fundamental role in shaping the choices, which lead them to travel. Among people who live with a disability, the idea of leaving behind one's everyday surroundings and going on a journey can create significant anxiety (Darcy, 1998). People with disability often can design or influence their everyday environment whilst they have routines to negotiate any difficulties and thresholds that exist. This does not apply to new environments whilst travelling, where they do not have prior knowledge, networks or influence on the design nor the potential barriers that are to face and the way to overcome them. Indeed, a recent European survey (GfK, 2015) suggests that up to half of people with disability do not travel on holiday, due to a combination of lack of reliable information, lack of funds and previous bad experiences. Yet, the

Figure 1 Universal approaches



desire to travel remains with studies showing that it is not a person's impairment that impedes their travel but a series of interpersonal, attitudinal structural constraints (Daniels *et al.*, 2005; Darcy, 2003). In recognising that a person's impairment does not constrain their travel motivations, the boundaries to what is regarded as accessible tourism destinations and experiences are continually pushed by the accessible explorers who forge new pathways for others to follow.

Human rights frameworks and social frameworks

The United Nations' (2006) Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPWD) was introduced, recognizing that people with disability have a right to access services from all areas of citizenship including under Article 9 (related to transport and the built environment, and under Article 30 which relates to a "cultural life" including leisure, sport and tourism). The CRPWD was written from a social model approach to disability that recognises that it is not the person's impairment that "disables" someone from undertaking tourism experiences but the social, political and economic barriers that create the "disabling" tourism environment (see Barnes *et al.*, 2010; United Nations, 2006). This is very similar to Packer *et al.* (2007) research that discussed the interaction between those with disability, the tourism barriers they encounter including service attitudes that affect tourism participation adversely to people without disability. These types of constraints and barriers in tourism have been the focus of a great deal of disability and tourism research, with the more recent research on accessible tourism seeking to focus on the development of "enabling" practice.

While "people with disability" suggests a homogenous group who can be dealt with as a "market segment", the term belies a complexity that is multidimensional across mobility, vision, hearing, cognitive, mental health and other forms of embodiment (Darcy and Buhalis, 2011; Small and Darcy, 2011). As outlined in the World Report on Disability, the underlying definitions of impairment and disability are contextual in the way they are operationalised across the globe

(World Health Organization and World Bank, 2011). What is not disputed is that about 15 per cent of the global population or some one billion people are living with a disability (World Health Organization, 2013). Each person has unique abilities and disabilities, levels of support and assistive technology that creates a unique mix to consider with respect to the interaction with the tourism environment (Packer *et al.*, 2007). Therefore the tourism environment of the future needs to be designed in a way that allows for interaction between a person's abilities, their support needs and the assistive technologies to allow for the enjoyment of all.

Many people with disability can cite a plethora of examples of discrimination caused by negligent or unsuitable design or service provision. In the built environment, wheelchair users are frequently excluded by environmental barriers put in at the design stage: at railway platforms without lifts; at entrances to banks and businesses with revolving doors; and on pavements without dropped kerbs. The same design barriers, of course, are a challenge to parents with children in push-chairs and prams, shoppers with shopping bags, travellers with suitcases and employees occupational health and safety (Darcy and Dickson, 2009). Past and current design practice leads in many ways to the discrimination of people with disability. Unsuitable design prevents access to goods and services and to major areas of social participation such as travel, work and full participation in civil, social and cultural life for the majority of people with disability. It also reduces their independence, dignity, equity and self-determination, thus giving rise to the misconception that disabled people are unable to travel by themselves.

Central to a social approach to disability within developing enabling practice for accessible tourism, the CRPWD (UN, 2006) is underpinned by eight principles:

1. respect for inherent dignity, individual autonomy including the freedom to make one's own choices, and independence of persons;
2. non-discrimination;
3. full and effective participation and inclusion in society;
4. respect for difference and acceptance of persons with disabilities as part of human diversity and humanity;
5. equality of opportunity;
6. accessibility;
7. equality between men and women; and
8. respect for the evolving capacities of children with disabilities and respect for the right of children with disabilities to preserve their identities.

As stated, Article 9 provides a right to transportation and access to the built environment where Article 30 of the convention recognises the right to equal participation in tourism as an important part of any person's citizenship. Some 160 nations have adopted the CRPWD. Yet, as already identified, people with disabilities participate less in all forms of citizenship where the transportation of people with disabilities to tourism destinations, access to accommodation and attractions is central to those rights. Yet, as documented in the USA, UK and Australia, a series of discriminatory tourism practices exist that curtail the potential of the citizenship rights (Darcy and Taylor, 2009; Miller and Kirk, 2002; Ronald and Richard, 2001; Shaw *et al.*, 2007).

Millennium development goals (MDGs) and the UN global compact

At the Millennium Summit in September 2000 the largest gathering of world leaders in history adopted the UN Millennium Declaration, committing their nations to a global partnership to reduce extreme poverty and setting a series of targets, with a deadline of 2015. These targets, known as the MDGs are a set of eight specific goals set by the 191 United Nations member countries that have the goal of halving world poverty by the year 2015:

Eradicating extreme poverty continues to be one of the main challenges of our time, and is a major concern of the international community. Ending this scourge will require the combined efforts of all, governments, civil society organizations and the private sector, in the context of a stronger and more

effective global partnership for development. The Millennium Development Goals set timebound targets, by which progress in reducing income poverty, hunger, disease, lack of adequate shelter and exclusion – while promoting gender equality, health, education and environmental sustainability – can be measured. They also embody basic human rights – the rights of each person on the planet to health, education, shelter and security. The Goals are ambitious but feasible and, together with the comprehensive United Nations development agenda, set the course for the world's efforts to alleviate extreme poverty by 2015 (United Nations Secretary-General BAN Ki-moon).

The aim of the MDGs is to encourage development by improving social and economic conditions in the world's poorest countries. Since the MDG's were agreed to significant progress has been made. To date average overall incomes have increased by approximately 21 per cent. The number of people living in extreme poverty declined by an estimated 130 million. Child mortality rates fell from 103 deaths per 1,000 live births a year to 88. Life expectancy rose from 63 years to 65 years. An additional 8 per cent of the developing world's people received access to clean water and an additional 15 per cent acquired access to improved sanitation services. In 2015 the UN countries will adopt a new sustainable development agenda and a new global agreement on climate change. The actions taken in 2015 are expected to result in new sustainable development goals that build on the eight MDG's (United Nations, 2015).

Tourism has long been seen as having significant potential to help achieve the MDG's in developing countries. For example in 1990 developing countries had 18 per cent of international tourism receipts. By 2005 this had risen to 30 per cent and to date it continues to rise. There has been significant promotion of the direct economic links between tourists and the poor. Tourism may provide employment opportunities for marginalised groups, may bring direct income to individual communities and may promote equality in developing countries (Saarinen and Rogerson, 2013).

UD supports destination competitiveness

The tourism industry needs to design and deliver offerings and services that are suitable to all potential users and remove any physical or organisational barriers that can prevent visitation. UD incorporates the accessibility requirements of people with the widest possible range of abilities, so that the greatest number of people can use mainstream products and services without the need for adaptations or special interfaces. Additionally, mainstream products and services should use interface standards which match those of technical aids, so allowing disabled people to access and use mainstream equipment. UD has been defined as:

Universal design is the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design. The intent of the universal design concept is to simplify life for everyone by making products, communications, and the built environment more usable by more people at little or no extra cost. The universal design concept targets all people of all ages, sizes and abilities'. The Universal Design approach goes beyond traditional design, which tends to focus on the 'average' user. Universal Design is a design approach, reflecting a way of understanding people's needs. It is not a list of particular solutions, measurements, or products – Universal Design is the way to reach the solution, contributing to social inclusion (cited in Center for Universal Design, 2009; and first articulated by Mace, 1985).

Applying the principles of UD can be seen as a way of developing tourism environments, transportation, services and offers, underpinning sustainable communities and businesses. Today, according to a recent study by European Network for Accessible Tourism (2015a) and partners, less than 10 per cent of tourism suppliers in Europe offer "accessible" tourism services, while demand for such services is set to increase due to the ageing population and continuing upward trend in market demand. Adopting UD enlarges the target markets of destinations as well as ensures that more pleasant experiences can be delivered. Therefore it can increase the market base, reduce seasonality and support the competitiveness of destinations (Buhalis, 2000). Yet, few studies have examined accessible tourism in relation to destination management and only recently has accessible tourism been examined from destination competitiveness perspective (Domínguez Vila *et al.*, 2015).

Papers in this issue

To address these concepts and developments this special issue is bringing a range of papers together that discuss research on many accessibility tourism aspects.

Naniopoulos and Tsalis (2015) discuss a methodology for addressing the accessibility of monuments. They focus on heritage attraction sites, highlighting the challenges with archaeological sites where interventions become problematic or even impossible. In doing so, they approached accessibility as a dual notion; accessibility of an area and its potential for independent physical access and movement around the monuments as well as perceived accessibility in terms of interpreting, understanding and learning from the environment. The methodology was applied to a number of byzantine monuments as part of a cultural route in the city of Thessaloniki in Greece, as case studies. Results provide both tools for assessing monument accessibility (process orientations and checklists) and insights into the needs of travellers with disabilities for more “usable” heritage attractions. Concluding remarks place a focus on the prerequisites of training and cooperation to allow for the future of accessible monuments to be realised.

Tsalis *et al.* (2015) provide an interesting study on the challenges of implementing accessibility solutions, also within the context of protection, conservation, and management of historical centres and monuments. Viewed from a tourism perspective, archaeological sites and monuments are location bound and exist only in their original place. Hence, access to such sites enables unique and authentic tourism experiences. Discourses on objective, constructive and existential authenticity are of paramount importance when accessibility is concerned. This study provides relevant examples of accessibility interventions on six monuments as well as considerations on the design of the tools that assisted site interpretation and interconnection in a cultural route. Results demonstrate how accessibility improvements can occur while respecting the history, architecture and character of the monuments. The study concludes by emphasizing that it is primarily through providing greater access, that the “socialisation” of these monuments will propagate authentic tourism experiences in the future.

Bowtell (2015) offers an examination of the market value and attractiveness of accessible tourism in Europe. Historic data were used to provide a forecast for 2025, while primary data obtained from travel and leisure companies provided insights into managerial perceptions. Findings show a very promising potential for accessible tourism market with significant projected revenues. However, a number of challenges including lack of awareness, cost of investments, complexity of customers’ needs and legal inconsistencies within the EU, create barriers toward developing comprehensive solutions for accessible tourism. Authors provide recommendations on bridging demand and supply.

Gillovic and McIntosh (2015) present an interesting study on stakeholder perspectives of the future of accessible tourism in New Zealand. The study provides insights into the current situation and the future propensity for an accessible tourism industry in New Zealand. A number of interviews with key stakeholders revealed that there is a need to develop a culture of accessibility that is perceived as the norm. Findings also include the business and demand arguments, but additionally highlighted the “ineptness” of upper industry levels to recognize the opportunity of accessible tourism, exhibiting apathy and complacency instead. Authors conclude with recommendations for the future of accessible tourism in New Zealand which can easily be generalised for other regions.

Zajadacz (2015) discusses the evolution of models of disability as a basis for the future development of accessible tourism. A review of medical, social, biopsychosocial, geographical and economic models of disability reveals the theoretical underpinnings and assumptions entailed in those. These are then linked to tourism, demonstrating that different models influence the tourism provision in terms of both products and services. Authors highlight the understanding of disability under different models toward diverse tourism experiences. Several suggestions are offered on the complementarity of the models and the implications on the transformation of the accessible tourism industry in the future.

Cruces Portales (2015) uses a scenario planning approach to envisage alternative futures for accessible tourism. With a timeframe leading to 2050, four alternative futures are unravelled

through storytelling. The scenarios are built on a matrix that includes the opposing forces of empathy – apathy, and fear of loss and certainty of benefits. The resulting, aptly named scenarios (Eden Gardens, Golden Bridge, Wasted Future and State of Hope) showcase different behaviours, schedules of changes and insights. Authors conclude with strategic ideas and proposals for the future of accessible tourism.

Conclusion

When exploring the future of tourism in this area two opposing trends can be observed: future societies are predicted to become more similar, more homogenous as a consequence of consumerism, globalisation and converging urban lifestyles. However, the accessible tourism market is characteristically diverse, with complex needs and the range of dreams and ambitions is boundless. Will future global travellers be able to access more varied and personal services or will increasing numbers of travellers give rise to greater standardization of services?

Accessible tourism as an emerging field of study will influence tourism destination competitiveness in the future, whether that be from a human rights, emerging market segment or service delivery perspective. In this conceptual examination, we have presented implications of number of theoretical constructs and lenses through which accessible tourism will be influenced in the future. In this special issue, a number of future dimensions are explored that demonstrate how the field has moved from an examination of the intersection of disability and tourism, to one that is clearly defined through conceptual and definitional approaches as accessible tourism. There is a common thread amongst all the papers presented in this special issue. They focus around stakeholder collaboration, as a foundation for the future development of accessible tourism. It has been explicitly suggested that raising awareness amongst stakeholders is essential to overcome barriers inhibiting the application of solutions that enhance access. The importance of stakeholder collaboration across the accessible tourism value chain has been emphasized in a number of ways in this special issue.

Improving accessibility of facilities, transportation, attractions and destinations more generally, demands the collaboration of a wide range of stakeholders including architects, designers, economists, local councils, policy makers, travellers with disabilities, historians and archaeologists to name a few. Therefore “socialising” tourism means that access can be granted only when a number of relevant stakeholders are in accord, work together and specifically developed strategies to target the accessible tourism market. Stakeholder collaboration is a key factor for developing accessible tourism solutions, recognising the value of the market and capitalising on it. Hence, a collaborative approach is required to recognise the complementary nature of the different paradigms; to re-shape and transform the future of the accessible tourism through influencing the tourism industry, contributing government organisations and the not-for-profit sectors. The strength and depth of stakeholder collaborations will determine alternative future realities; from a future where all cooperate and share benefits for all parties, to a fatalistic picture where each stakeholder is sailing alone because they consider their interests incompatible, and everything in between. UD should provide a better accessible tourism future that should enhance the competitiveness of tourism destinations and organisations.

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Further reading

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