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**BaGMIVI – Bridging
the Gap between Museums
and Individuals with Visual
Impairments**

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The BaGMIVI Consortium

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1.Executive Summary

The present Intellectual Output (O1: Needs Assessment Study) constitutes part of the activities of a European Project entitled “BaGMIVI: **B**ridging the **G**ap between **M**useums and **I**ndividuals with **V**isual **I**mpairments" with code number: “2014-1-EL01-KA200-001631. The coordinating partner is the University of Thessaly and Dr. Vassilios Argyropoulos acts as the Coordinator of the project.

According to the approved proposal of BaGMIVI Project the first intellectual output (O1) is a needs assessment study which included the following phases of activities:

1st Phase: Literature Review.

The 1st phase included relevant literature review with research data and theoretical perspectives regarding museums and people with visual impairments. This research was conducted at local and international level through reports, books and journals.

2nd Phase: Relevant Research

The 2nd phase included the conduction of interviews with individuals with visual impairments and teachers of students with visual impairments. The purpose of this phase was to explore their experiences and perspectives regarding the level of accessibility and inclusion of students with visual impairments to the museums. Also the 2nd phase included the development of a questionnaire which aimed to explore museum staff members’ needs and experiences regarding visitors with visual impairments.

The chief participating organisations of Intellectual Output O1 (including the leading organisation) are:

- 1.UNIVERSITATEA BABES BOLYAI (Romania)
- 2.BULGARIAN ASSOCIATION FOR EDUCATION OF VISUALLY IMPAIRED CHILDREN (Bulgaria)
- 3.SOFIISKI UNIVERSITET SVETI KLIMENT OHRIDSKI (Bulgaria)
- 4.EOTVOS LORAND TUDOMANYEGYETEM (Hungary)
- 5.UNIVERSITY OF THESSALY (Greece - Coordinator)

The analysis of the obtained data led to the completion of Intellectual Output 1 (O1) which is the needs’ assessment study. The following sections consist of a summary of the literature review (1st phase) and a brief description of the results of the conducted research (2nd phase).

2. Relevant literature review: Theoretical Framework of the BaGMIVI Project (1st Phase of the Needs Assessment Study)

Relevant literature review has revealed some basic topics and key points which shaped the theoretical framework of the BaGMIVI project (see Box 1):

- 2.1 The rights of people with disabilities – Social model of disability
- 2.2 The educational and social role of the museums in the 21st century
- 2.3 Issues of accessibility
- 2.4 The relationship between museums and individuals with visual impairments
- 2.5 Reflections on legislations and practices (Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary).

Box 1. Basic topics of relevant literature review regarding O1

2.1. The rights of people with disabilities – Social model of disability

The improvement of access to museums for individuals with visual impairment is the aim of the BaGMIVI project and is expected to be a step toward the implementation of the rights of all people for access to cultural goods. This aim is in line with many conventions which recognize the right of all people for access to cultural goods (e.g. UN, 1948, article 27:1; UN, 2006, article 30:1)

A key topic of the theoretical basis of the BaGMIVI project is the social model of disability (Barnes, Mercer & Shakespeare, 1999; Oliver, 1990). The social model of disability stresses issues like the barriers of the society which isolate and exclude people with disabilities from equal social participation. Thus, the adoption of the social model of disability had a significant impact on policies and practices towards disability, including those of museums (Argyropoulos & Kanari, 2015; Moussouri, 2007).

2.2. The educational and social role of the museum in the 21st century

“Bridging the gap between museums and individuals with visual impairments” is an initiative which is expected to contribute to the educational and social role of museums with impact to cultural accessibility for individuals with visual impairments. The above is in line with the development of the role of museums as cultural institutions. Museums in the 21st century are considered as spaces with a multidimensional and wide educational and social role (Black,

2005; Hooper-Greenhill, 2007, 1999; Sandell, 2002). Over the past decades museums have redefined their relationship with their audiences (Black, 2005; Vergo, 1989) and this relationship is reflected on the museums' definition of the International Council of Museums (<http://icom.museum/the-vision/museum-definition/>). Museums have recognized that their audience is not homogeneous but consists of different people with different needs, different ages, different characteristics and backgrounds (e.g. social, religious, ethnic, cultural, etc.), different interests and expectations (Black, 2005; Hooper-Greenhill, 1999a). The recognition of the heterogeneous audience in combination with the finding that museums for a long time were addressing limited social groups (Merriman, 1999), have led museums to redefine their relationship with their audiences and their social and educational role in order to contact different people and respond to contemporary social changes. In this framework the investigation of the needs, perceptions and suggestions of individuals with visual impairments may be a good starting point to tackle critical issues in the BaGMIVI project.

2.3. Issues of accessibility

The need of museums to address and develop new audiences and the need to build sustainable relationships with their audiences, have led museums to investigate the nature of access as well as to identify different barriers of access. As Weisen states (2008:247), barriers to access constitute a “*multidimensional reality*” or in other words there are different types of access such as the physical access, sensory, intellectual, emotional/attitudinal, financial, cultural, digital access, etc. (Dodd & Sandell, 1998; Weisen, 2008).

Regarding access of people with disabilities to museums, it is true that access for people of disabilities is a major issue of discussion in museums around the world. However, there are lot of differences among different countries and museums regarding the type, the variety and the systematic character of accessibility provisions, facilitations and programmes for people with disabilities (EBU, 2012; Sandell & Dodd, 2010; Weisen, 2008). In terms of individuals with visual impairments, a recent research of the European Blind Union revealed that the right of individuals with visual impairments for access to cultural life is “*poorly implemented*” (EBU, 2012).

In order to build bridges between society and museums it is vital to consider the relationship between education and museums since a significant barrier of access to culture and museums may stem by the limited educational opportunities (Weisen, 2008:247). In this direction,

teachers' role is significant since they can organize visits to museums for children from different backgrounds or different needs (Kanari, 2014; Vemi & Kanari, 2008). Teachers may contribute to meaningful learning experiences as well as to positive social experiences for their students including those with disabilities encouraging them to participate in different spaces and actions and develop different skills and positive attitudes towards museums (Pearson & Aloysious, 1994). School visits in museums may enrich and support school life and practice in relation to various learning objectives (Kanari, 2014; Rosenberg, Schroder & Wheelock, 2003) and also, teachers' experience regarding inclusive practices in special or/and mainstream schools may also provide valuable information to museums' staff and enrich their practices (Shepherd, 2009).

Hence, based on the above, it may be argued that collaborations between museums and schools are very important with lots of benefits for children with disabilities including those with visual impairments. As Castellano states in Art Beyond Sight handbook (<http://www.artbeyondsight.org/handbook/az-museum-school.shtml>): *“museum educators, along with school staff, can create an atmosphere of opportunity for blind students by making contact with active, competent blind adults, learning positive attitudes about blindness, and encouraging independence and full participation on the part of blind students”*. The author gave strong emphasis on museums and school partnerships and on the preparation to museums tours. Museums have the privilege to create opportunities inviting students with and without disabilities to experience art and history through a range of inclusive practices. For example, projects with visually impaired and sighted students (Hayhoe, 2013), show how museums after adaptation are able to play an important role in many ways and in social inclusion. In this framework, one of the main aims of the BaGMIVI project is to shape and promote strategic partnerships between museums and schools.

2.4.The relationship between museums and individuals with visual impairments

The BaGMIVI project assumes that there is an existing gap between museums and individuals with visual impairments which is related with one of the most important “missions” of museums; to display exhibits and preserve them at the same time (Argyropoulos & Kanari, 2015; Hetherington, 2000, 2003). This characteristic of museums as *“spaces of seeing”* (Hetherington, 2000:447), is in the heart of many discussions about blind people access to museums.

In order to remove this barrier museums organize a variety of activities and provide facilitations for the access of people with visual impairments to their collection and spaces such as:

- guided or self-guided touch tours (i.e. tours that individuals with visual impairments can explore by touch original exhibits, models, tactile diagrams or other objects (Axel & Levent, 2003; Levent, Kleege & Pursley, 2013),
- tactile exhibitions (i.e. exhibitions that are accessible to individuals with visual impairments by touch), (Hayhoe, 2013a; Kalou, 2012; Pearson, 1991),
- tactile material (i.e. relevant material such as tactile maps, tactile books, tactile diagrams that provide supplementary information to the visitor who has visual disabilities giving him/her the opportunity to extract information by touch) (Ginley, 2013; Landau, 2010; Ziebarth, 2010),
- verbal/audio descriptions [i.e. means that provide information and enhance the access of individuals with visual impairment aurally such as a “*narrative technique*” (Snyder, 2003: 224)]. This may be feasible by downloading audio guides or descriptions of relevant events on smart phones) (Axel & Levent, 2003; Snyder, 2003; Levent, Kleege & Pursley, 2013; Ginley, 2013),
- information in braille or in large print, magnifying glasses, access and facilitations for guide and assistance dogs, etc. (Axel & Levent, 2003; McGinnis, 1999; Ginley, 2013).
- educational programmes, workshops and other activities for students and adults with visual impairments (Axel & Levent, 2003; Ginley, 2013).

Although many steps have been made towards the direction of an inclusive museum, there are a lot of differences among museums regarding the level of access for individuals with visual impairments who still face many barriers in museums (EBU, 2012; Weisen, 2008). Among these barriers are the limited choices, the limited permanent access facilitations (e.g. limited exhibits available to touch, temporary tactile exhibitions, etc.) (Boussaid, 2004; Candlin, 2003; Weisen, 2008), the lack of museum staff awareness in disability issues (De Coster & Loots, 2004; Kanari & Argyropoulos, 2014; Weisen, 2008), and/or difficulties to decide spontaneously to visit a museum (Argyropoulos & Kanari, 2015; Boussaid, 2004; Reich et al., 2011), difficulties or lack of access to information or lack of publicity (Weisen, 2008). In this framework BaGMIVI project aims to the improvement of access to museums for individuals

with visual impairments as well as to the development of partnerships between museums and schools, museum staff and teachers of students with visual impairments.

2.5. Reflections on legislations and practices: Greece, Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania.

The following section includes a summary of the literature review which was conducted at national level by each participating country in the BaGMIVI project: Greece, Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania. The literature review at national level has put emphasis to relevant legislation regarding the rights of individuals with disabilities as well as practices for the access to museums and cultural activities.

The literature review which was conducted by the participating countries in the BaGMIVI project, revealed that there are many laws that insure and promote the rights of individuals with disabilities in all sectors of social life such as education, built environment, health, work and employment, participation in social, political, and cultural life. Although there are some differences among the participating countries regarding the time of the introduction of these laws, regulations and orders or revisions, there is a coherent and discrete legislation for the protection of the rights of people with disabilities. For example, all participating countries have ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Optional Protocol on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [(i. e. 2012 for Greece (Law 4074/2012), 2012 for Bulgaria by the Bulgarian National Assembly (law published in the Governmental official paper in issue 12/ 10.02.2012), 2007 for Hungary by the Hungarian Parliament (XCII Act 2007) and 2010 for Romania (Law no.221/2010)].

2.5.1 Greek context

Regarding practices towards access to museums and cultural life it seems that despite the differences among the participating countries in the BaGMIVI project there are some important relevant initiatives. For example, in Greece one important initiative for the access of individuals with visual impairments to museum exhibits was the foundation of the Tactual Museum (<http://www.tactualmuseum.gr/indexe.htm>) in Athens by the Greek Lighthouse for the Blind during 80s. The collections of the Tactual Museum consist of replicas from important artifacts of different historical periods (Asideri, 2004; Benaki, 1991). Furthermore, museums in Greece have focused on enabling access for people with disabilities by developing educational programmes. Some museums began to carry out educational

programmes for children with disabilities and special educational needs from the 1980s and 1990s (Kanari & Argyropoulos, 2014; Kanari & Vemi, 2012; Ministry of Culture, 2004; Velioti-Georgopoulou & Tountasaki, 1997). Gradually, there was an accumulated interest for the access of people with disabilities to museums in Greece the last decade; representative examples may be the proclamation of 2003 which is considered as the European Year of People with Disabilities and the Olympic and Paralympic Games in Athens in 2004 which had a great impact on museums regarding matters of accessibility (Argyropoulos & Kanari, 2015; Kanari & Argyropoulos, 2014; Levi, 2005; Tsitouri, 2004). Over the past years Greek museums have developed various activities for people with visual impairments such as: educational programmes for schoolchildren with visual impairments (Kanari & Argyropoulos, 2014; Kanari & Vemi, 2012; Tsitouri, 2004), accessibility programmes, such as the programme “Touching Art” of the State Museum of Contemporary Art in Thessaloniki (<http://greekstatemuseum.com/kmst/education/accessibility.html>), participation to international initiatives such as “Art Beyond Sight Awareness Month” of the International Organization Art Education for the Blind (AEB) as for example the National Archaeological Museum in Athens (<http://www.namuseum.gr/museum/pressreleases/2009/pr05-2009/pressrelease05-gr.html>), temporary tactile and multisensory exhibitions and programmes (Chaitas & Trada, 2010; Emmanouil & Avgoulas, 2011; Kalou, 2012), touch guided tours and permanent touch tours as for example the Byzantine and Christian Museum in Athens (EBU, 2012; Konstantios, 2008). Also, in many cases museums seek to collaborate with associations for the blind and individuals with visual impairments in order to develop programmes, services or material accessible to blind visitors such as information in braille, tactile diagrams, touch tours, etc (Emmanouil & Avgoulas, 2011; Kalou, 2012; Konstantios, 2008).

However, people with visual impairments still face many difficulties in Greek museums since the majority of tactile exhibitions are temporary and usually take place in big cities such as in Athens and in Thessaloniki and less in province (Levi, 2005; Tsitouri, 2005). It seems that there are a lot of differences between museums regarding the level of access offered to individuals with disabilities (Nakou, 2010). That is to say, that museums in province seem to confront more difficulties regarding the development of programmes for individuals with visual impairments because of lack of infrastructure, financial resources and training in disability issues compared to museums located in big cities (Kanari & Argyropoulos, 2014).

2.5.2 Bulgarian context

In Bulgaria there are some Key strategic documents which have been adopted by the Government of Republic of Bulgaria pertinent to policies related to people with disabilities as for example the following:

The “Strategy to ensure equal opportunities for people with disabilities 2008 – 2015” which was updated in 2012 in accordance with the mechanism for monitoring the implementation of guidelines to ensure equal opportunities for people with disabilities. The strategy contains 8 goals. Goal 7 “Ensuring equal opportunities for sport, recreation, tourism and participation in cultural life” includes content such as: i. participation in cultural events and entertainment, ii. creating conditions for development of talented children with disabilities by encouraging their creativity and stimulating art schools and creative unions of artists, musicians, artists, museums, galleries and cultural institutions to implement programmes involving children with disabilities, iii. availability of artistic works, iv. trained staff available for sports, entertainment, tourism, culture and other communication with people with disabilities, v. development of projects for art, culture and sport for people with disabilities and their organizations, vi. conditions for development and integrated training in the field of science, art, sports for children with disabilities, vii. promotion of public and private organizations in the field of culture, sports, leisure and tourism to undertake regular training on awareness of disability for their staff as a mainstream activity, etc.

Another initiative in Bulgaria is the “Action Plan on equal opportunities for people with disabilities 2014 – 2015”, planned to adopt a strategy to ensure equal opportunities for people with disabilities. It provides measures on participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sport. Of particular importance are the activities foreseen for the provision of public awareness on the problems of people with disabilities. The specific measures in the plan are related to ensuring physical access to public buildings, housing, open spaces and workplaces, equal opportunities for sport, recreation, tourism and participation in cultural life. Section A of the Action Plan refers to the museums and postulates: Museums and art galleries operate on providing equal access of visitors to the museum spaces. Starting point in this direction are the texts of the Cultural Heritage Act, which oblige cultural institutions to provide appropriate conditions for access to museum exhibitions to people with disabilities (Section 186 of the Law on Cultural Heritage). Children, students and people with disabilities pay reduced prices or are exempt from payment of an admission ticket (Sections 185-187 of the Law on Cultural Heritage). Museums should work not only for the physical access of people with disabilities

to exposures, but also on educational impact of exhibits that may have on people with disabilities. It is necessary to carry out an amendment of regulations to regulate access to the museums of accompanying persons with disabilities and the development of models of movable cultural property for blind visitors. Also, in the field of the international cooperation, it should be noted that on 28.07.2013, Bulgaria acceded to the Treaty of Marrakech of the World Organization of Intellectual Property to facilitate access to published works/materials for blind and visually impaired persons or for people with other visual disabilities that prevent them from reading printed publications. In November 2014 the Ministry of Culture in Bulgaria accepted an official Concept with concrete proposals for improving the current legislation. Section A is dedicated to the field of culture.

2.5.3 Hungarian context

In Hungary, it is accepted that in museums the physical environment and services should be created in such a way that as many people as possible can gain access. For this purpose a short publication was published in Hungary in 2008. In the publication rehabilitation engineers, museum experts and special education professionals were expressing attitude, knowledge and practice about open access participation to exhibitions. The approach was integrating all aspects of individuals living with diverse special needs including blindness and low vision (Arpassy, Gyorgy, Kormanyos, Pandual & Pronay, 2008). Visits to museums and participation in museum programmes is based on the accessibility of the built environment and the access to service and information offered there (Arpassy, Gyorgy, Kormanyos, Pandual & Pronay, 2008). Three aspects are highlighted for testing accessibility and participation: a. public transport to the building and identification of the building, b. access to and within the building and c. access to services and relevant information offered in advance and during the visit in the building.

Regarding other initiatives for the access of individuals with visual impairments several exhibitions were created for people with visual impairments in the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest. In the exhibitions, copies of objects, dresses and models were combined with written descriptions (“The time of Sigmund”, “Copts in Egypt”). In one of these exhibitions (“... and then the Inca’s arrived”) special descriptions of objects were audio taped for audio guide use. One of the latest events was a 5-day exhibition in cooperation with the Miro Museum of Barcelona to exhibit tactile versions of Miro’s pictures. The last exhibition ran for 5 months and included 8 tactile and reduced in size versions of Rembrandt’s pictures together

with models of typical objects of the time. The last two exhibitions were sponsored by the 90decibel Foundation. This foundation is also preparing audio narration to films and theater performances for visually impaired visitors (www.90decibel.hu). A travelling exhibition is organized by the Kezzelfogható Foundation (Tangible Foundation) since 2013 (<http://kezzelfogható.hu>). There are several other examples of different approaches of accessible exhibitions all over the country. Some of these exhibitions mentioned here are successful and/or got a lot of critical comments by visually impaired visitors. Cooperation and joint programs of museums and schools are getting more and more popular in Hungary.

It is also worth mentioning that great emphasis has been given to training programmes for museum staff. Personal assistance and help provided by the exhibition depends on attitude and knowledge of employee about special needs. In Hungary, it was organized a 4-day course for museum staff on skills to assist visitors with different disabilities in museums. One of the most successful courses is *“Do you understand? Yes, I do! How can we manage to have visitors with disability in museums?”* (in Hungarian: "Érted?! -Értem!" Hogyan fogadjuk fogyatékos embertársainkat múzeumainkban? <http://mökk.skanzen.hu/erted-ertem-hogyan-fogadjuk-fogyatekos-embertarsainkat-muzeumainkban.html>) organized by the Museum Education and Training Center (Múzeumi Oktatási és Képzési Központ). Topics, such as equal opportunities to access information, physical accessibility, and cooperation with interest groups of people with disability, special needs of those with visual, hearing and physical impairments, complex activities for individuals with intellectual disabilities are all included in the training course.

2.5.4 Romanian context

In Romania some relevant projects about accessibility and museums are the following: The project entitled “Feel Art in 6 museums” was carried out by the Association for the Urban Development and it was financed by Orange Foundation. The objectives of the project were: a. the introduction in the museums of equipments and services adapted to people with disabilities (tactile exhibitions, catalogues, braille maps, tactile carpets, audio guides, sign language interpreters, etc.), b. the organization of visits and free workshops and c. the awareness and increase of opportunities for access to museums of people with disabilities (<https://simtearta.wordpress.com/>, <http://www.simtearta.ro>).

The project “InclusivART”, which was organized by the National Art Museum of Romania 2013 addresses people with sensory, motor, cognitive, emotional disabilities and disorders. Within this project financed by the Administration of the National Cultural fund, at the Art Collections Museums a space was planned for people with special needs, a space with materials and products that it is expected to increase awareness for the target groups regarding museum and art collections, history of art. The tactile gallery of the Art Collections Museum will be a permanent explorative and interactive space that will contain replicas and tactile diagrams of the art works exhibited in the museum, kits and multisensory models as well as braille catalogues. The project also aims to develop modified educational programs with respect to different categories of people with disabilities.

Another initiative in Romania was the “Second edition of the exhibition: REHA for the Blind in Romania (29-30 May 2014): The world through touch and sound organized by Chance for the Blind” (Foundation in partnership with National Library of Romania and National Council of Disability). The activities proposed in this edition refer to: a. Meeting of people with visual impairments together with support services and organisations to find solutions for a better independence, b. Presentations of organisations and companies that offer services for people with disabilities, c. Exhibition with international participation with modern technology for the use of people with visual impairments, d. Movie presentation with audio description for people with visual impairments and e. Sport and recreative activities for people with visual impairment (<http://www.mnar.arts.ro/inclusivart/galerie-tactila>).

3. Relevant Research (2nd Phase of the Needs Assessment Study)

According to the approved proposal of BaGMIVI Project the 2nd phase of the needs assessment study (O1) included a research part. The following sections describe the research that has been conducted for the needs assessment study and a summary of the main results that have been revealed. The research has been conducted in 2014-2015 in three fields: a. Special schools for blind students and more specifically special education teachers of these schools (silent partners of the BaGMIVI project), b. Individuals with visual impairments and c. Museum staff (partners of the BaGMIVI project).

3.1. The aims of the research

The research aims were the following:

- a. to investigate the experiences and the needs of special education teachers regarding school visits in museums with students with visual impairments.
- b. to investigate the experiences and the needs of individuals with visual impairments regarding visits in museums.
- c. to investigate the needs of museums' staff regarding issues of accessibility for people with visual impairments.

3.2. Method

3.2.1. Sample

As it was mentioned above the research has been conducted in three fields. The sample for each field was the following:

- a. Special education teachers from special schools for blind students. The participants in this research were in total 50 special education teachers. The participants were working in special schools for the blind which are the partners of the BaGMIVI Project in four different countries: Greece, Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary.
- b. Individuals with visual impairments. The participants in this field of research were in total 71 persons with visual impairments from four different countries: Greece, Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary.
- c. Museum Staff. The participants in this field of research were individuals from the staff of the museums which are partners of the BaGMIVI Project in four different countries: Greece, Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary. The participants were in total 55 persons

with different specialties in the museums such as museum educators, other scientific staff and security guards (Table 1).

Table 1: The sample of the research

	Greece	Bulgaria	Romania	Hungary	Total
Participants					
Special education teachers	8	10	6	26	50
Individuals with visual impairments	20	21	15	15	71
Museums staff	16	3	19	17	55

3.2.2. Instruments and research design

The data for the development of the needs assessment study were obtained via semi-structured interviews in case of special education teachers and individual with visual impairments. This type of interviews has been organized on an interview guide with some basic axes/issues. The basic axes of the interviews were the following:

- A. Experiences and perceptions for museums
- B. Issues of access (facilitations or barriers)
- C. Social interaction (with the museum staff, other visitors)
- D. Suggestions

The suggested questions of the semi-structured interviews were organized around the above axes. However, this type of interviews provide the researchers the flexibility for further questions and clarifications and at the same time provide the interviewees the option to express their opinions or describe their experiences (Cohen & Manion, 1994). Two interview guides were proposed. In case of semi-structured interviews with special education teachers the first interview guide referred to teachers of students with visual impairments and had experience of museum school visits and the second one referred to those who had students with visual impairments and did not have any experience from museum school visits. Similarly, in case of individuals with visual impairments two interview guides were also proposed. The first one referred to individuals with visual impairments who have visited museums (in other words have some kind of experiences from museum visits) and the second one referred to those who have no experiences from museum visits.

The interviews were conducted at the participants work places, clubs (e.g. associations for the blind) or at their homes. All the participants were informed about the BaGMIVI project, the aims of the research and of course about the anonymity and the confidentiality of the data. After the transcription and the translation of the data the analysis of the qualitative data (semi-structured interviews) was held with content analysis (Dey, 1993). Regarding the third field of the research which is the museums' staff (partners in the BaGMIVI Project) the data were obtained via questionnaires. The questionnaires consisted mainly by closed questions.

3.3 Results of the research

The following sections include a summary of the main results of the research in each field (special education teachers, individuals with visual impairments and museums' staff) regarding the needs of stakeholders for the improvement of access to museums for people with visual impairments.

3.3.1 Special education teachers (special schools for the blind)

More than half of the participants reported that they had experiences from school visits in museums with their students with visual impairments. The majority of the special education teachers who had experiences from school visits in museums reported that they have visited the museums following a guided tour (special or general) or an educational programme.

Regarding the special education teachers who had not experiences from school visits in museums with their students with visual impairments it seems that the main reason for not visiting museums is related with issues of specific administrative roles in their schools which means that school visits in museums were not part of their duties. Other reasons for not visiting museums are related with the special educational needs of the students (e.g. multiple disabilities) and the lack of appropriate educational programmes for students with visual impairments and multiple disabilities, the age of children, the lack of access or the teaching subjects which according to teachers' opinion do not require visits in museums.

According the answers of the special education teachers who had experiences from school visits in museums the main **factors that facilitated the access of their students with visual impairments** were the following: a. Accessibility provisions, b. Museums' staff positive

attitudes, c. Educational programmes and guided tours and d. Support of other persons (teachers and escorts) (Table 2).

More specifically all the special education teachers who had experiences from school visits in museums with their students with visual impairments reported various facilitations or provisions on the part of museums for the access of the students to the museum collections.

The main facilitation was the **tactile exploration** of exhibits, replicas or other objects in the museum or in special areas in some museums. Furthermore, as it was mentioned above the majority of the special education teachers who had experiences from school visits in museums reported that they have visited the museums following a guided tour (special or general) or an educational programme. Besides the guided tour or the educational programme, an important facilitating factor is the **verbal descriptions**. Also, it was mentioned that in some cases the information was given to students with legends or stories. The **audio tours/guides** are also a facilitation that has been reported from some of the participants as well as **information in braille**. Also there were some references about the role of **light** in the area of museums or other **facilitations for the orientation** in museums.

An important factor that has been reported by special education teachers for the facilitation of the access of students with visual impairments to museums is the **attitudes on the part of museums' staff**. The positive attitudes in combination with the communicational skills, the support and the detailed description had impact to the access of students with visual impairments to the museums. Special education teachers also reported the significant role of the **educational programmes**, their content and others activities which are included in the educational programme in addition with explanations and descriptions or the access through touch. There were also references to other ways of access using different senses like smell or sound (e.g. museum with instruments) or references to interactive exhibitions. Special education teachers also pointed out their own role or the **role of other persons** regarding access to museums like the escorts.

Table 2: Facilitating factors of access to museums for schoolchildren with visual impairments

Accessibility provisions/facilitations	Tactile access
	Verbal descriptions
	Audio guides
	Information in braille
	Museum area lighting
	Provisions for orientation
Museum staff's positive attitudes	Acceptance
Educational programmes/guided tours	Variety of activities
	Various senses
	Interactive exhibits
Support of other persons	Teachers
	Escorts

In contrast, according to the answers of the special education teachers who had experience from school visits in museums the main **factors that hindered the access of their students with visual impairments** were the following: a. Lack of accessibility provisions/facilitations, b. Museums' staff attitudes/information and c. Issues regarding the educational programmes or the guided tours (Table 3).

More specifically, the main barrier in museums for the access of students with visual impairments is the lack of accessibility provisions and mainly the **restrictions for access through touch**. Teachers reported this barrier in combination with the museums' exhibitions where all the objects are in showcases. Furthermore, teachers reported that in some museums the number of available objects for haptic access was limited. Apart from sensory barriers teachers also reported **barriers to physical access** especially for children with visual disabilities who use wheelchairs and cannot get near to the exhibits. Other difficulties that have been reported are related to **barriers to access to information** regarding the labels of exhibits.

Regarding museums staff's attitudes although the majority of the participants recognize that museum staff tries "to do the best" there are some references for **negative behaviors**. Another thing that was reported is the **lack of a systematic policy for accessibility** on the part of the museums. There was also reference for difficulties in communication regarding issues of accessibility due to **lack or misunderstandings in information** on the part of the museums. One significant barrier for the access of school children to museums is **the lack of educational programmes/guided tours** in general in combination with the lack of accessibility provisions. Teachers also reported the **lack of adjusted educational programmes** for children with visual impairments and children with multiple disabilities. Some teachers also reported difficulties regarding the educational programmes or the guided tours such as the **long duration of the guided tour**, the **complicated information or the crowded and noisy environment**.

Table 3: Hindering factors of access to museums for schoolchildren with visual impairments

Lack Accessibility provisions/facilitations	Restrictions for tactile access
	Barriers to physical access
	Lack of accessible information
Museum staff's attitudes/information	Museums staff behavior
	Lack of a systematic policy regarding accessibility
	Lack or misunderstandings regarding Information
Educational programmes/guided tours	Lack of educational programmes
	Lack of adjusted educational programmes
	Duration of the guided tour
	Complicated information
	Crowded and noisy environment

According the **suggestions of the special education teachers** regardless their experiences of school visits in museums the main factors for the improvement of access in museums for

students with visual impairments were the following: a. Accessibility provisions/facilitations, b. Issues of museums policy, staff attitudes and training in disability issues and c. Issues of educational programmes in museums (Table 4):

More specifically, the majority of the participants reported as a main facilitation for the improvement of the access to museums for children with visual impairments the **tactile access** to **exhibits** where this is possible due to reasons of objects' protection or **replicas** and **models** or other **tactile material**. **Verbal descriptions and explanations** are also very important for the improvement of access to museums for children with visual impairments in combination with opportunities to explore objects through touch. Access to information is also important for special education teachers and for this reason they suggest labels, brochures etc. in **braille** as well as material in **large print** or with **high contrast**. There was also reference about accessible websites of the museums. Special education teachers also reported that **audio guides/tours** and **descriptions** would be very useful for children with visual impairments and that they should be offered more in museums. Another suggestion on the part of some special education teachers is the provision of **special areas in the museums** for people and children with visual impairments. Finally, apart from facilitations for access to collections, exhibits and information, special education teachers also reported issues regarding the **space of museums**, the **better organization** and **layout** of the space in museums, the **infrastructure**, the **light**, **facilitations for the orientation** or the **new technologies**.

Special education teachers stressed also the importance of museum staff for the improvement of access to museums for individuals and children with visual impairments and they consider very important the **training of museum staff** in issues of visual impairments. Special education teachers referred also the need for **special supportive museum** staff in order to address children or persons in general with visual impairments. Special education teachers also reported that museums staff should be more **active** and **interested** for the development of various access facilitations.

Furthermore, special education teachers reported that there is a need for the development of more **educational programmes appropriate for students with visual impairments** in different museums and more frequently. Also there were references for more educational activities during holidays. There were also references about the **content** of educational programmes, the **variety of activities** in combination with opportunities to explore through

touch different objects or materials, the use of **different senses** or the **small groups**. Also there were references for **individual approach** for students with visual impairments. Finally, economical and other practical issues have been reported as well as for the need of **better communication** and **information** regarding the educational programmes.

Table 4: Suggestions of special education teachers for the improvement of access to museums for school children with visual impairments

Accessibility provisions/facilitations	Tactile access
	Verbal descriptions
	Information in braille
	Material in large print
	High contrast
	Accessible websites
	Audio guides/tours/descriptions
	Special areas for individuals with visual impairments in museums
	Museum space organization
	Lighting systems
	Orientation facilitations
	Other infrastructure/arrangements
	New technologies
Museum staff's training/attitudes	Museum staff training in visual impairment issues
	Special supportive staff
	Activation for the development of accessibility
Educational programmes	Adjusted/designed educational programmes for children with visual impairments
	Variety of educational programmes
	Frequency of educational programmes

Variety of activities
Different senses
Small groups
Individual approach
Economical and practical issues
Communication/Information

3.3.2 Individuals with visual impairments

The majority of the participants in this field of research had experiences from visits in museums. The main reasons for not visiting museums is the lack of access provisions in museums for people with visual impairments, the lack of chances and opportunities for such visits or because they do not want to visit museums.

According the answers of the participants who had experiences from visits in museums the main **factors that facilitated** their **access** were the following: a. Accessibility provisions/facilitations, b. Issues of guided tours, c. Museum staff positive attitudes and d. Support of other persons (Table 5).

The main factor which facilitated the access of individuals with visual impairments to museums was the opportunity to **touch** some exhibits. Other facilitating factors were the **verbal descriptions** as well as **the audio guides**. The participants reported the content of the description, the language and the rhythm of audio description. Access to information with labels in **braille** was also reported by participants as a facilitating factor. Some participants reported also other tactile material like **tactile maps** in combination with other accessibility facilitations.

Most of the participants reported the **guided tours** – general or special – as a facilitating factor for individuals with visual impairments. The combination of tactile exploration and the information of guides seem to satisfy people with visual impairments. Furthermore, guided tours are helpful for individuals with low vision not only for the information but also for the movement in museum. There were also references to other ways of access to the exhibitions like **sound** depending on the type of exhibition.

Museum staff attitudes and behavior in general in combination with the verbal descriptions and explanations have been reported as facilitating factors for the access to museums for individuals with visual impairments. Positive attitudes on the part of the museum staff may play an important role not only for the access and understanding of the collection but also to feel welcome in the museum. Another facilitating factor that has been reported from the participants is the **support of other persons** who accompanies them in museums. These persons may be members of their family, friends or escorts who support them for the move in the museum but also by describing the exhibits or reading the labels.

Table 5: Facilitating factors of access to museums for individuals with visual impairments

Accessibility provisions/facilitations	Tactile access
	Audio guides/Verbal descriptions
	Information in braille
	Tactile material
Guided tours	Special guided tours
	General guided tours
	Other senses
Museum staff's positive attitudes	
Support of other persons	Family
	Friends
	Escorts

In contrast, based on the answers of the participants who had experiences from visits in museums, the main **factors that hindered** their **access** were the following: a. Lack of accessibility provisions/facilitations, b. Issues of museum policy and museum staff and c. Other difficulties (Table 6).

The main factor that hindered the access to museums was the **lack of access through touch** in combination with references for objects in showcases or ropes. There were also difficulties due to **lack of assistive technology** or difficulties to access to information like for example **inaccessible labels** or difficulties regarding the **organization of museum' space and**

accessibility provisions. Some of the participants reported the **lack of staff**, the **lack of clear information** about the available accessibility provisions of the museum or **other restrictions** regarding the distance from the exhibits. Other parameters that have been reported as hindering factors is the **opening hours** of museums which do not allow people to visit museums or the days and hours of special guided tours for individuals with visual impairments. The participants reported also other difficulties regarding the **content**, the **rhythm** and the **duration of the guided tour**, the **content** and **function** of the available facilitations or the **crowded environment**:

Table 6: Hindering factors of access to museums for individuals with visual impairment

Lack of Accessibility provisions/facilitations	No access through touch
	Lack of assistive technology
	Inaccessible labels
	Museums' interior space
Museum policy and staff's issues	Lack of museum staff
	Lack of information
	Other restrictions
	Opening hours of museums
Other difficulties	Lack of interaction during guided tours
	Content, duration and rhythm of guided tours
	Content and function of the available facilitations
	Crowded environment

The main **suggestions** of the participants for the improvement of access to museums for individuals with visual impairments are the following: a. Accessibility provisions/facilitations and b. Museum policy and staff's issues (Table 7).

Regarding the accessibility provisions the main suggestion of the participants is the improvement of access through **touch**. Participants referred to exhibits where this is possible and to replicas. The participants also reported the need for **information in braille** as well as **audio guides** that it should be included in the museums' policy for accessibility. The suggestions of the participants for the improvement of access to museums include also issues regarding the **interior space** of the museums. The participants reported suggestions for the **light** in the museums, the facilitations for the **orientation** and the general organization of the space.

The participants reported the need of **museums staff training in disability** issues in order to be able to provide assistance and to address visitors with visual impairment in the museum. They also reported the need for **available staff** to give explanations and descriptions for the exhibits. The participants also reported the need for **more accessible exhibitions** and organized **guided tours** for people with visual impairments in a more interactive way.

Table 7: Suggestions for the improvement of access to museums for people with visual impairments

Accessibility provisions/facilitations	Tactile access
	Information in braille
	Audio guides
	Museum interior space
Museum policy and staff's issues	Museums staff training in
	Disability
	Escorting
	Verbal explanations
	Available staff
	Guided tours
	Accessible exhibitions

3.3.3 Museum Staff

As it was mentioned above the participants in this field of the research were members of the museums which are partners in the BaGMIVI project. These museums – an archaeological museum, an ethnographic museum and two galleries - have different collections. The characteristics of each collection, the different infrastructure and the different experiences regarding individuals with visual impairments among museums, etc., created a complex field. Nevertheless, it was feasible to compose an overview regarding the difficulties that the members of the participating museums were facing in order to accommodate visitors with visual impairment and respond efficiently towards their needs.

Staff from the participant museums – scientific staff, museum educators, security guards – stressed the importance of training in disability issues and in visual impairments issues. Although the participating museums are willing to develop provisions for individuals with visual impairment - some of them have already conducted some steps towards this direction - it seems that the need for training is very high. The phrases **“training in disability issues”** and **“training in visual impairment issues”** have been selected from the majority of the participants as the most representative.

Furthermore, it seems to be a lack of knowledge about various forms of accessibility such as **“tactile material** (tactile maps, diagrams)”, **“audio/verbal descriptions”** and **“information on environmental adaptations** (e.g. tactile and visual landmarks; suitable lighting, color contrast, reduction of glare, etc.)” which are very important for visitors with visual impairments. Depending the experience of each museum it is worth mentioning that **“training in museum education”** is also a need that has been reported as well as the **“lack of organized educational programmes”**.

4 Overall Conclusions

The needs assessment study responds to the current practices of museums not only in direction of audience research and development but also in direction of working with different communities and audiences (Coxall, 2006).

The results of the needs’ assessment support an important aspect which is implemented through the present project, referring to the importance of cooperation between local entities and people with visual impairment as beneficiaries with the aim to improve access to cultural activities within the local community. Even though there is a continuous objective of the museums to offer accessible services for individuals with visual impairment, the main issue is

that in their great majority, the visits to museum take place only if they are organized by institutions or teachers within schools, without having in consideration that the individuals with visual impairment would and should be able to have as an important component of self-determination the opportunity to have their own initiative in carrying out such activities and visits. All the partners of the present project strongly believe and support the social model of disability with concepts like quality of life, self-determination, empowerment, active participation, independence.

Each participant country provided evidence of important steps that were made throughout the year in regard of accessibility, mainly talking about legislation and the ratified Convention of Human Rights that become operational and visible in all National Policies and Action Plans. There are examples of judicial regulations, projects developed by public institutions and NGO's, organized activities within educational institutions and associations, campaigns in term of accessibility, publications and studies carried out by researchers, all of these proving the interest in this matter. However, important issues remain uncovered and not approached such as permanency, expertise in the field, professional training and self-determination. Although remarkable initiatives have been taken into account there are still many barriers for people with disabilities and especially for individuals with visual impairments.

Even if we cannot generalize, in a great majority of situations, museums offer in a limited way access to their exponents and mostly for a certain period of time, and if it is permanent only for a certain section. There is also the discussion about training and competence of museum staff regarding accessibility, but also implications of visual impairment in regard of learning, communication, accessing the environment. The issue in discussion refers to their initial training of museum staff, as there is no related subject in their curricula as museologists referring to disability or accessibility. Having this into consideration, a training regarding this matter is of great importance and must be implemented in each museum. In regard of training and professional development, universities must develop courses through the specialists in the field, but also to carry out studies and publish and disseminate the results, not only to raise awareness on the topics, but offer quantitative and qualitative data about the effects and implication on the development and personal abilities of people with visual impairment.

In terms of self-determination, individuals with visual impairment must assume an active role of participation in all types of activities, cultural and sport ones included, without being

prompted or organized, but taking in their own hands their initiatives and opportunities to spend free time according to their wishes and interests, to learn about different aspects of life, to access culture.

5 Limitations

It has to be underlined that the research which was presented above had a descriptive character and its ultimate purpose was to explore experiences and perspectives of i. individuals with visual impairments, ii. teachers of students with visual impairments and members of museum staff regarding the level of accessibility and inclusion of students with visual impairments to the museums. The 2nd phase functioned as an extra pool of data contributing to a more integrated synthesis of Intellectual Output 1 (Needs Assessment Study). No thorough examination took place regarding the exact role and duties of the teachers of children with visual impairments who participated in this project and also no inter-rater reliability was examined for the categories. Nevertheless, the participants' reflections added value to the literature review (triangulation) and it is strongly supported that the Needs Assessments Study (O1) describes with accuracy contemporary issues regarding museums and people with visual impairments.

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