



## Accessibility and inclusivity changes in small and medium-sized cultural institutions

*Author(s)*

Bank of Cyprus Cultural Foundation

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*In 2023, the BoCCF, a small to medium-sized cultural institution, underwent significant transformations to enhance accessibility for all. With the establishment of the "Aisthiseis" programme, the BOCCF emphasised the need for accessibility and inclusivity by integrating permanent adaptations such as sign language tours, audio guides, tactile stations, and Braille guides. These changes not only facilitate the engagement of vulnerable groups within the museums but also extend the multisensory experience to its events. The commitment to training staff and the introduction of specialised workshops, reflect the BOCCF's dedication to creating an inclusive and culturally enriching environment for all visitors.*

**Organisation in charge of best practice**

Bank of Cyprus Cultural Foundation

**Location**

Nicosia, Cyprus

**Dates**

January 2023 - Ongoing

**Description**

In the year 2023, the BOCCF emerged as a trailblazer among small to medium-sized cultural institutions in Cyprus through the implementation of its "Aisthiseis" (Senses) programme. This initiative highlights BOCCF's commitment to encouraging accessibility and inclusivity within cultural spaces, particularly by integrating vulnerable groups into various cultural activities. Rooted in the belief that culture fundamentally defines societal identity, the "Aisthiseis" programme represents a transformative endeavor, highlighting the importance of providing inclusive cultural experiences for all. The notable changes instituted within BOCCF, including the introduction of sign language tours and Braille





guides, not only meet specific accessibility needs but also elevate the overall cultural experience for the broader public. Going beyond the confines of traditional museum settings, the programme's innovative adaptation ensures inclusivity across diverse cultural contexts, signaling dedication to embracing diversity in all its forms.

The BOCCF places strong emphasis on the training of its staff, as well as external individuals who express an interest in effectively engaging and catering to various vulnerable groups through the arts and culture. This commitment involves providing comprehensive training programmes that equip both internal personnel and external participants with the necessary knowledge and skills to better understand and meet the needs of diverse individuals through cultural activities. By actively engaging in training initiatives, the BOCCF seeks to enhance the competence of its staff and the wider community, creating an environment that is not only accommodating but also responsive to the unique requirements of these groups. Adopting the importance on training for engaging vulnerable groups through the arts and culture, is a strategic move for small and medium-sized cultural institutions. It not only aligns with societal values but also enhances community connections, visitor experiences, and overall institutional reputation.

An example of the BOCCF forming a workshop for people who want to engage and cater to various vulnerable groups through the arts and culture, was an art therapy workshop that was held specifically for health professionals (therapists) with the objective of team-building. The prevalent themes that surfaced encompassed trust, collegiality, teamwork, family, and balance. Throughout the workshop, the exploration of synergy occurred through engaging activities such as play, movement, and working with clay material, transitioning from individual experiences to a collective context. The discussions raised various perspectives, realisations, and concepts, emphasising themes of journey, joy, love, balance, and family. As the session concluded, several participants expressed a desire to repeat the workshop, extending it to other groups of health professionals with whom they collaborate in the healthcare field.

The programme's dedication to tailored workshops, led by skilled professionals, addresses a range of topics including art therapy, museum education, clay therapy, experiential storytelling, and creative writing. These workshops cater to the diverse requirements of vulnerable groups. This ensures a broad array of meaningful connections and outlets for expression. An example of the specialised work carried out in the context of 'Aisthiseis' is observed in the art therapy workshop hosted in collaboration with a designated art therapist and the Autism Association Cyprus in Nicosia. Inspired by selected exhibits which 'reveal their own history,' the participants played with visual materials, for example through painting, to create material manifestations of their thoughts, feelings, and responses. This session offered the group a safer-practice framework for expressing emotions with colours on paper.

Another specialised workshop as a part of the 'Aisthiseis' programme that took place at the BOCCF, titled "Feel again", was an experiential storytelling workshop for pregnant women. A professional storyteller and musician guided several expectant mothers on a mystical journey. Latent senses and capabilities were stirred, traversing the various stages of a woman's life. Unraveling the intricacies of the symbolic red thread, participants underwent





a distinctive multi-sensory encounter that brought back memories. Throughout this workshop, they interacted with diverse materials and narratives, recalling childhood flavors, mimicking sounds with their bodies, and allowing smells and colors to evoke sensations that encouraged the pregnant women to relive memories. On the whole, these specialised workshops led by skilled professionals can enhance the overall cultural experience for the participants, broaden audience reach, and establish a positive reputation for small to medium-sized cultural institutions.

The "Aisthiseis" project also includes a multi-sensory museum kit that travels to external sites and organisations, expanding the reach of inclusive practices. It aims to bring people who are far from museums in contact with museum objects. The museum kit involves accurate replicas of exhibits from the collections of the Foundation's Archaeological and Coinage Museum, which participants can touch and feel. Some examples of where it has travelled, include the elderly, by offering a workshop in the two units of the Matera Group, Matera and Thalpori, as well as to several summer schools and to the School for the Deaf in Cyprus.

Crucially, the BOCCF has actively sought collaborations with other organisations. These collaborations play a pivotal role in enhancing the overall visitor experience. By forming such partnerships, the BOCCF not only broadens its impact but also sets a standard for cultural institutions in promoting accessibility, diversity, and inclusivity. These collaborations not only enrich the cultural landscape but also reinforce the idea that cultural institutions can be powerful agents of positive social change. A notable exemplar of successful collaboration manifests in the partnership between the BOCCF and the School for the Deaf in Cyprus, specifically in the implementation of guided tours featuring sign language interpretation at the Foundation. These tours not only cater to the specific needs of the deaf community but also contribute to raising awareness about the rich cultural offerings available to diverse audiences.

The volume of workshops conducted—65 in total for the year 2023—attests to the BOCCF's dedication to reaching a broad and diverse audience. In essence, the BOCCF's "Aisthiseis" programme serves not merely as a checklist of accessibility measures but as a holistic and integrated model, setting a high standard for creating enriching, accessible, and inclusive cultural spaces.

## Links

<https://www.boccf.org>

## Resources needed

Implementing the "Aisthiseis" programme and specialised workshops at BOCCF requires financial backing for development, skilled professionals, as well as for replicas of artifacts. Human resources include trained staff, while infrastructure demands accessible spaces and virtual capabilities (eg. QR codes for sign language videos). Collaborations with external organisations, marketing efforts, and feedback mechanisms contribute to the programme's success. Additionally, adaptive tools, administrative support, and continuous improvement initiatives are vital. Community engagement strategies are essential for broadening participation. Securing these resources enables small to medium-sized cultural





institutions to offer inclusive programmes, creating positive community impact and improving the overall cultural experience.

### Challenges encountered

The BOCCF grapples with the challenges inherent in implementing changes which emphasise accessibility and inclusivity, foremost among them being the imperative to attract new audiences and maintain relevance. Recognising the need for constant revitalisation, a challenge for the institution, specifically for 'Aisthiseis' is that it has to infuse the programme with new and captivating elements each month. This approach ensures that each iteration of the programme remains dynamic and responsive to the evolving expectations and interests of its diverse audience. A key strategy involves tailoring workshops to cater to diverse target groups, a nuanced process that considers the distinctive needs and preferences of each audience. This customisation is facilitated by a team of professionals, each possessing specialised expertise in certain areas, carefully selected to contribute to the richness and diversity of cultural experiences. Through collaborative discussions, these professionals actively seek to rejuvenate and to continually enhance their workshops, adding new elements. Another challenge is maintaining financial sustainability, especially for targeted programmes like 'Aisthiseis,' making the securing of funding vital for their ongoing success. Furthermore, maintaining relevance also demands adaptation to the ever-evolving educational landscape and technological advancements. This necessitates a continual assessment and integration of innovative methodologies while preserving the core values and aims of the programme. For instance, by enabling the creation of accessible content, thereby rendering cultural experiences more inclusive. In essence, the BOCCF's approach is rooted in an unwavering commitment to adaptability and audience-centric strategies, ensuring the sustained vibrancy and relevance of its cultural programmes.

### Evidence of success

Evaluating the effectiveness of the BOCCF's 'Aisthiseis' programme involves a comprehensive examination through various means. These assessment methods encompass diverse aspects, from participant feedback and participation rates to social media engagement. Feedback: A cornerstone in evaluating the success of BOCCF's initiatives lies in the feedback received from participants. Consistently positive responses underscore participants' satisfaction with the Foundation's inclusive and accessible approach. For instance, the BOCCF held an art therapy workshop aimed for people over 60 years old seeking to connect with themselves and tell their story. Forms were given where the participants were asked to circle how they feel at the beginning and at the end of the workshops, as well as any feedback they had. At the start and at the end of the workshop all participants said that they were 'very happy'. They also stated that they felt grateful, calm, and highlighted the importance of these workshops for people who are over 60. Participation Rates: The robust engagement witnessed in the 'Aisthiseis' workshops serves as a compelling metric for success. In the year 2023, a total of 65 'Aisthiseis' workshops were held, indicating widespread community participation. This substantial turnout underscores the Foundation's commitment to inclusivity and accessibility, demonstrating its broad appeal and resonance with diverse audiences. Additionally, the 'Aisthiseis' workshops have seen substantial repeat participations, indicating the programme's enduring success and positive impact. This pattern highlights the sustained





interest and enthusiasm generated by these inclusive and innovative cultural initiatives, showcasing the workshops' ability to captivate diverse audiences and provide lasting value to participants. **Social Media and Online Presence:** Another dimension in measuring success lies in the BOCCF's social media and online presence. Collaborating with an external marketing agency, the Foundation aims for high engagement on its social media posts. Metrics such as likes, shares, and comments on these platforms provide tangible indicators of the ongoing success and relevance of the 'Aisthiseis' programme. Press releases distributed to Cypriot media further contribute to informing and attracting new audiences, enhancing the visibility and impact of the Foundation's cultural initiatives. **Adaptability and Flexibility:** Evaluating the success of the programme can also involve measuring its adaptability and flexibility in response to the changing needs and interests of participants, ensuring ongoing relevance. The 'Aisthiseis' project serves as a prime example of impressive adaptability and flexibility, consistently adjusting to the evolving requirements and interests of participants. This interdisciplinary initiative has showcased its ability to modify its offerings, ensuring sustained relevance and dynamism. The workshops, characterised by an innovative approach to cultural engagement, underscore a commitment to adaptability, allowing the programme to connect with diverse audiences and cater to emerging preferences. By remaining responsive to the continually shifting landscape of cultural interests, the 'Aisthiseis' project sustains its efficacy and appeal, presenting a paradigm of adaptability and flexibility within the cultural institution's endeavors. This multifaceted evaluation approach underscores the Foundation's dedication to providing enriching and accessible cultural experiences for all.

### **Potential for transfer**

The BOCCF's experience in implementing the "Aisthiseis" programme and specialised workshops offers valuable insights that can be transferred to other small to medium-sized cultural institutions, particularly those aiming to enhance accessibility and inclusivity. The key resource needs, including financial backing, skilled professionals, and adaptive tools, serve as a blueprint for institutions seeking to replicate inclusive programmes. The emphasis on collaboration with external organisations, robust marketing, and feedback mechanisms provides a model for community engagement, broadening participation and ensuring sustained relevance. The commitment to continuous improvement and adaptation to technological advancements sets a precedent for navigating the evolving educational landscape. The practice of tailoring workshops through collaborative discussions among professionals is a transferrable strategy, allowing institutions to meet the unique needs of diverse audiences. Importantly, the BOCCF's dedication to customising workshops and infusing new elements monthly demonstrates a dynamic approach to programme revitalisation that can be adopted by other institutions to keep their offerings engaging and responsive. The challenges faced, such as financial sustainability and the need for ongoing adaptation, also serve as lessons, encouraging similar institutions to proactively address these concerns for long-term success. Ultimately, the 'Aisthiseis' programme stands as an example for small to medium-sized cultural institutions seeking to transform their programmes, fostering accessibility, inclusivity, and cultural engagement.





### Further Information

In 2023, the BOCCF embarked on a transformative journey to enhance accessibility and inclusivity within its cultural institutions. Pioneering the "Aisthiseis" (Senses) programme, the BOCCF underscored its commitment to providing cultural access for all, aligning with the Bank of Cyprus ESG principles and the social development principles advocated by the H2020 ReInherit programme. This initiative encompasses permanent changes, including video-taped guided tours in Cypriot sign language, tactile stations, replicas of statues, vases, and coins, as well as audio guides and a Museum Guide. Notably, these adaptations extend beyond the museums, permeating the entire annual programme of events with guided tours in sign language, multi-sensory experiences for vulnerable individuals, and inclusive practices across all cultural foundation events. The introduction of expert-designed workshops focusing on art therapy, museum education, therapeutic ceramics, experiential storytelling, and creative writing further amplifies the institution's dedication to fostering inclusivity in museum activities. Under the motto 'More senses – Fewer Barriers – Better society,' the BOCCF not only enacts tangible changes within its premises but also places a strong emphasis on public awareness regarding vulnerable groups and the imperative for an inclusive society. This approach positions the BOCCF as a trailblazer in championing accessibility and inclusivity, setting a standard for small to medium-sized cultural institutions seeking to create culturally enriching environments for diverse audiences.

