



# **Mapping of Skills and Training Needs to Improve Accessibility in Tourism Services in Europe**

*Case Study 1. ABTA, United Kingdom*

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“Mapping skills and training needs to accessibility in tourism services”  
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**Case study  
ABTA – Accessible Travel Made Easy, United Kingdom**

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## Executive Summary

This case study focuses on the e-learning courses given by ABTA – *Accessible Travel Made Easy* - which was developed in collaboration with and funded by the UK Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) in 2010.

The Accessible Travel Made Easy courses were developed for use by travel agents and tour operators. It encompasses two modules targeted to different occupational groups within the sector. Module 1, which is targeted to frontline staff, focuses on the meeting the needs of customers with accessibility requirements. Module 2, which is targeted to supervisors and managers, aims to provide a good understanding of businesses' legal obligations, advice on training staff, breaking down business barriers and how to develop accessibility policies.

Legal developments, at both EU and UK level, prompted the development of these training courses, as new regulations resulted in the need for increased skills levels for travel agents and tour operators in dealing with customer with accessibility needs. Thus, the courses were implemented to help businesses comply with the new legal environment, but it was also an opportunity to increase the industry's awareness of the business case for accessibility.

The online method of delivery was selected to facilitate the uptake of the training as it has meant increased flexibility around scheduling and it has been a low cost way for smaller businesses to raise staff awareness.

The online training courses have taken an innovative approach in mixing different learning methods such as case studies, quizzes, the use of quotes and images overcoming the theoretical focus associated with online learning. The course was also accompanied by a practical checklist aiding frontline staff to ensure appropriate service is given.

The impact of the training on improving accessibility skills for travel agents and tour operators is uncertain. No evaluation mechanism was established during the course development. Moreover, whether the training has effectively reached its target audience is also unclear as there are no reliable numbers of completed trainings. Nevertheless, the course is a useful tool in promoting increased skills levels in a cost effective manner to a targeted sector of the tourism industry.

## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

This case study focuses on the e-learning courses given by ABTA which was developed in collaboration with and funded by the UK Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) in 2010. It aims to understand the needs that prompted the development of the course and the practical lessons learnt which can help inform training providers in other contexts and Member States.

The following section outlines the general background of the UK accessible tourism market and the challenges encountered by disabled tourists, which has had an important bearing on the rationale of the initiative.

Tourism is a significant industry in the UK, both in terms of inbound and outbound visits. Much focus has been placed on making Britain an accessible destination and there are a number of past and ongoing training efforts financed and delivered by UK charities and VisitEngland - the national tourism board. The increased focus on accessibility was spurred by the hosting of the Olympics and the Paralympics in 2012 as well as an increasing emphasis on the growing market demand for accessible services and facilities around the UK.

Also in terms of outbound tourism, there has been a growing need to cater properly to the accessibility market segment who wants to travel outside the UK. A survey conducted by Tourism for All in 2010 (before the launch of the training courses described here), highlighted that 85% of respondents did not believe that travel agents understood the need of disabled travellers and 78% felt they were not being catered for by high street agents. Moreover, 35% of tourists with access requirements argued that they would not consider booking with a mainstream travel agent<sup>1</sup>.

Thus, an evident skills and training gap have existed for those professionals – travel agents and tour operators - involved in the first stages of ensuring that the journey is made as accessible as possible. Legislative developments, which will be discussed further in the subsequent section, have contributed to an increased awareness both from industry on what needs to be improved, but also from the customer side on what rights and regulations exist.

Anecdotal evidence points toward growing consumer pressure on industry to improve service levels. In parallel there has been an urgent need to minimise legal risks and maximise profits in an increasingly competitive environment. The

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/travelnews/7270413/Travel-industry-failing-to-cater-for-disabled.html>

description and analysis of the ABTA initiative must be situated within this context.

## **2.0 OVERVIEW AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

This section provides an overview of the key organisations involved in the development and provision of the training courses. It also aims to provide a background of the initiative and the factors that influenced its emergence.

**ABTA** is the UK's leading travel trade association representing around 1,200 members and over 5,100 retail outlets and offices. ABTA members provide 90% of the package holidays sold in the UK as well as selling millions of independent travel arrangements.

The association's key role is to help their members grow their businesses as well as helping customers have confidence in the travel industry. ABTA is also responsible for providing information and guidance to its members in order to enable them to keep up-to-date with legislation emanating from the UK and the EU. Part of ABTA's core work includes encouraging good business practices within the tourism industry in terms of sustainability, CSR, health and safety and more recently in the area of accessibility.

**The UK Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC)** is mandated to challenge discrimination, and protect and promote human rights in the UK (excluding Northern Ireland). It is committed to a vision of modern Britain where everyone is treated with dignity and respect and where everyone has an equal chance to succeed. Practically, the EHRC is responsible for the promotion and enforcement of equality and non-discrimination laws. It also engages in awareness raising of rights for the public. In this context, it actively promotes accessible travel for all.

### **Background to the training course**

Accessibility has become an increasingly important part of the tourism industry, especially taking into account projected future developments. An ageing population, a growing demand from tourists with access needs as well as the ability to cater to those who suffer from temporary injuries or illnesses have come onto the agenda in recent years. In addition, legislative developments, at both EU and national level, have also contributed to influencing the provision of accessible services for the travel industry.

ABTA's work on promoting the issue of accessibility started with small seminars which aimed to increase the industry's awareness of the subject. However, this method of raising the profile of accessibility was met with little interest from businesses. Accessibility was considered a burden and in an increasingly worsening economic climate, the issue was given low priority. In addition, the seminars were given face-to-face which lowered the uptake as time and costs were considerable barriers, especially for smaller businesses.

Two legislative developments largely prompted the development of ABTA's online training programme and provided the overall framework for the course content.

### **The legal framework for the ABTA's training courses**

- **The UK Equality Act 2010** requires that all service providers, including tourism businesses, treat everyone accessing their goods, facilities or services equally. This means that disabled people should be able to access premises, services and information in an equal manner to other customers. Moreover, the Act establishes that service providers should take reasonable steps to find out whether someone is disabled e.g. enquire as to whether anyone in the travelling party has any access needs. In addition, requires that service providers must make reasonable adjustments to think ahead and take steps to address barriers that impede disabled people.
- **Regulation (EC) No. 1107/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 July 2006, concerning the rights of disabled persons and persons with reduced mobility when travelling by air** came into effect in July 2008. This regulation sets out that persons placed at a disadvantage, by reduced mobility, whether caused by disability, age or another factor, should have opportunities for air travel comparable to those of other citizens. Essentially, the law affects the whole of the air travel process, not just the flight itself. It covers booking flights, arriving at the airport, checking in, getting on and off the plane and leaving the airport. The regulation applies to tour operators and travel agents as well as to airports and airlines. This means that tour operators and travel agents must pass information about accessibility needs to the airlines, and they in turn must inform the airports of the individual services required.

The EC regulation was an important step in the initial development of the training course in particularly in regards to the funding of the training. The

EHRC, who provided the funding, became the designated complaints handling body of this regulation. In addition to helping people with their complaints, the EHRC aimed at taking a more pre-emptive approach, which essentially prompted the developed of the two training courses. Budgetary resources were provided to develop the e-courses which could help inform industry on how to comply properly with the regulation.

ABTA became a natural collaborator due to its industry clout and its channels to reach out to those actors most effected by the regulation. In addition, there was also an opportunity to incorporate learning points valuable from the perspective of the UK Equality Act 2010.

Although, the training was directed to travel agents and tour operators there was also an emphasis placed on communicating to customers that they have a shared responsibility in notifying travel agents about any access requirements at the time of booking.

### **3.0 CONTENT, TRAINING MATERIAL AND AVAILABILITY**

In general, both training courses aimed at encourage greater awareness amongst the travel industry about the needs of disabled customers or those with mobility issues to ensure they receive the right assistance when they go on holiday while at the same time demonstrating why it makes good business sense to do so.

Although the foundation of the framework was legal in nature, helping industry make right by their customers, from a business and social perspective was imperative. The courses were developed in collaboration with ABTA, the EHRC, disability organisations as well as industry stakeholders in order to include an all-rounded perspective throughout the development of the course.

By the course developers it was argued that it is imperative that disabled people are involved in the development of the training. Just as it is crucial to involve disabled people in the traditional class-room based training, it was equally important to gather input from the disability movement on the design of the online learning platform. There was also much effort put into making the online course accessible for all and a lot of emphasis was put into selecting the right colours and ensuring compatibility with accessibility needs.

As this training was directed to businesses, it was important to also raise awareness and gather support amongst industry for the training before launch. However, as costs were covered by the EHRC and the courses were freely available for download there was a very good reception from larger stakeholders and ABTA members.

The two courses focuses on:

- **Module 1: Meeting your customers' needs**
- **Module 2: Inclusive travel – making business sense**

The second module was launched after the first module due to the demand from industry on increasing their knowledge of the business case for accessibility, which was a good indication that industry was or is becoming increasingly aware of the potential for accessibility in their business strategies.

Below we discuss the modules, content and training methods in further depth.

### **Module 1: Meeting your customers' needs**

The first module is aimed at travel agents, tour operators and other staff offering a service to disabled passengers. It gives an overview of what is meant by inclusive or accessible travel, and how to use this information to provide good customer service. It helps students to understand the various sorts of accessibility issues (sight, back pain, wheelchairs, hearing impairment, for example). It also helps students to understand how to make their premises and print material and websites more accessible. The course teaches frontline staff how to be considerate towards their customers with accessibility needs without being condescending and how to ensure that the correct questions are asked so as to ensure that a suitable holiday is being booked.

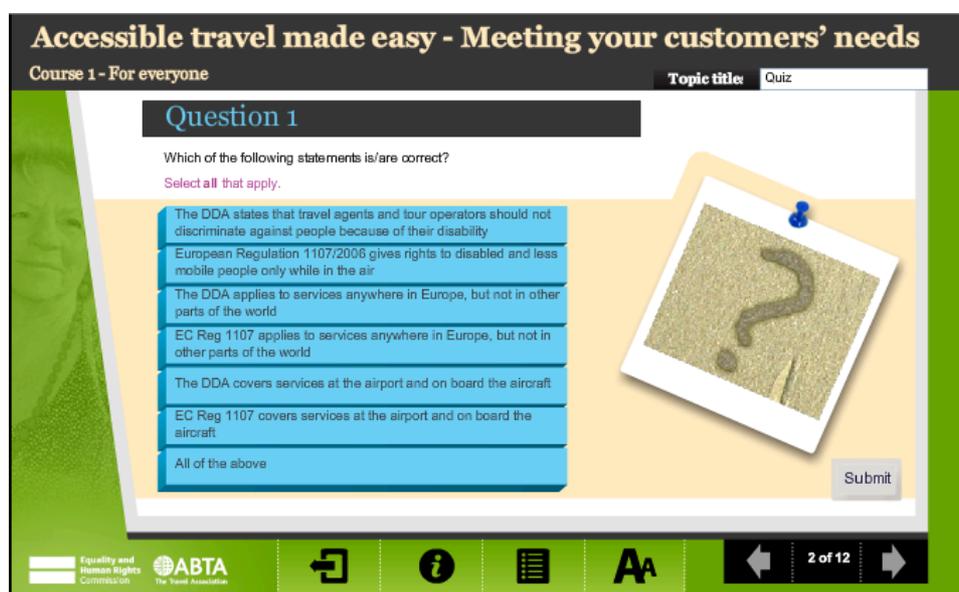
The course is divided into set of topics which is essential for the whole of the visitor journey.

- **The customer journey:** this section focuses on how disabled tourists plan their journey.
- **Hearing about you:** this section focuses on how disabled people can find the travel agent or tour operator they might be interested in using. It involves practical tips on the importance of web accessibility, the

importance of marketing and advertising to attract the accessible tourism market.

- **Getting to you:** this section focuses on how to make your business premises accessible to all.
- **Customer care:** this section explains the proper etiquette when dealing with disabled people.
- **Making a booking:** this section focuses on not to discriminate against customers with access needs in the booking stage of the journey.
- **On holiday:** this section focuses on the entirety of the journey and follows a hearing impaired customer through the journey where he makes observations contextualising real barriers that disabled tourists might face while travelling.

Figure 1: Example of Module 1 topic



The course is highly interactive. Each topic is presented in different ways such as a quiz outline where participants can choose the most appropriate answer and feedback is then given on what to think about in terms of accessibility.

As pointed out earlier, the basis for development of the course was the UK Discrimination Act as well as the EU regulation on air travel, however, the

course developers strived to move away from legal obligation in the module and emphasised the importance of making accessibility interesting. As one interviewee pointed out:

*“When talking about legal things people get disinterested”.*

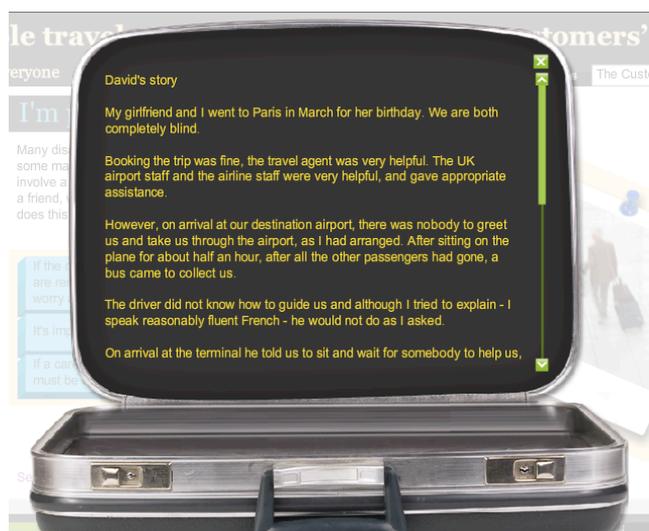
Thus, it was important to make the course attractive, but also interactive. As pointed out elsewhere in this study, e-learning is a very cost-effective tool to implement training. Especially because the material can be distributed among a wide audience, there are no space limitations, there are no cost associated with room hire or trainer fees and it is flexible to suit the students’ or participants’ individual schedule.

However, the drawback of this approach is that it does not lead to any practical engagement with disabled people or others who have access requirements. In particular, face-to-face contact is considered important as it helps to break down communication barriers and to make tourism professionals comfortable in the presence of someone who is travelling with access requirements or a disability.

The ABTA course has attempted to remove the theoretical focus that inevitably comes with e-learning by accompanying the different course sessions with case studies, “facts about” and “quotes”.

The case studies present real experiences of tourists with disabilities to compliment what is being taught. It nuances the training for the participant and also contextualise the information given in the course in a more practical way. For instance, one case study highlights what can go wrong and relates to how a blind tourist arrives at a destination airport and does not get the assistance which was pre-booked.

Figure 2: Example of case study used in the online training



Similarly, one section follows a tourist throughout the journey in photographs and with text. It gives the perspective of the tourist and highlights the potential barriers that might be invisible to the travel agent.

The course is to be considered “light”, in that it does not provide in-depth definitions of different access requirements or it does not go deep into areas of etiquette or a client-friendly reception. Instead it is meant to make noticeable improvements in the way that tourism professionals engage with disabled clients and also to make sure that travel agents become familiar with the experiences and barriers of disabled clients in a practical manner.

### The ABTA checklist

In connection with module 1, ABTA developed a checklist that would practically accompany the training. It ensures that the agent asks the right question and collects the right information at the time of booking. Especially given that:

- Customers may not be aware that someone in their party needs assistance;
- Some passengers are proud and do not like to admit they need assistance;
- They might not realise how big some airports are until they are physically there ie they become disabled by their environment; and

- Passengers have good days and bad days and might not require assistance all the time eg a lung condition.

Module 1, also aimed to make travel agents aware that customer have a share in the responsibility in providing correct and detailed information about their needs. Experience shows that customers do not always pre-notify their assistance needs and when they do, sometimes the information is not passed on correctly to airlines and airports. In this vein, the checklist was an important tool to ensure that travel agents and tour operators complies with regulations and help to enforce the practice of the training.

## **Module 2: 'Inclusive travel – making business sense'**

The second module aims to help those working in the travel industry to increase their knowledge of inclusive travel and identify the changes their organizations can make to help their business grow. The course teaches industry practitioners to understand good business practice in relation to accessibility and communicate this effectively with staff and customers.

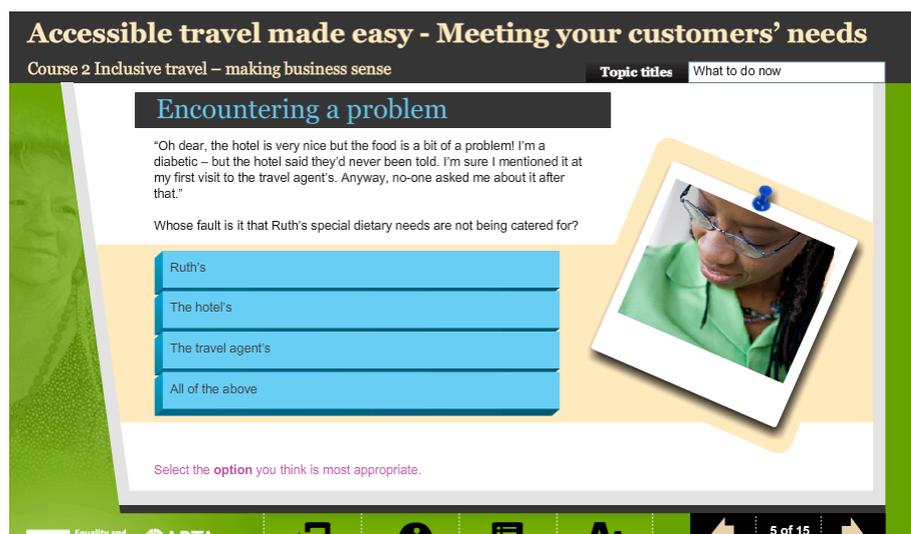
It gives the student a good understanding of their legal obligations, advice on training staff, breaking down business barriers and how to develop their own accessibility policies.

The course follows the same format as the first module and is divided into a set of interactive topics:

- **Breaking down barriers:** focuses on barriers experienced by disabled people and provides managers with an understanding of what they need to improve in order to tap into the accessibility market.
- **Your duties:** explains the legal obligations of the tour operators and travel agents relating to the UK Equality Act 2010.
- **The customer journey and the Equality Act:** sets out the legal obligations of the tour operator throughout the customer journey and not only in relation to making premises, booking and services accessible.
- **Changing your business practices:** sets out practical tips on how to improve business practices in order to improve on accessibility.
- **How to reap the rewards:** focuses on the business case for accessibility.

- **What to do now?** Practical tips and case study focus on how to pursue accessibility issues within the organization.

Figure 3: Example of training topic in module 2



As managers and owners are ultimately responsible for the actions of their staff, there is a greater emphasis placed on minimizing legal risks while maximizing profits in this module. However, the issues presented is at an introductory level rather than designed to provide in-depth skills and awareness. Similarly to the ABTA checklist complimenting module 1, each topic is presented with tips on improvements and references to outside sources which provides more in-depth information on the issues put forward in the course. In this vein, the course aims at merely stimulating and introducing the topics of accessibility to management and further reading and learning is encouraged.

The learning module also followed the same innovative structure as module 1, with interactive quizzes, tips and case studies.

#### 4.0 TARGET AUDIENCE, COMMUNICATION AND BARRIERS

This section discusses the most common barriers and the different measures or conditions implemented overcoming those challenges. Specifically the issues of whether the training initiative have been effective in reaching its target

audience, the availability of communication channels and barriers to uptake are discussed.

### **Target audience**

At the beginning of the launch of the training courses, in 2010, there was little interest from industry in the issue of accessibility. The challenges to improve the training situation were similar to those experienced in other Member States or in other organisation, namely accessibility was mainly viewed as a cost burden and an obligation rather than as a business opportunity.

In the ABTA case, both the UK Equality Act 2010 as well as the EC regulation (No. 1107/2006) facilitated the urgency for tour operators and travel agents to think about accessibility as they could potentially find themselves sued or involved in compensation claims if not complying. This seem to have been an important lever and a starting point towards further understanding of accessibility as a good business strategy. A good indication of that businesses are slowly catching on to the issue of accessibility is the prompt to develop module 2 of the course. As pointed out earlier, this course was requested by managers and owners. To date (2013) 214 people have participated in the course.

In regard to the first module and whether it has effectively reached the intended target audience of tour operators and travel agents is a difficult question to answer. Mainly because there are no reliable figures on how many students have completed the course. Officially 1888 people had participated in the training by September 2013, however, the real figures are estimated to be higher for mainly two reasons:

- 1) Companies use one login for staff members; and
- 2) Some larger organisations have embedded the online course into their own training courses and material.

This make it difficult to assess the impact on training initiative and to assess whether the target audience has been effectively reached. However, the checklist established by ABTA is an important tool to improve and increase awareness from both a customer perspective and from a business perspective and it is widely promoted by ABTA.

## **Communication and uptake barriers**

Many of the barriers, which would normally be associated with training efforts such as budgetary issues, lack of communication channels, lack of uptake and low industry engagement was largely circumvented in this training case given the importance and size of ABTA.

Due to its strong membership base, ABTA has been able to access the industry immediately. In particular, because many of the biggest actors in the travel market are ABTA members, such as Thomas Cook, TUI and Virgin Holidays, and were also consulted in the development of the course, there has been a good uptake. Especially considering that some of these larger actors made the training mandatory for their frontline employees.

In addition to the importance of big market actors, ABTA has well-established channels of communication in the form of newsletters and other promotional activities. The press release announcing the launch of the training was also widely disseminated in the travel press. This made it easier to disseminate the news about the training as it came from a well-established and reputable organisation.

For smaller sized travel agents and tour operators, there were also a number of benefits circumventing the most common barriers to accessibility training.

- Firstly, the cost burden was not an obstacle due to the funding from the EHRC. The training was given freely to industry and made it a cost effective way to raise staff awareness levels;
- Secondly, training towards a better focus on accessibility also make, in particular smaller businesses, look more responsible towards their local market and can be a good tool to prompt further interest in accessibility; and
- Lastly, the online training was set up to better meet the needs of the travel industry. In particular, in terms of flexibility around schedules which is particularly important for SMEs.

A weakness in the ABTA case, which is also present in most Member States and for a majority of training providers, is the lack of certification or labels associated with completed training. In order to incentivise uptake of the training, it is important for businesses to see a direct added value of engaging in training. This, according to one interviewee, could have helped the uptake efforts both at employee level where a personalised certificate could help increase

employability as well as the level of the business by turning the training into a marketing tool. However, for this to have an effect it would be important for customers to recognise the value of said label and for employers to valorise accessibility training amongst their staff.

## **5.0 EVIDENCE OF IMPACT**

During the development of the modules, ABTA and the Equality and Human Rights Commission did not incorporate an evaluation mechanism to establish the success of the training. This makes it difficult to evaluate its impact. In addition, due to the unreliable numbers of uptake, especially for module 1, it is difficult to assess how many people employed as frontline staff in travel agents and tour operators have undertaken the training. However, it must be pointed out that it is, in general, difficult to measure impact of training both by qualitative and quantitative methods.

It is possible to speculate that the inclusion of a practical checklist used at the time of booking has made improvements in this process. However, figures on the overall uptake and use of this checklist is not available.

Questions on the experience of the EHRC and whether the training had fulfilled any indirect objectives were prompted in order to draw a possible correlation between the number of complaints (a possible reduction) and the uptake of the training course. One interviewee responded that numbers had gone up rather than down. However, this is explained by the public's increasing knowledge of their rights ie. the travellers now know what they have the right to expect, which is a positive thing as it also establishes increased pressure on industry and stimulates uptake of training and awareness. However, the long-term impact of the training course is yet not possible to gauge.

## **6.0 CONCLUSIONS**

This case study has explored the EHRC funded ABTA online training targeted to travel agents and tour operators.

As set out in the analysis, the training was prompted by legislation emerging both from the EU and from the UK. Due to the emergence of legislation and the importance of minimising risk, there was an important gap to fill in terms of skills level of both frontline staff and supervisors in accessibility issues. The development of regulations was also an important step in forcing businesses to think of accessibility. As in most Member States and sub-sectors of the tourism industry, the interest and knowledge of catering to disabled were limited. In this vein, the business case for training was made on the basis of legal risks and financial costs of not complying. However, it also presented an opportunity to raise awareness of the market potential of the disability market, which was clearly present in the second module developed.

The course has successfully been structured to circumvent some of the problems associated with uptake of accessibility training. Especially the choice of delivering the training online have been important to stimulate uptake as this type of method is believed to be beneficial for smaller organisations who are less flexible in terms of time. In addition, the online training has been made available to industry free of charge, which has provided a cost-efficient way to raise staff levels.

However, it is difficult to estimate the impact of the training on the occupations targeted by the initiative. This is due to the fact that no evaluation mechanisms have been provided. Therefore it is difficult to assess whether this training has had an overall impact and influenced improvements in accessibility skills for travel agents and tour operators.

Nevertheless, the training course with accompanying material such as the checklist is an important and freely available tool to the benefit of the UK tourism industry.

## 7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendation are based on the analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the ABTA case and provides valuable insights into the promotion of accessibility training across Europe.

- **Certification is needed in order to incentivise uptake of a training course.** This could be either a training certificate specific to the student who has undertaken the course which could help with employability. Alternatively, a label which businesses can display and use as a marketing tool would add extra weight in the uptake of training. However, this certificate or label must also have some equity on the demand side, ie. the customers as well as from the perspective of the employer.
- **Online training should be made interactive and it must include real life experiences to stimulate learning.** As describe in the case study, online training methods encompass a number of inherent weaknesses in terms of learning processes. Online learning is often static and does not encourage the sharing of experiences and is not effective in breaking down visible and invisible barriers, but with the right course design some of these disadvantages can be circumvented.
- **A checklist and references to other resources** should be incorporated into e-learning modules. Signposting references can help facilitate the learning in practice as well as encourage further in-depth study into accessibility issues.
- **Disability organisations and representatives must be involved in the training design and course curriculum** in order to ensure that the needs of this market segment is effectively met.
- **Secure support from industry by asking businesses to collaborate in the start-up process of the training.** In the case of ABTA, the support from larger actors on the market seem to have facilitate the uptake of the training.

8.0 ANNEX I

Table 1: Criteria and justification for best practice

Criteria	Justification	On track/off track
<b>Innovative</b>	ABTA's training course has attempted to break the traditional problems associated with e-learning such as too heavy focus on theory and static learning processes. Innovative and interactive ways of communicating the key messages to their target audience have been integral to the e-learning modules.	
<b>Relevant</b>	The framework of the training was developed around UK and EU legislation as a way of helping businesses understand accessibility and its importance. The training provided by ABTA has been taken up by some of the biggest actors in the target group for whom the training was designed.	
<b>Transferable</b>	The initiative can be replicated to other Member States and for other target groups. It can also be scaled up.	
<b>Efficient &amp; Effectiveness</b>	The training is cost-effective, as it is carried out online. However, if there is a good return on investment is difficult to gauge as this is related to how effectively the target audience has been reached.	
<b>Impact</b>	It is impossible to measure the impact of the training on the industry. The number of participants are not reliable as some bigger companies only use one login or have embedded the training in their own course material. Therefore, the official number of participants (1 888 by 2013) is probably much higher than displayed in the available figure. The weakness of the training is that there is no immediate way of assessing impact, however, this is not a problem uncommon with training providers.	

*Case Study 1. ABTA, United Kingdom*

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<b>Sustainable</b>	As the training methods used is e-learning, the developmental costs were only significant in the initial phase. In addition, the first module was more expensive and the subsequent model could be developed much cheaper.	
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