



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

Case Study 14. Lousã, Accessible Tourism Destination, Portugal

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Case study

“Lousã, Accessible Tourism Destination”

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Executive Summary

This case study presents the project “Lousã, Accessible Tourism Destination” and focuses on the training components that were developed in order to create an accessible tourism destination in the region in 2008-2011.

In 2008, in the municipality of Lousã, a handful of local authorities, enterprises and institutions set out to make Lousã the first accessible tourism destination in Portugal. One cornerstone in achieving accessibility in the tourism sector, was to improve the skills level of people working in local tourism businesses. Entrepreneurs and frontline staff were targeted through a series of informal and formal training actions which aimed to increase hospitality levels, but also to raise general awareness of the benefits and opportunities of increased accessibility.

As accessibility was a relatively new area of interest in Portugal, the project team was first tasked with better understanding what skills and trainings should be promoted. Based on the outcome of extensive research, three action points were put forward encompassing different activities aimed at raising the skills and awareness. However, it was understood that in order to truly achieve an accessible destination the key was to promote a participatory approach to the project. This meant inviting the local community and key stakeholders to take part in awareness raising events and training actions. Thus, not only those engaged in businesses were targeted in the actions.

An innovative approach to upgrade the skills of tourism businesses was founded on the notion of “tour simulations”. These simulations were practical experiments whereby disabled travellers followed a tour package with accommodation, transport and activities. This gave the businesses an opportunity to gauge whether their services levels were of expected quality in order to receive more tourists with accessibility requirements.

The project came to an end in 2011. Due to the economic situation in Portugal the local authority of Lousã has suffered significant budget cuts. Some of the planned works has for the most part been postponed. In addition, there is also economic constraints in the private sector and businesses have been reluctant to engage in training.

However, positive impacts resulting from the project can also be detected. ARCIL, one of the key organisations in the project, has created a department of “accessible tourism” and is moving to train and coach other public and private organisations in Portugal. Ultimately, ARCIL's intention is to launch an incoming

tour operator based in Lousã taking advantage of the skills and training resources developed as part of the project.

In general, it is believed that one of the main contributions of the project carried out in Lousã, has been to increase the knowledge of accessibility in Portugal.

The study concludes with a few recommendations highlighting the importance of including skills and training considerations as part of creating an accessible destination.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This case study concerns the project “Lousã, Accessible Tourism Destination” and the training components that were developed in order to create an accessible tourism destination in the region.

Accessible tourism has, in general, not had a strong uptake in Portugal. The main reason for this relates to the lack of awareness of the tourism sector to avail of the market opportunities generated by accessible tourism. This inexperience has also resulted in an inability to properly serve tourists with accessibility needs.

In 2008, in the municipality of Lousã, situated in the central region of Portugal, a handful of local authorities, enterprises and institutions attempted to change this situation and set out to make Lousã the first accessible tourism destination in Portugal.

The potential economic benefits arising from accessible tourism was the main driver behind the project. It was early recognized that any effort and commitment to promote and consolidate accessible tourism requires new talents and skills. Therefore, project initiators set among their main priorities to develop of skills and training to improve accessibility in Lousã’s tourism services. Furthermore, the preparatory stages of the project also revealed that there was a great need for training and coaching in accessibility.

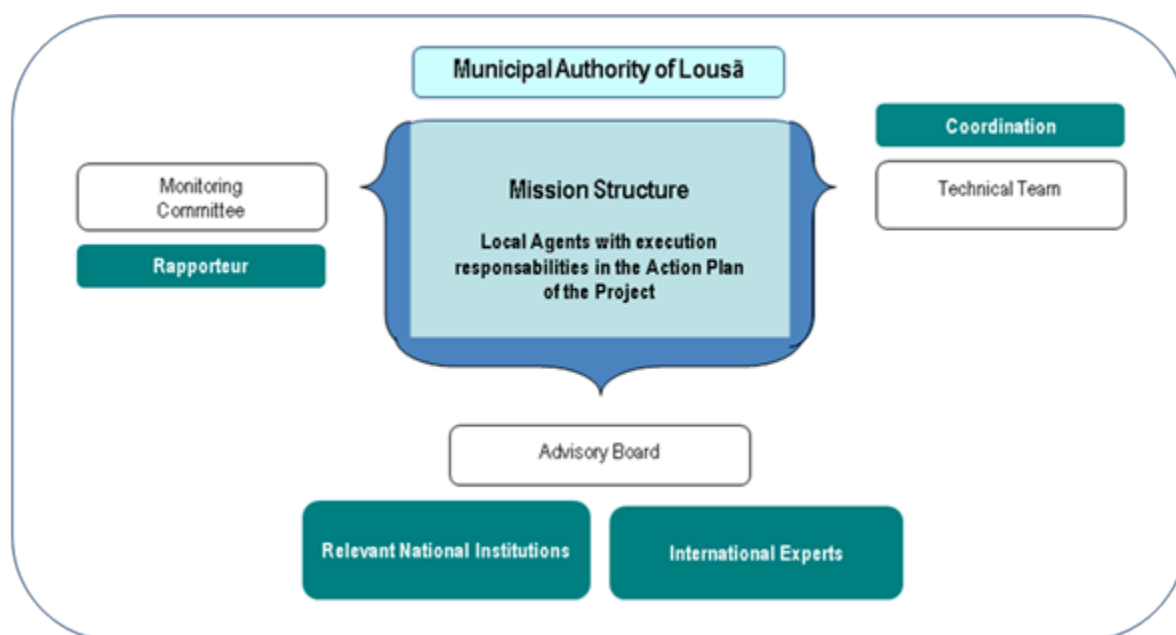
However, it also became evident that developing accessible tourism at a destination-level, where this concept was largely unknown, the support and involvement was required by all stakeholders. The project was also contingent on the awareness of the local community in Lousã of the opportunities and requirements of accessible tourism. It was argued that an accessible tourism destination depends on the commitment of the entire local community and not only that of the providers of tourist services. A systematic and participatory approach was developed to integrate all tourism services and stakeholders in the project.

The project applied an innovative framework to reach its objective. In the core of its governance (Figure 1) there was a Mission Structure helped by a Technical Team.

This Structure had mainly operational tasks and worked as a platform for the cooperation of local stakeholders in order to create and design adapted supplies and services for tourists. This platform would also become a “Front

Office” to attend to both businesses and tourists with special needs, creating new hospitality requirements and, thus, new skills and jobs.

Figure 1: The Governance of the Project “Lousã, Accessible Tourism Destination”



Source: Essentia consulting, 2007

2.0 OVERVIEW AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

On the 17th of May 2009, a cooperation protocol formalized a network of strategic cooperation between different local stakeholders to launch the Project "Lousã, Accessible Tourism Destination".

An action plan was designed to meet the objectives of the projects based on the approach set out above:

- i. **Promotion of an accessibility culture in the local community** including the ordering of studies and diagnosis to improve the available knowledge about accessibility issues in the municipality of Lousã, the promotion of regular discussion meetings and the organisation of educational visits to other municipalities in Portugal and abroad;
- ii. **Improvement of talents and skills** including the organisation of awareness sessions to key publics in Lousã, the preparation and

realisation of training sessions and the planning and conducting of a cycle of coaching actions;

- iii. **Improvement of urban accessibility** including the planning on accessibility, the realisation of public works of urban adaption and requalification and the adaption of public tourist attractions (riverside beaches, museums, etc.);
- iv. **Accessible destination management** comprising the setting of a program for the development of accessible tourism in Lousã, including a broad range of activities concerning the assessment of the local tourist units, the realisation of small interventions in those private tourist units (hotels, camping, restaurants, etc.), the mapping of skills and jobs related with accessible tourism and, finally, the communication, marketing and animation for launching the accessible tourist destination;
- v. **Assessment and certification of the accessible tourism destination** led by an international team of experts.

As illustrated above, the Action Plan placed emphasis on raising awareness in the local community in general as well as the training and coaching of local tourism stakeholders in order to ensure higher standards of hospitality in the market of accessible tourism.

However, the Technical Team in order to train and coach local businesses first needed to better understand the requirements of Lousã in terms of accessibility and accessible tourism. Thus, several studies and plans were commissioned. The need for training and coaching on accessible tourism was highlighted in three studies:

- “Diagnosis of Accessibility and Mobility of Tourist Establishments in Lousã”;
- “Study on Hospitality, Entertainment and Occupation of Tourists with Special Needs in Lousã;” and
- “Study on the Impact of the Tourism for All in the Social Market of Employment of Lousã”.

Following this preparatory stage, the project team adopted a specific Action Plan for the awareness, training and coaching activities which set out the following actions:

- First, it promoted several awareness sessions directed towards the local community. For instance, sessions were specifically targeted to local

schools and local media. In addition, it scheduled regular discussion meetings with the project's main stakeholders and organised educational visits to Ávila and Pontevedra (Spain) which were used as case studies.

- Second, the Action Plan launched a cycle of training actions aimed to tourism professionals and entrepreneurs, rehabilitation professionals, health technicians and local officials.
- Third, a cycle of coaching actions specially designed for the local tourism stakeholders was organised. The project team set out a partnership with a national Tour Operator (TO) for coaching purposes. The aim was to test an array of tourist proposals and itineraries especially designed to serve tourists with different access requirements. This training model was a major asset not only for the tourist agents involved in the delivery of tourist services, but also for the Technical Team, which had been directly involved in the preparation, implementation and evaluation of the "simulated tours".

In implementing these "simulations", the Mission Structure highlighted many critical points related to the organisation and provision of tour packages for tourists with special needs. These tour simulations were a showcase for Lousã's tourist stakeholders. They were invited to improve, through persistent training effort, their accessible tourism skills. Moreover, the simulations helped to recognise the stakeholders that were more willing and prepared to provide services to tourists with special needs.

3.0 CONTENT, TRAINING MATERIAL AND AVAILABILITY

As specified in the previous section, the Lousa project encompassed a range of different formal and informal trainings delivered as part of making Lousa accessible. This section discusses further in detail the different forms of trainings that were integral to the project.

Content

The main content of the training actions were related to:

- Introduction to accessible tourism;
- Reception and information of tourists of special needs; and
- Special services related to accessible tourism.

A total of about 15 training actions were carried out between 2011 and 2012. Among these training actions there were four training workshops on accessible tourism, involving 5 trainers and 42 trainees, including entrepreneurs and

professionals from companies of the tourism sector belonging to each one of the following groups of stakeholders:

- Accommodation establishments;
- Restaurants;
- Other establishments of food & beverage; and
- Agents of leisure, animation and tourism information.

The training actions were also comprised of ten “coaching actions”, which took place in the spring-summer of 2011. These training actions were designed as tour simulations, as described briefly above, involving real tourists who followed specially designed itineraries. The first three of these simulations were implemented as tests while the following seven were carried out as real-life experiments. The groups involved in these simulations had on average 6 tourists (people with special needs, family and friends), which lasted for 2 to 3 days. This was free of charge to the tourists with the condition that they were to give feedback on the services that had been provided. It was argued that it was a valuable learning opportunity for businesses to interact with disabled tourists in a practical setting in order to understand whether their service standard was adequate.

Figure 3: Images from the tour simulations





Material

Since, at that time, there was no training material on accessible tourism publicly available in Portugal, the project team dedicated much of its time to develop training material adapted specifically to Portuguese conditions and, in particular, to those of Lousã.

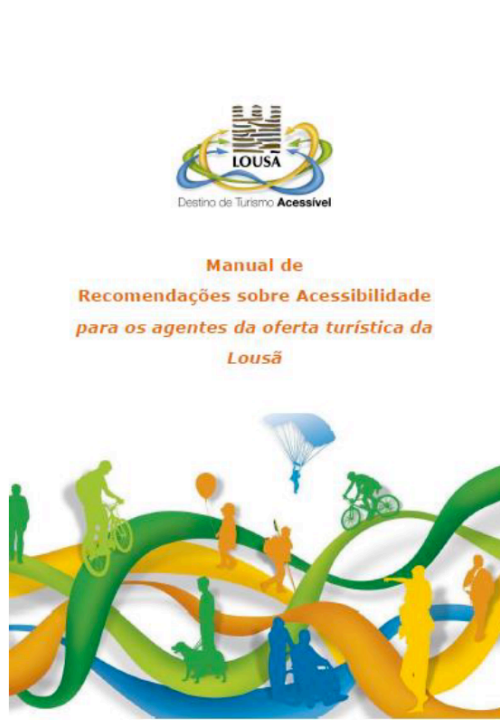
Taking advantage of the expertise of many of the specialists participating in the project, a pioneering “Manual of recommendations on accessibility for Lousã’s tourism stakeholders” was produced. The manual was used as the main training material in the activities developed in the framework of the project. Other training materials were developed as additional resources and other material

was designed for some particular training actions. This included a checklist for assessment of skills and guides for role playing. However, the main manual was the only material that could be universally applied across different tourism businesses and subsectors.

The Manual was organized in respect to the following contents:

- **Introduction**, with the project overview, objectives and goals;
- **Enunciation of benefits of accessibility**, either in collective (local community) or individual (tourist entrepreneurs, rehabilitation professionals, etc.) terms;
- **Recommendations to trainees (entrepreneurs and professionals)**, focused on:
 - How to be a good host;
 - How to give useful and critical information;
 - How to increase accessibility and comfort in tourism establishments, facilities and services;
 - How to provide extra-tourism accessible services (for instance, day care help, physiotherapy services, provision of adapted diets, etc.);
- **Expert advice**, including special tips, web links and bibliography concerning this subject.

Figure 4: Cover of the training “Manual de Recomendacoes sobre Acessibilidade para os agentes da oferta turistica da Lousa”.



The specific coaching activities also had training material of its own, but these were meant to provide practical help to trainers and trainees. Thus, they were adapted to each of tour simulation although some may have been shared (for instance, tour preparation checklists).

Meanwhile, in this training material the acquisition of adapted vehicles, equipment and gear aimed to serve the coaching actions were included. This set of material was indispensable for the execution of the scheduled simulations. Only by its own, the material could be object of training since most of the trainees never had contact with such adapted vehicles and equipment.

Finally, the production of information and interpretation banners (roll-ups) aiming to explain the project and the concept of accessible tourism were key communication material to raise awareness of the project and accessible tourism. These banners were displayed whenever an action, session or initiative related with the project was organised. They were displayed clearly as awareness material for a general public.

4.0 TARGET AUDIENCE, COMMUNICATIONS AND BARRIERS

The Mission Structure was progressively enlarged and, in its final 2011 form, it integrated the main sectors of Lousã's tourism businesses. These participants were the main project stakeholders and they were also the first target audience of the awareness, training and coaching actions that were being carried out in Lousã.

The primary audience included:

- The Municipal Authority of Lousã;
- Private sector:
 - Accommodations.
 - Restaurants.
 - Animation and activities.
 - Shopping.
- NGOs:
 - Association for the Recovery of Unadapted Citizens of Lousã (ARCIL);
 - Social Institution "*Santa Casa da Misericórdia*" of Lousã;
- Other targeted audience was the local community of Lousã such as teachers, doctors, nurses, rehabilitation staff, emergence staff, firemen, policemen and officials that were living and working in the municipality.

Other targeted audiences included people in the local community of Lousã which were invited to information sessions and awareness-raising actions. These activities were meant to promote accessible tourism as a means to foster employment and entrepreneurship within the local community.

In addition to awareness raising, the Mission Structure developed specific expertise in the field of accessible tourism that now need to be consolidated through the continual professional training with the help of specialized trainers. This effort must be associated to the delivery of materials and equipment (technical aids) which are suitable for the "accessible tours" simulated within the framework of the project.

Communications

In order to truly capitalise on the investments made in making Lousã accessible, a cycle of conferences dedicated to the awareness towards the issues of accessibility and tourism were implemented. These awareness raising

conferences placed special emphasis on the social and economic advantages of increasing accessibility for all. Other municipalities, institutions and corporations were invited to present their own experiences and methods with regard to accessible tourism. Some of these gatherings were reserved for the project stakeholders, but others were open to the local community and were widely promoted through local schools and media. Some relevant examples included:

- Action "Accessible Tourist Animation", June 2008;
- Action "Food Services for People with Disabilities", May 2009;
- Annual event "Downhill in Wheelchairs of Lousã", since 2010;
- Since 2010, introduction of accessibility concerns in some actions contained in the quarterly Agenda of Animation of the *Câmara Municipal da Lousã*, as for instance:
 - "Urban Hike - Hike Inclusive", on April 2010;
 - "Sport for All - Goalball", counting for the national championship, on April 2010;
 - "Healthy Lousã", on May 2010;
 - "Meeting of Generations," on September 2010.
 - "Table for All", accessibility in the gastronomy festivals of Lousã, since 2010;
- Festival "Arts for All", June 2011.

Other information sessions and awareness-raising actions were also carried out in order to spread the concerns and opportunities of accessibility among teachers, trainers, entrepreneurs and professionals of the tourism industry, technicians and staff in the fields of rehabilitation and social support, as well as among the local residents with disabilities. These actions were meant to promote accessible tourism as a means to foster employment and entrepreneurship within the local community. These channels meant that many tourism businesses operating in Lousã were reached.

Barriers

In a region where tourism was not yet a major industry, the main barrier to the training and coaching actions was changing the priorities and expectations among the project stakeholders. The economic situation of Portugal, particularly after 2012, has caught municipalities, businesses and communities in a trap of uncertainty. This economic environment is not encouraging authorities, local entrepreneurs and NGO to engage in new ventures and partnerships.

The Local Authority of Lousã suffered significant budget cuts in these late years due to financial restrictions in the public sector in Portugal. The initial investment plans had to be reviewed and the costly works for adapting public spaces in urban centres and leisure spots had, for the most part, to be postponed. So, the investments made in studies, planning and training of officials will take longer to recover. The risks related to a full recovery of these public efforts are real.

In the private sector, the economic situation is also a major constraint, however, not the only one. Among all the stakeholders involved in the project, entrepreneurs were the most resistant to recognise the importance to develop new skills and training in accessible tourism, even if this group was probably the one who had the most to gain with the development of Lousã as an accessible tourism destination. Essentially, the biggest resistance came from tourism businesses.

The final evaluation of the project provided some clues to this resistance. Primarily the lack of understanding the needs of tourists with access requirements and economic stress contributed to the low motivation of tourism businesses operating in Lousã.

However, the project also had positive impacts. ARCIL, probably the main stakeholder of the project, has taken some important steps: it has created a department of “accessible tourism” and is moving to train and coach other public and private organisations in Portugal. Ultimately, ARCIL's purpose is to launch a business of an accessible incoming tour operator based on Lousã taking advantage of the skills and training resources developed as part of the project.

Finally, the local community answered on a very positive way to the aim of promotion an accessibility culture in Lousã. According to the interviewees, it is clear that the project sparked a vivid interest in accessible tourism and the opportunities and requirements associated with it.

5.0 EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

The activities developed in the field of accessible tourism related to awareness raising, training and coaching of accessibility skills in the tourism industry had a great impact, not only locally but also nationally. This fostered a feeling of local pride that helped substantially in the implementation of the scheduled activities. Moreover, the positive media exposure and the recognition in tourism circles

have granted to Lousã a good image, which was also perceived by the stakeholders of the project.

Certainly improvements were made in what concerns the awareness levels and the upgrading of skills in the tourism sectors of Lousã. Even today, two years after the end of the project, the legacy is visible: the front page of the website of the municipality of Lousã highlights the link to “accessible tourism”, which is probably unique for municipal websites in Portugal. Many project stakeholders have been investing in small interventions in their businesses to also serve customers with accessibility needs. In addition, some stakeholders now offer adapted tourism services, if and when requested. Lastly, ARCIL is starting an inbound tour business on accessible tourism in the region.

The training sessions and the cycle of coaching activities provided a rare chance to gather a unique set of skills in accessible tourism. Moreover, it is also important to highlight that the project “Lousã, Accessible Tourism Destination” is a milestone for the development of accessible tourism in Portugal, sparking a vivid interest that helped the country to catch up with other European countries. Locally, the project changed the way tourism was seen by tourist entrepreneurs and professionals.

In fact, the project covers many assets, from the technical development of training contents to the marketing advantages related to the exposition in national media. Probably the best way to translate the relevance of this success is the continual reception of invitations to present Lousã’s project in national and international conferences and seminars, the number of research papers that are referring to it and the number of relevant awards granted, nationally and internationally (for instance, an European Enterprise Award and an National Tourism Award).

Moreover, the project had an impact within academic circles and inspired many scientific papers and magazines, especially in Portugal. There are many references to the project in national and international bibliography concerning accessible tourism, where the project “Lousã, Accessible Tourism Destination” is quoted as a case study, a pilot project or even an innovative initiative. These observations are also extended to skills and training needs.

As part of the external monitoring and evaluation of the Lousã project, Toegankelijkheidsbureau (TGB), based in Belgium, had the task to develop a special certification programme for the assessment of the accessible tourism destination. This is most likely the first accessible tourism destination

certification programme in the world and one of its main items was the improvement of skills and training.

This certification programme entitled Accessible Tourism Destination Certification Program (ATDCP) involved assessment meetings with destination managers, coupled with on-site audits and document analysis by external auditors, thus building a picture of the capacity and level of achievement of the accessible destination. Training sessions were one of the main concerns for the certification. One of the major lessons of Lousã is that achieving good access, as well as more and satisfied visitors is a process which must be continually nurtured and supported by those involved. This is especially true in what concerns one of the key points of ATDCP: the assessment of skills and training needs to accessibility in tourism services. Such actions as the awareness of the local community, the training of tourism suppliers or the coaching of staff in accessible “tour simulations” should continue to be persistently assessed and certified by the kind of tools such as ATDCP.

The project came to an end in July 2011 with a great cultural venue: the first accessible festival in Portugal, “Arts for All”. Lousã was then awarded with the first “Accessible Tourism Destination” internationally certified by TGB with the supervision of ENAT. This certification will be renewed every two years which means that Lousã must continue its improvement efforts in this field. The new mayor of Lousã continues to highlight accessible tourism as part of the modern identity of the municipality. The new Ombudsman for the people with special needs continued the work initiated by its predecessor, Mr José Ernesto Carvalhinho. ARCIL provided coaching in other parts of the country (for instance, in the municipality of Penedono, in the Douro Valley), has created a business section to work in the accessible tourism. The group of experts gathered for the project still joins the time on time in the Consultation Council created by Lousã’s Ombudsman.

6.0 CONCLUSIONS

The challenge of training and coaching on accessible tourism leads us to conclude that the host communities tend to gradually improve the conditions of access offered to disabled citizens, whether they are tourists or residents. Therefore, it is believed that the creation and development of a given "accessible destination" will promote, in time, a symbiotic relationship between tourism and accessibility, which tends to benefit everyone: residents and the local community, entrepreneurs and local authorities, institutions of rehabilitation and of social aid, the different tourist agents and, after all, the tourists with greater or lesser degree of "special needs".

Lousã had – and still has – to overcome some serious constraints. The lure of economic benefits which spurred the project "Lousã, Accessible Tourism Destination" to an initial success may not have materialised to the extent realised, however, this is an ongoing and long-term process. Tourism entrepreneurs and professionals had hoped that accessible tourism could engender new skills and jobs in the municipality. However, the economic crisis in Portugal has eroded many of these hopes.

However, Lousã undertook pioneering work in the conception and testing of innovative solutions to prevent and overcome the challenges in the creation of accessible tourism destinations. This assessment poses opportunities but also responsibilities for the municipality: the development of accessible tourism in Lousã will only rise to its full potential if the expertise gathered in recent years is further enhanced and consolidated. The creation of networks between tourist stakeholders is an example of these "innovative solutions". The next stage will probably be the empowerment of the stakeholders of the project in terms of the development collective organisation skills in the municipality.

In fact, the skills needs of the new jobs related with the organisation of tour packages, the incoming of organised groups of tourist with special needs and, finally, the marketing and distribution of accessible tourism proposals are all essential to catapult the accessible tourism in Lousã and the trainings that were designed as part of this

In conclusion, the project "Lousã, Accessible Tourism Destination" served as a lever for the rise of a new set of skills and jobs based on a collective approach to offer accessible tourism supplies and services. However, there is still a long way to go in adapting the local services and infrastructure, along with changes in mentalities in the businesses of tourism. The country's present situation does not favours a true breakthrough in Lousã. However the training and coaching

expertise acquired by the local stakeholders of the project is an important asset that institutions like ARCIL are starting to value.


7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS





The following recommendations are based on the lessons learnt from case of Lousã and its attempt to create an accessible destination.

- Training does not need to encompass only formal training sessions, but can also include “soft”, informal trainings and practical real life experiments such as tour simulations, which gives businesses the opportunity to receive disabled tourists in their facilities.
- To create and promote an accessible tourism destination it is imperative to increase skills levels of the professionals involved in the tourism sector. For certification of a destination, the level of hospitality skills must be included in its assessment. This will encourage the uptake of training and enhance training efforts.
- It is useful to situate skills upgrading and training efforts in the context of an accessible destination. This enhances businesses understanding of the importance of appropriate skills. There is little relevance to provide an accessible physical environment and infrastructure without the skills to serve and welcome tourists with accessibility requirements. As shown by the case of Lousã, it is imperative to have all stakeholders committed to the project and especially tourism businesses who may be reluctant to change.

ANNEX I: CRITERIA AND JUSTIFICATION FOR BEST PRACTICE

Table 1: Criteria and justification for best practice

Criteria	Justification	On track/off track
Innovative	The accessible destination project implemented in Lousã incorporated both formal training and “soft” trainings which aimed to give businesses practical skills in catering to guests with accessibility requirements. These trainings were implemented through innovative approaches such as, for instance, the tour simulation packages. The case of Lousã is also innovative as it brings all stakeholder together and relies on the community	

	to understand the benefits of accessibility and not only the businesses directly concerned.	
Relevant	The initiative clearly addressed a need in the market. It was the first attempt to create an accessible destination in Portugal. In its initial phases it had high-level support from major stakeholders, however, businesses who would benefit the most were reluctant to engage in the project. This indicates that there is a need to raise awareness levels before formal training could be implemented.	
Transferable	All of the different tools can be transferred to other destinations in Portugal and abroad.	
Efficient & Effectiveness	It is doubtful whether the training packages, whether formal or informal, are efficient and effective. Some of the activities should be regarded as effective. The “tour simulation packages” are good examples of how businesses can come to learn practically about accessibility and how to properly cater to tourists with accessibility requirements. However, the time and labour intensity in organising and carrying out this activity does not seem to be very efficient.	
Impact	The project had a good impact on raising awareness in the immediate locality as well as nationally on the benefits of accessible tourism. Some good examples have resulted from the study such as ARCIL’s attempts to create an accessibility department and tourism business. However, external factors have hampered the impact of the project.	
Sustainable	The project relied on ESF funding and has not been able to secure its own sustainability over time. In light of the financial crisis, the project has also not been able to garner funding from other sources.	