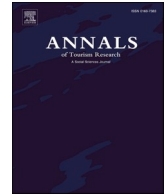




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Research note

Sharing experiences of co-design for accessible tourism

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This research note seeks to encourage researchers to adopt “a new tradition of sharing experiences in order ... to learn from one another” (Hendriks, Slegers, & Duysburgh, 2015, p. 70) in co-design *with* (Milner & Frawley, 2019) people with disabilities. Fraser-Barbour et al. (2025, p. 4) argue that co-design should “shift power towards people with disability”. However, previous studies have focused on the results of co-design rather than sharing effective principles, techniques and critical reflections of the co-design process. A pooling of knowledge allows greater reflection and understanding about ethical ways to partner with people with disabilities to empower them and ensure they can express their voice. In tourism research, there remains little evidence of co-design (Chiscano & Darcy, 2023), with most research failing to actively engage people with disabilities beyond being the subject of the research or tokenistic consultation (Dickson, Darcy, & Schweinsberg, 2024). Yet tourism environments continue to marginalise and discriminate against people with disabilities despite calls for transformative research that recognises the diversity of embodiments that shape access needs, such as mobility, vision/blind, hearing/Deaf, cognitive/intellectual, neurodiverse (Gillovic, McIntosh, & Darcy, 2024).

Co-design adds value to research “as an essential component of ethical and respectful work grounded in human rights” (Fraser-Barbour et al., 2025, p. 2), that supports the empowerment of people with disabilities as “experts of their experiences” (Hendriks et al., 2015, p. 70). In disability research, it seeks to challenge ableist practices by shifting the debate about inclusion from *on* or *for* people with disabilities to *with* and *by* them (Milner & Frawley, 2019). It is emancipatory in approach, essential to address the “accessibility gap” in policy and practice (Dickson et al., 2024, p. 2), ensuring people with disabilities engage in research and decision-making central to their priorities, and where outcomes lead to tangible change in their everyday lives. A lack of attention to actively working *with* people with disabilities in tourism research can perpetuate the cycles of dependency, inequality and marginalisation they have experienced through discriminatory practices, ableist assumptions, and by those in power (Charlton, 1998). Despite a focus on power sharing, co-design may involve “tensions” that can “de- and re-territorialise power in the co-design process”, undermining intentions to shift power (Fraser-Barbour et al., 2025, p. 1). Furthermore, co-design methods may need adjustment to remove barriers to

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participation, for example, by choosing approaches that ensure co-design partners with cognitive or sensory disabilities can express themselves (Hendriks et al., 2015). As such, sharing co-design experiences is valuable.

In light of the nascent body of research on co-design in disability research, the aim of this research note is to critically reflect on the co-design process employed in our interdisciplinary research which sought to evaluate and demarginalize New Zealand's built environment. Public buildings, including airports, restaurants, attractions and accommodation, represent essential touchpoints in the tourism system; if any of these are inaccessible, they may prevent travel for people with disabilities (Darcy, 2012). Indeed, New Zealand's built environment has many public buildings with problematic access features that limit full participation for people with disabilities (Flemmer & McIntosh, 2025).

Our co-design research involved a seven-partner Accessibility Partnership Panel. Each partner identified as living with a disability or worked for a disability advocacy organisation, and represented a diversity of disabilities - mobility, hearing/Deaf, vision/blind, cognitive/intellectual, neurodiversity, or intersections of multiple disabilities. The academic partners do not identify as living with a disability but strive for "ethical sensitivity" in their research (Lu, Yang, Moyle, & Reid, 2025, p. 6). The partners participated in five key stages of the research during which their voices and lived experiences were central in the co-design process. A survey of New Zealand residents with disabilities was undertaken to ascertain the main challenges in accessing public buildings and priorities for improvement. Audits of a sample of different types of public buildings revealed a lack of compliance with New Zealand's accessibility legislation and minimal enforcement. A survey of construction industry stakeholders showed they held little knowledge of inclusive building design and were reluctant to bear the financial cost of improving building accessibility. The partners also co-designed research outputs, including a quick fact sheet for industry and a petition calling for legislative change. The research findings confirmed that critical barriers to accessibility remained and highlighted the important expertise the partners contributed to the research.

Sharing "method stories" (Hendriks et al., 2015, p. 70) can help other researchers learn from our experiences and, if necessary, adapt co-design to their specific situation to aid the empowerment of co-design partners with disabilities. We identified experiences relating to three aspects for sharing: the core role, accessible practices, and ability to resolve ableist conditions through the co-design process. Firstly, the role of our seven partners was central to the research and facilitated co-design. Our external funders supported an hourly payment for their core role, ensuring they could be more than just "informants" (Raman & French, 2022, p. 432). However, this proved problematic in our university systems and required negotiation. Gift vouchers became the only method of remuneration for our partners; this failed to recognise them as equally valued partners (Runacres & Herron, 2023). Furthermore, while the Accessibility Partnership Panel placed our partners in expert roles, their voices were absent in the initial research proposal; collaboration to establish the research agenda should be a key principle of co-design. The defined one-year timeline of the research contract also posed a challenge to engage with partners at each key stage and to function as an inclusive team, ending abruptly at the conclusion of the research contract period. These realities reduced how much power our partners held in their roles, created time barriers to work in an authentic way, and are realities shared previously in co-design with people with disabilities (Fraser-Barbour et al., 2025; Hendriks et al., 2015).

Relations and differing viewpoints can also impact the practice of co-design. The dynamics of the research team were friendly, collegial and honest, meaning few tensions needed to be navigated. This is likely because the partners held previous research relationships with at least one of the authors; this ensured a level of trust and facilitated the co-design rather than restraining it (Raman & French, 2022), although could involve unconscious bias or blind spots. The first online meeting established shared common values and goals of the project, namely, being solution-focused, prioritising lived experiences (Dickson et al., 2024) and ensuring a safe and respectful space for open discussion. Indeed, we found that partners spoke up when they wanted to. Partners were asked to provide their input, even if not present at a meeting, to ensure the co-design process captured their lived experience and involved them at each stage. The partners were each invited to lead future meetings but declined to do so, meaning the leadership and management of the process remained with the people who initiated the research. They also preferred not to co-author research outputs. However, their expertise remained crucial, for example, ensuring the practice of sharing information in accessible formats. Budget limitations prevented employment of a sign language interpreter to attend meetings. Instead, we relied on written communication and visual formats consistent with screen reader software (JAWS 2023 for Windows; SuperNova 2022; and VoiceOver for Apple devices). None of our partners found the communications inaccessible.

We recognise that our co-design process and research methods were limited to verbal and visual communication and required cognitive skills that may prove challenging for some people living with cognitive or sensory disabilities. As an important objective for co-design is to resolve ableist practices and conditions, flexibility and use of a range of methodological approaches would have engendered greater inclusivity. Indeed, Fraser-Barbour et al. (2025) encourage the use of inclusive research methods to resist against engrained ableist structures. Shared dialogue encouraged greater reflexivity within the research team, for example, challenging ableist vocabulary that may (re)produce oppression (Gillovic, McIntosh, Darcy, & Cockburn-Wooten, 2018). The person-first language we use reflects our partners' self-identification (i.e. 'people with disabilities'), the New Zealand context, and established usage across local organisations. We acknowledge other scholars prefer 'people with disability' to foreground the disabling nature of society (Oliver, 1990). Another ableist condition significantly impacted our research; the University's research ethics committee imposed two limitations on our survey of New Zealand residents with disabilities. First, survey respondents had to be aged over 18 years. Second, respondents had to be able to communicate their own responses rather than have someone speak for them, such as a carer or proxy, who may provide a conflicting view (Hendriks et al., 2015). Thus, certain groups were denied the right to express voice in co-design or were assumed more vulnerable or incapable due to being marginalised by ableist barriers, and further disempowered.

To conclude, our research promotes co-design *with* people with disabilities as 'user-experts' of New Zealand's public buildings as essential to lead change. While our research methods and restricted practices limited inclusivity, a strength of our research was that the process was viewed positively by those involved and achieved a mutually beneficial relationship. The challenges we faced were not

related to any type of disability. Rather, we found institutional, funding, and attitudinal barriers counterproductive to shifting power. These conditions perpetuated dominant and ableist norms (Fraser-Barbour et al., 2025). Co-design remains messy in this regard, even when external funding bodies encourage co-design. Further shared learnings will help build a body of knowledge to determine what factors may facilitate or constrain co-design and engender greater methodological reflexivity and flexibility to ensure dedicated research methods, and/or customised research approaches, may be applied in-situ to meet individual abilities (Hendriks et al., 2015; Raman & French, 2022). We advocate for future inclusive, collaborative co-design to shift power and ableist assumptions to empower those most impacted by discrimination and ensure tourism research can positively and effectively co-create an accessible tourism for all.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Alison McIntosh: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Claire Flemmer:** Writing – review & editing, Project administration, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

The authors equally contributed to the conceptualisation, funding acquisition, methodology, writing and editing.

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Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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