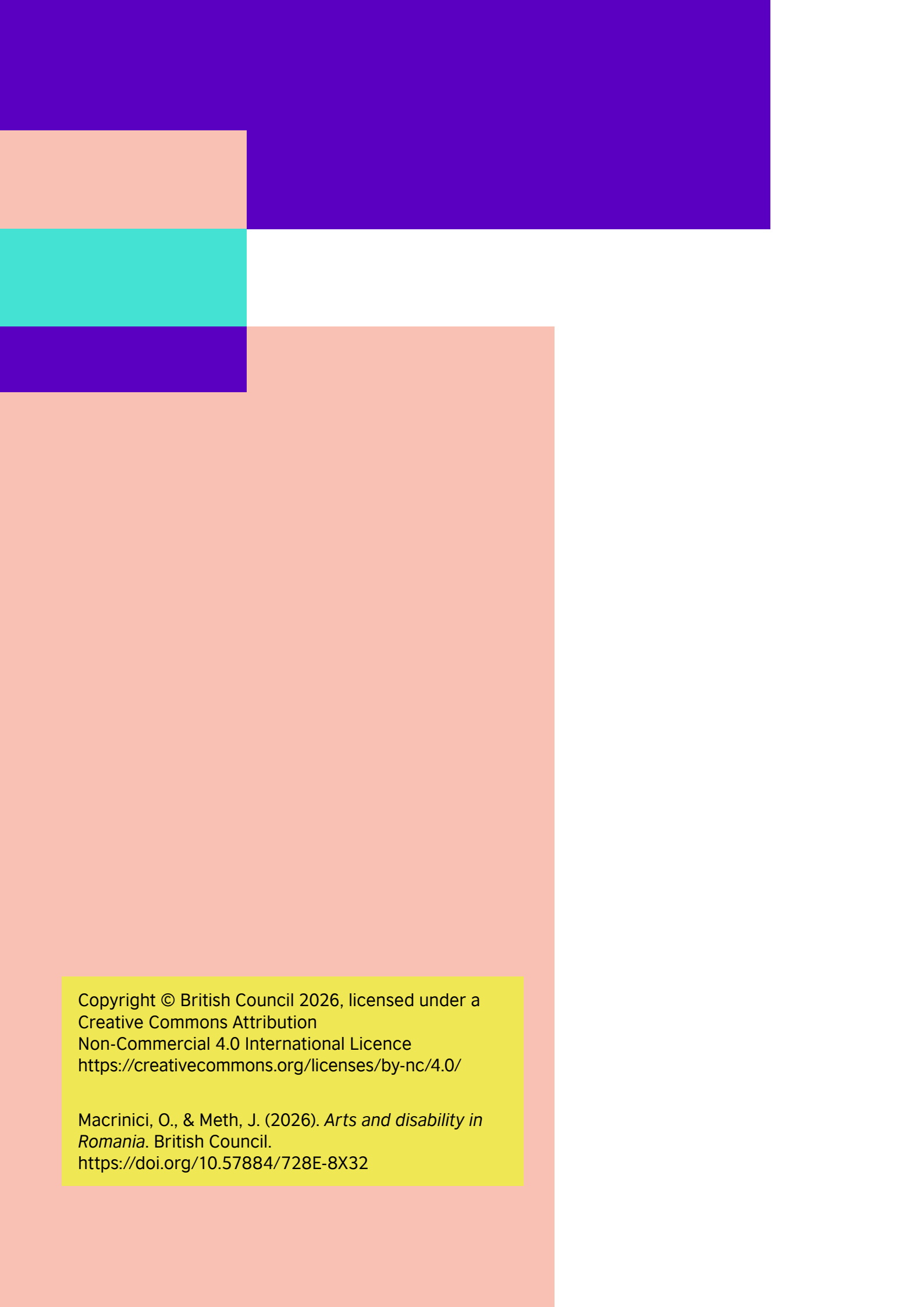


Arts and disability in Romania

From fragmented practice
to a national framework





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A note on terminology¹

Both ‘disabled people’ and ‘people with disabilities’ are generally accepted terms, and here used interchangeably. ‘Disabled people’ is often preferred by disability advocates as it reflects the social model of disability, emphasizing that society disables people through barriers rather than focusing solely on the individual’s condition. ‘People with disabilities’ aligns with the United Nations and is sometimes seen as more person-first, but it can implicitly place the onus for change on the individual rather than society.

Neurodiversity posits human brain variation as natural and inherent, meaning *all people* are ‘neurodiverse’. ‘Neurodivergent’ describes someone whose brain functions, learns, or behaves differently from what society considers ‘typical’, a term used for people with conditions such as autism or ADHD.

¹ Rahman, L. (2019, July). *Disability Language Guide*. Stanford Disability Initiative. https://disability.stanford.edu/sites/g/files/sbiybj26391/files/media/file/disability-language-guide-stanford_1.pdf

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Foreword

There are people for whom contact with artistic creation can be an alternative way of perceiving the world and being present within it. And yet, for many of them, the path to art remains difficult or even impossible. Not because of a lack of interest, talent, or desire, but because of obstacles that are often invisible to others, yet extremely concrete for those who face them every day. In Romania, people with disabilities still encounter this reality far too often. Their presence in cultural life -as audience members, artists, or professionals - is fragile, sporadic, and dependent on isolated initiatives or individual efforts.

The way a society structures access to art and culture says a great deal about its true values. It reveals how willing it is to create spaces for genuine encounters, rather than merely proclaim generous principles. It shows whether diversity is truly embraced or remains an abstract concept, rarely reflected in everyday reality. When access is missing, the loss is not borne only by those who are excluded. It is a collective loss that affects the entire cultural community, impoverishing it by depriving it of essential perspectives, voices, and experiences.

Accessibility does not mean only technical adaptations or isolated solutions. Above all, it means people and relationships. It means how someone is welcomed, whether they feel genuinely included or merely tolerated, whether their voice is heard or fades away like an echo. Accessibility begins long before ramps, subtitles, or assistive technologies, and it continues long after them. It is a matter of attitude, openness, and the way cultural institutions define their mission and their relationship with their audiences.

Today, Romania has a solid legislative framework regarding the rights of persons with disabilities, and the commitments undertaken at both national and international levels are clear. Nevertheless, everyday experience shows that the application of these principles is uneven, and the gap between law and reality remains, for now, considerable. People with disabilities are still far too little visible in the cultural space - not because of a lack of interest or skills, but because of barriers built up over time: inaccessible infrastructure, fragmented educational pathways, a lack

of specific expertise within cultural institutions, and a public discourse that oscillates between compassion and avoidance. Under these conditions, participation becomes difficult, and trust is hard to build.

This study is grounded in the conviction that access to art and culture for all is, first and foremost, a fundamental right and a prerequisite for a society that values competencies rather than differences. People with disabilities are not merely beneficiaries of inclusion policies. They are creators, professionals, dialogue partners, and an integral part of a vibrant and diverse cultural space. Their presence should not be the exception, but the norm.

At the same time, accessibility cannot be built unilaterally. Cultural institutions have the responsibility to open their doors, adapt their practices, and invest in long-term skills and strategies. But this process equally requires dialogue and the active involvement of people with disabilities, through feedback, co-creation, and jointly developed solutions. Sustainable change emerges where there is a willingness to work with one another, not merely for one another.

This study does not propose quick fixes or universal recipes. It brings together voices, experiences, and diverse perspectives, all of which are necessary to understand the complexity of the field. Between the legislative framework and lived reality, between good intentions and implementation, between courageous initiatives and a lack of resources, a landscape takes shape that calls for greater coherence, accountability, and a long-term vision.

Above all, this report is an invitation addressed to authorities, cultural institutions, artists, educators, funders, civic organizations, and the general public to view accessibility not as a formal obligation, but as an opportunity to enrich the cultural life of all. An invitation to move from fragmented initiatives to a shared effort built on respect, collaboration, and trust. Not all changes can happen immediately, but the direction is clear: integration, not isolation; dialogue, not unilateral decision-making; long-term construction, not short-term solutions.

There are already people who care. There are initiatives that work. There is a sincere desire to do things better. This study aims to bring them together, to offer a common language and a solid starting point for the next steps – because a truly vibrant culture is one in which no one is left behind.

Executive summary

This scoping study examines the current landscape of **arts and disability** in Romania and sets out an evidence-based foundation for strengthening cultural participation, representation, and professional pathways for disabled people. Commissioned by the British Council, the study draws on national legislation, international frameworks, and qualitative research undertaken with both disabled and non-disabled artists, cultural practitioners, educators, public authorities, funders, non-governmental organisations, and civil society actors. Throughout the process, the British Council has acted as an honest broker, creating the conditions for open dialogue across sectors and connecting Romanian perspectives with wider UK and European practice.

The study seeks to understand how disabled people currently experience cultural life in Romania, both as audiences and as creators, and to identify the structural barriers and enabling conditions that shape participation. Three core questions run throughout the report. The first considers how national values, public discourse, and legal frameworks influence disabled people's visibility and participation in cultural life. The second examines systemic barriers across education, employment, public space, and cultural institutions. The third explores opportunities for coordinated action through capacity building, funding, and European cooperation.

The report is organised across ten chapters, moving from national context and public discourse to sector-specific analysis, and concluding with a proposed **National Arts and Disability Framework**. Each chapter combines contextual analysis with insights from consultations and concludes with key findings that inform the recommendations set out at the end of the report.

Context and methodology

Romania has a well-established legal framework for disability rights, including constitutional protections, anti-discrimination legislation, and ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2010. However, implementation remains

uneven. Nearly one in twenty Romanians is registered as disabled, yet disabled people remain largely absent from mainstream cultural spaces and cultural production. Evidence gathered for this study highlights a persistent gap between legal commitments and lived experience, particularly in relation to access, representation, and sustained professional pathways.

The research underpinning this report is qualitative and exploratory. It draws on seven focus groups held in Bucharest and Timișoara, meetings with ministerial and local government representatives, and individual interviews with experts from across Romania. The focus groups were deliberately dialogic, creating space for listening, reflection, and shared sense-making. While individual voices are not attributed directly, the analysis reflects recurring themes and priorities across the consultations. An intersectional approach is adopted throughout, recognising that disability intersects with poverty, rurality, ethnicity, gender, age, migration, and other forms of exclusion.

National values, public discourse, and intersectionality

The report situates **arts and disability** within a wider social and cultural context shaped by historical legacies, public attitudes, and patterns of invisibility. While legal language has increasingly aligned with international standards, public discourse often remains paternalistic and shaped by limited contact with disabled people's lived experience. Disabled people are frequently invisible in everyday public life, yet hypervisible when they enter cultural or civic spaces. This tension reinforces exclusion and undermines confidence for both disabled individuals and cultural institutions.

An intersectional lens is central to the report's analysis. Disabled people in Romania often experience multiple and overlapping forms of disadvantage. Access to culture is therefore not solely a matter of physical infrastructure or compliance. It is also shaped by social relations, representation, affordability, and power. The report argues that a universal approach to access, embedded from the outset rather than added later, offers a more sustainable foundation for inclusion.

Education, skills, and professional pathways

Education is identified as a critical determinant of access to cultural life and professional participation. While access to education for disabled learners has improved, structural gaps persist across early education, vocational training, and higher education. Support systems remain under-resourced, and staff often lack training in inclusive pedagogies. These factors limit progression into artistic and cultural careers.

The transition from education to employment remains particularly fragile. Disabled artists face barriers to professional training, adapted work environments, and access to production systems. Although legislation requires larger employers to employ disabled people or contribute financially to a national fund, evidence shows that many employers choose to pay penalties rather than invest in inclusive employment. The cultural sector reflects these wider labour market dynamics, resulting in continued under-representation of disabled artists.

Public space, infrastructure, and capacity building

Access to public space extends beyond the physical environment. It includes communication, digital access, and how disability is imagined within society. The report identifies persistent shortcomings in the accessibility of cultural venues, transport routes, and public buildings, alongside inconsistent enforcement of existing legislation.

Digitalisation presents both risks and opportunities. Poorly designed systems can reproduce exclusion. Inclusive digital practices, however, have the potential to significantly expand access, particularly in a country with a strong IT sector.

Capacity building emerges as a key lever for change. Cultural institutions often lack dedicated access roles, trained staff, and long-term strategies for inclusion. Progress is frequently driven by grassroots organisations and individual advocates working with limited resources. While these initiatives demonstrate strong potential, they require formal recognition and sustained investment to move beyond isolated examples of good practice.

Funding, partnerships, and the European dimension

Funding constraints affect all aspects of the **arts and disability** landscape. Cultural institutions and disabled artists face challenges in accessing resources, navigating complex funding processes, and securing long-term support. Existing funding models tend to prioritise short-term outputs rather than sustained impact.

The report highlights significant opportunities within European frameworks, mobility schemes, and cultural cooperation programmes. Romania's experience with the European Capital of Culture, alongside wider EU funding instruments, offers pathways for strengthening international partnerships and capacity building. Accessing these opportunities requires improved coordination, targeted support, and match funding.

Towards a National Arts and Disability Framework

This study concludes that **arts and disability** in Romania is best understood as a mosaic. Provision is uneven and often fragile, yet there are committed individuals, organisations, and institutions capable of driving meaningful change. To move from fragmented initiatives to systemic progress, the report proposes the development of a **National Arts and Disability Framework**.

Five strategic priorities underpin this framework. These include stronger national coordination and governance, a shift in public discourse towards visibility and representation, improved education and professional pathways, embedded accessibility and workforce capacity, and funding models that support long-term impact and European cooperation.

This report is intended for policymakers, funders, cultural leaders, educators, and practitioners with a role in shaping Romania's cultural ecosystem. It is designed to support informed decision-making, cross-sector dialogue, and strategic planning.

While not all recommendations can be implemented immediately, this study provides a clear and shared evidence base for action. Progress will depend on collective responsibility, sustained collaboration, and long-term commitment across public institutions, the cultural sector, civil society, and disabled people themselves.

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