Enhancing Access to the Arts: A Comprehensive Guide to Hybrid Event Planning

accessible**arts**
arts + disability

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Introduction

Accessible Arts is the peak arts and disability organisation in New South Wales. We advance the rights of, and opportunities for, people with disability or who are d/Deaf to develop and sustain professional careers in the arts and have equitable access to arts and culture across NSW.

This resource manual has been specifically developed to address the needs of arts and cultural organisations so they can improve accessibility and inclusiveness through the creation of hybrid events and activities.
By following the steps outlined in this resource manual, you will be well-equipped to create a memorable and impactful event that engages both online and in-person participants.

Hybrid Events

What is a Hybrid Event?

A hybrid event combines the benefits of both online and in-person experiences, allowing organisers to reach a broader audience while fostering new forms of accessibility, engagement and inclusion. To run a successful hybrid event, careful planning, effective technology use, and seamless coordination are essential. This resource manual provides a step-by-step guide to help you execute a memorable and impactful hybrid event.

Running Hybrid Events

Where to start

When planning for an accessible hybrid event, there are several factors to consider ensuring accessibility and seamless execution. Venue selection plays a crucial role. It is essential to opt for a venue that is accessible and will support virtual integration. Look for venues that have ramps, elevators, and accessible restrooms.

Ensure that the venue has proper audio-visual equipment for streaming and remote participation. By choosing an accessible venue, you facilitate more inclusive participation for all attendees, both in-person and online.

Partnerships are an important aspect of planning an accessible hybrid event. Collaborate with organisations/businesses that specialise in accessibility, as they can provide valuable insight into the infrastructure of your event. Consult with disability advocacy groups or experts who can provide feedback on event design, layout, and technologies to ensure your event is accessible. Collaborating with accessibility-focused organisations also allows for your event to reach a wider audience.

Budgeting is a critical part of any event planning process, especially for accessible hybrid events. It is essential to allocate funds specifically for accessibility requirements, such as Auslan interpreters, captioning services, or assistive technologies. Prepare a comprehensive budget that includes costs for accessible transportation options, accessible seating arrangements, and other access requirements for participants with disability. By prioritising accessibility in the budgeting process, you create an environment that is welcoming and inclusive for all attendees.

Running Hybrid Events

Communications & Marketing

Create an inclusive marketing strategy designed to remove barriers to access and inclusion.

Embed accessible design features into marketing materials. Use alternative text for images, caption all videos, and select accessible fonts and colour contrast. Using different platforms and channels, such as social media, email campaigns, and website announcements, can help reach a wider audience and ensure that information is accessible to all. Get an access audit of your website to ensure best practice.

Clear communication and provision of event information allows people to plan ahead. Explain the hybrid nature of the event, provide step-by-step instructions, and showcase accessibility features using universal access symbols. This ensures that attendees understand what to expect. Offer multiple ways to access event content to remove barriers to attendance. This can include in-person attendance, live streaming, and on-demand options.

Make being an accessible event your top priority. In the registration process, ask attendees for their access requirements and provide detailed information about event accessibility features. Set up event reminders so that you are ensuring that your audience is provided with the most up-to-date information on the event.

Leverage technology to maximise accessibility; use event platforms that support assistive technologies, and thoroughly test accessibility features before launching. Run multiple streams for online participation, such as a plain stream, Auslan and captioned stream. Creating an inclusive online experience is equally important. Active online participation, networking opportunities, and creating connections among attendees can help foster connection and community. Use chat and forum functions to allow active participation and engagement. It is recommended that chats functions are monitored throughout your event. Seek out a platform that allows you to review comments prior to them being shared publicly.

Running Hybrid Events

Ticketing & Event Wayfinding

Offer a variety of ticketing options to accommodate varying requirements. Provide accessible seating tickets for wheelchair and mobility aid users or people with support animals, offer companion card tickets to provide complimentary tickets to support workers, and discounted tickets for individuals with disability to minimise financial barriers to attendance. Provide virtual tickets for online participation.

Make event wayfinding accessible by using clear signage in large accessible fonts with good colour contrast. Consider the whole journey from entering the venue to each location attendees will need to visit and provide ample navigation signs. Use audio announcements for both virtual attendees and those present at the venue. It is essential to provide detailed access maps, including information about accessible entrances, gradients, ramps, elevators, and designated seating areas, information points, bathrooms and parking. Offering digital wayfinding tools, such as Bindi maps available as a mobile app or interactive websites, can further enhance accessibility by guiding attendees through the event space with step-by-step directions and real-time updates.

Wayfinding is not limited to your in-person audience; it should also extend to your online audiences. To cater to online audiences, consider incorporating a visual and audio engaging holding screen that is available for people who join the event early. This will effectively assure them that they have entered the correct link.

By adopting these measures, hybrid events can become more inclusive and accessible to individuals with access requirements, promoting a positive atmosphere of inclusion.

Access Services

Ensuring your event is accessible

Provide a range of access services for online and in-person audiences. Key access services include:

- Auslan
- Captioning
- Audio Description
- Seating
- Visual Story
- Quiet Spaces
- Relaxed Performances
- Hearing Loops

Auslan Interpreting

Auslan is the language of the Australian deaf community, but not everyone who is deaf/Deaf will use it. When planning hybrid events, book interpreters well in advance (at least 4 to 6 weeks) and share event materials, transcripts, and presentations with them beforehand. Provide Auslan interpreters with a thorough briefing about the event so they know what to expect.

For optimal viewing, place the Auslan interpreter on or near the stage with ample even lighting. Use a dedicated camera to capture the interpreter and another camera for speakers for live-stream of the footage to online audiences. Have a separate online stream for Auslan interpreters in addition to a 'plain' stream. Ensure clear visibility of interpreters and speakers to all audience members and set up a designated seating area with a clear line of sight for those who require Auslan interpretation.

Please note – watching a 4D language, such as Auslan, in 2D is tiring; consider offering regular breaks or keeping the event under an hour to make it accessible and comfortable for everyone.
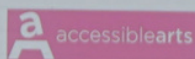
Captioning

There are two types available: **Open and Closed captions.**
Closed captions - can be turned on or off, allowing the viewer to choose whether to view them or not.
Open captions - are embedded into the video file or media player and cannot be turned off.

For Hybrid events, the best practice is to use professional captioning services. The caption service provider will listen to the speakers and transcribe the speech in real-time, which can be displayed on a screen or available via Wi-Fi or via an app on a mobile phone or tablet. Another option is to have a stenographer present to type out the speech, which can be linked to a display screen or device. It is vital to ensure that the captions are large enough to be easily read by everyone in the audience and that the screen or device displaying the captions is positioned to maximise visibility to the whole audience. Live captioning is of higher quality than auto-captioning from online platforms.

Please note - Captioning is not just for people who are d/Deaf it also benefits individuals who may experience barriers to understanding spoken content. By providing both captioning and Auslan, you can ensure that all attendees can fully engage with the content and have inclusive access to information.

Visual Story & Quiet Space

A visual story is a communication tool that combines images, text, and other visual elements to convey information about a venue or event so that individuals know what to expect and can plan their visit in advance. Visual Stories reduce barriers to attendance for people who are neurodivergent or have cognitive disability or anxiety.

When planning your event, create a visual story that helps people to familiarise themselves with a new space. Include information about how to access the event space, such as accessible toilets, how to get there, parking facilities, maps of the space and what to expect at the event. It should provide a step-by-step guide to know what to expect from entering the venue and navigating throughout, Include the visual story on the event website before the event and embed it within the ticketing information.

Quiet spaces and planned breaks can reduce barriers to participation for people who are neurodivergent, experience anxiety or have chronic illness. Events can be physically and mentally tiring and lead to sensory overload in new environments. By offering quiet rooms and scheduled break periods, audiences can take a break, recharge, and better participate in the event without feeling overwhelmed or fatigued. Quiet spaces or low sensory spaces should accommodate people of all ages and consider physical and sensory access requirements. Include comfortable seating, toys for stimming and earphones to reduce noise.

Audio Description Seating & Hearing Loops

Audio Description (AD) is for people who are blind or have low vision. AD provides a spoken description of any visual elements from a trained audio describer.

Accessible seating ensures that people with disability can comfortably and safely participate in events. Accessible seating can include wheelchair-accessible spaces, companion seating, and seats with extra legroom or arm supports. Include a range of seating options throughout your event venue.

Assistive listening systems (such as augmented hearing or hearing loop) are installed in many venues and are used to amplify or enhance sound quality via hearing aids, headsets or other devices. They include infrared, loop and FM systems. Hearing loops allow people to adjust the volume and tone of the sound to their personal preferences, ensuring optimal understanding. This level of control allows for better engagement during presentations, performances, or discussions. Portable systems may be available in some venues.

Planning Checklist

✓ Define your objectives

Clearly outline the goals and purpose of your event. Are you aiming to reach a wider audience, increase accessibility, or provide an experience for online and in-person audiences? Identifying your objectives will help shape your event's format, content, and logistics.

✓ Plan your event format

Develop a comprehensive event plan that incorporates online and in-person components. Decide on the attendee capacity for the physical location while also considering technical infrastructure, such as a good internet connection, cameras, microphones, and a virtual event platform for online audiences.

✓ Choose the right venue

Finding a venue that can accommodate both in-person attendees and virtual elements is crucial. Consider factors such as space requirements, accessibility, and technical capabilities. Ensure your organisation or the event venue has the proper equipment to support live streaming the event.

✓ Utilise technology effectively

Invest in user-friendly online event platforms that support the seamless integration of in-person and online experiences. Use features like live streaming, chat functionalities, and interactive tools to engage both audiences. Conduct thorough testing to ensure all technical aspects are capable and ready to use.

✓ Create engaging programs

Design a program that caters to the needs of both online and in-person audiences. Offer a variety of sessions or activities that can be effectively delivered online and in-person. To encourage engagement, consider incorporating networking opportunities, Q&A sessions, and online chat functions.

Planning Checklist

✓ Ensure accessible content

Check that all content, presentations, and documents are accessible to both online and in-person audiences and release the content early so audiences have enough time to prepare before the event. Provide Auslan interpretation, visual stories, quiet spaces, captions and transcripts, and offer materials in multiple formats to better ensure the virtual event platform supports accessibility features. Record and post the event on your website so that people who could not attend have access to it.

✓ Use accessible ticketing platforms

Choose an online ticketing platform that has accessibility built into it. Ensure the ticketing information is clear, and the site is easy to navigate. Provide information about the accessibility at the event and contact details for any questions or concerns. Offer alternative options for purchasing tickets, such as via email or phone.

✓ Communication strategies

Develop a communication plan to keep participants informed before, during, and after the event. Clearly convey the accessibility features of your event, including information on your event website, registration materials, and social media channels. Assign a dedicated team member to address any inquiries promptly

✓ Gather feedback and learn from your experience

After the event, collect feedback from both online and in-person audiences to evaluate the success of the hybrid format. Use online surveys to obtain insights that can help improve future events. Analyse attendance rates, engagement, and audience satisfaction to measure your event's effectiveness. Stay updated on industry trends, utilise new technology, learn from your experience and refine your approach to hybrid events.

Additional Resources

Universal Access Symbols

Use access symbols to promote the accessibility of venues and services. These indicate accessible services and considerations to audiences and anyone else who needs access to your event venue. Use access symbols to promote the accessibility of venues and services. These indicate accessible services and considerations to audiences and anyone else who needs access to your event venue. The Graphic Artists Guild (USA) has created a set of free Universal Access Symbols, which you can download in a variety of different formats.

Access Service Providers

Here is a list of organisations that provide audio description, Auslan interpretation and captioning services in New South Wales.

Access Checklists

The following is a collection of practical checklists for arts and cultural organisations to assist in improving access and developing audiences.

- Accessibility Starter Kit
- Marketing and Communications Checklist
- Transport and Accessible Parking Checklist
- Signage and Communications Checklist
- Ticketing, Seating and Services Checklist

Meet the AArts Team

Liz Martin - CEO

Rachel Musgrove - Marketing and Development Manager

Amy Claire Mills - Arts Development Manager

Michelle Teear - Training and Project Coordinator

Eugenie Lee - Project Manager | Ripple: Disability and Culturally Diverse Internship Program

Liv Hutley - Program Coordinator | Front & Centre

Daniel Jaramillo - Office Administrator

Special Thanks

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Create NSW

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Sydney Opera House

Bell Shakespeare

Museum of Contemporary Art

Art Gallery of New South Wales

Pyrus Events