

# Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion in Design Education: Pedagogical Advances and Future Opportunities

Emilio Rossi  <sup>a,b</sup> \*

<sup>a</sup> “Gabriele d’Annunzio” University of Chieti-Pescara, Department of Architecture, Pescara, Italy

<sup>b</sup> “Gabriele d’Annunzio” University of Chieti-Pescara, UdA-TechLab Research Center, Chieti, Italy

\* Corresponding author: emilio.rossi@unich.it

## ABSTRACT

In an era where global societal pushes are rapidly producing alterations of social dimensions, both in positive and in negative, the need for enabling solutions that help people to live more cohesively and inclusively is apparent. In this scenario, the principles of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) enable Design Education to be at the forefront of cultural transformations by innovating the teaching and learning practices. Although the concept of EDI is not new in Design studies, today it can contribute to promote pivotal changes in the way designers are trained to work with companies and competitive markets. By stimulating new teaching and learning pedagogies, it is possible to prepare students to better address the pressing issues that are arising. However, to properly integrate EDI into Design Education, some aspects need to be strategically considered; these span from institutional positions against the design culture of teaching staff, to studio settings, and the nature of projects proposed to students. This article delves into the pedagogical advances promoted by the introduction of EDI principles in Design Education and explores how this concept transforms the current teaching and learning methods of Design programs, as well as curriculum development and student engagement.

*Keywords:* Design Education, Equality, Diversity, Inclusion, EDI, Design pedagogy.

## INTRODUCTION

In the current globalized society, designers are often asked to address the fear of social exclusion expressed by a large part of the population. Designers accomplish this by creating solutions that help people, regardless of their psychophysical abilities or disabilities, to live better and healthier, while respecting individual needs and desires (Holmes, 2018). In this context, the concepts of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) emerge as powerful cultural means to contrast the trend of global standardization of products driven solely by international market pressures. Although the synergy between these concepts and the tradition of Design studies has a long history (Story et al., 1998; Clarkson and Coleman, 2015), without structural disciplinary integrations risks being reduced to a mere cultural trend. In fact, EDI in Design studies calls for mature considerations such as human-product interaction, the social value of artifacts, the participatory processes used to conceive solutions, and a more ethical culture in Design.

Moving from the cultural dimension to the impact of enabling solutions on global markets, there are clear trends that demonstrate the interest of companies to intercept inclusive markets. This is usually achieved by offering products that cater to the broadest range of user

needs. For example, it is estimated that in the future, the global spending power of the disability community will reach \$13 trillion (World Economic Forum, 2023), while \$697 billion is the estimated growth in the fashion industry by 2027 according to Allied Market Research (2024); about digital solutions, previsions affirm that the number of vulnerable people who will access to e-commerce services will increase in the next years (WebAIM, 2025). All these trends not only confirm the economic growth of a specific market niche, but an imperative for designers to consider other target groups of consumers. However, this expansion requires designers to demonstrate mature design awareness and ethical considerations in relation to EDI to adequately address with the new needs of future consumer groups.

The cultural forces and the future picture of global markets inevitably draw attention to the role of Design Education and its position regarding EDI-related issues. In educational contexts, it is known that EDI principles have become paramount, prompting modifications across various disciplines, with Design Education emerging as a critical arena for transformative applications (Cooper, 2018). However, rapid pace of social changes and a heightened awareness of historical injustices and current systemic inequalities have together underscored the urgent need for educational systems to reflect and actively contribute to a more just and inclusive world. Design studies, as a discipline concerned with shaping human experience, bears a unique responsibility (Papanek, 1971). This is true not only at the product, service, and system design level, but also within the cultural dimension of Design studies. Designers are no longer seen as “creators of objects”, but rather as professionals who build bridges among disciplinary areas (Amrita and Aaron, 2022). Thus, the imperative is aligned with the motto: “training today to lead tomorrow”.

To better understand how Design Education can properly meet the cultural advances introduced by EDI and its related topics, some questions are particularly relevant. How can Design schools empower the future generation of designers to address the demands of EDI-oriented markets? How can Design Education align with the emerging trends of EDI so that the students are prepared to address future market scenarios while acting as bridges between companies and end-users? What are the structural and pedagogic advances that EDI can bring to curriculum design? How can EDI improve the way teaching staff teach and relate with students? This paper explores the pedagogical advances promoted by EDI in Design Education and the illustrates the potential areas for future development in Design studies.

## 1. EDI AND DESIGN EDUCATION

The tradition of Design Education, driven by functionalism and market-driven focus, can be characterized by the combination of creativity and technical skills (Margolin, 2002). Although this framework has produced a robust cultural baseline instrumental in advancing the field’s body of knowledge, it exhibits intrinsic biased culture when compared to EDI. As such, Design curricula, historically tended towards Western-centric canons, has demonstrated shortcomings in preparing students to navigate the intricate social, cultural, and ethical dimensions of contemporary design practice. To better understand this phenomenon, this section explores how EDI has influenced Design Education.

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## 1.1. EDI in Design versus EDI in Design Education

The concept EDI has emerged as multi-dimensional, capable of influencing not only the subjects to be taught, but also the cultural ecosystem surrounding teaching and learning practices (Hitch et al., 2016). Today, there is an unprecedented opportunity to rectify the historical shortcomings so that a new era of relevance and responsibility can be fostered through innovative design pedagogies. EDI, however, exhibits an interesting dichotomy when considered at the design level versus the educational level.

Regarding the design dimension, EDI concepts generally lead to straightforward applications (cfr. Holmes, 2018); for instance, an equitable product should be accessible and intuitive not only physically and cognitively, but also economically and relationally accessible. A product designed to accommodate human diversity should acknowledge and enhance human differences, so that even people experiencing permanent disabilities, temporary impairments, and cultural differences can enjoy it and fulfil a given task; finally, inclusivity encompasses both the design processes used to create new solutions and the assessment of the societal impacts produced by artifacts, leading to social improvements.

At the educational level, there is an observable increase in the level of cultural sophistication. Rossi and Brischetto (2024) have provided a detailed analysis on how EDI has influenced Design Education, discussing its implications for cultural advancement. Equality in Design Education is crucial for diversifying the design process used in teaching and learning and breaking down systemic barriers; equality creates learning opportunities that later lead the creation of solutions empowering all end-users to have equal access and possibilities. The concept of Diversity in Design Education promotes an improved understanding of cultural, social, psychophysical, and economic differences of all end-users; to do this, holistic design processes and informed work methodologies must be promoted to encourage pupils to examine user abilities and attitudes, while promoting collaborations with social stakeholders. Inclusion is crucial for developing ethical behaviours and social consciousness needed to emphasize the cultural and methodological processes used by designers; at the same time, inclusion requires educators to be proficient in unbiased approaches, enhancing user experience and highlighting designers' ethical responsibility.

It can be noted how EDI in Design Education is rooted in sustainability when analysed through the lens of Sustainable Development Goals – in particular SDG 4 “Quality Education” (UNDP, n.d.), though impacts are produced on other SDGs when EDI is translated into design practice – by fostering barrier-free education, diversity in open knowledge, and accessibility to educational facilities.

## 1.2. Advances in Design Education

When related to the cultural complexities introduced by EDI-related issues, the mantra of functionalism can jeopardise the cultural setting traditionally used to build the Design curriculums. In other words, EDI forces students, but mostly teaching staff, to move beyond merely aesthetic and functional considerations, to cultivate awareness, empathy, and the set of soft skills that are essential to create enabling solutions that genuinely serve the society (Ceyhan et al., 2023).

The introduction of EDI into Design Education is essential to make students aware of their strategic role as societal shapers (Rieger and Rolfe, 2021). However, this may have important cultural and operative limitations. For example, it is essential to teach that Design is not

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neutral, and designers cannot design inclusive or EDI-based solutions that comprehensively meet the needs of all users; training them to make conscious interventions to realistically include certain groups of users can enhance their ability to reduce abstraction while interacting with real stakeholders. Developing clear metrics to assess how much an inclusive solution enhances the EDI dimensions can guide them to undertake tangible actions. Also, designing non-tangible experiences and opportunities are even more important than creating just functionally performant solutions – this aspect is crucial to move the attention from the “here-and-now design attitude” to the goals and impacts of informed inclusive practices.

Equipping students with a foundational understanding needed to creatively interpret EDI, while adopting adequate research and design methodologies, is crucial to foster the creation of more just and equitable conditions for societal prosperity so that users, including vulnerable ones, can feel welcomed (Dong et al., 2015). This leads to an understanding of how they can guide stakeholders and companies to overcome systemic cultural biases. A common misconception in teaching Design for EDI (or Design for Inclusion) is that it exclusively yields objects for disabled individuals. In Design Education, this important implication impacts the core competencies required by contemporary designers. The globalized nature of markets and the increasing diversity of user bases mean that designers must be able to work effectively across cultural boundaries and design for a vast spectrum of human needs and preferences. A Design Education deeply rooted in EDI is not just capable of training pupils within inclusive teaching and learning ecosystem, but also a powerful means that enables them to navigate complex dilemmas inherent in the pursuit of enabling innovations (Altay et al., 2016).

The inclusion of EDI in Design Education is not about “checking a box”; it is instead a radical and profound enrichment of the creative process shaping the creative mindset of future societal shapers. Holistic approaches ensure that inclusive solutions can be culturally sensitive (Equality), universally accessible (Diversity), and socially impactful (Inclusion).

## 2. EDI AND PEDAGOGICAL ADVANCES IN DESIGN EDUCATION

The integration of EDI has spurred profound innovations in Design studies, and the analysis of scientific productions made in the last forty years confirms that informed creative practices rooted in inclusivity make significant improvements in Design Education. However, it must be noted that spontaneous developments are not exempt from biases. Design Education’ focus on addressing complex societal issues necessitates deeper analysis of how the Discipline is holistically taught, its relationship with the existing educational ecosystem, and its connection to curriculum development. At the same time, EDI has already stimulated the implementation of important pedagogical advances, and these move beyond superficial adjustments of teaching and learning practices. To provide evidence to these assertions, this section discusses four relevant pedagogical advances.

### 2.1. Design culture on EDI

EDI acts as a bridge between society and the informed culture needed by designers to act responsively and ethically. However, in Design Education this bridge also generates a significant transformation course-centric approaches, where the intrinsic nature of projects and the personality of teachers are predominant, to a student-centric creative reflective culture that promotes an ethos of inclusivity.

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When it comes to the creation of a creative and ethical reflective culture, EDI considers a variety of user groups, such as students, teaching staff, and school managers. In particular, teaching staff are considered the most important link in a pedagogical chain, due to their role in promoting a culture of reflexivity and critical self-awareness regarding student biases, assumptions, and positions within the design world. EDI offers Design Education the opportunity to develop open dialogues about identity, privileges, and overlooked social dynamics necessitating a redesign of the modalities through which content is delivered to students. On this matter, creativity plays a fundamental role, offering the opportunity to challenge the status quo and advocating for marginalized voices. In fact, reflective creative thinking (Schön, 1987; Cross, 2006) and the use of live teaching modalities to expose students to inclusion/exclusion phenomena foster deeper incorporation of notions, which transcend the traditional factual knowledge, to emphasise experiential learning.

This cultural shift extends to the language used in classrooms and studios, moving away from biased knowledge and promoting culturally sensitive experiences by embracing inclusive practices. Moreover, creative learning promoted by live experiences is essential to overcome intrinsic cultural barriers, stimulating a reflection on the core topics of EDI, for instance: what are the creative modalities to promote equal access to resources and products? How does the sense of diversity vary when applied to social instances that are not directly tied to physical diversity? What informed practices can designers employ to generate inclusive effects?

EDI positively influence Design Education by fostering intercultural competences, moving beyond a superficial understanding towards a deeper engagement with various design epistemologies (Altay, 2016; Ceyhan et al., 2023). A design culture in EDI becomes essential in the process of reinforcing the structural components of teaching and learning methods, creating more authentic learning environments where students can see themselves reflected in their educators and feel more comfortable in sharing their unique cultural insights.

## 2.2. Inclusive teaching and learning methodologies

The current body of teaching methodologies traditionally employed in Design Education are very flexible and capable of being adapted to a variety of subjects, user groups, and contexts of use. However, when it comes to EDI, they risk failure if implemented impersonally. This is because the complexities introduced by the multidimensional and the multidisciplinary concepts of equality, diversity, and inclusion require profound updates to foster consistent learning among students, so that they can navigate the complexity of real-world challenges. More inclusive and participatory learning experiences must be used as alternatives to traditional lecture-based approaches.

Several studies document how EDI can benefit from live activities that bring diverse human experiences into educational contexts (Nae and Smith, 2021). Collaborative design projects that intentionally bring together students from diverse backgrounds and perspectives with real users and societal stakeholders are essential to this end (Kuzmina et al., 2023). This is not only because exposing students to real-life situations is an effective means to generate deeper and consistent learning, but mostly because the participation of real users potentially representative of final target groups helps learners to overcome biased prejudices and cultural clichés, often driven by a pessimistic interpretation of others' lives. Therefore, students can develop first-hand knowledge to be shared with others, including teaching staff, enabling them to develop a shared body of knowledge for future learners.

The shift in teaching and learning methodologies encourages interdisciplinary teamwork and democratic teaching and learning environments where different viewpoints are not just tolerated but actively sought out and valued as essential to design processes. To foster this core value, community-engaged learning is emerging as a cornerstone of EDI-driven design pedagogy.

EDI radically innovates the teaching and learning settings used in Design Education by applying elements of critical pedagogy to encourage students to deconstruct power dynamics, biased knowledge, and assumptions inherent in design processes, products, and systems of solutions. Better empathy, cultural humility, disposition toward learning, and a deeper sense of social responsibility are the result of a pedagogic evolution that moves Design Education from a purely aesthetic pursuit to one deeply rooted in social justice.

### 2.3. Participative curriculum development and content integration

EDI, given its complexity and interplay with an array of subjects and disciplines, cannot be a taught as a standalone subject within a Design programme. In fact, a core aspect often brought by EDI into Design Education is its capacity to restructure both undergraduate and postgraduate curriculums. This ensures that the capability of designers to engage with diverse perspectives and cultural contexts, while enhancing their social responsibility in acting as agents of inclusive change is met. Learning content, however, is part of a broader narrative that lies in curriculum development.

When considered in terms of curriculum development, EDI draws attention to the need for a systematic revision of existing courses, the distribution of EDI-based or EDI-oriented concepts across programmes, as well as the creation of entirely new modules or programmes that explicitly address EDI themes (Ceyhan et al., 2023). This systematic review produces threefold benefits. Firstly, it allows students to integrate EDI in a pathway that is more distributed over time, giving them the opportunity to foster holistic learning through a series of integrated teachings that address themed contents and aspects. Secondly, it enables learners to acquire comprehensive knowledge of learning content that are increasingly complex. In this way, they can have sufficient time to foster deeper reflection and self-awareness, instrumental in shaping their design philosophy, ethos, and attitudes. Thirdly, teaching staff can be part of a choral learning process, and this in a long run generates a design culture within programmes.

At the level of curriculum, it can be reimaged to embed inclusive design principles as foundational elements from which to foster learner growth (Dong, 2010), rather than optional add-ons to be sporadically addressed by far-sighted teachers. This involves introducing specific methodologies and contents that become fundamental part of the creative process, fostering informed inclusive practices and cultures grounded in EDI. Furthermore, this pervasive integration could be “unlabelled” – as it is believed that attitudes, knowledge, and abilities related to EDI must be core skills for Design students.

Students can learn how to identify and challenge assumptions about equality, diversity, and inclusion across various components of the discipline to proactively envision solutions that maximize participation. In this way, ethical considerations and social justice issues commonly linked to Design for EDI can be explicitly integrated into Design curricula, moving beyond a purely vocational training to a powerful force for cultivating socially responsible practitioners.

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## 2.4. Inclusive learning environments

Beyond culture, curriculum, and methodology, EDI can be a crucial means to effect fundamental reconfigurations of the learning environment itself. An aspect that is often underestimated when it comes to the design of new curricula, especially in Design, is the physical and technological setting of studios where teaching occurs. In these environments, students perform several tasks such as developing projects, sharing experiences, and presenting results. However, an inclusive environment is also a space, even phygital, where Design students feel valued, represented, and empowered to engage authentically with EDI-oriented challenges (Fathallah, 2021).

An inclusive teaching and learning environment is the one where every student, regardless of their background, identity, or learning style, feels psychologically safe to express ideas, take risks, and make mistakes without fear of judgment or marginalization. At the teacher level, this involves the creation of intentional strategies to build trust, foster respect, and celebrate diversity within the classroom and studio, as well as validating diverse forms of knowledge to embrace experiential learning and community wisdom (Ahmed, 2012).

On a daily basis, inclusive learning environments promote student engagement by fostering equitable participation. Sometimes, traditional design critiques can be intimidating, especially when students are deeply involved, even emotionally, with sensitive topics, or when external stakeholders are invited to work with learners. Inclusive environments encourage constructive criticism, actively democratizing the voices of both learners and teaching staff. Consequently, diverse mentorship opportunities can be promoted to foster inclusive engagement.

In terms of equipment and architectural features, design studios are often considered as the heart of Design Education. However, when EDI principles are truly embedded into Design schools and in their culture, studios can celebrate diversity by mitigating possible barriers. This goes beyond the physical layout to encompass studio norms, thereby creating a microcosm for inclusive design practices that models the equitable and collaborative environments designers should strive to create in the real world.

## 3. FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

The set of pedagogical advances introduced by EDI in Design Education presents revolutionary shifts in teaching and learning, which positively impact different areas. However, given that EDI is a complex topic that necessitates deep reflection to be fully understood and integrated in all aspects of the higher education ecosystem, it is fully acknowledged that initiatives described in the previous section represent an initial, though very important, sign of change. Building on the current dynamics observed in some forward-looking examples, some future opportunities for a more equitable and impactful Discipline can be proposed. These involve changes in policy at the institutional level, professional development, research, and innovative use of digitalization as a means for holistic expansion of work and pedagogical environments.

### 3.1. Policy changes

It has been said that modules covering EDI topics cannot stand alone within undergraduate or postgraduate programmes. However, programmes aligned with EDI directly and indirectly

demonstrate a clear vision from management teams in addressing the growing demand for innovative soft skills and cultural competencies, more aligned with present and future trends of a profession that imperatively requires resilience and adaptability.

Profound policy changes within Design schools can ensure that EDI is not just a departmental initiative or a cultural trend, but a systemic commitment agreed and promoted by the entire academic body to act in tune with real-world scenarios (Sohoni, 2009). Strategic action plans are essential to achieve this goal, so it is important to fuel this evolution rather than keep it as a fixed endpoint. At the same time, changes in policies can improve administrative aspects such as hiring practices, promotion criteria, and student support services, resulting in improved institutional positioning and reputation in relation to assessment criteria.

### 3.2. Professional development

EDI requires both new competences and a desire to further refine existing ones to create shared narratives so that the teaching staff can act cohesively by aligning not only content and design subjects, but also the search for new open competencies – both factual and experiential. There is a need for continuous professional development for all faculty and staff, moving beyond initial training to foster ongoing learning and adaptation to evolving EDI-related best practices.

Professional development aligned with EDI principles is essential to address potential reluctance of staff, such as lack of familiarity with its concepts, discomfort with discussing sensitive topics like race, gender, or disability, or a perceived lack of expertise in these areas. Consequently, the complexities traditionally associated with assessing EDI outcomes can be mitigated: unlike traditional design, which can often be measured through project outcomes, the impact of EDI on students is more nuanced and difficult to quantify (Gurin et al., 2002).

### 3.3. Research

If Design Education is essential and is considered a “first mission” for Design universities, research can be a vital “second mission”. Beyond research grants and fundraising, the opportunity to contribute to novel projects and studies, as well as teaching and learning outcomes offers academic staff the chance to develop their own research outcomes, which are needed to advance the knowledge in the field.

Increased research on EDI impact is crucial to build evidence for effective pedagogical strategies and to demonstrate the tangible benefits of inclusive Design Education on students. This leads to more consistent learning outcomes. Research on EDI offers the chance to cultivate a self-sustaining ecosystem where EDI principles are intrinsically woven into every aspect of Design Education. At the student level, this means preparing students to be skilled designers and powerful advocates for a more inclusive world. This ongoing commitment ensures that Design Education remains at the forefront of societal transformation, meeting the needs of a diverse global community.

### 3.4. Digitalization

Innovations in teaching and learning made during and after the COVID-19 pandemic have revealed the power of digitalization in supporting both formal and informal educational practices. This was evident in many disciplinary fields, though Design studies benefitted from

this transition not only in terms of instrumental improvement, but also culturally. Digitalization can be a powerful avenue to expand the inherent values of EDI in Design studies.

First, digitalization can mitigate problems related to the lack of resources (i.e., unbiased knowledge, access to refined data, public engagement, co-development of initiatives in civic society), which is a serious issue in relation to the promotion of a culture of EDI in Design Education. Implementing initiatives related to Design and/or EDI often requires significant investment, so smaller institutions may struggle to allocate the necessary funds, leading to superficial efforts and impacts.

Second, virtual ecosystems for teaching, learning, research, and collaboration can be a valuable means to increase the capability of Design schools to attract funding for studies on Design for EDI (Callahan, 2021). Partnerships with industry and community organizations to share resources and expertise can also be promoted.

Third, instrumental integration via digitalization, such as AI, VR, and AR, can create immersive empathy-building experiences, allowing students to “walk in the shoes” of diverse users, including vulnerable ones like disabled people, and understand their challenges firsthand.

Fourth, in a connected world, interdisciplinary collaboration promotes virtuous knowledge ecosystems for peer learning and content sharing. If biased knowledge is one of the main barriers that limits the expansion and the development of creative reflective practices on EDI, digitalization can overcome the physical obstacles.

Finally, if Design for EDI is an informed creative design practice that contributes to achieve one or more aspects in terms of equality, diversity, and inclusion, the full access to any educational content that deals with this subject must be promoted. EDI is about real people, so designs aligned with EDI principles can have a tangible impact on how people interact with their environment. Therefore, digitalization can support the promotion of open and fair access to data, case studies, and projects, as well as to collaborative and multilingual initiatives.

### 3.5. Positivistic narratives

The themes and the subjects related to EDI often evoke a sense of commiseration, sadness, or pity. However, EDI does not always refer to the negative side of human experience. A design culture that approaches EDI through a commiseration lens can easily fall into biased solutions. Design Education must strive to overcome this negative interpretation and focus attention on the inner essence of EDI: people.

Positivistic narratives are essential in Design Education, and in Design for EDI (Lee et al., 2021), they can play a pivotal role at several stages. During the research stages, positivistic narratives can help students explore the different dimensions of human diversity by highlighting aspects to enhance, rather than problems to solve. During the design stages, a positivistic narrative can emphasise the value and the social impacts of enabling solutions when used by a variety of users such as everyday users, children, older adults, and foreign users, but also disabled people, users with temporary disabling conditions, users experiencing social inequalities, among others. During the presentation and promotion stages, positivistic narratives can become essential to translate all cultural values associated with EDI to non-expert audiences, making design practice a more powerful means for public education.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Design Education and Design studies are fundamental pillars for shaping a sustainable and resilient society, culturally and technically. However, the cultural growth of future generations of designers must consider the contributions offered by EDI with its holistic and multidimensional contributions. EDI in Design studies offers opportunities to create innovative and enabling solutions, which can meet the needs of present and future users. Therefore, Design Education needs to address this emerging topic by considering its inherent features to properly integrate them into all components of the academic life. As it has been discussed in this work, EDI offers several improvements to Design Education, however, further exploration of other areas is needed to fully align with the evolving landscape of equality, diversity, and inclusion.

In the ongoing transition process toward a sustainable and inclusive society, the journey towards fully embedding the EDI principles in Design Education is not a linear path but an ongoing process of learning, adaptation, and commitment. For this reason, the imperative for an EDI-based Design Education extends beyond mere compliance with norms and standards, leading to a fundamental re-imagining of what design education can and should be in the coming years, and of the tangible impacts it can produce.

Internal catalysts for profound pedagogical advances can be found by transcending singular perspectives and voices. However, synthesizing these diverse viewpoints is crucial to developing a cohesive narrative that holds both global and local value. Given the immense transformative potential of EDI in preparing the new generations, Design schools are imperatively called upon to act promptly and accordingly, to foster the necessary open, inclusive culture required to drive global progress and improvements.

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