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Research and analysis of teaching contents on Design and EDI in the Italian system of Design Education

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ABSTRACT

The study examines how the principles of Equity, Inclusion and Diversity (EDI) are integrated into the curricula of Italian universities, with a particular focus on Architecture and Design courses. It is part of the European project EDIDesK and was done alongside other European universities to compare how these issues are integrated in different countries. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, the research involved reviewing syllabi and conducting semi-structured interviews with university lecturers. The goal is to provide a current view of how widely EDI issues are recognised and taught in design education in Italy. The findings show an increased interest in EDI but also highlight a significant variation in how these topics are addressed across different regions, teaching methods, and subjects. Inclusion is often seen as a technical issue, yet critical viewpoints and a deeper understanding of how to make inclusion a part of project development are often missing. Despite these challenges, the need to enhance EDI in educational curricula, starting from the early years, is clear. This preparation is vital for new generations of designers to tackle today's social challenges with more awareness and responsibility.

Keywords: Inclusive Design Education, Italian Higher Education, Equality, Diversity, Inclusion, EDI.

INTRODUCTION

This study examined and mapped the integration of themes related to Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion into the design curriculum at both undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate (PG) levels in higher education in Italy, as well as the related tools and teaching practices adopted. It provides an in-depth analysis of how Italian universities develop their teaching program model in response to these themes, fostering a more inclusive learning environment. Based on qualitative and quantitative methodologies, the study aims to give back both the breadth and depth of EDI content in design modules. In particular, the methodological approach includes on-desk research, data collection, analysis, and interviews with a selected group of academics. The focus is on how EDI-related topics are integrated into academic modules, providing a clearer view of EDI in Italian higher education. Particular attention is paid to institutional choices, the terminology used in course descriptions, the degree of curricular integration, and the presence (or absence) of collaborations with external stakeholders.

The research issue is particularly crucial considering the growing awareness of the need for more inclusive forms of education, which can effectively address the complexity of social differences.

Indeed, in recent years, the principles of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) have become a top priority and value in the scientific and professional communities working in the field of Design Studies (Rossi and Brischetto, 2024). This shift signifies a broader understanding of how inclusive and diverse approaches foster creativity and innovation, while also creating a more welcoming environment for everyone. By proactively pursuing EDI, these communities aim for a design process that is representative of multiple backgrounds, experiences, and ideas, capable of developing more effective and impactful solutions for the discipline. Consequently, the knowledge and application of EDI principles have become indispensable for design practitioners and researchers. As the international design industry continues to evolve, these principles are increasingly recognised as key drivers of creativity, innovation and socially responsible design approaches. Prominent scholars such as Victor Papanek (1971), Victor Margolin (2005) and Ezio Manzini (2016) emphasise the need for responsible, ethical, and responsive design principles that promote social change and sustainable development. Carl DiSalvo (2022) reiterates the idea of "doing design otherwise" in order to contribute meaningfully to local democracy and community participation. Lorentzen et al. (2018) define "Diversity" as responding to the psychophysical, cultural, social, and economic differences of users. Holmes (2018) completes the picture by explaining that "Inclusion" is about designing environments that make people feel valued in every aspect, regardless of race, age, gender, or psychophysical abilities.

The application of EDI in design education is a complex issue that transcends mere didactics and requires a profound reorganisation of pedagogical frameworks. According to Boztepe (2007), the contribution of design to global market development is now evident, further highlighting the critical need for design education to generate economic and social outcomes.

In addition, educational researchers such as Asojo (2001), Sohoni (2009), O'Sullivan & Hakaraia (2018), Lee et al. (2021) and Albert et al. (2023) jointly emphasise the need for culturally diverse environments, transformative strategies, cross-cultural intelligence and affective engagement to design EDI-centred and impactful educational experiences.

Design courses in Italian higher education institutions have been embracing EDI issues in a transdisciplinary and holistic manner for several years.

Through the research conducted within the EDIDesK project in the Italian context, an attempt was made not only to map EDI within university curricula, but also to offer a critical reading of the approaches, priorities and gaps emerging from the collected data. Rather than limiting itself to a theoretical investigation, this research aims to provide guidance and practical tools for educators and scholars engaged in developing design practices that are inclusive, empathic and culturally aware of responding to the complexity of today's social and environmental challenges.

The article is structured as follows: Section 1 provides an overview of the courses identified in Italian higher education that engage with EDI-related themes in the field of design. It opens with a description of the methodological framework and the tools used for data collection and analysis, followed by a detailed presentation of both quantitative trends and qualitative observations.

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Section 2 moves into a more interpretative dimension, offering a critical discussion that brings together insights from the data to highlight the strengths, limitations, and emerging trajectories within the current academic landscape. Finally, Section 3 presents the main conclusions and reflects on the broader implications of the findings, offering considerations for the development of more inclusive and reflective design education practices in Italy.

1. OVERVIEW OF DATA GATHERED

1.1. Research methodology

The research encompasses both quantitative and qualitative analysis. To ensure that, the methodology utilised followed three distinct stages. The first stage involves a systematic desk review of the academic modules provided by Italian institutions that offer Design or Design-related programs. The second stage includes interviews with a carefully selected group of academics. Finally, the third stage incorporates global surveys to gather diverse perspectives.

The data collection process followed a harmonised protocol developed jointly by the project partners to ensure consistency across the different national case studies. This protocol focused on publicly accessible information retrieved from official university websites, including course catalogues, module syllabi, programme descriptions, teaching staff profiles, and institutional curricula.

The aim was to identify modules that explicitly or implicitly address EDI-related topics. For this purpose, an analytical framework was created to extract and organise information under a series of categories that enabled both qualitative interpretation and quantitative comparison. The resulting database was constructed using a spreadsheet structure that included:

- Basic identifying information (university, department, module name, lecturer).
- Educational level (Undergraduate Programme UG; Postgraduate Programme PG).
- Type of subject (e.g., theoretical subject, design studio, diploma seminar, supporting subject, extracurricular activity).
- Number of ECTS/CFU credits assigned.
- Domain of design (e.g., product design, communication, service, architecture).
- Main EDI domain addressed (e.g., accessibility, diversity, inclusion).
- Module keywords and themes.
- Evidence of cooperation with external partners or stakeholders.
- Module content description and links to syllabi or institutional documentation.
- Evaluation of the module based on EDI relevance and integration, using a 1-to-5 scale.

This classification enabled a comparative overview of the structural and thematic aspects of each module, offering insight into how EDI-related issues are framed within academic design teaching.

The evaluation of the teaching modules constituted a critical component of the data analysis and was subject to comprehensive classification. Each module underwent assessment based

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on three primary criteria: explicitness, depth, and consistency in addressing Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI). This evaluation adhered to a five-level scale:

- Level 1: The module includes only selected or incidental references to EDI.
- Level 2: EDI topics are present, and some student work addresses related issues.
- Level 3: EDI themes are structurally included, and most student work reflects those themes.
- Level 4: EDI topics are broadly integrated; student work consistently engages with EDI, and external collaborations support the module.
- Level 5: The module is fully and explicitly dedicated to EDI, with all learning outputs focused on these issues.

The evaluation was not intended as a hierarchical judgement but rather as a way to visualise degrees of integration and pedagogical consistency. It also allowed for identifying both emerging best practices and areas where EDI themes remain marginal or unstructured.

The second stage consists of a qualitative phase that complements the desk research, involving semi-structured interviews with university staff responsible for the identified modules during the initial data collection. Each national research partner selected a group of academics considered to be actively engaged with EDI-related topics in their teaching. In Italy, the selected academics represented different institutions and disciplines, providing a cross-section of approaches, strategies, and reflections on EDI in Design education.

The interviews were structured around seven thematic areas:

- Basic information on the module and institutional context.
- Personal understanding of EDI and how it informs teaching.
- Experience with EDI in professional and academic practice.
- Detailed module content, pedagogical objectives, and expected student outcomes.
- Evaluation methods used to assess EDI-related competences.
- Didactic tools, formats, and methodologies employed.
- Integration of the module within the broader curriculum.

The qualitative data collected through interviews provided valuable contextual insight and allowed for the identification of patterns not immediately visible in the desk analysis. Furthermore, interviews highlighted institutional constraints, cultural resistances, and opportunities for innovation, helping to frame the Italian case within a broader reflection on systemic challenges and pedagogical experimentation.

In addition to interviews, academic staff were asked to submit examples of student work that best exemplify the impact of EDI content within design education. These examples were intended to provide evidence of how students understand and respond to EDI principles in their design practice.

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1.2. Quantitative analysis at the national level: Data collection

The Italian dataset comprises 28 modules from 13 academic institutions: Polytechnic of Milan, Polytechnic of Turin, IUAV University of Venice, University of Bologna, University of Campania "Luigi Vanvitelli", University of Genoa, University of Naples "Federico II", University of Perugia, Mediterranean University of Reggio Calabria, University of the San Marino Republic, University of Floence, University of Ferrara, and "Gabriele d'Annunzio" University of Chieti-Pescara. These institutions are distributed across the national territory and include both specialised polytechnics and multidisciplinary universities. The sample thus captures a variety of institutional missions, pedagogical traditions, and territorial contexts, from northern to central and southern regions. The selection aimed to offer a national-level snapshot and enable a comparative analysis of how EDI is addressed at different stages of academic formation.

The first element of this reading concerns territorial distribution: 13 of the 28 modules are located in six universities in Northern Italy, 8 courses in 3 universities of Central Italy, and 7 modules in only two universities of Southern Italy. This confirms an imbalance in the presence and integration of EDI in higher education curricula, potentially reflecting broader inequalities in institutional investment and research orientation.

Out of the 28 modules, 18 belong to postgraduate studies and 10 to undergraduate programmes. This confirms a preliminary hypothesis that EDI themes tend to be more present and more thoroughly developed at the postgraduate level.

Looking at the evaluation score, 6 modules were rated at levels 4–5 (0.21%), 14 at level 3 (0.53%), 2 at level 2 (0.07%), and 6 at level 1 (0.17%). This distribution illustrates the varying degrees of engagement with EDI themes, from minimal coverage to more structured and systemic approaches, with level 3 emerging as the most recurrent evaluation.

Modules were also categorised by type: 20 Basic of Design, 2 theoretical subjects, 2 design studios, 3 supporting or supplementary subjects, and 1 diploma seminars. These types cover both practical and theoretical dimensions and show that EDI is being introduced through different didactic strategies (Figure 1).

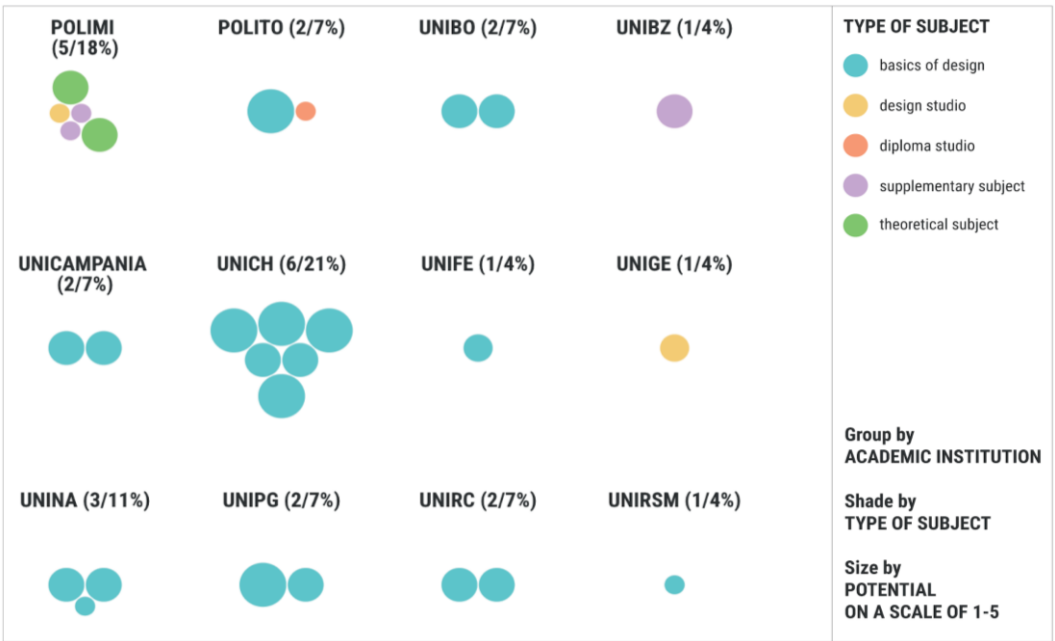

Figure 1. Desk research of modules on Design and Design-related fields deliver EDI in Italy: Details of the number of modules grouped by University where they are taught and by subject type.

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From a disciplinary perspective, product design is the most represented field (11 modules), followed by digital product design (9 modules), communication design and visual culture (8 modules), interior and architecture-related design (6 modules), service design (4 modules) and design for public spaces (4 modules). Other areas, such as fashion, social design, and art and design, appear only once. This spread confirms a tendency to integrate EDI more within domains that are closer to user experience and interaction and artefacts dimension, while art and fashion show limited attention to such themes (Figure 2).

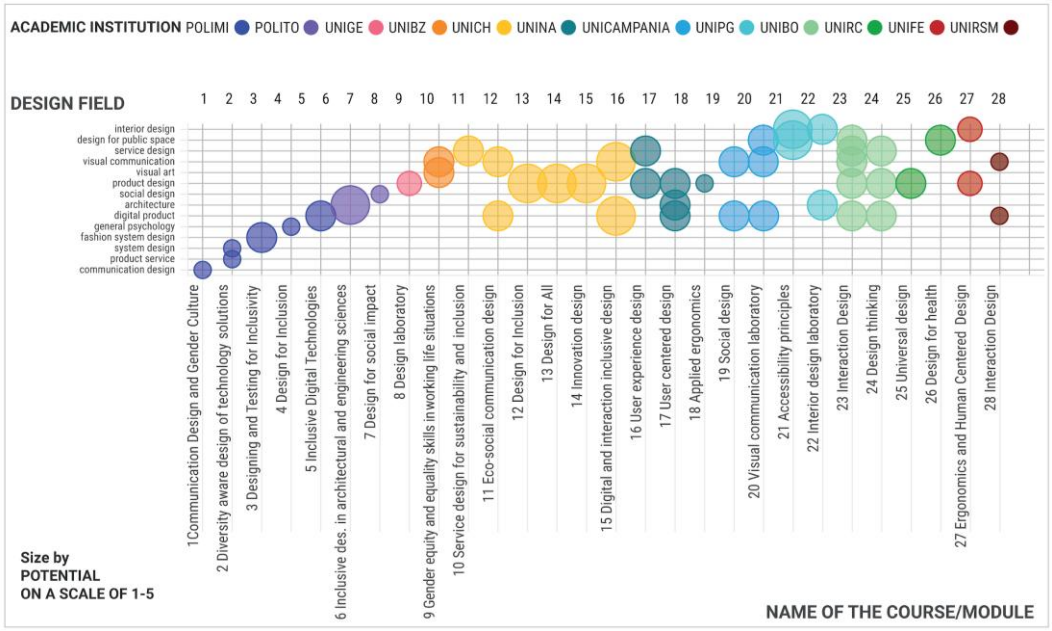

Figure 2. Desk Research of Modules on Design and Design-related Fields that Deliver EDI in Italy, Details of design field, name of the modules, sized based on levels of EDI integration (potential). View the interactive table: https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/24149857

The thematic keywords extracted from the analysed modules offer useful insight into how EDI is currently framed within Italian design education (Figure 3). The most frequently recurring term is Design for All (11 occurrences), followed by User-Centred Design, Communication Design, and Social Inclusion (each mentioned 4 times). These are complemented by Universal Design and User Experience (3 mentions each), and Interaction Design, Design Thinking, Human Factors, and Co-Design (2 mentions each). Other terms appeared only once across the sample, such as Information Design, Service Design, Inclusive Digital Service, Social Design, Environmental Sustainability, Wayfinding, Architectural Barriers, Cognitive Ergonomics, Physical Ergonomics, Ergonomics for Design, Ambient Assisted Living, and Human Diversity.

Figure 3. Desk Research. Keyword frequency.

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This lexical distribution reinforces the prevailing focus on functional and ergonomic aspects of inclusion, mostly oriented towards usability and accessibility, founded in module classification.

The frequent use of expressions like Design for All, Universal Design, and User-Centred Design confirms a predominantly technical and instrumental interpretation of EDI.

Moreover, only one module reported a structured collaboration with an external stakeholder, which is specifically a local non-profit organisation. This isolated instance highlights a common situation in Italian Design Modules: a significant lack of engagement with external stakeholders such as NGOs, public institutions, or private organisations, pointing to a broader systemic disconnect between academic environments and the social contexts in which design practices unfold.

1.3. From quantitative mapping to qualitative insights: Interviews

While the quantitative mapping presented in Chapter 1.2 provides a comprehensive overview of how EDI themes are currently embedded in Italian design curricula, it offers only a partial understanding of the pedagogical rationales, challenges, and innovative practices underlying these modules. To gain a deeper and more nuanced perspective, the study complemented the desk analysis with semi-structured interviews with faculty members actively engaged in EDI teaching. In addition to the data analysis conducted, one university was incorporated into the list of participants for the semi-structured interviews, resulting in a total of 29 universities. This adjustment was made to facilitate the completion of 10 interviews. The following section explores these qualitative insights, which enrich the dataset by highlighting lived experiences, methodological approaches, and institutional constraints.

This chapter relates the quantitative mapping presented in Chapters 1.2 to the qualitative evidence gathered through ten semi-structured interviews with Italian design teachers who explicitly integrate the principles of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) into their teaching methods. Together, the interviews offer a granular view of how inclusive principles are operationalised in the classroom, what skills are assessed and how each module fits into the overall curriculum (Figure 4). Although the sample is small, the interviewed lecturers teach compulsory and characterising workshops in seven universities; the patterns that emerge thus shed light on the dominant pedagogical logics in the national context.

All the interviewed courses are full-time, studio-based and compulsory, confirming the centrality of practical learning in Italian design education. Six modules are offered at master's level and four at bachelor's level, reflecting the tendency of the wider dataset to consider EDI an "advanced" skill. In the programme and module descriptors, Product and Digital Product Design prevail (9 and 5 occurrences, respectively), followed by Service Design, Visual Communication, and Interior Design. This disciplinary focus reiterates the national bias towards usability-driven inclusion noted in Section 1.2, leaving the fields of strategic or spatial design relatively under-represented (Table 1).

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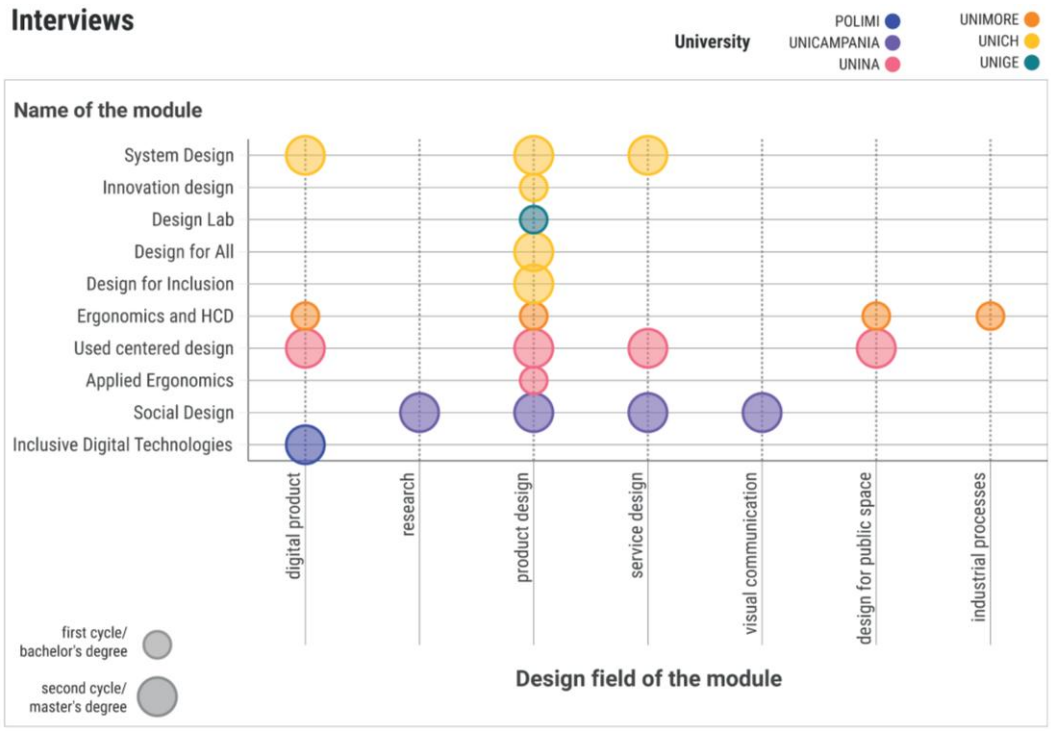

Figure 4. Interviews with Selected Academic Running Modules on Design and/for EDI in Italy. view the interactive table: https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/24149498/

Table 1: Details of the outcome and results of a selection of modules for teaching EDI topics.

University	Name of the module	Programme	Design field	Module outcome	Result and comments from interviews
Polytechnic of Milan	Inclusive Digital Technologies	Second cycle/master's degree	Digital product	Project	The greatest impact is from a social point of view, because through the course students experience a world they did not know before. They also acquire skills that are particularly useful in the field of Human Computer Interaction. Skills relating to inclusive design which from a professional point of view will be an increasingly requested topic. They acquire a different approach to design.
University of Campania "Luigi Vanvitelli"	Social Design	Master's degree	Research Product Design Service Design Visual Communication	Project	The best result is the advanced skills of the students. Very important are the awards received for the student's work and the possibility to experiment with the project with the communities.
University of Naples "Federico II"	Applied Ergonomics	First cycle/bachelor's degree	Product design	Project-executive design	This module generates a positive impact, to what we might call the "third mission", meaning it has a practical impact on partners and society as a whole.
University of Naples "Federico II"	Used centered design	Second cycle/master's degree	Product design Digital product Service design Design for public space	Project-executive design	This module generates a positive impact, to what we might call the "third mission", meaning it has a practical impact on partners and society as a whole.
University of Modena and Reggio Emilia	Ergonomics and HCD	First cycle/bachelor's degree	Product design Digital product Design for public space Industrial processes	Project	I would say more than a social impact. Specifically, it's a design impact, meaning they must learn to design for inclusivity and to provide the same user experience for different users. I know that sometimes they find calls for some competition, and at times they have brought their ideas, but I'm

					not sure if they have received any awards or not.
University of Genoa	Design Lab	First cycle/bachelor's degree	Product design	Project	We haven't had awards for students, but some students have spontaneously applied for internships at the company, asking us for information. Sometimes, after a couple of years, we see some of the students' projects being launched on the market.
"Gabriele d'Annunzio" University of Chieti-Pescara	Design for Inclusion	Second cycle/master's degree	Product design	Project	All teaching courses of the "Eco Inclusive Design" master's degree generates a positive impact, both on the students and on the involved companies and local territory.
"Gabriele d'Annunzio" University of Chieti-Pescara	Design for All	Second cycle/master's degree	Product design	Project	All teaching courses of the "Eco Inclusive Design" master's degree generates a positive impact, both on the students and on the involved companies and local territory.
"Gabriele d'Annunzio" University of Chieti-Pescara	Innovation design	First cycle/bachelor's degree	Product design	Project	Students' ability to suggest to companies how to design EDI solutions that don't necessarily require a huge economic or promotional effort and that aren't necessarily designed for a vulnerable user base.
"Gabriele d'Annunzio" University of Chieti-Pescara	System Design	Second cycle/master's degree	Product design Digital product Service design	Project	Students' ability to suggest to companies how to design EDI solutions that don't necessarily require a huge economic or promotional effort and that aren't necessarily designed for a vulnerable user base.

When asked to define their conceptual approach, lecturers converge on a Human Centred/Inclusive Design paradigm that translates human variability into ergonomic, experiential, and technological requirements. Four complementary frameworks recur:

1. Inclusive/Universal Design – designing 'for as many people as possible', anchored in anthropometric and cognitive ergonomics.
2. Co-design and participatory practices, involving stakeholders throughout the process.
3. Design for All toolkit with low/medium/high contact checklists.
4. Problem-finding through empathy, where students experience exclusion (e.g., by navigating interfaces with screen-readers or wearing ageing-suits) before devising solutions.

Several lecturers highlighted that their teaching methodologies—such as user-centred research, co-design with stakeholders, and rapid prototyping—are directly inspired by, and aligned with, practices widely adopted in professional design contexts. While collaborations with external partners are still limited, these experiences are seen as crucial bridges between academic learning and real-world application.

Overall, the interviews frame inclusion less as the production of universally accessible artefacts and more as the construction of conditions of equity - a shift that echoes the ethical appeals discussed by Margolin (2005) and Manzini (2016). At the same time, structural lenses

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such as intersectionality or decoloniality remain marginal, confirming Chapter 1.2's finding that Italian curricula privilege technical over socio-political readings of exclusion.

An almost constant "blended" pattern emerges in the ten modules:

1. Introductory lectures on EDI definitions and frameworks (10/10 modules).
2. Field/user research through interviews, observations or questionnaires (9/10 modules).
3. Iterative concept development and rapid prototyping - physical, digital or hybrid (8/10 modules).
4. Targeted co-design workshops with external actors (4/10 modules).
5. Simulation exercises to stimulate empathy (3/10 modules).
6. Occasional hackathons with industries or NGOs to align briefs with real clients (2/10 modules).

The outputs reflect this: six modules conclude with physical product prototypes, three with accessible digital interfaces and two with integrated product-service-system proposals (multiple outputs per module are possible). The prevalence of tangible artefacts highlights a persistent material orientation in Italian laboratories, even in tackling inclusive challenges.

The assessment strategies favour formative and dialogic practices. Eight lecturers rely primarily on oral critiques in which students must demonstrate consistency between user data, design decisions and inclusive outcomes. Formal written quizzes only appear in courses with a strong ergonomic content (2/10 modules), while four modules combine intermediate assignments with a final prototype. Tests with real users - ideal for validating inclusive claims – are reported in only two cases, indicating logistical or time constraints. Teachers highlight the importance of reflective judgment, which is the ability to argue design choices in both ethical and functional terms, despite certain limitations.

Seven of the ten modules are compulsory; six are embedded in "integrated workshops" or micro-credential tracks (e.g., the Milan Polytechnic's Ambassador track), while four function as stand-alone courses. The interviewees generally consider the current placement to be adequate, but nine would like to see a broader vertical alignment, in which EDI fundamentals are introduced in the first year and taken up with increasing complexity. Two explicitly call for a mandatory first-year unit to normalise inclusive mindsets across all cohorts. The almost unanimous desire for diffusion into other courses reveals that EDI remains confined to core studies rather than being woven into the entire undergraduate experience.

Teachers employ a range of resources: expert interventions (6/10 modules), WCAG and anthropometric guidelines (5/10 modules), physical simulation kits (4/10 modules) and community audits (4/10 modules). Prototyping facilities - digital fabrication, AR/VR, or traditional labs - are used in six cases. Crucially, instructors consider simulation tools as empathy triggers; authentic user feedback is deemed irreplaceable for final validation. Nonetheless, the episodic nature of collaborations with NGOs or companies suggests that university-community relationships are temporary rather than structural, consistent with the single-module partnership identified in the documentary study.

Taken together, the interviews outline a methodologically coherent but conceptually biased landscape. Co-design, iteration and ergonomic rigor constitute a solid educational triptych for

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functional accessibility. However, the scarcity of critical theory vocabulary, limited engagement with systemic inequalities and sporadic partnerships with stakeholders limit its transformative potential.

Three operational directions emerge:

1. From projects to programmes: Italian design schools could enhance the existing study template by embedding EDI milestones in sequential modules, allowing students to rework inclusive challenges with increasing disciplinary and socio-political complexity.

2. Beyond functional inclusion: Integrating readings and debates on intersectionality, decolonization, and design justice would enrich the current predominantly ergonomic framework, aligning curricula with contemporary European debate and UN Sustainable Development Goal 10.

3. Institutionalized partnerships: long-term agreements with civic organizations would stabilize co-design activities, improve skills testing in real-world contexts and broaden the social impact of students' work.

In summary, the interview data corroborate the quantitative findings of Sections 1.2, adding nuance to the Italian picture: committed educators offer high-quality, user-centred, inclusive design experiences, but these remain geographically and disciplinarily concentrated, episodic in their external involvement and poorly connected to systemic equity debates. Filling these gaps requires both a curricular rethink and a broader institutional commitment so that Italian higher education can achieve the EDIDesK project's goal of a harmonised and comprehensive EDI framework in European design schools. Overall, the Italian dataset is sufficiently broad and diverse to support further investigation and interpretation. The critical discussion that follows will unpack the pedagogical, institutional, and cultural implications of these trends and propose directions for development.

2. CRITICAL DISCUSSION

This critical discussion draws on both the quantitative mapping and the qualitative interviews to identify systemic patterns and propose directions for a more integrated approach to EDI in Italian design education.

The analysis of the data collected in the Italian sample highlights a growing attention to the themes of equity, diversity and inclusion within higher education in design. The evidence, gathered through desk research and interviews with university lecturers, provides a detailed picture. The analysis and study carried out so far led to the formulation of two research questions: RQ1) What is the broader context of EDI principles in relation to the field of Design in Italy? And RQ2) What is the current state of integration of EDI issues in Italian Design higher education?

From the latter question, the teaching of Inclusive Design is not yet homogeneous nor fully consolidated, and it manifests through very heterogeneous forms, intensities and approaches. On the one hand, Italian design schools show a growing interest in inclusive practices; on the other hand, these efforts are uneven, geographically concentrated and conceptually unbalanced. As the data show, the polytechnics in the North stand out for the number and depth of modules dedicated to inclusive design (13 out of 28 modules in all of Italy), while in the universities of the Centre and the South, these initiatives still depend on the isolated

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commitment of individual lecturers. This distribution reflects not only historical inequalities in terms of institutional resources and pedagogical investments but also the lack of a cohesive national strategy for the integration of inclusiveness in design education.

These territorial gaps intersect with structural imbalances at the academic pathway level. The clear predominance of postgraduate courses (18 out of 28) confirms that EDI issues are generally addressed as specialised or advanced content, rather than as foundational knowledge. This trend suggests that students' exposure to inclusion themes is often postponed, thus limiting the possibility of developing critical and continuous engagement with diversity issues throughout the entire educational journey. The evaluations attributed to the various modules are a clear indicator of a high potential for EDI integration in university courses, but at the same time, they highlight how it is still far from full realisation, often lacking coherent pedagogical frameworks, systematic methods or adequate tools to effectively address these issues. The educational offer also appears unbalanced from a disciplinary point of view: most EDI activities are concentrated in areas related to product and interface, while fields such as strategic, spatial or fashion design remain still little explored.

This reveals a prevailing tendency to associate inclusion with ergonomic and interface issues, rather than with the broader socio-political contexts in which design operates. Among the urgent frameworks, it is necessary to bring to light integrated studies between inclusion and sustainability, but from the reading of the data, it emerges that only in rare cases is there an integration of these two themes. Also, the typological classification of courses, mostly "Basic of Design" or practical workshops, suggests a functionalist approach to EDI, privileging usability and physical accessibility. This approach is also reinforced by the analysis of the keywords present in the course descriptions. Expressions such as "Design for All", "User-Centred Design" and "Universal Design" appear most frequently, indicating an interpretation of EDI mainly based on the technical dimension of accessibility. Terms such as "Co-design" appear only twice, confirming that collaborative approaches are still an exception. Moreover, only one module reported a structured collaboration with an external stakeholder, indicating a systemic disconnection between academic institutions and the lived realities of marginalised communities.

Overall, these results outline a fragmented picture of the state of EDI in design education in Italy. It is certainly a subject of strong interest, but there is still little awareness of what is meant by Inclusive Design and what the real trajectories of experimentation and research could be. Although efforts are increasing and often driven by motivated lecturers, they remain isolated and highly context-dependent. To better understand the reasons for these imbalances, it is necessary to complement quantitative data with qualitative reflections, drawn from direct interviews with the lecturers involved.

From a pedagogical point of view, however, the picture is encouraging. Lecturers, in almost all institutions, follow a coherent educational structure, ranging from introductory lectures to user research, through co-design activities, iterative prototyping and critical reflection. This path, rooted in human-centred ergonomics and functional accessibility, provides students with solid tools to face the variability of users' physical and cognitive abilities. It is precisely this solidity, however, that, once again, as already demonstrated by the data, highlights its conceptual limits: Italian programmes still tend to frame inclusion mainly as a technical usability issue.

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However, these educational practices are not always confined to the academic sphere; in some cases, they mirror and often anticipate trends in professional design practice. For instance, the integration of co-design workshops and user simulation exercises reflects the increasing adoption of participatory and empathic methods in the industry. Interviewees also reported that alumni trained within these modules have gone on to apply inclusive design frameworks in sectors ranging from digital interfaces to public space design, demonstrating the practical relevance of these pedagogical approaches. This alignment between educational content and professional practice suggests that strengthening EDI in curricula has direct implications for shaping socially responsive design practices in the field.

One significant limitation is the lack of structured collaborations with civil society organisations, public institutions, and minority-led enterprises. In the absence of systematic comparisons with lived experiences, workshop briefs may remain speculative. Additionally, evaluations tend to rely more on classroom discussions than on authentic assessments with actual users.

Within the EDIDesK research project, the Italian results confirm a tendency to promote design-for-inclusion issues, but this is mediated by cultural bias. This fragmentation reinforces the need for a shared transnational framework, capable of integrating EDI from the first year of study, fostering collaborations with communities and offering common metrics to monitor progress.

Moving in this direction requires Italian universities to rethink the positioning of inclusive design in their degree programmes. A compulsory fundamentals unit, placed at the beginning of the curriculum, could create a common language; vertically connected workshops would then allow students to tackle inclusive challenges with increasing complexity. Courses focused on service, interior or strategic design should be incentivised, through funding or accreditations, to integrate EDI briefs. Lecturers need structured opportunities to explore critical literature on inclusion, while departments should establish multi-year agreements with external stakeholders so that co-design becomes the rule, and not the exception. Finally, an evaluation rubric that measures not only functional accessibility, but also sociocultural impact would allow programmes to credibly monitor their progress and share good practices.

Despite its limitations, a small number of interviews and the absence of students' perspectives, this research sends a clear message: Italy possesses the pedagogical skills and ethical commitment needed to make inclusive design a distinctive feature of its educational offering. What is still missing is a systemic will capable of transforming widespread excellence into a true national culture of inclusion. By implementing the proposed recommendations, Italian institutions can evolve from an emerging but fragmented practice to a coherent and forward-looking model, aligned with European aspirations and, above all, with the social imperative of designing for inclusion.

3.CONCLUSIONS

The analysis conducted reveals a complex and multifaceted picture of how the principles of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) are integrated into design education at the university level in Italy. Alongside a quantitative and qualitative mapping, the study aimed to offer an accurate snapshot of the national context and an interpretive framework to understand how educational choices, disciplinary traditions, institutional geographies, and cultural postures influence the systemic adoption of an inclusive approach in curricula and design practices.

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One of the main findings concerns the emerging yet still fragile character of EDI within design education. Despite growing awareness among teaching staff and the explicit commitment of certain academic institutions, inclusion often appears as an occasional addition, entrusted to the initiative of individuals rather than structured as a core principle of the educational path. The absence of a shared infrastructure, made up of common languages, operational tools, evaluation criteria, and a shared pedagogical model, makes it difficult to consolidate the most virtuous experiences and, more importantly, to turn them into widespread and replicable practices.

At a cultural level, a certain conceptual ambiguity surrounding the notion of inclusion emerges. Too often, it is reduced to a purely technical issue, linked to usability or ergonomics, overlooking its connection to broader social inequalities, cultural diversity, and contemporary societal challenges. This narrow view limits the transformative potential of inclusive design, which should instead be understood as an enabling tool for individuals, communities, and society as a whole. For this to happen, inclusion must be addressed as a subject of critical reflection, capable of questioning the implicit assumptions of design education itself.

Looking ahead, the study strongly highlights the need for a strategic rethinking of the educational offer. Integrating EDI does not merely mean adding specific modules but reorienting the entire design pedagogy toward greater awareness of human diversity, systemic inequalities, and the ethical responsibilities of design. This implies, on the one hand, introducing inclusive principles at the earliest stages of study to make them foundational rather than marginal; and on the other, promoting stable collaborations with external actors able to bring real needs and complex challenges into the academic context.

The interviews revealed that approaching EDI issues within the design disciplines simultaneously requires a holistic view and a personal, reflective attitude. These two aspects, apparently in tension with each other, turn out to be complementary in the educational process. On the one hand, the student is called upon to approach projects not through the mechanical application of single technical solutions, but through a transversal and inclusive understanding of needs. At the same time, inclusive design education must solicit genuine attention to the other, challenging the idea that inclusion means deciding in the user's place. In this sense, the personalised approach is essential to recognise the specificities of individual experiences and to avoid stereotypical or normalising solutions.

To this end, co-design represents an indispensable pedagogical principle, but one that is difficult to apply in the academic sphere. The logistical and organisational conditions of courses - one thinks, for example, of the difficulty of setting up heterogeneous working groups that include people with physical disabilities limit the effective possibility of experimenting with collaboration with real users with specific needs. This difficulty, however, should not be a deterrent, but a further incentive to imagine new modes of interaction, simulation and exchange, capable of bringing didactics as close as possible to the complexity of reality.

Among these solutions, the hosting of testimonials, including from recent graduates or doctoral students with direct design experience on EDI issues, and the application of design exercises to real cases, through collaborations with external partners, prove particularly effective. While these strategies do not replace direct involvement of the users, they represent concrete ways of fostering design empathy, confrontation with diversity and empowerment of the student towards authentic application contexts.

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Within this framework, the transnational dimension of the EDIDesK project represents a valuable opportunity. The comparison with other educational systems has made clear not only the specificities of the Italian context, but also the shared European need to build common frameworks that can guide change. The development of shared minimum standards, evaluation rubrics, pedagogical guidelines, and strategies for active community engagement could constitute a first step toward a more robust and conscious educational alliance.

Ultimately, this study does not claim to offer definitive answers, but to open a space for inquiry and responsibility. If design is to be a tool for social transformation, then design education cannot shy away from questioning its role in reproducing or challenging existing inequalities. In this sense, inclusion is not just a content to be added, but a critical posture to be cultivated, an ethical horizon to be shared, and a collective project to be built.

In conclusion, strengthening EDI integration in design education is not only essential for fostering inclusive academic environments but also pivotal for preparing future designers to embed these principles in professional practice. As such, the evolution of curricula directly contributes to reshaping design practices towards greater social and cultural responsiveness.

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