Advancing Global Design Education Through Strategic Internationalization

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ABSTRACT

This position paper, jointly developed by the Cumulus Association and EIDD – Design for All Europe, articulates a shared vision to advance global design education through strategic internationalization. In the face of climate change, technological disruption, and social inequality, design education must equip future professionals to operate across cultural, social, and geographic boundaries. The paper outlines key strategies that extend beyond traditional mobility programs, advocating inclusive, sustainable, and culturally responsive curricula, collaborative research, and community-building practices. By integrating the principles of "Design for All" with Cumulus's global network of institutions, it promotes equitable access, interdisciplinary cooperation, and ethical responsibility. The paper ultimately frames design education as a transformative force to address global challenges while fostering creativity, diversity, and social well-being.

Keywords: Internationalization of Design Education, Inclusive Design, Global Collaboration, Sustainability, Cultural Diversity.

INTRODUCTION

With an era of unprecedented world interdependence and increasing challenges – from climate change to technological disruption, from social inequality to cultural heritage – design education has perhaps never been more critical. As we grapple with complex planetary issues that disregard borders, the call for internationally skilled designers who can transcend cultures and contexts has become exigent.

This common position paper by the Cumulus Association and EIDD Design for All Europe states a shared vision to carry forward internationalization in design education. The two organizations, although varying in their respective missions, come together on a set of fundamental values: facilitating worldwide cooperation, enabling design for all, and training designers to address worldwide challenges through innovative, culturally relevant, and universally accessible solutions.

Cumulus Association, representing over 400 institutions of art, design, and media in 71 countries across five continents, is the global leader in collaborative education in design. EIDD Design for All Europe is committed to universal design and accessibility values that form the basis of design solutions serving all individuals regardless of age, ability, or origin. Both associations together promote complementary yet essential features of the worldwide mission of design education in the contemporary world.

As design education increasingly addresses worldwide issues, both organizations recognize that traditional, locally oriented school models may require additional help so that students can thrive in an increasingly interconnected world. The COVID-19 pandemic, accelerating technological advancements, and unsustainable challenges have all validated the need for design solutions that work best across cultural, geographic, and access divides.

The following position paper outlines strategic internationalization strategies that move beyond the regular mobility programs to encompass a radical reimagining of curricula, research culture, and institutional settings. It lays out a framework for inclusive, sustainable, and culturally responsive international engagement to address the needs of diverse global publics, both respecting the specificities of local contexts and addressing universal human needs.

1. THE CUMULUS APPROACH TO GLOBAL DESIGN EDUCATION

1.1. Historical foundation and evolution

Cumulus Association itself began in 1990, shortly after the Berlin Wall fell, with the objective of forming networks for collaboration across institutional and national borders. Initially intended as an EU project to facilitate scholarly exchange in harmony with the new Erasmus program, Cumulus has evolved into a global association encompassing the full spectrum of international design education.

This evolution from a European network to a global platform reflects broader transformations in the practice and education of design. From its inception as a facilitator of student and academic mobility, it has evolved into a system that encompasses research collaboration, knowledge sharing, and the education of globally competent designers. Cumulus now spans the five continents, bringing together institutions ranging from large universities to specialist academies, from public to private, to provide unparalleled cross-cultural learning and collaboration opportunities.

1.2. Strategic pillars of internationalization

The Cumulus model of internationalization relies on specific fundamental pillars that have been the cornerstones of our growth and expansion throughout the years:

- Communication: developing multi-channel, holistic communications strategies that leverage digital technologies to unite our global community. This involves providing platforms for knowledge exchange, facilitating virtual collaboration, and ensuring information crosses linguistic and cultural divides successfully. Cumulus's communications infrastructure supports everything from everyday coordination between member institutions to large international initiatives.

- Collaboration: building substantial, two-way partnerships that go beyond transactional relationships in pursuit of long-term collaborative partnerships. This pillar encompasses joint research projects, collaborative curriculum development, international working groups, and collective responses to global design problems. Our collaboration model is founded on mutual benefit and cultural exchange rather than one-way knowledge transfer.

- Community: building a sense of shared identity and belonging among our global diversity networks. This pillar involves the development of inclusive spaces for interaction, serving underrepresented regions and institutions, and ensuring that every member feels like a respected contributor to our collective mission. Our community-building efforts recognize that effective internationalization requires not just professional relationships but also personal ones.

- Student-Centric Internationalization: at the heart of Cumulus's identity is our commitment to being a student-centred association. We understand that students are not merely recipients of internationalization efforts, but also active agents in shaping the global design culture. This philosophy is manifested in a series of flagship initiatives:

- Student Ambassador Program: the merit-based Student Ambassador Program has been honouring excellent student talent in member institutions since 2015, offering chosen students the opportunity to serve as representatives of global ambassadors at Cumulus conferences. These ambassadors interact with our worldwide design community, develop leadership skills, and support association activities through social media promotion, documentation, and peer networking. The program offers opportunities for emerging designers to engage with the global design education community, introducing fresh perspectives into our practice.

- Cumulus Student Talent Camp: this new program brings together students from around the world for intensive week-long workshops that create unique spaces for collaboration across disciplinary and cultural boundaries. The geographical path of Talent Camps – from Jaipur, India (2023) to Pordenone, Italy (2024) to Cotonou, Benin (2025) – demonstrates our commitment to making these opportunities truly global, exposing students to varied design contexts while making international experience accessible to those who would otherwise be excluded from global mobility.

- Cumulus PhD Network: recognizing the growing importance of doctoral education in design, we established this network to connect PhD students, supervisors, and programs in our global network. The network fosters specialist tracks in conferences, discussions in research methodology, and connects emerging researchers with senior researchers across institutional boundaries. This initiative has been particularly valuable for members in regions where doctoral education in design is still in its early stages.

- Working Groups – Communities of Practice: Working Groups are Cumulus' intellectual force, vibrant communities of practice where members collaborate based on shared interests and competence. Beginning with the pioneering X-Files Working Group, set up to facilitate international exchanges, the Working Groups have evolved to encompass a broad range of design research and practice areas. Our Working Groups are semi-autonomous but networked communities within the overall Cumulus context. They organize thematic sessions at conferences, generate collaborative research activities, publish research, and offer opportunities for ongoing interaction between our biennial conferences. Recent changes have enabled the launch of new Working Groups in emerging areas,

provided structural support for activities, and fostered publication and dissemination of outcomes. The Working Groups are among our most successful models of long-term international cooperation, demonstrating how intellectual interests can stretch across geographical and institutional boundaries to create fruitful professional alliances and build knowledge in specific fields.

- Biennial Conferences – Uniting the World Community: biennial conferences remain the most visible expression of Cumulus's internationalism and intellectual vibrancy. The conferences bring together thousands of members of our global network to engage with the newest research, share best practices, and form new collaborations. This recent set of conferences testifies to both our geographical reach and thematic responsiveness to emergent issues: Detroit's exploration of "Design for Adaptation" (2022), Antwerp's examination of "Design for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion" (2023), Beijing's exploration of "Design Education in the Age of Artificial Intelligence" (2023), Budapest's investigation of "Design for Resilient Communities" (2024), and Monterrey's exploration of "Design Futures: Innovation for Societal Transformation" (2024). Finally, our latest conference in Nantes Atlantique (June 2025) marked our 35th anniversary while tackling "Ethical Leadership: A New Frontier for Design". These conferences play several roles in our internationalization strategy: they serve as forums for academic and professional exchange and networking, provide insights into various approaches to design education and practice, generate new collaborative projects, and strengthen the bonds of community that sustain our global network.

- Regional Meetings: Localised Global Engagement: to complement our large conferences and internationalization, which makes it more accessible to members of various types, Cumulus introduced the Regional Meetings initiative. This initiative addresses specific regional concerns while maintaining connections to our international network. Such small-scale events reduce the barriers of travel, strengthen local networks, and provide podiums for members who do not often participate in global conferences. The strategic focus on the Far East has witnessed successful activities in China and Japan, which have strengthened our presence within this dynamic region and forged new partnerships. These regional actions demonstrate how successful internationalization can simultaneously respond to local needs and global networks.

- Research and Knowledge Exchange: Cumulus has increasingly prioritised research collaboration at the heart of internationalization, offering the potential for meaningful academic exchange while addressing global challenges through design research. Cumulus supports members with research project applications, coordinates participation in international consortia, and leverages our network to form more effective multi-institutional partnerships. Cumulus' involvement in collaborative research consolidates its position as a key player in shaping design, creativity, and innovation research agendas. The Reveda Research Working Group was established to this end, to structure activities, refine models of international research collaboration, and develop mechanisms for sharing best practices within the membership (Di Lucchio et al., 2023).

- Publications and Academic Recognition: Cumulus has made significant strides in enhancing the academic quality and recognition of its publications, including the introduction of DOI certification for conference proceedings, improvements to peer review processes, and the consolidation of quality control mechanisms. The "Think Tank" publication series offers valuable platforms for disseminating knowledge, while digital accessibility improvements ensure a broader audience for our scholarly works.

1.3. Sustainable internationalization and global advocacy

While recognizing environmental concerns with traditional mobility-based internationalization, Cumulus has pioneered sustainable approaches that maintain the benefits of international exchange without increasing environmental impact. Cumulus's approach includes hybrid programs that combine physical and virtual learning opportunities, regional clusters of activities, investment in web-enabled collaboration platforms, and the development of "slow internationalization" models that emphasise deeper, longer-term collaborations (Dutta et al., 2016).

Over the past three years, Cumulus leadership has disseminated internationalization materials to over 40 international conferences on four continents, spanning 15 countries, thereby establishing the association as a leading global voice for design education and research. All this work of advocacy has raised awareness, created significant contacts between prospective members and partners, and outlined a vision of design education as a tool for international cooperation and sustainable development.

1.4. From Kyoto to Nantes: Evolving our foundational principles

One of our recent significant activities has been our participatory process to revisit and enhance the Kyoto Design Declaration. Our foundational document, drafted in 2008 by Cumulus founder Yrjö Sotamaa, has served as a foundation for our association's values. Recognizing more profound changes in our world since 2008, the association launched an extensive two-year participatory process involving over 250 participants to co-create a new Cumulus Design Declaration.

This collaborative evolution signals the commitment to shared governance and continuous responsiveness. The upcoming declaration is a step towards planet-oriented design rather than human-centred design, acknowledging the intrinsic interdependence of humans and non-human actors in our shared home. It refers to sustainability beyond the SDGs frameworks, promotes inclusiveness, and positions designers as powerful agents in leveraging change towards preferred futures.

1.5. Challenges and future directions

Forward thinking, Cumulus faces several key issues to deal with that will shape our future growth: how to respond to the challenge of artificial intelligence in design education; how to address the climate crisis through regenerative design strategies; how to ensure equal access to design education globally; how to navigate geopolitical competition that affects global cooperation; and how to reconcile growth with social coherence.

How the association responds to these challenges will determine its success in preparing designers with the competencies to address a volatile but opportunity-rich future and developing models for international cooperation that are inclusive, sustainable, and responsive to multiple global contexts without sacrificing openness and the spirit of creativity that has propelled its evolution from an EU network to a global community.

2. EIDD – DESIGN FOR ALL EUROPE: AN INCLUSIVE AND INTERNATIONAL VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF DESIGN

In the European panorama of design culture, the international association EIDD – Design for All Europe (later simply called EIDD) represents one of the most significant entities in promoting inclusiveness through design. Born as a response to emerging social, political and cultural needs, the association supports a design approach that places human diversity at the center as a resource, rather than an obstacle. The following outlines the vision, founding principles, historical evolution, prevalent activities and current impact of EIDD, highlighting its central role in promoting a design culture oriented towards well-being, equity and the inclusion of human diversity.

2.1. Origins and development of the concept of Design for All

The concept of "Design for All" has its roots in the Scandinavian functionalism of the 1950s and in the applied ergonomics of the 1960s. In Sweden, the concept of "society for all" emerges as an expression of welfare policy, placing accessibility at the center as a fundamental right. These ideological developments led, between the end of the 1960s and the 1990s, to an ever-increasing focus on the role of design in building inclusive environments, culminating in the foundation of EIDD in 1993 in Dublin. EIDD is an acronym for European Institute of Design for Disability, but the founders immediately realized that it was necessary to overcome the pressing issue of disability, to embrace a broader vision of accessibility and inclusion, extended to the entire human race (Gheerawo, 2022). Since its inception, in fact, EIDD has had the objective of promoting a culture of design that is not limited to responding to the functional needs of certain categories, but that starts from the valorization of human diversity in all its forms. Thus, "Design for All" was born, which, according to the definition proposed by the association, is "the design of environments, products, services and systems that can be used by all people in the widest possible range of situations, without the need for adaptations or special designs" (Accolla, 2009).

2.2. Design for All: A cultural paradigm beyond disability

One of the most innovative aspects of the work of EIDD is having overcome the reduction of inclusive design to the sole issue of disability. Design for All is not only concerned with eliminating physical barriers, but with developing environments and relational systems capable of welcoming a plurality of users. This implies the ability to read contexts, to anticipate emerging needs and to include multiple points of view in the design process.

In this sense, Design for All becomes a cultural paradigm, which concerns urban policies as well as education, communication, cultural heritage, health and technological innovation. Inclusion thus becomes a transversal principle, capable of orienting design choices towards more equitable and sustainable models.

2.3. The EIDD – Design for All Europe association: Structure and mission

EIDD – Design for All Europe is today a European network composed of universities, professional organizations, public bodies and non-governmental organizations, which share the commitment to inclusive design. The association currently has over 40 organizations in more than twenty countries, both European and non-European, it is federated with similar organizations such as Cumulus and IcoD, collaborates with European bodies such as the EDF (European Disability Forum) and promotes projects, publications, conferences and training activities aimed at raising awareness and training designers, administrators and citizens.

One of the main tools through which EIDD spreads its principles is the "Stockholm Declaration" (2004), which represents a milestone in the formal recognition of Design for All as a fundamental strategy for a sustainable, inclusive and democratic society. This document underlines the importance of design as a tool for promoting quality of life, well-being and participation, regardless of age, ability or cultural background.

Twenty years later, in 2024, EIDD has produced a new declaration, the "Gaia Declaration", in which the same principles are updated in relation to the main contemporary social, economic, environmental and cultural challenges, such as climate change, the aging of the global population, wars and social conflicts, the exponential development of new technologies. The name "Gaia" that was attributed to the Declaration is the result of a fortuitous coincidence between the name of the city that hosted the event, Vila Nova de Gaia, and the name of the mythological Greek goddess Gaia who gave the first name to our planet Earth.

2.4. Main activities of EIDD – Design for All Europe

The activities are divided into different areas of intervention, which define its strategic role at European and international level.

- Advocacy and cultural awareness: EIDD is actively involved in promoting Design for All as a tool for equity, citizenship and well-being. As mentioned, it collaborates with European and national institutions to promote the integration of the inclusive approach in public policies, supporting the dissemination of regulations, strategies and tools oriented towards people's rights. Its campaigns and initiatives contribute to making visible the importance of inclusive design in contemporary challenges: from active ageing to disability, from sustainable mobility to digital inclusion.

- Research and theoretical-methodological development: the association promotes and participates in applied and theoretical research projects on a national and European scale, working in synergy with universities, public bodies and third sector organizations. It produces policy documents, guidelines and position papers, contributing to the evolution of design practices and models. The research activity is aimed at promoting a deep understanding of the relationships between matter, space, body and culture, in a multidisciplinary perspective.

- Training and skills development: one of the most significant areas of EIDD's action is training. The association promotes the integration of Design for All in academic courses, especially in the disciplines of design, architecture and social sciences. It participates in Erasmus+ programs and European educational projects,

supporting seminars, courses, workshops and summer schools. The aim is to spread knowledge and skills useful for designing for human diversity, involving students, professionals, teachers and policy makers.

- Events, exhibitions and public communication: EIDD organizes and supports numerous international conferences, thematic and itinerant exhibitions and cultural events, aimed at disseminating good practices and activating public debate. Among these are the Design for All Europe Conferences (mainly organized during the General Assembly of the Association), the annual promotion of an international conference on "Design for Inclusion" (which takes place mainly in the United States), or the traveling exhibition "Cities for All", as well as numerous study days promoted in collaboration with local authorities and academic partners. These moments constitute meeting spaces between scientific communities, institutions and active citizenship.

- Networking and transnational cooperation: the associative structure of EIDD, which now extends across all continents, serves above all as a platform for exchange, also between institutions and organizations of a different nature, facilitating the transversal sharing of experiences, tools and replicable models. This is also thanks to the collaboration with other European and international networks, such as Cumulus, IcoD, Zero Project, and with organizations committed to the promotion of human rights and sustainable development.

- Production of strategic documents and cultural references: as mentioned, EIDD is the author of one of the founding documents of Design for All: the Stockholm Declaration (2004), a cultural and political manifesto that helped redefine the paradigms of European design for inclusion. Since then, the association has continued to develop or promote the drafting of reference texts, including operational manuals, recommendations and teaching materials, also through internationally prestigious editorial series, positioning itself as a qualified interlocutor in the dialogue between institutions, academia and civil society.

- The role of the Inclusive Project for Cultural Heritage: a particularly significant area for the application of the principles promoted by EIDD – Design for All Europe is that of cultural heritage. As underlined by Pete Kercher, ambassador of EIDD-Design for All Europe, "the evolution of the museum from a place of conservation to a space of participation requires a review of the role of the project. Heritage can no longer be thought of as a resource intended for a few but must be made accessible and meaningful for all" (2024). In this perspective, Design for All provides theoretical and operational tools to build inclusive cultural experiences: comprehensible signage, multisensory paths, accessible digital interfaces, flexible exhibition spaces. These are interventions that do not simply correct a deficit, but that increase the overall quality of the experience for each visitor, strengthening the social value of heritage.

2.5. Training, awareness and future challenges

For Design for All to truly become a widespread practice, it is necessary to intervene in the field of training. EIDD-Design for All Europe has been promoting workshops, summer schools and university programmes for years that introduce future designers to the principles of

inclusiveness. The challenge is not only technical, but cultural: it is about developing a new design sensitivity capable of reading complexity and transforming it into a resource. In the current context, marked by ecological crises, migration, population ageing and growing inequality, Design for All takes on a strategic function. It is not just about designing better, but about rethinking the relationships between individuals, communities and environments in terms of equity, participation and well-being.

The contribution of EIDD – Design for All Europe to the European debate on inclusive design is fundamental. Its action has made it possible to build a shared lexicon, to network skills and to promote an ethical and responsible vision of design. Today more than ever, it is necessary to strengthen this culture, recognizing the value of the project not only as a tool for solving problems, but as a means to build more just, welcoming and plural societies.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADVANCING INTERNATIONALIZATION

Given the experiences described here, there are several central strategies for promoting internationalization in design education: investing in digital infrastructure for worldwide collaboration; creating equity models taking account of particular requirements of under-resourced regions; building regional networks within world frameworks; creating enhanced strategic partnerships with complementary institutions; establishing sustainable funding models for worldwide initiatives; and creating overall sustainability plans guaranteeing ethical and environmental values to be at the heart of all activity.

Effective internationalization in design education requires constant commitment, participatory decision-making, and adaptability. The shift from being an exchange network for Europeans to a global platform indicates the potential and challenges of developing truly international learning communities. As world associations advance to the subsequent phases of growth, there must be adherence to the initial vision of design education as a force for global cooperation, cultural awareness, and social improvement.

It is also essential not to consider education on inclusion issues in isolation, but to find continuous opportunities for meeting and relating between the various stakeholders of design, of which those involved in training certainly play an important role, but together with all the stakeholders of the world of work (professional associations, companies, public and private bodies) and institutions (local bodies, NGOs, international institutions).

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