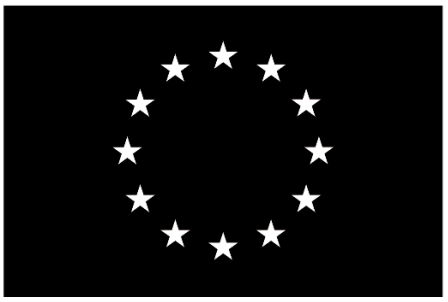

Co-funded by
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GUIDELINES
FOR DESIGN INCLUSIVENESS
IN ART ACADEMIES

Tools, reflections and strategies

for embedding inclusion in design education

*DESIG*ness - Cooperation Partnership to teach and learn Inclusive Design and Diversity in Higher Education*

2023-1-IT02-KA220-HED-000166430

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1. About the project and topics addressed

The DESIG*ness project, led by **NABA - Nuova Accademia di Belle Arti** with the **Art Academy of Latvia in Riga** (Latvia), the **Vilnius Academy of Arts** (Lithuania), **Cerpa Italia Onlus**, **Design For All Italia**, and **BAM! Strategie Culturali** (Italy) aims to catalyze **significant transformation within the European Higher Education system**, focusing on **inclusivity** and **transformative design**. It seeks to create an educational context where accessibility and diversity are foundational, aligning with the evolving societal expectations towards inclusivity.

In addition to raising awareness on inclusion and diversity, and expose the academic staff and the students to core methodologies and techniques for Design Inclusiveness, the main objective of DESIG*ness is to create the conditions for a radical transformation of Higher Education Systems. The project is thus a test case for involving Design Inclusiveness into Art and Design Academies curricula and for structuring new teaching and learning methodologies in order to generate a long-term impact with the goal of building inclusive higher education systems. Through new practices and methods, teachers and students develop a new sensitivity to work with specific social needs that will be integral part of their training, and will be later on part of their professional design approach.

The greatest ambition of this project resides in changing the mindset of the professionals of the future, towards design practices that will be based and developed on new methodologies and strategies. We may start this process from European Higher Education Systems, from our Art and Design Academies, from our students and professors, to produce a broader change.

To this aim, **5 main activities/products have been identified as milestones**:

1. **Training of teaching staff and students**: Central to the project is the advanced training of educators and students to implement inclusive practices effectively within European Art and Design Academies, equipping key educational actors with the necessary skills and tools.
2. **Development of a transnational training program:** A cutting-edge transnational training program is being developed to transcend geographical and cultural barriers, providing

educators with a shared knowledge base and innovative pedagogical approaches to inclusivity.

3. **Inclusive Design guidelines**: The project aims to establish clear, pragmatic guidelines for inclusive design, offering a conceptual and operational compass for Art and Design Academies to integrate inclusivity into their design processes.
4. **Innovative teaching formats and shared assessment methods**: DESIG*ness introduces innovative teaching modalities and shared assessment methods, supported by a solid theoretical and practical foundation, to overcome traditional methodological barriers.
5. **Stakeholder engagement and strategic development**: Active engagement of stakeholders with expertise in inclusion and disability policies is a key component, aiming to refine project strategies and ensure a multi-dimensional, inclusive perspective tailored to European social and normative contexts.

2. Scope and meaning of the term “Inclusive Design.”

Inclusive design is a design process in which a product, service, or environment is designed to be usable for as many people as possible, particularly groups who are traditionally excluded from being able to use an interface or navigate an environment. Its focus is on fulfilling as many user needs as possible, not just as many users as possible.

1. Historically, inclusive design has been linked to designing for people with physical disabilities, and accessibility is one of the key outcomes of inclusive design.
2. However, rather than focusing on designing for disabilities, inclusive design is a methodology that considers many aspects of human diversity that could affect a person's ability to use a product, service, or environment, such as ability, language, culture, gender, and age.
3. The Inclusive Design Research Center reframes disability as a mismatch between the needs of a user and the design of a product or system, emphasizing that disability can be experienced by any user.

4. With this framing, it becomes clear that inclusive design is not limited to interfaces or technologies, but may also be applied to the design of policies and infrastructure.

Design is design, it must be inclusive in itself. Design is for people and people can be seen as a huge variety of needs and desires.

3. The Design for All (DfA) process as an operational approach

Design for All is not a prescriptive methodology, nor a set of specialized techniques to be applied. It is, first and foremost, a process—a way of conceiving design that recognizes human diversity, in terms of functioning, language, and context, as the very substance of design. Working within a Design for All approach means structurally rethinking how needs are defined, how users are involved, how solutions are developed, and how outcomes are evaluated. Design is no longer an individual act, but a collaborative and progressive process in which inclusion is not an additional constraint, but a fundamental condition of quality.

The Design for All approach takes shape through an articulated yet flexible process, one that can adapt to educational, cultural, social, and organizational contexts. Everything begins with listening: the selection and involvement of stakeholders is never symbolic but constitutes an integral part of defining the project itself. The analysis of needs takes place through qualitative and observational tools—interviews, workshops, simulations, field explorations—that make it possible to gather complex and layered data. These data are not merely described, but organized by area and relevance, enabling a strategic reading that will guide the entire process. The people involved are not passive “carriers of needs,” but active interlocutors, capable of redefining design priorities through their own perspective.

When the process moves into the co-design phase, the Design for All approach calls for a cultural shift: the goal is no longer to respond to a predefined question, but to build the right question together. The solutions that emerge are never abstract, but deeply contextual—rooted in the real

experience of users and validated through testing, prototyping, simulations, and continuous feedback. Verification is not a final step, but an ongoing practice that accompanies every phase. In this process, evaluation also takes on a transformative role: it does not merely measure the effectiveness of the project, but also captures its social, cultural, educational, and experiential impact.

Applying Design for All methodology within the educational sphere—particularly in Art and Design Academies—offers a concrete opportunity to train a new generation of designers who are more aware, more capable of interpreting the complexity of the world, and more equipped to create solutions that empower rather than exclude. It also means providing educators with operational and reflective tools to transform curricula, learning environments, teaching materials, and modes of interaction. DfA does not ask us to design “for everyone” in a generic way, but to develop projects that are strong in their capacity to adapt to diversity. It is a process grounded in shared responsibility, genuine listening, anticipation of barriers, analysis of functioning and pursuit of quality in experience—with the ultimate goal of restoring dignity and value to all those involved.

In this perspective, Design for All becomes an operational approach in the fullest sense: it informs decision-making, supports project development, guides decision processes, and enables the activation of truly transformative solutions. It does not simply produce accessible results but builds environments in which inclusion is a structural element of design, not a post-hoc adaptation. It is an open, dynamic, generative process,one that evolves alongside the people who engage with it.

4. Scope and meaning of the term “Co-Design.”

Co-Design is a cultural and operational approach that redefines how design processes are conceived, developed, and evaluated—especially when inclusion is the goal. It is not a participatory method for specific cases, nor a predefined sequence of tools and workshops. Within art and design academies, Co-Design offers a way to rethink roles, competences, and relationships, acknowledging that design knowledge is not the exclusive domain of professionals, but emerges collectively through interactions with students, users, communities, and contexts.

To speak of Co-Design means to refer to a process where all participants contribute meaningfully to the framing of problems, the generation of ideas, the development of solutions, and the evaluation of outcomes. This is not symbolic participation, but a transformative one, in which lived experience and tacit knowledge become integral to the design process. Unlike traditional design, Co-Design does not begin with a predefined problem to solve, but questions the formulation of the problem itself. It values complexity, diversity of perspectives, and the richness of disagreement.

In educational contexts, Co-Design becomes a shared responsibility: students and teachers co-create both the learning journey and the project itself. The process is not linear, but iterative and open, and may involve negotiation, uncertainty, and reorientation. The goal is not efficiency, but the quality of relationships and the significance of the experience.

A key element of Co-Design is the redistribution of decision-making power. This does not mean eliminating roles, but fostering horizontal relationships where everyone feels entitled to contribute, propose, and shape the direction of the work. Facilitators play a crucial role by creating safe spaces, managing time and language, and supporting group dynamics. Accessibility—cognitive, physical, linguistic, emotional—is not an added feature, but a precondition for meaningful participation.

When well structured, Co-Design creates environments where diversity is not an obstacle, but a generative resource. It builds trust, makes room for vulnerability, and accepts conflict as part of the process. The final outcome is not just a product or service, but also a shared set of meanings, a culture of coexistence, and a renewed vision of the design profession.

In the field of education, Co-Design becomes a tool for transforming not only curricula, but also institutions. It promotes active learning, critical thinking, and collective responsibility. For students, it offers an experience of diversity as a concrete resource; for educators, it invites exploration of uncertainty as a space for pedagogical innovation. In this perspective, Co-Design is not a technique to be used occasionally, but a disposition—a way of being and designing together, rooted in values such as equity, accessibility, and social justice.

5. State of the art: relevant European and national regulations in the field

An investigation of the relevant regulations in the field of inclusive design is the first step to align vocabulary and concept, as it is necessary to highlight the dark areas, the differences, what is missing rather than what is prescribed.
The most interesting results of a thorough research of the European, Italian, Latvian and Lithuanian laws (taking a closer look at the countries of DESIG*ness Partnership) on accessibility can be summarized as follows:

1. 1.There is a core of EU and national laws related to inclusion, with a common focus on equity an non discrimination;
2. 2. The regulations focus mainly on web and physical accessibility
3. 3. There are few indications, beyond equity and non discrimination, to support inclusive education

It is important to consider the mindset too, in spite of the regulations the perceived meaning of accessibility is still linked (and reduced) to physical access for people using wheelchair, and that a widespread

6. The challenge of accessibility to artistic and cultural experiences

What does accessibility mean when we refer to art and culture? The meaning cannot be narrowed down to a pure physical accessibility as art and culture mostly deal with personal, subjective experience. There are two main challenges and can be summarized as reaching and understanding: i.e. reaching and enjoying places and understanding the experience, according to each one's personal functioning. In practice, many barriers—beyond the merely physical—still prevent full enjoyment of this

right, particularly for people with sensory disabilities (visual, hearing) and cognitive disabilities (neurodiversity, learning difficulties, dementia, etc.).

A first challenge concerns **sensory perception**: How can visual art be made accessible to people who are blind or have low vision? How can sound-dependent experiences be understood by those with hearing impairments? Exhibitions often feature tiny captions, poor lighting, a lack of Braille descriptions, inaccessible or unsynchronized audio guides, and videos without captions or sign-language interpretation.

The second challenge is **cognitive and communicative**: overly complex texts, specialist jargon, confusing signage, or spatial layouts that disorient visitors with cognitive disabilities or orientation difficulties. Moreover, excessive sensory stimulation (bright lights, loud sounds, crowded spaces) can frustrate or even distress neurodivergent visitors or those with sensory sensitivities.
Another obstacle is staff training: cultural workers need to understand a range of disabilities—not just physical—and be prepared to produce art, organize events, teach students bearing in mind a wide range of functioning rather than type of disabilities, shifting towards an integrated approach to design. This is a methodological approach: we are used to think and work with categories, often represented by an image, a stereotype in our mind: the disabled, the blind, the foreign students, and we proceed by adapting our work to those categories, separately. The inclusive approach, based on functioning and needs is more effective and supports teachers, students and staff to effectively build an inclusive environment

II) The *Inclusive education*

1. Introduction to the concept of inclusivity at a systemic level within academic institutions.

The ICF (International Classification of Functioning, Disability, and Health) of the World Health Organization from 2001 defines disability as an interaction between a health condition and an unfavourable environment. The disability is not a characteristic of the individual but is a result of the relationship between a person, with his or her own health condition, physical and psychological functioning and occurs when the person meets an environment that can facilitate his or her participation to life or can hinder it, when the environment creates barriers. We talk about people and their surrounding environments, regardless of their more or less evident disabilities.
Therefore we define something (whether a course, a lecture or a space) accessible when it can be simultaneously reached, used, enjoyed and understood by as many functioning types as possible.

2. Key questions and design inclusivity

This aim necessarily requires the integration of different tools, approaches, services in a multidisciplinary perspective. “Every environment, every space, every service, must be read in light of the type of people who will live it and their needs, ways of use, and purposes. Every classroom, every course and every public building has its unique social, cultural or architectural characteristics, as do the users that inhabit or frequent it, students, teachers and administrative workers.

A careful analysis of the context allows us to understand and identify the different needs, in order to be able to acquire the best information from competent sources.

Design includes everything.

No designer can solve the issue of inclusion alone.

Inclusive design requires a multidimensional approach that combines:

- **Physical, sensory, and cognitive accessibility** from the design stage (Universal Design);
- **Assistive technologies and multimedia solutions** - A variety of languages to support sensorial impairments but also different learning styles (Universal design for Learning);
- **Comprehensive staff training** to build inclusive skills and awareness.
- **Direct participation of people with disabilities** in co-designing experiences, not just as users but as collaborators.
- **Policies, funding, practices and regulations** that require or incentivize inclusive practices, within Universities and Academies

3. Analysis of key areas: services offered by the university

A strong, committed leadership that promotes inclusive values and provides the necessary resources and support is essential.

An Inclusive University should, in the first place, promote an inclusive mindset amongst Faculty, non-teaching students and students.

At the same time, an Inclusive University must ensure a set of services to actively and concretely support inclusion, such as:

- Accessible online information, suitable to different needs (i.e. accessible website, simple language, intuitive interface, etc.)
- A tutoring network to provide competent support at all levels to effectively respond to each request.

Inclusion works when the whole Academic Institution is committed, involved and aware that inclusive design for learning requires continuous dialogue amongst academic leadership, Faculty, non-teaching staff, students and experts.

Accessibility of buildings and infrastructure

Accessibility is traditionally considered a characteristic of the buildings. Inclusive buildings are accessible, meaning that they are reachable, understandable and usable.

How?

1. The venue shall be reached easily and autonomously using the public means of transportation, whereas possible;
2. Everybody should use the same entrance; if not possible, for example in case of an historical heritage building, a secondary entrance should be provided to everybody and not labelled as “disabled people doorway”
3. Wayfinding is crucial, sign, board and maps, as well as tag to indicate name and/or numbers for classes and departments, must use text, symbols and simple language, Vocal signs (ex alarms) should be repeated using lights and different type of alerts
4. Staff shall be trained to deal with deaf and blind people and with neurodivergent people.
5. Libraries and laboratories must ensure equal access and use to every kind of student, with the same level of safety

Configuration of classrooms and learning spaces

a) **Key principle: design flexibility into the space before designing the tools (Universal design for Learning)**

Spaces that allow quick reconfiguration (mobile seating, adjustable chairs, modular tables, multipurpose zones) make it easier to apply the three UDL principles (multiple means of representation, action & expression, engagement). Creating “zones” (e.g., presentation area, collaborative zone, quiet individual zone, lab bench) boosts participation and autonomy.

Example: In a STEM lab, use mobile carts with different kits (sensors, prototyping materials) that can be wheeled to the mini-lesson area; tables on casters allow seamless shifts between individual and group work.

b) Physical accessibility + sensory design (lighting, acoustics, visual contrast) reduce invisible barriers

Relatively low-cost upgrades—adjustable lighting, acoustic panels, clear pathways, high-contrast signage—improve comfort and access for students with diverse cognitive, auditory, and visual needs. Studies show gains in attention and participation when these elements are addressed.
Example: Provide dimmable lights at lab stations; use portable microphones or amplification for demonstrations; create "quiet pods" with movable partitions for students needing reduced stimuli.

c) Built-in multimodal technologies support alternative representation and expression

Integrating shared displays, video/audio recording stations, accessible data-capture software, and alternative input devices lets students demonstrate learning in multiple ways (visual, verbal, hands-on). Research on labs and simulations shows that UDL-driven practical activities improve outcomes and reduce the need for individual accommodations.
Example: In a creative or scientific lab, pair hands-on kits with tablets for voice notes, screen-reader-friendly data tables, and a recording station to capture experiments as evidence of learning.

d) Co-design of space and activities is more effective than isolated interventions

Successful implementations combine spatial changes with professional development and participatory design involving students (including those with disabilities). This produces context-specific and sustainable solutions.
Example: Run initial workshops where students map practical needs (e.g., equipment placement, visual cues) and train faculty on how to leverage flexible layouts for UDL activities.

Safety and compliance: adapt procedures without restricting access

Adjusting safety protocols—PPE in multiple sizes, step-by-step visual instructions, accessible emergency stations, alternative methods for students with motor limitations—enables participation while maintaining compliance. Research highlights that many barriers are procedural, not technical. Example: Stock PPE in varied sizes and configurations; design alternative safe protocols (e.g., tele-operation or real-time video assistance) for tasks requiring complex manual skills.

Preparation and support for teaching and non-teaching staff

Educational materials and curriculum design.

In the realm of higher education, inclusive practices are increasingly recognised as essential for fostering equitable learning environments. This involves rethinking how courses are taught and assessed to ensure that all students, regardless of their backgrounds or learning needs, have equal opportunities to succeed.

Inclusive practices in higher education encompass a range of strategies, from diversifying curricula to reflect a variety of perspectives and experiences, to employing teaching methods that cater to different learning styles and abilities.

Inclusive education requires a shift in mindset from considering disability, as well as diversity, as a deficit to recognising the diverse strengths and needs of all students.

HOW?

- **a.** Being open and facilitate the dialogue with and among the students, be ready to listen to them and to adapt programs and assignments with flexibility (listen)
- **b.** Being aware that inclusion refers to all the students, not only the one with disabilities, because language, gender, cultural background, temporary psychological difficulties and habits could become situational disabilities when facing a non-favourable environment

c. Including disability and cultural and gender diversity in discussion and assignment, considering diversity a professional knowledge, i.e. knowing our potential customers and users

The curriculum, teaching methods, and assessment practices used in the classroom must be designed to be accessible and engaging for students with diverse learning needs. This may involve providing differentiated instruction, using universal design for learning principles, and offering multiple ways for students to demonstrate their knowledge. It is of paramount important to keep in mind that a curriculum is really inclusive not only when the teaching methods and tools are designed to meet the needs and preferences of as many people as possible, but also, and above all when the contents are inclusive. When dealing with topics like architecture, organization of exhibitions, art and in general when the professionals to be that are educated in those courses are main actors in shaping the environment of people it is fundamental to prepare the students to think and design on the basis of real people, not stereotypes or categories.
Different way of physical and cognitive functioning shall be introduced and experienced throughout the whole academic path, in order to educate inclusive professionals

By addressing these key factors and implementing inclusive practices, universities can create learning environments that truly support the success and well-being of all students.

4. Inclusive Curriculum: Principles and performance objectives for inclusive curricula and tools for a dynamic and adaptable approach

The Universal design for Learning methodology and the principles of Design for All lead the designers towards the shaping of inclusive curricula. As far as the objective the main questions is:
How can I support each one of my students' learning?
All students learn in a different way: according to the available literature there are different ways to classify the various learning styles, based on psychological, attitudinal or sensorial approaches.

An inclusive curriculum design starts from the last one because it is the easiest to detect and the psychological and attitudinal ones are easily recognizable when the knowledge of the students increases as soon as the course goes on, therefore they can lead to adjustments in the programme, following a transition period, while the sensorial approach is very useful in the designing phase. The 3 more common learning styles are:

- Visual
- Auditory
- Kinesthetics

Some students can have a combination of the four, others have a prevalent one, either way, knowing the students will easily lead us to find out the best strategies for any specific class, bearing in mind that different way to present the learning materials is always helpful.

In Europe, the words used is Special Educational Needs and includes three subcategories: disability, specific developmental disorders, and socioeconomic, linguistic, cultural disadvantage. The specific developmental disorders include Learning Disabilities (LD), language deficits, non-verbal skills deficits, motor coordination deficits, attention deficits, and hyperactivity."

While describing the three main learning styles it appears clear how some impairments could result in a specific learning style, especially those related to neurodiversity, such autism and specific learning disorders like dyslexia. Generally speaking, students have their own learning style which does not depend from the type of disability. A deaf student, for example could rely on view to pay attention but is a "hands on learner", that is kinesthetics

As for tools and methodology the Internet is full of suggestions and there are experts from association to be consulted for specific cases and needs.

Visual learners are individuals who prefer to take in their information visually—be that with maps, graphs, diagrams, charts, and others. The visual types can use images and photos to better memorize but their learning is more linked to patterns and shapes. They need to see the different

relationship and connections between data and facts. Students with dyslexia and some autistic students can benefit from such a visual way to display information, as well as students from other countries that do not speak well the language of the Country.

Visual learners needs to read or have a visual picture of the topic treated, **useful tools** are:

Speech recognition (speech to text -app), Note recognition (digital pens) can allow individuals to upload handwritten notes to a computer. Apps to create maps and flowchart Apps helping to organize, plan and schedule using voice input (for ADHD) and images as output

For visually impaired people, speech to text apps can be paired with **magnifying text tools**.

Some learning methodologies that can be of help for visual learners are :digital storytelling: storytelling using multimedia software/presentations or story creation websites. By actively engaging in digital storytelling and providing visual support, students have the advantage of creating through their own words, drawings,and photographs. This strategy can be used for assignments and essays too.

Auditory learners are individuals who learn better when they take in information in auditory form when it is heard or spoken. It is not simply a matter of hearing as they learn better when a topic is discussed, i.e through the dialogue with teachers and other students. They think better when speaking than in advance. For them, discussion and the recording of lessons or the availability of audiobooks is a very good solution, along with a text to speech apps for handouts and printed material. It is evident how visually impaired people and people with cognitive disability could also benefit from any provision implying hearing and repeating, together with foreign students.

Auditory learners-Tools

Screen readers are most used by blind people but PC and Mac have accessibility features that can help everybody Also, certain types of pens will playback audio of text listened to in a lecture.

If the required text is unavailable as e-text (example: a course reader assembled by an instructor), one must create e- text from printed material using a scanner and OCR (optical character recognition)

software. The amount of editing required to make the resulting e-text document useable varies greatly, depending on the print quality of the original material and the student's ability to tolerate misrecognized text.

There are also apps helping to manage timing and scheduling via vocal input, that can be of help for auditory learners.

Tools can be of help but they cannot replace a comprehensive inclusive learning strategy encompassing different learning styles. Here below there is a list of examples of activities/methodologies suitable for auditory learners:

Tutoring or peer tutoring

The student is paired with another student (peer) or with an older student or newly graduated one to perform some of the activities, especially repeating and discussing the topics learnt.

Debate and discussion

Flipped classroom (the students examine the learning material before the lesson, so that they already have an insight and can balance the time and effort according to their needs, in classroom there are practical exercise and/or discussion so that the teacher can review and deepen what is needed)

Cooperative learning

Kinesthetics learners are individuals who prefer to learn by doing. They enjoy hands-on experience. They are usually more in touch with reality and more connected to it, which is why they require using tactile experience to understand something better.

The best way to present new information to a kinesthetics learner is through personal experience, practice, examples, or simulations. Moving requires focus but could be suitable for some ADHD students.

Kinesthetics Learners-Tools, are those tools that stimulate practical work, the main source of learning for Kinesthetics students, for example: 3D Printer for fast prototyping and, in general, laboratories equipped for modelling and design.

The learning methodologies directly involving practical learning are based on simulation and large and structured use of case studies and practical examples for theoretical courses and modelling, drawing and prototyping for more output oriented courses.

Question-based approach **to identify challenges and opportunities**

Designing a curriculum, and above all tuning it up, running it and transforming it into true learning is not a static process. Recipes, tips and ready to made solutions cannot be effective in such a multifaceted context that requires flexibility.
Therefore, when approaching curriculum design a teacher/trainer should reply to the following questions not as if they were a check list considering them a stimulus, a trigger for others, and better to arise.
Please note that some of those questions, divided into macro-areas, require talks and information from the enrolment office and inclusion office, others can be listed but will receive a precise and detailed reply only after the course starts and co-design activities have been run.

Understanding Students' Learning Needs & Styles

- ***a.*** What are the dominant and diverse learning styles among my students (visual, auditory, kinesthetics, reading/writing, etc.)?
- ***b.*** Are there students with neurodivergent profiles (e.g., ADHD, autism, dyslexia) whose needs should be addressed through differentiated instruction?
- ***c.*** How can I present art concepts using multiple modes of learning to ensure comprehension and engagement across all styles?
- ***d.*** Do I provide opportunities for both individual and group work to accommodate introverted and extroverted learners?

e. What kind of assessments can I offer that allow students to demonstrate their learning in varied ways (e.g., portfolios, presentations, written reflection, performance)?

Accommodating Different Abilities & Access Needs

- What physical, cognitive, or emotional disabilities might students have, and what accommodations are necessary for full participation?
- Are all studio spaces, materials, and tools physically accessible to students with mobility challenges?
- Do I use inclusive language and accessible resources in my teaching materials (e.g., captions on videos, screen-reader-friendly PDFs)?
- How do I engage with support staff (e.g., special education teachers, counsellors) to align the curriculum with students' IEPs or 504 plans?
- What strategies do I have in place for managing sensory sensitivities or attention challenges in a creative?

Considering Gender Identity & Expression

- Is my curriculum free of gender stereotypes in terms of roles, media, and themes?
- Am I using inclusive language when addressing or referring to students (e.g., pronouns, titles, names)?
- Do I provide representation of artists of diverse gender identities and expressions, including transgender and nonbinary artists?
- Are classroom dynamics monitored to ensure gender equity in participation, leadership, and critique opportunities?
- How do I create a safe and affirming space for students of all gender identities to express themselves artistically?

Respecting Cultural Backgrounds & Beliefs

- Does the curriculum reflect a wide range of cultural art forms, traditions, and perspectives from around the world?

- Am I avoiding cultural appropriation by teaching cultural context, authorship, and meaning of the works studied or created?
- Do I allow students to explore and express their cultural identities in their own art projects?
- How can I be sensitive to religious or spiritual beliefs that might influence a student's engagement with certain content, materials, or practices?
- Are there any holidays, fasting periods, or observances that might affect student participation, and how can I be flexible around them?

Encouraging Student Voice & Feedback

- Do I invite student input when designing project themes or choosing artists to study?
- How do I ensure that every student feels heard and valued in class discussions and critiques?
- What mechanisms are in place for students to share concerns or feedback about the inclusivity of the curriculum or classroom culture?

Reflecting on Bias & Representation

- Whose voices, histories, and practices are centered in my curriculum—and whose are missing?
- Am I challenging Eurocentric or colonial narratives in the history of art education?
- Do I regularly evaluate and update the curriculum to reflect contemporary issues and diverse lived experiences?
- Have I considered intersectionality (the overlap of race, gender, disability, etc.) when choosing artists, themes, and critiques?

Planning for Equity & Growth

- How do I scaffold the curriculum to ensure that all students, regardless of background or prior experience, can succeed and grow?
- Am I providing equitable access to high-quality materials and tools for all students?
- What professional development do I need to better support diversity, equity, and inclusion in my teaching practice?

III) DESIG*ness Project

1. Objectives

The main objective of DESIG*ness is to create the conditions for a radical transformation of Higher Education Systems. Reaching long-lasting cultural transformation through Design, promoting inclusiveness in Higher Education Systems, integrating and establishing new learning products on Design Inclusiveness in Art and Design Academies programs, the ambition of this project is to lay the foundations for a network of HED institutions committed in practice-based research on Design Inclusiveness. The greatest ambition of this project resides in changing the mindset of the professionals of the future, towards design practices that will be based and developed on new methodologies and strategies.

In particular, DESIG*ness project trains teaching staff and students to promote inclusion and transformation in European Higher Education by creating a transnational teacher training program and guidelines on Design Inclusiveness in Art & Design Academies. Through innovative teaching formats and joint assessment methods, DESIG*ness activates training strategies to engage with design for disability, involving stakeholders with expertise in policies and advocacy of inclusion and disabilities to develop its strategies.

2. Teachers' Training Course

The training programme addressed to teachers in art and design academies was conceived with the aim of fostering greater awareness and operational capacity in relation to inclusion, accessibility, and co-design. It is not intended as a technical update or an introduction to new tools, but as a transformative opportunity—a space for rethinking one's role as educator, designer, and agent of change. The course supports participants in gradually re-examining their own teaching practices and design culture, while offering strategies to integrate inclusive perspectives into educational processes, content, and environments.

Rather than following a rigid format, the programme unfolds through a progressive sequence of learning experiences that encourage reflection, exchange, and experimentation. Participants are guided in exploring key concepts related to human diversity, accessibility, and the Design for All approach; they are invited to critically analyze current practices within their institutions and to identify possible barriers—both visible and systemic—that affect access, participation, or representation. Along the way, they are encouraged to imagine and prototype new didactic actions that could promote inclusion in real teaching contexts.

The course is designed to be delivered primarily online and synchronously, in order to ensure wide accessibility and transnational participation. However, in-person or hybrid formats are also foreseen when feasible. Sessions combine theoretical input with collaborative activities, small group work, and peer dialogue. The educational methodology is based on active learning principles, with a strong emphasis on experience sharing, contextual observation, and applied critical thinking. Simulations, storytelling, case analysis and self-assessment tools are used to support learning in a non-linear and inclusive way.

Instead of offering predefined models or standardised lesson plans, the training promotes an open and reflective posture. Educators are not positioned as implementers of solutions, but as co-creators of inclusive educational ecosystems. The final phase of the programme invites each participant to develop a concrete project proposal to be implemented—or tested—within their own academic context. This proposal functions both as a learning outcome and as a potential seed for broader institutional transformation.

Ultimately, the course aims to generate a shift: from inclusion as a theoretical concern to inclusion as a daily design responsibility. It prepares educators to navigate complexity, embrace uncertainty, and activate new forms of engagement that benefit all learners—not through accommodation, but through systemic, anticipatory, and creative design thinking.

3. Summer Schools Program 2024

A Summer School Program in 2024 was structured into intensive workshops (8 hours per day, 5 days a week), organized in Milan, Riga and Vilnius.

The workshops have seen the participation of:

- 3 leading professors + 11 tutors + 11 professors in mobility across the 3 Institutions;
- 67 students' applications;
- 31 students from 7 countries and 3 continents, 11 course of studies, 3 special needs
- 3 local associations / communities of people with disabilities and/or special needs in 3 different cities

The Summer School Programme in Milan has been a very intense and powerful experience, where students worked in connection with deaf people. Participants adopted a co-design approach based on the awareness of the power of the proximity in between our bodies, our needs, our desires and emotions. A design approach that empowers every student, with different abilities and disabilities to co-design his learning environment. 'Play with Me' aimed at using the creation of non-verbal relationships to design collective, relational objects.

The Summer School Programme in Riga was particularly focused on human contact, working with a community of blind and visually impaired people. 'Seeing Beyond Sight' (structured into 3 workshops) aimed to use the different approaches and contexts of co-creating with the audience, experiencing different ways of perceiving and transmitting information on the artistic process.

The Summer School Programme in Vilnius, 'Try Walking in My Shoes, You Stumble in My Footsteps' was an inter-diversity, multidisciplinary and multicultural workshop aimed to raise awareness on the individuals' needs, while mapping, documenting and analysing the environment of a historical context (Trakai Castle in Lithuania). Another experience of co-design practices where collaboration and empathy defined the activities experimented by the participants.

Analysis of feedback received and resulting outcomes

The evaluation of the Summer Schools and its outcomes was based on a questionnaire among design and art students and semi-structured interviews with blind and partially sighted participants

from workshops in Riga. Several interviewees acknowledged that their participation in this project was different from their previous experiences, where their inclusion had been formal. They confirmed that the art and design students have shown genuine care and empathy throughout the workshop, both in walking towards and accompanying them, during workshops, meals and informal activities.
It was mentioned that perhaps the theoretical part could be shorter, leaving more time for practical work. One of the participants (with partial visual impairment) said that the intensity of the activities could be greater. It was confirmed that the content of the workshops was engaging and that they had acquired new knowledge. The group work was appreciated, but it was not new as it had been experienced before in the learning process.
After analysing the feedback, organizers and workshop leaders got the impression that all participants felt fully involved in the process with interest and dedication. Students complained about the lack of time, but despite that, they presented great conceptual solutions. The ideas and thoughts of the participants were original and outstanding and can be really useful for the future. Working interdisciplinary and internationally greatly broadens the horizons of all involved. Workshop topics and types of problems being solved were new experiences for all students. The experience stimulated personal growth, empathy, and inspiration to further explore inclusive design. It established meaningful cooperation and creative involvement.

Transferable and replicable elements for everyday teaching

Thanks to the DESIG*ness project, new knowledge and skills were acquired in structuring content and methodology, as well as in the accessibility of the study environment and resources, and in working with students with disabilities (vision, hearing and movement disorders, etc.).
The relevant study topics and practical research tasks are structured in three different directions:

1. Design tasks are solved with maximum focus on the needs, expectations and opportunities of a specific target group, in order to make one of their life processes more convenient, understandable and usable. Prototypes are tested together with the target group; shortcomings are identified and improvements are made.

2. Design tasks are solved in a co-creation process with the target audience, involving them in generating ideas, searching for solutions and testing prototypes.
3. Design tasks are identified together with students who have one of the types of disability, assuming that they are both experts based on personal experience and best familiar with the field of problems they encounter in everyday life. Thus, the study environment and the study topic are audited by the student himself. He/she becomes a participant in the creation of study content within the framework of a given topic.

Within the framework of the study process, there is an opportunity to implement works in various formats, which are respectively measurable in different time frames:

1. There is an opportunity to address a given topic within one study semester (corresponding to a three-month period), which is called coursework, which means that studies take place within one study subject or one study module.
2. A more extensive study and research process can be implemented within the framework of a qualification or so-called diploma thesis. In a bachelor's study program, one study year or two study semesters can be devoted to this, while in a master's study program, one and a half years or three study semesters are allocated for this work.
3. Short-term and flexible content (sometimes different from the direct study process) can be implemented during intensive study courses, creative workshops or summer schools. This allows students and teaching staff to look at a specific problem in the shortest possible time and in a concentrated way. The result does not always have to be work with an implementable result, it can be speculations, impulses or work tasks for further in-depth creative work.

Various forms of cooperation are extremely important for social innovations. They can be implemented in specific co-creation work with the public sector (ministries, state institutions, municipalities), various education and culture institutions (universities, schools, museums, theatres, etc.), non-governmental organizations (associations of disabled people). Contemporary creative education is unthinkable without interdisciplinarity in creating new solutions and innovations, therefore, in each socially oriented study task, it is important to make a balanced alliance between the parties involved, the time frame, form of cooperation, goal, methods, achievable results and impact on social well-being.

A clear institutional communication is essential for meaningful experience and know-how local and international sharing process. Pre-agreement and common understanding on project goals can strengthen the final result. Professors have made their own contribution, which will be applied when modifying the study programs in future applying such suggestions and methods as:

1. Scenario development for the target audience;
2. Presentation simulations and feedback cycles;
3. Shared reflection and visual storytelling techniques;
4. Presentation and proposal sets;
5. Evaluation criteria for self-assessment;
6. Developed instructions with adaptive formats.

Over time, students will gain more confidence in expressing and defending their projects visually and verbally. Inclusive practices, such as multimodal presentation (verbal, visual, spatial), will help to broaden participation. More practical tasks related to empathy and inclusive thinking would be needed for students.

4. Best Practices

The following insights stem from the joint analysis of twenty case studies collected from faculty members at the three partner universities of the DESIG*ness project: NABA (Milan), LMA (Riga), and VDA (Vilnius). Each case documented, through different formats and narratives, educational experiences dealing with inclusion, accessibility, participatory design, and social innovation in higher education. Some of them were already developed before 2023, other ones, on the contrary, were possible thanks to the process of change activated by DESIG*ness activities within the partners Academies and thanks to the experience of the Teachers Training, but, above all, of the Summer Schools Program. That was the first real occasion to test the possible change of mindset of the students and professors towards a better, more inclusive world, through a better oriented design practice.

Based on these materials – integrated with a comparative evaluation on thirteen criteria – it was possible to identify common patterns, particularly meaningful practices, and, most importantly, a series of operational recommendations that can be transferred to other contexts.

The first key finding concerns the diversity of the experiences: from co-design with students with special needs, to disability simulations as empathy-building exercises; from the use of accessible digital tools in workshops, to the design of multisensory experiences for museums and/or urban spaces. What unites the most effective practices is not a fixed model or a repeatable formula, but the ability to activate transformative educational environments where diversity becomes both the raw material and the generative force of design. The most appreciated activities by students were those that enabled authentic interactions, experiential learning, and exploration of design complexity through human and participatory dimensions.

Another critical issue that emerged from the case studies is the centrality of time. Many experiences, although highly promising, suffered from insufficient duration or poor distribution of the different phases of work. This highlighted the importance of carefully defining timelines in educational modules that aim to incorporate co-design, inclusive experimentation, or engagement with external communities. In several cases, the absence of structured feedback and collective evaluation limited the educational potential of the activities. In contrast, the quality of feedback sessions, critical discussions, and shared documentation proved to be among the most appreciated and valuable aspects for future replicability.

From a long-term perspective, many of the analysed experiences showed that they could be progressively integrated into academic curricula – not as isolated events or extracurricular workshops, but as structuring components of formal education. In this sense, the adoption of design briefs rooted in real-life needs, the involvement of external stakeholders, the embrace of interdisciplinarity, and the use of accessible languages now stand as concrete practices that can be adapted to various institutional and national settings.

To enable such integration, universities must establish enabling conditions: the availability of accessible material and digital resources, continuous training for teachers on inclusive design, the presence of dedicated support figures for students with disabilities, and the infrastructure needed to support co-design processes and horizontal collaboration. This also requires a strong cultural and organizational commitment that recognizes inclusion not as a legal obligation, but as a core design, ethical, and professional competence.

The good practices collected in this project show that all of this is achievable, even in a short time, as long as change is conceived not as an external adaptation, but as an internal transformation of the educational project. Designing inclusive learning activities does not simply mean adding content; it means rethinking teaching, methods, tools, and relationships in a systemic way. This is the deepest contribution these experiences can offer to other universities: the possibility to reactivate design as a tool for equity, exploration, and the collective construction of knowledge.

Operational recommendations for replicability and curricular integration

1) **Design empathy through simulation**

In several case studies (NABA, VDA, LMA), the use of simulations – such as moving in a wheelchair, wearing blindfolds or gloves limiting movement – had a strong and immediate educational impact. It is recommended to integrate these exercises into course modules to foster deep reflections on different capabilities, limitations, and ways of functioning.

2) **Multisensoriality as an Inclusive Language**

Activating multiple sensory channels – touch, sound, smell, movement – was shown to enhance accessibility and inspire new design ideas. Incorporating such practices in design studios can enrich both narrative and inclusive potential.

3) **Systematic use of accessible digital tools**

Some educators integrated WCAG guidelines and collaborative tools like Figma, Canva, and Google Suite, demonstrating that digital accessibility should be part of the core design skillset. Widespread training in accessible digital tools is strongly recommended.

4) **Real, not Simulated, Co-Design**

The direct involvement of students with disabilities or real users generated authentic, contextualised design processes. Co-design should not be a simulation, but a practice rooted in active listening, reciprocity, and progressive experimentation.

5) **Structured feedback and open critique**

Several case studies highlighted the lack of time for feedback. Structured time for critical discussion, self-evaluation, and outcome reflection must be guaranteed. For students with visual impairments, open verbal feedback is not only pedagogically effective but a fundamental right.

6) **Accessibility of spaces and materials**

Certain cases emphasized the importance of accessible environments, appropriate materials, and the use of assistive devices and Tiflo-pedagogical tools. Universities should provide adequate and even temporary resources to support real participation of students with disabilities.

7) **Progressive curricular integration**

The most impactful experiences were those embedded within mid- or long-term academic paths (e.g. thesis work, advanced modules, entire courses). Flexible curricular spaces for inclusive experimentation should be planned, while short-term actions (e.g. workshops) can act as catalysts for structural change.

5. Communication and Dissemination

These guidelines reflect the open, inclusive, and collaborative approach of the DESIG*ness project. They are designed to support both the training activities and the transparent, accessible dissemination of project goals and outcomes to a wide audience.

The guidelines aim to:

- Support Training: Enhancing the visibility and impact of training, research, and co-design activities.
- Promote Understanding: Making the project's values, processes, and results accessible, clear, and meaningful for all stakeholders.

Communication Channels and Content

The project adopted a streamlined channel strategy. Two primary platforms were established for DESIG*ness-wide communication: the project website and YouTube channel. All additional outreach was carried out via the social media and newsletters of individual partner organisations, including Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and email campaigns. Communication content was structured around two main categories:

- Training Content (to be published): this includes outputs from research and data collection, aimed at raising awareness and fostering a culture of accessibility.
- Communication Content (to be documented): this highlights human involvement in training, co-design, and prototyping activities. Photos and videos are used to capture stories, emotions, and growth, reinforcing the people-centred nature of the project.

Visual Identity and Website

The project's visual identity—developed by NABA with consultancy from BAM! Strategie Culturali —is characterized by simplicity and clarity. A vibrant green was chosen for its strong contrast with black and its energetic presence. The website, designed by VDA with input from BAM!, adopts this visual identity. It features an intuitive and accessible interface, tailored to accommodate diverse users. A communication roadmap further enhances transparency, illustrating the project's milestones and facilitating comprehension of its development and objectives.

Tone of Voice

DESIG*ness maintains a unified voice across all communications, while adapting its tone to suit different platforms and audiences: formal and informative on the website and in newsletters; informal and dynamic on social media. This flexible approach ensures that communication resonates with both professionals and the broader public, while remaining consistent with the project's identity.

Monitoring and Evaluation

The effectiveness of DESIG*ness communication is assessed through three key indicators:

- Awareness: Reach and visibility, measured through website traffic, social media impressions, and newsletter performance.
- Engagement: Interaction levels, such as likes, shares, comments, and time spent on content.
- Conversion: Tangible outcomes, including event registrations and form submissions.

IV) Toolkits for Inclusive Co-Design

1. Design Toolkit as an operational tool to support Co-Design.

What is a toolkit?

What is this toolkit for?

Annex A offers an attempt to convey the project experience from the perspective of those who lived it—those who spent thirty-six months within a Cooperation Partnership.

It is an insider's account.

Furthermore, it is a visual representation structured to be inclusive and to reach a broader audience, starting from Art and Design Academies, part of the European Higher Education System (but with the possibility to reach out to other academic realities), in the intent of

building a DESIG*ness legacy that necessarily will need more institutions, associations and academic partners to structure a radical change into the Higher Education system, to rethink the ways we teach and learn design, therefore the way we will design our world in the future.
It is not a manifesto, it is on the contrary a narration built in order to frequently put the protagonists in crisis. For this reason, the narration presents an external voice, intentionally designed to question the assumptions and the ways of the project.
DESIG*ness itself is a toolkit.
During the months of implementation of the project, we realized that it is not really possible to provide objective and irrefutable instructions. The toolkit becomes the storytelling of the experience, in addition to a necessary list of doubts, questions and possible variations that arose during the project.
Are you ready to be the next partner into the next phase of DESIG*ness project?

2. Practical instructions and suggestions for organizing and facilitating Co-Design sessions.

The Co-Designing process requires additional resource investments, regardless of the form (study course, diploma work or summer school) project is being implemented and whether it is in the form of a single university or inter-university, or in the form of inter-institutional cooperation, and if it has an international dimension, the coordination process is still an additional duty to the involved academic staff and/or administration. This is especially true for cooperation with persons with otherness, regardless of their status in the academic environment, whether they are students or lecturers, or partners, as different target audiences and/ or different parties use different contexts and approaches. At the same time, attention should be paid to the fact that interdisciplinary cooperation cannot be accidental only on the principles of empathic and social activism or charity-based parties, which is directly related to the design, art and other cultural areas, and must become innovative forms of cognitive practises and possible employment. The experience gained by all the parties involved should become a tool in the labour market and in social integration.

The different stages of the co-designing process are:

1. Pre -preparation - definition and invitation of the parties involved, obtaining their consent and preparation of documentation;
2. Definition of interdisciplinary and integrated co-designing - horizontal or vertical, liability distribution;
3. Co-creation environment, information and provision of wellbeing for all participants, regardless of their state of health or professional status: use appropriate techniques and technologies, computer-aided design and hand sketches to better perceive the task and methods;
4. Planning of cooperation content, forms and methods for the entire co-production process;
5. Attraction of appropriate academic staff and/ or facilitators;
6. Pre-introduction of the academic staff to content and, if necessary, training;
7. Pre-introduction of the student audience to the presence of persons with otherness. It would be crucial to familiarize everyone with the task in advance, give them some time to generate ideas;
8. Clarified time schedule, with 40-50 minutes of working sessions, enough time for recreation, socialisation and meals;
9. Clear description of content in different media and channels to facilitate information circulation and equal understanding of all parties involved. Visual communication should be integrated early as an inclusion tool, not just as a presentation tool;
10. Necessity to distribute the work equally taking into account everyone's abilities. A consistent structure, reflection checkpoints and mixed media experimentation help to create a common design in long-term courses.

The usual challenge for such inclusive projects is how cooperation could benefit from otherness, how the functional or mental impairments become special in addition to their abilities. At the same time, the attitude of the participants must be humanly nice and inclusive in order not to cause the side effect of exclusivity.

Time as the main and most important component for both process planning and implementation. It is advisable to calculate the time coefficient in cooperation with people with various disabilities, as well as obtaining information from specialists.
There can be more of a recommendation-based approach, different countries, different mentalities, different reactions to the same subject, even different presentation speeds, while maintaining maximum student concentration. It is necessary to follow local instructions, partially using what is best and easily adaptable from partners.

3. How to do it yourself

Funding

Begin by thoroughly researching relevant funding opportunities, such as Erasmus+ (KA2 Cooperation Partnerships), Creative Europe, Horizon Europe, or national/local inclusion and education grants (e.g., National Disability Authorities or Arts Councils). Clearly highlight your project's alignment with their strategic priorities—such as innovation in inclusive education or enhancement of design curricula. For example, Erasmus+ funded DESIG*ness due to its innovative approach in integrating accessibility into higher education curricula. Consider engaging grant experts to refine your application and increase its competitiveness.

Timing

Construct a precise project timeline. Clearly define each stage: initial stakeholder consultations, partner selection, curriculum co-creation, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and dissemination. For example, DESIG*ness allocated approximately six months to initial stakeholder workshops and partner onboarding. Schedule periodic evaluation points (e.g., quarterly reviews) to allow for necessary adaptations and improvements. Including buffer periods for unforeseen delays ensures smooth progress.

Choice of the partners

Choosing the right partners is crucial. Effective partnerships significantly enhance your project's success, bringing valuable expertise, resources, and credibility. Good partners ensure smoother collaboration, deeper impact, and sustained innovation.
Below, we propose a classification into three main — though not exclusive — stakeholder groups, categorized according to their project-related value.

Schools / Art Academies: Availability

Identify and approach art academies or schools that already prioritize or express genuine interest in inclusive and accessible education. Verify their administrative commitment, resource allocation, and calendar availability to ensure a smooth integration process. Initiate early dialogues with key decision-makers to secure institutional buy-in.

Partners: Expertise, Openness

Carefully select partners based on their proven expertise in inclusive design, accessibility, educational innovation, and European project management. Assess their openness through prior collaboration experiences, readiness for knowledge exchange, and adaptability to new educational frameworks. Effective partners should be proactive, cooperative, and communicative.
Associations: Direct Experience
Partner with associations actively engaged in disability advocacy, accessibility enhancement, or inclusion practices. These organizations should possess practical, hands-on experience, providing valuable insights, authentic case studies, and real-world perspectives. Leverage their networks and knowledge to validate and enhance the practicality, relevance, and effectiveness of your educational programs.

Communication

Establish clear, accessible, and inclusive communication practices from the outset. Use collaborative tools like Google Workspace, Slack, and Zoom—ensuring they meet accessibility standards (e.g. screen-reader compatibility, captions).

Adopt a tone that reflects the project's values:

- Inclusive: Use gender-neutral, clear, and respectful language.
- Collaborative: Prioritize shared ownership and openness.
- Professional yet empathetic: Be concise, considerate, and culturally sensitive.

Agree on communication norms early and revisit them regularly to ensure they support smooth and respectful collaboration.

Conclusion | The Philosophy of Limits in Inclusive Design: A Path Towards Authentic Harmony

The very essence of inclusive design, with its noble aspiration to dismantle barriers and champion equality, finds itself grappling with a profound paradox. What becomes unmistakably clear from both specialized literature and practical implementation is that any singular definition of inclusive design inherently risks being non-inclusive. To indiscriminately group highly diverse categories, despite the best intentions, often leads to a neutralization of the very diversities one aims to celebrate. This inherent tension between the desire for universality and the imperative to respect profound individuality constitutes the core of our contemporary challenge.

The prevailing critique consistently highlights a fundamental conflict between the individual's "moral autonomism and self-legitimation" and the indispensable need to provide effective support for disabilities. The urgent imperative, particularly within educational contexts but extending far beyond, is to shift the focus from a mere cataloging of barriers towards the development of affirmative solutions that actively promote the self-determination and inherent dignity of every single person. This isn't

merely about obstacle removal; it's about architecting environments that empower individual capabilities and choices, recognizing the full, multifaceted humanity of each being.

Overcoming Contextual and Conceptual Obstacles in Design Praxis

The scholarly discourse largely converges on identifying several critical impediments to the widespread adoption of genuinely inclusive design. Prominent among these are the prevailing market logics, which frequently fail to adequately account for inclusive needs, and the intrinsic dynamics within design research and development, often constrained by rigid project briefs and limited budgets. These structural factors significantly hinder the materialization of truly inclusive projects. In this regard, a decisive intervention on the broader context is not just advisable but essential; one that transcends the simple application of principles and moves towards dismantling the very preconceived notions of "ability" or "human dignity" themselves. This necessitates a radical interrogation of the categories that, even with the most benevolent intentions, can perpetuate a binary vision separating the "normal" from the "diverse."

The principal issue with inclusive design, as it is often currently articulated in literature, is that in its zealous pursuit to include those traditionally excluded, it paradoxically tends to marginalize those who were previously "normally" included. This phenomenon, which I've termed the "paradox of inclusivity," is a recurrent problem inherent in moral correctives applied across various domains. Empirical studies, particularly in socio-behavioral design research, demonstrate that when modifications are introduced to accommodate previously excluded groups, "traditional" participants sometimes disengage from the context. This isn't merely a social observation but a critical design challenge: how do we re-engineer systemic participation without inadvertently creating new forms of alienation?

The only viable pathway to navigate this paradox, as proposed by certain meta-ethical theories, involves adopting an "egalitarian" approach. This stance defends the proposition that the inclusion of the previously marginalized, even at the temporary "cost" of adjustment or re-calibration for those already included, constitutes a necessary corrective before achieving de facto equality. "Gender quotas" in various professional fields serve as a potent illustration: a temporary and "discriminatory" measure, understood in a positive, affirmative sense, aimed at rebalancing a historically skewed system. From this perspective, inclusive design is not an end in itself, but a crucial means to foster a

more equitable society, where differences are no longer vectors of exclusion. It is a transitional phase, a deliberate ethical intervention aimed at systemic re-calibration.

Beyond Simulative Empathy: The Ecological Potential of Design

The Strategic Inclusive Design for Education (SIDe) model, while aspiring to facilitate inclusion within educational contexts, still exhibits significant limitations in its practical applications, and supportive empirical studies remain sparse. While "empathetic modeling" undeniably aids the cognitive and affective development of novice designers, thereby fostering inclusive design education, it fundamentally remains a "simulated" mechanism. It operates under the often-unspoken assumption that one form of life (A) can fully and accurately comprehend another (B). This mode of appropriation of another's diversity, no matter how well-intentioned, represents perhaps the least inclusive aspect of current design practice. It generates a second, more profound paradox: inclusive design, in its very methodology, can be inherently exclusive when its understanding of "diversity" is mediated by an inauthentic, second-hand experience. The "design for" rather than "design with" paradigm perpetuates a subtle form of epistemic violence, where the subjective experience of the "other" is filtered through the designer's pre-conceived notions.

The only mechanism that currently appears genuinely functional, though certainly amenable to refinement, is one that allows design requirements to emerge directly from the involved subjects, under ecological conditions. This necessitates that the comprehension of individual needs must occur without the coercive imposition of pre-existing structures or categories that do not organically belong to them. It is paramount to evaluate differences in relation to the Theories of Mind (ToM) at play, recognizing that the perception and interpretation of the world vary profoundly across individuals. Only through an authentic, unmediated listening and the active participation of the intended beneficiaries can truly inclusive solutions be forged—solutions that are intrinsically shaped by their own lived experiences and perspectives. This is where design moves from being a top-down imposition to a bottom-up co-creation, a radical shift in methodological approach.

Towards a Three-Tiered Inclusive Design: The DARE Framework

In light of this, one of the most concrete proposals stemming from an extensive analysis of market literature suggests a layered approach to inclusive design, predicated on a decreasing gradient of discordance between the user and the designed object. This model articulates three progressive levels:

1. Providing Accessibility (Level 1): This constitutes the foundational layer, focused on the removal of physical, cognitive, or sensory barriers that impede the use of a product, service, or environment. The objective here is to ensure that anyone, irrespective of their specific abilities, can access and interact with the design. This involves rigorous adherence to established standards (e.g., WCAG for web content, ADA guidelines for physical spaces) and employing universal design principles at the most basic functional level. It's about fundamental reach.

2. Fostering Participation by Creating Equitable Experiences (Level 2): Moving beyond mere accessibility, this level aims to craft experiences that are not only usable but also meaningful and equally rewarding for all. The focus shifts from basic access to experiential quality. It entails designing so that every individual feels valued and engaged, actively participating in the experience rather than merely being granted entry. This requires a deeper understanding of diverse user journeys and emotional responses, moving beyond purely functional usability towards emotional and social resonance. The design must account for varied socio-cultural contexts and individual learning styles to ensure genuine parity of experience.

3. Facilitating Enhanced Success Through Flow Experiences (Level 3): This represents the highest echelon of inclusive design, where the design is not just accessible and equitable, but actively cultivates a state of "flow"—a profound sense of total immersion and intrinsic enjoyment in the activity. Here, the design is so seamlessly adapted to the user's needs and capacities that it promotes genuine excellence and an amplification of their potential. The experience transcends mere utility, transforming into a moment of authentic personal realization and flourishing. This level demands sophisticated cognitive ergonomics and an understanding of intrinsic motivation, aiming to create environments where individuals can perform at their peak and derive profound satisfaction from their interaction with the design.

To elucidate the complex cognitive evaluations and emotional responses that characterize each of these three levels, we introduce our DARE framework (Design, Appraisal, Response, Experience). This framework allows for a granular analysis of how the Design (the artifact, service, or environment itself) is Appraised (perceived and evaluated) by the user. This appraisal, in turn, generates specific Responses (behavioral, physiological, and emotional reactions) that culminate in an overall Experience. DARE provides a structured lens through which designers can systematically assess the impact of their choices across the entire user journey, from initial perception to ultimate fulfillment, ensuring that inclusivity is woven into every stage of engagement.

Ultimately, the profound insight that inclusive design functions optimally when it is not explicitly targeted at a specific need, but rather universally benefits anyone who uses it, represents its highest aspiration. When a design is so intrinsically well-conceived that it proves intuitive, functional, and aesthetically pleasing for a vast spectrum of individuals, without the need for specific labels or compensatory adaptations, it has achieved its most elevated form of inclusivity. It is in this radical fusion of universality and a profound respect for radical individualities that the future of inclusive design truly resides—a future where current limitations can transmute into fertile ground for genuinely design for all, transcending the very notion of "disability" as a category of exclusion.

The Paradox of Disability and the Imperative of Limits

The journey toward authentic harmony in inclusive design, as we've explored, is fraught with inherent tensions and paradoxes. Perhaps one of the most subtle yet pervasive challenges is what can be termed the paradox of disability: the risk that in striving to acknowledge and address historical and systemic exclusions, we inadvertently create a framework where difference is perpetually framed through the lens of deficit or disadvantage. This isn't to diminish the very real struggles and barriers faced by individuals with disabilities, but rather to highlight a crucial conceptual tightrope. While absolutely crucial for advocating for necessary support and accommodations, an overemphasis on "disability" as a primary, defining identifier can inadvertently reify the very categories we aim to transcend. It risks casting individuals in a perpetual role of "victim" or "other," where their identity becomes inextricably linked to a perceived lack rather than their full, multifaceted human potential. This dynamic, though often well-intentioned, can inadvertently hinder the move towards genuine

self-determination and empowerment, as the focus remains on what is missing rather than what can be.

This highlights the indispensable need for a thoughtful and balanced approach: recognizing and supporting genuine needs stemming from significant functional limitations, while simultaneously resisting the temptation to pathologize every deviation from a statistical norm. Without clear, albeit flexible, parameters for defining disability, we risk diluting the very concept of inclusive design into an unmanageable and ultimately ineffective endeavor. If every unique preference, every individual quirk, becomes grounds for special accommodation under the umbrella of "disability," the concept loses its specific meaning and its ability to target genuine systemic barriers. This erosion of shared understanding can lead to a state where "normal parameters of judgment"—essential for societal cohesion, shared understanding, and the development of universally applicable solutions—become fragmented beyond utility. The danger lies in a perpetual state of "othering," where the very idea of a common human experience, with its shared challenges and aspirations, is overshadowed by an infinite array of highly individualized demands, making truly universal and widely beneficial design an impossibility. The societal contract, in part, relies on shared frameworks and expectations; an unchecked expansion of the "disability" category risks undermining these foundational elements, not to exclude, but to ensure that genuine need is met effectively.

Diverse Educational Approaches to Universal Design

This critical balance is subtly reflected in the varying approaches to universal design championed by institutions like CAST in the United States, and the Universities of Birmingham and Newcastle in the United Kingdom. CAST's Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework exemplifies a proactive, strengths-based approach, meticulously designing learning experiences "to value strengths and eliminate barriers" so that "everyone deserves the opportunity to grow and prosper." This ethos leans heavily into the idea of systemic barrier removal and leveraging individual strengths, aligning with our third level of inclusive design—facilitating enhanced success through flow experiences—by aiming for optimal engagement and flourishing for a broad spectrum of learners. Their focus on designing for variability from the outset, rather than retrofitting, implicitly acknowledges the spectrum of human experience without necessarily categorizing every variation as a "disability" requiring a "victim"

narrative. It embodies the aspiration that design should be so intrinsically well-conceived that it proves intuitive and functional for a vast spectrum of individuals, transcending the need for specific labels. In contrast, the approaches at the University of Birmingham and the University of Newcastle, while also championing universal design principles, often appear to operate within a context that, perhaps due to different national legislative and social frameworks, maintains a more explicit distinction around "disability" and "neurodivergence" as distinct areas of focus within the broader inclusive design landscape. While their commitment to accessibility and equitable participation (Levels 1 and 2 of our DARE framework) is clear, the discourse, particularly in specific resource pages, sometimes retains a more clinical or categorical framing of difference. For instance, while inclusive, the discussion around "understanding neurodivergence" at Birmingham, or "effective practice" at Newcastle, may, to varying degrees, maintain a conceptual boundary between "typical" and "atypical" users, even as they advocate for universal solutions. This is not necessarily a flaw, but rather a reflection of different priorities or perhaps the practical realities of engaging with established legal and educational classifications. These approaches, while striving for inclusion, might inadvertently perpetuate the very "design for" rather than "design with" paradigm that risks epistemic violence, where the subjective experience of the "other" is filtered through predefined categories.

The ultimate aspiration of inclusive design, then, is not to erase all distinctions, but to render them irrelevant as vectors of exclusion. It's about cultivating environments where the need for "special" accommodations diminishes because the default design is inherently flexible, adaptable, and genuinely empowering for the broadest possible human diversity. This calls for an ongoing, nuanced dialogue about where to draw the lines—not to exclude, but to ensure that genuine need is met effectively, without inadvertently fostering a culture where a claim to difference, however minor, becomes a demand for limitless, individualized adaptation, thereby undermining the very possibility of universally beneficial design and shared societal norms. The true harmony lies in a design philosophy that both embraces individual uniqueness and simultaneously cultivates common ground, moving beyond the paradox of victimhood to celebrate a shared, multifaceted humanity.

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