STRATEGIC DESIGN RESEARCH JOURNAL

Integration of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) in Design Education in Poland

Marta Więckowska [a]* | Patrycja Rudnicka [b]

[a] Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Katowice, Faculty of Design, Katowice, Poland
[b] Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Katowice, Department of Theory and History of Art, Katowice, Poland
* Corresponding author: marta.wieckowska@aspkat.edu.pl

ABSTRACT

The paper presents the current picture of the introduction of EDI (Equality, Diversity, Inclusion) into design education curricula in Poland. We focused on design programs taught at eight public art universities. Desk research confirmed EDI-related topics in 51 modules taught on undergraduate first-cycle, postgraduate second-cycle, and unified master's long-cycle programs. Further interviews with educators allowed us to identify best practices, activities, and challenges in EDI education across various design disciplines. The findings reveal the specifics and outcomes of EDI in the Polish context. We outline a comprehensive overview of educational practices developed by teachers, revealing diverse, multi-level, and often innovative approaches to EDI-related education. It provides rich data and a detailed picture of the characteristics of Polish design education, which could serve as a foundation for developing more systematic national regulations. These regulations could promote the EDI approach more broadly within society and among institutions, enabling more effective collaboration with Academies.

Keywords: Design Education, Poland, Equality, Diversity, Inclusion

INTRODUCTION

Historical context

In Poland, the role of the contemporary designer has always been defined in the context of social responsibility. Despite the different ideological foundations of a socialist state in post-war Poland, the discussions on the role of designers accentuated their part in shaping the quality of life and its influence on society. In the works of Andrzej Pawłowski, one of the founders of design education in Poland in the 1960s and '70s, the profession was positioned on the border of art and technology, and was focused on creating a new value and orientation on social responsibility. He considered design a fundamentally social activity, which places a moral responsibility on the designer to act ethically and in the public interest (Pawłowski, 2001, p. 56). Reflecting this perspective, Pawłowski firmly believed that design should be taught exclusively within Academies of Fine Arts. He argued that the essence of art lies in its selflessness, and that its core attributes cannot be taught in a conventional sense but must be awakened and developed through an environment that supports artistic growth. Also, design education should balance manual and technical skills with a socially engaged mindset focused on real-world problem-solving, rather than simply producing aesthetically pleasing objects (Pawłowski, 2001).

This interconnection between ethical dimensions and socially responsible design was also visible in the works of Papanek (1984/2012), and is still present in designer debates (Cipolla & Bartholo, 2014; Cooper, 2005; Thorpe & Gamman, 2011). Also in Poland, this narration is continued, and design is perceived as a socially responsible profession. Inclusive designing is also mentioned as one of three pillars of the designers' role, next to sustainable and participatory designing. In a recent Polish research, which involved 51 interviews with designers, social responsibility was confirmed as important and introduced on a practical level, but also perceived as a "mission" or an internalized value. The participants also mentioned that it was an important element in design education (Rojek-Adamek, 2019).

Characteristics of Design Studies in Poland

Polish classification of fields and disciplines of science, which regulates HEIs, recognizes design education within the fine arts and art conservation disciplines. Therefore, the EDI (Equality, Diversity, Inclusion) content is not mentioned in the Polish Qualification Framework (PQF) (Integrated Qualifications System, 2015). Hence, the presence of EDI-related topics is the result of traditions in design education and the general understanding of the role of the designer rather than of legal requirements. Recently, it has also been supported by the impact of numerous EU-funded programs that have helped higher education institutions (HEIs) to integrate universal design principles into their educational frameworks. These programs focused on updating curricula, creating accessible facilities, organizing trainings for teachers, and establishing centers for knowledge development.

In the Polish system of public higher education institutions in design, three main directions of development can be identified. The first one is related to design studies with two main specializations: industrial design and visual communication. Such programs, taught mainly at art universities and originally grounded in the tradition of industrial design, have progressively shifted toward approaches that are more human-centered, service-oriented, and socially responsible. Over time, technical universities have also begun to offer similar programs, often with a stronger focus on engineering aspects and a practical, application-oriented educational profile. The second direction involves interior design, and in some cases, also specialization in furniture or stage design. These programs were usually developed within the faculties of architecture at technical universities. The third trajectory remains in the domain of arts, where traditional visual arts have gradually transitioned toward more utilitarian applications, giving rise to graphic design and new media design programs. Finally, several classical comprehensive universities also developed design-oriented programs within art education faculties. Design programs are also present in private higher education institutions.

Apart from the context of different directions in the development of design education, which are rooted in different traditions and methodological approaches, it is also important to distinguish the two profiles of education offered by Polish HEIs, defined by national regulations. Design study programs follow either a practical or a general academic profile. The practical profile focuses on developing students' practical skills and social competencies, with over half of the ECTS credits coming from hands-on courses, often led by professionals with industry experience. In comparison, the general academic profile is more research-oriented, with over half of the program based on courses connected to the academy's scientific research, aiming to provide students with in-depth theoretical knowledge.

Więckowska, M.; Rudnicka, P. (2024). Integration of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) in Design Education in Poland. *Strategic Design Research Journal. Volume 17,* number 01, January - April 2024. 44-57. DOI: 10.4013/sdrj.2024.171.04
.

Polish HEIs offer various levels of design education from first-cycle undergraduate (UG), second-cycle postgraduate (PG), and long-cycle five-year unified master's degree programs to a plethora of post-diploma studies and also doctoral-level schools. First-cycle programs are oriented toward building foundational knowledge and practical skills for employment or further study. Postgraduate and master's programs focus on deepening theoretical knowledge, developing advanced creative and research skills, and fostering independent, innovative thinking and interdisciplinary problem-solving.

Table 1 presents, based on ELA (2025), types of design studies offered on two types of Polish public higher education institutions – art academies and universities of technology.

Table 1: Characteristics of Design Studies in Poland

University type	General academic profile	Practical profile	UG	PG	Unified Master Studies	Full-time studies	Part-time studies
Artistic	18	1	8	9	2	18	0
Technical	2	7	6	3	0	9	0

Among public higher education institutions offering design studies, all eight art universities run programs with a general academic profile, where the EDI approach is more visible. Academic profile places greater emphasis on the humanities and the research process. In contrast, technical universities tend to offer programs with a practical profile, which translates into more engineering-oriented education and more practical classes.

1. OVERVIEW OF DATA GATHERED

1.1. Desk Research

The analysis of EDI in the context of design education in Poland focused on public art universities to identify how these principles are addressed in their curricula. Those HEIs offer programs in industrial design and visual communication within undergraduate first-cycle, postgraduate second-cycle, and unified master's long-cycle programs. The curricula of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, Jan Matejko Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków, Academy of Fine Arts in Gdańsk, Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Katowice, Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Fine Arts in Wrocław, Strzemiński Academy of Art Łódź, Magdalena Abakanowicz University of the Arts Poznań, and Academy of Art in Szczecin were researched. Based on the programs published on their websites, the courses' content was reviewed to identify EDI-related material.

Table 2: Distribution of Analyzed Modules Across Study Levels

Number of modules	UG modules	PG&UG modules	PG modules	Unified Master Studies
52	25	7	19	1

The collected dataset comprises 52 modules from eight universities: 25 delivered at the undergraduate level, 26 at the postgraduate level, 7 at the postgraduate and undergraduate level, and one representing an integrated five-year master's program. In Polish design education, it is common for design studios to offer joint courses for undergraduate and

Więckowska, M.; Rudnicka, P. (2024). Integration of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) in Design Education in Poland. *Strategic Design Research Journal. Volume 17,* number 01, January - April 2024. 44-57. DOI: 10.4013/sdrj.2024.171.04
.

postgraduate students. While learning objectives align, expected outcomes differ in complexity, depth, and project scope depending on the study level.

The collected modules were analyzed using a set of categories designed to build understanding of both the approach to EDI and the extent to which EDI themes are embedded in course content and learning outcomes, particularly in relation to module type and its role within the broader curriculum.

The collected information included:

- basic information: level of study, field of study, and module area;
- module characteristics: classification based on a prepared taxonomy of module types;
- module evaluation: the extent to which EDI content is integrated into the course using a 5-level EDI Integration Scale (see Table 5).

The research covered a wide range of design courses, highlighting the integration of EDI content across various domains. These include commercial design, design for public space, digital product design, fashion and textile design, furniture and product design, and interior design. Additionally, the study explored service design, social design, and visual communication, all of which incorporate elements of accessibility, inclusivity, and user-centered approaches. Furthermore, several modules integrate both theoretical and practical elements, such as ergonomics courses, which are evolving to include a stronger focus on physical accessibility. Other courses, like user testing, increasingly address cognitive and perceptual diversity among users.

Table 3: Module Types Across Study Levels

Type of module	UG	PG&UG	PG	Unified Master Studies	Total
Basics of design	4				4
Design studio			2	1	3
Design & diploma studio	16	5	14		35
Diploma studio		2	1		3
Supporting/ Supplementary subject	4				4
Theoretical subject	1		2		3

Note: An additional module type, Design Studio/Diploma Studio, was introduced to serve both undergraduate and postgraduate students within an integrated curriculum.

In terms of specific EDI dimensions covered within the modules:

- Diversity was addressed in 22 modules,
- Accessibility in 18 modules,
- Inclusion in 12 modules,
- Equality, however, was not explicitly covered in any of the analyzed modules.

This distribution suggests that while diversity and accessibility are relatively well-represented within the curricula, the concept of equality remains significantly underexplored or at least underreported in course descriptions and outcomes (see Table 4).

Więckowska, M.; Rudnicka, P. (2024). Integration of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) in Design Education in Poland. *Strategic Design Research Journal. Volume 17,* number 01, January - April 2024. 44-57. DOI: 10.4013/sdrj.2024.171.04
.

Table 4: Covered EDI Dimensions

Domain	Accessibility	Equality	Diversity	Inclusion
Number of modules	18	0	22	12

The extent to which EDI content was integrated into the course was evaluated using a 5-level assessment scale presented in Table 5.

Table 5 EDI Integration Scale

EDI Contents Level	Description
Level 1	The program covers selected EDI issues
Level 2	The program covers selected EDI issues, and some student work includes EDI issues
Level 3	The program covers selected EDI issues, and the majority of student work includes EDI issues
Level 4	The program covers selected EDI issues, the majority of student work includes EDI issues, and cooperation with an external partner in the area of EDI is carried out
Level 5	The program focuses entirely on EDI, and all student work carried out addresses EDI issues

Table 6 summarizes the evaluation results for all types of modules.

Table 6: Modules Assessment Using EDI Integration Scale

Type of subjects	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5
Basics of design		1	2		1
Design studio			3		
Design studio, Diploma studio		11	11	7	6
Diploma studio/Diploma seminar			2	1	
Supporting/ Supplementary subject	1	1	1		1
Theoretical subject		1	1		1
Total	1	14	20	8	9

EDI education often begins within basic design modules, four of which were identified and categorized at Levels 2 and 3 of the EDI Integration Scale. One of these modules was even rated at Level 5. The analysis reveals that EDI content is most prominently featured in practice-based modules, particularly design studios and diploma studios. The EDI integration levels for these modules range from Level 2 to Level 5. While some modules are fully dedicated to EDI topics, others only include EDI-related content through selected student projects.

Summarizing the evaluation of various types of modules:

- 20 modules were classified at Level 3, indicating that the module addresses selected EDI issues, and most student work reflects EDI concerns;
- 14 modules were categorized at Level 2, meaning that the module covers selected EDI issues, and some student work demonstrates EDI engagement;
- 8 modules were classified at Level 4, and 9 at Level 5, reflecting deep and comprehensive integration of EDI principles, with all or most student outcomes demonstrating advanced understanding and application;

Więckowska, M.; Rudnicka, P. (2024). Integration of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) in Design Education in Poland. *Strategic Design Research Journal. Volume 17,* number 01, January - April 2024. 44-57. DOI: 10.4013/sdrj.2024.171.04

- 1 module was classified at Level 1, where EDI issues are only marginally present.

This process facilitated the creation of a keyword map illustrating how EDI is integrated into design and design-related education (see Figure 1). The analysis of the themes covered in the modules reveals a broad and multidimensional range of issues related to the EDI approach in design education.

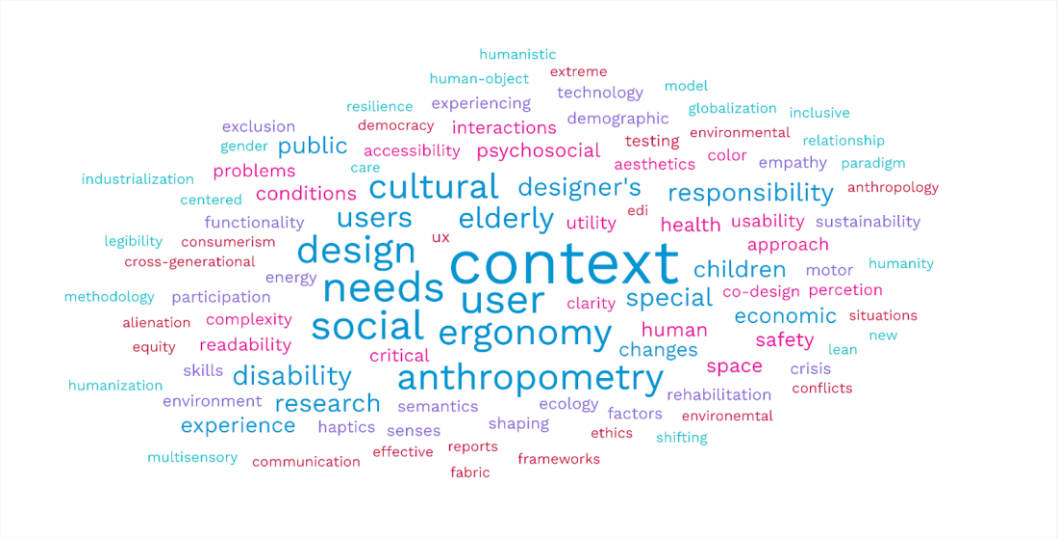

Figure 1. Keyword map of EDI content.

Among the most frequent topics are ergonomics and anthropometry, as well as the needs of users with special requirements, such as elderly people, children, and individuals with disabilities. The presence of inclusive design, universal design, and social responsibility in design is particularly prominent, along with topics related to co-design, participation, empathy, and social changes. Modules often combine practical and theoretical approaches, referring to concepts such as psychosocial factors in use, perceptual processes, legibility, user experience, usability testing, and human-object interaction. There are also references to public health, safety, and social sensitivity. Keywords related to ecology, energy crises, and designer responsibility highlight the growing importance of social and environmental factors in design education.

1.2. Interviews

Upon the completion of desk research, several academics from various art universities were selected for further interviews on how they deliver EDI-related content in order to determine best practices. The participants were identified as leaders, running modules evaluated on Level 3 or higher using the EDI Integration Scale.

The interviews were conducted with 12 academics, the gender ratio was six females and six males. They were holders of varied scientific titles: master's (1), PhD (4), postdoctoral degree (4), and professorship (3 people). All participants have extensive practical experience as designers, and they teach modules in product design, service design, social design, interior design, design for public space, game and VR design, as well as research and visual communication. All participants actively develop their EDI knowledge and skills by participating in various workshops, conferences, and training.

Participants were asked to define EDI, and as a result, some similarities and differences in their answers were identified. All participants recognized that EDI is a multifaceted concept intertwined with principles and practices of design. It was a common recognition that

Więckowska, M.; Rudnicka, P. (2024). Integration of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) in Design Education in Poland. *Strategic Design Research Journal. Volume 17,* number 01, January - April 2024. 44-57. DOI: 10.4013/sdrj.2024.171.04
.

diversity extends beyond traditional notions of disability, as well as understanding that the concept of the "average person" is limitative, which led to wide and contextualized definitions of special needs and exclusions (e.g., a person with a disability, a mother with a stroller, someone temporarily in an unusual situation). A fundamental agreement is that EDI involves acknowledging and designing for the population's diverse needs, moving away from a one-size-fits-all approach. Some participants noted that we need to extend the accessibility beyond ergonomics and consider equally important cognitive, sensory, and technological capabilities of users. Many see design through an EDI lens as a tool for positive social change and fulfilling the social role of the designer. EDI issues are integral to designers' jobs and shouldn't be separated from other design aspects. There was also a consensus on the importance of educating students about these principles.

There were differences in the explicit versus implicit integration of EDI into curriculum design; for some participants, EDI is something explicitly written into the syllabus. In contrast, others saw it as an obvious and integral part of the designers' job, therefore linked to values and taught more "naturally". Also, the scope of application varied, as some participants focused on specific design challenges (e.g., urban space, specific user groups), while others linked EDI to much broader societal and global issues (e.g., human rights, fair trade, ecology). EDI-related topics covered in these courses include designing for diverse and vulnerable groups, emphasizing social responsibility and impact, and introducing inclusive and universal design principles. Topics are selected by the teacher with a specific aim, sometimes based on an introductory lecture or a brief provided by a partner. While all students may work on the same topic, each develops an individual solution. These are practical projects with the potential for real-world implementation. The graduation project topic is chosen independently by each student and serves as evidence of their maturity and engagement with EDI-related themes.

Although EDI values may not always be explicitly stated in the syllabus, they naturally emerge as an integral part of the design activity. The primary approach is working within real-world contexts, engaging with actual places, users, and stakeholders. Teachers actively facilitate collaboration with external partners such as NGOs, local institutions, public centers, experts, and businesses. Activities include visits to users' environments and maintaining consistent contact with target individuals. This process ensures that design projects are grounded in the genuine needs of users rather than based on abstract assumptions.

Regarding teaching and assessment, tutors often act as facilitators, guiding students instead of suggesting solutions. The methodology encourages a shift from theory to practice through project-based learning (PBL), where students tackle particular problems with real-world implementation potential. Classes combine lectures, discussions, and both structured and ad hoc workshops, tailored to the group's preparedness and the nature of the assignment. Evaluation focuses not only on final outcomes but also on the student's process, depth of research, and learning journey. Assessment methods include teacher evaluations, user feedback, expert reviews, and, in some cases involving implementation, real-life validation. Key assessment criteria include the potential for implementation and social impact. Some tutors also incorporate student self-assessment and peer feedback to foster a culture of mutual support and continuous reflection.

To enhance and make the learning environment more inclusive and engaging, teachers use supportive tools, structured discussion formats, frameworks, collaborative design methods,

Więckowska, M.; Rudnicka, P. (2024). Integration of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) in Design Education in Poland. *Strategic Design Research Journal. Volume 17,* number 01, January - April 2024. 44-57. DOI: 10.4013/sdrj.2024.171.04
.

and digital platforms that enable asynchronous communication and cooperation (e.g., Google Classroom, Miro). It is especially important for effective collaboration within student teams, with tutors, and external partners, which are key elements of EDI-focused design education.

Another important group of teaching aids focuses on information gathering and analysis, supporting research, data structuring, contextual understanding, and problem identification. Students use tools such as empathy maps, personas, and value proposition canvases to interpret collected data, while frameworks like social service design and the intersectional approach guide contextual analysis. All of these tools aim to present the user's perspective clearly and meaningfully. They also help communicate research outcomes to the public and stakeholders, fostering more constructive feedback. Additionally, narrative tools such as storyboards, diagrams, recordings, and films are used to simulate user journeys and foster empathy. Through scenarios, modelling, and iterative testing, students not only validate the effectiveness of their designs but also gain deeper insight into inclusive, human-centered solutions.

Prototyping and simulation also play a vital role in EDI-focused design education, allowing students to test, refine, and better understand their concepts through experiential methods. These models are evaluated through usability testing and real-life verification in partner facilities or actual user environments. Sometimes, teachers apply tools that simulate various disabilities or user perspectives, such as accessibility standard calculators or vision impairment simulations.

The focus of each module was to develop the skills necessary to define and understand the various needs of individuals. Such "special needs" should be broadly and individually defined; their understanding should not be limited only to disability. It is interconnected with methods and tools of a user-centric approach, helping to overcome stigmas, stereotypes, and averages to move from "all individuals" to "unique individuals" perspective. It is interesting, however, as descriptions of users' needs varied in the interviews. For some participants, avoiding stigmatization was the most important, others emphasized the role of working directly with users, while for some, the broad concept of thinking of all possible individual needs was paramount.

Participants discussed different values, mindsets, approaches, and areas of understanding what they considered crucial for students to be educated in the context of EDI. Development of the moral values and soft-skill competencies associated with them, like empathy, openness, tolerance, and respect, as well as acceptance towards people with diverse needs, were highlighted. Other competences are observational skills, as well as flexibility and openness to challenge students' existing paradigms and blind spots. Communication and organizational competencies were also mentioned as necessary to conduct any project. Several participants highlighted the need for analytical skills and design methodologies to effectively identify problems, understand user needs, and develop solutions. The enlisted methods to achieve inclusive results were workshop exercises, design thinking-based approaches, desk research, and problem-solving.

Table 7 summarizes the key EDI-related approaches identified in the interviews that facilitate its integration into teaching.

Więckowska, M.; Rudnicka, P. (2024). Integration of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) in Design Education in Poland. *Strategic Design Research Journal*. *Volume 17*, number 01, January - April 2024. 44-57. DOI: 10.4013/sdrj.2024.171.04
.

Table 7 Key EDI Areas in Teaching

EDI Integration Area	Description
Curriculum	EDI integrated explicitly (syllabi) or implicitly (teaching values).
Teaching methods	Project-based learning, real-world briefs, facilitation over instruction.
Assessment	Focus on process and iteration, depth of research, social impact, and potential for implementation.
Collaboration	Active engagement with users, stakeholders, and institutions.
Focus on soft skills	Empathy, observational skill, critical thinking, analytical skills, communication, and organization skills.
Tools/methods	Participatory and co-design methods, frameworks for contextual understanding, narrative & visual tools, prototyping and testing methods.

2. CRITICAL DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

2.1. EDI Integration in Curricula

Desk research revealed that while diversity and accessibility were visible in curricula, equality was not mentioned directly. This gap may indicate a need for more explicit framing and inclusion of equality-related content within design education programs. Assessing the levels of EDI integration across modules, mostly clustered around moderate integration, as the majority of them were assessed as Level 3 (20 modules) or Level 2 (14 modules), while fewer demonstrated deeper integration at Level 4 (8 modules) or Level 5 (9 modules). Only one module showed minimal EDI presence and was classified at Level 1. The collected data indicate that EDI content is present across a wide range of module types within Polish design education, at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. This is particularly evident in design studios and diploma studios, where students often have the freedom to define their own graduation project topics. The fact that many students choose to focus on EDI-related themes suggests that the overall program fosters a mindset that values inclusivity and social responsibility in design practice.

2.2. Institutional Context

In Poland, HEIs must demonstrate how their study programs relate to the socio-economic environment and how this environment influences the content and implementation of the curriculum. These relationships are subject to systematic evaluation by the Polish Accreditation Committee – the Relationship with the Socio-Economic Environment (Quality Assurance Standard 6.2) is one of the assessment criteria. These conditions catalyze the process of involving students in participation and work with real users, allowing for further inclusion of EDI topics into the curriculum. As public services and spaces must meet universal design standards, collaboration with external stakeholders allows students to understand and practice their role in delivering socially responsible products and services. It also helps shape the curriculum to reflect local and regional needs, offering students opportunities to develop practical, real-world skills.

Despite EU-funded programs that support the development of universal design curricula, interviews revealed that curricular changes aligned with EDI values were often driven by the initiative of individual teachers. Many of them actively sought professional development

Więckowska, M.; Rudnicka, P. (2024). Integration of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) in Design Education in Poland. *Strategic Design Research Journal. Volume 17,* number 01, January - April 2024. 44-57. DOI: 10.4013/sdrj.2024.171.04
.

through specialized conferences and training, and integrated EDI principles (particularly those related to accessibility, which are mandated by law) into their professional practice. While guided by a general skill matrix for fine arts education, teachers can develop the module curriculum with specific course objectives. This flexibility allows for the integration of the latest knowledge, as well as new topics, methodologies, and approaches. They actively use this space to create unique programs that incorporate the EDI approach across various aspects of the design domain they represent.

2.3. EDI and Teaching Methods

The analysis of interviews confirmed that there is an understanding that design has a social role to fulfill and can be used for positive change. It is interconnected with the broader moral values of designing without stigmatization. Empathy is regarded as a skill that must be actively trained and developed through repeated exposure and reflection. This development is also supported by specific exercises involving simulation or direct user observation. One approach involves self-observation, enhanced by physical simulation tools such as age simulation suits, hand paresis simulators, or Tactilus seat pads. Another type of exercise includes research walks through public spaces, which help students identify physical and social barriers faced by different user groups. Other methods involve direct engagement with users through mindful listening, co-design sessions, user observation, and interviews – especially with people with disabilities – students gain valuable, firsthand insight into diverse needs. All those activities aim to deepen emotional understanding and push students to look beyond generalized categories, recognizing the individuality of each experience. However, educators acknowledge that cultivating social sensitivity is a complex process that must account for each student's predispositions.

When considering the broader curriculum, educators note that EDI is directly addressed in specific studios, especially those with a social focus. However, this is mainly achieved through project-based learning, direct user engagement, development of student sensitivity and competencies, and the influence of instructors, rather than through mandatory components in course syllabi.

2.4. Teachers' Needs for Strategic EDI Integration

Some important takeaways from the interviews included the need for a comprehensive, strategic approach to EDI at the institutional level and for broadening its understanding among both designers and non-designers. This involves clarifying and building awareness around the use of various terms (e.g., "inclusive design," "universal design") and promoting more nuanced definitions of exclusion that go beyond disability, taking into account global, social, and cultural differences. This, in turn, highlights the need to raise public awareness of EDI. Education and promotion play a key role in fostering a deeper understanding of EDI across society, as well as among local administrators, stakeholders, and governmental officers. Strengthening this awareness will enhance cooperation with HEIs on joint projects, leading to more meaningful and breakthrough solutions.

Teachers do not perceive a systematic, institution-wide embedding of the EDI approach in curriculum development. Instead, they independently shape their course content to address EDI-related challenges. Although universities participate in initiatives that support the development of competencies in universal design and promote the integration of these

Więckowska, M.; Rudnicka, P. (2024). Integration of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) in Design Education in Poland. *Strategic Design Research Journal. Volume 17,* number 01, January - April 2024. 44-57. DOI: 10.4013/sdrj.2024.171.04
.

principles into curricula, implementation remains fragmented. A comprehensive approach across all levels – such as curriculum design, delivery, assessment and feedback, learning resources, physical and virtual learning environments, and staff engagement – is still lacking. Similar findings were also outlined by researchers in the field from other countries (May & Thomas, 2010).

While many of these EDI layers are addressed, they typically appear only in selected areas of the curriculum rather than being part of a coherent, holistic strategy embedded across the entire educational environment. Teachers, through experimentation and individual initiative, often take action across these various levels without institutional oversight. This bottom-up approach suggests that EDI-related practices may gradually become common among staff. It is worth noting that Academies of Fine Arts are relatively small institutions, where faculty members are generally familiar with each other's teaching practices and outcomes. Public reviews and final exhibitions play a key role in fostering dialogue about teaching results, often serving as informal mechanisms for reflecting on and improving educational programs. However, a more systematic way of introducing EDI topics into the curriculum might benefit both educators and students, yet it requires forming a universally understood language, procedures, and programs of introduction on institutional and national level (May & Thomas, 2010; McLatchie & Campbell, 2017; Rossi & Brischetto, 2024).

3. DISCUSSION ON EDI AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL

EDI is present in Polish design education and is considered an important element of curricula by educators. The elements of EDI are visible on all levels of education, from undergraduate to postgraduate. The understanding of EDI is nuanced and multifaceted, allowing students to develop empathy and openness. The methods of education blend theoretical and practical approaches, and, what is equally important, are usually user-oriented and account for collaboration or even co-creation with end users. EDI is strongly rooted in the traditional understanding of the role of designers in Poland, and therefore, even without external pressure from law or educational framework demands, it is present in Polish curricula across all design faculties. It also means that designers are very aware of the constantly changing expectations towards them and understand EDI as an integral feature necessary to be considered and implemented in education and professional activity. It also means that continuous training of empathy and sensitivity allows to recognize new areas for EDI, also beyond humans, regarding animals, plants, ecosystems, and the planet itself as important stakeholders in design activities. It is in tune with European and worldwide discussions on paradigm shift and the new role of design that now connects technologies and human activities, and also on blurring the lines among physical, digital, and biological spheres (see Davis and Dubberly, 2023, or Design Council's Systemic Design Framework, 2025).

In recent years, several EU-funded programs have been launched to help adjust Polish HEIs to the universal and more inclusive demands. Apart from funding necessary adaptations and facilities, many of those programs also allowed for the development of knowledge, skills, and competences in the administrative and educational staff, as well as the creation of knowledge centers. Several participants of the interviews mentioned that such programs allowed them to participate in conferences and training necessary for their professional development, which later benefited students. Also, there were programs aimed specifically at financing the development of curricula focused on universal design. The growing awareness and sensitivity on EDI issues are beneficial for all, as they help create an educational environment responsive

Więckowska, M.; Rudnicka, P. (2024). Integration of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) in Design Education in Poland. *Strategic Design Research Journal. Volume 17,* number 01, January - April 2024. 44-57. DOI: 10.4013/sdrj.2024.171.04
.

to the various needs of different groups. It results not only in universal and friendly spaces, but also opens a possibility for many interventions oriented toward more humanistic and empathetic academic institutions.

On the other hand, there are several areas for improvement. Despite the legal regulations, there is still a lot to do in both physical and mental spheres. It is connected to economic conditions in Polish HEIs; for example, many institutions are situated in historical buildings, which are hard to adapt. Without EU-funded programs, it would be difficult to change those environmental barriers. However, apart from external forces, human attitudes and beliefs are crucial for the common introduction of EDI ideas and activities into public life. The public awareness of EDI is still to be developed, which points to earlier levels of education, as well as public campaigns, as necessary for systematic EDI introduction in social functioning. As in the case of any social change, it is not enough to impose a law; the introduction and maintenance, as well as social acceptance and understanding, are equally important.

Academic training of young designers is focused on developing EDI-aware professionals. When entering the "real world," designers often face challenges while working with clients or institutions that lack awareness of EDI principles or the broader role of design. It is essential to equip designers with the skills to educate clients and the public, but this also requires systemic support from public institutions. Critical discussions about the role of design, along with practical skills gained through training and project work, are well established in design education. However, this knowledge and approach are often not transferred to the national level, neither through legislation nor through broader efforts to disseminate knowledge or influence public attitudes.

4. CONCLUSION

Designers' education in Poland is based on a strong ethical and value-based perspective of social responsibility. This perspective was adopted from the very beginning and has been actively continued through the years. It is also a symbol of grassroots activities as the curricula are constructed and evolve regardless of legal regulations. EDI is considered an important element of designers' education, necessary for them to adjust and to create social change and development.

This research was focused on design programs carried out at public art universities. It revealed not only that EDI-related topics are addressed and taught at each level of designers' education but also has made it possible to compile a comprehensive overview of educational practices developed by teachers, revealing diverse, multi-level, and often innovative approaches. What is particularly important is the effective exchange of these practices between institutions and the need for a more systematic approach to curriculum development based on already prototyped and tested educational methods. We are entering a stage of effective communication and knowledge sharing, where valuable and meaningful experiences can be transformed into systemic actions.

Although several challenges to the systemic introduction of EDI into design education were identified, key issues include the need to unify terminology and to systematize the process of integrating EDI topics into the curriculum. Faculty training in curriculum development, supported by access to high-quality, regularly updated educational resources, could help address these gaps. Finally, social aspects such as community education, public engagement,

Więckowska, M.; Rudnicka, P. (2024). Integration of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) in Design Education in Poland. *Strategic Design Research Journal. Volume 17,* number 01, January - April 2024. 44-57. DOI: 10.4013/sdrj.2024.171.04
.

and the broader promotion of EDI topics require attention and change at the individual, institutional, and national levels.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to thank all the interview participants for their valuable input. We also thank the research team members – Agata Chmielarz, Anna Lorenc, Kinga Pawlik, Martyna Piątek, and Jeremiasz Rzenno – for their contribution to the desk research and interview data collection.

This work is funded by the European Erasmus+ project "Open Access Contents on Design for Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion for Higher Education Programmes"; project acronym: EDIDesK; strand: KA220-HED (Cooperation Partnerships in Higher Education); grant number: 2023-1-IT02-KA220-HED-000153774; project website: https://www.edideskproject.com/. This work is based on the results achieved by the authors involved in the WP2 of the EDIDesK project. This WP was aimed at mapping the current landscape of EDI teaching in Design and related subjects at undergraduate and postgraduate levels in the participating countries of Italy, Poland, Slovakia, and Spain. The content of this publication does not reflect the official opinion of the European Union. Responsibility for the information and views expressed in the publication lies entirely with the author(s).

REFERENCES

Cipolla, C., & Bartholo, R. (2014). Empathy or Inclusion: A Dialogical Approach to Socially Responsible Design. International Journal of Design, 8(2), 87–100, from https://www.ijdesign.org/index.php/IJDesign/article/view/1255/633

Cooper, R. (2005). Ethics and Altruism: What Constitutes Socially Responsible Design? *Design Management Review*, *16*(3), 10–18. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1948-7169.2005.tb00197.x

Davis, M., & Dubberly, H. (2023). Rethinking Design Education. *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation*, *9*(2), 97–116. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sheji.2023.04.003

Design Council. (2025). *Systemic Design Framework*. Retrieved 9 July, 2025, from https://www.designcouncil.org.uk/our-resources/systemic-design-framework/

ELA. (2025). *Ogólnopolski system monitorowania ekonomicznych losów absolwentów szkół wyższych [Nationwide system for monitoring the economic development of university graduates]*. Retrieved 9 July, 2025, from https://www.ue.katowice.pl/jednostki/centrum-karier-i-wspolpracy-z-absolwentami/badanie-losow-zawodowych-absolwentow/ogolnopolski-system-monitorowania-ekonomicznych-losow-absolwentow-ela-szkol-wyzszych-badania-ilosciowe.html

Integrated Qualifications System. (2015). *Polish Qualifications Framework (PQF)*. Retrieved 9 July, 2025, from https://kwalifikacje.gov.pl/en/about-iqs/polska-rama-kwalifikacji-2

May, H., & Thomas, L. (2010). *Embedding Equality and Diversity in the Curriculum: Self Evaluation Framework.* Retrieved 9 July, 2025, from https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/embedding-equality-and-diversity-curriculum-self-evaluation-framework

McLatchie, J., & Campbell, L.A. (2017). *Embedding equality and diversity in the curriculum: Developing a train the trainers model*. Edinburgh: Napier University. Retrieved 9 July, 2025, from https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/embedding-equality-and-diversity-curriculum-developing-train-trainers-model

Papanek, V. (2012/1984). *Design for the Real World. Human Ecology and Social Change*. Łódź: Recto Verso.

Pawłowski, A. (2001). *Inicjacje. O sztuce, projektowaniu i kształceniu projektantów* [Initiations. On Art, Design, and Designers' Education]. Kraków: Wydział Form Przemysłowych ASP.

Rojek-Adamek, P. (2019). *Designerzy: Rola zawodowa projektanta w oglądzie socjologicznym [Designers: the Professional Role of a Designer in a Sociological Perspective]*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar

Rossi, E., & Brischetto, A. (2024). Contribution of the "Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion" Concept to Design Education: A Systematic Literature Review. *Sustainability*, *16*(19), Article 19. https://doi.org/10.3390/su16198478

Thorpe, A., & Gamman, L. (2011). Design with society: Why socially responsive design is good enough. *CoDesign*, *7*(3–4), 217–230. https://doi.org/10.1080/15710882.2011.630477

Więckowska, M.; Rudnicka, P. (2024). Integration of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) in Design Education in Poland. *Strategic Design Research Journal. Volume 17,* number 01, January - April 2024. 44-57. DOI: 10.4013/sdrj.2024.171.04
.