

# Embedding Inclusive Communication in Research Performing Organisation: Processes, Challenges and Outcomes

Elise Allix-Desfautaux and Vanessa De Luca

Istituto Italiano di Tecnologia, Genoa, Italy

[elise.allixdesfautaux@iit.it](mailto:elise.allixdesfautaux@iit.it)

[Vanessa.deluca@iit.it](mailto:Vanessa.deluca@iit.it)

**Abstract:** Inclusive language is not merely a stylistic preference but a foundational infrastructure for reliable and equitable organisational cultures. For Research-Performing Organisations (RPOs), particularly those trying to comply with the Gender Equality Plan (GEP) requirements of Horizon Europe, the operationalisation of inclusion is critical for fostering retention, driving innovation, and ensuring compliance. However, substantial barriers remain in translating these high-level mandates into daily practice. In the international research context, where English acts as the primary vehicle for scientific dissemination, researchers frequently face nuance deficits. Because English is often not the primary language of researchers and staff in RPOs, many lack the specific vocabulary to navigate evolving inclusive norms despite professional intent. This friction is compounded in bilingual institutions by the structural rigidity of heavily gendered local languages like Italian, where the transition from the neutral masculine default (*maschile sovraesteso*) to inclusive alternatives creates a high barrier to entry. Consequently, researchers often perceive inclusive language guidelines as ideological, prescriptive, or cognitively burdensome, creating a persistent gap between theoretical diversity principles and practical scientific communication. This paper presents the design, implementation, and governance of the IIT Inclusive Language Guide, a comprehensive bilingual (English and Italian) instrument developed by the Istituto Italiano di Tecnologia. Diverging from traditional compliance-based policy documents, our primary objective was usability: to design a linguistic framework that significantly lowers the cognitive load of inclusivity while maintaining the precision required in a STEM environment. To enhance adoption and global relevance, the Guide moves beyond the traditional gender binary to systematise six intersecting dimensions of inclusion: Age, Culture, Disability, Ethnicity, Gender, and Socioeconomic Status. The architecture of the Guide prioritises accessibility through a modular design and visual comparative tables that allow users to intuitively understand why and how to shift their language without disrupting their workflow. We detail the mixed-method development strategy, which combined extensive international benchmarking with a pragmatic sponsorship governance model involving co-design with senior leadership and researchers. Our analysis shows that while gender-specific policies are now common in Italy, broader inclusive frameworks are almost non-existent. This makes the IIT Guide a novelty in the field. Finally, we discuss the specific challenges of governing non-normative cultural tools in a high-performance research environment. We conclude by offering a scalable, open-access blueprint for other anglophone or bilingual institutions, demonstrating how RPOs can proactively codify their values into actionable standards that foster a more cohesive ecosystem of inclusivity.

**Keywords:** Inclusive Language; Gender equality plans (GEP), Intersectionality, Research-performing organisations (RPO), STEM, Organizational culture.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 The Institutional Context

The Istituto Italiano di Tecnologia (IIT) is a leading Italian research foundation conducting basic and applied research across computational science, life technologies (LifeTech), nanomaterials, and robotics. As a Research-Performing Organisation (RPO), IIT's primary objective is to drive technological development and high-level education in Italy, fostering the national production system while maintaining a competitive international dimension.

The operational frameworks for inclusion were formally introduced in 2020 with the establishment of the Diversity, Inclusion, and Social Impact Office (DISO). The cornerstone of this office's strategy is the Gender Equality Plan (GEP), implemented in 2021. While the DISO is mandated to embed an inclusive culture within the institute, this mission must operate alongside and support the institute's demanding core research priorities.

### 1.2 The Problem

Language acts not merely as a medium of expression but as a structuring force that shapes thought (Boroditsky 2001) as well as institutional and cultural contexts (Fricker 2007; Laugier 2013). Defined broadly, inclusive language acknowledges diversity, mitigates unconscious bias, and demonstrates respect through thoughtful choices of words, phrases, and other linguistic elements (Linguistic Society of America 2016). Within a research environment, such language constitutes the foundational infrastructure for equity, driving belonging, retention, and scientific excellence. However, at IIT, where international and local cultures intersect, this system faces unique friction. The institute operates bilingually: English is the *lingua franca* of research, while Italian is the

language of administration and local culture. This creates a dual challenge. English, while gender-neutral in grammar, is often a second language for staff, leading to a lack of nuance in sensitive contexts. Conversely, standard Italian relies heavily on the overextended masculine, a grammatical default that renders women and non-binary individuals linguistically invisible.

Furthermore, within the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) community, inclusive language is often perceived as polarised, ideologically complex, or prescriptive. This perception creates a high "cognitive load" for researchers and staff, acting as a barrier to adoption. While there is an institutional desire for inclusivity, the lack of a clear, actionable framework has made the transition from intent to practice difficult.

### **1.3 The Goal**

In 2023, the DISO and the Communication and External Relations Directorate (CERD) initiated a collaborative project to bridge this gap: the creation of the *IIT Inclusive Language Guide*. This guide was conceived with multiple strategic objectives: to operationalise the GEP's 'Inclusive Culture' area (Leone et al., 2022), to foster a research environment where all individuals are respected and represented regardless of background, and to harmonise the work of the two directorates.

Crucially, the guide was designed to be more than just linguistically correct. Adopting a user-centric approach, the goal was to lower the barrier to entry for inclusive communication. We aimed to create a practical tool that allows users to intuitively understand *why* and *how* to shift their language without slowing down their daily workflows. The guide moves beyond the gender binary to address six intersecting dimensions of inclusion and focuses on three pillars: Representation, Precision, and Freedom of Choice.

### **1.4 Paper Structure**

This paper serves as a blueprint for creating a bilingual, intersectional guide designed not just for compliance but for usability. The remainder of this paper analyses the specific linguistic challenges of English and Italian in a STEM RPO context (Section 2), details the guide's architecture and user-centric design (Section 3), and outlines the mixed-method methodology used to co-create the tool (Section 4). Finally, we present the implementation challenges encountered (Section 5), discuss the dissemination strategy and limitations (Section 6), and offer actionable recommendations for other research organisations (Section 7).

## **2. The Challenge: Linguistic and Institutional Barriers at IIT**

### **2.1 The Institutional Barrier: Resource Competition**

IIT is a private foundation primarily funded by the Italian government, with a mandate focused on high-performance research. In this context, resources are scarce. Inclusion initiatives often face a prioritisation gap. Because the DISO is structurally positioned within Human Resources (HR) rather than being a directorate, inclusion is frequently perceived by researchers as a support function rather than a core component of scientific excellence. The challenge, therefore, was to demonstrate that language is not merely an HR compliance issue, but a critical tool for the research mission itself.

### **2.2 The Linguistic Barrier**

A defining challenge for IIT is its bilingual nature. The institute faces a double linguistic problem with its two official languages, requiring distinct corrective strategies. Standard Italian that relies on the overextended masculine as the grammatical default. Shifting away from this default is cognitively demanding, as it requires overriding deeply ingrained grammatical habits. While English offers a more gender-neutral grammatical framework, it presents a trap of false neutrality. For many IIT staff, English is a second language (L2). L2 speakers often lack the cultural nuance to identify exclusionary idioms.

## **3. Designing for Adoption: The Guide's Architecture**

### **3.1 Scope: Intersectionality by Design**

While our benchmarking analysis revealed that the current landscape of inclusive language in Italian research is predominantly focused on gender asymmetry, we determined that a singular focus would be insufficient for IIT's complex environment. To prevent the fragmentation of resources and ensure a holistic approach, we adopted an intersectional framework (Crenshaw, 1991) covering six dimensions: age, culture, disability, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status.

This decision was driven by two operational necessities. First, the diverse composition of IIT’s international community requires addressing cultural and ethnic nuances that go beyond Italian norms. Second, specific research contexts dictated the scope; for example, laboratories working directly with individuals with physical or cognitive disabilities required precise, non-stigmatising terminology for daily interactions and subject recruitment. Consequently, we expanded our benchmarking beyond general inclusivity guides to include specialised documentation for less systematic dimensions such as age, disability, gender, and socioeconomic status (American Chemical Society n.d.; American Psychological Association n.d.; European Commission n.d.; European Institute for Gender Equality n.d.; United Nations Office at Geneva n.d.; Washington University in St. Louis School of Public Health n.d.; Weir 2023; World Health Organization n.d.). To avoid establishing a hierarchy of marginalisation, these dimensions are presented strictly in alphabetical order.

### 3.2 User-centric Design: Lowering Cognitive Load

To ensure the Guide served as a practical tool rather than a theoretical manifesto, we prioritised "cognitive fluency." The Guide addresses high-impact domains, including recruitment, leadership, and external communication, but is written in a concise, accessible style suitable for non-expert readers.

Recognising the time constraints typical of a high-pressure research environment, we minimised dense prose in favour of visual functionality. The core pedagogical tool is the use of comparative tables: tables that juxtapose common (discouraged) expressions with recommended alternatives. This visual design allows a user to scan and solve a linguistic problem in seconds, making the inclusive choice the path of least resistance.




| <br>Avoid this              | <br>Instead try  | <br>Why?  |
|--|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Ladies and gentlemen"</li> </ul>                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Dear colleagues"</li> <li>• "Everyone"</li> <li>• "All" / "Thank you all for being here"</li> <li>• "Team"</li> <li>• "IITans"</li> </ul> | <p>Avoid unnecessary gendering.</p> <p>Inclusive greetings help everyone feel welcomed.</p>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assuming pronouns or use a former name</li> </ul>                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask and use the person’s chosen pronouns ("they," "she," "he")</li> </ul>  | <p>Using the correct names and pronouns affirms a person’s identity and fosters respect.</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "A disabled colleague"</li> <li>• "A handicapped person"</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "A colleague with a disability"</li> </ul>   | <p>Puts the person first and avoids reducing someone to a characteristic.</p>                |

Figure 1: Common expressions and their alternatives in English

### 3.3 Standardised Architecture

To facilitate rapid information retrieval, we created a standardised architecture functioning as a reference manual rather than a linear text. Each thematic chapter follows an identical four-part template: (1) foundational concepts (glossary); (2) the rationale (sociolinguistic context); (3) practical toolkit (comparative "Avoid/Try/Why" tables); and (4) key considerations (strategic nuance). This predictable rhythm enables intuitive navigation, allowing users to quickly locate evidence-based definitions or actionable alternatives without reading the document sequentially.

## 4. Methodology: Co-construction and Validation

We adopted a mixed-method, iterative approach that combined international benchmarking, gap analysis of the national landscape, and multi-level internal consultation. This process was designed to ensure scientific rigour while maximising operational usability.

### 4.1 International Benchmarking and National gap Analysis

Our development phase began with an extensive analysis of existing guidelines, stratified into three key sectors:

- **Supranational and European bodies**, including the European Commission and UN agencies (Council of the European Union n.d.; Council of Europe n.d.; European Commission 2021; European Parliament n.d.; Publications Office of the European Union n.d.; UNICEF n.d.; United Nations Global Compact n.d.);
- **Leading international universities and RPOs**, specifically those with established inclusion frameworks (EPFL 2022; Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health 2021; Maynooth University n.d.; MIT Communication Lab 2023; Sheridan College n.d.; University of Cologne n.d.; Western University n.d.); and
- **Specialised associations and centres** focused on linguistics, disability, and psychology (American Psychological Association n.d.; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention n.d.; Linguistic Society of America n.d.; National Center on Disability and Journalism n.d.).

This analysis allowed us to map common terminology conventions and implementation strategies relevant to high-performance research settings.

Simultaneously, we conducted a comparative analysis of peer Italian research institutions to identify the specific gaps in the national landscape. As summarised in **Figure 2**, the prevailing focus in Italy has historically centred on gender asymmetry. Our analysis indicates that while gender-sensitive guidelines are now standard among major Italian research bodies, holistic frameworks remain rare. Most peer institutions focus exclusively on gender asymmetry; identifying comprehensive, multi-dimensional tools for the Italian research context proved difficult, positioning the IIT Guide as a distinct novelty to the national landscape.

| Institution         | Broader Inclusive Language Guidelines | Gender-Specific Language Guidelines |
|---------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| INFN                | No                                    | In Preparation (2022)               |
| CNR                 | No                                    | Yes (2024)                          |
| ENEA                | No                                    | Yes (2022)                          |
| INGV                | No                                    | No                                  |
| Human Technopole    | Webinar only                          | No                                  |
| INAF                | No                                    | Yes (2017)                          |
| FBK                 | Yes                                   | Yes                                 |
| Fondazione Telethon | No                                    | No                                  |
| AI4I                | No                                    | No                                  |
| ASVAPP              | No                                    | No                                  |
| Fondazione E.Zancan | No                                    | No                                  |
| IRS                 | No                                    | No                                  |

**Figure 2: Comparison of inclusive language resources in Italian research institutions. June 2025**

#### 4.2 The Iterative Co-design Process

The drafting process was executed through a collaboration between the DISO and the CERD. This structure ensured the integration of specialised expertise: DISO provided the theoretical frameworks for inclusion, while CERD ensured the tone was consistent with the institute’s voice. Successive drafts were refined through continuous exchange, reconciling the theoretical need for precision with the operational need for brevity.

### 4.3 Structured Stakeholder Validation

Once a working prototype was established, we launched a structured review process involving four distinct layers of institutional governance to stress test the Guide before release.

- **Strategic alignment (HR director):** The first review assessed the Guide’s alignment with IIT’s broader internal policies and values, ensuring no conflict with existing HR regulations.
- **Communicative efficacy (communication director):** This phase tested the clarity, tone, and immediacy of the text. The goal was to ensure the Guide felt "inviting" rather than bureaucratic.
- **Operational relevance (principal investigators):** To ensure the Guide resonated with the scientific community, we solicited structured feedback from four Principal Investigators (PIs) across diverse fields. PIs completed a structured questionnaire (Figure 3) assessing clarity, usability, and contextual fit. This step was crucial for identifying terminology that is useful for certain research environments.
- **Scientific oversight (scientific director):** The final review was conducted by the Scientific Director. This high-level feedback introduced critical nuances regarding forms of exclusion specific to academia, such as credentialism and subtle classism, which are often overlooked.

| Section                                   | Question   | Response Options                                 | Comments   |
|---|--|--|--|
| 1. Clarity and Comprehensibility          | Is the language used clear and accessible?   | Always, Mostly, Sometimes unclear, Often complex |  |
|   | Are the key concepts understandable even for those unfamiliar with the topic?  | Yes, Partially, No                               | Please note any unclear or improvable sections:  |
| 2. Structure and Organisation             | Is the division into thematic sections effective?  | Yes, Partially, No                               |  |
|   | Is the guide easy to consult (e.g., when looking for specific information)?  | Yes, Partially, No                               | Comments on structure, logical flow, and formatting:   |
| 3. Relevance to the IIT Context           | Are the contents relevant to IIT’s internal and external communication?  | Very much, Fairly, Slightly, Not at all          |  |
|   | Are there examples or terms that do not fully fit our scientific and/or multicultural context?   | No, A few, Several                               | Comments on cultural, linguistic, or scientific adaptation:  |
| 4. Applicability and Operational Impact   | Does the guide offer useful suggestions to improve communication in daily work (e.g., emails, documents, events)?                            | Yes in a practical way, Partially, No            |  |
|   | Do any suggestions seem difficult to apply in practice?  | No, A few, Several                               | Comments on suggestions, examples, or practices that need clarification or more practical support: |
| 5. Topics to Deepen or Add                | Which topics could be expanded or added in a future version of the guide? (e.g., international context, intercultural aspects, other biases) | [Open Text]                                      | Write your proposals here:   |
| 6. Final Comments and General Suggestions | Any other comments, recommendations, or ideas that may help improve the guide?   | [Open Text]                                      |  |

Figure 3: Feedback form sent to the Principal Investigators

### 4.4 Evolution and Limitations

The validation process also highlighted areas for future development. Reviewers identified a need for accessible formats, such as audio versions for individuals with visual impairments and signed versions for the Deaf and hard-of-hearing community. Additionally, feedback suggested expanding the coverage of neurodivergence (e.g., ADHD, Autism spectrum). Rather than delaying the release, we utilised the Guide’s modular format to treat these as planned updates, reinforcing the living document approach described in Section 5.3.

## 5. Implementation Challenges and Governance

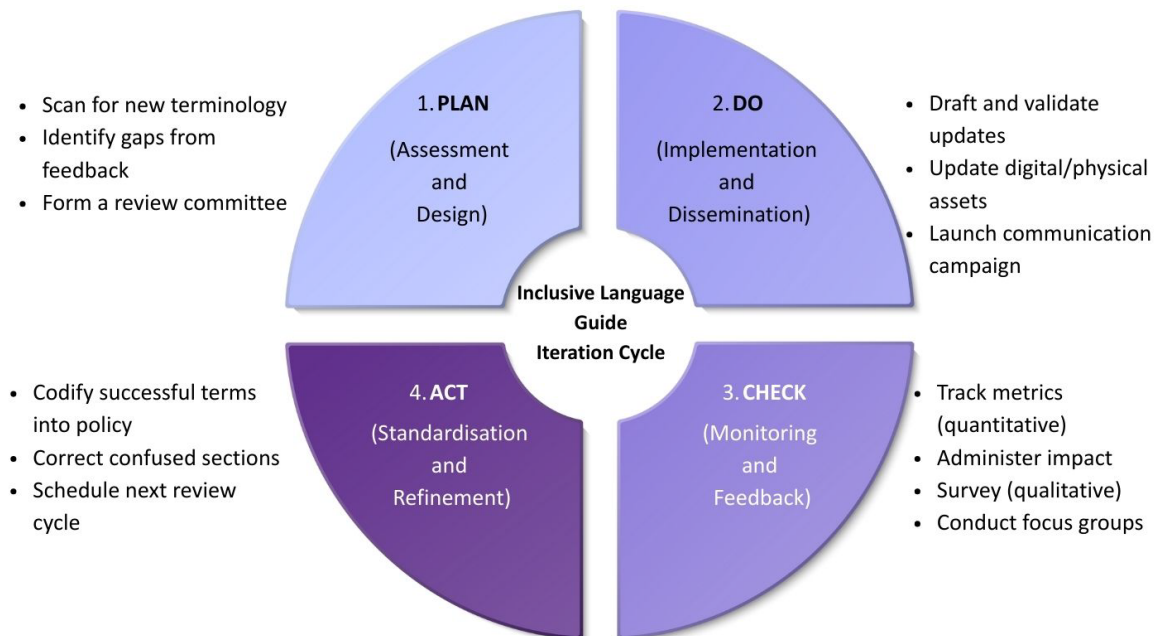
### 5.1 Governance of Non-normative Tools: The Positioning Dilemma

A primary challenge lay in defining the Guide's status, which sat ambiguously between binding policy and informal suggestion, creating tension between calls for strict rules versus contextual flexibility. Recognising that excessive formalisation risked framing inclusion as bureaucratic control, we deliberately positioned the Guide as non-binding recommendations. To ensure institutional weight, the Scientific Director and the CERD Director, alongside key PIs, endorsed it as a shared cultural resource.

### 5.2 Sustainability: The Living Document Approach

Finally, a rigid implementation risks obsolescence, as inclusive language evolves rapidly. To mitigate this, we established the Guide as a living document rather than a static publication.

We recommend that institutions implement a Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle for linguistic guidelines. In this model, the "Check" phase involves gathering qualitative feedback from the community (as demonstrated during our PI validation phase), which directly informs biennial updates ("Act"). This iterative approach ensures the Guide remains dynamic, allowing for the continuous integration of new dimensions, such as the emerging need for neurodivergent-inclusive language, thereby maintaining its relevance as an institutional standard.



**Figure 4: Application of the PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Act) cycle to the maintenance of inclusive language guidelines**

## 6. Discussion and Future Work

### 6.1 Contextual Limitations

A challenge in adapting international benchmarks to the Italian context was the categorisation of "race." In continental Europe, the term still carries heavy stigma. Consequently, we consciously excluded the term "race" in both the English and Italian versions of the Guide to avoid alienation among non-anglophone speakers. Instead, we utilised ethnicity and culture to address these dimensions, prioritising cultural receptivity over direct translation of anglosphere norms.

Regarding syntax, the Guide navigates the tension between Person-First Language (PFL) and Identity-First Language (IFL) (United Nations Office at Geneva n.d.). While we adopt PFL as the institutional default to emphasise the individual over their condition, the Guide explicitly mandates deferring to IFL when referring to communities that prefer it (e.g., the Deaf community), thereby prioritising self-determination over rigid grammatical consistency.

## 6.2 Dissemination Strategy

Dissemination employs a multi-channel strategy. The official launch is integrated into the Institute's annual seminar on organisational values, positioning the Guide as a core ethical tool rather than a standalone HR document. Simultaneously, visual assets (infographics and digital slides) are deployed across internal screens and intranets to maximise visibility.



Figure 5: Example of dissemination material

## 7. Recommendations: A Blueprint for Research-performing Organisations

### 7.1 Scalability and Replicability

This initiative offers a scalable blueprint for other anglophone or non-anglophone research institutions facing the dual challenge of linguistic diversity and scientific rigour. As diversity requirements become central to European funding mechanisms (e.g., Horizon Europe's GEP requirements), institutions often struggle to operationalise these mandates beyond high-level policy.

By providing an open-access, bilingual framework that addresses six dimensions of inclusion, the IIT Guide demonstrates how research centres can proactively codify their values into operational tools. We encourage other institutions not to merely translate existing anglosphere guides, but to adapt this framework to their specific cultural contexts. This approach transforms compliance into culture, creating a more cohesive ecosystem of inclusivity across the European research landscape.

### 7.2 Actionable Recommendations

Based on the development and implementation of the Guide, we offer four key recommendations for other RPOs:

- **Adopt an intersectional approach from the outset:** Do not separate gender from other dimensions of marginalisation. Our benchmarking reveals that addressing gender in isolation risks fragmenting

resources and overlooking overlapping identities (e.g., disability or age). A unified, multi-dimensional guide underscores a commitment to total inclusivity rather than piecemeal compliance.

- **Prioritise cognitive fluency over theory:** Scientists work under high cognitive load. Avoid dense theoretical prose in favour of modular, visual architectures (e.g., comparative tables). The goal is to lower the barrier to entry: make the inclusive choice the easiest choice to find and apply.
- **Establish pragmatic sponsorship governance:** Avoid the trap of over-bureaucratisation. We recommend that organisations (1) clarify the non-binding status of the guide to reduce resistance, (2) assign high-level institutional sponsors, and (3) define a simple validation route to prevent approval deadlocks.
- **Involve scientific leadership early:** Inclusive language is often misperceived as an administrative soft skill. To counter this, involve PIs in the validation phase. Their input ensures the guide is relevant to the laboratory context and signals to the wider community that inclusivity is a core component of research excellence.

## 8. Conclusion

In this paper, we addressed the specific challenge of implementing inclusive language within a bilingual RPO. Starting from the mandate of GEP, we developed the IIT Inclusive Language Guide, a tool designed to significantly lower the cognitive load of inclusivity. By prioritising cognitive fluency as a primary design goal, we decomposed the problem into intersectional dimensions rather than a monolithic set of rules. We further analysed the specific challenges related to organisational uptake and dissemination, distilling these experiences into actionable recommendations for peer institutions.

**Ethics Declaration:** This study did not require formal ethical approval according to IIT's and national guidelines, as it is based on the analysis of institutional documents and anonymised feedback from staff collected in the context of internal organisational development activities. No sensitive personal data were gathered, no vulnerable groups were involved, and all contributors were informed that their anonymised comments could be used for research and dissemination purposes.

**AI Declaration:** AI-based language tools (e.g., ChatGPT by OpenAI, Gemini by Google) were used to support text editing, paraphrasing and the refinement of structure and wording in some sections of this manuscript. It has also been used to do the design of figures 2 and 4 as well as the reference list. No AI tools were used for data collection, analysis or interpretation. The authors have critically reviewed all AI-assisted content and retain full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity and originality of the work presented.

**Authors Contributions:** The authors contributed equally to this work.

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