

# Graduation projects within interior architecture education in Turkey: Limits, possibilities, prospects

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## Abstract

Graduation project in interior architecture education is the final step in which candidates use the theoretical knowledge they acquired throughout their bachelor's education and create solutions in the face of the most comprehensive design problems. It is the threshold for interior architect candidates who will participate in interior architecture professional practice.

This study questions interior architecture education in Turkey through a thorough investigation of the graduation projects of universities and creates a framework within different approaches and common tendencies between departments.

In the first phase of the research, a comprehensive data collection was made from the Turkish Higher Education Council Database, competition booklets of the MEKAN Competition, the web pages as well as YouTube and Instagram accounts of the interior architecture departments of the universities in Turkey. In the second phase, content analysis was conducted by three independent researchers through deciphering the transcripts of in-depth interviews with 13 selected academics. A total of 374 minutes of video recording was converted into texts. "System and Resources", "Competence" and "Context" were collected from the deciphering of these interviews with academics with qualitative coding. The mutual aspects of the academics' discourses were grouped to provide a concrete structure of different perspectives and insights on graduation projects and interior architecture education in Turkey. Together with the graduation projects, interior architecture education in Turkey is evaluated collectively by using these mutual themes. Limits, possibilities, and prospects which are derived from the findings are presented via recommendations towards the education of interior architecture in Turkey.

## Keywords

Interior architecture education, Graduation projects, Interior design studio, Interior design profession.

## 1. Introduction

Beyond offering students an opportunity to create solutions to the given problem by combining their acquired knowledge with their original design languages, the graduation project can also be an appropriate setting for universities to review their four-year undergraduate curricula. In Turkey, all the departments of interior architecture (and environmental design) do have graduation project as a must-course in their curricula.

This study aims to understand the approaches of different universities of interior architecture graduation projects and their direct effect on interior architecture education in Turkey to produce a body of knowledge for interior architecture.

Within the scope of the research, firstly, the data collected from The Council of Higher Education database, the outputs of the Interior Architecture Students National Graduation Projects Competition (MEKAN) [1], the web pages and social media accounts of the interior architecture departments were analysed. Further in data collection, in-depth interviews were conducted with 13 academics working in different universities to understand the insights of these academics who have proactive roles in interior architecture education. Following that, three independent researchers conducted a content analysis to interpret the data obtained from the text collected by transcribing these interviews. In the final step, with the evaluation of the data and content analysis, this study aims to enable the interior architecture candidates to acquire the practice of “interior architecture” more comprehensively at the last stage of their education and present recommendations for the future of interior architecture education in Turkey.

### 1.1. Historical context: Interior architecture education in Turkey

The historical context of interior architecture education in Turkey is a multifaceted process that evolved in relation with the global development of the profession. The emergence of interior applications in the early 20th century in the United States marked the initial stages of the profession

and education, initially referred to as “interior decoration”. In Europe, the institutionalization of interior architecture education can be traced back to the period following the Second World War, with Bauhaus playing a significant role in the process (Kaptan, 2003).

In Turkey, the profession gained momentum accompanied by the commencement of professional practices, driven by societal, political, economic, and technological advancements which result in the emergence of professional applications, signifying a shift towards a more structured and recognized practice within the field of interior architecture. The establishment of the first formal fine arts education in Turkey in 1882 at the Sanayi-i Nefise Mektebi (Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University) laid the foundation for formal education of the discipline (Demir, 2008; Özdamar, 2020). Subsequently, the official opening of the Department of Tezyinat (Ornament) as a interior decoration department at the same institution in 1928 has been a turning point and marked the beginning of interior architecture education at the university level in the country (Özsavaş Uluçay & Kaptan, 2018). Another significant milestone is the opening of the Department of “Interior Architecture” at Marmara University in 1957. The subsequent establishment of both state and foundation universities, particularly the rapid increase in the number of universities from 1928 onwards, has significantly contributed to the expansion and diversification of interior architecture education in Turkey (Erbay & Ulusoy, 2021).

After the European Directive in 1987, which directs the profession of Architecture, it became apparent that countries use different titles for the profession of interior architecture. In Turkey, there are two education models named as: “Interior Architecture” and “Interior Architecture and Environmental Design”. Özsavaş mentioned that Interior Architecture and Environmental Design departments were structured by including courses such as landscape, environmental design, urban furniture and physical environmental control in interior architecture

education programs (2011). However, Erbay and Ulusoy (2021) emphasized that even though there were two different department names, there were still unclear attitudes in terms of the faculty under which it would be located, the type of points it would receive students with, and the differences between “Interior Architecture” and “Interior Architecture and Environmental Design” departments.

The differences between interior architecture education in the USA, Europe and Turkey are evident in the institutional frameworks. In the United States, the Foundation for Interior Design Accreditation (FIDER), later renamed the Council for Interior Design Accreditation (CIDA), has played an important role in setting standards and accreditation of interior architecture programs. Whereas in Europe, the European Charter for Interior Architecture (ECIA) has provided a common platform for interior architecture education among member states. In the United States, interior designers have to prove their professional competence through a specific exam and NCIDQ manages this process.

### **1.2. Theoretical framework: “Graduation project” in interior architecture education in Turkey**

Interior Architecture, which is a relatively new discipline (Tate & Smith, 1986; White, 2009; Kaptan, 2014); requires studio-based education that takes time and continuity. The design studio is defined as a venue where students focus on solving problems (Chan, 1990; Lawson, 1979) that arise through the learning experience in the studio, develop new forms of understanding, and reflect on what they have sensed to knowledge (Salama, 1995, 2016; Schön, 1985; Schön & Wiggins 1992). Kepez and Üst (2017) described the studio as a research lab powered by knowledge, where students and academics work together to address questions as well as some phenomena. From the first studio to the graduation studio, interior architecture students develop solutions for design problems with different project sites and increasingly complex spatial functions. Interior design

studios, with the highest course credits and the longest practice hours, aim to provide students interior architectural competence.

This study starts with the following research questions on interior architecture departments in Turkey:

How does the graduation project differ from the other design studios that the student has experienced in previous semesters in terms of subject, scope, learning experience and implementation methods?

Can the graduation project be referred to as the last project as a continuation of the consecutive studio experience in the undergraduate curriculum, or is it a ceremonial threshold where the students are expected to reflect all the knowledge and experience gained during their undergraduate education and take the initiative as designers?

Where does the education of interior architecture in Turkey stand? Is interior architecture education in Turkey a vocational education that is based on professional practice, or an universal one which also culminates in theory?

Most of the early research on interior architecture graduation projects investigated the competencies expected from students as potential interior architects (Alnejem, 2018; Cordan et al., 2014; Çavuş & Kaptan, 2022; Wilsing et al., 2019). While Çavuş and Kaptan (2022) identified students’ skills to be acquired as “research and documentation”, “independent process management for a complex interior architecture project where the function and project site are freely chosen by the students”, and “project-specific detail solution”; Wilsing et al. (2019) defined the fourth-year graduation studio, as a process where students reflected their identities and ideologies on their designs and exhibited the skills they acquired throughout their undergraduate education. Similarly, Alnejem (2018) described the graduation project as the process of preparing students for the job market. Cordan et al. (2014), defined the interior architecture graduation project as the process in which the students developed comprehensive, imaginative, innovative, and practice-based design solutions for complex spatial problems that they had never encountered before, and convinced the jury members with the

design proposals that they developed. Last but not least, the function type of a graduation project also has an impact on the intellectual competence of the interior architect candidates, as Üst and Güler (2021) evaluated the relationship between conservation awareness and education through the students' re-functioning proposals for a historic building in a graduation project.

A limited number of studies have examined the outputs of Interior Architecture Students National Graduation Project Competitions holding a crucial formation for “the learner” in interior architecture education and arrived at quite similar findings. Kutlu et al. (2018) evaluated the design approaches in the participated projects of 2017 through sociocultural context, environmental-physical context and spatial interventions, and revealed different points of view of the different universities to interior architecture graduation projects. Usta et al. (2022) analyzed the student works of the same competition between 2012-2021 through project context, intervention method to the space, function, solution proposal to the design problem, presentation technique and project scale.

There are also a few studies focusing on the evaluation criteria of graduation projects. Elsamanoudy (2014), addressed the issue of differentiations of evaluation systems in final-year graduation projects across interior design programs worldwide and sought to produce uniform assessment criteria that could fit varied project kinds, sizes, and approaches.

As can be seen above from the limitation in the literature on interior architecture graduation projects, the number of sources that could be accessed was not sufficient, thus literature on global “architecture graduation projects” that were also reviewed. Ghonim and Eweda (2018) offered recommendations for enhancing graduation project courses in architectural education by integrating design and research, verifying student qualifications, selecting relevant project topics, ensuring compatibility between students, topics and supervisors, simulating the architectural profession in the learning experience, employing mixed

evaluation methods, and exploring innovative alternatives for motivating students and assessing program outcomes. Ding (2020) argued that the subject of the graduation project should meet the teaching objectives, be diverse and original, at the same time, be appropriate to the scale and of medium-difficulty level. AboWardah (2020) discussed the importance of the “pre-design bridging phase” as a transition between the research and schematic design phases in architecture graduation projects and suggested the use of strategies such as mind mapping, freehand drawing and physical modeling methods, self-assessment and peer assessment to increase students' creativity. Refaat and Maher (2018) addressed the common problems in graduation projects like randomly assigned projects, scale imbalances, and homogenization of project outputs due to digital tools. Sipahioğlu and Alanlı (2020) sought an answer to whether graduation studios should be seen as a final exam or a learning process through the academics' perspectives from 55 different universities.

“Competence expected from the students”, “outputs of the project competitions”, “evaluation criteria” and “worldwide architectural and interior architecture graduation projects” are the four main contexts of the architecture and design literature. At this point, graduation project outputs should not be considered independent from the actors (students, instructors, i.e.).

Therefore, this research differs from the ones above as we aim to fill the gap in the literature on graduation projects with a comprehensive data collection of a 7-year timeline (2015-2022) [2] and to have a contemporary perspective on the interior architecture education and knowledge in Turkey through a content analysis which involves the discourses of the actors of the graduation project course.

## 2. Methodology

Firstly, data collection was made from (a) the universities offering undergraduate interior architecture education in Turkey through the (a) Turkish Higher Education Council database (YÖK Lisans Atlası, n.d.),

(b) the booklets of the MEKAN Competition held between 2015 and 2021 were thoroughly scanned and, (c) the web pages for the curricula, guidelines, and graduation project syllabi (d) YouTube and Instagram accounts of the departments (Figure 1).

Secondly, in-depth interviews were conducted who held positions such as department chairs or graduation project coordinators of different universities in Turkey. As the non-verbal behavior of the participants could be observed, and the element of artificiality was less than other techniques, the in-depth interviewing method had a to-the-point impact on the research. Creswell (2002) stated that in-depth interviews must be conducted with at least 6-8 participants in qualitative research. Since in-depth interviews require much time and effort, working with a diverse and random sample group was impracticable. 45 Academics from different universities were chosen for a fair selection and received invitation emails. Those academics (Table 1) were invited according to the location (central/peripheral) and the implementation (jury/studio) of the graduation project. The academics who accepted our invitation were 13 (7 from private; 8 from state universities) in total, therefore the in-depth interviews were conducted with them via online Zoom meetings in September and October 2022. The participants were academics who were willing to contribute to the research. The main purpose of

in-depth interviews is not to generalize about interior architecture graduation projects or interior architecture education, but to gain a deeper understanding of the perspectives of academics, who are the main actors in interior architecture education, about the focus of the research.

6 open-ended questions based on the data collection findings, covering all aspects of the graduation projects, were created as the outline of the interviews. Still, a flexible interview evolving around the questions' answers was aimed. During the online interviews, audio and video were recorded with the permission of the participants. A total of 374 minutes of video recordings obtained from 13 interviews were converted into texts.

Content analysis, as a qualitative research method, helped the researchers making this deciphered text ready for processing (Creswell, 2009). Content analysis is based on the facts that are frequently repeated and emphasised by the participants by focusing on the data collected from the texts (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The aim of content analysis is to reach common themes and relationships by examining the data in detail (Creswell, 2002, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

### 2.1. Outcomes of the data collection

The data collected from the Turkish Higher Education Council database showed that there are a total of 88 programmes of which 34 pursue

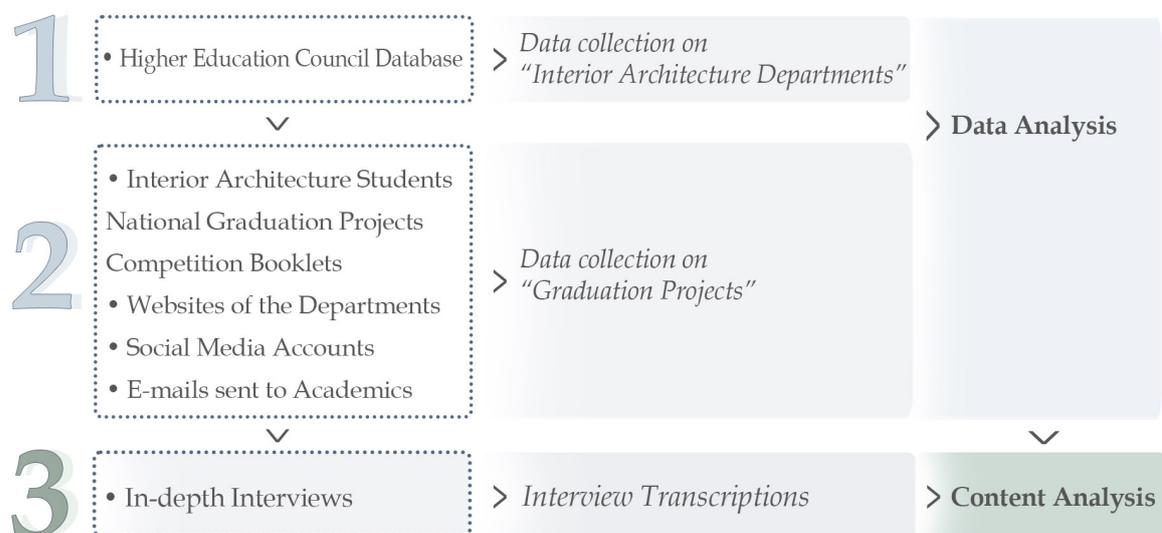


Figure 1. The steps of methodology of the study.

**Table 1.** Information regarding the participants of the study.

PARTICIPANTS	CENTER   PERIPHERY		PRIVATE   STATE		JURY   STUDIO	
PARTICIPANT 1		✓		✓		✓
PARTICIPANT 2	✓			✓	✓	
PARTICIPANT 3	✓			✓	✓	
PARTICIPANT 4	✓		✓		✓	
PARTICIPANT 5		✓		✓	✓	
PARTICIPANT 6		✓	✓			✓
PARTICIPANT 7	✓		✓			✓
PARTICIPANT 8	✓		✓			✓
PARTICIPANT 9	✓		✓			✓
PARTICIPANT 10		✓		✓		✓
PARTICIPANT 11	✓		✓			✓
PARTICIPANT 12	✓		✓			✓
PARTICIPANT 13		✓		✓		✓
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>9</b>

their education under the name of “Interior Architecture” and 41 under the name of “Interior Architecture and Environmental Design” in 74 universities, offering Interior Architecture education in 21 different cities in Turkey.

According to the MEKAN Competition outputs, the web pages and social media accounts of the relevant interior architecture departments that were

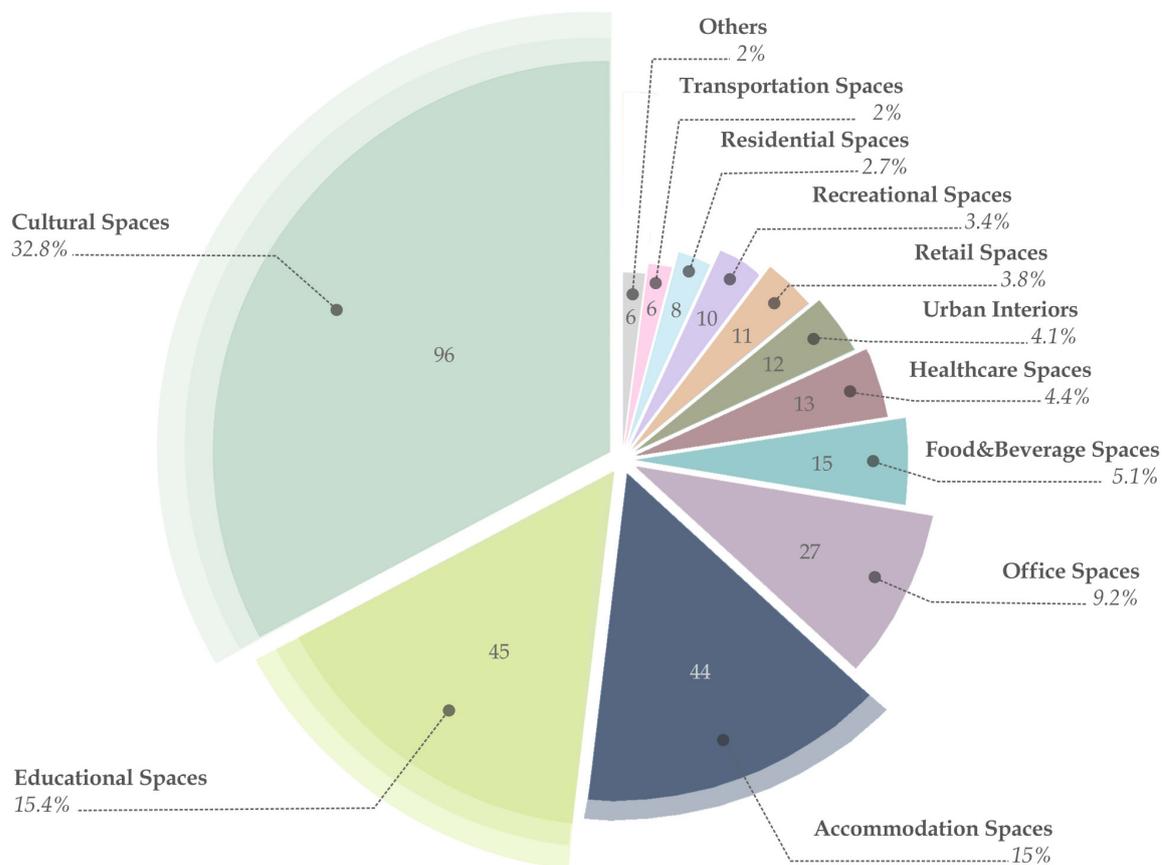
analysed by 3 independent researchers, there were specific tendencies in the graduation projects in interior architecture departments. It is also worth to say that the distinctive diversity of the universities contributes to the difference in educational models and curricula (Kaptan, 2007). According to the findings of our research, the following contexts varied in different universities: The type of the university (private

or state), the location of the university (center or periphery), function type (purpose of use of an interior space), cultural heritage value of the given project and the implementation method of the graduation projects (jury or studio). Graduation projects carried out in the departments are categorized under the heading of “function types” through the distribution of subjects (Figure 2).

The most preferred function type studied in graduation projects was “cultural spaces” with a rate of 32.8% among all function types. Cultural spaces were considered as an appropriate topic for the graduation project in terms of being a comprehensive project since the programme required functions such as exhibition areas, conference or seminar rooms, and sales units, where each sub-unit requires its own technical and design solution. Other frequently preferred project subjects are educational spaces with a rate of 15.4% and accommodation spaces with a rate of 15%. In support of this situation; Usta et al. (2022) analysed the interior architecture graduation projects that were

awarded in the MEKAN Competition held between 2012-2021, and stated that the most studied function, regardless of typology, was multifunctional interior spaces. In interior architecture graduation projects in Turkey, giving a multifunctional design problem with high complexity in terms of function at the point of measuring student competence has been one of the common attitudes preferred by many interior architecture departments.

In recent years, alterations were made in the design issues of graduation projects. Since 2019, topics related to the COVID-19 pandemic have come to the fore in graduation projects. Rethinking public spaces after the pandemic and producing solutions for emergencies constitute the main theme of the projects. Another example that draws attention among the project subjects is the projects aiming at “urban interiors”. Urban interiors, which correspond to a third space section where the interior and the exterior intersect, were one of the preferred subjects in order not to limit interior architecture to four walls. It was observed



**Figure 2.** Function types that are given as graduation projects in interior architecture programs of Turkey.

that 58% of the urban interior space projects were handled in Interior Architecture and Environmental Design departments and 42% in Interior Architecture departments. The fact that the spatial scope overflows from the “building boundaries-interior” scale to the “street-urban” scale gives an idea about the differences in the approach and scale of the project between these two departments. Last but not least and apart from the function type of the graduation project, the importance of undertaking a re-functioning purpose within a cultural heritage building was found via data analysis: 42.1% of the investigated graduation projects in Turkey were given as re-functioning of interior spaces of heritage value buildings.

Another point of focus in the data collection has been the implementation methods of the graduation projects of the universities offering interior architecture education in Turkey. It was determined that there are two basic processes, namely “jury” and “studio” and the universities that prefer to carry out the graduation project as a

studio are the majority (Figure 3).

Another remarkable point is that while the studio-jury distribution is proportionally distant from each other in Interior Architecture and Environmental Design departments, it is closer to each other in Interior Architecture departments.

## 2.2. Content analysis of the in-depth interviews held with the academics in interior architecture field in Turkey

In the light of the findings of data collection, 6 semi-structured questions were asked in in-depth interviews conducted with 13 participants who were department heads or graduate project coordinators in various interior architecture departments in Turkey.

- Q1. How are the design problem and the function type of the graduation project determined in your department?
- Q2. How is the size of the project area determined when defining the design problem?
- Q3. Can you give information

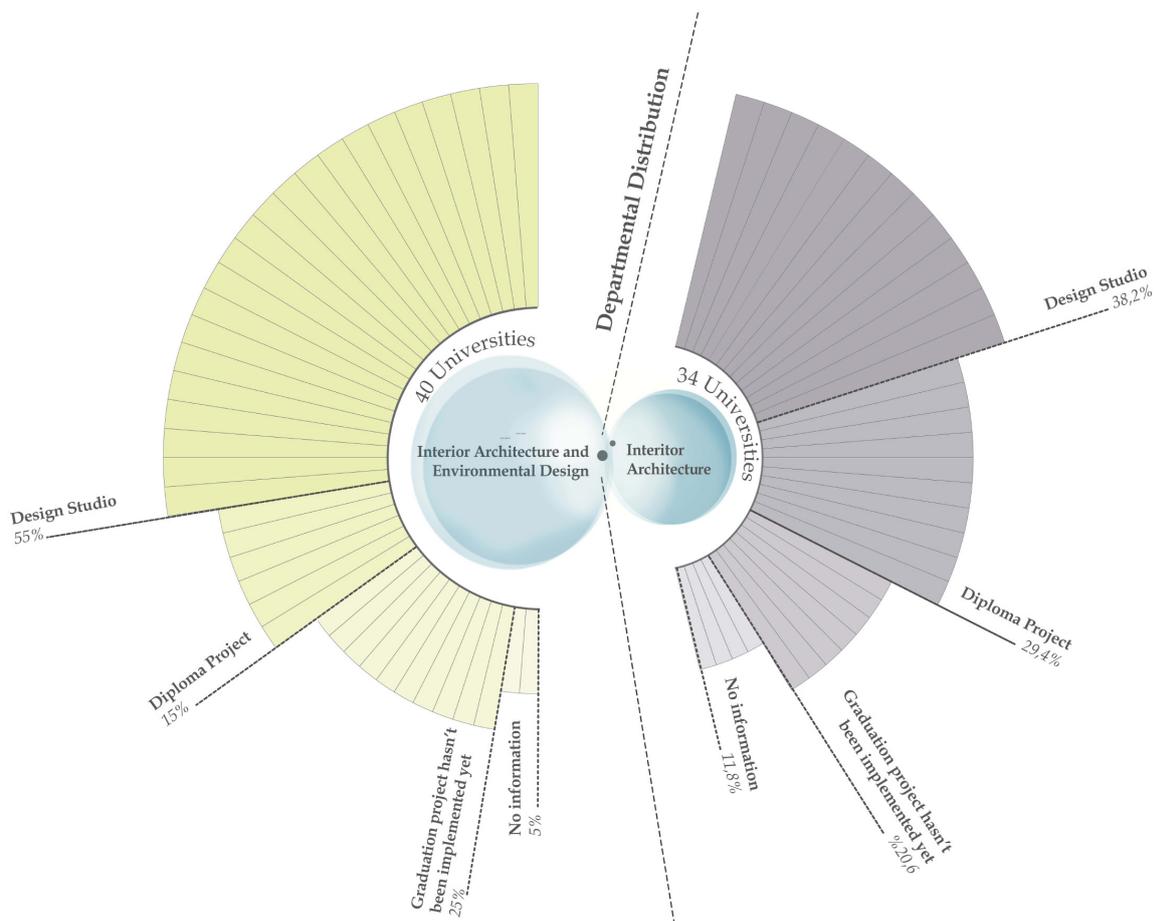


Figure 3. Implementation type of the graduation projects.

about the implementation method of the graduation project in your department?

- Q4. How are the jury members determined for the graduation project?
- Q5. Does the graduation project involve studying in buildings with cultural heritage value?
- Q6. How is the project area location selected for the graduation project?

Content analysis, a qualitative research method (Creswell, 2002), was conducted on the answers to these questions. The texts obtained by transcribing the in-depth interviews were evaluated through that methodology.

Three independent researchers examined the deciphered texts. Firstly, as mentioned above, 6 different questions were forwarded to the academics. After deciphering the interviews, “cluster of keywords” were found for each question’s answer according to the contextual similarities within the discourses of academics. Lastly, for each “cluster of keywords”, a “code” is given in order to act as an umbrella. For example, when Question 1 is for-

warded, if the academics mentioned the keywords “department, graduation project coordinator, and student”, we grouped them and gave a code namely “active actors” (Q1.5.) Through a deeper analysis of the texts, which are categorized according to these common codes, the aim was to reveal concepts and relations that were not noticed at first sight. The questions asked to the participants are listed below in the following paragraphs, presented with crucial codes and clusters of keywords.

**2.2.1. Determination of design problem and function type of graduation projects in interior architecture education**

In the first question (Q1), the participants were asked to explain how the design problem and the type of function of the space to be solved were determined in the graduation project in interior architecture education. In the answers given in the content analysis, 8 codes related to the context of the question emerge through the answers to this question (Figure 4).

**Q1** How are the design problem and the function type of the graduation project determined in your department?

	<b>CODES</b>	<b>CLUSTER OF KEYWORDS</b>
Q1.1.	<b>Multifunctionality</b>	Complex/Complicated/Complex Function/Multifunctional/Complexity
Q1.2.	<b>A new problem</b>	Unprecedented function type
Q1.3.	<b>Professional practice</b>	Market / Customer / Professional life / Threshold / Implementation / Co-operation
Q1.4.	<b>Public Space</b>	Spaces used by the public / Public functions / Spaces open to public use / Issues of public interest / Contribution to the city
Q1.5.	<b>Active Actors</b>	Department / Graduation Project Coordinator / Student
Q1.6.	<b>Departmental Discourse</b>	Department manifesto / Departmental directive / Departmental directive / Procedural directive / Custom / Departmental school / Strategic plan
Q1.7.	<b>Freedom</b>	Creativity / Freeing the student when choosing a problem / Freeing the student / Identity
Q1.8.	<b>Current topics</b>	Social issues / Trending topics / Designing accordingly to changing living conditions / Sustainability

Figure 4. Q1 subsets encountered in the content of the answers and keywords used in the answers.

Initially, what the interviewed academics emphasised while determining the design problem was the need of solving “multifunctional” spaces. Many of the participants often emphasized that the graduation project students should solve a problem of such complexity that they can carry the space design-solving skills to a higher level. Participant-10 explained the complex function-solving problem in the graduation project with the following words: “From day one to the graduation day in interior architecture education, we need to organize the professional knowledge gradually from basic to complex, from less to dense and from simple to rich” Since it takes a very long time and networking to encounter a multifunctional problem for interior architects in their professional life, the academics underlined the importance of giving multifunctional spaces as topics in the graduation project. Along with the multifunctionality, “Current Issues” related to future needs were preferred when determining the graduation project topics. In this way, students can approach any global crisis as highly aware interior architects who conduct thorough research. Participant-4 stated that they were oriented towards topics such as coding centre, incubation centre that would challenge students’ creativity for the future. Participant-3 stated that the concepts of climate crisis, sustainability and cultural sustainability were given as graduation project topics.

Another code that emerged in this question is “A New Problem”. Participant-3 stated that they concentrated on a function type that had not been studied in previous periods: “We try to give space typologies and subjects that were not encountered in previous design studios and have not been studied before”. On the other hand, Participant-1 responded to this first question as follows: “We do not find it right for students to design the same function typology over and over again. That is why, we choose among the subjects that our students can encounter often once they are professional interior architects”.

As can be seen in the answer related to the given function type, another

issue mentioned by Participant-1 is “Professional Practice”. Participant-11 mentioned the issue of professional practice as follows: “In the graduation project, we choose space typologies that an interior architect may encounter in professional life. We talk about how they should know their professional responsibilities and how they should be in contact with an architect or contractor as an interior designer.” While Participant-12 reported that they were sensitive about “the scale of interior architecture”, that is, “instilling in students the concern for scale in practical life” among the issues that the department cares about the professional practice, it was observed that Participant-8 and Participant-12 carried out their graduation projects in cooperation with organisations (municipalities, NGOs, etc.). It was seen that the function was not prioritized in some universities; the axis of the graduation project subject is determined in line with the collaborations. Participant-2, in the cluster of professional practice, stated: “We aim to guide the students with a real customer expectation in the graduation project”.

“Public Space”, a determinant in the problems given within the scope of the graduation project, was another contextual preference by the departments focusing on space solutions where the public can interact with each other. Designing within a public space was seen as a positive approach for students to work both with the urban and the interior scales.

Academics emphasized that three main “Actors”, namely, the members of the department, the graduation project coordinator and the students, played active roles in determining the design problem of the graduation project. There were indications at least one of these three actors came to the stage: The department council, the project coordinator or the students could choose the function of the space. Ensuring the inclusion of students as “decision-making” actors is an important issue that has to be thought of. There may be cases where different project topics are assigned to different sections within the graduation project studio, where students can choose among the options in

a fair system or study the subject they want. Having students work on a topic of their interest will contribute to the adoption of their projects and reveal their original design identities. This approach will keep the student's interest and curiosity active at every step and make the student feel professionally competent. Coded as "freedom" in this cluster, the universities aimed to support students to create their own design language and to direct students to the subjects they wanted to specialise in their professional lives.

In interviews, some of the participants reported that their departments had their own discourses. In this subset coded as "departmental discourse", the participants expressed the requirements in the graduation project course as a department manifesto or directive and a teaching directive. These manifestos, which also include the function of space given to students as a problem in graduation projects, are directives that include course objectives and outcomes as well as the curriculum. Participants-2, 5, 8 and 10 reported that the topics of graduation projects were also included in these manifestos. Among the participants, it is understood that there were some departments where the graduation project design problem could be freely chosen by the student.

### 2.2.2. Determination of project size of the graduation projects in interior architecture education

In the second question (Q2), the participants were asked to give information about the importance of the square-meter (sqm) of the project area in determining the design

problem, their approach towards interior architectural details and scale in interior architecture graduation projects (Figure 5).

"Project size" indicates the area of each dimension in a given volume of the project space. The interior architecture profession and the usage of square-meter in applications defined this question's inclusiveness in terms of "size". In addition, when asked about "the size of the project area" to academics, they responded using the word "square-meter" without mentioning "volume".

It was the mutual opinion of the majority of the participants that the graduation project should be bigger in terms of sqm when compared to the previous term projects. Participants 4, 11 and 12 stated that an increase of sqm starting from the first-year studio and progressing towards the fourth year was clearly visible. However, some participants stated that graduation projects should be in a scope that the student could master in terms of sqm, scale and detail, emphasising primarily the "scale of interior architecture". Participant-3 emphasised the importance of the size of the project area at the point of determining the design problem by stating that the sqm is more important than the function. Participants-5 and 6, by giving examples of their graduation projects in the previous years, stated that they had worked on projects with large sqm in the previous periods, but in the process they observed that the students did not have enough time to go into the interior architectural details in the project, so they decided to change their approach

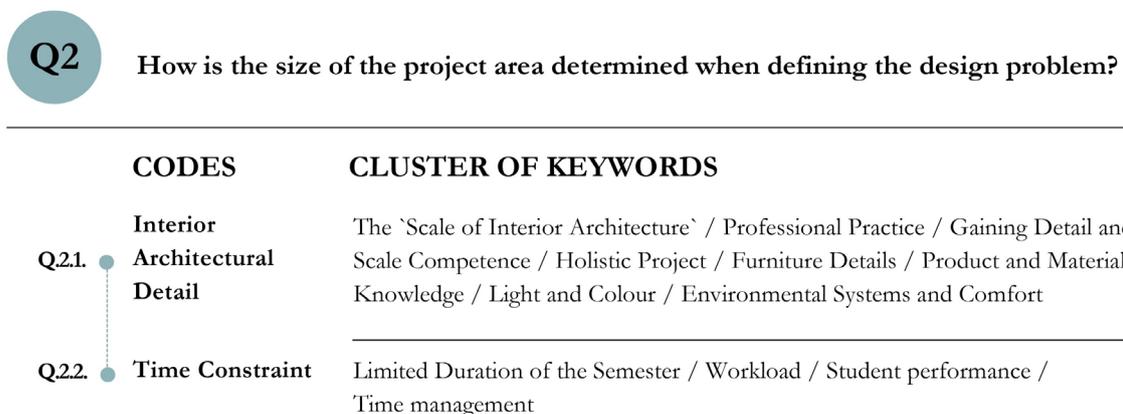


Figure 5. Q2 subsets encountered in the content of the answers and keywords used in the answers.

to the project and decided to work on projects with smaller sqm. Participant 5 criticised this situation with the statement, “The students almost started to produce architectural projects”. Participant-11 stated that it was compelling to solve the details for the whole project in projects with large sqm, so that details of some of the specific spaces were drawn. Participant-10 mentioned key expressions such as “contacting with the real material” and “working with the master in the workshop” while working with 1/1 scale in detail, on the other hand, he also said “While designing furniture, the student has to learn the details of wooden joints at school. Designers who know these details are hiring now.” In most of the interviews, the participants stated that 1/20 scale is the indispensable scale of interior architecture; therefore students are always expected to submit their projects with details drawn in 1/10, 1/5, 1/2, 1/1 scale as much as possible together with 1/20 scale. However, some departments are observed to be more flexible than others in terms of the size of the area to be solved and detail representations. Participant-9, who stated that they do not set a lower and upper limit for the sqm of the project area, mentioned that students are free in this regard and that the details required for their projects should be represented in the scale that the student seems appropriate on a print-out representation. The second code of the second question related to sqm and scaling is

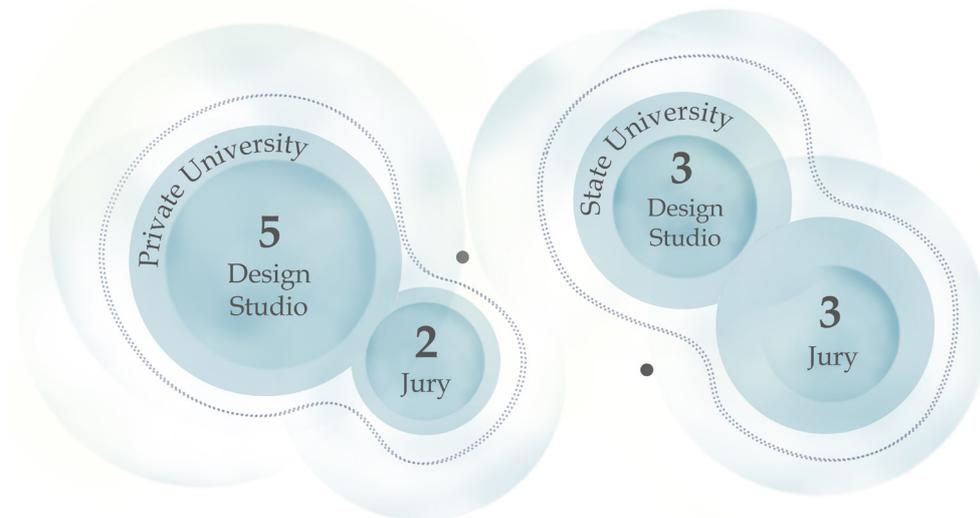
“Time Constraint”. The short duration of the semester affected the choice of project area sqm for some universities. Participant-12 stated that they had to run a project with a smaller sqm because their department had a shorter semester than other departments in Turkey. Many participants stated that some of the students had problems in time management of the project development process and could not get closer to the expected level of detail.

### 2.2.3. Implementation method of the graduation projects in interior architecture education

It is known that the graduation projects of the interior architecture programmes are carried out through two main implementation methods as “jury” and “studio”. The distribution of the project implementation methods of the interview participants is as follows (Figure 6).

The third question in the in-depth interviews aimed to reach the details of the processing process through the concepts used by the participants in evaluating these two methods (Figure 7).

The first code that came to the fore under this question was “Interaction”. The one-to-one relationship and communication inherent in design studio courses continue in the graduation project. While describing the graduation project supervision process, the participants emphasized the importance of the student’s communication with the jury members and the studio instructor, as well as the importance



**Figure 6.** Distribution of project implementation methods of the interview participants

of the student's communication with other students in the class, other students in the department and students in different departments. Participant-2 stated that during the juries, students could feel themselves alone and get support from their friends, creating a positive interaction between the students while developing their designs. He added that the interaction made students start to see their own mistakes by consulting others and criticizing other's projects, drawing attention to peer learning. Thus, as Kepez and Üst (2017) mentioned, the studio space is an environment of interaction and sharing where graduation project students can work for a period of time by interacting and communicating not only with peers but also with academics from their own discipline as well as from other disciplines. Nevertheless, interior architecture is informed not only by academic disciplines within a larger framework of design, but also by social sciences that are placed in a framework that is separate from design (Marshall-Baker, 2005). Keeping in mind that the spatial practice is defined as the production and reproduction of every single spatial characteristic as LeFebvre (1974) mentioned, the spatial practice of peer to peer and student to instructor in the studio space shapes the whole practice of education, not to mention the importance of the graduation project. Shortly, the studio space of the institutions assigned not only to

graduation projects but also other design studios has to be re-evaluated to raise the bar of the interior architecture profession.

Some academics stated that they run the graduation studio (which was called Project 6 or Project 8) as a continuation of previous studios. At this point, they emphasised that the graduation project had no special meaning except that it was the most comprehensive project the students had completed. In these universities, the graduation project progressed with critiques/revisions between the student and the project coordinator. Participants 2 and 5 often emphasised the importance of master-apprentice relationships and mentoring. Regardless of the implementation method of the graduation project, these interviewees preferred least intervention in the student's ideas.

Echoing former studies that explored students' skills to be acquired during the graduation project process (Cordan et al., 2014; Wilsing, 2019; Çavuş & Kaptan, 2022), "Student Competence" stands out as one of the second code deciphered from the second question. The academics teaching at universities that carried out the graduation project as a jury underlined that they aimed to train competent designers who could reflect their original design language to the graduation project and produce solutions individually. Participant-1 expressed this situation in the following words: "We support

Q3

Can you give information about the implementation method of the graduation project in your department?

	CODES	CLUSTER OF KEYWORDS
Q3.1	Interaction	Peer to Peer Communication / Peer learning / Group work / Student Jury Communication / Student Studio Conductor Communication / Intervention
Q3.2	Student competence	Individuality / Ability to Solve the Problem Alone / Responsibility Gaining Original Design Language Competence / Rehearsal of Professional Practice / Being a Colleague / Limited Duration for Interior Architecture Education
Q3.3	Research	Graduation Thesis / Conceptual Research / Seminar
Q3.4	Quantity of Students	Group Work / Studio implementation Method Variability / Jury Frequency Variability / Lack of Instructors in Quantity

Figure 7. Q3 subsets encountered in the content of the answers and keywords used in the answers.

our students just like a child starting to walk - and then we gradually let them go of our hands. “ Participant-5 stated that they perceived the graduation project as “the last step to get a driving licence” with the following words: “We try to give students a demo of market work. They will never find a mentor in the market. This approach helps the students to stand on their own feet and make their own decisions.” Similarly, Participant-2 made the following statement in support of the other participants: “We want to be sure whether our students can solve the problem on their own within the given time. There are also opposing viewpoints among the participants that pointed out that 4 years of undergraduate education was not sufficient in terms of “the ability to do interior architecture”. Participants-8, 10 and 11 stated that for this reason, they preferred the graduation project to be taught as a “studio” in which the students could develop their project by receiving critiques from the studio coordinator twice a week, rather than as a “jury”. They thought that this situation was more efficient in terms of learning the practice of interior architecture in the most comprehensive way. It is apparent that the most fundamental problem in interior architecture education is the insufficient duration, which lasts 4 years / 8 semesters. The graduation project is the ceremonial threshold where the students are expected to reflect all their knowledge and take the initiative as individual designers. It would be much more efficient to spread the graduation project over two semesters instead of a single semester and to start the project with research-oriented courses that will enable students to gain in-depth knowledge about the project area and the subject. As Guerin and Thompson (2004) underlined, instructors must be eager to teach future professionals the importance of research that adds to the body of knowledge to strengthen the bridge between practice and education. Learning critical thinking before technical solutions is important to graduate with a design solution based on a cause-effect relationship. The third code that attracted attention in the question of the way of process-

ing the graduation project was determined as “Preliminary Research”. Two participants stated that the graduation thesis, defined as a report including research, analysis and examination, helps students to gain in-depth knowledge about the existing structure and the space given as a problem. Participant-9 defined the graduation thesis within the scope of the graduation project as follows: “Students analyse theses related to their subjects, read academic articles... We see this as an important experience; it is crucial to do conceptual research on the subject before the graduation project.” The findings show that students learn how to approach their projects conceptually and with which design idea they will solve their projects through preliminary research before starting their professional practice.

In most of the interviews, it was emphasised that the ratio of the number of students and the number of teaching staff was important. Participants stated that the increase in student quotas in parallel with the increase in the number of universities and programmes providing interior architecture education caused the “number of teaching staff” who were interior architects to be insufficient. Thus, the number of students per lecturer in project groups reaches 18-20. It is seen that there are interior architecture programmes that carry out graduation projects in the form of group work due to the high number of students and the number of lecturers not being able to respond to this demand. When accreditation criteria are on the agenda of various interior architecture departments in Turkey, it is known that under ideal conditions, there should be 12 students per lecturer, which should not exceed 15. For this reason, it has been noticed that arrangements such as “Group Work”, “Change in Studio Implementation Method” and “Change in Jury Frequency” have been made.

#### **2.2.4. Determination of jury members of the graduation projects in interior architecture education**

In the fourth question (Q4), the academics were asked to explain how the jury members are determined in

interior architecture graduation juries. The responses to the question are categorised under 3 codes (Figure 8).

“Diversity” is the first code that came to the fore under this question. Most of the participants found “diversity” of the jury members crucial for evaluating students’ projects. Most of the interviewed academics preferred that an interior architecture jury should be blended with academics who were experts in their field (conservation expert, acoustics expert, etc.), experienced professionals, graduates. Participant-10 summarized this situation as: “In the market, it is important to combine academic knowledge with theoretical implementation. In our department, we form a jury from a team that can see the projections of the project with theoretical, analytical, empirical, rational knowledge.”

The participants emphasised that they achieved this diversity with jury members variable “connections”. It was frequently stated that the team was enriched with full-time and part-time lecturers in interior architecture departments, sometimes lecturers from different departments of the same university, and sometimes jury members outside the institution. However, the departments with a high number of academic staff conduct their juries with their own academic staff yet open to all audiences.

In the process of evaluating students’ projects, regardless of the course implementation method (studio or jury), “fair jury time” and “fair evalu-

ation process” were common concerns among the participants. While paying attention to ensuring equality, Participant-3, with their experiences from previous years and semesters, observed that when a jury session exceeded the evaluation of 20 student projects, the performance of students and jury members also decreased. For this reason, in graduation project courses with more than 20 students, they aimed to make a fair evaluation process by dividing the jury into two parallel sections. Participant-10 stated that they proceeded within the framework of the equation of the number of jury and students, which was important in accordance with IMEPAK[3] and CIDA [4] accreditations, and that the fairness in the evaluation was designed in a way that did not exceed 15 students. Last but not least, a rotation system in jury evaluations was practiced by Participant-12’s department, as they thought it was not fair to have a single faculty member/director running the studio.

**2.2.5. Cultural heritage value of the graduation project in interior architecture education**

In the fifth question (Q5), the participants were asked to provide information about working on buildings with cultural heritage value (Figure 9).

“Historical character of the space” was the most encountered subset. Participants-7, 11 and 13 stated that “Industrial Heritage Buildings” were definitely studied as a subject of the

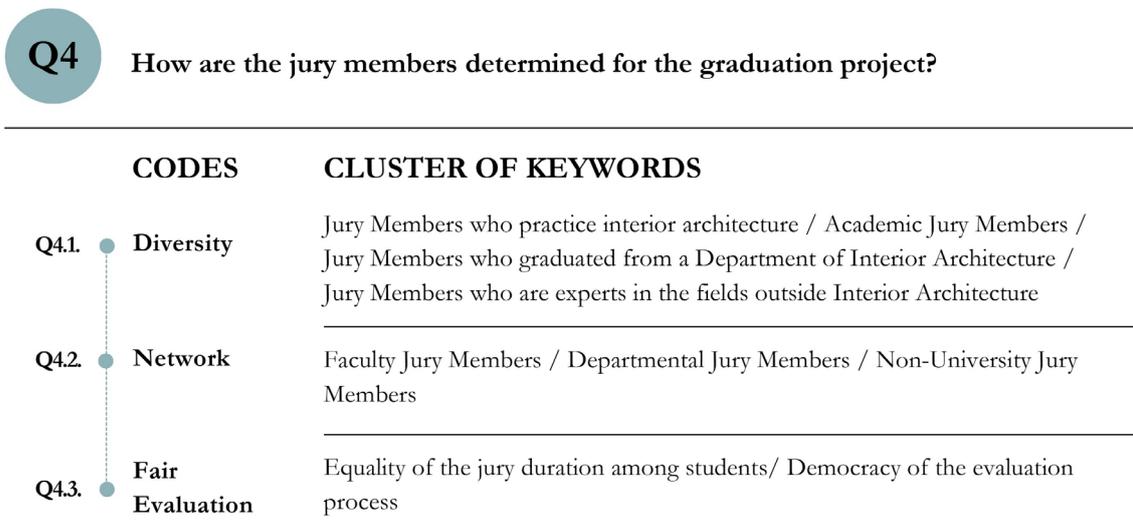


Figure 8. Q4 subsets encountered in the content of the answers and keywords used in the answers.

Q5

Does the graduation project involve studying in buildings with cultural heritage value?

CODES	CLUSTER OF KEYWORDS
Q5.1. Historical Character of the Space	Industrial Heritage Buildings / Out-of-function Buildings / Re-functioning Projects / Historic Buildings
Q5.2. Limit of Expertise	Architectural Conservation / Architectural History / Architectural Theory

Figure 9. Q5 subsets encountered in the content of the answers and keywords used in the answers.

graduation project. Some participants worked on existing “historical buildings”, while only Participant-7 worked on “Re-functionalisation Projects” within “Out-of-function Buildings”. For instance, Participant-12 gave a residential apartment building, which was considered a historical building and cultural heritage value, as a project and presented it to the students as a “re-functioning” project, and Participant-8 stated that Turkish Republican heritage buildings were given in the graduation project in their departments. Throughout their professional lives, interior architects encounter not only recently constructed buildings but also buildings that have lost their function but need to be preserved as cultural assets. Since Turkey is rich in cultural heritage buildings, it is both an opportunity and a responsibility for the students to gain awareness and learn about the preservation of cultural heritage buildings. However, as Üst and Güler (2021) stated; it would be unrealistic to expect this to happen only with graduation projects. With the help of a continuous approach, students’ awareness of conservation can be increased and they can establish a correct relationship with cultural assets within the conservation framework. It was observed that most universities that preferred cultural heritage buildings as a project area were located in the center such as Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir, and conservation-oriented projects were rarely included in the scope of graduation projects in peripheral cities.

Most of the participants stated that they would like to guide the students working on buildings with cultural

heritage value. However, due to the “Lack of Experts” in the field of architectural conservation, the topic of heritage could not be realized throughout the semester. It was a mutual opinion among the interviews that the graduation project students should be able to cope with such a design problem where they could acquire conservation awareness. Participant-6 stated that another difficulty of working in buildings characterised as cultural heritage is accessing the technical drawings of the building. Similarly, Participant-5 also expressed the difficulty of obtaining permission to conduct fieldwork on the building.

#### 2.2.6. Location of the project site of the graduation projects in interior architecture education

In the sixth question (Q6), the participants were asked what criteria they considered while choosing a project area within the scope of the graduation project. In the content analysis, the responses to the question were grouped into 3 subsets as “University Constraints”, “On-site Learning” and “Collective Learning” (Figure 10).

Because of “University constraints” such as budget, finding a vehicle for transportation, access ease, and accommodation, interviewed academics preferred the graduation project located in nearby surroundings. Compared to private universities, state universities have difficulties obtaining permission to travel out of the city. Participant-3 stated that this was one of the main reasons for choosing the project area from the city of the university.

Q6

How is the project area location selected for the graduation project?

	CODES	CLUSTER OF KEYWORDS
Q6.1	Constraints due to the University	Access / Logistics / Budget / Vehicle / Accommodation / Permission
Q6.2	On-site Learning	Embodying the Problem / Determining the current situation / On-site detection / Seeing the Space / Feeling the Atmosphere / Design within the near environment
Q6.3	Collective Learning	Experiencing the project area together, Learning through questions and answers

Figure 10. Q6 subsets encountered in the content of the answers and keywords used in the answers.

“On-site Learning” is crucial in carrying out the graduation project on a site where they can have easy physical access. Participant-13 stated the importance of site visits: “Perceptions from the given technical drawings and site observations are totally different.” In addition, Participant-1 stated that site visits helped students to shape their problems in their minds and to perceive the atmosphere of the project.

“Collective Learning” holds importance as the field trips allow students to experience the information on-site and share the process with their instructors. Participants shared a mutual opinion that field trips contributed to the learning process with question-and-answer sessions on the project site. Participant-3 stated that the learning process of the graduation project was easier when the students visited the site with the jury members. Participant-7 supported this discourse with the following words: “If the project area is not accessible, then, this area is not chosen for the graduation project.”

### 3. Discussion and recommendations

In the light of the interviews, the present work reveals that the academics highlight three main mutual themes namely: “System and Resources”, “Competence” and “Context”. Together with the graduation projects, interior architecture education in Turkey is evaluated and criticised collectively by using these mutual themes in this section. In the end, recommendations

towards the education of interior architecture education in Turkey is made by the guidance of the findings. It should be noted that the realisation of the following recommendations will take a long time in Turkey, as the necessities under these mutual themes are practical but difficult to achieve.

First, “System and Resources” theme presents the constraints of time, quota, departmental, and institutional decisions. The systemic constraints that participants shared with us were not universal, but institutional limitations. However, it would be unfair to define interior design education solely through the limits of institutions. Increasing the numbers of colloquia, congresses, and conferences that are and will be held under the subject interior architecture discipline can help us overcome the barriers that are set between institutions by bringing academics together on a national level.

Second, “Competence” of the students is an important discussion topic in interior architecture education. The academic gatherings will most likely have participatory discussion sessions on the current location of where the interior architecture education stands, whether it is given under a university or a vocational school. We believe that having hands-on practice competence equipped with a theory and knowledge would help the student to have an easier transition from an undergraduate student to a professional. Therefore, the applications under both vocation-

al schools and university departments should be merged and integrated in a desired scenario of having fully equipped professionals in the field. Exchanging knowledge between the two types of institutions (vocational and university) would be a great chance for the future interior architects to paint a mere picture about their professional life ahead. Involving all the actors to these debates to have culmination in the end to this prospective problem of “educating the interior architect” for the market or for the sake of having a creative interior architect. Not only the interaction between the students, instructors and faculty members would be possible through these gatherings, but also the intellectual and professional competence of the students would be in the making, long before they graduate.

Third and last, “Context” is the theme encountered while deciphering the interviews. The mutual opinion of academics was that students should be confronted with a complex problem in which they can exhibit the skills gained since the first studio of interior architecture education and should produce a solution to this problem in the graduation project. While deciding the graduation project topics, it is important to consider the context that enables students to question and gain awareness on different subjects. In some cases, this means designing spaces by addressing current challenges such as climate crisis, sustainability and cultural sustainability; in others, it means producing conservation oriented projects by addressing cultural heritage buildings; and in other cases, it means rethinking urban interiors which correspond to a third space section, where interior and exterior intersects. Therefore, design competitions as a transition between the educational and professional process can be the guides in helping interior architect candidates find this identity.

We believe that learning should not remain only on the level of studio-based design solving, it should go further with hands-on practice through internships. It is crucial for interior architecture students to be involved in internships under an office

branch or an ongoing construction site not for a summer break time (as applied in Turkey), but as long as possible. This will be amplifying the skills of decision-making, time-managing, interior design application observation, master-apprentice interaction, customer-interior architect interaction and so on. Students will be able to train themselves as interior architect professionals, not only by solving representations behind the computer screen before becoming an “interior architect”.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> MEKAN 2023 National Graduation Project Competition for Interior Architecture Students, organized officially for the tenth time in 2023, is organized by Istanbul Kültür University Department of Interior Architecture and Environmental Design. The competition, involving Interior Architecture students from Turkey and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus with their graduation projects, serves as an important bridge between the educational process and profession by allowing young interior architect candidates to introduce their design approach and philosophy through their graduation projects. URL: <https://icmim.iku.edu.tr/tr/mekan-yarismasi> (Accessed on September 15th, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Although MEKAN competition has started to organize in 2012, the booklets of MEKAN competition have started to be published by the year 2015. No accessible data can be found regarding the results of the competition held between 2012 and 2015.

<sup>3</sup> IMEPAK is the accreditation body for Interior Architecture/ Interior Architecture and Environmental Design undergraduate programs in Turkey, Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and Turkish speaking countries. <https://www.taplak.org/about> (Accessed on September 18th, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> The Council for Interior Design Accreditation (CIDA) is an independent, non-profit accrediting organization for interior design education programs at colleges and universities in the United States and internationally. <https://www.accredit-id.org/> (Accessed on September 18th, 2023).

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