Niche to National: The rise of design education

From elite institutions to over 300 universities now, design education is driving innovation, employment, and cultural change across India, writes World University of Design VC

Sanjay Gupta

Design education in India has undergone a quiet but far-reaching transformation over the past decade, becoming an increasingly central part of the country's knowledge economy and higher education landscape. What began as a niche field reserved for a few elite institutions has now expanded into a robust and diverse ecosystem of programmes, disciplines, and delivery models.

This evolution has occurred alongside, and often in response to, wider shifts in India's social, economic, and technological frameworks. Institutions such as the National Institute of Design (NID) laid the foundations in the 1960s, but it is only in the past decade that design education has begun to move beyond its original boundaries and assert a wider relevance.

A landmark moment in this journey was the establishment of the World University of Design (WUD) in 2018 — the first university in India dedicated solely to creative education — which offered a comprehensive academic structure for design disciplines and served as a catalyst for broader curricular and institutional reforms.

Design education and NEP

One of the key drivers of change in design education has been the increasing recognition of design as a strategic tool not just for aesthetics, but for innovation, problem-solving, and human-centered development. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 formally acknowledged the creative disciplines as essential to holistic education. This prompted universities across the country to offer undergraduate and postgraduate design programs, incorporating interdisciplinary approaches and flexible curricular models.

WUD not only preempted NEP but was among the first institutions to fully implement NEP's provisions — from multidisciplinary electives to multiple entry and exit points, to a strong focus on sustainability and community engagement. This proactive alignment of design education with national academic policy has led to diversification of the student base and a democratisation of access to design learning.

Curricular reform has been central to this expansion. Earlier design education in India was largely driven by studio-based learning with a focus on traditional domains such as product design, graphic design, and fashion. Over time, this model evolved to include emerging areas like interaction design, service design, digital product design, animation, game design, and strategic design. WUD, for instance, introduced specialisations in animation and game design in 2018 — well ahead of the curve, anticipating the rise of the AVGC sector, which

would later be identified as a national growth area in the Prime Minister's 2023 Independence Day speech. Likewise, disciplines like UI/UX, curation, and digital humanities, which had limited presence in mainstream academic settings, found structured and rigorous formats at WUD and similar institutions.

Administrative and statutory changes have also contributed significantly. The passing of the NIFT & NID (Amendment) Acts, in 2006 & 2016 respectively, which granted Institutes of National Importance status to these institutions, was a turning point. The University Grants Commission (UGC) has in recent years approved design as a distinct discipline within its purview, allowing for greater recognition of design degrees and smoother regulatory pathways for new programmes.

WUD's status as a university — rather than an autonomous institute — allowed it to award degrees across multiple design specialisations under one umbrella, offering both disciplinary depth and interdisciplinary flexibility. This institutional model has inspired many private and public universities to initiate their own design schools or integrate design into existing departments.

The expansion in design education is reflected not just in the number of institutions, but also in the diversity of learners. Design is no longer the preserve of urban, upper-middle-class youth; students from small towns, tier-2 and tier-3 cities, and non-traditional backgrounds are now part of the design ecosystem. This broadening of the student base has been enabled by better outreach, more accessible entrance processes, scholarships, and awareness of the wide applicability of design skills.

Placements and prospects

The employment landscape for design graduates has also shifted in significant ways. Earlier, design students largely sought placements in industries like fashion, publishing, or product manufacturing. Today, design professionals are recruited across a range of sectors including IT, e-commerce, healthcare, education, automotive, public services,

and governance. Corporates now see value in hiring design thinkers for roles in user experience, digital transformation, branding, service delivery, and innovation labs. As per recent industry surveys, UI/UX design, animation and game design, and strategic design roles are among the fastest-growing employment categories in the creative sector.

The rise of startups, digital platforms, and tech-based services has only accelerated this demand. WUD's placement data reflects these trends, with high-value projects and job offers coming from leading firms across industries, and alumni entering global roles or launching successful ventures of their own.

Design education has also begun to expand its epistemological foundations, moving beyond the studio to engage with research, theory, and social impact. PhD programs in design are now being offered by more institutions, allowing for deeper engagement with design history, policy, pedagogy, and applied research. WUD, again a pioneer in this regard, awarded its first design doctorate in 2024, and has since positioned itself as a hub for creative research, with international grants, conferences, and research collaborations to its credit. The university's work in post office heritage buildings—funded by the UK's AHRC — is an example of how design education is engaging with cultural memory, adaptive reuse, and place-based inquiry in ways that are both academically rigorous and socially relevant.

Another important shift is the integration of design with technology and business. While earlier education models maintained a separation between design and engineering or management disciplines, the contemporary model encourages hybrid courses that bridge these domains. WUD's BTech program in Computer Science and Design is emblematic of this trend, combining core coding competencies with design thinking, interface development, and application in areas like AR/VR, AI, and immersive systems.

The road ahead

Design education's future is poised to grow in alignment with global trends

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such as sustainability, digital transformation, and inclusive innovation. There is increasing demand for designers who can work in policy, public health, education, and climate adaptation, particularly in the Global South. Indian institutes will need to build capacities to train such designers — not just as practitioners, but as critical thinkers and changemakers. Mentorship, international collaborations, and real-world immersion will remain essential pillars.

WUD's role in this transformation has been catalytic. From reimagining the boundaries of design education to leading policy conversations and setting institutional benchmarks, WUD has influenced how design is taught, learned, and positioned in India. The rise of 300 universities and 3,000 colleges offering design programmes in India today is not merely a statistical achievement but a cultural and intellectual shift towards recognising creativity, innovation, and human-centered thinking as core to India's future. Design education is no longer at the margins — it is now central to how India imagines its development, economy, and identity in the decades to come. ◪

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