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The Influence of Alumni Engagement on the Enhancement of the Interior Design Program at Ahlia University

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Abstract

In the contemporary era, characterized by rapid advancements, the workforce and the global market are experiencing unprecedented changes in their demands. Consequently, universities are required to consistently modify their programs to align with these ever-changing demands. The primary objective of this study is to examine how the involvement of alumni influences the enhancement of Ahlia University's undergraduate interior design program. The survey, conducted among graduates from the interior design program between 2015 and 2022, had the specific objective of collecting their perspectives on the program's efficacy in accomplishing its mission. From a pool of 218 alumni, a substantial number of 160 individuals actively participated in the survey, providing valuable insights and feedback on the Interior Design Program's mission fulfillment. This response rate represents a significant portion of the alumni population and contributes substantial insights to the overall findings of the study. The survey results demonstrate a high level of satisfaction among alumni regarding the Interior Design program, indicating that they perceive the program to be successful in accomplishing its mission. Furthermore, certain aspects of the survey revealed a noteworthy increase in alumni satisfaction levels.

Keywords: *Alumni engagement, interior design program, ahlia university, curriculum, enhancement, mentorship opportunities, community development.*

Introduction

“Assessment theories and academics alike espouse the importance of feedback on performance assessment tasks for supporting improvement and progress in student learning achievement.”

Al-Bashir, Kabir & Rahman, 2016:38

A wide range of individuals and entities are involved in higher education, including employers, faculty members, students, parents, and accrediting bodies. All these stakeholders have a significant interest in the accomplishments and success of graduates from higher education institutions. Among the various stakeholders involved in educational programs, alumni play a crucial role due to their capacity to provide valuable feedback, which can be used to assess the effectiveness of these programs (Escobar, 2008). Purcell, Henriksen, and Spengler (2019) have documented that accreditation bodies require universities to maintain comprehensive alumni records and actively ensure that their academic programs consistently meet the expectations of their stakeholders. Marshall (2018) argues that alumni play a crucial role as key stakeholders in higher education. This is due to their status as direct customers who receive services from the

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institution, as well as their expectations regarding the outcomes of their education. Additionally, alumni feedback plays a crucial role in shaping educational institutions, encompassing various aspects such as curriculum refinement and the cultivation of a supportive environment conducive to personal and academic development (Das, 2023). By harnessing the knowledge and perspectives of alumni, educational institutions can acquire valuable insights into the dynamic demands of the industry, pinpoint areas for enhancement, and furnish students with indispensable guidance and mentorship. According to Nanda et al. (2021) and Escobar (2008), alumni play a crucial role in assessing the success of a program, serving as a reliable measure of the program's effectiveness and the skills acquired through their educational journey. According to Escobar (2008), alumni studies provide valuable data at the department level, where the potential for improvement is greatest (p. 128). Collecting this information periodically is beneficial for the program.

In the context of Ahlia University's interior design program, it is crucial to establish consistent communication channels with alumni and actively seek their guidance and feedback. This is done to ensure that the program remains competitive and effectively equips graduates with the necessary skills and knowledge to excel in their careers. To achieve this, the Professional Relations Directorate has taken the initiative of conducting alumni follow-up activities through its dedicated Alumni club. The club maintains a comprehensive database that contains current contact information of the alumni (URL 1). Therefore, the primary objective of this research study is to investigate the influence of alumni engagement on the enhancement of the undergraduate interior design program at Ahlia University.

Therefore, this article explores the significance of employing alumni surveys as a potent method for assessing the efficacy of interior design programs. These surveys provide valuable feedback on multiple facets, encompassing the curriculum, faculty, facilities, and overall effectiveness of the program. Additionally, alumni possess a wealth of knowledge and experience that can offer invaluable insights into the fundamental skills and knowledge necessary for achieving success in the field of interior design. By utilizing alumni feedback through the implementation of surveys, educational institutions can make well-informed decisions aimed at improving their interior design programs and effectively equipping students for the demands of the industry (Das, 2023).

Program History

The bachelor's degree in interior design at Ahlia University aims to attract imaginative students from diverse backgrounds in terms of study, age, gender, and nationality. The program aims to develop their knowledge, skills, and attributes, transforming them into professional innovators in the field of interior design for built environments. The program introduces an integrated design approach to interior spaces, considering the physical space, the people, and the surrounding furniture, objects, activities, and interactions within that space.

In dynamic studio-based educational environments, students collaborate to learn and gain design experiences in various types of interior environments. In the studios, students are provided with theoretical, historical, and technical knowledge and practice. They also cultivate their oral, written, and visual communication skills in a collaborative environment.

Our students are equipped with problem-solving, critical thinking, and futuristic skills to meet industry demands. Our graduates are skilled in various design fields, such as interior architecture, furniture, gardens, TV, and theater set design, exhibitions, and event planning. They possess strong abilities in self-development, teamwork, and leadership. Additionally, their

awareness of sustainability and socio-cultural issues related to Green Design qualifies them to creatively address the challenges of human health, lifestyles, and community development in Bahrain and beyond.

Centre of Measurement and Evaluation (CME) at Ahlia University

The CME at Ahlia University plays a crucial role in facilitating the ongoing enhancement of educational offerings. This is achieved through the provision of evidence-based insights and recommendations, which are derived from rigorous assessment and evaluation processes. Through its specialized knowledge and unwavering dedication to achieving the highest standards, the (CME) plays a pivotal role in elevating the caliber of education and fostering a climate of ongoing advancement within the university (URL 2).

The assessment methods utilized by the Centre of Measurement and Evaluation (CME) at Ahlia University are subject to variation based on the specific context and purpose of the evaluation. The CME commonly employs various assessment methods to collect extensive data and gain valuable insights. Some of the assessment methods commonly employed by the CME may include:

- The CME has the capability to develop and implement surveys to gather both quantitative and qualitative data from a range of stakeholders, including students, faculty, alumni, and employers. These surveys have the potential to offer valuable feedback regarding different facets of educational programs, encompassing levels of satisfaction, learning achievements, and perceptions of program efficacy.
- Focus Groups: The CME has the capability to conduct focus group discussions to collect comprehensive qualitative data from participants. These discussions serve as a platform for fostering open dialogue, enabling participants to exchange their viewpoints, experiences, and recommendations pertaining to educational programs or initiatives.
- Interviews: The CME has the potential to carry out structured or semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, including faculty members, program coordinators, or industry professionals. These interviews offer a valuable opportunity to acquire comprehensive insights and expert perspectives regarding the efficacy and influence of educational practices.
- The CME involves the examination of various documents, including course materials, syllabuses, assessment rubrics, and program reports. This analysis aims to evaluate the extent to which educational programs align with their stated objectives, learning outcomes, and industry standards.
- Performance Assessments: The CME has the capacity to develop and implement performance assessments, including examinations, projects, or portfolio evaluations, to assess students' proficiency in specific knowledge and skills within their respective disciplines.
- External Benchmarking: The (CME) involves the comparison of Ahlia University's program performance and outcomes with those of similar institutions or industry standards. This process aims to identify both areas of strength and areas for improvement within Ahlia University's programs.

Literature Review

In recent years, there has been a notable expansion and progress in higher education

institutions, primarily driven by technological advancements and the evolving demands of various industries (URL3). Consequently, institutions of higher education are consistently making efforts to deliver education programs of exceptional quality that equips students with the necessary knowledge, skills, and competences required for the future. To accomplish this objective, active involvement of academic institutions with their alumni is of utmost importance. Alumni possess valuable perspectives and experiences that can significantly contribute to the development and improvement of academic programs (Puerzer & Rooney, 2022). The process entails the establishment and maintenance of connections with alumni, utilizing their expertise, and soliciting their input to influence the curriculum, teaching methodologies, and overall structure of the program. By engaging alumni in the continuous advancement of their programs, universities can leverage their practical expertise, industry connections, and firsthand experiences, thereby guaranteeing the program's relevance and alignment with contemporary industry trends (Adedeji, Eshofonie & Tomisin, 2019). The importance of alumni engagement resides in its capacity to offer a retrospective viewpoint on the program's strengths and weaknesses. Saunders-Smiths and de Graaff (2012) assert that alumni offer distinctive perspectives on the efficacy of the program, as they have firsthand experience with its curriculum, pedagogy, and career outcomes. The perspectives of external stakeholders, such as industry professionals, can provide valuable insights into areas that require improvement, identify gaps in the curriculum, and highlight emerging industry demands. These perspectives may not be immediately evident to faculty members or current students (Prabowo & Naylah, 2020). Marshall (2018) argues that alumni surveys play a crucial role as an evaluation tool, capturing the self-reported perceptions, recollections, and attitudes of graduates after completing an academic program. These surveys offer perceptual data that can provide valuable insights into the extent to which the program's goals and expectations have been achieved, as well as offer guidance on how programs can effectively respond to the changing job market. Hermes (2002) highlights the significance of utilizing surveys as a common assessment method to evaluate alumni perceptions. The valuable insights derived from these surveys are instrumental in identifying areas that require program enhancement.

Additionally, numerous research studies have emphasized the beneficial influence of alumni engagement on the quality of academic programs and the outcomes of students across diverse academic disciplines. For instance, a recent study conducted by Mainga et al. (2022) revealed that the active participation of alumni in business school programs resulted in notable benefits such as increased curriculum relevance, expanded networking prospects for students, and improved employability. Ingram (2005) highlights the significance of monitoring former students and collecting their feedback to gain insights into their requirements and enhance the program. McAlexander (2001) examines the effects of the relationship between alumni and universities, as well as alumni evaluations of their college experiences, on the manifestation of loyalty. The study suggests that robust alumni relationships can result in favorable outcomes for the university. Younis (2002) examines the utilization of alumni feedback as an evaluative instrument for the enhancement and refinement of curriculum development. Gaier (2005) discovered a noteworthy positive correlation between the level of satisfaction expressed by alumni regarding their academic experience and their present engagement with the university, encompassing financial contributions and active participation. Similarly, Ingram et al. (2005) have shown that maintaining connections with alumni serves multiple purposes. These include providing networking opportunities for current students to secure internships and professional positions, meeting the requirements of accreditation agencies, and evaluating the program's

effectiveness in preparing graduates for their professional pursuits.

Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the extant literature on alumni engagement in educational programs. This study aims to investigate the various approaches utilized by universities to cultivate alumni relationships, and to assess the effects of these initiatives on student achievement and program enhancement. By conducting a thorough analysis of the results obtained from multiple studies, the objective is to present a comprehensive overview of the most effective strategies and potential obstacles related to alumni engagement within the framework of educational program transformation. In addition to conducting a comprehensive literature review, our research methodology will involve conducting interviews with alumni who have graduated from Ahlia University's Interior Design program. This approach aims to provide a more profound insight into the concrete advantages that arise from cultivating robust connections between graduates and their alma mater. Through conducting these interviews, our aim is to reveal the distinctive strategies and initiatives that Ahlia University has employed to promote alumni engagement within their Interior Design program. By disseminating these success stories, our objective is to motivate other educational institutions to prioritize alumni connections and leverage the transformative potential it can exert on their respective programs.

The conceptualization of alumni engagement in higher education involves several key elements

Alumni engagement encompasses the establishment of connections, facilitation of communication, promotion of active participation, encouragement of continuous learning, and guaranteeing reciprocal advantages between educational institutions and their alumni. Establishing robust affiliations with alumni fosters a sense of camaraderie and allegiance, thereby resulting in their active engagement and valuable contributions towards the achievement of the institution's objectives. Effective communication plays a crucial role in keeping alumni well-informed about institutional updates and offers them a platform to express their experiences and provide valuable feedback. Alumni are strongly encouraged to engage in a wide range of activities, including mentoring, guest speaking, volunteering, and fundraising. By utilizing their time, resources, and expertise, alumni can make a significant impact on the institution and its community, thereby benefiting both. Institutions also provide avenues for lifelong learning and professional growth, aiding alumni in staying up to date in their respective domains and improving their career prospects. Ultimately, the engagement of alumni should aim to establish a mutually advantageous relationship, encompassing networking prospects, resource accessibility, career assistance, and a sustained sense of pride and identity for both alumni and the educational institution.

Benefits of Alumni Engagement in Program Improvement

Alumni play a crucial role in reshaping the higher education curriculum by providing valuable insights from their professional experiences and perspectives. As representatives of the university dispersed throughout the business world, alumni serve as a reflection of the university's quality and effectiveness in preparing graduates for the workforce (Haza et al.2022). Their feedback can help identify areas where the curriculum needs to be updated or adapted to meet the evolving demands of the job market (Para, 2022). Alumni can also provide valuable input on the development of new courses, programs, and initiatives that address emerging trends and challenges in various fields (Burns & Schneider, 2019). Engaging alumni in program improvement initiatives offers numerous advantages to educational institutions. Firstly, alumni contribute a valuable real-world perspective by sharing their personal experiences and insights. This collaboration aids in identifying areas for curriculum enhancement that align with current

industry trends and demands. Secondly, alumni play a crucial role in enhancing industry relevance by providing valuable insights into the skills and competencies required for achieving success in the professional domain. This active involvement of alumni ensures that graduates are adequately equipped and prepared to meet the demands of the workforce. Thirdly, alumni engagement fosters networking and mentorship prospects for present students, thereby facilitating their educational and career advancement. Furthermore, alumni who are actively involved and committed to their alma mater become strong advocates, providing support to the program through financial contributions, volunteering, and advocacy efforts. Alumni involvement also enables continuous program improvement through the provision of valuable feedback on individual courses and program components. Sharing success stories of alumni ultimately serves as a source of inspiration and motivation for current students, thereby reinforcing the perceived value and effectiveness.

Research Methods

The primary research methodology utilized in this alumni study, conducted by the interior design program at Ahlia University, involved the use of surveys.

An online survey was chosen as the alumni are geographically dispersed across different global locations. The utilization of an online system allows them the opportunity to actively engage in improving the curriculum for future generations. According to Ramshaw (n.d.), surveys are considered a preferred method for data collection due to their effectiveness in efficiently gathering substantial amounts of data from numerous participants within a reasonable timeframe and at relatively low costs. The objective of this initiative is to collect a diverse range of perspectives from alumni, with the intention of providing the interior design program with valuable feedback on its efficacy and identifying areas that require improvement. The data that has been gathered can be utilized to improve the curriculum, teaching approaches, and overall student experience of the program. Additionally, gaining insight into the career paths of alumni and the perspectives of employers can provide valuable information for enhancing the program's career services and alumni engagement initiatives.

The collected background information from the alumni encompassed variables such as gender, year of graduation, grade at graduation, and current professional status in the field of interior design. The subsequent component of the alumni feedback system centered on collecting their evaluation of the course content's influence and utility in their present professional endeavors. To assess the perception, a Likert scale with 5 points was employed, enabling the alumni to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with statements pertaining to the course content. This analysis entails the identification of prevalent themes and patterns in the feedback, along with the assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the existing pedagogical approach. The outcomes of this analysis will subsequently be utilized to formulate suggestions for enhancement.

Results

The survey findings are used to highlight alumni perspectives and assess the alignment of the interior design program with its mission. The survey was emailed to 218 alumni on June 15, 2023. The recipients were selected from the database of the Ahlia University Centre of Measurement & Evaluation (CME) and the Professional Relations Directorate. The survey was open for two weeks and closed on July 1, 2023. It was distributed to all alumni who completed their studies between

summer 2015 and fall 2022. It has been observed that most alumni, specifically 95%, are female. It is important to recognize that the university welcomes students from various countries. However, Table 1 shows that most enrolled students are Bahraini nationals. The questionnaire had a response rate of 73.5%, with feedback received from 160 alumni. Prior to participating in the survey, alumni received an email requesting their consent and providing an explanation of the research's purpose. Participants indicated their consent to participate by clicking on the survey link. Participants were explicitly instructed not to disclose their names, the names of other alumni, or any other personal information when responding to the survey questions. Any names mentioned were removed from the results to ensure anonymity. The participants made valuable contributions to the department by providing information that can be used to improve the curriculum and enhance the program for future students.

Table 1. Interior Design Alumni Characteristics.

Characteristics	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Female	142	89.00%
Male	18	11.00%
Nationality		
Bahraini	150	93.60%
Non- Bahraini	10	6.40%
Employment		
Employed	136	84.90%
unemployed	24	15.10%
Type of organization are you currently employed in		
Private Company	48	35.30%
Government	18	13.30%
Freelance	32	23.50%
Entrepreneurs	27	19.90%
Other	11	8.00%
Age		
≤ 25 years	17	10.60%
26 – 35 years	62	38.80%
36 – 45 years	79	49.30%
46 – 55 years	2	1.30%

Table 2 Number of alumni graduated from Summer 2015 to Fall 2022

Year of Completion	Number of Alumni
Summer 2015	10
Fall 2015	8
Spring 2016	12
Fall 2016	14
Spring 2017	16
Fall 2017	14
Spring 2018	17
Fall 2018	15
Spring 2019	11
Fall 2019	10
Spring 2020	8
Fall 2020	7
Spring 2021	6
Fall 2021	5
Spring 2022	4

Table 3. List of course codes in Interior Design (URL 4).

INTD 100	INTD 111	INTD 112	INTD 113	INTD 214	INTD 218	INTD 219
INTD 220	INTD 224	INTD 228	INTD 229	INTD 230	INTD 240	INTD 306
INTD 309	INTD 318	INTD 320	INTD 327	INTD 328	INTD 340	INTD 350
ETHC 394	INTR 470	INTD 403	INTD 413	INTD 420	IDRM 498	INTD 499
INTD 312	INTD 315	INTD 329	INTD 343	INTD 412	INTD 419	INTD 427
INTD 435						

Enhancing the Interior Design Program at Ahlia University: Insights from Alumni Feedback

A survey conducted among alumni of Ahlia University's Interior Design program yielded valuable insights into areas for improvement within the program. The alumni's feedback highlighted the following key points:

Incorporate Emerging Technologies: Integrate courses or workshops on advanced design software, virtual and augmented reality applications, and Building Information Modeling (BIM) to ensure graduates possess the latest technological skills.

Enhance Practical Experience: Increase hands-on projects, internships, and collaborations with industry professionals to provide students with real-world experience, skill development, and professional networking opportunities.

Nurture Design Thinking and Problem-Solving Skills: Incorporate courses or modules that focus on critical thinking, creativity, and innovative design solutions. This will enable students to approach design challenges in a holistic and effective manner.

Strengthen Business and Entrepreneurship Education: Integrate courses on project management, marketing, budgeting, and client management to prepare graduates for the business aspects of the industry.

Diversify Elective Course Offerings: Expand the range of elective courses to include specialized tracks or concentrations in sustainable design, healthcare design, hospitality design, and retail design.

Foster Collaborative Learning and Industry Connections by organizing guest lectures, workshops, and networking events. Establish mentorship programs and create alumni networks to foster collaboration and facilitate industry connections.

Table 4 Changes suggestions in the Interior Design program from alumni

Specific Changes or Improvements Suggested	Number of Alumni
Incorporate more emerging design technology	68
Enhance practical experience opportunities	52
Foster design thinking and problem-solving skills	45
Strengthen business and entrepreneurship education	38
Diversify elective course offerings	26

Foster collaborative learning and industry connections	29
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Table 5 Number of alumni satisfied with the Interior Design program.

Overall Satisfaction	Number of Alumni
Very Dissatisfied	2
Dissatisfied	6
Neutral	12
Satisfied	92
Very satisfied	48

Table 6 Preparation for a Career

Preparation for Professional Career	Number of Alumni
Not prepared at all	4
Somewhat prepared	12
Moderately prepared	30
Well prepared	82
Very well prepared	32

Table 7. Perception test on the impact of Interior Design courses.

Put (✓) to the one that applies to courses in interior design using:

5= strongly Agree, 4= Agree, 3= Neutral, 2= Disagree, 1= Strongly Disagree.

Parameters	5 strongly Agree	4 Agree	3 Neutral	2 Disagree	1 Strongly Disagree
1 The overall educational experience was satisfactory.	35%	42%	15%	5%	3%
2 There was a balance between theory and practical applications.	40%	32%	18%	5%	5%
3 The program facilitated a prompt industry placement.	51%	38%	9%	2%	0%
4 The independent research work was sufficient.	28%	40%	20%	0%	12%
5 Teamwork was promoted.	65%	17%	13%	3%	2%
6 The courses were intellectually stimulating.	71%	24%	5%	0%	0%
7 Quality of advising.	63%	11%	24%	0%	2%
8 Entrepreneurship was promoted.	23%	12%	57%	8%	0%
9 The study improved my problem-solving abilities, allowing me to solve problems more efficiently and effectively.	82%	15%	3%	0%	0%
10 The computer-based program instruction in the courses is sufficient.	88%	12%	0%	0%	0%
11 The business component of the program was effectively taught.	17%	24%	5%	35%	19%
12 Communication skills were improved.	87%	0%	13%	0%	0%
13 The courses are applicable to real-life situations.	79%	0%	21%	0%	0%
14 There were sufficient course materials.	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%

15	Organizational and managerial skills were developed.	91%	0%	9%	0%	0%
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Table 8. Perception test on the impact of Interior Design courses

Statement	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
The interior design courses I took helped me develop the skills necessary to be successful in my career.	78.20%	21.80%	0%	0%
The interior design courses I took were challenging, but they were also rewarding.	67.90%	28.40%	3.70%	0%
The interior design program at Ahlia University prepared me well for the professional world.	75.50%	24.50%	0%	0%
I am glad I chose to major in interior design	82.60%	17.40%	0%	0%

Most participants expressed agreement that the Interior Design courses they completed were beneficial, demanding, and fulfilling. They also held the belief that the program adequately prepared them for their careers. These findings are encouraging and indicate that the Interior Design program is effectively meeting the expectations of its students.

Conclusion

The survey on the influence of alumni engagement on the enhancement of the Interior Design program at Ahlia University yielded valuable insights and findings. Through the survey, which had a response rate of 73.5% and received feedback from 160 alumni who completed their studies between summer 2015 and fall 2022, several key conclusions can be drawn.

Overall Satisfaction: Most alumni (64%) expressed satisfaction or higher levels of satisfaction with the Interior Design program. This indicates that the program has generally met the expectations and needs of the alumni.

Valuable Courses: The courses that alumni found most valuable included INTD 100, INTD 218, INTD 240, and INTD 320. These courses were identified as having a significant impact on the learning and skill development of program alumni.

Alumni provided constructive feedback on areas that could be improved within the program. The suggestions included incorporating more emerging design technologies, enhancing practical experience opportunities, fostering design thinking and problem-solving skills, strengthening business and entrepreneurship education, and diversifying elective course offerings.

Career Preparation: Most alumni (51%) felt that the Interior Design program prepared them well or very well for their professional careers. This indicates that the program has been effective in equipping alumni with the necessary skills and knowledge for success in their chosen fields.

Alumni Engagement: The high response rate (73.5%) indicates a significant level of alumni engagement in providing feedback to enhance the Interior Design program. This demonstrates the importance of alumni involvement in the continuous improvement and development of the program.

Based on these conclusions, it is evident that alumni engagement plays a vital role in improving the Interior Design program at Ahlia University. The feedback and suggestions provided by alumni offer valuable insights into areas that can be improved to better meet the needs of current and future students. With the implementation of alumni-driven recommendations, the program can continue to evolve and remain relevant in the dynamic field of interior design.

Further research and ongoing engagement with alumni can help foster stronger connections between the program and its graduates, ultimately leading to a more vibrant and successful Interior Design program at Ahlia University.

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