

Unleashing Alumni Potential: Reimagining their Role in Business School

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Abstract

This study explores the evolving role of alumni as strategic contributors to institutional development through the lens of an alumni engagement event at a Malaysian business school (hereafter referred to as Azam Business School, ABS, a pseudonym). Despite their potential as mentors, industry connectors, and institutional partners, alumni engagement at ABS remained underutilized due to undefined roles, weak communication, and a lack of structured initiatives. Guided by Role Theory and Social Capital Theory, this action research implemented a targeted alumni engagement intervention supported by a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) involving diverse alumni participants. Thematic analysis revealed five emerging roles: Alumni as Industry Connectors, Mentors and Knowledge Contributors, Social Capital Builders, Digital Stakeholders, and Community Builders. The findings underscore that alumni are willing and capable of contributing beyond financial means when provided with structured platforms and meaningful institutional recognition. This study offers practical insights for business schools seeking to reposition alumni from passive stakeholders to active partners in institutional advancement.

Keywords: Alumni Engagement, Business Schools, Role Theory, Social Capital, Stakeholder Involvement, Focus Group

Introduction

Alumni play a crucial role in ensuring the long-term sustainability and advancement of higher education institutions. Their engagement is not confined to sentimental affiliation but extends to mentorship, industry linkages, institutional support, and knowledge sharing (Munshi & Maske, 2024). Within the broader social and theoretical landscape, alumni engagement reflects the dynamics of social capital, community building, and together with sustainable knowledge ecosystems. In the context of business schools, where industry relevance and strategic partnerships are critical, alumni act as vital assets in bridging academic knowledge with real-world practice (Andrade & Davis, 2020). However, despite this acknowledged importance, many institutions continue to have difficulties in translating the potential of alumni into structured, consistent, and impactful engagement.

Despite the recognized value of alumni engagement, many institutions, particularly in Malaysia, continue to face challenges in fostering consistent and meaningful involvement

(Rista et al., 2024). Barriers such as lack of role clarity, weak post-graduation communication, and the absence of structured engagement platforms contribute significantly to passive alumni networks. One study highlights that the graduates often lack an understanding of their roles as alumni, which hinders their intention to remain connected with their alma mater (Gilbert, 2022). Similarly, weak institutional communication strategies have been shown to diminish alumni participation and reduce long-term connectedness (Shen & Sha, 2020).

At Azam Business School (ABS), alumni represent a diverse and influential community, with many holding leadership positions across various industries. However, persistent challenges such as fragmented communication efforts and underutilized relationship-building mechanisms have hindered sustained engagement. This under-engagement not only limits opportunities for current students in gaining mentorship and career exposure but also constrains the school's ability to fully leverage alumni networks for strategic development and institutional visibility.

This study adopts a qualitative action research approach to address these gaps by examining alumni perceptions, expectations, and potential contributions through a structured engagement platform. Guided by Role Theory (Biddle, 1979), the research investigates how alumni perceive and enact their roles when institutional expectations are clarified. Social Capital Theory (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000) further frames the value of alumni relationships in fostering professional linkages, mentoring opportunities, and collaborative initiatives that support institutional growth.

By providing alumni with opportunities to voice their insights and engage directly with the institution, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how alumni roles can be strategically sustained and positioned. The findings offer practical implications for business schools seeking to strengthen alumni networks, institutionalize engagement, and unlock alumni potential as long-term partners in higher education.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative action research approach to examine, and to consecutively improve alumni engagement within ABS. The action research design was selected due to its participatory and reflective characteristics, in which this would allow the researcher to further address the real-world institutional issues while also actively involving stakeholders in the process of inquiry and change. This methodological approach was best suited to the study's objective of exploring on how alumni perceive their roles and how these roles can be better structured to support towards the development of institution. The research was conceptually grounded by embedding Role Theory and Social Capital Theory, which provided a dual lens to examine both the behavioral expectations associated with alumni roles and as well as the relational networks that contribute to mutual value creation within the ecosystem of alumni-institution.

A purposive sampling method was employed to recruit participants who could offer rich and relevant insights into alumni engagement focusing at ABS. Five alumni were selected to participate in the study, whom representing a range of graduation cohorts and professional backgrounds across different industries. These participants were identified based on their past affiliation with ABS, current professional engagement, and expressed interest to provide

full support for institutional activities. The deliberate selection ensured diversity in perspectives while maintaining alignment with the study's focus on institutional-level alumni involvement.

Data collection was conducted through a structured Focus Group Discussion (FGD), which held in conjunction with a formal alumni engagement event organized by ABS. The FGD served as not only an interactive platform for reconnection and but also as a qualitative method for eliciting alumni perspectives. The discussion, lasted for about 30 minutes approximately and was facilitated by the researcher using a semi-structured protocol which is designed to capture alumni expectations, perceived institutional gaps, and envisioned roles in terms of mentoring, networking, and professional collaboration. The discussion environment encouraged on the openness and reflexivity, which allows the participants to articulate on both their personal experiences and their aspirations for contributing to ABS in a more structured manner.

The session was audio recorded with informed consent from all participants and later was transcribed verbatim for analysis. A thematic analysis was conducted following the Braun and Clark's six-phase approach, where it included familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, and development of broader thematic patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The coding process was inductive, where the themes were allowed to emerge organically while remaining anchored in the conceptual framework of the study. Particular attention was given to recurring phrases, shared experiences, and as well as, values that signaled alumni willingness, expectations, and perceived barriers towards engagement. Through iterative review, themes were refined, verified against the raw data, and further organized into coherent and structured categories which reflected the strategic and relational dimensions of alumni roles. Based on the above explanation, Figure 1 representing the input, transformation and output model for this action research study.

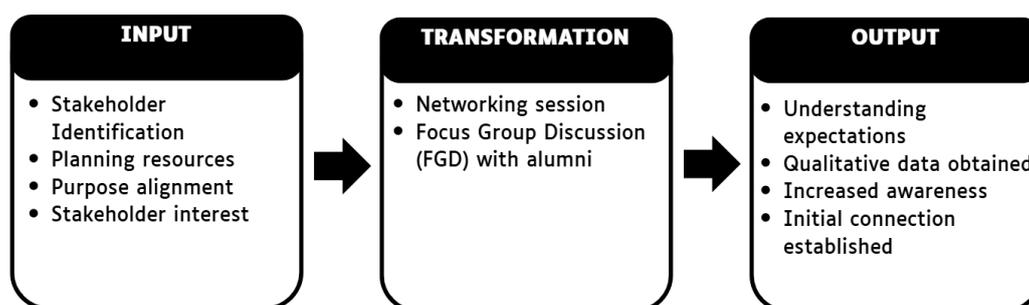


Figure 1 Summary of Input, Transformation and Output of the Action Research

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the research process. Participants were well informed and explained about the study's purpose, procedures, and the voluntary nature of their involvement. Each participant provided written consent and was assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. The researcher also ensured that the process was conducted respectfully and professionally, in accordance with institutional ethical guidelines. No identifiable information was disclosed in the reporting of results, and all findings were presented in aggregate to preserve participant privacy. To promote transparency, protect participant rights, and foster trust throughout the research engagement, the ethical framework was followed in this study (Ozano et al., 2020).

Results and Discussion

The thematic analysis of the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) revealed five important and notable roles that alumni perceive themselves capable of fulfilling within ABS which are, Industry Connectors, Mentors and Knowledge Contributors, Social Capital Builders, Digital Stakeholders, and Community Builders. These themes emerged consistently across participants’ responses, in which it reflects a shared understanding of the multifaceted contributions that alumni can offer when provided with appropriate engagement channels and institutional support.

Table 1
Focus Group Discussion (Thematic Analysis)

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Explanation	Supporting Evidence	Patterns & Connections
1. Alumni as Industry Connectors	Leveraging Industry Linkages	Alumni recognize their unique position to serve as bridges between ABS and various industries, enabling practical exposure and collaboration.	<i>“Our expectation, I think we need industry link. Alumni, we are from all industry. Our knowledge and expertise are unique.”</i>	Alumni acknowledge their diverse industry backgrounds as valuable institutional assets, whereby this aligns with their role as professional liaisons (Role Theory).
	Promoting Cross-Institutional Exposure	Alumni propose networking visits across global institutions, which can enrich ABS’s industry and academic outlook.	<i>“Perhaps we can do visiting programs with other universities, like Manchester Business School.”</i>	Alumni see themselves not only as industry partners but as institutional ambassadors, supporting internationalization and benchmarking efforts.
2. Alumni as Mentors and Knowledge Contributors	Mentorship and Guidance	Alumni are open to formal mentorship and knowledge-sharing through advisory or adjunct roles.	<i>“We can have an adjunct lecturer or mentor program.”</i>	Strong willingness to assume educational roles through mentoring, enriching student development (Social Capital Theory)
	Sharing Expertise through Talks	Alumni suggest structured events like talks and forums to share their experiences and inspire students.	<i>“Why not we have alumni awards, or leadership forum discussions?”</i>	Alumni prefer visible, interactive platforms to engage with students and strengthen their institutional ties.
	Supporting Research and Development	Alumni are willing to support student research by offering industry data, access, and internship placements.	<i>“As a student, I struggled to get research help. Now in industry, I can provide access to research and internships.”</i>	Alumni see themselves as resource enablers who can bridge academic-industry gaps, emphasizing their latent institutional value.

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Explanation	Supporting Evidence	Patterns & Connections
3. Alumni as Social Capital Builders	Creating Meaningful Social Impact (CSR)	Alumni view their role beyond academia, further into societal impact through CSR programs.	<i>"We can organize CSR activities, giving back to the community."</i>	Alumni embrace a holistic institutional role that includes social responsibility by strengthening ABS's brand and visibility.
	Contributing Financially to ABS	Alumni show interest in contributing through donations or sponsorships to support development and student aid.	<i>"Maybe in the future, we can do some donation drives."</i>	Financial engagement complements other alumni roles, in which, emotional loyalty and perceived institutional value drive these actions.
4. Alumni as Digital Stakeholders	Structuring Alumni Data for Strategic Engagement	Alumni emphasize the need for a well-organized database, segmented by industry or graduation year.	<i>"The database needs to be solidified; alumni need to be categorized by industry."</i>	A structured alumni database is essential for activating targeted engagement strategies and enabling alumni-student linkage.
	Enhancing Digital Visibility	Alumni propose leveraging digital platforms for branding and outreach.	<i>"We should invest in paid apps like TikTok or Instagram to increase visibility."</i>	Alumni wish to enhance ABS visibility via digital storytelling and online brand presence. This reinforces pride and identity.
	Developing Alumni Connectivity Apps	Alumni recommend an app to help track and connect with others geographically and professionally.	<i>"Even a simple app, like Waze, to show nearby alumni would create a stronger connection."</i>	A modern, tech-enabled alumni platform strengthens the alumni network and activates peer collaboration.
5. Alumni as Community Builders	Social Interaction & Reunions	Alumni prioritize face-to-face meetups to rebuild social bonds and reconnect with peers.	<i>"We need to see our friends first, we haven't met in years."</i>	Alumni relationships are an important form of social capital that indirectly strengthens loyalty and identity.
	Educational and Leadership Events	Alumni suggest formal events like town halls and leadership forums for professional exchange.	<i>"We should have online town hall sessions, leadership forums, and mentorship programs."</i>	Professional events blend alumni roles as mentors, networkers, and thought leaders which aligns with Role Theory and Social Capital Theory.

The first theme, *Alumni as Industry Connectors*, highlights on the alumni perceived role which is bridging the gap between academia and the real world. Participants emphasized their strong willingness to facilitate internships, job placements, and industry exposure for students by leveraging their networks and as well as, professional positions. This finding aligns with the Role Theory, where alumni interpret their post-graduation identity as contributors whom continue to support the academic ecosystem by fulfilling context-specific expectations (Johnson & Fauske, 2005). It also reflects the application of Social Capital Theory, where alumni's relational capital provides access to valuable industry linkages that benefit both students, together with their institution (Kistyanto, 2021).

The second theme, *Alumni as Mentors and Knowledge Contributors*, underscores the alumni's readiness in providing academic and career guidance to students. Several participants mentioned on the absence of formal mentoring platforms and expressed interest in offering guest lectures, coaching, and real-world advice based on their respective industry experiences. This is supported by prior studies that suggest structured mentorship programs significantly enhance not only student development, but also strengthen alumni identity within the institution (Munshi & Maske, 2024). These findings also affirm the argument in another study, that alumni understand their potential role as mentors, they become more inclined to engage more meaningfully (Gilbert, 2022).

The third theme, *Alumni as Social Capital Builders*, reflects the alumni's recognition of their role in fostering a strong and interconnected ABS community. Participants shared ideas about hosting reunions, collaborative events, and networking platforms which can allow alumni to engage with each other, faculty, and current students. This demonstrates an awareness of social capital as a collective asset that can essentially support institutional advancement through trust, reciprocity, and shared values (Jack et al., 2025). Such social infrastructure is crucial in cultivating loyalty for a long-term and institutional advocacy.

Alumni as Digital Stakeholders emerged as the fourth theme, where it reveals on the expectation of the participants for ABS to utilize more effective digital platforms for continuous engagement. Alumni suggested leveraging social media, personalized newsletters, and digital portals that can enhance and facilitate real-time updates and collaborative opportunities. This theme is particularly crucial and relevant in the post-pandemic context, where digital engagement is no longer supplementary but essential in sustaining alumni-institution connections. The findings also support the view that digital engagement must be conversational, responsive, and interactive to build lasting alumni bonds (Shen & Sha, 2020).

Lastly, the theme *Alumni as Community Builders* highlights on the alumni's sense of moral responsibility giving back to the society through meaningful institutional collaboration. Participants expressed a desire and interest to be involved in community outreach, corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, and educational programs to be facilitated by ABS. This role extends the alumni impact beyond institutional boundaries, with reinforcing the notion that alumni are not just contributors to the university alone, but to the society at large (Siswanto & Ngadri, 2022).

Overall, the findings indicate that alumni are willing and capable of contributing in diverse and strategic ways when their roles are clearly defined and institutionally supported. The engagement event served as a valuable platform, both to reconnect alumni with ABS and at the same time, to surface actionable insights that can inform long-term engagement strategies. The results affirm the theoretical proposition that role clarity (Role Theory) and trust-based relational structures (Social Capital Theory) are central and key element for sustainable alumni involvement. These insights offer practical guidance for institutions seeking to transform alumni from passive observers into active collaborators in terms of institutional growth and innovation.

Conclusion

This study highlights the strategic potential of alumni towards contributing for institutional development, when their roles are clearly defined and supported through structured engagement. By focusing on a targeted alumni engagement event at ABS, the research demonstrated that alumni are not only willing but also equipped to serve in diverse capacities which includes industry connectors, mentors, social capital builders, digital stakeholders, and community builders. These emergent roles underscores on the breadth of value alumni can offer when platforms for meaningful contribution are provided strategically.

Guided by Role Theory and Social Capital Theory, the findings affirm that alumni engagement extends far beyond financial donations. When role expectations are made clear, explicit, and indeed aligned with institutional goals, alumni are more likely to perceive themselves as ongoing contributors towards the success of their alma mater. Furthermore, the relational capital that underpins long-term engagement can be reinforced by fostering trust-based relationships through participatory events

From a practical standpoint, this study provides a foundation for business schools and can also be implied for higher education institutions, to reimagine alumni engagement not as a passive affiliation but as a mutually beneficial partnership. Institutions must work on to formalize alumni roles within strategic frameworks and invest in platforms that support continuous interaction, mentorship, and as well as, collaboration.

While this study focused on a single intervention, the insights gained reveal scalable potential. Future efforts should include expanding engagement models, integrating digital engagement strategies, and measuring long-term outcomes of alumni contributions. By doing so, institutions can unlock the full spectrum of alumni potential as key stakeholders in academic, professional, and societal advancement

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