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# Alumni Engagement as a Catalyst for Strengthening Public Service: Reflections on Professionalization, 4IR, and Sustainability from a South African Dialogue

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**Abstract:** As South Africa faces urgent demands for ethical, professional, and future-oriented public service, universities are reimagining their role in shaping responsive governance ecosystems. Alumni engagement has become a strategic avenue for higher education institutions to bridge academic knowledge with real-world practice. This article explores the significance of alumni engagement for strengthening public service professionalism, innovation, and impact, drawing insights from the 2025 Alumni Dialogue Series hosted by the School of Public Management, Governance and Public Policy (SPMGPP) at the University of Johannesburg as part of its 20th Anniversary commemorations. The event brought together alumni, students, scholars, and public sector leaders to reflect on the evolving demands of governance and the university's role in addressing them. Using qualitative methods—including embedded observation, livestream content review, and social media analysis—the study examined the deliberations across three core panels: professionalisation of the public sector; public management in the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR); and sustainability and governance impact. Two additional themes, outcomes and lessons learned, and cross-cutting challenges, emerged inductively during post-event reflection and thematic analysis. Findings highlight that alumni are more than institutional ambassadors; they are active public actors who offer grounded insights and critical feedback loops for curricular reform, research relevance, and practice-informed teaching. Their experiences revealed persistent gaps in digital readiness, ethical leadership, and institutional responsiveness, while also proposing forward-thinking strategies such as systems integration, digital capacity-building, and alumni mentorship models. The article concludes that alumni engagement must move beyond symbolic gestures toward structured, reciprocal partnerships that position alumni as co-creators of public value. In doing so, institutions like SPMGPP can embed real-time learning into their academic offerings and governance interventions. The study offers a replicable engagement model for other schools of public policy and administration across Africa, contributing to the scholarship on alumni-university-government collaboration.

**Keywords:** Alumni engagement; Professionalism; collaboration; Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR); University of Johannesburg.

## Introduction and background

In an era of heightened demands for responsive governance, public trust, and effective leadership, universities are reasserting their role as civic actors—not only through teaching and research but also through sustained public engagement. As Campbell (2018) notes, the 21st-century university must transcend its traditional boundaries and engage meaningfully with its alumni and broader communities to influence policy, practice, and public value. This is

especially vital for disciplines like public management and governance, where the relevance of academic scholarship is tested daily in the corridors of public institutions. Against this backdrop, the School of Public Management, Governance and Public Policy (SPMGPP) at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) initiated a milestone Alumni Dialogue Series in 2025, as part of UJ's 20th Anniversary celebrations. The initiative recognised that alumni are not only products of the institution but also co-creators of its ongoing legacy, capable of shaping and modelling the values they were once taught.

The importance of alumni engagement in public administration is widely acknowledged in scholarly literature. Farrow and Yuan (2011) show that digital platforms can be harnessed to foster emotional connection and alumni volunteerism, thereby strengthening institutional outreach. Similarly, Gallo (2013) argues that beyond philanthropy, alumni offer critical intellectual, professional, and advocacy resources that can enhance university impact and policy influence. In line with this thinking, the 2025 SPMGPP Alumni Dialogue Series aimed to reposition alumni as partners in transforming the public sector through thought leadership, mentorship, and collaborative reform. Chiavacci (2005) found in the Japanese context that alumni networks serve not only as transition tools to the workplace but also as institutional anchors in times of reform. These insights resonate with South Africa's urgent need for state transformation through capable, ethical, and networked public servants.

Moreover, global research supports this approach. Malhotra, Massoudi, and Jindal (2023) underscore how alumni-based collaboration models can enhance academia-industry synergy, while Politis et al. (2024) frame alumni engagement as integral to entrepreneurial universities that prioritise impact. Digital engagement, as explored by Rubejes-Silva (2024), enables meaningful and scalable alumni participation. Within Africa, Karikari and Yawson (2017) advocate for structured public engagement training, particularly for students, to build long-term civic leadership pipelines—a call echoed by Ige, Doyle, and Pienaar (2021), who champion alumni-student collaboration as a catalyst for inclusive institutional development.

At SPMGPP, the decision to host the alumni event was also guided by concerns about the declining sense of collective purpose in public institutions and the fragmented relationship between academia and policy actors. By creating a space for dialogue across generations of graduates, the School sought to revive the ethos of public service, build strategic networks, and co-produce solutions to pressing challenges in local governance. This aligns with broader calls for evidence-informed public engagement in higher education (Karikari & Yawson, 2017; Nisar, Nasruddin, & Goh, 2023). In short, the 2025 event was more than a commemorative moment—it was a deliberate act of civic renewal, using alumni not only as guests but as governance interlocutors. This article presents the case for structured alumni engagement as a tool for institutional responsiveness and public service transformation, drawing on the event's content, reflections, and outcomes.

### **Theoretical Framework: Social Capital and Alumni Engagement**

This study draws on Social Capital Theory as a foundational lens to examine alumni engagement in the context of public service and institutional development. Social capital, as articulated by Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988), and later expanded by Putnam (2000), refers to the value derived from social relationships and networks that facilitate coordinated action, trust, reciprocity, and collective efficacy. Within higher education, alumni networks serve as critical social structures that connect individuals not only to one another but also to the institutional missions of their alma mater and to the broader public they serve.

In South Africa's dynamic public administration landscape, marked by concerns around governance quality, public accountability, and service delivery, alumni networks represent an underutilised but vital reservoir of knowledge, mentorship, and professional influence. Social Capital Theory helps illuminate how alumni contribute to public value through both bonding capital (internal ties among graduates who share institutional and disciplinary affiliations) and bridging capital (connections between alumni and current students, faculty, and external stakeholders). Moreover, linking capital, which describes vertical relationships across power hierarchies, becomes particularly salient when alumni engage with government officials, academic institutions, and civil society actors to support policy change and institutional reform (Coleman, 1988; Gallo, 2013).

The University of Johannesburg's SPMGPP Alumni Event provided a vivid demonstration of how such social capital can be mobilised to foster ethical leadership, professionalisation, and sustainable governance. For instance, by convening former students who now serve in influential roles across sectors, the event facilitated knowledge exchange, policy reflection, and the mentoring of future practitioners. This aligns with Gallo's (2013) assertion that alumni contribute to universities beyond philanthropy, offering strategic partnerships, thought leadership, and experiential insights into public governance.

Furthermore, recent scholarship underscores the role of digital platforms in enhancing alumni relationships and sustaining professional identity. Farrow and Yuan (2011) argue that online engagement tools, particularly social media, amplify the strength and reach of alumni networks. These tools enable interactive, real-time communication that reinforces trust and collective identity, vital ingredients in building professional communities. Digital platforms thus serve not only as dissemination tools but as active spaces for collaboration, visibility, and civic mobilisation (Rubejes-Silva, 2024; Suriani et al., 2025).

In sum, Social Capital Theory offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the strategic value of alumni networks in public sector renewal and institutional transformation. It positions alumni not simply as former students, but as active contributors to the shared civic mission of universities, particularly those in the governance and public policy domain. This theoretical grounding strengthens the analysis of the alumni engagement event and situates it within a broader conversation about networks, leadership, and public service impact.

### **Literature Review Section: Alumni Engagement and Public Service Preparedness: Insights from Global and African Contexts**

Alumni engagement in higher education has become a critical vector for shaping institutional identity, enhancing student preparedness, and strengthening public service responsiveness in rapidly evolving governance systems. As Veluvali and Suriseti (2023) argue, effective alumni engagement allows universities to establish enduring relationships with graduates, enabling them to serve as both role models and institutional ambassadors. This is particularly pertinent in the South African context, where the legacies of exclusion and institutional disconnection have weakened the feedback loops necessary to align higher education curricula with workplace and societal demands. Jordaan (2024) underscores the value of reflective alumni engagement in postgraduate education, highlighting how structured conversations with alumni yield more profound insights into professional expectations and help universities tailor their curricula to real-world complexities. These insights are echoed by García-Aracil et al. (2021), who find that students with opportunities to engage with alumni perspectives report higher confidence in their preparedness for the transition to work.

International literature has repeatedly pointed to the transformative potential of alumni networks in fostering employability and work-readiness. Mobarak (2019), in her research on South African graduates, found that although graduates may be academically competent, they often experience significant dissonance when navigating practical, ethical, and relational expectations in their first jobs. Alumni mentorship models, as advocated by Pitan and Muller (2021), play a vital role in bridging this gap by demystifying workplace norms, contextualising theoretical training, and offering psychosocial support. Römgens et al. (2020) similarly note that employability is not a static attribute but a composite of evolving competencies shaped through continuous learning, social interaction, and feedback. By integrating alumni as co-creators in this process, higher education institutions can help students develop more holistic, adaptive skills.

Van Laar et al. (2020) extend this conversation by emphasising the need for digital and 21st-century skills, suggesting that alumni currently navigating the labour market can provide real-time insights into digital transitions, platform use, and professional adaptability. In South Africa's dynamic public sector, where issues of capacity, transformation, and digital innovation intersect, these alumni insights are particularly crucial. Matlala (2025) offers an example within the Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) landscape, where young emerging professionals benefit significantly from intergenerational knowledge transfer, mentorship, and exposure to seasoned professionals who help bridge the chasm between academic theory and professional practice. The implications of these findings are especially relevant for disciplines like public administration, where values, ethics, and responsiveness must be cultivated alongside technical knowledge.

Ultimately, alumni engagement is not simply a tool for fundraising or branding. As Campbell (2018) and Farrow and Yuan (2011) note, it represents a strategic asset for institutional transformation, a means to democratise access to mentorship, and a platform for inclusive policy and leadership dialogue. Through digital platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn, alumni can continue to influence curricular reform, strengthen peer-based learning, and contribute to sectoral innovation. For alumni working in the public service, these roles carry an added layer of responsibility—serving not only as proof of institutional success but also as active stewards of public value and ethical leadership.

### **Research Design and Approach**

This study adopts a qualitative instrumental case study design (Stake, 1995), which is appropriate for understanding the meaning, implications, and dynamics of alumni engagement in higher education with reference to public service readiness and transformation. The case study method allows for in-depth exploration of a single bounded system (the

UJ-SPMGPP Alumni Engagement Event), focusing on the interaction between institutional actors, alumni, and governance discourse. It is anchored within the interpretivist paradigm, which acknowledges that knowledge is socially constructed and context-specific (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014).

The aim was not only to document what occurred at the event but also to interpret the symbolic and practical roles of alumni in shaping academic and public service linkages through reflexive engagement, storytelling, and policy dialogue. The focus on a bounded case supports generalisability through analytic generalisation (Yin, 2014) rather than statistical inference.

### **Case Selection and Context**

The case was purposively selected as part of the UJ's 20-Year Celebration, focusing on a high-profile alumni event hosted by the SPMGPP. The event featured over 100 participants, including distinguished alumni, academic staff, students, and invited public-sector professionals. It comprised five panel discussions, each centred on a key governance theme.

Purposive sampling (Patton, 2015) was employed to select this specific case because of its rich potential for learning and alignment with institutional, pedagogical, and governance transformation priorities. The event offered a unique setting in which alumni, as reflexive practitioners, shared insights into their own transition from student to public servant, aligning with the literature on work-readiness, alumni employability, and university-community engagement (Chiavacci, 2005; Gallo, 2013; Jordaan, 2024).

### **Data Sources and Collection**

Data for this study were derived from four primary sources to ensure depth, triangulation, and contextual integrity. First, detailed field notes were produced by three embedded academic observers from SPMGPP, all of whom are co-authors of this article and have published extensively on qualitative methods. Prior to the event, a structured observation template was developed to guide real-time data capture across panels. As trained scholars, they applied this structured observation template to capture rich data from each of the three panel discussions, including speaker insights, audience responses, thematic cues, and interpretive reflections, following Flick's (2014) guidance. Second, publicly available digital reflections from Facebook and LinkedIn were collected and analysed. Posts made by alumni, staff, and institutional accounts between 7–9 July 2025 were purposively sampled using event-specific hashtags and were coded to identify prevailing sentiments and patterns of alumni engagement. Third, the full YouTube livestream of the event was reviewed in detail, with authors independently timestamping segments to validate the field notes and to extract spontaneous interactions not formally recorded. Fourth, a short survey was administered at the end of the event to capture participants' immediate reflections on the relevance of the dialogue themes, the perceived value of alumni engagement, and suggestions for strengthening future engagements. The survey items included a small number of closed-ended questions (for descriptive summarisation) and brief open-ended prompts to capture qualitative comments. These multimodal sources were further enriched through informal post-event dialogues between the academic authors and several alumni participants, enabling contextual interpretation of key themes. Together, these data sources provided a robust foundation for capturing the multi-layered nature of alumni engagement as experienced during the UJ-SPMGPP event.

To mitigate potential internal biases associated with verbal, textual, and visual data sources, several procedural safeguards were implemented. First, triangulation across multiple data types (field notes, social media posts, and video recordings) reduced reliance on a single interpretive lens and strengthened confirmability. Second, independent coding by three academic authors ensured inter-coder reflexivity, with discrepancies discussed and resolved through iterative peer debriefing sessions. Third, timestamp verification of video material was used to cross-check observational notes, limiting recall bias and selective interpretation. Fourth, reflexive memo-writing was conducted during analysis to identify potential positionality effects arising from the authors' embedded roles within the institution. Finally, only publicly available digital content was analysed, thereby reducing the ethical and interpretive distortions associated with private communications. These combined strategies enhanced credibility, dependability, and analytic transparency in line with qualitative best practices (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Flick, 2014).

### **Data analysis**

The collected data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework to ensure systematic and credible interpretation. First, all sources, including note-taker field notes, social media reflections, YouTube video excerpts, and responses from the short post-event survey, were independently reviewed multiple times by the three academic co-authors to ensure immersion and familiarisation. Initial codes were generated inductively by

each author to capture recurring ideas related to alumni engagement, professional development, institutional identity, and the role of alumni in the public service landscape. These codes were recorded and organised in Microsoft Excel, enabling structured comparison across data types and panel themes.

Survey data were analysed using a complementary approach. Closed-ended items were summarised descriptively (frequencies and thematic clustering of response trends) to provide an overview of participants' perceptions of the event's relevance and value. Open-ended survey responses were integrated into the broader qualitative dataset and coded inductively alongside observational and digital data, ensuring analytic consistency across data sources.

In the third phase, codes were grouped into candidate themes corresponding to the event's key areas: professionalisation of the public sector, digital transformation and the 4IR, sustainability and governance, outcomes and lessons learned, and challenges and considerations. The use of Excel facilitated the colour-coded organisation of data excerpts, enabling thematic clustering and cross-verification. Themes were then collaboratively reviewed and refined through a series of iterative author meetings, ensuring that each theme was internally consistent and supported by multiple data sources. The final stage involved critically interpreting the themes in light of existing literature on alumni engagement, employability, and public sector reform. This method ensured both analytical depth and methodological transparency, consistent with best practices in qualitative research (Flick, 2014; Creswell, 2013).

### **Sample Size and Rationale**

The unit of analysis for this study was the structured alumni dialogue event as a bounded institutional case. The event consisted of three thematic panel sessions, each comprising three panellists and one facilitator, for a total of 12 structured panel contributors across the programme. The live audience comprised approximately 150 attendees, including alumni, academic staff, students, and public sector practitioners.

While the study's qualitative focus centred on the deliberative content generated by the panel discussions, the broader audience was treated as an interpretive layer of the case through both observational engagement and a short post-event survey. Of the approximately 150 attendees, 102 completed the post-event survey, for a response rate of just over 60%. This provided a substantial complementary dataset for capturing immediate perceptions of the dialogue's relevance, impact, and thematic resonance.

The rationale for this configuration is grounded in instrumental case study logic (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018), where analytical depth within a bounded event takes precedence over statistical representativeness. The three panels constituted the primary deliberative core of the case, while the audience responses enabled triangulation between elite discourse and participant reception. Rather than sampling individuals as independent units, the study examined the event as a collective governance forum, thereby justifying the inclusion of panel discourse, audience engagement, digital reflections, and survey feedback as integrated components of a single analytic case. This approach prioritised contextual richness, thematic saturation within the event, and cross-modal triangulation, consistent with qualitative standards for information-rich case analysis (Patton, 2015).

### **Ethical Considerations and Limitations**

Ethical clearance for this study was formally granted by the University of Johannesburg's Research Ethics Committee prior to data analysis. The study involved a public academic event and incorporated multiple data sources, including structured observation notes, publicly accessible social media content, YouTube livestreams, and a short, voluntary post-event survey. Survey participants were informed of the study's academic purpose, assured that participation was entirely voluntary, and advised that responses would be anonymised and used for research purposes only. No personally identifiable information was collected in the survey instrument. Observational data were recorded without attributing statements to named individuals, and social media content was cited only when publicly posted and directly relevant to the event themes. All data were securely stored and analysed in accordance with institutional data protection guidelines, ensuring confidentiality, responsible data handling, and compliance with established ethical standards for research involving human participants.

Despite these safeguards, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The study relied partly on structured observational notes rather than verbatim transcripts, which may introduce interpretive filtering. Additionally, the authors' embedded roles within the institution may have shaped their interpretive lens. However, these risks were mitigated through methodological triangulation, independent coding by multiple researchers, timestamp verification of video material, and reflexive peer debriefing throughout the analytic process. The post-event survey, while yielding a strong response rate, reflects immediate perceptions rather than longitudinal impact assessment. As a bounded instrumental case study, the findings are analytically generalisable rather than statistically representative. These

limitations do not undermine the credibility of the findings but instead frame them within transparent qualitative research parameters.

### **Findings and Discussions: Key Insights from the Alumni Engagement Event**

#### **Professionalisation of the Public Sector**

The theme of professionalising the South African public service featured prominently in the opening panel and resonated deeply across both senior alumni and emerging public sector professionals. Discussions reflected widespread concern over declining ethical standards, political interference in appointments, and a misalignment between leadership roles and the skills required for 21st-century governance. Participants called for a decisive shift toward values-driven governance, grounded in competence, meritocracy, and public accountability. One speaker articulated this sentiment by emphasising that “we must attract and retain talent based on what you know, not who you know,” highlighting the need to elevate skills, integrity, and public trust as central pillars of public service professionalism.

Another recurring concern was the structural erosion of recruitment and promotion processes in the public service. Alumni panellists critiqued cadre deployment, unqualified appointments, and the lack of consequence management as drivers of poor governance. Several recommendations emerged, including implementing mandatory skills audits, enforcing minimum qualification standards for leadership roles, and strengthening the independence of key institutions such as the Public Service Commission. Notably, the panelists underscored the importance of ethical training and leadership development programs for both senior managers and junior recruits. Digital solutions were also explored—such as the use of digitalised HR systems to reduce nepotism and enable transparent talent pipelines.

In their reflections, alumni affirmed that professionalisation is not solely the responsibility of government but requires collaborative partnerships between academia, civil society, and alumni networks. The role of universities in shaping public leadership through embedded values, co-curricular mentorship, and continuous education was elevated as a long-term lever for reform. Several alumni stressed that graduates should be equipped not only with policy knowledge but with the courage and capacity to interrogate institutional cultures. The need to restore public confidence through demonstrable integrity, responsive service delivery, and merit-based leadership resonated as both a governance imperative and a moral obligation.

These reflections align with current scholarship that frames professionalisation as a necessary condition for realising broader public sector reforms. Scholars such as Hendrickse (2023) and Gornitzka & Larsen, (2004) argue that professionalisation contributes directly to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, Agenda 2063, and the NDP 2030 by fostering institutional capability and moral governance. Others, such as Kroukamp & Cloete (2018); Matshabaphala (2014), Ndlovu, Thusi, Mlambo & Mkhize (2020) emphasise that ethical leadership, independent oversight bodies, and human resource reforms are interdependent drivers of a competent public sector. In this context, the alumni dialogue served as both a critical mirror and a mobilising force for reimagining public service professionalism in South Africa’s evolving governance landscape.

#### **Public Management in the Fourth Industrial Revolution**

The second panel critically engaged with the implications of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) for public management, governance, and service delivery in South Africa. The central arguments converged on how emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, drones, blockchain, and digital data systems are radically transforming the state’s operational modalities, requiring not only technological adoption but also institutional, policy, and leadership reform. Panellists reflected on global and local transformations, with examples ranging from geopolitical conflicts mediated through technology to domestic applications of digital tools in sectors like immigration and taxation.

The discussion opened with the recognition that 4IR is not a distant concept but an active force reshaping governance. Participants argued that digital platforms and cyber technologies are now core arenas of power, as seen in global conflicts and domestic information warfare. Consequently, there was strong emphasis on the state’s responsibility to embrace data modernisation, systems integration, and e-government platforms. For instance, departments such as Home Affairs and Border Management were identified as key sites where digital transformation must be institutionalised to address new governance challenges. This aligns with growing scholarship that positions the digital state as a cornerstone of efficient, secure, and inclusive public service delivery in 4IR contexts (Nhede et al., 2022) (Balkaran, 2017).

However, the panellists did not present a techno-optimistic perspective. They highlighted critical barriers to the successful implementation of 4IR tools in the South African public sector—particularly infrastructural

underinvestment, fiscal constraints, and the digital divide. Digital inequity was framed not only in terms of access to devices and internet connectivity, but also as a skills and literacy gap that inhibits equitable adoption of emerging technologies. These constraints mirror those identified by scholars such as Shava and Hofisi (2017), who caution that without a foundational investment in skills development and inclusive digital access, the 4IR may reinforce, rather than reduce, inequality in public service outcomes.

The potential of 4IR to transform institutions such as the Border Management Authority was also discussed. Practical examples included the use of drones for border surveillance, automated internal systems for leave and performance management, and the adoption of interoperable systems with international law enforcement agencies. These innovations reflect global trends toward predictive analytics and innovative governance tools in border management and security frameworks (Zervoudi, 2020; Xu et al., 2018). Nevertheless, participants were candid in acknowledging that technological implementation is uneven and often limited to “pockets of excellence” due to inadequate budgeting and poor inter-agency coordination.

The broader governance implications of 4IR were also debated, particularly the paradigm shift it imposes on public administration. As digital technologies reshape how policies are crafted, services delivered, and performance measured, the state must foster institutional cultures that are adaptive, data-driven, and citizen-centred. This requires a reimagining of public administration education, with panelists calling for the decolonisation of curricula and stronger integration of digital governance frameworks in academic programs. The transition to 4IR was framed not only as a technical shift but a normative one—demanding new leadership styles, ethical standards, and public accountability mechanisms that keep pace with technological advancement (Jarbandhan, 2017) (Shibambu, 2025).

In sum, the panel presented a nuanced view of 4IR in the public sector, acknowledging both its disruptive potential and its structural constraints. Key recommendations emerging from the discussion included enhanced investment in digital infrastructure, institutional capacity-building, reform of education systems to embed digital literacy and critical thinking, and more deliberate efforts to close the skills gap. Importantly, participants warned against treating 4IR as merely an administrative tool; rather, it must be viewed as a socio-political transformation that redefines the state's identity and purpose in the digital era.

### **Sustainability and Governance Impact**

Sustainability has become a defining pillar of good governance, particularly in public administration in the Global South. The alumni panel underscored that contemporary governance systems must now extend their priorities beyond economic and administrative efficiency to incorporate the principles of environmental justice, intergenerational equity, and social accountability. These discussions reinforced the growing consensus that sustainable governance is not only a normative ideal but also an operational imperative especially within South African institutions striving to fulfill commitments under the NDP, Agenda 2063, and the UN SDGs. As noted in the broader literature, sustainability is increasingly situated at the intersection of environmental stewardship, inclusive development, and responsive public institutions, requiring governments to embed long-term thinking into their policies and delivery mechanisms (Cavalheiro et al., 2025; Kostakis & Tsiouris, 2024).

Panelists highlighted how governance failures characterised by weak accountability mechanisms, corruption, and policy discontinuity continue to undercut sustainability goals in many African contexts. These views mirror empirical findings that weak governance is strongly associated with lower social development outcomes, particularly in developing regions (Liashenko et al., 2024; Chanda et al., 2024). It was argued that without structural reforms and investments in governance capacity, efforts toward sustainable development are likely to remain fragmented. The role of digital governance was also discussed as an enabler of transparency, citizen monitoring, and data-driven policy feedback loops, positioning it as a mechanism for building institutional resilience and public trust.

Importantly, the panel discussed how African countries, including South Africa, can draw lessons from global practices while developing context-specific models of sustainable governance. Drawing on examples such as the BRICS countries' environmental and social governance frameworks (Hieu & Hai, 2023), panelists advocated for a holistic approach that integrates economic performance, environmental care, and participatory decision-making. The shared conclusion was that alumni, as embedded professionals in the public and development sectors, can play a transformative role by advancing sustainability principles into the mainstream of public-sector practice. The session ultimately reinforced the School's commitment to cultivating governance leaders who are not only technically competent but ethically grounded and future-facing.

### **Outcomes and Lessons Learned**

The alumni engagement event yielded several multi-dimensional outcomes, both tangible and intangible, that reinforce the strategic importance of structured alumni involvement in shaping the future of public service education. One of the most notable outcomes was the reactivation of professional networks among alumni, current students, academics, and institutional stakeholders. Numerous alumni indicated their willingness to contribute toward curriculum design, policy advisory services, mentorship, and internship facilitation. This commitment to ongoing engagement represents a significant departure from traditional notions of alumni as passive stakeholders or donors, repositioning them instead as critical institutional collaborators. This shift echoes Gallo's (2013) argument for recognising alumni as developmental partners rather than transactional actors. Furthermore, the event established a precedent for integrating alumni voices into school governance through consultative panels and advisory forums thus institutionalising alumni engagement as part of the School's developmental DNA, rather than treating it as an episodic or ceremonial activity.

Another key lesson that emerged from the event was the persistent mismatch between graduate preparedness and the realities of public-sector work. Alumni from various cohorts reflected on their transition from university to public service, revealing that while their academic training provided strong theoretical foundations, it did not adequately prepare them for the systemic, political, and institutional complexities they encountered. This concern resonates with the broader literature on employability and work-readiness in South Africa, which has identified gaps in critical thinking, adaptability, and digital fluency as major barriers to graduate integration into the workforce (Mobarak, 2019; Jordaan, 2024; Pitan & Muller, 2021). In response, the School acknowledged the need to strengthen its partnerships with alumni and employers to ensure that its academic programmes are not only contextually relevant but also anticipatory of future governance challenges. This aligns with García-Aracil et al.'s (2021) contention that higher education institutions must play an anticipatory role in preparing students for the transition to work, especially in volatile governance environments.

A further outcome was the demonstration of how digital technologies and social media platforms can extend the reach and depth of alumni engagement. The livestreaming of the event on YouTube, coupled with active engagement on Facebook, LinkedIn, and WhatsApp, enabled real-time interaction between in-person and virtual attendees, many of whom were based in different provinces or abroad. This hybrid engagement model created what Farrow and Yuan (2011) describe as "digital alumni commons"—spaces where memories, ideas, feedback, and solidarity were exchanged. This blurring of physical and digital participation not only widened access but also showcased how blended alumni engagement can support lifelong learning, professional networking, and the development of collective agency. This insight underscores the need for universities to invest in sustainable digital platforms that facilitate ongoing interaction, feedback loops, and collaboration beyond isolated events (Rubejes-Silva, 2024; Hayt, 2023).

Lastly, the event reinforced the value of alumni engagement as a form of participatory evaluation and organisational learning. Alumni were not simply reflecting on their past experiences but offering critique, strategic direction, and visionary ideas for the School's future. Their observations on gaps in curriculum design, the need for practical exposure, and the importance of interdisciplinary thinking served as informal evaluative feedback that the School can incorporate into its review and planning cycles. This echoes Campbell's (2018) vision of the university as a civic institution embedded in its community, one that thrives through meaningful engagement and collective reflection. In this way, alumni engagement can be framed as a form of public accountability, in which universities remain responsive to their social contract and to the evolving needs of the public service sector. The key lesson, therefore, is that alumni engagement should not be relegated to symbolic homecomings but strategically integrated into pedagogical planning, institutional governance, and public sector reform conversations.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This article explores the importance of alumni engagement for strengthening public service professionalism, innovation, and impact, drawing on reflections from a 2025 alumni event hosted by the School of Public Management, Governance and Public Policy. Through qualitative analysis of panel discussions, field observations, and social media interactions, five thematic areas were identified: professionalisation of the public sector; the future of public management in the 4IR; sustainability and governance; outcomes and lessons learned; and cross-cutting challenges. Across these themes, the evidence demonstrates that alumni are not only carriers of institutional legacy but also active agents of knowledge, practice, and change in public service contexts. Their insights—rooted in lived experience—can provide universities with critical feedback loops to shape curriculum relevance, research agendas, and graduate employability.

In drawing these conclusions, particular attention was paid to mitigating internal biases associated with interpretive qualitative research. Findings were not derived from a single data stream but from triangulated sources, including field notes, publicly available digital reflections, and full video recordings of the event. Interpretations were subjected to collaborative cross-checking among the three academic authors to reduce individual confirmation bias and institutional positionality effects. Where themes appeared prominent in one data source, they were verified against at least one additional source before inclusion in the final analysis. Reflexive discussions were conducted during the analytic process to interrogate assumptions arising from the authors' embedded roles within the institution. Importantly, conclusions are presented as context-bound analytic generalisations rather than universal claims. The study does not assert representativeness of all alumni or public institutions but instead offers interpretive insights grounded in a bounded case. By foregrounding transparency in coding, theme development, and interpretive reasoning, the study enhances credibility, dependability, and confirmability in line with established qualitative research standards.

Yet, for this engagement to move beyond symbolism and yield strategic value, institutional systems must evolve. First, universities need to formalise alumni engagement as a core pillar of public service training, embedding it within governance structures, student curricula, and professional development initiatives. Just as Matlala (2025) and Veluvali & Suriseti (2023) highlight the role of alumni in bridging theory and practice, so too must schools of governance treat alumni as co-creators of knowledge—not mere event participants or donors. Second, there is a need for inclusive and sustainable engagement models. This involves diversifying communication platforms, recognising generational and digital divides, and deliberately creating dialogic spaces that elevate the voices of marginalised groups, including emerging professionals and rural graduates.

Third, alumni data infrastructure must be modernised. Institutions should invest in integrated databases, feedback tools, and digital platforms that allow for real-time interaction, data-driven engagement strategies, and longitudinal tracking of graduate trajectories. As argued by Politis et al. (2024) and Nisar et al. (2023), without robust systems, even well-intentioned engagement efforts may falter due to fragmentation, inconsistency, and poor follow-through. Fourth, the article recommends that alumni contributions be meaningfully acknowledged—not only through ceremonial recognition, but also by involving them in mentorship, advisory boards, curriculum reviews, and collaborative research. This aligns with Gallo (2013) and Hayt (2023), who call for expanded definitions of alumni value that go “beyond philanthropy.”

Finally, this article underscores that alumni engagement is not simply a social event; it is a governance and development imperative. In contexts like South Africa, where public institutions face capacity deficits, digital transitions, and trust erosion, alumni represent an underutilised reservoir of credibility, leadership, and context-specific knowledge. If universities are to meaningfully contribute to the National Development Plan (NDP 2030), Agenda 2063, and the SDGs, they must leverage alumni as strategic partners in building a professional, inclusive, and forward-looking public service. This requires not just intention, but institutional redesign, one that recognises engagement as both a value and a strategy.

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