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### ***Learning for the job market: Preparing graphic design students in the GCC for the local design industry (0245)***

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#### **Introduction**

The number of graphic design students in the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC) is steadily increasing and universities in the region are responding to the increasing student interest by adding new graphic design programs. However, employers in this young and growing industry still employ a majority of expatriate designers, not GCC nationals. Therefore, this study set out to investigate whether faculty and graduates of GCC-based graphic design programs and the graduates' employers in the GCC are satisfied with the depth, range and quality of the graphic design education offered by higher education institutions in the GCC; whether the groups' levels of satisfaction are in alignment with each other; and what reasons might be associated with the level of reported satisfaction of these three groups.

#### **Methods**

The research questions were answered based on survey responses collected between December 2014 and December 2015 from GCC region employers in the graphic design industry (n=34), as well as alumni (n=152) and faculty members (n=69) from GCC-based universities. The quantitative data gathered was used to describe the perceptions of graphic design education held by its stakeholders, and provide insights into these perceptions. The collected data was examined in relation to selected literature available in higher education; more specifically on graphic design education both internationally and in the GCC, graduate outcomes, employability of graduates, and skills-based learning.

#### **Major Findings**

##### ***Satisfaction with the depth, range, and quality of the graphic design education***

Overall the study showed that the graphic design education in the GCC is not yet fulfilling its goal to prepare its students to be able to participate in the local graphic design industry upon graduation. Currently graphic design programs are in large part not teaching the skills required by the industry. And although some might argue that is isn't the purpose of higher education to train students in skills (Minogue, 1973), the GCC governments as well as many of the universities themselves have announced that it is their goal to prepare students to fill existing gaps in the current local labor market, to train students to decrease youth unemployment, and to improve national participation in both the public as well as the private sector (American University of Sharjah, 2016; Dar Al-Hekma University, 2016; Higher Colleges of Technology, 2016; Higher Colleges of Technology Oman, 2015; Princess Nourah Bint Abdulrahman University, 2016; The Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf - Secretariat General, 2006). If this is the aim, then graphic design programs and the graphic design employers have to come together to discuss the needs of the industry as well as the needs of the education sector to be able to teach what is needed by the industry.

##### ***Level of satisfaction among alumni, faculty members, and employers***

Undergraduate programs cannot teach all there is to know to prepare a person for the

workforce. The notion that we never cease to stop learning and that learning is a life-long process is not new (Geinare, 2009). Yet, educational institutions in the GCC often claim that their goal is to prepare their students to be skilled in their field of study and to be ready to enter the workforce upon graduating (Donn & Al Manthri, 2010). It is not uncommon to find statements in this regard on university websites and in their institutions' catalogs (American University of Sharjah, 2016; Dar Al-Hekma University, 2016; Higher Colleges of Technology, 2016; Higher Colleges of Technology Oman, 2015; Princess Nourah Bint Abdulrahman University, 2016). However, it is unclear to what extent the universities involve the respective industries in the curriculum development process and how success rate is measured in this regard.

The three participant groups provided a very different understanding of what skills or competencies were lacking in fresh graphic design graduates. Faculty members do not seem to be aware of the needs of the industry in regard to required technical expertise. This suggests that a dialogue between the employers and the educational institutions would be beneficial. Similarly, alumni seem unaware of the importance of time-management skills in the field of graphic design, a skill regarded most important by employers. Faculty members and students seem removed from the reality of the graphic design industry and its current state. At the same time the results indicate that alumni would like to receive an education that is less focused on the international design industry, but also provides them with more in-depth knowledge about Arabic design and design within the context of their own heritage and culture. Including this might improve alumni's satisfaction with their programs of study.

### ***Reasons for reported satisfaction***

Overall two main reasons emerged as being crucial to the education of employable graphic design graduates that need to be addressed. One reason is the skill set that students learn while they study and secondly the mode of instruction that students study in. If it is the aim of the GCC-based graphic design programs to graduate students that are well prepared to work in the local design industry, then the taught curricula need to incorporate courses that target the needed competencies.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, in order to improve the perception that alumni, faculty members, and employers currently have of the graphic design education provided at the undergraduate level in the GCC, the universities need to review their current curricula and consider changes that would improve the performance of graphic design graduates in the skills and competencies identified as lacking. Available literature has shown that the dissatisfactory performance of fresh graduates in several of the mentioned competencies is not unique to the GCC, but has been discussed by scholars internationally (Jackson, 2010). Others are more specific to the GCC given its context as an Arabic speaking region offering international English-medium programs. However, regardless of this, universities in the region need to pay attention to these skills if they want to graduate graphic designers ready to work in the local design industry in the GCC.

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