

The PSSD Community Network Service Ecosystem

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Designing a sustainable relational infrastructure
for professional transition
and global alumni engagement



POLITECNICO
MILANO 1863

Product Service System Design

Master's Thesis

The PSSD Community Network service ecosystem:
Designing a sustainable relational infrastructure for
professional transition and global alumni engagement.

Politecnico di Milano
School of Design
MSc in Product Service System Design
Academic Year: 2025-2026

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Acknowledgment

Dedicated to:

The future PSSD Community Network

We sincerely thank all the people who supported this thesis throughout the process, including more than 200 people who, over the course of one year, dedicated their time to interviews, surveys, and community events.

We are especially grateful to our supervisors, Professor Daniela Sangiorgi and Professor Valentina Auricchio, for their guidance and feedback throughout this thesis, as well as to the other PSSD professors who offered their support along the way.

This work is also dedicated to us, Valentina and Ayano, and to the experience we shared throughout this journey. Finally, we thank our families and friends for their continued support.

We hope this work will be valuable to those who follow, helping the PSSD community — alumni, students, and faculty alike — support one another and build the international, collaborative ecosystem this thesis proposes.

Abstract

ENG

International master's programs create valuable learning communities that often weaken after graduation, despite the lasting social, emotional, and professional relationships developed during students' studies. This thesis explores how service design can support these relationships by designing a sustainable community network for the Master's program in Product-Service System Design (PSSD) at Politecnico di Milano.

The research originated from the organisation of the program's twentieth anniversary celebrations, which revealed both the strength of the global PSSD community and the difficulty of maintaining meaningful connections once graduates returned to different countries. Building on this experience, the study combines a theoretical foundation on alumni engagement, sense of belonging, transition theory, and service ecosystem design with an analysis of existing alumni initiatives and external community models. A mixed-methods research approach was adopted, including an online survey involving 107 students and alumni, semi-structured interviews, stakeholder interviews, and co-design workshops. The findings show that the transition from university to professional life is the most challenging period for many graduates. During this stage, participants expressed needs that extend beyond career support and include belonging, peer learning, international networking, and continued engagement with the PSSD community.

In response to these findings, the thesis proposes the PSSD Community Network, a service ecosystem structured around three interconnected pillars: Career Orientation Program, the Alumni International Network, and the Community Infrastructure and Visibility System. Rather than developing isolated services, the proposal creates a flexible infrastructure that encourages knowledge exchange, mutual support, and shared responsibility among students, alumni, faculty, and external partners. Several components of the network, including PSSD Exploring, Alumni Stories, Global Circles, and the Global Ambassador Program, were designed, implemented, and evaluated during the research process, demonstrating the potential of a community-led model supported by the institution.

By reframing alumni engagement as a reciprocal community rather than an institution-centred activity, this research contributes to service design by showing how relational infrastructures can support professional transition, strengthen communities of practice, and create long-term value for international higher education programs.

Abstract

ITA

I corsi di laurea magistrale internazionali danno vita a ricche comunità di apprendimento che, al termine del percorso formativo, tendono progressivamente a dissolversi, nonostante le relazioni sociali, emotive e professionali costruite durante il percorso di studi. Questa tesi esplora come il service design possa sostenere la continuità di tali relazioni attraverso la progettazione di una rete comunitaria sostenibile per il Corso di Laurea Magistrale in Product-Service System Design (PSSD) del Politecnico di Milano.

La ricerca prende avvio dall'organizzazione delle celebrazioni per il ventesimo anniversario del corso, un'esperienza che ha rivelato al contempo la forza della comunità globale del PSSD e la difficoltà di mantenere connessioni significative dopo il rientro dei laureati nei rispettivi Paesi. A partire da questa esperienza, lo studio integra una revisione della letteratura su alumni engagement, senso di appartenenza, teoria della transizione e service ecosystem design con un'analisi delle iniziative esistenti dedicate agli alumni e di modelli comunitari esterni. È stato adottato un approccio metodologico misto che comprende un questionario online somministrato a 107 tra studenti e alumni, interviste semi-strutturate, interviste agli stakeholder e workshop di co-design. I risultati evidenziano come la transizione dall'università al mondo del lavoro costituisca la fase più critica per molti laureati. In questo periodo emergono bisogni che vanno ben oltre il semplice orientamento professionale e includono il senso di appartenenza, l'apprendimento tra pari, il networking internazionale e il desiderio di mantenere un legame vivo con la comunità PSSD.

In risposta a tali risultati, la tesi propone il PSSD Community Network, un ecosistema di servizi articolato attorno a tre pilastri strategici interconnessi: il Career Orientation Program, l'Alumni International Network e il Community Infrastructure and Visibility System. Anziché sviluppare servizi isolati, la proposta definisce un'infrastruttura relazionale flessibile che promuove lo scambio di conoscenze, il supporto reciproco e la responsabilità condivisa tra studenti, alumni, docenti e partner esterni. Alcune componenti del network – tra cui PSSD Exploring, Alumni Stories, Global Circles e il Global Ambassador Program – sono state progettate, implementate e valutate nel corso della ricerca, dimostrando il potenziale di un modello a guida comunitaria sostenuto dall'istituzione.

Reinterpretando l'alumni engagement come pratica di comunità reciproca, piuttosto che come attività orientata esclusivamente all'istituzione, questa ricerca offre un contributo al dibattito sul service design mostrando come infrastrutture relazionali possano supportare la transizione professionale, rafforzare le comunità di pratica e generare valore duraturo per i programmi universitari internazionali.

Table of Contents

Valentina	01	Introduction	11
	1.1	Research Motivation	12
	1.2	Overview of the PSSD Master Program	16
	1.3	Research Context and Project Origins	17
	1.4	Identified Gap and Research Opportunity	18
	1.5	Institutional Alignment and Strategic Relevance	19
	1.6	Research Vision	20
	1.7	Research Methodology	21
Ayano	02	Theoretical Foundation	27
	2.1	Traditional Operation and Financial Centricity of Alumni Engagement	30
	2.2	Sense of Belonging and Attachment	37
	2.3	Vulnerabilities in Transitions	43
	2.4	Key Perspectives for the PSSD Network	55
Valentina	03	Contextual Grounding: Existing Initiatives and Community Models	59
	3.1	PSSD Student–Alumni Initiatives	62
	3.2	Polimi Ecosystem level initiatives	73
	3.3	External Case Studies: Communities, Networks and Tools	77
	3.4	Universities Alumni Networks	85
	3.5	Synthesis: Design Opportunities from Contextual Grounding	93

Ayano	04	User and Stakeholder Research	99
	4.1	Research Framework	101
	4.2	Quantitative Research	103
	4.3	Qualitative Research	121
	4.4	Conclusions: User Research Overview and Insights	139
Valentina	05	Design Synthesis and Strategic Framework	151
	5.1	Introduction	153
	5.2	PSSD Community Network Vision and Strategic Framework	155
	5.3	Governance Ecosystem	161
	5.4	Community Lifecycle Journey and User Segmentation	173
	5.5	Offering Map and Service ecosystem	177
Ayano	06	Career Orientation Program	183
	6.1	Positioning of Career Orientation	185
	6.2	Proposed Interventions and Feedback from the Co-design Process	189
	6.3	Implemented Intervention 1: PSSD Exploring	197
	6.4	Implemented Intervention 2: Alumni Stories	211
	6.5	Future Development Opportunities	219
	6.6	Chapter Summary and Reflection	225

Valentina	07	Alumni International Network	229
	7.1	Service Overview	223
	7.2	Research Process and Co-design	238
	7.3	Implemented Intervention 1: Global Ambassadors Program	255
	7.4	Implemented Intervention 2: Global Circles 2026	263
	7.5	Future Developments Opportunities	272
	7.6	Chapter Summary and Reflection	280
Valentina	08	Community Infrastructure and Visibility System	283
	8.1	Internship Continuation Plan	287
	8.2	Knowledge Passing Manual	289
	8.3	Communication System and Brand Identity	292
	8.4	PSSD Archive and Editorial Plan	297
	8.5	PSSD Career Report and Alumni Data	299
Ayano and Valentina	09	Conclusion	301
		Sources	305

List of Figures

Figure 3.1.	Alumni Design Talks poster featuring Daria Cantù	63
Figure 3.2.	Josina Vink presenting during the Design Talk “Shaping Relations Otherwise”	63
Figure 3.3.	PSSD Advisory Board kick-off meeting, 2025	64
Figure 3.4.	PSSD Tour event held online with Logotel	65
Figure 3.5.	Pictures of PSSD Tour at Fifth Beat	65
Figure 3.6.	Participants attending the online kickoff session of the PSSD Mentoring Program and slide of the PSSD Mentoring Program	66
Figure 3.7.	Overview of the PSSD Mentoring Program presented during the PSSD Mentoring Final Event	67
Figure 3.8.	Summary of PSSD Mentoring Program participation and outcomes	67
Figure 3.9.	Activities during the PSSD 20th Anniversary celebrations, 2025	68
Figure 3.10.	The PSSD 20th Anniversary organising team	70
Figure 3.11.	Performance metrics of the official PSSD social media account during June and July 2025	71
Figure 3.12.	Politecnico di Milano campuses and School of Design spaces	73
Figure 3.13.	Career Mentoring with Alumni for Design Students program	75
Figure 3.14.	Alumni Polimi Day 2026 and Alumni Convivio materials	76
Figure 3.15.	Service Design Drinks Milan event	81
Figure 3.16.	Nova Talent website	82
Figure 3.17.	Mega Mentor website	83
Figure 3.18.	Aalto University Mentoring website	87
Figure 3.19.	Royal College of Art Alumni website and AlumniRCA Instagram profile	89
Figure 3.20.	UCL Alumni-Student Chats website	91
Figure 4.1.	PSSD Alumni Network & Visibility System: Objectives and Question Form	104
Figure 4.2.	Employment status among the 22 early alumni	107
Figure 4.3.	Employment status among the 54 alumni who had graduated more than one year earlier	108
Figure 4.4.	Responses to what extent current jobs reflected expectations after completing PSSD from early alumni	109
Figure 4.5.	Responses to what extent current jobs reflected expectations after completing PSSD from alumni who had graduated more than one year earlier	109
Figure 4.6.	Responses to whether PSSD had given them the skills and preparation needed for their current job from early alumni	109
Figure 4.7.	Responses to most difficult transition phase	110
Figure 4.8.	Responses to types of challenges experienced	111
Figure 4.9.	Responses to adaptation to challenges	113
Figure 4.10.	Responses to support systems used	115
Figure 4.11.	Responses to helpfulness of support	116
Figure 4.12.	Responses to expected support from an alumni network	117
Figure 5.1.	The 6 Elements of Effective Strategic Planning Pyramid	155
Figure 5.2.	PSSD Community Network graph adapted from the Strategic Planning Pyramid framework	156

Figure 5.3.	Conceptual illustration inspired by the Global Circles 2025 initiative	157
Figure 5.4.	Green House for growth illustration	157
Figure 5.5.	PSSD Community Network Governance Ecosystem	162
Figure 5.6.	Community Lifecycle and Contribution Journey	174
Figure 5.7.	Offering Map of the PSSD Community Network	177
Figure 6.1.	Career Orientation Program Offering Map	187
Figure 6.2.	Co-design session conducted online on 22 April 2026	189
Figure 6.3.	Overall view and close-ups of key sections of the FigJam board used in the co-design session	194
Figure 6.4.	Distribution of typology of participants	197
Figure 6.5.	Event announcements on social media	199
Figure 6.6.	Prepared list of questions for the event	199
Figure 6.7.	Presentation during the event	200
Figure 6.8.	Presentation by SDD Milan during the event	202
Figure 6.9.	Participants during the presentation	202
Figure 6.10.	Participants during the break time	202
Figure 6.11.	Advisory board members and participants during table discussion	204
Figure 6.12.	Advisory board members and participants during table discussion	205
Figure 6.13.	Advisory board members and participants during table discussion	205
Figure 6.14.	Sheet for assigning participants to tables	205
Figure 6.15.	PSSD Exploring Organizational Realities & Table Discussion Report	207
Figure 6.16.	Alumni Stories article from the PSSD website	213
Figure 6.17.	Profile information of the interviewee from the article	213
Figure 6.18.	Online interview with Ning Meng	213
Figure 7.1.	Alumni International Network Offering Map developed by Valentina Phung	234
Figure 7.2.	Timeline of 2025 Global Circles	238
Figure 7.3.	Map of 2025 Global Circles operative system	240
Figure 7.4.	Thesis Research Timeline	241
Figure 7.5.	Value Exchange Map between PSSD Faculty / Program, Global Ambassadors and Alumni	243
Figure 7.6.	Early alumni and graduating students during the online co-design session	246
Figure 7.7.	Ambassador participants during the online co-design session	246
Figure 7.8.	FigJam board used as the working surface for the co-design sessions	247
Figure 7.9.	Global PSSD Ambassadors logo	255
Figure 7.10.	Global Ambassador Board webpage	256
Figure 7.11.	Screenshot from the Alignment Meeting session	258
Figure 7.12.	PSSD Global Circles logo	263
Figure 7.13.	PSSD Global Circles 2026 Season Topic Poster	264
Figure 7.14.	Global Map with local circles activated in 2026	265
Figure 7.15.	Illustration of the different groups on the PSSD Network WhatsApp Community	266
Figure 7.16.	Brainstorming materials for the PSSD Circle 2026 season (1)	268
Figure 7.17.	Brainstorming materials for the PSSD Circle 2026 season (2)	268
Figure 7.18.	Prototype of the Global Circles Archive on PSSD website	274
Figure 7.19.	Prototype of the Global Circles Interactive Map on PSSD website	276
Figure 7.20.	Prototype of the Alumni Expert Talk social media poster	278
Figure 8.1.	Offering map of the Community Infrastructure and Visibility System	286
Figure 8.2.	Visual Identity Guidelines for PSSD Community Network	293

Figure 8.3.	Examples of brand identity application: PSSD Exploring poster and Global Circles 2026 season poster (1)	293
Figure 8.4.	Examples of brand identity application: PSSD Exploring poster and Global Circles 2026 season poster (2)	293
Figure 8.5.	PSSD Archive prototype made for the PSSD 20th Anniversary	298
Figure 8.6.	Slides about PSSD Career and data insights presented in the Alignment	300

List of Tables

Table 2.1.	CASE Alumni Engagement Metrics framework	33
Table 2.2.	The 4S System Applied to Post-Graduation Transition	48
Table 2.3.	Summary of theoretical foundations informing the research hypothesis	56
Table 4.1.	List of interviewee summaries	123
Table 4.2.	List of interviewees: PSSD Faculty members	124
Table 4.3.	List of interviewees: Polimi Career Service	125
Table 4.4.	List of interviewees: Alumni Ambassador and Local Circle organiser	125
Table 4.5.	List of interviewees: Transition-stage students and young alumni	126
Table 4.6.	List of interviewees: External design community	126

01

Introduction

Chapter written by Valentina Phung, based on the overall research conducted together.

- 1.1** Research Motivation
- 1.2** Overview of the PSSD Master Program
- 1.3** Research Context and Project Origins
- 1.4** Identified Gap and Research Opportunity
- 1.5** Institutional Alignment and Strategic Relevance
- 1.6** Research Vision
- 1.7** Research Methodology

66

Valentina's Perspective

As a person who has a multicultural background, being born in Italy and having Vietnamese origins, I have always taken multicultural exchange and the celebration of diversity close to heart. The feeling of not being strictly either one thing or the other, the need to feel normal and different at the same time. Throughout the process of "accepting" my bicultural identity, I came to understand that my comfort zone is being surrounded by people who are open to sharing and getting to know one another, each with their own cultures and uniqueness.

Help organising the PSSD global circles for celebrating the 20th anniversary of the Master program gave me a platform to develop this idea. Creating bridges—connecting people globally and locally —inspired me to take this topic as my thesis. This project has been a challenging task, taking into consideration different levels of complexities, geographics and hierarchies in order to make a valuable proposal that worked for (almost) everyone. Being both European and Asian may have helped, along with my excitement for bringing people together and making connections fun! My main driver was helping people meet, connect, and augment the possibilities of new opportunities and friendships. What could be more fun and rewarding than this?

Ayano's perspective

As someone who had spent most of her life in Japan, studying in the PSSD Master program was my first long-term experience of living, learning, and building relationships in a different cultural environment. During these two years, I was surrounded by people from various countries, backgrounds, and perspectives, and this experience gradually changed the way I understood design, community, and myself. PSSD felt like a small version of the world, where people who might never have met otherwise could come together, collaborate, and become part of each other's lives.

My involvement in the 20th anniversary of the program gave me the opportunity to look at PSSD from a wider perspective. Through discovering its history, evolution, and the many people who had contributed to it over the past twenty years, I felt excited by the richness and potential of this community. I also learned that many alumni had gone on to do meaningful, diverse, and inspiring work in different contexts. At the same time, I felt that this value should not remain only as an internal memory of the course. There was something worth making more visible, more accessible, and more alive.

On the other hand, after the taught part of the master's program ended and I returned to Japan to work on my thesis, I started to notice another side of this international learning experience. During my life in Milan, a large part of my time, attention, and daily rhythm revolved around PSSD. Through classes, projects, assignments, and relationships with friends, school life occupied a significant part of my everyday life. However, once I left that environment, the stimulation and interactions that had once felt natural suddenly became distant, and I felt a strong gap. Even though I had returned to my home country, the sudden shift from an international and active environment to a more familiar but less stimulating one made me experience something close to reverse culture shock.

When I spoke with close friends who had also returned to their own countries through Zoom calls, I realised that I was not the only one feeling this way. Many of them described similar feelings of loneliness and loss, as if the time we had shared in Italy had become almost like a dream. This made me reflect on how fragile international student communities can become after the shared physical environment disappears. While such communities may naturally exist when people are studying, working, and spending time together in the same place, they can easily become disconnected once everyone moves on to different locations.

For me, this thesis is driven by the desire to keep the PSSD experience from becoming only a line on a CV, or a beautiful but closed chapter of life. I believe that the experience of studying in such an international and relational environment has the potential to continue supporting people after graduation, emotionally, socially, and professionally. Therefore, my motivation is to explore how the PSSD community can remain a living network after graduation, helping people stay connected, feel supported, and carry this meaningful period of their lives into their next transitions.

1.2

Overview of the PSSD Master Program

¹Official PSSD Master's website:
www.pssd.polimi.it

The Product Service System Design (PSSD)¹ program is a Master of Science offered by the School of Design at the public university of Politecnico di Milano, one of Europe's leading technical universities, located at the Bovisa Campus in Milan. Established in 2005, the program emerged from Politecnico di Milano's pioneering research on Product-Service Systems for sustainability and the emerging field of service and strategic design, making it the first Master's program globally to develop competencies in service design. The School of Design is currently ranked 1st in Italy and 6th in the world by the QS World University Rankings by Subject 2024 (QS Top Universities, 2024).

The course focuses on systems that combine products, services, spaces, and digital technologies to address complex challenges in a sustainable manner, with a multidisciplinary approach drawing from product, service, systems, space, and interaction design, alongside tools from project management, strategic management, sustainability, and anthropology (Politecnico di Milano, 2024c). The program is delivered entirely in English across four semesters. The first three semesters are structured around design studios, from the Innovation Studio in the first semester, through the Product Service System Design Studio in the second, to the Final Synthesis Design Studio in the third, with the fourth semester dedicated to the final examination (Politecnico di Milano, 2024b).

Each year the program welcomes approximately 100 students, drawn from a international community in which roughly half come from outside Europe, spanning a wide range of nationalities.

What further distinguishes PSSD is its attentiveness to student wellbeing and a supported transition into academic and professional life. From the very beginning of the program, a dedicated Teambuilding course helps students connect and build the collaborative foundations the course relies on (Politecnico di Milano, 2024b). Beyond the classroom, the program runs a set of dedicated initiatives: the PSSD Tour, which involves visits to companies and organisations; PSSD Mentoring, which connects students with alumni; and PSSD Expert and Alumni Talks, a recurring series of lectures by practitioners and former students (Politecnico di Milano, 2024a).

1.3

Research Context and Project Origins

This thesis originated from the organization of the 20th anniversary celebration of the Product-Service System Design Master's course at Politecnico di Milano – an event in which both authors were directly involved. Ayano contributed to the communication and planning of the Milan events, while Valentina helped coordinate the international circles, both working under the guidance of Professors Daniela Sangiorgi and Valentina Auricchio, alongside further faculty and staff support.

The anniversary aimed to reconnect alumni and current students across generations, both in Milan and worldwide. After months of planning, it brought together over 200 people through a main celebration day, a two-day design jam, a series of side activities, and 10 international circles with 60 participants globally – a meaningful reach, given that PSSD's total graduated students numbers approximately 1118 (Product Service System Design [PSSD], 2024).

What shaped our perspective was our position within this process. We were not external observers but graduating students with close ties to the faculty, which gave us a dual vantage point: we understood the operational and communicative challenges of running such an event, while also knowing firsthand what students and alumni needed from it. This proximity made visible the need for a more durable structure to keep the community connected beyond a single occasion.

From this realization emerged the central question guiding this thesis:

How can a service system reinforce the value of PSSD beyond graduation, ensuring lasting connection and professional growth for the international community of students and alumni?

1.4

Identified Gap and Research Opportunity

The anniversary celebration made the PSSD community visible – but only for a few weeks. It demonstrated that people wanted to connect and would participate when given the opportunity. What was missing was a light infrastructure capable of sustaining the network over time, alongside a compelling value proposition to keep the community engaged beyond the event itself.

As our research deepened, we came to understand that alumni engagement is not an isolated challenge but part of a broader, more complex phenomenon rooted in the quality of care and belonging students experience during the program itself. Drawing on Transition Theory (Schlossberg, 1981), we recognized that the shift from university to professional life constitutes a significant life transition – one that carries both challenges and opportunities for identity development and personal growth.

As students who had recently navigated this transition ourselves, we were well-positioned to observe the PSSD student experience across different stages. During the taught program, students benefit from a strong sense of community and multiple opportunities for connection. Once coursework ends, however – as students shift to electives, begin job hunting, and disperse across different cities and countries – those connections tend to fade. This fragmentation is not inherently negative, but the uncertainty of this in-between period can be isolating, particularly for international students and those relocating far from their support networks.

Our research confirmed that these challenges were most acute for those navigating geographic and cultural transitions, and that connection opportunities held the greatest value for professionals seeking to maintain meaningful networks. This pointed toward a clear opportunity: to design something that could bridge the gap between the richness of the PSSD experience and what comes after it – offering alumni, students, and faculty a platform for meaningful exchange that continues to grow in relevance over time.

1.5

Institutional Alignment and Strategic Relevance

The questions raised by this thesis are not only relevant to the PSSD community – they align closely with the broader institutional priorities of Politecnico di Milano. The university's Strategic Plan 2026–2028 identifies people as **“the heart and driving force”** of the institution, positioning research, education, and social responsibility as interconnected pillars of its mission. Within this framework, alumni are described as **“key members of a united community”** – lifelong ambassadors whose ongoing relationship with the university is seen as strategically important. The plan specifically calls for strengthening alumni networks through mentoring, advisory boards, and social impact collaborations. (Politecnico di Milano, 2026)

At the course level, PSSD was founded as an international master's program, with diversity and global thinking embedded in its identity from the outset. This orientation has consistently informed the faculty's attention to student well-being and community building – from team-building activities at the start of the program to initiatives such as PSSD Mentoring and PSSD Company Tours. The 20th anniversary itself was conceived as an opportunity to actively reconnect the community through shared activities and informal exchange.

The faculty's commitment to student and alumni care is therefore central to the course's identity and long-term vision. Alumni represent both a source of collective knowledge and a reflection of the program's impact in the world. A well-designed community network offers mutual benefit: it brings prestige and visibility to the course while providing alumni with continued access to a meaningful professional and personal community.

1.6

Research Vision

The vision of this thesis is to design a light, sustainable infrastructure that addresses one of the most persistent challenges in alumni community networks: continuity over time. If the 20th anniversary celebration planted seeds of reconnection, the aim of this project is to build the conditions, the structure, the value, and the rhythm, that allow those seeds to grow rather than fade. This vision emerged from a central observation: PSSD already possesses remarkable assets. It has a strong identity, committed faculty, internationally diverse alumni, a rich body of professional knowledge, and a genuine sense of belonging among those who have been part of it. What is missing is not the raw material for a community, but the infrastructure to make it continuous, accessible, and self-sustaining across time and geography.

Achieving this required a deep understanding of the exchanges that matter most among PSSD faculty, alumni, and current students: what each party can offer, what they need, and when connection is most relevant. The research revealed that alumni engagement cannot be separated from student care. The two are part of the same loop. Students who feel supported and connected during their studies are more likely to remain engaged as alumni; alumni who find genuine value in the network are more likely to contribute back to the students who follow them. The service vision is therefore not a linear pipeline from student to graduate to donor, as traditional alumni engagement models tend to frame it, but a circular and self-reinforcing system that creates value at every stage of the lifecycle, from the first semester through to decades after graduation, across cities and continents.

This thesis proposes the PSSD Community Network as the vehicle for that vision: a shared service umbrella developed jointly by both authors, composed of three interconnected pillars. The Career Orientation Program, developed by Ayano, supports students and early alumni in navigating the transition from university to professional life, making diverse career paths visible and helping graduates translate the PSSD experience into professional identity. The Alumni International Network, developed by Valentina, creates the conditions for geographically dispersed alumni to remain connected through local circles, a structured ambassador program, and shared knowledge exchange across regions and generations. The Community Infrastructure and Visibility System, developed jointly, provides the operational backbone that makes both pillars sustainable: a recurring internship model, a knowledge-passing manual, and a communication system that ensure the network can be transferred, adapted, and scaled by each successive cohort without losing coherence or momentum.

Together, these three pillars embody a broader design ambition: to transform the PSSD experience from a closed chapter into a living resource, one that continues to support people long after graduation and that grows richer as more generations of students and alumni contribute to it.

This thesis is grounded in a design research approach, understood as a form of inquiry in which design practice and research activity are intertwined rather than sequential (Frayling, 1993). Rather than studying an existing phenomenon from the outside, the research emerged from direct participation in the design context itself, specifically the organisation of PSSD's 20th anniversary, and developed iteratively through cycles of investigation, reflection, and design action. This positions the work within a tradition of research through design, in which knowledge is produced not only prior to design but also in and through the act of designing (Schön, 1983).

Given that the research aimed to understand complex human experiences across a diverse and internationally distributed population, including community belonging, professional transition, and alumni engagement, a mixed-methods approach was adopted. Quantitative and qualitative methods were treated as complementary rather than hierarchical: the quantitative phase provided breadth and allowed patterns to surface across a larger sample, while the qualitative phase provided depth, context, and the kind of situated knowledge that numbers alone cannot capture. The research unfolded in four phases:

The first phase consisted of desk research, in which we conducted a review of the theoretical foundations of alumni engagement, sense of belonging, transition theory, and community network design. This phase also included an analysis of existing alumni community models, with particular attention to design-oriented universities and city-based professional networks, examining their organisational structures, value propositions, and governance approaches. The purpose of this phase was to build a theoretical foundation capable of framing both the problem and the design direction, and to avoid reinventing solutions that already existed in other contexts.

The second phase was a quantitative survey, distributed digitally to all reachable PSSD alumni and current students via email and social media between December 2025 and January 2026, yielding 107 responses. The survey was designed to assess the perceived difficulty of different transition phases, the types of challenges most strongly experienced, the support systems used, and the kinds of community initiatives respondents would value or contribute to. The sample was intentionally constructed to ensure diversity across graduation year, current occupation, and geographic location. Questions were structured around Schlossberg's 4S system, Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies (Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman, 1995), to allow both descriptive and analytical readings of transition experience. This phase was conducted jointly by both of us, as it addressed shared research questions relevant to both thesis directions.

The third phase consisted of semi-structured qualitative interviews with 17 participants across five stakeholder groups: three faculty members, one institutional career support representative, six alumni ambassadors who had organised international circles for the 20th anniversary, five transition-stage students and early alumni, and one external design community organiser. Participants were selected purposively to ensure diverse perspectives across stakeholder roles, graduation years, geographic locations, and professional contexts. Each interview was conducted individually, recorded with consent, and analysed thematically to identify key patterns around user needs, transition challenges, community motivations, and engagement conditions. This phase was also conducted jointly, as the stakeholder groups crossed both areas of research focus.

Following the joint research phases, we proceeded independently to develop our respective design proposals, with Ayano focusing on career orientation and professional transition support, and Valentina on the international alumni network, while maintaining ongoing dialogue to ensure the coherence of the broader PSSD Community Network umbrella. Each of us then conducted separate co-design sessions with relevant user groups to test and refine our proposals. Ayano held a session with transitioning students and early alumni to validate the Career Orientation concepts; Valentina held two sessions, one with alumni ambassadors and one with graduating students, to refine the Global Circles and Ambassador program. Insights from these sessions were synthesised through affinity mapping and informed the development of the final service proposals, including a service blueprint and an offering map for the PSSD Community Network.

The fourth phase was the design and implementation of pilot projects. We developed and partially implemented our respective proposals during the 2025 to 2026 academic year, treating the pilots as first designed iterations rather than concluded evaluations. This approach reflects the iterative logic of service design, in which early implementation is understood as a form of research that generates knowledge feeding back into the design process, rather than representing a final outcome.

Together, the two thesis projects converge within the PSSD Community Network, a shared service umbrella composed of three interconnected pillars. The first is Career Orientation, developed by Ayano, which supports students and recent graduates in navigating the transition from university to professional life. The second is the Alumni International Network, developed by Valentina, which creates conditions for geographically distributed alumni to remain connected through local circles, a structured ambassador program, and shared knowledge exchange. The third pillar is the Community Infrastructure and Visibility System, developed jointly, which addresses the long-term sustainability and continuity of the network as a whole. This infrastructural layer includes the Internship Continuation Plan, which proposes a recurring student internship model to ensure the network is managed and developed by each new cohort; the Knowledge Passing Manual, a living operational document that transmits institutional knowledge across cycles; and the Communication System and Brand Identity, which provides visual and communicative coherence across all initiatives. Together, these elements ensure that the network does not depend on any single individual or cohort, but can be transferred, adapted, and scaled over time.

Several methodological limitations should be acknowledged. The survey sample, while diverse, relied on self-selection and on the reach of available communication channels, which means it likely over-represents more engaged alumni and under-represents those who had already lost contact with the program. The qualitative sample of 17 participants, while carefully selected across stakeholder groups, is not sufficient to claim full representativeness of the PSSD community. We were also insider researchers, graduating students with close ties to the faculty and personal investment in the outcomes, which brings the advantage of contextual knowledge and access, but also the risk of confirmation bias. This positionality has been acknowledged throughout the research and managed through the use of multiple methods, multiple stakeholder perspectives, and an explicit effort to surface critical and contradictory voices alongside supportive ones.

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02 Theoretical Foundation

Chapter written by Ayano Osawa, based on the overall research conducted together.

- 2.1** Traditional Operation and Financial Centricity of Alumni Engagement
- 2.2** Sense of Belonging and Attachment
- 2.3** Vulnerabilities in Transitions
- 2.4** Key Perspectives for the PSSD Network

As anticipated in the introduction, this joint design research project explores the design for a sustainable and resilient community network for PSSD alumni. In order to design such a network, it is not sufficient to simply consider alumni events or information-sharing activities. It is also necessary to clarify the theoretical framework that supports the proposed service system.

This chapter reviews several interrelated areas of literature in order to build the theoretical foundation for the proposed “PSSD Community Network.” First, it examines how alumni engagement has traditionally been operated and discussed, particularly in relation to fundraising, institutional loyalty, and university-centred benefits. Second, it explores the role of sense of belonging, attachment, trust, and affective commitment in alumni communities. Third, it discusses the vulnerabilities and support needs of graduates, especially international students and alumni, during the transition from university to professional life, drawing on Transition Theory. Finally, based on these discussions, the chapter identifies the need to design a service system that supports voluntary connections, mutual support, and continuous engagement among alumni in an international and interdisciplinary educational program such as PSSD.

Through this research, it reinterprets alumni engagement not only as a matter of contribution to the institution, but also as a community network that supports graduates' career development, professional identity, sense of belonging, and continuous learning after graduation.

2.1

Traditional Operation and Financial Centricity of Alumni Engagement

This section uses Alison O'Connor's *Activating Alumni Engagement: The impact of an engaged alumni community on an institution's strategic goals* (2022) as a useful starting point for discussing institution-facing alumni engagement. O'Connor's study is a qualitative applied research project developed as a MACT Capstone at the University of Alberta. Therefore, it is not treated here as a quantitative study, a theoretical model, or a general theory representing all university alumni populations. Rather, it is positioned as a case-based and practice-oriented reference that examines alumni engagement from the perspective of institutional strategy in a North American higher education context.

The study was selected among the sources reviewed for this section because it brings together several themes that are central to the traditional operation of alumni engagement: fundraising, institutional advancement, strategic value, and broader forms of alumni participation. O'Connor's work is particularly relevant to this thesis because it illustrates how alumni engagement has often been framed from the perspective of the university. In this framing, alumni are not only former students or potential donors, but also stakeholders who can support institutional goals through mentoring, advisory participation, teaching partnerships, student recruitment, employment opportunities, lifelong learning, ambassadorship, and philanthropy.

Its main focus remains on how alumni engagement can contribute to the strategic goals of the institution. This thesis builds on that perspective, but extends it toward a different relational direction: alumni-to-alumni relationships, mutual support, and transition support. In this sense, this section first examines the institutional logic of alumni engagement, and then identifies its limitations in order to position the proposed PSSD Community Network as a more horizontal and reciprocal service system.

2.1.1

Alumni Engagement as an Institutional Strategy

Alumni engagement has traditionally been positioned as an important activity within higher education institutions. Alumni can contribute to universities in various ways, including enhancing institutional reputation, supporting current students, providing professional networks, and contributing to institutional development through donations and volunteering. Sharma, Bhatia, and Bali (2026) state that “Alumni engagement has become one of the dimensions of institutional success and sustainability in the vibrant environment of contemporary higher education.” (p. 58). For this reason, alumni engagement has often been treated not only as a way to maintain relationships with graduates, but also as an institutional mechanism that supports the long-term development and strategic goals of universities.

This institutional framing is also reflected in O'Connor's study, which discusses alumni engagement as a way for institutions to mobilize alumni participation in support of strategic goals (2022). In this view, alumni are not only former students or potential donors, but can become active participants in the institution's long-term success.

At the same time, O'Connor also points out that alumni engagement departments are often expected to demonstrate their value through measurable institutional outcomes. In particular, institutions may want to know whether alumni relations efforts lead to an increase in donors, fundraising dollars, student recruitment, testimonials, or other forms of institutional support. This suggests that alumni engagement is often discussed through the question of how universities can maintain relationships with graduates in order to secure loyalty, participation, advocacy, and financial or strategic contribution.

2.1.2

Measuring Alumni Engagement: From Fundraising to Institutional Participation

In particular, alumni engagement has often been closely associated with fundraising, alumni giving, donations, and institutional advancement. This tendency was also identified during the preliminary research. Several studies reviewed at this stage suggest that, especially in the United States and in higher education contexts facing financial pressure, alumni engagement has been discussed in relation to declining public funding, increasing competition, and the need to diversify funding sources.

For example, McDearmon (2013) explicitly connects alumni support to the decline of state and federal support for higher education in the United States, arguing that many institutions have looked to increase support from alumni and other constituencies in response to these financial pressures. Similarly, Francioni et al. (2021) state that higher education institutions have experienced severe cutbacks in government funding and have therefore explored alternative funding streams, including alumni funding. These studies help explain why alumni have often been discussed as important sources of financial and institutional support.

Together, these studies show that alumni engagement has often been studied within an institution-facing logic: universities seek to understand how alumni can be encouraged to give, participate, support, and remain connected in ways that contribute to institutional sustainability. O'Connor's review of existing alumni engagement literature is consistent with this observation, noting that philanthropy and fundraising are among the common topics examined in the field. From this perspective, alumni relationships are frequently understood as an important foundation for universities to secure continuous financial support and long-term institutional value.

At the same time, alumni engagement is not limited to financial contribution alone. Alumni engagement may also be evaluated through indicators such as event attendance, volunteering, mentoring activities, communication, and loyalty to the institution. For example, the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE), an international non-profit association that supports advancement professionals in areas such as alumni relations, communications, marketing, and development, provides a useful framework for understanding how alumni engagement is commonly measured in higher education institutions. CASE's Alumni Engagement Metrics framework defines alumni engagement across four modes: philanthropic, volunteer, experiential, and communications. These categories include financial and in-kind support, formal volunteer roles such as mentoring or advisory participation, meaningful experiences such as events and reunions, and interactive communication with alumni.

Table 2.1. CASE Alumni Engagement Metrics framework

Source: Adapted from Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE), Alumni Engagement Metrics framework / CASE Insights on Alumni Engagement

Mode of engagement	What it measures	Examples of activities	Main direction of engagement
Philanthropic	Financial or in-kind support that contributes to the institution's mission and strategic goals	Donations, campaign giving, planned giving, gifts in kind	Alumni to institution
Volunteer	Formally defined volunteer roles that support the institution's mission and strategic goals	Mentoring, advisory boards, student recruitment, classroom speaking, public advocacy	Alumni to institution / students
Experiential	Meaningful experiences that connect alumni with the institution and its community	Events, reunions, homecoming, online events, digital forums, alumni programs	Institution to alumni / alumni participation
Communications	Interactive, meaningful, and informative communication with alumni	Social media interaction, class notes, direct correspondence, interactive communication	Institution–alumni interaction

Nevertheless, even when alumni engagement is defined beyond financial contribution, its evaluative focus still tends to remain on how alumni interact with and provide value to the institution. In other words, these indicators make visible whether alumni donate, volunteer, attend events, communicate with the university, or participate in institution-led activities. They are therefore useful for understanding alumni engagement from the perspective of institutional management and advancement.

However, such indicators do not necessarily correspond to the quality of relationships among alumni themselves, the degree of mutual support within the alumni community, or the psychological connection and sense of belonging experienced by graduates after leaving the institution. They also do not necessarily show whether alumni's own post-graduation needs, such as career uncertainty, isolation, access to informal knowledge, or the desire for continued connection, are being addressed. Therefore, while existing measurement frameworks are valuable for making alumni engagement visible and manageable, they may not fully capture the horizontal, relational, and needs-based dimensions of alumni communities.

2.1.3

Alumni as Strategic Partners Beyond Fundraising

Within this institution-facing and practice-oriented perspective, O'Connor's (2022) study moves beyond a narrow fundraising-oriented understanding of alumni engagement. O'Connor does not treat alumni simply as donors or former students, but positions them as an engaged alumni community that can contribute to the strategic goals of an institution. The study asks how alumni want to be involved in activities that may help advance the goals of their alma mater, and connects these possible forms of involvement to the institution's strategic plan.

This approach is important because it reframes alumni as **strategic partners**. O'Connor identifies several ways in which alumni can contribute to institutional goals, not only through philanthropy, but also through mentoring students, participating in guest lectures, joining advisory councils, supporting student recruitment, hiring graduates, providing industry knowledge, and acting as ambassadors for the institution. In this view, alumni are not a passive audience that simply receives institutional communication. They are active stakeholders who can participate in the development, reputation, and educational value of the institution. This broader understanding is also consistent with Weerts and Ronca's (2007) view of alumni support, which examines alumni not only as financial donors, but also as volunteers and political advocates who can contribute to their institutions in multiple ways.

O'Connor also suggests the need to move alumni engagement **from a transactional relationship to a transformational one**. In a transactional model, alumni are often approached as former students or potential future donors. In contrast, a transformational model understands alumni participation as part of the culture of the institution. Alumni are not only asked to give back; they are invited to participate in meaningful ways that create value for themselves, current students, and the wider institutional community.

This point is important for the present research. This study also understands alumni engagement not as a one-way request or communication from the university to graduates, but as an ongoing relationship in which universities and alumni communicate, collaborate, and co-create value. O'Connor's study therefore provides a useful reference point for moving beyond fundraising-oriented alumni engagement and toward a broader understanding of alumni as active stakeholders in long-term institutional relationships. However, as the next section discusses, this perspective still needs to be extended in order to address alumni-to-alumni relationships and mutual support after graduation.

2.1.4

Limitations of Institution-Facing Alumni Engagement

O'Connor's study is useful because it expands alumni engagement beyond fundraising and positions alumni as active participants who can support institutional strategy (2022). However, this perspective still remains largely institution-facing. Even when alumni are understood not only as donors but also as mentors, advisors, ambassadors, or strategic partners, the main direction of value creation is still framed around how alumni contribute to the university.

This limitation is also visible in Unangst's study of international alumni engagement at U.S. research universities (2020). Unangst examines international alumni affairs among research-intensive, doctoral-granting institutions in the United States, mainly from the perspective of university administrators. The study notes that alumni engagement has often been connected to philanthropic goals, especially in the U.S. context, while also recognizing alumni as permanent constituents who can contribute to institutional well-being beyond financial support. This supports the idea that alumni are increasingly understood beyond donors, but it also shows that alumni engagement is still often discussed through how universities organize, manage, and benefit from alumni relationships.

For the present research, this perspective is important but insufficient. It does not fully address how alumni relationships can support graduates themselves, especially through peer connection, informal knowledge exchange, mutual support, and belonging after graduation. Therefore, this thesis shifts the focus from alumni as contributors to the institution toward alumni as members of a horizontal and reciprocal community. The central question is not only how alumni can support the university, but also how the university can enable alumni to support one another.

2.2

Sense of Belonging and Attachment

This section examines the relational foundations of alumni engagement by focusing on two empirical studies: Drezner and Pizmony-Levy's *I belong, therefore, I give? The impact of Sense of Belonging on graduate student alumni engagement* (2021), and Snijders et al.'s *Alumni loyalty drivers in higher education* (2019). These studies were selected because they help shift the discussion from institution-facing engagement, discussed in the previous section, toward the personal and interpersonal conditions that shape long-term alumni relationships.

Drezner and Pizmony-Levy's study is particularly relevant because it explicitly examines Sense of Belonging in the alumni context. Conducted in the United States, the study investigates the association between graduate alumni's Sense of Belonging and alumni engagement by combining administrative records on giving with survey data from graduate alumni. It is therefore useful for this thesis because it connects belonging not only to alumni giving, but also to pro-philanthropic attitudes, volunteering, and participation.

Snijders et al. provide a complementary perspective from a European context. Their study focuses on alumni from two Dutch universities of applied sciences and examines how relationship quality, former student engagement, and alumni loyalty are connected. This is especially relevant for the present research because the study focuses on non-monetary alumni loyalty and shows that dimensions such as trust in benevolence and affective commitment are important for long-lasting alumni relationships.

Together, these studies suggest that alumni engagement cannot be understood only as a matter of institutional communication, strategic participation, or measurable contribution. It is also shaped by whether graduates feel respected, supported, connected, and emotionally attached to the community they once belonged to.

2.2.1

Sense of Belonging as a Relational Foundation for Alumni Engagement

Drezner and Pizmony-Levy (2021) begin from the observation that Sense of Belonging has long been an important concept in higher education research, especially in relation to student success, persistence, and academic outcomes, but that it had rarely been examined in the alumni context. Their study addresses this gap in the context of graduate alumni from a single graduate and professional school in the United States. Using an original dataset that combines administrative records on alumni giving with data from the 2017 Graduate and Professional School Alumni Engagement Survey, they examine whether graduates with a stronger Sense of Belonging are more likely to give to their alma mater and participate in other forms of alumni engagement.

Their findings show that Sense of Belonging is positively associated with multiple forms of alumni engagement. Alumni with a stronger Sense of Belonging are more likely to give to their alma mater and to hold pro-philanthropic attitudes. Importantly, this association is not limited to monetary giving. The study also shows that Sense of Belonging is positively associated with other forms of engagement, including participation in activities, volunteering, and helping current students.

This is relevant because it helps move the discussion of alumni engagement beyond a purely financial or transactional interpretation. Although giving remains one of the outcomes examined in the study, Drezner and Pizmony-Levy frame Sense of Belonging as a social and relational condition that may shape future engagement. Alumni engagement is therefore not explained only by solicitation, institutional communication, or individual donor characteristics, but also by whether graduates felt that they belonged to the educational community.

2.2.2

Sense of Belonging versus Organizational Identification

Drezner and Pizmony-Levy (2021) also make an important distinction between Sense of Belonging and Organizational Identification. Organizational Identification refers to the extent to which individuals define themselves through an organization. In the alumni context, this may appear as pride in being associated with an institution or as identifying oneself as an alumnus or alumna of a particular university.

Sense of Belonging offers a different perspective. Rather than focusing on whether graduates identify with the institution, it concerns how individuals perceive their own place within their alma mater. In Drezner and Pizmony-Levy's operationalization, Sense of Belonging includes interpersonal experiences such as feeling like a real part of the school, having someone to talk to when facing a problem, and feeling respected by professors.

This distinction is important because alumni engagement can easily be reduced to visible expressions of institutional affiliation, such as pride, loyalty, recommendations, or willingness to give back. However, these expressions do not necessarily show whether alumni felt accepted, supported, included, or connected in their lived experience. For this reason, Sense of Belonging is useful for understanding alumni engagement not only as institutional identification, but also as a relational and affective experience.

2.2.3

Relationship Quality, Trust, and Affective Commitment

While Drezner and Pizmony-Levy (2021) clarify the relevance of Sense of Belonging in the alumni context, Snijders et al. (2019) provide a complementary perspective by examining relationship quality as a driver of alumni loyalty. In this Dutch study, they investigate how alumni perceptions of their former relationships with educational faculty and staff are associated with former student engagement and current alumni loyalty. Importantly, the study focuses on non-monetary alumni loyalty, which makes it relevant for understanding alumni engagement beyond financial giving.

Snijders et al. argue that alumni can provide value to higher education institutions not only through donations, but also through non-monetary contributions such as positive word of mouth, remaining connected, participating in advisory boards, offering expertise, and supporting current students. To understand what drives this loyalty, they examine relationship quality through dimensions including trust in honesty, trust in benevolence, affective commitment, affective conflict, and satisfaction. Among these, trust in benevolence and affective commitment are particularly relevant to a relational understanding of alumni engagement.

Trust in benevolence refers to the belief that educational faculty and staff care about students' welfare and act with beneficial intentions. Affective commitment refers to students' emotional desire to remain connected to their educational community. Snijders et al. show that these dimensions are positively associated with student engagement and alumni loyalty. This suggests that alumni loyalty does not emerge only after graduation, but can be shaped by the quality of relationships experienced during the student period.

This perspective helps translate Sense of Belonging into more concrete relational conditions. If belonging is rooted in feeling accepted, respected, supported, and connected, then relationship quality helps explain how such feelings may be produced. Trust in benevolence and affective commitment show that long-term alumni relationships depend not only on communication or institutional identity, but also on whether students experienced care, recognition, and emotional connection during their studies.

2.2.4

From Institutional Loyalty to Alumni-to-Alumni Belonging

Drezner and Pizmony-Levy (2021) and Snijders et al. (2019) provide important insights into the relational dimensions of alumni engagement. Both studies mainly focus on the relationship between alumni and the institution. Drezner and Pizmony-Levy examine how Sense of Belonging to one's graduate alma mater is associated with giving and other forms of engagement with the institution. Snijders et al. examine how relationship quality with former educational faculty and staff is associated with student engagement and alumni loyalty. In both cases, the relational perspective is important, but the primary object of attachment remains the alma mater, the university, or its faculty and staff.

This distinction opens a further question for the present research: whether belonging and relationship quality can also be understood through horizontal relationships among alumni themselves. In this sense, alumni engagement may depend not only on the relationship between graduates and the institution, but also on the quality of peer connection, mutual recognition, and shared experience within the alumni community.

Together, these studies suggest that sustainable alumni engagement depends on more than formal communication, institutional pride, or measurable participation. It depends on the quality of relationships that make graduates feel respected, supported, connected, and emotionally attached to a community.

These insights provide the basis for the following section, which examines why such relational support becomes particularly important during post-graduation transitions.

2.3

Vulnerabilities in Transitions

This section examines why post-graduation transitions can be vulnerable periods for students and recent graduates, and why relational, practical, and professional support becomes especially important during this stage. Building on the previous section, which argued that belonging and relationship quality are central conditions for sustainable alumni engagement, this section shifts the focus to the transition from university into professional life. If alumni engagement is shaped by relational experiences of support, recognition, and connection, then the period around graduation is a particularly important moment to examine, because it is when students may lose familiar structures, relationships, routines, and identities while also facing uncertain professional futures.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory provides a useful theoretical lens for understanding this vulnerability. Although the original model was introduced in 1981, it is used here as a foundational reference and is complemented by later formulations of the transition model, particularly the 4S system. Schlossberg defines transition as an event or non-event that results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world, and therefore requires a corresponding change in behaviour and relationships. This definition is important because it frames transition not as a single administrative event, but as a process of adaptation.

Later developments of Schlossberg's transition model explain adaptation through the 4S system: Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies (Schlossberg, 2011; Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012). Situation refers to the characteristics and context of the transition itself, such as timing, duration, source, and perceived impact. Self refers to the individual's personal and psychological resources. Support refers to the availability of social, institutional, and relational resources. Strategies refers to the coping responses individuals use to manage change.

This framework is useful for the present research because it shows that transition vulnerability should not be understood only as an individual problem. While each person's Situation and Self may differ, educational institutions and alumni communities can play an important role in strengthening Support and Strategies. In other words, a program may not be able to remove all uncertainty from the transition period, but it can create conditions in which students and recent graduates have access to people, knowledge, guidance, and coping resources.

This section therefore brings together three complementary perspectives. Schlossberg's transition model provides a general framework for understanding individual adaptation to change. Cage et al. (2021) are used to examine university transitions from the perspective of student mental health, support needs, and the transition out of university. Boffo (2019) and the European Training Foundation (2008) are then used to connect this psychological and relational understanding of transition with employability and education-to-work transition systems. Together, these references make it possible to understand post-graduation transition as both a personal and systemic process.

2.3.1

Transitions as Psychologically Demanding Periods

Cage et al. (2021) define university transitions as navigated periods of change. This definition is important because it frames transition not as a single moment, such as graduation day, but as an extended process that students must actively move through. In the university context, transitions include entering university, moving between years or stages of study, and leaving university to enter employment or postgraduate study. Across these stages, students are required to make sense of who they are, how they fit into university life, and how they relate to the world beyond university.

This view aligns with Schlossberg's understanding of transition as a process of adaptation. From this perspective, the transition out of university can be psychologically demanding because it involves multiple forms of change at the same time. Students may leave behind familiar peer networks, academic routines, institutional structures, and a student identity. At the same time, they may need to develop a new professional identity, make decisions about work or further study, and adjust to new expectations from employers, family, society, and themselves.

Cage et al. show that transitions can play an important role in the context of student mental health. University itself can be experienced as a period of heightened distress, and transitions are moments when psychological pressure may become particularly visible. According to the literature reviewed by Cage et al., the transition into university has been described as an acute stressor, while the transition out of university can involve uncertainty, ambivalence, and identity processes. For students approaching graduation, this means that the movement from university into professional life is not only about obtaining a job. It can also involve a shift in social role, self-understanding, and emotional security.

This is particularly relevant to the present research because the PSSD program is where students may have highly diverse post-graduation pathways. In such a context, the transition from university to work may not follow a clear or linear route. Students may move into different countries, industries, job roles, or further study opportunities. Some may remain in Italy, others may return to their home countries, and others may continue to move internationally. Therefore, transition should be understood as a potentially unstable period in which students and recent graduates may need support to navigate both emotional uncertainty and practical career decisions.

2.3.2

Understanding Transition Through the 4S System

Later formulations of Schlossberg's transition model explain adaptation through the 4S system: **Situation**, **Self**, **Support**, and **Strategies** (Schlossberg, 2011; Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012). This framework is useful for the present research because it helps examine how transition experiences are shaped not only by the individual, but also by the context of the transition, the support available around them, and the strategies they use to cope with change.

In the 4S system, **Situation** refers to the characteristics and context of the transition itself. This includes how the transition is experienced, when it occurs, how long it lasts, and how strongly it affects the individual's life. **Self** refers to the individual's personal and psychological resources. **Support** refers to the social, institutional, and relational resources available to the individual. **Strategies** refers to the coping responses that individuals use to manage change.

Applied to the context of post-graduation transition, **Situation** may include the timing of graduation, the uncertainty of employment, the expected or unexpected nature of the transition, and the degree to which the transition affects the student's life. In international and interdisciplinary programs, this situation may become particularly complex because graduation can coincide with questions about employment, visas, geography, professional identity, and future mobility.

Self can be understood as the personal and psychological resources that students bring into the transition. In the post-graduation context, students may differ in their confidence, self-efficacy, previous work experience, language skills, financial resources, cultural background, and ability to tolerate uncertainty. They may also differ in how clearly they understand their professional field and how prepared they feel to translate their educational experience into a career narrative. This means that transition support cannot assume a single type of student or a single pathway into work.

Support refers to the resources available around the individual during the transition. In the post-graduation context, support may come from friends, family, faculty, career services, peers, alumni, professional communities, or institutional services. This dimension is directly connected to the discussion in Section 2.2. If belonging and relationship quality are important for alumni engagement, then the availability of support during transition becomes particularly important. However, when students graduate, some of these support structures may become weaker or less accessible.

Strategies refers to the coping responses individuals use to manage transition. In the post-graduation context, these may include seeking information, asking for advice, reframing uncertainty, building networks, developing practical plans, applying for opportunities, or learning how to present one's skills and experiences. Strategies are not only individual behaviours; they can also be enabled by the environment. For example, students may develop more effective strategies when they have access to peer discussions, realistic career information, mentoring, workshops, alumni stories, or informal opportunities to ask questions.

In relation to the research, the 4S system is useful because it clarifies where the proposed service system can intervene. The network cannot fully control each student's Situation or Self. However, it can strengthen Support and Strategies by connecting students and recent graduates with alumni, peers, role models, situated knowledge, and practical advice. In this sense, the research can be understood not only as a community-building tool, but also as a transition support system.

To clarify this framework and its relevance to the present research, Table 2.2 summarizes the four dimensions and illustrates how they can be applied to the post-graduation transition context.

Table 2.2. The 4S System Applied to Post-Graduation Transition
Source: Adapted from Schlossberg (2011) and Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg (2012).

4S factor	Meaning in Transition Theory	Application to post-graduation transition	Relevance for the PSSD Community Network
Situation	Characteristics and context of the transition	Graduation, employment uncertainty, visa issues, geographical mobility, timing of transition	Helps identify the complexity of students' transition contexts
Self	Individual personal and psychological resources	Confidence, self-efficacy, language skills, work experience, financial resources, tolerance for uncertainty	Shows that students have different starting points and support needs
Support	Social, institutional, and relational resources available to the individual	Faculty, peers, family, career services, alumni, professional communities	Can be strengthened through alumni connection, peer support, and community relationships
Strategies	Coping responses used to manage transition	Seeking advice, gathering information, reframing uncertainty, building networks, applying for opportunities	Can be strengthened through mentoring, alumni stories, workshops, and practical knowledge exchange

2.3.3

Transition Out of University: Uncertainty, Loss, and Identity Change

Cage et al. (2021) emphasize that the transition out of university and into employment or postgraduate study can coincide with feelings of uncertainty and ambivalence. Students moving toward graduation may have to make decisions about work, further study, location, finances, and future identity, often while losing the routines and relationships that structured their student life. The literature reviewed by Cage et al. also suggests that some students postpone major life decisions until after university, while others may struggle with this transition if they do not yet perceive themselves as fully adult or ready for professional life.

This transition can also be understood as a loss experience. Students may leave behind a familiar social environment, a daily routine, a sense of place, and a student identity that gave structure to their life. Cage et al.'s student participants described the transition out of university as involving a "massive sense of loss" and compared the sudden withdrawal of support after graduation to a "cliff edge." These accounts are important because they show that graduation can create not only practical uncertainty, but also emotional disruption. For some students, leaving university may mean losing access to friends, staff, support services, academic identity, and a familiar community all at once.

This sense of loss is closely related to the discussion in Section 2.2. If belonging is rooted in feeling respected, supported, included, and connected, then graduation may threaten belonging by interrupting the relational environment in which such feelings were formed. The student may no longer have everyday access to peers, teachers, studios, classrooms, or support services. As a result, the transition out of university can weaken both practical support and emotional connection. This helps explain why post-graduation support should not be treated as an optional add-on, but as an essential part of sustaining the relationships and sense of belonging developed during the program.

For the project proposal, this means that support should not begin only after alumni have already become disconnected. Instead, the network should help soften the boundary between being a student and becoming an alumnus or alumna. If the transition out of university is experienced as a cliff edge, then the design challenge is to lengthen and support the transition period. This may involve creating opportunities for students to connect with alumni before graduation, access realistic information about post-graduation pathways, and remain connected to a community during the early stages of professional life.

2.3.4

Support Needs During Transitions

Cage et al. (2021) identify several forms of support that students and staff consider important for navigating university transitions. For students, the main themes include equipping students to cope, encouraging and enabling stable support networks, fostering a more inclusive and supportive culture, and lengthening transition periods. For staff, the themes include fostering student preparedness, emphasizing community belonging and peer support, addressing challenges faced by university support services, and developing a whole university approach. These findings show that transition support is not a single service or intervention. Rather, it involves a combination of preparation, skills development, relational support, inclusive culture, and continuity across different stages of the student journey.

The first important dimension is preparation. Students need realistic expectations and practical skills to navigate transitions. Cage et al. show that students discussed the need for practical preparation for university life and life after university, including academic skills, job searching, applications, interviews, and understanding the realities of the workplace. Staff also emphasized the importance of managing expectations and preparing students for life beyond university. This suggests that transition support should help reduce uncertainty by equipping students with knowledge, skills, and realistic expectations before they face major changes.

The second dimension is support networks. Cage et al. show that both students and staff recognized the importance of social support, peer mentoring, buddying schemes, and community belonging. Students described the value of student-led support networks that allow them to learn informally from peers. Staff also emphasized that talking to another student can help students settle, feel less isolated, and navigate uncertainty. This is directly relevant to the project proposal because it suggests that transition support can be strengthened through peer-to-peer and alumni-supported relationships, not only through formal institutional services.

The third dimension is continuity. Cage et al. argue that transition periods should be lengthened rather than treated as short, isolated moments. Students suggested that preparation for leaving university should begin before graduation and that support should remain available afterward. This challenges the idea that support can be concentrated only around fixed administrative moments, such as welcome week or graduation. Instead, transition should be supported as an extended period before, during, and after the moment of change.

The fourth dimension is institutional responsibility. Cage et al. emphasize the value of a whole university approach, in which wellbeing and transition support are embedded across the institution rather than delegated only to specialist services. This does not mean that every actor performs the same role, but it does mean that transitions are supported through coordinated relationships between academic staff, support services, career services, peers, and external organizations. For the project proposal, this suggests that a sustainable support system should connect different actors rather than relying on a single channel or platform.

2.3.5

From Transition Support to Career and Employability Support

While Cage et al. highlight the psychological and support-related dimensions of university transitions, Boffo's work (2019) helps connect transition support to employability and career development. Boffo argues that the transition to work after university is a central issue for higher education, especially when it is connected to transversal and technical skill-building, curriculum development, formation for employment, and care for learning pathways. Importantly, Boffo emphasizes that the transition to work does not begin only after graduation. Rather, research has shown that this transition already begins during school and university.

This perspective is important because it suggests that career transition support should not be treated as a separate service that appears only at the end of a degree. Instead, it should be embedded into the broader educational journey. Students need time to understand their skills, develop self-awareness, explore possible professional identities, and build connections with the world of work. In this sense, career support is not simply about matching graduates to jobs. It is also about helping students construct a professional self and prepare for uncertain futures.

Boffo's discussion of career services is particularly useful here. Career services are described not only as places that provide CV support, interview preparation, or job matching, but also as contexts that connect students, universities, employers, mentors, and alumni. The career center of the future is described as a place for building meaningful connections through partnerships, experiences, mentors, and career communities that engage students and alumni over time. This is closely aligned with the idea of the PSSD Community Network as a relational service system rather than a static information platform.

For PSSD, this perspective suggests that career transition support should be both practical and relational. Practical support may include access to information about career paths, portfolio development, job search strategies, visa issues, and professional positioning. Relational support may include opportunities to learn from alumni, hear about real career trajectories, discuss uncertainty, and build confidence through community. In this way, career support becomes part of the same relational infrastructure discussed in Sections 2.1 and 2.2.

2.3.6

Education-to-Work Transition as a System

To complement the individual and university-level perspectives discussed above, this section refers to the European Training Foundation's report *Transition from Education to Work in EU Neighbouring Countries* (2008). This report was selected because it provides a conceptual and analytical framework for understanding education-to-work transition as a system, rather than only as an individual process of employability development or psychological adaptation. Although the report focuses on EU neighbouring countries and is not specific to higher education or design education, it is useful for this research because it shows how transition outcomes are shaped by the interaction between education systems, labour market structures, institutional contexts, and intermediary actors.

The ETF report emphasizes that the transition from education to work is a complex process in which socioeconomic structures, institutional settings, education and training systems, labour market conditions, and policy contexts interrelate. This means that transition outcomes cannot be explained only by individual motivation, skills, or effort. They are also shaped by the systems that structure young people's available options, the clarity of pathways into work, the match between education and labour market demand, and the availability of guidance and support.

A key contribution of the ETF framework is its attention to the interface between education and employment. This interface can be understood as a transition system composed of actors, processes, and institutions that help young people move from education into work. These may include employment services, retraining institutions, temporary work agencies, career guidance providers, youth programs, and other intermediary actors. From this perspective, transition systems are not merely passive channels for information. They can actively shape how young people navigate uncertainty by providing guidance, building networks, reducing vulnerability, and helping individuals interpret and access opportunities.

For the present research, this systems perspective is useful because it expands the understanding of post-graduation transition beyond personal readiness or emotional adjustment alone. It shows that support for transition must also consider the surrounding structures, interfaces, and intermediary actors that influence how students and graduates move into professional life. In this sense, the ETF report complements Schlossberg's focus on Support and Strategies, Cage et al.'s focus on student mental health and transition support, and Boffo's focus on higher education, employability, and career services. Together, these perspectives suggest that post-graduation transition should be understood as a relational, practical, and systemic process.

2.4

Key Perspectives for the PSSD Network

This chapter reviewed alumni engagement, Sense of Belonging, relationship quality, and post-graduation transition as theoretical foundations for the proposed research. Across the reviewed literature, alumni engagement emerges not only as an institutional activity, but also as a relational process shaped by value creation, belonging, support, and continuity.

The first perspective concerns **alumni engagement and institutional value**. Existing literature and measurement frameworks show that alumni engagement has often been discussed from an institution-facing perspective, especially in relation to fundraising, advancement, volunteering, communication, and measurable participation. This perspective is useful because it demonstrates that alumni can contribute to the long-term life of a university in multiple ways. However, it also reveals a limitation: alumni engagement is often evaluated through what alumni do for the institution, rather than through how alumni relationships support graduates themselves.

The second perspective concerns **Sense of Belonging and relationship quality**. The literature suggests that sustainable alumni engagement depends on more than formal affiliation, institutional pride, or communication frequency. It is also shaped by whether graduates feel respected, supported, connected, and emotionally attached to a community. Sense of Belonging is therefore not only an abstract feeling toward an institution, but a relational and affective experience formed through interactions with peers, faculty, staff, and the wider educational community.

The third perspective concerns **post-graduation transition**. Transition theory and studies on university transitions show that graduation can be a vulnerable period involving uncertainty, identity change, loss of familiar support structures, and practical challenges related to work and future direction. From this perspective, alumni engagement becomes especially relevant around the boundary between student life and professional life, where continuity of support, access to knowledge, and relational resources can influence how graduates navigate change.

Together, these perspectives form the theoretical basis for the research hypothesis of this thesis: an alumni network can be understood not only as a database, communication channel, or event-based community, but as a relational service system that supports mutual value creation, belonging, and transition over time. Such a system is not defined by a single platform or touchpoint. Rather, it depends on the coordination of multiple actors, relationships, interactions, and forms of knowledge exchange.

The following table summarizes the main theoretical concepts and insights that inform the next stages of the research and design process.

Table 2.3. Summary of theoretical foundations informing the research hypothesis

Theoretical area	Key insight	Implication for the following design phase
Alumni engagement and institutional value	Alumni engagement is often framed through institutional goals, fundraising, advancement, and measurable participation.	The design should acknowledge institutional value, but not reduce alumni engagement to contribution to the university.
Belonging and relationship quality	Sustainable alumni engagement depends on relational experiences such as feeling respected, supported, connected, and emotionally attached to a community.	The design should consider how to support trust, recognition, peer connection, and meaningful interaction among alumni.
Post-graduation transition	Graduation can create uncertainty, identity change, and loss of access to familiar support structures.	The design should consider how to support continuity before, during, and after the transition from student to alumnus/alumna.

In conclusion, this chapter positions the proposed network as a response to three interconnected theoretical issues: **the limits of institution-facing alumni engagement, the relational nature of belonging, and the vulnerability of post-graduation transition**. These foundations do not yet define specific design solutions. Rather, they clarify the conceptual direction for the following research phases, which examine existing communities, networks, and practices in order to translate these theoretical insights into design opportunities.

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03

Contextual Grounding: Existing Initiatives and Community Models

Chapter written by Valentina Phung, based
on the overall research conducted together.

3.1

PSSD Student–Alumni Initiatives

3.2

Polimi Ecosystem Initiatives

3.3

**External Case Studies:
Communities, Networks and Tools**

3.4

Universities Alumni Networks

3.5

**Synthesis: Design Opportunities
from Contextual Grounding**

To inform the design of a sustainable alumni community for the Master's program in Product-Service System Design (PSSD) at Politecnico di Milano, this chapter examines existing initiatives, services, and community models operating at three distinct levels.

First, the chapter analyses alumni and community-oriented initiatives developed within the PSSD program itself, including the Expert & Alumni Design Talks, the Advisory Board, the PSSD Tours, the Mentoring Program, and the 20th Anniversary celebrations. These initiatives offer insight into how the program has historically fostered connections between students, alumni, faculty, and industry partners, as well as the challenges involved in sustaining these efforts over time.

Second, the chapter situates PSSD within the broader institutional ecosystem of Politecnico di Milano by examining two key university-level entities: the Career Service and Alumni Polimi. Understanding their organisational models, objectives, and areas of intervention was essential to mapping existing opportunities for students and graduates, while avoiding duplication of services already provided by the university.

Third, the chapter analyses a selection of external case studies drawn from professional communities, alumni networks, mentoring programs, and digital platforms. Cases such as Service Design Drinks¹, Nova Talent, Aalto University Mentoring, AlumniRCA, and UCL Alumni-Student Chats were selected because they represent distinct approaches to community building, knowledge exchange, mentoring, and alumni engagement. Each case was examined through a shared analytical framework centred on governance, participation, decision-making, and sustainability.

Together, these analyses provide the contextual foundation for the project and help identify the organisational principles, participation models, and governance structures capable of supporting the long-term sustainability of a PSSD alumni community. The chapter concludes by synthesising the key opportunities and design directions emerging from a comparison of internal initiatives, institutional services, and external benchmarks.

¹ **Service Design Drinks Milan (SDD)** is a Milan-based community initiative that brings together service design students, alumni, and professionals through informal events and knowledge-sharing activities.

3.1

PSSD Student–Alumni Initiatives

² The Master of Science in Product-Service System Design (PSSD) is a Master's degree program offered by Politecnico di Milano.
Website: pssd.polimi.it

The Master of Science in Product-Service System Design (PSSD)² at Politecnico di Milano is known worldwide for its focus on creating innovative systems that integrate products, services, digital technologies, and user experiences to address complex social and business problems. Since its start in 2005, it has been among the first master's programs globally to specialize in service design and strategic innovation. Located in Milan, the program uses a multidisciplinary approach that brings together design thinking, sustainability, business strategy, ethnographic research, and digital innovation. Students work on real projects, join workshops, take part in international exchanges, and collaborate with companies and organizations – helping them build skills in systems thinking, teamwork, and creative problem-solving, preparing them for careers in service design, innovation consulting, strategic design, and sustainable product-service development.

The Product-Service System Design master's program at Politecnico di Milano has consistently prioritised building a cohesive and culturally diverse student community since its founding, maintaining an approximate balance of 50% international and 50% Europeans students, while fostering collaboration through its curriculum. Under the successive leadership of Luisa Collina (2005–2015), Anna Meroni (2016–2021), and Daniela Sangiorgi (2022–present), the program has developed a series of structured initiatives aimed at strengthening the student community and supporting the transition from academic study to professional practice. The following section presents and analyses five program-level initiatives specifically designed to advance these two goals:

1. PSSD Expert & Alumni Design Talks (2016)
2. PSSD Advisory Board (2017)
3. PSSD Tour (2021)
4. PSSD Mentoring (2021)
5. PSSD 20th anniversary events (2025)

1. PSSD Expert & Alumni Design Talks

Each year, the PSSD program hosts Expert and Alumni Design Talks, inviting national and international speakers from both academia and industry to address specialised topics and methodologies relevant to complex service system design (PSSD Program, n.d.). The initiative also serves as a platform for reconnecting with alumni who, after gaining experience in the professional world, return to share their knowledge and insights with current students. Beyond internal community building, the talks provide visibility for the PSSD program, engage external stakeholders, and contribute to building its broader legitimacy and reputation.

Figure 3.1. Alumni Design Talks poster featuring Daria Cantù (M.Sc. in PSSD, 2026).

Figure 3.2. Josina Vink presenting during the Design Talk “Shaping Relations Otherwise”.

Source. M.Sc. in PSSD (Product-Service System Design, 2026)



2. PSSD Advisory Board

Founded in 2017, the PSSD Advisory Board operates on a three-year renewal cycle, with its most recent renewal taking place in 2025. The Board provides strategic, non-binding advice to the program, with a focus on the evolution of design competencies and the identification of emerging job-market opportunities and expectations. In doing so, it contributes to shaping the graduate profile and informing the program's longer-term educational direction.

The Board meets annually to discuss labour market trends and offer feedback on how the curriculum can remain relevant and responsive to professional needs. Its role is twofold: on one hand, it builds a community of interest around the program, supporting teaching staff in developing the graduate profile and curriculum through real-world professional perspectives; on the other, it creates opportunities for students to engage with external organisations, both academically and professionally.

Figure 3.3 PSSD Advisory Board kick-off meeting, 2025.
Source. Designing Our Future: Advisory Board 2026–2028 Report – Kick-off Meeting 16.02.2026 (Politecnico di Milano, 2025).



Following the 2025 renewal, the Advisory Board comprises representatives from 19 organisations: six design and IT agencies, four private-sector organisations, four public-sector organisations, three third-sector organisations, and two research and innovation centres (Politecnico di Milano, 2025). This composition reflects a deliberate effort to bring together a range of voices – industry, public institutions, civil society, and research – ensuring the program remains connected to the broader landscape of contemporary societal and professional challenges.

3. PSSD Tours

The third Advisory Board meeting, held in 2019, focused on supporting alumni in their transition into professional practice. During the discussions, board members identified networking and relationship-building as key opportunities to strengthen students' connection with the professional world. A central question that emerged was how the program could offer students new learning experiences and industry connections through a "more flexible space for experimentation and iteration" (de Sainz-Molestina & Taverna, 2021), without requiring changes to the formal curriculum.

In response, Professor Anna Meroni and PhD candidate Andrea Taverna developed the PSSD Tours – an extracurricular initiative designed to strengthen collaboration between the university and industry through organised visits to companies and organisations. The format enables students to engage directly with practitioners, learn about ongoing projects, and gain first-hand insight into different organisational and professional contexts (PSSD, 2025).

Figure 3.4. PSSD Tour event held online with Logotel.
Source. M.Sc. in Product-Service System Design. (2021)

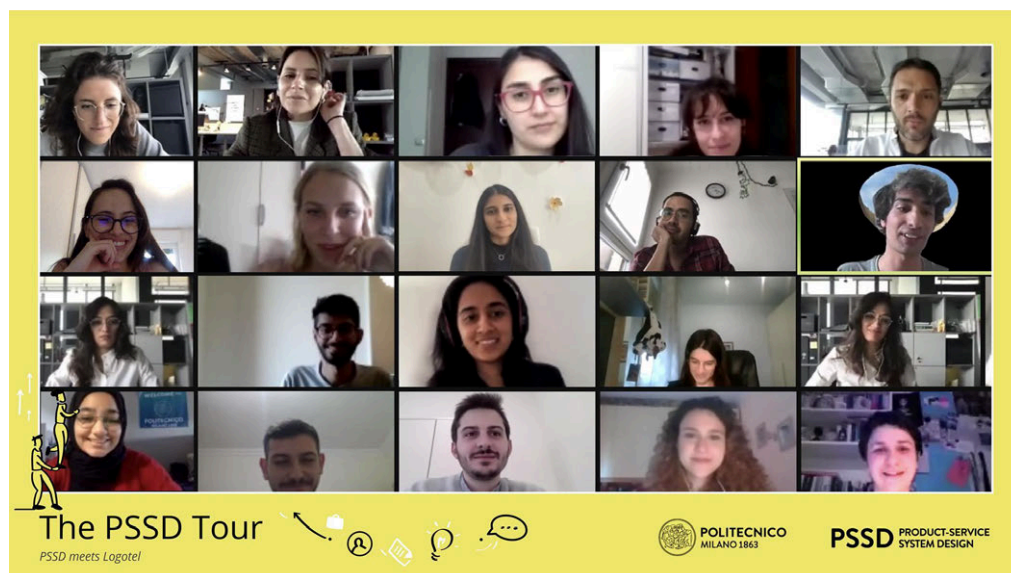


Figure 3.5. Pictures of PSSD Tour at Fifth Beat.
Source. M.Sc. in PSSD (Product-Service System Design) (2024)



The initiative aims to support students' transition into professional practice by exposing them to diverse career paths, roles, and working environments. Through direct interaction with practitioners, students develop a clearer understanding of how Service Design is applied across sectors and how the role of the Service Designer varies between organisations (de Sainz-Molestina & Taverna, 2021; PSSD, 2025).

The PSSD Tours were first launched in 2021 as a digital initiative due to the COVID-19 pandemic, before being adapted into an in-person format. Following strong student engagement, the initiative was subsequently adopted by the Polimi Career Service and extended to students across other Master's programs within the School of Design.

4. PSSD Mentoring

³**Passion in Action** is an extracurricular program offered by Politecnico di Milano to support the development of students' transversal and soft skills through voluntary educational activities.

The PSSD Mentoring program is a Passion in Action³ initiative developed by Andrea Taverna and Arianna Bosio under the supervision of Professor Anna Meroni. First launched as a pilot between May and November 2021, it aimed to support students in their transition from university to professional practice through meaningful exchanges with PSSD alumni.

The initiative was conceived in response to three challenges: the growing diversification of Service Design practice across sectors, the perceived gap between academic education and professional work, and the need to strengthen connections within the PSSD community. Rather than relying on traditional lecture-based formats, the program promoted learning through dialogue, peer exchange, and one-to-one mentoring relationships.

Figures 3.6 Above: Participants attending the online kickoff session of the PSSD Mentoring Program, May 2021. Below: Slide of The PSSD Mentoring program.

Source. Master in PSSD [Product Service System Design]. (2021)

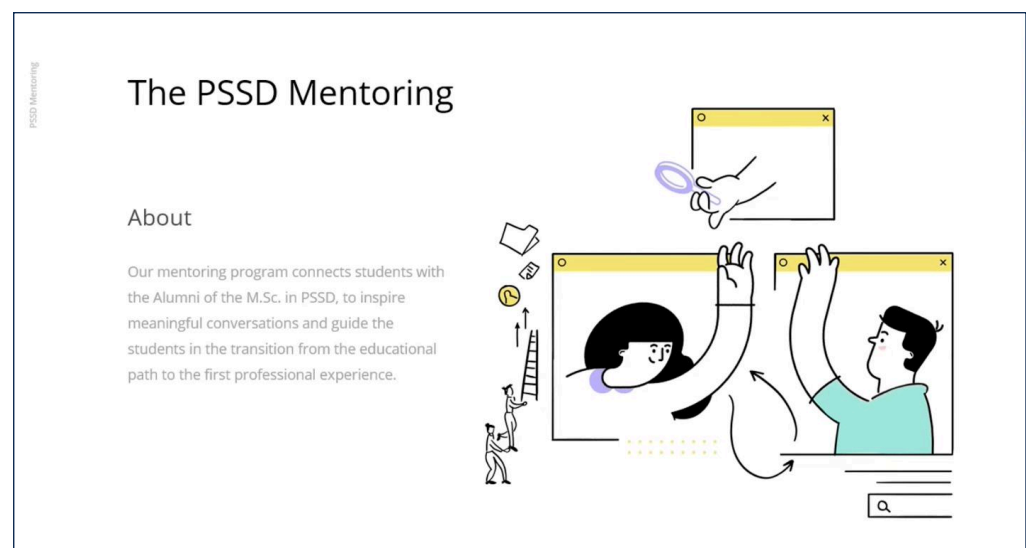
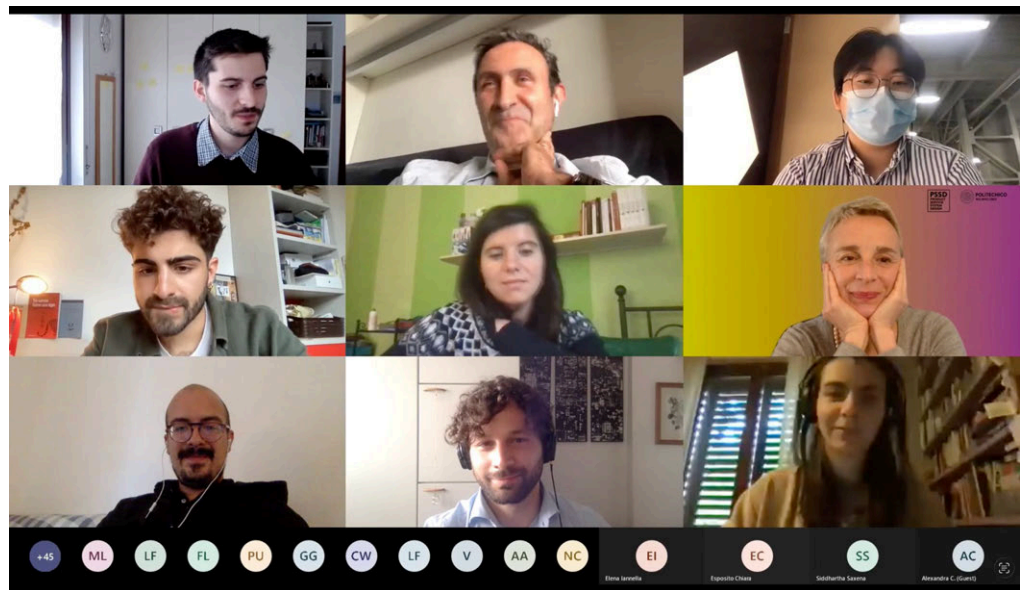
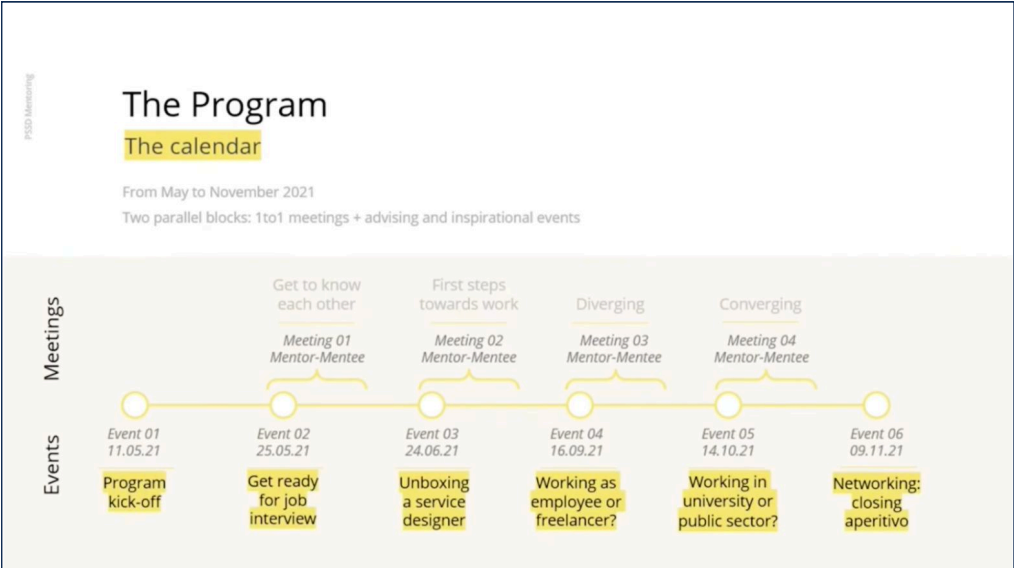
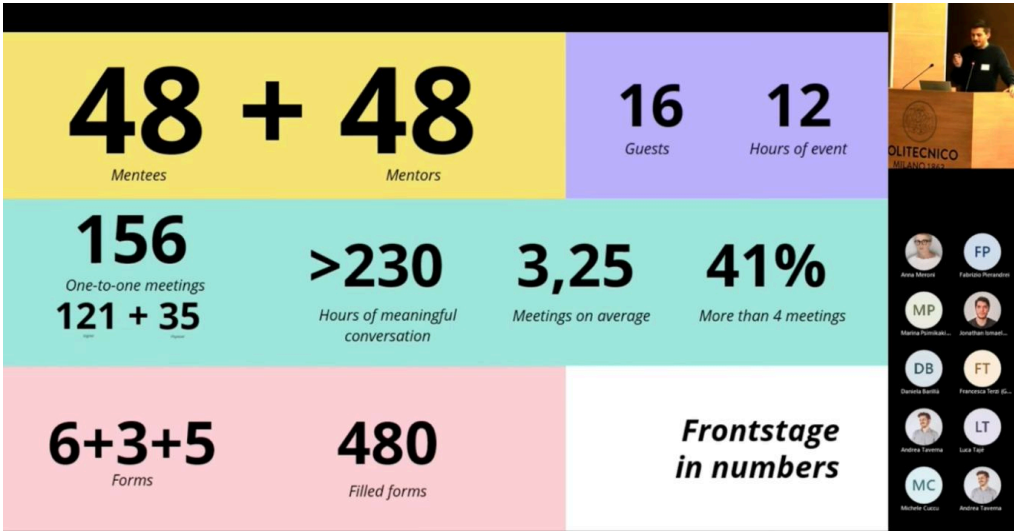


Figure 3.7 Overview of the PSSD Mentoring Program presented during the PSSD Mentoring – Final Event – Networking Aperitivo.
Source. Master in PSSD [Product Service System Design] (2022).



As we can observe from Figure 3.8, the program combined six collective events (on the bottom) with a structured series of individual mentor-mentee meetings (on the top). The events addressed topics such as preparing for job interviews, understanding the role of the Service Designer, exploring different career paths, and networking with alumni. Alongside these, students were matched with alumni mentors who provided personalised guidance throughout the duration of the program.

Figure 3.8 Summary of PSSD Mentoring Program participation and outcomes – Final Event – Networking Aperitivo.
Source. Master in PSSD [Product Service System Design] (2022).



The pilot involved 48 students and 48 alumni mentors, generating 156 individual meetings and over 230 hours of conversation. On average, pairs met 3.25 times, with 41% meeting more than four times – a figure that points to a notably high level of engagement (PSSD Mentoring Final Event Presentation, 2021). While the structured pilot was not continued in its original form, its approach informed subsequent mentoring activities with the Polimi Career Service.

5. The PSSD 20th Anniversary events

The celebration of the program's 20th anniversary took place from 13 to 26 June 2025, with the goal of reconnecting faculty, alumni, and students across time and space, both locally in Milan and globally. After months of planning, the initiative brought together more than 200 participants through a main celebration day, a two-day design jam, a series of side activities, and ten international PSSD Circles involving around 60 participants worldwide.

Figure 3.9

Activities during the PSSD 20th Anniversary celebrations (2025).

Above: photo booth during the aperitivo preceding the main celebration event.

Left: participants engaging in the Design Jam.

Right: presentation during the main celebration event.

Bottom left: interview with alumni invited to share their professional experiences.

Bottom right: Team Igida, winners of the Samsung Innovation Campus Award.

Source. Photographs by Valentina Phung.



The celebration was structured around five interconnected initiatives, each designed to engage the alumni and students in different ways:

⁴**The Samsung Innovation Campus Award** is part of a collaboration between Samsung Electronics Italia and Politecnico di Milano, challenging students to explore the intersection of technology, sport, and service design. (Samsung, 2025).

1. **A main celebration event** bringing together 250 participants, featuring faculty speeches, a keynote by Federico Casalegno, Head of Samsung Design Innovation Center, on the role of designers in the age of AI, the Samsung Innovation Campus Award⁴, and alumni talks in which graduates were invited to return and share their professional journeys and reflections with current students and faculty. The event concluded with an aperitivo in the exhibition area – an informal moment for the whole community to celebrate together.
2. **A two-day intergenerational design jam**, developed in collaboration with Moleskine and Paco Collective, in which 57 participants – 33 students, 17 alumni, and 7 faculty members – worked together across generations. Facilitated by Paco Collective and centred around the theme of Reconnect for Future, six groups explored speculative and experimental design questions around the evolving role of the designer in an age of technological change, in a format that was deliberately open and playful. The jam also featured a talk by Christophe Archaimbault, then CEO of Moleskine, and included shared coffee breaks and lunch – informal moments of connection woven into the two days.
3. **An exhibition** showcasing selected alumni projects displayed alongside a timeline of the program from its founding in 2005 to 2025. The exhibition gave physical form to the collective history of PSSD and visibility to alumni works.
4. **The PSSD Alumni Worldwide Circles**, a distributed celebration for those unable to attend in Milan, held across ten cities over four months with a total of 56 participants. The format was developed collaboratively: in a brainstorming session held on 8 March 2025, interested alumni ambassadors, professors, and Valentina Phung discussed how the circles could best be organised. The outcome was an open concept, giving alumni the freedom to shape their gatherings according to their local context, with coordinators providing light guidelines and materials rather than a rigid structure.
5. **A series of side events** designed to encourage spontaneous connection within the participants, including a treasure hunt and Moleskine Memory Wall integrated into the exhibition, a book presentation on Systemic Service Design, a Pilates and design thinking session, urban art walks through Bovisa, a communal picnic, and an evening pub quiz (PSSD, 2025).

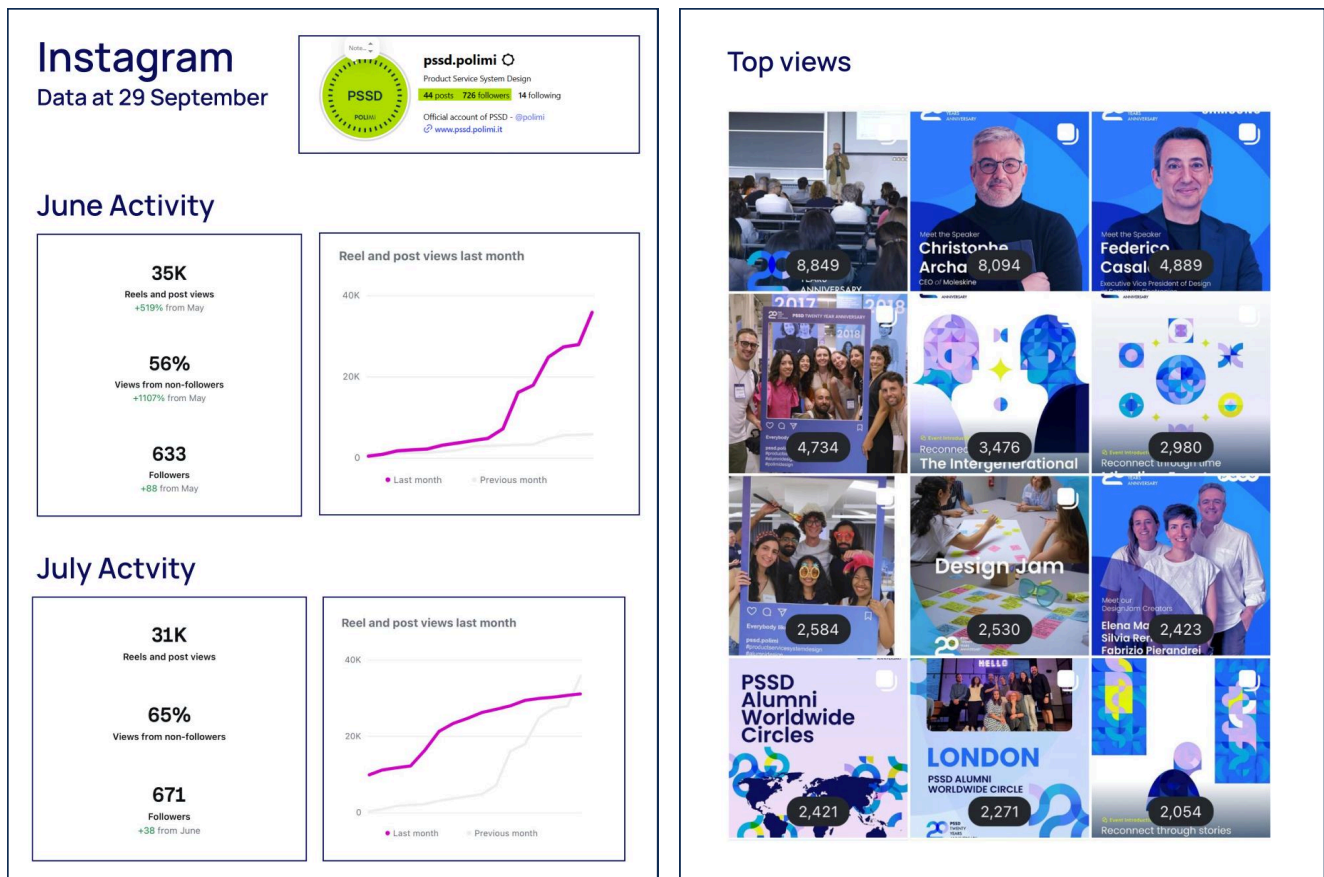
Figure 3.10 The PSSD 20th Anniversary organising team. From left to right: Prof. Valentina Auricchio, Ayano Osawa, Valentina Phung, Vanessa Monna, Ahmed Adnan, and Prof. Daniela Sangiorgi.



The anniversary was a complex, multi-layered undertaking spanning organisational coordination, communication, branding, and direct alumni engagement. The core student team included two PSSD interns – Ahmed Adnan and Ayano Osawa – and one 200-hours student⁵, Valentina Phung, each with distinct areas of responsibility.

⁵**200-hours student** refers to a student enrolled at Politecnico di Milano who participates in a remunerated part-time collaboration with the university, contributing up to 200 hours per academic year to administrative, teaching support, or peer-to-peer activities (Politecnico di Milano, n.d.).

Ayano Osawa and Ahmed Adnan focused primarily on the Milan-based events, leading the graphic and visual communication project for the anniversary and coordinating the curation of alumni-submitted work for the exhibition, including the selection and preparation of materials for display. Valentina Phung was responsible for the PSSD Alumni Worldwide Circles, managing outreach to alumni through multiple channels – including email and LinkedIn – facilitating the brainstorming session with alumni ambassadors, and providing coordination and support throughout the four months of the initiative. Both also contributed extensively to the program's social media channels: Ayano focused on anniversary content and event materials, while Valentina documented the Milan events through photography and video and published content across the program's platforms.



Figures 3.11 Performance metrics of the official PSSD social media account during June and July 2025.

Source. Authors' elaboration based on internal Meta Insights data.

The impact of the anniversary on the program's digital presence was measurable. During June and July 2025, the official PSSD Meta account recorded 35,000 reel and post views in June alone – a 519% increase compared to May – with 56% of reach coming from non-followers, indicating substantial visibility beyond the existing community. The highest-performing post, the anniversary celebration itself, generated 8,849 views, with event highlights and alumni-related content consistently ranking among the top-performing posts (Fig. 3.11).

This direct involvement gave us a privileged vantage point that extended beyond event coordination. Working inside the program's communication infrastructure – its website, social media platforms, and internal channels – provided access to know-how and ways of working that would not have been visible from the outside. Equally, the sustained contact with event participants (alumni, faculty, and students) built over the course of the initiative allowed us to establish relationships across the network – a proximity that has directly shaped the perspective from which this research was conducted.

Key Insights from the PSSD Initiatives

The analysis of the PSSD initiatives reveals a recurring tension between **ambition and sustainability**. While these projects were consistently well-received and demonstrably impactful, most relied on levels of individual dedication that proved difficult to maintain over time. As a result, several initiatives gradually lost momentum, while others were absorbed by the Politecnico di Milano Career Service – an institution with the structural capacity to sustain them, but without the program-specific focus that had defined their original value.

Beyond issues of continuity, the initiatives also lacked a shared communication strategy and any structured mechanism for transferring knowledge between those running them. Without a clear handover process, contacts, experience, and accumulated know-how remained tied to individuals rather than to the program – making it difficult to build a lasting sense of community across cohorts.

3.2

Polimi Ecosystem Initiatives

Figure 3.12

Above: Politecnico di Milano, Leonardo Campus.

Source. Politecnico di Milano.

Left: Bovisa Durando Campus, home of the School of Design at Politecnico di Milano.

Source. Politecnico di Milano.

Right: Interior view of the Bovisa Durando Campus, School of Design, Politecnico di Milano.

Source: Politecnico di Milano. (2015), photo by Matteo Bergamini



Founded in 1863 and located in Milan, the **Politecnico di Milano** is Italy's largest and most prestigious technical university, offering education in Engineering, Architecture, and Design (Times Higher Education, n.d.). The institution currently counts nearly 48,400 enrolled students – including architects, designers, engineers, and PhD candidates – with over 8,800 international students from across the world (Politecnico di Milano, 2024). Its academic reputation is reflected in major global rankings: according to the QS World University Rankings 2026, Politecnico di Milano holds 1st place in Italy and 98th in the world, while its School of Design ranks 1st in Italy, 2nd in Europe, and 5th in the world in the QS Rankings by Subject (Cumulus Association, n.d.).

The School of Design stands as one of the most internationally recognized design institutions globally, characterized by a constant commitment to innovative approaches that respond to the real needs of contemporary society (Cumulus Association, n.d.). Within this context, it is no surprise that Politecnico di Milano has developed a range of structured initiatives to support both its students and alumni — of whom 97% find employment within a year of graduation (Politecnico di Milano, 2024) — making it a point of excellence in Italy and internationally. What makes these organizational models particularly interesting is the fact that Politecnico is a public university, meaning it cannot rely on the same financial resources available to private institutions. As this section will explore, we examine the models through which these entities operate and the factors behind their success. Understanding this institutional landscape was also essential for our own community project, in order to avoid overlapping with or duplicating existing structures already in place at Politecnico.

The Career Service

The Politecnico di Milano Career Service plays a central role in connecting students and alumni with the professional world. Its offer is wide — career orientation, mentoring, career days, entrepreneurship support, and job placement — making it one of the most structured services of its kind among Italian universities (Politecnico di Milano Career Service, n.d.).

To better understand how this service works and where a community initiative could fit, we conducted an interview with Francesca Saracino, Head of Career Service at Politecnico di Milano, who gave us an overview of the service, along with direct organizational insights that were fundamental in shaping the direction of our project:

1. The Career Service's business model, as Francesca said, is quite unique for a public university: students access all services for free, but the service doesn't rely on university funding or donations to operate. Instead, it sustains itself through company subscriptions: any organization that wants to formally recruit Polimi students or alumni must register as a partner. This essentially inverts the typical logic — companies come to Polimi, not the other way around, because the students themselves are the central value. For the project, this also clarified an important boundary: formal recruitment and job placement activities belong to the Career Service's domain. A community initiative like ours cannot — and should not — position itself as a hiring platform. Our role is to facilitate connections and build community, and if employment opportunities emerge from those relationships, that's a welcome side effect, not a stated goal.

Figure 3.13 Career Mentoring with Alumni for Design Students program.
Source. Career Service, Politecnico di Milano (2026).



2. The second insight was about scale: with nearly 50,000 students, the Career Service naturally has to operate at a broad level. Events tend to be organized at the School of Design level rather than for individual Master's programs — the PSSD Tour in May 2024, for example, included students from other design courses, and the career mentoring session in March 2026 was open to all design students. Design graduates across programs often end up in similar professional roles, so grouping them together is both practical and reasonable. But it also means that the specific needs of a smaller community like PSSD get absorbed into something more general. The Career Service is built for scale, and that's its strength, but it also means that program-level community building, the kind that works best in smaller and more specific groups, falls outside what it can realistically offer. This is where we identified our space: as exposed in the previous chapter, graduate alumni tend to identify more with their program or area of study than with the institution as a whole. And this sense of belonging is what actually drives meaningful engagement and mutual support among peers (Drezner & Pizmony-Levy, 2021) — which is our area of application.

The Alumni Polimi

The Alumni Politecnico di Milano association is another key institutional service within the Polimi ecosystem. With over 250,000 alumni worldwide, it operates as a global network whose goal is to keep graduates connected to the university and to each other, through news, a searchable alumni directory, fundraising initiatives, and community events (Alumni Politecnico di Milano, n.d.). The most significant initiative is the Alumni Polimi Day, this year held on June 6, 2026, an annual convention held at the Politecnico campus in Leonardo. The event brings together the entire alumni community for a day that includes institutional moments such as the Graduation Anniversary Ceremony, professional and inspirational talks, guided campus tours, and more informal spaces for networking and socializing. The service also provides a space, on the website and as an invited speaker, to notable alumni who, through the success of their ideas, companies, and achievements, have innovated and improved the world in the technological, industrial, and social spheres, serving as ambassadors for the University and its values around the globe. (Notable alumni Politecnico di Milano, n.d)

Figure 3.14

Left: poster for Alumni Polimi Day 2026. Right: map of the Leonardo Campus showing the activities of the second edition of Alumni Polimi Day. Below: 11th Alumni Convivio.

Source. Alumni Polimi



The Alumni Politecnico di Milano association excels at representing success stories and building an institutional narrative around Polimi graduates – particularly those who have gone on to lead major companies, institutions, and cultural organizations. However, this perspective, while inspiring, creates a certain distance from the day-to-day reality of current students and recent graduates. The profiles showcased tend to reflect decades of professional achievement, which makes the association more of an aspirational reference point than a space for peer-to-peer exchange. A PSSD community initiative would still exist within the broader Polimi ecosystem, and maintaining an active dialogue with Alumni Polimi is both natural and strategically useful. On one hand, the community could help showcase and amplify Polimi alumni events, keeping its members informed and connected to the wider institutional network. On the other hand, active participation in program-level initiatives, and the visibility that comes with being recognized by faculty, could open doors for PSSD alumni to be nominated and included in the more prestigious institutional alumni circles.

3.3

External Case Studies: Communities, Networks and Tools

This section presents the external case studies collected during the research process. The analysis encompasses both existing communities and networks, as well as digital tools identified as particularly relevant to this project's scope. Rather than providing a purely descriptive overview, the case studies were examined with a focus on understanding their organizational models — in particular, how decision-making flows within each initiative, how they are governed, and who they serve.

To structure this analysis, a profiling framework was developed drawing on Wenger's theory of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, 2010) as a basic reference and expanded with further dimensions relevant to professional and design-oriented communities. Each case study was mapped across a set of key dimensions: decision-making flow (top-down, bottom-up or hybrid), governance and management model, membership structure, primary purpose, knowledge orientation (practical or academic), format, geographic reach, and funding sustainability. This matrix allows a comparative reading of the cases and helps identify the organizational features most relevant to the design of a PSSD community initiative.

Understanding how existing communities operate — and where they succeed or fall short — was essential not only for gathering inspiration, but also for identifying the gaps that a new initiative could meaningfully fill. As Carmen et al. (2024) highlight, the quality of relationships and the structural choices made within community-based initiatives are central to their long-term success and adaptability. With this in mind, the case studies were selected to represent a range of typologies: from large international networks to smaller, more intimate communities of practice; from institutionally managed programs to fully self-governed grassroots initiatives.

In the following section, we will examine external case studies, community models and tools, analysed across key values including decision-making flow, governance, membership, purpose, knowledge orientation, format, reach, target audience, and sustainability model. We will then further analyse three case studies selected for their particularly distinctive formats and models: SDD, Nova Talent, and Mega Mentor.



www.creativemornings.com

CreativeMornings

A free monthly breakfast talk series for the global creative community.

Founded in 2008 by Tina Roth Eisenberg in New York, CreativeMornings is a volunteer-run, non-profit organisation hosting free monthly breakfast talks open to anyone with an interest in creativity. Each event is built around a shared global theme, involving local speakers ranging across design, art, and other creative disciplines — with local chapters across the globe, weekly virtual events, and an online directory connecting creatives and companies.

Status	High frequency
Decision-making	Hybrid
Governance	Co-managed
Membership	Open
Purpose	Interest-based
Format	Hybrid
Reach	Global · 200+ chapters
Target	Creative professionals
Sustainability	Sponsor-funded



www.linkedin.com/company/service-design-drinks-milan

Service Design Drinks

Informal events on service design, hosted by local practitioners and companies.

Founded in 2015 with the main chapter in Milan, Service Design Drinks are open, informal meetups bringing the service design community together — in cities across the globe. Each chapter connects people interested in service design, user experience, customer experience and design thinking, to share experiences, expand knowledge and create new opportunities.

Present in 20+ cities/countries — including Milan, Berlin, Toronto, Zurich and India — each chapter takes its own shape, adapted to its local community. Chapters stay connected across borders, occasionally crossing over for shared events.

Status	High frequency
Decision-making	Bottom-up
Governance	Self-governed
Membership	Open
Purpose	Interest-based
Format	In-person
Reach	Global · local chapters
Target	SD practitioners
Sustainability	Volunteer-run



www.ladiesthatux.com

Ladies that UX

A global community network supporting women in the UX industry.

Founded in Manchester in 2013, Ladies that UX was established in response to the limited visibility of women at mid and senior levels in the UX field. The network operates through local chapters, each independently run and free to define its own format — ranging from structured talks to informal social gatherings. Open to women at all career levels, it provides a space to share experiences, build connections, and access peer support. Today it has grown into a global network of chapters across multiple cities and countries.

Status	Medium frequency
Decision-making	Bottom-up
Governance	Self-governed
Membership	Semi-open
Purpose	Mission-driven
Format	Hybrid
Reach	Global · 55+ chapters
Target	Women in UX / design
Sustainability	Volunteer-run



www.globaljams.org

Global Service Design Jam

An annual worldwide design event focused on service prototyping.

The Global Service Jam is a yearly event in which participants have 48 hours to develop and prototype new services around a shared theme, revealed at the start of the weekend. Teams self-organise locally, across multiple cities simultaneously, making it one of the largest co-design events in the world. Open to anyone — designers, students, and complete beginners alike — it is entirely volunteer-run and free to attend. It operates as a family of jams, including the Global Gov Jam and the Global Sustainability Jam, each applying the same format to different sectors.

Status	High frequency
Decision-making	Bottom-up
Governance	Self-governed
Membership	Open
Purpose	Interest-based
Format	In-person
Reach	Global · 200+ cities
Target	SD students & professionals
Sustainability	Volunteer-run



www.service-design-network.org

Service Design Network

A global non-profit organization dedicated to the advancement of service design.

Founded in 2004, the Service Design Network (SDN) is a non-profit institution for expertise in service design and a driver of global growth. Its mission is to continuously push the boundaries of the practice by expanding awareness of its value across multiple domains — through community-building, events, and knowledge-sharing. Local chapters bring the network's vision to life regionally, helping members collaborate, share knowledge, and promote the impact of service design in their areas.

Status	High frequency
Decision-making	Top-down
Governance	Co-managed
Membership	Semi-open
Purpose	Mission-driven
Format	Hybrid
Reach	Global · national chapters
Target	SD professionals & academics
Sustainability	Membership-funded



www.novatalent.com

Nova Talent

A curated, application-based professional network connecting top talent worldwide.

Founded in Madrid in 2017, Nova Talent is a merit-based professional network connecting vetted professionals through mentoring, peer groups, events, and career opportunities. Membership is selective — all applicants go through a rigorous review process in order to join the network. With over 25,000 members across 80+ countries, Nova operates through local city groups and industry-based micro-communities, facilitated by a matchmaking engine that pairs members for one-on-one introductions.

Status	High frequency
Decision-making	Top-down
Governance	Co-managed
Membership	Closed
Purpose	Resource-based
Format	Hybrid
Reach	Global · 30+ cities
Target	Young professionals (cross-industry)
Sustainability	Membership-funded

MEGA MENTOR

<https://mega-mentor.com/>

Mega Mentor

A free, open directory connecting designers with experienced mentors.

Mega Mentor is a free platform that makes it easier to find and offer design mentorship. Born out of frustration with traditional mentoring models — time-consuming, long-term, and hard to access — it removes the awkwardness of asking for help by letting mentees browse a directory of senior and lead-level designers, filter by expertise or location, and book a session directly through Calendly.

Status	Low Activity
Decision-making	Bottom-up
Governance	Self-governed
Membership	Open
Purpose	Interest-based
Format	Online
Reach	Global
Target	Senior designers
Sustainability	Volunteer-run

Service Design Map

www.servicedesignmap.polimi.it

Service Design Map

A co-created global map of the service design landscape.

The Service Design Map is a research project developed by Politecnico di Milano, running since 2017. It is an open, community-contributed directory mapping who is dealing with service design around the world — covering higher education programs, consultancies, research centres, public innovation labs, and networks. Addressed to students, practitioners, and researchers, it aims to provide a clearer picture of the global service design ecosystem, enabling comparison, discovery, and collaboration across borders.

Status	Inactive
Decision-making	Top-down
Governance	Institutionally managed
Membership	Open
Purpose	Resource-based
Format	Online
Reach	Global
Target	SD professionals & students
Sustainability	Institutionally funded + volunteers

sdt

www.servicedesignmap.polimi.it

Service Design Tools

An open online repository of service design methods and tools.

Originally developed as a research project by Roberta Tassi at Politecnico di Milano in 2009, and later expanded in collaboration with Oblo and POLI.design, Service Design Tools is a free, open collection of communication methods used in service design processes. Tools are organised by design activity, each with a description, how-to instructions, and real-world case studies.

Status	Static
Decision-making	Top-down
Governance	Hybrid institutional
Membership	Open
Purpose	Resource-based
Format	Online
Reach	Global
Target	SD professionals & students
Sustainability	Institutionally funded (oblo+poli.design)



Figure 3.15 Service Design Drinks Milan event.

Source. Service Design Drinks Milan (2024)



Service Design Drinks (SDD) is a global network of informal, open meetups for the service design community, self-organized by local practitioners in cities across the world. The Milan chapter connects everyone interested in Service Design, UX, Customer Experience, and Design Thinking, creating space to share experiences, expand knowledge, and build new opportunities. What makes SDD Milan particularly relevant to this research is its origin: it was co-founded in 2015 by PSSD alumni from Politecnico di Milano, driven by a desire to bring the local service design community together and spread awareness about the evolving role of designers. The model is entirely volunteer-run, free to attend, and open to anyone — no membership, no fees, no formal hierarchy. Its strength lies in the “energy-based” model, which relies on the availability of members and the regularity and informality of its format, which lowers the barrier to participation and keeps the community alive between events.

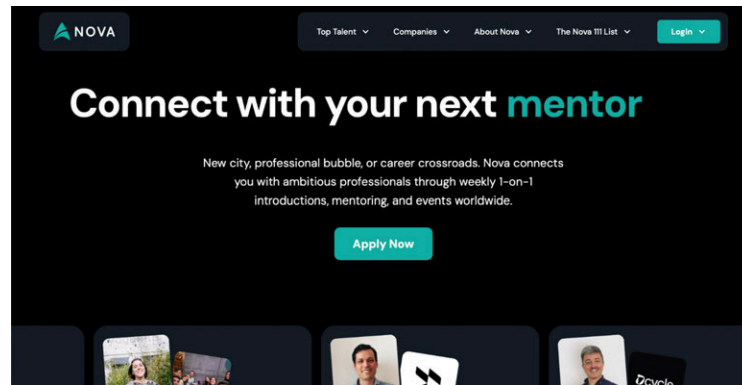
Insights:

- SDD’s success lies in its informal, non-competitive spirit: curiosity and genuine connection over hard networking or skill-building, appealing to designers who want to stay current and feel part of something bigger.
- Rhythm and variety keep it alive: regular enough to build habit, varied enough to stay energising. As SDD Milan organizer Giulia di Gregorio noted, adapting format to what people actually need sustains participation over time.

Critical aspects:

- Depends on finding hosts willing to provide space and refreshments — a reliance on venue partnerships that introduces instability.
- Operating under a global brand without formal legal structure has led to misuse of the SDD name for unrelated projects, leaving informality and identity protection unresolved.
- Purely volunteer-based, so the community is vulnerable if founding members step back, with no institutional safety net.

Figure 3.16
Nova Talent website.



Nova Talent is a curated, merit-based professional network connecting ambitious young professionals across industries through events, one-on-one matchmaking, peer groups, and mentoring. Membership is selective and application-based, positioning Nova as a quality-first network. Financially, it operates through annual membership fees and company subscriptions, making it a type of community model that is fully self-sustaining without institutional support. Within the broader network, members can join industry-specific micro-communities for more focused exchange — a layered structure that balances scale with intimacy.

Insights:

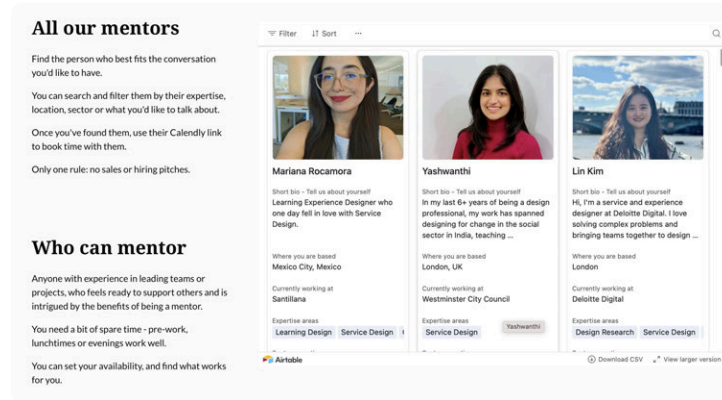
- Exclusivity and branding reinforce each other: application-based membership creates desirability, amplified by strong visual identity.
- Framing the community around "talent" gives members shared identity and legitimacy beyond any single profession.
- Self-sufficient model: member subscriptions plus company access fees monetize both sides, keeping Nova financially independent.
- Layered structure — global network plus industry micro-communities — balances scale with intimacy.

Critical aspects:

- The transactional, professional tone feels more like hard networking than community, potentially alienating those who prefer collaborative, low-pressure spaces.
- Exclusivity that builds legitimacy can also exclude valuable people who don't fit the "elite talent" narrative, risking homogeneity.
- The required infrastructure — dedicated team, proprietary app, matching algorithm, marketing — demands investment incompatible with a public university's resources or PSSD's values.

MEGA MENTOR

Figure 3.17
Mega Mentor website.



Mega Mentor is a volunteer-run digital platform launched in 2020 by Alessandra Canella, Kirsty Sinclair, Mathew Trivett, and Afsa Akbar — all service design practitioners — connecting designers with senior and lead-level mentors for free, one-off 30-minute conversations. Mentors list themselves in a public directory and link their own Calendly, allowing mentees to book sessions directly — no cohorts, no fees, no institutional gatekeeping. Within eight months of launch it had attracted over 100 mentors across Europe, North America, and beyond. Its service design origins are evident in its core logic: treating barriers to mentoring access as a design problem, and reducing friction as a primary value.

Insights:

- Public, directly bookable availability removes the awkwardness of unsolicited outreach — a barrier the founders flagged as key.
- Digital format bridges geography beyond what in-person models allow, drawing on a far broader expertise pool than local alumni networks.
- One-to-one dialogue offers personalised guidance workshops can't, especially for design careers' ambiguous, non-linear decisions.
- Reflects a shift from institution-mediated hierarchies toward distributed, peer-activated knowledge sharing.

Critical aspects:

- Volunteer-run with no institutional backing — continuity and quality depend on a small team's spare time, making it fragile and hard to scale.
- Individually managed Calendly accounts are a weak point: unupdated calendars break the booking experience.
- No session guidance or quality standards, so interaction depth varies widely — a gap the founders acknowledge.
- Ambiguous positioning and lack of documented outcomes limit its integration into broader professional development strategies.

3.4

Universities Alumni Networks

This section examines a selection of alumni and mentoring programs from universities that share relevant characteristics with Politecnico di Milano, in particular their international scope and the presence of design-oriented programs. The case studies were chosen not for their scale alone, but for the quality and originality of their approach: each one offers a methodology that is both effective and potentially transferable to a context like PSSD's.

Among the institutions considered, which range from large public universities to specialized private art and design schools, we focused on institutions with a strong design culture: Aalto University, the Royal College of Art, Otis College of Art and Design, and University College London. The presence of design programs was a key selection criterion, since the specificity of a design education shapes both the professional trajectories of graduates and the kind of community they tend to form after graduation.

From this initial pool, three cases were selected for deeper analysis: Aalto, UCL, and RCA. These three were retained because together they represent three distinct but complementary models of alumni engagement: a structured institutional mentoring program (Aalto), a lightweight and low-commitment peer-support format (UCL), and a visibility and identity-driven storytelling approach (RCA). Together, they offer a broad enough spectrum to draw meaningful design opportunities for the PSSD context.



Aalto University

www.aalto.fi/en/career-design-lab/join-the-aalto-university-mentoring-program

Aalto University Mentoring Program

An annual one-to-one mentoring program connecting students with working-life alumni.

Based in Espoo, Finland, the Aalto University Mentoring Program has been running since 2012, connecting master's and doctoral students across all faculties — including business, technology, and arts, design and architecture — with Aalto alumni who have at least four years of working experience. The program runs annually from December to May, with pairs meeting once a month. Students browse alumni profiles directly on the platform and send their own mentoring requests. Since its launch, the program has brought together over 1,700 mentoring pairs.

Status	Low to medium frequency
Decision-making	Top-down
Governance	Institutionally managed
Membership	Semi-open
Purpose	Support-driven / experience-sharing
Format	Hybrid
Reach	International
Target	Current students & alumni volunteers
Sustainability	Institutionally coordinated



Royal College of Art

<https://www.rca.ac.uk/alumni/>

AlumniRCA

A global alumni network for graduates of the Royal College of Art.

Based in London, AlumniRCA is the alumni relations program of the Royal College of Art, connecting over 30,000 graduates worldwide. It supports alumni through a range of benefits including access to careers advice, library resources, fabrication facilities, and exclusive professional and social events both in the UK and internationally. The program also serves as a channel for ongoing engagement with the College, through the MyGenerationRCA stories series and regular communications keeping alumni connected to institutional life.

Status	Medium frequency
Decision-making	Top-down with alumni contribution
Governance	Institutionally managed
Membership	Semi-open
Purpose	Identity-driven / visibility-driven
Format	Hybrid (Online + events + social media)
Reach	International alumni
Target	Alumni, students, creative community
Sustainability	Institutionally maintained



www.ucl.ac.uk/alumni/volunteer/alumni-student-chats

UCL Alumni-Student Chats

A one-off mentoring program connecting UCL alumni with current students.

Based in London, UCL Alumni-Student Chats is a light-touch volunteering initiative run by University College London. Alumni sign up to be matched with a current student from a similar academic background or home country, for a single 30-minute conversation — virtual or in person. Topics are open-ended, ranging from life at UCL and career pathways to personal experience beyond university. There is no obligation to form an ongoing relationship, though longer connections are encouraged. The program runs once a year, with the next round scheduled for Summer 2026.

Status	Low to medium frequency
Decision-making	Top-down
Governance	Institutionally managed
Membership	Semi-open
Purpose	Support-driven / experience-sharing
Format	Hybrid
Reach	International
Target	Current students & alumni volunteers
Sustainability	Institutionally coordinated



www.otis.edu/alumni/benefits.html?

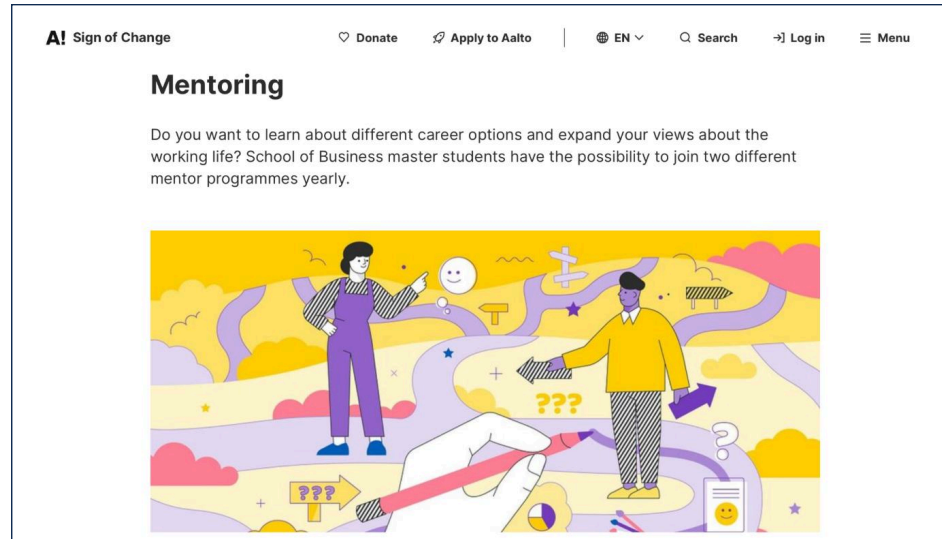
Otis College Alumni Assoc.

A free alumni network bridging graduates, students, and the creative industry.

Based in Los Angeles, the Otis College of Art and Design Alumni Association is a free, automatically enrolled network connecting graduates with each other, with students, and with the college. Managed jointly by the Institutional Advancement Office and the Alumni Leadership Council, it supports career development, mentorship, and collaboration through both online and in-person activities — from exhibitions and reunions to industry networking events.

Status	Low frequency
Decision-making	Top-down
Governance	Institutionally managed
Membership	Semi-open
Purpose	Resource-based
Format	Hybrid
Reach	Local
Target	Art & design alumni
Sustainability	Institutionally funded

Figure 3.18
Aalto University Mentoring
Website



The **Aalto University Mentoring Program** is a structured career-development and networking initiative run by the Aalto Career Design Lab. It pairs master's and doctoral students with experienced professionals — mainly Aalto alumni — for a six-month mentoring relationship focused on career exploration, professional growth, and navigating working life. Running annually from January to June, it brings together over 400 students (Finnish and international) and alumni through structured monthly one-on-one meetings. Rather than a top-down transfer of knowledge, the program is designed as a reciprocal process: the student sets the goals, and the mentor supports through experience and perspective, acting as a bridge between academic life and the professional world. The emphasis is on conversation, reflection, and guidance rather than direct job placement. A dedicated matching platform gives the program continuity and scale.

Beyond mentoring, Aalto structures alumni engagement as a broader ecosystem of participation — alumni can become ambassadors, share career expertise, join events, support student marketing, or organise local gatherings. The Ambassador model is particularly relevant for internationally distributed communities: alumni act as local contact points, organise casual meetups, and share local knowledge, effectively bridging the university and its diaspora.

Insights

- Aalto is a relevant benchmark for Politecnico di Milano — both are international public technical universities with strong engineering, business, and design ecosystems — and the program reflects a "career design" philosophy that treats careers as evolving, non-linear journeys rather than fixed paths.
- The reciprocal framing is one of the program's strongest features: rather than positioning mentoring as one-way support, it encourages mutual learning between experienced alumni and students who bring fresh perspectives.
- Institutional scaffolding — timelines, matching platforms, and briefing sessions — reduces friction while allowing relationships to develop organically, and strengthens students' access to networks, professional norms, and social capital beyond technical education.
- Testimonials suggest the program fosters belonging and confidence, with many participants describing lasting relationships and both professional and personal support, pointing to value well beyond career guidance.
- The broader volunteer ecosystem shows the importance of offering alumni different levels of participation: some may commit to a six-month mentoring relationship, while others may prefer a one-off talk, a career story, or a casual local meetup.
- For PSSD — a globally distributed program — the Ambassador model is especially relevant, as it allows alumni to serve as local contact points in cities where graduates are active, combining a structured mentoring layer with a lighter community-building one. A graduated approach could begin with low-friction formats such as alumni stories and one-off chats, then develop toward more structured roles over time.

Critical aspects

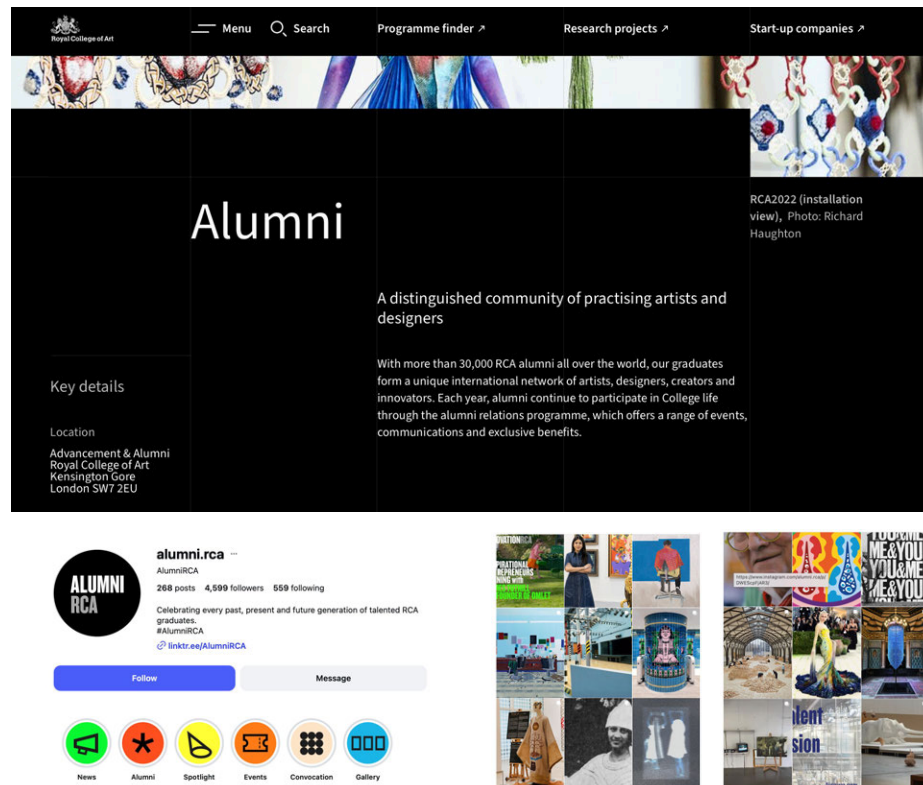
- The program's effectiveness depends heavily on match quality; experiences can vary significantly depending on compatibility and the engagement of both parties.
- Because the process is largely self-directed, students who are less proactive or less confident in networking may benefit less.
- While effective for reflection, networking, and personal development, the program offers fewer direct pathways to internships or employment compared to more career-service-oriented models.
- A broader volunteer ecosystem requires clear role definitions — if expectations for mentors, ambassadors, speakers, and chat volunteers are ambiguous, alumni will hesitate to participate.
- International ambassador activity will inevitably vary by city or country depending on individual motivation, making consistency difficult to guarantee.
- To avoid over-reliance on a few active alumni, the system needs continuous recruitment, visible recognition, and simple guidelines that make participation easy to enter and sustain.



Royal College of Art

Figures 3.19

Above: Royal College of Art Alumni Website. Below: Alumni Rca Instagram profile



The **AlumniRCA** program is centred around storytelling, visibility, and creative identity. Rather than focusing primarily on formal mentoring or structured career support, RCA presents its alumni community as a living archive of creative careers, practices, and achievements. Through the official AlumniRCA platform, alumni stories, interviews, news, events, and social media communication are used to showcase the diverse trajectories of RCA graduates across art, design, architecture, communication, and related creative fields.

One of the most distinctive features of RCA's alumni communication is the richness of its alumni interviews and storytelling formats. The "My GenerationRCA" stories highlight individual alumni through personal narratives, creative processes, career paths, and reflections on how their RCA experience shaped their professional practice. These stories do not only function as career information, but also as inspirational references for current students and recent graduates who are trying to imagine possible futures after graduation.

In addition to the website, RCA also maintains an active AlumniRCA presence on Instagram, where alumni achievements, events, exhibitions, opportunities, and community updates are shared in a visually engaging way. This multi-channel communication helps keep the alumni network visible and emotionally present. It also lowers the threshold for alumni to stay connected, since they can engage with the community through familiar and informal digital channels.

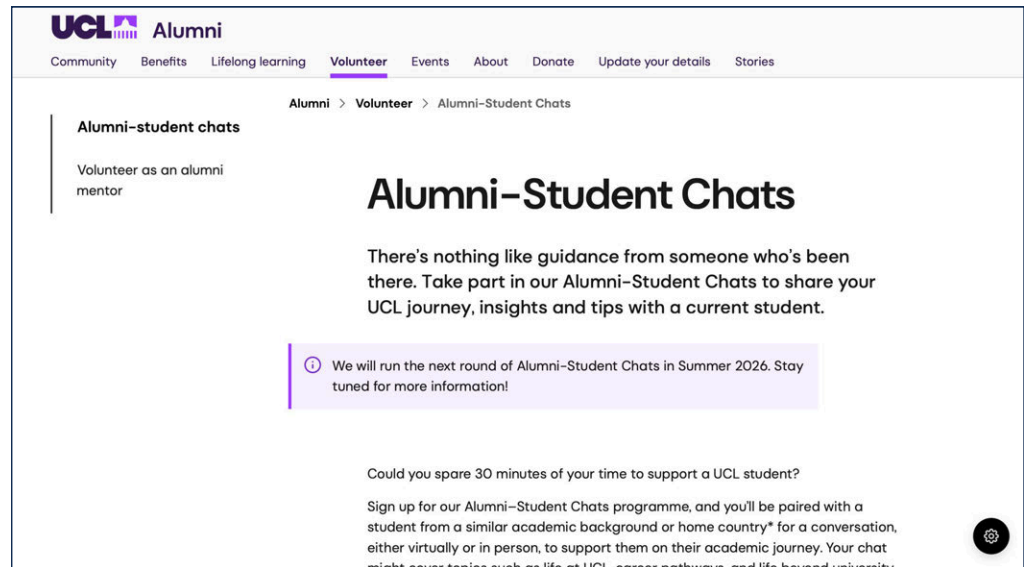
Insights:

- RCA is a relevant benchmark for PSSD because both are design-oriented institutions where graduate identity, creative practice, and professional visibility are important parts of the student experience.
- The strongest feature of RCA's model is its ability to transform alumni careers into accessible stories. Rather than presenting alumni only as professional contacts, RCA frames them as role models, cultural contributors, and examples of diverse creative futures.
- The combination of website articles and active Instagram communication makes the alumni community more visible and emotionally engaging. This is especially relevant for PSSD, where many alumni are doing interesting work internationally, but their stories are not always easy to discover.
- RCA's storytelling approach suggests that alumni engagement does not always need to start from direct mentoring. Making alumni visible through interviews, stories, and social media can already create inspiration, recognition, and a sense of continuity between students and graduates.
- For PSSD, this case supports the idea of strengthening the "Alumni Stories" section as a way to document career paths, international transitions, and diverse applications of service design after graduation.

Critical aspects:

- RCA's model is strong in visibility and inspiration, but it is less focused on direct interaction between students and alumni.
- Because the format depends heavily on curated stories, it may privilege more successful, visible, or media-friendly alumni, while less linear or more uncertain career paths may remain underrepresented.
- The model requires continuous editorial work, including identifying alumni, conducting interviews, editing content, and maintaining social media communication.
- While storytelling can inspire students, it may not fully address more practical needs such as career doubts, visa concerns, job-search strategies, or emotional support during the transition after graduation.

Figures 3.20
UCL Alumni-student chats
website



UCL's Alumni-Student Chats is a lightweight volunteer program that connects current students with alumni for a one-off conversation. Unlike a formal mentoring program, it is designed to be low-pressure and easy to join. Alumni register their interest, are matched with a current student, and arrange a short conversation through phone, Teams, Zoom, or another platform that works for both sides. The conversation can focus on studies, career aspirations, challenges, personal experiences, hometowns, or any topic that feels relevant to the student and alumnus.

One of the key strengths of this model is its flexibility. There is no obligation to continue the relationship beyond the first conversation, although the chat may become the beginning of a longer connection. This makes the program less intimidating for both students and alumni. For students, it provides a chance to speak with someone who has gone through a similar experience. For alumni, it offers a meaningful way to give back without requiring a long-term commitment.

UCL's matching approach also reflects an understanding that support is not only professional, but also personal and contextual. The program aims to match students and alumni based on similar degree backgrounds or shared locations. This makes the conversation more relatable, especially for students who may be dealing with questions about career direction, international transition, belonging, or life after university.

Insights:

- UCL is a useful benchmark for PSSD because it shows how alumni engagement can be designed as a small, casual, and low-commitment interaction rather than a formal mentoring relationship.
- The one-off conversation format lowers the psychological barrier for both students and alumni. Students do not need to feel that they are asking for a long-term mentor, and alumni do not need to commit to a long mentoring process.
- The matching criteria based on degree background or location are especially relevant for PSSD, where international students often face questions related to country-specific career paths, relocation, cultural transition, and local job markets.
- The program is valuable not only for career guidance, but also for emotional reassurance. Speaking with someone who has already experienced a similar transition can help students feel less isolated and more confident about their next steps.
- For PSSD, this case strongly supports the idea of “Chat with Alumni” as a casual matching service. It could work as a lighter alternative to mentoring, allowing students to ask specific questions about careers, countries, visas, portfolios, or life after graduation.

Critical aspects:

- Because the interaction is short and informal, the depth of support may be limited compared to a structured mentoring program.
- The quality of the experience depends on the relevance of the match and the willingness of both sides to engage openly.
- A one-off chat may help students feel supported, but it may not be enough for complex or long-term career challenges.
- The program still requires institutional coordination, including collecting expressions of interest, matching students and alumni, providing guidance, and gathering feedback after the conversation.

3.5

Synthesis: Design Opportunities from Contextual Grounding

The analysis of the PSSD ecosystem, institutional services, and external case studies revealed that the challenge of building a sustainable community network is not simply a matter of creating opportunities for connection, but rather of designing organizational conditions that allow relationships, knowledge, and participation to persist over time.

Across the different initiatives examined — from PSSD mentoring projects to external professional communities and institutional alumni networks — several recurring patterns emerged regarding governance, engagement, continuity, and sustainability. While the formats, scales, and objectives of these initiatives varied significantly, common tensions repeatedly surfaced: between informality and structure, specialization and scalability, institutional support and grassroots participation. The following opportunities can be drawn from these case studies:

1. A hybrid governance model: institutional backbone, community soul

The ideal structure for the PSSD community network is neither fully top-down nor purely grassroots. Institutional legitimacy in the PSSD program, as a constant, recognizable presence, provides stability and continuity. Although, the real energy comes from peer-to-peer dynamics and engagement, where students and alumni co-shape the network over time. Too much institutional control risks making it stiff and formal; too little risks leaving the network feeling discontinuous and chaotic. The balance lies in a light yet consistent organizational presence that makes the project trustworthy, so participants can see its value. In this way, the institution enables it and provides the space for ideas and engagement to flourish.

2. Multilayered and molecular participation: calibrating involvement to available energy

A one-size-fits-all format might not be right for everyone. The network should offer a range of participation levels — from low-commitment touchpoints like reading an alumni story or joining a single event, to more involved roles like mentoring, ambassadorship, or helping organize initiatives. This flexibility is especially important for alumni, whose availability varies widely by location, career stage, and personal circumstances. The network should feel like an opportunity to connect and disconnect freely and not like a formal obligation. On the other side, if a role requires a lot of energy and commitment, it needs to be retributed in value, status, or opportunities in proportion.

3. PSSD-specific identity within the broader Polimi ecosystem

The intimacy and specificity of a program-level community is what makes it valuable – and what larger institutional structures like the Career Service or Alumni Polimi cannot replicate at their scale. At the same time, isolating the network from those entities would mean losing access to resources, visibility, and opportunities. The right approach is a conversational relationship: PSSD's community can amplify Polimi initiatives, share data, and benefit from institutional reach, while the Career Service and Alumni Polimi can, in return, offer opportunities, legitimacy, and visibility to the network. Although it is crucial to maintain the semi-informal community's peer-to-peer nature, which also avoids stepping into the institutional territory of formal recruitment or official alumni representation.

4. Light structures and rituals to support sustainability over time

The PSSD initiatives analyzed were not lacking in intention or quality – what they lacked was a lightweight infrastructure capable of surviving beyond the individuals who built them. For this reason, it's crucial to standardize processes and resources and enable knowledge transfer to deliver a “minimum viable product” that can keep the network alive independently of who comes next. For this reason, small, repeatable rituals and formats that can be handed down, tested, and adapted over time are important. Rather than designing a finished system, the goal is to prototype proposals starting from the students themselves – understanding their real challenges and needs, and what would genuinely attract alumni to participate. This is the direction the next research phase will take, through surveys and interviews that place students and alumni at the center of the design process.

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04 User and Stakeholder Research

4.1

Research Framework

4.2

Quantitative Research

4.3

Qualitative Research

4.4

Conclusions: User Research Overview and Insights

4.1

Research Framework

This chapter presents the user research conducted to understand the needs, experiences, and expectations of the PSSD student and alumni community. The research focused particularly on the transition from the program to professional life, as this emerged as a critical moment in which questions of career orientation, belonging, support, and continuity become especially relevant.

The research was designed as a mixed-methods study, combining quantitative and qualitative research. This choice was based on the need to understand the research topic at two complementary levels. On one hand, the project needed to identify broader patterns across the community, such as common challenges, perceived gaps, and recurring expectations. On the other hand, it also needed to understand how these challenges were experienced, interpreted, and situated within individual trajectories.

The quantitative survey was used to map tendencies across a wider group of students and alumni. It aimed to measure and compare recurring issues related to career preparation, access to support, sense of belonging, and expectations toward alumni-related initiatives. In this sense, the survey helped clarify what kinds of needs and challenges were shared across different respondents.

The qualitative research, instead, aimed to explore the personal meanings, perceptions, experiences, and contexts behind these patterns. Through interviews, the research investigated how students and alumni experienced the transition from PSSD to professional life, how they made sense of uncertainty, and what kinds of support, relationships, and community connections were meaningful to them.

This combination was particularly relevant for the PSSD context, where students and alumni come from diverse cultural, educational, and professional backgrounds. The international composition of the program means that transition experiences are shaped by different conditions, including language, visa status, financial pressure, local networks, career expectations, and access to opportunities. For this reason, the research aimed not only to identify and quantify shared issues, but also to explore the specific contexts in which these issues emerged.

4.2

Quantitative Research

4.2.1

Aim of this research

The aim of the quantitative research was to gain a broad understanding of the difficulties, needs, and expectations experienced by PSSD students and alumni in relation to the transition from university life to post-graduation professional life. The survey was designed as an exploratory mapping tool, rather than as a statistically representative study, in order to identify recurring patterns across the PSSD community.

Given this broader aim, the survey measured the perceived difficulty of different transition phases, the types of challenges most strongly experienced, and how respondents adapted to those challenges. The research also examined what kinds of support systems respondents used when facing difficulties. These included solving problems by themselves, receiving help from friends or family, receiving help from classmates or colleagues, accessing school support systems and faculty, using local or digital communities, and relying on public or social support systems.

Another important aim was to identify the gap between existing support and actual needs. Since this thesis explores the potential of the PSSD Community Network, the survey investigated not only what forms of support had been missing or ineffective in the past, but also what kinds of initiatives respondents would be willing to participate in or contribute to as members of the PSSD community.

Within the broader mixed-methods research process, the survey functioned as the first step for identifying relevant tendencies and areas of concern. These findings were then used to inform and contextualise the qualitative research, which explored in greater depth how and why these issues emerged in specific personal, professional, and social contexts.

4.2.2

Research Methods

The quantitative research was conducted as an online survey using Google Forms. Personal information such as names and email addresses was collected only from respondents who were interested in participating in follow-up interviews or co-design sessions.

Figure 4.1 PSSD Alumni Network & Visibility system: Objectives and Question Form



How

The survey was composed of a combination of multiple-choice questions, rating-scale questions, and optional open-ended questions. The full questionnaire, including the branching structure and question wording, is provided in Annex list 4.1. Multiple-choice questions were used to understand respondents' profiles, transition phases, support systems, and preferred alumni network initiatives. Rating-scale questions were used to measure the seriousness of each challenge and the perceived helpfulness of different support systems. Open-ended questions allowed respondents to describe additional issues, missing skills, or comments that could not be captured by the predefined options.

The survey also included a branching structure. Current students in the 1st to 3rd semester were asked about their motivations for joining PSSD, information channels that influenced their decision, anticipated future challenges, and desired support. On the other hand, current students in the 4th to 5th semester or awaiting graduation, as well as alumni, were asked about the transition challenges they were currently experiencing or had already experienced, and the support they had used.

The types of challenges were divided into four domains: financial, social, environmental, and professional issues. In addition, in order to understand the factors contributing to each challenge, the survey incorporated perspectives corresponding to Schlossberg's Transition Theory and its 4S System: Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies (Schlossberg, 2011; Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012). This structure made it possible to analyse not only what types of challenges existed, but also how those challenges were related to contextual conditions, lack of support, personal factors, and coping strategies.

When

The survey was conducted between 5 December 2025 and 27 January 2026.

Where

The survey was conducted online through Google Forms.

Who

The survey targeted the broader PSSD community, including current PSSD students and alumni from different cohorts. As an indicative estimate, this community may include around 1,500 students and alumni, considering the program's twenty-year history and its current cohort size of around 100 students. However, this number should be understood as an approximate reference rather than an exact denominator, as the number of students per cohort was smaller in the early years and the accessibility of alumni varies significantly across cohorts and communication channels.

The survey was shared through available PSSD-related communication channels and personal networks, including current student groups, alumni contacts, and informal community channels. Its original aim was to collect a broad overview of students' and alumni's experiences, needs, and expectations regarding career transition, community connection, and alumni engagement.

In total, 107 responses were collected. Considering the estimated size and dispersed nature of the PSSD community, the results are not presented as statistically representative of the entire population. Instead, they are used as an exploratory sample that provides meaningful indications of recurring needs, challenges, and expectations within the reachable PSSD community.

The respondent profile was distributed as follows:

- Current students in the 1st to 3rd semester: 8 respondents
- Current students in the 4th to 5th semester or awaiting graduation: 23 respondents
- Early alumni within one year after graduation: 22 respondents
- Alumni one to five years after graduation: 26 respondents
- Alumni more than five years after graduation: 28 respondents

In terms of geographical background, 53 respondents were from Italy, 28 from Asia, 8 from Europe outside Italy, 7 from the Middle East and North Africa, 6 from South America, 2 from Sub-Saharan Africa, and 1 from North America. A small number of respondents selected more than one region. This means that while Italian respondents formed the largest group, the survey also included a significant number of international respondents, reflecting the international character of the PSSD program.

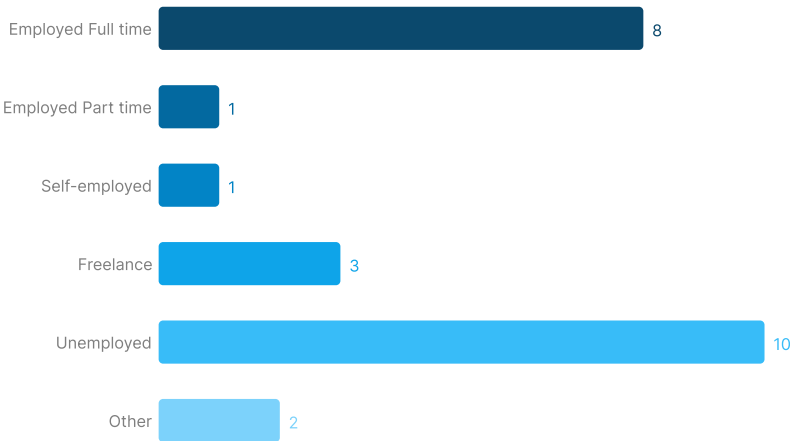
The main transition-related questions were answered by 99 respondents. This group consisted of 23 current students in the 4th to 5th semester or awaiting graduation and 76 alumni. The remaining 8 respondents were current students in the 1st to 3rd semester and answered a separate set of questions focused on future expectations and anticipated challenges.

Before presenting the results, it is important to clarify the limitation of the reached sample. The survey results cannot be generalised to the entire PSSD student and alumni population, as the sample was limited to 107 respondents in relation to an estimated reference population of around 1,500 students and alumni. This number should be understood as an approximate reference rather than an exact denominator, since cohort sizes have changed over the program's history and the accessibility of alumni varies across communication channels. Therefore, the following findings should be understood as indicative tendencies within the reachable PSSD community, rather than statistically representative conclusions. Nevertheless, the results provide useful insights into recurring challenges, support gaps, and expectations that are relevant for the development of the PSSD Community Network.

Professional status and employment experience

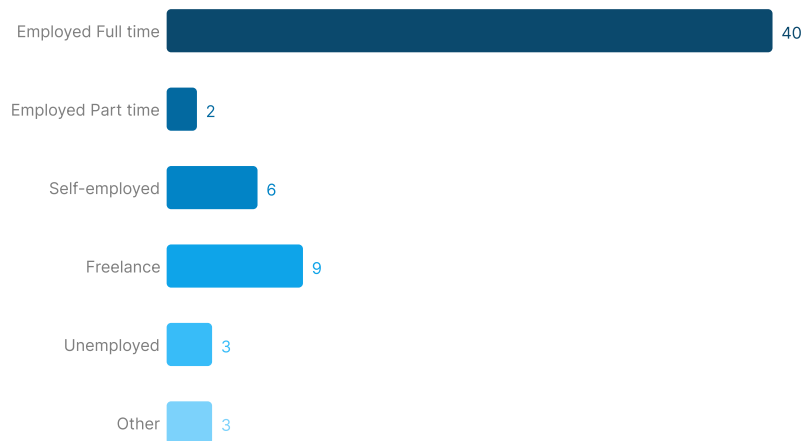
The employment-related responses showed differences between early alumni and alumni who had spent a longer period after graduation. Among the 22 early alumni who answered the employment status question, 10 respondents were unemployed and 8 were employed full-time. Other respondents were freelance, self-employed, employed part-time, or combining multiple types of work. Although this subgroup is small and cannot be used to generalise about all PSSD early alumni, the distribution is still relevant for this research because it shows that a considerable part of the reached early alumni were not yet in a stable full-time employment situation. This pattern can therefore be read as an indicative signal that the first year after graduation may involve professional uncertainty and an ongoing process of positioning oneself in the labour market.

Figure 4.2 Employment status among the 22 early alumni (multiple choice)



On the other hand, among the 54 alumni who had graduated more than one year earlier, 40 were employed full-time. Others were self-employed, freelance, unemployed, or combining multiple types of work. Compared with early alumni, this group showed a more stable employment pattern. However, the presence of freelance, self-employed, and mixed working arrangements also suggests that career paths in service design and related fields are diverse and flexible.

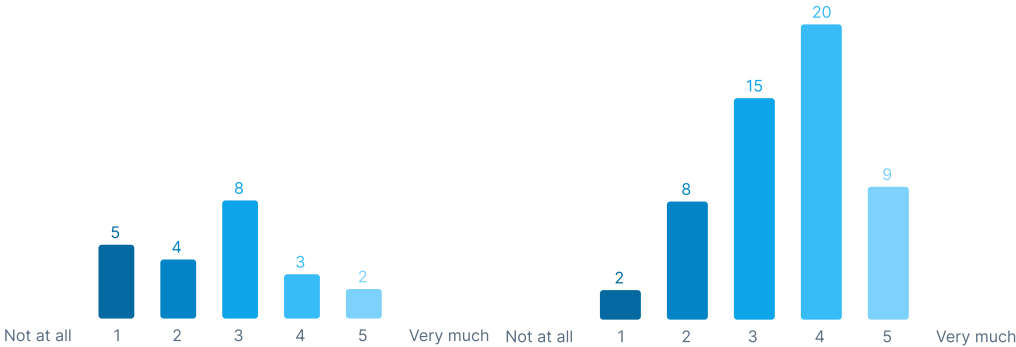
Figure 4.3 Employment status among the 54 alumni who had graduated more than one year earlier (multiple choice)



The survey also asked respondents to what extent their current job reflected the expectations they had after completing PSSD. Early alumni gave an average score of 2.68 out of 5, while alumni who had graduated more than one year earlier gave an average score of 3.48. Within the reached sample, this difference may indicate that the alignment between expectations and professional reality was weaker among early alumni than among alumni with more time after graduation. However, due to the limited and non-representative nature of the sample, this finding cannot be generalised to the entire PSSD alumni population. It should instead be read as an indicative pattern that raises a possible hypothesis: the immediate post-graduation phase may involve a stronger mismatch between expectations and professional reality, while some alumni may gradually adjust their career direction through experience. This interpretation is further considered through the qualitative interviews, particularly the perspectives of young alumni and career-related stakeholders.

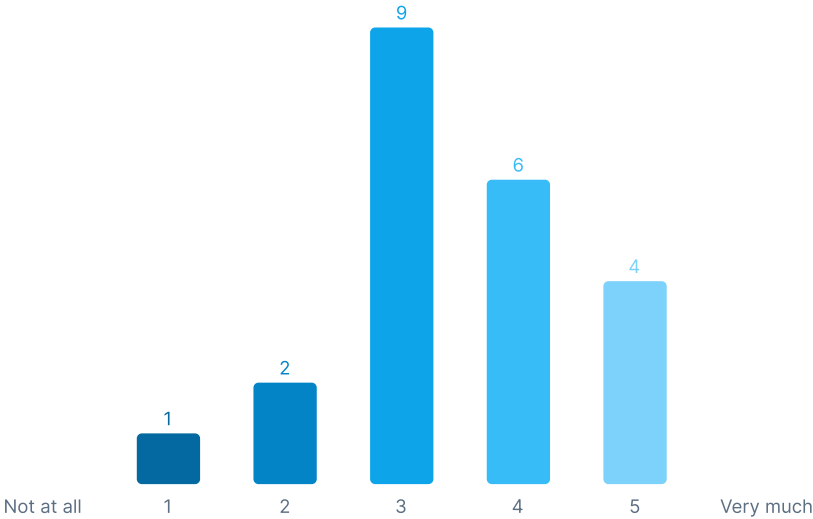
Figure 4.4 Responses to what extent their current job reflected the expectations they had after completing PSSD from early alumni

Figure 4.5 Responses to what extent their current job reflected the expectations they had after completing PSSD from alumni who had graduated more than one year earlier



Early alumni were also asked whether PSSD had given them the skills and preparation needed for their current job. The average score was 3.45 out of 5. Within this subgroup, this indicates a moderate level of perceived preparation, but not enough to suggest full confidence. In the open-ended responses, missing areas included business knowledge, practical skills, UX-related skills, data analysis, team management, AI-related skills, and clearer preparation for the professional world. These responses should not be understood as general evidence of missing skills across all PSSD alumni, but as useful indications of areas where additional career orientation and alumni-based knowledge exchange could provide support.

Figure 4.6 Responses to whether PSSD had given them the skills and preparation needed for their current job from early alumni

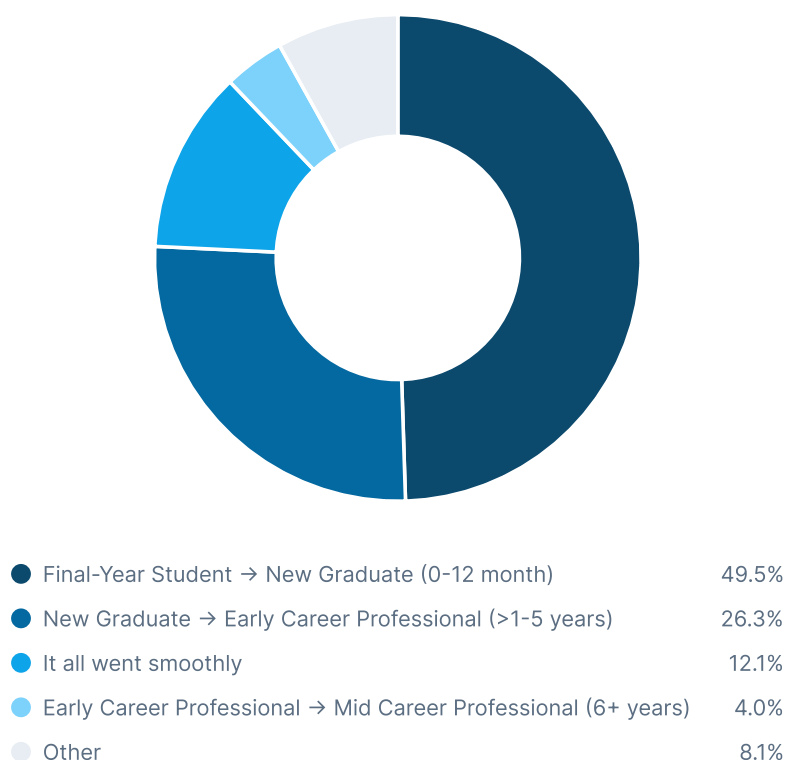


Most challenging transition phase

One of the important findings of the survey was that the most difficult transition phase was concentrated around graduation and the first few years after graduation.

Among the 99 respondents who answered the transition-related questions, 49.5% selected “PSSD Final-Year Student → PSSD New Graduate (0–12 months)” as the most challenging transition phase. Another 26.3% selected “PSSD New Graduate → PSSD Early Career Professional (1–5 years).” Combined, 75.8% of this group identified the period from the final year of PSSD to the early career phase as the most difficult transition period.

Figure 4.7 Responses to most difficult transition phase



By contrast, only 12 respondents answered that everything went smoothly, and only 4 selected the transition from early-career professional to mid-career professional as the most challenging phase. This result seems to suggest that the most vulnerable moment is not simply during the period of studying at PSSD, but rather the stage in which students leave the university environment and begin to define themselves as professionals.

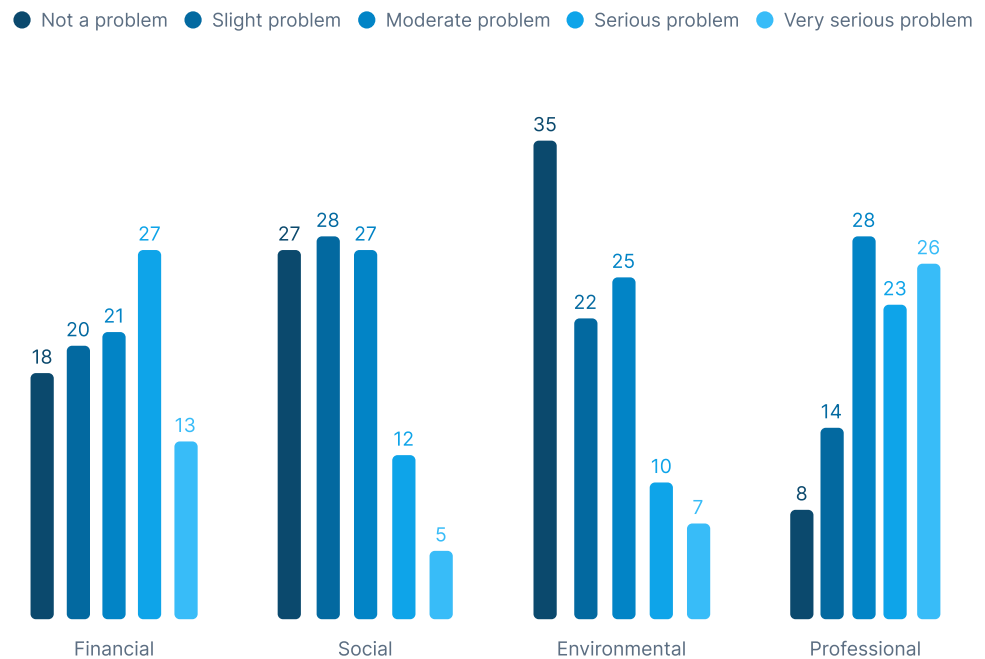
This suggests that the need for support does not end at graduation. Instead, graduation marks the beginning of a new phase of uncertainty.

Types of challenges experienced

In the survey, respondents were asked to evaluate the seriousness of four types of post-university transition challenges: financial, social, environmental, and professional challenges. These four categories were defined as concrete domains of challenges that could occur during transition. At the same time, in order to understand what factors contributed to each challenge, the survey referred to Schlossberg's Transition Theory and its 4S System, analysing the challenges through the perspectives of Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies.

The most strongly experienced challenge was professional challenges. Among the 99 respondents, 49 rated professional challenges as a serious or very serious problem. Including those who rated them as a moderate problem, 77 respondents experienced professional challenges at least at a moderate level. By contrast, only 8 respondents answered that professional challenges were not a problem.

Figure 4.8 Responses to Types of challenges experienced



This result indicates that the transition into professional life was the most significant area of difficulty for PSSD students and alumni. Professional challenges included finding employment, developing a professional role and identity, adapting to workplace expectations, and managing performance pressure. These findings suggest that graduates need more than access to job information. They need support in understanding how to position themselves, how to translate the skills gained through PSSD into professional language, and how to build confidence in their professional identity.

Financial challenges were the second most strongly experienced challenge area. Among the 99 respondents, 40 rated financial challenges as a serious or very serious problem, and 61 experienced them at least as a moderate problem. This shows that financial instability is an important element of the post-graduation transition, particularly in relation to income stability, debt, budgeting, unpaid or low-paid internships, relocation costs, and the cost of independent living.

Social and environmental challenges were less severe than professional and financial challenges, but they still remained relevant. 17 respondents rated social challenges as a serious or very serious problem, and 44 experienced them at least as a moderate problem. Similarly, 17 respondents rated environmental challenges as a serious or very serious problem, and 42 experienced them at least as a moderate problem. Social challenges included feelings of isolation, the loss of a structured student community, and the need to build new relationships. Environmental challenges included housing, relocation, adaptation to a new city, culture shock, and homesickness.

The open-ended responses added further depth to these results. Several respondents mentioned visa issues, language barriers, uncertainty about whether to remain in Europe or return to their home country, unclear career paths, difficulty translating PSSD skills into the labour market, and a gap between skills learned at university and expectations from companies. These comments suggest that, especially for international students and alumni, professional transition is closely connected to social, cultural, and legal conditions.

Adaptation to challenges

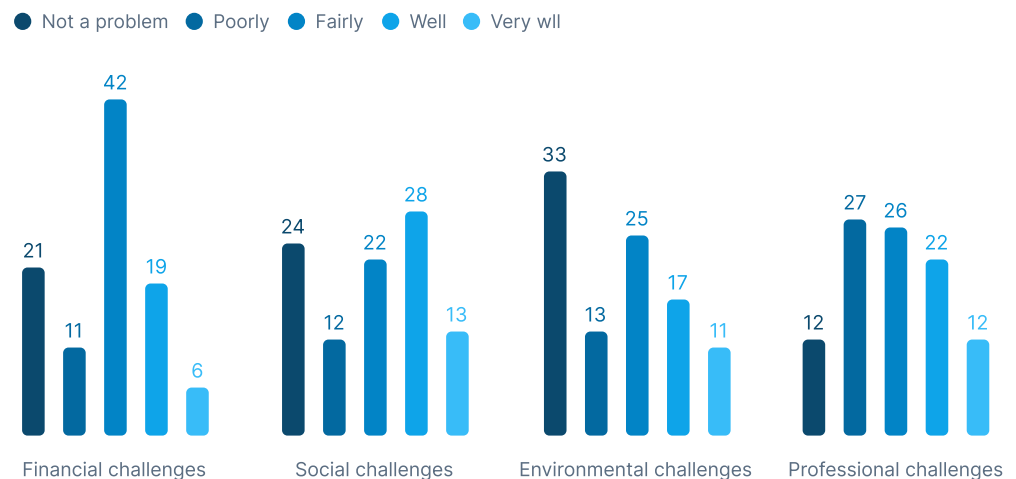
The results concerning adaptation to challenges also showed that professional challenges were the most difficult area to manage. For professional challenges, 27 respondents answered that they adapted poorly, 26 adapted fairly, 22 adapted well, and 12 adapted very well. 12 respondents answered that professional challenges were not a problem.

This distribution suggests that many respondents were not yet in a fully stable situation, but were still in the process of adaptation. It also suggests that professional transition should be understood not only as the problem of finding a job, but also as an ongoing process of learning how to act in the professional field, form one's role, and manage uncertainty.

For financial challenges, 42 respondents answered that they adapted fairly, 19 adapted well, 6 adapted very well, and 11 adapted poorly. This result indicates that although financial issues were difficult, many respondents managed them through personal coping methods or support.

For social and environmental challenges, the results were more mixed. Some respondents answered that they adapted well or very well, while others continued to experience difficulty. These areas may depend greatly on individual circumstances, such as whether the person stayed in Milan, moved abroad, returned to their home country, lived with family, or found a new community after graduation.

Figure 4.9 Responses to adaptation to challenges



Support systems used

The survey results showed that respondents relied more strongly on informal and personal support systems than on formal institutional support.

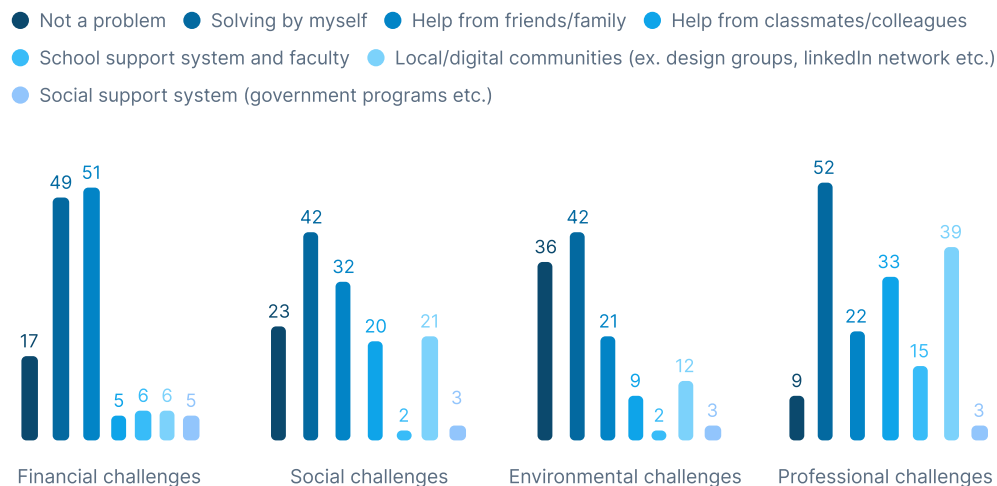
For financial issues, the most frequently used support was friends and family, selected by 51 respondents. This was followed by solving the issue by oneself, selected by 49 respondents. By contrast, school support and faculty were selected by only 6 respondents, local or digital communities by 6 respondents, and social support systems by 5 respondents. This result suggests that financial difficulties were mainly dealt with privately through personal networks or individual coping.

For social issues, solving by oneself was the most frequently selected option, with 42 respondents choosing it. Friends and family were selected by 32 respondents, local or digital communities by 21, and classmates or colleagues by 20. Only 2 respondents selected school support and faculty. This indicates that although social transition is related to belonging, isolation, and community connection, it was rarely addressed through formal school-based support.

For environmental issues, 42 respondents selected solving by oneself, 21 selected friends and family, and 12 selected local or digital communities. School support and faculty were again selected by only 2 respondents. This result indicates that challenges related to relocation, housing, cultural adaptation, and living in a new environment were mainly handled through individual effort and close personal networks.

For professional issues, the support pattern was slightly different. Solving by oneself was the most frequently selected option, chosen by 52 respondents. This was followed by local or digital communities, selected by 39 respondents, classmates or colleagues by 33 respondents, and friends or family by 22 respondents. School support and faculty were selected by 15 respondents. Formal school-based support was still not as central as informal or external networks, suggesting the need for a broader support ecosystem.

Figure 4.10 Responses to Support systems used



Helpfulness of support

The survey also asked respondents how helpful different support systems were.

Self-solving was widely used and relatively positively evaluated. 94 respondents reported using self-solving, and 83 rated it as satisfied or very satisfied. This result suggests that many respondents had developed personal coping strategies. At the same time, it also indicates that a significant burden was placed on individuals.

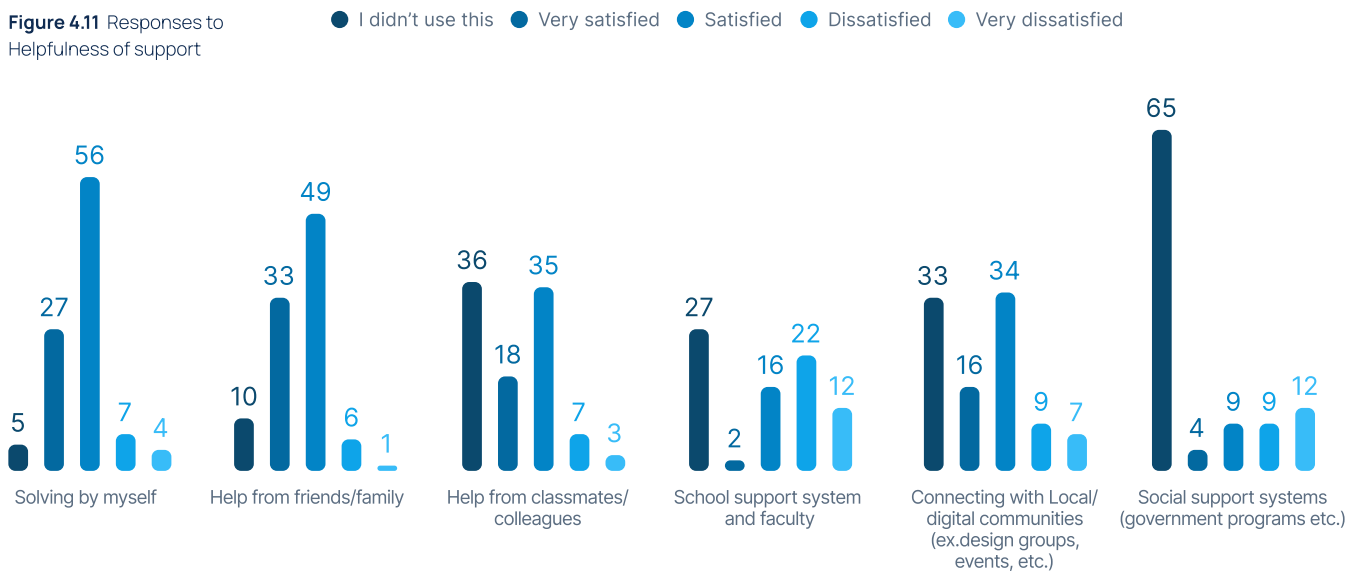
Friends and family were also evaluated highly. 89 respondents used this type of support, and 82 rated it as satisfied or very satisfied. This shows that personal networks were one of the most reliable forms of support during the transition period. At the same time, it also indicates that access to support depended strongly on each person's family situation and personal relationships.

Classmates and colleagues were used by 63 respondents, and 53 rated this support as satisfied or very satisfied. Local and digital communities were used by 66 respondents, and 50 rated them as satisfied or very satisfied. These results show that peer-based and community-based support had high value, especially in professional and social transitions.

On the other hand, the results for school support and faculty were weak. 47 respondents reported that they did not use this support. Among all 99 respondents, only 18 rated school support and faculty as satisfied or very satisfied, while 34 rated them as dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. This result suggests that formal school-based support was not only less used, but also less positively evaluated compared with informal, peer-based, and community-based support.

Social support systems, such as government or public programs, were also low in both use and evaluation. 65 respondents reported that they did not use them, 21 rated them as dissatisfied or very dissatisfied, and only 13 rated them as satisfied or very satisfied. This may suggest that these support systems were not sufficiently visible, accessible, or relevant for PSSD students and alumni.

Figure 4.11 Responses to Helpfulness of support

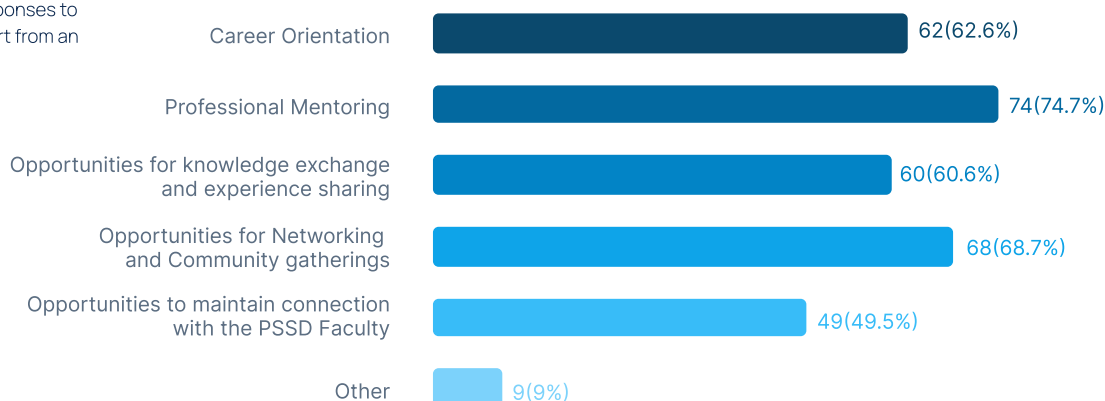


Expected support from an alumni network

The survey also asked what types of support would have been helpful but were not available or effective. The most frequently selected option was professional mentoring, chosen by 74 out of 99 respondents. This was followed by networking and community gatherings, selected by 68 respondents, career orientation by 62 respondents, knowledge exchange and experience sharing by 60 respondents, and opportunities to maintain connection with PSSD faculty by 49 respondents.

These results show that respondents strongly sought professional connections and guidance. They were not only looking for job information, but also for mentoring, experience sharing, human connection, and ways to maintain a relationship with the PSSD ecosystem after graduation.

Figure 4.12 Responses to Expected support from an alumni network



The survey also asked what initiatives respondents would be willing to initiate or actively participate in as members of the PSSD community network. The most frequently selected option was networking and community gatherings, chosen by 70 respondents. This was followed by knowledge exchange and experience sharing, selected by 68 respondents, professional mentoring by 62 respondents, connection with PSSD faculty by 53 respondents, and career orientation by 48 respondents.

Current students' anticipated needs

The 8 current students in the 1st to 3rd semester answered a separate set of questions about their motivations and future challenges. Although this group was small, it still provides useful indications of future needs.

Among these students, 7 selected financial challenges as a concern when transitioning to the job environment, and 6 selected professional challenges. This suggests that even before approaching graduation, students already recognised financial instability and professional uncertainty as major concerns.

When asked what type of support they would like to receive through an alumni network, all 8 selected career orientation. 6 selected professional mentoring, 5 selected knowledge exchange and experience sharing, and 5 selected opportunities to maintain connection with PSSD faculty. This result is consistent with the alumni responses and suggests that needs for career orientation, mentoring, and knowledge exchange exist both before and after graduation.

4.2.4

Key Takeaways

The quantitative research revealed the following insights.

First, **the most vulnerable transition phase is concentrated around graduation and the early career phase.** Among the respondents who answered the transition-related questions, 75.8% selected either the transition from final-year student to new graduate or the transition from new graduate to early-career professional as the most difficult phase. This result shows that the need for support does not end at graduation. Instead, graduation marks the beginning of a new uncertainty, where students must redefine their role, identity, and direction outside the structure of university.

Second, **professional challenges were the most significant issues experienced by respondents.** Among the 99 respondents, 49 rated professional issues as serious or very serious, and 77 experienced them at least at a moderate level. These challenges included finding employment, forming a professional role identity, adapting to workplace expectations, and managing performance pressure. This indicates that what PSSD students and alumni need is not only job information or general career advice. They need support in translating their PSSD experience into professional language, positioning themselves across different fields, and building confidence as designers.

Third, **respondents relied more strongly on informal and peer-based support than on formal school-based support.** Friends and family, classmates and colleagues, local and digital communities, and self-solving were used more frequently and evaluated more positively than school support and faculty. The low use and low satisfaction of school-based support reveal a gap between existing institutional resources and the actual ways students and alumni seek support.

Fourth, **there is a significant opportunity for the PSSD Community to become a continuous and reciprocal support system.** Respondents showed strong interest in professional mentoring, career orientation, knowledge exchange, networking and community gatherings, and maintaining connection with faculty. Importantly, many respondents also showed willingness to participate in or contribute to these initiatives themselves. This suggests that the alumni network should not be designed merely as an information platform or a top-down support service from the school, but as a living community that enables mutual support, experience sharing, professional orientation, and continuous connection after graduation.

Overall, the survey shows that the transition from PSSD to professional life is not merely a career-related issue. It is also deeply connected to financial stability, belonging, confidence, identity, and access to appropriate support. The findings suggest that a future PSSD Community initiative should address both practical and emotional support needs. In other words, through mentoring, peer exchange, community connection, and more visible support pathways, the network should help students and alumni navigate uncertain transition periods.

4.3

Qualitative Research

This qualitative research was conducted to gain a richer understanding of how multiple stakeholders related to PSSD perceive the transition from university to professional life, their relationship with alumni, the limitations of existing support, and the future potential of the alumni networking system.

While the quantitative research identified several areas of difficulty, it was necessary to analyse the individual experiences of multiple stakeholders in order to understand why these challenges occur, in what contexts they become more serious, and what kinds of support are actually meaningful.

Therefore, this research organised the interviews from multiple perspectives: faculty members, institutional career support, Alumni Ambassadors who organized the local Circles for the PSSD 20th Anniversary, students and young alumni in the transition phase, and an external design community organiser.

Overall, the interviews revealed that PSSD already has a recognised identity, and many community members feel some degree of emotional attachment to it. However, there is still a lack of structure to transform this attachment into continuous relationships and concrete support. In particular, for students and young alumni in the transition period before and after graduation, job searching is only one part of a more complex situation. Visa issues, language barriers, financial insecurity, place of residence, career direction, and emotional burden often overlap. In this context, connection to the university and access to alumni experiences can become important forms of support.

4.3.1

Aim of this research

The aim of this qualitative research was to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and needs that PSSD students and alumni experience during the transition from student life to professional life, from the perspectives of multiple stakeholders.

More specifically, the research aimed to clarify the following four points.

First, it aimed to understand how PSSD students and young alumni experience the transition period before and after graduation. Particular attention was given to how job searching, internships, visa issues, language barriers, financial insecurity, unclear career paths, and emotional burden are interconnected.

Second, it aimed to understand how well existing university support and career services correspond to the specific situations of PSSD students. Since PSSD is an interdisciplinary and highly international program, there may be specific challenges that cannot be fully addressed by general career services alone.

Third, it aimed to understand what value alumni perceive in the PSSD community, and under what conditions they are willing to remain involved. In particular, by looking at the experiences of Ambassadors and Local Circle organisers, the research explored alumni motivations, operational burdens, challenges of continuity, and expectations toward Polimi and PSSD.

Fourth, it aimed to identify the role that the future PSSD Community Network should play. Rather than functioning simply as a directory or event series, the research explored what design requirements are needed for a system that circulates knowledge, experiences, opportunities, and care among students, alumni, faculty members, institutional actors, and external communities.

4.3.2 Research Methods

This research was conducted through semi-structured interviews with multiple stakeholders related to the PSSD Community Network. The interview questions were adapted according to each participant's role, while covering topics such as their relationship with PSSD, transition experiences, use of existing support, participation in communities, and expectations toward the Alumni Network.

The interviewees were divided into five main groups; Faculty, Institutional career support, Alumni Ambassador / Local Circle organiser, Transition-stage students and young alumni, and External design community

Table 4.1. List of Interviewee summaries

Group	Interviewees / Participants	Positioning of the Perspective	Main Analytical Focus
Faculty	Daniela Sangiorgi, Full Professor and Head of PSSD; Daniela Selloni, Associate Professor and Internship Advisor; Peter Arthur Di Sabatino, PSSD Internship Advisor	Faculty members involved in the strategic direction, teaching, internship supervision, and alumni engagement of the PSSD program	How PSSD perceives alumni from an educational and institutional perspective; limitations of current community and transition-support initiatives; support needed during the transition from academic life to professional life
Institutional career support	Francesca Teresa Saracino, Polimi Career Service	Institutional actor responsible for career support across the university	Existing support offered by Polimi Career Service; issues of access and visibility within the Design School; employer partnership-based operating model; mentoring formats; Student Advisor Program; possible connections with PSSD-specific career support
Alumni Ambassador / Local Circle organiser	Elisa Facondo and Emanuele Laviosa in London; Matteo Mariani in Dubai; Adriana Martin in Zurich; Carolina Wilson in Hamburg; Elnaz Tehrani in Tehran	Alumni who actively supported and contributed to local PSSD gathering events organised in different cities and regions as part of the PSSD 20th Anniversary initiatives in June 2025	Motivations for acting as Ambassadors; experiences organising Local Circles; participants' reactions; cultural and professional contexts in each location; expectations toward PSSD and Polimi
Transition-stage students and young alumni	TS01, TS02, TS03 (Students in the transition period), YA01, YA02 (Recent graduates)	Participants who were currently experiencing, about to experience, or had recently experienced the transition period before or after graduation	Job searching; internships; visas; financial insecurity; career direction; sense of belonging to PSSD; access to existing support; expectations toward the Alumni Network
External design community	Giulia di Gregorio, Service Design Drinks Milan	Representative of an external service design community operating outside PSSD	How a professional community creates continuous participation; how different event formats influence engagement; how the PSSD Community Network could make use of existing community assets and opportunities

Faculty perspective

From the faculty perspective, interviews were conducted with faculty members involved in the strategic direction, teaching, internship supervision, and alumni engagement of the PSSD program. The interviewees were Daniela Sangiorgi, Full Professor and Head of PSSD; Daniela Selloni, Associate Professor and Internship Advisor; and Peter Arthur Di Sabatino, another PSSD Internship Advisor.

This group was analysed in relation to how PSSD, from an educational and institutional perspective, perceives alumni, what limitations exist in current community and transition-support initiatives, and what kinds of support are needed for students during the transition from academic life to professional life.

Table 4.2. List of interviewees: PSSD Faculty members

Interviewee	Role / description	Date of interview	Duration
Daniela Sangiorgi	Full Professor and Head of PSSD	16 December 2025	45 minutes
Daniela Selloni	Associate Professor and Internship Advisor of PSSD	22 December 2025	1 hour
Peter Arthur Di Sabatino	Internship Advisor of PSSD	23 December 2025	1 hour

Institutional career support perspective

From the perspective of institutional career support, an interview was conducted with Francesca Teresa Saracino from Polimi Career Service. This interview was positioned not as a direct expression of student or alumni needs, but as the perspective of the institutional actor responsible for career support across the university.

This stakeholder was analysed in relation to the existing support offered by Polimi Career Service, issues of access and visibility within the Design School, the employer partnership-based operating model, mentoring formats, the Student Advisor Program, and the potential connection with PSSD-specific career support.

Table 4.3. List of interviewees: Polimi Career Service

Interviewee	Role / description	Date of interview	Duration
Francesca Teresa Saracino	Polimi Career Service representative	10 April 2026	30 minutes

Alumni Ambassador / Local Circle organiser perspective

From the Alumni Ambassador and Local Circle organiser perspective, interviews were conducted with alumni who actively supported and contributed to the local PSSD gathering events organised in different cities and regions as part of the PSSD 20th Anniversary initiatives in June 2025. The interviewees were Elisa Facondo and Emanuele Laviosa in London, Matteo Mariani in Dubai, Adriana Martin in Zurich, Carolina Wilson in Hamburg, and Elnaz Tehrani in Tehran.

This group was analysed in relation to their motivations for acting as Ambassadors, their experiences organising Local Circles, participants' reactions, cultural and professional contexts in each location, and their expectations toward PSSD and Polimi.

Table 4.4. List of interviewees: Alumni Ambassador and Local Circle organiser

Interviewee	Role / description	Date of interview	Duration
Elisa Facondo	London Circle organiser	12 January 2026	1 hour
Emanuele Laviosa	London Circle organiser	18 December 2025	1 hour
Matteo Mariani	Dubai Circle organiser	22 December 2025	1 hour
Adriana Martin	Zurich Circle organiser	23 December 2025	1 hour
Carolina Wilson	Hamburg Circle organiser	22 December 2025	1 hour
Elnaz Tehrani	Tehran Circle organiser	30 December 2025	1 hour

Transition-stage students and young alumni perspective

From the perspective of transition-stage students and young alumni, interviews were conducted with participants who have international background, and were currently in the transition period before or after graduation.

This group was analysed in relation to job searching, internships, visas, financial insecurity, career direction, sense of belonging to PSSD, access to existing support, and expectations toward the Alumni Network.

Table 4.5. List of interviewees: Transition-stage students and young alumni

Interviewee	Role / description	Date of interview	Duration
TS01	Transition-stage student	22 December 2025	1 hour
TS02	Transition-stage student	23 December 2025	1 hour
TS03	Transition-stage student	31 December 2025	1 hour
YA01	Young alumna	22 December 2025	1 hour
YA02	Young alumna	29 December 2025	1 hour

External design community perspective

From the external design community perspective, an interview was conducted with Giulia di Gregorio, who is involved in Service Design Drinks Milan, as an example of a service design community operating outside PSSD.

This stakeholder was analysed in relation to how a professional community creates continuous participation, how different event formats influence engagement, and how the PSSD Community Network could make use of existing community assets and opportunities.

Table 4.6. List of interviewees: External design community

Interviewee	Role / description	Date of interview	Duration
Giulia di Gregorio	Service Design Drinks Milan organiser	23 December 2025	1 hour

Faculty perspective: A recognised identity, but limited continuity

The interviews with faculty members revealed that PSSD already has a strong identity and emotional attachment among alumni, but lacks a stable structure to maintain this as a continuous relationship. Faculty members understood alumni not merely as former students, but as important resources for supporting PSSD's professional identity, educational development, social visibility, and students' transition into professional life.

Daniela Sangiorgi, as Coordinator of PSSD, stated that while the PSSD community has a strong identity, it is difficult to say that there is currently enough continuous and active interaction. She perceived the 20th Anniversary event as a moment that reactivated the community, but also recognised that it has not yet become an everyday, continuous mechanism. She also pointed out that alumni engagement requires reciprocity. Rather than asking alumni to contribute one-sidedly, PSSD needs to return value to them, such as research insights, market trends, professional exchange, and opportunities to reconnect with PSSD. Regarding the student transition period, she emphasised the difficulty of finding internships, low response rates to applications, early career roles that do not always match PSSD training, and the emotional burden of job searching itself.

Daniela Selloni, Associate Professor and Internship Advisor, described the current state of the PSSD Alumni community as "strong identity, weak structure." According to her, PSSD is internationally recognised, and informal connections among alumni already exist. However, there is a lack of official alumni events, regular contact points between alumni and students, dedicated communication channels, and continuous institutional support. She particularly positioned internships as a critical point of intervention in the student transition period. The quality of internships strongly affects students' early professional experiences, and remote internships, insufficient mentoring, or unclear conditions can increase the fragility of the transition period. She saw value in alumni sharing transparent internship information and advice based on their own experiences.

Peter Arthur Di Sabatino, PSSD Internship Advisor, positioned alumni as a strategic resource for strengthening the identity of the PSSD program and increasing the visibility of Service Design as a professional field. He argued that graduation should not be framed only as a moment of uncertainty or disconnection, but rather as a positive beginning for professional growth. At the same time, he recognised that international students face specific challenges, such as language barriers, limited access to local opportunities, and difficulty communicating the value of PSSD's expertise in the job market. For him, a structured Alumni Network is not only an opportunity for networking and referrals for students, but also a long-term mechanism for increasing the social recognition of PSSD as a professional field.

From the faculty perspective, the issue is not the absence of identity within PSSD. Rather, the challenge lies in the lack of mechanisms that can transform this identity into continuous contact points, transition support, and visibility of professional expertise.

Institutional career support perspective: Existing support is available, but access and connection remain challenges

The interview with Francesca Teresa Saracino from Polimi Career Service revealed that although many forms of career support are already available to PSSD students, there are still challenges related to access, visibility, and connection to the specific context of PSSD within the Design School.

From the Career Service perspective, the main issue for the Design School is not the absence of services themselves, but the difficulty students have in recognising their existence and value. Career Service already offers multiple services, including individual counselling, mock interviews, personal branding consultations, Career Days, company visits, and mentoring. However, Career Service does not have a permanent physical presence on the Design School campus, which makes it difficult for students to become aware of it in their daily environment. Francesca explained that email and websites are not enough for students to know that Career Service exists and what services are available. Instead, it is important for Career Service to appear regularly in physically visible places.

Career Service also pointed out that even when students need career support, they often become aware of this need too late. Students often look for Career Service only when anxiety about job searching or career decisions becomes urgent. At that point, the pressure to make decisions is already high. Therefore, career support needs to become visible earlier within students' learning processes, rather than only at the very end before graduation.

An important aspect of the Career Service system is that, at Polimi, career support is built around employer partnerships. Career Service values continuous relationships with companies, and when companies or alumni are involved in events, this needs to happen through partnerships with their organisations rather than through individuals alone. This policy allows the university to manage relationships with companies consistently and to avoid relying on individual faculty members or one-off events. Therefore, if the PSSD Community Network conducts activities related to career orientation or recruitment, it needs to be designed in a way that does not conflict with Career Service's partnership model.

At the same time, Francesca was not negative about collaboration with PSSD. On the contrary, she explained that if PSSD proposes concrete plans or ideas, they could potentially be integrated into Career Service planning. In particular, communication that increases the visibility of Career Service and pathways that encourage students to use Career Service are areas that could be connected to the PSSD Community Network and Career Orientation outputs.

Career Service currently offers two main types of mentoring. The first is Group Mentoring, in which several alumni or company representatives sit at tables, and students move between them in small groups. This is not provided specifically for PSSD students; rather, staff are assigned to support the School of Design as a whole. While this is not long-term mentoring in the strict sense, it allows students to speak with several professionals in a short period of time and broaden their understanding of possible career paths. The second is Single-company mentoring, in which one company provides several mentors, and groups of students meet the same mentor several times. In this case, Career Service provides preliminary training for mentors, designing the program not as recruitment activity but as a space for supporting students' career development.

Career Service is also experimenting with a Student Advisor Program. In this program, students are trained to act as Peer Advisors, connecting Career Service with students on campus. Career Service expects students to help increase its visibility, especially in the Design School where its physical presence is limited, and to guide other students toward existing support from a peer perspective.

The important insight from this interview is that the PSSD Community Network should not be designed to replace the existing Career Service, but to complement it. Career Service provides university-wide company networks, institutional rules, and official career support. On the other hand, the PSSD Community Network can provide PSSD-specific career paths, Service Design expertise, international student experiences, practical alumni stories, and community-based pathways that make it easier for students to access support. Therefore, the relationship between the two should not be competitive, but complementary, connecting the institutional foundation of Career Service with the community resources of PSSD.

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Alumni Ambassador / Local Circle organiser perspective: Willingness to contribute, but a supporting structure is needed

The interviews with the Alumni Ambassadors who organised the Local Circle of the 2025 season revealed that many of them have a strong willingness to reconnect with PSSD and support younger generations. At the same time, they also showed that when such initiatives depend only on individual motivation and informal connections, their continuity and impact remain limited.

Matteo Mariani, a PSSD alumnus based in Dubai, works as a Service Design leader and also teaches at Marangoni. He explained that his motivation to become an Ambassador came from a desire to provide the mentoring that he himself had not fully received as a student. The Dubai Circle was organised informally through personal connections and brought together a small number of participants. Although the event itself was positive, its long-term impact was limited by the lack of follow-up, institutional support, and a clear value proposition. He suggested that the future network should be designed around different personas, such as Ambassadors, experienced professionals, students, and young alumni.

Adriana Martin, originally from Spain, has built her career across Italy and Switzerland and currently works as a Customer Experience Designer at Roche Diagnostics. She understood the value of the PSSD Alumni community not simply as a professional network, but as an emotional and identity-based connection. For her, the Alumni Network becomes especially important after leaving Milan, when graduates begin to search for people who share similar professional realities. Although the Zurich Circle had only a small number of participants, she felt that even a small local and in-person connection could support the sense of belonging of internationally mobile alumni. At the same time, she expressed concern about one Ambassador carrying all the responsibility and emphasised the need for multiple organisers, clear communication, and light support from PSSD.

Carolina Wilson, originally from Brazil, has built her career across China, Italy, and Germany, with experience in consultancy, venture building, and Service Design at the World Food Program. She placed more importance on mentoring than on casual meetups. For her, providing concrete advice based on her own transition experience to recent graduates or people moving internationally is more meaningful than simple social exchange. She also noted that in the current remote-working context, additional online events can easily lead to fatigue, and that in-person contact is important for building meaningful relationships. However, in cities such as Hamburg, where the Service Design community is not very large, the number of participants and opportunities is limited. This means that local conditions need to be taken into account.

Elisa Facondo is an alumna who, together with Emanuele, leads the London Circle, the largest alumni community with 27 members. After several years of experience in Service Design, she pursued an entrepreneurial path and is now Co-Founder and Director of Orbita Collective. Drawing from her experience, Elisa emphasized the importance of evaluating new initiatives through three key dimensions: desirability, feasibility, and viability. She encouraged focusing first on the value that proposals can create for alumni and students, while also considering whether they are realistic for PSSD to implement. In particular, she highlighted the importance of prioritizing low-effort, high-impact initiatives. Finally, she stressed the need to assess the long-term benefits for Politecnico and to define clear indicators of success to measure the impact of each initiative.

Emanuele Laviosa, an early PSSD alumnus based in London, has built an international career across consultancy and in-house design roles. He saw PSSD Circles as feasible initiatives that can start small, while also pointing to the possibility for PSSD to develop more institutional and visible initiatives. When he graduated, Service Design as a field was not yet widely recognised, so explaining Service Design and demonstrating its value was itself a challenge. In the London Circle, motivations for participation included networking, helping each other as a community, and increasing the reputation and visibility of alumni. He argued that alumni could help bridge the gap between the academic side of PSSD and the business world, and suggested PSSD-led panels, conferences, visiting lectures, and greater alumni visibility.

Elnaz Tehrani, based in Iran, has built a career combining design management, curation, and Service Design thinking. Her experience showed the risk of designing an international Alumni Network as a uniform model. Her context is strongly shaped by political instability, economic uncertainty, migration-related stress, and personal responsibilities. In Tehran, the institutional recognition and educational foundation of Service Design are also limited, and she had to start a grassroots Service Design community herself. She pointed out that low alumni participation does not necessarily mean lack of interest. Rather, people are often occupied by migration, daily life, political conditions, and emotional burden. Therefore, the Ambassador role needs to be flexible, low-burden, and sensitive to local context and safety.

These interviews show that alumni are generally positive about sharing experiences, mentoring, organising local gatherings, and creating contact points with faculty. However, without clear roles, operational templates, communication support, institutional recognition, and realistic workload design, initiatives risk depending on a small number of highly motivated individuals. Therefore, alumni engagement needs to be designed as a light, distributed, and supported contribution model.

Students in transitioning period and young alumni perspective: Belonging exists personally, but is weak as a system

For ethical reasons, the interview participants in this section are anonymised. Transition-stage students are referred to as TS01, TS02, and TS03, while young alumni are referred to as YA01 and YA02. These codes are used to protect participants' privacy while still allowing the analysis to distinguish between different perspectives.

The interviews with transition-stage students and young alumni revealed that the transition from PSSD to professional life is experienced as an unstable and uncertain period. The main challenge is not simply finding a job, but having to deal with multiple uncertainties at the same time.

TS01, a current PSSD student living in Milan while working on the thesis, portfolio, and job or internship search, stated that networking opportunities are valuable but often lack continuity. TS01 participated in the 20th Anniversary event as a volunteer and experienced high-quality interactions with faculty members, researchers, alumni, and students that are difficult to obtain through regular classes or projects. In particular, informal conversations with faculty members and seeing alumni career paths strengthened TS01's sense of belonging to PSSD. However, there was no mechanism to maintain those relationships after the event, and the event itself was not necessarily the right context for serious career discussions. Regarding Career Service, TS01 pointed out that career events tend to be oriented toward engineering students, design-related companies are limited, and recruiters do not always understand Service Design or PSSD. TS01 saw potential in a PSSD-specific platform, similar to LinkedIn, that connects students, alumni, faculty members, and companies.

TS02, a transition-stage student who spent time in Milan during PSSD but later returned to the home country due to financial and career-related constraints, described the transition period as emotionally and structurally exhausting. TS02 felt personal connection and shared values with people in PSSD, but did not feel a strong sense of belonging to a larger community structure. TS02 also pointed out that students often find it difficult to share their struggles unless asking for help is explicitly encouraged or normalised. In particular, TS02 expressed concern about unpaid internships, arguing that they can exploit the vulnerable position of students who need internships in order to graduate. This experience shows that, during the transition period, psychological support and peer support are as important as career information.

YA01, a young alumna working in a non-traditional design role in Northern Europe, emphasised the difficulty of following a niche career path. YA01 felt that this professional profile does not easily fit into standard Service Design job applications. At the 20th Anniversary event, YA01 found it valuable to see the diverse career paths of alumni and to understand future possibilities. At the same time, YA01 felt anxious in large networking settings and wanted more structured ways to connect with others. YA01 also pointed out that financial insecurity is a major barrier during the transition period, and that an alumni community should support not only career development but also living needs, such as temporary work, housing, and short-term opportunities.

TS03, a current student working on a master's thesis while also engaging in social responsibility-related projects outside Italy, emphasised that PSSD graduates follow highly diverse career paths. TS03's interests are in social responsibility, service learning, and community service, which differ from more conventional paths such as UX/UI or consulting. This creates uncertainty about whether to continue in social or community-oriented work after graduation, or to move toward more traditional UX/UI roles. TS03 described the connection to the wider PSSD community as fragile and noted that, without official and long-term activities, relationships after graduation may become a matter of "saying goodbye and never meeting again." TS03 also pointed to the need for information sharing across regions, especially regarding differences between local and international job markets.

YA02, a young alumna working in an engineering-driven industry in East Asia as a project, program, and product management professional, described the difficulty of working in an environment where Service Design is not well understood. YA02's PSSD experience was strongly affected by COVID-19, which limited in-person interaction, internships, and connection with the PSSD community. In the current workplace, the thinking and value of Service Design are not widely shared, and YA02 often needs to translate and explain Service Design concepts repeatedly. YA02 stated that alumni engagement decreases when the value proposition is unclear, and expressed more interest in practical knowledge exchange, technical discussions, mentoring, and small collaborative projects than in generic networking.

Across these interviews, several common patterns emerged. First, students and young alumni feel connected to individual friends, faculty members, and small peer groups, but not necessarily to the larger PSSD community. Second, career uncertainty is intensified by international conditions such as visas, language barriers, regional market differences, and financial insecurity. Third, networking is recognised as valuable, but when there is no structure, follow-up, or clear benefit, it becomes difficult to participate and its impact remains limited. Fourth, participants are not only looking for information. They are seeking situated advice from people who have experienced similar transitions, emotional support, and access to concrete opportunities.

External design community perspective: Community as a third place and engagement shaped by format

She described SDD Milan as a “third place” for Service Designers. It is a space outside formal organisations such as companies and universities, where professionals can exchange ideas, reflect on the field, and discuss topics that may not easily fit within corporate priorities. According to her, the motivation to participate in SDD is not primarily material or transactional. People participate not as representatives of their companies, but as individuals who want to connect with others and engage with the human and social dimensions of Service Design.

This perspective is also important for the PSSD Community Network. Alumni engagement cannot be sustained only through functional value such as job postings. It also needs emotional, identity-based, and value-driven motivations.

Giulia also explained that different event formats create different forms of engagement. Unconferences create a strong sense of participation because participants actively create content and take part in discussions. Mini-conferences are effective as spaces for inspiration and for positioning the community. Casual meetups are useful when organisers have limited time and energy. This suggests that the PSSD Community Network should not depend on a single event format, but should offer different levels of intensity according to participants’ situations, motivation, time, and energy.

Another important insight is that new networks do not necessarily need to be built from scratch. Giulia suggested making use of existing opportunities such as Career Days, thesis discussions, conferences, and end-of-year events, and reconnecting them in more meaningful ways. This aligns with a service design approach. By using existing touchpoints and reconfiguring them as more meaningful connections, new value can be created.

This perspective shows that, in community design, the format itself strongly influences the quality of engagement. Whether people participate is not determined only by their level of interest, but also by timing, emotional energy, format, clarity of purpose, and ease of contribution.

Cross-stakeholder Synthesis

The central insight that emerged across all stakeholder groups is that the problem is not the absence of identity, interest, or willingness to contribute within PSSD. Rather, the problem is the lack of a continuous structure that can transform existing attachment, experience, knowledge, and goodwill into accessible support.

Faculty members see the PSSD Alumni community as strategically important, but also recognise that it is not yet sufficiently structured. Career Service has many support functions at the university-wide level, but there are challenges in terms of visibility within the Design School and connection to the specific context of PSSD. Alumni Ambassadors want to support younger generations, but they need support, recognition, and distributed responsibility in order to do so. Students and young alumni need advice, emotional support, and practical knowledge during the transition period, but the current community is fragmented and often dependent on personal connections. The external design community perspective shows that sustainable participation depends on format, timing, and emotional motivation.

Therefore, the future PSSD Community Network should not be designed merely as a directory, an event series, or a generic alumni community. Instead, it should function as **relational infrastructure**. In other words, it should make informal knowledge visible, enable light and sustainable contribution, connect people across regions and generations, and support the transition from student life to professional life.

This network should not compete with Career Service, but should be designed to complement existing institutional support from a PSSD-specific perspective. Career Service has university-wide employer networks, official career events, and institutional rules. On the other hand, the PSSD Community Network can address Service Design career paths, international student experiences, practical alumni stories, regional knowledge, and emotional support. Therefore, rather than separating the two, it is important to position the network as a layer that uses the institutional foundation of Career Service when necessary, while also connecting the relational resources of the PSSD community.

For this reason, the network needs to provide multiple types of value at the same time. For students and young alumni, it should provide career orientation, real alumni stories, mentoring, access to opportunities, and emotional reassurance. For experienced alumni, it should provide recognition, visibility, reconnection with PSSD, access to updated academic and professional knowledge, and low-burden ways to contribute. For faculty members, it can function as a channel for understanding alumni career trajectories, labour market changes, internship quality, and changes in the professional identity of Service Design.

4.3.4

Key Takeaways

The following key takeaways emerged from the qualitative research.

First, PSSD already has a recognised identity, but this identity is not sufficiently supported by a continuous engagement structure. Faculty members and alumni repeatedly expressed attachment to PSSD, while also pointing out the lack of regular contact points, communication channels, and long-term activation mechanisms.

Second, the interviews provided further qualitative evidence for the fragility of the transition from student life to professional life, which had already been identified through the literature review and the quantitative survey. Especially for international students and young alumni, this transition emerged not only as a job-searching process, but as a complex period in which financial insecurity, visa uncertainty, language barriers, regional market differences, unclear career paths, and emotional exhaustion intersect.

Third, the existing Career Service is an important institutional foundation, but an additional mechanism is needed to complement it from a PSSD-specific perspective. Career Service has employer networks and official support functions, but an additional layer is needed to address visibility within the Design School, Service Design-specific career paths, international student experiences, and practical alumni knowledge.

Fourth, alumni have a willingness to contribute, but their involvement needs to be carefully designed. The Ambassador interviews showed strong interest in mentoring, sharing experiences, and participating in local gatherings. However, sustainable engagement requires low-burden formats, distributed responsibility, clear roles, institutional recognition, and support from PSSD or Polimi.

Fifth, networking alone is not enough. Students and alumni see networking as valuable, but open networking events may be difficult to join, unclear in purpose, and limited in impact when they lack structure. Meaningful connections require clear purposes, accessible formats, guided dialogue, follow-up mechanisms, and formats that respond to different levels of participation.

Sixth, the Alumni Network needs to support both professional and emotional needs. Participants were not only looking for job information. They were also looking for reassurance, peer support, real stories, regional knowledge, visibility of possible career paths, and spaces where they could feel part of a larger community.

Seventh, international and regional differences need to be taken into account. Experiences in London, Zurich, Hamburg, Dubai, Tehran, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Copenhagen, Milan, and Turkey show that the recognition of Service Design, language, political conditions, job markets, and community cultures differ significantly by region. Therefore, while the network should maintain a certain shared framework, it also needs flexibility to adapt to local challenges and characteristics.

Finally, based on these findings, the PSSD Community Network should be designed as relational infrastructure. Its role is to connect students, alumni, faculty members, Career Service, and professional communities across time, and to circulate knowledge, care, opportunities, and identity throughout all steps of the transition from student life to professional life.

4.4

Conclusions: User Research Overview and Insights

This section integrates the insights that emerged from the quantitative research in Section 4.2 and the qualitative research in Section 4.3, and identifies the main directions for designing the PSSD Community Network.

Across both studies, it became clear that the challenges experienced during the transition period in PSSD cannot be understood simply as issues of job searching. Students and young alumni experience several difficulties at the same time: uncertainty about career direction, difficulty explaining the expertise of Service Design and PSSD, visa and language barriers, financial insecurity, limited access to existing support, and a weakening sense of belonging. In particular, the period from before graduation to the early career stage is a phase in which institutional connections with the university begin to weaken, while anxieties and practical challenges related to professional life increase sharply. This indicates the need for continuous and context-sensitive support.

The central insight from this research is that PSSD already has a certain degree of identity, experience, knowledge, and willingness to contribute. However, there is still a lack of structure to transform these existing assets into continuous support and mutual exchange. Therefore, the future PSSD Community Network should not be designed merely as an event series or a directory. Rather, it should function as relational infrastructure, centred on students, alumni, and faculty, while also creating links with Career Service and external design communities.

1. The transition period is the most fragile point in the PSSD journey

The quantitative research showed that the transition from New Graduate to Early Career Professional is perceived as the most difficult stage. In particular, professional issues appeared strongly as challenges related to job searching, professional identity, and the gap between workplace expectations and previous academic experiences.

The qualitative research further confirmed this tendency through concrete personal experiences. Students and young alumni in the transition period are not simply looking for jobs. They are dealing with multiple questions at the same time: in which country they should work, what kind of role they should apply for, how to explain their skills, how to overcome visa and language constraints, and how to sustain themselves financially.

This suggests that support for the transition period should not begin suddenly after graduation. It needs to start gradually before graduation. In particular, the 4th and 5th semesters are crucial moments, as students begin to think about internships, thesis work, and post-graduation paths at the same time.

2. Career challenges are also identity and translation challenges

Both the survey and the interviews showed that career challenges for PSSD students and alumni are not only about finding job openings. Many participants found it difficult to explain what they had learned in PSSD within the professional market, to understand what type of designer they were, and to communicate the value of Service Design and Product-Service System Design to companies and society.

This becomes especially evident in regions or industries where Service Design is not yet widely recognised. In such contexts, PSSD graduates often need to translate their expertise into other professional languages. Some explain themselves through terms closer to UX or Product Design, while others explore their roles in more niche areas such as Social Design, Research, Management, Food Experience, or community-oriented work.

This insight shows that a PSSD Community Network cannot be reduced to a job board. Students and young alumni need more than job titles or job postings. They need opportunities to understand how alumni have actually built their careers, how they explain their expertise, and what kinds of additional skills they acquired after graduation.

3. Belonging exists through people, but it fades without structure

Qualitative research showed that a sense of belonging to PSSD is created less through abstract branding or institutional identity, and more through closeness to people. For example, direct conversations with professors, opportunities to see alumni career paths, and conversations with peers who share similar concerns helped students and alumni feel that they were part of the community.

However, without continuous mechanisms, this sense of belonging can easily remain temporary. Even when people participate in an event, relationships naturally fade if there is no pathway to continue the connection afterwards. In addition, simply attending a space is not enough to create belonging. Having a role, being able to contribute, and feeling safe enough to ask for help are also important.

This indicates that the PSSD Community Network needs to be designed to support psychological safety and ease of participation. In particular, the structure should not only benefit people who are already good at networking or who have louder voices. It should also make participation accessible for introverted people, international students, and alumni who are geographically distant from Milan.

4. Alumni are willing to contribute, but contribution must be light, concrete, and meaningful

The interviews with Alumni Ambassadors and Local Circle organisers showed that many alumni are willing to contribute to PSSD in some way. They were positive about sharing experiences, mentoring, organising Local Circles, and giving advice to students and young alumni.

At the same time, alumni are cautious about carrying long-term and heavy responsibilities alone. Their capacity to participate varies greatly depending on work, family, location, time, and political or cultural contexts. Therefore, alumni engagement should not depend on a small number of highly motivated individuals. It needs to be designed as a light, concrete, and distributed form of contribution.

Alumni also need to receive clear value from their involvement. They are not only there to help students. They can also benefit from reconnecting with PSSD, meeting other alumni, understanding the current state of Service Design, making their own experiences and work visible, and exchanging knowledge with faculty members. In this sense, a sustainable Alumni Network requires reciprocal value exchange rather than one-directional support.

5. Internationality is both a vulnerability and a strategic resource

The international nature of PSSD is a major value for students and alumni, but it also creates complex challenges during the transition period. International students are more likely to face multiple constraints at the same time, including visa issues, language barriers, access to local job markets, cultural adaptation, and financial insecurity. After graduation, when alumni leave Milan, their connection with PSSD can become even weaker, and they tend to rely more on nearby communities such as local UX communities or workplace networks.

However, this international dispersion is also one of PSSD's strengths. The presence of alumni across different cities and countries creates the possibility of spreading PSSD knowledge and values in different local contexts. Especially for alumni who are far from Milan, even small points of contact with other PSSD graduates can be meaningful both professionally and emotionally.

Therefore, the PSSD Community Network should not only maintain Milan-centred relationships. It should also be designed as a system that loosely connects alumni distributed across different countries and cities. By combining online touchpoints, Local Circles, region-specific information sharing, and alumni stories, PSSD's internationality can be transformed from simple geographical dispersion into a network where knowledge and support circulate.

6. The network should be structured, but not overly formal

Both the survey and the interviews showed that participants want clearer structure and continuity. However, they do not necessarily want spaces that are too rigid, obligatory, or overly business-like. Students and alumni need career-oriented support, but they also look for a safe, human, and welcoming atmosphere.

This point also overlaps with the perspective of external design communities such as Service Design Drinks Milan. Sustainable participation requires a clear purpose, accessible formats, low psychological barriers, and an atmosphere where people naturally feel like talking. Therefore, the PSSD Community Network should have structured pathways, while avoiding creating excessive pressure or tension for participants.

This balance becomes an important design principle for the following Design Proposal. The network needs to be a hybrid system that connects formality and intimacy, career support and emotional support, online and offline touchpoints, and top-down institutional support with bottom-up voluntary participation.

4.4.1

Synthesis: From disconnected experiences to relational infrastructure

By integrating these insights, the central issue that the PSSD Community Network System needs to address is not simply solving individual problems one by one. Rather, it is about reconnecting fragmented experiences, knowledge, relationships, and opportunities.

PSSD already has a certain degree of identity, alumni experience, faculty knowledge, institutional support from Career Service, and links with external design communities. However, these elements currently exist in a fragmented way and are not sufficiently integrated into a form that students and young alumni can access when they need them.

Therefore, the future system should not simply connect people related to PSSD. It should function as relational infrastructure that circulates the knowledge, care, opportunities, and visibility needed during the transition period. This infrastructure can help students understand their post-graduation possibilities, support young alumni in building their careers without feeling isolated, enable alumni to contribute in light but meaningful ways, and allow faculty members to continue learning from changes in the market and alumni trajectories.

Therefore, the Design Proposal developed in this research should build on PSSD's existing assets and move in the following directions:

- Career orientation and emotional support for students and young alumni in transition
- Visibility of role models and practical knowledge
- Mechanisms that allow alumni to contribute continuously
- Connections with Local Circles and external design communities in different regions
- Continuous communication that shares PSSD's expertise, history, and current evolution both inside and outside the community

These directions will be developed in the next chapter as a concrete service system, including touchpoints and an operational model.

Sources

References

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Annex

List 4.1 Questionnaire structure

The questionnaire was structured into the following sections and questions.

General respondent profile

All respondents answered the following profile questions:

- Where are you from?
- What is your gender?
- Which best describes your current status?

These questions were used to understand the background of respondents and to direct them to the relevant section of the survey.

Employment and professional experience

Respondents who were alumni or already in the professional field answered questions related to their current employment status and professional experience:

- What is your current employment status?
- What is your current job role or job description? For example, service designer, UX researcher, etc.
- Does your current job reflect the expectations you had after completing PSSD?
- Do you feel like PSSD gave you the skills and preparation needed for your current job?
- If not, what skills or preparation do you feel were missing?
- How much do you feel fulfilled and satisfied in your professional role as a designer?
- For alumni who had been out of PSSD for a longer period, an additional question was included:
- What contributed the most to your professional development since graduation?

These questions were used to understand how respondents were positioned professionally after PSSD, how their current roles related to their expectations, and whether they felt prepared by the program.

Early-stage current students: motivations, decision-making, and anticipated needs

Current students in the 1st to 3rd semester answered a separate set of questions focused on their motivations for entering PSSD, the information channels that influenced their decision, and their anticipated concerns about future transition.

Q1 asked respondents to rate how important the following factors were when deciding to enter the PSSD program:

- Obtaining an MSc degree from Politecnico di Milano
- Becoming part of the PSSD community, including students, alumni, and faculty
- Gaining better career or job opportunities through the university's network
- Participating in an international program and engaging with new cultures
- Living in Milan or Italy and adapting to a new cultural and social environment
- Developing knowledge and skills in Product-Service System Design

Q2 asked whether there were any other important factors not mentioned above.

Q3 asked respondents to rate the importance of the following channels or touchpoints in their decision to enrol in PSSD:

- PSSD official platforms, such as the website, LinkedIn, Instagram, etc.
- Personal connections, such as friends or acquaintances who were familiar with PSSD
- New contact with current students or alumni, in person, through LinkedIn, social media, email, etc.
- QS ranking website, articles, or newspapers
- Open Days at Politecnico

Q4 asked whether there were any other important channels or touchpoints not mentioned above.

Q5 asked what challenges respondents feared the most when transitioning to the job environment.

Q6 asked what type of support respondents would like to receive from a future Alumni Network before and during this transition.

Respondents were also given the opportunity to add any further advice or comments.

This section helped the research understand how students perceive the value of PSSD before graduation and what kinds of support needs already appear before they enter the final transition phase.

Transition-stage students and alumni: transition experience and challenges

Current students in the 4th to 5th semester or awaiting graduation, together with alumni, answered questions about their actual or ongoing transition experience.

Q1 asked which transition phase was the most challenging. This question was used to identify where difficulties were most concentrated across the PSSD journey, particularly around the transition from final-year student to new graduate and from new graduate to early-career professional.

Q2 asked respondents to rate the seriousness of four types of post-university transition challenges:

- Financial challenges: income and financial security, pressure from debt, and managing a new budget
- Social challenges: loss of a structured social environment, feelings of isolation, making new friends and flatmates
- Environmental challenges: housing, new city, cultural shock, homesickness, and other challenges related to location
- Professional challenges: finding employment, developing a professional role identity, adapting to workplace expectations, and managing performance pressure

These four categories were defined as practical domains of transition challenges in this survey. They were not a direct replacement of Schlossberg's 4S System, but were designed to capture concrete areas in which PSSD students and alumni might experience difficulty during transition.

Q3 asked respondents to describe any other issues not mentioned in Q2.

Q4 asked which factors contributed to the difficulties selected in Q2 and Q3. This question was informed by Schlossberg's Transition Theory and adapted the 4S System into the survey design. Respondents were asked to select factors corresponding to:

- Self, referring to internal factors such as low motivation, stress, low confidence, poor time management, or mental health issues
- Situation, referring to external or contextual conditions affecting the transition
- Lack of Support, referring to insufficient social, institutional, or relational support
- Lack of Strategies, referring to lack of coping methods, practical resources, job-search strategies, budgeting skills, routines, or knowledge of where to apply
- This question was asked across the same issue categories: financial, social, environmental, professional, and other issues.

Q5 asked how well respondents felt they were able to adapt to each type of challenge:

- Financial challenges
- Social challenges
- Environmental challenges
- Professional challenges
- Other issues, if mentioned in Q3

Q6 asked what kinds of support respondents used to address each issue category:

- Financial issues
- Social issues
- Environmental issues
- Professional issues
- Other issues, if mentioned in Q3

The support options included self-solving, help from friends or family, help from classmates or colleagues, school support system and faculty, local or digital communities, social support systems such as government programs, and other support.

Q7 asked respondents to describe any other support systems they used that were not mentioned in Q6.

Q8 asked how helpful the support they received was in addressing their issue. The support systems evaluated were:

- Solving by myself
- Help from friends or family
- Help from classmates or colleagues
- School support system and faculty
- Local or digital communities, such as design groups or events
- Social support systems, such as government programs
- Other support, if mentioned in Q6

Q9 asked what types of support would have been helpful but were not available or effective. This question was directly connected to the design opportunity of a future PSSD Community Network.

Q10 asked which initiatives respondents would be willing to initiate or actively participate in as members of the PSSD community network. This question was included to understand not only what support respondents wanted to receive, but also what kinds of community-based activities they might be willing to contribute to.

Optional follow-up information

At the end of the survey, respondents could optionally provide:

- Name and last name
- Email address
- Current city and country
- Free comments

These fields were optional and were mainly used to identify respondents who were open to follow-up interviews or co-design sessions.



Design Synthesis and Strategic Framework

Chapter written by Valentina Phung, based on the overall research conducted together.

5.1

Introduction

5.2

PSSD Community Network Vision and Strategic Framework

5.3

Governance Ecosystem

5.4

Community Lifecycle Journey and User Segmentation

5.5

Offering Map and Service ecosystem

5.1

Introduction

As outlined in the previous chapters, the analysis identified the key actors, user needs, and existing resources that shape the current ecosystem. While this ecosystem is rich in experiences, relationships, and opportunities, its fragmented nature limits accessibility, visibility, and coordination among stakeholders. In response to these findings, rather than introducing entirely new dynamics, the present proposal aims to reorganize and systematize these existing assets into a more coherent and accessible framework.

For this reason, the design proposal does not focus on creating a single service but rather on developing a community infrastructure that supports relationships, knowledge exchange, and professional opportunities across the different stages of the PSSD lifecycle.

Drawing on service design approaches that emphasize creating enabling conditions for participation and long-term transformation, the proposal focuses on building capacities and infrastructures that support collaboration and the emergence of value, rather than fixing specific interactions or outcomes in advance (Sangiorgi, 2011). In this sense, the network is designed to remain open and adaptable, evolving with the changing needs and practices of its participants rather than following a predetermined structure.

The vision behind the network is that of a greenhouse: a structure that does not directly produce growth, but provides the conditions that allow existing seeds to develop. In the same way, the PSSD Community Network offers a lightweight and durable framework through which knowledge, experiences, opportunities, and relationships can continue to grow across generations of students and alumni. The PSSD Community Network is designed as a community infrastructure composed of three interconnected strategic pillars: Career Orientation, Global Alumni Network, Governance & Community Infrastructure. Each pillar addresses a different dimension of community value creation while contributing to the overall vision of a connected, supportive, and sustainable PSSD ecosystem.

Design Challenge

How can PSSD create a sustainable relational infrastructure that connects a globally distributed alumni network with current students, while supporting knowledge exchange and professional transition across generations?

Design Drivers

1.

Foster Connections Across Time and Space

Enable meaningful relationships between community members in different geography, graduation year, or career stages.

2.

Enable Reciprocal Knowledge Exchange

Promote mutual learning and professional guidance between students, alumni, and faculty members.

3.

Support Sustainable Participation

Create opportunities for contribution that respect the voluntary nature of engagement and adapt to different levels of availability.

4.

Ensure Continuity Through Shared Governance

Balance institutional support and community ownership to sustain initiatives and maintain long-term value.

5.2

PSSD Community Network Vision and strategic framework

To define the PSSD Community Network, this chapter adopts the Strategy Pyramid framework developed by Spur Reply. Presented as a six-level strategic planning hierarchy, the framework is designed to promote organizational alignment by connecting long-term aspirations with operational execution (Overgaag, 2018). The 6 Elements of Effective Strategic Planning Pyramid was selected because it provides a comprehensive framework that links organizational mission and vision with strategic goals, objectives, and operational actions. Unlike SWOT and PESTLE, which focus primarily on analysis, or OKRs and the Balanced Scorecard, which emphasize execution and performance measurement, the Pyramid integrates both strategic formulation and implementation within a single hierarchical structure. This makes it particularly effective for ensuring organizational alignment and translating long-term strategic intent into actionable outcomes, from a macro to micro scale.

Figure 5.1
The 6 Elements of Effective
Strategic Planning Pyramid
Source. Adapted from The 6
Elements of Effective
Strategic Planning, by D.
Overgaag, 2018, Spur Reply



As illustrated in Figure 1, the pyramid begins with the organization's vision, which articulates its desired future state, and mission, which defines its fundamental purpose. These are translated into objectives that specify desired outcomes, strategies that outline how those outcomes will be achieved, and approaches that provide direction for implementation. At the operational level, tactics consist of concrete actions and measurable activities that support the overall strategy. By linking each level within a coherent hierarchy, the framework provides a structured mechanism for translating strategic intent into coordinated day-to-day action and measurable results.

Strategic Planning Pyramid of the PSSD Community network

Figure 5.2

PSSD Community Network
Graph Adapted from the
Strategic Planning Pyramid
Framework

Vision

A compass in an ever-changing world:

A lifelong point of reference for
the global PSSD community

Mission

A Greenhouse for Growth:

A lightweight infrastructure to support meaningful connections and
professional growth by providing accessible opportunities for engagement,
contribution, and mutual support throughout the PSSD lifecycle.

Objectives

1. Support professional growth and transition.

for students & early alumni

2. Strengthen global community connections.

for alumni worldwide

3. Ensure long-term continuity and collective ownership.

for faculty & network governance

Strategy

Create structured opportunities for
students and alumni to exchange
experiences, knowledge, and
professional guidance.

Create recurring rituals and
infrastructures that enable local and
global community interactions.

Establish governance structures,
knowledge management systems, and
operational tools that support continuity.

Approach

- Inclusive and accessible participation
- Different levels of engagement (for introverts and extroverts)
- Attention to international students' specific needs
- Long-term relationship building beyond graduation

- Multicultural and geographically distributed
- Community-led and collaborative
- Flexible and lightweight participation
- Open dialogue between faculty and alumni

- Shared ownership between faculty, students, and alumni
- Progressive implementation and experimentation
- Documentation and knowledge transfer
- Adaptability based on community feedback

Tactics

PSSD Career Orientation Program

- PSSD Exploring
- Alumni Stories
- Mentoring Program
- Graduation Toolkit

PSSD International Alumni Network

- PSSD Global Circles
- Ambassador Board
- Interactive Alumni Map
- Global Circles Archive
- Alumni-led Expert Talks

PSSD Community Infrastructure and Visibility system

- PSSD Archive
- Communication System and Brand Identity
- Knowledge-Passing Manual
- Internship Continuity Plan
- PSSD Career report & Alumni Data

Vision

A compass in an ever-changing world

A lifelong point of reference for the global PSSD community, where students, alumni, and faculty remain connected through shared knowledge, opportunities, and experiences across professional journeys and geographical boundaries.

Figure 5.3
Conceptual illustration
inspired by the Global
Circles 2025 initiative.
Note. Created by
Valentina Phung.



Mission

A greenhouse for growth

A lightweight infrastructure to support meaningful connections and professional growth by providing accessible opportunities for engagement, contribution, and mutual support throughout the PSSD lifecycle.

Figure 5.4
Green House for
growth Illustration
Note. Created by
Valentina Phung



1. Support Professional Orientation and Transition

Desired outcome

Students and recent graduates gain greater awareness of professional opportunities, career trajectories, and support networks during the transition from university to work.

Strategy

Create structured opportunities for students and alumni to exchange experiences, knowledge, and professional guidance.

Approach

- Inclusive and accessible participation
- Different levels of engagement (for introverts and extroverts)
- Attention to international students' specific needs
- Long-term relationship building beyond graduation

Tactics

PSSD CAREER ORIENTATION AND PROFESSIONAL TRANSITION

- PSSD Exploring
- Alumni Stories
- Mentoring Program
- Graduation Toolkit

2. Strengthen the Global PSSD Community

Desired outcome

Alumni remain connected across geographical boundaries and continue to participate in the community throughout their professional journeys.

Strategy

Create recurring rituals and infrastructures that enable local and global community interactions.

Approach

- Multicultural and geographically distributed
- Community-led and collaborative
- Flexible and lightweight participation
- Open dialogue between faculty and alumni

Tactics

PSSD INTERNATIONAL ALUMNI NETWORK

- PSSD Global Circles
- Ambassador Board
- Interactive Alumni Map
- Global Circles Archive
- Alumni-led Expert Talks

3. Ensure Continuity and Long-Term Sustainability

Desired outcome

The PSSD Community Network remains active, transferable, and capable of evolving over time beyond individual contributors.

Strategy

Establish governance structures, knowledge management systems and operational tools that support continuity.

Approach

- Shared ownership between faculty, students, and alumni
- Progressive implementation and experimentation
- Documentation and knowledge transfer
- Adaptability based on community feedback

Tactics

PSSD COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE AND VISIBILITY SYSTEM

- PSSD Archive
- Communication System and Brand Identity
- Knowledge-Passing Manual
- Internship Continuity Plan
- PSSD Career report & Alumni Data

5.3

Governance Ecosystem

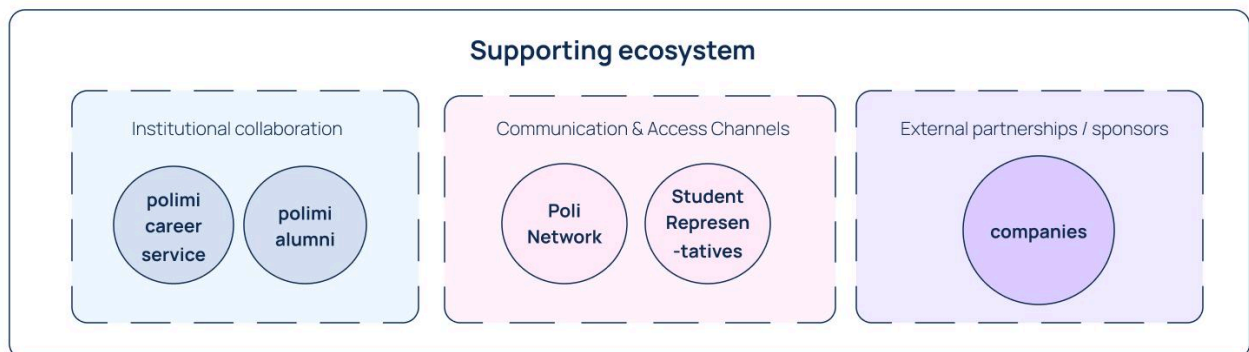
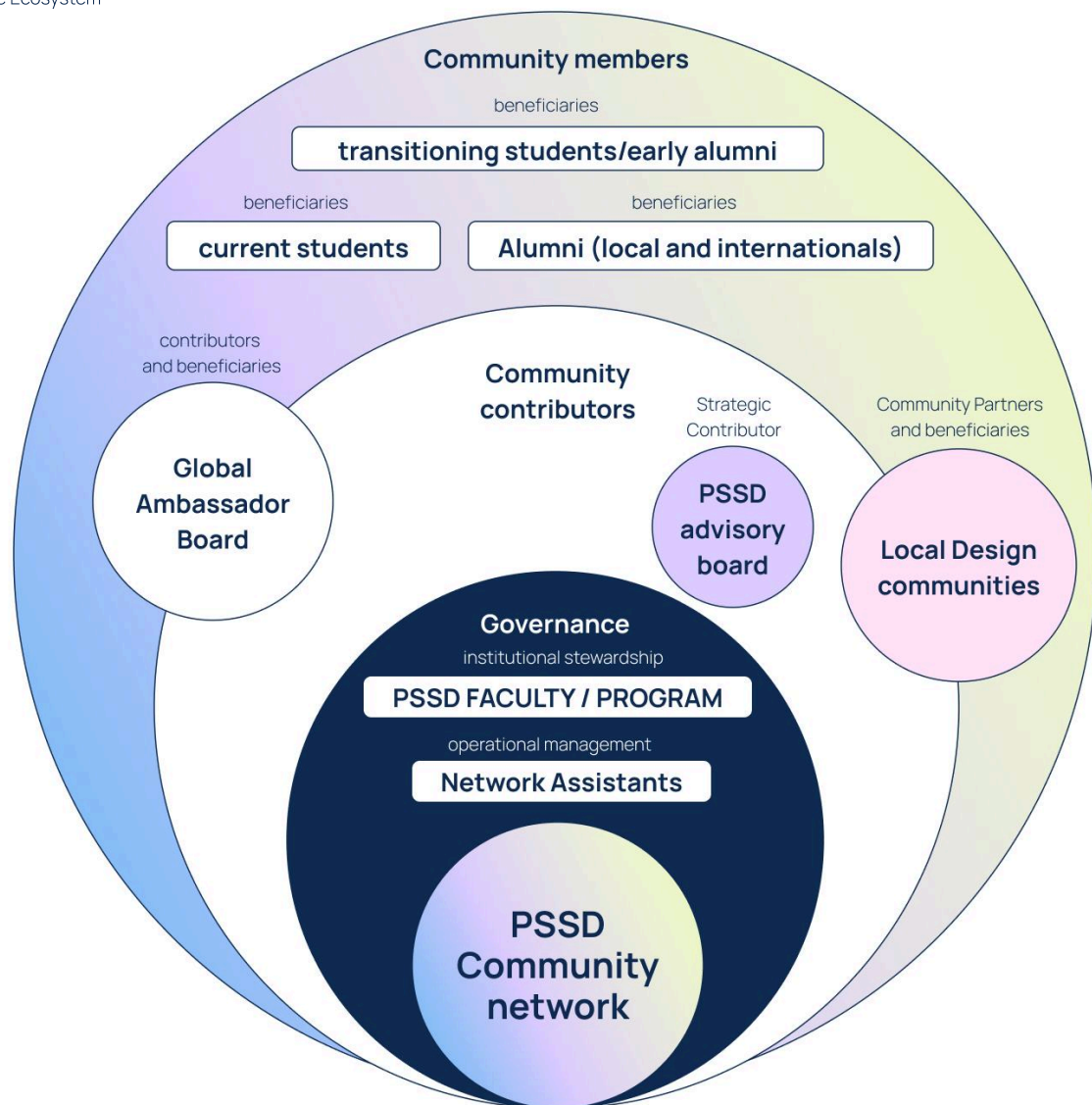
As exposed in the theoretical foundation and in the case studies, we could see how one of the crucial design opportunities and goals was to design a hybrid governance model: top-down with institutional legitimacy and stewardship, with a community soul where members can join and contribute bottom-up, providing different degrees of voluntary involvement that creates an exchange of value for all the parts involved. For this reason, the design proposal of the PSSD Community Network is not conceived as a collection of isolated initiatives, but as a long-term ecosystem of services and initiatives that supports relationships, knowledge exchange, and professional development throughout various stages of the PSSD journey. For this reason, the project draws upon concepts from service ecosystem design, infrastructuring, and communities of practice.

Drawing on Sangiorgi and Vink's (2017) service ecosystem perspective, services can be understood as networks of actors who collaboratively create value through interactions and resource integration. Value is therefore not delivered by a single organization but emerges through the participation of multiple stakeholders. Applied to the PSSD context, this suggests that the program's role is not to control the network but to facilitate the conditions that enable value co-creation among students, alumni, faculty members, professionals, and external partners.

The shift is from the focus of design from creating individual services towards creating the socio-organizational conditions that allow initiatives to evolve and sustain themselves over time. Consequently, the proposal places particular attention on governance structures, operational roles, communication systems, and community management mechanisms. Elements such as the Network Assistants, the Global Ambassador Board, and the visibility and involvement system are not conceived as services themselves, but as infrastructures that enable future community activities and collaborations. Based on these principles, the governance model aims to balance institutional management with community participation. While the PSSD Program provides legitimacy, strategic direction, and long-term continuity, the network is actively formed by community contributors, ambassadors, advisory board members, and external partners. This distributed governance structure allows the community to remain connected to the values and identity of the PSSD program while fostering participation, ownership, and mutual exchange among its members.

PSSD Community Network Governance Ecosystem

Figure 5.5
PSSD Community Network
Governance Ecosystem





Governance

PSSD Faculty / Program

The PSSD Faculty serves as the institutional steward and strategic owner of the PSSD Community Network. It provides legitimacy, direction, and oversight, ensuring that the network remains aligned with the educational goals and identity of the PSSD program.

As the most stable and enduring actor within the ecosystem, the Faculty acts as a key point of reference and continuity. Unlike other stakeholders who may change over time, it is the only actor that remains constant, allowing the network to maintain its long-term vision and stability.

Its role is not to control or dominate the network, but rather to enable and support collaboration. This position is particularly important because the Faculty can recruit Network Assistants as program interns and offer thesis research opportunities to further develop, deepen, and scale the initiatives of the PSSD Community Network. It is also the stakeholder with the resources and institutional capacity to sustain the network and facilitate value exchange among faculty, alumni, and students.

The direction of the PSSD course changes every four years. Currently, the program is led by Daniela Sangiorgi, together with Valentina Auricchio and Beatrice Villari as master's coordinators. While the commitment to maintaining and supporting the initiative ultimately depends on the program leadership, the objective is to make future transitions as smooth and efficient as possible. In this way, the PSSD Community Network can continue as a stable and long-lasting initiative that creates value for faculty, alumni, and students alike.

For this reason, involving additional professors is also crucial. Broadening participation helps distribute ownership, strengthen institutional support, and ensure that more members of the faculty recognize and contribute to the value of the initiative.

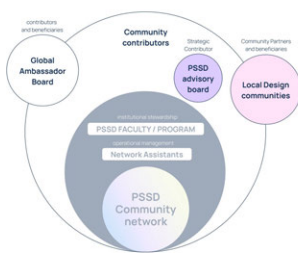
Network Assistants

Network Assistants are the operational managers of the PSSD Community Network. They coordinate activities, maintain communication channels, support ambassadors, and ensure the continuity of the network over time.

These roles are filled by students undertaking internships within the program, giving them the opportunity to develop concrete projects that support peers and alumni around the world. Through this experience, they can build professional networks and collaborate closely with other contributors, including the Advisory Board, institutional partners, and senior alumni. This opportunity is particularly valuable for international PSSD students, who often face challenges in finding internships in Italy.

The role of the Network Assistant is especially important because it bridges the gap between faculty and alumni. Network Assistants serve as a point of reference for questions, feedback, and suggestions, creating a continuous loop of dialogue that helps align initiatives with the evolving needs of the PSSD community. As a result, they contribute directly to shaping services and activities, influencing the development of the entire service ecosystem from year to year.

Their position as students is also significant because it brings a fresh perspective on the needs, values, and experiences emerging from the classroom. Together with student representatives, they provide an additional layer of insight into how the course and its initiatives can continuously improve and remain relevant to future generations of students.



Community Contributors

Global Ambassador Board

The Global Ambassador Board is a distributed group of active alumni representing different geographical regions around the world. Ambassadors facilitate local connections, organize community initiatives, and act as bridges between their local contexts and the broader PSSD Community Network.

As volunteers, they are among the most important representatives and contributors within the network. The success of the Global Circles largely depends on their commitment, as they enable local engagement, foster relationships among alumni, and serve as key points of reference within their respective regions. Their role is fundamental in transforming a global alumni community into a network of locally connected and active groups.

This stakeholder group represents the most engaged segment of the alumni community. Ambassadors actively contribute to building the network and, in return, gain closer relationships with faculty, increased visibility within the community, and a sense of legitimacy and recognition for their contributions. For this reason, establishing a dedicated board is essential. The board provides a space where ambassadors can connect with one another, exchange experiences, discuss relevant topics, and collectively reflect on the development of the community. It also creates a structured channel through which their perspectives, feedback, and recommendations can be heard by the Faculty, making the board a highly representative body within the PSSD alumni ecosystem.

Network Assistants act as the primary point of contact for ambassadors, providing operational support, responding to questions, and facilitating communication between the board and the Faculty. They may also encourage ambassadors to participate in additional initiatives, such as alumni stories, expert talks, mentorship activities, and future community projects.

Because ambassadors are among the most active contributors, it is particularly important to involve them in interviews, consultations, and ongoing discussions that help shape the evolution of the network. While the Global Ambassador Board plays a significant role in enabling community participation, it is not part of the formal governance structure of the PSSD Community Network. Strategic decision-making and institutional responsibilities remain with the PSSD Faculty. Instead, ambassadors operate as community leaders, fostering engagement through distributed and collaborative forms of leadership.

Beyond supporting alumni connections, ambassadors can also engage with local design communities, organizations, and professional networks. In this way, they act as bridges between PSSD and the broader design ecosystem, facilitating collaborations, sharing knowledge, and contributing to the dissemination of design culture within their local contexts.

PSSD Advisory Board

The PSSD Advisory Board is a group of professionals and industry experts who contribute strategic perspectives, professional knowledge, and mentoring opportunities to the PSSD ecosystem. Through their expertise and networks, they support both the academic program and the wider community by providing professional orientation, contributing to community initiatives, and facilitating connections with industry.

The Advisory Board is a particularly important stakeholder because it creates a direct link between the PSSD program and the professional world. Board members are selected by the PSSD Faculty and serve as strategic advisors for the course on a three-year basis. The board was renewed in 2025 and currently includes representatives from a diverse range of organizations:

- 6 design and IT agencies
- 4 private-sector organizations
- 4 public-sector organizations
- 3 third-sector organizations
- 2 research and innovation centers

The knowledge generated through Advisory Board meetings and discussions represents a valuable resource not only for the Faculty, but also for students and alumni. The board provides access to influential design and innovation contexts that would otherwise be difficult for most students to reach independently. Through the reputation and professional relationships established by PSSD, students and alumni can gain exposure to organizations, leaders, and industry perspectives that enrich their understanding of the field and broaden their professional horizons.

An additional strength of the Advisory Board is the willingness of many of its members to actively support students and recent graduates. Beyond their advisory role, several members are interested in contributing to mentoring activities, career guidance, and professional development initiatives.

This creates opportunities for different forms of engagement, ranging from guest lectures and expert talks to networking activities, mentoring programs, and career-oriented events. As a result, the board can play a significant role in supporting students and alumni during their transition into professional practice. Looking ahead, an interesting opportunity could be the creation of stronger connections between the Advisory Board and the Global Ambassador Board. This could take the form of joint meetings, collaborative initiatives, or one-to-one networking opportunities. Such interactions would strengthen connections across different levels of the professional ecosystem, creating opportunities for students and early-career alumni to engage with experienced practitioners, while also connecting mid- and senior-level professionals with leaders from influential organizations. In doing so, the network could generate additional value through the exchange of knowledge, opportunities, and perspectives across generations and career stages.

This role becomes even more relevant in light of the increasing challenges faced by junior professionals in recent years. Economic uncertainty, geopolitical instability, and a competitive job market have made career entry more complex, particularly for recent graduates. In this context, the Advisory Board can serve as a strategic asset for the PSSD Community Network, expanding opportunities for mentoring, professional connections, career exploration, and potentially access to employment opportunities. By strengthening the relationship between education and practice, it contributes to a more supportive and resilient ecosystem for both students and alumni.

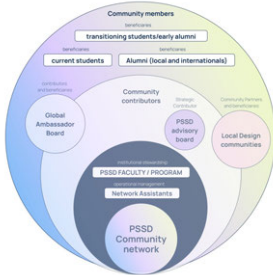
Local Design Communities

External design communities and associations that collaborate with the network through events, knowledge exchange, and community-building activities. The core idea is to establish partnerships with local design communities, both for career-orientation projects in Milan and within an international context. The network is built on a collaborative rather than competitive approach: it makes little sense to duplicate activities when many participants and objectives overlap. Instead, the aim is to create synergies, share resources, and generate mutual value.

While some circles and activities are designed primarily for the internal community, larger events and global initiatives remain open to external audiences, particularly local design communities that the network actively engages with.

A good example is the collaboration with SDD during the PSSD Exploring initiative. In this context, SDD acted not only as a communication amplifier for the project but also as a bridge between students and professionals. This collaboration created value for both communities: it increased engagement among students, who may eventually become active professionals within SDD's network, while also enriching the PSSD community through broader participation and knowledge exchange.

The collective knowledge, experiences, and perspectives shared from design communities are truly valuable for a "new born" project like the PSSD community network. For this reason, listening, learning, and continuously collaborating with other communities remain central principles of the project. Looking ahead, some PSSD circles may eventually evolve into larger, more open communities, following a path similar to SDD or other established design networks.



Community Members

Current Students

This group refers to students actively enrolled in the PSSD program, particularly those attending the compulsory courses and laboratories during the first three semesters. While these students generally have limited time to focus on job searching or participate extensively in extracurricular initiatives, many still value intergenerational connections with both senior students and alumni already working in the field.

At this stage, career-related concerns are usually not yet urgent, and students already benefit from strong community interactions through their daily engagement with classmates. Nevertheless, they continue to seek guidance, a sense of belonging, opportunities for peer exchange, and exposure to professional experiences and future career possibilities. Engaging with alumni and more experienced students can help broaden their perspective on the discipline and provide inspiration for future professional pathways.

Transitioning Students / Early Alumni

This group includes students approaching graduation and recent graduates navigating the transition into professional life, generally from the fourth semester onward. They represent the segment with the highest demand for career orientation, mentoring, and professional support.

During the third semester in particular, students begin elective courses, undertake or search for internships, and increasingly focus on their future careers. At the same time, many students start returning to their home countries or cities as in-person classes come to an end. This period of transition is marked by significant personal, professional, and geographical changes, making it a critical moment for the PSSD Community Network to engage students and connect them with opportunities for career development and community participation.

Engagement within the network begins during student life, and this phase represents a key opportunity to introduce initiatives related to mentoring, career orientation, and professional networking.

The transition from education to employment can be especially challenging, particularly for international students seeking to establish themselves in Europe. As students work on their theses, define their areas of specialization, complete internships, and gradually enter the job market, the experiences and connections offered by PSSD alumni can provide valuable support, inspiration, and career exploration opportunities.

This target group is closely connected to early alumni, as both share similar needs and challenges. However, recent graduates often face a more immediate urgency regarding employment and financial stability. While students may still be exploring different possibilities, early alumni are typically looking for concrete job opportunities and practical career support. For international graduates, factors such as Italy's one-year post-graduation work visa can further increase this pressure.

At the same time, graduates' connections with PSSD remain strong and recent. Their experiences as junior designers are highly relevant and can provide valuable insights, support, and inspiration for students currently undergoing the same transition.

Alumni (Local and International)

This group consists of alumni who actively seek to maintain a connection with the PSSD program. Some wish to give back to the community, others want to network with local PSSD professionals, while some are simply interested in staying informed about the evolution of the discipline and the program.

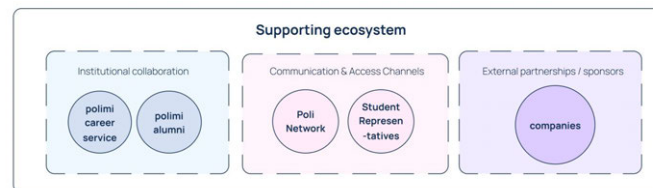
These individuals can be described as "active alumni" because they choose to remain engaged with the network and seek opportunities to reconnect with faculty, connect with peers, and participate in a global community of PSSD graduates. Their involvement is driven by a desire to maintain relationships, exchange knowledge, support younger generations, and contribute to the continued growth of the network. Alumni act both as beneficiaries and contributors, creating value through mentorship, knowledge sharing, and professional connections.

An important aspect of the network is the shared identity created by having studied the same program. This common background fosters trust and strengthens the sense of belonging to a professional community. It also facilitates the exchange of opportunities among alumni, such as sharing job openings, recommending candidates, or connecting peers with relevant organizations and projects.

Naturally, alumni demonstrate different levels of participation and engagement. Some actively seek networking opportunities, events, and social interactions, while others prefer a more passive form of involvement, such as following alumni stories, reading updates, or supporting initiatives from a distance. Despite these differences, many share an interest in understanding the professional trajectories of their peers, learning about career outcomes, and staying informed about how the PSSD program and discipline continue to evolve.

As the primary contributors and driving force of the network, alumni play a fundamental role in its long-term sustainability. For this reason, it is essential for the PSSD Faculty to maintain a balanced exchange of value, ensuring that alumni contributions are recognized and that participation remains meaningful and rewarding for all involved.

Supporting Ecosystem



This category differs from the previous stakeholder groups because these actors are not direct participants or contributors within the PSSD Community Network. However, they play an important role in supporting the network through collaboration, infrastructure, visibility, and access to resources. Their contribution strengthens the ecosystem in which the network operates and creates opportunities for mutual value creation.

Polimi Career Service

Institutional partner supporting employability initiatives, career guidance activities, and access to professional opportunities.

The Polimi Career Service remains the primary institutional reference point for students regarding employability, career guidance, and access to professional opportunities. For this reason, it is important that the PSSD Community Network complements rather than overlaps with its responsibilities and institutional role. At the same time, there are several opportunities for collaboration between the two actors. The Career Service regularly collects data from students and alumni to produce reports on employability trends and career outcomes. These data are highly relevant to the PSSD Community Network, particularly for understanding alumni career trajectories and supporting career orientation initiatives. A potential partnership could involve collaboration in data collection, analysis, and dissemination, creating value for both organizations.

Furthermore, the Career Service already offers a wide range of initiatives, events, and resources for design students. Improving communication channels between the Career Service and the PSSD Community Network would allow both parties to remain informed about ongoing activities and identify opportunities for collaboration. This reflects one of the core principles of the network: operating through collaboration within the broader Politecnico ecosystem rather than as an isolated initiative.

Polimi Alumni

Official alumni association of Politecnico di Milano and potential collaborator for alumni engagement, visibility, and knowledge exchange.

Polimi Alumni is another important actor within the wider ecosystem. Although no formal collaboration currently exists, the PSSD Community Network can create value by sharing opportunities offered through Polimi Alumni, including events, professional initiatives, and alumni engagement programs. This would allow community members to benefit from both networks while strengthening connections between them.

Establishing communication channels between the two organizations could create mutual benefits. For example, Polimi Alumni's annual Alumni Day regularly features alumni speakers and success stories. Future collaborations could potentially involve members of the Global Ambassador Board or other PSSD alumni representatives, increasing the visibility of the program within the wider Politecnico alumni community.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that the two organizations serve different purposes. Polimi Alumni represents the entire university and acts as an official institutional body, engaging a broad audience and often highlighting high-profile alumni and large-scale initiatives. In contrast, the PSSD Community Network is characterized by its smaller scale, stronger sense of intimacy, and discipline-specific focus. Its value lies in creating meaningful relationships and fostering connections among people who share a common educational and professional background. The two initiatives should therefore be viewed as complementary rather than overlapping.

Companies

External organizations that may support the network through sponsorships, mentoring, internships, professional opportunities, or participation in community initiatives.

External companies are currently represented indirectly through the Advisory Board, but they may play a more active role in the future. Potential forms of involvement include mentoring activities, workshops, guest lectures, sponsorship of community initiatives, and participation in career-oriented events.

While companies are not a central stakeholder within the network, their contribution can generate significant value, particularly when alumni occupy leadership positions or act as founders within these organizations. Such connections can facilitate access to professional opportunities, internships, mentoring relationships, and industry insights for students and recent graduates. Examples such as the sponsorship of the PSSD 20th Anniversary Celebration demonstrate how external organizations can contribute to strengthening the community while increasing opportunities for interaction between academia and professional practice. In the future, companies may also become important partners for career-oriented initiatives and employer engagement activities.

PoliNetwork

Student-led infrastructure supporting communication and visibility across Politecnico communities.

PoliNetwork manages many of the communication channels used by Politecnico student communities, including WhatsApp groups for PSSD cohorts. However, these groups are often dismantled after students complete their coursework, limiting opportunities for maintaining long-term connections.

The PSSD Community Network proposes a complementary approach. Through collaboration with PoliNetwork, cohort communication channels could be gradually transferred to Network Assistants once students complete their courses. Interested members could then choose to remain connected through the broader PSSD Community Network, preserving relationships beyond graduation and facilitating continued access to community initiatives, peer support, and professional opportunities.

In this sense, the two organizations address different phases of the student journey. While PoliNetwork primarily supports communication during academic life, the PSSD Community Network extends these connections beyond graduation, integrating both the temporal and geographical dimensions of the alumni experience.

Student Representatives

Student representatives who facilitate communication between cohorts, faculty, and the wider community.

Although student representatives are not directly involved in the operation of the PSSD Community Network, they play an important role in maintaining communication between students, faculty, and other stakeholders.

Student representatives are already involved in various governance-related activities, including participation in Advisory Board discussions and other PSSD committees. Given their close relationship with both students and faculty, they represent valuable connectors within the ecosystem and can help ensure alignment between community initiatives and student needs.

Another important contribution is their role in fostering relationships between different student cohorts. Through initiatives such as welcome events, aperitivi, picnics, and informal gatherings, student representatives help create connections between first-year students and more senior cohorts. The PSSD Community Network can support these initiatives by providing additional visibility, communication channels, and organizational support, reinforcing the sense of belonging that begins during student life and continues throughout alumni engagement.

While their role within the network remains supportive rather than operational, student representatives contribute to strengthening community culture and maintaining connections across different generations of PSSD students.

5.3

Community Lifecycle Journey

This section illustrates the different stages of the PSSD community lifecycle, from current students to experienced alumni, and highlights how individuals can progressively evolve from beneficiaries of the network to active contributors.

The PSSD Community Network is built around two interconnected pillars: career orientation for students and early alumni, and the global alumni network. These two dimensions reinforce one another throughout the lifecycle. Students and recent graduates benefit from the knowledge, guidance, and professional connections provided by alumni, while alumni remain connected to the program through opportunities to mentor, share experiences, and contribute to the community's growth.

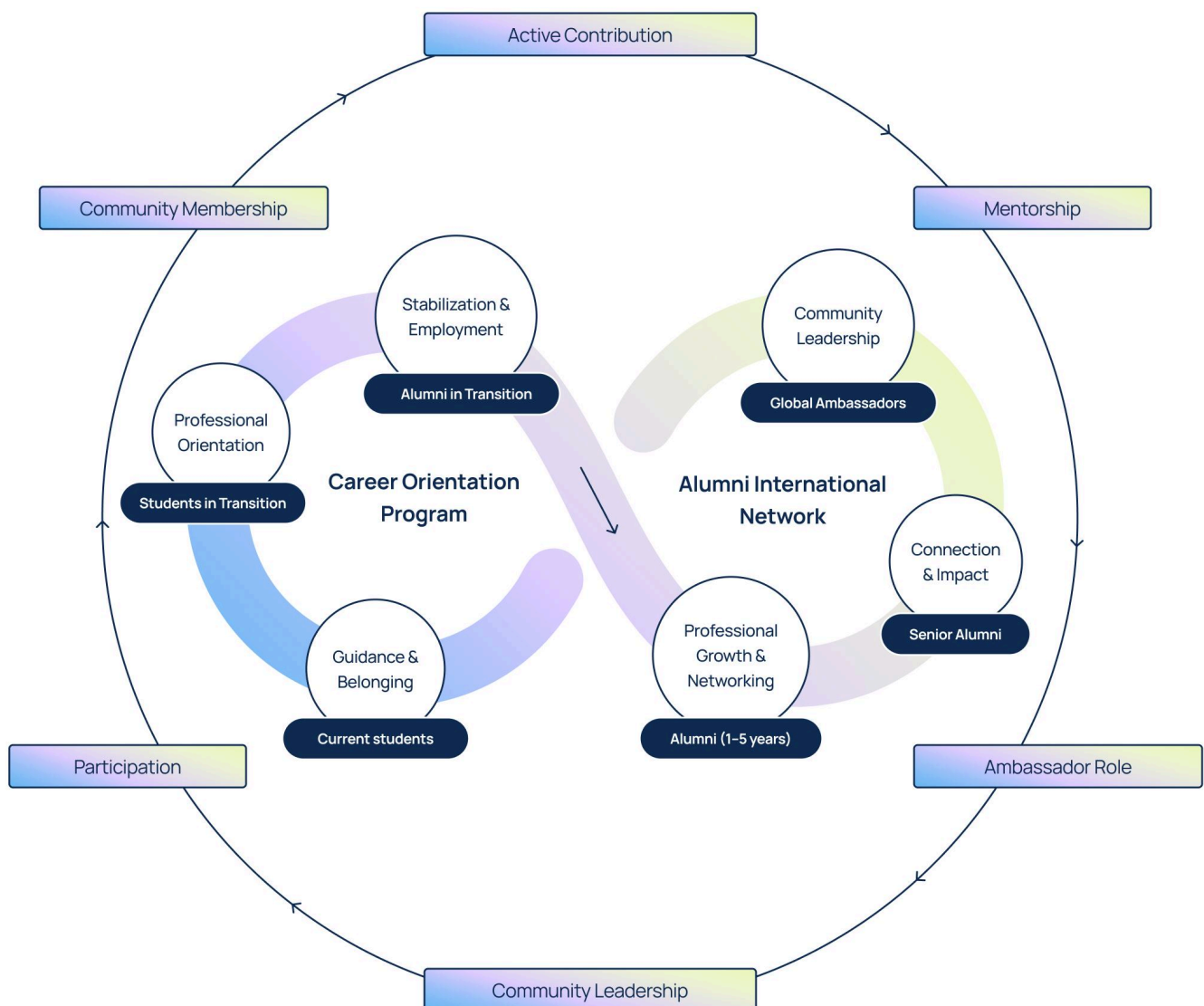
As members progress through different stages of their academic and occupational journeys, their relationship with the network evolves. Current students primarily look for guidance, a sense of belonging, and opportunities for career exploration. Transitioning students and early alumni require more targeted professional support, mentoring, and access to employment opportunities. More experienced alumni increasingly become contributors, offering knowledge, connections, and support to newer generations. In this way, the network creates a continuous cycle of value exchange in which those who once benefited from the community can later contribute back to it. Participation can also go beyond engagement in community activities. Through roles such as Network Assistant, students can actively shape the network, gaining experience in community building, project management, and collaboration with alumni, faculty, and external stakeholders. These operational roles transform the network into a learning environment where participants contribute to service development while simultaneously developing professional skills.

The PSSD Faculty provides the institutional infrastructure, legitimacy, and long-term continuity necessary to sustain this ecosystem. At the same time, other stakeholders—including the Advisory Board, Global Ambassadors, design communities, and external partners—contribute expertise, professional connections, and opportunities that enrich the network.

Although alumni are the primary contributors of knowledge, mentorship, and professional opportunities, students also generate significant value. They deliver fresh perspectives, emerging methodologies, and new skills developed through their studies. Their active involvement in shaping and managing the network as network assistants ensures the community remains relevant, dynamic, and responsive to the evolving needs of future generations of PSSD members.

Figure 5.6
Community Lifecycle and
Contribution Journey

Overall, the lifecycle model positions the PSSD Community Network as a self-reinforcing ecosystem in which learning, professional development, and community contribution continuously feed into one another over time.



The Community Lifecycle and Contribution Journey illustrates how members engage with the PSSD Community Network throughout different stages of their academic and professional development. The model combines two complementary dimensions: the evolution of members' needs across their lifecycle and the progressive increase of their contribution to the community. The infinity-shaped structure represents the two core pillars of the network: Career Orientation and the Global Alumni Network. The first pillar supports current students, students in transition, and alumni in transition as they navigate educational choices, internships, career exploration, and entry into the job market. During these stages, members primarily seek guidance, belonging, professional orientation, and employment support.

As individuals become more established professionally, they progressively move into the Global Alumni Network. Alumni in the early years of their careers focus on professional growth and networking, seeking opportunities to expand their expertise, build relationships, and strengthen their professional identity. More experienced alumni increasingly value maintaining meaningful connections with the community while creating impact through knowledge sharing, mentorship, and professional support.

Global Ambassadors represent the highest level of engagement within the network. Rather than being a mandatory stage of the lifecycle, the ambassador role is an opportunity for highly engaged alumni to take on community leadership responsibilities, facilitate local connections, and contribute to the development of the global PSSD ecosystem.

Surrounding the lifecycle is a second loop representing the evolution of participation and contribution within the community. Members can progressively move from participation to becoming active community members, contributors, mentors, ambassadors, and community leaders. This progression reflects the transition from primarily receiving value from the network to actively creating value for others.

The model highlights the self-reinforcing nature of the PSSD Community Network. Students and early-career alumni benefit from the experiences, knowledge, and opportunities provided by more experienced members, while alumni remain connected through opportunities for networking, mentorship, leadership, and continued engagement with the PSSD community. Over time, those who once received support become contributors themselves, creating a sustainable cycle of value exchange across generations and geographical contexts.

5.4

Offering Map and Design Interventions

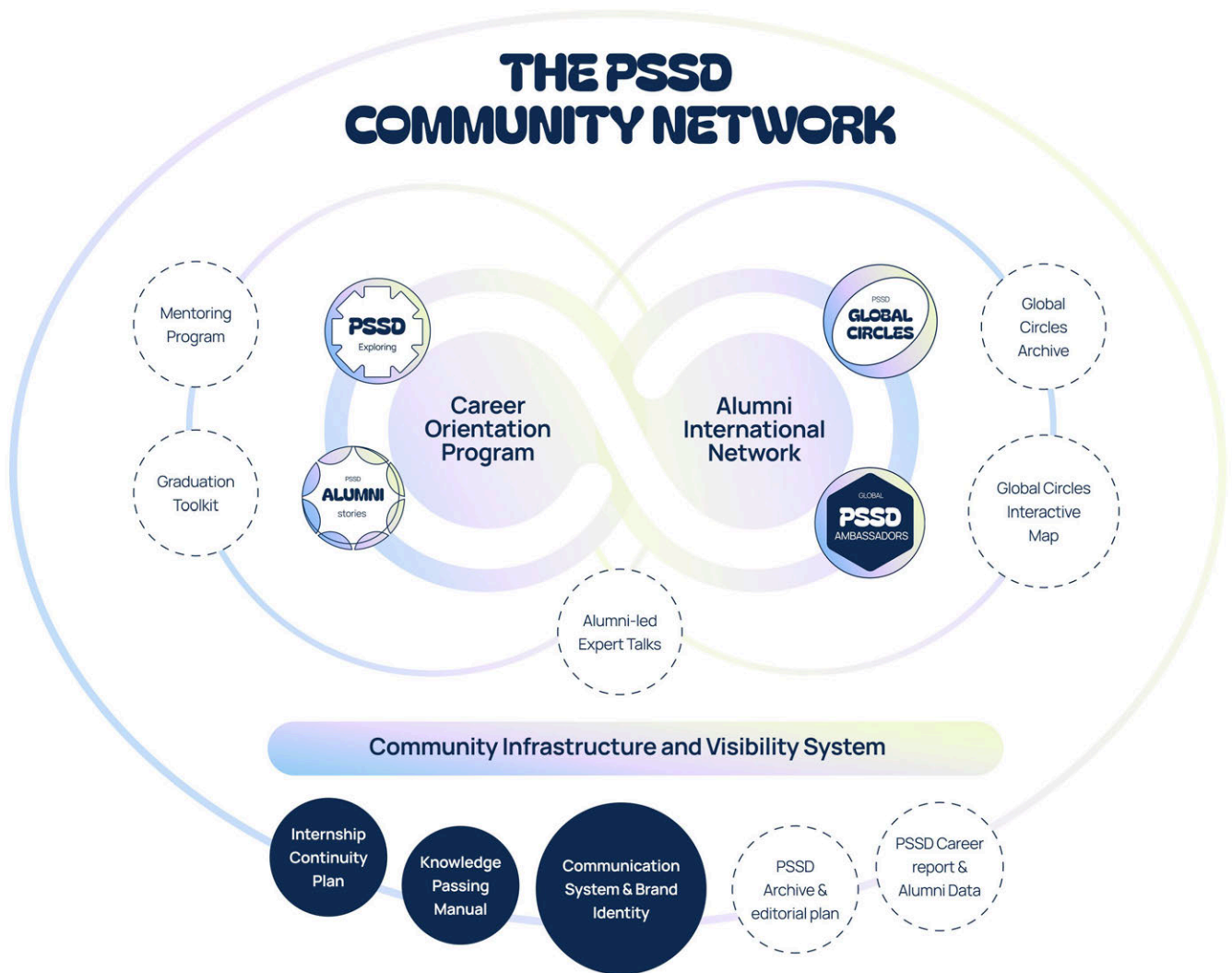


Figure 5.7
Offering Map of The PSSD
Community network
Note. Dashed lines refers
to future services

The PSSD Community Network is designed as an interconnected ecosystem of services that support both students and alumni throughout their professional and personal development journeys. While the offering map is organized into two main service areas—Career Orientation and Alumni Global Network—all initiatives are part of a broader community network and are intended to interact, reinforce, and create value for one another.

At the center of the map are the implemented and core services, which currently form the foundation of the ecosystem.

2. Career Orientation Program

The Career Orientation area focuses on supporting students and recent graduates in exploring career pathways and learning from the experiences of the wider PSSD community. Existing services include:

- PSSD Exploring, an offline event which helps students discover professional opportunities and career trajectories.
- PSSD Alumni Stories, a collection of alumni experiences and insights that provide inspiration, guidance, and real-world perspectives which are accessible online.

Future developments within this area include:

- Mentoring Program, connecting students and alumni through structured mentoring relationships.
- Graduation Toolkit, providing practical resources and guidance to support the transition from university to professional life.

2. Alumni Global Network

The Alumni Global Network area aims to strengthen relationships among alumni and foster a sense of belonging across geographical boundaries.

Current services include:

- PSSD Global Circles, a community-building initiative that facilitates connections and conversations among alumni worldwide.
- Global Ambassadors Board, a network of engaged alumni who support community development, representation, and outreach.

Future initiatives include:

- Global Circles Archive, preserving and making accessible the knowledge, discussions, and outputs generated through Global Circles activities.
- Global Circles Interactive Map, a visual platform to showcase and connect the global PSSD alumni community.
- Alumni-led Expert Talks, a cross-cutting initiative shared with the Career Orientation area, where alumni contribute expertise, professional insights, and learning opportunities for both students and fellow graduates.

3. Community Infrastructure and Visibility System

Supporting all services is the Community Infrastructure and Visibility System, which provides the organizational foundations necessary for long-term sustainability, continuity, and growth. These infrastructural elements include:

- Communication System & Brand Identity
- Knowledge Passing Manual
- Internship Continuity Plan
- PSSD Archive & Editorial Plan
- PSSD Career Report

Together, these components ensure that knowledge, visibility, communication, and operational continuity are maintained across the entire ecosystem. By combining service offerings with supporting infrastructure, the PSSD Community Network creates a sustainable framework that enables ongoing engagement, knowledge exchange, and collaboration between current students and alumni worldwide.

The following two chapters (6 and 7) examine the two service areas separately, reflecting the division of focus within the project. Chapter 6, developed by Ayano, explores Career Orientation, while Chapter 7, developed by Valentina, focuses on Alumni Global Network. Each chapter presents the design research that informed the development of the concepts, the co-design activities through which they were refined, and the final service implementations. Finally, both chapters outline the future evolution of the proposed services through dedicated roadmaps, highlighting opportunities for growth, expansion, and long-term sustainability within the broader PSSD Community Network.

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Image Credits

Figure 5.1. Overgaag, D. (2018). The 6 elements of effective strategic planning [Diagram]. Spur Reply. Retrieved June 25, 2026, from <https://www.reply.com/spur-reply/en/blog/the-6-elements-of-effective-strategic-planning>. Adapted by the authors.

06 Career Orientation Program

Chapter written by Ayano Osawa, based on the research conducted individually.

- 6.1** Positioning of Career Orientation
- 6.2** Proposed Interventions and Feedback from the Co-design Process
- 6.3** Implemented Intervention 1: PSSD Exploring
- 6.4** Implemented Intervention 2: Alumni Stories
- 6.5** Future Development Opportunities
- 6.6** Chapter Summary and Reflection

6.1

Positioning of Career Orientation

The Career Orientation Program is positioned as an early-stage support layer within the PSSD Community Network, especially for current students, students approaching graduation, and young alumni. Its main purpose is to help PSSD students understand what kinds of career possibilities may exist after graduation, and to support them in reflecting on the fields, organisations, working styles, and roles that may fit their interests and personal direction.

The need for this program emerged clearly from the user and stakeholder research. The transition from PSSD to professional life is not merely a matter of job searching. For many students and young alumni, it is a period in which multiple uncertainties overlap: professional identity, career direction, financial stability, visa and language issues, decisions about which country or region to work in, and how to apply and communicate the value of Service Design within their own career paths.

Therefore, what students need is not limited to job postings or general career advice. They need opportunities to understand how the skills learned in PSSD can be connected to different industries and roles, how alumni have built their careers, and how the PSSD experience can be translated into professional language.

This is particularly important in the context of PSSD for two reasons. First, career paths after PSSD are highly diverse. Students learn Service Design methods, but Service Design itself is not limited to one fixed professional role. It can be understood as an approach for “interpreting existing service systems and proposing new ones” (Wetter-Edman et al., 2014), and has also been described as “a human-centred and creative approach to service innovation” (Meroni & Sangiorgi, 2011, cited in Yu & Sangiorgi, 2018). These perspectives suggest that Service Design knowledge and methods can be applied across multiple fields, from improving existing services to creating new ones, and may also be connected to entrepreneurship.

Second, PSSD is highly international. Today, around half of the students are international students. After graduation, they do not necessarily remain in Italy. Some return to their home countries, while others move to different countries for new opportunities. Cross-border mobility is not limited to non-Italian students; Italian students may also leave Italy and build their careers abroad.

However, the level of recognition and maturity of Service Design differs depending on the country or region. In the interviews, one alumna from Taiwan described the difficulty of finding a local position as a service designer and explained that Service Design is not yet widely recognised in her context. Another alumna from Indonesia also explained that, although Service Design thinking exists in practice, it is not always called “Service Design”; rather, it may appear as a mindset that individuals use to provide better services without a formal name.

This professional and geographical diversity is one of the strengths of PSSD. At the same time, it can make it difficult for students to imagine what direction they can take after graduation.

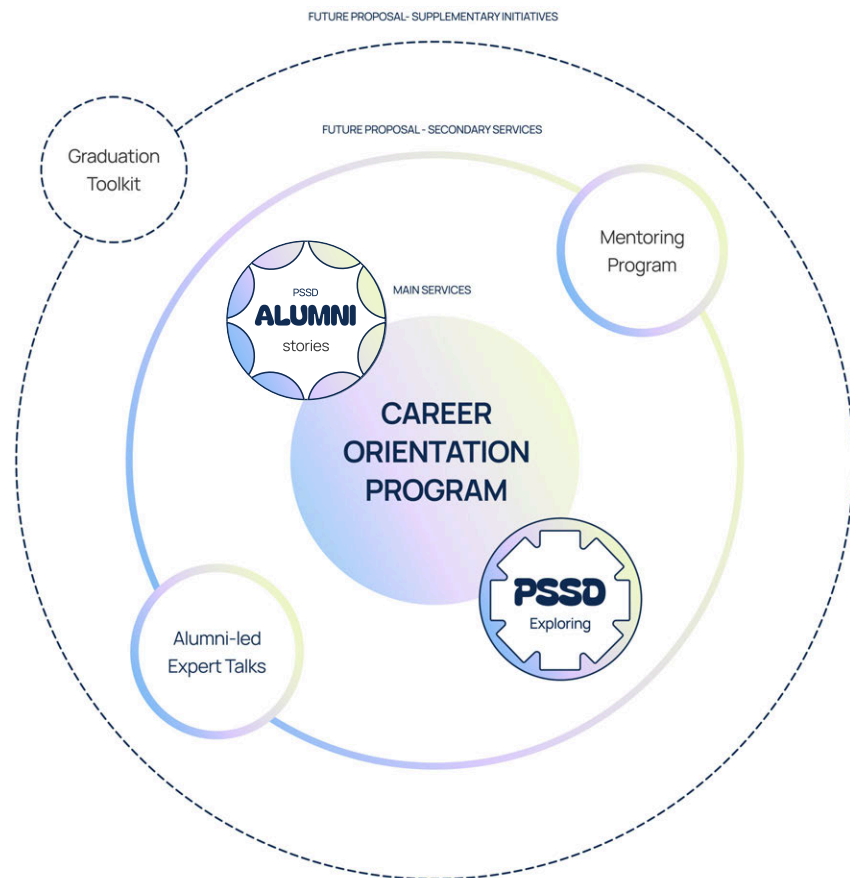
For this reason, the Career Orientation Program aims to make the diverse career paths of PSSD alumni more visible and to provide reference points for students as they reflect on their own futures. It does not present one correct career model. Rather, it enables students to explore directions that fit their interests, values, strengths, and situations through the sharing of information that is possible precisely because of the PSSD community: multiple examples, conversations, and lived experiences. It also aims to go beyond completely formal or surface-level information by encouraging alumni to share informal, sometimes messy, and realistic experiences from their own careers. In this way, Career Orientation supports the exchange of truly valuable and situated knowledge.

Within the broader PSSD Community Network, Career Orientation Program plays a bridging role between students, young alumni, experienced alumni, faculty members, Career Service, and external design communities. It does not replace the existing Career Service, but complements it. While Career Service provides university-wide institutional career support and relationships with companies, Career Orientation provides knowledge based on alumni’s real experiences and voices from the field, including PSSD-specific career paths, international transition experiences, and the professional positioning of Service Design.

This program is designed as a light but continuous form of support. It does not begin suddenly after graduation. Rather, it starts gradually when students begin to think about internships, thesis work, and post-graduation pathways, and continues into the early alumni phase after graduation. Through events, Alumni Stories, and future knowledge-sharing formats, Career Orientation transforms experiences and knowledge that are currently scattered among individuals into shared resources that can be accessed by the wider PSSD community.

In this proposal, Career Orientation Program is developed through two implemented interventions and several possible future programs. The first implemented intervention is **PSSD Exploring**, a live setting where students, alumni, faculty members, and professionals can meet directly and discuss experiences and career possibilities. The second is **Alumni Stories**, a digital content format that shares the real career journeys of alumni and allows students and young alumni to access them at any time. In addition, although they were not implemented within this research process, a **mentoring program**, a **graduation toolkit** and **Alumni-led Expert Talks** are also introduced as future development opportunities. These remain open for further implementation, but are included as references for the basic direction of the program. Through these components, Career Orientation Program can make knowledge about post-PSSD careers more visible, understandable, personal, and rooted in the PSSD community.

Figure 6.1
Career Orientation Program
Offering Map



6.2

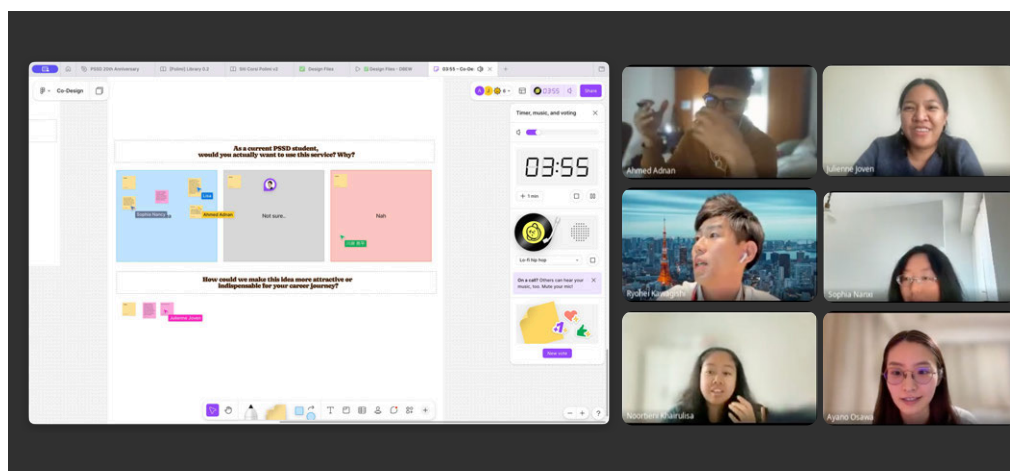
Proposed Interventions and Feedback from the Co-design Process

Before implementing the Career Orientation interventions, an online co-design session was conducted with current PSSD students and young alumni. The session was held on 22 April 2026 with five participants: two current students in transition, two early alumni, and one alumnus with around five years of post-graduation experience. All participants were international, and the gender balance was two male and three female participants.

The aim of this session was to present two initial concepts, PSSD Exploring and Alumni Stories, and to understand whether they could respond to the needs, concerns, and expectations of students and young alumni during the transition from university to professional life.

The session was held online using Google Meet and FigJam. It followed a simple structure: participants first introduced themselves, then the thesis topic and the role of Career Orientation within the PSSD Community Network were briefly explained. After that, two proposed interventions were presented. For each proposal, participants were asked whether they would want to use or join it, what concerns they had, and how the idea could be made more attractive or useful for their career journey.

Figure 6.2
Co-design session
conducted online at 22 April
2026



6.2.1

Overview of the Proposed Interventions

Alumni engagement has traditionally been positioned as an important activity within higher education institutions. Alumni can contribute to universities in various ways, including enhancing institutional reputation, supporting current students, providing professional networks, and contributing to institutional development through donations and volunteering. Sharma, Bhatia, and Bali (2026) state that “Alumni engagement has become one of the dimensions of institutional success and sustainability in the vibrant environment of contemporary higher education.” (p. 58). For this reason, alumni engagement has often been treated not only as a way to maintain relationships with graduates, but also as an institutional mechanism that supports the long-term development and strategic goals of universities.

This institutional framing is also reflected in O'Connor's study, which discusses alumni engagement as a way for institutions to mobilize alumni participation in support of strategic goals (2022). In this view, alumni are not only former students or potential donors, but can become active participants in the institution's long-term success.

At the same time, O'Connor also points out that alumni engagement departments are often expected to demonstrate their value through measurable institutional outcomes. In particular, institutions may want to know whether alumni relations efforts lead to an increase in donors, fundraising dollars, student recruitment, testimonials, or other forms of institutional support. This suggests that alumni engagement is often discussed through the question of how universities can maintain relationships with graduates in order to secure loyalty, participation, advocacy, and financial or strategic contribution.

6.2.2

Feedback on PSSD Exploring through co-design

After the concept of PSSD Exploring was presented, participants were asked whether, as current PSSD students or as alumni reflecting back on their student experience, they would actually want to use or join this service. Four out of five participants answered yes, while one participant answered that they were not sure. The participant who was unsure explained that the event might be less accessible after starting work outside of Milan, because of the geographical distance from Europe and the difficulty of staying closely connected to PSSD.

Overall, the feedback on PSSD Exploring was positive, while also revealing several practical concerns. Participants saw value in having an in-person opportunity to meet people from the PSSD ecosystem. Several participants pointed out that simply connecting with people on LinkedIn often does not lead to meaningful conversation. In contrast, meeting people in person was seen as a more effective way to start deeper conversations and build trust.

Participants also appreciated the structured nature of the proposed event. The guided activities, such as collecting questions in advance, using small group discussions, and providing connection missions, were seen as useful ways to reduce the awkwardness of networking. This was particularly important for participants who described networking events as difficult when they are too informal or when participation depends on being highly extroverted. In this sense, the structure of PSSD Exploring was valued because it could make networking more accessible to shy participants or to those who do not naturally feel comfortable approaching others.

Another positive reaction was that the event could help students and young alumni stay connected to the Service Design field. One participant pointed out that it is not always easy to meet other service designers in daily life, especially after graduation. Therefore, an event connected to PSSD could help alumni remain updated on what is happening in the field, reconnect with familiar faces, and maintain a sense of connection to the Service Design identity developed during the program.

At the same time, participants raised several important concerns. The first concern was the sustainability of connections after the event. Participants worried that, even if good conversations happened during the event, the relationships might disappear once the event ended. This suggested that the event itself would not be enough unless it was connected to some kind of follow-up mechanism.

The second concern was geographical accessibility. Since PSSD alumni are distributed across different countries and time zones, an event held in Milan would mainly benefit people who are physically close to the city. One participant who was working in Japan pointed out that even an online or hybrid event may not fully solve this issue because of the time difference. This feedback showed that PSSD Exploring could be valuable as a local live touchpoint, but it would need to be complemented by other formats in order to include the wider international community.

The third concern was language. Some international students worried that, during networking sessions, conversations might easily shift into Italian, making it difficult for non-Italian speakers to participate. This was not only a practical issue, but also a psychological one. Asking a group to switch language can feel embarrassing or uncomfortable, especially for students who already feel less confident in networking situations. This feedback suggested that language inclusivity should be considered as part of the event design, not as an informal matter left to participants.

The fourth concern was the diversity of participants' questions and backgrounds. For international students, career concerns are often connected to visa sponsorship, language barriers, and local labour market conditions. These questions cannot always be answered by alumni who have a very different background. Participants therefore suggested that it would be helpful to know in advance who would be present, what topics would be discussed at each table, and whether there would be people with similar experiences.

Based on these comments, several design improvements were suggested. Participants proposed sharing table topics before the event, using badges to indicate participants' interests or current status, increasing the frequency of the event around graduation periods, and creating more structured ways to continue conversations after the event. A mentoring or matching mechanism was also suggested as a way to allow students to ask more specific and private questions outside the public event setting.

One participant also pointed out that the project should not focus only on the detailed event format, because the actual format would depend on the venue, number of participants, available partners, and timing. Instead, the event should also be considered from a system-level perspective. This means defining the purpose of the event, the roles of organisers, the partnership with Service Design Drinks Milan, the team structure, and the operational model that would allow the event to happen continuously over time.

6.2.3

Feedback on Alumni Stories through co-design

After the concept of Alumni Stories was presented, participants were asked whether they would want to use this service as students or young alumni. All five participants answered yes. They were also asked whether they would be willing to contribute to Alumni Stories from the alumni side, and three out of five participants answered positively. This showed that the concept was perceived not only as useful for students seeking guidance, but also as a possible contribution opportunity for alumni.

The feedback on Alumni Stories was generally positive. Participants appreciated the idea of having a dedicated place where students could discover what PSSD alumni are doing after graduation. For students who do not know who to contact, Alumni Stories was seen as a useful first entry point. It could help them identify alumni who may be able to provide guidance, especially when they are unsure about their own direction.

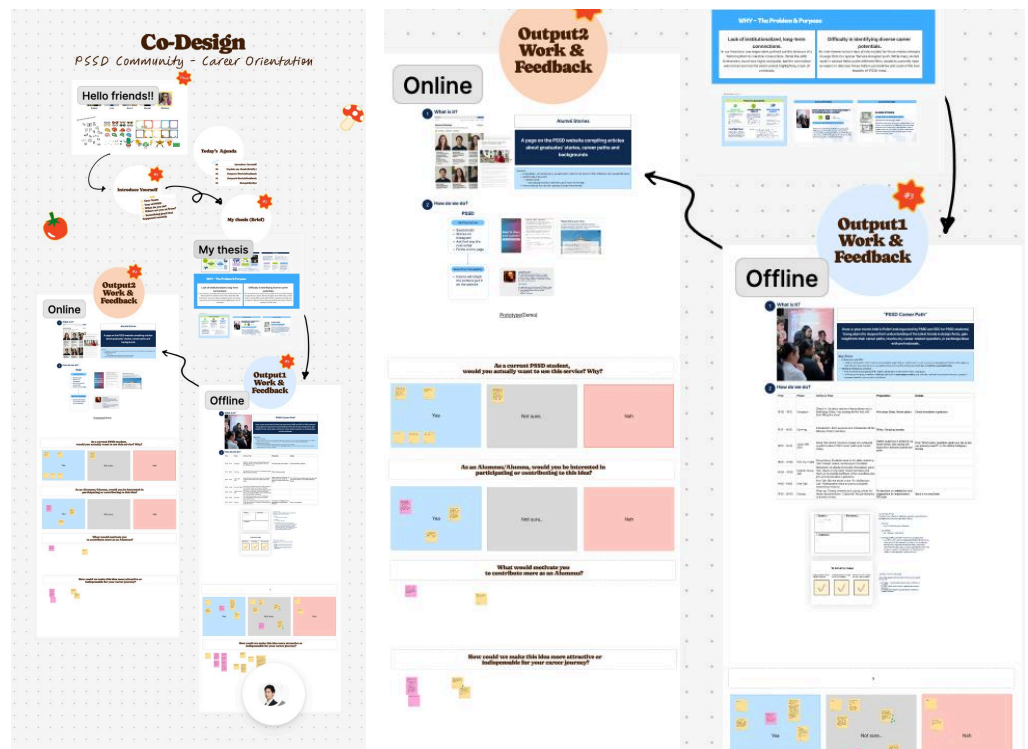
International students saw particular value in finding stories from alumni with similar backgrounds. For example, participants mentioned the importance of finding other international students who had succeeded in finding jobs in Europe or staying in Italy after graduation. This type of story was seen as useful not only because it provides information, but also because it makes certain futures feel possible. Seeing someone with a similar background navigate a difficult transition can provide reassurance and emotional support.

Participants also saw value in Alumni Stories as a way to understand the diversity of PSSD career paths. Instead of only showing standard career outcomes, the platform could show how alumni move into different industries, countries, roles, and hybrid professional identities. This would help students understand that there is no single correct path after PSSD.

However, participants also raised several concerns. One important question was how Alumni Stories would be different from LinkedIn. Since students can already search for alumni on LinkedIn, the value of a PSSD-specific platform needed to be clarified. Through the discussion, the distinction became clearer: Alumni Stories should not simply repeat public career profiles. Its value should lie in sharing personal, situated, and honest experiences that are usually not visible on LinkedIn. LinkedIn often presents polished achievements, while Alumni Stories could include the more informal and realistic side of career development, such as doubts, failures, visa struggles, language issues, job-search difficulties, and practical advice.

Figure 6.3

Overall view and close-ups of key sections of FigJam board: co-design session conducted online at 22 April 2026



Another concern was the contact mechanism. If Alumni Stories encourages students to contact alumni, students may expect to receive replies. Participants worried that messages might not be read or answered, especially if alumni are busy. This means that the platform needs to clarify whether each alumnus or alumna is open to being contacted, what type of contact is appropriate, and what students can realistically expect. Without this clarification, the platform could create disappointment or pressure for both students and alumni.

Participants also suggested that Alumni Stories should include filters or search functions. Suggested filters included region of origin, current location, industry, role, PSSD focus area, language, and professional field. A geographical map or infographic layer was also proposed as a way to visualise where alumni are located and what kinds of roles they have. This would allow students to understand not only individual stories, but also broader patterns across the alumni community.

From the alumni perspective, participants expressed willingness to contribute, especially if their experiences could help younger students. Early alumni also saw value in participating because they were still developing their own careers and could benefit from remaining connected to the community. At the same time, the session showed that alumni contribution needs motivation. Possible incentives included personal branding, public visibility, recruitment opportunities, or the personal satisfaction of mentoring and supporting others.

6.2.4

Design Implications

The co-design session confirmed the relevance of both proposed interventions, while also clarifying how they should be refined.

First, PSSD Exploring should not be designed as a generic networking event. It needs to be guided, inclusive, and connected to the specific needs of PSSD students and young alumni. The event should create psychological safety through small group formats, clear prompts, and simple participation tools. It should also consider language, background, visa-related concerns, and different levels of confidence in networking situations.

Second, PSSD Exploring needs to be connected to a follow-up system. The event can create initial encounters, but it cannot sustain relationships by itself. Therefore, future development should consider how conversations can continue after the event, through mentoring, matching, online communities, or other light follow-up mechanisms.

Third, Alumni Stories should not be positioned as a simple directory or a replacement for LinkedIn. Its value lies in making visible the situated knowledge, informal advice, and realistic career experiences that are difficult to find through official platforms. For this reason, the stories should include not only achievements, but also challenges, decisions, transitions, and lessons learned.

Fourth, Alumni Stories should be searchable and transparent. Filters, tags, or a map-based overview could help students find stories that are relevant to their own situation. Contact expectations should also be clearly communicated so that both students and alumni can engage without confusion or excessive pressure.

Finally, the session showed that these two interventions should be understood as part of a broader Career Orientation system. PSSD Exploring provides a live and relational moment of exchange, while Alumni Stories provides a continuous digital archive of alumni experiences. Together, they can make career knowledge more visible, personal, and accessible. However, their long-term value depends on how they are connected to follow-up mechanisms, alumni contribution models, and the wider PSSD Community Network.

6.3

Implemented Intervention 1: PSSD Exploring

PSSD Exploring was implemented as the first intervention of the Career Orientation Program within the PSSD Community Network. This section describes the purpose, structure, content, and key learnings of the event, and reflects on how it functioned as a live opportunity to support PSSD students and young alumni in their transition from university to professional life.

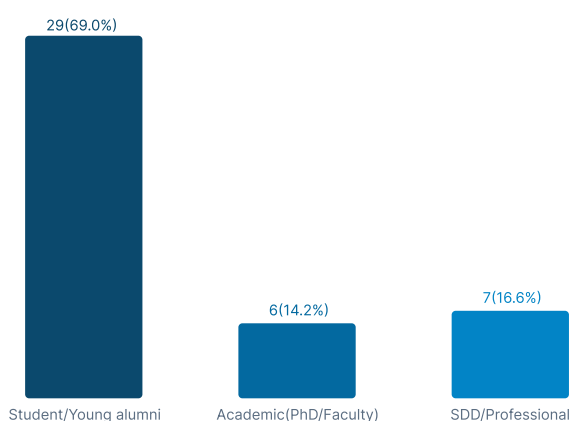
6.3.1

Event Overview and Objectives

PSSD Exploring was held at Politecnico di Milano on 20 May 2026. The two-hour event was designed as a career-oriented opportunity for PSSD students and young alumni to directly hear from the PSSD Advisory Board and professionals about current realities in the field, and to explore diverse professional paths after graduation. Participants included students, alumni, faculty members, Advisory Board members, professionals, and members of Service Design Drinks Milan. More than 40 participants attended the event.

The purpose of the event was not to function as a recruitment event or a conventional career fair. Rather, it aimed to create a structured space where students and young alumni could understand the realities of different professional environments, ask questions about career paths, and reflect on how their PSSD education could be translated into professional contexts.

Figure 6.4
Distribution of typology of
participants



6.3.2

Event Structure and Ecosystem Collaboration

The event was implemented through collaboration between PSSD, the PSSD Advisory Board, and Service Design Drinks Milan. PSSD designed and provided an official setting with an educational and institutional context. The Advisory Board contributed professional perspectives from different industries and organisational contexts. Service Design Drinks Milan brought the perspective of an external design community, as well as event design knowledge for open conversation.

The event consisted of two main parts: an input session and table discussions. The input session included “Organizational Realities,” based on survey responses collected in advance from PSSD Advisory Board members, and field perspectives shared by Service Design Drinks Milan. Through this structure, participants were able to access a practical sense of how designers work in professional fields, how different companies and organisations operate, and how to explore the career.

Event communication started approximately one month before the event through the official Instagram accounts of PSSD and Service Design Drinks Milan, as well as LinkedIn and the PSSD website. In order to collect real questions from students before the event, participants were invited to submit questions through Instagram Stories and during the Eventbrite registration process. The collected questions were then reviewed, grouped into recurring themes, and used as guiding questions for the table discussions.

The submitted questions covered a wide range of concerns related to career orientation after PSSD. Some questions focused on employability and professional development, such as the most required skills in the job market, expected competencies for service designers, salaries, growth opportunities, and internship or job possibilities. Others asked about the role of service designers in different organisational contexts, including corporate environments, public organisations, and data-related fields. Several questions also reflected the concerns of international students, such as how to find a design job without advanced Italian fluency, how life after PSSD may look in Italy or abroad, and how to approach the first professional experience after graduation. The collected questions were synthesised and displayed at each discussion table as guiding questions. Preparing these questions in advance helped provide a starting point for the conversations, while keeping the discussions connected to the doubts, interests, and concerns that students had expressed before the event.

In this way, PSSD Exploring was designed not simply as a school-led career event, but as a point of connection between the PSSD learning experience and the wider professional environment by linking the university, the Advisory Board, and an external design community.

Figure 6.5
Event Announcements on
Social Media

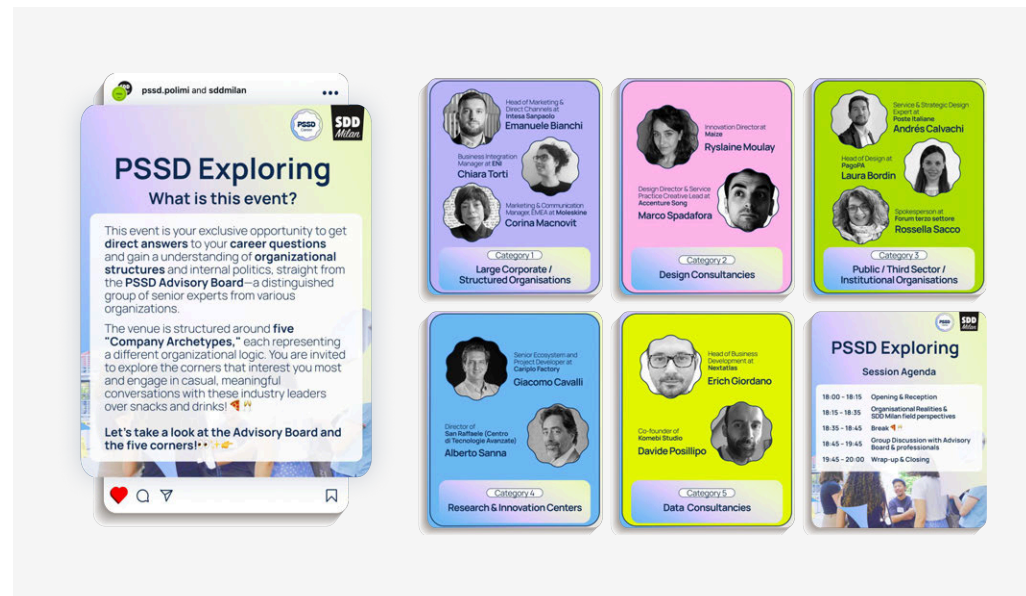
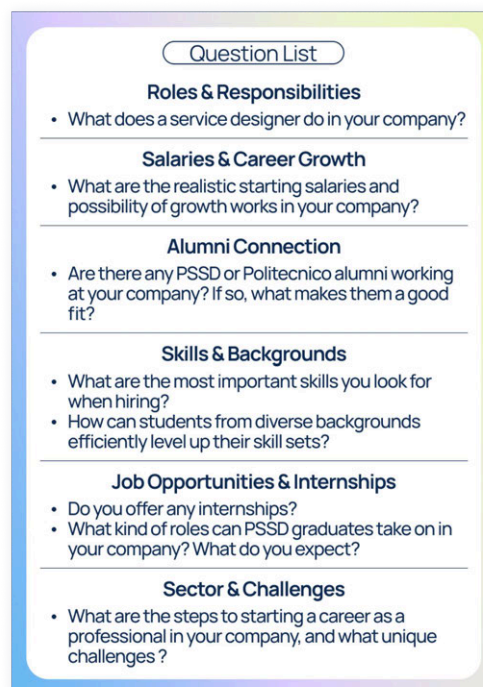


Figure 6.6
Prepared list of questions for
the event



6.3.3

Organizational Realities: Understanding Different Career Contexts

“Organizational Realities” was designed to help students understand the differences between professional environments. Based on responses from Advisory Board members, the participating companies and organisations were grouped into five categories: Large Corporate / Structured Organisations, Design Consultancies, Public / Third Sector / Institutional Organisations, Research / Innovation Centres, and Data Consultancies. This categorisation helped students compare how Service Design may be practised differently depending on the organisational context.

This session showed that different organisations require different working styles, selection criteria, and mindsets for early-career professionals. For example, data-related companies, specialised research environments, and progressive consulting studios were described as more fluid and autonomous environments. These contexts may offer a high degree of freedom, but they also require strong self-management, initiative, and tolerance for uncertainty.

On the other hand, large corporations, design consultancies, research centres, and public institutions were described as structured but flexible environments. In these contexts, roles, processes, and organisational hierarchies may be relatively clear, but adaptability and collaboration with multiple stakeholders are still required.

The session also clarified that selection criteria vary depending on the organisation. Some organisations value attitude, passion, and alignment with company values. Others place more emphasis on logical thinking, problem-solving processes, and the ability to clearly explain design decisions. In more technical or execution-oriented environments, practical skills, portfolio quality, and familiarity with specific tools or technologies may become more important.

Figure 6.7
Presentation during the event



This showed students that employability after PSSD is not determined by one universal professional profile. Rather, students need to understand what kind of environment they want to enter, what that environment expects, and how their own strengths, interests, and working style fit that context.

Early-career barriers were also addressed as one of the themes. In highly autonomous environments, young designers may have freedom, but they may also feel isolated or unsure about how to structure their work. In large corporations and public sector contexts, challenges may include bureaucracy, stakeholder complexity, and the ability to navigate internal relationships. In consulting environments, students may face pressure to deliver high-quality results quickly, handle multiple projects at the same time, and communicate effectively with clients and internal teams.

Across these differences, two common mindsets were emphasised across all sectors: curiosity and proactiveness, and tolerance for ambiguity. Students are expected to keep learning, question assumptions, actively seek information, and move projects forward without waiting for complete clarity. At the same time, it is also important to accept uncertainty as a natural part of design practice. This was especially relevant for PSSD students, who are preparing to enter environments where problems are not clearly defined, stakeholders are diverse, and professional paths are not linear.

For each category, the event also outlined an Ideal Profile and Potential Misfit. This helped clarify what types of people may adapt more easily to each organisational environment, and where mismatches may occur. For example, in large corporations and structured organisations, people who can connect creative thinking with business strategy and patiently build relationships within complex organisations may be a good fit. However, people who strongly resist hierarchy or institutional constraints may experience significant stress. In design consulting, autonomy, strategic thinking, a broad skill set, and the ability to adapt to ambiguous situations are important, while people who strongly need clear instructions and stable frameworks may find it difficult. In the public and third sector, systems thinking, collaboration, and interest in long-term change are important, while people who seek only short-term results or clear success indicators may not find the context suitable. In research and innovation contexts, intellectual curiosity, the ability to connect disciplines, and the capacity to work with uncertain questions are important. In data consulting, the ability to connect quantitative analysis with human-centred interpretation becomes essential. This framework provided students with a reference point for thinking not only about which companies they could enter, but also about which environments may fit them.

Figure 6.8
Presentation by SDD Milan
during the event



Figure 6.9
Participants during the
presentation

Figure 6.10
Participants during the
breaktime



6.3.4

Table Discussions: Student Questions and Professional Advice

The table discussions connected the general insights from the input session to more concrete and individual questions. Participants moved to the table they had registered for at reception and joined approximately one hour of discussion. The tables were divided into four areas: Large Corporate, Design Consulting, Public and Third Sector, and Research and Data-related contexts. Professionals from each sector first introduced themselves, and then discussed career-related concerns and questions with the participants.

In the Large Corporate discussion, students were strongly interested in the role of designers, working styles, visibility, salary, and career growth within large organisations. In particular, they discussed why designers are needed in non-design-centred organisations, such as traditional energy companies, and how designers can avoid becoming isolated or invisible within large organisations. The professional advice suggested that designers in large companies need not only design skills, but also the ability to understand the structure of the whole organisation, read relationships between departments, and build internal networks. In environments where designers are few, the lack of a clearly defined role can be challenging. At the same time, it can also become an opportunity to define one's own value and area of impact. Therefore, a career in a large corporation can be understood not as fitting into an existing role, but as a process of creating one's own position and influence within the organisation.

In the Design Consulting discussion, students asked about project involvement, autonomy, methodology, skills in the age of AI, language, portfolios, and career transitions. In this area, professionals emphasised that the problem initially presented by a client is not always the real problem. Service designers are therefore expected to enter complex situations and reframe the problem. Methodology was also described as something that should not be applied mechanically as a fixed process, but should be selected and sometimes reconstructed according to the context. In addition, even in an age where AI can support some hard skills, judgement, responsibility in decision-making, storytelling, communication, and the ability to be someone others want to work with become even more important. This shows that in consulting environments, the value of PSSD is not only in systems thinking and research skills, but also in the ability to communicate these skills to others and connect them to organisational decision-making.

Figure 6.11

Advisory board members and participants while table discussion



In the Public and Third Sector discussion, students explored how service designers can be positioned in public administration, third sector organisations, and organisations aiming for social impact. There was particular concern around career pathways, such as whether students could enter the public sector directly, whether they should first gain experience in consulting, and whether junior designers could succeed in this field. Professionals explained that in public and social sectors, job titles are less important than the ability to understand context and continuously adjust one's role within changing environments. In mature organisations, junior designers may be able to participate and learn within an established culture. In less mature organisations, however, a certain level of experience and autonomy may be required. Professionals also pointed out that roadmaps often change in public sector contexts, and political and institutional constraints can be significant. For this reason, students should not choose this field only because it appears stable. A strong motivation to impact people's lives is essential. This discussion showed that Service Design in the public sector is deeply connected not only to profit or efficiency, but also to impact, collaboration, and institutional change.

In the Research and Data-related discussions, students were interested in the role of human-centred design within data, AI, and technical systems. Professionals explained that data is not completely objective, but is the result of human decisions and contexts, including what is measured, who measures it, and why it is measured. Therefore, designers have a role in interpreting the human meaning, relationships, and decisions behind numbers and technical outputs, rather than accepting them as neutral facts. When collaborating with data scientists and engineers, the systems thinking of service designers, ownership of process, metacognition, and cross-disciplinary communication become important. In particular, professionals advised students not to chase every new tool, but to understand basic principles and standards, and to keep learning within communities of practice. This offered practical guidance for building a career in a rapidly changing technological environment.

Through these table discussions, it became clear that students' interests went beyond job titles and application methods. Students wanted to understand what kind of organisational culture would fit them, what skills they should develop, in which fields Service Design can create value, and how they could position themselves within uncertain career paths. The advice from professionals did not present a fixed career model in any of the sectors. Rather, it showed that reading the context, building relationships, and continuously defining one's own role are important for career development after PSSD.

Figure 6.12

Advisory board members and participants while table discussion



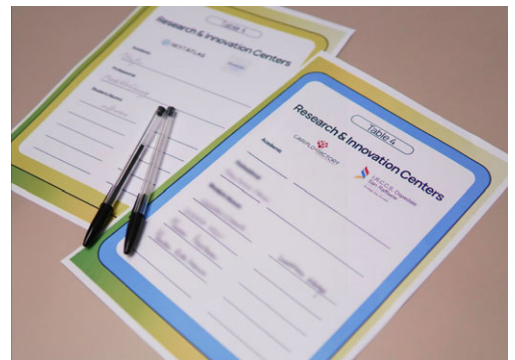
Figure 6.13

Advisory board members and participants while table discussion



Figure 6.14

Sheet for assigning participants to tables



6.3.5

Key Learnings and Future Improvements

Overall, PSSD Exploring functioned as an offline live event within the Career Orientation Program. It showed whether the PSSD Community Network could create a space where students' concerns and questions could directly meet the knowledge, experience, and expertise of professionals. The event made the diversity of career environments more visible, and provided concrete and honest information about how different organisations actually work, what kinds of people they look for, and what kinds of difficulties young designers may face.

The implementation also confirmed some of the insights that had emerged from the co-design session. First, the event showed that career exploration benefits from intentional guidance, while also requiring enough flexibility for participants to follow their own interests. Categorisation, guided discussion, and sector-based tables helped transform open networking into a more purposeful learning experience. Dividing the tables by sector also helped prevent participants from concentrating too heavily in one place, and created an environment where they could ask more specific questions according to their interests. During the event, participants actively asked questions to Advisory Board members. Even after the official end of the event, many participants stayed in the room to ask individual questions or continue conversations with each other. This suggests that there was value in the opportunity to hear directly from professionals in person and to build relationships in a relaxed atmosphere.

Second, Career Orientation needs to address both professional and personal concerns. Students' questions included not only skills and application processes, but also language, visas, confidence, work-life balance, and anxiety about whether they would fit into certain environments. In terms of addressing professional concerns, it was highly meaningful that many Advisory Board members attended and spoke directly with students. However, for international students, language, visas, mobility, and access to local labour markets remain urgent issues. The advice on these issues remained relatively general, such as the importance of learning the local language. Therefore, future editions could become more valuable by involving more alumni and professionals who have experience with international mobility and working abroad.

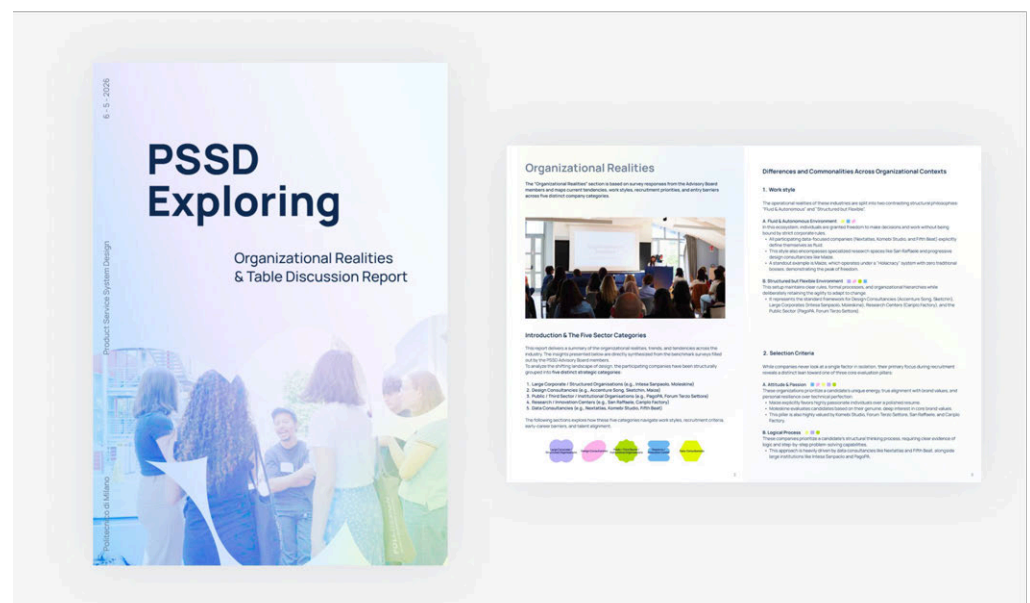
The event also revealed areas for improvement. Among the responses to the post-event survey and informal feedback received from several participants during the event, one of the most common comments was that participants wanted to move between tables. In this edition, participants were expected to remain at the table they had initially chosen, so free movement was relatively limited. As a result, even participants who were interested in multiple sectors had to stay with one sector throughout the discussion. Being able to explore one sector in depth is a strength of this format. However, for participants who wanted to gather broader information across multiple areas, there is room for improvement.

In this regard, the event summary shared after the event was useful for participants who wanted to know what had been discussed in other sectors. However, for those who wanted to speak directly with multiple Advisory Board members, this may still have represented a missed opportunity. Future editions could therefore consider a format that supports both types of participants: those who want to stay at one table for deeper discussion, and those who want to move between tables to gain broader information.

As also pointed out during the co-design session, a single live event cannot fully solve the issue of long-term connection. The event is currently imagined as an annual event, but the value of the network created during the event depends on whether the conversations continue afterwards. Therefore, future editions could include clearer follow-up mechanisms, such as sharing contact points, providing discussion summaries, creating mentoring opportunities, or connecting participants to Alumni Stories.

In conclusion, PSSD Exploring demonstrated the potential of the Career Orientation Program as a live, community-based intervention. By allowing students to access professional knowledge in a more direct and approachable way, the event helped them understand the professional environments after PSSD more concretely and reflect on their own direction. Rather than presenting one ideal career path, the event made visible multiple possible futures and the conditions, skills, and mindsets required to navigate them.

Figure 6.15
PSSD Exploring
Organizational Realities &
Table Discussion Report



6.3.6

Suggested Operational Model for Future Editions

In order to make PSSD Exploring sustainable, the event should not depend only on a single thesis project or on the availability of a few individuals. It should be supported by a light but clear operational model that can be repeated and adapted in future editions.

The event is currently imagined as an annual event. If resources allow, it could be held more frequently. However, considering the time and effort required for coordination, an annual edition could be a realistic starting point.

Based on the experience of this implementation, preparation should ideally begin at least three months before the event. At this stage, Network Assistant could start meeting with the PSSD coordinator and Service Design Drinks Milan to define the main theme of the event. The theme does not need to be fixed every year. It could change depending on students' needs, current discussions in the design field, Advisory Board interests, or emerging career concerns. The important point is that the topic remains useful for career exploration and connected to the transition from PSSD to professional life.

At least two months before the event, possible dates should be defined and the organising team should begin contacting potential contributors, such as Advisory Board members, alumni, professionals, faculty members, and external community partners. At this stage, it is also important to clarify the expected format, the number of speakers or table hosts, and the type of participation required from each contributor. Initial social media communication can also start from this stage.

Around one month before the event, the date, venue, contributor list, and overall structure should be confirmed. More active communication should also begin at this stage, including announcements through PSSD channels, social media, newsletters, and student groups. A registration page, such as Eventbrite or a similar tool, should be prepared to manage participants and collect basic information about their interests. At the same time, the organising team should already be preparing the presentation materials, printed materials, table topics, name lists, and any tools needed for the interactive part of the event.

On the day of the event, the operational tasks include setting up the venue, checking the list of registered participants, welcoming contributors and participants, managing timing, facilitating transitions between sections, and supporting the table discussions. It is also important to document the event through photos, videos, and notes, with appropriate consent. These materials can later be used for reports, internal archives, and future communication.

After the event, a short feedback survey should be sent to participants and contributors in order to understand satisfaction, improvement points, and possible topics for future editions. The organising team should also prepare an event report summarising the main discussions, key insights, and practical advice shared during the event. This report can be distributed to the wider PSSD community, especially to students and alumni who could not attend. In addition, photos, videos, presentations, and written summaries should be archived so that they can be reused for future communication, website publication, or the development of other Career Orientation resources.

Through this operational model, PSSD Exploring can become not only a one-time event, but a repeatable community touchpoint. By preparing early, clarifying roles, documenting the content, and sharing the outcomes afterwards, each edition can contribute to a growing archive of career knowledge within the PSSD Community Network.

6.4

Implemented Intervention 2: Alumni Stories

Alumni Stories was implemented as the second intervention of the Career Orientation Program within the PSSD Community Network. While PSSD Exploring created an offline opportunity for students, alumni, and professionals to meet and engage in direct dialogue, Alumni Stories was designed as a digital content format that continuously makes alumni career paths and experiences visible and accessible to students at any time.

The intention of Alumni Stories is to provide a space where students and young alumni can explore the stories, careers, backgrounds, and professional experiences of PSSD graduates. By reading these articles, they can learn how alumni experienced their time during PSSD and the transition around graduation, why they chose certain fields or roles, and what kinds of challenges, decisions, and turning points shaped their paths. This format also creates an opportunity to showcase alumni achievements, while offering current students role models, practical insights, and guidance from graduates whose post-PSSD pathways are increasingly diverse.

6.4.1

Purpose and Positioning

Alumni Stories was designed in response to the need for more concrete and relatable reference points about careers after PSSD. As discussed in previous sections, career paths after PSSD are not fixed into one direction. Graduates do not necessarily remain only within service design or closely related design fields. Their fields of work are highly diverse, and their careers are also strongly international. This diversity is one of the strengths of PSSD, but it can also make it difficult for students to imagine their own future in a concrete way.

For this reason, Alumni Stories aims to make the diverse career paths of PSSD graduates more visible. The alumni featured in these stories are not presented simply as successful professionals. Rather, they are portrayed as graduates who have experienced specific transitions, choices, difficulties, and learning processes. In this sense, Alumni Stories allows students to understand how graduates made decisions, how they dealt with uncertainty, how they translated the skills learned in PSSD into professional language, and how they positioned themselves within different contexts.

Alumni who agree to collaborate are asked whether their contact information can be included. This is designed to create an opportunity for students to actively reach out to graduates who work in fields they are interested in or who have similar backgrounds. Compared to social media platforms, this connection can feel more approachable because it is framed within the PSSD community. At the same time, alumni can participate in the community as collaborators, creating a mutual opportunity to strengthen relationships between students and graduates.

6.4.2

Content Format and Editorial Approach

Alumni Stories was designed as an interview-based article format published on the official PSSD website. Each article introduces one alumnus or alumna through their background, career trajectory, current work, connection to PSSD, challenges after graduation, and advice for current students.

An important editorial principle is that Alumni Stories should not become a simple collection of success stories. The aim is not only to present polished and attractive career narratives, but to share realistic and honest experiences that include both achievements and difficulties. On professional platforms such as LinkedIn, careers are often presented as organised, linear stories of success. However, the actual transition after graduation is often uncertain, fragmented, and strongly shaped by personal, geographical, financial, and institutional conditions. Alumni Stories therefore aims to make visible aspects of career development that are usually hidden, such as doubts, failures, visa issues, language barriers, administrative procedures, unexpected turning points, and informal strategies for moving forward.

The first published article features Ning Meng, who graduated from PSSD in 2024 and co-founded 2518 Design Studio in Milan. His story was selected as an example of a non-linear and entrepreneurial career path after PSSD. Instead of entering a design position in an established company after graduation, he chose to stay in Milan and build a design studio with his business partner. The article introduces his background, his reasons for joining PSSD, the turning point that led him to start a business, the development of 2518 Design Studio, and the practical difficulties he faced while building a business in Italy.

This story also shows how learning from PSSD can be connected to entrepreneurship and professional practice. Ning explains that leadership, systems thinking, and co-design continue to play important roles in his current work. For example, systems thinking helps him understand the deeper problems behind clients' surface-level requests. Co-design also informs the way he structures early conversations with clients and transforms unclear needs into clearer project briefs. In this sense, the article is not only a personal career story, but also an example of how PSSD skills can be applied beyond conventional job roles, including entrepreneurship and hybrid forms of practice.

Figure 6.16
Alumni Stories' article from
PSSD Website

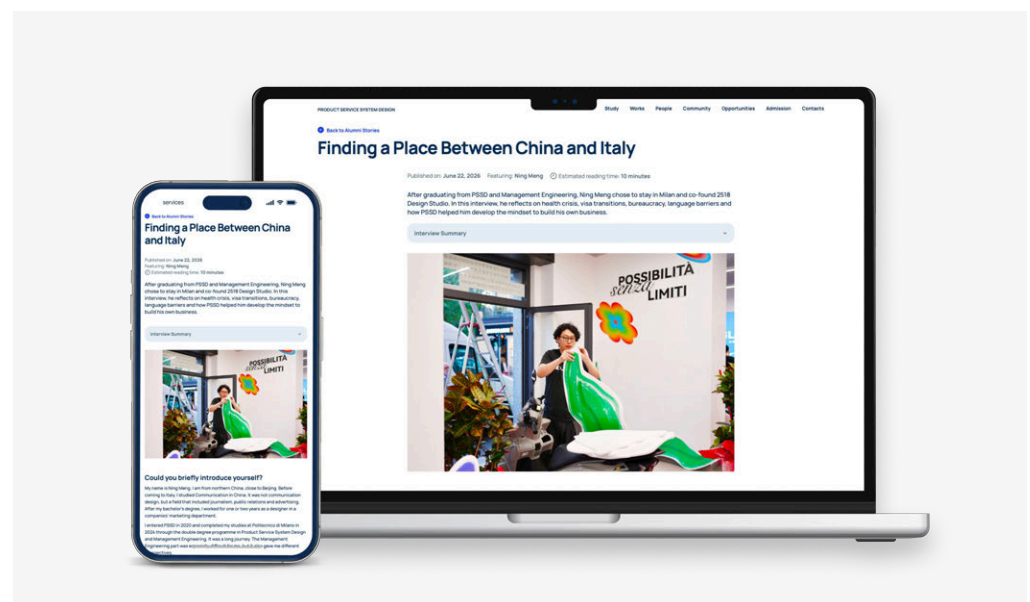
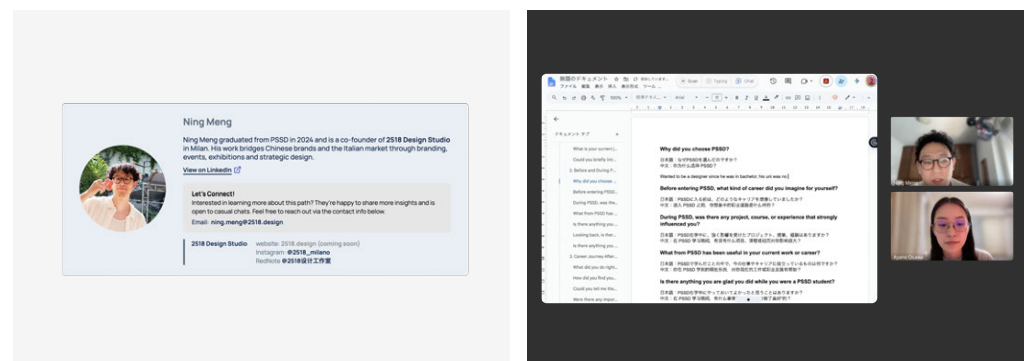


Figure 6.17
Profile information of the
interviewee from the article

Figure 6.18
Online interview with Ning
Meng



6.4.3

Value for Students in Transition

For current students, Alumni Stories provides reference points for imagining possible futures after PSSD in a concrete way. Instead of only knowing abstract job titles, students can learn how an alumnus or alumna actually moved from academic life to professional life, what decisions they made, and what kinds of difficulties they experienced. This can help students reflect on their own direction and understand that career development after PSSD does not need to follow one fixed model.

This is especially valuable for international students. Many international students face decisions about whether to remain in Italy after graduation, return to their home country, or move to another country. They also need to deal with visa transitions, language barriers, local labour markets, and administrative procedures. Alumni Stories can present these issues not as abstract anxieties, but as concrete processes experienced by actual graduates. In this sense, Alumni Stories provides not only career inspiration, but also emotional reassurance and practical orientation. By allowing graduates to openly share the difficulties of transition, the platform is expected to support students currently facing uncertainty both psychologically and informationally.

6.4.4

Value for Alumni and the PSSD Community

Alumni Stories does not provide value only for students. For alumni, it also creates an opportunity to make their work, achievements, and professional identity visible. Sharing their story can support personal branding, strengthen their connection with PSSD, and create new opportunities for dialogue with students, faculty members, professionals, and other alumni.

From the perspective of the wider community, Alumni Stories transforms individual career experiences into shared resources. Many alumni hold valuable knowledge about labour markets, industries, countries, visa systems, organisational cultures, and career transitions. However, this knowledge often remains scattered within personal networks and does not easily reach the students who need it. By collecting and publishing these experiences as articles, Alumni Stories can build a living archive of knowledge within the PSSD Community Network.

This archive also creates continuity between students and alumni. Students can see what graduates are doing after PSSD, while alumni can recognise that their experiences can contribute to the next generation. In this way, Alumni Stories supports a reciprocal relationship in which students receive guidance and inspiration, while alumni gain visibility and opportunities to contribute.

6.4.5

Implementation and Future Improvements

The first Alumni Story was implemented and published on the official PSSD website. Being published on the official website gives the initiative visibility, legitimacy, and accessibility. It also positions Alumni Stories not as an informal side project, but as part of the infrastructure of the PSSD community.

At the same time, this implementation also indicates several future opportunities. First, it will be important to continue publishing stories from alumni with different backgrounds, countries, industries, career stages, and professional fields. The value of Alumni Stories lies not in presenting one successful example, but in showing multiple possible pathways. Therefore, the diversity of stories is essential.

Second, in the future, tags or filters could make the stories easier to search. For example, students could search articles by country of origin, current location, industry, role, language, area of interest during PSSD, or career stage. This would make it easier for students to access alumni experiences that are close to their own situations. It would also respond to the need identified in the co-design process, where participants expressed interest in finding alumni with similar backgrounds or specific experiences.

Finally, Alumni Stories can be connected more directly to other Career Orientation activities. For example, reading Alumni Stories before PSSD Exploring could help students reflect on which tables or themes they are interested in. Articles could also be used as additional resources after the event to deepen questions that emerged during discussions. In addition, alumni featured in the articles could be invited to future talks, mentoring activities, or smaller thematic sessions. There is significant potential to use these resources not only within the Career Orientation Program, but also across the wider PSSD Community Network.

In conclusion, Alumni Stories demonstrated the potential of a digital and story-based intervention within the Career Orientation Program. By making alumni experiences visible and sharing them in a personal and accessible format, students and young alumni can better understand the diversity of post-PSSD careers and reflect on their own possible paths. By transforming alumni knowledge into a shared resource for the community, Alumni Stories can also strengthen the connection between current students, graduates, and the wider PSSD Network.

6.4.6

Suggested Editorial and Operational Model

To make Alumni Stories sustainable, it is important to establish a simple editorial and operational process. The value of Alumni Stories depends on continuity and diversity. A single article can show one meaningful pathway, but the platform becomes more useful as it gradually collects multiple stories from alumni with different backgrounds, countries, industries, career stages, and professional roles.

At the same time, the stories should not become too superficial. Although a short written contribution could be easier to collect, a semi-structured interview can give more depth to the article and help reveal the real voice, experiences, and reflections of the alumnus or alumna. For this reason, each story could begin with an interview request sent by email or chat. The message should briefly introduce the purpose of Alumni Stories, explain why the alumnus or alumna was selected, and ask whether they would be willing to participate.

If the alumnus or alumna agrees, a semi-structured interview of around one hour can be conducted online. A prepared question guide can be used as the basis for the interview, while still allowing the conversation to adapt to the interviewee's background, current work, and specific experiences. The interview should explore not only their career achievements, but also their time during PSSD, the transition around graduation, important decisions, challenges, unexpected turning points, and advice for current students.

After the interview, the content can be edited into an article. The interviewee should be asked to provide any necessary materials, such as photos, a short profile, current job title, LinkedIn profile or other contact information, and permission to publish these details. Before publication, the draft should be shared with the interviewee for confirmation, especially to check accuracy, sensitive information, and consent around contact details.

In terms of frequency, Alumni Stories should aim to publish new articles regularly, while remaining realistic about available resources. A possible rhythm could be one article every three to six months. This pace would allow the platform to grow gradually without placing too much pressure on the organising team. Over time, this would create a meaningful archive of alumni experiences.

To find future interviewees, the process can use several channels. At the end of each interview, the interviewee could be asked to recommend other alumni whose stories may be useful or inspiring for students. The project could also involve Alumni Ambassadors, alumni who contributed to the 20th anniversary activities, or graduates who are already active in the community. In this way, the network of stories can expand organically through alumni recommendations and existing community connections.

Through this operational model, Alumni Stories can become a continuous editorial practice rather than a one-time publication. By combining a clear process with regular publication and alumni referrals, the platform can gradually build a diverse and living archive of PSSD career experiences.

6.5

Future Development Opportunities

PSSD Exploring and Alumni Stories are the main interventions of the Career Orientation Program implemented within this research. At the same time, this project also identified several ideas that could be further developed in the future. This section proposes three possible directions that future collaborators or operators of the PSSD Community Network could develop: Mentoring Program, Graduation Toolkit, and Alumni-led Expert Talks. Although these were not implemented within the timeframe of this research, they are positioned as complementary opportunities to support students more continuously during the transition phase.

6.5.1

Mentoring Program

The first development opportunity is a Mentoring Program led by alumni. This program is not intended to replace the professional and institutional mentoring programs provided by Career Service. Rather, it is designed as a more casual and accessible space for one-to-one conversation before students move toward more formal support.

In this system, students would be able to check the profiles and availability of alumni volunteers online and book a short online meeting. Each profile could include information such as graduation year, country of origin, current location, current profession or field, topics they are open to discussing, and LinkedIn profile. Students could then find someone whose interests, background, or career path is close to their own, and casually talk about career concerns, uncertainty about future direction, visa or international mobility issues, portfolio questions, or job-search related concerns.

An important point of this proposal is to avoid making the relationship too heavy. Unlike Polimi's Buddy Program, where buddies support new students over a longer period of time, the Mentoring Program would be based on short, one-off conversations. If both participants feel a good connection and would like to continue the conversation, they could book another meeting. However, the program would not require a long-term commitment from the beginning. This can reduce the psychological and time burden for both students seeking advice and alumni volunteers offering support.

If students need more specialised or institutional support, it would also be useful to include links to official Career Service programs or consultation channels on the same platform. In this way, the Mentoring Program could function as an informal peer-support layer, while still connecting students to formal institutional support when necessary.

To implement this system, several elements would need to be developed, including volunteer recruitment, profile management, a booking system, user guidelines, message templates, and rules related to privacy and safety. It would be especially important to avoid placing excessive responsibility on volunteers by clearly defining the topics they are willing to discuss, the frequency of their availability, and the fact that replies or continuous relationships are not mandatory. If implemented, this system could connect the experiences made visible through Alumni Stories and the interests generated through PSSD Exploring to more individual and concrete conversations.

6.5.2

Graduation Toolkit

The second development opportunity is the Graduation Toolkit. Strictly speaking, this is not only a career orientation tool. However, because it targets students at the moment of graduation, it can be positioned as one branch of the Career Orientation Program that supports students during the transition phase.

The Graduation Toolkit is imagined as a small physical booklet handed to students around the time of graduation. Its purpose is to provide a guide-like resource that graduates can return to when they feel lost, anxious, or in need of support after leaving PSSD. Rather than being only an information booklet, it could also function as a memorable object that reminds graduates of their learning experience at PSSD and their connection to the community.

Possible contents include messages from professors or faculty members, contact points for support, links to the PSSD Alumni Community, resources related to Career Orientation such as Alumni Stories and PSSD Exploring, maps and methods that can be used as Service Design tools, and simple questions or worksheets for reflecting on future direction. Through these elements, graduates could refer back to the ways of thinking they developed in PSSD even after entering uncertain post-graduation situations.

The transition after graduation also involves many practical issues beyond career development, such as visas, permesso, housing, administrative procedures, insurance, and international mobility. Therefore, the Graduation Toolkit should also include entry points to information related to these practical concerns. However, information about visas and administrative procedures changes frequently depending on country and time. For this reason, a physical booklet alone would not be enough to keep the information up to date. The Toolkit should therefore include a URL or QR code linking to an official PSSD web resource page that can be continuously updated.

In this way, the Graduation Toolkit can combine two roles: a physical and memorable object, and an entry point to updateable digital resources. For graduates, it can help them feel that they still have a connection to the community after leaving PSSD. For the PSSD Community Network, it can become both a symbolic and practical touchpoint that supports the transition from student to alumnus or alumna.

6.5.3 Alumni-led Expert Talks

The third development opportunity is Alumni-led Expert Talks. This program is positioned between the Career Orientation Program and the Alumni Global Network, and is imagined as an online format where several alumni gather around a specific theme to share their professional experiences.

Rather than directly addressing visa issues or the immediate difficulties of the graduation transition, this program aims to help students and young alumni understand broader professional possibilities through alumni career experiences. For example, each session could focus on a specific role, industry, region, working style, or theme, and invite alumni with relevant experience to join a panel-style conversation. Speakers could include Alumni Ambassadors, alumni who wish to share their experiences, or alumni with specific professional expertise.

From the perspective of the Career Orientation Program, the value of this format lies in allowing students to compare multiple concrete career examples at the same time. While Alumni Stories introduces individual stories in depth, Alumni-led Expert Talks allow several alumni to discuss the same theme from different perspectives. This helps students understand that there is not one correct career path, and that even from the same PSSD experience, different professional trajectories can emerge.

This program can also make visible how the same role may be interpreted differently depending on organisational culture and geographical context. For example, even when alumni share the same job title, the meaning of the role, its position within the organisation, the required skills, and the possible career progression may differ across regions and organisational cultures. By listening to these differences through conversations among alumni, students can gain clues for reflecting on what kind of environment they may want to challenge themselves in, and which regional or organisational context may fit them.

In addition, Alumni-led Expert Talks can be valuable not only for current students and recent graduates, but also for young alumni who already have their first professional experience. After experiencing an initial position, young alumni may begin to consider what direction to take next, how to expand their expertise, or whether to move to another country, industry, or type of organisation. At this stage, learning from the career trajectories of alumni with similar backgrounds can become an important reference point. Therefore, this program can function not only as support for the immediate transition after graduation, but also as a form of continuous orientation for later career development.

To implement this program, several elements would need to be designed, including theme selection, speaker selection, the online format, recording or summary publication, and the collection of questions from participants. It could also be connected with Alumni Stories by sharing the speakers' story articles before or after the session, allowing participants to deepen their understanding of the discussion. In the future, by holding Alumni-led Expert Talks regularly, the PSSD Community Network could make alumni expertise more visible and develop a continuous space for knowledge exchange between students, young alumni, and the Global Alumni Network.

6.5.4

Future Integration

The Mentoring Program, Graduation Toolkit, and Alumni-led Expert Talks could each function as independent initiatives, but they would become more valuable if connected with PSSD Exploring and Alumni Stories. For example, a student who reads an Alumni Story could request a mentoring conversation with the featured alumnus or alumna. A participant who becomes interested in a specific topic during PSSD Exploring could continue exploring it afterwards through related Alumni Stories or Mentoring. Alumni-led Expert Talks could invite graduates featured in Alumni Stories, or develop the topics discussed during the talks into articles or resources within the Toolkit.

The Graduation Toolkit could gather links to these resources and provide an entry point for graduates to continue accessing the PSSD Community Network after graduation. In this sense, PSSD Exploring creates live encounters, Alumni Stories accumulates individual experiences, the Mentoring Program connects students to personal conversations, Alumni-led Expert Talks share professional experiences around specific themes, and the Graduation Toolkit hands these entry points to students at the moment of graduation.

Through these connections, the Career Orientation Program could develop beyond single events or articles into a system that supports students across multiple touchpoints during the transition phase. Future collaborators could use these ideas as a basis for exploring more sustainable forms of support in collaboration with existing PSSD structures, Career Service, alumni, and external design communities.

6.6

Chapter Summary and Reflection

This chapter described the Career Orientation Program positioned within the PSSD Community Network. The program was designed as an early-stage support layer for current students, students approaching graduation, and young alumni during the transition from PSSD to professional life. Its purpose is not to present one correct career model, but to make the diverse career paths after PSSD more visible and to help students reflect on directions that fit their own interests, values, backgrounds, and situations.

Through the implemented interventions and proposed future opportunities, this chapter showed the potential of the Career Orientation Program to provide support rooted in PSSD-specific experiences and community relationships. While Career Service provides institutional and professional career support, the Career Orientation Program within the PSSD Community Network can work at a closer distance to students and alumni. It can address alumni's lived experiences, direct dialogue with professionals, the sharing of uncertainties, and the diverse career paths that are specific to the PSSD context.

What students need is not only job information or general career advice. They also need access to the experiences of graduates with similar backgrounds, the realities of different organisational environments, voices from professionals, and opportunities to articulate their own concerns through dialogue. The Career Orientation Program demonstrated its value as an attempt to transform experiences and knowledge that are scattered among individuals into shared resources for the wider PSSD community.

The future challenge is to develop these interventions beyond single events or articles into a continuous and sustainable system. To do so, sustainable operational structures, alumni motivation, information updating mechanisms, consideration for language and geographical access, and follow-up design will become increasingly important. By connecting PSSD Exploring, Alumni Stories, the Mentoring Program, the Graduation Toolkit, and Alumni-led Expert Talks, the Career Orientation Program can develop into a more comprehensive support system that assists students across multiple touchpoints during the transition from student to alumnus or alumna.

In conclusion, the Career Orientation Program is useful as a mechanism within the PSSD Community Network that enables students in transition to think about their own paths by referring to the knowledge, experiences, and connections of the community, rather than facing uncertainty alone. If continuously operated and further developed, this program has the potential to grow into a more practical and community-rooted form of support for the diverse careers that emerge after PSSD.

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07

Alumni International Network

Chapter written by Valentina Phung, based on the research conducted individually.

- 7.1** Service Overview
- 7.2** Research Process and Co-design
- 7.3** Implemented Intervention 1:
Global Ambassadors Program
- 7.4** Implemented Intervention 2:
Global Circles 2026
- 7.5** Future Developments
Opportunities
- 7.6** Chapter Summary and Reflection

This chapter documents the conception, development, and implementation of the Alumni International Network, a service system designed to foster connection, knowledge exchange, and mutual support among PSSD graduates across the world.

The chapter opens with an overview of the Alumni International Network: its purpose, its audiences, and the ecosystem of services that compose it. This overview establishes what the network is and why it exists before tracing the path that led to its current form.

The second part reconstructs the design process in its full sequence. It begins with the 2025 season, which, though not formally designed, served as a first operational experimentation that contributed to inspired the main research question: How can a service system reinforce the value of PSSD beyond graduation, ensuring lasting connection and professional growth for an international alumni community? This broader research question was then investigated through primary and secondary research in chapters 02, 03 and 04., ultimately mapping the needs and opportunities that would shape the concept of the service ecosystem exposed in chapter 05. From this foundation, a set of initial proposals was developed and then brought into a co-design process, one session with Ambassadors who participated in the 2025 circles, and the second one along with transitioning students, and early alumni. This phase refined not only the content and priorities of the offering, but also its operational feasibility.

The third part presents the two pilot projects implemented for the 2026 season, the Global Circles program and the Global Ambassadors program, examining the system and individual components that support each of them. Finally, the chapter looks at the services currently in development, the Global Circles Interactive Map, the Global Circles Archive, and the Alumni-led Expert Talks, before closing with a critical reflection on the project as a whole: what was achieved, what remains open, and what this work contributes to the broader thesis.

7.1

Service Overview

The Alumni International Network is a series of interconnected services designed to support former PSSD students located worldwide, at different stages of their careers. The network operates through a distributed model built around three layers: the PSSD program, which provides institutional support and legitimacy; the Network Assistants, students who contribute to the coordination and management of the network; and the Ambassadors, alumni who take on the role of local community builders and organise activities within their own geographies. This molecular structure allows the network to remain grounded in the program while being driven by the community itself, sharing responsibilities and efforts in a way that is sustainable and valuable for all parties.

The relevance of such a network is shaped by the uneven development of Service Design across countries and industries. While some graduates work in contexts where the discipline is well established, others operate in environments where it is still emerging. This creates different motivations for reconnecting: for some, the network represents a space for professional exchange, collaboration, and career opportunities; for others, it offers a sense of belonging and continuity, providing a shared space where practitioners can speak a common language and draw on collective experience, as a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). The network is designed to assist both scenarios, and is oriented around three core aims:

- **Connection between alumni:** creating ties within local alumni communities and enabling broader networking opportunities across career stages.
- **Connection to the PSSD Master program:** keeping alumni informed about the program's current directions and opportunities for participation, while maintaining a sense of continuity with the institution.
- **Connection to the global PSSD community:** facilitating international exchange between alumni in different regions, and linking the PSSD network to the wider professional knowledge landscape and to local design communities.

Figure 7.1
Alumni International Network
Offering Map developed by
Valentina Phung



The Alumni Global Network service ecosystem is designed to offer different levels of engagement, reflecting different degrees of motivations and availability: from passive participation, such as reading published insights or following community activities, to active contribution as a local organiser or Ambassador. This system, whose components are described in detail in the following section, aims to support an adaptive model of participation: members can engage, step back, or exit without excessive pressure on the individual, while maintaining the overall visibility and continuity of the network. The ecosystem is structured around a minimum viable core of essential services, complemented by supporting integrations and future developments that can be carried forward by successive Network Assistants:

Core services

- 1. PSSD Global Circles:** Once a year, during the Global Circles Season, alumni worldwide gather in geographically distributed groups, by city, region, or country, either in person or online. Each season is organised around a shared yearly topic relevant to PSSD and the professional field, explored independently across the different groups. Events are self-organised by local Ambassadors and supported by the Network Assistant, who provides coordination support, brainstorming materials, and communication guidance. Insights from the meetups are published on the PSSD website in the Global Circles Archive. Between events, local WhatsApp and Wechat groups, operating under the PSSD Community Network umbrella, serve as ongoing channels for informal exchange and coordination, alongside a shared common space where PSSD opportunities and events are also circulated.
- 2. Global PSSD Ambassadors Program:** PSSD Ambassadors are alumni who volunteer to take on a local organiser role within the network. Through the Global Ambassador Board, hosted on the PSSD official website in the community section, their role is formally recognised by the program. Ambassadors are the operational backbone of the Global Circles, acting as local community builders and facilitators. Each year, they participate in the Alignment Meeting, a dedicated session that connects them with PSSD faculty, introduces them to one another, and frames the themes and priorities for the upcoming season.

Supporting services

- 3. Global Circles Archive:** A public-facing repository of insights collected from the Global Circles events, organised by year and yearly topic. The archive functions as a longitudinal record of how PSSD-related knowledge and professional practice are evolving across the global community. By making alumni perspectives visible, it also contributes as a communication channel for the program itself.
- 4. Global Circles Interactive Map:** A map displayed on the PSSD website showing all active Circles events during the current season, allowing community members to discover nearby groups and join them. The map is designed to be integrated with local design networks, expanding the reach of the PSSD community and reinforcing a collaborative relationship with the broader design landscape.

In development

- 5.** **Alumni-led Expert Talks:** A series of interdisciplinary online conversations in which groups of alumni working in a specific field discuss and reflect on their area of practice. Each session brings together multiple perspectives from different parts of the world around a single topic, offering both current practitioners and students a window into diverse professional trajectories. The format is intended to make alumni expertise more visible while creating an ongoing space for knowledge exchange across generations of the program.
- 6.** **Collaborations with the PSSD Master:** The network also opens the possibility of more structured forms of re-engagement with the program itself, including visiting lectures, studio collaborations, and participation in program events. These opportunities would emerge organically from the relationships developed through the network rather than being centrally prescribed.

Platforms and tools

The network operates across two main infrastructures. The first is a WhatsApp Community organised into local groups, one per geographical area, alongside shared spaces for broader communication, where PSSD news, opportunities, and events are shared. The second is the dedicated Community section of the PSSD website, which hosts the Global Circles Interactive Map, the Global Circles Archive, the Ambassador Board, and information about the Network Assistant role. Together, these two infrastructures support both the relational and the informational dimensions of the network.

7.2

Research Process and Co-design

Figure 7.2 Timeline of 2025 Global Circles



7.2.1

The 2025 Season – First Circles Experimentation

The Alumni International Network did not originate as a deliberately designed system. It emerged organically from the organisation of PSSD's 20th Anniversary celebrations, when the faculty sought to reconnect with former students and invite them to take part in the event. For alumni who were unable to travel to Milan, an alternative form of participation was needed, and it was within this context that the idea of Alumni Circles first took shape: local gatherings that could take place anywhere in the world, simultaneously, as part of a shared anniversary moment.

More than 200 alumni responded to the participation form, and many volunteered as Ambassadors. At that stage, however, neither the Ambassador role nor the structure of the Circles had been clearly defined. The initiative existed as a potential, generative yet largely open-ended. It was within this context that I became involved, initially as a student assistant supporting communication activities, and progressively as the coordinator of the Circles initiative itself.

What followed was an intentionally experimental phase, spanning four months from May to August 2025. Rather than constituting a fully designed service, it functioned more as a live test: a way of discovering what an alumni network could become by attempting to bring one into being.

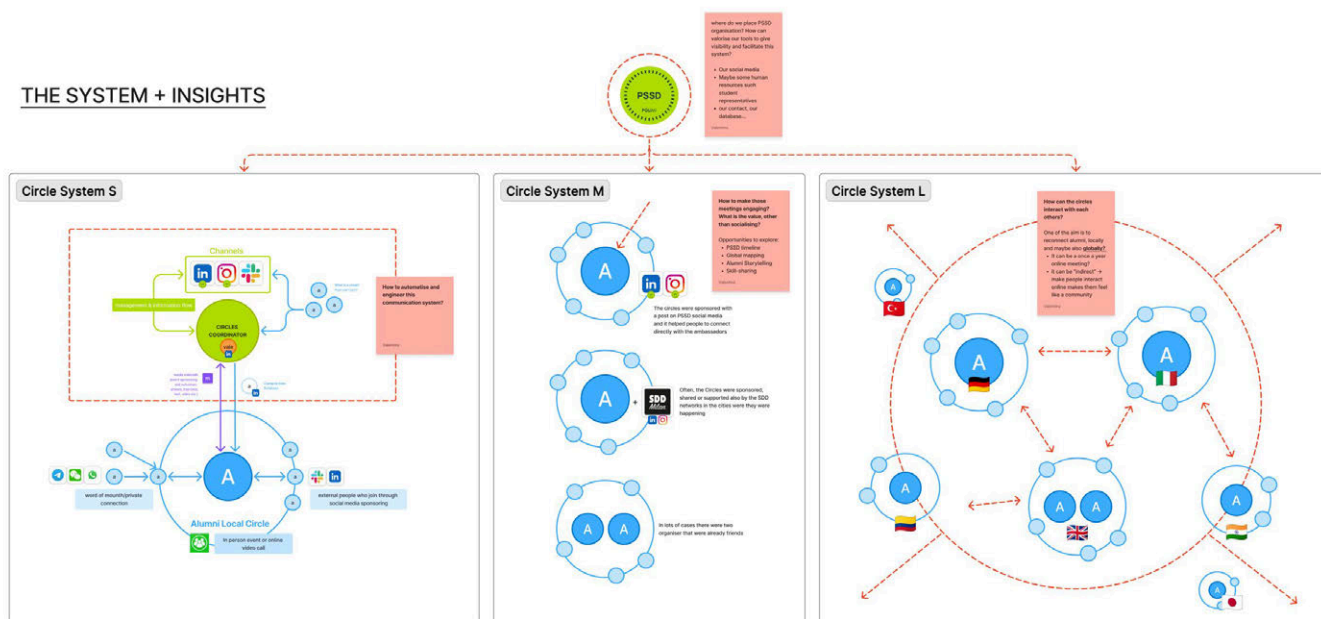
First Insights from Brainstorming with Ambassadors

Before the Circles formally launched, an online session was held on 8th May 2025 with interested Ambassadors to align expectations and explore how the gatherings might be organised. Beyond the logistical dimension, the session surfaced a set of interests and needs within the alumni community, with a shared desire to reconnect and remain informed about the ongoing developments at PSSD. Participants expressed a strong desire for connection and visibility, curiosity about one another's professional trajectories, and a shared difficulty in articulating the value of service design in professional contexts. At the same time, a fundamental question remained unresolved: whether this initiative was conceived as a one-time celebratory event, or as the beginning of something more sustained. This tension between event and network would remain central throughout the entire development process.

Figure 7.3
2025 Map of 2025 Global
Circles operative system

How the System Operated

THE SYSTEM + INSIGHTS



To understand how the 2025 edition functioned — and where it struggled — it is useful to read it across four scales.

At the **small scale**, the system relied on a direct relationship between the Circle Coordinator, the ambassadors, and the PSSD team. Communication happened through a mix of channels (LinkedIn, Slack, WhatsApp, WeChat) often informal and personalised. Ambassadors needed clarification, encouragement, and follow-up before becoming active. The presence of a visible human reference point proved essential to keeping engagement alive. This raised an immediate design question: how could this relational quality be preserved as the network grew?

At the **medium scale**, each circle developed autonomously, shaped by its organizers, local context, and the relationships already in place. Most shared the same underlying goal — reconnecting alumni, exchanging experiences, expanding networks — but their formats, rhythms, and levels of activity varied significantly. Sustaining engagement beyond the initial event emerged as a common challenge.

At the **large scale**, the circles operated largely in isolation from one another. The coordinator represented the only consistent link between local groups, and direct cross-circle communication was minimal. The network existed more as a collection of parallel experiences than as a connected whole.

At the broadest scale, the question became one of institutional role: how should PSSD position itself within this ecosystem? The 2025 edition suggested that the program's most valuable contribution was not as an organiser of local activities, but as a facilitator — providing visibility, resources, and connective infrastructure while allowing circles to retain their autonomy.

What the 2025 Season Left Open

The 2025 edition demonstrated that the appetite for an alumni network was real. Alumni engaged, circles happened, and connections were made. But the experience also exposed the limits of an undesigned system: engagement was uneven, the Ambassador role was unclear, cross-circle connection was absent, and the long-term sustainability of the initiative was undefined. Those findings contributed as a starting point for the design research phase that followed and in understanding the design opportunities.

7.2.2

Design Research & Key Principles

Figure 7.4.
Thesis Research
Timeline



Following the series of events organised for the 20th Anniversary, the thesis research phase was initiated. The quantitative and qualitative research conducted, including surveys and semi-structured interviews with students, alumni, and faculty members, has been analysed and presented in full in Chapter 04. This section draws selectively on those findings to focus on what is most directly relevant to the design of the Alumni International Network: the value exchange between the key actors of the system: PSSD faculty, Ambassadors, and alumni, and the design opportunities that emerged from it.

Stakeholder Targets and Core Needs

For the Alumni International network, three primary stakeholder groups were identified as central:

Alumni represent the broadest group within the network, encompassing graduates at different stages of their professional trajectories. Research identified two broadly distinct phases that shape how alumni relate to the network. In the earlier years after graduation, alumni are primarily motivated by peer exchange, professional development, and maintaining a sense of belonging within the PSSD community, particularly relevant in contexts where service design is not yet widely recognised. As alumni become more professionally established, their relationship with the network shifts from seeking support to seeking contribution: mentoring, knowledge sharing, and staying connected to the evolution of the discipline become more central motivations. Across both phases, a consistent need emerged for lightweight, meaningful, and flexible forms of participation: formats that generate genuine value without requiring excessive time commitment.

Ambassadors occupy a distinct and structurally critical position within the network. They are alumni who have volunteered to take on an active coordinating role within their local communities: organising meet-ups, facilitating connections, and acting as a bridge between PSSD and the broader alumni population. Research revealed that Ambassadors are strongly motivated by a desire to give back and support others, but that their engagement is fragile when insufficiently supported. Core needs include clear role definitions, shared responsibilities across multiple co-organisers, practical operational support from PSSD, and institutional recognition that makes the role meaningful and visible. Without these conditions, Ambassador-led initiatives risk depending on individual enthusiasm rather than a sustainable structure.

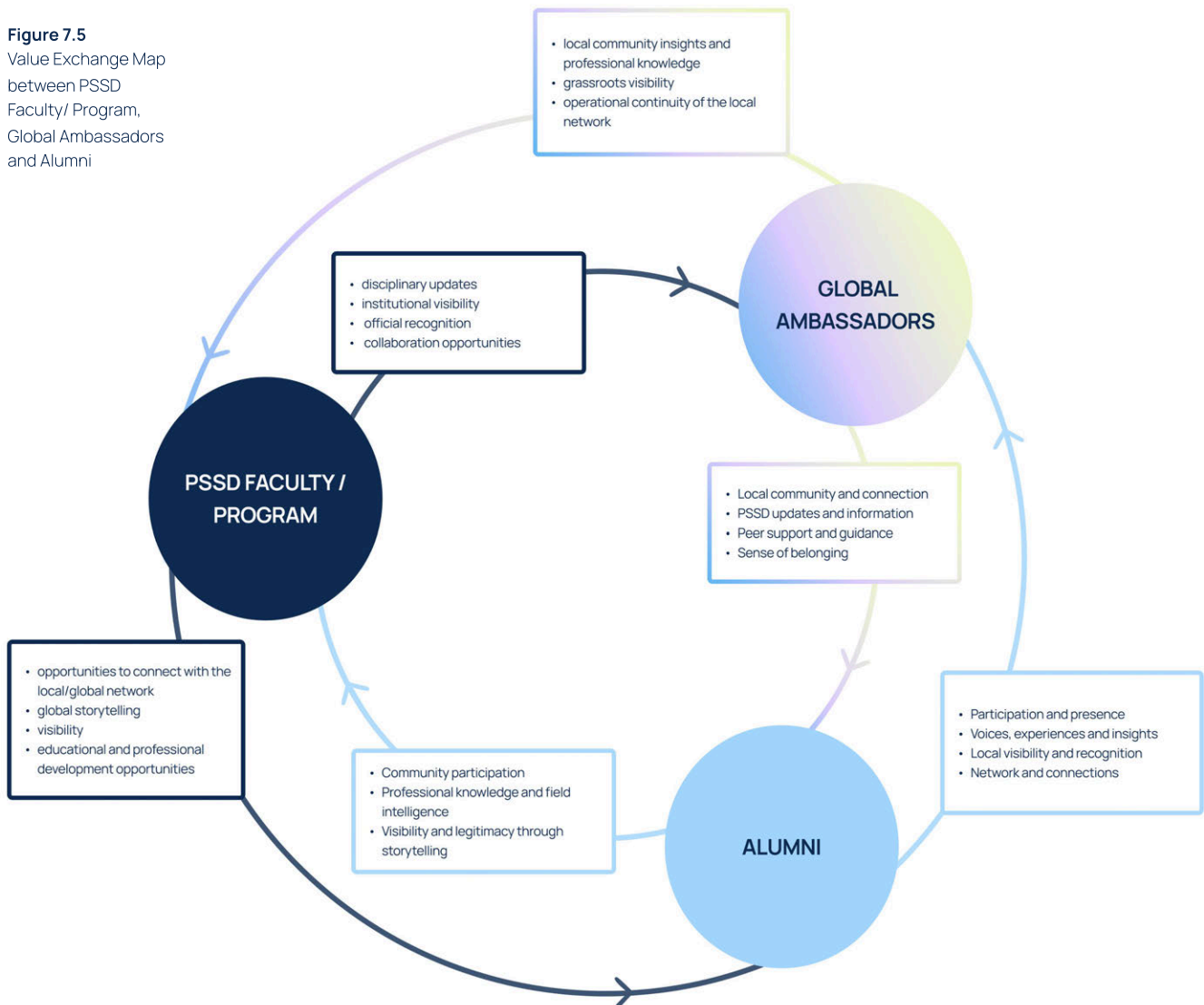
PSSD Faculty view the alumni network as both a community-building initiative and a strategic institutional resource. Faculty interviews highlighted the importance of maintaining a continuous exchange between academic practice and professional reality, as well as the structural vulnerability of initiatives that rely on individual effort. Core needs include sustainable governance frameworks for community and communication management, structured mechanisms for alumni involvement in educational activities, and visibility strategies that serve both alumni engagement and program development objectives.

Value Exchange Between Actors

One of the central findings of the research phase was that the alumni network should not be understood as a unidirectional service delivered by PSSD to its graduates. Rather, it functions as a circular system of value exchange in which each actor both contributes to and benefits from the network.

Figure 7.5

Value Exchange Map
between PSSD
Faculty/ Program,
Global Ambassadors
and Alumni



The diagram illustrates the flows of value between the three main actors. PSSD provides Ambassadors with disciplinary updates, institutional visibility, official recognition, and opportunities for collaboration with the program. Ambassadors, in turn, activate local alumni communities by organising and managing the Global Circles, sharing program updates, facilitating peer connection, and providing support and a sense of belonging to alumni navigating professional transitions. Alumni contribute back to Ambassadors through their participation and presence, their voices and experiences, and the local visibility and network connections they bring to the circles.

What returns to PSSD from the community operates through two distinct channels. Ambassadors feedback local community insights, professional knowledge, and grassroots visibility, acting as the primary operational link between the institution and its distributed global network. Alumni contribute more directly through their active participation in community life, the professional knowledge and field intelligence they carry across industries and geographies, and the visibility and legitimacy they generate through global storytelling.

This two-channel structure is significant: PSSD's relationship with Ambassadors is direct and structural, built on defined roles and mutual responsibilities, while its relationship with the broader alumni community is more mediated, sustained through the Ambassador layer, through communication channels, and through the opportunities for connection, storytelling, and professional development that the program makes available. The Ambassador role is therefore not simply a coordination function; it is the connective tissue that makes the circular value exchange possible at scale.

Synthesis: Key Design Principles

The findings across stakeholder groups converged on a set of design principles that directly informed the subsequent concept development phase.

- 1. Lightweight and distributed participation.** The system should distribute responsibilities across multiple actors and minimise the operational burden on any single individual. Roles must be clearly defined, and the supporting infrastructure should reduce coordination effort rather than increase it.
- 2. Relational value over transactional exchange.** The network's primary value lies in the quality and relevance of its connections rather than in the volume or frequency of its activities. Design decisions should prioritise meaningful exchange and peer learning over high-volume engagement metrics.
- 3. Local autonomy within a global structure.** The system must function effectively at both local and global scales simultaneously. Local circles should retain the flexibility to adapt to their specific contexts, while remaining visible and connected within the broader network.
- 4. Institutional enablement without institutional control.** PSSD's role within the network should be that of a facilitator and infrastructure provider — offering support, resources, and visibility — while preserving the autonomy of local communities and individual contributors.
- 5. Sustainability by design.** Every component of the network should be developed with long-term continuity in mind. This includes clear onboarding processes, documented operational practices, transferable roles, and formats that do not depend on exceptional individual commitment to remain functional.

These principles were subsequently tested and refined through a co-design process involving Ambassadors and transitioning students and early alumni, as documented in the following section.

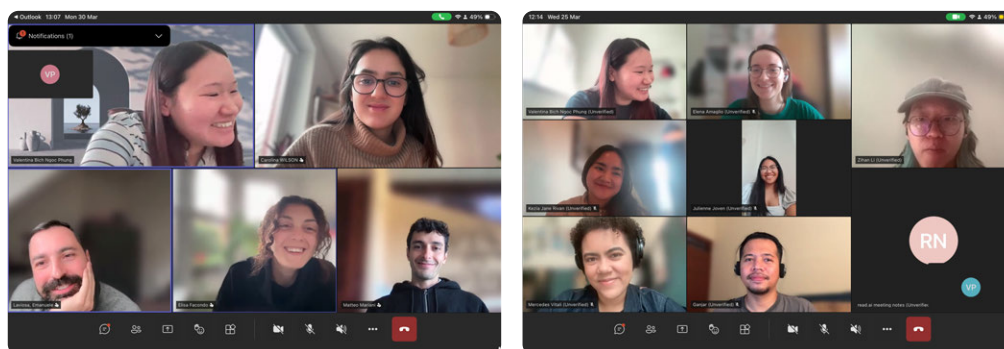
7.2.2

Co-Design & Concept Development

Following the design research phase, a set of initial proposals was developed and brought into a co-design process to test, challenge, and refine the emerging concept of the Alumni International Network. The objective of this phase was not simply to validate existing ideas, but to understand how the proposed components were perceived from the perspective of the people who would ultimately use and operate them, and to identify what needed to be adjusted, added, or reconsidered before moving toward implementation.

Figure 7.6 Early alumni and graduating students during the online co-design session

Figure 7.7 Ambassador participants during the online co-design session



Two online sessions on FigJam were organised with distinct but complementary participant groups. The first session, held on 25th March 2026, involved six participants including two student representatives, two early alumni, and two graduating students at the threshold between academic and professional life, many of whom had returned or were preparing to return to their home countries after studying in Milan. This group was selected to capture the alumni and international student perspective: how the network would be experienced by those entering it for the first time, navigating professional transition in a new context. The second session, held on 30th March 2026, involved four Global Ambassadors who had participated in the 2025 circles: Emanuele and Elisa from London, Matteo from Dubai, and Carolina from Hamburg. This group brought an operational and organisational perspective, grounded in direct experience of coordinating local alumni communities.

While the two sessions were distinct in their composition, the feedback that emerged was largely convergent. Rather than organising the findings by session, this section presents them thematically, reflecting the shared concerns and directions that surfaced across both groups. Overall, participants responded with genuine enthusiasm and expressed strong support for the initiative and its implementation as a pilot.

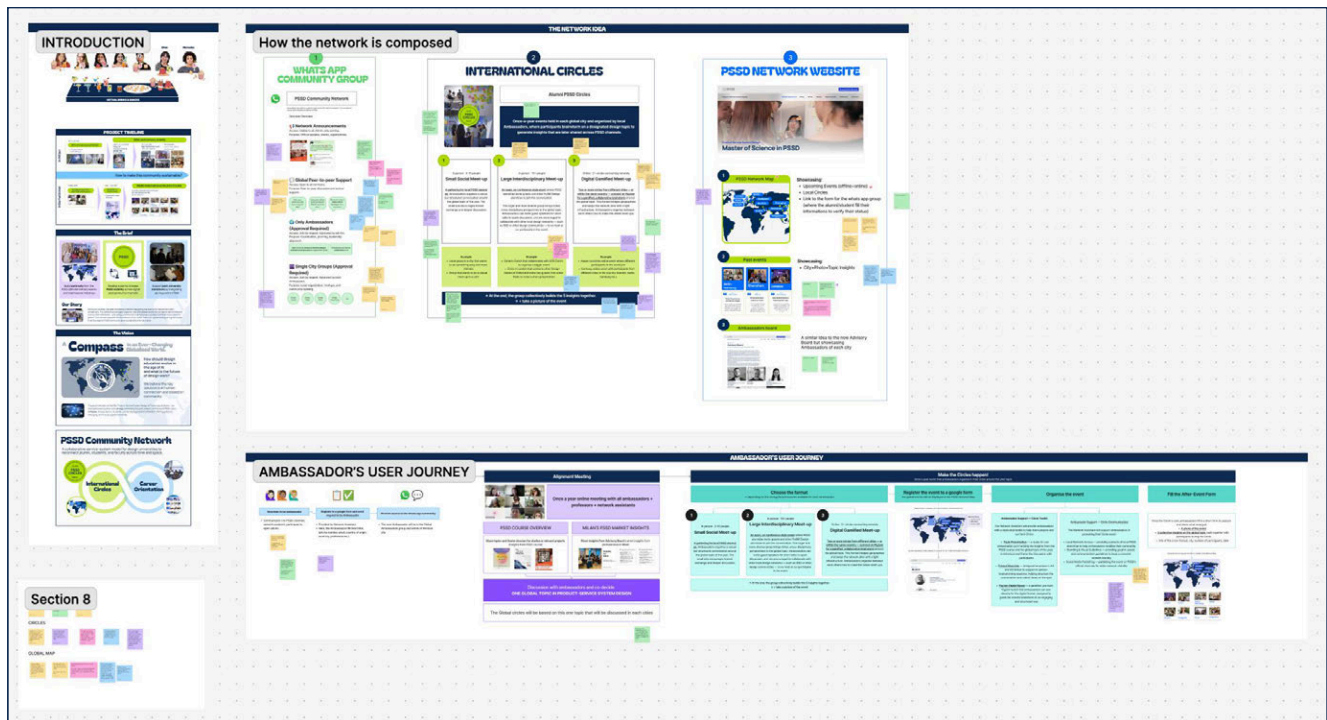


Figure 7.8 FigJam board used as the working surface for the co-design sessions

The Proposals

The concepts brought into the co-design sessions were organised around four interconnected components: a shared digital infrastructure, a set of circle formats, a structured Ambassador journey, and a public-facing network website. Taken together, these components formed an early articulation of what would become the Alumni International Network.

Digital Infrastructure: WhatsApp Community

The first proposal concerned the communication backbone of the network. Rather than relying on a fragmented set of platforms, the concept introduced a structured WhatsApp Community organised into four distinct channels: a network announcements channel, visible to all members and managed by administrators, for official updates, events, and opportunities; a global peer-to-peer support channel, open to all members, for discussion and mutual support; an Ambassadors-only coordination channel, accessible by request, for planning and leadership alignment; and individual city groups, managed by local Ambassadors, for local organisation and community building. This structure was designed to balance openness with organisation, providing a single accessible entry point into the network while preserving distinct spaces for different types of interaction.

Circle Formats

The second proposal explored three formats for the International Circles, designed to accommodate the diversity of local contexts and resources available to Ambassadors.

The first format, a small in-person meet-up for three to ten people, was conceived as a casual but structured gathering centred on a shared annual topic. The limited size was intentional, designed to encourage honest exchange and deeper conversation among participants.

The second format, a large interdisciplinary meet-up for ten or more people, proposed an open unconference-style event in which PSSD alumni could invite guests from other Politecnico di Milano design programs and adjacent professional communities. Ambassadors could invite guest speakers and were encouraged to collaborate with local design networks to co-host or co-participate in the event.

The third format, a digital gamified meet-up, proposed connecting two or more circles from different cities remotely through a pre-built FigJam board, designed to guide a collaborative brainstorm around the annual topic in an engaging and structured way. This format was conceived as a lightweight mechanism for bridging geographies and maintaining network activity beyond in-person gatherings.

Across all three formats, the session would conclude with participants collectively producing five shared insights on the annual topic, alongside a photograph of the event.

Ambassador Journey

The third proposal outlined a structured journey for Ambassadors across three phases. The onboarding phase covered how alumni could volunteer as Ambassadors through PSSD channels, register through a dedicated form, and gain access to the WhatsApp community as administrators of their local city group. The alignment phase proposed an annual online meeting bringing together all Ambassadors, faculty members, and the network assistant to share updates from the PSSD course and the Milan professional landscape, and to collectively decide on one global topic in product-service system design that would frame all circle discussions for that year. The activation phase described how Ambassadors would organise their local circle, supported by a dedicated toolkit including a topic presentation, printed materials for in-person sessions, and a pre-built FigJam digital space, as well as communication support covering local alumni contacts, branding guidelines, and social media publishing through PSSD official channels. Following the event, Ambassadors would complete a short after-event form capturing a photograph, five collective insights, and key event information to feed into the network's shared knowledge infrastructure.

PSSD Network Website

The fourth component introduced the concept of a dedicated network presence within the PSSD website, serving as the public-facing layer of the Alumni International Network. The proposed page would include a network map displaying upcoming and past events and local circles, alongside a link to the community registration form; a past events archive showcasing city, photograph, and topic insights from previous circles; and an Ambassadors board presenting the representatives of each city in the network.

Feedback and Emerging Insights

Both sessions generated strongly positive responses. Participants across both groups expressed enthusiasm for the initiative and genuine excitement about the prospect of its implementation. Rather than fundamental challenges to the concept, the feedback surfaced a series of refinements, operational considerations, and new directions that collectively shaped the final design.

Digital Infrastructure: Refining the WhatsApp Community

The proposed WhatsApp Community structure was broadly accepted, but participants raised important questions about governance and tone. A recurring theme was the need to define a clear code of conduct for the group, alongside guidelines for the network assistant regarding what types of information should be shared and how. The question of faculty participation was also discussed: while professors were welcomed as administrators of the announcements channel, participants suggested they should not be included in individual city groups, in order to preserve the peer-to-peer character of local communities.

A broader tension emerged around the balance between institutional and informal registers. The network is fundamentally alumni-led and peer-oriented, yet it operates under the PSSD name and carries institutional weight. Participants agreed that this balance needed to be made explicit in the community communication guidelines. On the question of membership, priority was given to a streamlined verification system, through which members would access the group by completing a registration form confirming their status, rather than a strictly closed or exclusive model. A further challenge that emerged was the need to accommodate divergent platform preferences within the community: some alumni favour WeChat, others WhatsApp, and finding a way to bridge the two so that the network could function effectively for everyone remained an open and unresolved question.

Circle Formats: Validation and Operational Considerations

Feedback on the circle formats was generally very positive. The small in-person format and the digital gamified format were both received enthusiastically, with the online format generating particularly strong reactions for its capacity to connect alumni across geographies and allow classmates to reconnect regardless of location. The digital circle was identified as one of the most distinctive and valuable elements of the overall concept.

For both formats, participants identified engagement and perceived benefit as a critical factor in driving participation. Ambassadors noted that alumni would be most motivated to join if the circles offered something not easily accessible elsewhere, particularly updates from the PSSD course and the broader professional landscape. The possibility of tangible benefits, such as discounts for service design conferences or professional subscriptions, was also raised as a potential engagement mechanism worth exploring in future iterations.

The large interdisciplinary format generated more nuanced feedback. Participants were not opposed to the idea and believed it could attract significant interest, but raised important concerns about the Ambassador role within it. For an event of this scale, involving external guests, local networks, and potentially sponsors or partner institutions, the responsibility placed on a single volunteer Ambassador was considered disproportionate. Participants were clear on this point: Ambassadors could act as points of contact and community connectors, but the organisational and institutional weight of a larger public event required more direct support from PSSD. The question of funding, space, and partnership with local universities or design communities was identified as something the program would need to address structurally before this format could be realistically implemented.

Alignment Meeting: Enthusiasm and Expanded Ambitions

The proposed annual alignment meeting was received with considerable excitement, particularly among Ambassadors. The prospect of receiving direct updates from the PSSD course and insights from the Advisory Board on professional trends in Milan was described as highly valuable. Several participants expressed interest in participating in the Advisory Board itself, even as listeners, suggesting that the boundary between the alumni community and institutional knowledge could be made more permeable in future iterations.

Network Website: Strongest Point of Enthusiasm

The PSSD Network website concept generated the most enthusiastic response across both sessions. Participants described the network map and past events archive as genuinely valuable, offering a way to stay informed of what was happening globally across the community and serving as a growing knowledge library of insights produced through the circles over time. The combination of visibility and continuity that the website offered was seen as central to building the network's legitimacy.

The Ambassadors Board provoked a particularly strong reaction among ambassador participants. For several of them, official public recognition on the PSSD website represented the single most meaningful aspect of the Ambassador role. This feedback clarified an important design insight: the value of being an Ambassador is not only operational. Recognition, legitimacy, and a visible professional identity within the network are themselves powerful motivators. Participants suggested this could be extended further through a LinkedIn badge, a clearly defined title, and an explicit description of what distinguishes an Ambassador from a regular community member.

Additional Themes and Open Questions

Beyond the specific components tested, both sessions surfaced a number of broader themes that informed the final design and flagged directions for future development.

Participants consistently emphasised the importance of making technical and administrative processes as frictionless as possible, particularly for Ambassadors. Registration, event logging, and form completion should require minimal time and effort to avoid placing unnecessary burden on volunteers.

The idea of a closing event was proposed as a meaningful way to conclude the annual cycle: a moment, either online or in Milan, in which the insights gathered across all global circles are brought together, presented, and given collective visibility. This would reinforce the sense that local activities contribute to something larger and shared.

The question of Ambassador selection, succession, and long-term sustainability was raised as a structural concern. With a relatively small number of active Ambassadors, participants discussed whether PSSD should define selection criteria based on seniority or community involvement, or whether proactivity alone should serve as the primary qualifier. The regeneration of the Ambassador pool over time was identified as something requiring deliberate and ongoing attention.

A recurring theme across both sessions was the generative value of intergenerational exchange within the community. Senior alumni expressed curiosity about how recent graduates were thinking and what they had learned, while junior alumni were equally interested in the professional trajectories of those ahead of them. This mutual dynamic was seen as one of the network's most distinctive qualities and one worth actively designing for.

Finally, participants raised the longer-term possibility of restoring some form of alumni affiliation with Politecnico di Milano, including access to research resources, institutional discounts, or other benefits associated with student status. While not immediately actionable, this aspiration reflected a broader desire for the alumni relationship with the institution to be recognised and formalised in more tangible ways.

Synthesis: From Co-Design to Final Concept

The co-design process confirmed the overall direction of the Alumni International Network while introducing a series of targeted refinements. The WhatsApp Community structure was retained, though it became apparent that a governance framework and clearer communication guidelines would be necessary. Alongside this, the session led to the decision to create a dedicated WeChat Ambassador group and to establish coordination with the pre-existing informal PSSD alumni community on WeChat, acknowledging that a functional network needed to account for the platform preferences of all its members. The small and digital circle formats were validated as the most immediately feasible and impactful, while the large format was reframed as a longer-term development requiring greater institutional support. The network website, and the Ambassadors Board in particular, emerged as a higher-priority element than initially anticipated, given its central role in motivating and recognising Ambassador participation. The co-design approach proved instrumental in clarifying implementation priorities. By identifying which interventions offered the highest impact relative to effort, it allowed for a provisional hierarchy to emerge – distinguishing what required immediate attention from what could be deferred to later stages of development. Equally, it surfaced which touchpoints participants perceived as carrying the greatest exchange of value. Chief among these was the alignment meeting, confirmed as a cornerstone of the system and considered a candidate for expansion, particularly in terms of providing broader access to institutional knowledge.

These outcomes directly informed the design of the two pilot projects implemented for the 2026 season, documented in the following sections.

7.3

Implemented Intervention 1: Global Ambassadors Program



Figure 7.9
Global PSSD
Ambassadors logo

The co-design process made clear that the Ambassador role is the central pillar of the Alumni International Network. Without active, supported, and recognised Ambassadors, the local circles cannot happen, the value exchange cannot flow, and the network remains an idea rather than a functioning system. For this reason, the formalisation and implementation of the Global Ambassadors Program was identified as the first priority of the 2026 pilot.

What emerged from both the research and co-design phases was that Ambassadors are not simply event organisers. They are the most engaged alumni in the network: volunteers motivated by a genuine desire to give back, to maintain a connection with PSSD, and to play a visible role within their local professional communities. At the same time, the research had surfaced a critical tension: the weight of representing Politecnico di Milano and the PSSD program publicly, particularly in the context of larger events, was perceived as a significant responsibility that required institutional backing and clearer role definition. Designing the Ambassador program therefore meant addressing both dimensions simultaneously: streamlining the operational side while making the role genuinely meaningful, protected, and professionally valuable.

Formalising the Ambassador Role

The first step in implementing the program was to reach out to all alumni who had expressed interest in becoming Ambassadors through the 20th Anniversary registration form. Professor Daniela Sangiorgi, as head of the program, personally proposed the formalisation of the role to interested alumni, inviting them to complete a dedicated registration form. This direct institutional outreach was deliberately chosen over a generic open call: given the findings around recognition and responsibility, it was important that the invitation came from the program itself, signalling that PSSD was actively investing in the role rather than simply accepting volunteers.

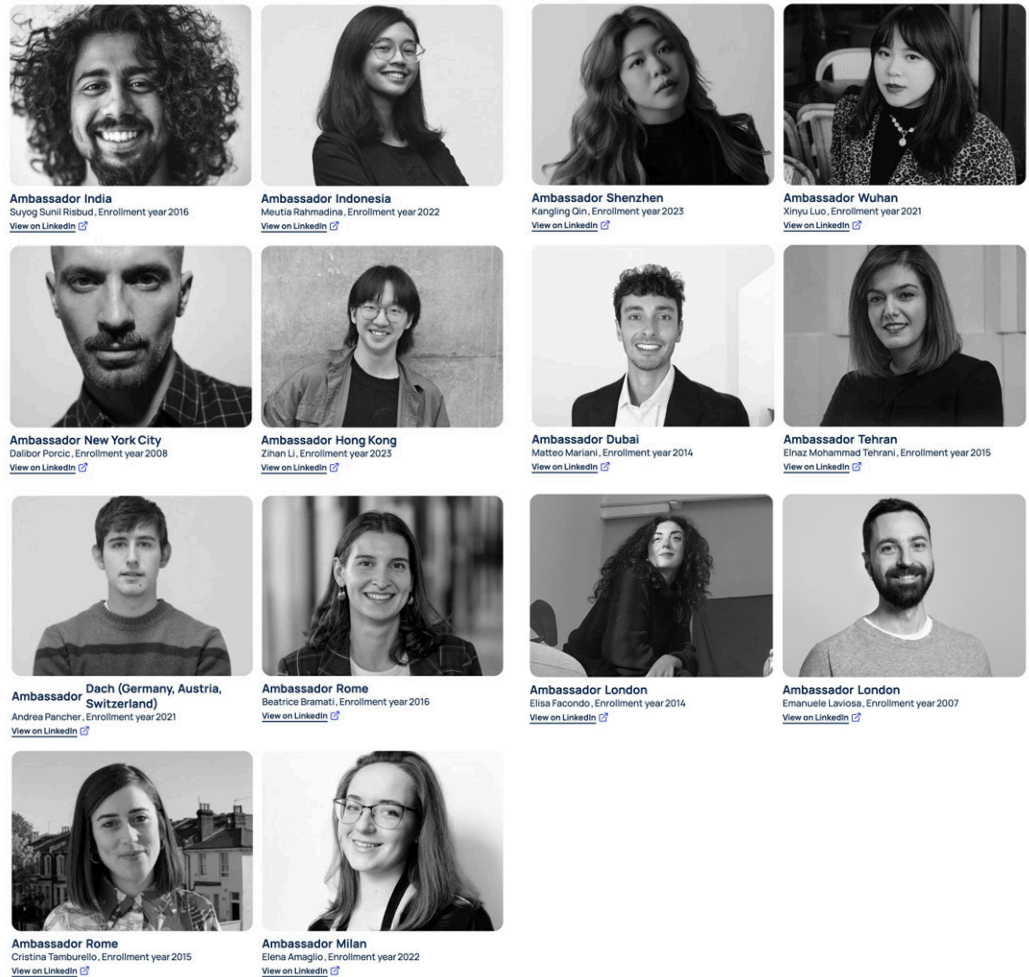
A dedicated WhatsApp group for Global PSSD Ambassadors was created within the broader community infrastructure, providing a shared space for direct communication between Ambassadors and the network assistant. This channel proved more immediate and informal than email, enabling faster coordination and a stronger sense of collective identity among the Ambassador group. In parallel, the Global Ambassadors Board was designed and implemented on the official PSSD website, within the newly created Community section. The board presents each Ambassador with their name, location, and role within the network, giving them a publicly visible and institutionally endorsed presence.

The co-design had identified this as one of the most valued elements of the entire program: for many Ambassadors, official recognition on the PSSD website represented the primary motivation for taking on the role. The board was therefore not designed as a secondary feature but as a core component of the program, directly addressing the need for legitimacy, visibility, and professional identity that the research had consistently surfaced.

Figure 7.10

Global Ambassador Board webpage

Source. PSSD website, Community page (<https://www.pssd.polimi.it/community/the-pssd-global-circles>).



As of June 2026, the Global Ambassadors Board features **13 Ambassadors representing 12 locations across three continents**. The active circles span London, with Emanuele Laviosa and Elisa Facondo; Rome, with Beatrice Bramati and Cristina Tamburello; Milan, with Elena Amaglio; Dubai, with Matteo Mariani; Tehran, with Elnaz Mohammad Tehrani; the DACH region covering Germany, Austria and Switzerland, with Andrea Pancher; Hong Kong, with Zihan Li; Shenzhen, with Kangling Qin; Wuhan, with Xinyu Luo; Indonesia, with Meutia Rahmadina; and New York City, with Dalibor Porcic. The geographic spread of the network reflects both the international character of the PSSD program and the diversity of professional contexts in which its alumni operate.

The Ambassador role is designed with sustainability and renewal in mind. Each Ambassador holds the role for a two-year term, after which it can be renewed or passed on to another alumnus from the same city or region, allowing the network to grow while ensuring that leadership does not become permanently concentrated in the same individuals. At this early stage, the selection process has remained largely voluntary and collaborative: given the relatively small number of active Ambassadors, the priority has been to welcome motivated alumni rather than apply formal criteria. As the network matures and more alumni come forward, the question of how Ambassadors are selected, supported, and succeeded will become increasingly important to address structurally.

Ambassadors are supported throughout the season by the network assistant, reachable directly through both WhatsApp and WeChat to accommodate participants across different platform ecosystems.

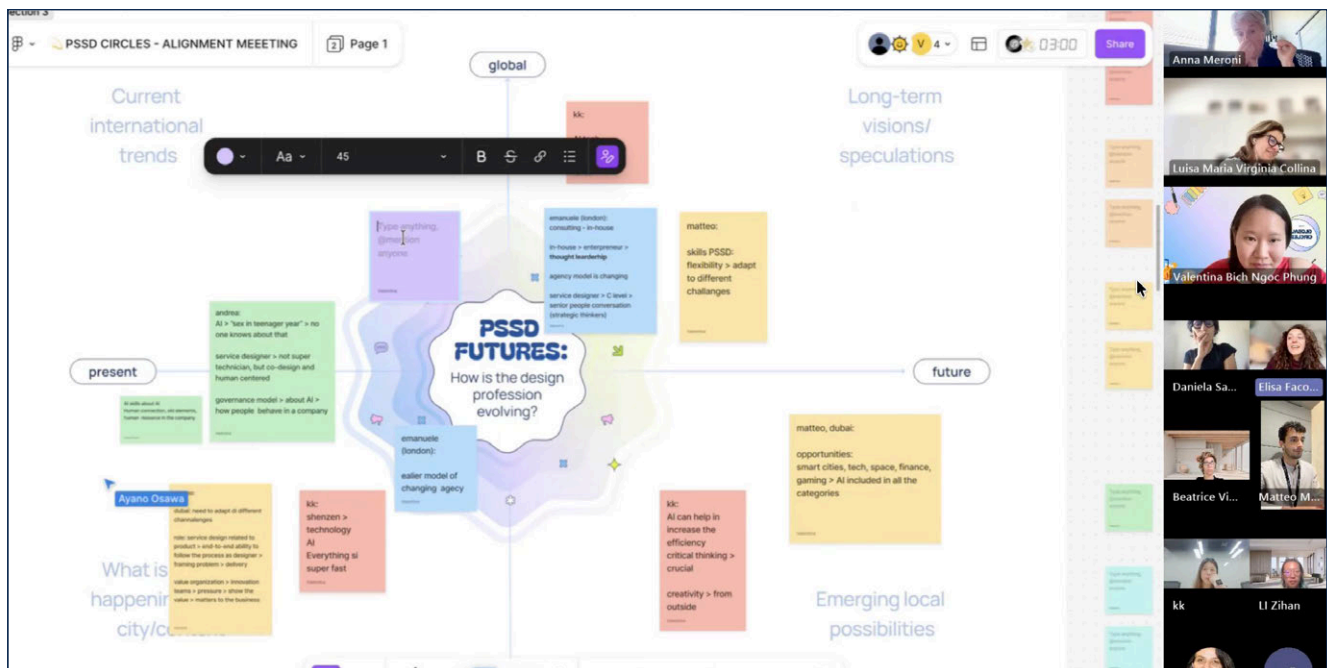


Figure 7.11
Screenshot from the
Alignment Meeting session.

The Alignment Meeting

The Alignment Meeting represented the operational and relational heart of the Ambassador program. Conceived as an annual gathering bringing together all active Ambassadors, PSSD faculty, and the network assistant, its purpose was twofold: to share institutional knowledge and program updates with the Ambassador community, and to collectively define the global topic that would frame all circle discussions for the year.

Organising the meeting involved several layers of coordination. On the faculty side, almost all PSSD professors were invited to contribute, including former heads of the program Luisa Collina and Anna Meroni. Faculty members were asked to prepare a short report offering Ambassadors a window into how the program was developing: its current themes, student projects, and emerging initiatives, along with wayfinding links to relevant resources. The report was structured around three areas: an overview of the evolution from product-service to complex service systems; current course topics and their development; and examples of PSSD initiatives, faculty projects, and program statistics. The intention was that Ambassadors could review this material and share relevant parts with their local communities, creating a direct channel of knowledge from the academic environment to the global network.

On the Ambassador side, a FigJam brainstorming board was designed to facilitate the collective discussion around the annual topic. The session was structured around the question: PSSD Futures: How is the Design Profession Evolving?

The board was organised along two axes, present to future and local to global, to frame the discussion and help surface insights across different dimensions of professional experience.

The meeting was held online on 3rd May 2026 at 12:00, a time chosen to accommodate participants across multiple time zones. Attendance was strong: Ambassadors joined from Rome, London (two participants), Dubai, Indonesia, India, Hong Kong, Shenzhen, Milan, and Tehran, alongside five PSSD professors, the three program coordinators, and the two former heads of the program. The session opened with an introduction to the Alumni International Network and the 2026 pilot, followed by the faculty program update presented by Professor Sangiorgi. Professor Luisa Collina and Professor Anna Meroni then offered their perspectives on the evolution of the design profession, before the floor was opened for the Ambassador brainstorming session. Five interconnected themes emerged from the discussion:

1. The Local and Global Dimension

Participants observed that design work is increasingly shaped by global information flows, making local and global contexts progressively less distinct. Projects originating in one country are routinely designed for entirely different contexts, and the boundaries between local practice and global influence are becoming harder to draw. In countries where service design does not yet exist as a formal professional role, such as Indonesia, the practice is already embedded in adjacent industries and disciplines. As Dina, joining from Indonesia, noted, community plays a central role in nourishing knowledge and bridging different fields where formal structures are absent. Suyong, joining from India, captured the broader shift concisely:

“

The world is so interconnected that local and global are becoming the same.

2. The Evolution of the Agency Model

In mature markets, the trajectory of the design profession is shifting. Emanuele and Elisa, both based in London, observed that where designers previously moved from consulting agencies into in-house roles, the current movement is from in-house practice toward entrepreneurship and thought leadership. Senior designers are increasingly entering strategic conversations at the executive level, and the rise of fractional leadership is opening new lanes for experienced practitioners. Their advice to younger alumni was direct:

“

Learn to speak the language of engineers, of executives, of the boardroom.

3. The Multilayered Designer: Wide Skillset, Sharp Niche

Participants identified a growing pressure on service designers to demonstrate end-to-end capability: from problem framing through to delivery, value creation, and measurable business impact. At the same time, owning a specific niche was identified as what allows designers to access more strategic conversations. As Matteo from Dubai observed: "A designer needs to be flexible and adapt to different challenges, with the end-to-end ability to follow the process and deliver value that matters to the business."

66 Emerging opportunity spaces identified by the group included smart cities, fintech, space, and gaming, all increasingly intersecting with artificial intelligence.

4. The Human Side of Design

Several participants reflected on the designer's role as a translator and connector across communities, institutions, and stakeholders. Li Zihan, working on social innovation projects at Hong Kong Polytechnic University, described environments driven by institutional logic rather than design thinking, where the designer's role is to mediate between competing interests and translate complex goals into something meaningful for end users. From Shenzhen, Kangling observed a shift underway in AI-heavy contexts: away from templates and toward genuinely listening to users and centering the human dimension of design. As Li Zihan put it:

66 The service designer is a connector, linking different targets, translating needs, aligning stakeholders across languages and institutions.

5. AI: Opportunity, Fear, and Creativity

Artificial intelligence emerged as an unavoidable theme, present in every professional context represented in the room. Participants agreed that most organisations are currently grappling with governance rather than technology: the service designer's role around AI is not to become a technical specialist, but to bring human-centred and co-design thinking to how AI gets adopted and implemented. Andrea, who is Service Design Drinks Milan coordinator, offered a characteristically direct observation: "AI is like sex in the teenage years: everyone is talking about it, nobody really knows what it is and what they are doing."

66

The antidote to AI-driven standardisation, participants suggested, lies in cultivating a personal perspective fed by experiences beyond the screen. Creativity, in this reading, lives outside.

Coordination and Activation

Following the meeting, the coordination phase began. Ambassadors were provided with the full circle toolkit: a topic presentation summarising the PSSD program update and the key insights from the alignment meeting brainstorming session, printed materials in A4 and A3 format to support in-person sessions, and the pre-built FigJam digital board for the online format. A registration and review form was shared to allow Ambassadors to log their circle at the outset and capture collective insights and photographs at the close. This streamlined process was designed to minimise administrative burden while ensuring that the knowledge produced across all global circles could be gathered, published, and fed back into the network's shared infrastructure.

The Strategic Value of the Ambassador Program

Taken as a whole, the Global Ambassadors Program demonstrated something that the research had anticipated but that the implementation made concrete: formalising recognition and creating genuine institutional exchange are as important as operational infrastructure in making a volunteer-led network sustainable. Ambassadors did not simply need tools and guidelines. They needed to feel that their role was real, visible, and valued by the institution they were representing. The Ambassadors Board, the personal outreach from faculty, and the alignment meeting, with its direct access to program knowledge and the perspectives of former heads of the course, were not peripheral gestures. They were the conditions that made voluntary participation meaningful enough to sustain.

7.4

Implemented Intervention 2: Global Circles 2026



Figure 7.12
PSSD Global Circles logo

Global Circles 2026

The Global Circles 2026 season represents the first fully designed edition of the PSSD Alumni Global Circles. While the 2025 edition emerged as an experimental initiative to reconnect alumni worldwide during the programme's 20th anniversary, the 2026 season translates that experience into a structured and repeatable community engagement model. The initiative was developed with a defined governance framework, a coherent visual identity, dedicated communication channels, and operational guidelines intended to make the system sustainable, manageable, and replicable over time.

At the time of writing, the 2026 season is actively underway, with local circles scheduled between June and September 2026. This section documents the initiative as designed and implemented, outlining its governance, operational model, and planned developments throughout the remainder of the season.

Governance and Concept Definition

The 2026 edition is centred around the annual theme "PSSD Futures: How is the design profession evolving?". The topic was developed collaboratively with the PSSD faculty and introduced during the annual Global Ambassadors Alignment Meeting, where ambassadors collectively reflected on the objectives and organisation of the initiative.

The selected theme responds to one of the most significant challenges emerging from the research: supporting alumni in navigating a rapidly evolving professional landscape. As technological innovation, artificial intelligence, and changing organisational contexts continue to reshape design practice, the Global Circles provide an opportunity for alumni to exchange experiences and compare how these transformations are unfolding across different countries, industries, and cultural contexts. Rather than seeking a single answer, the initiative encourages the emergence of multiple local perspectives, contributing to a richer understanding of the future of the design profession worldwide.

Operationally, each Global Circle is organised by one or more local ambassadors, who coordinate an online or in-person gathering within their geographical area. Communications are centralised through dedicated community channels, primarily WhatsApp and WeChat, under the broader PSSD Community Network, while ambassadors remain responsible for identifying suitable dates, locations, and formats according to local needs.

Each meeting is designed as a facilitated conversation rather than a formal event. Participants reflect on the annual theme, share professional experiences, discuss local opportunities and challenges, and strengthen relationships within their regional community. Following each session, ambassadors collect the key insights and outcomes using a shared documentation framework. These contributions are then consolidated and published through the PSSD website, creating a collective narrative that connects local conversations into a global body of knowledge.

Beyond individual events, the Global Circles are intended to become an annual community ritual that reconnects the international PSSD network. By creating recurring opportunities for alumni to meet, exchange knowledge, and build meaningful professional relationships, the initiative reinforces the relational infrastructure of the PSSD Community Network while generating shared insights that benefit the wider community.

Figure 7.13
PSSD Global Circles 2026
Season Topic Poster



Branding and Visual Identity

Figure 7.14

Global Map with local circles activated in 2026



Alongside the governance work, a visual identity system was developed for the Global Circles 2026 season. The branding served a dual purpose: creating a coherent and recognisable aesthetic across all communication materials, and reinforcing the sense of a unified global initiative rather than a set of disconnected local events. Materials produced included posters and social media assets for the season launch, as well as branded templates for circle promotion that Ambassadors could adapt for their local contexts. The visual identity was designed to feel both institutional and community-oriented, reflecting the balance between PSSD program ownership and alumni-led organisation that had been a consistent theme throughout the design process.

Digital Infrastructure: The WhatsApp Community Network



Figure 7.15
Illustration of the different
groups on the PSSD Network
WhatsApp Community

A central element of the 2026 operational setup was the creation of the PSSD Community Network WhatsApp community, now counting 131 members. Drawing on the learning from previous communication experiments, including the Slack workspace used in 2025 which had progressively migrated toward more personal WhatsApp groups, the decision was made to consolidate the community infrastructure under a single organised platform. Rather than allowing groups to develop independently and without connection to each other, the WhatsApp community brought all city and regional groups together under one umbrella, making the network visible as a whole while preserving the local character of individual groups.

Each city or regional group was branded consistently, reinforcing the unified identity of the Community Network while giving each circle its own local presence. The structure follows the four-channel architecture developed during the co-design phase: a network announcements channel, a global peer-to-peer support channel, an Ambassadors-only coordination channel, and individual city groups managed by local Ambassadors.

Additionally, in an effort to accommodate the different communication habits of the community, a dedicated presence on WeChat was established, recognising that students based in China face significant barriers to accessing WhatsApp. This took the form of an ambassadors group and active engagement with the existing PSSD alumni community on the platform. This choice reflects a broader community-driven mindset that has guided the network's development: rather than expecting all members to adapt to a single communication infrastructure, the network seeks to meet people where they already are, ensuring that no part of the community is structurally excluded from participation.

Operational Structure and Next Steps

The operational model for the 2026 season is more centralised and structured than in 2025, while deliberately preserving Ambassador autonomy in how individual circles are organised and run. The network assistant coordinates the process, supports Ambassadors with contacts and materials, and manages communication and publishing through PSSD official channels.

The season is currently in its activation phase. The next steps planned for the remainder of the 2026 season are as follows.

The first is supporting Ambassadors in reaching local alumni communities by providing contacts from the PSSD alumni database, helping to ensure that circles are not limited to those already connected to the Ambassador personally.

The second is publishing confirmed circle events on PSSD social media channels as dates and locations are finalised, giving each circle institutional visibility and helping to attract participants beyond the immediate Ambassador network.

The third is to support the Global Circles meet-up itself. To facilitate their local gatherings, Ambassadors are provided with a toolkit prepared by the Network Assistants, which includes: a PSSD report updating the community on the course, its initiatives, and relevant career data; a summary report from the alignment meeting with key insights and directions; and two facilitation frameworks, one to guide the brainstorming session around the annual topic, and one to support Ambassadors in capturing and writing up the insights emerging from the discussion.

The fourth is the creation of the Global Circles Archive, planned for launch at the end of September 2026 when the season concludes. The archive will collect and publish the insights produced across all circles, alongside photographs and event information, creating a permanent and growing knowledge resource for the community.

The fifth is a feedback and follow-up phase with both Ambassadors and participants at the close of the season, gathering reflections on what worked and what could be improved, and opening pathways for further involvement such as alumni storytelling contributions or participation in the Alumni-led Expert Talks.

Figure 7.16 and 7.17
Brainstorming materials
for the PSSD Circle 2026
season.

Position trends, topics, challenges, opportunities and ideas about how the design profession is evolving according to where you think they belong.

PSSD Circles of:

Date:

No. of participants:

global

Current international trends

Long-term visions/speculations

present

future

What is already happening in your city/context

Emerging local possibilities

local

PSSD FUTURES:

How is the design profession evolving?

GLOBAL CIRCLES

2026 SEASON

Insights 01

PSSD Circles of:

Date:

No. of participants:

OUT OF THE BRAINSTORMING

Which transversal topics emerged from the brainstorming – and why do they matter?

Insights 02

SKILLS & ROLES

What skills and roles will be must-haves for designers across different industries?

Insights 03

INDUSTRY & MARKET

In which sectors and contexts is PSSD knowledge most valuable – and where is it headed next?

Insights 04

EDUCATION & COMMUNITY

How could the PSSD community network be valuable – to you, the profession, and design education?

Insights 05

THE ONE THING WE ALL AGREE ON

If you had to sum up the future of PSSD in one sentence – what would it be?

GLOBAL CIRCLES

2026 SEASON

Alumni International Network

268

A First Designed Edition

The 2026 season is the first edition of the Global Circles that has been intentionally designed, with a defined structure, a coherent identity, and operational processes built around the needs of Ambassadors and participants. It is not a concluded project with measurable outcomes. Faculty and the project team share the understanding that this season functions as a first designed iteration: the goal is to run it, learn from it, and use the feedback gathered to refine and improve the system for future editions. The insights collected at the end of the season will directly inform that next iteration, closing the loop between design, implementation, and reflection that has characterised the development of the Alumni International Network from the beginning.

7.5

Future Developments

The Alumni International Network was designed from the outset with long-term evolution in mind. The two pilot projects implemented in 2026 represent a deliberate first iteration: a minimum viable system built to test the core infrastructure, establish the Ambassador role, and run the first designed edition of the Global Circles. What follows describes three developments that are planned or under consideration for future editions, each building directly on the foundation established this year. The network assistant role, which this year was carried out as part of this thesis project, is intended to be renewed annually through a new PSSD student volunteer or intern, ensuring that the system continues to evolve with fresh energy and perspective while maintaining institutional continuity.

7.5.1

Global Circles Archive

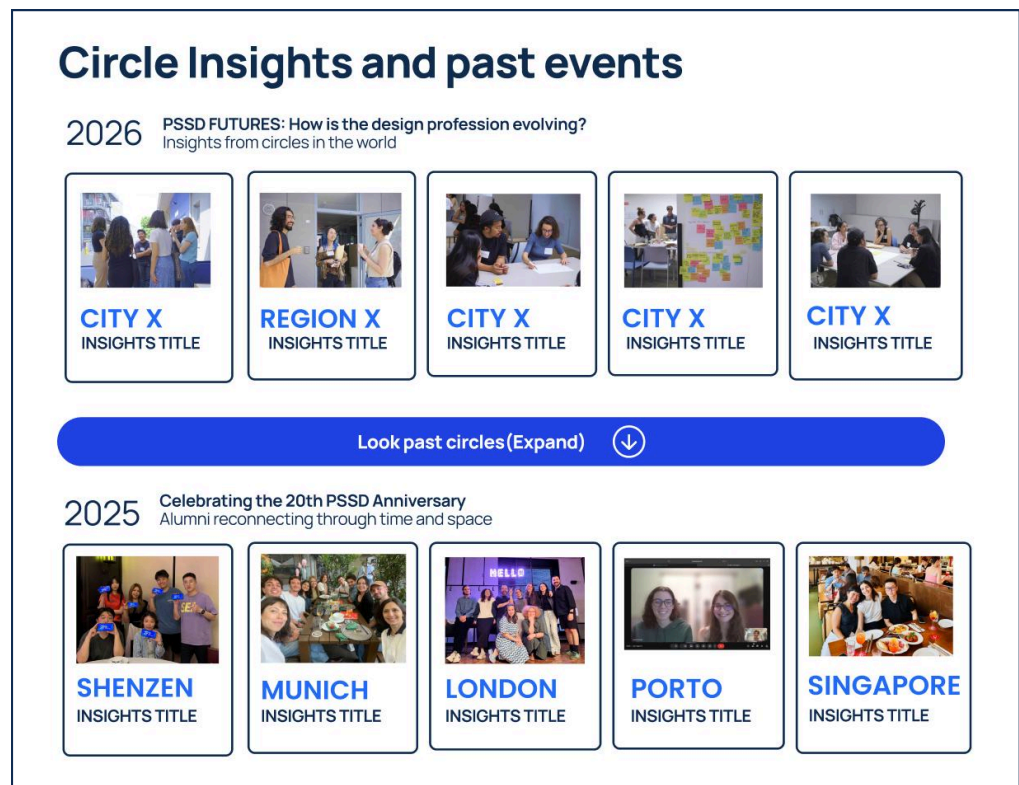
The Global Circles Archive is the most immediately planned development, with implementation scheduled for September 2026 at the close of the current season. The archive will serve as a permanent and growing repository of the knowledge produced through the circles each year: collecting the insights, photographs, and event information submitted by Ambassadors through the after-event form, and publishing them in a dedicated section of the PSSD Community website. Beyond documentation, the archive has a strategic function: it makes the collective intelligence of the global network visible and accessible over time, transforming individual local conversations into a shared disciplinary resource.

For alumni and external visitors, including prospective students, design practitioners, and others curious about the program, the archive offers a way to stay informed of what is being discussed globally across the community. For future participants and Ambassadors, it provides a record of how the network has grown and what questions it has explored across different seasons. For PSSD as an institution, it is evidence of the program's international reach and the ongoing relevance of its community beyond graduation.

In the longer term, the archive aspires to become something more than a documentation tool. As it grows year after year, it has the potential to become a meaningful reference point not only within the PSSD community but for the broader design world: a place where students, alumni, faculty, and external practitioners can return to learn, reflect, and understand how the discipline is evolving from the ground up. This ambition responds directly to one of the most consistent needs identified through the research: the desire to know and understand the stories of others, to see where people have gone and what they have encountered along the way.

This feels particularly significant in the current moment. At a time of professional uncertainty, rapid technological change, and geopolitical complexity, the archive offers something rare: a collection of grounded, international, practitioner perspectives on what it means to work as a designer today. Alumni operating across twelve countries and four continents bring genuinely diverse vantage points to shared questions, and the archive is the mechanism through which those voices become collective and public. It serves a dual purpose: socialising the community by making individual experiences visible and relatable, and professionally informing it by surfacing patterns, tensions, and emerging directions that no single perspective could capture alone. In this sense, it embodies the bottom-up logic that has guided the design of the Alumni International Network from the beginning: not a platform that broadcasts institutional knowledge downward, but one that gives the community itself a structure through which to speak.

Figure 7.18
 Prototype of the Global
 Circles Archive on PSSD
 website



7.5.2

Global Circles Interactive Map

The Interactive Map is planned as a development for the 2027 edition, once sufficient data from the 2026 season has been collected and reviewed. The concept involves a dynamic, publicly accessible map embedded in the PSSD Community website that visualises the global reach of the network: showing active circles, Ambassador locations, and upcoming events during the circles season, planned around spring and summer each year. The 2026 season will generate the first structured dataset of circle registrations, locations, formats, and outcomes, providing the material needed to design and test the map in a meaningful way.

Beyond its communicative value, the interactive map responds to one of the recurring themes from the research and co-design phases: the importance of making the global dimension of the network visible and tangible, both for existing members and for prospective alumni considering joining. A further integration being considered is the mapping of local design networks and communities in each city, region, or country where Ambassadors are active. This possibility is grounded in a concrete observation: according to the Ambassador registration data, approximately half of the current Ambassadors are also members of other local design networks, and many regularly participate in broader community and networking activities beyond PSSD. Rather than treating this as peripheral, the map could make these connections visible, allowing alumni and current students to discover and engage with the wider design ecosystem in cities they are based in or moving to.

This reflects a collaborative rather than competitive positioning that is central to the philosophy of the Alumni International Network. The PSSD community has an intentionally intimate character: the shared academic experience, the direct relationship between faculty, students, and alumni, and the relative scale of the network all contribute to a sense of closeness and specificity that larger professional networks cannot replicate. This quality is worth preserving. At the same time, the network does not seek to be exclusive or self-enclosed. Its broader ambition is to contribute to the nurturing of design culture across different regions and contexts, and connecting alumni to local communities of practice is one meaningful way to do that.

Figure 7.19
Prototype of the Global
Circles Interactive Map on
PSSD website



7.5.3

Alumni-Led Expert Talks

The Alumni-Led Expert Talks occupy a unique position within the broader service ecosystem: they sit at the intersection of the Alumni International Network and the Career Orientation Program, connecting the two in a format that generates value for every actor involved. While the Career Orientation dimension of this initiative is discussed in the relevant chapter, this section focuses on its role within the international alumni community specifically.

The format envisions an annual online series in which alumni, Ambassadors, and potentially faculty members or Advisory Board professionals gather around a specific theme to share and compare their professional experiences in a panel-style conversation. Each session could focus on a particular intersection of service design with a specific field or context, for example PSSD and healthcare, PSSD and entrepreneurship, PSSD and the public or non-governmental sector, or PSSD and emerging technologies. By bringing together practitioners who work in the same domain but operate in geographically distant contexts, the talks make visible how the same professional territory can be interpreted and navigated very differently depending on organisational culture, regional context, and individual trajectory.

The involvement of Advisory Board members and faculty alongside alumni adds a further dimension: for senior alumni and Ambassadors, the opportunity to engage in peer-level conversations with industry leaders and academics represents a meaningful form of professional recognition and intellectual exchange. For students and early graduates, it offers something rarer than generic career advice: a multiplicity of concrete, comparable examples from people who share the same educational background but have taken different career paths. The activation model is designed to be lightweight and scalable. Once a year, Ambassadors would circulate a call within the network to identify alumni interested in participating as speakers on a given theme. Interested alumni would register through a shared database, and once a minimum threshold of five participants is reached around a specific topic, the talk can be confirmed and organised. This bottom-up mechanism ensures that sessions only happen when genuine interest and availability exist, avoiding the risk of creating a program that depends on exceptional individual effort to sustain.

The online format is central to the viability of the initiative. Given the geographic distribution of the network, an in-person format would require significantly more resources, coordination, and potentially external sponsorship to be realistic. Online delivery makes the talks accessible to all members regardless of location, reduces the organisational burden considerably, and aligns with the lightweight and distributed ethos that has guided the design of the network throughout. An in-person edition could be considered in the future as the network matures and additional resources become available, but the online format represents the most viable and appropriate starting point.

In the longer term, the Expert Talks have the potential to become one of the most distinctive offerings of the Alumni International Network: a recurring space where the global community comes together not simply to connect, but to collectively advance its understanding of where service design is going and what it means to practice it across different industries, cultures, and contexts.

Figure 7.20
Prototype of the Alumni
Expert Talk social media
poster



7.6

Chapter Summary and Reflection

This chapter has documented the full arc of the Alumni International Network: from its unplanned origins in the 20th Anniversary celebrations, through a design research and co-design process, to the implementation of two pilot projects and the definition of future developments.

The 2025 season revealed both the appetite for an alumni network and the limits of an undesigned one. The research phase that followed mapped the needs of alumni, Ambassadors, and faculty, and identified the circular value exchange logic at the heart of the network's design. Five principles guided the concept development: lightweight and distributed participation, relational value over transactional exchange, local autonomy within a global structure, institutional enablement without institutional control, and sustainability by design. These were tested and refined through co-design sessions, which validated the core direction while prioritising recognition and visibility for Ambassadors, the small and digital circle formats, and the alignment meeting as a cornerstone of the system.

The two 2026 pilot projects translated these findings into a functioning structure. The Global Ambassadors Program formalised the role through a registration process, a public Ambassadors Board, and an Alignment Meeting connecting Ambassadors with faculty and former program heads. The Global Circles 2026 season introduced a coherent identity, a WhatsApp community infrastructure, a shared annual topic, and a support toolkit for Ambassadors. Thirteen Ambassadors are currently active across twelve locations on four continents. Three future developments, the Global Circles Archive, the Interactive Map, and the Alumni-Led Expert Talks, extend the network's ambition into the coming editions.

7.6.1

Criticalities and Open Challenges

The most significant structural risk of the Alumni International Network is sustainability over time. Designing conditions for renewal is not the same as guaranteeing it: the system depends on a continuing supply of motivated volunteers, both as Ambassadors and as network assistants, and sustaining that motivation requires ongoing attention. The 2025 experience already offered an early signal of this fragility, with some Ambassadors disengaging once the initial enthusiasm of the anniversary context faded. Adding structure helps, but structure also introduces a degree of bureaucracy that can itself become a barrier to participation. Every process, form, and guideline added to streamline the system also represents a threshold that potential volunteers must be willing to cross. Finding the right balance between operational clarity and lightness of touch remains one of the most delicate ongoing challenges.

A second tension concerns the relationship between institutional governance and community autonomy. The network needs PSSD's backing to function: without institutional recognition, resources, and communication infrastructure, the Ambassador role loses its meaning and the circles lose their visibility. But too much institutional weight risks undermining the very qualities that make the network valuable: its peer-to-peer character, its informality, and its sense of belonging to something built by and for alumni rather than administered from above. Creating genuine space for dialogue between Ambassadors and faculty, rather than a one-directional flow of guidelines and requests, is essential to preserving this balance. The alignment meeting is one attempt to do this, but it will need to evolve as the network grows.

Finally, the role of the network assistant deserves honest acknowledgment. It is a demanding position: part coordinator, part designer, part community manager, and part institutional diplomat. It requires availability, initiative, sensitivity to the needs of people across very different contexts, and the capacity to hold together a complex system with limited resources. The hope is that as the service ecosystem matures and its value becomes more tangible to participants, the role will become progressively easier to hand over and sustain. A well-documented system, with clear processes and a growing archive of experience, is the best foundation for that transition.

7.6.2

Personal Reflection

The Alumni International Network began with a simple idea: make alumni meet globally. What it became was something considerably more complex, and considerably more human.

Many people got involved at different levels throughout this process, and that is precisely the point. A product-service system approach was essential here not as a methodological preference but as a genuine necessity: the only way to create something valuable for such a diverse set of stakeholders, across such different geographies and career stages, was to design a light infrastructure capable of enabling connections and knowledge exchange without trying to control them. Community, at this scale and with this kind of international dimension, cannot be fully designed. It can only be given conditions in which to grow.

That is also the trickiest part. As the designer of this system and its first network assistant, I can say with certainty that the architecture, the research, the co-design process, and the operational structure all matter. But what gives the network its soul is something that design cannot produce directly: personal connection, trust built between strangers, the quiet generosity of people who want to help others navigate the same path they once walked. An Ambassador who mentioned that he found his current job through a connection made at a 2025 circle. An introduction to a local design agency in my hometown that came through the network unexpectedly. A collaboration with a student assistant who became a friend in the process of building the website together. These moments are not outcomes that appear in a service blueprint, but they are the truest consequences of the human connections the Community Network made possible.

Multiply that across five, ten, twenty circles, across dozens of cities and hundreds of alumni, and the potential impact becomes genuinely significant: it is truly a domino effect. What has been built this year is a beginning: fragile in some places, unfinished in others, and dependent on the people who will carry it forward. But it is a beginning with real foundations, real participants, and real momentum. I close this chapter with gratitude to everyone who took part, and with genuine optimism about what this network can become.

08 Community Infrastructure and Visibility System

Chapter written by Valentina Phung, based on the research conducted individually.

8.1

Internship Continuation Plan

8.2

Knowledge Passing Manual

8.3

Communication System
and Brand Identity

8.4

PSSD Archive and Editorial Plan

8.5

PSSD Career Report and Alumni Data

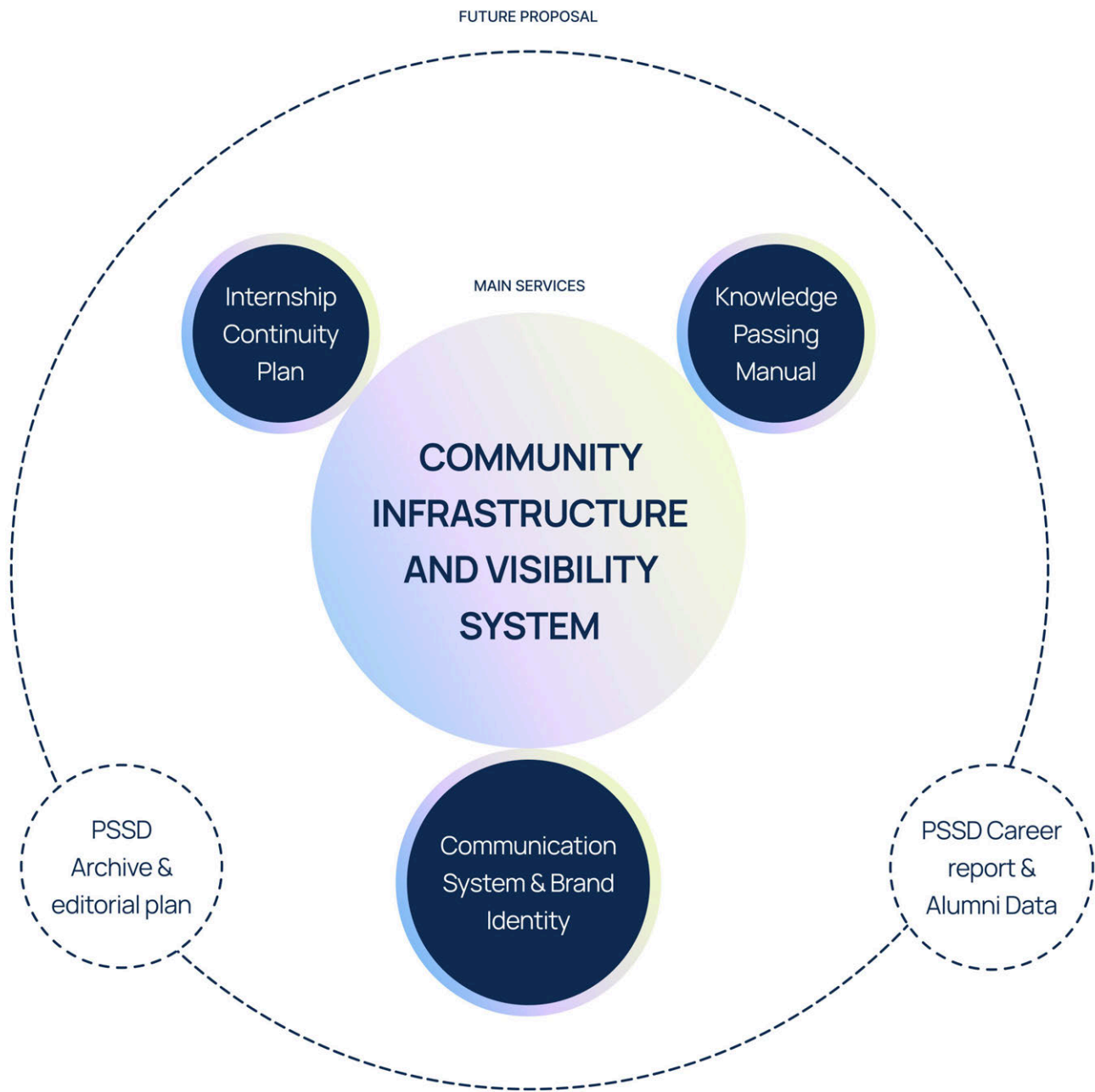
If the Career Orientation Program and the Alumni International Network represent the two visible, community-facing dimensions of the PSSD Community Network, the **Community Infrastructure and Visibility System** is what makes them possible to sustain. It is the backbone of the broader service ecosystem: the greenhouse structure that creates the conditions for the other initiatives to grow, the structural support that holds them in place across time, cohorts, and changing circumstances. Without it, the network risks depending on the energy and knowledge of specific individuals rather than on a shared, transferable foundation.

This chapter presents the five services that constitute this infrastructural layer. The first three, the **Internship Continuation Plan**, the **Knowledge Passing Manual**, and the **Communication System and Brand Identity**, are currently in the process of being implemented and are considered essential to the functioning of the network as a whole. Together, they address three fundamental needs: ensuring human continuity through a structured internship model that brings in new operational contributors each year; preserving and transmitting institutional knowledge through a living, updatable manual; and maintaining visual and communicative coherence through a defined brand system. These three services also serve as a practical reference for the faculty coordinators who oversee the initiative, providing a clear framework within which the network can be maintained and developed independently of any single cohort.

The remaining two services, the **PSSD Archive and Editorial Plan** and the **PSSD Career Report and Alumni Data initiative**, are presented as future proposals. They are not yet fully developed, and are deliberately left open as research and design opportunities for students who wish to investigate, prototype, and carry them forward, whether through an internship, a thesis project, or both.

They are included here because they represent high-value directions for the network's long-term growth, and because naming them explicitly is itself a way of keeping them alive within the institutional imagination of the program.

Figure 8.1
Offering map of the
Community Infrastructure
and Visibility System



8.1

Internship Continuation Plan

The PSSD program's 20th Anniversary celebration in 2025 represented a significant precedent, where students were able to fulfil their compulsory internship requirement by contributing directly to a course-related initiative. Building on this experience, the Internship Continuation Plan proposes to re-activate this model in the context of the PSSD Community Network, offering students the opportunity to complete their mandatory internship while serving as operational contributors to the network's ongoing programs.

Role

The position is structured as a Network Assistant Internship within the PSSD Community Network. Interns will operate across two core programs, the Career Orientation Program and the Alumni International Network, working collaboratively under the academic supervision of the PSSD course coordinators.

Primary responsibilities include: **(1) organizing the PSSD Exploring initiative**, and **(2) coordinating the Global Circle season**. Interns may also engage with the network's future development areas, with the possibility of integrating the internship with a thesis project. These prospective areas, which remain open for research, investigation, and prototyping, include: the Mentoring Program, Graduation Toolkit, Alumni-led Expert Talks, Global Circles Interactive Map, PSSD Archive and Editorial Plan, and the PSSD Career Report and Alumni Data initiative.

Team Composition and Candidate Profile

The internship is designed to be carried out by a team of a minimum of 2 to 6 students, large enough to distribute responsibilities across the network's programs while remaining manageable in terms of coordination. Requirements are to have a genuine interest in community building and design careers, as well as in international networks and cultural diversity. In terms of skills, a working knowledge of graphic design and social media is important, while familiarity with Webflow, video and motion editing, and photography support are a plus

Academic Recognition

As an internal internship at Politecnico di Milano, the placement automatically fulfills the compulsory internship requirement of the PSSD curriculum, with CFU credits recognised accordingly through the university's standard internal internship procedure.

Timeline and Structure

The call will open in September for a second-semester placement running from January to June/July, for a total of 6 months and 250 hours. The workload is distributed primarily online, with bi-weekly in-person meetings with the supervising professors, increasing to weekly sessions during intensive periods.

Benefits

Interns will gain hands-on experience as operational managers of the PSSD Community Network, with direct exposure to an international alumni network and to industry professionals through the PSSD Exploring initiative. Additional benefits include visibility through credit on the community website, access to the Design Department facilities, and the opportunity to interact with researchers and faculty. For those with an interest in academic careers, the role also offers insight into course coordination and institutional research processes.

Onboarding and Knowledge Transfer

To ensure continuity and a smooth transition between cohorts, incoming interns will undergo a structured onboarding process developed in collaboration with the outgoing Network Assistants who managed the network in the previous cycle. This process includes the handover of a Knowledge Passing Manual, as well as the Communication System and Brand Identity documentation.

Scope of Work

The internship spans four interconnected areas of activity within the PSSD Community Network Service Ecosystem:

- **Research:** Conducting interviews with ambassadors and community participants, collecting feedback, analysing data from previous editions, and documenting alumni stories.
- **Management and Operations:** Serving as the primary point of contact for alumni, students, and professionals across community platforms (WhatsApp, WeChat); sharing news and opportunities; managing ambassador onboarding forms; and creating new circles as needed.
- **Initiative Design:** Contributing to the development and improvement of the Career Orientation Program and the Alumni International Network, including proposing themes for upcoming editions, identifying implementation strategies, and receiving structured guidance on how to advance proposals within the institutional context.
- **Communication and Branding:** Producing graphic and social media materials; updating the community website (alumni stories, circles archive, ambassadors board); and coordinating with the PSSD social media team for broader dissemination.

8.2

Knowledge Passing Manual

The **Knowledge Passing Manual** is a living document designed to consolidate the operational knowledge accumulated through the management of the PSSD Community Network. Its core purpose is to compress the experience of each cohort into a structured, accessible resource that incoming Network Assistants can consult from day one, reducing onboarding time and ensuring institutional continuity across cycles. The manual is produced as a PDF with integrated links to relevant materials and resources, and is also accessible through the central Figma workspace where all design resources are stored. It is versioned by academic year, and updated at the end of each cycle, around June/July, in conjunction with the annual report on the work completed. The manual will be developed in the coming months so that it is ready for the first incoming cohort.

The manual is organised around five areas:

- 1. Network Overview:** A comprehensive introduction to the PSSD Community Network, including its vision, the initiatives implemented to date with links to materials from previous editions, and an outline of future directions under development.
- 2. Platform Access:** Access credentials and entry points for all channels and tools used to manage the network, including Meta, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, WhatsApp Community, WeChat, Webflow, Figma, and Google Drive.
- 3. Operational Know-How:** Step-by-step guidance for each platform and recurring task, supported by video walkthroughs recorded by the outgoing Network Assistants and 200-hour students. This section covers actions such as editing the website, adding new ambassadors, publishing content across social media channels, and other routine operations, so that incoming interns can orient themselves independently and efficiently.
- 4. Data and Supporting Resources:** A centralised repository of forms, alumni data, contacts, and any additional information needed to manage the network smoothly on an ongoing basis.

5. Insights and Contextual Knowledge: A section dedicated to the softer, experiential dimension of managing the network: reflections on what worked and what did not, notes on community tone and communication style, guidance on alumni relations, and lessons learned that do not fit neatly into operational procedures. While this section is documented in the manual, it is primarily transmitted in person during the overlap period between outgoing and incoming cohorts, through a dedicated handover meeting that allows for a more direct and nuanced exchange of knowledge.

The manual is conceived as a cumulative resource: at the end of each internship cycle, outgoing Network Assistants are responsible for reviewing and updating the document, ensuring that it remains accurate, current, and genuinely useful for every successive cohort

8.3

Communication System & Brand Identity

The Communication System and Brand Identity constitutes the visual and communicative framework for all materials produced within the PSSD Community Network. It serves as the reference system that Network Assistants consult when designing and producing content across the network's initiatives, ensuring visual coherence and recognisability over time and across cohorts. The current system was developed in 2026 and represents the first structured branding effort for the network. Like any living brand, it is intended to evolve: future cohorts may refine or expand it, and in the case of significant changes, a rebranding process would require approval from the course coordinators, while smaller experimentations and iterative updates remain at the discretion of the Network Assistants.

The system is organised and maintained in Figma, where all assets are structured and accessible for production and reference. It operates in dialogue with the Politecnico di Milano brand system, which is also provided within the Figma workspace as a reference for cases where more institutional materials are needed. The two systems are distinct in intent: the Polimi brand reflects the university's institutional communication, while the PSSD Community Network brand is designed to feel closer to its community, warmer, more experimental, and oriented toward a student and alumni audience. This distinction is intentional and reflects the hybrid nature of the network itself, which sits between the institution and its people. The system encompasses:



Figure 8.2
Visual Identity Guidelines for
PSSD Community Network

Figure 8.3 and 8.4
examples of brand identity
application: on the left, PSSD
Exploring poster, on the right,
Global Circles 2026 season
poster.



Visual Identity

Colours, typography, logos, backgrounds, and iconography that define the network's aesthetic language, versioned from 2026 and subject to evolution over successive cycles.

¹**Politecnico di Milano brand system:**
<https://www.polimi.it/en/the-politecnico/communication/brand-identity-manual>

The visual identity is built as a deliberate dialogue with the **Politecnico di Milano brand system**¹ rather than a departure from it. Deep blue is retained as a connecting element, anchoring the PSSD Community Network within the institutional family and signalling continuity of provenance. **Manrope**, likewise inherited from the Polimi system, provides typographic consistency for body text and formal communications.

Against this institutional base, the identity introduces its own expressive layer. **Bagel Fat One**, a playful and rounded display typeface, is used for headlines, event names, and moments where the brand needs to feel approachable rather than formal – it is the clearest visual signal of the network's community-first personality. Colour is further extended through the "**marshmallow gradient**," a soft multi-tone blend developed from the PSSD 20th anniversary colours, evoking a cloudy, modern, and sweet feeling. Where deep blue anchors the system institutionally, the gradient is what gives it warmth.

Geometric shapes remain a shared language with the Polimi system but are treated more playfully here: forms are more varied, less rigid, and combined more freely. Iconography follows the same logic – softer, rounded, and deliberately less "square" than institutional icon sets, reinforcing an overall impression of openness rather than formality. Together, these choices are designed to give the impression of a community that people feel free to join, avoiding any sense of exclusivity.

Tone of Voice and Communication Register

Guidelines on how the network communicates, both in writing and visually, across its different touchpoints. The tone is defined by warmth, openness, and accessibility: it is friendly without being informal to the point of losing credibility, and inclusive rather than exclusive or hierarchical. This register is particularly important in direct interactions with alumni and students, many of whom engage through social media and expect to be met with genuine interest and care. Since Network Assistants are, in these moments, representing PSSD as an institution, the tone must balance approachability with a sense of responsibility.

To guide this balance consistently across contributors and cohorts, the tone of voice can be anchored to a small set of pillar words:

Friendly	Warm	Welcoming	Community driven
approachable, never distant or bureaucratic	human-first, personal in tone	actively signals that joining is easy, not exclusive	speaks with alumni and students, not at them

These pillar words function as a quick reference for Network Assistants when producing captions, copy, or visual content, helping maintain tonal consistency even as contributors change across cohorts. This section also includes practical guidance on how to write captions and communicate initiatives on social media, covering structure, register, and the specific expectations of each platform.

Templates and Formats

Reusable graphic assets and layout structures for recurring content types across social media, website, and printed or digital materials, with embedded guidance on how to use and adapt them, including notes on producing short videos and edits, and supporting photographic productions.

Sound and Music Identity

For video and motion content, the network adopts a consistent musical register drawing on **retrowave-adjacent, lo-fi electronic and chill electronica influences**. The primary character is optimistic, modern, calm, and human — supporting rather than competing with the visual content. Within this primary genre, several sub-influences shape music selection: downtempo rhythms keep the pace relaxed and non-dance-oriented, in line with the network's unhurried tone; ambient electronic textures add atmospheric pads and spaciousness for background use; a light touch of organic house brings soft, natural-feeling percussion without pushing the music toward a strong rhythmic drive; and cinematic background scoring builds emotional tone quietly, without drawing attention away from the content itself.

Together, this musical identity reinforces the same qualities expressed visually: **warmth, playfulness, and an atmosphere that feels human rather than institutional**.

AI Tools Guidance

General orientation on the use of AI tools within the network's production workflow, in line with Politecnico di Milano's institutional guidelines. As a principle, AI tools are not to be used to generate or manipulate images of people. Their use is encouraged for generative tasks such as icon creation, visual asset exploration, and other non-representational production needs.

Photographic and Video Archive

A collection of images and video formats produced during previous editions of the network's initiatives, available as reference and reusable material for future productions.

Like the Knowledge Passing Manual, the Communication System and Brand Identity is a cumulative resource, expanded and refined by each cohort of Network Assistants as new initiatives are run, new formats are explored, and the network's visual language continues to mature.

8.4

PSSD Archive and Editorial Plan

The PSSD Archive is conceived as a centralised, publicly accessible repository of all materials produced across the program's initiatives: alumni and expert talks, insights from events such as PSSD Exploring, Global Circles seasons, and any other activity that would otherwise risk being dispersed or lost over time.

Unlike the Alumni Stories section or the Global Circles Archive, which are initiative-specific, the PSSD Archive operates as an umbrella resource encompassing the full breadth of the program's output, including historical materials. Among the first candidates for archiving are the PSSD Timeline developed for the 20th Anniversary exhibition and the alumni projects presented on that occasion, which represent a significant body of collective memory that deserves to be preserved and made accessible.

In terms of platform, the archive could be hosted on the existing PSSD website or on an external publishing platform such as Substack or Medium, depending on the level of editorial control and accessibility required. The Editorial Plan would govern how this content is organised, published, and maintained over time, defining the rhythm, format, and priorities of publication. One proposal within this plan is the production of a curated newsletter, possibly issued once per semester, that synthesises and shares the most relevant materials and developments from across the network.

As a future proposal, the PSSD Archive and Editorial Plan remains at an early stage and requires further research, definition, and prototyping before it can be fully implemented. It is nonetheless included here as a strategic direction, given its potential to consolidate the network's institutional memory and make it available to the wider PSSD community.

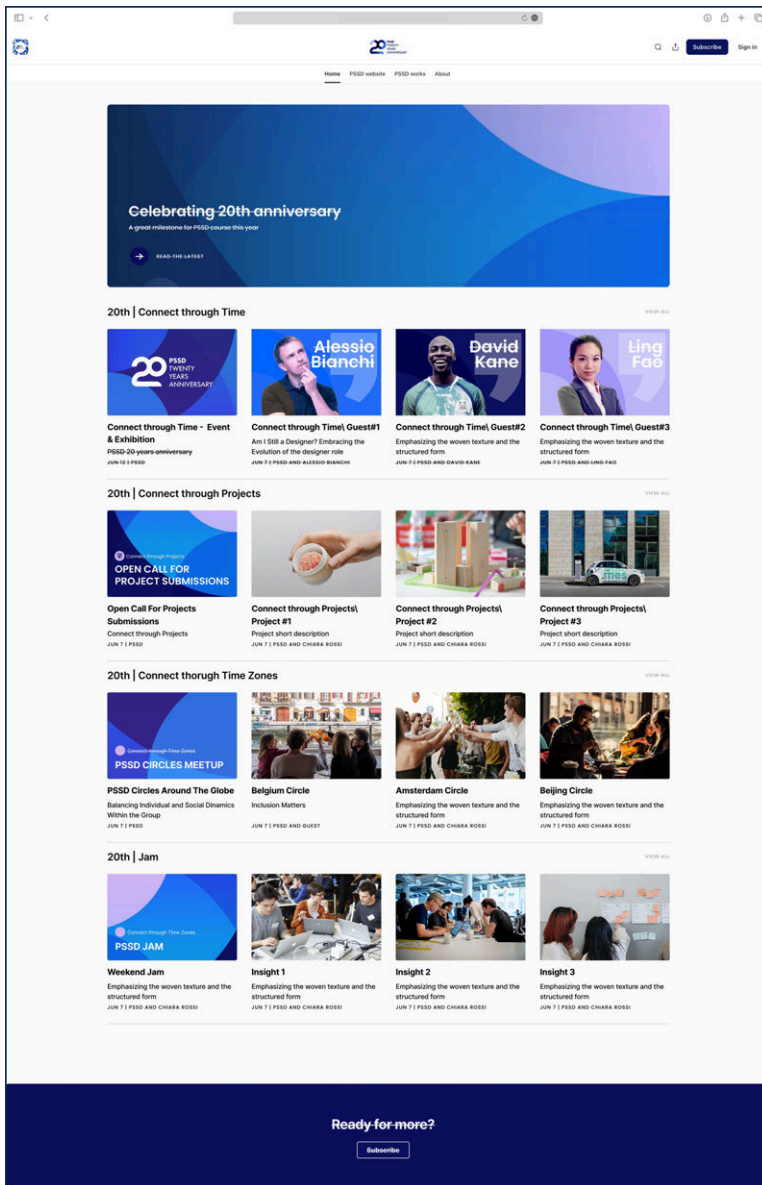
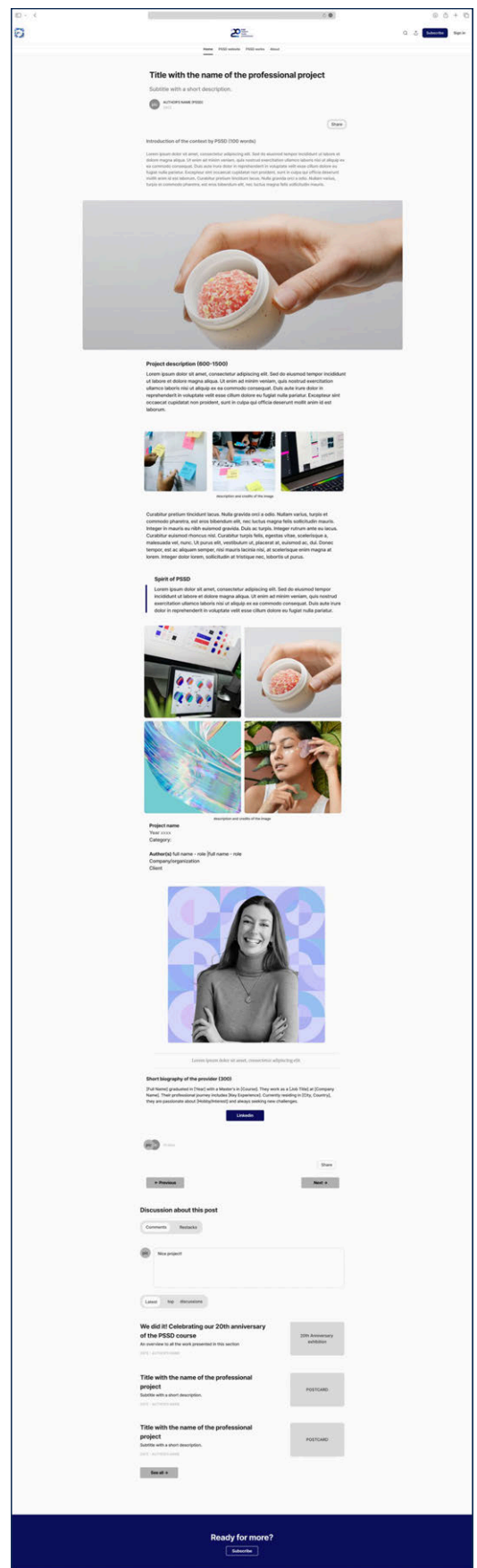


Figure 8.5
PSSD Archive prototype made
for the PSSD 20th Anniversary



8.5

PSSD Career Report and Alumni Data

The PSSD Career Report and Alumni Data initiative responds to one of the most consistent interests within the community and the faculty: understanding where PSSD graduates are now, what kinds of professional paths they have taken, and how the profession is evolving in different parts of the world. This kind of knowledge is uniquely positioned within the network, as only PSSD has the relational proximity to its alumni to gather it meaningfully and present it back to the community in a relevant way.

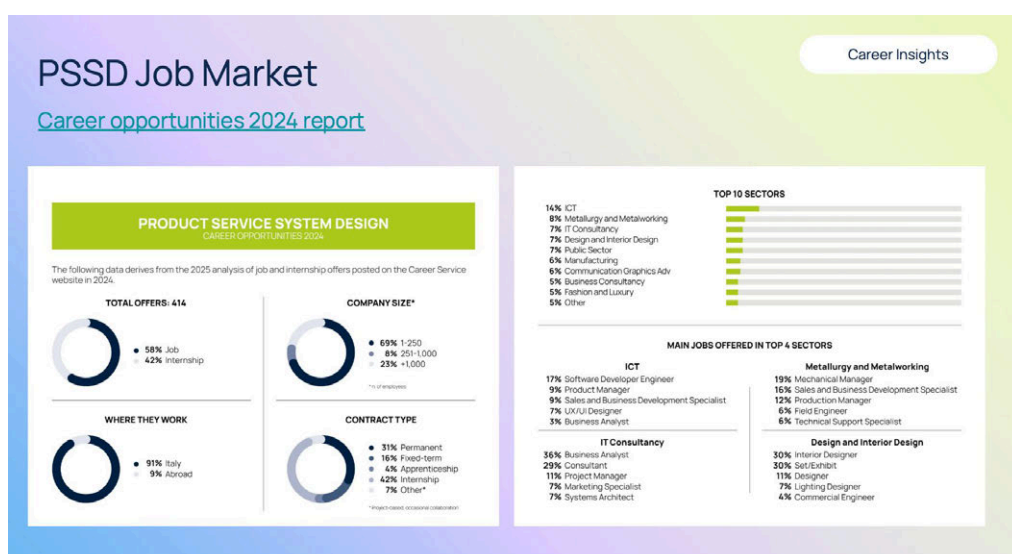
The initiative envisions a structured research process combining direct data collection through platforms such as LinkedIn, surveys, and alumni interviews, with the goal of producing a career report that is shared with the community and, in particular, presented at the Global Circles. Data collection for the report operates on two straightforward principles: information that is publicly available, such as LinkedIn profiles or published work, may be referenced directly, while any additional data is gathered exclusively through the voluntary participation of alumni via surveys or interviews.

The report is envisioned as a periodic publication, produced approximately every three to four years, allowing sufficient time for meaningful shifts in career trajectories to emerge across the alumni community and for the research process to be conducted with the depth it requires.

In terms of collaboration, one possible model would involve partnering with the Politecnico di Milano Career Service, which already conducts graduate tracking activities but with limited PSSD-specific participation. The network could contribute by actively engaging alumni in responding to existing Career Service surveys, broadening the dataset without duplicating efforts. Alternatively, the report could be developed independently, with a focus specifically on the PSSD community and its particular professional landscape.

Given the research and data-oriented nature of this project, it is well suited to be carried out by an intern or thesis student with a specific focus on alumni research and career mapping. Like the PSSD Archive, this initiative is part of the network's future proposals and requires further development, but it is identified here as a high-value project given its direct relevance to generate knowledge in the PSSD Community Network.

Slides about PSSD Career and data insights exposed in the Alignment meeting 2026



09

Conclusion

Chapter written by Ayano
Osawa and Valentina Phung

This thesis was guided by the following research question: **How can a service system reinforce the value of PSSD beyond graduation, ensuring lasting connection and professional growth for an international alumni community?**

This thesis proposes the PSSD Community Network as a service ecosystem that reinforces the value of PSSD beyond graduation by supporting lasting connection, professional growth, and mutual support within its international alumni community. Rather than proposing a single platform, event, or communication channel, the project defines a lightweight relational infrastructure that connects students, alumni, faculty, and external communities through shared knowledge, opportunities, visibility, and continuity.

The research demonstrated that PSSD already possesses many of the conditions necessary for a thriving alumni community. A strong program identity, committed faculty members, engaged alumni, international diversity, and a shared sense of belonging represent valuable assets. However, these resources often remain fragmented, relying on personal relationships, isolated initiatives, or exceptional moments of reconnection. The design opportunity was therefore not to create an entirely new community, but to make existing relationships more visible, accessible, and capable of evolving beyond individual cohorts or temporary initiatives.

The findings also highlight that alumni should not be understood solely as former students or institutional stakeholders. Instead, they represent mentors, peers, collaborators, knowledge holders, ambassadors, and future contributors to the program. From this perspective, alumni engagement becomes a reciprocal process of belonging, knowledge exchange, and collective growth, where value is continuously created through relationships rather than delivered by the institution alone.

The research further identified the transition from university to professional life as one of the most fragile moments in the PSSD journey. This transition extends well beyond employment, encompassing financial uncertainty, relocation, visa and language barriers, changing social networks, questions of professional identity, and the challenge of translating the multidisciplinary nature of PSSD into diverse professional contexts. These findings revealed the need for a support system that accompanies graduates beyond the academic experience while maintaining meaningful connections with the wider community.

In response, the PSSD Community Network was developed around three interconnected pillars: Career Orientation, Global Alumni Network, and Governance and Community Infrastructure. Together, these pillars create complementary conditions for supporting graduates during their professional transition, enabling distributed participation across different geographical contexts, and ensuring the long-term continuity of the network through shared governance, clear roles, and knowledge transfer mechanisms.

A defining characteristic of this project is its research-through-design approach. Rather than remaining at a conceptual level, the thesis translated research insights into tangible interventions that were implemented and tested within the PSSD ecosystem. The organisation of the program's twentieth anniversary, the development of the Global Alumni Circles, the ambassador program, communication materials, governance structures, and community touchpoints provided opportunities to observe how relatively lightweight service interventions can activate existing community resources and generate new forms of participation. These experiences strengthened the proposal while demonstrating the importance of iterative development, experimentation, and continuous adaptation.

The contribution of this thesis is threefold. Conceptually, it reframes alumni engagement as a relational infrastructure, shifting the focus from institution-centred initiatives or fundraising activities towards reciprocal relationships, mutual support, and collective value creation. Methodologically, it demonstrates how Service Design can combine user research, stakeholder engagement, co-design, and real-world experimentation to address complex organisational and community challenges. Practically, it proposes an operational model that integrates governance, communication, career support, storytelling, local alumni circles, ambassador-based participation, and knowledge management into a coherent service ecosystem that can progressively evolve over time.

Beyond the PSSD context, this research also contributes to Service Design by illustrating how designers can work with communities whose value emerges over extended periods rather than through individual service encounters. In this perspective, designing services means designing the conditions that enable relationships to develop, participation to emerge, and communities to sustain themselves over time. Governance, continuity, and shared ownership therefore become design materials alongside digital platforms, physical events, and communication channels.

At the same time, this research presents several limitations. Most of the proposed interventions were implemented as early-stage pilots, meaning that their long-term effects on students, alumni, faculty members, and the wider ecosystem could not yet be fully evaluated. Future work should therefore focus on longitudinal assessment, continuous refinement, and the gradual institutional integration of the proposed initiatives. Collaboration with the PSSD program resources, the Career Service, the Advisory Board, student representatives, Alumni Politecnico, and external design communities could further strengthen the network while ensuring its sustainability beyond individual organisers or project teams. Success should ultimately be measured not only through participation numbers but also through the quality of relationships created, perceived support, knowledge exchange, and the ability of community members to progressively move from receiving value to contributing value.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that the value of PSSD does not end at graduation. It continues through the people who carry its knowledge, relationships, culture, and design mindset into different organisations, countries, and professional trajectories. The PSSD Community Network does not seek to preserve a community as it exists today, but to create the conditions for it to continuously evolve through successive generations of students and alumni. By designing a relational infrastructure that supports connection across time and space, this project demonstrates how Service Design can foster resilient communities where belonging, learning, and collaboration continue long after formal education has ended. In this sense, the legacy of PSSD lies not only in what students learn during the program, but also in the relationships they continue to build, nurture, and pass on throughout their professional lives.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this thesis, the authors used AI-assisted tools to support the writing and research process. DeepL was used to translate selected English materials into Japanese to support understanding and to assist with drafting written text. ChatGPT, Gemini, and Claude were used to refine the framework, structure, and wording of the thesis. Grammarly was used to review English grammar and phrasing. Notta was used to support the transcription and analysis of interview data.

After using these tools and services, the authors reviewed, edited, and critically assessed the content as needed. The authors take full responsibility for the final content, accuracy, and integrity of this thesis.

