

# Make-in-MCE: A Differentiating Alumni Initiative in an Engineering College

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**Abstract:** Alumni associations present first-hand opportunities for educational institutions to understand the ever-changing demands and expectations of the industry and to develop their curriculum accordingly. Alumni given their professional experience can identify such areas at the institute which need improvement and can make best efforts to provide the same to current students to experience better learning. The project based learning offers several advantages to students and significantly guides and helps in their career immediately after graduation. One major issue with student projects is in getting a good problem to work and an effective mentoring. Our alumni have made a sincere and big attempt to address this problem. This paper presents a case study of the recent venture by our alumni to help ambitious students to launch their own venture immediately after graduation.

**Keywords:** alumni, mentor

## 1. Introduction

The purpose of engineering education is to create successful socio-economic problem solvers. These problem solvers also known as engineers use technology innovation as an instrument to solve problems. To achieve this, it is imperative to improve the nature and quality of engineering education. One good method to accomplish this is to educate students to Conceive-Design-Implement a product, a process or a system. The leaders in academia, industry and government have debated on the necessity for reforms in engineering education and the implicit criticism is on placing more emphasis on teaching theory than on laying the foundation for practice which stresses more on design, teamwork and communication skills. The engineering education must emphasize more on fundamentals and must be set in the context of Conceive-Design-Implement. There is a need to develop programmes which are educationally effective, exciting to students, use innovative methods to adopt modern pedagogical approaches and practise new learning methods to provide real-world learning experiences.

Though Alumni Associations are placed outside the physical boundary of the college, they have more connection to the inside of the system than any other element [1]. Alumni can be given greater voice in institute academic issues, because of their experience as undergraduate in this institute. Alumni are emotionally connected to the success of their alma mater.

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The relationship that alumni share with their alma mater is unique and has its beginning when alumni were students. The research finding by Merchant and Ford [2] indicate that higher education institutes have a closer connection to their students due to shared experiences between the two and much of this connection is associated with nostalgia. More than anything, alumni can act as practical and reality check to the course curriculum and can bridge the gap between corporate and campus.

Alumni who try to help students now have the resources which they did not have during their time at the institute. Such alumni can better identify areas at the institute which need improvement and can make best efforts to provide the same to current students to experience better learning. Alumni can also propose and assist in carrying out better industry relevant and/or social concern projects because of their accrued practical knowledge and experiences. Alumni with the experiential knowledge and students with the fresh perspective can collaborate to launch a new platform in the relationship between college and alumni network

In Malnad College of Engineering (MCE), Hassan, Karnataka, India alumni have launched one such novel initiative called – “Make-in-MCE” (MIM) where alumni propose projects or nurture the ideas of MCE students by acting as mentors and providing necessary support including technical and financial.

## 2. A Brief look into Philosophy of Services and the Services rendered by Alumni Associations

Social exchange theory [3] suggests that two parties enter into a relationship when there can be a possible exchange of information, money, services, friendship, intimacy, etc. Thus alumni and students can enter into a relationship due to exchange of information and knowledge. Many scholars and practitioners define the relationship between donor and an organization as “involvement”. Noonan et al. [4] have found that “involvement” is the second top criterion for giving and also suggested that it was an absolute precondition for any kind of giving. The two significant causes for donating are “passion for cause” and “direct involvement”. A good number of our alumni show significant involvement with the growth of their institute.

Alumni concept was prevalent in ancient Indian mythology with a unique tradition of having spiritual,

intimate and longstanding relationship between teachers and students [1]. This results in a natural formation of alumni associations.

Sivaprasad et al. [5] have explored potential alumni sponsored programmes that can be implemented in marine engineering institutes which include seminars, interactive sessions, alumni sponsored internships, conduct of conference and workshops, setting up of laboratories or research facilities and commemorative offers.

The initiative taken by our alumni is different from the services generally rendered by alumni associations. The main objective of the venture is to provide technical and financial support to interested and capable students to realize their idea into a product or a start-up company.

## 3. Inspiration

There are various mechanisms today by which alumni have engaged with their alma mater. Most of them have taken the form of scholarships, mentorships, special lectures, institutional aid and internships in their firms. Although all of them contribute towards betterment of college, facilities and students, none of them make a seminal difference to the post-graduation life of a student. The proposed initiative, Make-in-MCE(MIM) differs from rest as it provides complete path for a student to realize entrepreneur dream. The need of doing an initiative which is different from run of the mill initiatives, the new world of opportunities in start-up and launch of Make-In-India by the central government inspired our alumni to launch an initiative in a similar model.

## 4. Necessity

Final year project is a mandatory academic activity that a student has to perform in engineering. Today likeminded students get together to form a group and either based on inputs from their professors or by going through research papers will do the final year project which is more of an academic exercise. Very few students get an opportunity to do it outside the college in the Industry, but amount of time they can spend is very less as these project are not full time activity. To bridge the gap, our alumni felt this is the right opportunity for intervention and launched this initiative which has rooting in the final year project. Winfried Schoepf, Architect from Unisys Austria said "The big idea is the only thing with the ability to attract

enough people around a new concept when real change is needed in an organization.” Thus few alumni came out with this idea, when there was a real need to improve the quality of student projects. And the idea was very well received and accepted by many other alumni and the college administration.

### 5. Adopted Method for Implementing the Idea

A group comprising of fifteen alumni who wished to make a difference to the college was formed as executive committee for this initiative. The group had representation from different disciplines and its members had a standing in the industry. The group now has an extended team of more than hundred alumni. The group entered into tie ups with industry leaders, PE firms and venture capitalists. It pooled a significant amount as corpus and deposited the amount in a public sector bank. The group then executed a Memorandum of Understanding with the college Principal as the signing authority. The combined entity of alumni team and the college office bearers created a well-documented Code of Conduct.

The whole idea was well communicated to all students and they were invited to submit their project ideas. Alumni members from the group visited the college and took sessions to explain the benefits of this venture. They ignited the students to come out with novel ideas to solve real industry or community issues with inputs from alumni. In addition, the initiative encouraged inter-discipline students to come-together and attempt to solve a problem. All the projects mandatorily required students from more than one discipline to join hands.

Students submitted their project ideas. The response was good with a significant number of applications. All the teams gave presentation in the presence of the Principal and a panel of faculty members. Selected teams were taken to Bangalore to give presentation to a team of alumni who made critical evaluation of the project ideas and the students' confidence to pursue them. After a lot of interaction and deliberations, four projects were shortlisted to be funded this year and three more complete software projects to have alumni mentors. Each of these projects is being mentored by a professor from the college and a senior alumnus from the group who has shown interest in the project. The group also has a well-defined governance and communication model with built-in checks and balances. Social media is being used to fullest to keep

everybody is apprised of the status.

### 6. Responses from Mentees and Mentors

Although the initial response was either of appreciation or scepticism, over a passage of first few projects all stake holders have realized the value MIM has brought in and are now fully behind and supportive of this initiative.

To measure the outcome of this venture, students were asked to give their opinion about MIM. Few selected opinions are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Selected Opinions about MIM by students

1.	MIM is a good approach to cultivate and encourage students to take on developing their own stuff and not to follow the herd
2.	An innovative, robust platform to recognise, nourish and showcase excellence of students
3.	We are fortunate to have alumni who give industry view of recent developments in technology
4.	Requires a more stable support to direct students with their experience
5.	The reach of MIM must be further enhanced to include more number of students
6.	MIM has surpassed our expectations and many other students are looking forward to be a part of it

### 7. Ways in which Alumni can involve in this venture

The different possible ways in which alumni can involve and contribute to MIM are listed below.

**Alumni Expertise:** Alumni who work in an area for significant number of years would become experts in an area can impart their knowledge and experience to students. The proposed MIM initiative provides a ready and good platform for such alumni to share their knowledge and expertise with students, eventually coming out with a good and useful project.

**Venture Capitalist:** There would be few alumni who have done very well financially mostly as entrepreneurs. They have the money but may not the required technical expertise. These kinds of alumni can give financial support to the students and college. A good synergy between alumni expertise and venture capitalist can definitely result in a number of good student projects in the college.

**Startup Alumni:** The start-up ecosystem has emerged recently in India. The budding entrepreneurs' alumni

look for resources at a reasonable price and their alma mater can be the best place. The on-campus startup companies benefit both alumni and students.

**Leadership:** It is essential to bring and connect alumni technical experts, venture capitalists, startup alumni, students and the college. This can be best done by alumni who have emotional connect to the college and possess good leadership and organizational skills.

### 8. Achieved Benefits of MIM initiative

Few important benefits achieved from MIM are given.

- MIM has given the right platform for the students who have a strong desire to work on an idea and gradually wish to begin a startup. Thus few good projects are being realized in our institute under MIM.
- MIM initiative has fostered strong and meaningful fabric among students, alumni and faculty. It has also helped few students to get better job, links to resourceful persons and facilities.
- Has provided an opportunity for the students to listen and interact to persons with wide spectrum of experiences. This would significantly help students to plan their career in diverse fields.
- A digital social group of both alumni and students is very active since the inception of MIM. This gives an opportunity for the students to watch and take part in serious discussions about current affairs, history and literature with alumni, which is essential for the youths. Above all, the good human relation among students and alumni is making a significant impact on our campus life.

### 9. Essentials to drive this Initiative

Matt Crichton pointed out that "You can have the biggest idea in the world but if you don't make it personal in your employees' lives the idea will go nowhere". Our college management and administration gave full encouragement and support for this venture from its inception. A good number of faculty members made this idea personal and worked whole heartedly with alumni for its realization. Students are also used effectively in bringing out this idea.

A good communication channel is a must for the success of this venture, as frequent interaction and discussion must happen between alumni mentors,

students and faculty. This calls for the need to have a full-fledged video conference hall in the campus.

### 10. Conclusion

Although the initiative is still in an infancy stage as the first set of projects have just started, the initiative has brought in new interest and freshness to the projects. The success of one batch of students under MIM has brought enormous confidence and motivated junior students to think and plan for challenging projects to pursue under MIM. Though started with one specific batch of alumni group, the initiative has attracted other batch of alumni to participate. The context of Conceive-Design-Implement will be complete if one of the four projects is shortlisted as an idea for a start-up. Nevertheless, this initiative has shown the other alumni that there can be various novel models of interaction between alumni and Alma mater.

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