Designing a dynamic institutional identity system: The Arab Open University–Jordan across nine countries

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ABSTRACT

As universities expand across regions and platforms, the demand for flexible and culturally adaptive visual identities continues to grow. This study aims to develop a dynamic logo system for the Arab Open University (AOU), which operates across nine countries. The objective is to create a unified yet culturally responsive design framework that enhances institutional branding and visibility at the faculty level.

The scope of the research centers on the faculties within AOU, with particular emphasis on balancing coherence and localization in visual identity. The study targets faculty-level visual branding needs across nine AOU country branches, recognizing the importance of both unity and cultural distinction in institutional image-making.

Employing a design-based research methodology, the study analyzed cultural symbols, academic disciplines, and national elements to guide the creation of a dynamic visual identity system. Logos were developed in both Arabic and English, and in horizontal and vertical formats, ensuring usability across digital, print, and physical applications. Implementation began with the Graphic and Multimedia Design Department at AOU's Jordan branch, which piloted the system through branded social media platforms.

Findings show that dynamic logo systems effectively enhance institutional identity, accommodate cultural diversity, and reinforce cohesion across decentralized academic environments. This research is the first documented academic initiative in the Arab world to develop and implement a comprehensive faculty-level dynamic logo system, making it a pioneering contribution to the field of higher education branding. It also provides a scalable model for multi-national universities seeking to modernize and unify their visual identity systems.

Keywords: Dynamic identity systems, visual communication, modular branding, multinational institutions, institutional identity.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, visual identity has emerged as a strategic pillar in higher education branding, particularly within transnational institutions that operate across multilingual and multicultural contexts (Chapleo, 2010; Waeraas & Solbakk, 2009). As universities expand across regions and platforms, the demand for flexible, adaptive, and culturally sensitive branding systems continues to grow. Traditional static logos often fail to accommodate the diverse communication needs of decentralized academic structures.

The Arab Open University (AOU), established in 2002 in partnership with the Open University (UK), exemplifies such complexity. With nine branches across the Arab region—including Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, and others—AOU operates in diverse cultural, linguistic, and regulatory environments. Each national branch hosts multiple faculties (Business, Education, Computer Studies, etc.), all serving heterogeneous student populations through a blended open-learning model.

Brand consistency becomes especially critical for institutions like AOU that aspire to maintain regional credibility while strengthening global visibility. However, projecting a unified institutional identity without disregarding local distinctiveness remains a branding challenge in Arab higher education (Al-Momani & Bataineh, 2020).

This study responds to that challenge by introducing and evaluating a dynamic logo system tailored to AOU's faculties across its branches. The system integrates cultural, academic, and national iconography to enhance coherence at the institutional level while supporting differentiation at the faculty and national levels.

Furthermore, this research adopts a Design-Based Research (DBR) approach, traditionally employed in instructional technology, as a theoretical and practical framework for institutional branding. It contributes to branding scholarship by demonstrating how modular visual identity systems can serve as communicative tools that negotiate tradition, modernity, and institutional values across borders.

By moving beyond a descriptive case study, the paper positions branding as an evolving strategic discourse in higher education—where design serves both aesthetic and semiotic functions in constructing meaning, identity, and engagement.

2. Method

This study employed a design-based research (DBR) methodology, a practice-oriented approach that merges design processes with academic inquiry to address authentic, context-specific challenges (Wang & Hannafin, 2005). DBR is particularly suited for applied disciplines such as graphic design, where iterative development, stakeholder input, and contextual adaptability are essential components of effective solutions. The methodology enabled the researchers to serve in dual roles as designers and evaluators, allowing for the refinement of the visual identity system through continuous feedback loops.

Research context

The study was conducted at the Arab Open University (AOU), Jordan Branch, specifically within the Faculty of Graphic and Multimedia Design, which was chosen for its active engagement in institutional branding efforts. The project focused on creating a faculty-level dynamic logo system adaptable across AOU's nine country branches, while preserving visual consistency with the university's overarching identity.

Design process

The development process comprised five phases:

Core Logo Analysis

The AOU's official logo was analyzed to extract foundational design elements, particularly the symbolic gateway motif representing access to knowledge. This element was stylized and retained as a unifying structure in each faculty's logo, ensuring institutional coherence while allowing thematic differentiation.

Cultural and academic symbol mapping

National symbols (Appendix A. Flags, architectural icons) and academic indicators relevant to each faculty (e.g., book, bar chart, circuit) were identified and translated into clean, scalable visuals. The goal was to achieve cultural relevance and academic specificity while maintaining visual clarity.

Appendix A: Dynamic logos with national flags

Prototype development

Using Adobe Illustrator and After Effects, bilingual (Arabic and English) logos were created for each faculty, in both horizontal and vertical formats. Examples included:
- Faculty of Business: Stylized bar charts and currency symbols.
- Faculty of Education: Book and pencil imagery.
- Faculty of Computer Studies: Circuitry and digital patterns.
- Faculty of Graphic and Multimedia Design: Creative tools and pixel motifs.
- Faculty of English Language and Literature: Letterforms and quotation marks.

Each logo incorporated subtle elements from the respective country's flag, maintaining a respectful nod to local identity.

Feedback and iteration

Two internal review rounds were conducted with faculty and design professionals. Participants evaluated balance, readability, and thematic accuracy. Feedback-informed iterative revisions to enhance alignment with both academic identity and practical use cases.

Evaluation and validation

A structured evaluation form was developed and administered to a panel of seven experts, including academic staff, branding specialists, and graphic designers. Evaluation criteria were rated using a 5-point Likert scale across the following dimensions: visual clarity, alignment with AOU brand identity, academic representation, cultural relevance, media adaptability, and originality. An open-ended section invited qualitative suggestions for improvement.

Ethical considerations

All logo designs were developed within an academic framework with no commercial intent. Informed consent was obtained from all evaluators, and institutional guidelines regarding branding integrity and representation were followed throughout the research.

Evaluation limitations and justification

While the expert panel (n = 7) provided valuable feedback grounded in professional design experience, the limited sample size and homogeneity of the group represent a methodological constraint. The evaluators were all senior academics and practitioners in graphic design or branding, which may have introduced bias toward aesthetic coherence and design logic rather than user-centered effectiveness.

Although informal feedback was gathered from a group of 15 AOU students during prototype presentations, it was anecdotal and not systematically analyzed. Future research should include structured surveys or focus groups to capture broader audience perspectives, particularly from students and administrative staff who interact with the brand on a daily basis.

The use of Design-Based Research (DBR), however, supports this staged and iterative approach. DBR prioritizes real-world implementation and expert-driven refinement over large-scale

generalizability (Wang & Hannafin, 2005). As such, the primary goal of this phase was to validate the internal logic, adaptability, and cultural appropriateness of the proposed identity system—objectives well-suited to expert evaluation. "Future studies should prioritize broader validation through student-centered assessments and cross-branch feedback mechanisms to ensure long-term effectiveness and contextual relevance."

3. Literature review

Theoretical foundations of visual branding

These frameworks provide a theoretical basis for understanding how branding systems can support institutions with multi-campus operations and diverse audiences. In a global educational environment, the challenge lies in balancing cohesion and differentiation. Strong theoretical models help institutions recognize branding as a strategic communication tool—not merely an aesthetic one. By leveraging brand equity models, institutions can align their missions, values, and visual expressions with evolving stakeholder expectations.

Applications of dynamic identity in higher education

Dynamic identity systems allow institutions to maintain a unified brand while tailoring visual cues—such as color, icons, or arrangement—to different departments, campuses, or cultural contexts. In higher education, notable examples include the MIT Media Lab's algorithmically generated identity system, which creates unique logo variations for research groups. (See Appendix. B. For global references) The City University of New York (CUNY) applies a modular branding approach across its network of colleges, while the London School of Economics (LSE) customizes its visual identity by department and platform (Johnson, 2015). These applications illustrate how dynamic systems can enhance internal coherence and audience engagement across varying contexts.

Appendix B. International University dynamic logo examples.

While Western institutions such as MIT Media Lab and CUNY illustrate the benefits of dynamic identity systems in digitally mature environments (Johnson, 2015), their cases differ significantly from the socio-cultural and institutional structures of Arab universities. In contrast, the AOU operates within

a region where cultural conservatism and centralized governance often limit visual experimentation (Al-Momani & Bataineh, 2020). This highlights a critical theoretical intersection between modular branding and the constraints of transnational institutional communication. By applying modular identity design within this context, the study offers new insights into how visual identity serves not only as a brand expression but also as a semiotic negotiation of tradition, authority, and modernity (Chandler, 2007).

In addition to promoting visual flexibility, these systems support stronger engagement on digital platforms. Social media channels, department-specific microsites, and event branding benefit from adaptive identity systems, making communication more direct, relevant, and visually cohesive.

Institutional and Cultural Barriers to Dynamic Branding in Arab Universities

Despite the increasing adoption of dynamic branding in Western academic institutions, Arab universities remain predominantly anchored in static and centralized visual identity systems. This lag is not merely a technological or strategic issue, but one deeply rooted in the socio-cultural and institutional frameworks of the region.

Cultural conservatism, bureaucratic hierarchies, and resistance to visual experimentation contribute to a branding culture that prioritizes stability over adaptability (Al-Momani & Bataineh, 2020). In such environments, institutional logos are often treated as symbols of authority rather than evolving communication tools.

Furthermore, many Arab universities operate within transnational contexts—serving multilingual and multicultural populations across branches—yet their visual identity systems fail to reflect this complexity (Melewar & Nguyen, 2014). The lack of modularity in these systems limits their ability to address localized audiences while maintaining institutional coherence.

From a semiotic perspective, the logo in Arab academia functions more as a static emblem of legitimacy than as a flexible narrative of institutional evolution (Chandler, 2007). This theoretical lens reveals why innovative identity systems, such as those proposed in this study, may face both symbolic and structural resistance in the region.

Use of dynamic logos in Arab universities

A recent report by the Arab Association of University Leaders (2022) found that fewer than 5% of Arab universities had implemented any form of dynamic or adaptive visual identity system. Most universities continue to use unchanging logos across all contexts, limiting their ability to connect with diverse audiences or platforms. The Arab Open University's initiative therefore stands out as a regional first: a scalable, faculty-based dynamic logo system developed with consistency, cultural nuance, and modern communication in mind.

This research bridges the gap between contemporary branding theory and underexplored regional practice, offering an original contribution to the limited literature on visual identity in Arab higher education.

Future challenges and research directions

While the current research highlights a promising direction for Arab universities, several future challenges remain. Sustaining a dynamic identity system requires institutional buy-in, regular training, and integration with broader digital strategies. Without clear governance frameworks, the flexibility offered by dynamic systems could lead to fragmentation.

Additionally, technological scalability and data-informed customization are emerging areas of interest. Future studies might explore how AI-driven design tools and automated brand asset management can enhance dynamic identities. Researchers are also encouraged to investigate user perception and emotional connection to dynamic visual identities, especially among students, faculty, and alumni.

A comprehensive framework for evaluating brand performance—beyond visual coherence—would further strengthen the strategic implementation of dynamic branding in higher education.

Research context

The research was conducted at the Arab Open University (Jordan Branch), within the Faculty of Graphic and Multimedia Design. The initiative aimed to design dynamic faculty-level logos for each of the university's nine country branches, aligning with the university's overall brand identity while incorporating localized and disciplinary elements. The Jordan branch was selected due to its active graphic design program and its central role in piloting visual identity projects for the institution.

4. Design process

The development of the dynamic logo system followed a structured four-phase methodology, grounded in principles of modular design and institutional coherence (see Appendix C & D). The process began with a critical deconstruction of the core AOU logo, isolating foundational visual elements such as the gateway arch motif, typography, and color palette. These components served as the unifying framework for all faculty-specific identities, ensuring brand consistency across applications.

Next, visual mapping was conducted to translate cultural and disciplinary themes into scalable iconography. Each faculty's unique identity—ranging from business and education to multimedia and computer studies—was articulated through symbolic elements that align with both academic focus and local national identity.

Prototypes were created using vector and motion tools (Adobe Illustrator and After Effects), with bilingual versions adapted for both horizontal and vertical formats. Internal design critiques and iterative feedback sessions were conducted to refine legibility, thematic alignment, and scalability. This cyclical refinement ensured that each logo remained functionally versatile while resonating with AOU's cross-cultural ethos.
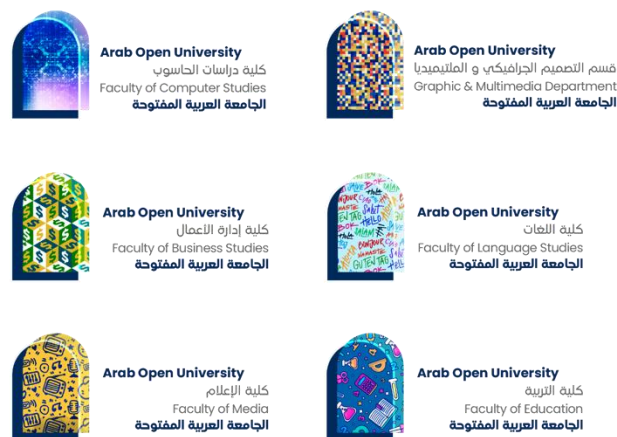
Appendix C: Faculty dynamic logos.

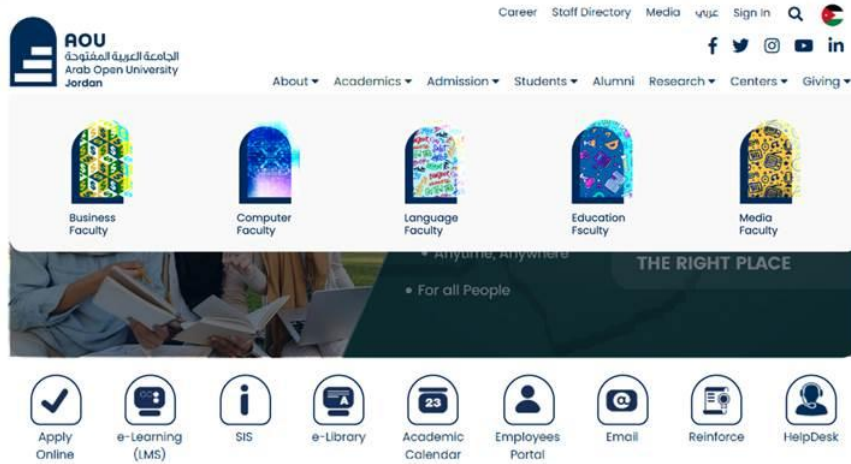Appendix D: Faculty dynamic logos.

5. Evaluation and validation

A visual design assessment form was developed to evaluate the quality and consistency of the dynamic logos. (See Appendix.E. For the full instrument) The tool included criteria such as visual coherence with the main university identity, clarity of academic representation, cultural relevance, and usability across media formats. The form consisted of the following evaluation statements rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Very Poor, 5 = Excellent):

1. The logo is visually clear and understandable.
2. The logo aligns with the official AOU brand identity.
3. The logo effectively represents the academic field of the faculty.
4. The design is culturally relevant and appropriate for the country branch.
5. The logo is adaptable for different media (digital, print, promotional).
6. The logo demonstrates originality and creativity.

7. Overall impression of the logo design.

Additionally, open-ended feedback was collected with the prompt: "What suggestions do you have for improving the logo design?"

An expert panel of 7 participants (including academic staff, branding specialists, and graphic designers) was invited to review the logos. Each participant completed the evaluation form using the Likert scale, and open comments were collected to guide refinement.

Appendix E: International University dynamic logo examples.

Ethical considerations

All logo designs were developed within an academic and internal institutional framework, with no commercial intent or external funding. Informed consent was obtained from evaluators, and ethical guidelines were followed regarding institutional representation and visual integrity.

Table 1.

The assessment form used by expert reviewers to evaluate the dynamic logo designs. It includes structured Likert-scale questions and an open-ended section for qualitative feedback.

Evaluation Criteria	Rating Scale (1 = Very Poor, 5 = Excellent)
The logo is visually clear and understandable.	1 2 3 4 5
The logo aligns with the official AOU brand identity.	1 2 3 4 5
The logo effectively represents the academic field of the faculty.	1 2 3 4 5
The design is culturally relevant and appropriate for the country branch.	1 2 3 4 5
The logo is adaptable for different media (digital, print, promotional).	1 2 3 4 5
The logo demonstrates originality and creativity.	1 2 3 4 5
Overall impression of the logo design.	1 2 3 4 5

Results and analysis

The results strongly validate the theoretical and methodological foundations of this study. Evaluation data collected from a panel of seven design experts was analyzed using both quantitative Likert-scale responses and qualitative open-ended feedback. As shown in Table 2, scores were consistently high across all evaluation dimensions, indicating broad agreement regarding the system's clarity, cultural sensitivity, and alignment with AOU's institutional identity.

Table 2.

Evaluation results of the dynamic logo system used in the Arab Open University (AOU) study.

Evaluation Criterion	Mean	SD	Variance
Visual clarity	4.6	0.49	0.24
Alignment with AOU identity	4.8	0.40	0.16

Faculty representation	4.5	0.52	0.27
Cultural appropriateness	4.7	0.45	0.20
Media versatility	4.6	0.49	0.24
Originality and creativity	4.8	0.40	0.16
Overall impression	4.7	0.45	0.20

These scores reflect a high level of satisfaction among evaluators and validate the system's ability to balance modularity with institutional coherence. The bilingual structure, visual adaptability, and contextual symbolism of the identity system were particularly praised.

Qualitative feedback added depth to these findings. Experts highlighted the "balanced integration of symbolism," "effective bilingual presentation," and "innovative use of cultural motifs." One reviewer noted that the system "achieves an impressive blend of academic seriousness and cultural warmth," which is seldom observed in higher education branding.

Constructive critiques included minor technical suggestions—such as improving readability on mobile devices for vertical logo versions and adjusting color contrast in certain variants. These recommendations were documented and will guide future iterations.

In sum, the evaluation affirms that the dynamic identity system effectively addresses the branding needs of a multi-national, multi-disciplinary institution like AOU. The positive reception, especially regarding cultural adaptability and digital readiness, suggests high transferability to other educational contexts across the Arab region.

6. Recommendations for refinement

Despite the positive evaluations, some constructive feedback emerged:

- Two reviewers noted the need to enhance legibility in mobile-sized versions, especially in vertical formats

- One suggested adjustments to color contrast in cases where icons and backgrounds share similar hues.

These suggestions are being considered for the next iteration of the system, underscoring the value of iterative refinement in DBR methodology.

6.1 Broader implications

These findings align with prior literature that emphasizes the value of dynamic visual systems in multi-campus institutions (e.g., Johnson, 2015; Wheeler, 2017). The bilingual and culturally responsive design suggest strong potential for replicability in other Arab universities, which traditionally rely on static branding. Thus, the evaluation not only confirms the utility of the design for AOU but also positions this system as a regional benchmark in identity innovation.

7. Discussion

This section discusses the broader significance of the results, contextualizing them within theoretical frameworks and highlighting their implications for practice and future research.

The results of this study confirm the efficacy and contextual relevance of the dynamic logo system developed for the Arab Open University. The strong scores received across all evaluation dimensions support the theoretical foundations presented in the literature review, particularly those relating to visual branding flexibility, modularity, and cultural adaptability.

This project demonstrates how a Design-Based Research (DBR) approach can be effectively employed in branding contexts, where iterative prototyping and stakeholder feedback contribute to highly functional design solutions. The expert panel's responses indicated that the dynamic logos successfully preserved institutional identity while allowing faculties the autonomy to express their unique academic and cultural characteristics.

The alignment between these findings and the core ideas from Olins, affirms the value of a modular branding approach in complex academic environments. Moreover, the dynamic system supports the operational needs of Arab Open University branches, which span nine countries with diverse sociocultural settings. The inclusion of national symbols and the use of bilingual typography directly addressed the multilingual and multicultural reality of the institution.

An important implication of this study is that the Arab Open University becomes a pioneering institution in the Arab region in adopting a faculty-based dynamic visual identity. The findings also demonstrate how universities in the Arab world can transition from rigid branding models toward more adaptive, audience-responsive systems, thereby enhancing their relevance in digital and global contexts.

Additionally, the integration of cultural symbols and localized motifs contributes not only to internal identity coherence but also to external engagement. These logos can enhance marketing, student recruitment, and public relations by offering more relatable and localized representations of academic disciplines.

While the results are encouraging, some limitations must be acknowledged. The evaluation was limited to a panel of seven experts, which may not fully capture end-user perceptions such as those of students, alumni, or administrative staff. Future studies could incorporate broader stakeholder groups and test the logos' effectiveness through A/B testing on university platforms.

In summary, this research contributes original insight into the under-explored field of dynamic visual identity design within Arab higher education. The results highlight the potential for scaling this model beyond AOU and into other multi-campus, culturally diverse academic institutions.

8. Conclusion

This study addressed a critical gap in Arab higher education branding by designing and evaluating a dynamic visual identity system for the Arab Open University (AOU). Using a Design-Based Research (DBR) methodology, the research integrated iterative prototyping, stakeholder feedback, and theoretical grounding to propose a scalable model of modular university branding adaptable across multiple national contexts.

Evaluation findings confirmed the feasibility and effectiveness of a dynamic logo system in balancing institutional unity with localized expression. The design was highly rated by expert reviewers for visual clarity, cultural sensitivity, and academic relevance, affirming its potential for broader application in multilingual and multi-campus institutions.

The study's contributions can be categorized into three interrelated domains:

1. Theoretical Contribution

This research extends the application of DBR—typically associated with educational technology—to the domain of institutional branding. It highlights how modular identity systems reflect principles of flexibility, semiotic pluralism, and adaptability in organizational communication (Olins, 2008; Wheeler, 2017). By integrating national symbolism, bilingualism, and faculty-specific iconography, the system serves as a case of visual semiotics operating within culturally sensitive academic branding. The research also supports Wang and Hannafin's (2005) argument that DBR is suitable for investigating real-world design problems through iterative, context-sensitive solutions.

2. Practical Contribution

The project introduces a practical framework for developing dynamic identity systems in universities. The AOU model demonstrates how logos can be systematized to accommodate diverse faculties, languages, and digital media formats without compromising institutional integrity. The model offers guidelines for implementation, including formal adoption, digital-first strategy, and stakeholder engagement (see Strategic Recommendations).

3. Regional Contribution

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first documented case of a dynamic logo system implemented in an Arab university. It challenges the prevalent reliance on static branding in the region and opens pathways for more responsive, inclusive, and modern approaches to visual communication in academia. This positions AOU as a pioneering institution and establishes a replicable model for other universities operating in culturally complex environments.

By synthesizing design innovation with academic rigor, this research lays the foundation for a broader regional dialogue on the role of branding in higher education identity. Future studies are encouraged to expand empirical validation through student-centered feedback and cross-institutional benchmarking.

Strategic Recommendations for Future Implementation:

• Formal Adoption:

The dynamic logo system should be officially adopted by AOU across all branches and embedded into the institution's brand guidelines.

• Scalable Expansion:

Extend the system to additional departments, student clubs, services, and university initiatives, ensuring broader brand cohesion.

• Digital-first Strategy:

Prioritize logo deployment on digital channels—websites, social media, virtual learning platforms—to increase visibility and user engagement.

• Stakeholder Inclusion:

Include students, alumni, and administrative staff in ongoing branding evaluation phases to ensure community resonance and practical usability. Table.2.

• Continuous Evaluation:

Conduct periodic assessments of the system's performance using analytics and A/B testing to adapt to evolving communication trends.

• Regional Benchmarking:

Encourage cross-institutional dialogue and benchmarking by presenting this model at regional conferences and academic consortia focused on higher education innovation.

By implementing these recommendations, institutions can move toward more adaptive, inclusive, and strategically aligned brand identities that reflect the realities of the contemporary academic landscape.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Faculty Dynamic Logos

Visual samples of the designed logos for each faculty, reflecting academic themes and university identity.

Appendix B: Faculty Logos with Bilingual Labels

The logos presented in both Arabic and English to show linguistic adaptability.

Appendix C: Dynamic Logos with National Flags
Logos integrated with subtle national flag elements to enhance cultural representation.
Appendix D: Digital Application of the Dynamic Logo System
Examples showing the logos used in digital media, such as websites and social platforms.
Appendix E: International University Dynamic Logo Examples
Visual references from institutions like MIT Media Lab, CUNY, and LSE to contextualize global practice.
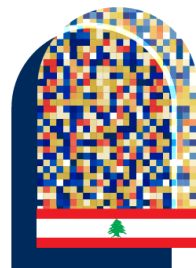Appendix F: Evaluation Instrument
The assessment form used by expert reviewers, with rating criteria and space for qualitative
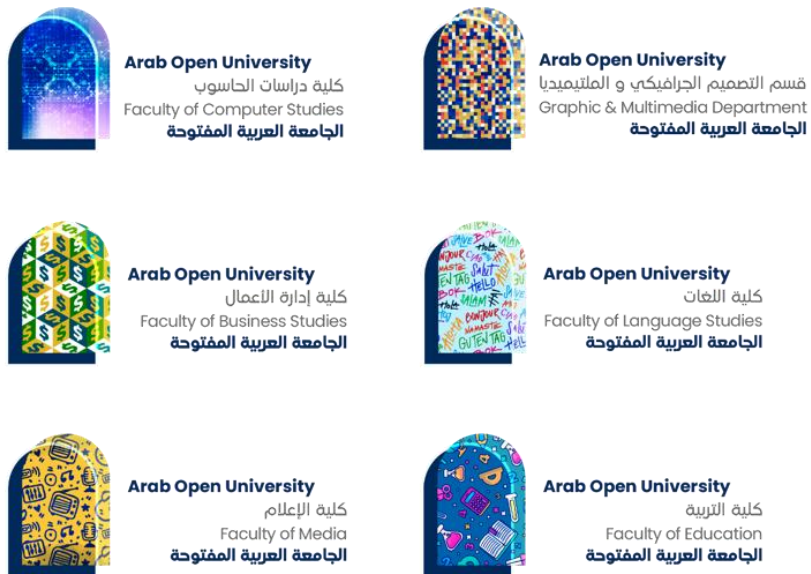
Appendix A: Faculty Dynamic Logos
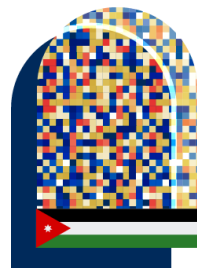
Appendix B: Faculty Logos with Bilingual Labels

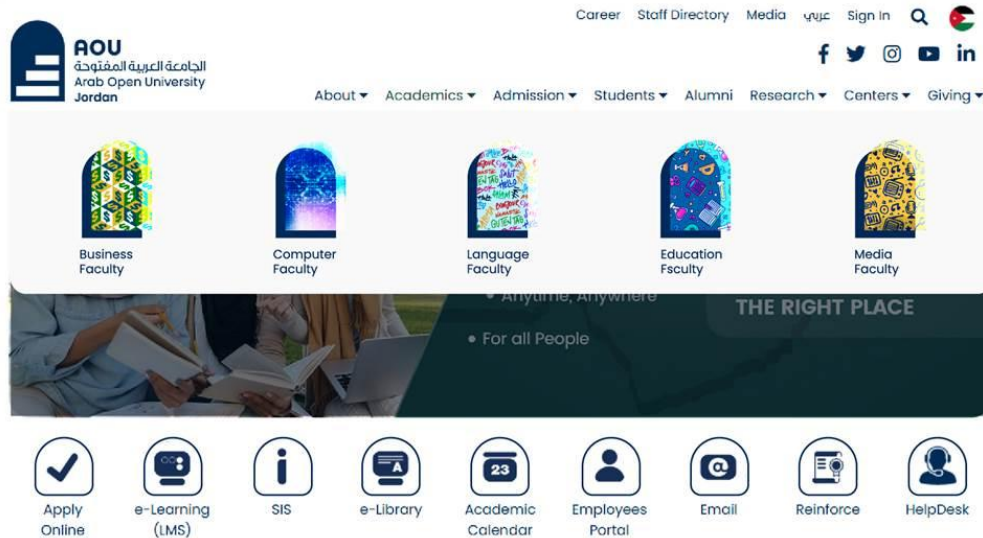## Appendix C: Dynamic Logos with National Flags

Appendix D: Digital Application of the Dynamic Logo System

Appendix E: International University Dynamic Logo Examples

1. MIT Media Lab (USA): Algorithmically generated visual identities unique to each researcher. Source: Pentagram.

2. City University of New York (CUNY): Modular visual identity system adaptable for individual colleges. Source: CUNY Brand Guidelines.

3. London School of Economics (LSE): Flexible student communication identity with vibrant typography and photography. Source: Consider Creative.

Evaluation Instrument

The assessment form used by expert reviewers to evaluate the dynamic logo designs. It includes structured Likert-scale questions and an open-ended section for qualitative feedback.

Evaluation Criteria	Rating Scale (1 = Very Poor, 5 = Excellent)
The logo is visually clear and understandable.	1 2 3 4 5
The logo aligns with the official AOU brand identity.	1 2 3 4 5
The logo effectively represents the academic field of the faculty.	1 2 3 4 5
The design is culturally relevant and appropriate for the country branch.	1 2 3 4 5
The logo is adaptable for different media (digital, print, promotional).	1 2 3 4 5
The logo demonstrates originality and creativity.	1 2 3 4 5
Overall impression of the logo design.	1 2 3 4 5

Summary Statistics for Expert Panel Ratings (n=7)

Evaluation Criterion	Mean	SD	Variance
Visual clarity	4.6	0.49	0.24
Alignment with AOU identity	4.8	0.40	0.16
Faculty representation	4.5	0.52	0.27
Cultural appropriateness	4.7	0.45	0.20
Media versatility	4.6	0.49	0.24
Originality and creativity	4.8	0.40	0.16
Overall impression	4.7	0.45	0.20

In addition to expert feedback, informal comments were collected from 15 students enrolled in the Graphic and Multimedia Design program during a classroom critique session. Responses emphasized the logos' modern appeal, cultural relevance, and bilingual clarity. Below are selected student comments:

"The logos feel clean and modern—I would be proud to share them on our department's page."

"The integration of national colors makes the designs feel more personal and relevant to our branch."

"The bilingual layout is effective, especially for communicating with both local and international audiences."

"Some vertical versions could use more spacing to be readable on mobile."

"I really like how each faculty has its own identity without breaking the university's image."