

Art, Murals, and Student Engagement in the Transformation of Educational Environments

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Abstract

Murals are a powerful form of artistic expression, providing a dynamic platform for community engagement, creative exploration, and the transformation of physical spaces. In educational institutions, wall painting can encourage collaboration, enhance student engagement, and promote institutional identity. This study investigates the impact of mural art initiatives at the University of Applied Sciences in Ferizaj, focusing on their role in enriching the campus environment, fostering teamwork, and improving student relationships. The findings highlight the potential of murals to create inclusive, inspiring, and engaging academic spaces. By using a survey in our research process, we will analyze data from 98 surveyed students to reveal how this creative endeavor has influenced their daily educational activities. Additionally, throughout the study, we will explore the relationships between students and the institution based on the artistic initiatives of this university. Findings show that student participation in mural projects improves teamwork, encourages emotional expression, and promotes a stronger sense of belonging. Survey results reveal that 72.6% of students reported enhanced teamwork, 88.8% felt encouraged to express personal interests, and murals emerged as the most preferred form of artistic intervention.

Keywords:

murals; educational transformation; community engagement; student participation; university

1. Introduction

Art has long been recognized as a powerful medium for fostering community engagement and creative expression. Among the many artistic approaches, murals have been chosen as a particularly effective technique for impactful art interventions. Murals, particularly indoor murals, boast a rich history. Their motifs have evolved over time to reflect the identities, aspirations, and values of various societies. (*The Evolution of Mural Art – Mural Form*, n.d.)

In the 20th century, murals became a tool for conveying social and political messages, as exemplified by Diego Rivera's works in Mexico. In the present

day, murals explore contemporary themes such as diversity, sustainability, and technology. From serving as decoration to becoming instruments of education and advocacy, murals continue to transform spaces and reflect the ever-changing values of the times. By employing vibrant colors, playful designs, and fantastical imagery, murals can evoke a sense of joy and wonder, transforming even the dullest of spaces. Additionally, murals can instill a feeling of tranquility through the use of serene tones, soft brushstrokes, and soothing imagery. Such murals create a peaceful and calming environment, providing a respite from the outside world and allowing individuals to unwind and find solace (*The Psychology of Murals*).

In his research, (Eisner, 2002) examines how murals and student participation in artistic activities enhance educational settings. Eisner argues that art fosters cognitive and emotional development, creating a more inclusive and engaging learning environment while promoting a sense of belonging and school identity. He emphasizes that involving students in mural creation fosters collaboration, respect, and stronger social relationships, improving cooperation between students and academic staff. Eisner concludes that integrating murals and art activities into education can create a more inclusive and mindful environment, positively impacting student development and success (Eisner, 2003). Yenawine believes that art is not just another subject in the school curriculum but an essential resource for enhancing learning across all fields of knowledge and improving students' critical abilities. He uses art as a means to promote visual thinking and create a more engaging learning environment for students (Yenawine, 2014).

Our framework focuses on in-person involvement and/or face-to-face interactions between people in a localized geographic community. Several scholars (e.g., Tebes et al. 2015; Nicolás and Harrison 2018) have called for more academic research in marketing to guide societal transformation through art (Adams, 2004). By working together on mural painting, participants can achieve common learning goals, emphasizing the importance of positive group interdependence and individual accountability for project success (Barkley et al., 2014).

Murals are increasingly used in educational institutions to enhance the aesthetic and emotional qualities of learning spaces. This paper explores the transformative power of murals in academic settings, specifically focusing on initiatives at the University of Applied Sciences in Ferizaj (UASF). These projects not only beautify the campus through collaborative artistic efforts but also foster a sense of belonging, creativity, and engagement among students. At a time when electronic communication is increasingly dominant and human, person-to-person contact is becoming less accessible to people living in underserved communities (Bowles, 2019).

In the United States, projects like City Year use art to enhance school environments and strengthen relationships between students and teachers. Similarly, in Latin America, murals have transformed marginalized communities, as seen in Colombia's Medellín's Biblioteca España, which fostered unity and belonging through collaborative art. In Europe, initiatives like Street Art Oslo and mural projects in British universities emphasize inclusion, sustainability, and cultural dialogue. (*Our Work | Care Force - City Year*, n.d.)

2. Transforming Educational Environments through Murals and the Methodology

This paper addresses the impact of mural art specifically in interior and exterior university spaces, using the Interview Methodology with 98 students, the method of mural comparison, the analysis of artistic expression motifs, and more. The survey participants were primarily selected from the Faculty of Applied Arts at UShAF, with a significant number also coming from the Faculty of Architecture and Interior Design. In a few cases, a small number of randomly selected respondents were included as well. The survey data shows that **98% of respondents are regular students at the University of Applied Sciences in Ferizaj**, while **2% are not**. This indicates that the survey primarily reflects the university's student population (see Figure 12).

The survey process utilized Google Forms, and the questionnaire was distributed via a link or QR code, allowing students the opportunity to complete it. Upon completion, pressing submit saves the results on the Google Forms platform. Therefore, the process is online. The findings from the study conducted at the University of Applied Sciences in Ferizaj align closely with the results of this research on mural art interventions. Both studies highlight the transformative impact of artistic initiatives on student engagement, participation, and emotional connections within academic settings.

In Kosovo, the initiative of the artistic organization Mural Fest Kosova (MFK), based in Ferizaj, is well-known. Recently, this initiative has artistically intervened in numerous educational spaces, including primary and secondary schools in Prishtina (*"Mural Fest Kosova"*,

Pikturon Shkollat e Kryeqytetit - Dukagjini, n.d.) (<https://www.dukagjini.com/mural-fest-kosova-pikturon-shkollat-e-kryeqytetit/>) and Feizaj, kindergartens, and even universities like the UASF. The latter has had a close partnership with the mural festival for years, and most of the activities were developed in cooperation. However, this study will specifically focus on the murals at the university, involving the staff and students of this institution. (<https://radioplus.fm/newsitem/?id=10034>) (<https://www.koha.net/kulture/muralfesti-le-shenja-e-mesazhe-edukative-ne-hapesirat-e-shkolles>)

These activities, along with other interventions in educational, correctional, and healthcare institutions carried out by Mural Fest, have resulted in a significant impact, inspiring many initiatives from organizations as well as independent artists. A specific example is the University of Applied Sciences in UASF, where numerous activities and artistic interventions have been

organized in collaboration with Mural Fest, as well as independently by the staff and students — as in the case of this particular work. The Mural Fest Kosova initiative at the UASF engaged students in creating murals that transformed the environment into a vibrant and inspiring space. The project included teaching artistic techniques, collaborating on conceptual designs reflecting institutional values, and fostering participation and teamwork (see Figure 1).

Art has long been recognized as an effective medium for fostering community and engagement. In educational settings, the incorporation of artistic initiatives, such as murals, has proven to be a powerful tool for enhancing student interaction and participation. A similar initiative was undertaken at the UASF, where students collaborated to transform the campus by creating collective murals.



Figure 1. Workshop with students on the technique of mural process organized by Mural Fest Kosovo and UASF, with US artist trainer Emily Her, supported by the US Embassy in Kosovo.

In this paper, the realization of murals in the interior and exterior spaces of the UShAF is presented. Regarding the preparation of colors for both cases, the mixing and combination were carried out at room temperature based on the provided guidelines. The colors used were **acrylic plastic paints** suitable for both environments. The difference is that **eco- paints** were used indoors for health considerations, whereas **stronger acrylic plastic paints** were applied outdoors. Both types are water-soluble. The painting process and technique are documented (see Figure 2 and 3) which illustrate the preparation of colors, their combination, and the extraction of shades by UShAF students.

The concept and color palette were typically chosen based on the nature and function of the space in which the mural would be created. In this specific case, the colors used were primarily inspired by the University's official logo (see Figure 6), while the motifs featured modern geometric designs with a soft pastel palette derived from the logo.

The mural motifs used in interior spaces also varied depending on the function and purpose of each room. Meanwhile, in the corridor area of the Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality, traditional Albanian motifs were featured (see Figure 7).



Figure 2.
Color preparation by students

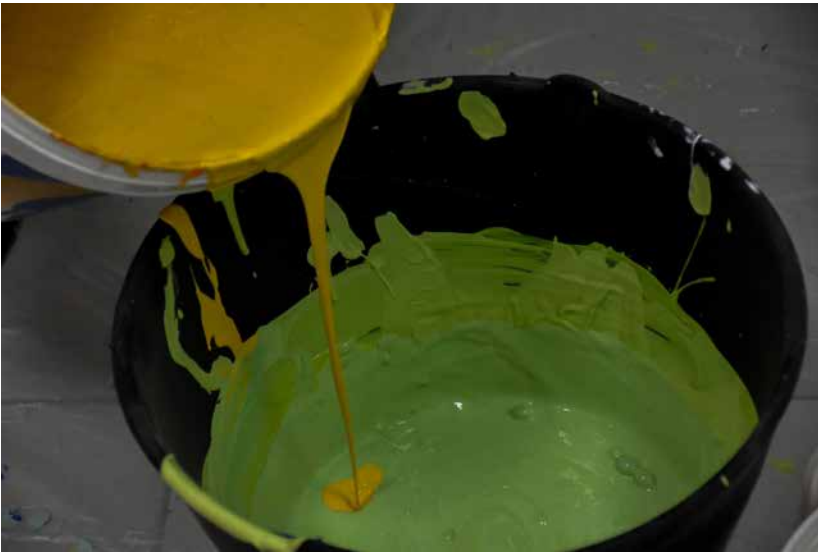


Figure 3.
Combining colors

2.1. Interior as an art form transformation

The spaces where murals have been identified are frequently visited by students, staff, and others. For this reason, the need for artistic intervention was recognized, and, as observed in Figures 4 and 5, artistic intervention significantly transformed these spaces visually.

The idea for the sketches was conceived and finalized by the students themselves, under the supervision of art professor Lebibe Topalli. A voluntary working group was formed, holding regular meetings and discussions about the concept and idea, alongside the identification of potential spaces for the mural.



Figure 4. before artistic interventions



Figure 5. after artistic interventions



Figure 6. Students of Faculty of Applied Arts in process painting in a meeting room



Figure 7. Painting process in the hall of the Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality in UShAF

The selected spaces were usually empty or “dry” areas, without furniture or existing displayed works. Each student submitted their individual sketches and explained their concept. The design that received the most votes from the group - under the guidance of the professor - was selected for implementation. The student whose sketch was chosen was appointed as the group leader.

2.2 Exterior as an art form transformation

Murals in outdoor spaces are one of the most prevalent art forms worldwide and in our country alike, serving both an aesthetic function and communicating specific messages to passersby. Their visibility and impact make them an essential aspect of public art.

Exterior murals of this project also show notable distinctions from UShAF interior murals; for instance: stronger acrylic paints were employed for increased durability while larger surfaces required different artistic approaches.

Sketching techniques were tailored to suit the size and visibility of the artwork. Motifs chosen weren't necessarily tied to University identities or logo colors but more relevant social themes.

Figure 10 and 11 depict these motifs that align with themes explored by MFK, such as On/Offline. Mural art at the University of Applied Sciences in Ferizaj (UASF), where vibrant and meaningful artworks were installed across campus, not only enriched the visual environment but also helped strengthen relationships among students as well as between them and professors as well as between these entities and UASF itself.

In the photo, in addition to the students, the art professor can also be seen painting together with the students (see Figure 8&9).

This research supports the findings of an earlier study that concluded art installations and exhibitions promote an inclusive and welcoming environment. Murals encourage students to spend more time in academic spaces for increased engagement and interaction among its users; by encouraging creativity, collaboration, and emotional well-being initiatives like these contributed significantly towards improving campus atmosphere as a whole and giving students pride of belonging at their university.

At UASF, art interventions demonstrate its power to transcend aesthetics by directly impacting student participation, attendance and interpersonal connections. Such outcomes emphasize the necessity of expanding

similar projects to further enrich academic environments while deepen student-institution relationships.

This study sought to assess how art initiatives impact interactions and contribute to installations and exhibitions displayed across university spaces such as lecture halls, common areas and classrooms. According

to this research, art initiatives strengthened relationships among peers as well as academic institutions while simultaneously increasing interest in classes for participating students. Most participants in the survey reported that art installations and displays created more welcoming environments while providing opportunities for deeper relationships among academic colleagues.



Figure 8. The art professor Lebibe Topalli painting together with students



Figure 9. Professor and students collaborating on painting together



Figure 10. Mural by Mary Iverson, assisted by students of UASF.



Figure 11. Mural by Mate, Mural Fest Kosova 2022

This study demonstrated how art initiatives transformed university spaces to encourage increased student attendance and commitment to attending classes regularly and spending additional time on campus. Students reported feeling motivated to attend more frequently as well as spend additional time there.

This aligns with the findings of the previous study, which concluded that art installations and exhibitions fostered a more inclusive and welcoming atmosphere environment. The murals motivated students to spend more time in academic spaces, creating a more engaged and interactive community. By fostering creativity, collaboration, and emotional well-being, these initiatives contributed to improving the overall campus atmosphere and encouraged students to feel a greater sense of belonging and pride in their university.

The integration of art into academic spaces at the UASF demonstrates the potential of such interventions to go beyond aesthetics, actively influencing student participation, attendance, and interpersonal connections. These outcomes reinforce the importance of expanding similar artistic projects to further enhance educational environments and deepen student-institution relationships.

The purpose of the study was to investigate how art initiatives impact interactions and contribute to the production of installations and exhibitions displayed in various university spaces, including lecture halls, common areas, and classrooms. According to the study, these art initiatives enhanced students' relationships with their peers and academic institutions, while also increasing their interest in classes. The majority of students who participated in the survey reported that the art installations and displays created a more welcoming and inclusive environment. Furthermore, they noted that these initiatives provided opportunities for deeper interaction with their academic colleagues. The study also revealed that the transformation of university spaces through art initiatives led to increased student attendance. Students stated that the aesthetically pleasing environment motivated them to attend classes more regularly and spend additional time on campus.

3. Results and Survey Findings

The survey findings underscore the transformative role of artistic initiatives in enhancing student engagement, strengthening teamwork, and fostering a more inclusive and dynamic campus environment. These activities not only stimulate creativity but also appear to support interpersonal development and the sense of community among participants. Out of 98 respondents, 98% identified as regular students at the University of Applied Sciences in Ferizaj, while 2% were external, indicating that the survey sample is largely representative of the university's student population (see Figure 12).

Are you a regular student at the University of Applied Sciences in Ferizaj?

98 responses

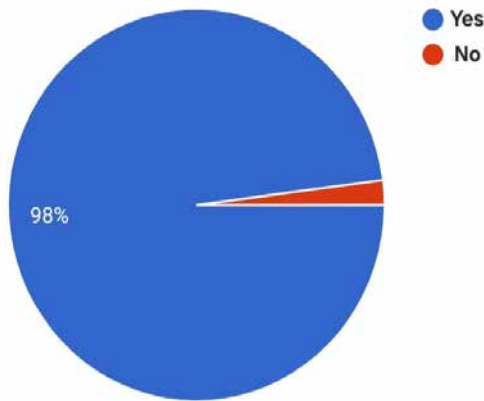


Figure 12. Demographic representation of respondents

The survey reveals the age distribution of respondents:

- 93.9% are aged 18-24, representing the majority of participants.
- A small percentage falls into the "Over 24 years" and "Under 18" categories, indicating minimal representation from these groups.

This reflects a predominantly young university demographic (see Figure 13.).

Age?

98 responses

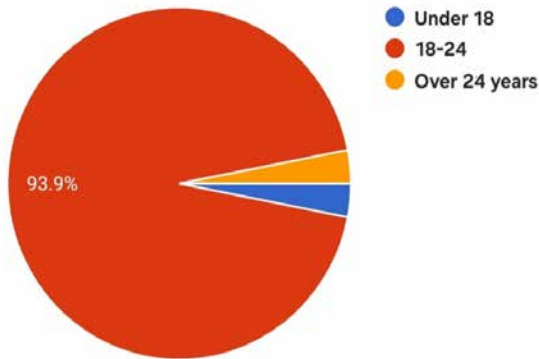


Figure 13. Age distribution of respondents

On participation in artistic activities:

- 28.6% of students reported having engaged in university-based artistic initiatives,
- while 71.4% had not participated in such activities.

This points to a significant opportunity to increase student involvement by expanding access, visibility, and diversity of artistic offerings on campus (see Figure 14)

Have you ever been part of the engagement in artistic creativity at your university?

98 responses

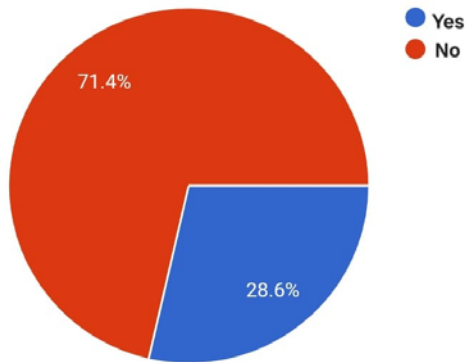


Figure 14. Participation in artistic activities

A key question in the survey explored how artistic activities influenced teamwork. 72.6% of respondents stated that these activities had a positive impact, while 27.4% reported no noticeable effect, and importantly, no students reported negative outcomes (see Figure 15).

For students participating in artistic activities: How have these activities influenced the strengthening of teamwork among you?

95 responses

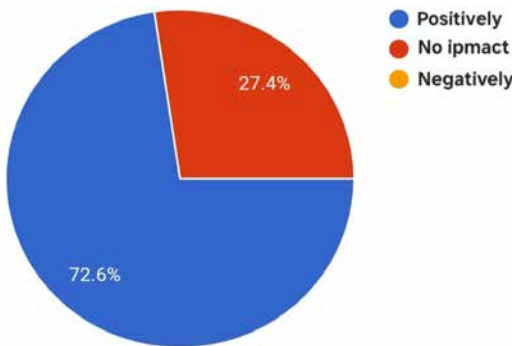


Figure 15. Perceived impact of artistic activities on teamwork

To interpret these results more deeply, qualitative responses indicated that positive effects on teamwork included:

- Improved peer communication,
- Greater willingness to collaborate,
- More effective division of responsibilities,
- and a stronger sense of shared purpose during creative group efforts such as mural painting or event coordination.

Although formal statistical significance testing (e.g., Chi-square test) was not applied at this stage, the clear trends and absence of negative responses suggest a meaningful correlation between participation in artistic activities and perceived improvement in collaborative skills. Future iterations of this research could incorporate inferential statistical methods to validate and expand these findings further.

In addition, 88.8% of respondents agreed that the university’s artistic activities offered them a platform for self-expression, while 11.2% remained neutral, and none disagreed (see Figure 16). This result reflects a strong perception of inclusivity and emotional connection, suggesting that the arts serve not only as a creative outlet but also as a vehicle for personal and cultural identity within the university setting.

Do you think that through such artistic activities the University gives you the opportunity to express your interests?

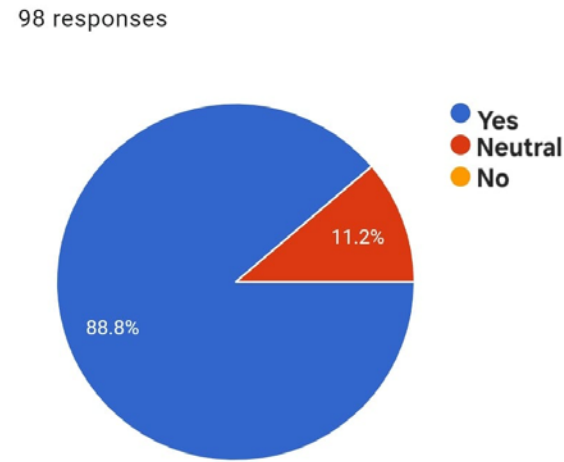


Figure 16. Perception of art activities as opportunities for self-expression

When asked about preferred forms of artistic expression:

- 59.2% selected murals as their favorite,
- followed by digital art (44.9%),
- paintings (38.8%),
- graffiti (36.7%),
- sculpture (22.4%),
- and drawing (1%).

The prominence of murals can be attributed to their large-scale visual impact, accessibility in public spaces, and their capacity for storytelling and community engagement. These preferences also reflect a desire among students to interact with art that is socially relevant and physically integrated into their daily environments (see Figure 17).

Which form of art do you want to practice more often in the spaces of your university?

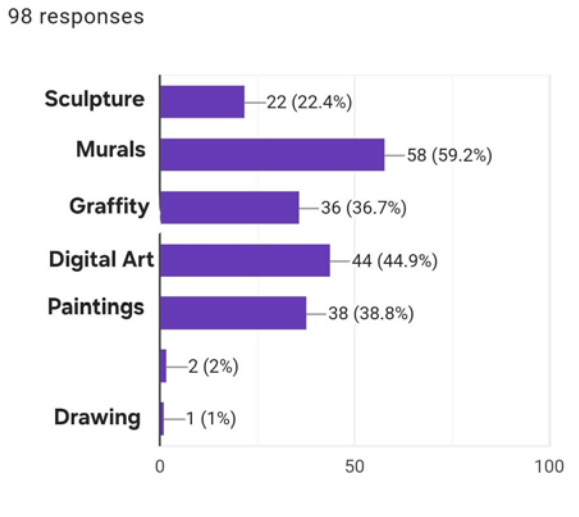


Figure 17. Preferred art forms among students

Out of 98 respondents, murals are the most preferred art form (59.2%), followed by digital art (44.9%), paintings (38.8%), graffiti (36.7%), sculpture (22.4%), and drawing (1%). Murals dominate due to their transformative and visual impact on university spaces.

4. Discussion

This study offers insights into the transformative potential of artistic interventions--specifically murals--in academic environments. Implementing such initiatives within higher education settings proved effective at strengthening interpersonal relationships, encouraging student engagement and creating an overall sense of belongingness among its participants. Students reported increased motivation and campus presence as well as stronger social ties and an appreciation of learning spaces more generally.

These results support prior research conducted by Elliot Eisner, which highlighted the power of art to foster critical thinking, communication and collaboration in education. Initiatives like City Year’s Whole School Whole Child model also demonstrate this point by offering artistic

and cultural programming which enhances student participation, emotional expression and community connection - similar to Mural Fest Kosovo where public art served both an aesthetic purpose as well as civic activation - creating more inclusive and livable spaces. This study is distinctive due to its focus on university environments, where art - specifically murals - have had less of an effect. While much of the literature addresses murals for K-12 education or community settings, this research contributes to our growing body of knowledge by documenting how artistic interventions may influence higher education environments - especially post-conflict or transitional environments like Kosovo.

UShAF’s initiative demonstrated how murals and visual arts could positively influence student experiences on campus spaces. Murals not only served as aesthetic enhancements, but they were also interactive social platforms where students expressed values like inclusion, identity, resilience and collaboration.

These findings have far-reaching ramifications for academic institutions worldwide. Universities could benefit from adopting similar initiatives - whether curriculum integration (for example incorporating mural design into visual arts or architecture programs), community outreach efforts or student-led art projects - as these approaches foster experiential learning while simultaneously enriching campus life.

Partnerships between municipalities, cultural organizations and NGOs could increase the reach and impact of such initiatives by broadening their scale and impact. Such collaboration could promote civic engagement while encouraging student ownership of public space. Institutions may wish to integrate arts-based strategies within student support frameworks for use as mental health, social inclusion and diversity awareness approaches.

Mural art has long demonstrated its ability to transform spaces and dialogue. Projects across cities, such as Philadelphia’s Mural Arts Program, the Fresque des Lyonnais in France, and Berlin’s East Side Gallery show how murals can transform not only visual landscapes but

also emotional and social dynamics in both educational and urban environments. By engaging with themes such as justice, sustainability and identity through mural projects pedagogy is extended far beyond classroom learning - uniting individuals within collectives while connecting locals with global issues.

5. Conclusions

This study confirms murals as an effective form of artistic expression with considerable potential to transform educational spaces into welcoming, dynamic, and emotionally engaging environments. At the University of Applied Sciences Ferizaj, the Murals initiative by staff of the university and the Mural Fest Kosovo initiative demonstrated how collaborative art projects, both indoors and outdoors, can shape student experiences by encouraging teamwork, encouraging self-expression, strengthening campus identity through emotional memory-making experiences for both staff and students alike.

Survey results derived from 98 student responses reveal that 72.6% reported improved teamwork, and 88.8% felt encouraged to express themselves artistically through artistic activities. Murals were identified as being particularly visually and symbolically powerful within university settings.

Indoor and outdoor murals featuring different themes and functions gave us a better insight into how their placement and design affect both social and academic dimensions of student life. Through such initiatives we strengthened a sense of belonging, increased motivation and contributed positively to campus cohesion.

Murals offer educational institutions an effective, low-cost strategy to improve learning environments, foster interdepartmental collaboration and promote student wellbeing. Integrating art into academic spaces not only enhances aesthetics but also serves pedagogical and psychosocial functions by increasing inclusivity, engagement and creativity.

Future studies must explore the long-term impacts of mural interventions, particularly with respect to academic performance, institutional culture and psychological well-being. Comparative analyses across contexts or between student-driven and institution-led projects would further demonstrate mural art’s educational value.

UShAF serves as an example that murals can serve not just as decorations, but as tools to facilitate positive educational, emotional and social transformation. Expanding similar initiatives across universities would foster more dynamic academic environments that celebrate student participation while emphasizing creative expression and student expression.

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