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Communication problem

Incoming European Union data protection rules could have a devastating effect on the relationships between universities and their alumni, but there is a solution.

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On 25 May, the Data Protection Act 1998 will be replaced by the EU's General Data Protection Regulation in the biggest overhaul of data protection legislation for more than 25 years. The change is expected to go ahead whatever happens with Brexit. But sometimes enforced change creates positive outcomes.

The EU rules will require universities to be transparent about the data they hold on their students, and what they do with it, and, combined with the EU's Privacy and Electronic Communications Regulations, will have a big impact on the ways in which universities communicate with their alumni.

In future, alumni will explicitly need to give universities permission to send them marketing communications. Mass emailings will be a thing of the past. It is likely that universities will lose contact with more than 90 per cent of their alumni contacts on centrally held databases no matter how compelling the message or how repeated the call to action to keep in touch.

However, rather than seeing this as a threat to alumni engagement, universities must use it as a prompt to up their game. They must think more carefully about the value of their alumni and the nature of communications that will inspire alumni engagement. They must make it clear that the alumni relationship is not predominantly about raising money and instead focus on how alumni engagement can benefit both current students' experiences of university and the alumni themselves.

Dramatic drop-out

I predict that this change will come in two stages. First, there will be a dramatic number of drop-outs from the database as few students bother to read and respond to requests to keep channels of communication open. Second, universities will realise that they need to invest more energy into the transition stage for students between final submissions, summer balls and becoming alumni.

For some universities, a summer graduation may already perform this task well. But for those universities that offer a delayed autumn graduation, time, effort and energy must be invested in the final weeks of students' time at university. Celebrations thanking them for their contributions during their degrees and introducing them to the status of alumni, should prompt future alumni cohorts to consent to ongoing communication. Students need to understand what it is to be part of the alumni community and transitional activities will make that much clearer.

In recent months I've been talking to alumni who took our marketing communications courses and some consistent messages emerge. Students are proud of their university and remember their lives here with affection and nostalgia. They feel loyal to the institution, but they've moved on.

For most of the graduates I spoke to, university was the final chapter of their education. That chapter had concluded. The end. Communication with the university was largely absent and few students recollected communication from the alumni office. More than that, there was an underlying sense that this wasn't at all a bad thing; no chance of being pestered for money.

Enduring relationships

Checking these alumni against the alumni database indicated that they were largely unengaged. Yet conversations revealed this was an incomplete picture. In fact, these alumni were talking about their

university and academic tutors elsewhere—socially and professionally, supporting current students who asked for career advice, endorsing applicants’ CVs and, in particular, their course of study.

While the alumni felt that their relationship with the university had moved on, they didn’t feel the same about their relationships with some—although certainly not all—academics who taught them. In these graduates’ minds, thriving relationships, built on a rapport nurtured at university, continued.

Not surprisingly, alumni experienced an emotional connection to the university through their connection with people—their friends and a selection of stand out academics. These connections were being sustained by infrequent interactions on social media platforms: predominately Facebook and LinkedIn.

Yet such relationships are in jeopardy. If class sizes increase, this undermines the possibility of the academic-alumni relationship developing. If students don’t even feel that academics know their names, how are they expected to build rapport and sustain this over the critical period of graduation and beyond?

Opportunities and solutions

So what should be done? Nurturing relationships while at university seems an obvious first step. Personal tutors and dissertation supervisors clearly know their students on a one-to-one basis, providing a strong underpinning for ongoing alumni relationships.

But what if we demanded a “know your name” strategy, which would mean class sizes and student allocations being designed explicitly to allow all academics to know their students’ names. Surely this would provide opportunities for the rapport-building which generates engagement within university and sustains alumni relationships beyond it.

We need authentic relationships with our alumni, built on reciprocity, trust and commitment: relationships that result in guest lectures, mentoring opportunities, industry panel contributions, employment opportunities for future students. These kinds of interactions are win-win, for the alumni and for current students. Get these people-focused relationships right and changes in data-protection legislation should be much less of a concern.

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- By Fiona Cownie

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