

## **Alumni gratitude and academics: Implications for engagement**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Gratitude may help Universities to sustain relationships with alumni and stimulate valuable input into current students' learning experiences. This small-scale, qualitative study draws from the voices of alumni associated with a UK University. The study explores gratitude's role within alumni's reflections on Higher Education. We find that alumni's feelings of gratitude appear to resonate most clearly towards academic teaching staff. Despite these feelings of gratitude, there are few verbal expressions of gratitude from alumni towards academics. Indeed, alumni have a variety of concerns about saying thank-you to academics including feeling awkward and may even see saying thank-you as a sign of weakness. However, hidden expressions of gratitude are evident. Alumni engage in behaviour which benefits the institution and are prepared to do more if asked, especially by key academic staff. We therefore suggest that it is useful to think of expressions of gratitude as known and unknown. The inequity between feelings of gratitude and known expressions of gratitude may mean that universities and academics remain less alert to the evidence and potency of gratitude within Higher Education than reality would merit. Indeed, we argue that gratitude is a central idea with the ability to inform HEIs' alumni engagement strategies. This research presents an opportunity to understand the importance of alumni gratitude towards academics and how this can facilitate known expressions of gratitude from a growing alumni base, for the benefit of current students.

**key words:** alumni, gratitude, alumni engagement, academics, faculty, expressions of gratitude

## **Alumni gratitude and academics: Implications for engagement**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Gratitude is a relevant yet under-researched idea within Higher Education (HE). This research examines experiences of gratitude amongst alumni. We argue that gratitude helps to sustain mutually beneficial relationships between alumni, institutions and academics aiding alumni engagement strategies. This small-scale, qualitative study draws from the voices of alumni from a UK university. Alumni can offer an informed, reflective analysis of their previous and ongoing experiences of their alma mater and the academics with whom they studied. Alumni are recognised as a valuable resource for HE, sharing their professional experiences with current students through activities from guest lectures to mentoring schemes. The paper starts from the premise that feelings of gratitude amongst alumni prompt reciprocal behaviours in the form of alumni engagement. This fuels ongoing interactions between alumni and their alma mater to the benefit of alumni, current students, institution and academics (McDearmon 2013).

### **CONCEPTUAL UNDERPINNING**

This study draws its theoretical framework from Relationship Marketing literature (e.g. Palmatier et al. 2009). Gratitude is a fundamental concept within relational exchanges, sitting alongside trust and commitment generating important relational outcomes (Morales 2005; Soscia 2007; Palmatier et al. 2009; Hasan et al. 2014; Raggio et al. 2014; Ting & Huang 2015). Research on HE through such a relational lens is increasing (e.g. Helgesen 2008; Southcombe et al. 2015; Cownie 2017b) with gratitude emerging as a focus for study. Research on gratitude in HE is limited, focusing on students (e.g. Fazal-e-Hasan et

al. 2017; Howells et al. 2017) and to a lesser extent academics (Cownie 2016, Howells et al. 2017) with little research on alumni gratitude. Therefore, this paper addresses a research gap by exploring the role of gratitude within alumni's reflection on their HE experience. This extends our understanding of a key idea within a relational theoretical framework, as experienced by an understudied stakeholder within HE with implications for current students' learning experiences.

The research conceptualises gratitude as an emotional response to act towards a perceived benefactor (Dewani & Sinha 2012; Raggio et al. 2014). Whilst this paper draws from gratitude within Relationship Marketing contexts, it also offers new conceptualisations of gratitude. This study is underpinned by a central construct, 'feelings of gratitude', defined as a positive emotional response accompanied by an intention to demonstrate appreciation to the perceived giver of valued benefits. Two aspects of this definition are worth noting. The emphasis on the positive characteristic of gratitude distinct from obligation (Gouldner 1960) and indebtedness (Pelser et al. 2015; Bock et al. 2016a). Second, the intentional aspect of this definition is important; though we note that sometimes intentions will not be manifest in behaviours. Emerging behaviours to express gratitude are conceptualised as 'expressions of gratitude'. Morgan et al. (2017) recognise feelings and expressions of gratitude as aspects of 'the virtue of gratitude' (2017: 180). Feelings of gratitude focus on the people and things for which gratitude is experienced; expressions of gratitude relate to the effort and priority which people accord to noticing and giving thanks (Morgan et al. 2017). Their quantitative study places feelings and expressions of gratitude alongside four further constructs: attitudes to appropriateness [of gratitude]; behavioural shortcomings; rituals/noticing benefits; and attitude of gratitude. These constructs offer a dimensional approach of thinking about gratitude which reflects noticing the good things you have, the importance of acknowledging kindness and showing gratitude and forgetfulness relating to acknowledging things you are grateful for. This conceptualisation of gratitude informs the study.

This paper also aligns with Relationship Marketing theory proposing gratitude as a powerful driver of relational concepts including trust and commitment (Palmatier et al. 2009; Fazal-e-Hasan et al. 2017) and intentions related to future behaviours (Palmatier et al. 2009). Existing research suggests that gratitude may drive engagement within HE (Cownie 2016; Howells et al. 2017); thus gratitude may provide a fertile underpinning for alumni engagement strategies.

Whilst many educational institutions' news releases combine gratitude and alumni, for example '*Kellogg celebrates alumni leaders at May 3 'With gratitude'*' (Norton 2018), there are few scholarly studies which conflate this idea and research population. Khanna et al. (2019) find gratitude to be a driver of brand resonance for alumni. Frech's (2018) doctoral thesis draws from a range of HE populations including alumni to inform an empirical study (amongst students not alumni) which demonstrates that gratitude is a mediator between satisfaction and engagement behaviours. Frisby et al. (2019) examined the recollection of alumni interactions with academics but rapport rather than gratitude is their conceptual focus. Thus, this study is original as it extends prior knowledge about gratitude to focus on gratitude amongst alumni. We can begin to consider the implications for alumni's expressed willingness to interact with academics or institutions in the future. Whilst the potential prosocial behaviours and philanthropic giving which might emerge from feelings of gratitude are acknowledged, these are intended to be the focus of future studies, rather this initial foray into alumni gratitude.

The relational elements between alumni and university also enable us to draw on Social Exchange Theory in the alumni context, offering further insights into why alumni decide to act altruistically towards their alma mater. Weerts and Ronca (2008) in their study of alumni donors who offer to volunteer, draw on Social Exchange Theory. They demonstrate how alumni analyse the benefits received during their studies and even post-graduation, described as: 'quality of education, career gains, social connections and

prestige' (2008, p.278) as factors when deciding whether to agree to a further volunteering role at their alma mater. Similarly, Social Exchange Theory underpinned Unangst's (2018) study of active alumni involvement in international alumni activities. For the purposes of this study, we acknowledge that Social Exchange Theory offers insight into why alumni gratitude can then manifest itself into behaviours and actions by alumni.

Examining gratitude in HE has the potential to change the position of students or alumni with the university. Unlike the rhetoric of student as consumer (Cuthbert 2010; Curtis 2010; Molesworth et al. 2011; Tight 2013), gratitude implies a public good in which students and alumni have availed of HE to their benefit. We recognise that the more marketization seeps into Higher Education, the more students and alumni may distance themselves as lifelong members of their alma maters, which may erode feelings of gratitude. This research provides new theoretical and practical contributions to our understanding of HE, by exploring a novel concept within an important, under-studied population—alumni—identifying implications for alumni engagement.

### **Alumni engagement**

Traditional engagement strategies, such as reunions, magazines and newsletters are employed by institutions to build relationships with alumni (Tromble 1998, Gallo 2012). Based on shared affiliations and affinity, HEIs aim to create mutually beneficial, sustained connections between alumni and institution (Gallo 2012, 2013). The professional association for alumni relations and advancement, CASE (Council for Advancement and Support of Education), offers a broad definition of alumni engagement emphasizing the involvement of alumni 'in meaningful activities to advance the institution's mission' (CASE 2018, p.5). Alumni may enact their agency in engaging in discretionary collaborative behaviours, either proactive or reactive, such as participating in an open day to promote the university, or working with academics to deliver a live assignment brief, with no

expectation of direct reward (Heckman and Guskey 2015). Such behaviours and intentions are influenced by the strength of the alumni-institutional relationship, together with alumni's reflection on their educational experience (Alexander and Koenig 2008; Fleming 2019). Literature related to alumni engagement also tends to focus on alumni engagement as activities towards an ultimate outcome of giving and generosity, concentrating on financial donations (Volkwein 2010). Previous research focuses on what determines this form of generosity, such as a positive student experience (McDearmon and Shirley 2009; Holmes 2009). This study is distinct in focusing on alumni's experiences of gratitude, interactions with academics and the potential implications of alumni engagement for current students' experiences of HE. Thus, in philanthropy terms, we are interested in elements of time and talent rather than treasure, understood as financial donations (Cascione 2003).

Vanderlelie (2015) recognises 'international trends to reposition alumni in the educational process' (p.1). However, universities underestimate the value of alumni within the curriculum (Irani 2012); the role of alumni engagement to support curricula remains understudied. There may be an opportunity to draw sustained input (for example mentoring) from alumni as a manifestation of alumni expressions of gratitude. Such input would enhance students' and alumni employability. Considering the role of alumni beyond financial giving and highlighting opportunities for volunteering and advocacy (Weerts and Ronca 2008; Weerts, Cabrera and Sanford 2010) or a contribution to the employability agenda (JISC 2013; Vanderlelie 2015), positions alumni differently, with the potential to reframe the role of alumni engagement. Research by Fleming (2019) outlines 'personal values' as one of five themes of an alumni engagement framework in which core experiences—as students or as alumni—are formed creating a sense of the active values of the institution, which include interactions with academics. Indeed Frisby et al. (2019) show that alumni recounting 'memorable messages' from academics impacts lifelong alumni engagement.

Traditionally alumni are the responsibility of the alumni relations function, though Gallo (2012) argues the imprint of alumni should be diffused across the institution. Engaging alumni in student recruitment, in the classroom, in offering students work placements or internships, means that alumni have the potential for interaction with other administrative and academic functions within the institution. The categories of alumni engagement presented by CASE (2018)—volunteer, experiential, philanthropic and communication—provide a framework to consider potential types of alumni engagement, with an emphasis on curricula-based volunteering (e.g. mentoring) or experiential activity (e.g. guest lecturer).

In summary, this work explores feelings and expressions of gratitude amongst alumni; an original way of thinking about the underpinning of alumni engagement strategies and alumni's potential contribution to the curriculum. By understanding the nature of feelings and expressions of gratitude and the place of academics in this gratitude, we will be in a better position to nurture alumni relationships to benefit current and future students' experiences of HE.

## **METHOD**

This study aims to explore alumni experiences of gratitude. An exploratory approach was appropriate given the dearth of research in this area (Cohen et al. 2011), widely used within the HE research context (e.g. Mulrenan et al. 2020; Wong & Chiu 2020). In a similar manner to Wright (2013 p.91) the study sought to 'develop rather than test theory'.

A qualitative method enabled us to listen to the voice of our participants to generate a deep understanding of alumni experiences of gratitude. We were interested in how alumni felt gratitude (if indeed they did feel grateful) and how and why they expressed or refrained



from expressing that gratitude within the context of HE. The qualitative approach complements the quantitative research studies that inform this work (e.g. Heckman and Guskey 2015, Fazal-e-Hasan et al. 2017; Frisby et al. 2019). Thus, we sought to provide additional depth to the extant knowledge concerning alumni experiences.

Our study was small scale, drawing from a single HEI which is certainly a limitation but again is a feature of many educational studies (e.g. Wright 2013; Frisby et al. 2019). This enabled access to a convenience sample of alumni who had engaged in undergraduate study within a broad subject area. Our aim was to speak to alumni who graduated over the past 25 years to listen to experiences across the alumni lifecycle. Our final sample comprised alumni who had graduated from the university 1 to 22 years before data collection.

Of the 61 undergraduate alumni invited to participate, interviews with 17 alumni were secured. Time or work pressures were cited as a reason for non-participation. Few requests were met with no response. Of the final participants, a small number of alumni had engaged in sporadic contact with the researcher since graduation, but most alumni had no direct contact with the researcher since graduation.

We chose to use semi-structured interviews to give us access to participants' individual voices in an open but guided manner. Whilst the research was exploratory, we wanted the opportunity to signpost areas which had emerged from the literature. Again, interviews are well used in educational research (e.g. Wong and Chiu 2020; Wright 2013) and have the practical advantage of being easily conducted online. This in turn may have had a positive impact on the sample's willingness to participate as they were happy to use Facetime or Skype for interviews. Indeed, online interviews allowed us to include alumni living in Hong Kong, Austria and Bulgaria.

The interview protocol was developed broadly drawing from literature about gratitude (e.g. Palmatier et al. 2009; Morgan et al. 2017) whilst offering opportunities for participants to reflect upon their HE experience. The semi-structured research tool invited alumni to talk about their experiences since graduation, reflections on their University experience and engagement with their University as an alum. Notions of gratitude were introduced whereby alumni reflected on the relevance of these ideas to their experiences as a graduate. A pilot interview allowed the research tool to be tested for face validity.

All participants had studied subjects within media and communication. None of the UK alumni paid £9000 tuition fees. The sample comprised 10 male participants and 7 female participants. Participants had been awarded either a first, 2-1 or 2-2 degree, indeed there was an over-representation of students with high honours classifications, a limitation of the sample.

All but two interviews were conducted online. Interviews varied from 37 to 77 minutes in length, generating a dataset of 15.5 hours. Analysis was conducted using NVIVO 11 first using open coding followed by analysis seeking to identify themes (Cohen et al. 2011). Creswell and Miller (2000) encourage prioritising credibility when making inferences from data, with the researchers seeking to represent participants' meaning regarding feelings and expressions of gratitude along with intentions to engage with HEIs. Thus, the quotes chosen to present the unmediated voice of participants were selected as credible and trustworthy reflections of participants' contributions to the interviews.

Ethical approval was sought and granted from the Institution. For informed consent, a participant information sheet was provided and a participant approval form was signed and emailed back to the researcher prior to the commencement of interviews. Participants were advised that they could withdraw from the interview at any time. For data reporting, each participant was allocated a pseudonym. No conflict of interest was raised during

data collection, for example, none of the participants were applying for postgraduate study at the institution. Whilst we acknowledge there was an element of insider research here, the research team were confident that participants' responses could be perceived as trustworthy, with no apparent attempts at compliance and little sense of participants seeking to please the interviewer. Indeed, we are confident the research approaches towards alumni via academics is authentic and appropriate given that alumni's previous experiences of HE have been with academic colleagues rather than members of the alumni office. Data is stored on a password-protected computer to be destroyed at the publication of results.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Higher Education as a context for feelings of gratitude

Gratitude was perceived by participants as a positive idea; Participants welcomed feelings of gratitude in their lives and spoke about a range of contexts in which such feelings resonated. These contexts included reflections back to experiences of university alongside experiences with their families, friends and work colleagues. There was a sense of variation in the capacity or willingness to be grateful and participants seemed to relate their own capacity to be grateful to their life experiences.

Participants readily spoke about how gratitude resonated with their thoughts of their university experience; Philly, an overseas' participant commented '*Gratitude for me means respect, it means thankfulness, it means generosity, and giving-back....I feel a huge sense of gratitude*'. However, this was not the case for all; Keith spoke positively about his university experience, but used alternative terms: '*Gratitude isn't a word that I would immediately apply to here, I would have other words such as empowerment, pride,*

*advocacy, those are the things I would use, much more so, dynamic words*'. Other alumni connected their experiences of University to gratitude. Genevieve, a recent graduate, talked about the bookends of university life—fresher's week to final results—shaping her reflections of gratitude. The university provided distinct stages, each contexts for feelings of gratitude: The beginning, with applications, open days and induction periods; through to time studying, socializing, perhaps undertaking placements and certainly engaging in assessments, confronting and solving problems; and finally onto the end of the university experience, marked by submissions of final pieces of work, summer balls and finally graduation. Each stage is anticipated, performed and reflected upon providing opportunities for feelings of gratitude to emerge.

Alumni who faced challenges whilst at university related their feelings of gratitude to the help, effort and care given to them during, but not limited to, these challenging times. These factors echo those which current students cite as drivers of their gratitude whilst at university (Cownie 2017a). Casper felt '*Absolutely, unequivocally, 100% grateful to [university], as a whole entity, the institution and the people, and the lecturers. I feel it for the whole package because I kind of feel [university] saved me from what was turning in to quite a nasty path*'. In these cases, HE is perceived as having a profound influence on life trajectory and thus alumni are grateful to the institution for the opportunity to work towards achieving their potential. The social and intellectual challenges university inevitably presents means that undergraduate students are likely to benefit from problem-solving support from their peers and academics. As alumni many of these problems may have been resolved. All participants successfully graduated, so even if family-related issues are sustained, intellectual challenges associated with learning and assessment are likely to have been addressed. For some that resolution may be intertwined with interactions with academics and fellow students; a fertile underpinning for feelings of gratitude.

However, whilst these aspects of HE seemed to reinforce the opportunity for feelings of gratitude to grow and be impactful, the marketisation agenda was a negative force in the minds of some of our participants reflecting the thoughts of a range of academics including Molesworth et al. (2011). Marketisation manifest in the demand for students to pay tuition fees (although none of these participants had paid the £9000/£9250 fee) appeared to impact the feelings of gratitude towards the university itself. Mark articulated this explicitly:

*I think from a university organisational level... the thing that gets in the way of feeling gratitude towards that is it is kind of similar to how I don't feel gratitude towards Argos when I buy a deck chair from them because I have given them money and I have got a deck chair and I feel like I am not grateful beyond that because they have got money from me and then I got something back from the transaction, I don't feel there is a gap to fill with gratitude... it feels like the exchange is complete and it wasn't a gift, I paid for it, it wasn't going to be offered to me if I didn't pay for it, that limits gratitude quite heavily.*

This data is consistent with the literature that describes the student as customer (Schwartzman 1995; Molesworth et al. 2011; Budd 2017). However, Tight (2013 p.293) argues the student as customer metaphor 'portrays the student as a relatively passive recipient of what the university has to offer, rather than the active, engaged, indeed self-directed, individual'. Such a description of passivity seemed at odds with these participants who were evidently high performing and self-directed when studying according to their accounts and corroborated by their degree classification.

Similarly Daniel perceived fees and operational issues as being reasons not to extend feelings of gratitude towards the university:

*It's that tension between being grateful to individuals who have taught me, who have been great but also just a wider ambivalence towards the wider organisation as a whole... I would never express gratitude to [university] as a whole because it was good but it also took a lot of money from me, certain things could have been better'.*

It was clear that tuition fees, even though lower than the current level, undermined feelings of gratitude towards the institution. So ubiquitous is the student as customer

rhetoric that it is applied by institutions to the detriment of the long-term alumni-institution relationship (Gallo 2012) resulting in diminished gratitude towards graduates' alma mater.

### **Academics as the primary focus of gratitude**

Academics emerged as a central focus for gratitude. Exceptional academics were described in terms of the rapport they built with students, the feeling of personal connection established, the quality of ideas shared, the care and effort extended in their specific role (e.g. programme leader, personal tutor, dissertation tutor). There are parallels with consumers' gratitude towards frontline employees within the commercial context (Bock et al. 2016b). Genevieve spoke about how help from academics had a profound effect on the final stage of formal education which becomes the indicator of educational achievement: *Your degree matters and academics can make a difference to that degree*. Beneficial interactions with academics can be powerful, invoking strong feelings of gratitude. Conversely interactions with academics which alumni felt to be unsatisfactory, often linked to the outcome of key assessments such as dissertations, appeared to continue to resonate. One participant spoke passionately over twenty years since graduation, about what he perceived to be a poor experience with his dissertation tutor. This resonated with Frisby et al.'s (2019) quantitative study which showed the impact of both positive and negative memorable messages on alumni behaviours.

Interestingly, two of the participants, Mark and Daniel, whilst not feeling grateful to the institution, were grateful to academics. Daniel comments:

*The individuals that teach you, and that is where the main source of gratitude is and really I think the tutors who put you on to incredible papers and incredible work and incredible ideas ....so I think gratitude towards individuals, gratitude towards ideas.*

This is echoed by Mark *'I think the gratefulness...to individuals alone and to certain individuals I feel were particularly good tutors and lecturers and I think that's where the gratitude starts'*. To unpack what makes 'good tutors', we draw from Moore and Kuol's (2007) study of 139 alumni who were asked to nominate a teacher for an excellence in teaching award and provide justification for their choice. Whilst subject knowledge was important (Daniel's reference to incredible papers and ideas) it was traits such as approachability and helpfulness which seemed to characterize good tutors who left an imprint on alumni within Moore and Kuol's (2007) study. The authors concluded that alumni judgement focused on student care over subject knowledge, an assertion supported in this study.

Interactions with academics appear for many participants to be at the peak of a ladder of gratitude. Indeed, surprisingly participants often spoke with as much vibrancy about interactions with academics as they did about interactions with friends. Such interactions appear to harness the emotional dimension of university life. They remind us of the importance of the student-academic relationship and its resonance during life at university and well beyond. Our study corroborates work by Carson (1996), Meehan and Howells (2018) and Frisby et al. (2019). Carson (1996) found that even 30 years after university, alumni spoke about their relationship with a caring academic as being the most influential aspect of their student experience. More recently Meehan and Howells' (2018) longitudinal quantitative research following students from freshers to completion, described academics as one of three key aspects of what matters to students. Frisby et al. (2019, p.170) conclude their study of alumni suggesting that 'connections to faculty also may have long-term effects [on alumni]'. We therefore argue that gratitude appears to be felt by alumni towards key (not all) academics, contributing to the body of evidence that this positive emotional reaction is sustained over many years, providing a platform for reciprocal behaviours. Gratitude towards academics appears to be important and

distinctive. It can exist and powerfully so, even when gratitude to other foci appears absent.

### **Expressions of gratitude**

Whilst alumni speak about feeling grateful, does this translate to expressions of gratitude? Few participants had, as alumni, thanked anyone related to the university. For some, reflecting upon the absence of thanking felt like an omission, because they did feel grateful. Why had alumni not followed through their feelings with an expression of gratitude? For some, this appeared to be a lack of attention to communication which was more broadly evident in their lives; Harry, a graduate of one year, commented '*I was thankful I just think I never thought about doing anything about it*'. Expressions of gratitude are in part predicated upon remembering to say thank-you. This reflects Morgan et al.'s (2017) idea of Behavioural Shortcomings that speaks to forgetfulness relating acknowledging things you are grateful for.

Whilst for some alumni a lack of attentiveness to communication masked their gratitude, other participants had thought about expressing their gratitude but perceived barriers to doing so. Genevieve reflects on an academic who had a real impact on her working life, thinking that the academic's response to a message of thanks might be '*Why is she emailing me, what does she want?...I think it would be a bit like: "is she okay? what's wrong? is she having a midlife crisis and wants to come back to University?"*' There was a sense amongst alumni that academics might see expressions of thanks as a weakness. This is interesting because it contradicts all that we know about authentic expressions of gratitude and how they are valued (Kumar and Epley 2018) and indeed might stimulate engagement in the receiver (Cownie 2016). It is important to challenge such ideas. If academics and universities value expressions of gratitude and see the



benefit in facilitating expressions of gratitude from students and alumni, then they must themselves demonstrate expressing gratitude through their practice.

There do appear to be difficulties in expressing gratitude to academics and there is a sense that such difficulties are related to perceptions of power imbalance. To illustrate Daniel suggest that:

*You become again grateful to individuals that have taught you but it is not a gratitude which is always easy to express...they are individuals with their own private lives, they don't really want sycophantic students going up to them and saying this was amazing, thank you so much.*

It was unlikely that Daniel as a student experienced an academic dismissing expressions of thanks as an irritation; He mentioned no specific incident to corroborate his thinking. Again, there is a sense of students perceiving that expressions of thanks would be unwelcome in the eyes of academics. Such difficulties were perhaps retained within the alumni-academic relationship. There is a parallel with the findings of Kumar and Epley's (2018) experimental study outside the context of education, which found those expressing gratitude systematically diminished its value. Senders of thanks underestimated how positive and surprised recipients would feel in receiving those messages of thanks and over-estimated how awkward recipients would feel. If awkwardness in thanking people applies to expressions of gratitude in many contexts (Cownie 2016; Kumar and Epley 2018), it is no surprise that alumni feel it too.

For the student who has built a strong profile recognised in high levels of academic achievement (Genevieve and Daniel achieved first-class degrees), there may be a concerted intention not to diminish this profile with academics, reflecting the egocentric bias which Kumar and Epley (2018) suggest is important in the context of expressions of gratitude. It is an interesting thought that students-turned-alumni may seek to establish, reinforce or at least not diminish the perceptions of themselves amongst academics.

Equally for students who were less strong academically, perhaps alumni communication with academics provides an opportunity to enhance or even rebuild perceptions amongst those academics whose opinions the alumni value. This is potentially interesting future research around alumni communication.

Whilst our interviews revealed that despite having feelings of gratitude, few alumni participants had explicitly said thank-you to academics to whom they felt grateful, alumni were engaging in behaviours beneficial to the university. Such behaviours coincide with those, scholars working outside the context of education (e.g. Raggio et al. 2014; Palmatier et al. 2009), identify as expressions of gratitude. They included within our study speaking positively about the university within the workplace or with family/friends, engaging in informal mentoring or talent-spotting fellow alumni. Damian, five years after graduation, frequently talks about his university positively at work.

These expressions of gratitude from alumni are informal, hidden and unprompted, with little attempt to let academics or the university know about these efforts. Such behaviours could be a result of alumni's sense that they have moved on from their university life as we saw earlier, or the awkwardness of expressing gratitude (Cownie 2016; Kumar and Epley 2018). More prosaically, they could be a function of time pressures evident in alumni's early graduate careers; Such pressure was evident within the participants' accounts of their professional life. Therefore, we argue that expressions of gratitude have two forms. Known expressions of gratitude are enactments of feelings of gratitude of which the original benefactor (largely academics and institution in this case) are aware. Unknown expressions of gratitude are enactments of feelings of gratitude of which the original benefactor remains unaware. This data suggests that the extent of known expressions of gratitude may be a poor reflection of the extent of feelings of gratitude alumni experience towards HE. Clearly quantitative research would be required to provide

evidence to support this claim. This inequity may mean that HEIs and academics remain less alert to the evidence and potency of gratitude within HE than reality would merit.

### **Gratitude, alumni engagement and the curriculum**

Despite the scarcity of known expressions of gratitude, the feelings of gratitude which alumni report, appear to underpin a willingness to give back through alumni engagement activities. Indeed, we see such a willingness or intention to give back as being central to the notion of gratitude. We argue that expressions of gratitude may manifest within alumni engagement in the form of contributions to the curriculum to the benefit of current students and can be more effectively harnessed than currently they appear to be. Alumni spoke about gratitude influencing their willingness to give back, rather than being reflected in the contributions they had provided to date. To illustrate, Damian says:

*I think gratitude does have a place in my mind when I think back about my time at [uni]...it would definitely influence my decision when giving-back to the University for a mentoring programme or for anything else...I had a really positive experience and would want to give back based on that.*

A positive student experience is critical in this context (McDearmon and Shirley 2009; Holmes 2009). Participants reflected on their experiences whilst as students attending sessions involving alumni; prompting intentions to contribute to the curriculum once in the workplace. These intentions as alumni rarely materialised. Reasons included pressure on time and an absence of requests by the institution. Indeed, being asked to give back was perceived as positive rather than inappropriate or onerous; Alumni felt that such requests would make them feel valued. There may be a mismatch between perceptions of alumni and institutions: academics perceiving asking students to contribute to the curriculum as an unwanted request, but for alumni would be welcomed. In studies such as Weerts and Ronca (2008) and Unangst (2018) there is a belief grounded in Social Exchange Theory,

whereby these positive feelings manifest in volunteering, creating a balanced give-back proposition.

Therefore, institutions may have access to a well of intention activated simply by asking alumni to contribute to current students' educational experience. Hilary spoke about being willing to respond to any request from her programme leader, but revealed a tension:

*It's a conflicted thing because you think can I be helpful and what can I do, at the same time you don't want to be that person that goes "look I've done really well"... you don't want to be arrogant...you want to be useful without being overbearing, so possibly I'm a bit held back by it.*

It is clear alumni are concerned about how the act of giving back might be seen by peers, students and academics; Such concerns appear to outweigh the potential benefits alumni see their actions will bring to current students. We suggest universities should emphasise the important and distinctive role alumni engagement plays in enhancing curriculum delivery so that alumni avoid perceiving giving-back as self-indulgence.

Whilst universities might be clear about the ways in which alumni can give back, it was not apparent to all participants. Fundraising appeared to dominate thoughts about what giving back as alumni might mean. Philly, commented:

*I think alumni do want to give back but they might not know how... the obvious way to donate funds but if you're not in a position where you can do that, then it kind of becomes unclear how you can give back...give alumni opportunities to give back in other ways.*

Even if universities value financial contributions, it appears that there is an opportunity to further emphasise the range of ways in which alumni can engage with their alter mater. Universities can seek to demonstrate the value of alumni contribution on current students' learning experiences. Universities must highlight opportunities for alumni engagement. A menu of activities would allow alumni to select activities with which they feel best able to engage, such as guest lectures, student mentoring, designing case studies, advice on

curriculum design and provision of internship opportunities. But to what or whom do alumni want to give back?

### **Giving-back to whom?**

Since alumni gratitude appears to be most keenly experienced towards people, how does that impact giving-back? Participants suggested that requests to give back would be most potent from someone known, ideally a stand-out academic, with whom they already had a relationship. There was a desire to reciprocate to someone from whom alumni had received valued benefits, such as inspirational teaching or support. Confidence also emerged as a factor. Alumni, even those with first-class degrees, wanted to feel confident the request came from someone who knew them and believes that they can make a meaningful contribution. Alumni expressed desire to be more than a number on a database, providing genuine value to current students.

Barry, who had contributed to the university on several occasions, commented that twenty years after graduation, an impersonal request from the university would prompt a more selfish reaction. Gratitude and the desire to give back would be less potent in a generic request from the university or even a bespoke request from someone unknown. It appears that being asked to do something by someone unknown, generates a less benevolent response with diminished potency of gratitude.

Thus, alumni speak about an intention to give back, best activated by a stand-out academic who stimulates gratitude within alumni, and, importantly, gives alumni the confidence that their contribution is of value. The focus on academics as being central to alumni engagement strategies corroborates the findings of Frisby et al. (2019 p.169) who conclude that alumni offices should be 'effectively leveraging positive relationships faculty may have already built with students.' As Emerson (1976) asserts in Social Exchange

Theory, maintaining a quality relationship becomes the basis for longstanding giving behaviour.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

A series of key actions emerge as implications of this research. We propose that the academic-student relationship is key to establishing alumni engagement. Academics must be encouraged and facilitated to maintain their relationships with students into alumni status, consistent with Frisby et al. (2019) and Volkwein (2010). They should be supported to attend alumni reunions and given resources or incentives to include alumni into the curriculum delivery and extra-curricula activity. Clearly this presents challenges: how do we know who are stand-out academics for students? Do we ask students as they graduate? What do we do when academics leave the institution? How do academics themselves feel about sustaining a relationship with alumni and making requests to those alumni? These are all potential questions for future studies exploring academics' involvement in alumni engagement.

An additional practical solution to the reliance on academics to facilitate alumni engagement, would be to appoint alumni ambassadors from each graduating class. Such alumni ambassadors would work alongside academics nurturing alumni relationships, requesting contributions from alumni, similar to the student representative role. These ambassadors might, once established in the role, sustain relationships with alumni when academics move on.

Students must be guided effectively through the transition to alumni status. Students would benefit from a clear understanding of the value of being a member of the alumni community and their lifelong value to academics, institution and future students. Institutions clearly need to express their gratitude to students for students' engagement

and commitment to their institution. Such expressions of gratitude should be at the heart of transitional events or communication. Indeed, there is scope to enhance the on-campus presence of alumni and alumni achievements. Celebrations of alumni success benefits alumni, university and current students. Posters or digital installations can provide a creative alumni presence to inspire current students and keep alumni salient within academics' minds.

Importantly universities would stimulate more alumni engagement if consideration was given to providing a wide range of give-back opportunities. Alumni with different skillsets could contribute if presented with a menu of potential engagement activities tutors can feel some confidence that requests to give back would be seen positively by alumni. Such requests, ideally from academics, should emphasise the value alumni input provides to current students. As alumni contribute as volunteers or within experiential activities that enhance the student experience, future alumni will have experienced the benefits of alumni interactions in a variety of capacities.

These recommendations seek to highlight practices which aim to facilitate and leverage alumni's feelings of gratitude and generate more known expressions of gratitude in the form of alumni engagement including curriculum delivery for the benefit of current students.

## **CONCLUSION**

Each year over half a million undergraduates leave university and become alumni (HESA 2018/19). This paper argues that there is an opportunity to do more to facilitate contributions from a growing alumni base, to the benefit of current students studying in HE. Relational exchange informs this study and identifies gratitude as an important conceptual pillar which aids our understanding of how universities can sustain

engagement with those who should know them best, their alumni.

This is the first study to place its key focus on experiences of feelings and expressions of gratitude amongst alumni. Consistent with Frisby et al. (2019), this study sees academics as a key impetus towards meaningful alumni engagement, suggesting alumni relations offices consider 'faculty-generated content' (p.170). This small-scale study offers original insights into the experiences of alumni and their potential contribution to current students' educational experience.

The study finds that people are the key focus of gratitude of these alumni participants. Alumni speak about feelings of gratitude towards stand-out academics because of academics' help, care and effort invested towards students. Known expressions of gratitude appear limited; few verbal communications of thanks are received by institution or academics. However unknown expressions of gratitude appear evident and include positive word-of-mouth and informal mentoring. We offer these emerging ideas as part of our theoretical contribution, defining known expressions of gratitude as known in the form of a verbal articulation of thanks, directly to a recipient (person or institution) or unknown expressions of gratitude, defined as actions intended to benefit the recipient without the recipient being aware of those actions. These two categories of expressions of gratitude are beneficial, reminding us that known expressions of gratitude are not the limit of how feelings of gratitude are enacted.

Whilst there is an intention amongst alumni to give back, alumni may not understand the ways to do so. Alumni were happy to consider giving back such as mentoring, delivering guest lectures, providing employment to current students. Our practical contribution is to highlight the importance of academics in the context of alumni gratitude. The clear focus of alumni's feelings of gratitude were stand-out academics. Alumni strongly favoured being asked to give back by an academic they knew in a personal capacity. This gave alumni confidence that they could fulfil the request successfully.



The study suggests that HEIs should actively work with their alumni to capture the benefits of feelings of gratitude and the desire to reciprocate. Indeed, this exploratory research anticipates that academics will be increasingly important within alumni relationship building as fees impact the desire of alumni to give back to their institution. Universities are challenged to implement pedagogic strategies centred around a thriving student-academic relationship, fostering potential alumni contributions across the student lifespan (Gallo 2012, 2013). Indeed, such pedagogic strategies should enhance reflection on the educational experience, which Alexander and Koenig (2008) tell us impacts alumni intention to give back. Meanwhile, the potency of gratitude within the alumni-institution relationship may reduce with increasing tuition fees. Alumni relationships with academics may be the impetus to creating a sense of lifelong engagement with the university community, to contribute to the curriculum, mentorship and employability for current students. These align with the CASE alumni engagement categories to leverage alumni as volunteers and in experiential opportunities with current students as beneficiaries.

This small-scale qualitative study provides initial insights. The sample came with limitations regarding its size and lack of representativeness of the alumni population. We acknowledge that those alumni who accepted the invitation to participate in the research, were arguably those happy to give back and that we might not have satisfactorily included the opinions of those alumni who have disconnected from their university experience. However it is interesting to note that Frisby et al.'s (2019:170) study of alumni, calls for future research to actively recruit engaged alumni. The participants from this study had not been exposed to the current £9,000 plus fee regime; clearly it will be interesting for future research to engage with graduates carrying the heavy burden of large educational loans.

Given the proliferation of alumni relations, we hope to extend this small exploratory study to stimulate discussion on alumni gratitude and giving within an international multi-

university study. Study outcomes could be tested including the importance of the alumni-academic relationship. Future research might helpfully explore academics' experiences of engaging with alumni. Analysis of the nature and implications of known and unknown expressions of gratitude would be worthy of future research.

Alumni have the potential to contribute relevant, informed insights to current university students. Feelings of gratitude particularly towards academics, appear to be at the heart of alumni's experiences of gratitude and stimulate a willingness to give back within Higher Education. To conclude as participant Mark explains, '*Gratitude comes from people going above and beyond expectations and really engaged learning...and engaged educators...if you measured gratitude and expression of gratitude you would see them rise over time if your education is doing the right thing*'.

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