

Time for alumni to step up

Now is the time for our alumni to get involved. It couldn't be easier and makes such a difference to our students' experience of learning in an online world. Alumni offer stories to inspire and guide students; most importantly they provide hope for the future. Ask alumni to step up and they'll be there for you and your students.

Building a sense of community is critical to students' learning and wellbeing during lockdown. We know how important it is to show our students that we care about them and are there to give them the help they need to navigate these most uncertain of times. The energies and effort we are investing in developing and delivering learning materials and environments confined to the online space, is crucial in generating a student experience which will be memorable - for some of the right reasons. Put simply, bringing the alumni voice to our conversations with students is an important way in which we can systematically and efficiently enhance our provision. It is a quick win. Moving on from the odd guest lecture, we can routinely and regularly integrate the alumni voice into our students' learning experience.

Here at Bournemouth University, we are putting energy into our community-building sessions, aiming to forge and maintain connections within our cohorts. There's a whole range of activities, from quizzes to film screenings and critiques. But for me, the most powerful contribution we can bring is to give our students continued access to those who have already been there, in other words our alumni.

Our alumni bring stories of challenges overcome, networking practices developed, success and failure within the job market. They bring credible, well-informed voices reflecting on their own experiences of balancing study, completing assessments, crafting research problems and delivering a dissertation against the numerous demands of a final year. Certainly, alumni who have been in graduate roles for several years, even decades, bring insights and inspiration related to the workplace. However, our most recent alumni, those who would have paraded across the graduation stage this summer or autumn (I'm writing during what would have been our graduation week) bring something really special - that experience of successfully navigating the uncertainty associated with the transition to online teaching in the final stages of their university experience, and the route into their graduate position or Master's degree. Their success is a beacon for our current students.

Ask your alumni to help and they will willingly agree. My research suggests that alumni feel grateful to the academics with whom they worked at university. Whilst alumni rarely express their thanks, they are certainly willing to help us out. They just need to be asked by someone they know. Reciprocity is at the core of this. By asking alumni to connect via Zoom, you are giving them an efficient and meaningful way of demonstrating their thanks to you and starting to pay-back the time and effort you invested in them.

As one of my former students Josh said when I asked him to get involved: *'No worries you and the rest of the lecturing staff gave me all of your time when I needed it, so I see it as only fair I give back!'*

My research suggests that far from being unwelcome, requests from academics are appreciated and make alumni feel valued. This was borne out when I messaged twelve alumni to get involved in our online conversations with our final year undergraduate students a month ago. All but one responded positively within a couple of days. In my research I categorised expressions of gratitude from alumni as 'seen' and 'unseen'. We have the opportunity to bring to the fore the 'seen' expressions of gratitude to the benefit of students, alumni and ourselves.

Alumni contributions are a convenient and effective way to demonstrate thanks to valued academics, but my sense is that our alumni really feel for our current students and genuinely want to help out.

Another of my former students Jack commented: *'Community/cohort building sounds like a really valuable idea to be pushing right now, given everything that's been happening...I'd love to be a part of something like that'*.

Whilst my research provides evidence that pressure on time is a reason why alumni might resist offering help to their university, these small-scale online contributions take little out of our alumni's day and avoid the demands and costs of travel. Now we can bring in alumni from across the world from, Hungary to Hanoi, from London to Glasgow.

These small-scale benevolent interventions make a real difference to our students. Students can learn together from alumni who trod their path. Our recent alumni have something new to add to their CV; older alumni have the satisfaction of being connected back into an environment which was part of their journey into their working life. There is no doubt for me that this will be a venture to be sustained as online interaction becomes part of a blended approach to the ways in which we interact with our students.

Ask alumni to step up, they'll gladly respond.