

## **Alumni associations**

Alumni associations exist to nurture sustained, mutually beneficial relationships between a higher education institution (HEI) and its graduates. Students, once they have graduated from an HEI, are known as alumni (male singular *alumnus*, female singular *alumna*). Many alumni associations are the product of the work of a dedicated alumni function within HEIs, often known as the office for alumni relations. The alumni office, in developing alumni associations, recognises that alumni can be the institution's most powerful supporters, but only if time and effort is invested in fostering the relationship. Put simply, good alumni relations should benefit alumni as well as the institution.

Alumni associations allow graduates to remain connected with each other. This may serve a social purpose, it may be focussed on sustaining the relationship with the HEI, or it may provide opportunities for professional networking. The extent and nature of involvement in alumni associations from the office for alumni relations function may vary. In some situations alumni associations will be largely driven by the HEI's office for alumni relations, in other situations the HEI's alumni function will provide a facilitating role. It is possible for alumni associations to function largely independently from the HEI's office for alumni relations, driven by alumni themselves and their desire to be connected to other graduates from their institution.

The Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) is an American professional body focussed on alumni activity and is influential within the work of HEIs' offices for alumni relations. According to CASE, in the past alumni relations tended to be treated as an entirely stand-alone activity, divorced from other university advancement activities (promotion, marketing and fundraising). Indeed, some alumni associations were entirely independent of their parent institutions and whilst their members interacted with each other, they had very little interaction with the institution. (Fundraising Fundamentals, Section 1.2, [www.case.org](http://www.case.org)). Today alumni associations are more likely to be an integral part of an institution's advancement activities.

Alumni associations largely comprise those alumni who studied for undergraduate degrees. This reflects the relative size of the undergraduate population compared to the postgraduate student population, but it is also a result of the strength of undergraduate students' relationship with their institution compared to that of master's students. Despite this weight of undergraduate student membership, students at all levels of study, including PhD students, will be invited to be part of the alumni association. It is likely that alumni associations will invite only those students who have successfully completed their programme of study and therefore have an award from the university at which they studied. Students who withdraw,

do not complete or fail their studies are unlikely to be members of their institution's alumni association. Staff members may be invited to join when they retire and some alumni associations embrace broader groups including 'family and friends' who support and maintain a connection to the institution. Terms of reference for alumni associations will usually be set by the office for alumni relations and will reflect the vision of the university.

The areas of focus for the office of alumni relations will vary according to the university's strategy and vision. That said, they are likely to fall into the following categories:

- Increasing employability - alumni provide key proof points for a university's success in employability. Engaging alumni can also increase the employability of undergraduates, by providing placement opportunities, master classes, guest lectures and mentoring;
- Building community - alumni engagement enriches the student experience - and can support student retention - by fostering connections between undergraduates, staff and those forging their careers in industry;
- Marketing and PR - alumni are powerful advocates for their university within workplaces, industries and social networks. International alumni can also become more formal ambassadors within overseas recruitment strategies;
- Recruitment - alumni provide inspiration to those at the start of their university journey. As such they are frequently used as part of institutions' promotional strategies, appearing at Open Days or within prospectuses targeting new students. Alumni offer relatable content and reassuring messages which can harness the power of peer-to-peer recruitment. Alumni engagement can also lead to more direct recruitment in terms of encouraging them to return for postgraduate study;
- Fundraising - alumni can influence opinion and secure support for projects through networks, as well as give direct gifts. Fundraising approaches vary from building relationships with potential major donors to community-based 'regular giver' campaigns. Messaging may focus on alumni providing financial support to specific research projects, or to support bursaries available to specific groups of students (often those in low HE participation groups).

Fundraising as a focus for alumni associations varies geographically. US alumni associations are known to be more successful fundraisers than alumni associations in UK and Europe. Indeed fundraising in US reached over \$43 billion during 2017, with Harvard and Stanford Universities heading the fundraising league each generating over \$1 billion of contributions (a similar sum to that generated across the UK as a whole). Much of this

alumni support was focussed on endowments, buildings and other capital investments (The Chronicle of Philanthropy 2017; Ross-CASE Report 2018).

Well developed alumni associations will utilise highly engaged alumni volunteers to build alumni chapters - locally and internationally. These chapters or groups extend the reach of the association by enabling alumni to meet together, share past experiences and support each other's future careers. Each chapter may develop its own terms of reference and membership reflecting its own context. Institutions may desire to retain an oversight of these chapters, but often the chapters will function with more independence than the university-established central alumni association.

Alumni chapters are a useful vehicle for sustaining alumni relationships overseas. Many universities seek to build on the goodwill of returning international alumni, by inviting them to international events, supporting cultural reintegration and offering careers advice. In return, international alumni can become powerful advocates to support the recruitment of new students on behalf of the HEI in their territory.

While the drivers for alumni engagement from the institution's point of view are clear, the office for alumni relations must also consider the value of their alumni associations and associated activities from the alumni perspective. This can include offering:

- Careers advice and guidance - often offered free from the central careers team for a specified number of years after graduation;
- Opportunities for professional development, whether through access to events, specific careers content or networking;
- Opportunities to develop skills through volunteering;
- Recognition in terms of alumni awards, or accreditation for joining schemes such as alumni mentoring programmes;
- Financial discounts and benefits - including those offered on and off-campus;
- Email addresses for life;
- Continued access to university facilities, such as the library, gyms, bars and clubs.

While this entry has largely focused on communications issued via the office for alumni relations, it is worth noting that it is neither realistic nor desirable to direct all contact through the alumni office. It is generally accepted that alumni maintain their strongest links with their former tutors and academics, for at least the first 10 years after graduation. Good alumni relations should be flexible enough to allow alumni to maintain connections not only with the office, but also with their former tutors, sports coaches or careers advisers. This broader

network is far more enriching for both the individual and the institution and is likely to lead to more sustained engagement. The challenge for the office for alumni relations is to build internal structures and lines of communication which enable them to be aware of alumni engagement activities. This ensures that the institution has a realistic view of the scale and impact of its alumni relations and can help to improve the alumni experience.

## References

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