

Do alumni want to give back to their university?

Alumni can offer informed, reflective analyses of HE and are a potentially valuable resource within HE delivery. As alumni grow in numbers, their experiences, intentions and behaviours become increasingly important. Advancement strategies are used by institutions to build relationships with alumni, with positive outcomes informed by themes of affiliation, affinity, engagement and support (Gallo 2012, 2013). Alumni may engage within discretionary collaborative behaviours 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 (McAlexander and Koenig 2008). This qualitative study explores whether gratitude has a role to play within alumni's reflections on HE and alumni's intentions to give back through curricula-based activities.

Gratitude has emerged as an important concept within relational exchanges, with important relational outcomes (Morales 2005; Soscia 2007; Palmatier et al. 2009; Raggio et al. 2014; Hasan et al. 2014; Ting and Huang 2015). The research which has been conducted to date about gratitude in HE focusses on students (Cownie 2016; Cownie 2017; Fazal-e-Hasan et al. 2017; Howells et al. 2017) and to a lesser extent, academics (Cownie 2016). Existing work suggests that gratitude may drive engagement within higher education (Cownie 2016; Howells et al. 2017). If such engagement can be sustained or reactivated amongst alumni, then gratitude-based strategies may have an important contribution to universities' interactions with alumni.

This research conceptualizes gratitude as an emotional response to a perceived benefactor, which critically, embraces a desire to act (Dewani and Sinha 2012; Raggio et al. 2014). Thus gratitude is seen as appreciation which stimulates an integral desire to reciprocate. This study is underpinned by a central construct, 'feelings of gratitude', a positive emotional response accompanied by an intention to demonstrate appreciation to the perceived giver of valued benefits (Cownie 2017). The emphasis on the positive characteristic of gratitude emphasizes its distinction from obligation (Gouldner 1960) and indebtedness (Pelser et al. 2015).

The aim of this research is:

To explore alumni experiences of gratitude related to UK higher education.

This research is based upon 17 exploratory semi-structured interviews with alumni of a UK HEI. The sample of alumni graduated between 1 and 22 years before their involvement in this research. None had paid £9000 tuition fees. The researcher had taught all participants. A semi-structured research tool invited alumni to talk about their experiences since graduation, their reflections on their university experience and engagement with their university as a graduate. Notions of gratitude and reciprocity were introduced and alumni were given the opportunity to reflect on the relevance of these ideas to their experiences as a graduate. Analysis was conducted using NVIVO 11 for open-coding and thematic analysis. The researcher sought to represent participants' meaning regarding feelings of gratitude and intentions to engage with HEIs (Creswell and Miller 2000).

The study finds that these alumni have feelings of gratitude related to their experiences of HE. Foci of feelings of gratitude embrace institution, academics, course and peers. In particular alumni speak about feelings of gratitude towards academics who stood out because of their teaching, rapport, role or demonstration of care and effort. The marketization of HE appears to have an impact on alumni's feelings of gratitude towards the institution. Looking forward to alumni cohorts who have paid higher tuition fees than these participants, we might assume that fees will have an increasing impact on feelings of gratitude towards the institution. The relative importance of feelings of gratitude towards academics, already apparently strong, looks likely to increase into the future.

Whilst there is a well of intention amongst alumni to give back, alumni may not understand the variety of ways in which this can be done. Alumni were happy to consider giving back through a variety of methods including mentoring, delivering guest lectures, providing employment opportunities to current students. However, alumni favoured being asked to give back by an academic they knew. This gave alumni confidence that they were considered to be an appropriate person to give back in this way, rather than just a name on a database. In contrast, should alumni be asked by someone they didn't know, this would elicit a less benevolent response. Barriers to giving back included time, the challenges of the workplace and a concern not to appear arrogantly.

This study suggests that HEIs should actively work with their alumni in order to capture the benefits of feelings of gratitude and the desire to reciprocate. They should provide a menu of activities within which alumni could be involved. Ideally alumni should be approached by a known academic. Indeed, this exploratory research anticipates that academics will be increasingly important within alumni relationships as fees impact the desire of alumni to give back to their institution. The implication of this is to implement pedagogic strategies which centre around a thriving student-academic relationship and underpin future alumni interactions characterised by affiliation, affinity, engagement and support (Gallo 2012,2013). Indeed such pedagogic strategies should enhance alumni's reflection on their educational experience, which McAlexander and Koenig (2008) tell us impacts alumni intention to give back. Meanwhile, the potency of gratitude within the alumni-institution relationship (McAlexander and Koenig 2008) may reduce with increasing tuition fees.

This was a small-scale qualitative study and thus provides initial insights. Experimental or survey methods could be used to test study outcomes, in particular the importance of the alumni-academic relationship omitted from current alumni research. The researcher was known by the participants which could be considered a limitation, but this did appear to help generate rich data. Alumni who accepted the invitation to participate in the research, were arguably those happy to give back. Participants had not been exposed to the current £9,000 plus fee regime.

In summary understanding the nature of the alumni relationship with higher education is increasingly important. Alumni have the potential to contribute relevant, informed insights to current university students. Feelings of gratitude particularly towards academics, appear to stimulate a willingness to give back within HE and can inform HEIs' alumni advancement strategies.

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