Re-visioning alumni relationships to improve graduate employability

AProf. Jessica Vanderlelie
IRU Vice Chancellors’ Fellow
OLT Fellow
“There were no feelings of great elation or relief among the many hugs and cheers. Instead, there was a feeling of total panic and paralyzing fear of the unknown. Picture a frozen smile on the outside melting into panic on the inside. Of course I was happy to be done with school, but I was in an unexpected state of shock. Every hug and congratulations on my graduation was complete with the question “What’s next?”

- Katherine Schwarzenegger
Graduate transitions: The employability hole

- Lack of awareness and capacity to articulate key skills.
- unaware of the supports available.
- Varied understanding of the path ahead & realities of job search.
Alumni have been a significantly underutilised resource in the process of enhancing both the **quality of higher education** and the **capability and employability of graduates** (Irani, 2012)

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Alumni Engagement

- The Council of Alumni Association Executives defines alumni engagement as

  “Activities and experiences designed to identify, cultivate, steward, solicit and manage gifts of time, talent and treasure from former students and graduates of a given institution in service to the needs of both alumni and alma mater”. (Forbes, 2014)
Value of alumni to employability

- Mentors
- Normalise the transition to the world of work
- Professions awareness
- Strong industry networks
- Job search strategies that worked for them
  » "Someone who has walked in my shoes"
Alumni commonly **fail to see themselves as old or experienced enough** to provide mentoring or **do not have the financial capital** to contribute philanthropically (Irani, 2012).
Question

- What are we asking of our alumni?
  - Money
  - Mentoring
  - Employment
  - Networking
  - Industry advisors

- What’s in it for them?
  - Reputation
  - Network
  - Opportunities

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What’s in it for them and how can we keep connected?

- **Current Strategies**
  - Free or heavily discounted professional development courses/masters offerings
    - (Korn, 2012 Wall St Journal)
  - Career Programs
    - Helping young alumni build their careers
    - Share career stories
    - Transition between careers
  - Discount offerings
  - Networking events
  - Sporting events

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ASK NOT WHAT YOUR ALUMNI CAN DO FOR YOU

ASK WHAT YOU CAN DO FOR YOUR ALUMNI
1. Identify their needs
   Ask students what they really need and how you can offer support.

2. Prove value
   Make service explicit and connect to personal success.

3.UCKET
   Provide opportunities to deliver to teams and for students.

4. Celebrate success
   Share students' differences that make them unique.

5. Maintain connection
   Engage students actively that allow them to maintain connections.

6. Facilitate involvement
   Offer authentic ways for alumni to participate and contribute.
Taxonomy of alumni engagement domains

(Created from the work of Forbes, 2014)
Friend Raising (Myran et al., 2003)

It is both timely and important to reshape alumni-university relationships into an intentional and mutually beneficial partnership with student and graduate success as the overarching mutual goal.
Connecting authentically

- To facilitate this kind of authentic connection with alumni we must

  » Understand that alumni engagement must be earned

  » Consider graduates as belonging to the university/school community long after graduation

  » Acknowledge OUR role in supporting graduates as their careers unfold, through times of success and transition.
Engagement challenges

- Difficulty tracking students after graduation
  - Generic university alumni network dilutes connection to schools
- Generic degrees are a stepping stone to further study
- Issues maintaining contact with graduates.
- Mobile graduates
- Busy
- Costly
- Takes a lot of time and effort
- Data collection and privacy
- School based vs alumni office initiatives
- Champions but not sustainable

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Senses of success for alumni
1. Citizenship and leadership
2. Proficiency
3. Resilience
4. Contribution and progression
5. Positive professional identity
Alumni Engagement and Employability model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transition in: awareness</th>
<th>Transition through: network building</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Connect alumni with students from orientation.</td>
<td>• Pair students with alumni for informational interviews</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Pathways for success and 'tips'</td>
<td>• Career information sessions</td>
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<td>• Build professions awareness with alumni examples.</td>
<td>• Networking functions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Begin to connect students with alumni through LinkedIn networks.</td>
<td>• Alumni as facilitators</td>
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Alumni help to solve the questions
'Am I in the right place?'
'Is uni for me?'

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<th>Transition out: industry experience</th>
<th>Transition up and back: supporting</th>
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<td>• Professional development and lifelong learning</td>
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Alumni help to solve the questions
'What's it like in the real world?'
'How do I get experience?'

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| • Employ other graduates | Alumni help to solve the questions
'Where do I begin to find a job?'
'I'm ready for a change but what else can I do?'
Communicating with alumni

- **Connect Early and Often**
  - Connect with students during their undergraduate degree
  - Relationship building starts on the first day at university.

- **Go beyond sharing ‘News’**

- **Facilitate conversations**
  - World of work
  - Postgrad opportunities
  - Work-life balance
  - Career resilience

- **Always prompt action**

- **Continue existing relationships to staff**

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How to connect

Alumni have an emotional attachment to the university based on the relationship established as students.

How do you keep in contact?

1. **Print**
   - Alumni feel they are involved by reading print media
   - Still important especially for older alumni

2. **Online: Websites and email**
   - Not as popular with alumni
   - Cheaper

3. **Social Media**
   - Increasingly important
   - Ability to maintain connections that would have been otherwise lost
   - Builds social capital and provides mechanism for alumni to be involved from afar.

4. **Personal**
   - Increasing female demographic
   - Want face-to-face or personal connection (invitations)

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Institutional model for alumni relationship management

Professional services
- Mentoring program
- Industry networks
- Careers and employment
- Library
- International Office
- Recruitment
- Marketing and communications

Institutional Level
Development and Alumni
- Coordinate university-wide networking/engagement functions
- Support international chapters
- Lead industry/alumni partnerships
- Communicate institutional vision
- Coordinate benefits program

Faculty Level
Alumni coordinators
- Coordinate faculty wide networking functions
- Coordinate alumni awards programs
- Coordinate faculty industry/alumni partnerships
- Communicate with and support school alumni coordinators

School Level
Alumni engagement portfolio
- Communicate regularly through the network
- Facilitate opportunities to participate within the curriculum.
- Identify excellence
- Help to connect students
Opportunities for engagement

It is the goal of this emerging initiative that it provides a foundation by which to re-imagine our goals for and methods of engaging with our alumni.

1. What new approaches to engagement with alumni would maximize value for recent graduates, alumni, universities and professional networks?

2. Are our current measures of graduate success congruent with our graduates’ perceptions of success?

1. How can universities better support the study-work transition?
The Program of Activities

- **Phase 1: Scoping the sector, its strategies and key stakeholders**
  - Activities focus on three main themes: connection with alumni, connection with academic environments and modelling alumni engagement.
    - 1a: Connection with health sciences alumni from home institution
    - 1b: Connection with University staff that provide alumni/employability support
    - 1c: Modelling Alumni engagement nationally and internationally

- **Phase 2: Establishing network of graduate lifecycle leaders and testing generalisability**

- **Phase 3: Developing the theoretical framework and conceptualising models of Engagement**

- **Phase 4 Internal and external dissemination and evaluation**

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For further information or to get involved

- Website
  - http://engagingalumni.com

- Twitter
  - @engagingalumni

- Email
  - j.vanderlelie@griffith.edu.au
References