

Higher Education over a Lifespan: A Gown to Grave assessment of a lifelong relationship between Universities and their graduates

Abstract

Graduation day often includes an oration by a Vice-Chancellor or President reminding the newest cohort of alumni to “keep in touch” with their *alma mater*. Often, graduates dismiss this invitation instead of embracing this lifelong opportunity. As the only constant—and constantly growing—stakeholder group of higher education institutions, this research analyses the wide range of interactive opportunities offered to alumni over their lifetime. This research probes the common “student as customer” rhetoric through the lens of a supposition presented by Newman (2005) of interactive participation in public systems: in this case graduates and their universities. These interactive opportunities are organised using an alumni relationship building cycle (Gallo 2012), allowing the alumni-university connection to evolve under the themes *affiliation*, *affinity*, *engagement* and *support*. A case study of an Irish higher education institution demonstrates some concrete examples of the interactions, and thus opportunities, available to alumni.

References

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Graduation day often includes an oration by a Vice-Chancellor or President reminding the newest cohort of alumni to “keep in touch” with their *alma mater*. With enthusiasm for their academic achievement at its zenith, it seems plausible that hundreds, even thousands, of alumni will flood the university with requests to forge an intimate, lifelong relationship. As the value of an academic qualification takes shape in the real world, a satisfying and successful life, especially in recent years, is not a seamless transition. Instead of turning back to the university as a means of support, many alumni forge ahead, parchment in hand, qualification indelible on the *curriculum vitae*, embittered by the sense of being set adrift into the world. It is at this despondent stage, graduates may utter: ‘What is Higher Education for?’, the value of a higher education is questioned. This introductory narrative presents the platform for this research exploring the plethora of opportunities available to former students (alumni). Webb (1998) describes alumni as the only permanent stakeholder of higher education institutions (HEIs), connected to their *alma mater* for life.

At the same time, this research argues that the relationship between a graduate and their *alma mater* is not a student-customer one. An alumnus/alumna

may avail of opportunities offered by universities as part of a lifelong connection. While the marketisation of higher education includes a range of debates on student as customer discourse (Sirvanci 1996; Brennan & Bennington 1999; Cuthbert 2010; Helms & Key 1994; Curtis 2010; Bay & Daniel 2001), this research argues that students-turned-alumni are not customers but shareholders in the institution, with a vested interest in its reputation and advancement. Moreover, the discourse on brand loyalty or customer relationship management in HEIs (Eagle & Brennan 2007; Bejou 2005; Molesworth, Nixon & Scuillion 2009), there is a distance between the individual and the product. A customer implies an exchange: once goods are received (argued in higher education as a qualification) the exchange is complete. This research argues instead that alumni are intrinsically linked to their *alma mater*, with a significant impact on an individual's life for life.

The focus of this study is the existing and potential university-alumni interactions. Newman (2005) illustrates the extent to which the commodification of public systems reduces an individual as simply a consumer and not a participant in the system (p.123). Newman's supposition is reversed for this study, examining the role of alumni as active participants in a university system. These interactions often offer a dual purpose: first to assist in advancing the reputation, causes and needs of the institution, while, at the same time, offering life advancement for the alumnus/alumna.

A case study of an Irish university shows examples of these university opportunities for alumni *in situ*. This case study was conducted over an eight-month period involving observation, extensive documentary analysis including over eighty University resources and interviews with key case study University stakeholders.

The opportunities identified during the case study research are organised using the four stages of an alumni relationship building cycle (Gallo 2012): *affiliation*, *affinity*, *engagement* and *support*. As alumni progress through this cycle, further opportunities unfold meeting the needs of alumni as they progress through their own life, while, at the same time, offering a mutual benefit to the University.

The case study findings show in the initial *affiliation* stage of the alumni-University relationship, opportunities for graduates are utilitarian, complementing their field of study or student-related interests. The case study University focused on educating alumni on campus services available after graduation such as career counselling and mentorship programmes.

The *affinity* stage focuses on communications through the alumni relations office, such as the alumni magazine and social media sites. These communications are a platform to promote University news to the wider alumni community in the hope of fostering pride while allowing alumni to gain a better, wider understanding of the breadth and reach of their *alma mater's* work beyond their own area of study. As an alumnus/alumna's own interests grow, the case study University presents a wide range of events, initiatives and achievements from the environment to the arts, to mountaineering and medical advancements. These news items act as catalysts for alumni to begin to realise aspects that may be relevant to their own personal or professional lives. Alumni also recognise that the University's has amassed a captive

audience for personal publicity (such as a class notes section) or gain writing experience in publications with a wide circulation.

The *engagement* stage focuses on two-way interactions, with alumni building on their affiliations, affinity and often nostalgia of university life. At the case study University, this interactivity included attending reunions, taking continuing education courses or re-joining University clubs and societies. Alumnus/alumna active participation enables the University to become aware of the motivations and interests of alumni to build individual profiles. At this time of their lives a university connection for alumni is for both professional development and pleasure.

By the *support* stage, the alumnus/alumna develops a mature, deeper and altruistic relationship with their *alma mater*. Some of the interactions are alumni-driven; the case study shows alumni as student recruitment ambassadors, governing body members and leaders of new regional networks. These alumni are at the time of their lives to give back, interacting with their University to advance the institution's needs. Philanthropy is also a key tenet of this stage, and the case study University shows alumni participation as benefactors, including participation in donor networks for academic departments designed to engage directly with the department's development. Even as alumni reach the age of retirement, there are opportunities to remember someone special through a named donation, legacy or bequest.

This research presents another lens in which to view the value of higher education for the benefit of its largest and constant stakeholder group: its graduates. This is an extended student experience that is timeless, and the research shows alumni can go through this cycle numerous times, developing a relationship which may have a significant impact on their lives, for a lifetime.

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