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**Strategy Identification for Increasing Alumni Engagement in a UK Business School**

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to provide a strategic approach for UK Business Schools to build relationships with their alumni by using the current development of the University of Huddersfield's Business School as a case study. Finding itself at a point where alumni engagement was low, the Business School has initiated a number of projects in order to overcome the situation. These research projects will aim to determine how a successful relationship between a Business School and its graduates should unfold and what methods can be deployed to maintain students engaged after graduation.

**Track:** Strategy

**Word count:** 1910

## **Introduction**

“A university’s alumnus grouping is one of its most valuable assets in terms of its potential financial, strategic and social contribution towards the credibility and longevity of the institution” (Barnard, 2008). Alumni marketing is becoming a bigger part of UK based universities. Following the American model, British institutions are exploring their relationship with their graduates in order to develop mutually beneficial exchanges. While the USA model cannot be simply copied and applied to the UK market, through identifying, transferring and adapting various tools and approaches value can be added both to alumni and their alma mater.

The University of Huddersfield’s Business School has recognized the importance of its alumni, trying to overcome the present low engagement. It currently has a number of projects in development that will serve to generate a better understanding of its graduates, consequently improving its connection with them.

The rationale for this is the recognition of the strategic advantages that will be generated for both stakeholder groups. In the case of the university, alumni add value to the process of preparing undergraduates for the working environment, through mentoring, placement offers or networking. They can also contribute to the University’s image, generating positive brand attitude through word of mouth. As graduates have a complete customer experience, the University can use feedback from them to deploy continuous improvement programmes. On the other hand, alumni can benefit from their relationship with the University in terms of career perspectives by receiving advice and support, but also networking and opportunities to establish business connections, discounts on various services or social benefits (such as shared interest groups, events or trips).

Based on this case study research, this paper will represent a starting point for providing a conceptual framework for developing a successful alumni strategy and roadmap for this University. This will be achieved throughout a benchmarking exercise and collecting the voice of the customer by interacting with graduates and other groups of stakeholders, suggesting a more strategic approach. Research will provide insight into the views of current and former students and best practices in alumni engagement, making a valuable contribution to knowledge for university marketing staff, but also lecturers, careers officers, Deans or any others that might interact with alumni on some level.

## **Literature Review – Alumni Research in the UK**

Alumni are identified as “the people who represent the university in the real world” (Chi, Jones and Grandham, 2012), stating the importance of alumni to the University’s public image. However, alumni literature is still at a relatively pioneer stage. Most of the existing literature on alumni focuses on matters such as fundraising or affinity credit cards. Worthington and Horne (1995) explore the usage of alumni affinity credit cards by graduates as a means of taking pride in their University through their display and also helping with fundraising. However, in order to develop a successful connection, it is necessary to focus on “friend-raising” before fund-raising (Myran, Baker, Simon & Zeiss, 2003). The development of an overall mutually beneficial relationship between alumni and their alma mater is in need of further exploration.

One of the most insightful papers on the subject has been released by Precedent, introducing the term “alundergraduates” and highlighting the fact that students and alumni should be viewed as one entity. This provides potential for further research into how the student experience influences graduate engagement. This is further supported by Heckman and Guskey (1998), who analysed the graduate-university relationship through the perspective of discretionary collaborative behaviour.

They argued that there are several variables that will affect this relationship that can be grouped in three categories: alumni satisfaction with the institution's performance, individual attributes and relational influences.

Furthermore, Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006) reviewed a total of 63 papers on marketing in higher education. One of their findings was that students can be encouraged to be supportive towards their university in the future if they are encouraged to take part in schools activities or the improvement or maintenance of the university's prestige level.

“Alumni Matters 2012: What Alumni Want” (Crisp, A., Brown, L. and Hardcastle, S. 2012) looks into the views that alumni have regarding the purpose of their relationships with their business school as opposed to the views of the business school itself. It is stated that, while a high number of institutions consider alumni relations as a source of raising funds, graduates consider their role to be more to the side of networking and forming business connections. This supports the idea that the university-alumni relationship should be developed from all the other points of view before trying to approach the financial side. Furthermore, “in the case of non-profit organizations (...) social rewards include emotional satisfaction, spiritual values, and the sharing of humanitarian ideals.” (Arnett et al., 2003, p. 90). Alumni are a group of people that share ideas, values and emotions, and that is the side of the relationship that should be focused on. Gibbs (2001) argued that participants in higher education aim for the development of “educational relationships rather than transactional deals between traders”.

Existing literature sustains the need for further research into alumni engagement, highlighting the importance of working on the lifelong relationship a university has with its students from the very start. In order to address this issue, two research questions have been identified: i) how to encourage maintain students actively engaged after graduation?; ii) what does a mutually beneficial relationship between alumni and their university consist of?

## **Methodology**

The first step in developing an offer of value for alumni was carrying out research in order to inform the future plan of action. The exploration began with a benchmarking exercise, examining the benefits that University of Huddersfield offers in parallel with those of competitor institutions across the UK and US. The organizations that have been examined include 24 universities members of the Russell group, 15 “post-92” universities and 5 US universities. A core objective was the collation and documenting of transferable tools, techniques and approaches that could be applied within the University of Huddersfield's future strategies. The benchmarking approach was used in order to assess how effective the University's alumni offering is compared to that of others and identify the best practices among UK institutions.

The benchmarking process consisted of online research, exploring the previously listed institutions' websites in order to assess their alumni offering. The factors evaluated included the alumni groups set up by the institution, career guidance offered, targeted events, newsletters and other forms of communication, publications, access to the institutions' library and sports facilities, the existence of an alumni directory that graduates could use to look up their former peers, discounts offered on various services and any other form of benefit offered.

A key element of the process was represented by a scoping exercise, interviewing final year Business School students. Twenty semi-structured interviews were recorded in order to generate an informal environment that would put respondents at ease and produce qualitative data. The interviews focused on four key topics areas: current satisfaction with university, awareness of

alumni benefits, expectations of relationship with university post-graduation and likeliness to engage in alumni activities. The data collected will be analysed through manual thematic analysis. A part of the respondents will be interviewed again a few months after graduation in order to discover any changes in attitudes and beliefs.

Through the use of quality function deployment, the voice of the customer captured through the interviews will be used to generate a tighter link between the alumni requirements and the processes the university goes through in order to meet them. An essential part of developing this project will be interviewing less recent graduates in order to record aspects of how their relationship with the University has unfolded from the completion of their course to present, discover their perceived positives and negatives in this relationship and evaluate what expectations and desires they would have for the future. The first step in this part of the research will be hosting a focus group with alumni members of the Business School's Advisory Committee. The focus group will be used to encourage discussion among participants with the end goal of obtaining qualitative insight.

Another key point in moving forward will be interviewing staff members, such as the University's Alumni Officer, the Dean of The Business School or the University's Vice-Chancellor. This will serve to capture the University's perspective on its connection with its graduates.

## **Findings**

The University of Huddersfield's Business School had not maintained a continuous and consistent relationship with its graduates over the past years. In order to improve this situation, a resource was put in place in order to overcome this gap. The position was created in order to find and collate any already existent Alumni data, to identify gaps in the database and suggest ways of finding the missing information, to create a communication system to be used regularly for connecting with graduates, to assist in preparation of reports and the organisation of school alumni events.

Missing data was collected through the use of registers from past events, personal contacts passed on by course leaders and a number of other sources. This information was stored in the University's main database through liaising with the Central Marketing Department.

The benchmarking exercise revealed that the University of Huddersfield has a basic offering of alumni benefits. The examination of competitor institutions showed several opportunities for improvement, such as providing off-campus access to the University's online library, producing more alumni-centred events or providing career guidance sessions via Skype.

An initial overview of the scoping exercise pointed to a number of conclusions for the interview topics. All responses pointed to an overall satisfaction with the quality of teaching and the university experience; however, most students stated a wish for a bigger emphasis on practical tasks rather than academic material. The engagement levels students felt towards the university varied, with some describing a deeper connection, while others stating they are strictly interested in obtaining their degrees. Some blamed the disconnection felt on the lack of opportunities to engage, with no societies operating within the Business School at the moment.

Students have little awareness of what support and benefits the university could offer them as graduates, most of them not having a precise understanding of what the term "alumni" means. Their expectations and desires centre on career support.

Results indicated a likeliness of positive response towards news and events as long as they are of relevance to the person (for instance, news would be of interest if it were Business School specific rather than generic University news).

## **Discussion**

The University of Huddersfield's Business School will go forward with its projects, using the gathered data to form short and long term engagement plans for its graduates. The information provided by the benchmarking exercise will serve for extracting ideas regarding what could be done, which will be put against data from the student scoping exercise and alumni focus groups revealing what students and alumni want.

Existing literature and initial findings point towards the idea that successful alumni relations start with a positive student experience. This justifies the need for further research in order to discover how the student experience can be enhanced and what engagement opportunities can be designed in order to encourage the continuation of a relationship post-graduation. This insight will serve to develop a strategic plan for building successful alumni relations.

As alumni are the only permanent institutional consistencies (Webb, 1998), graduate engagement should be high on any university's priority list, looking further than fundraising in order to build up a meaningful lifelong relationship. Universities should acknowledge that alumni relations start forming from the moment one becomes a student of that institution, and have that in mind when designing elements of the student experience.

This design should always be tailored for the needs and expectations of a specific institution's students, therefore it is essential to carry out research to bring out "the voice of the customer"; each institution prides itself on being different to others and having a better overall offering to its students and this should be reflected in the handling of alumni relations.

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