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Contemporary challenges in the management of university alumni associations

ABSTRACT

Polish organizations gathering alumni, functioning as independent bodies, have recently faced several problems including the generation gap, lack of young members, and problems with fundraising. Operating within existing models is no longer effective due to significant social and economic changes that have taken place in their environment. They need to rethink and redesign their strategies. The model presented in the paper identifies the main areas of the change and the directions that the organizations need to follow to ensure their further effective functioning.

The research contributes to the discussion on alumni management in Poland. The topic is marginally explored in Polish scientific literature and the perspective of other countries enables application due to specific characteristics. The discussion in the paper is adjusted to conditions specific to Poland and is focused on organizations of a certain type.

Keywords: university alumni management, challenges, model.

JEL Classification: L31, M31

Introduction

Alumni are identified in the literature as one of the most important groups of university stakeholders, and some authors identify them even as primary stakeholders [e.g. Meyer et al.2020]. They play a significant role not only as ambassadors of higher education institutions (HEIs), but also as a valuable source of knowledge and expertise. Alumni are a significant resource for universities and other educational institutions, and their support, either relational or financial, 'has grown to be instrumental to the continuous success of higher education institutions' [Shen, Sha, 2020]. In some countries, they set the largest group of voluntary contributions to universities which is why attention has been paid to develop the most effective strategies to maintain relations with this group and make them as beneficial as possible [e.g. Broussars, 2023; Fleming, 2019; Plante, Truitt, 2018].

In Poland, the organization of relations with alumni is different and it seems that insufficient attention is paid to it. Links between universities and their alumni are weak, there is no tradition of transferring money to universities, and the level of activities undertaken by alumni associations is low [Kuźniar, Żukowska, 2020; Łazorko, 2016]. Although some authors emphasized the importance of alumni relations [Krzak 2011; Mruk, 2006; Piotrowska-Piątek, 2016], contemporary research on university alumni still focuses on their careers and expectations toward university education [e.g. Murawska, Walkowiak 2022, Rocki 2021; Rocki 2023] which was inspired by the legislative obligation to monitor the professional careers of graduates to adapt the fields of study and educational programs to the needs of the labor market, introduced in 2011. Moreover, the concept of alumni loyalty is marginally analyzed [Bugaj, Rybkowski, 2022].

In Poland there are two main patterns of managing relations with university alumni. It may be conducted by independent organizations (mainly alumni associations), or by units within universities' structures. Both solutions have their advantages and disadvantages [Kuźniar, Żukowska 2018; Łazorko 2016]. The discussion in the further part of the paper is focused on organizations that operate as independent, self-governing bodies. They do not directly report to university authorities but interact with them as organizations supporting the promotion of universities and maintaining relations with graduates. They act as intermediaries between universities and their alumni.

Background

Recently, the importance of alumni to universities has increased because of their role in the universities' ecosystems [Meyer et al., 2020]. Alumni provide universities with important information about the education and services offered [Calitz et al. 2024], support enrollment, and foster technology transfer and entrepreneurship [Baroncelli et al., 2022].

Polities et al. [2023] indicate that two main alumni functions can be identified:

- providing function – alumni are resource providers to current students as guest lecturers, mentors;
- connecting function – they connect current students with valuable stakeholders such as customers, suppliers, collaborators, and investors.

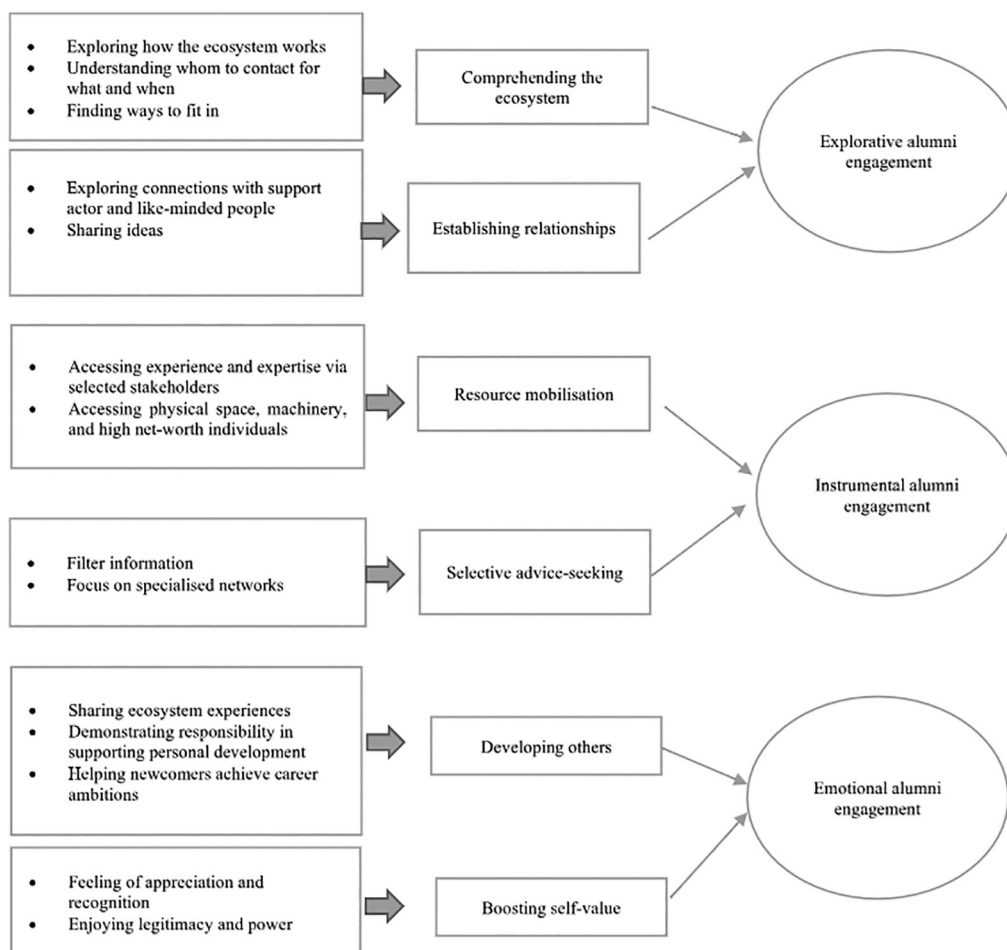
Alumni associations can provide alumni with all the information they require and universities with all the information they need about alumni. They should be included as an integral part of the system of information transfer between universities and their alumni. Clarifying their role would enable them to outline strategic plans. As it has been observed, the organizations that gather alumni, operating in the form of independent bodies, cannot define their role. Their functioning is beneficial for universities, but they also require some financial support from universities and depend on universities to some extent which puts them in a situation of reliance. This dual character of their functioning strongly influences the engagement of members – if associations cooperate well with university authorities and are supported, the engagement and level of satisfaction are higher. If the procedures or interpersonal relations are complicated, the level of satisfaction decreases, and in consequence, the motivation to further work, which is voluntary and usually means sacrificing one's own free time, decreases as well. In this scheme, the associations should be treated as partners with clearly specified roles and ways of support that can be provided by universities.

Another problem that organizations of the type discussed are currently facing is a decreasing number of members (as older members resign due to retirement or health problems) and the inflow of young members is not at a satisfactory level. The CUT Alumni Association funded the Senior Club funded, which gathers mainly retired members. The group is very active in organizing meetings, trips, etc., but the problem is to attract younger graduates who eagerly participate in initiatives organized by the Association (fairs, meetings, etc.) but do not expect any further involvement. CUT alumni cooperate with the university in preparing curriculum and advising on different aspects of education (they participate in advisory boards). They conduct open lectures for students as well. All such activities are successful and beneficial for students, alumni, and the university. In the literature, this type of cooperation is described as Alumni Capital, including alumni donations, cohesion, employment, and recurrent education [Liu, 2007]. It can be utilized through 'intellectual and technical production carried out together, the representativeness of positions held in academia, private and public sectors, recurrent education at the educational institutions, participation in committees, councils or research groups, donation or sponsorship of actions, and other relationships that build ties with former students' [Taxweiler et al., 2023, p. 1332]. This was researched by several authors [e.g. Chang et al., 2015, Frisby et al., 2019, Nanda et al., 2021] and shown to be affected.

One of the options to encourage students to support universities after graduation is fostering a philanthropic culture among students to build long-term relations [Sium, 2023]. This can also be an interesting space for alumni associations. As indicated in research, but not fully explored, different forms of alumni engagement enable a transition from students

to engaged alumni: explorative engagement, instrumental engagement, and emotional alumni engagement (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Forms of alumni engagement



Source: El-Awad et al. 2022, p. 11.

The research by E-Awad et al. [2022] enabled the identification of roles that alumni can play in the creation of the university experience of students to attract engaged alumni in the future. Their research is an interesting (and sparse) example of the study contributing to the discussion on the roles that graduates can play in creating potential groups of engaged alumni.

Some research indicates that alumni engagement can be related to the student experience, the universities' ability to adapt to changes to meet social demands, and higher social capital through networking [Sium et al., 2023]. But still, 'there is little theory informing about the drivers of alumni engagement and how they contribute with critical and timely resources and networks that boost current students' enterprising spirit and employability' [Polities et al., 2023] and the difficult aspect of alumni engagement is marginally researched [Shen, Sha,

2020]. It must be remembered though that alumni engagement and the networks they create enable universities to remain competitive and resourceful [Sium et al., 2023].

The model of alumni management

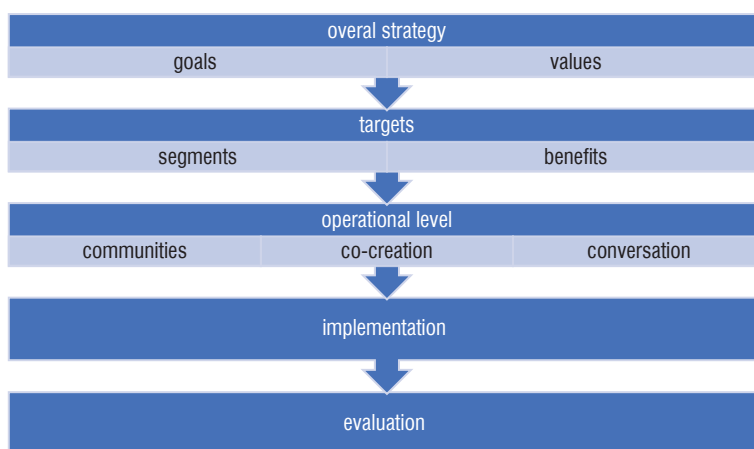
Since 2016 when the research on marketing communication between alumni and universities was conducted [Łazorko, 2016], no significant changes have been observed in this area. Nevertheless, the same approach to relations with alumni is presented by most universities in Poland. Although the world has changed significantly in recent years, the same patterns of cooperation are followed. The model of offers created for alumni, one-way communication, and presentation of initiatives undertaken are still used. Alumni associations in Poland do not seem to find a way to attract graduates to join their alumni communities. As it has been observed, some of them are struggling to survive and cannot find a way out of this situation.

The model was prepared based on the extended analysis of contemporary scientific literature discussing different aspects of alumni management within different types of HEIs from all over the world, observations of different types of alumni associations in Poland, but mainly as a result of many years of cooperation with the CUT Alumni Association.

The following introductory assumptions were made:

1. Decreasing number of members and the level of engagement. These problems are also reported by other universities [Żukowska, Rek, 2021];
2. Building relationships cannot be based only on communication – improving communication and using social media may not be enough;
3. The generation gap between alumni associations members and graduates becomes notable;
4. Graduates and their expectations have changed;
5. Volunteering is not effective.

Figure 2. New model of management of alumni association



Source: own elaboration.

The model of managing relations with alumni (Figure 2) indicates three main areas that require changes to make alumni associations function more effectively: strategy, targets, and performance planning. These three elements are crucial and need to be redefined and reorganized.

Strategy

The main element that can be observed when analyzing alumni associations is the lack of a strategic approach. Some of them are still based on the solutions they used 20 or even 50 years ago, when the market, students, the perception of higher education, and the field of study were very different. Alumni feel connected to universities and not to alumni associations. These organizations need to find their own space and role to play between universities and graduates. The associations were usually founded by groups of peers and promoted among friends, but now, they have to reach and attract people who do not know anything about the organizations of alumni.

The questions the organizations need to answer are following: What is the reason for their further existence? What role do they play for universities and the alumni?

The strategic element is crucial in the model. The strategic goal (s) must be well-defined and followed by an indication of values to be shared and communicated (tradition, trust, friendship, brotherhood, etc.).

This part of the model is also an opportunity to involve universities. Alumni organizations may use the knowledge and experience of university staff and students and cooperate with them at this stage (asking them to prepare research, analysis, etc.). This multidimensional cooperation may also help to tighten relations with university staff and associations that usually contact the Rector or other authorities within universities and occasionally other staff members.

It seems that the associations of the discussed type can undertake the role of intermediaries in the use of alumni capital. They have to abandon the formula of social clubs and move towards professional authorities with the image of reliable, experienced, and well-organized partners supporting younger colleagues (students and young alumni) entering their professional lives. They should also focus on the creation of a pro-philanthropic culture in groups of students – future alumni.

Segmentation & targeting

The groups of potential stakeholders of organizations should be defined. As mentioned above, organizations function in specific ecosystems, and they should not only focus on graduates, but look at their environment from a broader perspective. They should also focus not only on fundraising (although this aspect is crucial for their effective functioning), but also on benefits they can gain and provide to other groups. Non-donors cannot be treated as second – class users, and donation as the only way to serve the associations [Enterprise Alumni, 2023]. Moreover,

research indicates that alumni are treated as homogeneous groups irrespective of study background. In consequence, ‘receive somewhat of an “empty suit” treatment, which seemingly congruent interests and motivations regardless of educational context’ [El-Awad et al., 2022].

To attract new generations, their expectations should be researched. As potential employees, they declare openness, a combination of different skills, and the ability to learn quickly, while at the same time they expect quick reactions, diversity, social responsibility from businesses [PwC, 2022] as well as tangible, real-life, and quick benefits. It can be assumed that they do not expect any social benefits (that part of their lives is spent in social media), but support from professionals and concrete forms of cooperation. Mentorship programs performed by alumni are proven to be effective [Bolton-King, 2022, Dollinger et al., 2019, Skrzypek et al., 2022] and should be implemented with the alumni associations’ support as their organizers and cooperators.

Today, most universities host international students and they should be included in alumni management strategies. This possibility opens new perspectives of cooperation.

Alumni associations should consider different target groups including university staff – researchers, lecturers as well as administrative staff. The creation of the sense of belonging and the integration of the groups may be a key element. Research results reveal that individual academics are addressees of alumni gratitude rather than universities as institutions [Cowni, Gallo, 2020]. Significantly, tutors are usually not involved in alumni management [Żukowska, Rek, 2021].

Apart from these two main audiences: young graduates and university staff members, other targets should be identified depending on the specificity of the organization. They may include local authorities, local entrepreneurs, youth, etc. depending on the perceived role and values. Organizations should move towards networking in different social structures, especially regional ones.

Operational level

This level of the model includes practical implementation of the assumptions made previously, but significant change in their design is crucial as well.

Communities

Alumni associations have always operated in communities but now this is a time for them to move towards a moderator role. They should encourage networking and create communities of different stakeholders. A sense of belonging is a crucial part of the university experience and is positively associated with pro-philanthropic attitudes, alumni engagement, and participation, including volunteering [Drezner, Pizmony-Levy, 2021]. It may be advantageous for alumni associations to move from the model of purely alumni management to building a sense of belonging among students, promoting organizations at the same time.

Communities should not be created around the association, but around its members. People, their achievements, and their knowledge would attract alumni more than impersonal institutions.

Co-creation

Creating initiatives for different targets and inviting them to take advantage of them is not effective in the associations. In the CUT Alumni Association, the most attractive initiatives were these in which stakeholders could actively participate (e.g. contests). This aspect is worthy of further discussion, especially since research results indicate that the co-creation process directly affects the customer satisfaction [Iglesias et al., 2020; Vega-Vazques et al., 2013; Vernet, Kidar 2013] and in the case of the university experience, it increases satisfaction and loyalty as a consequence [Kotze, du Plessis, 2003; Ribbes Giner, Peralt Rillo, 2016]. As observed, traditional forms of events for alumni are not as popular as they used to be, so new offers need to be worked out with the cooperation of stakeholders.

Conversation

The traditional communication with stakeholders should be replaced with a conversational mode. Interaction and quick responsiveness should be introduced to manage relations effectively. As it has been observed, the alumni associations have their offices to serve older groups of alumni, but communication with younger ones is mainly done through social media and online. The annual fairs (in Polish: Giełda Promocji Absolwentów) organized by the CUT Alumni Association, were held online due to pandemic restrictions and many participants found that form of presentation attractive and appreciated its convenience and long-lasting effects. Different forms of online communication and cooperation can be effectively used in alumni management [Dean, Jendzurki, 2021].

After the implementation process, a thorough evaluation of the entire strategy should be conducted.

Summary

The implementation of the alumni management model within alumni associations requires comprehensive changes. The independence from the university (including financial aspects) is one of the advantages of that type of institution. Associations, as self-governing bodies, decide on directions and means to be used to fulfill their mission. At the same time, as they are not included in university structures, they are financially independent and need to ensure their financial stability by their own means and sources.

The model indicates some main areas for intervention, but it may not cover all possible improvements.

Further existence and effective functioning require profound changes, mainly rethinking and reorienting of perception of the role that alumni associations may play, rather than some ad-hoc actions. The formula of the social club is no longer effective and some other role for the associations' functioning in the university ecosystem should be identified.

Several constraints threaten the effective implementation of the model. The first is related to the scarcity of human resources. People involved in organizations such as the CUT Alumni Association are volunteers. They spend their free time supporting the association, however, as they work professionally, their time is strongly limited. Secondly, self-financing requires a constant effort to be undertaken. The proposed model and its results require a certain amount of time and work to become effective while day-to-day operating costs need to be covered. The events that used to provide the Association with financial resources were affected by the pandemic, as well as the financial situation of some donors. The instability of markets does not affect the financial situation of the association positively.

The board of the CUT Alumni Association is strongly determined to introduce the changes that may help to improve its performance and adjust it to the challenges of today's world as well as to changes that took place in the environment. The problem of low level of alumni engagement is not only Polish or European concern, but it is reported by many researchers and practitioners. The model presented is an attempt to solve some problems faced by the CUT Alumni Association and other organizations of that type in order to cultivate the tradition of alumni associations as groups of peers and friends who enjoy working for the common good and well-being.

The study is strongly focused on the local perspective. It may be indicated that a wider perspective should be introduced. At the moment, in Poland, this is not possible because the literature regarding the topic is very limited, the publications are marginal and focused on other aspects than alumni management. That is why it seems so important to enrich the discussion on the topic with different analyses conducted from very different perspectives.

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