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DEVELOPING ALUMNI ACTIVITIES IN TAMPERE AND TURKU UNIVERSITIES OF APPLIED SCIENCES

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INTRODUCTION

Alumni activities have recently started to receive more attention in Finnish universities and universities of applied sciences (UAS). Alumni activities and alumni relations have a long tradition in the U.S. higher education. In the USA, alumni participation rates are on average 14 to 33 % of all graduates, and some universities have been involved with alumni relations for decades or even centuries. (USA Study Tour Report, 2012)

In Finnish universities alumni activities started in 1990–2000. A few years later alumni activities were launched in universities of applied sciences; by 2004 twelve UASs stated they had started with alumni activities. (Mira Network, 2008) Some UASs are at a more advanced level and others are just getting started.

An alumni network is an essential element of a well-functioning university for multiple reasons, yet it seems that many UASs are not taking the full advantage of this. Alumni is an important partner for a university. The benefits of alumni relations are many-fold. The alumni network can support current students to find practical training places, working-life projects, thesis topics, and help with career planning and finding a job. The UASs will receive information and feedback for developing their study programmes, find guest speakers to courses and opportunities for theses, working-life and R&D projects, and practical training co-operation. Alumni members will get invitations to activities where they can meet their fellow alumni, have information on continuing education opportunities in the UAS or opportunities to take part in seminars or events organized by the UAS.

How to research and identify your alumni and how to engage them in the co-operation? It is important to engage alumni on their own terms and to distinguish diverse groups for example based on their degree programmes. When the alumni feel they belong to a group, they are more likely to volunteer and share with the university. Most alumni appreciate when their university provides networking opportunities with fellow alumni. It is easier to get alumni involved if they are proud of their alma mater. (USA Study Tour Report, 2012) It is important to strengthen ties with the alumni after their graduation and communicate of different events and news at the UAS; for example a newsletter can be a practical communication tool.

A good, up-to-date database is a key to success. Asking the alumni to join a database straight after the graduation is important, and using technology in alumni relations is a vital part of networking. If you cannot contact people, you cannot build relationships. Online social networks (Facebook, LinkedIn) are useful tools to create an alumni community. Social media can be seen as an engagement tool and a means to promote the UAS. You can also share articles or information on interesting events to alumni through the social media.

The success of alumni activities in a UAS is linked with the president and the management of the UAS, resources and register (the 3R-model in the Stepit project). It is important for a UAS to have an alumni strategy and goals which enable the strengthening of the co-operation with the regional working life. Another essential requirement is the resources, both financial and human, to enable organizing and coordinating the alumni activities. The third fundamental requirement to a successful alumni network is the register. It is important to keep the data updated to reach and engage the alumni. (Hohenthal et al., 2012, 40-41)

Alumni activities have been organized in different ways in the UASs. In the Stepit project publication Hohenthal et al. (2012) categorized the organization of alumni activities to a centralized or decentralized approach, or an organization through a separate alumni association. In the centralized approach one person is responsible for the alumni activities, and funds are received from the university. In the decentralized approach different degree programmes are usually responsible for taking care of the alumni activities with minimum or no resources, and the activities are funded through other activities. In some universities the alumni association is taking care of the alumni activities and funds are received from subscriptions. In addition to subscriptions, alumni activities can be funded by the university in some cases (centralized approach with alumni association). (Hohenthal, et al., 2012, 38-39)

The Days of International Degree Programmes for Finnish universities of applied sciences were organized at Tampere university of applied sciences (TAMK) in October 2017. A Weppol survey was organized for all the UAS participants of the Kilkas project workshop then. Of all the participants 51 responded to the survey. According to the results 39 % of the respondents stated that alumni related activities were managed at the centralized level, in 20 % of the UAS alumni activities were managed at the degree programme level, whereas in 35 % of all UAS alumni activities were managed at both the centralized and degree programme levels. Only 6 % stated that they have no alumni activities. (Kilkas project, 2017)

Students can be educated as the future alumni as soon as they have been accepted to the university and begin their studies. The student-alumni experience begins already before the student enters the university. The comparison of potential universities is based on the brand image, expectations, as well as stories that friends, alumni or media tell about the university. Students should see alumni in different roles during their studies (mentors, role models, guest lecturers, even donors) in order to understand that it is natural to give back either their time, talent or even money after the graduation. (USA Study Tour Report, 2012)

Student ambassador programs can be helpful in enhancing student-alumni networking. Engagement in alumni activities can strengthen the motivation of international degree students to stay in Finland and enhance their employability in Finland. In addition, alumni who return to their home country and keep in touch with their university are important networks to the UAS. Turku UAS (Tuas) and Tamk were given the opportunity to develop their alumni activities in Kilkas project. The experiments and activities of Tamk and Tuas from developing and maintaining the database to alumni reunions and newsletters will be presented next. A special focus will be put on exploiting opportunities that an alumni network can offer to international students who are looking for opportunities to start their professional career in Finland.

DEVELOPMENT OF ALUMNI NETWORK AT TAMPERE UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES

Alumni co-operation is vital for a UAS. Until 2016, Tamk International Business (IB) degree programme had not had working time allocated for improving their alumni co-operation. The alumni could inform the degree programme more actively about practical training positions, projects and thesis subjects available in their companies, as well as bring perspective from the working life to the studies of the current students. As such, alumni are like brand ambassadors for any programme.

The challenge at Tamk had been the task of gathering all the graduates into a single network - from which they are easy to reach and keep informed on what is happening in the programme. In October 2016, we decided to host an event for International Business-degree programme alumni at the beginning of 2017, and to try to reach as many alumni as possible from the past 20 years into a new Facebook group. This made contacting and informing our alumni about the event much easier.

As a starting point, we had a name list of around 750 graduates from 1996 – 2016. We then started reaching out to the Tamk International Business degree programme alumni through LinkedIn and Facebook. By the end of 2016, the new Tamk International Business Alumni Facebook group had approximately 350 members who then were invited to the IB Alumni event in January 2017.

Involved in the planning was a team consisting of four International Business students, and the event was considered a part of their project studies. We met with the student group roughly once every two weeks and the students designed an event schedule, made an alumni questionnaire and some made smaller event arrangements.

The Tamk International Business Alumni Questionnaire was sent to 570 alumni and 103 of them (18%) responded. With the questionnaire, we received valuable information about

our alumni's current employment situation as well as useful tips about the practical training, study exchange, further studies, and career planning for our current students. From all the respondents, approximately 75% were Finnish and 25% foreign alumni members.

The Tamk IB Alumni Day was organized on Friday 20 January from 4pm to 10pm with a total of 35 alumni participants. The program for the event was kept light and the focus was on spending time together. Before the supper, the alumni members were presented with the new Master's programmes offered at Tamk. The event was a success and we received a lot of praise and feedback from the alumni.

The challenges regarding the alumni event were primarily related to finding the optimal time and date for the event, because most of the alumni had already settled abroad or all across Finland. The starting time was postponed from 12 noon to 4pm, so we had to let go of our planned 'networking moment' between the alumni and the current students. The best part of the event was meeting with the familiar alumni and planning future forms of co-operation with them. The alumni wished for a similar event to be held every year, and we are arranging a new one in March 2018.

In January 2018, the Tamk International Business Alumni Facebook group has already 450 alumni, and the communication is being boosted by a new electronic newsletter in co-operation with the recruitment and alumni services.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE ALUMNI NETWORK AT TURKU UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES

At Turku University of Applied Sciences (Tuas), alumni work started during the spring 2016 within the International Business degree programme. Nothing had really been done before this, except establishing an alumni group in Facebook and LinkedIn where many alumni from the degree programme were missing. In addition, in January 2017 an alumni coordinator was appointed at the Tuas level with the mission of developing alumni activities.

This part of the article concentrates on what was developed within the International Business (IB) degree programme between the spring 2016 and the autumn 2017. The preparation work started during the spring 2016 by identifying the ways to create and activate our IB alumni network. At the same time, a database was created with the contact information of the alumni. The contact information was mostly gathered from LinkedIn and Facebook. This allowed us to invite the alumni who were present in LinkedIn and Facebook to join our IB groups and many did. Yet many alumni could not be reached and the student office could not provide us with the full list of IB graduates. In order to retrieve more names we searched through Theseus, and in this way, we were able to retrieve many alumni we had not had contact with for a long time, again thanks to LinkedIn and Facebook. As an example,

our International Business group on LinkedIn increased from less than 60 members in the spring 2016 to over 180 members in the autumn 2017.

After our database was updated, a questionnaire was designed and sent to obtain a realistic picture of what they were doing (work, career, studies, interest towards alumni activities, salaries). The results from the questionnaire provided very valuable information for our degree programme as well as on the kind of alumni activities they were expecting.

Sending this questionnaire was also nice way to renew contacts with our alumni and get them activated. As an example, several alumni proposed projects from their companies that our students were able to work on during their studies, which was very valuable especially for our international students.

A first alumni reunion was organised in March 2017 together with the Tuus level alumni network. A programme was developed to allow our alumni to participate in both the Tuus level and International Business degree programme level reunion. Sadly, the centralized Tuus level alumni reunion received very few positive responses, and this event was cancelled. However, many IB alumni answered positively and participated in the IB reunion at which IB students were also present. It was the first event of this kind we organised for our degree programme and it was a success. The programme for the event included a part with success stories and career choices from our alumni as well as a panel discussion. A get-together party was also organised in Turku.

The event proved to have several key factors of success. The first one being the time and day when it was organised: a Friday afternoon starting at 15.00 allowed, for example, the alumni working in the Helsinki region to join. The more official part of the event held within the school premises permitting networking and the fact that our IB student heard alumni telling about their success stories and career choices made it easier to engage discussions during the breaks to ask questions.

Having the staff, students and alumni joining both the programme at school and the get together party provided good networking opportunities for all parties. Everybody asked for a similar event to be organised again and it was decided to organise it around the entrepreneurship theme as several alumni had set up their own business. We think that this can benefit greatly our international students as several of them have the idea of establishing a business.

All these activities (survey, updating alumni database, projects, alumni reunion) supported each other and allowed us to keep contact between our alumni and our students. Several international alumni took part and gave a positive picture to our international students about the possibilities to enter the Finnish job market. They saw that it is possible to work in the business field in Finland being an international student/graduate.

Our main objective was to take advantage of the networking possibilities and connections with the business world an alumni network can offer. Our efforts with the alumni activities started in the spring 2016 and we believe to have established a functioning model that will continue working after the Kilkas project. Posting calls for projects, practical training and organising an alumni reunion on a yearly basis with a specific theme are the action points we are aiming at.

CONCLUSIONS

The developing of the alumni work has been a very rewarding process at both Tampere and Turku UASs. Based on our experiences, we want to encourage English-taught programmes to try and find ways to get resources to deepen their alumni co-operation. The work requires co-operation between the centralised alumni services and the degree programme level. Some parts of the development work can be organised as student projects in which the international students can get new and very concrete perspectives on their career planning.

Alumni surveys can produce valuable information for the future and current students to help them make plans for their future. Based on the Tamk and Tuas surveys, we were able to prepare materials for our application processes informing the future students about job titles and types of work the graduates are working in. We got “word of advice” from the alumni to our current students on how to prepare for practical training, how to plan the exchange period, and information on where they went for their Master’s studies and why. In addition to the guiding words, we also got some very concrete offers for company project studies, and for practical training positions for our current students.

At the Days of International Degree Programmes in October 2017, during the Kilkas workshop we summarized the alumni experiments in three main points:

1. Just do it! Find a way in your UAS to start developing the alumni network.
2. For the development, it is vital to have co-operation and resources for alumni work both on the degree programme level and the centralized level at a UAS.
3. You can never get all your graduates to involved: focus on the most active ones and try to find various win-win methods to keep the alumni work alive.

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