



Expert guide: Engaging alumni for student employABILITY

Professor Jess Vanderlelie

Our alumni hold a wealth of information about the quality of the student experience, the challenges of graduate transitions to the workforce and the long term outcomes of their education. Despite this potential value, alumni are still largely considered donors of time, money and brand capital and remain an under-utilised resource in the process of curriculum renewal and the support of student employability.

For schools, faculty and universities interested in improving undergraduate retention, ongoing student success and graduate outcomes, it is imperative that our connection to alumni is facilitated beyond our requests of their time and money. To this end, the task of engaging alumni is not only a matter of maintaining a list of contacts as time from graduation extends and neither is it the sole responsibility of the central alumni office. To reshape our connection with alumni we need to consider the 'world' of a new graduate and challenge our notions of having 'done our job' once a graduate has successfully completed their studies.

By building strong connection with alumni we have the power to enrich curriculum in a manner that is not only informed by industry experience but takes it further, to facilitate the co-creation of programs and activities through the continued investment of alumni in the teaching and learning community. To facilitate this kind of authentic connection, we must consider graduates as continuing members of the university community long after graduation, and acknowledge our role in supporting the journey of our alumni as their careers unfold, through times of success, challenge and transition.

How does this relate to employability?

The world of work is undergoing profound change with few questioning that emerging technology and globalisation have disrupted industries and changed the definition of a career-ready graduate. Supporting students in the development of their professional identity and career development skills is fundamentally important for ensuring graduate success. To support this end, universities are drawing upon their alumni networks more frequently to provide mentoring, support work integrated learning, contribute to industry advisory boards and deliver guest lectures. Despite the important contributions alumni are making to our universities, only approximately 20% of alumni continue to engage with their university.

The key challenge in facilitating the engagement of alumni is to maintain meaningful connection post-graduation. Despite the best efforts of our central alumni teams to connect with graduates, the best time to establish these relationships is not when a student walks across a graduation stage, but rather on the very first day they come to campus. In this manner, our efforts to improve the student experience and support student retention are laying an excellent foundation from which to build an alumni community.

By embedding employability across the curriculum we can offer our alumni a rewarding opportunity to contribute to the development of a student's professional identity and capabilities. The nature of this contribution can take many forms, from guest lectures and industry panels, to career conversations (informational interviews) and work placement. The added benefit of this activity is that it facilitates current students to understand what it means to be an alumnus, while also establishing a strong network that will support efforts long into the future.

Top tips

1. Create a discipline/school alumni group that allows you to stay connected with your graduates.
2. Build your community from Day 1 by showing students you care about their career development, helping them to understand what it means to be an alumnus and linking them with your network.
3. Provide opportunities for alumni to connect and share their stories with students across the student lifecycle.
4. Invite new graduates as well as more experienced alumni to speak to your students.
5. Collaborate with your alumni office when organising activities and developing your engagement strategy.

Things to avoid

Waiting until graduation - Connecting with your students as part of a supportive student experience is the most important way you can establish a network of graduates who WANT to stay connected. Waiting until graduation is a missed opportunity.

Doing it by yourself - Work with your alumni offices; they are an invaluable resource that can support your efforts to engage alumni and ensure your relationship and alumni contributions are recorded.

Organising 'on the fly' - Being systematic about your strategy for engaging alumni within your school/ discipline will allow you to plan and identify the best alumni to engage and avoid exhausting your highly active contacts.

Give as - Alumni want to feel part of a community and it is important you recognise their contributions and provide support and assistance for them to connect with other professionals and plan their careers.

Further reading and resources

- To access the engaging alumni for employability framework and additional resources to support your alumni community please visit www.engagingalumni.com
- Join the national conversation by participating in the Transition Out Networkwork as part of the Students Transition Achievement Retention and Success (STARS) conference <http://unistars.org/stars-network-groups/transition-out-network/>
- To learn more about alumni engagement internationally, connect with the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) <http://www.case.org/>

Contributed by [Professor Jessica Vanderlelie](#), La Trobe University, February 2018