

THE ALUMNI'S VOICE: BEYOND ACADEMIC MARKETING

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ABSTRACT: Shaping one HE institution's identity might be a challenge in the context of such a dynamic academic environment. In the past few years, Romanian universities have shown an increased interest in creating Alumni associations. Our hypothesis is that the Alumni associations in Romanian state universities play more a role of a marketing instrument than of building and preserving the organizational identity. Nevertheless, alumni organisations may contribute in terms of knowledge and best practices transfer for the enrolled students, continuous updating of curricula according to alumni's feedback and experience, bridging academia with the socio-economic environment, etc. In order to test our hypothesis, we conducted an exploratory research for the Faculty of European Studies, one of the Babes-Bolyai University's faculties, attempting to track several alumni by the use of a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The main results are analyzed, and several conclusions are drawn. The authors conclude by setting several recommendations regarding potential mechanisms for expanding the alumni's role in the academic life of a faculty.

1. INTRODUCTION

The present international Higher Education (HE) landscape may be described as a very competitive one, in a continuous search for excellence (for example the race for World Class University's status and for high placement in international rankings such as ARWU's Top 500 Universities or the Times Higher Education Ranking), while highlighting diversification's attributes stated in the university's mission. We can find various forms of diversity described in the higher education literature, one of the most cited belonging to Birnbaum [1]:

- Systemic diversity (institutional type, size and control)
- Structural diversity (historical and legal foundations, internal division of authority)
- Programmatic diversity (degree level, degree area, comprehensiveness, mission and emphasis of programmes and services provided by the institution)
- Procedural diversity (the way teaching, research and services are provided by institutions)
- Reputational diversity (status and prestige)
- Constitutional diversity (students, faculty, administration)
- Value and climate diversity (social environment and culture).

The prestige and reputation of each HE institution cannot be taken for granted, but carefully preserved and enriched.

The importance of alumni organisation in building a university's profile is obvious when analysing the criteria used by international ranking systems. For example, one of the criteria used in the Shanghai ranking refers to alumni winners of Nobel or Fields Medal (10% of the total weight).

In order to achieve high reputation, HE institutions worldwide are developing various systems to create and maintain strong ties with former students, creating a sense of belonging to a special academic environment.

An important pre-requisite for developing an Alumni Community is to create and continuously update a functional database with graduating students based on an Alumni Survey. This might be the first step for developing a feedback culture [2] among former students, turning their passive role into an active one. Therefore, any HE institution should engage in the

professional development of its students during the learning process, as well as in preserving genuine connections with them after graduation, as a follow up process. In this respect the widespread use of Internet facilities might be really helpful in creating a virtual alumni community.

2. ALUMNI'S ROLE IN UNIVERSITY'S LIFE

Traditionally, the alumni's role in Romanian university life was associated with marketing activities, such as: promoters and enhancers of university image among stakeholders, sponsorships, and donations etc.

The role of alumni in marketing activities has remained, but is no longer dominant. Nowadays, it is frequently connected to the quality assurance process. Thus, the alumni may play various roles: from information providers (on curricula development at BA or MA levels [3], or in setting the competencies to be developed – they might be the best choice for finding out what skills served most and what lacked after completing the learning process within the university) to active organizers of events such as alumni for students or alumni for alumni meetings, intermediates for internship programmes, experts, partners for projects or donors.

Their role of information providers could manifest in all the important educational stages: needs analysis phase (they provide an extremely valuable feedback on the competences required on the labour market), curriculum design phase (they can suggest relevant courses, and content topics), implementation phase (they can provide learning resources, financial aid, workshops, lectures etc.), and evaluation phase (they can provide feedback in order to improve the teaching-learning process, the research and development area etc.) [4]

Each HE institutions should investigate the relation between the learning outcomes, initially specified and actually realised, and what is needed in the real job situation [5].

HE institutions cannot rely on alumni only for counting their results in order to be included in international rankings or for sponsorship events, however. Reducing the contribution to alumni to these types of actions might lead to a negative perception among alumni - they perceive themselves as strategic tools in a chaotic marketing plan! We shouldn't forget that alumni represent one of the relevant stakeholders of each HE institution: students, parents, staff and employers. A survey

carried out in 2009 in USA by The Engagement Strategies Group, "The Mood of Alumni", indicates a decline in the alumni giving. This tendency has lasted for several years, and it is not the result of the current economic crisis, but of the fact that alumni „feel disconnected from their alma mater" [6].

Also, the younger alumni are no longer attracted by the traditional ways of alumni associations' functioning (reunions for raising funds and university promotion), but they become more and more attracted by the social networking (e.g., Facebook) in order to maintain the relationship with their colleagues and faculty. Moreover, many of the traditional alumni associations registered a declining of the members number, especially those that have a membership fee [7]. In this context, the universities started to change their approach and to exploit the opportunities offered by the social networks, e.g., creation of Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn accounts, where alumni can exchange useful information (exchange programmes, job postings), can share information, and best practices, can collaborate using wikis; the universities can start fundraising campaigns etc. Also, there are universities that created the possibility for "mobile reunions" (e.g., Princeton University) or their own Facebook-like social website (e.g., Texas A&M University) [8].

Alumni may also play an important role in the university's life in relationship with the current students. The universities have developed different strategies in order to create a stronger connection between them. Some examples of these strategies are: the involvement of alumni in students' recruitment, admission, and the orientation processes; the creation of student alumni organizations; mentoring programmes; the facilitation by the alumni of externship and internship programmes for current students; community service programs that involve both students and alumni; alumni in the classroom – lectures of alumni as a part of the curriculum etc.[9]

Each satisfied graduate may become a supportive alumnus, if we focus on creating a stimulating, innovative and attractive academic environment, before and after graduation. A genuine approach of the former students should contain a question like this: If you started afresh, would you choose the same programme/faculty/university?

If we take a good look to the evolution of the Romanian higher education system we can identify a tendency to a so-called homogenisation, due to the similarity in terms of declared mission, type of organisations, academic programmes offered, procedures, rules, and practices.

Nevertheless, in the past few years we have seen a growing interest for diversification, for creating and preserving organizational identity, with the support of organizational culture. Besides the tangible, visible elements of an organizational culture, the Romanian universities are looking for developing creative environments with transparent assessment instruments.

Moreover, remarkable efforts are made for carrying out tracer studies, which offer a glimpse on the graduates' professional development, on their life after graduation (we mention a national strategic project on tracer studies aiming to include the major Romanian HE institutions in researching the professional attainment of their graduates, the insertion on the labour market [10], etc.).

3. A BRIEF HISTORY OF BABES-BOLYAI ALUMNI ASSOCIATION (BBAA)

The Babes-Bolyai Alumni Association was founded in 1996, at the Rector's initiative. The 105 founders of the association designed the Association's Statute (modified in 2001), together with the Association's Board Structure, (several changes in 2008).

The analysis of the old version of the Babes-Bolyai Alumni Association's webpage – <http://recognos.ro/new/alumni/> – reveals the evolution of the alumni' institutional role. Thus, we could identify an initial emphasis (1996-2003) on association's marketing role – "[the association] carried on activities in order to promote the collaborative relationships between the University and its graduates from everywhere"[11].

The year 2003 represented a genuine turnover, meaning the interest in creation of an Alumni culture, and of a mutual aid relationship between association and graduates, and also between graduates. However, the marketing role still remains, without being dominant; thus, we could identify a focus on public relations strategies and on the large scale mediatisation of the association's activities [12].

The Alumni marketing role is also highlighted by the objectives established in the association's Statute (i.e., the organization of events may contribute to the enhancement of the university's image and prestige at national and international level or the development of international collaboration with similar associations). Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the declared intention for the development of a sense of belonging to the academic community of Babes-Bolyai University and for the maintenance and development of the university's values and traditions [13].

This evolution of the BBAA's role is explained by changes in societal demands and university's orientation and positioning (i.e. 'entrepreneurial university') [14].

The different perspectives on alumni institutional role is also reflected in the association's activities. Thus, the marketing role could be revealed by such activities as: "Don't forget our university" – a fundraising project driven by the university's scarce financial resources (2003), "Support Senior Magisters" – a humanitarian programme designed to help the university's retired teachers facing a vulnerable social situation (2003). None of those initiatives had success, with only a small number of graduates being interested in offering financial support.[15]

Our research among the Faculty of European Studies' alumni [16] indicates the same reluctance in offering sponsorships and donations, as part of a future relationship with the faculty (8% of our respondents [17]). A study on the civic and philanthropic behaviour in Romania indicates, at the level of the year 2010, that the main form of philanthropy manifestation is the donations for the church (33%) [18], similar results being registered for the period 2001-2002 [19]; in relationship with the NGOs the main form of involvement is volunteering, for a small percent of respondents (3% at the level of the year 2010 [20]). Another explanation could be the fact that in Romania there isn't an alumni culture/tradition, but the universities are making efforts in this respect.

The second stage, from 2005 up to 2008, continues with activities that suggest the important marketing role of alumni ("Support us!" – a project designed to benefit from sponsorship from UBB staff – 1% from global income tax; "I want a private grant" – activity from the project "Don't forget the university

that formed you”, “To be the best!” – activities designed to make popular the notorious alumni of university etc.), but we can find also projects/activities that aimed to create an alumni culture (“Councillor”), to enhance the cohesion (“Find a friend”), to facilitate the communication (“Forum Alumni”) etc.

Since 2008, the BBAA actions have represented a major change in the direction of a professional approach of the university-graduates relationship, with an emphasis on the alumni’s multiple roles: a modern database, social media marketing, programmes designed to involve alumni in academic life: on-line seminars, mentorship programme, and involvement of alumni in the university’s evaluation process. We can say that BBAA was the subject of a successful re-branding (not only in terms of images, but also of practices and values).

4. FACULTY OF EUROPEAN STUDIES (FSE) ALUMNI: A CASE STUDY

“Alumni FSE” doesn’t have a distinct legal status, is one of the Babes-Bolyai Alumni Association’s nucleus. Its evolution was, more or less, the same as the university’s one.

Until 2008, disparate efforts were made to gather information about graduates. The aim was to promote the faculty’s profile through the employability rates of its graduates, focusing mainly on the graduates highly positioned in well-known European institutions and/or corporations. The emphasis was on the so-called “successful” alumni. Despite the efforts, the results weren’t systematized, and the transfer of information from one responsible to other was rather deficient.

The year 2008 marked a change, as a result of the intensification at university’s level of the concern for a more active role of the BBAA in developing support services for the society. The university as a whole emphasized the importance of developing the famous triad: teaching, research, and support services [21].

At the faculty’s level, the focus on alumni’s marketing role remained, but the efforts to create a coherent data collection system increased. Thus, in the period 2008-2010, was constituted a database that registered 155 alumni. All the information, along with few testimonials from “successful” alumni, was published on the faculty’s web page. Also, selected information (those alumni holding more representative jobs for the faculty’s profile, employment domains statistics, and testimonials) were included in the brochures designed for the faculty’s promotion campaigns. In 2009, during the university’s evaluation process, some of the faculty’s alumni were invited to participate in a meeting with representatives of The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. In the same year, the alumni were invited to participate in the celebration of 15 years of European Studies in Cluj, within the framework of an international conference. In 2010, a roundtable on the theme of graduates’ professional insertion was organized, with the participation of alumni and current students.

The relation with alumni is maintained also by using social media instruments; i.e. the faculty’s Facebook account that allows communication with current students and graduates and that could create among them, at least virtually, the perception of the existence of a community, much closer to their needs. But this instrument is not exploited at its full potential (see above notes, 7 and 8).

The alumni are involved in the student’s life also by lectures held on different topics, as course invited guests, but these initiatives remain informal and unsystematic. Also, some of them continue to participate in special seminars which they attended as students, but in a small number. Another way of remaining connected with the faculty is through the informal relations developed with some teachers or for recommendation reasons (for grants, jobs etc.).

The nature of formal actions reflects clearly an emphasis on alumni’s marketing role. However, we cannot ignore the intention to go behind this role and to create a sense of belonging to the academic community. Also, the faculty aimed to exploit their feedback in order to create the basis for an alumni culture, educating the graduates and undergraduates in this spirit. The most recent activity, launched in January 2011 by the BBAA and The Fundraising Office of BBU, “Mentor Alumni”, constitutes a major step in this sense. The intermediate results and the feedback messages indicate an increased interest of Faculty of European Studies graduates and undergraduates for this programme (1/5 of the total responses belong to FSE’s alumni). The results of our exploratory research among faculty’s graduates indicate also a preference for this type of involvement (mentorship) in relationship with the faculty (41%).

4.1. Research methodology

In the period 15-30 January 2011 we launched a questionnaire among FSE graduates, using the contacts from the existing database and also the discussion groups constituted during their studies.

The questionnaire was designed to identify the following: a. personal data - current job/position, current employer, current town/country, studies after graduation, other jobs/positions after graduation, contact information (for those graduates who weren’t registered in the database); b. graduate – faculty relationship - means and types of information delivered by the faculty, the preferred further ways of involvement in relationship with the faculty, and the perception of their institutional affiliation as graduates (with the department, faculty, university, student association or no institutional affiliation).

Around 19% of the graduates registered in database responded to our questionnaire (30 graduates). We were more successful with the launching of the questionnaire on discussion groups (72 responses), so we registered a total number of 102 responses. We also applied a semi-structured interview with 12 alumni answering to our questions.

4.2. The main findings from the questionnaire

Regarding the types of information they are interested in receiving as faculty’s alumni, we registered the following results (multiple choice question): conferences, workshops, special seminars – 74%; institutional projects (research projects, investments in infrastructure etc.) – 66%; academic programmes (BA, MA, and PhD, postdoctoral, postgraduate) – 49%; other option – only 5% (i.e. an annual report with all the information mentioned above, vacant positions at the university, invitations at different extra-curricular activities, faculty’s teachers’ participation at international conferences). These results indicate the persistence of the interest for the academic life after graduation.

The results for the preferred means to be informed are as following (multiple choice question): electronic newsletter –

81%; discussion group (i.e. Yahoo group) – 28%; Facebook account – 21%. We might understand that our respondents prefer a more individualistic approach, than an effort to create a virtual identity, a too weak method for creating the sense of belonging! These findings somehow contradict the tendencies of the young alumni to adhere to social networks (see section 2 of this article). A possible explanation could be the fact that many of them are already in connection with the faculty and their colleagues through the faculty's Facebook account and they don't need a dedicated alumni social network.

For the preferred further ways of involvement in relationship with the faculty, the results are: participation at debates, roundtables – as a member of the audience: 49%, as a speaker – 37%, as the event organizer – 23%; mentorship programme – 41%; feedback on curricula and structure of the studies programmes – 41%; teaching online seminar on different topics (professional insertion after graduation, preparation of final paper etc.) – 33%; facilitation of internship/exchange programmes for the current students – 31%; a weaker interest for donations, sponsorship for the faculty/student association activities – 8%, confirming other studies mentioned above; for no involvement, only 1% out of our respondents. These findings are consistent with the existent tendencies regarding alumni's involvement in students' life and represent an argument for the development of such strategies at the faculty's level.

The (multiple choice) question regarding the institutional affiliation revealed that the stronger is with the department (25%), then with the faculty (16%), followed by a "shared" affiliation: department, faculty and Babes-Bolyai University (15%), solely with the university (13%), while 8% identifies with the department and the faculty. Smaller percentages (5% or less) are registered for the affiliation with the students' association, in various combinations with the 3 layers: university, faculty or department. In the same time, only 1% doesn't identify with any of those entities. Despite the numbers, the practices reveal a quite strong affiliation with the faculty's student association, many of graduates maintaining their relationship with current members, through common actions, both formal and informal.

The results clearly indicates that alumni are willing to go beyond their passive, marketing role and take an active role, from information providers, to involvement in the organization of events, or intermediaries for internship programme, sharing their professional experience, being mentors. We should take into account their availability for fostering the development of an alumni culture among graduates and undergraduates. Alumni prove to be a valuable resource for the faculty in their efforts to create a distinct profile within a comprehensive university.

4.3. The main findings from interviews

The interviews proved that the feedback from graduates could be an extremely valuable input for identifying what skills served most and what lacked after graduation, what are the elements of satisfaction and dissatisfaction regarding their studying experience, which are the perceived elements of differentiation on the labour market.

The information received from this very small sample of graduates give some important insights on the above mentioned aspects.

Thus, to quote some examples, the acquisitions that helped most to the insertion on the labour market were: knowledge

(European studies, marketing, economics, sales, project management, foreign languages, and multidisciplinary knowledge), soft competences (critical thinking, problem solving, „think global, act local" approach), skills (sociability developed through team projects, open-mindedness for studying and working abroad, teamwork in student association), international experience (Erasmus grants, international working context).

"My case was a happy one, because the project domain, by being so large and in the same time so specific, requires multidisciplinary knowledge, and the Faculty of European Studies shapes your thinking in that direction [...] (graduate of Management department, consultant on project structural funds)

"[...] all the advantages and disadvantages [of studying at FSE] made me think outside the box, so the experience of being a student at FSE could be perceived as a positive sum game" (graduate of Management department, MA student in Romania)

The feedback on alumni's experience as students offer important insights about their perceptions, that could affect the image of the faculty in the community at large, with potential effects on the enrolment rate.. Some perceptions are as follows: good communication with teachers, the possibility to establish closer relationship as a result of a relatively small students number, "interesting", "not boring", dynamism, interactivity, competition, use of incentives, offered the basis for the critical thinking development, in some cases the emphasis in the teaching process was on quantitative results and not on qualitative ones, excellent work environment, up-to-date studies, etc.

"It was a learning and personal development period, in which I made special friends. Our young teachers transferred us the necessity of constant learning, of logical learning, through correlations with real situations [...]" (graduate of Management department, sales assistant)

The feedback regarding the teaching-learning process is also extremely valuable: positively appreciated teaching methods – teamwork projects, mid-term evaluations; negatively appreciated teaching methods – exposition method; suggestions: more individual projects, the assessment of creativity, more strict evaluation of the students, emphasis on real-life situations at the exams, emphasis on academic writing, extra-school activities that involve teachers and students, more tasks for students that involve oral presentations, more advanced statistics, Excel and Access courses, higher learning standards, a better exemplification and synthesis of theoretical notions, more interactivity, more efforts for enhancing the students mobility, competence orientation, more economic based disciplines (especially for the graduates from Political Studies), reaction-papers, enhancement of teaching methods' diversity.

"I recommend as many as possible projects; the students to be pushed to interact with teachers and among them, to assume responsibility, be educated to assume their work and to finish it in a correct, qualitative and independent way. Qualitative, independent work is required by all employers and in every situation after graduation" (graduate of Management department, MA student abroad)

"I recommend an approach oriented towards the student's practical competences acquisition, towards the student's formation as a competent professional and not as a

theoretician” (graduate of International Relations and European Studies department, project manager, external relations referent)

As a response to the students’ need for involvement in real job situation, the university initiated a strategic project for easing the transition from faculty to labour market [22]. FSE also developed a grant project for students interested in internships, focused mainly on developing project management skills [23].

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Any HE institution should prove a genuine involvement in the society’s development. By supporting and receiving support from the alumni it may accomplish this aim. A coherent and long term oriented strategy for creating, maintaining, and developing an alumni association must replace the scattered efforts and isolated initiatives.

We need to make a clear distinction between the encouraging declared intentions to support the alumni association and the actual steps made by former students to get involved in the university’s life. We need to make our alumni aware of their role: not just simple receivers of information or beneficiaries of after graduation programmes, but initiators or lobbyists for various projects dedicated to alma mater.

The sense of belonging must be developed, enriched from the very beginning but not taken from granted - an enthusiastic and satisfied undergraduate should remain close to the university during their after graduation life.

The perceived elements of differentiation on the labour market could offer, for example an important input for a future positioning of the faculty and of the university:

a. for the faculty: knowledge diversity, European ”experience”; soft skills: a certain way (closer, more facile) to interact with people, confidence to speak in public, flexibility; good knowledge of foreign languages, entrepreneurial thinking, open-mindedness, ability to cope with different situations and orientation towards problem solving, the opportunity to study abroad, to activate in the faculty students association, the benefit of having well prepared and involved teachers, the versatility in professional profile that opens employment opportunities.

“[The differentiation is given by] the fact that he/she doesn’t fit in any graduates category, is different – to be different is good! [The FSE graduate] has diverse knowledge, knows the information sources for different domains, has more flexibility in specialising in a certain area” (graduate of Management department and of American Studies department, assistant manager).

b. for the university: prestige (national and international); the high placement in universities’ national ranking, better chances on the labour market as a result of a perceived preference among employers for BBU graduates, responsibility, high academic standards.

“A BBU graduate has an advantage in terms of image, including at international level.” (graduate of Management department, process assistant accounts payable)

“I think that the numerous contacts/partnerships with universities from the entire world are the elements that contribute to the value of a diploma obtained at BBU and offer opportunities for those who want to develop a career abroad”

(graduate of Management department and of American Studies department, assistant manager).

Also, we should consider our alumni organizations as external advisers for the teaching or research activities as well as for the relationship with the society, a role exploited by universities around the world [24].

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