Alumni engagement analysis in Kazakhstan: a case study for non-state commercial university

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Abstract: In order to leverage the relationship with alumni, universities strive to create an environment in which alumni would feel comfortable connecting, being part of the community, and realizing their volunteer and philanthropic potential. Such an environment also helps the university establish traditions of alumni relations that can ultimately lead to the achievement of the university's strategic goals, a sizable financial support and an active alumni community that broadcast success, knowledge and philanthropy. We started by surveying alumni about how much they were willing to be involved in supporting the alumni association, and how much time and money they were willing to invest. This article provides a short analysis of the literature on which the methods were selected, and the results of interviews with graduates were formed. The study was held in October 2023, stratified sampling method was used with five focus-groups. The article also contains information about the university, recommendations for future researchers and possible limitations. The findings suggest that future analysis of Kazakhstani alumni engagement should encompass the following elements: volunteer activities, fundraising, communication in social networks, and professional education. The results of this study could serve as a foundation for formulating communication strategies for young universities in Kazakhstan concerning their alumni relations. The study sheds light on the alumni lower willingness to engage in volunteer work, act as donors, offer contributions more focused on the educational process, and share their experiences.

Keywords: alumni engagement; alumni relations; alumni interactions; alumni challenges; Kazakhstani University.

1. INTRODUCTION

After graduating from the university and receiving a degree, the graduate leaves the university and begins his career. Whether an alumni maintains connection to university depends on a large number of factors, but mostly on the goals and motivations of the graduates themselves. Some of them return to university to continue their studies, some want to share their knowledge with the future generations in a lecturing capacity, some are looking to help students in career starting by sharing their experience. The university also benefits from the graduate's involvement, not just in the form of career fairs and fundraisers, but graduates being good ambassadors, volunteers and motivators for current students. In order to leverage the relationship with alumni, universities strive to create an environment in which alumni would feel comfortable connecting, being part of the community, and realizing their volunteer and philanthropic potential. Such an environment also helps the university establish traditions of alumni relations that can ultimately lead to the achievement of the university's strategic goals, a sizable financial support and an active alumni community that broadcast success, knowledge and philanthropy.

Many western universities, mostly in the US and Europe, already have established long-standing traditions of communicating with alumni, making it easier and faster for them to track the importance of alumni involvement and their participation in the development of the university. As a result, these universities can incorporate alumni engagement in their long-term strategic goals, as they have the history of past successes and experiences of working with alumni.

Younger universities should attempt to create such relationships, however they will inevitably will face a lot of difficulties. In this case, universities need to organize an infrastructure for working with alumni, channels for alumni communications,

working with current students, creating traditions, investing their own funds and attracting alumni volunteers. In general, the university needs to invest in the development of the alumni community from all perspectives, and at the same time analyze the participation of alumni themselves, which requires not only financial resources, but also the involvement of staff and administration.

This study came as a result of a review of the literature. Unfortunately, research and studies about the impact of alumni on universities, the importance of creating alumni infrastructure and developing alumni communities in Kazakhstani context are not found. Therefore, we identified a research gap, and decided to create a background for all future researchers by organizing a qualitative study in the form of open interviews with graduates from one Kazakhstani university.

We started by surveying alumni about how much they were willing to be involved in supporting the alumni association, and how much time and money they were willing to invest. This article provides a short analysis of the literature on which the methods were selected, and the results of interviews with graduates were formed. The article also contains information about the university, recommendations for future researchers and possible limitations.

2. DEFINITIONS

Alumni refers to individuals who have graduated from an educational institution, such as a school, college, or university. They are former students who have completed their studies and obtained a degree or qualification from the institution. Alumni often maintain a connection or affiliation with their alma mater and may be involved in activities such as alumni networks, events, and fundraising initiatives. They serve as a valuable resource for the institution, contributing to its reputation, mentorship programs, and fostering a sense of community among current and former students.

Graduates of the institution and others with a prior academic relationship, including non-graduates, certificate and credential holders, distance learners, lifelong learners, residents, post-docs, honorary degree recipients and honorary alumni. For research purpose researches used the following aggregate definition from literature review.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

When conducting a literature review for research about alumni communication, it is essential to explore various scholarly articles, books, and reports that have been published in the field.

During literature review, researchers discovered a very small number of international works on this topic, and the absence of any information on Kazakhstani context in particular.

Alumni engagement refers to the ongoing relationship and involvement of graduates with their alma mater or educational institution (McDearmon, J. T., 2013). It encompasses activities and initiatives undertaken by the institution to foster a connection with alumni and encourage their participation in various events, programs, and opportunities (Ebert, K., Axelsson, L. & Harbor J., 2015). Alumni engagement aims to maintain strong ties with former students, promote a sense of belonging, and leverage the collective expertise, networks, and resources of alumni for the benefit of both the institution and its graduates. Moreover, Curtis, A. Et al (2002) in their research article titled "Alumni and Their Alma Mater: A Partial Test of the Reformulated Model of Organizational Identification," explore how alumni communication plays a role in fostering identification and loyalty towards educational institutions.

Activities that are valued by alumni, build enduring and mutually beneficial relationships, inspire loyalty and financial support (Borden et al.,2014), strengthen the institution's reputation and involve alumni in meaningful activities to advance the institution's mission (Johnson, Jacquelyn T., 2023). For instance, Brudney, J and Foster, M. S. In their study (2009) about building effective alumni relations programs stated importance of creating environment for alumni relations professionals. We found few studies that show the importance of evaluating alumni engagement metrics and, accordingly, prepare foundation to an answer to the question "why is it important to analyze alumni engagement" in university life after graduation (Johnson, Jacquelyn T., (2023).

On the one hand, during interaction with its graduates, the university has the opportunity to directly influence the success of its program, since successful graduates are the best advertisement for the university (Moore, S., & Kuol, N., 2007). On the other hand, the university has the opportunity to gain access to a large pool of human resources in person of graduates, each of whom, based on his loyalty (Lertputtarak, S. & Supitchayangkool, S., 2014)., is able to contribute to the development and support of the university both as donations (Alvarado, LanLan, 2023) and as volunteers.

It is possible to calculate alumni engagement using both quantitative and qualitative metrics. Qualitative metrics may include the percentage of alumni attending university events, the number of communities on university social networks, the amount of money that alumni donate to the fund (Daly, S., 2013) and the number of volunteers willing to help organize university events. While the interviews that alumni agree to give to the university and their content, mentoring, access to qualified talent, discussions on social networks about the university, success stories of top graduates can be taken into account as quality metrics.

In general, analysis of alumni engagement indicators is necessary if the university wants to improve areas of communication with alumni or create a strong, cohesive group of alumni. The analysis helps determine the attitude of alumni towards the university, its programs, types of interaction, as well as possible omissions from the organizational structure (Lertputtarak, S. & Supitchayangkool, S., 2014).

Building relationships between the university and alumni is a long-term process, and here it is very important to create a goal for communication between graduates not only among themselves, but also with the university itself. The goals of creating such networks can be very different, ranging from the transfer of university values between generations, ending with the opportunity to receive contributions to the fund and volunteers for events (Pastorella, M. J., 2003). Durivage, J. H. (2016) in their doctoral dissertation titled "Institutional Advancement in Higher Education: A Study of Alumni Communication Preferences," the author investigates the preferred communication channels and content for alumni of higher education institutions.

If a university creates a community of alumni and clearly understands its goals, then the analysis of involvement will bring more results. Using alumni engagement analytics, you can take metrics that align with your community's goals, interpret the results, and compare the results to your plans. If the results don't meet your plans, you can think about ways to improve those metrics, which will ultimately impact the entire alumni network. In other words, it is useful to analyze the degree of involvement of university graduates, since involvement significantly affects the final performance indicators of the university.

When graduates who want to come to a university and take some action or propose something, have to go around several departments and in each of them find out a little information, collect general information bit by bit, this practice can be perceived very negatively by them. This is because universities often use different systems that don't communicate with each other, and so one part doesn't necessarily know what's going on in the other. This happens even in large international universities. This makes it increasingly important to report all alumni interactions and map their interactions with your university.

4. BACKGROUND INFORMATION: UNIVERSITY PROFILE

University under our study founded in 2001, which in a very short time has achieved top positions in the educational field among higher educational institutions in Kazakhstan. In 2023, about 1900 students entered the university, education process is carried out in 9 faculties. The university has prestigious international accreditations and attracts the best graduates from all over Kazakhstan. In Kazakhstan, the university is known as the best technical university across the country. Since the number of graduates has been growing every year, the total number of university graduates in this short period has amounted to approximately 7100 people.

However, the university administration began to take a very active part in building a communication system between graduates and the university in 2018. Previously, there were student support programs at the faculty level, but the university did not check the constant interaction of graduates.

The university developed fundraising initiatives among students from its establishment. In 2007, a trust fund was created by faculty dean to collect donations from alumni, which existed more than 10 years from 2007 to 2018. The foundation used donations to hold competitions, conferences and help students who were in difficult financial situations. In parallel, there was another fund for donations from graduates, on its basis scholarships were awarded to students every year on a competitive basis. At the same time, communications and between graduates and alumni meetings were conducted mainly in groups on social networks and at personal meetings that graduates organized independently of university.

In 2018, the university administration founded the Endowment Fund, which was supposed to unite all efforts, all funds and all donations from partners, alumni and third parties. At the moment, the fund operates at the expense of the university, with the participation of employees and the university administration.

5. METHODS

The study was held in October 2023, stratified sampling method was used with five focus-groups. Research with focus groups is a qualitative research method that involves gathering data through a facilitated group discussion (Krueger, R. A., 1998). The researchers informed all graduates in a month in advance with online invitation to participate event where graduates could come and talk about their desire to participate in the alumni community. The study involved 5 focus groups of 5 people, a total of 25 people and all were graduates of in different specialties and in different years of graduation. A sample of participants is selected using a stratified sampling technique, which ensures diverse representation and allows for a deeper understanding of different perspectives.

A facilitator is trained to guide the discussion, create a safe and comfortable environment, and encourage participants to share their thoughts and experiences openly. The facilitator follows a semi-structured interview guide that consists of predetermined questions and prompts, while also allowing for spontaneous discussion and exploration of new ideas (Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A., 2009).

Alumni were asked to share their experiences of the alumni community, their ideas for development, and how they envision involvement in the alumni community. Discussed at the meeting communication between graduates and the university, the engagement strategy, steps for further development of the alumni association in areas (social, educational, informational, networking and others) and attract interested volunteers to work in each communication area.

All focus group discussions were tape-recorded and typed verbatim, and all resulting transcriptions were checked for accuracy and correctivness. On the next step, analysis was conducted from the theoretical framework to identify categories of themes, and code words were identified within each category (Markova ́, I., et al., 2007). Transcriptions were also divided into themes and subthemes, code words were found, and comparisons were made for discussions in and between groups.

6. RESULTS

Some graduates have offered their help and participation in the discussed areas of the alumni association on a volunteer basis, drawing from their own experiences. As part of their volunteer activities, graduates envision themselves serving as mentors for students and leading interest clubs. One graduate expressed, *"Our company is actively expanding, and we are prepared to launch an internship program for students."* An IT graduate highlighted that his skills were well-suited for creating an application for graduates, aligning with one of the goals of the alumni association. One of the graduates volunteered for communication and engagement with other graduates, expressing readiness to become an ambassador and convey the values of the university. Graduates prefer volunteering in areas where they have previous experience and skills, and they are not inclined to volunteer for tasks in which they lack suitable expertise.

On the issue of fundraising, graduates said less that they were ready to make donations, and more offered to help establish contacts with companies that could be donors. However, none of the graduates were ready to negotiate with companies about charity on their own, everyone implies that this work should be carried out by the university administration, and, according to those inquired, they are only ready to transfer information to a person in the company responsible for public relations, or share the contacts of such persons to the university administration: *"Perhaps one of my friends wants to participate in charity , I don't promise anything, but at least I'll talk."* Another graduate indicated that he did not see the point in interviewing companies for financial support, since the companies did not benefit from their investments in the university.

None of the participants were ready to invest money in a charitable project right away, and only two participants said that they would study the project later and try to invest small amounts as support: *"Perhaps I will participate somewhere within reasonable limits."* Only one of the graduates indicated that she is a donor to the fund on an ongoing basis: *"I can continue to pay for the subscription that I signed up a year ago."*

The graduates also noted that it is important for the university to broadcast all positive changes on social networks. It was very important for them to look and find out exactly what changes had occurred since their graduation in educational processes, in buildings and infrastructure, or among faculties. It is, these changes that create interest for many, which directly affects engagement. The reaction to the changes at the university was ambiguous, some were happy about the growth and development of their alma mater, some said with regret *"why didn't it happen like this for us?"* One of the graduates also added *"I can help promote the alumni association on social networks and organize events."* All participants confirmed that they were ready to attend events organized by the alumni association if invitations were sent to them in a similar way, that

is, on an individual basis. Also, all participants thanked for the brief information about the university, including the announcement of news and changes in the alumni association and the fund.

Each of the graduates is ready to help in the development of the association within the framework of their own qualifications and career experience, that is, to transfer their knowledge, become a mentor for students, conduct open lectures, master classes or even courses in their specialty: *"I have already been a mentor for freshmen, also I have accumulated experience that I can pass on in the form of master classes, or I can take people who want to get a job in IT."* Also, one of the graduates indicated that he believes that it is more important for the university to receive their expertise in the form of knowledge from graduates than simply financial resources for investment. Many indicated that mentoring would be their first experience, and they would like to gain such experience within the walls of the university. One of the graduates suggested inviting the company in which she works to a master class at the university or holding a joint event: *"The mentoring program will be very useful for students, especially for graduates, I can tell students how to gain experience in an international corporation, how to successfully pass the interview"*.

Participants indicated that the most important thing for most graduates is the opportunity to communicate more with their classmates, professors, and to a lesser extent with current students and administration: *"What do I need? Involvement, ideas and sometimes talking to people."* Several alumni noted that the main resources they would like to receive from the university in support of graduation were a card for access to the university building and access to the library.

7. CONCLUSION

It is important to acknowledge that there are limitations to conducting research with focus groups. These include the potential for dominant personalities or groupthink to influence the discussion, the limited sample size, and the challenge of generalizing the findings to a larger population. However, these limitations can be mitigated through a well-designed research approach and careful interpretation of the results. Overall, research with focus groups provides an opportunity to deeply explore and understand the experiences and perceptions of participants regarding alumni communication, bringing valuable insights to inform future strategies.

This article provides a short analysis of the literature on which the methods were selected, and the results of interviews with graduates were formed. The study was held in October 2023, stratified sampling method was used with five focus-groups with 25 graduates. The article also contains information about the university profile, results and their interpretation within theoretical framework based literature review. The findings suggest that future analysis of alumni engagement should encompass the following elements: volunteer activities, fundraising, communication in social networks, and professional education. The results of this study could serve as a foundation for formulating communication strategies for young universities in Kazakhstan concerning their alumni relations. The alumni qualitative analysis outlined in this article represents one of the methods existing for evaluating engagement among graduates, establishing a base for further research in this field. Within the theoretical framework, it was established that the university perceives graduates it-selves as valuable resources for alumni community building. However, it is noteworthy that the study directly indicates the type of potential graduates are willing to share with the university. It also sheds light on their lower willingness to engage in volunteer work, act as donors, offer contributions more focused on the educational process, and share their experiences.

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