

Re-visioning alumni relationships to improve graduate employability

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Abstract

With graduate employability high on the national education agenda it is both timely and important to redefine our philosophy for engaging alumni. This emerging program proposes that by reshaping our conceptions of alumni worth, capturing their experiences and nuancing our approaches to connection, we can establish an intentional and authentic partnership between a university program and its graduates. The program aims to re-vision graduate success to more accurately reflect alumni career experiences throughout the graduate lifecycle. This will be achieved through development of a theoretical framework and series of online resources to empower universities to network with alumni in a mutually beneficial manner, to inform curriculum renewal, and tailor employability interventions support undergraduates and enrich the professional lives of alumni. This session aims to explore current alumni engagement methodologies and open dialogue around the role of alumni connection in facilitating graduate success and the study-work transition.

Introduction

Producing work ready graduates is core business for Australian Higher Education Institutions and recently, dialogue and strategic initiatives around benchmarking and quality assurance have seen graduate employability rise to the top of the list of priorities. Considerable work is already taking place to refine and implement engaging and evidenced based strategies for embedding employability in undergraduate education (Pegg et al., 2012), through developing graduate attributes and core competencies, shaped by assessments of graduate capabilities, industry perceptions and generic measures of graduate success (Oliver, 2011). To date alumni have been a significantly underutilised resource in the process of enhancing both the quality of higher education and the capability and employability of graduates (Irani, 2012). As such, it is both timely and important to reshape alumni-university relationships into an intentional and mutually beneficial partnership with student and graduate success as the overarching mutual goal. To facilitate this kind of authentic connection with alumni we must consider graduates as continuing to belong to the university community long after graduation, and acknowledge our role in supporting the journey of the graduate as their career unfolds, through times of success and transition.

Graduate employability relates not only to the acquisition of generic skills but more broadly to the ability of graduates to self-manage their career development (Bridgestock, 2009). Scholarship in the context of Australian Higher Education has advanced the employability agenda from a range of academic and employer perspectives. However the student experience, especially that of recent graduates remains an underexplored and untapped area of opportunity and one that has the power to influence transitions across the lifecycle.

Currently there are international trends to reposition alumni in the educational process (Creamer, 2013) and while the broader potential of the discretionary collaboration between alumni and university has been proposed (Heckman & Guskey, 1998), alumni are predominately and traditionally positioned as donors of time, money and experience (Monks,

2003). With this in mind, it should not be surprising that over 80% of alumni do not maintain active engagement with their institutions (Coolman, 2011) and that recent graduates report they see little value in the alumni network, as they fail to see themselves as old or experienced enough to provide mentoring and do not have the financial capital to contribute philanthropically (Irani, 2012). Yet our graduates have a lot to offer and potentially, a lot to gain from remaining in touch with their discipline and school.

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. By doing so we have the capacity to strengthen undergraduate sense of purpose (Lizzio, 2011) and facilitate connections between theoretical knowledge and professional applications. To effectively engage alumni in shaping employability interventions that match students' readiness and needs, pre and post graduation, it is essential to more fully understand the complexity of graduate notions of success. By appreciating alumni diversity and nuancing our approaches to connecting with them we may achieve an intentional, active and authentic partnership between a university program and its graduates (at various stages of their careers). This connection would bring to bear alumni's wealth of experience, not only about the world of work post-graduation, but also, of their experience of curriculum and its relevance to their careers.

Approach

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 only the responsibility of the specific alumni department. 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 successfully completes their studies. The focus of this initiative is to enhance student employability and success by conceptualizing and designing effective and evidence based methods to actively engage alumni in a mutually beneficial relationship with the university. The foundation for such engagement will be laid through exploration of graduate perceptions and the process of continuing graduate identity formation envisaged as an extension of the self-management capabilities outlined in Lizzio's student lifecycle framework (Lizzio, 2011).

The program of activities will culminate in the development of a framework for an extended graduate lifecycle that includes exploration of graduate views of the transition out of university and the unique affordances and intelligences that develop progressively post graduation and towards employment. It is proposed that engagement with alumni facilitated by use of social media in a range of collegial ways that focus on the sharing of experience and knowledge from the study to work transition phase, will positively influence students' and institutions' notions of success and how it might be achieved. Current models of alumni engagement will also be examined and redefined models of effective, mutually beneficial, alumni engagement informed by graduate experiences and needs will be proposed. Activities will involve the deep and continuing engagement of alumni and university staff to ensure capture of an authentic alumni voice and establish a multilayered network of influence. The program of activities will take place in four phases

Phase 1: Scoping the sector, its strategies and key stakeholders

Phase 1 activities focus on three main themes: connection with alumni, connection with academic environments and modelling alumni engagement.

1a: Connection with health sciences alumni from home institution

Initially, existing networks and structures will be utilised to *connect with alumni* who successfully completed either the Bachelor of Biomedical Science or Bachelor of Health Science from Griffith University School of Medical Science for the years 1999-2015. Connection to over 700 previous graduates from the school has been maintained through social media. Utilising these networks, online surveys, focus groups and larger group discussions will be undertaken to gather alumni perceptions of graduate success, experience of career identity formation, career trajectories, and perceptions of beneficial engagement with alumni organisations.

1b: Connection with University/sector staff that provides alumni/employability support

A series of focused discussions with academic staff from the School of Medical Science, Careers and Alumni services and other institutional stakeholders will be undertaken to critically evaluate current employability initiatives for undergraduate students and methodologies for engaging with alumni. Phase 1b will also see formation of key partnerships with sector stakeholders to inform the fellowship activities. These include discussions with the Career Counsellors Network of Australia, the Career Development Association of Australia, and discipline specific bodies such as the Collaborative Universities Biomedical Education Network (CUBEnet), Vision and Innovation in Biology Education (VIBEnet) and the Science and Mathematics Educators Network (SaMNet). The networks will enable the recruitment of a set of five partner institutions through which to conduct phase 2 activities.

1c: Modelling Alumni engagement nationally and internationally

The final activity of phase 1 will be to scope the higher education landscape both nationally and internationally for current strategies utilised to engage alumni.

Phase 2: Establishing network of graduate lifecycle leaders and testing generalisability

Drawing upon the successful networks formed during phase 1 activities, phase 2 will involve collaboration with 5 partnering institutions to validate the findings from Griffith University. Through partnering with universities from a diverse range (G08, innovative research and regional) it will be possible to test the generalizability of findings to a range of student cohorts from across the country. Data gathered through the employment of surveys and focus groups to alumni and key stakeholders (academic staff, careers services and alumni departments) from each partner university will be analysed and form the basis for the generation of key principles for a redefined notion of alumni engagement in the health science disciplines. It is anticipated that these key principles will also have relevance across disciplines. Key academic staff will be recruited from partner universities and will form a network of 'graduate lifecycle leaders' who will assist with the dissemination of the surveys and contribute alumni engagement case studies that will help inform the 'employability toolkit' produced in phase 3.

Phase 3: Developing the theoretical framework and conceptualising models of Engagement

Data gathered during phases 1 and 2, will form the foundation for the synthesis and conceptualization of a theoretical framework of graduate success to be published in a handbook titled 'Re-visioning Graduate Success'. In addition, this information will be

presented in an online format in the form of the 'Engaging Alumni' website. It is anticipated that this site will provide a useable interface, architecture and content that will be transferrable across disciplinary contexts. This site will contain the framework, video blogs from graduates across the lifecycle, models of alumni engagement, a map of the career trajectories for health sciences graduates as well as useful information for graduates on transitions from university to work and navigating uncertainty.

Phase 4 Internal and external dissemination and evaluation

Phase 4 involves the launch of the theoretical framework to the wider academic community through a series of show case events. These will focus on the possibilities of alumni engagement and offer the 'Engaging Alumni' website and the published 'Re-visioning Graduate Success handbook' as a basis through which to lead change within the discipline and more broadly across the sector.

Key questions for discussion

It is the goal of this emerging initiative that it provides a foundation by which to re-imagine our goals for and methods of engaging with our alumni. To open sector wide dialogue on this issue, the following questions are proposed:

- 1) What methods do we currently employ for engaging with alumni, and the strengths and weaknesses of these approaches?
- 2) What new approaches to engagement with alumni would maximize value for recent graduates, alumni, universities and professional networks?
- 3) Are our current measures of graduate success congruent with our graduates' perceptions of success?
- 4) How can universities better support the study-work transition?

Discussion

Over 250,000 students graduate every year from Australian universities (Guthrie, 2014) and we measure their success through the Graduate Destinations Surveys (GDS) 4 months post graduation and the three- and five-year Beyond Graduation Surveys (BGS). Despite the GDS capturing 55% of graduates, the longer looking BGS captures data from less than 5% of university graduates (Guthrie, 2014). Although these surveys provide an interesting snapshot of graduate destinations to contribute to pertinent health service provision, they lack the capacity to explore the acquisition of important skills in career management (Bridgestock, 2009), career resilience (Collard et al., 1996), as well as other motivational and attitudinal characteristics that impact employability (Tomlinson, 2011). What is also missing is the capacity to provide comprehensive program specific information regarding career trajectory and satisfaction over the long term due to small sample sizes.

Our alumni hold a wealth of information about their experience of study and the real life challenges and triumphs along the road of career success. Yet at the time of graduation we encourage engagement with a generic University alumni network and connections to the school through which they studied are diluted and the opportunities to engage program specific alumni are, for the most part, lost. 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 them to provide

mentoring, placement/intern-ship opportunities, membership on advisory boards and as sources of financial ‘donations’ and brand capital.

This emerging initiative proposes a redefining of the philosophy of the alumnus and their role in Australian Higher education and, correspondingly, new models of alumni engagement capable of facilitating a mutually beneficial interaction between the alumni, university and discipline schools. By redefining our notions of success and modalities for connecting with alumni we will enhance our capacity to maintain longer-term connection with our graduates, providing them with a custom made and perpetual lineage of connection to support them as their career progresses. In return we will unlock the potential for their contribution to curricula and employability initiatives, ensuring graduate capabilities in future cohorts (Oliver, 2011) and to more accurately track and assess graduate success and program experience.

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