

Supercharging Employability: How to harness the power of your graduates

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Abstract

Are you struggling to get your students to buy-in to your employability curriculum? Your greatest asset has potentially already left the institution. This collaborative workshop will explore approaches for the establishment of strong alumni communities that draw upon the strength of the student experience and relationship to the discipline. Strategies for the establishment of online networks and the use of social media will also be discussed, with simple tools for getting started. This session will provide you with easy to use techniques to build your network and a framework for the integration of graduate perspectives into the curriculum to supercharge your student's employability and support graduate transitions.

Introduction

Once again graduate employability is high on the national education agenda. Our young people face an uncertain job market characterised by increased casualization of the workforce, and the reality of potentially 17 careers across 5 industries in their lifetimes (Foundation for Young Australians, 2016). With this reality front of mind, it is imperative we support current students to develop the employability skills they require to make them work ready. Equally so, we have an obligation to supporting our graduates in the transition to the world of work, a task most institutions have still not tackled. The potential exists to harness the power of our alumni to support employability curriculum and provide mentorship and support for new graduates as they transition from university.

More than 250,000 students graduate each year from Australian universities (Australian Government, 2016), many with a strong relationship to their institution built upon the foundation of a high quality student experience and a personal connection to academics that 'made a difference'. Academics beam with pride as graduates cross the stage to receive their testamurs, yet few maintain connection with past students in a lasting way as the pressures of the new academic year get underway, fresh with a new cohort of undergraduate students to mentor. Long have academics thought the role of connecting with alumni was the responsibility of the university alumni engagement department. As the name would suggest, engaging with alumni is a key component of this departments remit. However, like all relationships, maintaining connection with alumni takes a personal touch and by handing over responsibility to a central element academics are giving away the most powerful opportunity they have to support the development of employability skills in their future cohorts. 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.

For schools, faculty and universities interested in improving undergraduate retention, ongoing student success and graduate outcomes, connection to alumni must be facilitated beyond our requests to provide financial ‘donations’ and brand capital (Creamer, 2013). The relationship instead must be supportive of the graduate and provide them with a range of ‘value add’ experiences, facilitating their involvement in way that have personal meaning (Myran *et al.*, 2003).

Recent measures suggest that 85% of graduates are willing to volunteer their time to support the university, particularly for mentoring activities. Yet despite such willingness to contribute, only 20% of graduates remain in contact with their institution (Madden, 2016). The task of engaging alumni is more complex than maintaining a list of contacts as time from graduation extends and it is not something that can be contracted out to a central element. 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 OLT supported fellowship 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. 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 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.

The Fellowship

This OLT National Teaching Fellowship proposes a redefinition of the philosophy of the alumnus and their role in Australian Higher education. Correspondingly, new models of alumni engagement capable of facilitating a mutually beneficial interaction between the alumni, university and discipline schools are proposed. By redefining our notions of success and modalities for connecting with graduates we may enhance our capacity to maintain longer-term connection with our students, providing them with a custom made and perpetual lineage of connection to support them as their career progresses. In return we will unlock their intelligences to support curricula and employability initiatives, ensuring graduate capabilities in future cohorts. This session aims to explore current alumni engagement methodologies, provide tools for connecting with alumni, and open dialogue around the role of alumni connection in facilitating graduate success and the study-work transition.

Workshop aims and objectives

This workshop is designed and intended for academic staff involved in the development of employability curriculum and university leaders interested in supporting alumni relationships. The aims of the workshop are to:

- Develop participant awareness of the value of alumni engagement in supporting the embedding of employability.

- Explore the challenges and opportunities for engaging alumni in undergraduate curriculum and employability initiatives.
- Facilitate improved relationships between alumni and their School/University.
- Develop participant confidence to establish their own alumni network and to work collaboratively with the university alumni department.

Activities

- Presentation of an Australian model of graduate engagement that draws on best practice nationally and internationally.
- Identification of key areas across the student lifecycle through which graduates may contribute to employability.
- Discussion of current and emerging methodologies for supporting new graduates in the transition to work.
- Strategies for developing and maintaining strong alumni networks.
- Graduate career trajectory methodology.

Resources

Participants will be presented with a hard copy of the Engaging Alumni for Employability Framework and access to online resources housed within the fellowship website www.engagingalumni.com

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