

Lunch with Alumni: a co-creative approach to student-industry engagement

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Abstract

Fostering mutually beneficial engagement between students, alumni and universities is an emerging area of interest across the higher education sector. Whereas teacher-led initiatives create academic-based outcomes, student-led programs have limited employer engagement. This emerging initiative explores the implementation of an innovative, co-creation approach to student-industry engagement. The 'Lunch with Alumni' program was developed in partnership with The University of Melbourne, its alumni network ABP Future Leaders and the student club Built Industry Group. Through the one-month pilot, 35 recently graduated alumni connected with 102 students. Quantitative evaluation of the program identified that 94% of students considered the initiative to be one of their "best career development experiences". This session aims to encourage discussion and support participants to consider how universities can reimagine alumni engagement to foster student workplace preparedness and graduate employability.

Introduction

As the industrial landscape continues to evolve, greater emphasis is being placed on universities to look beyond purely academic outcomes and consider their role in supporting student employability (Artess, Hooley & Mellors-Bourne, 2017; Taylor, 2015). Traditional curriculum and teaching approaches prioritise theoretical knowledge and skills with the notable absence of connection to workplace or broad employability skills development (Hammer, McDonald, & Forbes, 2014). In an environment where graduates can expect to have more than 17 careers across 5 industries throughout their working lives (Owen, 2016), developing strong networks and transferrable skills is increasingly important (Bridgstock, 2009; Isik, 2012).

Activities that encourage student-industry engagement are core to the development of a student's professional awareness, industry networks and career confidence (Bennett, Richardson & MacKinnon, 2016; Kinash, Crane, Capper, Young & Stark, 2017). The value of these opportunities is evidenced through student outcomes from mentoring programs (Gannon & Maher, 2012) and the rise of similar initiatives. Despite their success for small cohorts, they frequently struggle with achieving manageable scale and are rarely led by students or industry.

As the benefits of student partnership are embraced across the sector (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014) there is an opportunity to leverage the capacity of students to design events that will resonate and attract larger student attendance for the benefit of student employability. Unfortunately, a lack of industry connections may limit students' ability to facilitate employer engagement (Clarke, Wilson, Johal & Araujo, 2015; Smith, Vanderkley, & McDonagh, 2017).

Recently graduated alumni traditionally do not have a voice in student-industry engagement initiatives, though can offer an important link between study and professional practice (Madden, 2016; Monks, 2003; Vanderlelie, 2015). Most alumni maintain little engagement

with their university after graduation, and as such, their established industry networks and experiences of the study-work transition are a significant, untapped resource (Irani, 2012; Vanderlelie, 2017).

This paper examines the student-industry engagement opportunity afforded by a co-creative approach between students, alumni and universities. The University of Melbourne’s ‘Lunch with Alumni’ is a collaborative program that offers a scalable, high quality and mutually beneficial experience for participants. The approach leveraged the capabilities of stakeholders and in turn generated bespoke learning opportunities, high peer engagement and access to relevant industry networks (Smith, et al. 2017; Vanderlelie, 2015).

Approach

‘Lunch with Alumni’ was a result of stakeholder collaboration from research to execution, funded through an Engaging Alumni for Graduate Success Grant (Vanderlelie, 2018). The aim of the event was to prepare students in the construction industry for the workplace by pairing them with a recent graduate with similar career interests and backgrounds over a lunch.

The development process involved three workshops and a series of online communications between one alumni officer from The University of Melbourne, fifteen students from Built Industry Group and eight alumni ABP Future Leaders Alumni Network. Workshops encouraged critical discussion around the context, form of engagement and target demographic for the event. Online communication channels allowed students or alumni who were unavailable for the meetings to share their feedback while being a repository for consolidating ideas. By involving members of a student club and an alumni group, the feedback from the workshops represented diverse backgrounds, levels and career paths. These learnings underpinned the design of the event and ensured an evidenced-based approach to meeting the needs of participants. Results of the workshops are presented in Table 1.

From an operational perspective, once the concept of the event was established, the alumni network focused on providing their industry connections, the student club generated large student engagement and the university provided funding. By undertaking a partnership approach to the delivery of the event the project team overcame the workload challenges traditionally associated with scaling-up independently-run events (Smith, et al. 2017).

The lunches ran in September 2018 on two separate dates. Lunch groups consisted of three students and one alumnus. The alumni chose the lunch venue based on convenience from their workplace and paid for the lunch with reimbursements via the project team.

Context (where and when)	Students	Uncomfortable – students feel overheard by their peers at large scale networking events (careers fairs, industry nights)
	Alumni	Inconvenient – full-time work takes highest priority
Engagement (how, why and what)	Students	Generic – industry representatives participate for their firms’ recruitment interests rather than for sharing their career advice, especially at large-scale events
	Alumni	Underqualified – they feel they have insufficient knowledge in their field given they are still new to the workplace
Demographics (who)	Students	Not relevant – advice from seniors does not apply to them
	Alumni	Speaking from personal experience – they are more confident in speaking about their transitions from study to work than work itself

Table 1: Summary of learnings from co-creation workshops

Engagement, participant satisfaction and financial viability was evaluated at the conclusion of the program. An online platform (Jotform) featuring two multiple choice (5pt Likert scale), three true-false and two free-text questions were provided to students via email at the completion of the program. Questions explored the perceived value of the experience, students' satisfaction with their mentor and the likelihood that they would recommend the event to their peers. Alumni partners received a separate evaluation that explored the value they found in the program and willingness to participate in the future. Qualitative feedback was analysed by the project team to identify common themes with questions focusing on how students think their mentor could be more valuable and how their experience of the initiative could be improved.

Findings and Impact

Overall, 35 alumni and 102 Bachelors and Masters-level construction industry students participated in 'Lunch with Alumni'. 64% (65/102) of students and 56% (18/32) of alumni completed the program evaluation. From the responses received, 100% of students wanted to reconnect with their mentor; 100% of students would recommend this initiative to a friend; and 94% of students said it was one of their best career development experiences. Unsolicited follow-up feedback by several alumni reported that their students had applied their advice and obtained job interviews and new career connections. The experience of alumni engaged in the program was also positive, with 100% of alumni expressing willingness to participate again. Results of this feedback were categorised into the three themes: context (where and when), engagement (how, why and what) and demographics (who).

Context

An important factor in alumni selection was the proximity of their workplace to the Melbourne CBD. Meeting students at a CBD-based restaurant saved both the alumnus' and students' time, reducing a barrier to engagement identified in the workshops. For alumni, the lunch setting increased convenience and their availability – the timing within the lunch break rarely clashed with work commitments:

“I really enjoyed meeting the students ... lunch was the perfect casual setting”

“It was really helpful to have them come to me – made it very easy around my work schedule.”

Engagement

The sessions were designed to encourage discussions focused on students' individual career interests and objectives. The students' similarities with their alumnus produced relevant and implementable advice to their current career stage (Adusei-Asante, 2018).

“It was really refreshing to meaningfully engage with someone so like-minded. It felt like you were just talking to a more experienced friend in the field”

“He even showed us projects he was working on. He was very transparent, equal and open in conversation”

“I think this event is awesome ... we asked a lot of questions related to how to find an internship or a part time job, and she was quite patient to answer our questions.”

Alumni also felt more comfortable when meeting students who shared similar career interests, backgrounds, challenges or who were of a similar age bracket.

“I found the whole process very easy to participate in and it was seamless”

Demographics

Lunch groups consisted of three students per mentor. Workshops identified that one student per mentor may be too intimidating and that more than three students per mentor would cause inconvenience when finding a lunch spot. In addition to the high levels of participation, the results of the qualitative comments supported the 3:1 ratio with increased student confidence.

“It was good to have a mix of Bachelor and Masters Students as I think the Masters Student was closer to the goals of the Bachelor students which helped.”

“I do learn a lot from different points of views and all I need is stepping forward and being brave to start.”

Feedback from students and alumni also suggested areas for improvement. Alumni encouraged students to be more prepared and were interested in exploring whether the initiative could be a series of lunches. Students encouraged mentors to explore other ways they could expose their work experiences to students and requested subsequent lunches with an increased focus on learning more about their mentors' daily job routines.

Conclusion

The ‘Lunch with Alumni’ pilot program has shown strong initial success based on feedback and student engagement. By engaging recently graduated alumni to share their experiences with current students, this program provides valuable learning for students and an important opportunity to maintain connection to alumni and enrich their own professional experiences. The discussions and questions raised below aim to support the future growth of co-created initiatives.

- How can the university encourage alumni networks and student groups to participate in co-creating student-industry engagement initiatives? What are common reasons that would discourage students and alumni from participating and how can these be overcome?
- How can universities balance their objectives alongside the interests of the students and alumni who are co-designing the programs?
- The initiative provided opportunities for students to practice their interpersonal skills, learn practical advice from professionals and obtain knowledge that is implementable beyond university coursework. What are effective methods for measuring the value created by initiatives not focused on academic outcomes?
- How successfully could this model be applied to other industries or aspects of the student experience in higher education?

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