

O2 Creation of an Alumni Database

Status quo of Alumni Networks at Higher Educational Institutes



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Objective and Approach

As the ultimate objective of the project is to investigate opportunities for national and international collaboration by means of creating a shared Alumni Database, the first project phase of O2 is concerned with drawing up how Higher Educational Institutes (HEIs) support alumni relations today.

A descriptive approach seems necessary in order to provide information on the statements made by interviewees first, and to later draw grounded conclusions on the efforts made in regard to running alumni networks at participating HEIs as well as their national partners. Therefore, this report will be structured according to findings per participating country, in this case the Netherlands, Germany and Denmark, and subsequently draw conclusions relevant for international efforts in regard to alumni networks in the future. Within the scope of the project, three partners have focused on gathering the data in their domestic countries based on a standardized request from central project organization. The three partners in question are (1) Fontys School of Technology and Logistics, Venlo, the Netherlands (2) Offenburg University, Germany and (3) VIA University College, Aarhus, Denmark.

Each of the partners has individually been responsible for data collection based on a standardized, semi-structured interview allowing for common ground and comparability later on.

The Netherlands

Interviews at a total of five Dutch HEIs have been held. Each of the Interviews has been held with at least one representative in charge of alumni relations. In some cases, representatives from marketing departments have joined these interviews. The sample selected equals more than half of the entire population when it comes to universities of applied sciences offering logistic studies (from now on *HEIs*). One major difference between the institutes interviewed seems to be the approach when it comes to alumni relations. While some follow a strict segmentation with regards to studies and their alumni efforts, others try to consolidate cross-study in order to achieve some economies of scale when it comes to alumni relations. Most HEIs follow the approach of dedicated communication within every study domain, while organizing one or more consolidative events every once in a while. Particularly when it comes to physical presence, attendance rate often seems to be rather low amongst the (in this case logistic) alumni of the university.

When asked about participating **stakeholders** in their alumni networks, all interviewees state that they strive to grow their alumni networks by means of a diverse selection of stakeholders (including current students, lecturers and companies). None of them considers an alumni-

network to be 'alumni-only', yet at the same time in many cases this is the case when it comes to the *actual* population of an alumni network. With regards to 'fresh alumni', there is little variation in what enters these networks over time. While some HEIs (2 out of 3) offer Master (MSc) programmes that serve as an infeed as well, mostly Bachelor students join their alumni networks. Also, in one of these cases, Bachelor and Master programmes are treated as two different alumni groups.

Furthermore, alumni almost never seem to be segmented any further than by means of their primary description: Alumni. The answer to segmentation or targeting within this pool of alumni seems to be a steady 'no'. In other words, besides collecting contact information and consolidating members in generic alumni groups, none of the universities actively distinguish any of them in secondary ways. Lecturer participation in an alumni network often is to be seen as 'occasional' in these networks as well. Most Dutch HEIs appoint one or two lecturers to be in charge of alumni relations, or they rely upon voluntary work of their employees. Particularly in the case of the latter, there isn't a structured approach with regards to planning of any activities in many cases.

Also, it has shown that none of the alumni networks work with sponsorships or specified roles assigned to companies (e.g. as partners, recruiters, or for provision of knowledge). Therefore, the only significant origin of corporate participants in alumni networks are the employers of alumni. Hence the motivation is predominantly to be found in the circumstance that alumni have studied at the HEI in question. It is therefore confirmed that for Dutch companies, there seems to be no major corporate incentive to join (access to alumni; etc.). Whether this is actually the case however remains to be seen in later project phases when the alumni efforts of companies will become relevant.

The Dutch HEIs state that while they do organize **activities** or events related to their alumni networks, none of them follow a fixed pattern. Hence their activities are incidental and often 'opportunity related'. For instance, when an 'old alumnus' offers to organize a company visit or a workshop on a particular topic, this is planned and organized. In the vast majority of alumni networks, there are no annually or monthly recurring gatherings and events. This is true with the exception of one HEI organizing an annual meeting. Communication happens on a somewhat more frequent basis for most interviewees, yet often is done using standard newsletter mailing involving updates on relevant matters adjacent to the network's environment (developments like renewed curricula, retiring lecturers, etc.). These communicational efforts, much like gatherings, are incidental for most stakeholders based upon actual developments. Hence communication takes place on an incidental basis. One interviewee has pointed this out as an advantage particularly applicable to universities of applied sciences as "*...they are in possession of an abundance of contacts in an active, yet at the same time very informal*

network that communicates, and acts based upon immediate necessity.” This was also supposed to be value adding and at the same time resource efficient according to the person in question, and was said to be a property differentiating *universities of applied sciences* from regular universities, as they are more oriented towards immediate results.

While this was not explicitly highlighted by other respondents, the way HEIs act was familiar and generally seems to confirm this approach.

This approach -acting upon immediate necessity- also shows in **digital environments** used to organize these events and communicate within the alumni networks. All participants use a public social network to communicate with their alumni and group them. LinkedIn here seems to be the favored choice in the case of Dutch HEIs. Two of interviewees have split this communication up and also use Xing (mostly for German/international students). As mentioned earlier, traditional communication via email seems to be applicable for the organization of important events only, and in addition only for some of the HEIs in question. None of them uses a dedicated online portal or else to communicate with their alumni. An important reason for this, according to some, is the fact that alumni are not willing to deal with another account on another site just for their alumni relations. This is even more true when considering that in some cases there are multiple alumni-relations that alumni need to stay connected to (Bachelor study; Master study; College; Exchange students; etc.). While relying on the social networks mentioned, participants feel that they are somewhat restrictive in terms of functionality. So, while it seems to be positive that the entry barrier for becoming a member is lowered by means of LinkedIn and Xing, functionality is seen as restricted by the majority of interviewees. In particular, (member) data management, segmentation of members (age, working domain, etc.) and other general functionality issues have been mentioned.

The **Data** being kept within an alumni network is often restricted in line with the conclusions that have been discussed for digital environments. In many cases, only the size of the network is being tracked, which has resulted in the following figures:

Participant	Logistics alumni in Network	Annual entries	Primary Network
Fontys School of Technology and Logistics	1250	65	LinkedIn (Xing secondary)
Hogeschool Arnhem Nijmegen	550	?	LinkedIn
Hogeschool Stenden	275	13	LinkedIn
Breda University of Applied Sciences	951	100	LinkedIn
Fontys ILEC (Log. MSc programme)	278	25	Facebook

Table 1: Alumni figures logistic studies (NL)

Last but not least, interviewees were asked about the **Supporting Organization** of their alumni network, intending to gather data on how resources required to run such a network would be facilitated by the HEIs in question. In the course of the interviews on this topic, the HEIs were asked to state the timely resources provided by their employers for running the alumni network. The standard answers provided in this area were that no resources were particularly provided for this task (3x) or that the amount of time invest was restricted to very little (about two hours) per calendar week. While for four of the HEIs the staff involved was assigned with this task of alumni relations, one of the HEIs not providing particular resources mentioned that the 'lecturers involved' basically maintained the network 'voluntarily'. This was one of the smaller HEIs interviewed (with few annual graduates). The majority of the participants also state that, in their eyes, the alumni network is also very active around a certain central person, often a lecturer, involved. Hence it represents a problem to them when this person leaves the organization. This circumstance is closely related to the knowledge present in an alumni network as well, as this central figure will often be in possession of a lot of informal information able to contribute to certain matters.

Given a potential link to partnering companies and their involvement in the HEIs' networks, none of the five state that there is any structural, external, support from those companies. This goes for financial funding as well as for *in kind* contributions. With regards to funding secured within the HEI for the execution of activities, most interviewees state that these resources are secured ad-hoc, meaning when there is a particular idea about an event to be held, resources are requested from within the institute.

Many participants have expressed remarks on the organizational centralization or decentralization of alumni relations for a number of studies. Two in particular state that other studies at the HEI benefit from significantly more mature alumni networks with regular activities and company involvement. Yet at the same time others state that their 'alumni work hard and do not have a lot of time to be involved in such a network on a regular basis' and that 'these matters often are low urgency and therefore also low-priority' for many of the alumni involved. A circumstance that is to be seen as particularly interesting in terms of international students and their relations is stated by one of the interviewees, claiming that 'international students tend to communicate more actively, or meet when they return to the country they used to study in' while 'domestic students have more informal communication, and hence are less interested in a formalized communicational structure such as an alumni network'.

Germany

Data collection with regards to alumni structures in Germany has turned out to be more complicated compared to the Netherlands. While there is active communication amongst Dutch HEIs, primarily due to a shared research network called KennisDC which has been deployed for data gathering subject to the first part of the report, the German HEIs seem to operate from a more isolated point of view. This as HEIs offering similar studies see themselves as direct competitors instead of an aligning collaboration each serving its own geographical market. Factors driving this competitive; non-disclosing attitude have not been taken into account further for the project at hand.

Based on this competitive perspective in particular many of the data collection approaches in Germany were repulsed with the comment that alumni policy, as a competitive differentiator among HEIs was seen as a semi-confidential matter. Hence, many of the German HEIs were either not willing to respond or utterly limited with regards to the level of detail when it came to provision of information and general data in regard to their alumni networks. Therefore, for Germany only two HEIs have been taken into account: Karlsruhe Institute of Technology (KIT) as well as Hochschule Karlsruhe (HSK). While both of these universities share free membership and regular newsletters (2-5 times a year). In terms of **Stakeholders**, specific figures in regard to the number of logistics alumni have not been made accessible by these HEIs, only university-wide figures were accessible, therefore also including other studies than logistics. Interestingly though, both universities seem to follow an approach in which they integrate or deploy older alumni in their corporate functions as what they call “Alumni Scouts” or “Alumni Mentors” respectively. Meaning that old alumni can account for two important roles in these networks: (1) Coaching current students in their study progress and dissertation work and (2) being an ambassador of the respective university, sharing information and bringing information to third parties on an everyday basis.

Furthermore, both HEIs leverage their networks for employability opportunities (job wall) and organize a number of events/**activities** such as “Annual International Alumni Meetings” (KIT) or plain “regular alumni meetings” (HSK). Detailed information about the size of these events however has not been shared. Besides these annual meetings, KIT offers a so called “regular’s table” event, during which alumni meet on a more short-term, regular basis without a structured programme. In the case of KIT, Alumni-Scouts organize Alumni events on a non-regular basis all around the globe. This is particularly targeted towards international alumni of KIT as they do often not have the opportunity to travel long distance just for the purpose of an alumni gathering. This way, they can meet likeminded alumni of their former education on a more proximate basis. In terms of the **digital environments** used for communication, both

universities, much like the Dutch HEIs, rely on LinkedIn as well as *-in contrast to many Dutch HEIs-* Xing. Additional means of communication that would be internal to the HEI or dedicated alumni portals have not been disclosed. Same goes for the data of the respective alumni networks with regards to their size (logistic students specifically) and annual amounts of students entering these networks (see table 2).

Participant	Logistics alumni in Network	Annual entries	Primary Network
Karlsruhe Institute of Technology (KIT)	N.P. (22.000 in total)	?	LinkedIn & Xing
Hochschule Karlsruhe (HSK)	? (700 in total)	?	LinkedIn

Table 2: Alumni figures logistic studies (DE)

The **supporting organization** in these two HEIs could not be investigated due to the confidential attitude of the Institutes.

Denmark

With regards to Danish alumni approaches, two Institutes have been investigated: Aalborg University (AAU) and Via University College (VIA). Both institutes offer a broad portfolio of studies, with economically centered studies being one of the important domains. AAU offers these with a logistics specialization in the form of their economic studies. VIA's portfolio contains a dedicated logistic study profile in the form of *Value Chain Management*.

The **stakeholders** in either of the two alumni networks are, naturally, very student centered. Meaning that both parties do not define an alumni network in its broader context, but primarily see it as a setting in which (*only*) alumni of the respective institutes come together. AAU considers 'alumni' eligible to enter their network once they lack 60 ECT or less, as these students are approximating completion of their degree. In the near future, they want to re-launch their mentoring programme which is comparable to the ones discussed for German studies earlier. Various ways are used to motivate potential entrants to join their alumni network: Mailings to current students, learning systems such as Moodle, the university's info-screens and others. The strategy in terms of catering an alumni's needs is currently based upon a rather dated survey and, according to AAU, should be renewed soon. Also, there is no segmentation with regards to how different types of alumni should be approached. Neither is there any other significant involvement from companies or other stakeholder in this network which could be mentioned in this regard. This is true with the exception of an advisory board

consisting of former alumni, advising the University in terms of updating curricular profiles. These activities however are not to be seen as an organized activity of the alumni network at AAU. Aforementioned aspects are, without any differentiation, also applicable for VIA. Their lecturers play an ad-hoc role in the alumni network. Facilitating and attending gatherings here and there, however not on a structural basis.

Communication at AAU is currently undertaken by means of a semi-regular alumnus newsletter, about 2-3 times a year. Right now, AAU states that there is little communication with their Alumni, and also little tailoring of the information communicated as they are not in possession of the necessary (CRM) systems to follow any segmented approach for alumni. Alumni **activities** at AAU are segmented in a two-fold approach. Across all studies there is a larger, annual, alumni event for all campus wide studies. Individual studies are free in the deployment of their respective gatherings. This is also true for the economic domains of AAU and their communicative approaches. These gatherings are to be seen as ad-hoc and more sporadic. While larger events have an average attendance of about 220 alumni, for smaller events this appears to be 30 on average. VIA does currently not offer specific alumni events for logistic alumni at all. Also, participation seems to be limited on both alumni- and lecturer side. The only communication seems to be occasional posts by VIA lecturers in the respective LinkedIn group. These do not follow any kind of strategy or structure.

Digital Environments supporting the alumni networks at AAU are rather restricted as long as their new CRM systems have not been implemented. Specifically, AAU aims to keep track of (basic) employment details with regards to their alumni. This information however is only collected upon entry into their alumni database. As they try to be in conformity with the GDPR, no additional data is collected at any further point. Consequently, there are no statistics or further segmentation undertaken by AAU with regards to any **data** beyond plain alumni member-count. VIA in this regard seems to be very similar, as there is no traceable record of any alumni information besides the informal social media groups and their members. This data of course is not structured nor analyzed in any way. The primary digital environment with regards to communication is LinkedIn for both HEIs. The primary reason for this appears to be the low entry barrier for entrants in combination with the “easy” administrative maintenance of a LinkedIn group. Total figures with regards to (overall) alumni amounts in these groups can be found in the figures below.

Participant	Logistics alumni in Network	Annual entries	Primary Network
Aalborg University (AAU)	Unknown (13.500 in total)	?	LinkedIn (& Facebook)
Via University College (VIA)	380		LinkedIn

Table 3: Alumni figures studies (DK)

As a large part of the alumni efforts at AAU is undertaken in a centralized (cross-study) manner, so is the **organizational support**. AAU employs two FTE to support university-wide alumni activities, one of which is temporary capacity. This is not taking into account possible support from study-domains with regards to smaller alumni events belonging to these individual studies. Both HEIs follow a more informal approach with regards to their study-specific alumni communication. Here, there is no formal, centralized, responsibility or dedicated personnel for alumni matters. This, according to these HEIs can also be seen as the root cause for some of the other settings formerly described.

Conclusion

After examining a total of 9 higher educational institutes (5 Dutch, 2 German, 2 Danish) and their alumni network approaches, there appear to be quite some intersections with regards to how these HEIs prioritize and execute alumni policy. The most apparent conclusion to be drawn is in the fact that the vast majority of participating HEIs define an alumni network in its narrower sense, being an accumulation of alumni of the respective institute, and hence also follow a rather narrow purpose: The communication and interaction of said members in a mostly informal, non-structured setting. This seems to be the case regardless of alumni-member-count or nationality of a participating institute. None of the participating HEIs had significant roles assigned in their alumni networks (except for ambassadors), or deployed more elaborate structures with regards to communication or segmentation of alumni.

Aforementioned stakeholder participation indicates that alumni networks are often seen as a rather loose social network that acts very instantaneously. According to a Dutch participant, this is grounded in the fact that *"(...) many institutes in reality have a deeply integrated connection with their proximate working field and therefore do not require a formal network, as the informal communication (based upon necessity) works just fine."* Whether this is also the case from the perspective of the actual alumni is to be determined later by means of alumni-questionnaires.

Barely any data is used by participating HEIs to segment or structure the way in which HEIs communicate with their alumni or other external stakeholders in an alumni network. In most cases, the only information that is kept is based on the immediate data provided by means of the digital environment used (*e.g. job description on LinkedIn*). With regards to these digital environments, there appears to be a semi-coherent approach, meaning that every alumni network appears to be represented on LinkedIn and often a secondary social network such as Facebook or Xing. While these networks serve as a low-entry barrier according to many participating HEIs, they also bear significant disadvantages, in a way that no sub-groups, topics, or other functionalities can be developed in these restricted social-network groups. Therefore, the question remains whether HEIs should use dedicated platforms to support both institute specific as well as international alumni activities. Informally, there is often an anticipated downside of doing this. This downside is stakeholders/alumni having to enroll into another platform, which then will most likely not be used and/or checked due to the large variety of sites that people are already enrolled in. So, the tradeoff for many of the participating institutes seems to be technical flexibility vs. persistent member base (& involvement).

Also, using more than a free-of-charge, legally not binding, social network would demand more control from HEIs. This because with a dedicated platform, these HEIs are legally responsible for the content shared and discussed in their own digital alumni environment. Hence, opting for anything else comes with a risk in terms of moderation and control. The additional personnel

required to keep the digital environment running and eventually moderating it would incur permanent cost that many HEIs evidently try to avoid. This is particularly true when such a platform would only be applicable to the alumni of a certain study-domain, rather than the entire university (or even multiple).

The subjective impression resulting from the interviews conducted is that interviewees seem to feel (in some cases even realize) that their current approach is somewhat unsatisfactory as there is not an extremely lively alumni network, while at the same time they are wondering to which extent this is really necessary, or whether aforementioned disadvantages would be compensated by benefits. In order to obtain more insights in these potential benefits, student/alumni opinions and expectations will be investigated in a further part of the research project amongst aforementioned parties.