

O2: Creation of an Alumni Database

Stakeholder Motivation: Companies



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***Funded by the European Union
KA2 Strategic Partnerships***



August 2021

Funded Project Partners

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Preface

The O2 project within MidPlus Logistics Knowledge Cluster aims to set up an alumni database. In a previous document, the project management was described and literature research was done on alumni networks. We also investigated how other universities/HEI's in close to the MidPlus participants have set up their alumni network. One of the steps of the O2 project is to research whether companies see an added value of an international alumni network for their company and what role they see for themselves in such a network. The report of the contacts with companies on this subject can be found in this document.

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Introduction | 5 |
| Characteristics of survey and survey sample | 6 |
| Expectations of companies towards an international alumni network | 10 |
| Country specific characteristics..... | 12 |
| Willingness to join | 13 |
| Critical remarks and advice..... | 15 |
| Conclusions | 16 |

List of Figures

| | |
|--|----|
| Figure 1: Distribution of type of company over the sample | 7 |
| Figure 2: Distribution of type of company of companies interviewed by HS Offenburg (Germany)..... | 8 |
| Figure 3: Distribution of type of company of companies interviewed by Fontys (the Netherlands) | 8 |
| Figure 4: Distribution of type of company of companies interviewed by VIA (Danmark) | 9 |
| Figure 5: Main goals of international alumni network according to interviewed companies... .. | 10 |
| Figure 6: Main goals of alumni network, graded..... | 11 |
| Figure 7: Activities of alumni network contributing to main goals according to interviewed companies. | 13 |
| Figure 8: Willingness of interviewees to join an alumni network | 13 |
| Figure 9: Willingness of interviewees to recommend the alumni network to colleagues. | 14 |

Introduction

Alumni networks are a great way for universities and alumni to stay in touch. But alumni networks can serve more goals like fund raising or knowledge exchange. Since the purpose of this research is to find out how an international alumni network (AN) should be set up to be successful it is imperative to learn if and in what way companies want to be involved in such a network: do company representatives see the added value for their company, what should an alumni network entail to be interesting for companies, are companies willing to actively participate? The answers to these questions will be of great help in designing a successful and sustainable international alumni network.

Characteristics of survey and survey sample

A number of companies was approached to be interviewed to get their opinion on their interest in participating in an international alumni network.

The questionnaire used in or next to the interviews consisted of some open questions and some closed questions. Open questions have the advantage of getting answers that are not prompted, where closed questions are much easier to do quantitative analysis on.

First, companies were asked, in the form of an open question, whether an international alumni network could serve their company and what immediate benefits they could think of when actively participating in such a network. This was followed by a closed question where companies were asked to score on a scale of 1 to 5 how relevant the given options could be for their company. Purposefully the open question was posed first and then the closed question followed so as not to influence the interviewee in coming up with possible valuable aspect of an AN. Another reason to ask a similar question twice is for reason of checking the consistency of the answers given.

Secondly, companies were challenged to mention important capabilities/functions of an AN followed by important activities and/or events. These were open questions.

Thirdly, the question whether the interviewee would personally join the prospective AN and/or recommend a colleague to join, was asked in an open question.

The last question looked into the willingness of companies to support activities/events of an AN (closed question) in combination with asking for the precondition of the company when supporting activities (again, closed question).

All three partners (VIA University in Arhus, Fontys Hogeschool Techniek en Logistiek in Venlo and Hochschule Offenburg in Gengenbach) approached companies through existing contacts, in spring 2020. It was however not possible to reach the targeted number of interviewed companies since companies had to shift their attention as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first 4 interviews (all Dutch companies) were conducted in person. The remaining interviews of Dutch companies were held during the period of COVID-19 lockdown and hence were conducted online, where the open questions were discussed and the closed questions were not discussed but the interviewee was asked to answer the closed questions in a point in time convenient to the interviewee. Results of this strategy was that most interviewees did

not answer the closed questions anymore. All together, 9 companies in the Netherlands were interviewed

The German companies (12 in total), after the initial contact, have been sent the questionnaire and have returned it. When, upon reading or analyzing the returned answers some unclarities had to be resolved, the company representative was contacted to get more information or clarification. The result of the applied strategy was that answers to open questions were rather short and the elaboration which automatically follows in an interview was lacking and furthermore not all questions were answered.

The Danish companies were interviewed on-site (4 interviews) and online (1 interview) and all questions, open and closed, were answered during the interviews. The results of these interviews were very complete; unfortunately, not many interviews were held.

With an overall sample size of 26, this is a rather small sample, particularly the number of Danish companies (5) is too small to be able to draw reliable conclusions.

The companies were classified based on type of location and the distribution of the type of company per country is given in the following charts, where the first charts show the overall distribution of type of company.

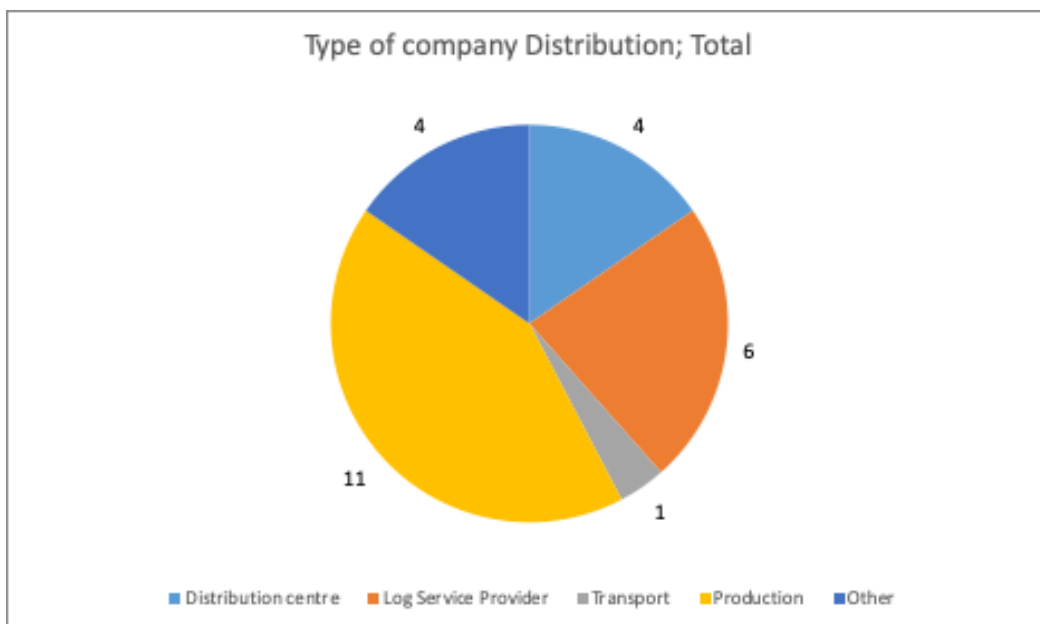


Figure 1: Distribution of type of company over the sample

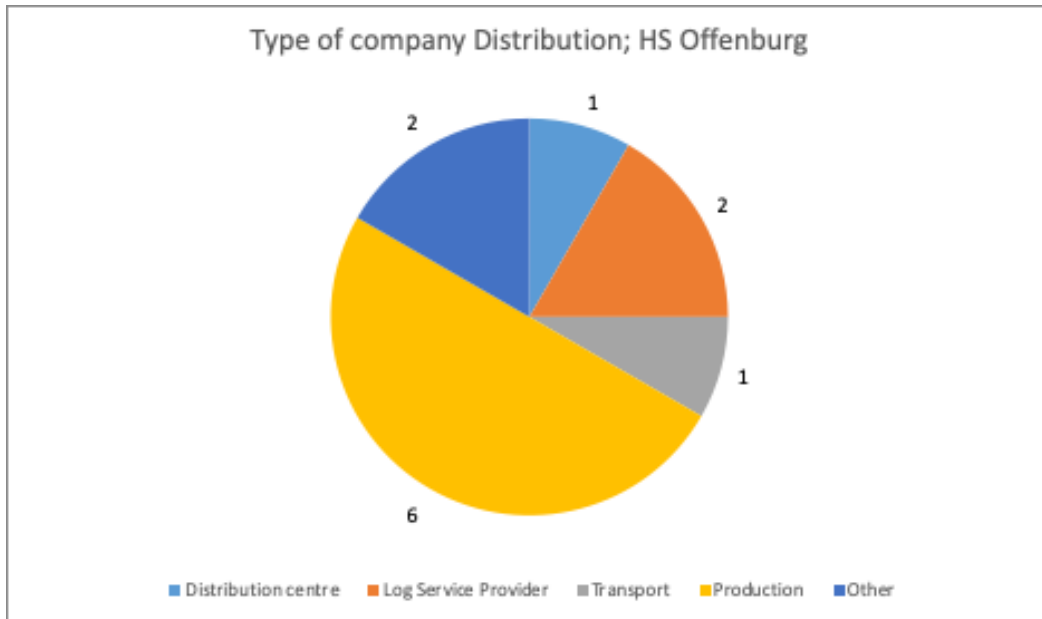


Figure 2: Distribution of type of company of companies interviewed by HS Offenburg (Germany)

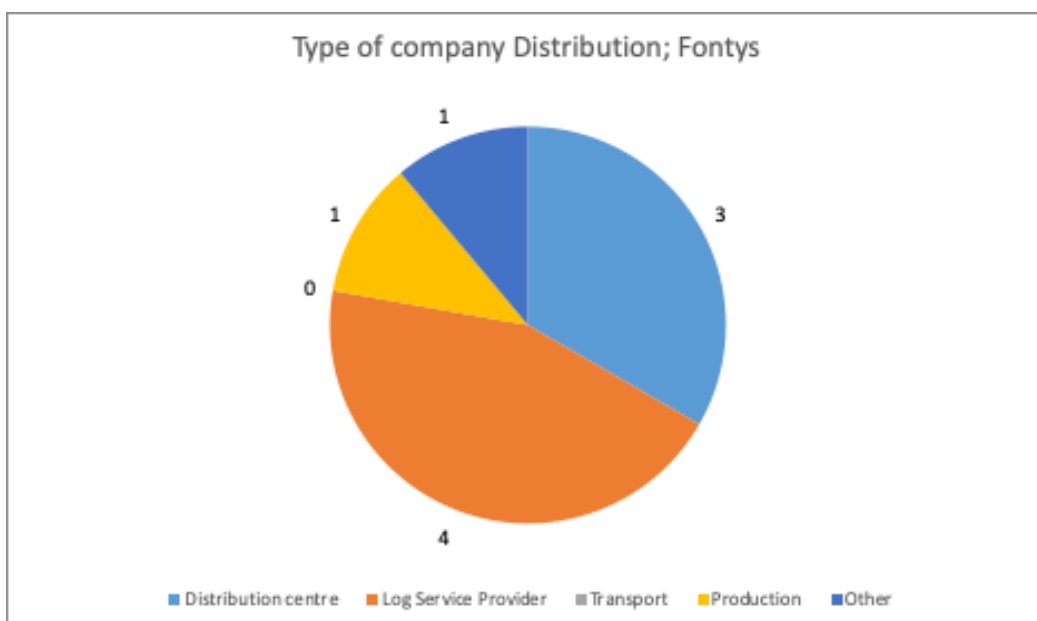


Figure 3: Distribution of type of company of companies interviewed by Fontys (the Netherlands)

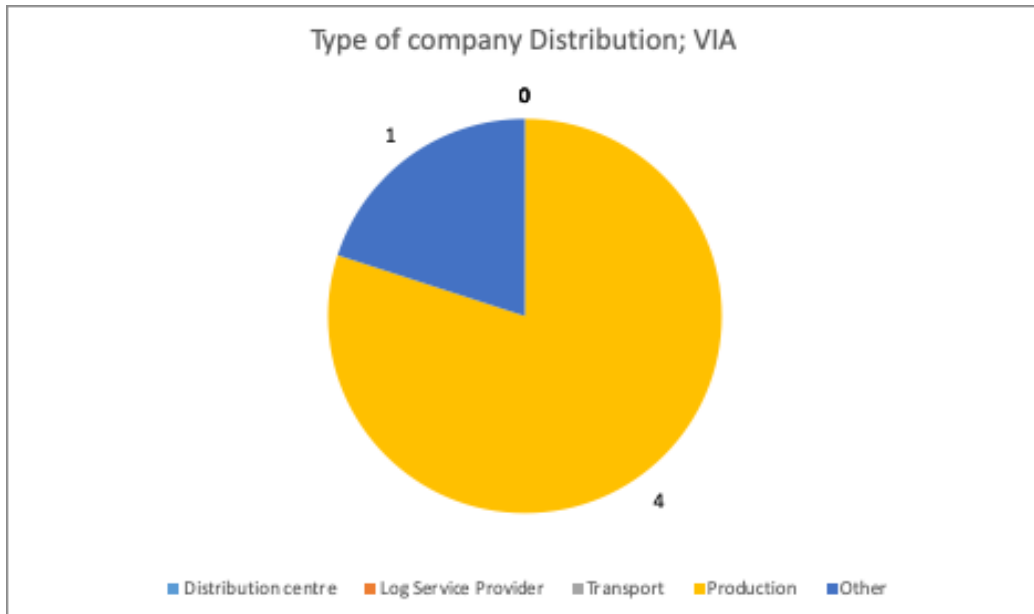


Figure 4: Distribution of type of company of companies interviewed by VIA (Denmark)

All but 1 of the companies is relatively large, with over 200 employees in total.

Expectations of companies towards an international alumni network

A pattern is emerging when looking into reasons for companies to join an (international) AN. Not only the exchange of knowledge interests companies, most companies mention that they find an alumni network an opportunity to get in touch with possible candidates for job opportunities. A German company answered: *“This can be an interesting additional channel for finding suitable candidates. With certainty, students have a higher affinity to companies they have already met several times in their university”*. In addition to that, companies are of the opinion that an AN is a channel to present their company to possible candidates by means of company branding; although company branding might also serve a wider perspective. A Dutch company stated *that their company was not very well known in the Netherlands and that they wanted to improve that, so that possible employees can find them more easily*. Furthermore, the building of networks is also on the list of functions of an AN for a majority of the interviewed companies as illustrated by this statement from a German interviewee: *“Alumni can exchange experiences and contacts which can serve the company immediately”*.

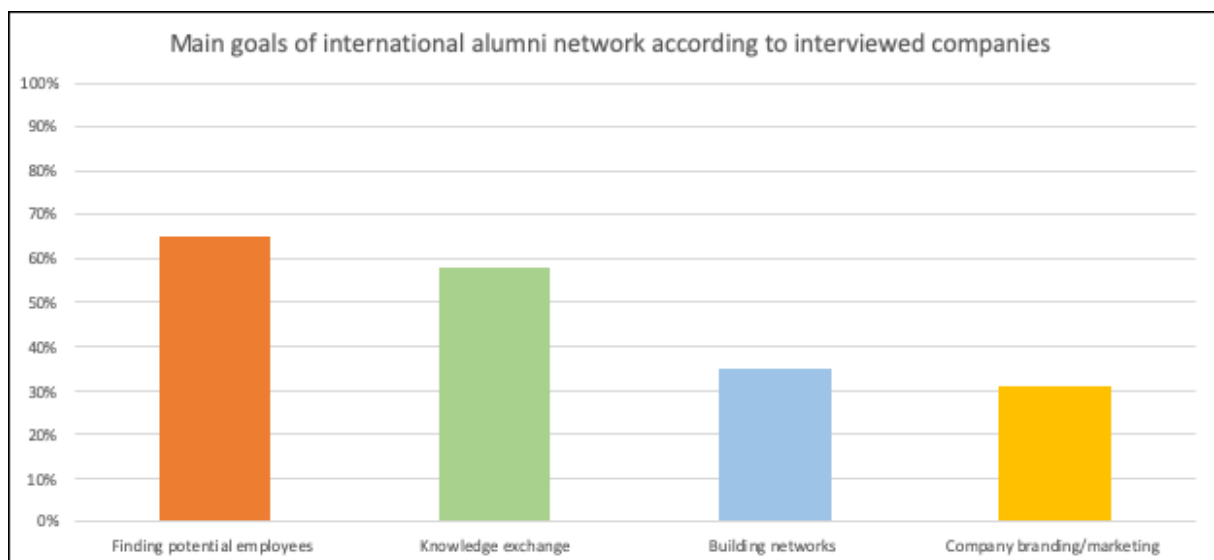


Figure 5: Main goals of international alumni network according to interviewed companies

Apart from an open conversation/question about possible added value of an AN for companies, a list of possible reasons for joining an AN was presented to the company representatives. They were asked to score on a scale of “1 = very important” to “5 = not important at all”.

The overall or average score was:

- 2,3 International recruitment
- 2,3 Networking
- 2,5 Knowledge exchange
- 2,8 Marketing

- 3,0 Process improvement
- 3,2 Life-long-learning
- 4,3 Own sales

When looking at the four possible reasons that score highest, it springs to mind that these four are the same as mentioned previously, although worded slightly differently and ranked in a different order.

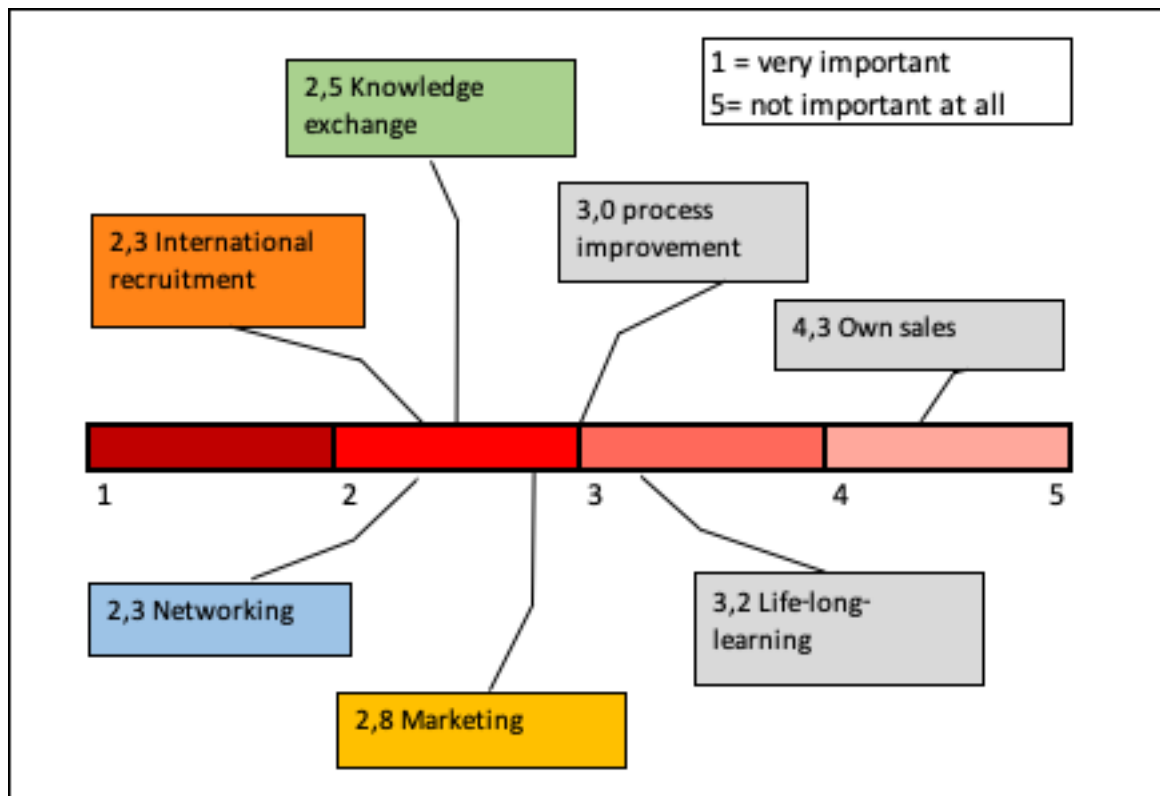


Figure 6: Main goals of alumni network, graded.

Country specific characteristics

Even though the sample size of interviewed companies is small, some differences in respondent's opinions over the three countries probably are significant.

For **finding potential candidates for job opportunities** specifically the Danish companies find an AN very welcome: 100% of the interviewees saw that as important functionality. Whereas only 58% of the German respondents were of the same opinion. With 78% the Dutch respondents were also seeing it as an important functionality.

Company branding seems to be considered attractive functionality of an AN amongst the Dutch respondents (78%). The Danish (40%) and the German (25%) respondents are mentioning this a lot less. Since there was no prescribes answer set it cannot be ruled out that in case of most German and Danish companies this option just 'did not come to mind'.

Knowledge exchange is seen as an important functionality of an AN over all countries: all score 89% or more on this.

The possibility of using an AN for **building networks and networking activities** is valued highest by Danish companies (80%) and least by Dutch companies (33% of the Dutch respondents found this important functionality).

Companies were asked to share what activities they would value in an AN. A diverse range of activities were mentioned. In Figure %%% the activities are related to the 4 main goals of an AN according to the interviewed companies. As can be seen in the figure, some activities serve more than one goal.

| building networks | finding potential employees | both <- and -> | company branding | both <- and -> | knowledge sharing |
|----------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------|----------------|-----------------------------------|
| network live event | matching alumni and companies | workshops with students | company presentation | guest lectures | refresher courses |
| network online event | central point for job openings | internship assignments | | company visit | webplatform for sharing knowledge |
| | | students assisting with exhibition | | | webinar |
| | | pitch day | | | |

| |
|------------------------|
| projects with students |
| roadshow |
| mentoring of students |

Figure 7: Activities of alumni network contributing to main goals according to interviewed companies.

Willingness to join

Whether or not the interviewees really see the added value of an international AN might be confirmed by the answer given when asked whether the interviewee would personally join such an AN.

Most interviewees (61%) said that they would personally join although about half of these positive answers came with a prerequisite showing that the AN should first prove itself to be worthwhile.

| | |
|---|---|
| No, I will not join (15%) | |
| Yes, I will join (no conditions attached) (23%) | |
| Yes, but | as company representative (7%) |
| | if it is worth my while (7%) |
| | as company representative AND it has to be worth my while (12%) |
| | if the network has interesting members (8%) |
| No answer given (23%) | |

Figure 8: Willingness of interviewees to join an alumni network

Unfortunately, due to the low number of answers it is impossible to reliably draw conclusions over differences in willingness to join an AN over the three countries. Especially the number of answers by Danish and German respondents was very low. Of the Dutch interviewees all but one answered this question and answered it positively.

When asked whether the interviewees would recommend a colleague to join, the results were that most interviewees answered positively but with an added condition. A few mentioned that they would advise their HR-colleague(s) to join. This confirms that companies see the AN as an opportunity to find prospective employees. Others were a bit cautious in stating that they would only advise colleagues to join when they themselves were convinced of the added value of the AN; something of which they were not convinced, yet.

| | |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| No, I will not recommend a colleague to join (15%) | |
| Yes, I will recommend a colleague to join (12%) | |
| Yes, but | only an HR colleague (12%) |
| | if AN is interesting enough (15%) |
| | if colleague is recent alumnus (8%) |
| No answer given (27%) | |

Figure 9: Willingness of interviewees to recommend the alumni network to colleagues.

Critical remarks and advice

During or after the interview most interviewees added value by placing critical remarks. These remarks can be categorized in four main groups, three of which address more organisational and technical issues where the fourth is related to the international aspect of the proposed AN.

Six respondents aired their concerns about the attainability of setting up a sustainable AN. Two of these six mentioned that an AN should be different from traditional networks to be successful, without giving clear directions as to how that can be organised. As a German interviewee wrote: *'However all alumni networks I know are not sustainable and without a constant driver the alumni network doesn't serve the purpose for the companies'*. Four of these six emphasized that an AN should be very active, of benefit to the participants and very interesting to be able to survive after a couple of months or years. As a Danish company worded succinctly: *'Mutual benefit or it dies'*.

Two (Dutch) company representatives suggested that managing the network is necessary to become and stay attractive to the users of it. They suggested smart technology or a pivotal person to be assigned with the task of connecting the right parties to optimize the added value of the AN. A Dutch interviewee said: *'This means that a request is not broadcasted (in the original sense, so 'broad'+ 'casted') in the network, but that somebody or some technology is doing preselection of possible successful contacts'*.

Three (Dutch) interviewees stated they would prefer the network to be easily accessible as a Linked-In group or using a linked-In (automatic) login. They were of the opinion that the easier the access the higher the chances of establishing a sustainable AN. One of them was even more outspoken: *'Only if this network is easily accessible, e.g. with an automatic login over LinkedIn. Not if it is a separate network, with its own login/facilities. Updating profiles on multiple sites is not preferable'*.

Specifically on the international component of the intended AN two companies explicitly added that they did not see the advantage of it. As a Dutch interviewee worded it: *'In general, I cannot think of a situation where a Danish student/employee would add value in comparison to a Dutch student/employee. Only when specifically dealing with Danish customers'*. A Danish respondent saw another challenge: *'Alumni networks are good, but we do not see any particular need for an international one. We find it hard to see newly educated contacting other alumni from other countries unless they know them beforehand'*.

Conclusions

A number of conclusions can be drawn from the analysis of the results of the interviews and questionnaires as answered by company representatives in the three countries where the respective HEI-partners are located. Although the number of companies questioned is relatively low, some patterns emerge:

- Companies see added value in an AN when it provides for:
 - o Help in finding potential employees
 - o Knowledge exchange
 - o Building networks
 - o Company branding

The order depicted here is the order of relevance.

- Based on the activities companies suggest the AN to deploy, a shift in priority towards 'Help in finding potential employees' and 'Company branding' is noticeable, although a majority of the suggested activities also hold a 'knowledge exchange'-aspect.
- Danish companies specifically value 'Help in finding potential employees', whereas Dutch companies relatively often favour 'Company branding'.
- Most respondents expressed their interest in participating in the network, albeit not always personally and with some reservations: the network should first prove itself to be worth the time investment for a company.
- Companies have their reservations regarding the international aspect of the AN. Only internationally oriented companies can come up with some advantages of having an international AN in comparison to it being specifically for one HEI.
- Considering the organization of an AN, some companies advised on that: the AN should be easily accessible preferably using an already proven access (e.g. LinkedIn), management of the network e.g. with regards to matching interested parties is needed and regularly actively communicating through the network is a prerequisite.

The company interviews and questionnaire show an interesting and relevant pattern which brings useful insights for the research into the relevancy, goals and activities of an international AN.