

7 Steps to: Engaging Alumni in Support of Employability

Overview

As noted by Bradford (2008) 'Alumni have a unique, dual perspective to contribute' to employability. As former students they can provide opinions on the value of their degree, particularly in relation to how content, delivery, assessment, and opportunities, contributed to their employability. They can therefore help us evaluate our practice and focus on those aspects that are most beneficial to graduate success. Also, because alumni are working, they have recent and relevant experience to share in relation to getting a job and functioning in the workplace. They therefore have a valuable contribution to make in relation to careers advice and the skills and experience needed to be employable (Willmott, 2011).

Alumni are keen to give something back to their university and willing to contribute because of the relationships that have been built up with staff (Koenig-Lewis *et al*, 2016). Students are often more willing to listen to alumni than the same messages given by staff – their voices offer more credibility and impact. This makes alumni extremely useful in underlining key points about employability. Likewise, alumni are helpful in selling your course to prospective students. But it isn't all about alumni altruism and what we, as a university, can gain from them. Academic staff who work with alumni report that alumni get a lot from the relationship too. Alumni often feel that their work with students benefits their own professional development, such as promoting the company that they work for, and as an opportunity to recruit talented graduates. We therefore should not feel shy of working with alumni – they are often happy to do so, get a lot out of giving, and may also have their own benefits to take from the relationship.

There are many ways that alumni inform and contribute to the curriculum. This 7 Steps explores these in order to help guide how to make best use of our alumni.

1. Encourage mentoring

There are many benefits for students in being mentored for employability. These include: getting employment insights; networking; being helped to recognise important skills, qualities and experiences; being helped to set meaningful and realistic career goals; and gaining confidence. Alumni make excellent mentors because of the special relationship they have with your institution/programme (Stanbury, *et al*, 2009), and the shared experience they have with your current students (Sword *et al*, 2002). Consider how you make use of your alumni to develop mentoring relationships for students. Mentoring is particularly valuable for students in disadvantaged groups who face confidence issues and other barriers ([Goddard and Hughes, 2006](#)). Mentoring opportunities are available to these students through the [C&ES Employer Mentoring Programme](#). This programme is specifically designed and available to care leavers, students from a BaME background and those with a disability. Consider how your programme connects these students to this form of careers support.

2. Showcase alumni achievement

For students, role models and real models can be powerful in promoting and encouraging career aspiration and personal development (Bosma, *et al*, 2012; Butterwick and Benjamin, 2006). Alumni are particularly potent because *'they are de facto the embodiment that it is possible to reach "their chosen occupation" from essentially the same starting point'* as your students (Willmott, 2011, p3). Do you make use of alumni stories as case studies with your students? The [Alumni Engagement Team](#) have created a bank of [alumni case studies](#) which appear on the university website and which may be featured in the prospectus, and on social media, etc. Also available are alumni videos through the Plymouth University [Youtube Alumni Channel](#). Use alumni case studies on your programme website and refer to them where relevant, such as embedding within employability elements of your curriculum. The [Alumni Engagement Team](#) can support you by developing case studies for your programme.

3. Using alumni as guest speakers

Most degree programmes make use of outside speakers but alumni can make particularly relevant guests. Are they a resource that you are utilising effectively? Willmott (2011) recommends using those who graduated between five and ten years ago as this allows your graduates to establish themselves in their career but be sufficiently recent to *'maintain a resonance with current undergraduates'* (p4). When you use a guest speaker it is useful to encourage them to talk, not just about their work and how it relates to the curriculum, but also encourage them to share their own career stories, career tips, insights into their industry etc. Brief your students and encourage them to think in advance of relevant questions they might ask. Burns and Chopra (2017, p9) suggest asking students for feedback immediately after they have heard a guest speaker and ask for suggestions for continuous improvement to be acted upon for the next speaker.

4. Involve alumni in activities and assessment

Perhaps the least exploited area of alumni involvement is getting them involved in curriculum activities and assessment. There is no single way of doing this but the following may provide some ideas. Myers (2015) reports on the use of alumni nurses invited to a skills day to teach

References

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nursing skills to students. This provided a learning opportunity to develop, not just skills, but a more holistic picture of the context of their real-world application. Along the way, informal conversations with alumni helped students reflect on their course and their futures. Consider drawing on alumni to work with your students on a practical level or utilizing them to provide research / consultancy projects. Think about designing assessment so that students present their work at a showcase event at which alumni participate in assessing the work.

5. Use alumni as advisors

All Schools should consider having an [Employer Advisory Panel](#) (see [Guidance on terms of reference for Employer Advisory Panels](#)) on which it is recommended alumni should feature. Through this, alumni can input into the design, approval and review of programmes in order that they are informed, relevant and aligned to graduate and industry requirements (Bradford, 2008). As with the use of alumni as guest speakers, it is important to consider using alumni that have some workplace experience but who are recent enough to have a good memory of which aspects of the programme were useful after graduation. The [Alumni Engagement Team](#) can contact alumni from specific programmes and ask for their feedback to inform or act as external panel member for [periodic review](#).

6. Build alumni career networks

At Plymouth, all students have the opportunity to search for, and network with alumni through [Plymouth Connect](#). The alumni that volunteer and register on [Plymouth Connect](#) can act as Career Champions and provide e-support for your students. Signpost your students to Plymouth Connect and encourage them to register as part of the personal and career development that your programme offers. Also, encourage your [alumni to register](#) and act as Career Champions. [Template emails and social media posts](#) have been produced to make it easy for staff to encourage alumni and students to register. Plymouth Connect provides one way of developing and managing your alumni career network, but many programmes stay in touch with their alumni using social media platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn. These forms of social media can be used to track down and stay in touch with alumni. More than this though, they can be used to facilitate active groups which can network your alumni with each other and with your current students. Examples include the LinkedIn [3D Design Alumni Plymouth](#) group, and on Facebook the [Art History Alumni – Plymouth University](#) group, or for an external example, the [Sussex University Geography Alumni](#) group. Support use of social media by prompting participation – ask alumni to share advice and knowledge; ask questions, get them to share news and opportunities. These interactions will be of value to your current students who will be able to learn from your alumni, ask them questions, and keep them networked to potential opportunities.

7. Facilitate alumni contact and keep accurate data

The [Alumni Engagement Team](#) are there to help and will approach alumni for you. They can assist with many of the activities discussed above such as inviting alumni to: act as mentors; be guest speakers; sit on employer advisory panels; join career networks; attend career events etc. They can help you find the right graduate to support your needs and meet with your alumni if they visit the campus. Services they provide include giving gifts of gratitude to visitors, and arranging to photograph/film your alumni for a case study. The [Alumni Engagement Team](#) can also share your school news and events and appeal to your alumni to get involved if you need volunteers. Whilst you may have your own alumni contacts, it is recommended that you work with the [Alumni Engagement Team](#). The new [General Data Protection Regulations](#) will mean, from 2017, graduates will have to give active consent for the University to remain in contact with them, with failure to comply resulting in significant fines. It is therefore important that academic staff help engage students in signing up to the alumni community before they graduate in order to support the DLHE survey and lifelong alumni engagement. If you hear that alumni have changed their contact details or have sadly passed away, please let the [Alumni Engagement Team](#) know. They will ensure that details are updated on the CRM as all of the opportunities listed here are more effective when the University has accurate [data about alumni](#).

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