

Summary

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Giving and Getting: How do alumni feature in university strategic plans?

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Summary:

Universities maintain a complex relationship with their alumni base. The National Higher Education Strategy in Ireland presents little direct mention of alumni or philanthropic giving in the document (Department of Education and Skills 2011, Gallo 2014), thus offering limited guidance in this area to Irish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Instead the policy landscape focuses on graduate success and HEIs as the instrument to achieve this success. Thus, as publicly funded HEIs, universities focused on graduates as a key institutional output by improving student retention rates and postgraduate completion rates. Moreover, the decreasing public funding model for higher education means universities turn to philanthropic donations from alumni and friends to advance the institution, turning universities from those giving support to graduates to getting support from alumni.

This paper presents research from a small-scale study that analysed how alumni feature in the strategic plans of all Irish universities (n=7). All the strategic plans were published since the National Higher Education Strategy and align with the key themes of this policy document. Overall, the plans include significant mention of both graduate and alumni, with the two seemingly synonymous terms described in different ways. The data suggests that the word graduate is used to describe the work of the university as an enabler for the individual (the graduate) for something greater, to prepare for the world of work or to acquire key skills. Graduate is linked to universities supporting a foundation of gradueness such as reflective thinking, moral reasoning, lifelong learning (Steur, Jansen & Hofman 2012) while meeting the institution's key

performance indicators. In contrast, alumni in strategic plans is related to building institutional reputation based on alumnus/alumna success. HEIs view alumni as a key enabler to contribute to the university's mission and vision: through giving, both of their time and philanthropic donations. The literature points out the aspirational and ambitious nature of strategic planning in higher education (Cowburn 2006; Shattock 2010) and a need for institutions to examine inwards at how HEIs can be more autonomous from the state. Based on the strategic plan discourse, the role of alumni in Irish universities suggests a similar trend, relying on alumni as an internal stakeholder with an external ability to offer value to the institution.

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