

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

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1. Abstract

This paper presents research from a small-scale study analysing how alumni feature in the strategic plans of all Irish universities (n=7). All the strategic plans in the study were published since the National Higher Education Strategy, aligning 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 'graduateness' such as reflective thinking, moral reasoning, lifelong learning (Steuer, 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.

2. Main text

2.1. Introduction

Universities maintain a complex relationship with their alumni base. The Irish *National Higher Education Strategy to 2030* (Eire, Department of Education and Skills 2011) presents little direct mention of alumni or philanthropic giving in the document (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 focus 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 students-turned-graduates to *getting* support from alumni.

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2.2. Context

There remains anecdotal evidence that Irish universities are embracing many of the same institutional advancement principles of North American institutions. Gallo (2012) describes this proliferation of communications, alumni relations and development (fundraising) as a type of formula, whereby universities in Ireland are following the same trends, strategies and techniques as employed in North America. The Council for the Advancement and Support of Education (CASE), a professional association for advancement professionals, helps to support these strategies through a comprehensive training and education programme in the United Kingdom and also has started networking events in Ireland (CASE 2017).

Alumni relations is often thought of as the precursor to securing philanthropic donations: the friend-raising before the fundraising. In Ireland despite the fact that government funding for these publicly funded universities continues to decrease, it is surprising that the National Strategy for Higher Education makes only limited mention of philanthropy (three mentions in the whole report) as an alternative source of funding (Eire Department of Education and Skills 2011; Gallo 2014). Moreover, other sources of funding, including through research programmes, both national and European projects, have proved to be lucrative for universities alongside a number of capital building programmes. Therefore, alumni relations is still in the early stages of development, with the culture for philanthropic giving in Ireland, in the higher education that is, is not established in the mainstream as would be seen in American institutions (Gallo 2014). In addition, the operations for philanthropy in Irish HEIs is based in separate university foundations, to ensure the funding from private sources (including alumni) would not impact on public funding. This was a legacy largely supported by Atlantic Philanthropies and philanthropist Chuck Feeney who believed that the role of philanthropy in Irish higher education was not to replace exchequer funding, but to enhance and transform universities.

This context shows that alumni relations within the university and indeed the interface with alumni could have a broader meaning and impact for Irish universities. Alumni become informal ambassadors for their alma mater supporting the student recruitment efforts, alumni serve on governing authorities, act as mentors to students and offer work placements and volunteering opportunities to those on campus. And what is in it for the alumni themselves? There is a focus on benefits for alumni, also consistent with CASE-affiliated institutions worldwide. Benefits can range from acquiring a fellow alumni mentor, accessing career services, getting an affinity credit card, participating on special alumni trips, attending reunions and so on.

However innocuous these alumni relations initiatives may seem, for many of the universities in Ireland, the alumni relations function is located in the philanthropic foundation—not directly with the university—therefore there remains a link to the friend-raising to fundraising construct.

2.3. *Research Study*

Within this context this research emerged because of the role of alumni in Irish universities seemed to be changing, however, there was no studies that explicitly addressed this shift. To what extent are alumni considered a strategic stakeholder in the university? How have universities recognised the value of alumni to contribute to advancing the institution? From these initial inquiries and interest in the topic, what emerged was the following research question: How are alumni featured in university strategic plans? The strategic plans were chosen as a static but strategic document that demonstrated the extent to which universities viewed the importance of alumni as strategic stakeholders in the institutions ambitious aspirations.

The research study took place between June and September 2015. At this time, all the strategic plans of Irish universities (n=7) were included as part of the study. This time period was chosen in order to identify new strategic plans, ones that were developed since that National Strategy on Higher Education to 2030 (Eire, Department of Education and Skills 2011). Initially during this period six of the seven universities had launched new strategic plans that encompassed roughly 2015 to 2020 or 2021. During this research period, the final university, the University of Limerick (UL), also launched their new strategic plan, so during this research both UL strategic plans were analysed as part of this study.

All of the strategic plans are publicly available on each of the university's Web sites. As such the universities in this study are not anonymised, as the information can be sought freely by anyone with an internet connection. Moreover, the data gathered on how alumni are featured in strategic plans is examined through the themes that emerge by the placement of the word 'alumni' or the word 'graduate/graduates' in the strategic plan documents. While the data gathered is discussed in aggregate, individual examples and quotations of use are highlighted.

2.4 *Research Results*

Through the text analysis of the strategic plans at each of Ireland's seven universities, there is 112 instances of the use of 'alumni' in the strategic plan documents. In contrast, the analysis uncovered 68 instances of the work 'graduate' or 'graduates.' Table 1 presents the quantitative findings of the data collected on both 'alumni' and 'graduate/graduates' as they featured in strategic plans. The number of instances where 'alumni' included a range of mentions from five times to 34 times in the strategic plan documents. The word 'graduate' was written in the strategic plans two to 27 times. It should be noted that this was unique context for each word, that is, if either words were mentioned in the same explicit point, such as a key performance indicator or objective, it was counted as one instance.

As noted above, UL had a new strategic plan that was publicly available and launched in 2015. With the preliminary analysis of the number of instances already completed on the original strategic plan (a plan written prior to the National Strategy in Higher Education) this allowed for a small comparison on how alumni were viewed in each of the plans. What this comparison did uncover was that while the original pre-National Strategy strategic plan had only three mentions of the word alumni through the entire plan, this changed to 30 in the newest plan. Similarly, the same inversion also occurred with the use of the word graduate, with fifteen mentions of graduate in the original plan and only two mentions in the new plan.

Table 1. Number of times 'alumni' or 'graduate' featured in recent Irish university strategy plans (n=7)

| University | Years of Plan | alumni mention | graduate mention |
|---------------------------------|---------------|----------------|------------------|
| UCD (University College Dublin) | 2015-2020 | 9 | 7 |
| DCU (Dublin City University) | 2012-2017 | 6 | 11 |
| NUI Galway | 2015-2020 | 25 | 27 |
| Maynooth University | 2012-2017 | 3 | 8 |
| UL (University of Limerick) | 2015-2019 | 30 (3)* | 2 (15)* |
| TCD (Trinity College Dublin) | 2015-2019 | 34 | 6 |
| UCC | 2012-2017 | 5 | 7 |
| <i>Total</i> | | <i>112</i> | <i>68</i> |

**UL launched a new strategic plan during the research period of this project the number in parentheses is the number of times 'alumni' or 'graduate' featured in the older strategic plan.*

This study takes the strategic plans at face value: the placement and the references to both alumni and graduates in the documents are analysed on their own merit. One of the limitation of the study is to understand how and why alumni (and indeed graduates) are actually featured in the way they are in the strategic plans. It is difficult to speculate without any research evidence, such as interviews with key university personnel or focus groups, to understand why alumni are featured the way they are in the plans. The raw data collected from the strategic plans was the sorted and coded through a process of reflective analysis (O'Leary 2014). The coding allowed for the creation of themes that emerged inductively through the data.

2.4. Analysis: Getting and Giving

Four key themes emerged in how alumni featured in the university strategic plans. In this section, each of these themes are explored separately, although there is some overlap between them connecting alumni and their alma mater.

Theme 1- Distinct roles of graduate and alumni

The research shows the word 'graduate' is presented in the plan in the context of the university as an enabler for the individual (the graduate) to strive for something greater, such as progressing to the world of work or acquiring key skills. This is consistent with the considerable ambitious targets set in the National Strategy for graduates in relation to employability and securing knowledge and skills (Eire- Department of Education and Skills 2011). For example, the coupling of the university as the enabler towards the labour market includes examples such as: *'...high-quality work-ready graduates'* (UL 2015-19, p.19) and Dublin City University excerpt: *'...made our graduates more attractive to employers.'* (DCU 2012-17, p.12). Trinity College Dublin's strategic plan also employs the word graduate in terms of the individual acquiring skills: *'...the emphasis on critical thinking and fostering independence of mind'* (TCD, 2015-19, p. 19). Therefore, by employing the term 'graduate' universities are supporting a foundation of 'graduateness' such as reflective

thinking, moral reasoning, lifelong learning (Steur, Jansen & Hofman 2012; Glover, Law & Youngman 2002) that is consistent to meeting the institution's key performance indicators.

While the university is the enabler for the graduate's success, in contrast, the alumnus/alumna is the living embodiment of the success of the university, as an enabler for the university to achieve global impact: "*alumni community embodies the spirit of excellence*" (TCD 2015-19, p.37). Together the distinction between the discourse for graduate compared to alumni can be understood by the following example: "*...graduates are world-ready joining our alumni across the globe*" (UCC 2012-17, p. 3). In this example, University College Cork demonstrates that the university has prepared its graduates to be successful on a global stage. Thus, the university recognises the alumni as a key stakeholder, focused on the former students' role to support the institution's reputation and achievements.

Theme 2: Alumni and the outside world

Aligned to Theme 1, this theme describes alumni from both an insider and outsider perspective. Insider as they are part of the institutional community: '*...we wish to celebrate their achievements*' (UL, 2015-2019, p. 37) and also outsider as there is distance between the institution and alumnus/alumna, connected to the outside world. This is not surprising as graduation is a rite of passage, leaving the university for life in the wider world including in the 'world of work' (NUI Galway 2015-2020, p.41). The data also points to wider aspirations in the outside for the most recent graduates as illustrated by the excerpt noted also above: "*...graduates are world-ready joining our alumni across the globe*" (UCC 2012-17, p. 3). The societal impact of alumni is also the way alumni are featured vis-à-vis the outside world as illustrated in the following excerpt: "Trinity's staff, students, and alumni have helped shape the social, political, cultural and economic landscape of Ireland and the world" (TCD 2015-2019, p. 35). This is consistent with the concept of describing the aspiring position of graduates as having a key role to play in driving Irish economic development as outlined in the National Higher Education Strategy (Eire- DES, 2011).

Theme 3: Alumni as key university stakeholder

The main and most frequent individual instances of alumni featured in university strategy plans was in the alumni's role as a key stakeholder for the institution (n=41). Dublin City University refer to this as the "DCU Family" (DCU 2012-2017, p.10) alongside other key stakeholders including students and staff. While the extent of the role as stakeholder was broad, overall it pointed to a role of alumni to contribute to the university achieving its strategic goals. For example, at University of Limerick, the strategic plan states: "*...alumni we can better achieve our long-term goals.*" (UL 2015-2019, p.36) and "Facilitate alumni to support international student recruitment and to enhance our global profile" (Ibid., p.39). The clear role of alumni as an external stakeholder for the institution is reiterated in this University College Cork excerpt:

We will deliver on the key initiatives of our internationalisation strategy by strengthening the global UCC alumni network, exploiting further opportunities for overseas delivery of our programmes and by increasing our international student cohort by 17%. (UCC 2012-2017, p 9)

With a focus on internationalisation, which is also a key priority in the national policy (Eire 2011) indeed with the named of Ireland's higher education internationalisation strategy *Irish Educated, Globally Connected* (Eire 2015), this example shows clear actions to enlisting the support of alumni in international student recruitment as a means to meet strategic institutional aims. Trinity College Dublin clearly states its desire to involve alumni in the strategic advancement of the institution: "*...actively harnessing alumni expertise and desire to help by serving on advisory board, and providing strategic input for the future direction of the college*" (TCD 2015-2019, p.14). The strategic plans feature alumni in terms of their ability to serve the institution for the betterment of the institution.

Theme 4: The interactive nature of the alumni-alma mater relationship

Grant (2008) and Gallo (2013) recognise the key place of a sustained and mutually beneficial alumni-alma mater relationship aligned to the data from this study. This is related to the role of alumni as stakeholders, but was considered as a distinct theme as the stakeholder pointed to a clear benefit to the institution, whereas there was also evidence of examples of how alumni could also yield professional and personal advantage by engaging with their alma mater. NUI Galway describe the “...mutually enriching relationships with alumni, friends and supporters” (NUI Galway 2015-2020, p. 44) while Maynooth University also employ similar language to describe strategic work of the institution: “...for the mutual benefit of alumni and future generations of undergraduates” (Maynooth University 2012-2017, p.26). In the alumni relationship building cycle, Gallo (2012) recognises the role of building affinity as a key component of the alma mater relationship. University College Dublin aligns with this concept:

To build on our affinity with our alumni we will expand our social alumni networks. Conscious of the benefit of two-way exchange, we will foster greater engagement between our faculty and alumni through a programme of events aimed at sharing expertise in this wider community. (UCD 2015-2020, p.9)

Universities acknowledge, at the highest strategic level, their role in developing opportunities for alumni to re-engage with their alma mater while remaining mindful that the alumnus/alumna motivations may be a combination of university service and some personal or professional needs. As a component of a key goal related to external engagement, University College Cork’s strategic plan states: “Enliven global alumni networks to stimulate a more active relationship and commitment to the University in volunteering, fundraising and provision of expertise to the University community” (UCC 2012-2017, p.21). This excerpt exemplifies other examples whereby there is a university commitment to strengthening the relationship with alumni, but ultimately the university becomes a net beneficiary of this support. McAlexander & Koenig (2012) consider the nuances that lead to building communities of philanthropy. Giving environments, while centred on fundraising, is also a desirable outcome for the strategic relationship between Irish universities and their alumni base. To achieve such an ultimate outcome, the Irish universities’ strategic plans recognised that building alumni affinity is the first step, consistent with Pumerantz (2005) and McAlexander, Koenig & DuFault (2014) and Gallo (2012).

2.5. Discussion and Conclusion: Strategic alumni or alumni as strategic?

The research also suggests that the university also see their role as an enabler, in this case to reconnect alumni with the university. This quotation from the University College Dublin strategic plan epitomises this role: *‘To build on our affinity with our alumni we will expand our social alumni networks...’* (UCD 2015-2020, p.19). These other examples also demonstrate the extent to which universities view their relationship with their alumni: *‘We will engage with alumni as advisors, supporters and friends of the university in ways that allow our graduates to retain a continuing close relationship with NUI Maynooth over their lifetime...for the mutual benefit of alumni and future generations of undergraduates’* (Maynooth University 2012-17, p.15). This is a unique example as Maynooth University’s use of the word ‘graduate’ and the word ‘alumni’ were used interchangeably. What is consistent to the other universities is the desire to maintain and build the alumni-alma mater relationship, with alumni taking on a variety of roles within the university.

Additional examples of the desire for universities to re-engage with their alumni includes: *‘We will deliver on the key initiatives of our internationalisation strategy by strengthening the global UCC alumni network...’*

(UCC 2012-17, p.9) and *'Increased alumni involvement in the following areas of University activity: volunteering; work placement; philanthropy, mentoring and career development.'* (NUI Galway, 2015-20, p.45). These excerpts from the strategic plans demonstrate a duality: the university recognise the success and achievements of alumni and the desire to connect with them will enable the university to realise its own specific goals. The sentiment is not all one-sided; there is a sense of mutual benefit too, alumni getting value out of giving back, but to the benefit of the institution is paramount.

Overall, the strategic plan data suggests that “graduates” and “alumni” are recognised as two separate cohorts. Graduates are the most immediate and recent alumni, the desired output of the university’s efforts in supporting students in their academic experience and wider student and extra-curricular experience. While graduates are the university’s output, alumni are the outcome, that is, the university’s aspiration of alumni as a success while espousing the university’s values of excellence. The universities also aspire to a strategic relationship with their wider alumni base, in particular to complement students’ experience in university, whether that is through mentorship or offering work placements, or indeed to enhance the university infrastructure, whether through programming or donations. The strategic role of alumni is essentially a philanthropic one, one of giving back to their alma mater. Giving philanthropically does align closely with time, talent and treasure: financial giving through donations, managed through the universities’ foundations, however it does also connect directly with university giving of time and talent through mentoring, career development or support student recruitment efforts.

The Irish university strategic plans demonstrate a focus on positioning: the discourse on graduates is focused on the university as the enabler- the one that prepared the graduate for life. In contrast, alumni are largely featured in strategic plans as a mirror of how the university views itself- using terms like ‘excellence’ ‘global impact’: the word alumni could be substituted with the word ‘university’, as the universities throughout their strategic plans use this terminology to describe the institution.

Based on the how alumni are featured in the current university strategic plans in Ireland, there is immense potential to develop this relationship. Irish universities may wish to investigate alumni affinity and alumni sentiment—how an alumna/alumnus feels about their connection with their alma mater—to reinforce the strategic decision-making for alumni benefits and programming, consistent with the literature (Pedro, Pereira, Brito Casasquiera 2017). As Irish universities continue to build their advancement infrastructure- alumni relations and fundraising work in particular- aspects of giving and getting alumni achieve through a lifelong relationship with their alma mater is worthy of future research. If the University of Limerick example of the progression on the use of alumni within strategic documents in one a few years is any indication, the role and means of featuring of alumni in Irish university strategic plans will become more significant to contribute to wider philanthropic and strategic goals.

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