

Alumni Mentoring as a Bridge to Philanthropy

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Abstract

This conceptual paper examines the philanthropic value of alumni mentorship programmes. Through the review of literature on alumni mentorship, this paper argues that participation in alumni mentoring provides a bridge to philanthropic awareness and giving on a corporate and individual level. Co-operative strategies between graduate employers, higher education institutions (HEIs) and alumni mentors create an environment of multiple beneficiaries to alumni mentorship. Alongside student or recent alumni mentees who benefit from career advice and mentorship, mentoring schemes normalize giving back to one's alma mater. Alumni mentors benefit by building their own professional development and leadership skills. Industry partners, who encourage alumni to become mentors, benefit from developing mentoring and early coaching skills within their graduate employees while enhancing their corporate social responsibility (CSR) profile. HEIs also benefit by building affinity, re-engaging alumni in the institution and translating alumni engagement into support for the institutional goals. This project seeks early conceptual underpinning for a future research project to explore alumni mentorship contributing to an employment and educational environment that promotes philanthropy.

Keywords

Alumni; Mentorship; Corporate social responsibility; Institutional advancement

Alumni Mentorship as a Bridge to Philanthropy

Introduction

As students and graduates continue to question the value of the investment in higher education, institutions are using alumni mentorship as a means to extend this value beyond the classroom. Alumni mentorship research concentrates on the main beneficiary of this process: the student, recent graduate or alumni mentee.

This conceptual paper focuses on the philanthropic value of alumni mentorship programmes. Through the review of studies and literature on alumni mentorship, this paper argues that participation in alumni mentoring provides a bridge to philanthropic awareness and giving on a corporate and individual level. Co-operative strategies between graduate employers, higher education institutions (HEIs) and alumni mentors, in particular alumni who offer graduate placements and employment opportunities, create an environment of multiple beneficiaries resulting from alumni mentorship. Alongside student or recent alumni mentees who benefit from career advice and mentorship, mentoring schemes normalize giving back to one's alma mater. Alumni mentors benefit by building their own professional development and leadership skills (Priest & Donley 2014; Christie & Baghurst 2017). Industry partners, who encourage alumni to become mentors, benefit from developing mentoring and early coaching skills within their graduate employees while building their corporate social responsibility (CSR) profile. Naturally, HEIs also benefit by offering alumni mentorship by building affinity and re-engaging alumni in the institution and translating their engagement into support for the institutional goals (Gallo 2012) such as supporting graduate employment.

Alumni mentoring provides all mentorship participants with an awareness and expectation of active citizenship, civic engagement and lifelong philanthropic giving. Participating in alumni mentorship encapsulates the very core of philanthropy including the broad definition of giving of time, talent, treasure (Frumkin 2006; Dietlin 2010). This philanthropic giving also extends to another 'T'- ties (Lemay 2009)- the generosity of alumni sharing and connecting their wider networks with mentees and with their alma mater. This project seeks to develop early conceptual underpinning for a future research project to explore alumni mentorship's contribution to the promotion of philanthropy.

Research Context

Research on mentorship suggests that the mentees—in this case students or recent graduates—are the main beneficiaries of this mentorship relationship (Rusu et al 2006; Gannon & Maher 2012) In the case of student or recent graduate mentees, the emphasis on creating and maintaining a mentorship programme offers an efficient and practical approach to enabling mentees to gain employment-related guidance. Efficiency is gained from the tailored, one-to-one career guidance and experience that an alumni mentor can offer. The sheer volume of students/recent graduates within an institution impedes the ability of an HEI careers' office to provide such a service. McDearmon (2010) highlights the interest in career-facing support by new alumni, imbuing the university experience with perceived value as students face the world of work. Alumni mentorship

programmes are a response to this call reflecting the importance of the employability agenda emerging in many higher education systems worldwide.

Mentorship programmes for recent graduates often comprise a partnership between the careers office and the alumni relations function of an HEI. They are viewed as a key service addressing the national or institutional employability agenda with targets for employment of graduates (Spence & Hymans – Ssekasi 2015). Employability targets for graduates may be aligned—or understood by HEIs to be aligned—to student and graduate satisfaction rates in national surveys. Employability is seen to influence future student recruitment; prospective students increasingly understanding and asking about the employment prospects after graduation. HEIs are actively offering employment statistics, potential careers and alumni testimonials within promotional materials aimed at prospective students, positioning promoted courses as attractive lifelong choices which translate into successful career paths.

HEIs often present mentorship programmes as a student or alumni service, an extra-curricular, usually optional activity. Programmes tend not to be an embedded component of academic programmes, but a student services-led or alumni relations-led programme. This extends the overall value of attending an institution, possibly creating a crucial differentiation factor at the stage that prospective students choose a course of study. Some programmes include a component of mentorship directly in their course of study, such as in an MBA programme, focused on enhancing graduates' ability to secure a senior management position after graduation.

With the value of mentorship programmes focused on students, recent graduates and alumni, it may be no surprise that the study of such mentorship programmes is also focused on these employability factors, with the emphasis on mentees as beneficiary. Student-alumni pairing may be viewed by the student as an additional 'perk' for entering exclusive programmes. Research outcomes from studies tend to focus on the mentee beneficiaries (Rusu et al 2006; D'Abate 2010; Marcel 2017); research focused on the benefits of participating in a mentorship programme for mentors is sparse. Indeed, employers of alumni mentors are rarely explicitly mentioned as beneficiaries of mentorship programmes, despite being active participants in the mentorship programmes (Ghosh & Reio 2013).

There is some general understanding and research that examines the extended benefits of mentorship, such as Hart (2009) and Dutton (2003) acknowledging that mentors too derive benefits from the mentorship experience. In addition, Ghosh & Reio (2013) recognise that there remains a dearth of research on the experience of mentors in the mentorship experience. Lankau and Scandura (2002) discuss the personal learning gained by mentors in participation in a mentorship programme, while Kennett & Lomas (2015) reinforce other soft skills including self-reflection and self-determination gained by mentors in employer sponsored mentorship programmes.

However, this paper considers not only the beneficiaries of the mentorship experience but also the philanthropic opportunities for beneficiaries in the participation in a mentorship programme. Participant includes these mentors, mentees along with industry partner, such as participating company that permits its employees to participate: recent graduates or student interns to participate as mentees or seasoned professionals to participate as mentors.

Throughout this paper, hypotheses are presented to explore to direction and design of future empirical research.

Philanthropic Value of Mentorships

Philanthropy, from its Greek origins, roughly translates as ‘for the love of humanity.’ Philanthropic value therefore can draw on this basic definition to examine value based on its ability to hold some benefit in people’s lives. Naturally philanthropy as a definition has extended beyond this etymological view and has a modern and public understanding as a private wealth giving to enhance the quality of lives of others, usually through significant financial donations. We see philanthropic value as the giving of time, talent, treasure (Frumkin 2006; Dietlin 2010). This philanthropic giving also extends to another ‘T’- ties (Lemay 2009). The emerging theoretical framework draws from literature that presents the philanthropic value of mentorship from either a time, talent, treasure or ties perspective. The original contribution of this paper is to consider mentorship organised through a higher education institution in terms of philanthropic value.

Given this research context, the research question for this conceptual research is: How can alumni mentorship be conceptualised as a bridge to philanthropy?

This paper approaches philanthropic value of alumni mentorship on the beneficiaries based on two perspectives: indirect benefits and direct benefits, through a triad of participants active in alumni mentorship.

Triad of Philanthropic Value

In order to fully gain an understanding of the interplay of the relationships between the different actors and beneficiaries of an alumni mentorship programme, the paper presents an original triad model for consideration, outlined in Figure 1.

The key actors in an alumni mentorship programme are: alumni mentors, higher education institutions offering the programme, graduate employers who release their employee-alumni to participate and the student or recent alumni mentees. As a triad suggests, there are three key sections, outlined as three key bubbles in the diagram: the alumni mentors, the HEI and the graduate employers. This triad, and the interplay between this triad enables the realization of the alumni mentorship programme. Kennett & Lomas (2015) demonstrate the benefit that mentors find in participating in employer sponsored mentorship including self-determination and self-reflection skills.

It should be noted at this stage that there can often be other type of mentorship programmes organised within HEIs: student-student mentorship, mentorship that involves alumni who offer mentorship independent of their employers to students or recent graduates, even reverse mentorship, with recent students/graduates becomes the mentees for seasoned alumni or even for the HEI senior management. In this conceptual study, the focus is on the alumni mentorship programmes that involve all three of the key actors of alumni mentor-employees, graduate employers and HEIs.

Naturally, the fourth and perhaps one of the obvious actors and beneficiaries of an alumni mentorship programme is the mentee. In this case, the mentee can be a student, a recent graduate

of the HEI or a recent alum that is a junior employee of one of the graduate employers. Equally the mentee may also be a student intern in a graduate employer company. The mentee is a beneficiary of the interactions and the interplay between the other three actors –the alumni mentors, the HEI and the graduate employer—thus is at the centre of this synergistic relationship.

This triad also begins to disentangle the relationships that exist between these actors that create philanthropic value and provide benefits for the mentees along with what is often viewed as the residual or secondary benefits for the mentors, engaged employers of the higher education institution organising the mentorship programme (Gannon & Maher 2012). It is recognised that across Europe in subject areas like entrepreneurship, that universities actively maintain relationships with local industry (graduate employers) and alumni (Wilson 2008).

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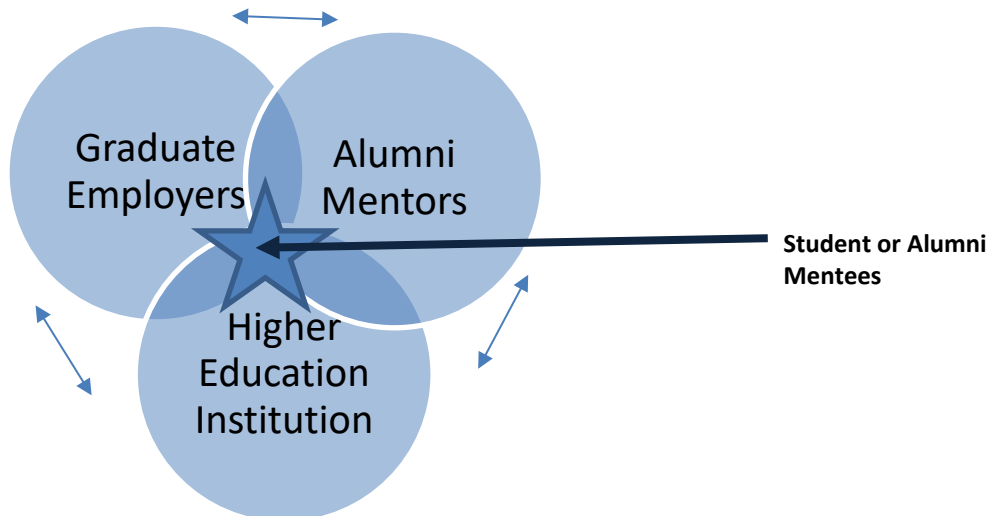


Figure 1: The basic actors in an Alumni Mentorship Programme for this conceptual study (The Triad)

This triad disentangles the relationships between actors that create philanthropic value, provide benefits for the mentees and residual or secondary benefits for the mentors, graduate employers and HEI (Gannon & Maher 2012).

Philanthropic Value – Direct benefits from Alumni Mentorship: Exploring Time and Talent

There are many direct and obvious benefits from alumni mentorship for all of the actors involved in the programme. These can often be promoted by the HEIs as the benefits to participation and are used as a means to recruit participants, whether they are graduate employers, alumni mentors or even student/alumni mentees.

In this section we explore the direct benefits from an alumni mentorship programme by actor and focus on the philanthropic value gained from this active participation. It is envisaged through devising this triad that each of the four key actors gain direct benefit and also philanthropic value from participation in alumni mentorship. The direct benefit can be characterised by the interactions between actors and aligned to the first two “T”s – time and talent- of the philanthropy construct.

Giving of Time and Alumni Mentorship

Participation in alumni mentorship requires a time commitment from all actors in the process. It is the interaction between alumni mentor and mentee that shows the most obvious direct benefit and individual philanthropic value: a student or recent graduate mentee secures advice, insight and support to enter employment and is the net beneficiary. Their life is enhanced by the experience of being mentored. If the interactions within the alumni mentorship ecosystem work smoothly, it is anticipated that the mentee, alongside the advice and support towards the job market, also gains an awareness of the generosity of giving by the mentor in the process.

The most obvious direct philanthropic value in this process is the alumni mentor volunteering their time to participate in the mentorship programme. There are also less obvious direct institutional beneficiaries of the time invested in the alumni mentorship programme work. The graduate employer generously gives the time of employees to participate as alumni mentors in this programme with the HEI; the HEI organises and gives time to build a partnership with the employer or industry partner to conceptualise and tailor the programme to the alumni employee (or student intern/graduate employee) needs.

The overall direct philanthropic benefit of an alumni mentorship programme is the ability to create socially responsible active citizenship amongst participants who are conscious of the importance of giving back to their community. Mentees are exposed to the philanthropic giving of time of others, which will help predispose them to give back when they are in a position to do so.

With these thoughts, the first hypothesis to explore in a future study is:

H₁ Actors give time, creating a sense of active citizenship, that others—including mentees— see, fostering mentor participation in the future

Giving of Talent and Alumni Mentorship

The direct philanthropic value related to talent is based on full interactions between actors: alumni mentors sharing their talent with mentees; graduate employers providing their employee talent to the HEI in the form of mentors. Graduate employers are also providing the platform and guidance to their employees in their role as mentor. Alumni mentors and their employers are poised to give back their professional skills, experience and advice to individual students and mentees, and collectively to the HEI. In addition, the participation as an alumni mentor also hones coaching skills and listening skills, thus supporting the career advancement of alumni mentors into leadership roles. This process of sharing expertise contributes to building partnership, trust and commitment and can lead to positive impact, especially on individual mentees navigating life after graduation.

Identifying, securing and retaining talent is a challenge for many companies and this talent agenda has also penetrated government policy circles. Therefore, the opportunity to mobilise existing talent within an organisation to engage in mentorship activity enables the employees to be mindful in the hunt for emerging talent or potential talent with student interns or recent graduates as they navigate their early careers. In addition, by retaining and re-engaging talent (alumni) back with their alma mater (HEI) this is a means to showcase their talent that can be applied across the institution: as a guest lecturer, providing guidance for in-class projects, offering work placement or job shadowing sessions, even providing a career profile for the career office or testimonial for the student recruitment materials. The talent becomes one that the HEI can foster as part of its ecosystem and community. With these thoughts, the second hypothesis to explore in a future study is:

*H₂ Alumni mentors, in giving their talent—advice, career support—through alumni mentorship are **open to giving back their talent within their alma mater in other ways:** curriculum-based activity or extra-curricular engagement.*

Philanthropic Value – Indirect benefits from Alumni Mentorship:

Exploring Treasure and Ties

The alumni mentor-mentee relationship yields clear direct benefits, in particular for the mentees who gain the professional knowledge and guidance from a seasoned professional. The organising HEI and graduate employer involved in the programme can also engage with and derive direct benefit from an alumni mentorship programme. To begin to explore the potential for alumni mentorship as a bridge to philanthropy we must recognise the indirect benefits that can be extracted from the interactions of actors involved.

The indirect benefits, fit best under the last two themes of philanthropy: treasure and ties. The trusted relationships built between actors illuminate the potential to give back financial donations or network contacts that could enhance the alumni mentorship programme and beyond to the HEI itself.

Treasure and Alumni Mentorship

The alumni relations office in an HEI is actively involved in building alumni engagement. An alumni mentorship programme is one way to enhance alumni engagement, the affinity and connection with an alum's alma mater. The hope is that through the participation of alumni as mentors will yield better educational outcomes for students. Alumni, mentors and mentees, through their positive experience would then also consider other ways to re-engage with their alma mater, which may also lead to financial donations to the HEI. There is a dearth of information in this area, in particular whether participation in alumni mentorship does lead to identifying and creating future donors. There is an opportunity to examine the proposed causality.

Moreover, graduate employers, as a key partner in an alumni mentorship programme, can also develop their relationship with the HEI through this process. One bridge to philanthropy is the potential to identify prospective corporate donors, corporate partnerships, sponsorship opportunities or financial donations from individuals to the institution. Wastyn's (2009) review of the alumni relations and advancement literature aligns alumni engagement after graduation to making a donation to their alma mater. This is reinforced in other studies (such as Weerts & Ronca 2007a). Another David Weerts and Justin Ronca article (2007b) explores the link between alumni participation in their alma mater and giving, describing some supportive alumni as those 'who do it all' (p20), drawing on Volkwein et al.'s theoretical framework (1989) that examines capacity to give and volunteer along with the inclination to do so (Weerts & Ronca 2007b and Volkwein et al 1989). These theoretical underpinnings could help to formulate a concerted study that examines the relationship between mentorship participation and financial giving.

With these thoughts, the third hypothesis to explore in a future study is:

*H₃ Participation in an alumni mentorship programme enhances the **potential that the actors involved will become active financial donors** to the institution in the future.*

Ties and Alumni Mentorship

As an indirect consequence of alumni mentorship programme interactions between actors, relationships develop. These are positive professional relationships between alumni mentor and mentee, along with forged relationships between alumni and their alma mater and indeed the HEI and graduate employers. As these relationships blossom, there is another component of philanthropic giving and bridge that can occur: the giving of ties. This includes sharing their network or contact of other graduate employers that may be interested in participating in an alumni mentorship programme. This may also include other alumni mentors familiar with fellow alumni who also have a developed affinity with their alma mater, who may be willing to give philanthropically: giving of their own time, talent or treasure to the institution. Marcel (2017) illustrates how alumni employees providing presentation skill mentorship to undergraduate business students were surveyed by the institution to gain insight and additional connections from

alumni to improve the curriculum. Completing a detailed 70-question survey that ultimately provides additional ties—and indeed draws on the talent of alumni—is a valuable way alumni can give back to their alma mater identifying changes in course curriculum to reflect graduate employer realities of the workplace.

Therefore, this becomes yet another bridge to philanthropy: a conduit that may lead to other contacts willing to engage in a philanthropic relationship with the HEI in the future. Graduate employers also have a special philanthropic position in the development and maintenance of a corporate social responsibility programme, in which the alumni mentorship programme—and the ties development within such a programme—become increasingly important. Important for the graduate employer to maintain their imprint in offering value to the local community through offering guidance and expertise from alumni mentors and also important for the HEI in fostering key corporate relationships that may lead to other corporate ties or modes of giving by participating companies.

With these thoughts, the third hypothesis to explore in a future study is:

H₄ Participation in an alumni mentorship programme builds positive relationship between actors that may lead to introductions to others—who may become key prospects for philanthropic giving into the future.

3.6 Discussion

Alumni mentorship programmes are growing in popularity in universities as part of the employability agenda and to increase graduate satisfaction on a programme. The alumni relations function or the career office lead the higher education institution's organisation of this programme, often in partnership with graduate employers to access a range of highly experienced employee alumni as mentor participants. In addition, mentees participating in the programme may include current students, recent graduate or one of these categories working or with an internship in a participating graduate employer organisation. The actors within this process seem like a simple straightforward process, however, there is complexity on the motivation for participation and especially on its ability to increase the elusive 'alumni engagement' desired by HEIs. Does participation in an alumni mentorship programme from the perspective of any of the actors truly increase the propensity of philanthropic giving? This is not only to their alma mater (in the case of alumni mentors or even mentees) but even among graduate employers. Is alumni mentorship truly a bridge to philanthropy? This conceptual paper shows the potential hypotheses that could be explored in future research. In this section we explore how this may be best outlined in various stages in diagram form:

In Figure 2, taking the key actors involved and deconstructing the tight relationship between the actors, there is the potential to view how the organisation of the programme in itself becomes a bridge towards philanthropic giving of time and talent by alumni mentors, both to the mentees and to their alma mater. The giving to mentees generates an outcome comprising the creation of active,

social responsible citizens. As outlined in Gannon & Maher (2012), it can be difficult to find meaningful ways to create alumni engagement. A positive interaction, such as a mentorship programme, may be such a means of creating long term connection with alumni and deriving philanthropic giving from them.

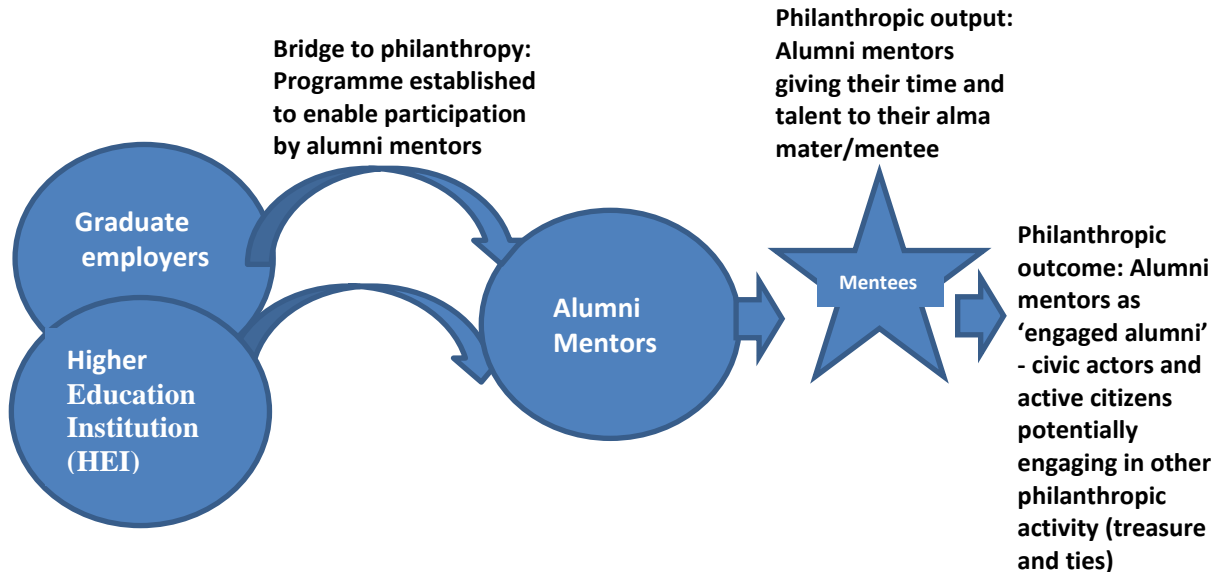


Figure 2: Alumni Mentorship Programme as a bridge to philanthropy – Alumni Mentor focus output/outcome

This figure aligns to a logic model, as outlined by McDavid and Huse (2012), whereby the input is the alumni mentorship programme and the output is philanthropic embracing the giving of time and talent. It is the extension of the philanthropic output to the ultimate outcome, which is of particular importance, that is creating philanthropically minded socially responsible members of the alumni community, who become active citizens giving of their time to help others.

The second bridge is the extent to which active participation in a mentorship programme creates a further bridge to other aspects of philanthropic giving, specifically treasures (financial donations) and ties (connections or network contact to provide further support to the institution).

In another sense it examines the extent to which alumni (and future alumni) along with employers (with leaders that may be alumni) may become more predisposed to giving donations with the university based on the relationship developed in the participation in the alumni mentorship programme.

By extension an alumni mentorship programme also provides an opening for a philanthropic bridge beyond the alumni mentors, HEIs and graduate employers, offering an awareness of philanthropic giving amongst new alumni, graduates and student mentees involved in the programme. By seeing alumni mentors giving of their time, they may consider by extension to also consider giving of their time and becoming engaged alumni and active citizens, leading to the final hypothesis:

H₅ Mentees participating in an alumni mentorship programme perceive value which increases their intention to engage in philanthropic giving.

Without a robust study and without a control group, that is, the perceptions of those that did not participate in an alumni mentorship programme, it is difficult to ascertain whether this propensity of giving back to their alma mater would occur in any case, or if this contributed the mentee participants' impressions of giving. That said, a qualitative study considering the perceptions of impact of the alumni mentorship programme could still yield some insight into why and in what ways a programme offers such a bridge to philanthropic thinking.

A study by Caroline D'Abate (2010) examines the early professional impact of particular practical interventions for business students, including alumni mentorship. She concluded, as compared to those business students without a mentor that "being mentored leads to more psychosocial support in the short-term and more career development, business knowledge, and psychosocial support once a student has graduated and is working for 3 to 5 years." (143).

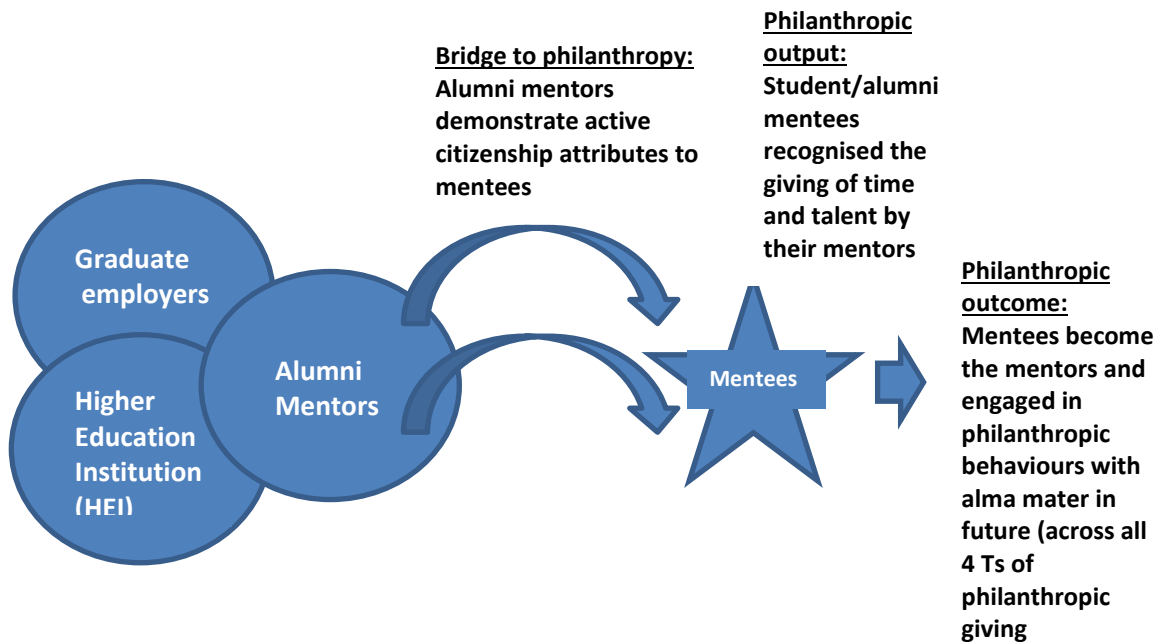


Figure 3: Alumni Mentorship Programme as a bridge to philanthropy –

Mentee focus output/outcome

The alumni mentorship programme becomes a platform to showcase philanthropic giving of others—in this case alumni mentors—to mentees, thus normalising philanthropic giving back to one's alma mater. This type of organisational culture of giving—whether time or talent, or indeed beyond to include treasure and ties—demonstrates potential expectations or behaviours for alumni once they have demonstrated career success.

Future Research and Conclusion

This conceptual paper presents a number of hypotheses to explore for further research. A qualitative research design would enable an interpretative and explorative nature of the research to surface, in particular in interrogating the relationships between key actors in the alumni mentorship programme work. By identifying alumni mentorship programmes in the United Kingdom, Ireland and across Europe, with common traits of involving these actors in the process thus offers a rich comparative landscape from which to confirm, explore and possibly refute the hypotheses from this paper. It is our intention that to test the components of philanthropic value in this paper that an empirical research study would be designed to test the hypothesis and research questions embedded within this conceptual paper. In particular, the causation between mentorship and philanthropic value within a higher education context.

This paper proposes a mixed methods study which combines quantitative survey amongst all participants (alumni mentors, mentees, HEIs and graduate employers) with qualitative semi structure interviews amongst participants. Such a study would seek to determine the relationship between participation and key attributes of philanthropic value (time, treasure, ties, talent) and to explore perceptions and experiences of the alumni mentorship programme and notions of citizenship, giving and philanthropy.

Bozeman & Feeney (2007) recognise that mentoring research has the potential to provide practical insights and outcomes, though they argue the need for more robust theories related to mentoring. It is anticipated that with empirical research on the value of mentorship as a bridge to philanthropy or indeed on its overall philanthropic value, would also contribute to the rationale for establishing a mentoring programme. Participation in alumni mentorship programmes demonstrate the potential for a wide range of philanthropic value and beneficiaries. By conducting empirical research to interrogate the hypotheses in this paper enables the alumni mentorship programme to not be viewed by a participating HEI, graduate employer or alumni as simply a linear stand-alone project but part of a multi-faceted strategic initiative with far reaching philanthropic giving outputs and outcomes.

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