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Alumni Relations – Why do we do this?

My friend and colleague Dr Lawrence Chia, alumni colleague Professor Teo, and another old friend David Chan, alumni colleagues, fellow Australian alumni, ladies and gentlemen. Lawrence – thank for your kind introduction. We go back to the mid 1990s when alumni relations was still relatively new in both Singapore and Australia, we often shared what we were doing professionally, and especially when we were visiting each other's countries.

My sincere thanks also to Simon Ho, Chairperson, and the members of the Organising Committee for AUIAC 2008 for inviting me to contribute to this panel sharing on *Universities Alumni Networking*.

It gives me great pleasure to be here at AUIAC in Singapore because I was the Secretary of the Organising Committee for the Inaugural AUIAC in Adelaide in 1998 – indeed three other members of that Committee, the Chair, Mr Michael Abbott QC, Professor Dean Forbes, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (International) at Flinders, and Sheryl Chandler, Head of Alumni and Development at Flinders are also here. I remember the work that went into our Convention, as well as the angst – Simon and his committee not only have my sympathy, but also my warmest congratulations.

Originally, when I was considering what aspect of alumni relations I would speak about today, my working title was “Alumni – it's more than just the money!”

Upon reflection though, I decided that I would reflect upon the question:

“Why do we do this?”

In this question, the “we” are alumni practitioners and alumni volunteers, of course, and the “this”, is alumni relations.

In reflecting on this question, I hope to provide you with an insight into what alumni relations is about, and to show that it really is more than just about money – notwithstanding, of course, that money remains an important factor.

Whilst many still think alumni relations is just an endless series of reunions and events, it is not, and what strategies are pursued, are pursued for specific reasons.

So, what is alumni relations really about, and how can it be defined? A couple of years ago, one American higher education institution defined alumni relations as:

the process of connecting or reconnecting alumni to the university in ways that lead to multi-faceted support of the university's mission and goals

Irrespective of its North American origin, that definition seems to me to have universal application.

Two days ago in Kuala Lumpur, and at the invitation of a fellow Flinders graduate, Professor Dr Nor Faridah, who is Director of the Alumni and Careers Services Office at the International Islamic University, I gave a talk on “alumni culture”. There were colleagues present also from other Malaysian universities, and from one Indian university.

In the question and answer session after the talk, it was quite clear that alumni relations is, universally, that process of connecting or reconnecting so as to achieve multi-faceted support.

Indeed, having read Professor Teo’s synopsis for his presentation today, it is obvious, at least to me, that this definition fits NUS too!

Moving on from the definition, the goal of alumni relations is to build long-lasting relationships between a university and its alumni so as to secure that multi-faceted support.

Successful outcomes in alumni relations, are the prerequisites to the success of the institution’s advancement program. The components of advancement or development follow separate, but linked strategies to achieve common outcomes. It is my considered view, based on more than two decades of experience, observations and learning, that alumni relations cannot be driven exclusively by just fund-raising considerations.

We all know that universities have an enormous reservoir of goodwill, and not just amongst their alumni, but in the community at large. The problem is that the goodwill remains just that, an untapped reservoir, unless some concerted, concentrated and well planned efforts are made to actually tap into it.

Australian universities realised as long ago as the mid 1980s that they could no longer survive on income streams drawn from one or two sources such as from the taxpayer and tuition fees.

Governments in many countries have made changes, in line with the prevailing neo-liberal approach to economic management that have lead to the “marketization” of universities. In turn, that has lead to the recognition of the fact that to tap into other sources of income or influence, relationships need to be built with all constituencies and, perhaps more than with any other constituency, the strongest relationship must be with the alumni.

In the current language of alumni relations, the term engagement has become interchangeable with relationship.

Engagement can be effected in many ways, and it should start as early as possible – there is no reason why it cannot begin when school students are considering which university they might choose for their higher education. Their decision-making

processes, also often influenced by their parents who in many cases nowadays are our alumni, can be influenced by having alumni present when a university's admissions people are visiting schools.

It is common practice now to include in admissions marketing materials, the names of, and testimonials from, prominent, well known alumni – we have found at Flinders that such alumni when asked, are only too pleased to help us. It is an opportunity also for these alumni to give back to their *alma mater*, and it is part of the engagement process.

There are many other strategies for engaging alumni – regular communications by magazine and email newsletter, reunions and other events where alumni can meet with their former lecturers, and also their contemporaries, who they may not see often. Such strategies must reinforce the mission and the culture of the university, and that is best done by a message (in the case of magazines and newsletters) or a short speech in the case of events, from the Vice-Chancellor or an Executive Dean about the state of the university and its strategic directions, and especially any new and exciting initiatives, and achievements by staff and alumni.

Flinders has a new Vice-Chancellor, and AUIAC provided the catalyst for him to visit Singapore and Kuala Lumpur to meet and engage with our alumni – he is not only meeting alumni, but sharing with them his ideas about the future of Flinders over the next few years.

Chapters, clubs or alumni communities, either actual or virtual, are another way of engaging alumni, as are recognition programs such as distinguished alumni awards. I commend to you as great examples of engagement, the seven programs listed at NUS.

Now engagement is a two way process – it is not just about us engaging with the alumni. It is critical, if there are to be successful outcomes, that our alumni want to be engaged, and want to support their *alma mater*.

With individual alumni, engagement “triggers” can be the key to developing and enhancing their relationship with the university – the staff member who is remembered with fondness, I met my husband or wife at university, our children now go to Flinders, if it was not for Flinders, I would not be where I am today. Identifying and building on these triggers, is all part of the process of engaging with alumni.

By way of a specific example – last year at the Penang Turf Club I met a Flinders graduate who actually attended the same school as me in Adelaide, but was a year ahead, so our acquaintance was only *en passant*.

I must qualify this by saying that I was not at the Penang Turf Club on alumni business, nor am I particular fan of horse racing, nor am I a gambler! There was another connection through the City of Adelaide's sister city relationship with Georgetown, Penang.

I knew that this person came originally from a sheep station in the outback region of northern South Australia, and that he has a very successful international company,

not, incidentally, exporting sheep or wool! We had a most interesting conversation, sharing reminiscences about school and university, and in the course of that conversation he revealed the engagement trigger for his relationship with Flinders – in 1967, the day before acceptances of offers for university places were due, Flinders had not heard from him. The offer had been mailed out (along with all the others) several weeks before. Given the isolation of where this person lived, and the nature of the work, the mail and newspapers were collected only infrequently from the local small town, many miles distant from the homestead. This person did not know that an offer of admission had even been made, until a staff member from the Registry at Flinders took the trouble to telephone the sheep station, (a somewhat difficult task then) and asked if he was going to accept the offer, and at the same time making the point that the university really hoped that he would! That action by the university staff member has stayed with our alum over 40 years, and is a key to his engagement with Flinders.

It was at his inauguration in January 1961, that John F Kennedy said “Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.” Universities do what they can for their students, and when those students graduate and become alumni, they have, I believe, an obligation to give back in the way JFK proposed, and if only to ensure that the standard of the degrees being awarded is maintained.

Why? Because a university’s degrees and reputation are not measured against an earlier point in time – degrees and reputation are measured by the university’s standing now.

So, where will this engagement lead? What can we expect from our alumni if we engage with them in a systematic and strategic way? Why do we do this?

We do it, in my view, because of the five things alumni will be able to do best for the university, provided, of course, that there is a strong, committed two way engagement between the university and its alumni.

Those things are:

- 1. Money** (for such things as salaries, research, scholarships, improved teaching facilities, and library resources, amongst other things)
- 2. New students** (because alumni can act as agents of influence to help us get the best students)
- 3. Advice** (because of their experience in the wider community, alumni can have important input into all strategic thinking and decision making in a university)
- 4. Representation** (alumni can represent a university before political, business and community leaders), exercising influence, opening doors, ensuring positive outcomes
- 5. Service** (alumni can serve their universities in a myriad of capacities)

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It is a “no-brainer” that the achievement of a university's goals will be made significantly easier, if it has the committed support of its alumni.

I believe that any alumni relations programme must aim to build the base of support amongst an institution's alumni in order to assist in obtaining a diverse base of resources and developing multi-faceted support that will, in turn, ensure success in what is now a global market. At the same time, alumni cannot do anything for us, however, unless they understand that we care about them, that we need their support, and that they understand why we need their support.

Developing this understanding cannot be done in isolation – it must be integrated into the university's marketing and fundraising strategies, and especially so that there are no mixed or contradictory messages, both inside and outside of the university.

The one question that I have not addressed, except in passing, is that of “whose responsibility is alumni relations?”

Now, you might respond to that question “well, Geoff, you are an alumni professional – it is *your* responsibility!”

And I might respond “Yes, I am indeed an alumni professional, and yes, it is my responsibility!”

My response would have a rider though, and that is:

“I am just one part of a much larger whole, and alumni relations for any university is not just the province of any single individual, faculty or department, it is an institutional responsibility,”

and this means that:

The university council, the Vice-Chancellor, the senior academic managers, the academic staff, the administrative and technical staff, the students, and last but not least, of course, the alumni, all have an important and interrelated role to play in ensuring that a university has the strongest and most effective alumni relations program possible.

This morning, Minister for Education, Dr Ng Eng Hen, made the point that governments' preoccupation with economic growth is narrowing and distorting society's idea of what education should be. He offered the view also that the economic approach to education has produced a focus on quantitative targets, and that this has reduced the average quality of a university education.

Minister Ng actually answered the question “Why do we do this?” for us, when he said:

Worst of all, the best universities are being starved of resources